Leo Inter Serpentes: Sixth Year
by Aeternum

Summary

Now that he knows the full contents of the prophecy, Harry begins training in earnest to kill Voldemort, with the help of his dad and two best friends. Dumbledore has voluntarily offered to divulge extra information to Harry, and the Ministry has finally realised what's been staring
them in the face for a year - but that doesn't mean that things will start to go smoothly for Harry. He and his loved ones will be tested in ways they haven't seen coming, and some relationships will buckle under the strain.

Notes

Thank you all for your patience while I wrote this thing! It took far longer than I had anticipated, but it's finally finished. I sincerely hope the wait was worth it! In an attempt to not have such a huge wait between this and Seventh Year, I'm going to be posting this story fortnightly rather than weekly. It'll still be on Mondays, though.

As always, a huge thank you to my lovely, talented beta, Charlie_Paloma! I very much appreciate all the help you've given me. Any remaining mistakes are my own, and probably left in against her wishes.
Harry walked down the stairs into the lounge room, unsurprised to find Severus waiting for him in his favourite armchair. A pot of tea and a tottering tower of books sat on the coffee table in front of him.

“I'm going,” Harry said.

Severus set aside the book he'd been reading. “Do you have your wand?”

“Yes.”

“Do not wander off on your own.”

“I won't.”

“I mean it, Harry,” Severus said. “Stay with Tonks or your godfather the entire time.”

“I will. I promise,” Harry said.

“Stay alert, and -”

“Dad, relax. You like Tonks and you said yourself that she's a good Auror. And you know Sirius wouldn't let anything happen to me or Draco. I'll be fine,” Harry said.

Severus nodded jerkily. “Very well. I'm going out myself for a couple of hours. I should be home well before you finish your shopping, but don't worry if you return before I do.”

“Okay. See you,” Harry said.

He grabbed some Floo powder and threw it into the fireplace. “Grimmauld Place!” he said, then stepped into the green flames.

He was spat out into the kitchen at Grimmauld Place, where he only stayed on his feet by grabbing the back of a kitchen chair. He righted himself to find Sirius and Tonks sitting on the other side of the table laughing at him.

“Wotcher,” Tonks said.

“Smooth, Harry,” Sirius said.

“I didn't face plant. I count this as an achievement,” Harry said good-naturedly, brushing soot off his robes.

“Amen to that,” said Tonks.

Harry sat down into the chair he was holding. “Is Draco ready yet?”

Sirius snorted. “Probably not.”

“I'll go get him,” Tonks said.

She walked over to the door and stuck her head out into the hallway. “OI! DRACO! HARRY'S HERE!” she bellowed.
Sirius chuckled. “Ever since Narcissa got rid of my mum's portrait, Tonks has decided she needs to make up for all the time she had to be quiet here,” he said to Harry.

Tonks just grinned as she returned to her seat. “It was unnaturally quiet in here. I'm trying to liven this place up a bit.”

“Because the army of house-elves and the two teenagers now living here haven't already done so,” Sirius drawled.

“Speaking of, where is everyone?” asked Harry.

Sirius leaned back in his chair in thought. “Remus is out on a mission. He'll be gone a few days, but he shouldn't be in too much danger. Kingsley's out at work. He's been assigned to protect the Muggle Prime Minister. Narcissa will be somewhere with the elves, either supervising the cleaning or planning the decorating. Theo's in the library, as per usual. And Draco's up in his room with Hermione.”

Harry perked up. “Hermione's here?”

“Yeah, she got here not long before you did. That's her luggage over there,” Sirius said.

Harry looked over to where Sirius was pointing. Lined up neatly against the wall was a small suitcase and a backpack. Looking up from the luggage, Harry saw that the wall was so clean it was fairly sparkling. It was a far cry from the dingy, soot-covered walls he was used to in this kitchen. Before Harry could ask about that, the door burst open and Draco hurried in, followed more slowly by Hermione.

“Good, you're here. Let's go,” said Draco.

“Hello to you too, you git,” Harry said. “Hi, Hermione.”

“Hello, Harry, it's nice to see you,” she said pointedly. 

Draco smiled. “Sorry, I'm just really looking forward to getting my new wand.”

“He's right, anyway, we do need to get a move on,” Tonks interrupted. “Gringotts is beefing up their security and we'll be there for a while.”

Sirius nodded and got up, moving over to the fireplace. He grabbed a handful of Floo powder and threw it into the fireplace. “The Leaky Cauldron.”

He was followed by Draco, Hermione, then Harry. He spun past countless grates before slowing down and pitching out into Draco's waiting arms.

Draco sniggered. “Hopeless, Potter. What would you do without me?”

Harry let Draco push him upright. “Not get called a prat nearly as often.”

The fireplace flared green once more, then Tonks came sprawling out onto the floor. Harry bent down to help her up.

“I hate Flooing,” she muttered to him as she brushed herself off.

Harry nodded. “Right there with you.”

“Keep your wands handy,” Sirius said in an undertone to Harry and Hermione, then led them
through the pub.

Harry couldn't help glancing around the Leaky Cauldron as he followed Sirius to the back courtyard. The pub was quieter than Harry had ever seen it, with only two patrons huddled together at a corner table. Tom the barman looked up hopefully as the group passed.

"Wotcher," Tonks called out to him.

Tom just nodded dejectedly when they showed no signs of stopping for a drink.

Out in the courtyard, the pattern in which Sirius tapped his wand on the bricks was the same as Harry remembered from previous visits, but the Diagon Alley he walked into was almost unrecognisable. The group stopped to look around themselves.

The shops were far less welcoming than usual. In previous years the store fronts had been a riot of colour and noise from the displays, with windows and doors thrown wide open to the public, and tables and barrels of wares sitting on the cobblestones in front of the stores.

Now, the store windows were in the process of being covered up by large posters, stuck to the glass by a team of what Harry assumed to be Ministry employees. The majority of the posters displayed security advice, but some had large, moving photos of the known Death Eaters running around the country. Sirius held up his middle finger at a nearby poster that showed a sneering Bellatrix.

The other shoppers were no longer chattering or stopping to browse shop windows. Everyone was tense and quiet, moving with swift purpose and sticking close to their companions. Harry couldn't see anyone shopping alone. A lot of people were looking around suspiciously; more than a few people slowed to stare at Harry when they noticed him. Though annoying, that was nothing new. What was unusual was the amount of stares Draco was receiving.

"Why's everyone staring at you?" Harry asked quietly.

"Because my mother killed my father at the Ministry and then escaped before they could arrest her," said Draco. "She's wanted for using an Unforgivable – it's been all over the _Prophet_ – when they aren't reporting on the Dark Lord, that is."

"Oh, yeah," said Harry, sheepish at having asked such a stupid question.

Tonks poked both boys in the back. "No dawdling."

They didn't talk for the rest of the way to Gringotts. The oppressive atmosphere of the street seemed to forbid unnecessary talking, and Tonks and Sirius weren't helping matters. They both had their wands in their hands, and had pushed Draco to the centre of the group, where, since he was wandless, he would at least be surrounded by four people who did have wands.

When the group reached the bronze outer doors of Gringotts, Harry was surprised to find that the old goblin guards had been replaced by a witch and a wizard. Both of them were wearing dark blue robes and stern expressions. They were both in the process of questioning a pair of patrons and poking them with long, golden rods. Every now and then one of the guards would write something on a clipboard. There was a long line of people in front of them, waiting for their own turns getting questioned.

Tonks led the group over to the end of the line, then turned around to regard the kids. "They're going to scan us with their Probity Probes and ask us a few questions. Just answer truthfully. If you've got anything on you that you shouldn't have, like, say, something you were planning on pranking your uncle with, dispose of it now."
Draco raised his chin at her words. “I'm not an idiot, Nym.”

“Sure about that?” she asked, cracking a proper smile for the first time since they'd arrived at Diagon Alley.

“Yes,” said Draco, then smirked. “Besides, I'll get Sirius once we're back home.”

“Not if I get you first,” Sirius replied

Hermione rolled her eyes. “I'm so glad I won't be staying for that.”

“You're not?” Harry asked in surprise. He'd just assumed she was there for the rest of the holidays.

“No, I'm only here for today. Draco asked me if I wanted to come with him when he got his new wand. I'm going to Heathrow tonight, to fly out to see Viktor. Sirius said he and Kingsley can take me to the airport, so my parents dropped me off this morning,” Hermione explained.

“Theo's tagging along tonight, too. Apparently he has some sort of fascination with the Muggle flying machines,” added Sirius.

“Yeah, he and Tracey went to Heathrow to watch the planes a couple of years ago,” said Harry. “Have fun in Bulgaria – say hi to Viktor for me.”

“I will,” Hermione said.

They'd been in line for fifteen minutes and had moved all of half a metre, when Sirius grinned and waved down the street. “Oi, Bill!”

Harry turned around to see Bill hurrying towards Gringotts. Like everyone else, he looked tense, though he grinned at Sirius' greeting.

“Morning. Been here long?” he asked.

“Long enough,” Tonks grumbled.

Bill just grinned again. “Come on, I'll take you through. You'll be here for a couple of hours otherwise.”

“Cheers,” Tonks said.

They followed Bill out of the line and up the stairs to the security guards, causing more than a few people to grumble about preferential treatment.

“This lot are with me,” Bill told the closest guard, then rattled of everyone's names.

She looked the group over; her eyes lingered on Harry's scar for a fraction of a second, though her expression didn't change in the slightest. “Vouch for them, Weasley?”

“Yeah.”

“Anything we should know?” she asked.

“One Metamorphmagus and one Animagus,” said Bill, pointing to Tonks and Sirius.

The guard sighed. “Ms Tonks, I'll need you to return to your natural body, if you are not already in it, and Mr Black, I'll need to see you transform into your animal form and back.”
A moment later a large, bear-like black dog was standing in front of her. The security witch made a note on her clipboard, told Sirius he could resume his human form, then turned to Tonks, who now had her natural, brown, shaggy hair.

“I'll need to charm you so that you cannot alter your appearance. The charm will wear off once you leave the premises,” she assured Tonks.

“Go on, then,” Tonks said in resignation.

The security guard ran her wand up and down Tonks' body. Tonks seemed to shimmer slightly, then the witch nodded them all through into the interior of the bank. Instead of the empty entrance hall Harry had been expecting, there were four more long lines stretching to the far side of the room, where a group of Aurors were guarding the next set of doors.

Sirius rubbed his ears. “That Probe nearly deafened me as a dog. Terrible ringing sound.”

“Yeah, I feel bloody shocking. Like something wet's clinging to my skin,” said Tonks.

“I'll have to leave you here, I'm afraid, the Aurors don't trust us employees enough for me to get you through,” Bill said apologetically.

“No worries, I've got this part,” Tonks said.

“Catch you at the next dinner party, then,” Bill said, then walked off.

“Come on,” Tonks said. She walked straight past all the other people lined up, stopping in front of the closest Auror. “Wotcher, Williamson.”

The Auror smiled. “Morning, Tonks. All four with you?”

“Yeah. My cousins Sirius and Draco Black, and Draco's friends Harry Potter and Hermione Granger,” said Tonks, pointing to everyone in turn.

Williamson jerked his head at the doors behind him. “Go ahead. See you back at work.”

“Cheers,” said Tonks, clapping him on the shoulder as she passed and ignoring the loud complaints that sprung up from the people still waiting.

There was yet another line in the main hall, and it was a good hour before Harry's group got to speak to a teller. After yet another interrogation, Krunholg the goblin beckoned over another goblin and announced that he would be splitting the group up.

“Not bloody likely,” Sirius growled. “These kids aren't going anywhere unaccompanied.”

Krunholg looked at him with great dislike. “I wasn't going to suggest they should. Durgbrog will take you and your nephew down to your vaults, as yours are both far deeper. I'll take Potter and the women.”

Tonks looked at Sirius. “We'll be back before you two – we'll wait for you in here.”

Harry, Hermione and Tonks all followed Krunholg into one the rickety little carts. After a breakneck journey, they stopped outside Tonks' vault. She quickly swept a stash of coins into her money bag, then they were hurling down to Harry's vault on the level below. Harry got out twice as much money as he normally would – he didn't want to have to go through all of the tedious security checks again if he could help it – then they were speeding back towards the surface.
It was another twenty minutes before Draco and Sirius rejoined them. Thankfully the line to exchange Galleons for Muggle pounds was quite short, so it wasn't long before the entire group was finally able to leave Gringotts. The second she had the security charm removed from her, Tonks gave a full body shake and turned her hair back to its usual bright pink. With their pockets jangling with coins, the group made their way to Ollivander's.

Here was one shop that seemed unchanged. Its windows may have been covered with Ministry posters, but since it had always been dim inside, it made little difference. A bell tinkled as the door opened, a cheerful little sound in the cool gloom of the shop. Harry hung back near the door with Hermione and Tonks while Sirius followed Draco into the centre of the room. Just like when Harry had come here at eleven, to buy his own wand, his skin prickled with the magic of the thousands of boxed wands surrounding him.

“Good morning,” said Ollivander.

Harry blinked; he hadn't seen Ollivander step out of the curtained doorway to the back of the shop. From the way Tonks was frowning, he gathered she hadn't noticed Ollivander, either.

“I need a new wand,” Draco said.

Ollivander turned his pale eyes on him. “Your current wand is hawthorn, ten inches and nicely springy, with a unicorn hair core.”

“Yes, but I need a new one,” said Draco.

“What's the problem with your current wand?” asked Ollivander.

“I – I just need a new one,” said Draco.

“Mr Black, in order to best fit you with your new wand, I need to know what the problem is with your current one. Are you having trouble performing a specific sort of magic? Is it refusing to cast spells you previously had no troubles with? Has the wand wilted altogether?” pressed Ollivander.

Draco half-glanced at Sirius before answering. “It – there's nothing wrong with its magic, alright? It was used to torture my mother and I refuse to use it again!”

“I see,” said Ollivander. Harry thought him remarkably unfazed by the mention of torture. “That would have been during the battle at the Ministry, I presume?”

“Yes,” Draco said tightly.

“Hold out your wand arm,” Ollivander said. He pulled a long measuring tape out of a pocket and began to measure Draco while he continued to question him. “Have you used another wand since?”

“Of course not, I'm only sixteen,” Draco said quickly.

Ollivander let go of the measuring tape, which continued to measure Draco by itself, and stared at Draco closely. “Your mother's wand is cherry with a core of dragon heart-string. Twelve inches long and quite brittle.”

“Yes, I think so.”

“It worked well for you – well, but not flawlessly.”

There was a pause, then Draco nodded.
Ollivander watched Draco unblinkingly while the measuring tape flitted around measuring him. After a minute Ollivander gave a quiet hum, snatched the tape out of the air and turned to the closest wall of wand boxes. He pulled an armful of boxes off the shelves, seemingly at random, and thrust a wand out to Draco. Harry could tell by the way she was fidgeting that Hermione was dying to ask Ollivander about his methodology.

“Here. Cherry and dragon heart-string. Ten inches and rigid. Don't try to cast a conscious spell – you've been learning long enough that you could force a spell out of just about any wand. Just give it a flick and see what happens,” Ollivander instructed.

Draco waved the wand to no effect.


Draco had barely closed his hand around the handle of this wand before Ollivander snatched it back off him.

“No, no, no... Oh, this is interesting... How about this. Rowan and phoenix feather. Nine inches and whippy.”

Again, Draco waved the wand, only for nothing to happen. Ollivander seemed delighted. He handed Draco five more wands in rapid succession; none of them displayed any magic when waved through the air.

“Yes, I think we have it! Apple and unicorn hair. Ten and a half inches. Very supple.”

This time, when Draco brought the wand down, a shower of green and purple stars flew out of the tip of it, bouncing onto the floor and lighting up the shop. Draco gave a relieved sigh and then grinned over at Harry and Hermione.

Draco quickly paid for his new wand, then the group returned to Diagon Alley and headed for Magical Menagerie to buy the parrot Draco had promised to Scarlett. Harry, for one, was pleased to get out of the wand shop; Ollivander had always given him the creeps. On the way they stopped first at Madam Malkin's, as all three teenagers needed new school robes, and then at Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes – because how could they not go in?

Where the rest of Diagon Alley was grim and joyless, the shop front of Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes was a calamitous riot of colour and sound. The right-hand window was suspiciously blank – Harry was sure it had been saved from yet more Ministry posters for something spectacular – but the left-hand window display was crammed full of the Weasley twins' wares. The display was so full of noisy, brightly-coloured, spinning items that Harry could scarcely make them out. He supposed that was the plan; catch the customer's eye, then draw them into the shop to ascertain what, exactly, they were looking at.

The interior of the shop was more crowded than Harry had been expecting, but a blonde shop assistant spotted the new arrivals right away.

“Welcome to Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes!” she said cheerfully. “May I help you with anything?”

“Hi, yeah, are Fred and George around?” asked Harry.

The woman nodded. “I'll send them right over.”

She hurried off to the back of the store, easily dodging a group of young girls laughing together over a display of fake wands. A group of slightly older kids were gathered around a display model of a
game of hangman. As Harry watched, the little wooden figure resignedly climbed the steps of a scaffolding, egged on by the kids.

A nudge in his side jolted his attention back to Draco. “Look, they've got more Skiving Snackboxes! We need to stock up.”

“Definitely,” Harry agreed, following Draco over to the display.

“Draco Abraxas Black, you are a Prefect,” Hermione said.

“So?” asked Draco, picking up a box of Nosebleed Nougats.

“So you shouldn’t be skipping classes!” Hermione said in exasperation.

“Yeah, Draco, you need to set an example to the younger kids,” Tonks said, grinning.

Sirius looked up from a box of Fainting Fancies he was inspecting. “Seems to me like he's setting a pretty good example on how to get away with skipping class.”

Draco smirked at him, while beside him, Hermione realised she was outnumbered four to one, and walked off. Sirius frowned after her.

“She's never once skipped a class, has she,” he stated.

“Nope,” Harry said.

Sirius shook his head. “She's just like Moony – taking school entirely too seriously. Now, your dad on the other hand – he would've loved these. James and I could have made very good use of something like this back in the day.”

“Now that is high praise.”

Harry turned around to see Fred and George both beaming at Sirius. They were wearing matching magenta robes that clashed so obnoxiously with their red hair that Harry suspected it was intentional.

“High praise indeed, George,” said Fred.

“Here,” George said, pulling one of each sort of Snackbox off the shelves and shoving them into Harry's arms. “On the house.”

“What?” Harry said, startled.

“You don't pay here. Your money helped us develop all this stuff. Take whatever you fancy,” Fred said firmly.

“Just don't tell your dad, okay?” George added.

“Sure,” Harry agreed, then dumped his Snackboxes in Draco's hands. “Draco won't mind holding onto them for me.”

Draco opened his mouth to argue, then realised he'd just been handed the entire range for free. “Of course not.”

“Wasn't Hermione with you?” asked Fred.

“Yeah, she's over by that pink stuff,” Tonks said, pointing across the shop.
“Ah, the Wonder Witch range!” cried Fred.

While Tonks stayed with Sirius, who was still bent delightedly over the Skiving Snackboxes, Harry and Draco followed the twins over to Hermione. She was standing in front of a range of products, all of which were coloured bright pink. There were a number of other girls clustered around the shelves, most of whom were giggling madly.

“A love potion, Hermione? Ginny's told us you're still dating Viktor Krum,” said George.

Hermione stiffened slightly. “I am. I was just curious. Do these actually work?”

“Of course they work,” Fred said indignantly.

“Depending on the attractiveness of the girl, and the size of the boy,” said George.

“But I think you could probably slip some to Harry or Draco and make them violently in love with you for a day or so,” said Fred.

Harry and Draco looked at each other, then at Hermione. “Even though neither of us is interested in girls?” asked Draco.

Fred shrugged. “If Hermione gave you some of this, you'd be interested in her.”

“I'd want to snog her?” asked Harry.

“Among other things,” George said with a wink.

“Until the potion wore off, anyway,” said Fred.

Harry didn't like the sound of that. It sounded like being under the Imperius Curse, or like being possessed by Riddle's diary all over again.

Hermione looked just as troubled. “You do realise that's rape, yes?”

The twins shared a glance. “What, no,” Fred said, shaking his head.

“It's just a laugh,” said George.

“Yes, unless whoever used the potion decided to shag their victim,” Draco said. “I mean, I love Hermione, but the only way I'd shag her was if I was being forced to.”

“Which is rape,” Hermione said, sounding properly angry now.

There was a deep, uncomfortable silence amongst their group, broken only by the background noise of the other shoppers.

“We didn't think about it like that,” the twins said together.

“Does Ginny know that you sell products that take away someone's free will?” asked Harry. “’Cause, you know, she hasn't forgotten what it was like to be under the control of that diary.”

The twins paled, looked at each other again, then nodded in unison.

“We'll scrap the lot,” said Fred. He picked up a nearby shopping basket and swept all the bottles off the shelf into it, picking one up to peer at it. “We can re-use the bottles for some of the beauty products.”
“Right you are,” George said. He plucked the label off the shelf and turned to the younger three. “Thanks for pointing this out. Bit of a costly mistake for us, but at least we won't have to live with knowing someone's using our products for – to do that.”

“Just don't tell Ginny,” said Fred.

After assuring the twins that they wouldn't say a thing, Harry, Hermione and Draco wandered off to look at the rest of the shop. Harry felt so guilty about causing the twins to lose money that he insisted on paying for the bag of stock he'd picked up. He was most excited about the Decoy Detonators (small horn-like objects that, when dropped, scurried away before blowing themselves up as a diversionary tactic) and the box of fireworks that he picked up.

“Got a lot planned for this year, then?” Fred asked.

Harry shrugged. “After Umbridge I'm going to be ready for whatever toe-rag they set as the new Defence teacher.”

“It could be someone good, you know,” Hermione said, once they were back out in the street.

“You could do it,” Harry said to Sirius.

Sirius shook his head. “I don't think so. Apart from the fact that I've got things to do for the Order, Narcissa's wanted by the Ministry for using an Unforgivable, and they suspect she's living at my place. Even if Dumbledore wanted to appoint me, the Ministry would use this to pressure me into giving her up.”

“But you wouldn't,” Draco said sharply.

“Of course not, Draco,” Sirius said.

“Besides, you'd make a terrible teacher,” said Tonks. “You'd show all the students how to smuggle booze into Hogwarts via the secret passageways and let anyone out of handing in their homework if they had a good enough excuse.”

Sirius laughed. “That too.”

Magical Menagerie turned out to be just as noisy and smelly as it had been during Harry's previous visits. This time, though, he was looking for something more interesting than owl treats. He looked around at all the various animals with interest. Apart from the more pedestrian animals, like dogs, cats and rats, they had poisonous snails oozing around a glass tank; bejewelled tortoises glimmering in a terrarium; bright purple toads sitting half-submerged in a small pool of water; a litter of young Kneazles playing in a large cage; and a wall of small glass enclosures that contained different species of invertebrates.

A sales assistant came over and was soon leading the group past a row of about twenty different owls, to a smaller group of brightly coloured parrots, chattering loudly in a cage. Less than an hour later and the group had returned to Grimmauld Place. Tonks and Sirius went down into the kitchen, leaving the three teenagers alone in Draco's room with the parrot.

