Initus

by TanninTele (orphan_account)

Summary

Harry was a goddamned celebrity - a celebrity whose stomach rolled in dread at the very thought of such attention. For Merlin's sake, he was famous because survived a murder attempt, one that killed his parents. Harry hadn't much experience with non-Dursley people, but he was quite certain death wasn't something you'd celebrate.

(Harry should know. He'd been on it's doorstep more times than he was willing to count.)

With trolls, a Cerberus, possessed teachers and a Dark Lord out for Harry's blood, life isn't about to get any less complicated.

Luckily, Harry's made some friends. Strange friends, but true friends all the same; and they aren't about to let the Boy-Who-Lived meet his maker anytime soon.

Notes
To receive the full experience and background information, it is preferred that you read the entire series in order.
Initus: One

Initus

(noun. an approach, arrival, or advent.)

A Harry Potter & Percy Jackson Crossover

Part 4 of the Amalgamation Series

by Tannin & Tele

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Warnings: Chapter includes implied child abuse, child neglect and mild language.

The opinions expressed by characters may not reflect that of the author's.

Chapter One

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July 30th, 1991
For the first time in ten years, Harry found himself missing his cupboard. Lying on a damp, grimy floor of a dilapidated hut was complete *hell* compared to his cupboard at Number Four. At least under the stairs, he had a blanket and a pillow. And air conditioning.

Without anything to cover his shivering body, Harry was forced to curl into himself to maintain some warmth. His back muscles ached as he shifted restlessly on the cold flooring, fighting against the violent shivers that wracked his body. Harry startled as a single raindrop slipped down from the sunken ceiling, landing on his cheek with a *splat*. The chill that raced down his body was unavoidable and Harry bit back a soft groan.

As much as he wished to moan *woe betide*, Harry knew that self-pitying never worked any miracles.

The boy turned painfully on his side. He watched the watch on Dudley's wrist tick ever-closer to midnight and let out a long breath. Ten minutes to midnight, and Harry didn't even bother with sleep; he was superbly cramped, his eyes fluttering shut every few moments, only to snap back open.

Some sort of . . . *sixth sense* was telling him that something *magical* was about to occur, and Harry couldn't help but get his hopes up. Harry wondered, after retrieving that first letter, when everything would come to peak. His imagination ran wild with fantasies and wonderments as Dudley's watch ticked closer to midnight.

Pulling himself to his elbows, Harry idly drew a birthday cake into the dusty floor, humming silently to himself. *HAPPY BIRTHDAY, HARRY!* the cake read, and Harry topped it with eleven 'candles'. Harry doubted he'd ever get *real* cake in his life, but the tradition was long ingrained.

Midnight was fast approaching - only minutes away- and Harry sincerely pondered waking his cousin. After all, he smirked; *misery loves company*.

Water clashed against the rocks, white light flashing across the sky. A deep rumble reverberated from the outdoors, causing the hut to shift. "Happy Birthday to me, Happy birthday to me -" Harry sang under his breath, leaning forward to blow away the image. As the last of the dust rolled away, a deafening bang sounded on the hut's door.

The whole hut shuddered, and Harry jolted up, eyes wide in surprise.

*BOOM!* Came the knock again, and Dudley awoke with a dumb: "Where's the cannon?"

A crash came from the staircase as Uncle Vernon stumbled down the last step, face purple and rifle cocked in his hands. Petunia came creeping out behind him, hair curled in obnoxious purple rollers. "Who's there?!!" Vernon shouted, wielding the gun in front of him as he warily approached the door. "I warn you - I'm armed!" his voice quavered, revealing true terror beyond all his arrogance.

There was a pregnant pause, filled only by Dudley's harsh breathing - and that was when all hell broke loose.

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*Rubeus Hagrid was a large, boisterous fellow that Harry had immediately taken a liking to.*

Despite being extremely clumsy and apparently half-mythical creature, the man was quite solicitous. He defended Harry against the Dursleys with a protectiveness Harry had never known before,
instantly earning the eleven-year-old's affections.

The next morning, Hagrid was holding Harry's arm tightly as they traveled out of Gringotts Bank, the older man attempting to keep the slight boy from flying over the cart's edge. "Please," Hagrid rumbled to the Goblin, his face turning green. "Can this thing go any slower?"

The goblin smirked. "One speed only," Griphook claimed - but Harry learned that with a bit of bribery, the cart could go faster. The goblin didn't much like Harry (unsurprising) but money was money. Hagrid was not amused.

The two companions stumbled out of Gringotts, Harry wearing a bright grin and wind-blown hair. Hagrid wiped the nervous sweat off his face, looking quite ill. "Might as well get yer uniform," Hagrid said quietly, nodding towards Madam Malkin's Robes for All Occasions.

"Listen, Harry, would yeh mind if I slipped off fer a pick-me-up in the Leaky Cauldron? I hate them Gringotts carts. I . . ." the man shuddered. "Really hate them."

Harry watched Hagrid's retreating back, anticipation building in his chest. Fingering the bag of gold in his trouser pocket, he entered the shop alone. Madam Malkin was only a few inches taller than Harry, dressed in a crisp mauve uniform and a maternal countenance.

"Hogwarts, dear?" she deduced, smiling reassuringly at Harry's nervous fidgeting. "Got the lot here - another young man being fitted up just now, in fact."

She led him to the back of the shop where a tall boy with pointed features was having his long black robes pinned. Madam Malkin placed Harry on a similar stool and slipped a sheet of fabric over him. The other boy eyed Harry with sharp silver eyes. "Hello," he finally greeted. "Hogwarts, too?"

"Yes," Harry said softly, almost afraid to lift his eyes.

"My father's next door buying my books and mother's up the street looking at wands," the boy continued in a bored tone. "Then I'm going to drag them off to look at racing brooms. I don't see why first years can't have their own. I think I'll bully father into getting me one and I'll smuggle it in somehow. Have you got your own broom?"

In my cupboard under the stairs, I've got a mop, Harry considered replying, but instead just shook his head.

"Play Quidditch at all?" the other asked, almost hopefully.

Harry just blinked, unsure of how to respond. "Is that a sport?" he asked.

The boy looked insulted. "What? Of course it is! It's the best sport around, how could you not - " he stiffened, eyes calculation. "Wait. You're not one of those muggleborns, are you?" he demanded, voice pinched. The woman pinning the boy's robe looked affronted, her needle slipping to poke his leg. "But your parents were our kind, right?" he corrected, scowling furiously at the seamstress.

"They were a witch and a wizard, if that's what you mean." Harry was startled at the direct question, but the other looked pleased.

"Oh. Well, I really don't - say, look at that man!" He shifted abruptly, gesturing toward the front window. His seamstress gave a muffled swear.

Harry blushed at Hagrid, who was holding up a set of melting ice cream cones. "That's Hagrid," Harry informed. "He works as the Keeper of Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts."
"Yes, I thought so. I heard he's a sort of savage - lives in a hut on the school grounds and every now and then he gets drunk, tries to do magic, and ends up setting fire to his bed." Harry was about to respond when Hagrid dropped one of the cones. On his way to grab it, the other slipped to the ground with a *splat*.

Harry sighed, ignoring the boy's soft snickers.

"He’s a bit clumsy, that's true," he said carefully. "But quite kind, really. I'd prefer if you didn't insult him, please." The laughter cut off abruptly, the boy's pinched face turning sheepish.

"Oh, sorry," he didn't sound very contrite. "Why is he with you, anyways? Where are your parents?"

Harry's hands twitched. "They're dead," he turned his eyes away.

The boy blinked, lips twisting thoughtfully. "Well, if you want, you can go shopping with - " before he could finish, Madam Malkin tapped Harry's leg.

"That's you done, my dear," she told him, peeling off the robes.

Harry's hair became a mess as the robes were pulled over his head and the boy gasped, gaping at Harry's forehead.

"You're - "

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**History, as Written by the Victors, by Darla Diggle and Katsu Chang**

**Chapter Thirty-Four, the Fall of the First Wizarding War:**

The end of the first wizarding war can be marked on the night of 31, October, 1981 with the attack on Godric's Hollow, a small wizarding community in the West Country of England. Little is known about the events that transpired that night, the only eye-witness being young Harry Potter, infant son of James Potter and Lily Potter née Evans.

Steadfast supporters of the Light side - see Albus Dumbledore on pg. 191 - the Potters were prime targets of the Dark Lord's ire . . . enough so that You-Know-Who personally chose to strike at their household, without even the assistance of his Dark-aligned advocates.

*This hubris, perhaps, was his fatal flaw.*

After the deaths of Lily and James, the Dark Lord turned his wand onto Harry Potter, and something went terribly wrong.

Despite being assaulted with the Killing Curse - see the Use of the Unforgivable Curses on pg. 314 - young Harry was left with naught but a lightning-bolt scar emblazoned on his forehead. With Harry's survival, You-Know-Who disappeared into the night, never to be seen again.

The Dark Side easily fell without their tyrants rule, and within months, several major arrests were made - see Death Eaters on pg. 426.

Sirius Black was found guilty of betraying the Potters and murdering their childhood friend, Peter Pettigrew, while the famous Lestranges were caught after their attack on the Longbottoms. Many
Death Eaters brought to trial were revealed to have been under the Imperius Curse - see the Use of the Unforgivables on pg. 314 - and friends and families were reunited with the removal of the War Containment Wall (WCW) around Britain.

Celebration reigned, and Harry Potter was commemorated as a celebrity.

[The vanquisher of You-Know-Who and the only known survivor of the Killing Curse, otherwise known as the Boy-Who-Lived, was unavailable for commentary on this matter.]

September 1st, 1991

Between Platform Nine 3/4, London, England and Hogsmeade Station, Hogsmeade, Scotland

It watched him. With those dark, too human eyes, it stared. And Harry stared right back.

He didn't like animals all that much.

Perhaps it started with Marge's dog, Ripper, who chased Harry up a tree and was, you know, killed by a falling child. And then, of course, were the inexplicable number of beasts that followed him on a daily basis. As the Hogwarts Express shouldered through Scotland country, Harry was unsurprised to see colorful pegasi grazing farm fields and fire-breathing vultures circling above head.

Compared to those creatures, most pets were alright, Harry supposed. His snowy owl was a sweetheart, and the garden snakes that hid beneath Petunia's azalea bush had many redeeming qualities. Most creatures, however, seemed overly intent on Harry's death.

Scabber's eyes were constantly darting about in a strange mixture of fear and curiosity, his pink nose twitching. Ron stroked his fingers down Scabber's back before finger-feeding him an ear-wax flavored jelly bean. The rat's nose crinkled and he let the candy roll off his tongue.

Turning a page in his book, Harry had to forcibly keep himself from sighing in exasperation. Ron was currently describing the sin that was Slytherin, animatedly waving his hands about while Harry nodded along distractedly, not precisely in agreement.

Eventually Scabbers fell asleep again, and Harry felt comfortable enough to relax.

For the better part of the train ride he'd been unable to unwind, distracted by the Weasley boy who would not shut up. When he had first forced his way into Harry's compartment and began fawning over his scar, Harry knew his life had just become a thousand times more complicated.

For Merlin's sake, he was famous because survived a murder attempt, one that killed his parents. Harry hadn't much experience with non-Dursley people, but he was quite certain death wasn't something you'd celebrate.
Harry should know. He'd been on it's doorstep more times than he was willing to count.

The countryside now flying past the window was becoming wilder. The neat fields had gone and now there were woods, twisting rivers, and dark green hills. There was a knock on the door of their compartment and a round-face boy tentatively stepped in.

He sniffled slightly, looking shy. "Sorry," the boy whispered, "but have you seen a toad at all?"

Harry and Ron shook their heads and hazel eyes became rheumy. "I've lost him!" The boy wailed. "He keeps getting away from me!"

"I'm sure he'll turn up," Harry told him reassuringly.

"Yes," the boy said miserably. "Well, if you see him," he trailed off.

"Wait!" Ron burst out, lifting a finger. "You should check the Prefect Compartment! My brother, Percy, is Gryffindor's new Prefect. Maybe he could help."

The boy's face lit up in excitement. "My Gran was prefect too! I forgot where she said the compartment was, though..."

"Just keep going down the train and look for stuffy upperclassmen with big 'P' badges. Some of them ought to be wandering about," Ron said helpfully.

"Thanks! I'm Neville, by the way," he beamed, before clumsily tripping out of the compartment.

Ron looked rather smug, and Harry saw his companion in a new light. Perhaps the redhead was useful for something other than babbling.

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"Finally!" Malfoy exclaimed, sliding open Harry's compartment door. Two heavy set boys flanked him, both reminding Harry uncomfortably of his uncle and cousin. He shrunk back into his seat, emerald eyes narrowed.

"I've been looking for you forever, Potter," he breathed, smoothing back his flaxen hair. Malfoy followed Harry's gaze. "Oh, right. This is Vincent Crabbe and Gregory Goyle. You do remember my name, right?" He acted as though the very idea was impossible.

Harry nodded slightly in greeting to the three boys. "Yes, of course; Draco Malfoy."

Ron gave a slight cough, lips pinched with amusement.

Draco's eyes snapped to him. "Think my name's funny, do you?" he said defensively, crossing his arms. "No need to ask who you are. My father told me all the Weasleys have red hair, freckles, and more children than they can afford." The blonde turned back to Harry. "You'll soon find out some wizarding families are much better than others, Potter. You don't want to go making friends with the wrong sort. I can help you there." He held out a pale, perfectly manicured hand.

Harry frowned at him. "That wasn't very nice, Draco. Ron has been very... obliging." Draco looked doubtful. "You know, he told me a bit about Quidditch, so I can finally talk to you about it. Ron's a big fan, and he has his own broom," Harry added.

Draco's face cleared, eyes lighting up at the mention of his favorite sport. "Oh. Well, then I suppose he's alright."
Harry gave Draco a look, and the blonde rolled his eyes. "Fine," he sighed. "Sorry, Weasley. I'm sure your family are . . . lovely folks."

Ron was clearly hesitant, glaring daggers as Harry finally took Draco's hand. The blonde didn't even bother attempting to shake Ron's.

The three purebloods took a seat, Draco sitting extremely close to the Boy-Who-Lived while Crabbe and Goyle sandwiched a red-faced Ron. Harry smiled shyly at their new companions while Ron seemed ready to launch into another 'Why Slytherins are the scum of the Earth' tirade.

Sensing Draco wouldn't appreciate Ron's input, Harry shifted next to the blonde. "So, Ron likes the Chudley Cannons," he offered up before said ginger could ruin their brief truce. The blonde's eyes widened in disbelief. "I'm not sure how good they are, but - "

"They're not good at all!" Draco shouted, while Ron made a loud noise of protest. "The team you really ought to be rooting for is Puddlemere United. My father brought me to the European Cup this summer, and they kicked arse."

"Really?" Ron leaned forward with wide eyes, momentarily forgetting the age-long Malfoy-Weasley rivalry. "The one against the Caerphilly Catapults? Didn't 'Dangerous' Dai Llewellyn break his femur doing a Dionysus Dive?"

Draco nodded enthusiastically. "Yeah, we could see the bone jutting straight through his uniform! There was blood everywhere, and the referee even sicked up! Course, Llewellwyn was fine after a few hours, but his injury really set the Catapults back - "

Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, Highlands, Scotland

"Its bewitched to look like the sky outside. I read about it in Hogwarts, A History," Hermione Granger informed her peers, most of which were staring up in awe at the ceiling of the Great Hall. It was quite beautiful.

Dean Thomas - standing beside Neville Longbottom and a boy with sandy hair - smirked lightly. "The Ravenclaw is strong in this one," he told the pureblood seriously. Neville's brow furrowed while Seamus Finnegan laughed quietly.

"Wow," Ron said, nodding towards the table on the far end. A group of stiff-backed students were watching the first-years enter with bored expressions and sneers. "They look like an unpleasant lot."

"I don't know," Harry said thoughtfully. "The one on the end looks quite cheerful."

"Sadistic. I think you mean sadistic," Draco said with a smirk, squeezing forcefully between the smaller boy and Ron. "That's Marcus Flint - he's the Slytherin prefect. We're second cousins on my dad's side. Scaring people is a hobby of his; he got it from his mum."

"Another reason why not to go into Slytherin. Sadistic prefects," Ron hissed, earning a subtle jab to his ribs. "Hey!" he exclaimed loudly, earning a lot of strange looks. Draco gave him a winning smile, and Ron grumbled to himself.

The clearing of a throat quieted him.

Professor McGonagall silently transfigured a gnarled, four-legged stool on a platform before them. On top of the stool she put a wizard's hat, frayed and extremely dirty. Aunt Petunia would have
a conniption, Harry thought to himself, breathing turning sharp with anxiety.

For a few seconds the hall was in complete silence. Then the hat twitched, before a tear near the brim opened like a mouth. And it began to sing in a smooth baritone, much to the first year's shock and excitement.

"Oh, you may not think I'm pretty, but don't judge on what you see, I'll eat myself if you can find a smarter hat than me.

You can keep your bowlers black, your top hats sleek and tall, for I'm the Hogwarts Sorting Hat and I can cap them all.

There's nothing hidden in your head the Sorting Hat can't see, so try me on and I will tell you where you ought to be.

You might belong in Gryffindor, where dwell the brave at heart, their daring, nerve, and chivalry set Gryffindors apart;

You might belong in Hufflepuff, where they are just and loyal, those patient Hufflepuff are true and unafraid of toil;

Or yet in wise old Ravenclaw, if you've a ready mind, where those of wit and learning, will always find their kind;

Or perhaps in Slytherin you'll make your real friends, those cunning folk use any means to achieve their ends.

So put me on! Don't be afraid! And don't get in a flap!

You're in safe hands (though I have none) for I'm a Thinking Cap!"

The hall burst into raucous applause.

"See!" Draco said proudly, slapping a possessive arm around Harry. "Slytherin's not so bad." Unused to such touches, Harry squirmed away, ducking his head.

Despite the concept's simplicity, the hat seemed to be asking rather a lot; Harry didn't feel particularly brave or quick-witted at the moment. If only the hat had mentioned a house for people who felt a bit queasy, that would have been the one for him. In fact, Harry wouldn't have been surprised if the hat just refused to Sort him at all.

. . . Could that happen?

His panic was brought to a halt as Professor McGonagall stepped forward, holding a long roll of parchment. She cleared her throat, and the Hall went silent once more. "When I call your name," she began imperiously. "You will put on the hat and sit on the stool to be sorted."

The professor delicately unrolled the parchment before peering over the tops of her spectacles.

"Abbott, Hannah," she enunciated. A pink-faced girl with short pigtails stumbled out of line and allowed McGonagall to plop the hat over her eyes.
After a moment's pause, the hat shouted: "HUFFLEPUFF!" The applause died down and Professor McGonagall swiftly called the next name.

"Bones, Susan!" was sent trailing after Hannah Abbott while a snooty-looking "Boot, Terrence!" swaggered over to the Ravenclaws. "Brocklehurst, Mandy!" shyly dashed after Terrence and "Brown, Lavender," became the newest Gryffindor.

"Corner, Michael!" sat besides Mandy Brocklehurst in Ravenclaw (giving a wink to the flushed brunette) and "Crabbe, Vincent!" needed help finding the Slytherins. The applause for Vincent was rather scant, Harry noted with amusement. "Davis, Tracey!" sat beside who Draco identified as Gemma Farley, the Head Girl in Slytherin.

Sometimes, Harry noticed, the hat shouted out the house at once, but at others it took a little while to decide. Seamus and Hermione both had what Ron called a 'near Hatstall', the sorting lasting for more than a minute before deciding to place the two first-years in Gryffindor.

"Can the hat refuse to Sort us?" Harry murmured to Draco, hands wringing nervously. Draco was about to laugh at the absurdity of his question before seeing the genuine anxiety in Harry's green eyes. Draco stared at the boy in amazement.

"Are you serious?" he whispered back furiously. "You're the bloody Boy-Who-Lived! It'd be mad not to Sort you, but only into the very best House, of course," Harry rolled his eyes, hardly reassured.

Neville was sorted into Gryffindor, much to the brunette's obvious relief - and surprise.

Draco nearly had an aneurysm when his name was called, clenching Harry's arm so hard he thought the fragile bone would break. Ron was scowling slightly, muttering disparages and slurs beneath his breath. Maintaining his composure, Draco sent Ron a sharp look before swaggering up to the stool.

The hat barely touched his head before calling out "SLYTHERIN!" Draco, looking inordinately pleased with himself, sent Harry a proud smirk.

Before Harry knew it, "Perks, Sally-Ann!" became a Hufflepuff and "Potter, Harry!" was called. Ron nudged him forward, giving him an encouraging smile.

The whispers were horrible. 'Potter, did she say?' 'The Harry Potter?' 'Merlin, he's so ickle!'

Heart in his throat, Harry shakily approached the platform, briefly meeting the sharp, almost expectant gaze of the professor. The Sorting Hat was swiftly slipped over his eyes and everything went deadly quiet. Harry jolted violently as a scratchy voice sounded in his ear.

"Difficult," the hat breathed, and Harry could swear he felt hot air against his neck. "Very difficult. Plenty of strength, I see. Not a bad mind either. There's talent, oh my goodness, yes - and a nice thirst to prove yourself, now that's interesting . . . So where shall I put you?"