Draco set the parrot's cage down on a desk and the trio crowded around it. It was a female eclectus parrot, about a foot high, with red plumage, an indigo chest, and a narrow band of yellow at the tip of her tail. She bobbed up and down on her perch and let out a loud squawk. Draco opened the bag of bird seed he'd bought and poured some into the cage. The parrot eyed him, then shuffled over to begin eating surprisingly daintily. Over in the corner, Thoth woke up at the parrot's squawk. His large eyes fixated on the parrot, and he shuffled restlessly on his owl perch as he watched the new
Harry turned away from the birds and looked around the room properly. It had definitely changed since the last time he'd been there. The heavy, old-fashioned furniture had been replaced with Draco's old bedroom furniture, salvaged from Malfoy Manor. The dingy old wallpaper had been stripped away and replaced with a greenish-blue pattern that brightened the room and went well with the silvery-blue bedding.

All in all, while the room was far smaller than Draco's old one, it was still comfortable and cheery. Harry couldn't help missing the dragon mural Draco had used to have, though it looked like all of his decorations from the Manor had survived. Framed photographs cluttered a shelf on one wall, mostly showing Draco with his friends (Harry and Hermione featured heavily), with a few ornaments were scattered between the frames; a large, signed Falmouth Falcons poster was pinned to another wall; on either side of that were two faded Slytherin banners that Harry recognised as having once belonged to Regulus.

Harry flopped down on the bed and settled back against the pillows. “I would've thought you'd be moving back to Malfoy Manor now that – er -”

“My father's dead?” Draco asked, then laughed bitterly. “No, we can't. The Order's fairly certain that the Dark Lord's taken it over as his base of operations.”

Harry stared at him in dismay. He'd always loved his visits to the Manor: he had had his first birthday celebration there, and the only family Christmas that he could remember having. He could only imagine how much worse Draco felt about the situation. He'd grown up there, had learned to walk and talk and fly there.

“What can we do about it?” Harry asked.

Draco shrugged. “Nothing. Mother, Kingsley, Sirius and Remus have discussed breaking in and taking it back. They think there's a chance I could get them in, since I'm a Malfoy by blood, but that it's too risky – the Dark Lord and god knows how many of his followers would retaliate. It's just not worth it.”

“I'm sorry,” said Harry.

“It's hardly your fault that my father made poor life choices,” said Draco. “I would have thought your own father would have told you about the Manor.”

“Guess he's got other things on his mind,” said Harry. “Er, speaking of your dad, how are you? You know, after everything that happened.”

“I'm fine,” said Draco.

Hermione tutted. “Tell him the truth, Draco.”

“That was the truth,” said Draco. When Hermione merely crossed her arms, he sighed and rolled his eyes. “Fine. I've been having nightmares, that's all.”

“You didn't have any when we were at Hogwarts,” said Harry.

Draco shrugged. “Yes, well, I was sleeping in your bed, wasn't I? It's not that bad. Mother's begun teaching me Occlumency, which has helped.”

“I didn't know your mum knew Occlumency,” said Harry.
“She's never had to use it against the Dark Lord like your father has, but she's more than skilled enough to teach me. And honestly, Harry, I don't know why you complained about that so much. It's really not that difficult,” said Draco.

“Yeah, well, maybe you're just naturally better at than I am,” said Harry.

“I'm naturally better than you at many things, Potter,” Draco smirked.

Harry rolled his eyes. “You getting used to it here, then?”

Draco walked around the bed to sit next to Harry. “Yes, slowly. It helps that my room’s finally inhabitable. Mother's done her own room, of course, as well as Theo's room and the kitchen, but she and the elves are only now getting started on sorting out the rest of the rooms. Most of their time has been spent just moving everything into the attic for storage and cleaning. You have no idea about some of the things they found.”

Harry thought back to the house-elf heads that had formally graced the staircase. “I think I do, actually.”

“Well, anyway, Mother's decided that they need to work on the guest bedrooms next, so that Hermione has a nice room when she gets back here,” Draco concluded.

“They really needn't go to that much effort on my behalf,” Hermione said, sitting cross-legged in the centre of the bed.

Draco shrugged. “They're going to do it all eventually. I think your bedroom takes precedence over the drawing room.”

“You're staying here too?” Harry asked.

Hermione nodded. “When I get back from Bulgaria.”

“When's that?” Harry asked.

To his surprise, Hermione fidgeted and frowned down at her lap. “I'm not quite sure.”

“Because those Muggle flying machines are awfully unreliable, right?” asked Draco, nodding. “I knew it. They can't possibly fly properly without magic.”

Harry and Hermione both stared at him.

“No, that's not it,” Hermione said eventually, “and I think you should get Theo to explain to you how planes work when he gets back from the airport this evening.”

“Why don't you know when you'll be back?” asked Harry.

Hermione sighed. “Because I'm not sure if Viktor will want me there after – after I break up with him.”

“You're breaking up with him?” Harry asked. “I thought you were happy with him.”

“I am,” Hermione said, sounding utterly miserable. “I don't want to break up with him, believe me.”

“Is it the long distance thing?” asked Draco.

“Not entirely. It hasn’t been the easiest thing in the world, only being able to see him over the
holidays, but it was manageable,” said Hermione.

Harry frowned. “Then what is it?”

“Protection. I don't want to put him in danger,” said Hermione.

“Is this because I was kidnapped to get to Harry? Because I think he's a slightly bigger target than you are,” Draco said bluntly.

Hermione shook her head. “I know that. But how could I ask Viktor to visit me while we're in the middle of a war? It's rapidly getting worse, you know that as well as I do. I couldn't live with myself if something happened to him because of me.”

Harry sat up so he could put his hand on Hermione's shoulder. “Hey, you never know. Maybe he won't find anyone else he likes, and when this is all over you can get back together.”

Draco snorted. “Oh, yes, that's likely, isn't it? The most famous Quidditch player in the world? He'll find someone else as soon as he gets over Hermione.”

Harry turned to glare at him. “That is not helpful, you prat!”

Draco opened his mouth to respond, but Hermione got there first. “No, he's right, Harry. I can't very well break up with Viktor but then expect him not to date anyone else. And who knows? Maybe this war will blow over quickly.”

“I'll kill Voldemort as quickly as I can,” Harry promised.

Hermione gave him a small smile. “That's very gallant of you, Harry, but you needn't kill Voldemort just for the benefit of my love life.”

“It's not just because of that,” Harry said. He took a deep breath and continued before he could change his mind. “I need to tell you both something. About the prophecy.”

Harry had a strong feeling of deja vu as he relayed the full contents of the prophecy to his two best friends, remembering how he'd first told them about the prophecy. The feeling dissipated when he finished talking. Instead of instantly promising to stick by his side like they had two years ago, both Draco and Hermione looked at him calculatingly.

“They can't really expect you to just kill him, surely,” said Hermione.

“Don't have much choice,” said Harry. “If I don't kill him, he's going to kill me.”

“Yes, but even so -”

“And anyway,” Harry cut her off, “even without the prophecy, I want to. He killed my birth parents. I want to be the one to kill him.”

Hermione pursed her lips. “It's horribly unfair to heap this on you. Not to mention terrible strategy. You're only fifteen. There has to be someone better qualified, more experienced.”

Harry gave a crooked grin. “I don't see anyone else stepping up, do you? Most people won't even say his sodding name.”

He and Hermione both turned to Draco. His eyes darted between Harry and Hermione's faces, then he raised his chin.
“Why does it matter what I call him?” he asked.

“Fear of a name only increases fear of the thing itself. Don’t give Voldemort more power than he already has,” Hermione said.

Harry rolled his eyes at her tone. “Ignore her if you want to. Just because you've started saying his name, Hermione, doesn't mean everyone has to.”

Draco reddened and cleared his throat. “So, Snape's just going along with this, is he?”

“He wasn't happy when he found out, but he didn't waste his time arguing with Dumbledore, if that's what you mean,” said Harry. “He said he's going to train me. He's been researching stuff ever since we got home from Hogwarts.”

A gleam appeared in Hermione's eyes. “What sort of things has he been researching?”

Harry shrugged. “Dunno. Duelling techniques, maybe?”

“If he wants any help, let me know,” said Hermione.

Harry didn't think that likely, but he nodded anyway. “Will do.”

“And Dumbledore's sure that your special power is love?” asked Draco.

“Yeah,” Harry sighed.

Draco pulled a face. “How's that supposed to help in a fight? What are you meant do, hug him to death?”

“Beats me,” said Harry. “But I'm sure Dad will figure it out. He always has in the past.”

********

A few hours later Harry wished Hermione a safe flight then returned home. He stumbled out of the fireplace, almost landing in the Pensieve that was sitting on the coffee table. Harry frowned down at the stone basin for a moment, then entered the kitchen to find Severus in the middle of cooking dinner.

“Ah, good, you're just in time to set the table,” he said.

“Okay,” said Harry, walking over to the cutlery drawer. “Why's there a Pensieve in the lounge room?”

“I borrowed it from Albus,” said Severus.

“Why?”

Severus placed two bowls of risotto on the table and sat down. “I've been researching possible explanations for your connection to the Dark Lord.”

“That's what you've been doing? I thought it was defence stuff, so you could train me to kill him,” said Harry.

“No, though I was planning on beginning your training tomorrow,” said Severus.
“Okay. So how's the Pensieve going to help?”

“I would like to view one of your memories,” said Severus. “Of the graveyard.”


“While we were at the Ministry, the Dark Lord possessed you with great ease. Even for a Legilimens of his calibre, he should not have been able to do that. I have been thinking that maybe he hit you with a curse that created this connection,” Severus said.

Harry frowned. “Why would he do that? He was mostly just trying to kill or torture me.”

Severus' mouth tightened. “It could be something unintentional – perhaps connected to your wands sharing a core.”

“I guess that makes sense,” Harry said slowly.

“No, it doesn't – you were having visions of him before the graveyard, so there's clearly some connection which pre-dates the encounter in the graveyard – but nothing else seems to make sense either,” said Severus. “Given that Ginevra has not experienced anything similar, I think we can rule out the diary. After that, the longest time you spent in his presence was in the graveyard, so I think we should start there.”

Harry nodded. “What did Dumbledore say?”

Severus sighed. “He disagrees that the Dark Lord could have cursed you in this way. He believes that the Dark Lord is simply employing particularly strong Legilimency on you. He agreed to lend me his Pensieve, despite telling me that I am wasting my time.”

“But you don't agree with him.”

“No, I don't. I've had the Dark Lord perform Legilimency upon me and do not doubt his prowess. He is the most skilled Legilimens of our time – if not in all of history – but I cannot see how he could accomplish what he has with you through Legilimency alone.”

Harry bent his head over his bowl, eating the rest of his dinner as he thought about all of that. Once they were done eating, Severus sent the dishes floating into the sink to wash themselves, then joined Harry in the lounge.

“I will extract your memory and place it in the Pensieve, where I will enter the memory,” Severus explained.

Harry raised his head. “I want to come with you.”

Severus shook his head. “No. I don't think that's wise. There is no need for you to relive this experience – that's why I chose to borrow the Pensieve to view the memory, instead of using Legilimency on you.”

“I'm not afraid.”

“There is no shame in being afraid, Harry. One cannot be brave unless one has to overcome one's fear. Absence of fear in the face of true danger is stupidity, not courage,” said Severus.

Harry shrugged. “Fine, whatever. I still want to come.”

“And I'm saying no,” said Severus sternly, then softened. “Harry, this is going to be difficult enough
for me as it is. I'll need to focus on what the Dark Lord did. Do you imagine that I will find it easy to block out the sound of your screams as he tortures you in front of me? The fewer distractions the better.”

Harry studied Severus' face. There was a tightness around his eyes that betrayed his unhappiness, but he was obviously resolute. “Fine.”

“Thank you,” Severus said in relief. “I'm going to draw the memory out of you with my wand. I want you to think of the graveyard, from the moment you arrived there. This won't hurt.”

Harry obediently cast his mind back to his painful, bloodied arrival in the Little Hangleton graveyard. As he did so, Severus leaned towards him and placed the tip of his wand against Harry's temple. There was an odd pulling sensation – like Severus had said, it wasn't painful – and then he drew his hand back. A silvery thread dangled from the wand. Severus carefully placed it into the Pensieve, where it began to swirl around.

Harry frowned at the feeling of losing a memory. He could still remember parts of what had happened, via other memories of himself talking about the events, though some of them he thought might actually be nightmares. He wasn't sure that he liked having a memory removed like this. It was too disorienting. His attention was wrenched back to the present when Severus spoke again.

“You will be able to see and hear snippets from the Pensieve as the memory plays itself out. Don't worry about me. Nothing in there will be able to physically touch me, understand?”

“Yeah.”

Harry watched closely as Severus leaned over the Pensieve and plunged his head into the gaseous liquid within. Harry gave a startled yell when Severus was then sucked into the Pensieve, leaving Harry alone in the lounge. He watched as the Pensieve's contents threw coloured light up onto the ceiling, then returned to the kitchen to fix some tea while he waited for Severus to return. He paced around the kitchen as he waited for the kettle to boil, trying to ignore the sounds he heard coming from the Pensieve.

Eventually Harry had enough and walked over to the record player and switched on its radio. After fiddling with the dial for a minute, he got it off static and onto a station that was playing a modern pop song. He'd never heard it before, but its relentless cheeriness was just what he felt like listening to then. He curled up on the couch and tried to read the *Daily Prophet*, which Severus had resumed buying once they'd stopped printing lies about Harry, but his eyes kept flicking back over to the Pensieve, which was still emitting bursts of light and sound.

Harry had to turn the radio up when he heard screaming – he had no desire to listen to his younger self getting tortured. Eventually a bright, golden light shot out of the Pensieve, which could only mean that the memory was up to the *Priori Incantatem*. Not long now, he thought, and gave up on reading entirely.

A few minutes later the Pensieve glowed white before Severus was spat back out of it, landing neatly on the floorboards. He turned around slowly to face Harry, who was shocked to see how pale he was.

“Are you okay?” asked Harry.

To his great surprise, Severus lurched forward and enveloped him in a fierce hug, so tight that Harry couldn't even move his arms to hug him back. “You -” he croaked. He squeezed Harry once more before releasing him. “You were so brave.”
“Er, yeah, I guess,” said Harry, nonplussed.

Severus sat down heavily and poured himself a cup of tea. “This is exactly what I need, thank you.”

Harry sat down too. “It wasn't that bad, was it? I already told you everything that happened.”

“There is a big difference between hearing about you repeatedly being tortured and almost murdered, and actually seeing it occur first hand,” said Severus.

“Right,” said Harry. “Did you at least get anything useful?”

“I think so. I need to ask you some questions, and for that, I need to give you back the memory,” said Severus.

He took another sip of tea and set the cup down on the table. He used his wand to scoop the memory back out of the Pensieve and held his wand out to Harry's temple once more. Harry felt a peculiar tingle as the memory was returned to his mind. He shook his head to clear it when all the details of that night came rushing back to him.

“Okay, shoot,” he said.

“What was the Dark Lord saying to you in Parseltongue?”

Harry cast his mind back. “Er, he was basically saying that he and I are alike. Both half-bloods, abandoned as babies to grow up with Muggles. Then he asked if I'd ever thought about joining him, that my life would be easier if I did.”

“What made him laugh after that?” asked Severus.

“I thought about lying and saying I would, then making a run for it,” said Harry.

“So he did perform Legilimency on you at that point,” said Severus.

“Yeah, he must have,” Harry agreed.

“Did it cause any pain to your scar?”

“No. Well, no more than it already had, anyway,” said Harry. “When he and Pettigrew had first arrived, it hurt so badly it felt like my head was being ripped open. That's when I collapsed. It faded a bit after that, to a steady burning.”

Severus tapped his mouth with one finger as he thought this over. “Clearly the pain is not caused by Legilimency, but rather his proximity to you – or at least, it is some of the time. Your scar then either stops hurting so much, or you become accustomed to the pain.”

“What does that mean?” asked Harry.

“It means I have absolutely no idea what is behind this connection you share with him,” said Severus. “The Legilimency I witnessed didn't appear to have any unusual effect upon either you or the Dark Lord. Nor did I see him use any spell against you which could have explained it. The Priori Incantatem was admittedly something I have never experienced before, but it tallied with all the descriptions of it that I have been able to read about.”

“So we're back to where we started from,” said Harry.

Severus sighed. “Yes. When I return his Pensieve I'll ask Albus if he's come up with any other
theories, but at the moment, I'm out of ideas.”

“Well, it was a long shot, anyway,” said Harry.

“Yes, it was,” said Severus. “For now, all I can suggest is that you continue to practise Occlumency, since it is obviously an effective defence. We shall begin your other training tomorrow.”

“Want me to do any reading or anything in preparation?” asked Harry.

Severus shook his head and gave an unsettling smile. “Just get a good night's sleep. You'll be needing it.”
In Which Harry Begins His Summer Training and Hears the Most Delightful News

The next morning Harry walked into the kitchen to find Severus seated at the table reading the *Prophet*, a steaming cup of tea next to him. Another cup and the teapot sat on the table, ready for Harry. He was about to ask what Severus had planned for the day when he caught sight of his face.

“What's wrong?” he asked as he sat down.

“The Death Eaters were busy yesterday,” said Severus, shutting the paper.

He pushed the *Prophet* across the table to Harry, who spun it around to read the front headline.

**DEATH EATERS STORM DIAGON ALLEY**  
**ONE FATALITY, ONE ABDUCTION**  
**COUNTLESS INJURED**

Harry felt sick as he looked at the picture below. Diagon Alley was strewn with debris and covered with a thick blanket of smoke, while Aurors swept down the street. In the corner he could see a pair of feet belonging to someone lying on the ground. They weren't moving.

“How died?” Harry asked shakily. He was fairly certain Severus would have already told him if it was someone he knew, so he thought the Weasley twins were probably safe.

“Fortescue,” Severus said grimly.

“The ice cream guy?”

Severus nodded. “More importantly, Ollivander was abducted. His shop was raided a couple of hours after you left it.”

Harry bit his lip. “Are you sure? If this is coming from the *Prophet*...”

“Lupin Floo-called me this morning. He'd been informed by Tonks and Kingsley, who were both called in to secure the area,” said Severus. “The Dark Lord has both Ollivander and all of the wands he had in stock.”

Harry went cold. “That's not good. What are people going to do for wands? What about all the first years starting Hogwarts this year?”

“There are other wandmakers in Britain, though Ollivander is indisputably the best. What worries me is the Dark Lord's reasoning behind this attack. I suspect that he will be questioning Ollivander about a solution to his wand's connection with your own,” said Severus.

“When you say 'questioning'...”

“Torture will undoubtedly be involved, yes.”

Harry shuddered. “Poor Ollivander.”

Severus inclined his head. “Indeed.”

“There's nothing Voldemort can do though, is there? Other than get a new wand?” asked Harry.
Severus raised his hands. “I don't know enough about wandlore to know the answer to that.”

Harry nodded slowly. “So what do we do now?”

“Now? We finish our tea and then go outside so that I may teach you how to Apparate.”

“You're teaching me to Apparate?” Harry asked in surprise.

“Yes. Sixth years can sign up for Apparition lessons in second term, but I want to teach you how to do so now. It is an extremely useful skill, not only as an efficient way to travel, but because it may also save your life one day,” Severus said.

“You're teaching me how to run away,” Harry stated.

“I am,” Severus agreed. “Sometimes fighting is not the best course of action. One must know when to retreat and regroup. Knowing how to Apparate will allow you to retreat without relying on myself or another adult.”

“This is because of the attack on Ollivander's, isn't it? Sirius and Tonks were there, they would've -”

“And what happens if you are attacked alone? Or the adult you are with is injured or killed? Or you become separated from them?” Severus shot back. “Cast your mind back to the Ministry. Did it escape your notice that you and all of your friends had an adult stay with them at all times?”

Harry shook his head. “I just thought that was for protection.”

“Yes. We needed to protect you from the Death Eaters – and the best means of protecting you was to get you out of there. It's why Narcissa and I tried to Disapparate with you and Draco when we did. We had planned to get you both somewhere safe, and then one of us would have stayed with you both while the other returned to the Ministry,” said Severus.

“But they jinxed you all so that you couldn't,” Harry pointed out.

Severus inclined his head. “They had set an Anti-Disapparition Jinx on the Department of Mysteries. That was an anomaly. The only reason they had the time to lay down that jinx was because they had laid a trap for us. They knew we were coming. In any ordinary fight, there simply wouldn't be time for that. Unless you're fighting somewhere like Hogwarts, where one cannot Apparate or Disapparate, knowing how to do so can be the difference between defeat and death.”

“Okay,” Harry said, feeling a bit better knowing that Severus didn't think it cowardly to run if necessary. “Can I have breakfast first?”

“No. You would likely only bring it up again,” said Severus.

Harry pulled a face, remembering the feeling of having his torso constricted by Apparition. “Good point.”

Five minutes later they walked down the garden path. Harry couldn't help frowning at the mist that was lingering on the moor, despite it being the middle of summer. Severus noticed his expression and sighed.

“It seems the rumours are true. The Dementors are breeding,” he said grimly.

Harry grimaced at the thought of Dementors shagging. “Do you think there are any around here?”

“We'd be feeling the psychological effects of them if there were any nearby. The mist must just
spread out over vast distances, though we should stay prepared to cast a Patronus,” said Severus.

Harry nodded and then went to lean against the fence, where he could watch Severus setting up wards around a large area of grass so they wouldn't be discovered by any Muggles. He finished walking around the perimeter of the warded area, then used his wand to draw a glowing yellow circle in the grass.

“Apparition is fairly simple. All you need is concentration, and a clear idea of where you want to go,” said Severus, turning to face Harry in full teacher mode. “It is always easiest to Apparate to a location you have been to before. As you get more experienced, you will be able to Apparate to somewhere you have read or heard about, but you shan't be capable of that for some time.

“You will also be hampered by both distance and the mass of those whom you are Apparating. The further you Apparate, the more power it requires. Likewise, if you are transporting someone else via Side-Along Apparition, that will require more energy than if you were Apparating alone. International Apparition is difficult and inadvisable except for only the most powerful people, and even then, you won't be able to travel to the other side of the planet. For example, from here, I could get to Ireland. I would need to stop off somewhere in England if I wished to make it as far as France,” Severus explained.

Harry nodded nervously. He had known there were limitations, from things Narcissa had said about Apparating with Harry, Draco and Hermione. He just hadn't thought he'd need to worry about it any time soon.

“For now, your target will be this circle. Step closer – a metre away from it should do nicely.”

Harry moved forward as instructed and listened as Severus continued.

“Now for the hard part. You must become weightless and insubstantial... Disappear from where you are, and reappear in the circle like so.”

Severus spun on the spot, disappearing with a soft crack and reappearing just as quietly in the circle.

“Your turn,” he said.

Harry gulped. “Already?”

Severus nodded. “Apparition is a skill best learnt through repetition. It is not a gradual learning curve so much as you will go from not being able to Apparate to being capable, and there isn't much theory behind it. In your case, you learn best by doing something, not reading about it.”

“So I should learn this quicker than I did Occlumency?” Harry asked.

“I think so.”

“Brilliant. Okay.”

Harry frowned at the circle glowing in front of him. He tried to block out everything around him then, with a deep breath, spun on the spot and tried to Apparate. All that happened was that Harry's foot caught in a tussock of grass and he nearly pitched forward. He turned back around to see Severus laughing quietly.

“Yeah, laughing at me's going to help,” he grouched.

“If it's any consolation, you'll be able to laugh at everyone else when you get lessons later this year,”
Severus said.

“I’ll still need lessons after you’ve taught me?” asked Harry.

“Of course. Declining the lessons would be suspicious, as would being able to Apparate straight away. You'll need to wait until at least a few of your class mates have achieved Apparition. We don’t want anyone suspecting me of having already taught you, especially since you were in trouble for underage magic last year,” said Severus.

“I didn't think of that,” Harry admitted.

“Fortunately for us both, I did,” Severus said. “Again.”

And so Harry tried to Apparate again. And again. He was reminded of his first Patronus lesson, only this time he didn't even come close to achieving his goal. Severus stopped him after he'd been spinning around the field for an hour or so.

“Does it usually take so long to learn?” Harry asked.

“Yes. Just be thankful you haven't Splinched yourself yet,” said Severus.

“What's Splinching?” asked Harry.

“The separation of one's body parts. It could be something as insignificant as an eyelash left behind, or as large as a limb. It is painful but repairable.”

“How do I not do that?” asked Harry.

“Concentrate properly when Apparating. It's why one should never Apparate whilst drunk or high, or if you have a head injury,” said Severus.

Severus' words sparked Harry's memory. “Oh, that's what you said you were worried about at the Ministry, wasn't it?”

Severus nodded. “Come on, time for breakfast. You need a good meal after all your work this morning.”

*******

A couple of days later, Harry wasn't any closer to achieving Apparition. Severus didn't seem at all surprised, which was slightly cheering to Harry, and in any case, he was more successful at the other lessons he was receiving. It had not taken long for him to learn how to put up the Muggle-Repelling Charm that Severus set up for their Apparition lessons. The charm to deflect minor hexes and another to warn of approaching enemies took a little longer to learn, but on the other hand he already had experience casting Severus' Muffling Charm.

Harry's favourite lessons by far were the stealth lessons. Harry had never played hide and seek as a child (running from Dudley's gang decidedly did not count as playing), and was enjoying this more advanced version immensely. The premise was simple – all he had to do was sneak up on Severus and steal a quill from his breast pocket, without getting hexed. Of course, that was without factoring in Severus' formidable observational skills. After trying for an hour or so each afternoon, the closest Harry had been able to get was a couple of metres away, before the squeaking of the door alerted Severus to his presence. He spun around and shot a Jelly-Legs Jinx at Harry.
Harry's legs skittered over the floor before he was able to end both the jinx and his Disillusionment Charm.

“Okay, that wasn't my fault, that was the door,” Harry said.

“No, that was your fault for not being prepared for the door,” Severus countered. “Never assume that a door won't squeak, that a floorboard won't creak, that a twig won't snap. In any case, you already know our front door squeaks.”

“I guess,” Harry grumbled. “And the stairs creak.”

“Why do you think I've never fixed them? Should an intruder get into our home, all the quirks of our house would serve as extra surveillance,” Severus said.

“I never thought of that,” said Harry. He had an idea, and bent down to take off his shoes.

“Absolutely not,” Severus said sharply. “You need to learn how to walk silently in shoes. Do you want to step on glass? Freezing cold stone?”

“Smooth floorboards?” Harry asked, gesturing around the room.

“Alas, we have none of those in the garden,” Severus said, then walked outside.

Harry's heart sank as he listened to Severus crunching down the gravel pathway in the garden. No matter how he tried, there was no way he'd be able to walk silently on the gravel. He stood there wracking his brain while he counted to twenty, then grinned when it came to him.

Severus had never said Harry had to walk.

Harry crept up the stairs to his room, avoiding the two creaky ones, and picked up his Firebolt. He cast a Disillusionment Charm on both the broom and himself, then climbed up onto the window sill and jumped out the open window.

He flew slowly around the side of the house, not wanting Severus to hear the sound of displaced air. Severus was standing in the centre of the garden, where Harry would have had to either crunch down the gravel path, or crawl through the garden beds to reach him.

Harry drifted closer, coming in from the side. Severus was watching the house closely, and Harry smirked to himself as he came within arm's reach. He took his right hand off the handle of his broom and stretched forward to grab the quill. Just a few more centimetres -

“Petrificus totalus!” Severus cried.

Harry froze in mid-air when the spell hit him, then crashed painfully to the ground.

“Finite incantatem,” Severus said.

“Ow,” Harry moaned, as soon as he was able to move again. He sat up and cancelled the Disillusionment Charms and stood up. “You could not possibly have heard me that time.”

“No, you did well on that account. I smelled your shampoo and your sweat,” said Severus.


“I have five senses, Harry, why should I limit myself to just two?” asked Severus.
“Sodding Potions master, of course,” Harry muttered.

Severus raised an eyebrow. “One would think that perhaps you should have anticipated that I have a good sense of smell.”

“Yeah, yeah. I'll know for next time,” Harry said.

“That is the point of these lessons, to teach you to think of every possibility,” Severus said. “I will admit to being very impressed by your use of your broom. I never stipulated that you needed to walk. Use every loophole you can.”

Harry grinned at the praise. “Hey, you need to be specific when giving a Slytherin rules.”

“Indeed,” said Severus, then smirked. “No broomstick this time. Go count by the front door.”

Harry nodded, unsurprised at the new rule, and trudged back up the path, his mind already ticking over with possibilities. He cast another Disillusionment Charm on himself and stood on the front step as he counted. When he finished he waited and watched Severus, who had his head cocked, clearly straining to hear Harry.

Harry cast a Featherlight Charm on himself and walked as carefully as he could around the garden. He could see Severus' eyes darting about but he didn't think he'd been heard – or smelled for that matter. He stopped a few metres away from Severus and studied him, trying to think of an approach. He didn't really fancy getting too much closer, but he needed to do so in order to grab the quill.

No, I don't, he thought. Smirking, he raised his wand. “Accio quill!”

The quill came soaring out of Severus' shirt pocket towards Harry. With the reflexes that got him the Seeker position, he snatched the quill out of the air and ducked before Severus' hex could hit him. He cancelled the charms he'd cast on himself and stood up triumphantly.

“Found another loophole,” he said smugly.

“Nicely done,” Severus said, smiling. “You may not have proven your stealth skills, but you certainly achieved the goal of the exercise.”

Harry's grin widened. “You never said I couldn't cheat.”

Severus turned sombre. “Nor shall I. The other side won't play by the rules. There is no reason you should have to.”

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After dinner, Harry remained sitting at the kitchen table with Severus, going through all of the tactics they had used that afternoon. Severus had just mentioned that they would be taking a break from training next week, in order to visit the optometrist in Holyhead for Harry's yearly check-up, when a whooshing noise interrupted him. He spun around in his chair to see McGonagall stepping out of the fireplace.

Severus stood up. “Minerva, this is -”

“We need you to come to Grimmauld Place, Severus,” she interrupted.

Severus frowned. “And Harry?”
“Albus wants him to stay here, along with Mr Black and Mr Nott,” McGonagall said. “I want your permission to tell Mr Nott about your house.”

“Tell Theodore. I'll be along in a minute,” Severus said quickly.

McGonagall gave a curt nod and walked back into the Floo. “Grimmauld Place!” she cried, then was whisked away by the green flames.

Severus immediately turned to Harry. “Do not leave the property. Keep your wand on you at all times. If I'm gone long I'll check up on you by Floo – or I might send Narcissa, depending on what's happened – not by Apparition. So if anyone comes in through the garden gate, treat them as suspect and come over to Grimmauld Place immediately, either by Floo or Portkey. I shall inform Draco and Theodore of this when I arrive there.”

Harry nodded nervously. “Do you know what's happening?”

Severus Summoned a black robe and began buttoning it up. “No idea. One of your friends might be able to tell you. Otherwise, I'll fill you in when I see you next. Stay safe.”

With that, he stepped into the fireplace. “Grimmauld Place,” he said, and then he, too, was spinning away, and Harry was left alone, wondering what on earth was happening.

Luckily, he didn't have long to wait. Not a minute later Draco stepped out of the fireplace, followed quickly by Theo.

“What's happened?” Harry asked urgently, latching onto Draco's hands.

“There have been two murders,” Draco said grimly, squeezing back.

“More murders?” Harry asked.

Almost a week ago, a group of Death Eaters had destroyed a bridge in Brockdale; the day after that, a giant had gone on a rampage in the West Country. The Daily Prophet was still printing stories about both instances, and there was still no confirmation on how many Muggles had died in the bridge collapse. Harry didn't read any of the articles after the first few. The Prophet didn't have any new information about either attack, and what's more, he was far more diverted by the constant barrage of articles calling for Fudge's resignation. After being slandered by Fudge for the last year, Harry was heartily enjoying reading about Fudge getting a taste of his own medicine.

“Witches this time,” Theo said.

Harry went cold. “Anyone we know?”


“Which one was she?” asked Harry.

“That brunette a few years older than Mother,” said Draco. “Nym really liked her.”

Harry nodded sympathetically. “And the other?”

“Amelia Bones,” said Theo.

“Bones?Fuck,” said Harry, remembering the tough older witch he'd met only a couple of weeks ago.
“Apparently it was the Dark Lord himself who murdered her,” said Draco.

“That one's going to hurt. Gemma had gotten her on our side,” said Theo.

“Yeah, and she arrested Umbridge,” said Harry.

“Well, that's why they got your dad to go over tonight. Gemma's the one who discovered Bones' body, right after the Muggle police arrived. She's absolutely devastated about it, and Remus suggested that since your dad was her Head of House, it'd be a good idea to have him there while she gives her official report to the Order. You know, as moral support or whatever, since he'd know her best,” said Theo.

“Yeah, she was one of his favourite students,” said Harry.

“Anyway, we got sent over here so we can't listen to all the gory details,” Draco said.

“They've finally figured out that we eavesdrop on all their meetings,” said Theo.

“They haven't managed to set up proper privacy charms?” Harry asked.

“Of course they have. But since there isn't much to do at Grimmauld Place unless you like cleaning and decorating, Theo and I entertain ourselves by trying to get around their charms,” Draco explained. “Obviously I can get Mother to tell me most things afterwards, but it passes the time.”

“Who's gone there tonight?” asked Harry.

“Besides your dad?” Theo began ticking off people on his fingers. “McGonagall, Hagrid, Tonks, Hestia Jones, Bill and Fleur, one of the Weasley twins and Fletcher. Sirius and Remus are trying to get in contact with Dumbledore, but they hadn't succeeded by the time we got sent here.”

Harry's eyebrows shot up. “Dumbledore's missing?”

Draco shook his head quickly. “Not missing as such. He's off on some mission but no one knows where he is or what he's doing. It's been happening quite a bit and it's pissing a lot of people off, actually. If people can't get in touch with him they try Grimmauld Place next and ask if we've heard anything.”

“You're always welcome to come here if you want to get away from everyone,” Harry offered. “There's only a handful of people who can get here.”

“And now I'm one of them,” Theo said.

“Congratulations,” Draco drawled.

Harry just laughed. “Have you guys eaten?”

“Yes, but I'd love a cup of tea,” said Draco.

“Me, too,” said Theo.

Half an hour later the three boys were sitting in the lounge. A pot of tea and three cups sat on the coffee table, amongst a selection of biscuits that Harry had found in the pantry. Theo had gotten up to look through Severus' book collection and was now sitting in the armchair reading through some old Muggle history book. Harry and Draco were curled up on the couch together, with Ladon stretched out across both of their laps, enjoying the extra attention.
“Have you given Scarlett her parrot yet?” Harry asked.

“Yes, though I nearly took it back when she told me what she decided to name it,” said Draco.

Theo sniggered without looking up from his book.

Harry frowned in confusion. “What'd she call it?”

Draco rolled his eyes. “Ginger. The reason being, and I quote, 'because she's a redhead. Do you get it? Do you get it?' What kind of moron wouldn't get that? It's not exactly difficult to grasp.”

Harry laughed at Draco's impression of Scarlett, bouncing on the couch. “That sounds like her. How is she, anyway?”

Draco exasperation faded and he gave a sad smile. “Better than she was. Her eye's fine now and her hair's started to grow back but she's stuck with the scar on her face. I was half expecting her parents to have a go at me about the whole thing, but they were really nice to me, surprisingly so. And her little brother thought the parrot was just the most amazing thing he'd ever seen before so now I'm apparently his new favourite person for buying it for her.”

Harry smiled. “That's great.”

“No it isn't. I really, really hope he's not sorted into Slytherin next year. I don't think I could handle having both of them in our house.”

Harry laughed again. “He can't be that bad.”

“He's a smaller, slightly less manic version of Scarlett,” Draco said flatly.

“So next year should be fun,” Harry said.

“As long as you're not a Prefect,” Draco muttered.

“We're not,” Theo piped up, grinning evilly over the top of his book.

Draco narrowed his eyes. “I think I'll tell Mother that she needs to stop being your guardian and let you fend for yourself, you twat.”

“Go ahead, try. It'll be funny,” said Theo.

Harry jumped in before the argument could pick up steam. “How is your mum, Draco? You know, with, er, everything...”

“You mean with the aftermath of killing my father?” Draco asked pointedly.

“Er, yeah, with that,” Harry said sheepishly.

Draco rolled his eyes. “There's no point beating about the bush. She killed him. He had it coming and she did what no one else had the guts to do. She may well have save my life. She's a heroine.”

“And now she's stuck in Grimmauld Place,” Harry said.

“For now,” Draco said. “It won't be forever. The Ministry has already had to come out and say that they were wrong about Voldemort, that you and Dumbledore were right all along. Eventually they'll have to declare that if they'd done their sodding jobs and strengthened the security at Azkaban, or done a better job looking for the escapees, she wouldn't have been put into that situation in the first
Harry hesitated, then forged ahead. “How’s she coping with using an Unforgivable, though? I – I’ve spoken to Dad about them before, and he flat out refuses to ever use one again.”

Draco shrugged. “She’s fine. I’m fine. Everything’s fine.”

“That’s a load of shit, Black. Tell him the truth,” Theo said.

Draco glared at him. “I just did.”

Theo put his book down and leaned forward. “Harry, you’ve no idea what it’s been like. Narcissa doesn’t seem to have a problem with what she did, and Draco has been pretty much like this the entire time. But there are a bunch of others who have a definite problem with what she did.”

“They’re all ungrateful morons,” Draco snarled.

Harry frowned at Theo. “Like who?”

Theo gave a humourless laugh. “Kingsley, for one. He’s an Auror for fuck’s sake. Can you imagine the hell he’s getting from his boss for the fact that his partner used the Killing Curse? He’s under a lot of pressure to take her in to the Ministry.”

“Kingsley is happy that both Mother and I are safe,” said Draco.

“Yeah, he is, but he’s also copping it at work, as is Tonks,” Theo retorted.

“Are you seriously going to drag my entire extended family into this?” Draco asked angrily. He slid Ladon over onto Harry's lap and stood up. “Before you ask, Harry, Sirius is perfectly fine with what Mother did. Don't listen to Nott.”

He stormed over to the stairs. Harry twisted around to watch him.

“Where are you -”

“I'm going to take a piss!” Draco snapped.

A few seconds later the bathroom door slammed shut.

“What's wrong with Draco?” Ladon asked in a small voice.

“I'm not sure. I'll tell you after I find out, when we're alone, okay?” Harry promised, patting him reassuringly. When Ladon nodded and slowly made himself comfortable, Harry turned around to face Theo. “What's the real story?”

Theo ran both his hands over his face. “Look, he's not lying. Both he and Narcissa seem fine, as does Sirius.”

“But?” Harry prompted.

“But Kingsley and Tonks are both in deep shit at work. Remus isn't happy either, though that's more because he's worried about the effect casting an Unforgivable might have on Narcissa,” Theo said.

Harry nodded slowly. “Yeah, Dad’s let slip a few things that make it sound like using those curses can mess you up.”
“I think so, yeah,” Theo agreed.

“How is she though? Really?” Harry pressed.

Theo slumped down in his chair. “I don’t know, to tell you the truth. She seems perfectly fine, but we both know she’s good at putting on an act when she wants to. She does get annoyed at being cooped inside all the time and is sort of channelling all of that into her campaign to revamp Grimmauld Place, I think.”

“That sounds pretty good. You know, a healthy distraction or whatever,” said Harry.

“Yeah, it does...” Theo trailed off, looked up the stairs, from which there was no sign of Draco, then lowered his voice. “She did kill her husband, though. Ex-husband, sure, but still, they were married for what, two decades? That has to fuck up a person. And Draco saw his father get killed – and by his mother, no less. Yeah, he hated him, but he saw him die. Don’t get me wrong, I fully sympathise with him wanting his father dead, but even so... This cheeriness is just...”

“Wrong?” Harry supplied.

“To put it mildly.”

Harry kept stroking Ladon, feeling worry gnaw at his gut. “I’ll talk to Sirius about it,” he said finally. “He’ll keep an eye on Draco – on both of them – and let me know if I need to worry.”

“I’ll do the same,” Theo promised.

“Thanks,” said Harry, then looked up the stairs himself. “I’m going to go see if he's okay. You alright if I leave you here by yourself?”

Theo picked his book up again. “I've got a room full of books and some tea. I'm good.”

Harry gave him a fleeting smile, gently moved Ladon onto the couch, then headed upstairs. He found the bathroom door wide open, with no sign of Draco, but there was a light on in his bedroom. Harry walked into his room to find Draco standing in front of Harry’s wardrobe.

“Draco?”

“I like your photos,” Draco said.

“Er, yeah, me too,” said Harry.

“You have one up of each of your fathers,” Draco continued.

“Yeah...” Harry said slowly.

“I don't have any photographs of my father. Or paintings. Not any more.”

Harry quietly shut the door. When he turned back around he found Draco was now facing him. His expression was so forlorn, so lost, so bewildered, that the only thing Harry could think to do was to hug him. He wrapped his arms around Draco's back holding him tightly. There was a pause, and then Draco's arms slowly wound around Harry's waist. One hand grabbed a fistful of Harry's shirt, while the other rested in the small of Harry's waist. He began to shake; it took Harry a few seconds to realise that Draco was crying.

“I – I don't mean to cry,” he whispered.
“Cry all you want,” Harry whispered back.

“I don't want to,” Draco replied. “I shouldn't. Not over him. I don't want to cry over him. He doesn't deserve it.”

“Maybe not, but you do,” Harry said.

Draco pulled away and looked at him in confusion. “What do you mean?”

Harry ran a hand through his hair, desperately wishing Hermione was there. She was the one who was good at this sort of thing, not Harry. To buy himself some time, he sat down on his bed, leaning against his headboard and scooting over so that Draco could join him. He did so slowly, frowning unhappily at Harry the entire time.

“It's normal to cry when your dad dies. You can't help that,” Harry said.

Draco shook his head. “But I hated him. He almost killed you, Mother and Hermione, and he tortured both Mother and me. I shouldn't be crying. I shouldn't feel this way.”

Harry twisted around and took hold of Draco's hands. “You're allowed to feel however the hell you want to feel. He was your dad. Nothing he did can change that.”

“Oh, yes, he was a great father locked up in Azkaban. Really hands on,” Draco said sarcastically, then sniffled.

“What about before all of this? Before our second year? You didn't have a problem with him back then, right?”

“Not really. Although his views on blood purity were troubling after I became friends with you and Hermione.”

“Okay, sure, but what about when you were little?”

Draco bent his head. “I thought my father was the richest, most powerful man in the whole world. And very tall.”

“And you have some good memories of him, right?”

“But I don't want to! I shouldn't.”

“Draco,” Harry said, squeezing his hands, “you can't help how you feel. So your dad turned out to be a prick.”

“Murderous arsehole.”

“That too. If he was nice to you when you were little, of course you're going to have nice memories of him,” said Harry.

“I don't think the word 'nice' has ever been applied to my father,” said Draco.

“You know what I mean,” said Harry. “No one's black and white, you know. We all have good and bad in us. Just look at both of my dads – I wouldn't call either one of them an angel, but that doesn't mean I don't love them both.”

“Yes, well, even so... His buying me a Quidditch pitch doesn't make up for him trying to murder Mother,” Draco said.
Harry latched on to the mention of Narcissa like a lifeline. “Have you spoken to your mum about this?”

Draco shook his head. “How could I? What if I made her feel bad for killing him?”

“You should talk to her. I'm pretty sure she'd have similarly confused emotions,” Harry said gently.

Draco blinked to dispel the last of his tears. “You really think so?”

“Yes. She was married to him for years, she must have some happy memories of him, no matter what he might have done in the past few years,” Harry said firmly. “She told me once that she'll never regret marrying your dad, because she got you out of it.”

It was the right thing to say, for Draco gave a watery smile.

“Plus I think she'd be upset to find out that you felt like this and hadn't gone to speak to her, frankly,” Harry added.

Draco's smile grew. “She probably would be.”

Harry sighed with relief. “Talk to her tomorrow?”

“Yes,” said Draco.

He wiped his eyes with one hand then lay his head on Harry's shoulder, curling into his side. Harry wrapped his arm around Draco's shoulders and held on as his breathing evened out. A few minutes later Draco cleared his throat.

“When did you get so wise?” he asked, his voice muffled by Harry's chest.

Harry chuckled. “I was trying to think what Hermione would tell you.”

“Ah, that explains it,” said Draco, tilting his face up.

“Git,” said Harry.

“Prat,” Draco retorted.

“Oh, this is the thanks I get for all my incredibly wise advice? Cheers, Black,” said Harry, though he was smiling to see the spark return to Draco's eyes.

He smirked. “I'm sorry.”

“No, you're not.”

“Yes, I am,” Draco said, leaning closer, still smirking. “Let me show you how sorry I am.”

He cupped Harry's face with one hand and gave him a slow, gentle kiss. It was a bit wetter than usual – Draco still had some tear tracks on his cheeks – but Harry didn't mind. Not if it meant Draco was feeling better than he had been. He tightened his hold on Draco and deepened the kiss.

“We – Theo -” Draco murmured into Harry's mouth.

“He's happy reading,” Harry said.

“Good,” Draco replied.
His kisses grew firmer, more urgent, and soon his tongue slipped inside Harry's mouth. Draco lowered his hands, trailing them down Harry's chest, then down his stomach, before slipping them underneath the hem of his T-shirt and pulling it off. Harry sucked in a ragged breath when Draco kissed his way down Harry's neck, biting and licking as he went, before latching onto his nipple.

Harry raised shaky hands to begin unbuttoning Draco's shirt as fast as he could, before yanking it off his shoulders, trapping Draco's arms by his sides.

“Do you mind?” Draco asked, looking down at his captured arms.

“Nope,” Harry said.

Before Draco could try to free his arms, Harry had slid down the bed, pulling Draco with him, so that he was lying flat on his back.

“Done manhandling me?”

“Definitely not,” Harry said, palming Draco's erection through his trousers and making him moan. “You don't seem to mind.”

“Get on with it then,” Draco ordered breathlessly.

“You're not in any position to tell me what to do,” Harry said, then moved to the end of the bed. Draco whined with the loss of contact. “What are you doing? Get back here!”

“I was about to take off your shoes, so that I could take your trousers off. But if you'd rather I didn't...”