Harry gripped the edges of the stool, breathing heavily. 'I don't know! Please don't make me choose!' Harry blurted in his mind.

The hat gave a sympathetic chuckle. 'Relax, child. I'm not going to force you. You are quite loyal, then, aren't you? Don't want to choose between your two friends, but thankfully, if worse comes to worst, you could just place the blame on me. Merlin knows I've seen worse than a few disgruntled eleven-year-olds."

Harry gave a nervous laugh, his grip loosening minutely. The hat seemed to dig deeper. "You could
be great in Slytherin, you know, it's all here in your head. And Slytherin will help you on the way to
greatness, no doubt about that.” Harry got the feeling the Sorting Hat was coming to a decision and
clenched the seat again.

It's brim brushed comfortingly over Harry's forehead. The hat seemed to jolt in surprise before it
cleared it's throat loudly.

"Better be . . . " it hedged. "SLYTHERIN!"

To be continued . . . 
"We're gonna be late, we're gonna be late, we're gonna - " Draco flew about the dorm room, frantically tossing parchment and quills into his messenger bag before reaching under the bed for his potions textbook.

"Well, we wouldn't have been late if you hadn't spent an hour greasing your hair!" Blaise snapped from the bathroom door. He grabbed Harry's tie from the stack of laundry, tossing it to the raven-haired boy.

Draco was insulted. "It's called gel, not grease, you prat! And if you hadn't been so picky at breakfast, we might be in class by now!"

"Please, you two. Stop fighting, we're not going to be late," Harry told them soothingly, shouldering his bag.

"No," Draco drawled, stopping by the wall mirror to check his hair. "But we will be the last ones in class, and we won't be able to get the best seats, and I'll end up sitting next to a stir-happy Gryffindor and my father will murder me if I get anything less than an 'O' in Uncle Sev's class - " By now, he was hyperventilating, a hand pressed into his chest.

"For Merlin's sake, get a hold of yourself, man!" Blaise grabbed Draco by the arm, yanking him out of the dorm. "If we have to drag you to the Nurse's wing this early in the morning, we will be late and I'll kill you myself!"

Harry just sighed at their melodrama, locking the door behind them. They crossed into the common
room, bickering quietly as several upperclassmen were lying half-asleep on the couches while others were studying or eating from the bowl of fruit.

The Potions classroom wasn't too terribly far from the Slytherin dorms, but they were still one of the last students to arrive. Crabbe and Goyle made it before them, as well as Theodore Nott and the first-year Slytherin girls.

Luckily, Draco's minions had saved the blonde a seat in the front. Draco shooed Goyle away so Harry could sit beside him on the bench.

"Right," Draco breathed in relief, setting out a quill and his book. "So, just a bit of a warning; Uncle Sev can be a bit much, and although he's fine with the Slytherins, he has a tendency to slip insults into every other sentence. He doesn't like to take points from us, but he's no pushover, either. Don't be alarmed, and don't get on his bad side."

Harry nodded, wide eyed. The doors burst open suddenly, revealing a small group of out-of-breath Gryffindors. Ron was the ringleader, slumped with a loud 'Finally!' on a stool in back. Ron sent Harry a cheeky smile, receiving an eye roll in response.

Dean, Neville and Seamus followed shortly, chattering in low voices as they eyed the pickled eyeballs and shriveled animal parts. Just then door slammed open, and the three Gryffindors let out startled squeaks. Draco had to stifle a snicker as the professor stalked to the front, black robes billowing behind him.

It was all quite dramatic.

The Potion's Master was a very tall man, with pallid features and a beaked nose. The light in the dungeons washed out his skin and accentuated his (wet?) hair, the flickering lantern light causing his dark blue eyes to glimmer with malice. He wasn't hideous, per say, just incredibly intimidating.

Without delay, Professor Snape launched into roll call, meeting each student's eyes with a turned up nose and a sneer. He pausing briefly at Harry's name, his pale lips twisting into a scowl. "Ah, yes," he said in a soft voice. "Harry Potter. Our new . . . celebrity."

Harry kept his eyes down, barely suppressed his flinch at the contempt practically dripping from the professor's tone. Harry quickly chastised himself. The boy was used to scorn and unadulterated intolerance from the Dursleys, but for a moment, Harry had thought - he had hoped - that the Wizarding World would be different. He thought he would be happy here, surrounded by people who cared.

"Potter!" The professor exclaimed suddenly. Harry jerked in surprise, back straightening. "What would I get if I added powdered root of asphodel to an infusion of wormwood?"

Harry glanced at Draco, whose brows were furrowed in bewilderment. Hermione was flapping her hand desperately, eyes wild. Harry cringed at her excitement. "I . . . I don't know, sir," His hands were shaking beneath the table.

Snape's tutted lightly. "Well, clearly fame isn't everything. Let's try again. Potter, where would you look if I told you to find me a bezoar?"

Draco looked to his friend, who was pale with terror. These aren't even in the textbook! The blonde was desperate to blurt. Perhaps I ought to message father. He'll tell Sev off. Draco thought, angered at the unfairness of it.
"I don't know, sir," Harry said quietly.

"Thought you wouldn't open a book before coming, eh, Potter?" Snape crossed his arms. Harry flinched violently, tears springing into his eyes, concealed by fringe. I tried to read it, I did! He thought desperately. But the letters just kept swimming, and I didn't understand half of the ingredients or the measurements -

"What is the difference, Potter, between monkshood and wolfsbane?"

Draco suddenly grabbed Harry's hand, eyes wide. 'Trick question!' he tried mouthing, but the Professor's nostrils flared in anger.

Hermione was leaning out of her seat, hand stretching toward the ceiling. "Sit down!" Snape demanded of her. "It is clear you are at a loss, Mr. Potter. For your information, asphodel and wormwood make a sleeping potion so powerful it is known as the Draught of Living Death. A bezoar is a stone taken from the stomach of a goat and it will save you from most poisons. As for monkshood and wolfsbane, they are the same plant, which also goes by the name of aconite. Well? Why aren't you all copying that down?"

As everyone scrambled for their supplies, Harry let out a long breath, eyes still red.

Snape stalked up to the blackboard. "And a point will be taken from Gryff - " his face pinched at the sight of Harry's tie and badge. He turned away. " - indor House for your unnecessary distraction, Miss. Granger."

Harry rushed from the classroom as soon as possible, Draco staying behind to speak with his godfather. Tears were spilling from his eyes when he heard a call from behind him.

"Harry!" A hand grasped his upper arm abruptly, pulling him to a stop.

Ron stared down at the Slytherin with a worried look, not oblivious to the wet cheeks and bloodshot retinas. "Hey," he said softly, loosening his grasp.

Harry tried to pull away, cheeks flaring with embarrassment, but Ron was having none of it. "Snape's nothing but a greasy git, you hear me? Don't listen to him. My brothers loose points from him all the time . . . " he trailed off, frowning. "Sometimes, I forget you're a Slytherin. You should be lucky he's too coward to take from Slytherin House, but I guess that just means Snape knows where you sleep and can give you detention, or otherwise make your life hell. You know what, forget I said that."

Harry shook his head. "It's fine. I'm fine." I'm used to it, he mentally added, spirits low.

Ron eyed Harry's bedraggled appearance and gave a snort. "No, you're not. But that's okay, you will be. Do you wanna check out the Gryffindor Common Rooms? I bet you a galleon that they're ten times better than these nasty, cold dungeons," his disgusted expression caused Harry to giggle slightly.

"Oh, alright," he shouldered his bag, spotting Draco exit the classroom with a surly frown. "But can Draco come? He looks like he needs cheering up, too,"

Ron's nose crinkled as Draco approached, and he groaned loudly. "Whatever. But cover his ears once we get to the portrait, I'm not giving him the password."
Draco was a bit excited for flying lessons. Actually, perhaps that was an understatement.

At the lunch table, he regaled his peers with tales of risky maneuvers and near-collisions with Muggle helicopters while flying his broomstick about the grounds of his family manor. Even Pansy Parkinson graced him with her presence, sitting daintily on the bench diagonal to the blonde. Flipping back a swath of tar-black hair, she gave Draco her full attention, eyelashes fluttering madly with false interest.

Harry immediately decided he didn't like her, and moved to sit with the Gryffindors.

"Honestly," Ron sighed around a mouthful of potatoes. "With pompous prats like him running his mouth, I'm amazed you're still sane."

Harry smiled. "I'm not even close to being sane, but that doesn't mean I'm not a functioning member of society."

Hermione laughed at him, while Ron just blinked in confusion. "Their bad humor is rubbing off on you. Anyways, did I tell you about that time I ran into a hang-glider with Charlie's old broom? Dad still tinkers with the broken pieces, although he had to Obliviate the Muggle flying it."

Hermione and Harry looked equally confused, sending each other anxious glances.

... 

At three-thirty that afternoon, Harry, Draco, and the other Slytherin first years could be found waiting next to twenty or so broomsticks, spread out across a grassy lawn opposite the Forbidden Forest. The Gryffindors were late, hustling down the steps with their usual lack of coordination and chatter.

Their teacher, Madam Hooch, descended from the sky, her gray hair fluttering in the wind.

"Well, what are you all waiting for?" she barked at them, fingering the silver whistle around her neck. "Everyone stand by a broomstick. Come on, hurry up." Harry glanced down at his broom, which was quite old and had several twigs in disarray. "Stick out your right hand over your broom," Madam Hooch demanded, "and say 'Up!'"  

Everyone mimicked her and Harry beamed as his broom jumped up at once. Hermione's had simply rolled over on the ground while Neville's hadn't moved at all. Perhaps brooms - like most beasts - could tell when you were afraid, Harry wondered.

Draco was scowling at the injustice - his old broom had sentient mold crawling up the handle, scrawling out insults and slurs towards his mounting skills. When Harry snickered, the blonde sneered at him. "Seems as though you're a natural with a stick between your legs," he mocked. Harry was confused, but Ron choked on his spit.

"Now, when I blow my whistle, you kick off from the ground, hard," Madam Hooch told them. "Keep your brooms steady, rise a few feet, and then come straight back down by leaning forward slightly. On my whistle. Three - two -" But Neville pushed off before the whistle had touched Madam Hooch's lips.

They watched him rise twenty feet, Madam Hooch shouting at him to get down. Neville was pale, and at twenty feet, his eyes rolled back into his head. He slipped sideways off his broom, and Harry gasped, raising his hand.
With a rush of air, instead of collapsing to the ground, Neville bounced and landed on his arse, inches away from Madam Hooch.

He wailed in pain, holding a palm to his bottom. The crowd surged forward to surround the boy, and Harry tucked away his tinging appendage, expression unchanged. Ron gave him a strange look, which went ignored. Madame Hooch inspected Neville with her wand, hand shaking slightly.

"Bruised tail-bone," Harry heard her mutter. "Could've been worse. Come on, boy, it's all right. Up you get."

As Madame Hooch led him away, Neville walking rather tenderly, Harry could hear Blaise speaking to Draco.

"If she had a wand, why didn't she try and keep him from falling at all?"

Draco shrugged, face pinched with amusement. "Slow reaction time? I don't know, but did you see him bounce?! And his face!"

"Shut up, Malfoy," Parvati Patil crossed her arms.

"Ooh, sticking up for Longbottom?" Pansy teased, smirking cruelly. "Never thought you'd like fat little crybabies, Parvati."

All the Gryffindors scowled, and Ron surged forward. "Why you little bi-"

Hermione gasped at him. "RONALD!" Sensing that intervention was needed, Harry gently turned Ron away from the other Slytherins.

"It's not worth it, Ron," he soothed, Pansy scoffing behind him. "Let's just wait here - "

"Say, what's that?" Draco broke in, snatching something out of the grass. "This looks like a Rememberall, my father has one of these - "

"That's Neville's, give it here, Malfoy!" Ron shoved Harry out of the way, pushing him to the ground. Harry landed harshly next to Hermione. The Gryffindor kindly helped him up and brushed at his robes, clucking at Ron and Draco's immaturity. Harry squirmed away, feeling uncomfortable.

Draco smiled nastily at the redhead, tossing the glass orb between his hands. Unbidden, a little plume of red began expanding, reminding Draco of his promise to Harry earlier that week. Don't be a bully, Harry had said after catching the blonde hexing a Hufflepuff.

Draco glanced between his friend, who was watching on with an expression of severe disappointment, and the red-faced Weasel. "I think I'll leave it somewhere for Longbottom to find," he mused, grabbing his broom. "How about - up a tree?" Draco took off.

He hadn't been lying, he could fly rather well. Hovering just above Ron's head, Draco dangled his foot a foot from Ron's red hair. Ron jumped at him fruitlessly. "Come and get it, Weasley!" he taunted. Ron grabbed his broomstick instantly.

Harry was scowling darkly at them. "Stop it, Ron - you're going to get into trouble,"

The redhead ignored him, and Hermione began shouting shrilly.

"This isn't going to end well," Harry sighed as they watched Ron and Draco chase each other. Draco tossed the Rememberall through the air, the redhead shooting after it. On a better broom, Ron
might've caught it in time, but he was one second too slow. Glass shattered against the side of the
castle, crimson smoking billowing into the redhead's face.

With an enraged yell, he started after Malfoy, only interrupted by a shout of "RONALD
WEASLEY!"

As McGonagall was distracted, Draco set down carefully next to Harry, grinning expectantly. Harry
turned away, his expression carefully controlled. Draco's smile faltered as Severus Snape came
careening into the field, pale cheeks flushing with anger.


That afternoon, Harry was enjoying a meal of chicken and mushroom pie when Draco plopped
down next to him. "You're ignoring me," he pointed out the obvious.

Harry twitched slightly, but otherwise continued chewing his food. Blaise and Theo looked up from
their quiet conversation. "He has every right to ignore you," Blaise spoke, lifting a dark eyebrow.
"You should have been expelled for a stunt like that."

"It was just a joke," Draco tried, and Theodore scowled, sweeping his shoulder-length hair into a
pony.

"Tell that to Neville, who needs a new Rememberall. I do hope Professor Snape is forcing you to
pay for it - from your own allowance, not your Daddy's vault," he added snidely.

"He is," Draco said sullenly, avertting his eyes. "And I'm banned from Quidditch next year, but I'm
sure father will talk him out of it," the blonde nodded to himself, reassured, and reached for the corn.
The other Slytherins sighed in tandem, shaking their heads.

Harry pinched his nose in exasperation, looking up in surprise as Ron entered the Great Hall.

He was sulking, glaring at the Slytherin table with a fair amount of menace. Ron paused for a
moment, considering, before stalking over with a determined gleam in his eyes. Looking concerned,
Seamus, Dean and Neville quickly followed.

"I'm going to murder you, Malfoy," Ron hissed from behind, fists clenched. Draco finished his bite,
wiped his face primly, and turned around. He looked infuriatingly unconcerned, and Ron's eye
began to twitch.

"No, I highly doubt that," Draco asked absently, glancing towards his peers.

Ron glowered, practically shaking from anger.

"I could take you anytime, Malfoy! Tonight, then. Wizard's duel. Wands only - no contact."

Draco thought about it, before drawing himself up smugly. "Accepted. Harry's my second,"

Harry made a noise of protest, looking defeated. "Please, no,"

Pleased that he managed to supersede his friend's silent treatment, Draco acquiesced. "Alright, then,
you'll be our overseer," he assessed the group of Slytherins, noting Blaise and Theo's murderous
expressions. "Crabbe will be my second." Vincent cracked his knuckles. "Whose yours?"

Ron looked around. "Harry?" he asked hopefully.

Sensing danger afoot, Ron quickly changed his mind. "M'kay. Neville's up to a chance at defending his honor, then. Right, mate?" Neville spluttered incoherently.

"Fine," Draco said, sounding bored. "Midnight all right? We'll meet you in the trophy room; that's always unlocked."

The Gryffindors agreed and Blaise stood from the bench momentarily to slap Draco upside the head. "Hey!" Draco yelped.

Blaise sat down with a grim expression. "If this doesn't get you expelled, I don't know what will."

"Merlin, calm down!" Draco snapped, before lowering his voice conspiratorially. "We're not actually going. I was planning leaving Filch an 'anonymous tip' about curfew-breakers in the trophy room," he seemed smug. Blaise stared at him.

"You -" he speared a potato, pointing it at Draco's chest. "- are truly an idiot. Weasley asked you to duel, and you - like an idiot - accepted. Now you're honor-bond to attend. Magic will keep you up all night if you resist. Now, if you had challenged him, well, maybe your little 'plan' would work. But..." Blaise trailed off, his expression speaking for itself.

"You're joking," Draco denied. Theodore and Blaise shook their heads grimly. "You're not joking."

Blaise sniffed. "My mum's a dueling champion, I should know. You know, if you skived on a real duel - instead of some petty spat between two idiots who can hardly hold a wand - you, Crabbe and Harry could all have your magic stripped."

Draco's eyes widened in horror. "Speaking of parents, what would your father say about this, I wonder?" Theo asked, placing a finger to his chin.

"Don't you dare!" Draco spat, standing up. Blaise and Theo laughed uproariously.

Snape was glaring from the head table and Harry nervously tugged Draco down. "It'll be fine, I'm sure," Harry said tentatively.

The two boys shook their heads, saying "Nope" and "Not at all". Draco groaned, placing his head in his hands.

From the Gryffindor table, Ron showed Harry and Draco an obscene gesture, mouthing - "This is war!"


"Shall we just pick one and hope for the best?" Crabbe asked, looking at the tens of moving staircases.

Draco sighed, kneading his forehead. "This, Crabbe, is why you're not in Ravenclaw."

Harry yawned deeply, leaning against a pillar as Draco and Vincent bickered about the fastest way to the trophy room. "You do realize we're late, right? Can you just stop fighting and get moving?" he said idly, rubbing at his eyebrow. Draco stuck out his tongue. "Wow, real mature, Malfoy," Harry scoffed.

The brunette began mentally compiling a list on 'Reasons Why This Was a Really Bad Idea'.
One: It was dark.

Two: Purebloods tend to be cranky when they're tired.

Three: It was the second week of school, and first years find themselves very easily lost.

Four -

The group stiffened as they heard a crash and distant shouts.

"What the absolute hell?" Draco hissed, twisting to look downwards. Careening through the Charms corridor was a floating apparition, bellowing out for Filch and Mrs. Norris.

"STUDENTS OUT OF BED!" Peeves the Poltergeist called. "STUDENTS OUT OF BED, DOWN THE CHARMS CORRIDOR!"

Rushing beneath him was a group of three, one with bright orange hair, one with bushy brown and another with pale umber. "The Gryffindorks!" Crabbe rumbled, looking excited. Taking two steps at a time, the pureblood took a staircase and ran after them.

Draco considered abandoning the fool, but Harry had already taken chase. The blonde sighed. "I dug my own grave, didn't I?"

"You sure did, child," said a matronly portrait. Draco squeaked in surprise and hurried off.

. . .

Harry was pale and shaking, breathing heavily on the green loveseat.

Draco sat beside his friend, holding Harry's hand tightly as Severus painstakingly removed the long, black dog claw from his upper arm. "You boys are lucky to be alive!" the professor was muttering, pressing a wet cloth onto the wound. The bleeding had stopped relatively, but several bandages had already been stained through by the time Draco finally went around to admitting their follies.

The trio - or, rather, as Crabbe was conked out on Severus' recliner - had approached their Head of House at midnight, with a bleeding and nearly catatonic Boy-Who-Lived sagging in Draco's arms.

The three Gryffindors and they had gotten themselves trapped inside the forbidden third-floor corridor, those 'brave lions' fleeing almost immediately at the sight of three dog heads. Draco and Crabbe had nearly followed after, but the Cerberus awoke and . . . well. Apparently, most mythical creatures didn't like the Boy-Who-Lived very much.

"And no wonder why," Severus continued beneath his breath, handing Harry a light blue anti-shock potion. "What creature - beast, human or otherwise - wants to be awoken at the crack of dawn by some wily, dauntless, moronic brat who can't leave well enough alone! Detention with Filch for a week, all of you!"

Draco was wide-eyed and red-faced by the end of this, rubbing his thumb against Harry's palm as the brunette fell into an uneasy sleep.

"Am I correct to assume our esteemed celebrity was the own to talk you into this, Draco?" Severus sneered, washing the blood from his hands.

"It wasn't his fault, Uncle!" Draco insisted. "Harry didn't even want to come - "

"Oh, I'm sure," Severus drawled, unconvinced. "While I'm positive you're just as guilty as he, Draco
- and your father and I will be having a word - just like his father, Potter can't help but go searching for trouble. It must be some faulty gene in his blood, the arrogant, foolhardy brat," he said in disgust, looking down at his red-soaked night shirt.

The blonde huffed, rather irritated at his godfather. "Something must be faulty with you to think Harry is 'arrogant'. I don't understand why you are so against him, he's actually rather nice for celebrity and all - "

"I don't want to talk about this, Draco," Severus warned, waving his wand. Both Harry and Crabbe suddenly floated up, the larger boy snorting in his sleep. Harry's robes slipped off, revealing a skinny body and overly pale skin. Draco bit his lip and gathered their things, dutifully following Severus out of his quarters.

"This is the last time I let your friends in here, Draco," Severus warned. "I trusted you with the password, and I surely hope that neither Crabbe nor Potter were coherent enough to remember it."

Draco scowled. "But it was an emergency!" He protested.

His godfather sneered again. "Yes, and next time one of you idiots get hurt during a Gryffindorish adventure, bother Madam Pomfrey instead. I'm sure Potter'll get the coddling he expects with her," he grimaced.

"Harry doesn't expect coddling at all," Draco murmured, averting his eyes. "We offered to bring him to the Hospital Wing but he refused. Seemed a bit startled that we even asked. I had to practically drag him down here," he added.

"Potter thinks he's too good for medical assistance, then? Too prideful? Typical," Severus said haughtily.

Draco stared, astonished at the complete idiocy of his usually level-headed godparent. "No," he said truthfully. "I just think he's not used to being cared for." The blonde left it at that, knowing a lost cause when he saw one.

They walked to the dorms in silence, although Draco could tell he'd given Severus something to ponder on.

As they reached the common room, Severus bid his godson goodnight. Just then, Draco thought of another question, blurt ing it out before his Uncle could leave. "Uncle Sev? Why was there a trapdoor beneath the Cerberus' feet?"

Severus paused before the stone wall, lifting a hand to pinch his nose. "Goodnight, Draco," he repeated, his tone leaving no room for further discussion.

Cowed, Draco returned the sentiment weakly. Severus left, and the blonde glanced up at his floating friends. Crabbe snored loudly in his sleep, turning midair to slap his hand against Draco's head.

"Now how am I supposed to put you to bed?" he grumbled.

To be continued...
On Halloween morning, they woke to the delicious smell of baking pumpkin wafting through the corridors.

The Slytherins were excited for the Samhain celebrations, voiding one solemn first year who had no reason to be cheerful. Harry was quiet all day, his peers oblivious of the boy's plight as they practiced the levitation spell in Charms.

The students chattered with uncharacteristic mirth as Flitwick bounced objects across the classroom. Theodore was the first to succeed with the charm and Harry was quick to follow, finding a certain ease at manipulating the air to lift his feather.

Crabbe and Goyle were doing surprising well, whereas Pansy somehow managed to set her feather on fire. Pink fire.

Draco was becoming irritated, the edges of his feather fluttering slightly but not complying. "Make the 'gar' in Wingardium nice and long, Mr Malfoy," Flitwick advised, quickly throwing up a shield as Blaise's feather exploded. The dark-skinned boy coughed, ash littering his curly hair.

"Guess that really . . . blew up in your face," Theo joked. Everyone groaned.

On their way down to the Great Hall for the Halloween feast, Harry stopped, sighing.
"I forgot my charms book," he told Draco and Goyle.

Goyle frowned with impatience. "I'm hungry! Come on, you can get it after the feast," the boy whined.

Harry shook his head, already heading back for the classroom. "Just go on ahead, I'll see you there."

Draco lingered, watching Harry's retreating back. Goyle yanked on his arm, already moaning about his rumbling stomach.

A few minutes later, Harry waved goodbye to Flitwick, who was charming away the last of the feather debris. The Slytherin tucked away his textbook, sparing a wary glance to the forbidden third corridor as he passed it. Swearing he could hear a distant growl, Harry shuddered and hurried forward. The scar on his upper arm stung with phantom pain at the memory of six sparkling eyes and razor-sharp claws.

"Oi, Potter!" Came a shout from the Fat Lady's portrait. Harry looked up in surprise, grimacing at the sight of two upperclassmen; Cormac McLaggen and one of his cronies, of whose name Harry had already forgotten. Cormac slid down the stair banister, flipping blonde fringe from his eyes.

"What'ca doing in lion territory?" Cormac asked, crossing his arms in an adequate attempt at intimidation. His arms were thick and Quidditch-toned, his hands calloused and caked with dirt from Herbology. Harry's nose crinkled in disgust.

"It's a public corridor, McLaggen. I have just as much right to be here as you," he drawled, eyeing the other boy with a bit of trepidation. Cormac slid down the stair banister, flipping blonde fringe from his eyes.

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"It's a public corridor, McLaggen. I have just as much right to be here as you," he drawled, eyeing the other boy with a bit of trepidation. "Lee Jordan, right?" Harry asked abruptly, looking to the dark-skinned boy with dreadlocks.

Jordan seemed a bit startled, shifting slightly. "What's it to you?" he muttered darkly, to which Harry responded with a genial smile.

"I'm friends with Ron - you know, the Weasley twins' little brother?" Harry said, green eyes glimmering. Jordan shrugged uncomfortably, looking towards McLaggen.

Cormac sniffed arrogantly. "Right, that Weasley brat. I ought to have a word with him, giving a slimy Slytherin like you our password. What was he thinking? You're just going to stab him in the back like you did with the rest of the wizarding world," he spat, spittle flying.

Harry delicately wiped at his forehead.

Don't take the bait, don't take the bait, don't take the bait, his inner voice was repeating. His inner voice sounded an awful lot like Draco. The worst course of action would be to ignore it - which, of course, he did.

"Whatever do you mean, Cormac?" he asked sweetly, noticing the wand holster on McLaggen's belt. The brunette casually slipped a hand into his robe pocket.

McLaggen scowled. "What, are you stupid as well as evil? You're a bloody snake! You were supposed to be the good guy, defeater of You-Know-Who!" he threw his hands up. "But you're nothing but a slimy, sneaky poof, aren't you? Prancing about with those snooty Death Eaters-in-training, licking their boots and likely sucking their -"

"Cormac!" Lee hissed.

" - just for a chance to get close to that . . . that . . . mother killer!" Cormac screeched, eyes flaring. Harry tensed, breath hitching as the boy towered over him.
"You probably offed You-Know-Who just cause he was your competition! You're nothing but an evil, Dark..." he couldn't finish his sentence, instead lurching forward to tackle the smaller boy. Harry was too slow with his wand, and he flew backward in surprise. Harry gasped in pain, having landed heavily on the stone floor.

Lee was frantically dragging Cormac away, muttering vague admonishments and quiet slurs. Cormac was snarling with anger, grasping for his wand. "Let go of me, Lee, let me - Ossis Effergo!" he spat out. A dark blue jet of light rushed toward Harry, who instinctively lifted his arm in a defensive motion.

The young boy cried out in pain as the bones shattered in his right forearm, a sizable snap echoing across the near-abandoned stairwell.

Lee dropped Cormac like a dead weight, swearing loudly. "You moron, you just hexed the Boy-Who-Lived!" He snapped, backing away quickly. Cormac blanched, staring at the pale and trembling boy gasping on the ground.

"Fuck," the Gryffindor muttered, scrambling for his wand. "Don't you dare speak a word of this, Jordan!" he said, aiming between Harry's bright, terrified eyes.

The last thing the Slytherin heard before his world turned into a blurred haze was a quiet, but firm - "Confundo."

Harry shuddered, his green eyes glazing over before rolling back into his skull.

. . .

"This is brilliant," Crabbe exclaimed around a mouthful of candied ham.

The first years nodded in agreement, tongues nearly wagging as they took a second helping of pumpkin pie. Goyle licked the sugar off his fingers, making a horrific lip-smacking sound. "Good thing Harry's not here," he said idly. "More food for me."

Draco looked up from his plate, eyes wide. "Shite," he whispered. "Where is Harry?"

With the enchanted holiday-appropriate decorations, cacophonous music and table full of goodies, Draco had forgotten all about the small Slytherin he'd left wandering the halls of Hogwarts - he checked his pocket watch - about twenty minutes ago.

Blaise lifted an eyebrow. "It's All Hallows' Eve, Draco. He probably doesn't feel like celebrating, much." At a table of blank looks, he sighed. "Merlin, overindulgence really does dull the senses. Honestly, what could Halloween possibly mean to Harry Potter, starting about - oh, I don't know - ten years ago?"

"Oh." Draco suddenly flushed.

Theo snickered. "'Oh' is right, my friend."

From across the table, Goyle's brow furrowed. "I don't get it."

Feeling merciful, Daphne Greengrass tried to help. "His parents - " she started softly.

"What about his parents?" Crabbe broke in. "Aren't they at home?"

A group of first-years scowled at him. "How dull can you get? They're dead!" Draco hissed. "Are
you simply daft, or have you been living under a rock for eleven years?"

Crabbe blinked. "You've been to my house, Draco."

Everyone exchanged looks. "Sugar must be the explanation," Theo muttered to Blaise, who pushed away his plate.

Shaking her head, Daphne took a sip of milk. "Harry probably just needs some time to mourn," she told Draco reassuringly.

The blonde clenched his teeth. "Well, he shouldn't be alone with his thoughts! That would be incredibly dangerous! Don't you guys know a thing about Harry?"

Theo rolled his eyes. "Merlin, leave it be, Malfoy. I'm sure he's fine."

Draco looked disgruntled. "I just have a bad feeling, is all."

His gaze suddenly snapped to the Hall doors as they opened, revealing two stunned and bedraggled-looking Gryffindors. Draco might've dismissed their presence entirely if not for the anxious glances they sent both Slytherin House and the Head Table. Draco straightened his back, watching as they paid particular focus to the empty space between himself and Crabbe.

Swearing beneath his breath, Draco searched through his robes for a spare piece of parchment. "Anyone have a quill?" he called out, receiving several strange looks and responses in the negative. Typical, Draco sighed. Slytherins hate to share.

Just as Crabbe craned his head to bite the nib off a Sugar Quill, Draco snatched it out of his hands. Grimacing at the stickiness, he gestured for the small bowl of raspberry turkey sauce. Draco sighed in resignation, dipping the quill and flattening his parchment.

A few moments later, Ron at the Gryffindor table was interrupted from his gormless devouring of a Cauldron Cake by a holiday-appropriate origami bat smacking into his head. From across the Hall, Draco smirked and twitched his wand, causing the bat to prod the Weasel's skull repeatedly.

With an irritated growl, Ron snatched it out of the air, tearing the paper open with little care. The other Gryffindors leaned in to read, their lips twisting into expressions of mutual dislike.

'Weasel -

Ask the other Gryffindorks if they've seen Harry. He's been missing for nearly a half-hour and some of your 'little friends' look awfully suspicious. I understand that, collectively, your House has the attention span of a flea, but do try and be prompt. It could be a matter of life and death.

Cheers,

You-Know-Who'

Needless to say, Draco thought himself terribly clever.

"Drama queen," Ron muttered to himself.

"Are you gonna respond?" Seamus asked. The redhead shrugged.

"As much as I hate the slippery bastard, if he's actually concerned about Harry then something must be wrong. Ask around, then," Ron prompted. Soft chatter sounded around the table, a few students
craning their necks to see a sneering Malfoy (caramel uncharacteristically smeared across his chin), but no sign of the usually demure Boy-Who-Lived.

"Anyone have something to write with?" Ron asked the crowd minutes later.

Dean lifted a hand, pulling from his pocket an odd plastic stick with the letters 'BiC' on the side. "I've got a pen," he said cheerfully, clicking the button. The purebloods around him startled, as if expecting it to explode.

Ron stared at the muggle-born in complete bewilderment before turning to Percy. "Quill, please." The prefect promptly produced a feather and inkwell from who-knows-where, handing them to his brother without a word. The redhead quickly penned -er, quilled - his response, turning to Malfoy with a shrug.

The Slytherin mimed the 'swish-and-flick' movement with his butter knife, wearing an 'are you a wizard or not?' expression. Ron scowled, but dutifully dug out his wand.

It took several embarrassing attempts, but after dropping the note into a glass of Lisa Turpin's pumpkin juice at the Ravenclaw Table, the girl swiftly hand-delivered it to Draco. "Sometimes, the Muggle way is easier," the muggle-born told him quietly, before wiping her pumpkin juice soaked hand on Draco's twenty-galleon robes.

While Draco gaped at the muggleborn, the Ravenclaw prefect awarded Lisa a handful of points for 'sheer gall' and 'an iron set of balls'.

Huffing indignantly, Draco peeled open the orange-stained paper. The Weasel's penmanship was horrid.

'Ferret Face -

Weren't you just in class with him? I know Harry's rather small, but how in the name of Merlin could you lose the Boy-Who-Lived?!

If he was in Gryffindor, we wouldn't need to be worrying about stuff like this. Gryffindors stick with their own. Anyways, no one has seen him, but Lavender says Hermione is missing too - ' Draco scoffed at the blatant hypocrisy. 'Maybe they're together?' The letter finished.

The blonde looked like he was about to fly into a rage at the very thought. He slammed the parchment down and was about to angrily reply when Professor Quirrell came sprinting into the Hall, his turban askew and terror plain on his face.

Draco's stomach sunk.

. . .

Harry splashed his face, staring in the bathroom mirror. His arm hurt like hell, and he could hardly move it - but Harry was used to pain.

The pale skin was swelling, turning purple, but the real problem was that Harry had no idea what caused it.

The last thing he remembered was waking up in the middle of a dark corridor, rising to his feet shakily before getting the sudden urge to vomit. He had hurried to the nearest loo and bent over a toilet, nearly oblivious to the soft sobs that echoed from the Girl's Bathroom across the hall.
Harry watched in his reflection as silent tears fell slowly, tasting salt and blood in his mouth.

He felt as though he should be doing something important, but he couldn't remember what. Sliding to the ground, Harry cradled his injured arm and stared listlessly up at the ceiling, trying to make sense of his swirling thoughts.

Suddenly, a foul stench reached his nostrils.

Harry gagged, jolting up in recognition.

*Troll,* some part of him realized, flashing back to an... *incident* during a primary school field trip to a meat factory. Harry shuddered at the memory of decapitated limbs, and began crawling back slowly upon hearing muffled thumps outside his door. Not even considering why a *bloody fucking troll was at Hogwarts,* Harry ducked behind a stall door, holding his breath.

The smell nearly overwhelmed him as a great green skull ducked through the bathroom door, the troll's nostrils flaring. Harry pressed himself back into the wall, his arm twinging slightly. He bit back a gasp of pain, and the troll growled deeply.

"Demigod," it seemed to grunt, ducking into the bathroom. Harry swore, grappling for his wand.

Just then, the door slammed shut, locking them in. Hearing muffled breaths of relief and a short conversation from outside the chambers, Harry sighed, before shouting "WHOEVER THE *FUCK* JUST LOCKED MY ONLY EXIT HAD BETTER HOPE THE TROLL KILLS ME BEFORE I KILL YOU!"

He heard two twin gasps from outside the chambers, and Harry ducked just in time as the troll swung it's club.

..."Is it dead?" It was Draco who spoke first, voice timid.

"I don't think so," Harry responded in an out-of-breath way, leaning back against the wall. "It's just been knocked out."

Ron was staring in shock at the wand in his hand; the weapon of destruction used to levitate the troll's club onto it's head. Harry was quite proud of the Gryffindor, knowing that he made the right decision in gaining Ron's loyalty.

A sudden slamming and loud footsteps made the three of them look up. They hadn't realized what a racket they had been making, but of course, someone downstairs must have heard the crashes and the troll's roars. Moments later, Professor McGonagall had come bursting into the room, closely followed by Snape and Quirrell.

Their poor excuse of a Defense teacher took one look at the troll, let out a faint whimper and scrabbled at his chest. "Wimp," Draco muttered, earning a sharp glare from his best friend, who was clutching at his broken arm.

Professor Snape crouched over the troll, prodding it's neck with his wand. By his pressed lips and glowering expression, the man clearly didn't trust himself to speak.

"What on earth were you thinking of?" said Professor McGonagall, with cold fury in her voice. Harry flinched slightly. "If not for Miss Granger and Prefect Weasley's warnings, you three might have been *killed!* Why aren't you in your dormitories?"
Ron looked at Draco, who shrugged slightly.

"They were looking for me, Professor," Harry said quietly, pulling himself up. "I... wasn't at the feast because - " he faltered. Harry felt faint again, the words dying on his tongue. Why can't I remember? he wondered.

Draco thought quickly, before coming up beside him and pulling Harry into a tight grasp. "Don't you know what day this is, Professor?" the blonde hissed, his attitude causing the Transfiguration teacher to jolt back. "How in the world could you expect Harry to celebrate on the day his parents died?"

Harry sucked in a breath. That's what I had forgotten, he thought to himself, tears springing in his eyes. Or, at least part of it.

McGonagall's expression softened, while Snape's seemed to harden.

"You... you're correct, Mr Malfoy. We should have realized Mr Potter's absence from the Feast was not without reason. Regardless, that doesn't explain what you and Mr Weasley were doing fighting a troll after being specifically told to stay in your dormitories." Ron and Draco shared a guilty look. "I might've expected it from you, Mr Malfoy, but I'm ashamed at you, Mr Weasley!" she turned on the redhead, while Draco and his godfather scoffed in unison.

"If they hadn't found me in time, I'd be dead now, Professor," Harry cut in, lifting his watery gaze. "Draco distracted the troll while Ron knocked it out with its own club. They didn't have time to come and fetch anyone. It was about to finish me off when they arrived."

Ron and Draco tried to look as though this story wasn't new to them.

"Well - in that case..." McGonagall stammered, staring at the three of them. "I still say you were lucky, as not many first years could have taken on a full-grown mountain troll. You each win five points for your respective houses," Snape gave his colleague a disapproving scowl. "However, I daresay your par - guardians, that is, might have a few things to say on this.

"Mr Weasley, with me. I believe you owe Miss Granger an apology for your actions this morning. Quirrell, take care of the troll," she told the quivering professor. "I'll send Hagrid to assist." As the two Gryffindors exited, Draco and Harry lingered behind, avoiding the heat of Snape's glare on them.

The professor began quietly, his body almost unnaturally still. "In all my years of teaching dunderheads like you, never have I seen such foolhardy, thoughtless - " Snape grasped Draco and Harry by their robes, dragging them out of the bathroom.

Harry gasped in pain, his arm jostling. Severus fixed his beady eyes onto the swollen appendage, his lips twisting into something nasty.

"Managed to injure yourself again, Potter? How you two find yourselves in such situations, I shall never know - and I don't think I should endeavor to find out. It would cause far too many sleepless nights," he sighed, pushing his students toward the dungeon staircase. "I'd give you both detention again, but Merlin knows you won't learn your lesson. Both of you, just like your fathers; Lucius was a cheeky little brat, too."

Draco looked oddly proud.

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Early November, 1991
Half a week after the troll had been disposed of, Lee Jordan had mustered all of his Gryffindor courage and revealed to Professor McGonagall that he and Cormac had been partially the cause of Harry's absence at the Halloween feast.

The Transfiguration teacher had been astonished at the actions of her Gryffindors, and had petitioned to have McLaggen expelled.

The headmaster was far too lenient in both Minerva and Severus' opinions, instead giving Lee a week's worth of detention and Cormac a month. Cormac's Quidditch privileges were also revoked, much to Gryffindor team's outcry.

Ron and Draco thought this punishment awfully lax, considering they had received nearly the same punishment for hopping onto a broomstick earlier that year - McLaggen had actually broken the Boy-Who-Lived, and then stolen away Harry's coherence within the same breath.

Hermione had taught them that the Confundus could be used in many situations, but 'had the potential to confuse a person to the point at which they endanger themselves'. If Harry had been any less sharp-witted during the troll attack, he might've died - or, at the very least, been ruthlessly maimed.

Lee had been apologetic to the small first year, explaining that Cormac's mother had died during a raid on Halloween 1989, tortured to death by - supposedly - Malfoy Senior. Upon noticing that Harry and Draco were practically attached at the hip, McLaggen had felt fiercely betrayed by the boy who had 'saved the wizarding world'.

Harry was unsure whether to feel sympathetic or not. He didn't quite the remember their attack, but he did remember the night's worth of Skele-Grow he was forced to take for the broken arm. He accepted Lee's apology, but had to make Draco and Ron swear not to seek revenge on Cormac.

The Boy-Who-Lived really didn't need any more enemies.

Late December, 1991

So, Ron and Hermione were friends now.

It was an odd sort of relationship, spurred by Ron's brave but gormless attempt making amends after causing Hermione to cry on Halloween. Hermione was oddly receptive to the apology, and Harry suspected she was a bit desperate for companionship.

_Harry knew what that felt like, probably better than anyone._

The two Gryffindors sat by each other in the library, bickering softly over a bit of Astronomy homework. "No, Ron - just listen. See, when Venus is at quarter phase, the sun is - for Merlin's sake, stop chewing on your thumbnail. That's disgusting," Hermione hissed, slapping away Ron's hand.

Harry watched them in bemusement, tapping his quill incessantly against a book on 'famous innovators in Wizarding history'; he'd borrowed it from Draco, who stole it from Snape. Harry wasn't a fan of the tiny print and swirling font, but Draco had insisted he read it - especially the chapter on famous alchemists. In blank ink, a small passage had been circled several times. Harry didn't think much about it, but Draco clearly thought it of import.

"Here, check through these," the blonde returned to their table, dumping an armful of books before Harry. His green eyes widened, before shutting quickly to block an emerging headache. "Don't act like that," Draco admonished, sitting down primly. "I just know Severus wouldn't have left this book
out if it wasn't for me to find it. I'm the only one he lets into his chambers!"

Harry sighed, grabbed the closest book. "What am I reading about, again?" he asked, flipping to the chapter index.

"Just look for any mention of the name 'Flamel'," Draco said patiently. "They ought to be in here somewhere."

... 