“Carry on.”

Harry huffed a laugh before leaning over Draco's feet. He undid the laces as quickly as he could then yanked off his shoes and socks, throwing them carelessly onto the floor. He unzipped Draco's trousers and pulled them off, along with his pants, watching eagerly as Draco's erection sprang free. He pushed Draco's legs apart and knelt between them, running his hands slowly up the pale thighs.

“Harry...”

Harry slid one hand up Draco's cock, relishing the feel of it. It had only been a week or so since they'd last done this, but that was far too long a time in Harry's opinion. He moved his hand slowly, catching some pre-come that was already welling up and spreading it down the hard length.

“Harry...” Draco moaned again, more urgently this time.

“What?”

“I – I need more...”

Harry glanced up at Draco and found he was biting his lip, with his hair rather adorably mussed. Harry shot a small smile at him and then bent down to take him in his mouth. He swirled his tongue around the head, paying extra attention to the spot on the underside where Draco was particularly sensitive. He hummed smugly when Draco began making little mewling noises.

Harry slid his mouth off Draco's penis in order to pay some attention to his balls. He kept jerking off Draco while he sucked on his balls one after the other. It didn't take long before Draco started to jerk his hips. Harry put his mouth back over his cock and began sucking for all he was worth.
Draco gave another moan, louder than before, and threaded his hands into Harry's hair. “Yes...” he hissed – and it may have been Parseltongue, for all Harry knew just then – and then he was coming in Harry's mouth.

Harry swallowed it down then slowly drew up to sprawl next to Draco, who was panting lightly. Harry kissed his neck and tried to ignore his own arousal while he waited for Draco to recover. To distract himself he lay his head down on the pillow and studied Draco's face. His normally pale face was flushed in the afterglow; his mouth was open as he breathed in cute little pants; his eyelashes fluttered against his skin as he began to open his eyes again.

“I love you,” Harry murmured, unthinkingly.

Draco’s eyes shot open and he jerked over to face Harry. “You what?” he gasped.

Harry went cold when he realised that he'd spoken aloud. How typical of him, to blurt out a declaration of love before he himself had even fully figured out how he felt. “I -”

Draco sat up with a lurch and started struggling violently with his shirt, which was still caught on his upper arms.

Harry watched him with a miserable panic. “I'm sorry – I take it back – Draco!”

Draco's head snapped around. “Don't you fucking dare.”

When Harry just stared at him some more, Draco rolled his eyes. “Harry, you giant, sodding prat, I love you too.”

Warmth returned to Harry's body and he grinned delightedly. “You do?”

“YES! So can you please help me get this fucking shirt off?” Draco demanded.

“Oh,” said Harry happily. Draco loved him. Wasn't that just the greatest thing he'd ever heard? Draco loved Harry. He wondered if it would be rude to write and tell Hermione, considering she was in the process of dumping Viktor. But surely she'd want to know about this. It was, after all, the best news that Harry had ever -

“HARRY!”

“Oh, right,” Harry said sheepishly.

He sat up and pulled the shirt off Draco. The second his arms were free, Draco wrapped them around Harry and began kissing him as if his life depended on it.

“You – are – so – thick – sometimes,” he said in between kisses.

“But you love me,” Harry said against Draco's lips, wanting confirmation of this very important fact.

“Yes.”

Harry beamed.

Draco pulled away. “I can't kiss you when you're smiling like that.”

“I can't help it,” Harry said.

Draco rolled his eyes, gave Harry one more kiss, then rolled him over onto his back. “You just lie
there and smile then, Potter.”

And so Harry did just that. It was a good thing, too. Between the twin onslaughts of learning that Draco loved him, and what Draco was currently doing with his lips and his tongue and – oh god – his teeth, Harry's brain was not much use for anything other than enjoying the sensations flooding through his body.

Draco had gone back to nibbling on Harry's nipples. After he'd gotten them nice and hard, Draco abandoned them to kiss and lick and bite his way down Harry's torso. Harry tensed in anticipation as Draco drew nearer to his cock. Harry clenched his hands in the bedspread when he was enveloped by the wet heat of Draco's mouth.

Draco took his time, moving slowly up and down Harry's prick, pausing to tease the head then bobbing deeper. He fondled Harry's balls with one hand, with the other wrapped around the base of Harry's penis, stroking it. After a few wondrous minutes of this, Draco pulled off him completely.

“Do you have any lube?”

Harry raised his head. “Lube?”

Draco was pink, whether from arousal or embarrassment, Harry didn't know. “I'll take that as a no.”

“What d'you want it for?” asked Harry.

“You'll like it. At least, I hope you will. If you don't, just say so and I'll stop,” said Draco.

With that he went back to sucking Harry, who let his head fall back down on the pillow. This time, Draco did something different with his hand. Before Harry could look properly, Draco had pushed Harry's legs wide apart and slid one spit-slicked finger into Harry's arse.

Harry's eyes flew open and he gasped.

“That doesn't hurt, does it?” Draco asked.

“No...” Harry said. “It's weird. Good weird, though.”

Draco looked down at his hand and gave an experimental wiggle of his finger.

“Guh,” said Harry.

Draco grinned and bent his head back down. He moved his finger with more confidence, now, and it wasn't long until Harry was moaning his name and coming down his throat. Harry lay on his bed, so relaxed he wasn't sure if he would ever move again. A minute or so later Draco flopped down beside him and slung an arm over Harry's chest.

Harry's last thought before sleep claimed him was that, if love was the power which would enable him to defeat Voldemort, then Harry would surely be victorious.

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Harry woke up to a low but persistent knocking.

“Whuh?” he said groggily.

He sat up to find his glasses perched lopsided on his face. He'd fallen asleep with them on? Why –
oh. Oh. He smiled as the memories came flooding back. The smile was short-lived, however, due to his bedroom door opening and Severus sticking his head inside.

"DAD!"

"Harry – ah!" Severus screwed his eyes shut, but didn't leave. "Get dressed. And quickly. Minerva and Albus are downstairs. If you don't want them to guess what you've been doing I suggest you make yourselves presentable and join us as fast as you can."

With that he withdrew and shut the door. Harry wasted no time in elbowing Draco, who was still half asleep. "Get up!"

"Huh?" asked Draco.

"Dad just walked in on us and McGonagall and Dumbledore are here!" Harry whispered.

"What?" Draco asked, then looked at himself in horror. "Fuck fuck fuckity fuck fuck!"

There was a minute of frantic panic, as both boys got dressed as quickly as they could. Harry watched Draco trying to smooth his hair into place, for once in his life glad his own hair was habitually messed up. Harry helped Draco lace up his shoes – he didn't need to worry about his own, as he often stayed barefoot at home over summer – then they nervously made their way downstairs, hoping desperately that their recent activities were not glaringly evident.

No such luck. They descended into the lounge to find Severus standing stiffly by the front door. His eyes raked over both boys and gave a minute nod. Beyond him, McGonagall was standing near the fireplace looking supremely uncomfortable. Next to her, Dumbledore had his hands clasped behind his back, inspecting the closest bookcase with an attention it didn't merit. Sitting in the armchair where Harry had left him, Theo was watching the group and making no effort to hide his smirk.

Severus cleared his throat. "Draco, Theodore, you may return home now."

Draco shot a mortified look at Harry and scuttled through the Floo without making eye contact with anyone else. Theo bit back a laugh and followed him, leaving Harry alone with all three professors.

"Harry, Albus and Minerva have come over to help me strengthen the wards we have on the property. You may come and watch if you want, just don't interrupt," said Severus.

"Yeah, okay," Harry said, willing himself to stop blushing.

They all trooped outside, where it was once again unusually misty for the time of year. Harry tightened his grip on his wand and waited in the garden as the three adults walked through the gate. They trod carefully around the perimeter of the property, waving their wands in intricate figurations and muttering incantations under their breaths.

Harry watched interestingly, his embarrassment quickly abating. McGonagall strode quite quickly and made three trips around the property, her wand glowing a different colour on each rotation. Walking far slower than McGonagall, Severus' wand left a haze in the air, similar to the distortion seen over a road in the middle of a hot summer's day. Dumbledore too walked slowly, though in the opposite direction as Severus. Harry couldn't make out any signs of magic from his wand, until he completed his circuit, whereupon a golden trail lit around the fence line with a muffled boom, before fading once more into darkness.

When they finished placing the wards the teachers conversed briefly. Harry drifted nearer in the hopes of hearing what they were saying, but anything interesting in their conversation was over by
the time he got into earshot.

“We really must get moving if we want to reach the Burrow before dawn,” McGonagall was saying.

“Quite right, Minerva,” said Dumbledore. “Severus, Harry, I bid you a good night.”

With that, he and McGonagall Disapparated, leaving Harry and Severus alone in the moonless night.

Harry immediately turned to Severus. “What's going on?”

Severus sighed wearily. “I'll tell you in the barn.”

Harry frowned. “The barn? Why the barn?”

“There is one more protection that I want to put up around our property, one which requires a potion,” said Severus.

Harry narrowed his eyes at Severus' hesitant tone. “What's the catch?”

Severus' mouth tightened. “I require your blood.”

Harry swallowed. The last time anyone had taken his blood, it had been used to resurrect Voldemort. He had a vivid flash of the pain and helplessness he had felt at the time.

Severus obviously knew what he was thinking. “I only require a few drops, and I promise you that I shan't butcher you like Pettigrew did. You won't be tied up, you can leave at any time, and I shall be using my own blood as well as yours.”

Harry reflexively rubbed the crook of his right elbow, where he had a small scar from that night. “It sounds like Dark magic.”

Severus inclined his head. “There are some who would see it that way, purely because of the use of blood. Which is why, when you inevitably tell Draco and Hermione about it, you must impress upon them the need for secrecy.”

Harry nodded. “Why are you doing it then?”

“Because it's an incredibly powerful protection. Unfortunately, it is only applicable to humans in their own home, so I cannot extend its protection to your pets or friends. Essentially, the potion will bind all of the existing wards together, strengthening them against anyone trying to gain access to our property in order to hurt either one of us. The Dark Lord will be, I think, the only person powerful enough to get past it, especially since he has your blood in his veins.”

“Okay,” said Harry, “but only if you let me help you brew it.”

Severus didn't hesitate before nodding. “Very well.”

They walked out to the barn together, where Harry was told to clean two sharp scalpels. He did so and brought them over to the workbench where Severus was setting up a small glass cauldron. His eyebrows shot up when he saw Severus pull a handwritten set of instructions from his pocket and smooth it out on the bench.

“Did you come up with this recipe yourself?” Harry asked, skimming over Severus' handwritten notes.

“No, this is a very old potion. I copied this from a book in Grimmauld Place,” said Severus.
Harry watched Severus moving around the room gathering ingredients. “And you're sure this isn't Dark magic? I mean, if you found the instructions in a book at Grimmauld Place...”

“It's a protection potion, Harry. The only reason it's illegal is because the Ministry is run by morons who automatically classify anything utilising blood as Dark, without thought to the purpose. Think of it as a more targeted version of the blood protection that Lily's death afforded you.”

Harry nodded, appeased, and didn't voice any more objections as he began to help Severus prepare the ingredients. The potion was one of the most intricate, complicated ones that Harry had ever made, and the hours quickly flew by as he carefully measured, poured, weighed, crushed and cut.

When it came time to add their blood to the silvery potion now bubbling in the cauldron, Severus hesitated.

“We each only need to give seven drops. A prick to your finger will suffice. Do you want to perform the cut yourself, or do you want me to do it?”

Harry appreciated being given the choice. “I'll do it myself.”

“Very well. Don't make it too deep – any more than seven drops will ruin the entire potion, and we'll have to start all over again,” Severus warned him.

Harry picked up the scalpel and pressed it to his left forefinger until blood welled up from the cut. Together, he and Severus held their hands over the cauldron and carefully squeezed out the required blood. They yanked their hands back when the potion threw up a shower of glittering silver sparks, before going completely still, despite the fire still burning underneath the cauldron.

Harry cast two quick healing spells on himself and Severus, who picked up the cauldron and led Harry outside, where they found the sky beginning to lighten. The potion was changing colour now, in a shifting rainbow of no discernible pattern. Harry kept pace inside the fence-line as Severus circled the perimeter of the property, carefully pouring the potion out into the grass, leaving behind a rainbow trail. When he completed his circuit the same glittering silver sparks again shot up from the potion, about two metres into the air, before falling down to sink into the earth.

They stood there in silence for a moment, before Harry gave a gigantic yawn.

“Bed,” Severus said at once.

Harry gave a tired nod before they headed inside. It had been an eventful day and a long night, and he barely managed to bring up his Occlumency shield before he fell into a deep sleep.
Harry didn't get up until around lunch time the next morning. He had a quick shower to wake himself up properly, then wandered downstairs for breakfast. Severus was already at the kitchen table, drinking coffee and reading through the *Prophet*. Harry gratefully snagged his own cup of coffee and made himself some toast.

“So what's the full story?” he asked.

Severus sighed and looked up from the paper. “Bill was the one who found Emmeline's body. They had been supposed to meet up near the Ministry of Magic. When she didn't arrive on time, he sent her a Patronus message, and when he got no response to that, he searched the surrounding streets. He found her body lying abandoned in a nearby alley.”

“Do you know who did it?” Harry asked.

“She appeared to have been ambushed by a number of assailants, perhaps two or three Death Eaters. It was quick, at least. She didn't suffer,” Severus said.

Harry took in his drawn expression. “Are you okay?”

Severus nodded jerkily. “Emmeline was a fine witch. She didn't deserve to be left in an alley like – she didn't deserve any of this. She will be greatly missed by all of us who knew her.”

“And Bones?” asked Harry.

Severus hesitated. “To kill someone of her calibre required a highly skilled murderer. We think the Dark Lord went after her personally. It was a fairly drawn out death – she put up a hell of a fight before she succumbed.”

Harry swallowed, trying not to picture what a drawn out death at Voldemort's hands would look like.

“The Muggle media's reporting on both deaths as well,” Severus said, turning a page with a shaking hand. “Bones was found in a room locked from the inside, so the police are baffled, and Emmeline was killed only a few blocks away from Downing Street, which is politically embarrassing for the Prime Minister.”

“They printed that in the *Prophet*?” Harry asked in surprise.

“No, Kingsley told me that last night,” said Severus.

Harry nodded. “Do you know why they were targeted?”

“We're not sure if Emmeline's murder was actually planned. Given her proximity to the Ministry, she may have simply been in the wrong place at the wrong time,” said Severus.

“And Bones?”

Severus hesitated, and got up to refill his mug.

Harry watched him, suddenly nervous. “Dad?”
Severus sat back down and met Harry's gaze unhappily. “Bear in mind that, as a competent Head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, Amelia Bones was always going to be a target.”

“Okay...”

Severus took a deep breath. “We think that what prompted the Dark Lord was the fact that Bones had arrested Umbridge for sending those Dementors after you. The fact that she investigated at all showed she was far less antagonistic towards you – and by extension, the Order – than the Dark Lord liked.”

Harry let out a shaky breath. “She's dead because of me.”


“Can't I?” Harry scoffed.

“No,” Severus said, leaning forward. “Do you remember what I told you after Arthur's murder?”

“Yeah,” said Harry, fiddling with his coffee mug.

“This is exactly the same: it all comes back to the Dark Lord. If you weren't around, Bones would still have been a target. Her arrest of Umbridge was merely the catalyst. Do you understand?”

Harry didn't answer, just swirled the dregs of his coffee around some more. Severus reached out and stilled Harry's hands, making Harry look up.

Severus was still leaning forward over the table, looking at him very intently. “The Dark Lord has many enemies, not just you. Dumbledore. Me. The rest of the Order. The Auror Department. Many other Ministry employees. You cannot and will not feel guilt whenever one of them is murdered, do I make myself clear? You are not to blame.”

Harry finally nodded, only feeling a little better, and changed the subject. “What's the Order doing? Adding extra security to the homes of all the members?”

Severus sat back in his seat. “To begin with. Hogwarts will also receive stronger protection. I will be called up there at some point this summer to help with that, as will the rest of the staff. There was some talk of putting everyone else's homes under the Fidelius Charm, but we ultimately decided that that would be impractical, not to mention advertise exactly who is in the Order.”

“How would it do that?”

“If a series of properties seemingly disappear, anyone with halfway decent observational skills could piece together that it was because of the Fidelius Charm. It doesn't take a genius to figure out that anyone going to such lengths to protect themselves must be in serious fear of being attacked by the Dark Lord or the Death Eaters,” Severus explained.

“So how come we're under the charm?” asked Harry.

“We're both already targets merely because of who we are,” said Severus. “In any case, I still have the house in Cokeworth. I bought this place from a Muggle real estate agent, so the Ministry shouldn't have any record of it.”

“Good,” Harry said in relief. He went to stand up, but was stopped by Severus raising a hand.

“I want to speak to you about something else.”
Harry frowned at his tone. “Am I in trouble?”

“No, not exactly,” Severus said, and now Harry saw that he was uncomfortable, not angry. “I wanted to talk to you about last night, and what I walked in on.”

“Oh, god...” Harry groaned, feeling his cheeks heat.

“I will not enjoy this conversation any more than you will, but it is necessary,” said Severus.

“It really isn't,” said Harry.

“Yes, it is. I know that Poppy gave you classes in sexual education in your third year and I want to know that you still remember everything she taught you,” Severus said.

“We haven't had sex!” Harry blurted.

“I'm pleased to hear that,” said Severus.

“Are – are you saying not to?” asked Harry.

Severus snorted. “I've been a teacher for most of my adult life, believe me when I say I know the futility of telling a teenager not to have sexual intercourse.”

“Now I'm confused as well as embarrassed,” Harry muttered.

“I won't tell you what you may or may not do with Draco. But last night made me realise that I have been rather lax in talking to you about this subject, and I was hoping to do so before you had intercourse,” said Severus.

“Okay,” Harry said slowly.

“All I ask is that you keep two things in mind. First, that you either use protection or perform diagnostic charms to check that neither of you has a venereal disease.”

Harry looked down at the tabletop. “But we – we haven't been with anyone else.”

“That doesn't necessarily mean that neither of you have any infections. Some of them do not present any symptoms. It is possible to contract a venereal disease from one's mother during childbirth, and cold sores can be transferred to another person through kissing or oral sex,” said Severus.

Harry could feel the back of his neck burning with embarrassment, and nodded. “Okay. What's the charm?”

“I don't actually know.”

Harry hadn't been expecting that answer. “How come you don't know?”

“I've never used it.”

“Is it a bad spell then? Should we use the protective charms instead?” asked Harry.

“There's nothing wrong with the spell. It's used primarily by people in long term, monogamous relationships. Since I've never been in one, I've never used the charm,” said Severus.

Harry stared. “You've never been in a relationship?”
"No."

"Why not?"

Severus shrugged. "You know that I was infatuated with Lily while at school... after we fought there was a girl in Ravenclaw that I sometimes studied with when I was in seventh year... but apart from them I've never really liked anyone."

Harry looked down at the table again. "So you've never – er, you know... done it?"

"No. Growing up, everyone else seemed to be obsessed with sex and I wanted to fit in, but... I didn't see what all the fuss was about. The entire activity seemed pointless unless there was an emotional connection," said Severus.

"Maybe you're gay," Harry said tentatively.

Severus shook his head. "I've never been attracted to a man. I'm just don't see the point in seeking out someone else just for sexual pleasure when I'm perfectly capable of achieving that by myself."

"I really didn't need to know that," Harry muttered.

Severus ignored his interruption. "You, however, are clearly interested in pursuing sexual relations with other people, so you will learn how to protect yourself. One of my medical textbooks has a section on diagnostic spells. If the charm's not in there, I can ask Pomfrey for you," said Severus.

"I'll have a look for it later," Harry said quickly. He really didn't fancy the thought of Severus asking Pomfrey about this. "What was the other thing you wanted me to do?"

Severus took a sip of coffee before replying. "Do only what you are comfortable doing. If you're not ready for something, say so. If Draco truly cares for you -"

"He does," Harry said firmly.

"- then he will respect your wishes," Severus finished.

"He will."

"You will, of course, afford him the same respect," said Severus.

"What? How can you – of course I will!" Harry cried.

Severus looked at him intently. "Consent doesn't have to be verbal, but do not take silence for consent. You can also change your mind at any time, as can Draco, no matter what you may be doing. If you start doing something and begin to feel uncomfortable, say so. And make sure that he is also comfortable. Do you understand?"

"Yeah... You're saying to talk to each other," Harry said.

"Precisely. Communication is key. If you cannot verbalise something you have no business performing it."

"Can I go now?" Harry asked desperately.

Severus nodded. "Be outside for Apparition lessons by half past."

Harry all but fled the kitchen, rushing upstairs to his bedroom. Between last night and this morning,
he rather thought that he had just received his yearly allotment of embarrassment all at once. He shut his door and slumped against it, taking a moment to be thankful that that conversation was over, and that he would never have to sit through it again. With a sigh, Harry got out a piece of parchment and wrote a short note to Draco, putting it in Parseltongue to protect it from Theo's – or Sirius' – curious eyes.

Dear Draco,

You are so bloody lucky you left here when you did. Dad didn't say anything to me last night, but this morning after breakfast he ambushed me with the sex talk. Long story short, he wants us to either use a diagnostic charm to check that we don't have any diseases, or to start using protective charms. I think I prefer the first option. Seems like less work. What do you think?

Hope you're enjoying your non-sex-talk-having house.

Love,

Harry

Harry rolled up the parchment and turned to Hedwig, who was watching him lazily from the headboard of his bed.

“Feel like going to London?” asked Harry.

Hedwig sat up straighter and chirped. Harry smiled and patted her, then tied the parchment to her leg. He carried her over to the window, where she butted her head against his shoulder then took off.

Harry was walking down to the garden gate when Ladon called out to him from the oak tree.

“Are you off to do more spinning?”

“Apparition,” Harry corrected him.

“Is it? I thought you humans usually move when you Apparate,” said Ladon.

Harry stared at the boomslang, who was hanging down from a branch to talk to him. “When the hell did you get so bloody cheeky?”

Ladon swayed a little, looking to Harry as if he were trying to shrug non-existent shoulders. “I must've picked it up from you.”

Harry stared after him as he rose back up into the foliage. First he'd had that talk with Severus, and now Ladon was giving him cheek? “At least Hedwig was nice to me today,” Harry muttered as he continued on to the gate.

“What was that?”

Harry turned around to see Severus walking down the path behind him. “Nothing. Just, Ladon's teasing me for not being able to Apparate yet,” he said, not quite meeting Severus' eye. Their earlier conversation was still far too fresh in his mind.

“You will achieve Apparition eventually,” Severus said calmly. “Now, you can set up the wards today.”

Harry did as he was told, walking in a large circle with his wand in one hand, his other hand held palm up in front of him, muttering the incantations for the various wards. When he was done he found Severus waiting for him with the smaller circle glowing on the ground as usual.
He didn't know if it was because he wanted to prove to Ladon that he could do it, or if he was still so embarrassed around Severus that he wanted to disappear – or some combination thereof – but after a quarter of an hour Harry finally Apparated into the circle.

He gave himself a quick once over, checking to make sure he hadn't left anything behind, then beamed at Severus. “I did it! Dad, I did it!”