"I do feel really sorry," Draco whispered during a Potion's class. "I tried convincing my parents to bring you home with us, but mother thinks you're a bad influence," Draco gave a little smirk. "If anything, I'm the one influencing you. Anyways, I suppose you're going to stay at school, then?" he asked, choosing not to add 'since I know you're not really wanted at home.'

Harry frowned, carefully measuring out powdered spine of lionfish for their Herbicide Potion. "Yeah. The Dursleys don't want me, and I'm not their biggest fan either," he said coolly, not taking his eyes off the potion in front of him. Just as Harry was about to drop a coupling of herbs into the mix, Draco stopped his hand, ignoring the brunette's surprised flinch.

"That's way too many sprigs, Harry" He said softly, removing the spare herbs and dropping them to the table. Harry pushed away the instructions and kneaded his forehead, feeling slightly dizzy. Draco eyed him with worry. "Sit down for a moment," the blonde advised, glancing up to see his godfather's back turned. "You're really smart Harry, I don't understand why you have such trouble - "

"I have dyslexia," Harry said quietly. Draco looked at him, confused. "It's a Muggle thing; ask Hermione," he waved his hand dismissively. "But it just means that I can't read very well sometimes, I'm easily distracted and I have trouble with the dumbest things - " Harry was getting frustrated, pressing his fists against his eyes.

Draco was getting concerned, pausing to stare at his - unquestionably - best friend . . . ever.

It was needless to say that Draco was terribly spoiled as a child. The boy was often given food or toys to quell his temper, instead of a time-out, spanking or 'a talking to'. His godfather was the only one to show Draco discipline, and taught him that 'in the real world, there will be consequences for his actions'.

If Draco's parents were't so invested in 'mending the family name', Lucius and Narcissa might have been good parents.

In Draco's youth, his most common playmate was Dobby the house-elf, who had been in charge of 'Young Master Malfoy' during the days. At night, his mother would return from her chambers and his father from who-knows-where to share a quiet dinner with their son before going to bed. Draco was the only one to talk during these dinners, his parents watching on fondly as their only son regaled them with tales of building block towers and reading an entire bookshelf in one evening.

He hadn't had many friends growing up, instead being forced to play nice with the children of family allies. Crabbe and Goyle - if they deigned to get off their fat arses - were tolerable enough, although Draco could only last so long in their presence before he could feel his intelligence dropping.

As Draco was forced into tutoring and whatnot, he was introduced to Theodore Nott and Blaise Zabini. Upon his father's insistence that the two would be good allies, Draco tried to make nice with the two pureblood heirs. Both boys had Neutral-aligned parents, implying that once at Hogwarts
they'd be most likely to slip under Dumbledore's radar. Useful as that was for the son of an ex-Death Eater, unfortunately, Draco could sense that neither pureblood boy could tolerate his pomposity and attitude.

After several months at Hogwarts (and a few grueling detentions to boot), Draco realized he was kind of a brat; and from the way he had acted at Madam Malkin's on Harry's birthday, he was amazed the younger boy hadn't smacked him upside the head. He was just glad that Harry was so damned nice.

Draco had been raised on stories of the Boy-Who-Lived, the mysterious savior of Britain and the vanquisher of the Dark Lord. Draco half expected Harry to be just another stuck up and boastful celebrity (cough, Lockhart, cough), but the Malfoy scion was unpleasantly surprised to notice that Harry was neither pampered nor arrogant in the least. He was so damned small, and - on a bad day - more introverted than the quietest Hufflepuff. Clearly, something wasn't quite right with the young wizard, but hey; if the Light-side's poster boy was willing to be friends with a Malfoy, Draco wouldn't pry . . . too much.

Harry was the one to teach Draco that dropping his father's name and throwing about insults wasn't the way to make friends, remaining fiercely loyal despite Draco's tantrums and lack of impulse control. (Sometimes, to be honest, Harry thought that Draco would've fit in better in gold and crimson.)

Harry's childhood was very different to Draco's, but oddly similar in the way they'd both hardly been raised. Draco had been blinded by luxury and comfort his entire life, while Harry had been constantly belittled and neglected, forced into an unemotional shell to save his life.

Most Slytherins had masks, but none were quite as good as Harry's.

Neither boy was allowed to make emotional connections, having been taught that they were either 'too good' compared to someone or 'not good enough'. But in each other, Draco and Harry could find the comfort and care they'd always dreamt of, and be accepted despite their family names, blood purity, temperaments and faults.

With that in mind, so not to startle the boy, Draco slowly grasped Harry's hand. "Stop frowning, you'll get wrinkles," Draco whispered, brushing a piece of hair out of Harry's eyes. Turning back to the cauldron, he grasped Harry's textbook and propped it up, passing over a spoon and a handful of Flobberworm mucus. "Here, let me help you. I'll read the instructions and you can prepare the ingredients."

Harry smiled in gratitude, but at the sight of the lingering frustration in his green eyes, Draco vowed to research this 'diss-lex-ya' - if only to help his friend have an easier time of it. It was the least Draco could do for the boy who'd taught him real friendship.

To be continued . . .
December 22nd thru December 24th, 1991

During his four months stay under Professor Snape's care, Harry slowly became aware that despite the man's shrewd exterior and surly attitude, Snape cared very much for his Slytherins. While the man certainly didn't coddle them like Professor Sprout with the 'Puffs or allowed his students to get away with a lot of shite, Snape showed his affection in different ways.

It was no secret that Snape favored the Slytherins in his class, but outside of school hours, the man could also be found working with the upperclassman in seeking career and academic options, as well as assisting the younger students with their homework and homesickness, or - on the rare occasion - teaching them spells.

Due to the dungeons being only a few degrees above freezing, on the first day of the Yule holidays, a note could be found beside each remaining Slytherin's pillow, describing in vivid detail the strongest, longest lasting, easily adjustable warming spell their Head of House could create. Harry had utilized it immediately, his ever-present chills and puffs of steamy breath abating quickly as he hurried up to the Great Hall to meet with Ron.

The days leading up to Christmas had come and gone faster than Harry had expected, the holiday thankfully lacking of what Draco called 'drama' or other injury-causing incidents. Snape, thankful for the reprieve, had even spared Harry a small nod of greeting during breakfast one day.

In spite of their original animosity, the man had marginally warmed up to the boy celebrity, due to the efforts of both Severus' godson and Harry's own unerring lack of recalcitrance. Their companionship had been particularly strengthened by Draco's incessant meddling; almost
immediately after revealing his ailment, Draco was quick to drag Harry into Severus' office, begging the man to assist with Harry's dyslexia.

The man had been surprised, to say the most.

After assuring the validity of Draco's statement, Snape had been strangely accommodating - although he did scold Harry for not informing his teachers of his disability earlier. Harry was sheepish, reluctantly revealing that he wasn't used to anyone caring that his grades were poor.

With the thought of the late Mr. Luther in mind, Harry was almost afraid to get close to another adult again; but, as expected, his worries were for naught.

During the evenings, Severus brought out some very familiar books for Harry to skim through, forcing the boy to practice his reading and recognition skills. You must remember that Harry had spent nearly three years out of school - tutoring and textbooks only did so much.

In anticipation of these headache-filled nights, Harry spent his days being stolen away to Gryffindor tower, having the best holiday of his life. Although, in hindsight, that didn't say very much.

Upon rebuking Fred and George's many attempts at starting snowball fights - some of them even indoors - Harry and Ron found solace in the common room, the redhead excited to teach Harry chess. Unfortunately, the boy was complete pants at it. Harry amused himself with their good-natured bickering and competition, relaxing into the stuffed chaise with a long sigh as the borrowed chess pieces shouted at him to 'cease his stalling'.

Despite the noise, it was very easy for Harry to ignore Ron's chatter and the sentient strategy game; the Gryffindor common room was quite different from it's Slytherin counterpart, warm and inviting with it's ever present fire and crimson decorations. Harry often found himself lulled into a pleasant languor, a state that was marginally unavailable in the cold, lifeless dungeons.

Ron was oddly smug whenever Harry felt comfortable enough to fall asleep, although the redhead always woke him up in time for Snape's nightly lessons.

Harry wasn't ashamed to borrow Ron's red and gold scarf down into the dungeons, although he received many indulgent sighs and exasperated eye-rolls from the Slytherin upperclassman and their Head of House.

Unknown to Harry, very time he spotted that striped neckwear, Severus was painfully reminded of another lionhearted, clever, green eyed child. Severus wasn't oblivious to the boy's uncanny resemblance to his childhood friend, and he was probably the only teacher sharp enough to notice Harry's complete lack of likeness to James Potter. Although it undoubtedly relieved him, it also brought up far more questions than Severus was willing to handle.

On the night of Christmas Eve, Harry gratefully settled into his four-poster bed, a pounding headache quickly abating as his head hit the feathered pillow.

He was surrounded by silence, as Blaise and Draco had both returned home for Christmas. It was a bit strange not to hear Blaise's snores or Draco's bed creaking as the picky blonde tried to get comfortable, and Harry found himself . . . missing them? How odd.

Harry found himself becoming acclimated to comforts and commodities - like friendship, and an actual bed - that a year ago, Harry never dreamed he'd have access to. The Dursleys had taught him how not to take things for granted, how to avoid hoping for better, and yet, during his very short time
at Hogwarts, a childhood's worth of neglect and belittlement had gone to waste.

Harry now knew that magic existed, that a freak like himself could be happy; and all he could ask for Christmas was for his reality to stay that way.

The Boy-Who-Lived never expected that he could find a home, a true family, and he was almost afraid that one day he'd awaken from this wonderful dream and be back in the cupboard under the stairs. He was often surprised in the mornings, awoken not by Petunia's shrill voice and a sharp tapping, but instead Blaise and Draco's meaningless bickering.

Sometimes, Harry felt the sudden need for someone to pinch him, just to assure him it was all still real. Draco took his odd request in stride, not asking questions but instead smirking at Harry's startled expression, which would always be followed by a sigh of relief.

Eventually, Harry knew he would return to the Dursleys - return to the oppression, the pain, the hunger, the darkness - but for now, he allowed himself to be content.

Burrowing beneath his blankets, Harry fell asleep with a small smile on his face, not expecting presents the next morning but merely anticipating a future full of love and friendship that he had once only dreamt of. Harry would never forget his past as Freak, but at least his future had a glimmer of light to look forward too:

He was sure of it.

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**December 25th, 1991**

"Oh. My. God(s)," Harry muttered, tentatively sliding his feet to the cold stone floor.

He ignored the chill, tentatively tying on his robe as he stared at the small pile of wrapped . . . things at the end of his bed. Harry lifted a hand to his mouth, looking around just to make sure no one else was around. He reached a trembling hand to the first parcel, which was wrapped in thick brown paper. Written in a jerky scrawl was the words 'To Harry, from Hagrid'.

Harry unwrapped it carefully, almost reverently. Inside was a roughly cut wooden flute, obviously whittled by the half-giant himself. Tears springing into his eyes. Harry lifted it to his lips - it let out a strange call, often heard up in the Owlery.

Harry was immensely glad that he'd the foresight to send the Groundskeeper a present of his own. It hadn't been anything fancy, merely a stiffened parchment with the image of a hand-drawn troll, banging it's club systematically against the ground. Harry had asked an upperclassman to charm it, making the troll grunt the lyrics to 'The Gloucestershire Wassail'.

Harry thought Hagrid would enjoy it, although, staring at the handmade flute, Harry wondered if it was enough. Next year, he vowed to buy Hagrid a new crossbow or pelt, something of the like.

He took his time opening his next presents, getting tearful all over again as he opened Draco's photo album, Chocolate Frogs from Ron, *Hogwarts, A History* from Hermione and small gifts from Neville, Crabbe, Blaise, Daphne and several other Slytherin first-years. Thankful once more for the presents he'd handed out before holiday began, Harry deposited the new treasures into his trunk, a deep warmth within him fighting the dungeon's chill.

As he debated sneaking a bit of chocolate before breakfast, Harry jerked as a crimson-wrapped parcel suddenly popped onto his bed covers, a large eared house-elf bowing slightly before disappearing. Letting out a calming breath, Harry shuffled on his knees to touch the gift.
He unwrapped it carefully, eyes widening as he felt the soft, silvery gray material. It lay gleaming on the green blanket, a small note tucked beneath one of the thin folds. Written in narrow, loopy writing that caused his eyes to burn were the following words:

*Your father left this in my possession before he died.*

*It is time it was returned to you.*

*Use it well. A Very Merry Christmas to you.*

There was no signature.

Harry stood, lifting the cloak so that it brushed the tops of his toes. Recognizing the design and color, Harry gaped in amazement.

"Draco would be so jealous," he muttered, wrapping the Invisibility Cloak around him. As Harry turned toward the wall mirror, he found himself surprised to see naught but a floating head bobbing midair as he breathed.

It's quality must have been very good for Harry's father to have owned it. According to Draco, most Invisibility Cloaks didn't last long due to the temperament of Demiguise hair, which eventually turned opaque and lost it's invisibility effects as time passed. The blonde had been whining for weeks about his father's cloak, which had apparently worn out before he could inherit it.

Thinking of his own father, Harry felt very strange wearing a dead man's cloak. He removed it quickly, deciding he'd test it later.

As Harry began cleaning up the wrappings, he found a very tiny parcel peeking out from beneath his bed. His brow furrowed upon reading the note attached. *We received your message and enclose your Christmas present. From, Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia.*

Harry hadn't sent his relatives any message, having doubts that they'd appreciate being bothered during the holiday season. Guessing that protocol caused his Head of House to send word of Harry's stay, he unwrapped the gift tentatively, as if expecting explosives.

Inside, there was a small box made of velvet, likely once holding woman's earrings. Harry was instantly suspicious.

He clicked the box opened and dropped it quickly, as though it burnt him. Within the box was a newspaper snippet, a tiny picture of - a then alive - Christopher Luther, ex-primary school teacher and Harry's first confidante staring up at him.

After regaining his bearings, Harry pinched a corner of the clipping, tears running free down his face. Grappling for his wand, Harry concentrated for a moment before casting the engorgement charm. The picture lengthened to the size of his hand, after which Harry placed into his brand new photo album.

Draco had said it was for 'new memories', but sometimes old ones deserved to be commemorated, too.

"I'll never forget you," Harry said quietly, pressing his fingers to Mr. Luther's genial smile. The man had died a few weeks before Christmas; the Dursleys might have been trying to be cruel, but instead they had only reminded Harry of what he was fighting for. A future, like what Mr. Luther had been trying to give him.
Harry wouldn't let the dead man's efforts go to waste.

Scrubbing his eyes and shutting the album, Harry's eyes eventually drifted to the innocent looking fabric glinting from within his trunk.

First things first; he wanted to test the efficiency of James Potter's so-called 'Invisibility Cloak'.

... 

Harry quickly realized that there wasn't much point in 'sneaking around invisible' without the tiniest amount of risk involved. During the day, the students were free to wander as they pleased. At night, however, many possibilities awaited him.

After a grueling lesson with Professor Snape, who had groused the entire time about his Christmas evening being 'ruined' - that is, until Harry presented the man with a brand-new set of crystal vials, bought by owl-order - Harry was very tired. However, remembering the Cloak, he suddenly felt quite awake. The whole of Hogwarts was open to him, secret passages and forbidden corridors - okay, perhaps not the forbidden corridor. Harry wasn't that reckless.

Excitement flooded through him as he cast Snape's warming charm and slipped the Cloak over his shoulders.

Harry crept out of the Slytherin dorms, blushing slightly as he saw two upperclassman draped over each other on the emerald green divan, breathing hotly. He hastened his footsteps, knowing that they were too involved with each other to hear him hurry past.

Harry was unsure, at first, where to go. Reminded of Draco's thoughtful present, Harry decided to do his friend a favor and research the Restricted Section for that 'Flamel' fellow.

According to Draco's daily letters, Lucius and Narcissa weren't particularly forthcoming with an answer. He'd asked them in the least subtle way possible, blurring the question during one quiet evening. They acted very suspicious, apparently, his father choking on his tea before hustling out of the room for 'Ministry business'. Draco's mother had merely given the boy a sly smile before changing the subject to Quidditch, which everyone knows is Draco's vice.

Very suspicious, indeed.

The library was pitch-black and very eerie in the middle of the night. Harry debating lighting a lamp to see his way along the rows of books, but instead cast a dim Lumos, hoping the artificial light wouldn't attract any attention.

The Restricted Section was in the very the back of the library, near where Harry and his friends usually studied. Stepping carefully over the rope that half-heartedly blocked his way, Harry aimed his wand at the book spines. They didn't seem to be in any particular order, nor did their titles reveal much about the contents.

The hairs on the back of Harry's neck pricked as he heard a faint whispering coming from the books, similar to that of a serpent hissing. He couldn't catch the words, and was uncertain if he wanted to.

Harry spared a glance backwards before removing the cloak, crouching to check along the bottom shelf. A large black and silver volume caught his eye, and despite the warnings ringing in the back of his head, Harry balanced the tomb on his knee and peeled it open. A piercing, bloodcurdling shriek split the silence, a tortured face arching out of the pages.
Horrified, Harry slammed it shut, the sound echoing in his ears. Why would they have books like that in a school?!

Harry stiffened as he heard footsteps coming, silently damning his idiocy and lack of caution. He replaced the book, shuddering in memory of the scream, and ducked back beneath the Cloak. He passed Filch in the doorway, the caretaker's cursed pet sniffing suspiciously at his feet.

Holding his breath, Harry slipped past them and vanished up the corridor. The darkness overwhelming him, Harry quickly found himself lost. He came to a sudden halt in front of a tall suit of armor, wiping a sweaty hand at his mouth.

"You asked me to come directly to you, Professor, if anyone was wandering around at night. Just now, somebody's been in the library Restricted Section," Harry heard a scratchy voice from directly behind him. Filch was fast, he'd give him that.

Harry ducked behind the armor, glaring at it slightly - just daring it to reveal his position - although knowing the suit couldn't see him.

A familiar voice replied, a tinge of exasperation in his tone. "The Restricted Section? Well, they can't be far. We'll catch them," Snape assured, his smooth voice echoing through the narrow corridor.

Harry backed away as quietly as he could, spotting an open door just to his left.

He squeezed through it, and to his relief he managed to get inside the room without their noticing anything. Reckless, foolish, rash - Snape's voice admonished in Harry's head. Harry leaned against the wall as he listened to their footsteps dying away.

Well. That had been an experience, Harry thought sardonically, once the adrenaline had worn off.

Harry straightened his back, looking about the empty classroom he solely occupied. The dark shapes of desks and chairs were piled against the walls, an upturned wastepaper basket sitting only a few feet away.

What drew his attention, however, was the large, ornate mirror that seemed very out of place. It was tall, nearly as high as the ceiling, with an ornate gold frame standing on two clawed feet. There was an inscription carved around the top: Erised stra ehru oyt ube cafru oyt on wohsi.

Harry's eyes crossed as he tried to decipher it, before shaking his head and focusing on his reflection. Despite wearing the Invisibility Cloak, Harry could very clearly see himself standing in the mirror, surrounded by several hazy images that shifted and moved sporadically. Stepping forward, Harry gasped in surprise as the images sharpened, revealing two figures standing right behind him.

After turning slowly to assure he was alone, Harry moved to touch the glass, green eyes fixed on another pair of tearful emerald orbs. Standing directly behind him (in the mirror), was a beautiful woman with long, crimson hair and a brilliant smile. She waved at him weakly, reaching out to press her fingers against Harry's. The boy so wished to overcome that thin piece of glass between them, joyful tears slipping from his eyes as he looked to the laid-back looking man beside her.

Harry's brows furrowed as he stared between the woman and the man, looking at the wedding rings shared between them. Glancing at himself, Harry could see many a similarities with himself and the pretty lady, but very few with the man. Despite the dark hair and glasses - which Harry only received due to 'retina damage', damn his Aunt Petunia's prowess at swinging frying pans - Harry was unsure if they were even related. Was this his father?

"Mum?" he mouthed to the woman. She nodded silently, placing a hand on reflection-Harry's
shoulder. He half expected to feel the ghost of touch on his arm, and found himself sorely disappointed.

The man - James Potter, he assumed - smiled solemnly at the pair before stepping out of the mirror, hurt jolting through Harry's chest. Lily squeezed his shoulder reassuringly, and Harry looked at his reflection. A silver trail of tears were sliding down his cheeks, his cheeks flushed slightly with emotion. On a random urge, Harry swiped away his fringe, abruptly noticing his pale, blemish-free forehead.

"Oh," Harry's mouth parted as a few new figures stepped forward, looking exceedingly happier than his mother. Draco leaned down to settle his chin against Harry's other shoulder, giving the small boy a beaming smile. The Malfoy scion looked older, his hair longer, the curly blonde strands free from Draco's usual excessive amounts of hair gel.

Harry gave a tentative smile back, looking past his friend to several others - Ron, Hermione, a few other mates, and even Crabbe and Goyle. In the far back, Harry was surprised to see the foreboding form of Professor Snape, eyeing the crowd with his usual condescending sneer. Harry wiggled his fingers in greeting, earning an eye roll and an unmistakably fond smile from the man.

The Boy-Who-Lived began to feel warm all over, his Cloak slipping off as he fell to his knees. He pressed both hands hard into the mirror and stared deeply, as if sheer exertion of will could force the looking glass to envelop him. So intent on his mother's glimmering eyes and Draco's solid presence beside him, Harry was blind to the growing storm clouds gathering, and a pair of sparkling, sky-blue eyes, staring down at him:

From within the mirror.

To be continued . . .
Chapter Five

Early January, 1992

("Not Harry, not Harry, please, not Harry . . . " the red-haired lady pleaded desperately, the mirror glinting briefly to reveal a scared little boy with a scarred forehead.

Hands pounded against glass as her executioner sneered nastily. "Stand aside, you silly girl. Stand aside, now . . ."

"Not Harry, please no, kill me instead," she begged, body quivering all over. A baby was wailing, screaming, calling out for his mother.

Harry screamed back, silver tears dripping down his cheeks, cascading into his mouth and down his chin. He choked on the liquid, falling to his knees.

The stranger's voice grew sharp with impatience as he raised a gnarled stick in his pale hand. "This is my last warning - "

"Not Harry! Please, have mercy. Have mercy! Please, save my son!"

Cruel green light flashed - the exact color of Harry's eyes - and Lily's body fell.

She crashed through the mirror, glass shattering as she landed beside him.

He reached towards her, gasping as her body erupted in black and purple flames.

Harry looked down and left in his hand was a glimmering stone, red as blood.
Red as the Dark Lord's cruel, laughing eyes. )

Harry jolted out of bed, a long scream echoing in his ears. The dorms were filled with Blaise's heavy snores, and Harry closed his eyes in relief. His Silencing Charm had held.

He tasted tears, salty and bitter. Harry lifted a hand to his scar, wincing as it burned to touch. A faint trail of blood decorated his fingertips and Harry lurched out of the bed, stumbling to the ensuite loo. The boy dry-heaved, the harsh noises finally arousing one of his dorm mates.

Draco blinked awake, forehead crinkling in confusion. Tiredly smacking away the curtains, he watched Blaise's form turn restlessly until his wits caught up to him. "Oh, Harry," he groaned softly, sluggishly following the sound of retching. Nearly tripping over a discarded textbook, Draco swore loudly, causing Blaise to snort.

Eyes glazed and fringe plastered with sweat, Harry looked up from the toilet bowl as a slim figure occupied the door frame. The stared at each other for a moment, Harry breaking the silence first. "I woke you? 'M sorry," the younger boy murmured, resting his head against the porcelain. Lips parting, Draco fell to his knees, enveloping the boy's still-trembling body into his tight grasp.

Harry stiffened at first, before completely melting in Draco's arms.

"'M sorry, 'm sorry, s ... sorry - " Harry sobbed, burying his head in Draco's shoulder. The blonde's blue silk pajamas were completely ruined, but Draco merely pulled Harry closer. He could feel every rib, every bone sticking through what could only barely pass as pajamas; rags, more like.

"It's fine, you're alright, you're safe ... " Draco cooed, running a hand through long black hair - internally, he vowed to convince Pansy or maybe Daphne cut it in the morning. Draco wasn't quite sure he trusted Parkinson near Harry's neck with a pair of scissors. "Don't apologize for being sick. Or having bad dreams," he added swiftly.

Muffled by fabric, the sobs were barely audible and Draco had a guess that Harry had experience in silencing his tears. After a few minutes, Harry's tension returned and Draco reluctantly pulled away. "Do you feel better?" Draco asked, tipping his head as a blush of embarrassment decorated Harry's pale cheeks.

The boy nodded slightly, shifting to pull the toilet's cord. The flush was loud, causing Harry to flinch slightly.

After helping him stand, Draco leaned against the wall as Harry scrubbed his hands and face. The sink became filled with pink while Harry washed away the blood, his motions becoming faster and harder as the damned scar remained red-tinted. As Harry's green eyes seemed to glow with frustration, Draco quickly grabbed his hands, yanking his friend away from the sink.

Harry was breathing heavily, his hands and face dripping with water. The blonde took a washcloth from the towel rack and wiped Harry's tears with the care of an elder sibling or the like. Nodding in satisfaction, Draco led his friend away from the restroom, not even bothering to turn off the light.

Finding himself exhausted, Harry didn't protest when he was pushed into Draco's bed and covered by a soft green quilt. After shutting the curtains and casting a very familiar charm, a warm body settled beside him. A pointed nose and sharp grey eyes lay only inches from his own on their shared pillow.

Harry lowered his eyes, shaking fingers rising to touch the silver buttons on Draco's pajama shirt.
The letters D.M. were engraved into the metal in a uniform, straight typeface, involuntarily causing Harry to relax. "Did you dream about the mirror again?" Draco asked quietly, stopping Harry's hand.

The boy paused, looking up through long eyelashes. "Yes," Harry said truthfully.

"You aren't thinking of going back, are you?" Draco demanded, his voice an accusatory hiss. "Dumbledore told you it was dangerous, hell, I could've told you that - "

"I know," Harry interrupted. "I know it's dangerous, but I just - " he finished lamely, turning on his back. "I'm fine now. Don't worry about it."

Moments passed before a hand clasped onto Harry's shoulder. He was forcibly rolled back, Draco hovering above him, silver eyes solemn. "Don't tell me not to worry, Harry, because I will," he said quietly. Draco laid back down, pulling Harry's head onto his chest. "You're my best friend, Harry. I'll always worry."

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**Late March thru Early April, 1992**

"I'll never remember this," Ron burst out one afternoon, throwing down his quill. Draco, who was helping Harry look up 'Dittany' in One Thousand Magical Herbs and Fungi, rolled his eyes. A few moments later, he looked up as he heard Ron say, "Hagrid! What are you doing in the library?"

"The savage," Draco smirked. "I didn't even know he could read." Harry poked him in the side.

Hagrid shuffled into view, hiding something behind his back. He looked very out of place in his moleskin overcoat, his head of bushy hair brushing against the ceiling. "Jus' lookin'," he said in a shifty voice that got their interest at once. "An' what're you lot up ter?"

Hermione huffed loudly, her tight bun the only thing peeking up over a textbook. "We're trying to study, if you don't mind," she told him impatiently.

Hagrid looked startled before nodding in bemusement. "Alright, but listen, you four - come an' see me later, I've got something to show ya," he said swiftly, shuffling away.

The library was quiet again. "How rude, Hermione!" Harry admonished, earning a slight blush from the girl.

"I agree, very impolite, Granger," Draco said distractedly. "Although I am curious, what was that behind his back?"

Ron, who'd had enough of working, went to see what section Hagrid was in. He came back a minute later with a pile of books that he slammed down on the table. Madam Pince shot him a dirty look.

"Dragons!" the redhead whispered, earning Draco's immediate attention. "Hagrid was looking up stuff about dragons! Look at these: *Dragon Species of Great Britain and Ireland; From Egg to Inferno, A Dragon Keeper's Guide.*"

"Hagrid's always wanted a dragon, he told me so the first time I ever met him," Harry said thoughtfully, eyeing the covers.

"But it's against our laws," Ron said, flipping through *A Dragon Keeper's Guide.* "Dragon breeding was outlawed by the Warlocks' Convention of 1709, everyone knows that. It's hard to stop Muggles
from noticing us if we're keeping dragons in the back garden - anyway, you can't tame dragons, it's
dangerous. You should see the burns Charlie's got off wild ones in Romania."

"Your brother works with dragons?!" Draco asked, voice pitching in excitement. Ron nodded
proudly.

"But there aren't wild dragons in Britain, right?" Harry interrupted, sounding a little nervous.

"Of course there are," Draco scoffed, as though it was obvious. "Hebridean Blacks and Common
Welsh Green are, well, common. Mother inherited a Summer home in Hebrides and I've spotted a
few Hebrideans roaming about there on the MacFusty reserve. They are really quite fierce creatures,
prone to burning down . . . you know, everything."

"The Ministry of Magic has a job hushing them up, I can tell you," Ron added. "Our kind has to
keep putting spells on Muggles who've spotted them, to make them forget."

Draco nodded. "Despite that, I think I'd like a dragon," the blonde said softly, staring out the
window.

"Oh, so you'd like an early death, is that it?" Hermione asked breezily. The girl lifted her Potions
tome, turning back to the correct chapter. "Well, whatever Hagrid's up too, it can't be good." she told
them ominously.

"But failing our exams would be worse, so back to work, boys!"

. . .

"Hagrid, what in the world that?" Harry asked several hours later, eyes going wide.

Their curiosity getting the better of them, Draco and Ron had dragged Hermione and Harry down to
the half-giant's hut. They'd chatted amiably for a while until Hagrid went to make some tea. It was
there in the fireplace, beneath the kettle that they could see a large, black egg.

"Ah," Hagrid hedged. "That's, er . . . about that -"

"Where did you get it, Hagrid?" Ron said in awe, crouching over the fire to get a closer look. "It
must've cost you a fortune."

"Won it," Hagrid coughed, fiddling nervously with his beard. "Las' night, I was down in the village
havin' a few drinks an' got into a game o' cards with a stranger. Think he was quite glad ter get rid of
it, ter be honest."

"But what are you going to do with it when it's hatched?" Hermione asked, sounding nervous.

"Well, I've bin doin' some readin'" Hagrid told them pulling a large book from under his pillow. "Got
this outta the library, Dragon Breeding for Pleasure and Profit. It's a bit outta date, o' course, but it's
all in here. Keep the egg in the fire, 'cause their mothers breathe on I em, see, an' when it hatches,
feed it on a bucket o' brandy mixed with chicken blood every half hour. An' see here - this chapter's
on how ter recognize differ'nt eggs - what I got there's a Norwegian Ridgeback. They're rare, them."

He acted very pleased with himself, although it was clear Hermione disagreed. "Hagrid, you live in a
wooden house," she told him, but her words went unheeded.

. . .
"I'm very concerned about those three," Hermione said a few nights later, watching as Hagrid reverently stoked the flames. Ron and Draco were talking animatedly, hands waving as they spoke of likely dragon-related topics.

Harry nodded in agreement, taking a tentative sip of his tea. It was mostly just hot water, and he choked upon seeing Draco leaned down to coo at the unhatched egg. "Very concerned," Harry rasped out, looking wary. Draco's attachment to the unborn creature was strange, almost as intense as Hagrid's.

Sitting at the small dining table, Harry and Hermione conspired ways to talk their friends out of raising the illegal, deadly, fire-breathing, winged reptilian. "We might need some help," Hermione conceded, itching to follow her instincts and inform a reliable adult.

The Slytherin wavered, noticing Hagrid's loving, maternal expression as he wiped a smudge off the eggshell.

"Let's just wait a bit," Harry told her reluctantly. "Eventually, they'll realize it's a bad idea, and we won't have two wand-wielding fanboys and a half-giant out for our blood." Hermione considered this, before sighing in acquiescence.

The fire suddenly roared, the egg rattling dangerously. Draco - who had been leaning a bit too close - yelped as his eyebrows were singed. Ron snickered loudly. "Whoa!" Hagrid laughed, nudging out an unnecessary log. "Little tyke's a feisty 'un, ain't they!" he said proudly.

Hermione pressed her lips together. "Maybe in the meantime, we can look up some fire-resisting spells. If the dragon doesn't burn down this house, Hagrid will," she said sagely. At the thought of more time in the library, Harry's head fell onto the tabletop in aggravation.

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**Late April thru Early May, 1992**

One breakfast a week or so later, Hedwig emerged from the flock of messenger owls and landed imperiously next to Harry's plate. Grinning, he fed her a bit of bacon. He sucked the grease off his fingers (much to Draco's disgust) and removed the message tied to Hedwig's leg.

Hagrid had written only two words, his writing hurried and sloppy. 'It's hatching.'

Draco grasped Harry's arm tightly, acting every bit the anxious father who had just been told his wife was in labor. Grabbing Ron and Hermione's attention, Harry made a show of cracking open a boiled egg with his fork, gaze meaningful.

Ron looked confused, but Hermione nodded in understanding, expression grim.

. . .

The dragon had grown three times in length in just a week. Smoke kept furling out of its nostrils, little puffs of heat singing the walls and furniture.

Hagrid hadn't been doing his gamekeeping duties because the dragon was keeping him so busy. There were empty brandy bottles and chicken feathers all over the floor, as well as a patch of drying blood on the rug. The children learned quickly to avoid the dragon's pointed fangs.

"I've decided to call him Norbert," Hagrid told them, looking at the dragon with misty eyes.

"I keep telling you she's a girl. The boys are immensely more sedate," Draco said sullenly, cradling a
burnt hand.

"He really knows me now, watch," Hagrid ignored the pureblood. "Norbert! Norbert! Where's Mommy?" he made clucking noises, slowly inching forward. Norbert hissed vehemently, causing Harry to rub his ears at the somehow intelligible vulgarity.

"He's lost his marbles," Ron muttered in Harry's ear.

"Hagrid," Harry laid a hand on his beefy arm, "Give it two weeks and Norberta - Norbert, sorry - is going to be as long as your house. We can't keep going on like this."

The half-giant bit his lip, sniffling. "I - I know I can't keep him forever, but I can't jus' dump him, I can't."

Draco nodded vehemently, seeming to have forgotten all about his burns and other injuries.

Hermione threw her hands in the air. "I can't handle this," she grabbed her book bag, heading towards the door. "I refuse to fraternize with disorderly criminals as yourself. If someone dies, don't come crying to me."

Feeling grim, Harry watched her leave before sharing a look with Ron. "We're completely doomed," the Gryffindor said quietly, one of his more accurate statements.

. . .

The following week dragged by, Wednesday night finding Hermione and Harry sitting alone in the Gryffindor common room, long after everyone else had gone to bed.

The clock on the wall had just chimed midnight when the portrait hole burst open. Ron appeared out of nowhere as he pulled off Harry's Invisibility Cloak.

He had been down at Hagrid's hut, helping him feed Norbert, who was now eating dead rats by the crate. "It bit me!" he said, showing them his hand, which was wrapped in a bloody handkerchief. "I'm not going to be able to hold a quill for a week. I tell you, that dragon's the most horrible animal I've ever met, but the way Hagrid goes on about it, you'd think it was a fluffy little bunny rabbit. When it bit me he told me off for frightening it. And when I left, he was singing it a lullaby."

Harry grimaced at the wound, the skin around it slowly turning green.

"I hope you didn't get blood on my Cloak," he murmured, meriting a shove towards the portrait entrance.

"Budge off, Harry. You need to talk with Draco, get him to come around. Merlin knows you're the only one able to talk sense into him."

The Slytherin sighed, slipping on his Cloak. "I'll try," he promised, waving them goodnight.

. . .

By this time, Harry and Draco were the only two willing to speak with Hagrid. The brunette was becoming more and more unnerved, knowing that if the dragon was found out, they'd be considered accomplices. The stress was getting to him, causing his appetite to wean and many restless nights, even with the Dreamless Sleep potion Draco stole from Snape's storage.

Harry was currently resting on the ground beneath Hagrid's large recline, leaning his head back into
Draco’s lap. He watched with half-lidded eyes as Hagrid played with Norbert(a), conjuring small, poorly-made toys with his umbrella-wand.

"Oh, he reminds me 'o Fluffy when he was jus' a pup!" Hagrid sniffled, bouncing a plastic ball to Norbert(a), who burnt it mid-air.

"Who's Fluffy?" Harry asked, glancing at Fang, who had suddenly began growling.

Despite being a rather lazy dog, he could be very jealous. Hagrid laughed, ruffling Fang's ears reassuringly. "Fluffy's my three-'eaded dog," he explained. "Bought him off a Greek chappie I met in the pub las' year. He's all grown now. I lent him to Dumbledore to guard the - " the man blinked dumbly. "I shouldn' a told you that. I should not have told you that."

He busied himself with fixing Norbert(a)’s bed of blankets, which was mostly chewed through.

Draco’s mouth slammed shut before opening again, his cheeks flushing with disbelief. "That bloody beast is yours?!" he shrieked, moving to his feet. Harry pulled himself into the now-empty seat. "That thing nearly murdered us - nearly murdered Harry - and you have the gall to call it your pet!"

Harry covered his face, blushing at his friend's outburst. "Draco, stop telling people I almost died," he said in embarrassment, voice muffled.

"Well, you did!" the blonde snapped.

"Murdered?" Hagrid gaped at them. "Nah, my Fluffy would never - say, what were you doin' up on the third floor corridor anyhow?"

The Slytherin waved a dismissive hand. "It was a completely unintentional venture, I promise. Just blame the Gryffindorks, I always do," he assured.

Hagrid was hardly mollified, but he dropped the subject. "Were you hurt badly, Harry?" the half-giant asked in concern. "I'm sure Fluffy didn' mean ta hurt ya . . ."

Harry averted his eyes, giving a one-shoulder shrug. "It was just a scratch," he mumbled.

"Just a scratch?" Draco slammed his hand onto the tabletop, voice simmering. "Remind me again, who dragged you to Severus when you were nearly unconscious and bleeding out from a Merlin-damned scratch? Who was the one to hold your hand while Severus pulled a bloody broken claw from within your arm, and who was the one to watch their best friend nearly die? Me! So don't sit there and try to diminish your injury, because you have no idea, Harry," he shook his head, pale face flushed. "No idea."

Hagrid looked between the two as Harry turned away, eyes suspiciously wet.

"I've had worse," he said quietly, wincing in immediate regret. The hut was silent for a beat.

"Worse?!" Draco hissed. "Broken arm aside, how could you possibly - " he paused, face twisting in realization. "Ugh, from those bloody Muggles, I suppose?"

Harry crossed his arms, not speaking.

Hagrid narrowed his eyes as he remembered the Dursleys, gunshots firing and a horse-like woman screeching about her 'freak of a sister'. Now, Lily Evans-Potter was many things, and none of them was a freak. The half-giant didn't want to assume, but sensibilities be damned, if Lily and James' son
was being hurt . . . those rotten Muggles would have a pretty big problem on their hands.

Norbert(a) sneezed, breaking the silence and Hagrid cooed in adoration. Draco finally tore his gaze from Harry, eyes softening at his scaly namesake.

Harry breathed out in relief, thinking crisis averted. Despite the brief reprieve, Harry thoughts were still troubled;

"Wait, so if you lent Fluffy to Dumbledore for the third-floor corridor, then you must know about the Philosopher's Stone!" he sat up quickly.

Hagrid looked up in surprise. "How'd you find that out?" he asked, suspicious.

"Well, we weren't positive, but you've just about confirmed it now," Draco said smugly. Hagrid looked sheepish. "Anyways, it really wasn't that difficult," the blonde continued arrogantly. "After seeing Fluffy, I found the name Flamel in an old book and got a sudden hunch. We couldn't find Flamel anywhere in the library, and it was only thanks to Granger that we figured it out. She found mention of Nicholas Flamel in an old copy of A History of Magic - "

" - and well, you weren't very discrete retrieving that stone-sized package from Vault 713," Harry finished. "We just put two and two together, really."

"Don't worry, we haven't told anyone else," Draco added, crossing his fingers behind his back.

Hagrid seemed disgruntled, although oddly impressed. "I wasn' sure at first, but now I'm positive yer Slytherins."

Draco grinned, shrugging off the compliment. "Yes, well. Like I said, it wasn't difficult. Honestly, Dumbledore really ought to up the security around here if he doesn't want two first years unveiling all his secrets. My mother is very clever with protection spells, perhaps the headmaster should speak with her - "

Harry leaned back and watched warily as Norbert(a) rested, rings of smoke erupting from it's nostrils as it snored. While he still wanted to ask Hagrid more about the Stone, for now, he had far bigger priorities.

About thirty-five feet bigger, to be exact.

. . .

" - we can't just give Norberta away! She's getting so strong, soon she'll be learning how to fly. I could keep her, bring her home to Malfoy manor, she'll have lots of room to stretch her wings . . ."

Harry took a deep breath and steadily bolstered himself. "Draco," he admonished. Harry took a cool cloth to press the burn on the blondes' hand, a sigh of relief slipping past Draco's lips. They had sequestered themselves in the bathroom later that night, Draco in near tears over the thought of 'his Dragon' leaving.

"Firstly," Harry began. "How would you bring her home? Smuggle her onto the Hogwarts Express in two months? She'll be huge by then. She's huge now."

Draco sniffed. "But - "

"Besides, " Harry didn't like to play this card, but when needs must; "What would your father say?"
he asked, voice echoing in the small chambers. "After all the work he's done to restore your 'family honor', what would Lucius say if he discovered - on top of all the detentions you've had so far - that you were willfully harboring an illegal animal? Endangering yourself, endangering your classmates and teachers, endangering . . . me?" Harry crossed his skinny arms, hating the manipulation and exploitation.

"He'd be devastated." Draco admitted, looking rather devastated himself.

Harry nodded, applying a burn salve to the tender, pink skin. "Exactly. And, really, this whole ordeal has been terribly Gryffindorish, don't you think?" he added slyly.

Convincing the pureblood was easy, after that.

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May 26th, 1992

Despite eventually informing Professor Snape of Hagrid's 'big problem', Draco, Harry, Hermione and Ron were all given detentions for 'withholding information' and being 'accomplices in crime'.

To be honest, they were lucky to still be in school after that. A hundred points were taken from both Gryffindor and Slytherin, putting them in last and second-to-last place for the House Cup, respectively.