Severus gave a small, proud smile. “Congratulations,” he said, then drew another circle on the ground, a few metres away from the one in which Harry stood. “Now Apparate into that circle.”

Harry focused on the other circle as hard as he could, spun on his heel, and ended up precisely where he'd been told to. He was given no time to congratulate himself, however, as Severus merely drew yet another circle and pointed to that one.

On it went for the rest of the rest of the morning, and the few after that. By the time Severus called an end to the lesson on the third morning, Harry was feeling both incredibly dizzy and confident about his ability to Apparate short distances.

“Tomorrow I'll give you longer targets,” Severus said as they walked inside for lunch.

Harry put the kettle on and leaned against the bench. “Will that make me feel even more nauseous than I do now?”

“No, the nausea comes from the act itself. It is unaffected by distance. You're doing well, Harry. Many people vomit when learning to Apparate, especially when repeating the act in as quick a succession as you have been,” said Severus.

Harry had just settled down in the lounge with his cup of tea – he had learned the hard way to avoid solid food for at least an hour after Apparating – when an owl swooped in the window and into the kitchen. Harry only gave it half a glance, as it clearly wasn't intended for him, until he heard Severus swearing. Curious now, Harry got up and walked over to find Severus holding a letter, on the back of which was a Ministry seal.

“What is it?” asked Harry uneasily, ignoring the owl now sitting on the back of a chair.

Severus didn't say anything, merely reread the letter and then handed it to Harry.

_Dear Professor Severus Snape,_
_You are hereby requested to present both yourself and your son, Mr Harry Potter, at the Ministry of Magic in order to meet with the new Minister for Magic, Rufus Scrimgeour, at 9am on 3rd July._

_Yours sincerely,_
_Percy Weasley_  
_On behalf of the_  
_Minister for Magic of Great Britain and Ireland_  

“That's blunt,” Harry said.

Severus snorted. “Percy Weasley always had far too high an opinion of himself and far less tact than he ought to. Still. This is interesting.”

“Because Fudge has finally been sacked?” guess Harry.

“That, and Scrimgeour clearly wants something from you,” Severus said slowly.
Harry sat down at the table. “Me?”

“If it was me they were interested in, your presence wouldn't be required. No, it's you they really want to talk to. They've just written to me because I'm your parent,” said Severus.

“Huh,” said Harry. He had had a few letters from the Ministry in his life, and all of them had been addressed directly to him. Then again, there wouldn't have been much point writing to the Dursleys. Even if they'd chosen to read a letter from the Ministry – and Harry doubted they would – they would likely have ignored whatever it said.

“Pack an overnight bag. We're going to Cokeworth,” Severus said. He pointed a finger at the owl. “You wait here.”

He stood up and strode quickly into the lounge, returning with a quill and a pot of ink.

Harry watched in confusion. “Cokeworth? Why?”

“Because we are not going into the Ministry. They can come to us, just not here. Take a few books and other possessions, too. We need to make it seem like we actually live there,” said Severus.

The Ministry owl hooted at him.

“You'll get a reply in a minute,” Severus snapped at it.

The owl glared at him. Severus glared back. The owl gave another, quieter hoot, and settled down on the chair to wait.

“Wait, you're refusing to do what the new Minister for Magic wants?” Harry asked.

“Yes,” said Severus. He wrote a short note and attached it to the owl's leg. It gave Severus one final glare before taking off for the window it had entered from. Severus looked at Harry. “I'll explain when we get there. Now come on.”

It didn't take Harry long to grab his backpack and stuff it with his pyjamas, a change of clothes, his Walkman and some textbooks. He slung the bag over his shoulder and went back downstairs. He was packing up his sketchbook and some drawing supplies in the lounge when Severus walked downstairs carrying a black bag. He set it down on the coffee table and began packing the books he had piled on top of it into the bag.

“You should bring Ladon and Hedwig as well,” Severus said over his shoulder.

“Er, I sent Hedwig to Draco this morning,” said Harry.

“Just Ladon, then. Are you done packing your things?”

“Yeah.”

“Good. Go fetch Ladon. I'll meet you at the gate.”

Harry walked down to the oak tree to find Ladon. By the time he had the boomslang coiled around his shoulders, Severus had walked out of the house, carrying his overnight bag and a few bags of food. A minute later he Apparated himself, Harry and Ladon into a squalid alleyway. Harry wrinkled his nose at the smell and followed Severus out onto the cobble stoned street, which was only marginally less filthy than the alley had been.

The street was lined on either side by small, drab, run down brick houses, with not a single tree
growing along the cracked footpath. The air was humid, with a heat far more oppressive than the mild summer of northern Wales, and what breeze there was brought with it a foul smell. Graffiti covered many of the houses, a good portion of which also had smashed or boarded up windows. Harry got the impression that not many of the houses were actually lived in.

Most of the street lights were broken, some still with shattered glass on the ground beneath them. The next street had the same deserted feel to it, though there was a sign of life here, courtesy of a stray cat digging through an overturned rubbish bin. There was more rubbish strewn along the street, caught up in the gutters.

Severus caught the expression on Harry's face. “Welcome to Cokeworth.”

“You and Mum grew up here?” Harry asked in dismay.

“I did. Lily lived a few blocks away, in a slightly better area. The town as a whole was better off back then. The entire region was hit hard by the mass unemployment of the 80s, when people moved away in droves.”

“And the smell?” asked Harry.

“The river's rather polluted nowadays,” said Severus.

Ladon raised his head and flicked his tongue out a few times. “I don't like this place. There are no trees and it smells horrible.”

“It's just from the river, apparently. Anyway, we'll be going home tomorrow,” Harry promised.

Ladon tucked his head into Harry's collar. “Good,” he said in a muffled voice.

They turned into another street just as depressing as those they'd already walked through. This one was distinguishable from the previous streets by the gigantic chimney looming over the end of the street, and by the gang of teenagers a little way down. They were a few years older than Harry, and were engaged in adding to the already impressive graffiti collection on the front of one of the houses. A couple of them appeared to be on lookout; the post seemed to consist of smoking and sharing a bottle of alcohol.

Severus ignored them entirely. “This is the street I grew up on. Spinner's End. Named after the mill at the end of the street.”

Just then one of the teenagers noticed their presence. She quickly alerted the rest of the gang, all of whom turned to stare unpleasantly at the newcomers. The second Harry and Severus stepped onto the cracked front steps of a house, however, the teenagers lost all interest in the newcomers, and returned to their vandalism.

“Muggle-Repelling Charm?” Harry guessed.

“Correct. I put a light charm on the house,” Severus explained.

He drew his wand to unlock the front door and pushed it open to reveal a gloomy sitting room, with the single window obscured by a curtain. Severus reached in and flipped a light switch. A bare bulb flickered on, bathing the room in a sour yellow light. The walls were lined with bookcases, though they were devoid of books. A shabby couch, a ratty armchair and a weak-looking coffee table were the only other objects in the room.

“Got enough bookcases?” Harry asked in bemusement, stepping inside. On his shoulder, Ladon
peeked out of his shirt.

“There are no more here than we have at home,” said Severus. “I put these in after my parents died. Dad didn't like reading, so it was partly to spite him.”

“Yeah, but Dad, there are no doors in here,” Harry said. “Even Hermione would think this is excessive.”

Severus shut the front door behind them, then walked across the room. He pressed a finger to the edge of a bookcase, which immediately swung open to reveal a tiny kitchen. He walked in and dropped the bags of food on the table. Harry gave an amused grin at the door before following.

“A secret door?”

“I liked to experiment,” Severus said. “Now come on, I'll show you the rest of the house. It won't take long.”

He led Harry back into the sitting room and through yet another hidden door, this one leading to a narrow staircase. Upstairs, there was a dingy bathroom, so cramped that there was only about two square feet of floor between the bath, toilet and sink, and two bedrooms. The larger one didn't have a single piece of furniture in it.

“This was my parents' room. I kept a few of Mum's possessions and burnt everything else,” Severus said. “You'll sleep in here tonight.”

He conjured up a bed then, after Harry had dumped his backpack on the bed, they walked into the other, smaller bedroom. Severus placed his own bag on the bed while Harry stared around himself with interest. There wasn't much to the room – a single bed and a small desk with no chair were the only furniture remaining.

The walls, however, were another story. They had the same faded, 50s style wallpaper as the rest of the house, but over the top of that, the teenaged Severus had evidently stuck up a number of old posters of rock bands. Harry recognised some of them – the Ramones, the Sex Pistols, Queen and Led Zeppelin – from the covers of Severus' records. They were the only halfway cheerful things Harry had seen since setting foot in Cokeworth.

“Nice posters,” he said.

Severus shrugged one shoulder. “They were one of the few things Dad would let me put up, since they're obviously Muggle. The other option was Newcastle United paraphernalia, but as I've no interest in football...”

“I like them,” said Harry.

Severus gave him a strained smile and abruptly walked out of the room. Harry followed him back downstairs and into the kitchen. Since it was now well past lunch time, they decided to have an early dinner.

“We'd best have an early night, as well. We've got an early start tomorrow,” said Severus.

Harry nodded distractedly; he was in the middle of trying to coax Ladon into having something to eat. “I've got newts and frogs here... Maybe a skink? Does this look like a skink to you?” he asked, peering into the jar of dead amphibians and reptiles.

Ladon gave a disinterested glance at the jar. “That's a skink, but I don't want anything from in there. I
want to hunt. I can hear rats in this room.”

Harry looked down at the floor. “Dad, Ladon reckons there are rats in here.”

“Probably in the cupboards,” Severus said calmly.

Harry relayed this information to Ladon and opened the closest cupboard for him. The snake slithered inside with a quickly hissed thanks.

Once they were seated at the table, Harry looked at Severus expectantly. “So. Why are we meeting Scrimgeour here and not at the Ministry?”

“It puts him on the back foot,” said Severus. “Of course, I told Scrimgeour in my reply that it was because we both nearly died at the Ministry a month ago, and that I didn't want to further traumatise you by making you return there.”

“Nice,” Harry smirked. “As for Scrimgeour... What's his story?”

Severus frowned down at his steak. “Until his promotion to Minister for Magic, he was the Head of the Auror Department.”

“So he's on our side?” Harry asked.

Severus snorted. “Hardly. Well, he will be opposed to the Dark Lord – he's not evil, and he's certainly more proactive than Fudge ever was. But I don't remember him speaking out in your defence last year, do you?”

“No...” Harry said slowly. “Wait, if he was in charge of the Aurors last year, does that mean he ordered Proudfoot and Dawlish to go to Hogwarts with Fudge last year? When he wanted to have me expelled?”

“They were there on Fudge's direct command, due to his being intimidated by Albus. According to Tonks, Scrimgeour didn't know about that until the next day, and Gemma said Bones was also left in the dark,“ said Severus. “But Scrimgeour did support the Ministry-wide denial of the Dark Lord's resurrection, and both Tonks and Kingsley were reprimanded by him for trying to win other Aurors to our cause.”

“Okay, so he's a good guy but not fully on our side?”

“To put it simply, yes. He's a politician, and they should never be trusted,” Severus said darkly.

“What do you think he wants?” asked Harry.

“I don't know. Perhaps he wants to question you about your knowledge of the prophecy, as the Ministry is aware of its existence, just not the contents,” said Severus.

“But I'm not in trouble, am I?” Harry pressed.

“No, I shouldn't think so. Just be careful about what you say to him,” Severus warned him.

Just then there was a thump and a squeal of pain from inside one of the cupboards; Ladon had evidently managed to catch some dinner.

“I will be,” Harry said.

Severus hummed his approval. “I want you to clear your mind while he's here, as well. I've no idea if
he is a Legilimens, but we can't be too careful.”

After dinner Harry sat on the couch sketching, while Severus set about making the sitting room look inhabited. Books were conjured to fill the empty shelves; he put the stack of books he'd brought from home onto the coffee table, which creaked ominously but held the weight; a sheaf of loose parchment, a ink pot and quill were piled on the corner of the table; and two cloaks were conjured, to hang from hooks by the front door.

Finally satisfied with the house's appearance, Severus brewed some tea and brought it into the sitting room, putting it on the already crowded coffee table. He and Harry had a quiet evening, before retiring early. Harry was all too eager to get to bed and fall asleep. The house – the entire town, actually – was depressing, and he couldn't wait to get home. At least Ladon's with me, he thought drowsily, staring out the warped window. Ladon may have been sulky because of the smell of the river, but at least it meant that Harry wasn't alone for the night.

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The next morning Harry awoke to Severus knocking on the bedroom door. He had a quick shower in the rusted bathtub, then joined Severus for breakfast. They ate quickly in order to be ready for Scrimgeour's arrival, then sat down in the sitting room to wait.

At precisely nine o'clock there was a sharp rapping on the front door. Harry stood up, hissing a reassurance to Ladon, who was fretting on the back of the couch. Harry had told him about the importance of their visitor, and Ladon had already decided that he did not like Scrimgeour. While Severus answered the door, Harry hastily cleared his mind, thankful for the modicum of calm it brought him.

“Good morning, Minister,” Severus said.

The man in the doorway certainly looked like he was more capable than Fudge had ever been. Leaning on a walking stick, he had the air of someone tough and powerful who had seen many a fight, much like Moody. He was dressed in plain black robes despite the summer heat, and his bespectacled eyes swept the entire room before settling on Harry.

“A pleasure to meet you, Severus,” Scrimgeour said, still focusing on Harry. “And Harry, of course.”

Harry didn't like the way Scrimgeour was looking at him, as if he were some sort of prize. “Minister,” he said neutrally.

“Come in,” Severus said, stepping to the side. “Would you like some tea?”

“Certainly,” said Scrimgeour.

Severus shut the door behind Scrimgeour and brushed past him towards the kitchen. Harry carefully didn't laugh when Scrimgeour glared momentarily at Severus' robes when they billowed out and snapped against Scrimgeour's legs.

“Say the word and I'll bite him,” Ladon said as Harry left him to join the adults in the kitchen.

Harry hadn't planned on replying to Ladon until he saw the way Scrimgeour started at the snake's words. “It's okay,” he said, hissing louder than necessary.

Scrimgeour's hand tightened on his cane. “So it's true that you can speak to snakes.”
“Yeah. I thought everyone knew that, after what happened when the Chamber of Secrets was opened,” said Harry.

Scrimgeour settled himself in a chair at the kitchen table before replying. “I believe so. I confess it unsettling to see in person.”

“Is that why you wanted to talk to me? Do you have a snake you need interrogated or something?” Harry asked.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Severus smirk over the tea things.

“No, of course not,” Scrimgeour said.

There was a period of silence during which Harry joined Scrimgeour at the table. Severus set the teapot, milk jug and sugar bowl on the table. When he put three mugs down, however, Scrimgeour held up a hand.

“I'd like to speak to Harry alone.”

“That's not happening,” Severus said in a quiet voice, the one Harry knew signalled danger.

Scrimgeour was oblivious. “I beg your pardon?”

“The last two times Harry was alone with a Ministry employee, he was almost drugged with Veritaserum, and was forced to slice his own hand open for hours upon end. Trust me when I say that you will not be speaking to my son alone,” said Severus.

This time, Scrimgeour noticed the venom in Severus' voice. He forged ahead anyway. “No harm will come to Harry through me.”

“I'm glad to hear it. Your summons was rather vague on what exactly you wanted with him,” Severus said, crossing his arms and standing at the foot of the table.

Scrimgeour gave a brief, grimace-like smile. “Ah, yes, Weasley's missive. He was deliberately vague on my orders. One cannot be too careful what one puts in writing lately, as I'm sure you understand. Don't want the enemy getting wind of anything important after all.”

“I agree,” said Harry.

“You do, do you?” Scrimgeour asked, pleased.

“Yeah. Dad's been telling me to take care what I put in writing ever since Voldemort returned. That was a year ago now. Glad to see the Ministry's finally catching up,” said Harry.

Scrimgeour's expression turned ugly. He made a visible effort to regain his composure. “We had no proof other than your word at the time -”

“Dumbledore believed me,” Harry interrupted.

“Yes, well, the Ministry now has incontestable proof that He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named is back,” said Scrimgeour.

“After spending the better part of a year slandering Harry in the press,” said Severus waspishly.

Scrimgeour cleared his throat. “As for that... I'm here to make, ah, reparations, if you will.”
“Yeah?” Harry said.

“Yes. I understand that before her murder, Madam Bones had been investigating Dolores Umbridge over her involvement in the Dementor attack in Surrey. She was readying her case to take Umbridge to trial before she died.”

Scrimgeour said all this with indifferent regret, as if talking about an employee who had left a task unfinished before going on leave, rather than being brutally murdered.

“Yeah, I got the impression that Bones didn't mess around,” said Harry.

Scrimgeour smiled; it didn't reach his eyes. “No, she didn't.”

“What does that have to do with your desire to meet Harry?” asked Severus, finally sitting down.

“Well, as a gesture of good faith, I have personally continued Amelia Bones' work,” said Scrimgeour.

“Is that so?” asked Severus. “I don't recall reading anything about a trial in the Daily Prophet. I'm impressed you managed to keep that from the reporters.”

“That's because Umbridge won't be having a trial. As we speak, she is on her way to Azkaban,” Scrimgeour said.

He sat back and took another sip of tea, clearly expecting Harry to be pleased by this piece of information.

He wasn't.

“You're sending her to Azkaban without trial?” Harry said, struggling to keep his voice level.

Scrimgeour nodded. “The Ministry is so busy dealing with the return of He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named, and Madam Bones had such an airtight case against her, that we thought it best not to.”

“And you thought I'd be happy about that?” asked Harry.

“Well, yes, given what we've learned she put you through over the last year,” said Scrimgeour. “As I said, it was a gesture of good faith. In return, I ask only one small favour.”

Harry was so angry at this that for a moment, his rage overpowered his Occlumency. Luckily, Severus jumped in before Harry could say anything.

“What exactly do you propose?” he asked softly.

“As I said, it would only be a small favour,” Scrimgeour said quickly, his eyes locked on Harry's. “I'd just like you to come into the Ministry from time to time – before you return to Hogwarts of course – I've no intention of disrupting your education!”

“And what would that achieve?” asked Severus.

“You know the rumours, Severus,” Scrimgeour said. “They're calling Harry the Chosen One... We'd like the public to see that the Chosen One is in league with the Ministry. That's all. I've heard that you want to become a teacher, Harry. I'm sure that, if you were to pop into the Ministry one day, I could organise for someone in the Department of International Magical Co-operation to arrange an introduction between yourself and someone from a foreign Ministry, to further your career aspirations.”
“You thought wrong,” Harry said through gritted teeth, and even Severus seemed startled at his tone.

“You're not the Chosen One?” Scrimgeour asked.

Harry let out a short laugh. “Right now, it doesn't matter one way or another if I'm the Chosen One or not. I'm not doing what you want. Locking Umbridge up without trial is definitely not the way to go about bribing me.”

“No one mentioned anything about bribery,” Scrimgeour said hastily.

“What you propose sounded very much like bribery to me,” Severus remarked.

“Oh, it's bribery all right,” said Harry. “Just not particularly good bribery. My godfather was locked up for twelve years without trial, Minister. What makes you think I would support someone else suffering the same treatment?”

“All the evidence says that Umbridge is quite clearly guilty of her crime,” said Scrimgeour.

“Yeah, that's what everyone said about Sirius, and hey, he was innocent all along!” Harry snapped. “If this is all you have to offer you can get out of my house right now.”

Scrimgeour looked at Severus, as if hoping he would contradict Harry. Severus merely stared stonily back at him. Scrimgeour clenched his jaw and lost all appearance of friendliness.

“What can I offer you?” he asked point blank.

Harry took a deep breath. “Pardon Narcissa.”

Severus’ eyes widened almost imperceptibly, but he remained silent.

Scrimgeour blinked. “What?”

“You heard me,” said Harry.

“Narcissa Black is wanted for using the Killing Curse. The use of any Unforgivable Curse warrants a life sentence in Azkaban,” Scrimgeour said.

“Narcissa used the Killing Curse in self-defence. Lucius Malfoy had just tortured her with the Cruciatus Curse. He was trying to kill her and her son, and to do it painfully. It was pure self-defence on her part,” said Harry.

“Harry, I can't do that. She used an Unforgivable Curse. There's no excuse for that,” said Scrimgeour.

“She wouldn't have had to do that if the Ministry had've been doing its job last year. Narcissa didn't let those Death Eaters break out of Azkaban. The Ministry did -”

“We didn't let -”

“And you didn't do a very good job of trying to recapture them, did you. When Sirius broke out of Azkaban, there were Dementors everywhere. That didn't happen last year,” Harry continued. “Lucius went straight to Malfoy Manor and tried to kill Narcissa, and the Ministry did nothing. Narcissa had to fight him by herself.”

“We did everything -”
“And then Malfoy and Bellatrix Lestrange kidnapped Draco in Hogsmeade,” Harry said, his voice shaking slightly. “Where was the Ministry then? My best friend was kidnapped and tortured and you did nothing! The Ministry employee at Hogwarts actually tried to stop Dad from alerting the Aurors, or even from making sure the rest of the school was safe! My friends and I had to go rescue Draco ourselves – from the Ministry of Magic, no less!”

“And why was he taken to the Department of Mysteries, Potter?” Scrimgeour asked.

“To get the prophecy about me, you know that, Minister. It's why you're here, after all. To suck up to the Chosen One,” said Harry bitterly.

Scrimgeour leaned forward. “So you admit that you're the Chosen One?”

“Yeah, I am,” said Harry recklessly. “I'm the only one who can kill Voldemort. But for me to do that, I need the support of those I know to be on my side.”

“The Ministry is on your side, Harry,” Scrimgeour said.

“No, you're not. The Ministry is on the Ministry's side. Narcissa is on my side. And she's in hiding. I need her free, or I can't kill Voldemort,” said Harry fiercely.

“Are you really trying to say that without Narcissa Black, you are incapable of killing He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named?” Scrimgeour asked sceptically.

“Yeah, I am. I could try to list all the times she's protected me, but we'd be here all day,” said Harry. “So if you want my help – and let's face it, we all know you do – you'll give her a full pardon.”

“With no conditions on her freedom,” Severus added.

Scrimgeour's eyes darted between them. “You're saying that if I formally pardon Narcissa Black, you, Harry Potter, will publicly support the Ministry?”

Again, Harry took a slow breath to get his thoughts in order. “Yeah, I am. Pardon Narcissa, let her go free, with no conditions, and I'll... I'll make a statement to the press supporting the Ministry.”

“Just one statement?” Scrimgeour scoffed.

“Just one. I've no intention of going into the Ministry. Like Dad wrote to you yesterday, I've got some pretty traumatic memories of that place,” Harry said, and this time, the tremor in his voice was deliberate. “But you have my word that I will speak to the press and tell them that I fully support what you've done. And I'll publicly come out as the Chosen One,” Harry added.

Scrimgeour studied Harry for a long time, before turning once again to Severus. “And you won't try to stop this? Use your position as Harry's parent to block him from speaking to the press?”

Severus didn't hesitate to answer. “No, I won't. Harry has my full support, as ever.”

“Very well,” Scrimgeour said, standing up. “I need to get back to the Ministry. I've a busy few days ahead of me, but I will formally pardon Narcissa within the week. I will expect your public statement no less than a week after that.”

He held out his hand. Harry stood up and shook it.