On the night of their detention, Ron, Draco and Harry chatted softly while Hermione stoutly ignored them. While feeling she deserved the punishment for not confessing earlier, she was still angry that she'd been dragged into it at all. At eleven o'clock, they were led outside into the cool spring chill.

"Follow me," Filch rasped, lighting a lantern. "I bet you'll think twice about breaking a school rule again, won't you, eh?" he said, leering at them. "Oh yes . . . hard work and pain are the best teachers, if you ask me. It's just a pity they let the old punishments die out. Hang you by your wrists from the ceiling for a few days, I've got the chains still in my office, keep 'em well oiled in case they're ever needed. Right, off we go, and don't think of running off, now, it'll be worse for you if you do."

Filch's steps were rather quick for his age, leaving Hermione - the shortest one, next to Harry - huffing to catch up.

As they crossed the dark grounds, Harry looked up, smelling rain. The moon was bright, but the incoming storm clouds were thick. Ahead, he could see the lighted windows of Hagrid's hut. A distant shout was heard, Hagrid's rumbling voice reaching them. "Is that you, Filch? Hurry up, I want ter get started."

Their relief must have been imminent, because Filch was quick to comment. "I suppose you think you'll be enjoying yourself with that oaf? Well, think again - it's into the forest you're going, and I'm much mistaken if you'll all come out in one piece."

At this, Ron let out a moan, and Draco stopped dead in his tracks. "The forest?" he repeated in disbelief. "We can't go in there at night! There's all sorts of things in there -werewolves, I heard." Needless to say, the boy wasn't eager to wander into a dark forest, surrounded by unspeakable horrors and what-have-you.

"That's your problem, isn't it?" Filch cackled. "Should've thought of them werewolves before you got in trouble, shouldn't you?"

Hagrid came striding toward them out of the dark, Fang at his heel. He was carrying his large crossbow, and a quiver of arrows hung over his shoulder.
"Abou' time," he grumbled. "I bin waitin' fer half an hour already. All right, Harry, Hermione, Ron, Draco?"

"I shouldn't be too friendly to them, Hagrid," Filch hissed. "They're here to be punished, after all."

"That's why yer late, is it?" Hagrid asked, frowning at Filch. "Bin lecturin' them, eh? 'Snot your place ter do that. Yeh've done yer bit, I'll take over from here."

Filch sniffed. "I'll be back at dawn . . . for what's left of them," he added mysteriously, and he turned back toward the castle.

"They can't possibly do this to us! It's called the forbidden forest for a reason!" Draco turned to Harry, who was standing very still. An ominous howl sounded from within the vast greenery, causing the brunette to flinch. "What was that?!" the blonde whispered, latching onto his friend's sleeve.

*Monsters,* Harry's inner voice answered in cold fear. Flashing back on silver liquid and ruby eyes, his scar twinged slightly, and Harry knew to anticipate something much worse.

. . .

Thick trees blew about them, the moon just visible through the branches. Sticks and leaves crunched under their shoes as they followed the bright silver blood, which seemed to glow more brightly the farther they went.

"Draco . . . Draco, I don't think I can go any farther . . . " Harry breathed as something howled in the distance. Draco glanced over at his friend, the boy's pale face deathly white. A bead of nervous sweat was visible on his brow, green eyes darting about the treeline in obvious fear. Draco let out a long sigh, pushing away his own fear as he grabbed before the younger Slytherin's hand gently.

"We'll be fine, we'll be fine," Draco muttered, mostly in consolation to himself. A few moments later Harry looked up in surprise, the first to hear soft whimpers of pain.

They were still holding hands when they saw the unicorn. Draco made a choked sound, hand rising to his mouth. The two boys inched forward, their breath taken. It was so beautiful, a blinding white color with slowly blinking silver-blue eyes. It's lithe legs were bent strangely, silver blood clotting on it's long mane.

"Who would try and kill -" Draco whispered, just as a dark cloaked creature came crawling out of the shadows.

Draco stumbled back, gaping in fear as the wraith bent over to drink the horse's blood. The unicorn choked silently before dying, it's glow dimming exponentially.

Harry screamed, pain burning through his skull, like a dozen daggers tearing through his consciousness. He fell to his knees with a strangled cry, hitting his head on a hardened tree root. A number of forest creatures cawed at the disturbance, the wind blowing roughly as the creatures eyes seemed to glow with an eerie red light. The wraith rose suddenly, silver dripping down his mouth, crimson eyes glinting in anger.

It jerked at the sound of hooves pounding against the forest floor, fleeing quickly.

Moments passed before Draco's quivering face came into view above Harry, tears streaked on his
cheeks as he shook Harry out of his stupor. "Harry . . . oh, Merlin, Harry," he whispered. As Harry blinked away the lingering pain, Draco pulled him into a bone-crushing hug, his warmth the only comfort in that damn forest. Realizing they had company, Draco protectively tugged Harry closer.

Harry lifted a hand to the back of his skull, nausea rising as he felt a streak of blood dripping down his neck.

"Are you alright?" the centaur asked, pulling Harry and Draco to their feet. His blue eyes glinting kindly, Harry nodded his thanks.

"Who'd be desperate enough to drink unicorn blood?" Draco muttered, remembering a distant Potions lesson. His eyes flickering to the motionless unicorn, the centaur didn't answer. The half-breed merely fixed his eyes onto the bleeding, puckered scar on Harry's forehead, his expression grim.

The Boy-Who-Lived leaned against his friend, feeling slightly faint.

"I have an idea," Harry told Draco quietly. "But you won't like it."

. . .

Harry couldn't sit down. He paced up and down in front of the fire, still shaking.

"Someone wants the Stone for Voldemort, and Voldemort's waiting in the forest, trying to sustain his body with unicorn blood - "

"Calm down, Harry," Draco said half-heartedly, staring at the ceiling. He was lying back on the divan, flaxen hair in disarray.

Harry wasn't listening. "Firenze saved us, but he shouldn't have done so; Bane was furious, he was talking about interfering with what the planets say is going to happen. Somehow, the centaurs must know that Voldemort's coming back - Bane even thinks Firenze should've let Voldemort kill me. Fucking hell, I suppose my death's written in the stars as well," he threw his hands up.

"Now, I suppose all we can do is wait for the Stone to be stolen," Harry went on feverishly, "And then Voldemort will be able to come and finish me off, and then I suppose Bane'll be happy," he ended bitterly, collapsing next to Draco.

The blonde eyed him warily, nudging the boy's arm with his foot. "You aren't thinking straight, let's go through this like - like a Slytherin would. Who says the centaurs are even right? It sounds like fortune-telling to me, and Uncle Sev says it's a very imprecise branch of magic. His precise words were, I believe, 'a load of shite'."

Harry rubbed at his eyes, feeling a bit better. "Right. I'm overreacting," he shook his head clear. They stayed awake for a bit longer, speaking in soft tones before falling into their beds, completely exhausted. Despite his burning eyes and tired limbs, Harry wasn't able to sleep much that night.

Lightning crackled forebodingly in the distance.

To be continued . . .
Initus: Six

Initus

(noun. an approach, arrival, or advent.)

A Harry Potter & Percy Jackson Crossover

Part 4 of the Amalgamation Series

by Tannin & Tele

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Warnings: Chapter includes descriptions of violence, mentioned child abuse, child neglect and mild language.

The opinions expressed by characters may not reflect that of the author's.

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Author's Note: Due to the inevitable stress of school, updates may not be as common - perhaps once a week - but rest assured, the story will continue. Please enjoy this recent installment to Initus, Part 4 of the Amalgamation Series!

Chapter Six

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Late May thru June 4th, 1992

In years to come, Harry would never quite remember how he had managed to get through his exams when he half expected Voldemort to come bursting through the door at any moment.

Yet the days crept by, and as Harry walked past the third-floor corridor each morning, he could tell by the growls that Fluffy was still alive and well behind the locked door. Unfortunately, as May ended and June approached, Harry no longer had time to investigate the Philosopher's Stone further.

The weather had changed drastically and the castle became sweltering hot, especially in the crowded classroom where they did their written papers. They had been given special quills for the exams, which had been bewitched with an Anti-Cheating spell. They had practical exams as well, animating pineapples and turning mice into snuffboxes. Ron had been practicing the transfiguration for days on Scabbers, whose toenails were now permanently a dull shade of silver.

Snape made them all nervous, breathing down their necks while they tried to remember how to make a Forgetfulness potion. Harry did rather well, much to his relief, despite spending the entire week ignoring the stabbing pains in his forehead.
Harry still wasn't sleeping well, spending most of his nights curled in bed next to Draco, trying not to cry. His dreams were an amalgamation of the Potter's deaths, the Forbidden Forest and various scenes of blood, shadowy creatures and mysterious artifacts. Ron and Hermione were the first people he'd told about Voldemort in the forest, but even with Draco's confirmation of the facts, they still found the idea hard to believe.

Harry didn't blame them.

As he tried to ignore his swirling thoughts, the four students spent Thursday focused entirely on the exam for History of Magic, a class Harry was only barely passing.

After one hour of answering questions about batty old wizards who'd invented self-stirring cauldrons and obscure goblin wars, the Slytherins were almost as raucous with their relief as the Gryffindors. "I'm so glad that's over," Draco exhaled as the first-years flocked out onto the sunny grounds. "Even without Binns droning on, I just about fell asleep. How many times can they ask 'describe this event in one or more inches' before it gets boring?"

"I wish they'd asked more on the 1637 Werewolf Code of Conduct or the uprising of Elfric the Eager; I didn't even get to psycho-analyze Elfric's reasonings for killing the wife of Heinrich the Hardfisted," Hermione pouted, she and Ron catching up to them.

Hermione always liked to go through their exam papers afterward, but Ron said this made him feel ill, so the four of them wandered down to the lake and collapsed under a tree. The Weasley twins and Lee Jordan were tickling the tentacles of a giant squid, which was basking in the warm shallows. Lee glanced over at them, quickly averting his gaze as Draco glowered warningly. The blonde inched closer to Harry, who was leaning tiredly against the tree trunk.

Blissfully oblivious, Ron laid out on the grass, shutting his eyes. "No more studying," he stretched, opening one eye to see Harry rubbing at his forehead. "You know, you could look more cheerful, Harry. We've got a week before we find out how badly we've done, there's no need to worry yet."

"That's not what I'm worried about," he muttered. "My scar is burning. I thought it'd get better once the exams were done - but if anything, it's gotten worse. What on Earth does it mean?"

"Go visit Madam Pomfrey," the redhead shrugged, not seeming terribly concerned.

"I'm not ill," Harry frowned. "I think it's a warning."

"Listen," Hermione insisted, tying her hair into a loose braid. "Everyone says Dumbledore's the only one You-Know-Who was ever afraid of. With Dumbledore around, You-Know-Who won't touch you."

"You-Know-Who?" Harry scowled. "No, I don't know who. Use the proper name, will you? That moniker is ridiculous."

"Come on, Harry, relax," the Gryffindor stared up at the clouds, arms tucked behind his head. "Hermione's right, the Stone's safe while Dumbledore's around. I doubt anyone could get past Fluffy, anyways. 'Cept Hagrid, I suppose,"

Harry nodded absentmindedly, but he couldn't shake the lurking feeling that there was something he'd forgotten to do, something important. He watched an owl flutter toward the school across the bright blue sky, a note clamped in its mouth.

Hagrid was the only one who ever sent him letters. But Hagrid - Harry suddenly jumped to his feet, eyes wide with realization.
"Where're you going?" Ron asked sleepily.

Harry grabbed his bag, smacking his hand against a tree. "Why didn't I think of it before? Merlin, I'm stupid!" he said in frustration.

Draco smirked, although his eyes betrayed concern. "Finally, you agree."

"Don't you think it's a bit odd," Harry ignored Draco, instead stalking down the grassy slope to the Groundskeeper's hut. "That what Hagrid wants more than anything else is a dragon, and a stranger turns up, just happening to have an egg in his pocket? How many people wander around with dragon eggs, especially if it's against wizard law? Awfully coincidental that they found Hagrid."

"What are you talking about?" Ron exclaimed, scrambling to keep up.

Hermione, who was quick to follow Harry's line of thinking, frowned in thought. "Awfully coincidental, I agree - but perhaps that's all it is. A coincidence"

"Perhaps," Draco sighed, sidling beside the brunette. "But when is anything concerning Harry merely coincidental?"

..."It's happening, today, I just know it!" Harry hissed, violently brushing a hand through his hair. "With Dumbledore gone, Voldemort or whoever is bound to take advantage."

Ron protested, looking winded from their trek up from the grounds up into the castle. "He's not going to strike in the daylight!"

"He's not a fucking vampire, you dumbarse," Draco snapped "He's a Dark Lord, and courtesy doesn't exactly apply to him, does it? He'll strike whenever he damn pleases, and we need to be ready when he does," he slammed a fist into his palm.

"But what can we do? We're just children!" Hermione interjected weakly, before jerking slightly in surprise.

They wheeled round, startled to see Snape towering above them. "Good afternoon," he said silkily, arching a dark eyebrow at the four children. "You shouldn't be inside on a day like this," he said, with an odd, twisted smile.

"Professor . . . " Harry began, glancing desperately at Draco.

The blonde bolstered himself, stepping forward to face his godfather. "Uncle, we need to tell you something," he said with conviction. "It's about the Philosopher's - "

Snape's face morphed into an an intense glower. Glancing about the corridor, he grabbed Draco's shoulder harshly, pulling him towards an abandoned classroom. "Only Potter may follow!" he shouted. The others scowled while Harry caught up quickly, heart leaping in anticipation.

The professor shut the door behind them, twitching his wand in a complicated movement. The sounds outside suddenly became muffled, and Harry's ears began to ring. He rubbed them idly, and the sensation disappeared.

"You ought to be more careful," Snape warned, tucking away his wand. "For two supposed Slytherins, you are certainly fond of acting like moronic Gryffindors," Harry had a feeling Hermione would be highly insulted by that comment. "I've told you before, boys, whatever preconceived
"But Severus, they aren't merely notions anymore!" Draco protested, pacing back and forth. "We know that Nicholas Flamel asked Dumbledore to watch the Philosopher's Stone, and we think someone's planning on stealing it - tonight. With Dumbledore gone . . ."

"With Dumbledore gone, the remaining teachers are surely capable of protecting what lies in the corridor," Snape said stiffly. "Precautions have been made, Mr. Malfoy, Mr. Potter, and children such as yourselves should not be sticking your noses in places they don't belong. Especially in the headmaster's business."

"Severus," Draco deadpanned, crossing his arms. "You were the one to circle Flamel's name in that book of yours, if you didn't want me to see it - "

"Draco," the professor mocked, expression hardening. "We both know that you would've kept pestering and pushing unless I gave a little. Better you learn from me than an . . . undesirable resource. I had hoped once your curiosity was quelled, you would be satisfied; clearly I was incorrect with that impression, but I will be frank with my intentions now," Severus suddenly leaned over them, his dark presence causing the boys to lean back.

"Under no circumstances will you boys or your Gryffindor 'friends'," he punctuated, sneering slightly. "Attempt to pursue this supposed 'thief' of yours or any other business regarding the forbidden third floor corridor on the right-hand side," Severus paused. "Or else."

Draco and Harry didn't bother asking Severus to clarify; their imaginations did work enough for them. As they fled the room back to Weasley and Granger, Severus sighed heavily, pinching his nose to fend off an oncoming migraine.

"Stolen tonight, eh? Severus thought, straightening his spine. We'll see about that.

Meanwhile, the four students were stalking back to Gryffindor tower, Harry yanking on his hair anxiously.

"Harry, perhaps Professor Snape is right. It's awfully dangerous, and we are - "

"Granger, I swear to Merlin, if you say 'we're just children' again, I will hex you," Draco scowled darkly.

Hermione crossed her arms. "But it's true! Perhaps we could try McGonagall again . . ."

"We tried warning them, Hermione," Harry spoke for the first time in several minutes, fists clenching. "I learned a long time ago not to trust adults for anything important, and it seemed I was right. If neither the Deputy Headmistress or Snape are going to do anything about it, we'll just have too."

"Right!" Draco broke in. "I know we promised Severus, but it's better to ask for forgiveness than beg for permission."

Harry agreed, looking grim. "We're the only ones that can do this. Voldemort killed my parents, and I'm not going to let live him any longer to kill anyone else."

Draco and Ron nodded determinedly as Hermione opened the Fat Lady's portrait. They crossed into the common room, finding it empty as the other students down by the lake. Sitting primly on the couch, Hermione pressed her lips in deep consideration.
The others watched her warily, even the dullest of them realizing that without Hermione, they'd be doomed. "Oh, fine," she sighed finally, earning a round of relieved smiles. "But if we're going to do this, we're going to do it smart," she slapped her palm to the armrest, daring the others to argue. Draco stared at her with faint respect.

"Well, of course we'll do it smart," he agreed complacently. "After all, despite what Uncle Sev claimed, Harry and I are Slytherins."

Hermione smirked "And with two Gryffindors on your side," she paused, sucking in a breath. "V - Voldemort will never see us coming."

Ron and Draco winced, while Harry's eyes gleamed with satisfaction. "Exactly. Now, any thoughts how we're actually going to pull it off?"

Dinner was a subdued affair, Draco and Harry muttering softly between themselves.

Meanwhile at the Gryffindor table, Hermione was sitting straight-backed and forcibly nonchalant in her seat; beside her, Ron was completely unsubtle about his excitement, tapping a salad fork incessantly against his plate.

Draco could tell his Uncle was suspicious, but he doubted the man would act on it. Draco had told Harry to avoid Severus' gaze but he neglected to mention his Uncle's skills to the two Gryffindors. It wouldn't do to have knowledge like that spreading about.

Although he was a highly skilled Legilimens, Severus didn't make a habit of searching through half-witted Gryffindor brains for fool-hardy plots - he'd have headaches constantly. Instead, Severus chose to intimidate them from afar, his dark glare never wavering, causing Ron and Hermione to squirm slightly in their seats.

The man lifted a goblet to his lips and took a sip, the wine leaving a crimson-colored stain on pale lips. Near dessert, Severus' eyes had already began to flutter in exhaustion, the potion's master lifting a hand to hide a wide yawn.

Draco internally thanked Merlin for his personal house-elf, Dobby, who was always excited for a bit of mischief. Sneaking a bit of Severus' own sleep-inducing potion into his nightly tonic was simple for Dobby, who had quickly infiltrated the kitchens and left without any fuss.

Thankfully, the affects weren't strong enough for the wizard to notice immediately. However, they were enough to scramble his thoughts, therefore disallowing Severus from recognizing he was poisoned. The Malfoy heir smirked at his plate as the professor excused himself, giving one last half-hearted glare to the two snakes. The blonde held out a hand beneath the table. Harry slapped it lightly, rolling his eyes.

Of course, Hermione and Ron probably wouldn't have approved of their actions, but after the four friends had separated to prepare for dinner, the two Slytherins decided their nightly excursion would be easier without worrying about Severus' prowling and suspicions.

The meal soon finished, the Slytherins gliding down to the dungeons. Draco and Harry waited on a couch in the common room for several hours, Harry's head situated in his best friend's lap. Draco absentmindedly ran his fingers through Harry's hair, both of them silently going over the plan again.

"I know I said that we had to do this, but I'm scared, Draco," Harry said softly.
Draco glanced around at the remaining students, satisfied that their attentions were elsewhere. "I'm scared, too," the blonde confided after a moment. He glanced down at his friend, silver eyes intensely bright. "I . . . " he worried his lower lip. "I've never told you this - implied it, maybe - but I've never . . . " Draco faltered, and Harry pulled himself upwards. "It's not something I'd usually advertise, but my father - he used to be one of You-Know-Who's right-hand men," he said quickly.

Harry's eyes widened, and Draco was swift to explain. "Father was pressured into it by Grandfather, you see, who had fallen ill during the end of First Wizarding War and couldn't fight himself." Harry looked confused, brows furrowing. "Why - ?"

"It was a common thing for strong, pureblood families to support either the Light or Dark Lord of the century," the boy elaborated. "A tradition, unfortunately, that my grandfather wished to continue. Grandfather always told us that the Dark Lord was a powerful, intoxicating presence in the early years. The Dark Lord was very popular with the purebloods, preaching their supremacy and whatnot, which was reason enough for many old families to give their support.

"Dark Magic was a force to reckon with in those years, a common practice of many families, but the Ministry was trying to restrict it. You-Know-Who wanted to reinstate it, and prove to the naysayers that 'there is no good or evil, only power,'" Draco quoted, grimly admiring. "He wanted equal rights for all magical creatures, werewolf and wizard alike . . . but eventually, his views became skewed. His attempt at fixing the government became a reign of terror, and Father was caught right in the middle of it. He'd just married mother and, with myself on the way, he couldn't turn traitor less You-Know-Who reaped our lives as payment,"

Harry tentatively reached for Draco's hand, which had begun shaking. "That's okay, you don't need to tell me anymore," he said in understanding. Draco shook his head, expression pained.

"No, I do. I want to show that, despite my family's past with him, I'm sticking by your side. You-Know-Who has pulled a lot of shite, nearly destroying my family with his oppression, but I'm not going to let that happen any longer," Draco said determinedly, clenching Harry's hand tightly. "I'm the sole heir of the Malfoy family, and I swear to you, this generation is going to do better.

"I've already found the strong wizard I support, and it's you, Harry - the defeater of the Dark Lord, a muggle-raised, horribly fashioned, lion-hearted, foolishly kind but amazingly wonderful best friend that deserves so much better than me," his voice cracked, and before Harry could protest, Draco shushed him. "It's true. You deserve better than anything this world offers, and if I can help lessen that pain by fighting by your side, I will.

"I will, and nothing you can do or say will change that." Harry blinked at Draco, tears coming to his eyes. "Merlin, I'm horrible," Draco sighed, lips quirking slightly. "Look at that, I've made you cry," he wiped at Harry's tears with his thumb, earning a grateful smile in return.

"Horribly amazing," Harry disputed, shaking his head and leaning into Draco's embrace. "Draco, truly . . . if anything, I don't deserve you," he muttered into the blonde's shoulder, tears soaking into the designer sweater. Draco shrugged lightly, unable to respond as he, himself, was becoming a bit choked up. Harry settled back into Draco's lap, sighing in content as pale, nimble fingers threaded through his wavy, tar-black hair.

The ministrations almost caused the brunette to fall asleep, but when the curfew alarm rang, Draco pinched him awake.
"Got the Cloak?" he asked. Harry nodded tiredly, pulling the silvery material from Dudley's deep trouser pockets.

The brunette reached up and tossed it over their heads, fingers brushing Draco's white-blonde hair. "I also grabbed Hagrid's flute," he whispered as they tip-toed past the stone wall. "Unless you're up to singing?" Draco snorted, slipping his fingers into Harry's as they huddled together beneath the Cloak.

The blonde, slightly taller than Harry, had to hunch so their shoes didn't peak out. Surprisingly, he didn't even complain; perhaps he sensed the sudden disquietude of his friend's thoughts, the Boy-Who-Lived glancing around anxiously as they crept upstairs.

"Are you sure you want to go up against Voldemort?" Harry asked suddenly, coming to a halt as a staircase suddenly moved. Portraits snored loudly, concealing his words from any potential passerbys. "I mean, after all he's done to your family - "

Draco looked down at Harry, his pale face cast in a dark, silvery light. "That's exactly why I'm going against him," he said darkly. "Like I told you, I'm not letting this shite continue. I may be young, but I'm not an idiot. If the Dark Lord is returning, whether we want to or not, my family is only going to be yanked back into the war - I can't let that happen again. Besides, I could never betray you like that," the boy finished sternly, clutching at Harry's hand.

"Now, what's the Fat Lady's password again?"

A few moments later, the portrait swung open, the Fat Lady scowling disagreeably at being awoken at such an hour. Ron and Hermione popped up from their position before the fire, both dressed in simple, uncomplicated outfits. Hermione smoothed her skirt, letting out a long breath.

"Took you two long enough," she said tersely, the sting lessened by her obvious anxiety. "Shall we?"

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"Music hath charms to sooth a savage beast," Hermione said idly, watching as Harry played a soft tune on his owl-flute. The Cerberus was obviously wary of him, growling beneath it's breath. Eventually, fatigue won the beast over and Fluffy fell to his knees, all six eyes fluttering shut.

"Keep playing," Ron warned Harry as they slipped out of the Cloak and crept toward the trapdoor. He could feel the dog's hot, rancid breath as they approached his feet. "I think we'll be able to pull the door open," Ron mused, peering over the dog's back. He bent down and pulled the ring of the trapdoor, the hinges creaking. They could see nothing within but darkness. "Want to go first, Malfoy?" Ron suggested, eyes hopeful.

"Not a chance, Weasel," the Slytherin said dryly, before placing his hand on Ron's back. "But by all means, ladies first," Draco pushed, and Ron fell in with a sharp yelp.

Hermione made a disapproving sound. "We don't even know what's down there. You could have just sent him to his death," she pointed out, veering around Fluffy's slumped body. Harry kept playing, his cheeks flushing red with exertion.

Draco sniffed. "Doubtful, but I'll indulge you. Still alive, then, Weasley?" he called down.

After a pause, a response came, slightly strained. "I'm okay! It's a soft landing, just, um - not very comfortable. Kind of thorny."
Harry's eyebrow arched, and he gestured for Hermione to take the flute. "I'll go next," Harry said breathlessly, sounding winded.

Draco's eyes narrowed. "We'll go together," he decided. "What kind of friend would I be if you got hurt?"

"A terrible one, Malfoy! You're absolutely terrible!" Ron shouted from the trapdoor.

The blonde looked smug. "Terribly amazing, right, Harry?" he offered a hand. Harry took it, rolling his eyes.

"I believe I said you were 'horribly amazing', which could alternatively be construed as 'amazingly horrible'. Which also applies to you."

Draco smirked. "Thank you, Harry. And just for that, jump!" the boy jolted down, dragging Harry with him. Later, Draco would loudly proclaim to the entire Slytherin common room that the Boy-Who-Lived screamed like a little girl, and he wasn't wrong.

The two landed with an 'oomph!' on something distinctly plant-like. The thick roots twisted and writhed beneath them, dull thorns occasionally scraping against their tangled limbs. "Come on down, Granger!" Draco called up to her, shifting slightly.

The music stopped abruptly and the dim light from the trapdoor was blocked by a small figure. Hermione took a deep breath and jumped, Fluffy barking in agitation behind her. As soon as she landed beside Harry, the trapdoor slammed shut.

"We must be miles under the school," Hermione said breathlessly, hair disheveled from the fall.

"Lucky this plant thing's here, really," Ron said, patting the roots gratefully.

"Lucky?!!" Hermione suddenly shrieked, brown eyes growing wide as her vision adjusted to the darkness. "This is Devil's Snare!" At her words, the vines began to twist snakelike tendrils around her ankles. As for the other's, their legs had already been bound in long creepers without their noticing.

Panic ensued, a slimy root slipping up to wrap about Ron's long neck. "How do we get out!" Draco screamed, fighting to free himself. Ron was blubbering incoherently, his face turning red.

"Don't move!" Harry warned, remembering a lesson in Herbology. The long tendrils found place in his hair, wrapping about his skull like a thorny crown. "The more we struggle, the worse it gets!"

"Oh, but I can't remember how to kill it!" Hermione wailed, reaching frantically for the wall. "Devil's snare, devil's snare . . . what did Professor Sprout say? It likes the dark and the damp - "

"So light a fire!" Harry exclaimed, a sheen of sweat dripping down his face.

"Yes - of course!" Hermione twisted her body, reaching past the Snare to reach her pocket. Whipping out her wand, she cried out: "Lumos Solem!"

A beam of light encased the plant, which cringed away, sizzling slightly. Ron let out a relieved breath as his throat was released. Standing shakily, Harry stumbled towards the far door, the four others following him.

"Good thing you pay attention in Herbology, Hermione," Harry told her, yanking a stubborn thorn from his arm.
Hermione nodded silently, the adrenaline steadily waning off.

"This way," Draco told them, pointing down a stone passageway. All they could hear apart from their footsteps was the gentle drip of water trickling down the walls. The passageway sloped downward, the stone floor becoming craggy.

"Can you hear something?" Ron whispered. Harry's brows furrowed as he heard a soft rustling and the clinking of metal.

"Sounds like wings to me. Snitches, do you think?" Draco commented, curious. "There's light ahead - I can see something moving."

They reached the end of the passageway and saw before them a brilliantly lit chamber, its ceiling arching high above them. It was full of small, jewel-bright birds, fluttering and tumbling all around the room. "They're so pretty!" Hermione breathed watching as silver light danced across the ceiling.

On the opposite side of the chamber was a heavy wooden door. "Do you think they'll attack us if we cross the room?" Ron asked nervously.

Harry pressed his lips together. "They seem non-violent, but so did the Snare at first. I suppose if they all swooped down at once . . . well, there's really no other choice. I'll run." Before his friends could protest, he took a deep breath, covered his face with his arms, and sprinted across the room. He expected to feel sharp beaks and claws tearing at him any second, but nothing happened.

Harry reached the door untouched, and letting out a relieved noise, he pulled the handle, but it was locked. The others followed him, each taking a shot at the door. "Now what?" Ron asked, put out.

"These birds -

"Look like snitches, to me." Draco muttered.

"Can't be here just for decoration," Hermione continued thoughtfully, looking up at the glittering creatures, and Harry gasped.

"They're not birds or snitches! They're keys! Winged keys - look carefully." The Slytherins surveyed the chamber while the other two squinted up at the flock of keys.

"Look, Harry!" Draco pointed excitedly. "Broomsticks! We must have to catch the key to the door, like real Seekers!"

"But there are hundreds of them!" Ron groused, before examining the lock on the door. "I think we're looking for a big, old-fashioned one. Probably silver, like the handle."

Watching the keys carefully, they each seized a broomstick and kicked off into the air, soaring into the midst of the cloud of keys.

The bewitched keys darted and dived so quickly it was almost impossible to catch one, but Harry was faster. Twisting through the throng of metal and crystal-like wings, Harry spotted something silver flash. "That one!" he called to the others. "That big one, there - no, there - with bright blue wings crumpled on one side."

Ron went speeding in the direction that Harry was pointing and promptly crashed into the ceiling, and nearly fell off his broom. Draco laughed quietly, unaware that his flaxen hair was in extreme disarray. Hermione was looking particularly uncomfortable on her broom, adjusting her skirt every few minutes.
"We've got to close in on it!" Harry called out, not taking his eyes off the key with the damaged wing. "Ron, you come at it from above; Hermione and Draco, you stay below. I'll try and catch it. Ready? Now!

They all rocketed toward it, Draco coming within inches of capture - however, the key was a wily little bugger. The blonde swore vehemently as it veered downward, and Harry streaked after it, following it toward the wall. Leaning forward, the brunette surged forward and pinned it against the stone with one hand. The key struggled weakly in his hands, the wings crumbled and ripped.

Harry was sympathetic, but not terribly.

Landing swiftly, he handed it to Draco who sadistically tore off it's wings and rammed it into the lock. "It works," Ron said unnecessarily, looking relieved as they pushed open the door. The next chamber was bathed in darkness, but as Harry stepped forward, light filled his vision.

"Goodness," Hermione squeaked, startled by the intricately carved statue standing only feet away. They were standing on the edge of a huge chessboard behind the black chessmen, who towered impressively over the board. Facing them, way across the chamber, were the white pieces. Ron and Hermione shivered slightly, as the towering white chessmen had no faces.

"It can't be this easy," Draco whispered, walking towards the opposite door. As he made to sidle past the row of pawns, from beneath their arms, long, gilded swords appeared, blocking their way. Draco stumbled back, yelping. The swords disappeared with a metallic clang.

"Now what do we do?" Hermione asked meekly. Ron stepped forward, looking around the corridor.

"Well, it's obvious, isn't it?" he said, blue eyes fierce. "We've got to play our way across the room."

"How?" Harry wondered nervously.

"I think," Ron hedged, "We're going to have to be chessmen."

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Hermione's screams still echoed in his ears, and Harry fought back a soft sob as he stepped forward. The white king took off his crown and threw it at his feet, clattering on the marble floor. They had won, but at what cost? The chessmen parted and bowed, leaving the door ahead clear. With one last desperate look back at Ron's still body, Harry, Hermione and Draco charged through the door.

"What if he's - ?" Hermione choked, silent tears tracking down her face.

Harry tried to answer, but found the words wouldn't come.

"He'll be all right," Draco told them softly, wrapping a protective arm around Harry. "Weasley knew that sacrifices had to be made."

This, of course, did nothing to console them, but Harry nodded obstinately, pulling away.

"What do you reckon's next?" he asked. Hermione bit her lip.

"We've had Sprout's, that was the Devil's Snare; Flitwick must've put charms on the key, and McGonagall transfigured the chessmen to make them alive. That leaves Quirrell's spell, and Snape's." As she spoke, they had reached another door.

"All right?" Harry whispered to his friends.
"Go on," Draco urged. Harry pushed it open and a disgusting smell instantly filled their nostrils, making all three cover their noses.

Eyes watering, they saw - unconscious on the floor in front of them - a troll even larger than the one they had apprehended on Halloween. It's face was drenched in a sheen of dark blood, almost black in nature. Harry swallowed harshly.

"I'm glad we didn't have to fight that one," he whispered as they stepped carefully over one of its massive legs.

"Come on," Draco whinged. "I can't breathe." The blonde pulled open the next door slowly, anticipating an immediate attack.

He peered in, letting out a breath. "It Uncle Sev's," he told them. "What do we have to do?"

They stepped over the threshold, eyeing the table with seven differently shaped bottles. Immediately a fire sprang up behind them, blocking the doorway. It wasn't ordinary fire either; it was purple. At the same instant, black flames shot up in the doorway leading onward. Harry sucked in a breath, remembering his dream. *(He reached towards her, gasping as her body erupted in black and purple flames.)*

They were trapped, and Harry felt an impending sense of claustrophobia creeping in.

"Look!" Hermione seized a roll of paper lying next to the bottles. Draco, looking over Hermione's shoulder, read aloud for Harry's benefit.

*Danger lies before you, while safety lies behind,*

*Two of us will help you, which ever you would find,*

*One among us seven will let you move ahead,*

*Another will transport the drinker back instead,*

*Two among our number hold only nettle wine,*

*Three of us are killers, waiting bidden in line.*

*Choose, unless you wish to stay here forevermore,*

*To help you in your choice, we give you these clues four:*

*First, however slyly the poison tries to hide*

*You will always find some on nettle wine's left side;*

*Second, different are those who stand at either end,*

*But if you would move onward, neither is your friend;*

*Third, as you see clearly, all are different size,*

*Neither dwarf nor giant holds death in their insides;*

*Fourth, the second left and the second on the right*
"Are twins once you taste them, though different at first sight."

"Godfather always did like his logic puzzles," Draco finished, glancing warily at Hermione.

"I think it's brilliant," the Gryffindor countered, smiling despite the silver tear tracks on her cheeks. "This isn't magic at all; it's logic! A lot of the greatest wizards haven't got an ounce of logic, and they'd be stuck in here forever."

"But so will we, won't we?" Harry worried his bottom lip.

"Of course not," Hermione scoffed. "Everything we need is here on this paper. Seven bottles: three are poison; two are wine; one will get us safely through the black fire, and one will get us back through the purple."

"But which one do we drink?" Draco asked impatiently. "I could sniff them for you, that's what father usually does."

"Don't be daft," Hermione dismissed. "If there truly is poison here, the fumes could put you in a coma. Just give me a minute," she read the paper several times before walking up and down the line of bottles, muttering to herself. At last, she clapped her hands triumphantly. "Got it," Hermione exclaimed. "The smallest bottle will get us through the black fire . . . toward the Stone."

Harry looked at the tiny bottle, stomach sinking in dread. "There's only enough there for one of us," he told them softly. "That's hardly one swallow. Which one will get you back through the purple flames?"

Hermione, smile dropping, pointed at a rounded bottle at the right end of the line.

"You two drink that," Harry took in a deep breath. Draco looked indignant. "No, listen, please," he pleaded. "Go back to the chess room and get Ron. Grab brooms from the flying-key room, they'll get you out of the trapdoor and past Fluffy. Hermione, you drop Ron off at the Infirmary and go straight to the owlery. Tell Hedwig to find Dumbledore, I have a feeling we'll need him. Draco, if you think you can, try and awaken your Uncle as well. I'm sure a bezoar will work - "

Hermione's eyes widened in shock. "I might be able to hold Voldemort off for a while, but I'm no match for him, really," Harry finished, clenching his wand handle.

"Harry," Draco protested. "The strongest spell you know is the petrifying charm! This is You-Know-Who we're talking about. You can't honestly expect - "

"Well, I was lucky once, wasn't I?" Harry swallowed, face dubious. "Who knows, I might get lucky again."

Hermione's lip trembled, and she suddenly dashed at Harry and threw her arms around him. "Hermione!" he gasped, his arms awkwardly at his sides.

"Harry . . . oh, Harry, you're a great wizard, you know," she whispered in his ears, bushy hair tickling his chin.

"I'm not as good as you," Harry stammered, standing stiffly until she let go of him.

"Me!" Hermione squeaked, wiping at her eyes. "Books and cleverness, perhaps, but that's it. There are more important things; friendship and bravery and - oh Harry, just be careful!" With that warning, she backed away, Draco quickly filling her spot.
The Boy-Who-Lived nearly lost his breath at Draco's strength, while the blonde's eyes were suspiciously wet. "You're a reckless fool, Potter," his best friend spat, pressing his cheek to Harry's wavy black locks. "I hate this. I hate it."

Harry silently agreed. The Malfoy heir pulled away, his expression scolding. Fully aware of Granger's eyes on them, Draco reached out to tentatively touch the back of Harry's hand. "Come back to me, Harry," Draco whispered. "If you die on me, I swear to Merlin that I will use whatever magic necessary to bring you back - only to kill you again. Then, I'll bring you back again and kidnap you for my own nefarious purposes."

"Summer Quidditch partner, right?" Harry said, faintly bemused. "Or a test subject for all your illegal potions?"

Draco smirked. "Obviously. But at least the accommodations will be nice. You're coming to the Manor during Summer hols, right?"

Harry sniffed lightly, eyes glimmering. "I hope so," he said softly, squeezing Draco's hand. Pulling away, he glanced toward Hermione, who looked a bit bewildered at the exchange. 'Boys' she thought in fond exasperation.

"You are sure which potion is which, aren't you?" Harry asked her.

"Positive," Hermione sighed. She and Draco went to stand by the purple flames, each of them taking a short drink from the round bottle. Hermione shuddered at the taste.

"It's not poison?" Harry asked anxiously.

"No, but it's like ice." Draco shivered.

Harry nodded at them, his eyes closing to fight another wave of tears. "Quickly, go, before it wears off. Good luck, both of you."

"Good luck to you," Hermione told him, both first-years hesitating before the flames. 

"Go!" Harry bit out furiously, turning away. The last thing they saw before passing through the flames was Harry's shoulders shaking slightly, before drawing up in resolve.

Hearing their footsteps become distant, Harry took a deep breath and picked up the smallest bottle.

Turning to face the black flames, he drained the little bottle in one gulp. It indeed felt as though ice was flooding his body, his teeth chattering in protest. Tossing away the bottle, he stepped through black flames. Faint heat licked at his body, smoke and darkness filling his vision.

He let out a small breath as he entered the last chamber, the potion already wearing off - he could feel the warmth at his back, but it didn't hurt. Harry took in his surroundings, fighting a gasp as he saw a figure with their back to him.

It didn't appear to be Voldemort, the wraith-like creature he'd met in the forest, but that did nothing to console him.

It was Quirrell.

To be continued . . .
June 4th, 1992

The Boy-Who-Lived stepped forward tentatively, glancing at the Mirror of Erised which took up the majority of the chamber. *So this was where Dumbledore relocated it, then? Is it another precaution for the stone?* Harry wondered.

"Of course it's you," Harry said softly, his tone dripping with distaste as Quirrell turned to face him.

"Me," he replied jovially, although his smile was cold. "I wondered whether I'd be meeting you here, Mr. Potter."

Harry clenched his fists. "There was no question whether or not I'd come. I can't let you do this," he warned, grasping at his wand.
Quirrell laughed, looking highly amused. "Do what, exactly, Mr. Potter? Tell, how much has Dumbledore let slip about this little plot of his?

"Quite a bit, actually," Harry admitted. "But I only really figured it all out today. Hagrid's not particularly good at keeping secrets, is he?"

The former Defense teacher broke into a pleased grin. "Apt deduction," he agreed. "Although I'm sure Snape had a hand in these revelations as well, hmm?"

Harry's eyes widened at the cutthroat amusement in Quirrell's tone. "How did you know about that?"

"It wasn't difficult to see Snape distrusted me," the man shrugged. "He's disliked me from the beginning of my tenure, even before my trip to Albania. This year, however, he was quite a bit more proactive with his attempts of thwarting me; unfortunately, his constant barrage of threats were - are - nothing compared to my Lord's temperament."

"Your Lord?" Harry wondered. "Voldemort?"

Quirrell's expression hardened. Snapping his fingers, ropes sprang out of thin air and wrapped themselves tightly around Harry's body, yanking him against the wall. "You dare speak the Dark Lord's name?" he hissed, summoning Harry's wand. "You, a mere child, know nothing of my Lord's magnificence, of his sheer magical prowess - earth's emotion.

Harry coughed, the ropes squeezing his chest cavity. "Magical prowess?" he rasped. "Your precious Dark Lord can't even kill a baby!"

The wizard let out another hissing sound, his neck arching angrily. "Silence! You're too nosy to live, Potter. Rather like your dear parents, actually; too meddling for your own good. What with scurrying around the school on Halloween, for all I knew you'd seen me coming to look at what was guarding the Stone."

"You let the troll in," the boy realized, eyes narrowed."

"Certainly. I have a special gift with trolls - you must have seen what I did to the one in the chamber back there? Unfortunately, while everyone else was running around looking for it, Snape, who already suspected me, went straight to the third floor to head me off. And not only did my troll fail to beat you to death, that three-headed dog didn't even manage to bite Snape's leg off properly."

Quirrell scowled. "Useless creatures."