Scrimgeour nodded. “I'll see myself out.”

He picked up his cane and limped out of the house. As soon as he heard the front door shut, Harry
sank back into his chair and took a large swallow of his tea.

“I hope you know what you're doing, Harry,” Severus said lowly.

Harry smirked at him. “I do, actually. Technically, I never said I'd come out in support of everything the Ministry's been doing, I just said I'd come out in support of them pardoning Narcissa.”

Severus stared at him, clearly running through the conversation in his mind. “So you did,” he finally said.

“And I never specified that I would be going to the **Prophet**, which is probably who he wants me to speak to. I figured that Polly Parkinson might like another exclusive,” said Harry.

“I have no doubt that she would,” Severus agreed. “Very clever, Harry.”

“You're the one who taught me how to look for loopholes,” Harry said.

Severus smiled, slowly but proudly. “A lesson you've learnt particularly well.”

“I have a great teacher,” Harry said with a grin.

“Indeed,” said Severus. He stood up and squeezed Harry's shoulder. “Well done, Harry. Very well done. Now, go pack your things so that we can get out of here.”

Harry did so cheerfully. He almost didn't believe how well things had turned out, but if Severus thought Harry had played the Minister for a fool, well, that was good enough in Harry's book.

Twenty minutes they were out on the street. Severus locked the front door with his wand, and then began walking up the street.

“This isn't the way to the alley we arrived in,” said Harry.

“No, it's not. I thought I'd show you the house in which Lily grew up before we leave,” said Severus.

Harry had been so caught up in worrying about Scrimgeour that he hadn't even thought about that. “Okay,” he said quietly.

A few minutes' walk soon had them in a nicer neighbourhood. By Cokeworth's standards, this meant that there was less evident vandalism, rubbish was confined to rubbish bins, and the smell of the river was not as pungent. The gang of teenagers they passed today was playing a game of cricket in the middle of the street, not vandalising empty houses.

Severus stopped outside a house that was only slightly larger than the one on Spinner's End. Like most of the neighbourhood, it had clearly seen better days. One end of the guttering had come loose from the roof, which was also missing a few tiles, and the paint on the front door was peeling. But the windows were whole, the front steps were neatly swept, and the flower boxes underneath the windows were planted with cheerful daisies.

“That was Lily's room up there,” Severus said, pointing to a window on the right side of the house. “She used to climb out of it and sit on that ledge when she wanted to get away from Petunia.”

Harry stared at the ledge. It was crumbled away in some places, though he supposed it wouldn't have been so bad twenty years ago. It was just wide enough for a child to sit on, if they were very careful. “Did she do that a lot?” he asked.
“Whenever she fought with her sister, which was frequently,” said Severus.

Harry had no problem imagining his mum fighting with his aunt.

“If she was up there when I was coming over to see her, she used to jump off the ledge and float down to the ground using magic. She did the same thing on swings, propelling herself as high as she could and then floating off the swing when it was at its peak,” said Severus. “She had to stop that after we went to Hogwarts, of course, or she would have gotten in trouble for underage magic. That didn’t stop her jumping off the ledge though. She just had a rougher landing.”

Harry smiled at that. Lily may not have enjoyed Quidditch like James or Harry, but it seemed that she had also loved to be airborne. Harry could almost see her now, jumping off the ledge with a laugh and running off to play with Severus.

When they reached a quiet alleyway, Harry went to grab hold of Severus’ arm in order to Disapparate, only to be stopped by Severus.

“You can Apparate yourself home.”

Harry’s eyes widened. “I can?”

“Yes. Give me Ladon and your bag,” Severus said.

Ladon wished Harry luck and slithered from his arm to Severus’. Harry swallowed nervously.

“You’ll be fine,” Severus said calmly. “Just focus on the field in front of our house.”

Harry did so, shut his eyes, and spun on the spot. There was the usual claustrophobic crushing sensation, and then he opened his eyes in front of Fen House. He breathed out gratefully, grinning at Severus and Ladon when they Apparated in a second later. It was good to be home.
As soon as Harry and Severus had Apparated back to Wales, Ladon had demanded to be put down in the grass. He wasted no time high-tailing it through the field. By the time Harry and Severus walked through the gate, Ladon was already halfway up the oak tree.

“He really didn't like Cokeworth,” Harry said.

“No one does,” Severus said. “You did well Apparating home in one piece.”

Harry looked at him suspiciously. “You weren't worried about me Splinching myself?”

“No. You haven't done so when Apparating shorter distances. In any case, Heads of House have to supervise Apparition lessons every year. I'm quite adept at healing Splinching injuries.”

“That would've been good to know beforehand,” Harry muttered.

Severus ignored that. “You should inform Narcissa that you have secured her freedom. You can Floo over, but don't be too long. I want to continue your training after lunch.”

Harry nodded and dumped his backpack on the couch, then crossed to the fireplace and Flooed to Grimmauld Place. He stumbled out into the kitchen, where a lone house-elf was scrubbing the kitchen table.

“Hi, er, Iggy, right?” said Harry.

The elf shook its head. “No, I is Nossy, sir! Nossy can be taking sir to Iggy?” the elf offered in a very high-pitched voice. Female, then.

“Sorry. Er, no. I was after Narcissa, actually,” Harry said quickly.

Nossy dropped her scrubbing brush. “Nossy will take sir to Mistress!”

She led Harry up two flights of stairs, to a room Harry remembered from a previous visit. While the tapestry of the Black family tree was still fixed to one wall, the rest of the room was almost unrecognisable. The heavy drapes had been removed and the windows thrown open, letting sunshine and fresh air stream into the room. The carpet and all the other furnishings had also been removed. In the centre of the room Narcissa was standing between Dobby and Kreacher, who were both glaring at each other.

“The tapestry shows the hallowed history of the most noble and ancient house of Black. Kreacher will not let scum like you touch it,” Kreacher croaked.

“Dobby will take the tapestry if Dobby wants to!” Dobby shouted back “Kreacher is not talking to the bad elf. Kreacher is talking to the blood traitor.”

“Kreacher is not talking that way about Miss Narcissa!” Dobby said angrily.

“It's alright, Dobby,” Narcissa sighed. “Kreacher, leave us, or I shall get Sirius.”

Kreacher grimaced up at her. “Kreacher does not want to be seeing Master. Master is busy with his pet monster.”
“Kreacher, go!” Narcissa said sharply.

Kreacher gave one last resentful look then Disapparated. Dobby made a rude gesture at the spot where he had been standing. Narcissa shut her eyes and took a deep breath.

Nossy cleared her throat. “Mistress, Mr Harry Potter is here to see you.”

Narcissa's eyes opened and she smiled. “Thank you, Nossy. You may leave us.”

Nossy curtseyed and Disapparated.

“Hello, Harry. How are you?” asked Narcissa.

“Great, actually. I've got good news for you,” said Harry. “I've gotten Scrimgeour to pardon you.”

Narcissa's eyes widened. “A full pardon?”

“Within the week, he said,” Harry said with a grin.

Narcissa held a hand up to her mouth. “Oh, Harry, thank -”

She was cut off by Dobby beginning to sob. “Harry P-P-Potter has freed Miss Narcissa!” he cried.

Before Harry knew it, Dobby had rushed towards him and thrown his arms around Harry's waist, where he proceeded to cry all over the hem of Harry's T-shirt. Not having expected anyone to react anything like this, Harry just stared in astonishment. Luckily, Narcissa was more proactive. She knelt down next to Dobby and carefully prised him off Harry.

“Yes, he has. I told you that everything would work out, now, didn't I?” she said gently.

Dobby stopped wailing, though tears continued to stream from his large, green eyes. “Y-you did, Miss Narcissa. And Dobby didn't b-believe you!”

“That's fine. There's no need to beat yourself up about it,” Narcissa said.

This time, there was a warning in her voice, and Harry could tell that she was worried Dobby would slip into his old habit of physically hurting himself in punishment. Lucius had drilled it into all of his elves to do so, and some of them had taken a while to lose the urge after he had disappeared from their lives.

Dobby shook his head, setting his ears flapping. “No, Dobby will not be doing that! Dobby is knowing better now.”

“Good,” Narcissa said.

Dobby nodded. “Yes, Dobby is now knowing that Miss Narcissa is always right.”

“Precisely,” said Narcissa. “Now, I'd like to talk to Harry alone, please.”

“Yes, Miss Narcissa,” Dobby said. He looked up at Harry seriously. “Thank you, Harry Potter, for freeing Miss Narcissa.”

“It was my pleasure, Dobby,” Harry said.

That earned him another hug from the elf. Prepared this time, Harry was able to hug Dobby back before he Disapparated.
Narcissa smiled at Harry. “You'll have to forgive Dobby. He hasn't handled my imprisonment well. Seeing my freedom curtailed brought up too many memories of when he wasn't free, I think.”

“That's understandable,” said Harry.

“Now, tell me how you secured my freedom. What did you have to offer Scrimgeour in return?” asked Narcissa.

Harry quickly outlined the deal for her. When he was done, Narcissa drew him into a hug and kissed his forehead. She had to stretch up in order to do so, and Harry realised with surprise that they were now the same height. “Thank you, Harry. I'm sure Polly will be thrilled with another exclusive, and I'm more grateful to you than I can say.”

Harry ran his hand through his hair when he was released. “You're welcome. Er, is Draco home? And Sirius?”

Narcissa nodded. “Draco is in his room with Hermione, and Theo is in the library, but I would advise you not to see Sirius today. Remus had rather a difficult transformation this cycle. He was undercover with some other werewolves, and didn't take his Wolfsbane.”

“Is he okay?” asked Harry.

“Yes, just tired. He's recuperating in his room with Sirius keeping him company. I'll tell them both that you said hello,” Narcissa told him.

“Cheers,” Harry said.

He hurried up the stairs, taking care to walk quietly when he reached the top landing. Sirius and Remus' bedroom door was firmly shut, as was Draco's, but the latter had light seeping out from beneath it. He knocked on it and walked in when Draco called out.

“Harry! How come you didn't tell me you were coming over?” Draco demanded. He got off his bed to give Harry a kiss.

“I came over to see your mum and just thought I'd say hi while I'm here,” said Harry, waving at Hermione over Draco's shoulder.

Draco's brow crinkled. “You came over to see Mother?”

“Yeah. I made a deal with Scrimgeour to get her a full pardon and wanted to tell her the good news,” said Harry.

Draco blinked at him. “You got her a pardon?”

“Yes.”

“She's free?”

“She will be soon.”

Draco stared at him for a moment, then broke into a wide grin. “I'll be right back!”

With that, he dashed out of the room, presumably to go find Narcissa. Hermione and Harry shared an amused smile.

“So how was Bulgaria?” Harry asked.
Hermione's face fell. “Painful and awkward...”

“You okay?” Harry asked in concern. When Hermione hesitated, he sat down next to her on the bed. “What is it?”

Hermione bit her lip. “Do you think Snape would mind if I stayed at your place for a while?”

“Er, I guess not,” Harry said, surprised. “How come?”

“Well, I know he doesn't mean anything by it, but Draco’s driving me crazy. And this house is still pretty depressing, despite Narcissa’s best efforts,” said Hermione.

Harry shrugged. “Fair enough. I’ll need to ask Dad, but I don’t see why he’d say no.”

“Thanks,” Hermione said in relief.

It didn’t take long for Harry to Floo call Severus and get his permission. Harry and Hermione spent another hour or so at Grimmauld Place, walking down to the library to see Theo before they left. The room was conspicuously bare; the library was evidently on Narcissa's list of rooms to redecorate. Harry had never been inside the room before, but he was willing to bet the empty shelves were a result of Narcissa removing the darker, more gruesome books before Theo could get his hands on them.

Harry was soon being regaled with Theo's plans for the week. He had given Tracey a Muggle chemistry textbook for her birthday, and she had a list of experiments she wanted to replicate with Theo.

“You know you're basically just doing Muggle kids' homework, right? I mean, that's gotta be an actual schoolbook that you gave her,” said Harry.

Theo nodded. “Tracey's really jealous of Muggles, because they learn such interesting things in their schools. We've decided that we're going to go to a Muggle university after we graduate from Hogwarts.”

“How did you two not end up in Ravenclaw?” Harry asked.

Theo snorted. “You're best friends with Hermione but you think Ravenclaws have a monopoly on intelligence?”

“No...”

Just then, Draco walked in the door. “Harry, Mother’s planning a celebratory dinner. Are you sure you can’t stay a bit longer?”

Harry shook his head. “Not unless I want Dad to change his mind about letting Hermione stay with us.”

Draco pouted. “Why are you leaving again, Granger?”

“I... I just need a change of scenery,” said Hermione.

Theo sniggered. “That or you're scared Sirius will try to lecture you next.”

“What?” asked Harry.

“No, I'm not,” Hermione said.
Draco sighed and looked at Harry. “Sirius gave Theo and me a lecture the other day.”

Harry stared at him. “Sirius gave you a lecture? Sirius? As in my godfather? A lecture?” Apart from Tonks, Harry couldn't think of an adult less likely to lecture someone.

“Yes, a lecture,” Draco snapped. “Because he isn't just your godfather, he's also my uncle. And so when Theo opened his fat mouth and told him about how your father walked in on us, Sirius decided to give us both a lecture on safe sex. Once he'd stopped laughing, that is, which took quite a while.”

“Okay, that last part sounds more like Sirius,” said Harry.

“It wasn't that bad, Draco. You can't say it wasn't informative,” said Theo.

Draco shuddered. “It was too informative if you ask me. There are certain things I don't need to know, and my uncle's favourite position is one of them!”

Harry snorted. “Sounds like I got off easy.”

Theo smirked. “It's doggy, in case you were wondering.”

“I really, really wasn't,” Harry said. “Hermione, we're leaving. Now!”

They quickly said their goodbyes, then left via the Floo. Harry stumbled out of the fireplace to see Severus preparing lunch in the kitchen. Hermione appeared right behind him with rather more grace.

“We're back,” Harry announced, putting Hermione's suitcase on the floor.

“I can see that,” Severus replied. “Welcome, Hermione.”

She set her backpack down on the top of her suitcase. “Thank you, sir.”

“Before we sit down for lunch, I'd like to go over a few rules with you,” said Severus.

“Of course, sir,” Hermione said, sounding a little nervous.

“First, there are only a small number of people who have access to this property. If you do not recognise a visitor, treat them as hostile. Harry will show you where the emergency Portkeys are later,” Severus said.

“Er, yes, sir,” Hermione said, giving Harry a questioning glance. He nodded in reply.

“Second, you and Harry are not to leave the property without informing me beforehand, and if you do so, you must take your wand with you. I understand that this may be far more restrictive than you are used to, but I'm sure you understand my concerns about safety,” said Severus.

“That's fine, sir.”

“Whilst here, you may perform magic as often as you like.”

Hermione's eyes lit up at that. “Thank you, sir.”

“And finally, this summer I am training Harry in the skills he will need to defeat the Dark Lord. You are not to distract him during these sessions.”

“May I join in, sir?” Hermione asked.
Severus considered her for a second. “I suppose, yes.”

“Thank you.”

Severus nodded. “Do you intend to bring your cat here?”

“No, sir. Crookshanks grew quite close to Sirius when he was, er, skulking around Hogwarts in our third year. I thought I'd leave him at Grimmauld Place so that they could catch up,” said Hermione.

Severus blinked. “As you wish... We do not have a spare bedroom here. I can either set you up on a camp bed in Harry's room, or enlarge the sofa down here for you.”

Hermione looked at Harry.

“You're welcome in my room, if you can put up with Hedwig flying in and out whenever she wants,” he said. “You can share my bed, if you like.”

Hermione smiled. “Sure. Was there anything else I should know, professor?”

Severus paused before replying. “Whilst here, you may call me Severus. That goes for the rest of your friends, Harry.”

Hermione's eyes widened. “I – er – thank you, sir – er, Severus.”

“Very well. Harry, take Hermione's bags upstairs. Lunch will be ready in five minutes.”

Harry picked up Hermione's luggage and carried it upstairs. She followed him into his room, looking around at his murals.

“I never would have thought your dad would live in a place like this, with white-washed walls and windows everywhere. It's just so... sunny,” she said.

“You know those rumours about him being a vampire are just rumours, right?” asked Harry.

“Of course I do... and Draco really wasn't exaggerating when he told me how good a job you'd done painting your room,” she said.

“Er, thanks,” Harry said distractedly. He began trying to tidy up his room – he hadn't been expecting a house guest, and the room was not at all neat. “It'll be cramped with you in here but it should work. You won't be able to have stacks of books up here, though.”

“I'm sure I'll survive,” Hermione said drily.

“You sure? ’Cause I've seen your dorm...” Harry ducked the pillow she aimed at him. “Quit it, Granger. We should head back down anyway.”

Over a simple lunch of salad and leftover sausages Harry told Hermione about the training he'd already been doing thus far that summer. She was predictably envious to learn that Harry was now capable of Apparating, and intrigued by the different wards he had learned to cast.

“I can show you them after lunch,” Harry offered. “Right, Dad?”

Severus nodded. “We'll be going back out to the field, yes. You're beginning combat training today.”

“Cool!” cried Harry, sharing a grin with Hermione.
A short time later, Hermione was standing in the field, tying her hair back in a ponytail and watching curiously as Harry set up the usual wards. When he was done he walked over to stand next to her.

“For this afternoon's exercise, I want you both to try to incapacitate each other, whether that be by Disarming, Stunning or some other method,” Severus announced. “Feel free to use whatever means necessary, but stay within the boundaries of the wards.”

Harry and Hermione both nodded.

“You have thirty seconds to get into position,” said Severus.

Harry immediately took off for the edge of the warded area. Behind him, he could hear Hermione running in the opposite direction. When Harry was a few metres away from the wards he stopped and turned around, making sure he had some space behind himself to retreat if necessary. Harry edged sideways, putting a little more distance between himself and Severus, who had remained near the gate. On the other side of the field, Hermione turned to face him. She and Harry both raised their wands and waited for Severus to give the signal.

“Begin!”

Harry immediately sent a Disarming Spell towards Hermione. She deflected it with a Shield Charm and then sent a Stunning Spell back at him. Harry threw up his own Shield Charm, then shot a Jelly-Legs Jinx at her. Hermione shielded herself from that and sent back another Stunning Spell, which Harry blocked with another Shield Charm. They volleyed spells at each other for a few minutes, blocking them all with Shield Charms, until Harry managed to Disarm Hermione.

Severus waited for Harry to give Hermione her wand back. “Nice shot, Harry. Take your positions again, but this time, no Shield Charms. You're both clearly adept at casting them but they won’t protect you from an Unforgivable Curse.”

This time it was Hermione who cast first, with a swift Bat-Bogey Hex. Harry side-stepped that and fired off a Knockback Jinx. Hermione ducked under that and then aimed a Stunning Spell at him. Harry pressed himself to the ground as a hot jet of magic shot over the top of him, then raised his head slightly to assess the situation.

Hermione was watching the grass for Harry to re-emerge. Less than a foot high, the grass afforded the meanest cover when lying flat, but not enough for Harry to move without presenting himself as a target. The second he began to get up, Hermione would be able to hit him.

If she saw him, that is.

“Dissimulo,” he whispered, aiming his wand at himself.

The Disillusionment Charm made Harry invisible, but it unfortunately did nothing to disguise his wand. He slipped it unwillingly into his jeans pocket and stood up quietly. Hermione made no sign that she had noticed him. Harry gave an invisible smirk and began creeping around the perimeter of the field, eager to get away from where Hermione would be expecting him to appear.

A moment later Hermione aimed her wand directly at him. “Incarcerous!”

Thick ropes flew through the air to wrap themselves around Harry. In only a matter of seconds he was completely immobilised. He looked down with some difficulty and saw the ropes seemingly coiled around empty air. He looked back up to see Hermione walking towards him with a self-satisfied grin.
Severus walked forward and flicked his wand twice, Vanishing the ropes and cancelling the Disillusionment Charm. “Care to tell Harry how you know where he was, Hermione?”

“You feet trampled the grass,” she said.

Harry glanced down. “Bugger.”

“Something you should have foreseen, Harry,” Severus said reproachfully. “Good work, Hermione.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“Positions again. This time I’ll be sending hexes at both of you from the sidelines.”

Harry walked back to his side of the field, this time putting a bit more distance between himself and Severus. Hermione did the same on her side of the field.

“Begin!” Severus called again.

“Stupefy!” Harry cried, dodging left at the same time.

Hermione had also skipped sideways. Harry's spell passed harmlessly by her and allowed her to retaliate. “Flipendo!”

The Knockback Jinx hit Harry hard in the chest, winding him instantly. He stood there desperately trying to get his breath back, but before Hermione could press her advantage, Severus had hit both teenagers with Dancing Feet Spells. Harry's feet had carried him halfway across to Hermione before he managed to cancel the spell.

“Depulso,” he wheezed.

His Banishing Charm sent Hermione careening backwards to tumble head over heels with a squeal. Harry grinned and moved forward to finish her off, only for Hermione to stick her wand up and blindly send an Impediment Jinx at him. Everything instantly slowed down for Harry, who felt as if he were struggling through wet cement. Hermione popped back up and, after checking that Severus wasn't aiming for her, sent a Disarming Charm at Harry. His wand went flying out of his sluggish grip. By the time the Impediment Jinx had worn off and he was able to move properly again, Hermione had already retrieved his wand for him.

“You both need to keep a better eye on your surroundings. I was able to hex both of you without either of you seeing it coming,” said Severus.

This round, Hermione cast first. “Avis.” A cloud of twittering yellow birds erupted around her. With two flicks of her wand she sent half the birds towards Harry, half towards Severus, who hastily brought up a Shield Charm.

Harry threw his hands over his head to protect from the birds' pecking and fell into a crouch to avoid the Disarming Charm Hermione shot at him. He frowned up at the surprisingly vicious birds, which were doing their best to gouge all the skin off his arms, and then smiled. Hermione wasn't the only one who could conjure up animal allies.

“Serpensortia,” he whispered, twice. Two long, black snakes burst out of his wand to coil in the grass. “You go for the girl. You get the man,” Harry ordered them.

The snakes took off without a word, leaving Harry to deal with the birds. “Immobulus.” He had to cast three Freezing Charms to hit all of the birds, but he was finally able to stand up again. He had to
immediately duck once more as Hermione sent a Stunning Spell at him. He threw one back at her and followed it up with a Mad Hands Hex.

This time, Harry was prepared for the Tickling Charm that Severus sent his way. He ducked under that and continued forward, shooting a Stunning Spell at Severus – who simply Disapparated.

“Damn,” Harry muttered, spinning around to see where he'd Apparated to. He caught sight of Hermione jumping back and aiming her wand down at the ground and smiled. The snake must have caught up to her. “Stupefy!” Harry shouted, running over even while she keeled over. As soon as he got there he Vanished the snake and Revived her.

“Was that thing poisonous?” she demanded.

“Nah. There are only a few species of poisonous snakes, and that wasn't one of them. It's highly venomous, though,” said Harry.

“And you told it to bite me?” Hermione continued.

“Remind me later and I'll show you the mass amounts of anti-venom we have here. You would've been fine,” Harry assured her.

“That's enough for today,” Severus said from behind him.

Harry pulled Hermione to her feet and turned around. “Already?”