He whipped around to face the mirror, his purple turban tilting slightly. "Now, wait quietly, Potter. I need to examine this interesting mirror. This mirror is the key to finding the Stone," Quirrell monologued, tapping his way around the frame. "Trust Dumbledore to come up with something like this, but he's in London. I'll be far away by the time he gets back."

All Harry could think of doing was to keep Quirrell talking and stop him from concentrating on the mirror. "If you knew Professor Snape suspected you, why didn't you - "

Quirrell barked out a laugh. "And I thought you were a Slytherin, boy!" Harry flinched slightly. "If dear Severus had gotten on the wrong side of a nasty . . . accident with Dumbledore watching, the wizard would have immediately changed tactics! No, the old coot is far more predictable when you play by 'his rules'," Quirrell sneered. "Insanity seems to disagree with him."

Harry struggled with the bindings, the ropes around his torso loosening with Quirrell's distraction.
"Now . . . I see the Stone; I'm presenting it to my master, but where is it?" the man growled in frustration.

"Your master - is he on the grounds?" Harry asked, forcing down his steadily rising panic. "That was him in the Forbidden Forest, I presume?"

Quirrell stiffened, and for a moment, fear flashed in his eyes.

"He is with me wherever I go," he said quietly. "I met him when I traveled around the world. A foolish young man I was then, full of ridiculous ideas about good and evil. Lord Voldemort showed me how wrong I was. 'There is no good and evil, there is only power, and those too weak to seek it'.

"Since then, I have served him faithfully, although I have let him down many times. He has had to be very hard on me." Quirrell shivered suddenly. "He does not forgive mistakes easily. When I failed to steal the stone from Gringotts, he was most displeased. He punished me, and decided he would have to keep a closer watch on me . . ."

Harry remembered his trip to Diagon Alley, wondering how could he have been so stupid. He'd seen Quirrell there that very day, shaken hands with him in the Leaky Cauldron. The man had probably broken into Gringotts only moments after he and Hagrid had left the bank.

Quirrell cursed under his breath. "I don't understand! Is the Stone inside the mirror? Should I break it?"

Harry's mind was racing. *The Mirror of Desire* he remembered. Harry shut his eyes, thinking deeply.

While Quirrell muttered to himself, Harry tried to edge to the left, to get in front of the glass without Quirrell noticing. Unfortunately, the ropes around his ankles were too tight - he slid down the wall, swearing softly. The wizard ignored him, still talking to himself. "What does this mirror do?" Quirrell whispered. "How does it work? Help me, Master!"

Much to Harry's apparent horror, a voice answered, seeming to come from Quirrell himself.

"Use the boy . . ." it rasped. "Use the boy."

Quirrell rounded on Harry, eyes wild. "Yes, Potter - come here." He clapped his hands once, and the ropes binding Harry fell off.

Harry slowly rose to his feet, desperately wishing he had a weapon.

"Come here," Quirrell repeated, becoming impatient. "Look in the mirror and tell me what you see."

Harry walked toward him warily, wiping his sweaty hands against quavering thighs.

Quirrell moved close behind him, his front nearly pressing into Harry's back. The boy tried not to choke on the funny smell that seemed to come from the man's turban. He closed his eyes, thinking hard, before stepping before the mirror.

He saw his reflection, pale and scared-looking at first. Dark shadows shifted behind him, but only one image was clear. It was a man, tall and imposing, but with kind blue eyes and thick black hair. Harry's lips pursed in confusion as the man snapped his fingers, looking down reassuringly; and - suddenly - Harry felt something heavy drop into his real pocket. Backing away quickly, Harry looked up nervously at his captor.
"Well?" Quirrell asked impatiently. "What do you see?"

Harry sucked in a breath. "My relatives," he said swiftly. "They're smiling at me, finally accepting me into their family." As if, he thought internally, heart panging with an old hurt. "Treating me . . . " As though I wasn't a Freak. "Like they loved me."

Quirrell ground his teeth. "Useless, maudlin drivel," he spat. "Get out of the way."

As Harry moved aside, he felt the Sorcerer's Stone against his leg. Dare he make a break for it?

Harry hadn't shifted five paces before a high voice spoke, though Quirrell wasn't moving his lips. 

"He lies!"

"Potter, come back here!" Quirrell growled, turban tilting as he spun around. "Tell me the truth! What did you just see?"

The high voice spoke again. "Let me speak to him, face-to-face."

Panic entered the professor's voice. "M - master! You are not strong enough!"

There was a pause, before a deep, shaky breath was taken. "I have strength enough, for this . . . "

Hesitating slightly, Quirrell reached up before snapping his fingers as an afterthought.

Harry struggled, but he couldn't move a muscle. Petrified, he watched as the man began to unwrap his turban, revealing flashes of bald, pasty skin. The turban fell away, Quirrell's head looking strangely small without it. Harry's gaze shifted to the Mirror of Erised, and a strangled noise slipped from his lips.

Where there should have been a back to Quirrell's head, there was a face, the most terrible face Harry had ever seen. It was chalk white with glaring red eyes and slits for nostrils, like a snake.

It was Voldemort.

"Harry Potter," it whispered, eyeing his small figure up and down. "See what I have become?"

Voldemort said, voice scathing. "Mere shadow and vapor. . . I have form only when I can share another's body, but there have always been those willing to let me into their hearts and minds. Unicorn blood has strengthened me, these past weeks. You saw faithful Quirrell drinking it for me in the forest, and once I have the Elixir of Life, I will be able to create a body of my own!"

His voice echoed through the chamber, shrewdly victorious. "Now . . . " the man said, his lips stretching in a gruesome bastardization of a smile. "Why don't you give me that Stone in your pocket?"

At a flick of Quirrell's wrist, the feeling suddenly surged back into Harry's legs. He stumbled backward, tripping over too-long pant legs. Harry itched for his wand.

"Don't be a fool," Voldemort snarled. "Better save your own life and join me, or you'll meet the same sticky end as your parents," the beast paused, as though thoughtful. "You know, they died begging me for mercy. And I, the merciful Lord I am, spared them the greatest mercy possible. If you so please, I could give you the same generous honor."

Harry's nose flared, although he didn't speak a word.

"You are a Slytherin, are you not?" Voldemort tried another tactic, Quirrell slowly walking
backwards - toward him. "A weak one, true, but any Slytherin must inherently value self-preservation. Surely even the son of two Gryffindors can recognize a lost battle?"

"That's ironic, you taunting me of being weak," Harry finally spat out, back straightening with resolve. "I mean, I am the one who, as an infant, vanquished your arse halfway to hell. So if I'm weak, what, exactly, does that make you?"

"How touching," Voldemort hissed, visibly restraining his anger. "Quite the barbed tongue on you, child. Now give me the Stone, unless you want it ripped out!"

Harry swallowed tightly, before looking over Quirrell's shoulder

He gasped. "Dumbledore!" Harry shouted, causing both Voldemort and Quirrell to wheel around.

Seeing no one, the wizard's eyes narrowed. "What are you doing, whelp?"

Harry smirked at them, slipping the Philosopher's Stone out of his pocket. "Stalling, of course," the boy said nonchalantly, pulling his arm back. By the time Voldemort had processed Harry's words, the boy had already thrown the rock with the skill of - well, an eleven year old.

The rock soured through the air, shattering against the stone wall before Quirrell even began uttering the summoning charm.

Silence reigned for several short moments before Quirrell lunged toward the boy, howling with rage.

At once, a needle-sharp pain seared across Harry's scar; his head felt as though it was about to split in two. He yelled, struggling against Quirrell's grasp with all his might, and to his surprise, Quirrell let go of him.

The pain in his head lessened, and Harry looked to see where Quirrell had gone. The man was hunched in pain, looking at his heavily blistered hands.

"Seize him! SEIZE HIM!" shrieked Voldemort again, and Quirrell leaped for the boy wizard.

Kicking out, Harry slammed his foot between Quirrell's thighs. Hearing a distinct crunch, Quirrell screeched shrilly.

Falling forward, he knocked Harry off his feet and landed on top of him. Wherever their skin touched, Quirell burned, the man howling in agony. "M - Master, I cannot hold him," he gasped out.

"Then kill him, fool, and be done!"

Quirrell raised a shaking hand to perform a deadly curse, his eyes wide and horrified, but Harry, by instinct, reached up and grabbed Quirrell around the face. Smoke sizzling from his skull, Quirrell rolled off him, his skin raw and red.

Harry knew now: Quirrell couldn't touch his bare skin, not without suffering terrible pain.

This was only chance to keep hold of Quirrell, keep him in enough pain to stop him from doing a curse. Harry staggered to his feet, grabbed Quirrell around the waist, and hung on as tight as he could.

It was almost like a hug - but, you know.

Deadly.

Quirrell screamed and tried to throw Harry off. The pain in Harry's head was blinding, his vision
filling with blissful darkness. As Harry sagged to the ground, he could only hear terrible, pained shrieks and Voldemort's yells of, "KILL HIM! KILL HIM!" and other voices, perhaps in Harry's own head, crying, "Harry! Harry!"

The boy blinked up, his breath catching in his throat as he caught one last glimpse of the Mirror of Erised. Two figure watched him, the tall man from before standing solemnly behind a red-haired beauty. Lily Evans looked grief-stricken, silver tears streaking down her cheeks as she mouthed to him 'stay strong' . . .

Harry felt ash trickle onto his face. His last view was of Quirrell's blackened and crispy face hovering above him, before all Harry knew was lost.

A pair of green and blue eyes followed their son slip and fall (into the arms of Morpheus), while a frantic figure banished the row of flames from the other side. Sweeping into the room, black hair and robes disheveled, Severus Snape watched Quirrell disintegrate completely, the dark cinders marring Harry Potter's pale skin.

"Potter," Severus breathed.

Ignoring the shattered remains of the Philosopher's Stone and the green eyes watching him from the enchanted Mirror, Severus immediately rushed over to test the boy's pulse, fearing the worse. Breathing out in relief as he felt a faint thumping, the man quickly schooled his expression as Dumbledore came flying in seconds later.

The headmaster halted at the door, seeing red glass marring the floor and ash scattered everywhere.

"Voldemort?" he breathed, sounding quite winded.

Severus nodded grimly, his Dark Mark pulsing in agreement. "Harry?" Dumbledore asked next, concern crossing his wrinkled face.

"Alive, although not in stable condition." Severus informed, prompt as always.

"But alive," he breathed out, looking down to brush the sweaty bangs from Potter's forehead. The famous lightning-bolt scar was burnt pink, a trail of blood trickling down his temple. "Seems the Boy-Who-Lived has managed the impossible once more," the man said idly, his tone lacking the usual dry sarcasm.

"So it seems, Severus," Dumbledore looked his age, face tightening as he flicked his wand to gather the remains of Quirrell. The red shards he left, sparing them the barest cursory glance. "So it seems."

July 8th, 1992

Harry awoke slowly, and then all at once as he felt hot breath on his cheek. Jerking slightly, Harry blinked up at the gently smiling face of the headmaster. "Good afternoon," the man said kindly, leaning back.

"Sir," Harry said distractedly, feeling as though he was missing something. "What're . . . " his eyes widened in remembrance. "Sir! Professor Quirrell, is he - "

"Calm yourself, dear boy," Dumbledore said softly, touching Harry's hand.

"But - "
"Harry, please relax, or Madam Pomfrey will have me thrown out."

Harry swallowed harshly and looked around. Recognizing the white curtains and uniform layout, Harry realized that he was in the hospital wing. He was lying in a bed with white linen sheets, and next to him was a table piled high with what looked like half the candy shop.

"Tokens from your friends and admirers," Dumbledore explained, beaming. "What happened down in the dungeons between you and Professor Quirrell is a complete secret, so, naturally, the whole school knows. I believe your friends Misters Fred and George Weasley were responsible for trying to send you a toilet seat. No doubt they thought it would amuse you. Madam Pomfrey, however, felt it might not be very hygienic, and confiscated it."

Harry couldn't even muster a smile. "How long have I been in here?" he asked, forcing himself to ask one question at a time.

"Three days," the wizard informed. "Mr. Ronald Weasley, Miss Granger and Mr. Malfoy will be most relieved you have come round, they have been extremely worried. They hadn't wanted to leave your side for a minute, but Madam Pomfrey threw them out for meal times," he added.

The young Slytherin felt a flush of warmth, fondness for his friends filling his chest.

"Is Ron alright?" Harry asked quietly, eyes fearful. "Hermione and Draco didn't get hurt on their way back, did they?"

Dumbledore's eyes twinkled benignly. "Your friends are fine, my boy. A few scrapes and scratches and a small bump on Mr. Weasley's head, but nothing Madam Pomfrey couldn't fix in a jiffy."

Harry sighed in relief, the boy lifting a hand to rub at his eyes. Belatedly, Harry realized he wasn't wearing glasses - but he could see perfectly fine. "My glasses?" Harry choked out, a bit astonished at the change. He could see far better now, without his glasses, than he'd ever experienced with them . . . however, his Aunt had found them in a bin at the dollar store, so Harry couldn't have expected perfection.

"Ah, yes," Dumbledore said, sounding pleased. "Madam Pomfrey took the initiative to perform a few extraneous healing charms, among them corrective spell for your eyesight. It seems that you never quite needed glasses, despite a little damage to your retinas - you know, perhaps I'll have our lovely Nurse explain the procedure. I'm a bit unfamiliar with it," his expression was sheepish.

Harry was quiet for a moment, trying to recall his memories from the other night. "Sir, about the Stone . . ."

"I see you are not to be distracted," the headmaster sighed. "Very well, the Stone. As you are aware, it was destroyed during your struggle with Quirrell, although I'm unsure of the specifics. I'm sure we'll get to that eventually," his eyes gleamed pointedly. "As for your former professor, by the time I arrived, the wounds he'd acclaimed were . . . unfortunately, beyond even our esteemed Nurse's capabilities."

"You got there? You got Hermione's owl?" Harry asked, sitting up.

"We must have crossed in midair," Dumbledore said thoughtfully. "No sooner had I reached London than it became clear to me that the place I should be was the one I had just left. I arrived shortly after you'd fallen unconscious, my boy. I feared I might be too late."

"You nearly were," Harry said quietly. "I wasn't sure how long I could keep him from fleeing."
"Not Voldemort, boy, you - the effort involved nearly killed you. For one terrible moment there, I was afraid it had."

Harry picked at a stray thread on the sheets, his eyes betraying extreme doubt at the wizard's concern.

" - Sir?" He changed the subject after a moment. "What will happen to your friend, Nicolas Flamel, now that the Stone is gone?"

"Oh, you know about Nicolas?" said Dumbledore, sounding quite delighted. "You did do the thing properly, didn't you? Well, Nicolas and I have had a little chat, and agreed it's all for the best."

"But that means he and his wife will die, won't they?" Harry asked, sounding regretful.

"Do not worry, my boy. After all, to the well-organized mind, death is but the next great adventure. You know, the Stone was really not such a wonderful thing. As much money and life as you could want! The two things most human beings would choose above all - the trouble is, humans do have a knack of choosing precisely those things that are worst for them."

Harry lay there, lost for words.

Dumbledore hummed a little and smiled at the ceiling. "Sir?" said Harry. "I've been thinking, even if the Stone's gone; Voldemort is still going to try other ways of coming back, isn't he? Something tells me he isn't gone for good this time," he frowned.

"No, Harry, he has not. He is still out there somewhere, perhaps looking for another body to share. Yet not being truly alive, he cannot be killed. He left Quirrell to die; he shows just as little mercy to his followers as his enemies. Nevertheless, Harry, while you may only have delayed his return to power, it will merely take someone else who is prepared to fight what seems a losing battle next time - and if he is delayed again, and again, why, he may never return to power."

Harry pressed his lips together, his stomach sinking in dread. "We'll just have to hope that he doesn't, then, won't we?"

Dumbledore gave the boy hero another smile. "Often, Harry, you'll find that hope is the only thing stronger than fear. But you must hold onto that hope," Dumbledore patted Harry's leg. "And never give up, for you'll always find that the beginning is always the hardest."

Harry lifted an eyebrow, wondering distantly to himself - *so this is only the beginning?*

... What seemed like several hours of explaining later, Harry smirked as Draco choked on his spit, the blonde staggering from his place against the wall.

"Wait, wait. Back up. You *kicked* the Dark Lord in his - "

"Draco!" Hermione hissed, elbowing Ron as the redhead starting laughing.

"It's official," Ron sniggered around a chocolate frog. "You're officially eviller than You-Know-Who!"

Harry merely smiled innocently in response, eyeing a deep purple-colored bean. He tasted it warily, pleasantly surprised to taste ripe, sweet grapes. Harry continued telling his friends of the events that followed his crossing through the flames, finishing before mentioning the two mirror figures that had
watched him fall into unconsciousness.

That was a mystery he'd keep to himself.

"So the Stone's gone?" Ron said finally. "Flamel's just going to die?"

"That's what I said," Harry said, lips pressed in consternation. "I think it's terrible, however, Dumbledore thinks that - what was it? - 'to the well-organized mind, death is but the next great adventure.'"

"I always said he was off his rocker," Ron said, and Draco nodded in agreement.

"So what happened to you three?" Harry changed the subject.

Draco scratched the back of his head, looking vaguely penitent. "I went to find Uncle Sev, like you told me too, but he wasn't - ah. Well, when he woke up to a bezoar being shoved down his throat, he wasn't the most pleasant of company."

"I can't believe you drugged him," Hermione muttered from her chair beside Ron's.

"It's not that unbelievable. I'm just surprised we didn't caught right away, after all, he is supposedly the best Potion's Master in Scotland." Draco shrugged. "Anyways, after I told him you'd gone down to stall Quirrell, he looked like he was about to murder someone." the Malfoy scion paused, his face turning red. "He petrified me and stuck me in the corner, and I wasn't released until yesterday morning! Thankfully, an elf came by to feed me, otherwise I'm sure I'd have died of starvation."

Harry's lips quirked, laughter threatening to bubble forth. "What?!" he giggled, covering his mouth.

Draco flushed further, crossing his arms. "It was absolutely horrid," the blonde pouted. "Severus even came back for a few hours, but he barely even glanced at me, other than to tell me you were alright."

"Speaking of, I got back all right," Hermione tried to distract them, although her eyes were crinkled with amusement. "I brought Ron 'round - that took a while - and we were jut dashing up to the owlery to contact Dumbledore when we met him in the entrance hall. It was like he already knew about you! He just said, 'Harry's gone after him, hasn't he?' and hurtled off to the third floor."

"D'you think he meant you to do it?" Ron asked, his mirth fading away. "Sending you your father's cloak and everything?"

"Well!" Hermione cut in, looking furious. "If he did, that'd have been terrible - you could have been killed!"

Ignoring her, Harry paused for a moment, thinking. "I suppose he could've planned it all. I mean, don't you find it odd? All of those protections, they weren't terribly difficult to solve." At Ron's affronted look, he pushed on. "I mean, they were difficult, yes, for first-years - but for Voldemort? He'd have gotten passed these in minutes. Think about it; anyone whose read about Orpheus, that Greek guy, could have easily figured out Fluffy's one weakness."

Harry ticked the numbers off his fingers. "We were taught about Devil's Snare by Sprout and in Potions, Snape had us brew Herbicide Potion! If I'd known about the Snare beforehand, I'd have most definitely brought some."

"We were given flying lessons within the first few weeks of school," Hermione jumped in. "And any well-rounded witch or wizard knows how to play chess. The troll, we could've knocked out
eventually, and logic quickly got us through the purple fire. It's almost as though - 

"As though Dumbledore wanted Voldemort to steal the Stone, of course," Draco spat, pacing across the small space. "He practically gave us the tools in order to apprehend the Dark Lord! The Mirror of Erised was the only real obstacle, and apparently only certain people could get past it."

"Merlin, why didn't I see it before?" Hermione broke in, slapping her forehead. "The Stone wasn't even real!"

As the others gaped at her, she dived for her book bag, pulling out her notes on Flamel and the Philosopher's Stone. "See, look here - *The ancient study of alchemy is concerned with making the Sorcerer's Stone, a legendary substance with astonishing powers. The inf Rangible stone will transform any metal into pure gold. It also produces the Elixir of Life, which will make the drinker immortal.*"

"Infrangible," Draco mused. "That means unbreakable, right?"

"But if I smashed the Stone against a wall, it had to have been a fake. " Harry's eyes narrowed. "And that means . . . "

"It means it was all just a trap for the Dark Lord . . . and for you." Draco finished, his voice naught but a whisper.

Harry closed his eyes, breathing in deeply. "It seems I can't trust anyone anymore." he murmured, rubbing his fists into his eyes.

His friends exchanged looks, before Hermione leaned forward to touch Harry's hand. "You can trust us, Harry," she told him, reassuringly. Ron and Draco nodded in agreement.

"I know." Harry spared them a weak smile, clenching Hermione's fingers in response. "I know."

Their fifteen minutes were up, and the shaking didn't occur until Harry was sure his friends were gone. He laid back into the cool sheets, sobs threatening to wrack his body. Placing a fist over his mouth, he practiced his breathing, thinking of nothing and everything all at once.

*Dumbledore was right,* Harry thought sardonically to himself, brushing away a rivulet of tears.

*This is only just the beginning.*

______________________________

*To be continued in Ophidian, Story Five of the Amalgamation Series*

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