Severus dismantled the wards before replying. “Yes. I was testing you today. Now that I have a better idea of where you both are, I can tailor tomorrow's lesson to further your skills. You both did very well today.”

Harry and Hermione beamed at each other. “We did?” asked Harry.

Severus nodded. “The animals you conjured were not only an effective distraction; they were also a secondary means of offence. You also both improved on keeping track of what I was doing, which could mean the difference between life and death in a duel with more than one opponent. Neither of you held back, either, which was pleasing.”

“And who won?” asked Harry.

Severus hesitated. “Hermione.”

“I did?” Hermione asked.

“As I said, you were for the most part evenly matched, but you were a little quicker to think of different tactics,” Severus told her. “It gave you a slight advantage.”

“I'll beat you tomorrow, Granger,” Harry said, heading back to the house.

“We'll see about that,” Hermione replied.

“Ow!”

Harry and Hermione turned around to see Severus holding his shin.

“Oops,” said Harry.

Severus flicked his wand at a dark shadow in the grass and straightened up with a grimace. “Any
That night, Harry was lying in bed chatting to Ladon when Hermione returned from brushing her teeth. She put her toiletries bag back in her suitcase then crawled over Harry to the other side of the bed. Once she was under the covers, Harry turned off his lamp, leaving the room dark except for some faint moonlight.

“Comfy?” asked Harry.

Hermione adjusted her pillow. “Yes, thanks.”

“I know it’s not the same as having your own room like you would’ve at Grimmauld Place, but -”

Hermione rolled over to face him. “Harry, it’s fine. Really. I appreciate you letting me stay here.”

“Just what was Draco doing that was so annoying?” asked Harry.

“Pestering me about Viktor. You know how he can get sometimes. I just – I couldn’t handle it right now,” Hermione said.

“Fair enough,” Harry murmured, though he, too, was curious to know what had happened between Hermione and Viktor. “You didn’t want to go home?”

“Oh, I did,” said Hermione. “Then I went back to Grimmauld Place.”

“When did you get back from Bulgaria?”

“Day before yesterday.”

Harry frowned in confusion. “You went home for just one day? Didn’t your parents want you to stay for a bit longer?”

“Yes. Kind of.”

Harry didn’t know what to make of that. He tried to think of the last time Hermione had spoken about her family, but he couldn’t remember her ever speaking about them for very long. He didn’t even know their first names, he realised with a jolt.

“Hermione,” he said tentatively, “your parents... You get along with them, don't you?”

“Yes, of course,” Hermione said at once.

“You – you never talk about them very much,” Harry pressed.

There was a silence, broken only by Hermione shifting under the blanket. “I was never particularly close to them. Not like you and Sn – Severus, or Draco and Narcissa,” she said finally. “They love
me, of course, and I them, but... We don't have anything in common. Not really. They're very – very normal, I suppose. They're middle-class, Muggle dentists, and I'm a witch who's getting ready to fight a war.”

Harry bit his lip as he watched Hermione's face. A sliver of moonlight was illuminating it enough for him to see how pensive she was. “They don't dislike that you're a witch do they?”

“Oh, no. They're very proud of me, actually, and not just because of my school marks. They just don't understand, I suppose. It doesn't help that I haven't told them anything about the war,” Hermione said.

Harry's eyebrows shot up. “You haven't told them about Voldemort?”

“No.”

“What about what happened at the Ministry?”

“They don't know a thing.”

“They don't know anything? Not that you went to save Draco? That you organised a propaganda attack against the Ministry?”

“I didn't tell them he was kidnapped in the first place, and it would take far too long to explain about the politics of the Ministry,” said Hermione.

Harry stared at her. “But... You're a heroine, Hermione. Your parents should know that.”

“They'd just worry, Harry. Or try to stop me going back to Hogwarts to keep me safe. Trust me, it's better this way,” Hermione said firmly. “I've only told them about the less worrisome parts of my life: you and Draco, the rest of my friends, and school. As far as they're concerned, my life is entirely normal for a witch. They don't read the Daily Prophet so they'll never find out otherwise.”

Harry rolled onto his back to mull that over. He couldn't imagine not telling Severus important things like that – or Lily and James, if they were still alive. Well, he might not have told Lily about certain rule-breaking adventures, but he rather thought he would have written a lot of letters home to James, bragging about his illicit misdeeds at Hogwarts.

“Is this why you never talk about them much?” Harry eventually asked.

“What do you want me to say? That they're treating children younger and younger for tooth decay?”

“No – I – I just meant I don't know anything about them,” Harry said awkwardly. “I mean, you and Draco know Dad, and Mum and Dad's story is in sodding library books. And we've both met most of Draco's extended family, both the good and bad sides... I don't even – what are your parents' names?”

“Oscar and Catherine.”

“Huh.”

“Why are you so interested all of a sudden?” Hermione asked.

“Like I said, it occurred to me that I didn't know much about your family, that's all,” said Harry.

“Uh huh. This wasn't in any way an attempt to distract me from Viktor?” asked Hermione.
“What? No,” said Harry. After a moment he began to laugh. “If I wanted to do that, I'd hex you and set a venomous snake on you again.”

Hermione started laughing too, softly at first, but it wasn't long before both she and Harry were giggling helplessly.

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Over breakfast the next day, Severus told Harry that his morning lesson would be on Side-Along Apparition.

“I'll get you to practise with Ladon first, then me,” he said.

Harry nodded. “Ladon will be happy. He likes being Apparated for some reason.”

“I can't believe you can Apparate,” Hermione said jealously.

“As of a couple of days ago, yeah.”

“You will be able to sign up for lessons once we return to Hogwarts,” Severus told her. “While we're gone you make full use of my books if you wish.”

Hermione eyed the bookshelves greedily. “Thank you.”

“Very well. And remember, if you see anyone you don't recognise, leave immediately. Either take the Floo to Grimmauld Place or use one of the Portkeys,” said Severus.

Hermione nodded, wide-eyed.

Apparating took up the rest of Harry's morning. Severus would point to a spot a few kilometres away from where they stood, and then both he and Harry would Apparate there separately. Harry had Ladon wound around his shoulders, and the snake thoroughly enjoyed being Apparated around half of Wales.

When Harry was deemed competent enough at Side-Along Apparating Ladon, he dropped him off at home, and then began to Side-Along Apparate Severus. This took a little more concentration than Apparating alone, or with just a light snake weighing him down, but he managed to do so without Splinching either of them. The lesson ended when Harry Apparated them both back home all the way from Holyhead.

After lunch, Severus had Harry and Hermione duel each other again. This time, they were forbidden from using their right hands. Since Harry had had his dominant arm injured in the battle at the Ministry, Severus wanted him to improve his aim with his left hand. What followed was a duel in which half the spells went wide of their targets. Harry had to admit that his left hand could definitely due with some improvement.

The next few days followed this same pattern. Harry would have a lesson in the morning – after Apparition, he had more advanced Occlumency, with Severus' Legilimency attacks getting more and more forceful – while Hermione made steady progress working her way through Severus' book collection.

Harry and Hermione spent their afternoons duelling each other, with Harry now expected to do so whilst Occluding. This took some getting used to, and Hermione beat him nine times out of ten. He didn't dare complain, though. After Voldemort had so easily possessed him at the Ministry, Harry
knew he had to grow accustomed to fighting while Occluding. In any case, it allowed him an opportunity to practise his first aid while he healed the minor injuries Hermione's hexes and jinxes left him with. It may have been a painful way to learn, but it was certainly effective.

After they had each had a post-duel shower, Harry and Hermione had the rest of their afternoons to themselves. They mostly just talked, sitting outside under the summer sun, sometimes while playing chess or cards. Harry was careful not to ask Hermione anything about Viktor, or even Bulgaria. She did occasionally mention somewhere she had visited during her time there, but invariably changed the subject soon afterwards, and never once said Viktor's name.

Hermione was still clearly upset about the breakup, though she never said so. She didn't have to. There were moments when Hermione would get uncharacteristically quiet, and Harry could tell that she was thinking about Viktor. It was worse at night, when they had gone to bed. Harry knew that she was trying to be quiet, but given that they were sharing a bed, Hermione couldn't completely muffle her sniffling. He honestly didn't know what to do. She obviously didn't want to be pressured into talking about Viktor, given the way she'd fled Grimmauld Place, but at the same time, Harry felt awful not doing anything when his best friend was crying.

Eventually, Harry ended up talking to Severus about it one morning. Harry had woken up early, and gone downstairs for coffee. He was sitting at the kitchen table, mulling over what to do, when Severus walked down the stairs.

“Why are you up so early?” he asked, heading for the kettle.

“Couldn't sleep,” Harry said.

Severus made himself a cup of coffee and joined Harry at the table. “Are you having nightmares again? You are still Occluding before sleep, aren't you?”

“It's got nothing to do with Voldemort,” Harry said.

“Are you sure?” asked Severus.

“Unless Voldemort's latest plan is to get to me by messing up my friends' love lives, yeah, I'm pretty sure,” said Harry.

“Am I to assume this is about Hermione?” asked Severus.

Harry automatically looked out through the lounge to the stairs. There was no sign of Hermione, but he cast a Muffling Charm anyway, before telling Severus the whole story.

“You are in a difficult position,” Severus said, once Harry was finished. “I think your only option is to wait for her to talk to you about it.”

“Yeah?” Harry asked miserably.

“If she wanted to come here to escape Draco bothering her, she will hardly thank you if you begin to do the same,” Severus pointed out.

“I know...” Harry agreed.

“Continue to keep her occupied in order to distract her in the meantime,” Severus advised him. “I'm sure it won't be long until she's ready to talk to you.”

“Since when are you so optimistic?” asked Harry.
Severus snorted. “I'm not. I've simply spent enough time with you to know that you, Hermione and Draco seem to operate under the assumption that the world will end if you don't tell each other every last minute detail of your lives.”

“We do not,” Harry objected.

“Do so. She'll talk to you within the week, you'll see,” Severus said confidently.
On Monday Harry and Hermione walked downstairs to find Severus in the middle of preparing a full English breakfast. Harry took a deep, appreciative sniff of the smell of frying bacon.

“That smells good,” he said, his stomach grumbling.

“We're celebrating,” Severus said, gesturing behind himself with a spatula at a copy of the *Daily Prophet* sitting on the kitchen table.

**NARCISSA BLACK PARDONED BY MINISTRY**

Harry shared a delighted smile with Hermione, and they sat down to read the article together.

_In a surprise move this morning, new Minister for Magic Rufus Scrimgeour has issued a formal pardon to Narcissa Black for killing her ex-husband, Lucius Malfoy. A prepared statement was given to the Daily Prophet by the Minister's office:_

“After a thorough investigation, the Minister has concluded that Ms Black acted entirely in self-defence on the night of 20th June. The Ministry will never condone the use of any Unforgivable Curse, and would like to remind the public that the use of any of them is grounds for imprisonment in Azkaban. On this one, highly unusual occasion, however, it is clear that, if Ms Black had not acted as she did, Mr Malfoy would have killed her and likely others at the scene, including four defenceless children. Ms Black is therefore fully pardoned for her actions.”

_There has already been speculation over the Minister's shocking decision. Malfoy was, of course, one of the most notorious Death Eaters (see page 7 for an account of his arrest and imprisonment for dissemination of a cursed object with intent to murder; see page 9 for a detailed analysis of his involvement in the mass breakout from Azkaban on 13th January, and his movements hereafter). It has been suggested that the Ministry is in fact grateful to Black for removing one of You-Know-Who's most powerful supporters._

_Another source suggests otherwise. After the brutal murder of the Head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, Amelia Bones, on 28th June, the Ministry has been struggling to replace her. Our source tells us that the Minister simply couldn’t spare the time or expense to chase down Black, when You-Know-Who is the bigger threat._

_Ms Black has been in hiding (suspected to be somewhere in London – see page 15 for a list of likely hideouts!) since she fled the scene at the Ministry on 20th June. She has yet to reappear in public, and did not return our owls when asked to comment._

“He actually went through with it,” Harry said, looking up.

“And in so public a manner that he will not be able to retract the pardon without significant damage to his image. Scrimgeour won't risk that, not after the public hounded Fudge from office,” Severus said.

“God, the *Prophet's* fickle,” said Hermione. “A month ago they were printing whatever the Ministry told them to. Now they're all but accusing them of using Narcissa as an unpaid assassin.”

“Hey, at least it's working in our favour for once,” said Harry.
“Speaking of which, you had best write to Pansy today,” said Severus.

Harry nodded, while Hermione eyed Severus curiously. “You're alright with Harry publicly declaring that the rumours about him are true?”

“Yes, I am. The rumours aren't going to go away, no matter we do or say, and Harry isn't going to get into detail about the prophecy. He knows what he's doing,” said Severus.

“I know, I just meant – well – I know that nothing you do can possibly make you a bigger target for Voldemort, but aren't you worried that this might increase the Ministry's interest in you?” Hermione asked.

“They're already pretty interested. It's why Scrimgeour sent Umbridge to Azkaban,” Harry pointed out.

Hermione tutted. “If anyone deserves Azkaban, its her, but to do so without a trial...”

“The Ministry is desperate,” Severus announced, placing heaped plates in front of Harry and Hermione. “You are aware of some of the tyrannical measures they brought in during the first war.”

“You think they'll bring them all back again? Like giving Aurors the right to kill suspects?” asked Hermione.

“Kingsley and Tonks wouldn't do that,” Harry said at once. “Not if they could help it.”

“They're not the only Aurors, Harry. The others may very well be happier to use deadly force,” said Severus. He put a plate down for himself and sat down. “Gemma will be doing all she can to find out the Ministry's plans, but with Bones' death her position is currently uncertain.”

“They wouldn't get rid of Gemma,” said Harry.

“They'd be idiotic to do so,” Severus said. “Unfortunately, the Ministry has a long history of making idiotic decisions.”

After spending breakfast abusing the Ministry with Hermione and Severus, Harry headed upstairs to write to Pansy.

_Dear Pansy,_

_Hope you're well. I assume you've seen today's Prophet. Reckon your mum would want an exclusive statement about that? Not a long interview like last time, but a paragraph or two? Let me know as soon as you can – Dad's suggested we meet you in front of Manchester Cathedral at six tonight. We'll meet you there unless we hear otherwise._

_Love,_

_Harry_

_PS. Hermione says hello._

Harry picked up his wand and aimed it at the letter. “Assicco,” he muttered. He rolled the parchment up and shifted around in his chair. “I've got a trip for you, Hedwig. Ever been to Lancashire?”

Hedwig gave an interested chirp and stretched her wings. Harry attached the letter to her leg and stroked her fondly, then carried her over to the window. “Have a good flight,” he said.

Hedwig butted her head affectionately on his shoulder and took off, quickly soaring out of sight in the clear blue sky.
Harry's Occlumency lesson that morning was interrupted by the arrival of Narcissa, Draco and Sirius. Narcissa wanted to thank Harry before going shopping with Draco. Together with Kingsley, Narcissa and Draco were going to France for a few days, to celebrate Narcissa's freedom; naturally, this trip necessitated a new wardrobe.

"I'm sorry we can't stay longer, but I'm going out with Kingsley tonight so I really don't have much time to shop," Narcissa said, as she released Harry from a hug.

"Apparently seven hours is barely enough shopping time," Sirius said with a grin.

"It isn't," Narcissa and Draco said together.

They left a few minutes later, leaving Sirius behind. "I don't have to leave straight away," he told Harry.

"Great. We could go for a walk if you want to. I was in the middle of an Occlumency lesson..."

Harry looked at Severus hopefully.

"Go. Please," he said.

Hermione declined to join them, so it was just Harry and Sirius who set off for a walk on the moor.

"I need to remember that," Harry said, shutting the gate behind him. "Any time I want to get out of here, I can just invite you over and Dad will all but push me out the door."

Sirius looked at him sharply. "Doesn't he allow you to leave when you want to?"

"I didn't mean it like that," Harry said quickly. "He's just protective. It's understandable, since we know Voldemort wants me dead. It's just nice to get out without the usual lecture beforehand." Harry didn't mention that after spending so long with the Dursleys, part of him would always welcome Severus' protectiveness, since it showed he cared about Harry.

"Don't you dare tell him that I agree with him, but I understand where he's coming from," Sirius admitted. "I guess I'm just a bit – I don't know – touchy about that sort of thing at the moment. Narcissa's been confined at Grimmauld Place for weeks and she was starting to go a bit mental. She was dragging the rest of us with her, too."

Harry didn't know whether to laugh or not. "What was she doing?" he asked instead.

"Decorating, mostly. And spending far too much time with Dobby. I don't know how many of her old clothes she's given him by now, but he dresses better than I do. Well, more expensively, anyway. I like to think I'm a little better at coordinating my clothes than he is," Sirius said. He gave his loud, bark-like laugh, with Harry joining in, though Sirius stopped quickly. "Still, I can't say I blame her. I'd lose the plot if I was trapped in that house for too long."

"At least the house is looking better now, right?" asked Harry. "It's not like she was just wasting her time."

"She re-wallpapered the dining room twice," Sirius said flatly.

"So she has high standards," said Harry.

"We don't even go in there. We usually just eat in the kitchen," Sirius told him.

"Oh," said Harry. "Er, how's Remus? When I came over the other day Narcissa said he wasn't all
“He’s better now – at least until the next full moon. It’s a lot rougher on him to transform into a werewolf as opposed to a regular wolf. It doesn’t help that instead of lying around at home for the duration, he’s out with a pack of other werewolves hunting and fighting,” Sirius said heavily.

“Fighting? They don’t hurt him, do they?” Harry asked.

“Nothing he can’t handle. It just all accumulates, which means he takes longer to recuperate after each moon,” Sirius said.

“How much longer does he have to keep that up?” asked Harry.

“Not sure. It depends on how much information he can get doing it,” said Sirius. “Don’t worry about him, Harry. Like I said, he can handle the mission. It’s just rough seeing him so run down afterwards.”

Harry nodded. “And how’s Kingsley?”

“He’s fine. Still working for the Muggle Prime Minister,” Sirius said. “What’s with all the questions? Surely Draco caught you up last time you saw him?”

“Er, not really,” Harry said.

Sirius smirked. “Too busy doing other things to talk, hey?”

Harry turned bright red. “I – we – no, er...”

His stuttering was drowned out by Sirius’ laughter. Next thing he knew, Sirius had flung an arm around Harry’s shoulders and used his other hand to ruffle Harry’s hair, making it even messier than usual.

“You and Draco never should have let Theo tell me about that,” Sirius said, still chuckling.

“Draco's the one who should have shut him up. I wasn't even there,” Harry grumbled.

Sirius dropped his hands. “Why don’t you tell me what you've been doing since I last saw you? Apart from my nephew, that is.”

Harry had opened his mouth to answer Sirius’ question, only to snap it shut again in embarrassment. “Are you quite done?” he ended up asking.

“I'll stop. I swear,” said Sirius.

“Thank you,” Harry said. “Er, I’ve been training, actually. Dad’s taught me how to Apparate, and with Hermione staying here, we’ve been having duelling lessons every afternoon.”

“Dueling lessons, eh?” asked Sirius.

“Yeah. They’re a lot of fun, if painful. Hermione's bloody vicious,” Harry said.

“Care to show me what you've learned?” Sirius asked.

“Sure,” Harry said with a grin.

He quickly set up the usual wards, then sent a Patronus off to Severus, telling him what he was up to,
before he and Sirius took up their positions. Harry was surprised when Sirius bowed to him – he and Hermione hadn't bothered with the formalities in their own duels – but he quickly reciprocated, then they began duelling.

It took Harry less than a minute to realise that Sirius was going easy on him. He was mostly defending himself from Harry's spells, and the attacks he did send towards Harry were either so slow or so poorly aimed that Harry had no trouble dodging them.

“You're not even trying!” Harry called out. He lowered his wand and walked forward. “There's no point if you're not going to try.”

“I am,” Sirius insisted.

“Sirius, I've seen you fight. I know how good you are,” said Harry.

Sirius sighed at that. “I just can't help thinking about what your parents would say if they saw me hurt you.”

“Dad's been watching Hermione curse me all week. I doubt he'd even blink at this stage,” said Harry. “As for Mum and Dad, from what I've heard about them, I reckon they'd laugh to see you knock me on my arse.”

Sirius grinned. “Not as much as they would if you knocked me on mine. Alright. Let's go again.”

This time around, Sirius didn't hold back. He gave as good as he got, forcing Harry to duck and dodge. By the time they called it quits, both of them were covered in dirt and sweat, and more than a few cuts and bruises. They laughingly rehashed their fight while they walked back to the house, with Harry casting healing charms on the cuts and scrapes he could see. Once home, Harry led Sirius up to the bathroom, to the well-used jar of bruise paste sitting on the sink. He held it out to Sirius, then scooped a dollop out for himself.

“I'd better make some more tomorrow,” Harry said, frowning at the almost empty jar.

“You made this? Is it safe for human use?” Sirius teased.

“Berk,” Harry said, swatting Sirius' shoulder. “It hasn't hurt Hermione or me yet, and we've used a hell of a lot of it.”

“I suppose I'll risk it then,” Sirius said. He looked up at the windowsill and jerked his chin at the pebble sitting there. “Is that one of those Portkeys Snape made?”

“Yeah. The one to your place, actually,” Harry said.

“Huh,” Sirius said thoughtfully. “Don't tell him I said this, either, but that's a pretty good contingency plan.”

Harry didn't reply, just screwed the jar shut and put it back down on the sink, privately wondering how long it would take Sirius and Severus to realise how much they had in common.

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That evening, Harry and Hermione followed Severus down the garden path. All three of them were wearing Muggle clothes, as they would be meeting Pansy and Polly in a Muggle area. Hedwig hadn't returned with an answer – even she couldn't make it from Cerrigydrudion to Lancashire and
back within a day – but Severus was confident that the lure of an exclusive with Harry would make Polly agree to meet them.

“Why are we meeting them in a Muggle area?” asked Hermione.

“It’s safer for us,” Severus replied. “Death Eaters are less likely to know the area, and they would be incredibly easy for us to spot if they did happen to be in the vicinity.”

“They don’t know how to dress like Muggles?” Harry guessed.

“Not at all. During the last war, I was invariably sent on any missions that involved covertly entering a Muggle area, since I was the only Death Eater who had any idea of appropriate Muggle clothing. They all saw it as a matter of pure-blood pride to not understand how Muggle clothing works, though Regulus wasn’t that bad,” said Severus.

“Regulus knew how to dress as a Muggle?” Harry asked.

“He may have dressed a little old-fashioned, but it wasn’t glaringly obvious that he was a wizard,” said Severus.

“Did you get along with him?” Harry asked curiously. Severus had mentioned Regulus with far less venom in his voice than when he spoke about Sirius.

“Yes, actually. He was a year below me at Hogwarts and I hated him at first, because I was by then intimately acquainted with his unpleasant brother, but I soon learnt that they had little in common with each other. He joined the Death Eaters not long after I did, and we became friends,” said Severus, opening the garden gate.

Hermione was listening, wide-eyed, unused to hearing Severus casually talking about his past. Harry was used to it, however, so pressed on.

“Was that just because he was around your age?” he asked.

Severus shook his head. “So was Barty Crouch, and I never got on with him. No, Regulus was – well, I know this will sound odd, but he was the closest thing to a nice Death Eater.”

“A nice Death Eater,” Hermione echoed faintly.

“Comparatively,” Severus said.

“Sirius and Narcissa didn’t like him, but Andromeda spoke a bit more nicely about him,” said Harry. “She said he was always nice to Kreacher.”

Severus held out both arms in order to Apparate. As soon as Harry and Hermione took hold of him, he Disapparated them into an alleyway. They let go, then Severus led them out onto a footpath running along some apartment blocks. On the other side of the road was a slow-moving river. A few hundred metres down the road, the spire of the cathedral rose into the sky. Harry put his hands into his pockets and gripped his wand.

“Andromeda is far more forgiving than her sisters or cousin will ever be,” said Severus. “Regulus was just as bigoted as any other Death Eater.”

“Why did you like him then?” Harry asked.

Severus shrugged. “It was rare to find another Death Eater who was both intelligent and sane. I had
been friends with some of the others while still at school – Rosier, Mulciber and Avery – but I soon
realised how much pleasure they took in the more brutal tasks the Dark Lord set. Not Regulus,
though. He also never gave me the impression that I was one false move away from being killed by
him.”

“Do you know what happened to him? Narcissa and Andromeda think Voldemort killed him,” said
Harry.

“I don't know, but I don’t think the Dark Lord killed him,” said Severus.

They fell silent as they passed an elderly Muggle couple walking slowly in front of them. Once they
were out of earshot, Hermione frowned up at Severus.

“Why don't you think Voldemort killed him? Do you have any evidence to make you think
otherwise?” she asked.

“It's the complete lack of evidence that makes me think he wasn't murdered,” said Severus. “When
the Dark Lord punished one of us, he did so publicly, in order to make an example to the rest of us.
His usual means was torture – the Cruciatuus Curse being the most common, whether cast by him or
another Death Eater.”

“He had you torture each other?” Hermione asked, sounding revolted.

Severus looked at her calmly. “It was an effective way for him to gauge our loyalty to him over one
another. And, of course, it could also be a form of punishment for whoever was doing the torturing,
to make them inflict that pain on a colleague. Didn't always work, of course. Bellatrix especially took
pleasure in torturing anyone she was asked to.”

Hermione didn’t seem to know whether she wanted to ask more questions or not. Even Harry was
feeling a little disturbed at the turn the conversation had taken, so he diverted it back to the original
topic.

“What do you think happened to him, then?” he asked.

Severus pursed his lips. “I hate to say this, but... I believe your godfather's theory is partly right. I
think Regulus wanted to leave the Death Eaters. I do not, however, think Voldemort had him killed.
I think he did it himself.”

“You think he committed suicide?” asked Hermione.

“Which would you prefer, a quick and painless suicide, or a long, torturous death at the hands of the
Dark Lord?” asked Severus.

“The first, of course,” said Hermione. “But there's no proof he's dead, is there? Couldn't he be in
hiding somewhere? Overseas, perhaps?”

“It's possible,” Severus said grudgingly, “but highly unlikely.”

They crossed a road to reach a small grassy area next to the cathedral. There was a low stone wall
marking the edge of the church land. When Severus came to a stop, both Harry and Hermione leaned
against the wall, looking around themselves. It was a good vantage point, from which they could see
anyone approaching the cathedral well before they arrived there.

For a few minutes, the only other people Harry saw were the usual Muggles one would expect at
such a place: tourists taking photos of the cathedral; office workers heading home from work in their
suits; and one or two people out walking their dogs.

“There they are,” Hermione said, then called out, “Pansy! Over here!”

He turned around to see Pansy and Polly hurrying towards them. They had both managed to dress in perfectly normal Muggle clothing – Pansy in a pink dress and cardigan, and Polly in a business suit, complete with a briefcase.

“Hi,” Pansy said, grinning at Hermione and Harry. She turned to Severus. “Sir, this is my mum, Polly Parkinson. Mum, this is Professor Snape.”

Polly held out her hand to Severus. “Call me Polly. Pansy's told me so much about you.”

Severus shook her hand. “Severus.”

Polly nodded. “And it's good to see you both again,” she said to Harry and Hermione.

“You should have seen her face when I showed her your note this morning,” Pansy told Harry.

“I admit that I was excited to learn that you wanted to give me another exclusive, though I'm not quite sure as to why,” said Polly.

“Let's find somewhere to talk, shall we?” Severus cut in.

It didn't take long for them to find a café that was still open, across the road from Harvey Nicholls. They sat down at an outside table and ordered. It was a bit busier here than outside the cathedral, and after the waitress had returned with everyone's coffees, Severus cast a Muffling Charm over their table. Polly pulled out a quill, ink pot and piece of parchment – thereby ruining her appearance as a perfectly normal Muggle – and leaned forward.

“So, Harry. How come you've decided to talk to me again after all this time?” she asked.

“Er, I'd rather not say why, exactly,” Harry said.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Pansy elbow Hermione. “Spill, Granger,” she whispered.

“Right...” Polly said slowly, eyeing Harry shrewdly. “If you don't want to tell me the real reason, that's fine. Any interview with the Chosen One will boost my sales.”

“I can't tell you, Parkinson,” Hermione whispered to Pansy.

“This isn't a full interview,” Harry said.

“But you're not denying that you're the Chosen One,” Polly said quickly.

Harry couldn't help sharing a brief glance with Severus. “No, I'm not. I mean, I am. The Chosen One.”

Pansy stopped badgering Hermione to gawk at Harry.

“No need to be nervous, Harry, we're all friends here,” Polly said.

Harry ran a hand through his hair, trying to ignore the intent stares he was receiving from Severus, Hermione and Pansy. “Right, yeah. I'm the Chosen One. Not denying that.”

Polly's eyes gleamed. “Alright... Now, this interview was prompted by Narcissa being pardoned by
the Ministry... Do you think she was right to use the Killing Curse, then?”

“This is not to be a full interview, Polly,” Severus said.

Polly gave a grin eerily similar to her daughter's. “No harm in trying. Alright then, Harry. Let's hear your statement.”

Harry couldn't help smiling back at her. “Okay... Here goes... I fully support the Ministry in its decision to pardon Narcissa Black. Lately, the Ministry has made so many mistakes – the biggest being their denial of Voldemort's return over a year ago – that many of us thought the Ministry had lost the plot altogether. Pardoning Narcissa for defending herself and her son is an excellent step in the right direction. Hopefully, under Scrimgeour, the Ministry continues to act sensibly, and can restore the public's faith in them. I'm sure we all look forward to having a Ministry that will protect us without infringing on our rights like they have in the past. A Ministry that we can trust. I think it's about time.”

Polly had been writing furiously as she took down his every word. She had flinched so violently that she had torn the parchment when he mentioned Voldemort by name, but recovered quickly. She finished with a flourish and beamed at Harry. “Anything else you'd like to add?” she asked.

“Er, not really...” Harry looked at Severus, wondering if he'd forgotten any of the statement that they'd worked on earlier with Hermione.

“That was all,” Severus said.

Polly nodded and began packing up her things. “In that case, while I've got you, I'd like to discuss Pansy's school subjects this year.”

“Mum!” Pansy hissed.

Polly waved a hand. “This won't take long, honey. Talk to your friends.”

Pansy sighed and did so, her cheeks now as pink as her cardigan. It didn't take her long until she was repeating a story about the Weird Sisters' drummer that was due to be published in the next issue of *Witch Weekly*. All three teenagers were giggling by the time Polly and Severus finished their conversation.

“Well, if you ever want to do another interview, you know how to reach me,” Polly said to Harry.

“Er, yeah, sure,” said Harry.

Polly stood up. “Pansy and I must dash. Thanks for today – I'll send you a free copy of the next issue of *Witch Weekly*, Harry. Make sure you don't go talking to any other journalists now, you hear?”

“I'll try to resist the urge,” Harry drawled.

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A few days later Severus called an early end to the afternoon's duel.

“Minerva will be here soon, and I'd prefer not to have her Apparate into the middle of a fight,” he said.

“Isn't it your turn to go to her house?” asked Harry.
McGonagall had visited Severus and Harry earlier that summer, and Harry had just assumed that Severus would be going to her house on the next visit.

“And leave you two here alone? No, she’s coming here again, which is for the best,” said Severus. “Her house has far too much tartan in it for my liking.”

“You left us here when you went to the Order meeting two days ago,” Harry pointed out.

“That meeting took twenty minutes. Minerva will be here for far longer than that,” said Severus. He considered Harry. “If you would prefer not to be here, the two of you may see if you would be welcome at Grimmauld Place. Narcissa and Kingsley are back from France today, aren’t they?”

“Tomorrow,” said Harry, “and Theo’s at Blaise’s while Sirius and Remus are out on Order business. Unless their missions ended early, it’d just be the house-elves.”

“You don’t want to listen to Dobby rhapsodising about whatever clothing Narcissa has given him lately?” asked Severus.

“Er, no, not really. Besides, I wouldn’t want to make Hermione miss out on seeing you and McGonagall get drunk together,” Harry shot back.

“I thought you were joking about that,” Hermione said.

“He’s exaggerating,” Severus told her.

“Am not,” said Harry. “Just wait, Hermione. McGonagall will bring half a bottle shop with her, and then tomorrow morning Dad will stagger downstairs to get a hangover cure.”

Hermione had to stifle a giggle at that.

Severus raised an eyebrow at Harry. “And here I was thinking about allowing you and Hermione to partake of some wine tonight. If I’d known that you object this strongly to alcohol I wouldn’t have dreamed of offering you any.”

Harry gave what he hoped was an innocent-looking smile. “Nope, no objections here.”

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That night marked the first time that Harry had ever won a game of Scrabble against Severus and McGonagall. The fact that they had been playing in teams, and Harry had paired with Hermione, was entirely coincidental.

“I can finally hold my head up around here,” Harry said happily.

“I believe you’ll find that your victory is mostly due to Miss Granger,” said McGonagall in amusement.

“It’s entirely due to Hermione,” Severus corrected.

Harry shook his head. “I was the one putting the tiles down. It still counts.”

“In that case, you won’t mind another game. Without teams,” said Hermione.

“I think I’ve had enough Scrabble for tonight,” Harry said quickly. “Anyone want some tea?”
Only Hermione accepted his offer; the adults preferred to stick to their wine. Harry got up – feeling slightly tipsy, if he was being honest – to sort out the tea, while the others began to set up for another game of Scrabble. By the time he served the tea and sat back down with his sketchbook, the other three were already in the midst of a fierce battle.

For the next couple of hours, Harry drew while the other three continued to play Scrabble. He didn't feel left out. None of the Scrabble players had any difficulty keeping up a conversation while playing. Harry and McGonagall got into a good-natured debate over Quidditch, while Hermione and Severus had a quieter discussion beside them. Harry discovered the hard way that one should never insult the Montrose Magpies within McGonagall's presence.

“Montrose is the best team in the league right now, there's no two ways about it,” McGonagall said after half an hour of arguing statistics with Harry.

“Okay, maybe they're currently the best Scottish team,” Harry eventually conceded, “but I still reckon Holyhead will beat them, and Tutshill and Appleby are still going strong from last season.”

“Appleby! Next you'll be saying that Chudley stands a chance,” cried McGonagall.

“I'll never say that, Professor,” Harry said, making them both laugh.

“Even I know how hopeless they are,” said Severus.

“Since when do you follow the national league?” McGonagall asked in surprise.

Severus shook his head. “I don't, but Harry listens to Quidditch programs on my wireless at Hogwarts. I've picked up a lot of it through osmosis.”

Eventually, Harry and Hermione bid the two adults goodnight and walked upstairs to get ready for bed. Harry let Hermione have the bathroom first, then took his turn. When he walked back into his room he found Hermione sitting on his bed with her knees pulled up to her chin, staring out of the window, with her hair obscuring her face.

“You okay?” Harry asked, shutting the door.

“Your dad won't leave you here alone for long, even with all the protective enchantments this place has,” Hermione said.

Harry frowned. “No, but it's not like he's not being overly paranoid. You know how much Voldemort would want to kill me and Dad.”

Hermione nodded. “And he's made sure I know all the safety measures here as well.”

“Yeah...” Harry said, sitting down next to her.

Hermione nodded. “And Narcissa is just as overprotective with Draco. And with Theo. And both of us, when we're at Grimmauld Place.”

Harry wondered what her point was. “Yeah. She always has been.”

Hermione made a small noise of assent. “And when we went to Diagon Alley, Sirius and Tonks didn't let us out of their sight.”

“Right...”

“So I made the right decision, didn't I? When I broke up with Viktor?” she asked.
“I think so,” he said.

Hermione turned her head to face him, and he saw she was crying. “Then why does it feel like it was wrong?”

Harry had to think about that. He couldn’t help thinking about what Hermione would say in his shoes. “Because part of you didn’t want to break up with him,” he eventually said.

“Which is entirely selfish of me,” Hermione said. A tear ran down her cheek and she brushed it away impatiently.

Harry put his arm around her shoulders. “No, it’s not. Not at all, Hermione. You still like him, of course you didn’t want to break up with him.”

“But I knew I had to.”

“Yeah.”

“It was so hard to do,” Hermione said in a small voice.

Harry gently squeezed her shoulders. “You don’t have to tell me about it if you don’t want to.”

“No, I do. And I’ll tell Draco later...” Hermione took a deep breath. “I’d intended to do it when I first got there. Well, on my first full day in Bulgaria. But he was so happy to see me, and I’d missed him so much that I couldn’t do it then. I waited. I felt awful about it. He introduced me to his parents – properly, no one was unconscious from Acromantula venom this time – and took me sightseeing. And we had sex.”

Harry leaned over and snagged a box of tissues from his bedside table and held it out to her. Hermione took a tissue and blew her nose.

“That’s what eventually made me do it. We were, you know, cuddling afterwards, and I – I couldn’t take it anymore. I just burst into tears and told him,” said Hermione.

Harry squeezed her shoulders again. “How’d he take it?”

Hermione started crying harder. “He was really nice and said he understood why I was doing it.”

“That’s good,” Harry said encouragingly.

Hermione shook her head. “It made it harder. Do you have any idea how hard it is to dump someone who’s trying to comfort you because you’re crying? It would’ve been easier if he got angry. He even said he wants to stay friends.”

“You don’t want to?”

“Oh, come on, that’s just a thing people say.”

“I don’t know, he’s still friends with Ulla, isn’t he?” Harry asked.

“Yes...”

“So he was probably being honest with you.”

“I don’t know if I can,” Hermione admitted. “If we keep writing to each other, then won’t that just extend the pain of not being with him? Wouldn’t I get over him quicker if I just cut all contact with
“I don't know, I've never broken up with anyone,” said Harry.

“I think it's like a bandaid. You need to rip it off quickly, instead of slowly peeling it off,” said Hermione.

“Well, I think that you need to decide whether or not you want to try to remain friends. And I think you should write to him and tell him that you haven't quite made up your mind yet. I'm sure he'll understand, but he deserves your honesty,” said Harry.

Hermione nodded and blew her nose again. She used a fresh tissue to wipe her eyes and then gave Harry a wobbly smile. “Thank you. For listening. And for the advice.”

Harry couldn't help giving a short laugh at that.

Hermione gave him a watery frown. “What's so funny?”

“I was just trying to think of what you'd be telling me. That's pretty much what I do whenever I'm trying to cheer someone up: I think, what would Hermione say? And then I can give good advice,” said Harry.

Hermione's eyes filled with tears again. “You do?”

“Yeah, I do. I did it the other day when Draco was upset.”

“What was wrong with him?”

“Er, it was about his dad. I'm sure he'll tell you about it when you get back to Grimmauld Place,” said Harry.

Hermione nodded. “You make a very good me, you know.”

Harry wrapped his other arm around her and hugged her properly. “That is the greatest compliment anyone has ever given me.”

Hermione laughed into his shoulder. They stayed that way for a couple of minutes, hugging on the bed, before Hermione pulled away and got under the covers on her own side of the bed. Harry turned off the light and lay down next to her.

Ladon lowered himself down from the headboard. “What's wrong with Hermione?”

Harry reached up to stroke Ladon. “She broke up with her boyfriend. She's been upset because she knows she's going to miss him, but I think she's going to be okay soon.”

Ladon rose back up and stretched out along the top of the headboard. “Tell her I'm glad she's feeling better.”

Harry did so, only to get no response; Hermione was already asleep. Harry grinned and snuggled into his pillow. It was the first night, since she had arrived at Fen House, that Hermione hadn't cried herself to sleep.

On Sunday evening an unfamiliar brown owl flew in through the lounge room window. It fluttered
down to the coffee table and hooted up at Harry. He detached the rolled up magazine from its leg and fed it an owl treat. While the little owl ate it messily, Harry unfurled the magazine. A handwritten note fluttered out from it.

Dear Harry,
Here’s your free copy, as promised. The issue goes on sale to the general public tomorrow morning – I’m expecting it to fly off the shelves! As you can see, I’ve added in some of what you told me last year, to flesh out the story a bit. Again, my offer of further interviews still stands.
Yours sincerely,
Polly Parkinson

Harry put the note down and looked at the magazine. Polly had used one of the photographs she had taken of him during his first interview with her six months ago. His photograph was sandwiched between one of Scrimgeour announcing that he was the new Minister for Magic; and what looked to be a recent one of Narcissa, looking tragic but resolute. Over the top of it blared a bright purple headline.

THE CHOSEN ONE SPEAKS OUT AT LAST!

Harry Potter Confirms The Rumours Are True

Harry flipped open the magazine and read the story. Polly had outdone herself. She had managed to use his meagre quotes to build a four page story which included his support for the Ministry’s pardoning of Narcissa; his distrust of and anger with the rest of their decisions; and the startling revelation that he was, in fact, the Chosen One.

He passed the magazine to Severus with a grin. “It's exactly what we needed.”

Severus read the story quickly, then handed the magazine over to Hermione. “Now we wait for Scrimgeour's reaction. He won't be pleased.”

“No, I don't reckon he will be,” Harry said happily.

Sure enough, at lunchtime the next day, a Ministry owl flew into the kitchen and dropped a red envelope on the table in front of Harry. The owl didn't stop, but flew right back out the window as if the hounds of hell were after it.

“How mature, he's sent you a Howler,” Severus drawled.

Harry eyed the red envelope, which was now smoking slightly. “That's the one that yells, right? It's not going to explode or anything?”

“It's perfectly safe,” Severus assured him. “Open it before it bursts into flames.”

Frowning at the contradiction between the two sentences, Harry did so. Immediately, Scrimgeour's furious voice thundered into the room.

“POTTER, WE HAD A DEAL! ONE THAT WOULD HELP THE WAR EFFORT! YOU HAD A DUTY TO WIZARDING BRITAIN THAT YOU THREW AWAY IN A FIT OF CHILDISH SPITE!” it began, before the volume lowered. “You will regret this, Potter. You and Snape both. I'll be watching you. One slip up from either of you, and I'll personally haul you before the
“Wizengamot!”

With that, the red envelope burst into flames. Harry and Hermione watched, gobsmacked, as it burnt into ash and fell to the tabletop.

“Bugger,” Harry said. “Do you think he's watching the house right now?”

“You'd have some warning if anyone approached the wards, wouldn't you?” Hermione asked.

Severus calmly Vanished the ash. “There's no one here. He may have possibly sent an Auror or two to watch the house in Cokeworth, under the guise of affording us protection, but I doubt it. I would hope that catching the Dark Lord would take precedence.”

“Yeah, but Dad, he's said he'll arrest us both if we do anything illegal, which we do all the time!” Harry pointed out.

“Yes, we do,” Severus said.

“And you're not worried?” Harry pressed.

Severus shook his head. “Once he calms down he'll realise the foolishness of sending a Howler to threaten a minor. I'm sure he'll figure out that if he does try anything, I'll go public about both the Howler and the deal he made with you. The public would eat up a political corruption scandal.”

Hermione nodded thoughtfully. “Especially coming so soon after the uproar of Umbridge's arrest. The Ministry can't afford it. Not when they have Voldemort to face.”

“Exactly,” said Severus. “We'll take this afternoon off from duelling. I expect you'll be receiving so much mail today that we wouldn't get anything constructive done. I'll be working in the garden if you need me.”

“You're not worried that someone might try to send me cursed mail? Or, I dunno, letters written in poison?” asked Harry.

Severus sent all the dishes floating to the sink to wash themselves and stood up. “No, I'm not. The wards will keep out anything harmful.”

Severus was right. It wasn't long before more owls began flying into the house, swooping around the kitchen and lounge room and dropping letters on every available surface. Some stayed, settling down on the backs of chairs and hooting for owl treats, while some flew back out the way they had come in.

The influx of owls terrified Ladon. After the third unfamiliar owl arrived, the poor snake crawled up Harry's body and slid inside his shirt, coiling himself around Harry's shoulders. Harry tried to convince him to hide out in Harry's bedroom, as the owls would be following Harry, who was staying downstairs, but Ladon refused to leave him, trusting Harry to protect him.

Harry and Hermione spent most of the afternoon in the lounge room, doing their holiday homework and opening the mail as it came in. The majority of it was positive, congratulating Harry for speaking out and for fighting Voldemort at the Ministry. Some people apologised for having doubted Harry in the first place, which he and Hermione agreed were the nicest letters.

Some of the praise, however, was excessive, if not downright creepy. One man had written in what appeared to be his own blood; Harry threw that letter straight into the fireplace and set it on fire. A few people had written poems, ranging from a haiku to a five-page epic; Harry and Hermione read
these out dramatically to each other, amidst plenty of laughter. There were no less than three proposals of marriage, and one offer to sign Harry to the Kenmare Kestrals as their starting Seeker. Harry was quite flattered by that last one, until Hermione pointed out the likelihood of it being legitimate was roughly equivalent to his chance of winning the lottery; besides which, he had to school to think about. One letter compared Harry to Merlin, Jesus, and Buffy the Vampire Slayer; clearly, some poor Muggle-born or half-blood had completely lost their mind.

In a far smaller quantity were the abusive letters. Uniformly from self-proclaimed pure-bloods, these were supportive of Voldemort, and threatened Harry with all manner of unpleasant fates should he succeed in defeating him. Harry put those aside to show Severus later. Try as he might, he couldn't help wondering if any of them came from people he knew personally.

Over a late dinner that evening, Severus surveyed the letters scattered around the lounge room. “I gather you two had an interesting afternoon,” he said.

“There are a lot of nutters in this country,” Harry said.

“Many of whom are barely literate,” Hermione chimed in.

“None of that is unexpected,” Severus said. “Anything interesting?”

“A few threats from Voldemort's supporters,” said Harry.

“You kept those, I hope,” Severus said sharply.

“Of course,” said Harry.

“Good. I'll read them later. They're probably nothing to take seriously, but I'd like to be sure,” Severus said. “Anything else?”

“Three women proposed to me,” said Harry.

“You're fifteen and gay,” said Severus.

“Didn't seem to bother two of them. One of them said she'd wait until I was of age,” said Harry.

“How considerate,” drawled Severus.

Just then there was a flash of light from the lounge room. They all looked up to see a phoenix sitting on the back of the couch. Ladon was so startled that he momentarily coiled painfully tight around Harry's right shoulder.

“Who the hell sends their mail by phoenix?” Harry asked, reaching up to soothe the snake.

Severus stood up so quickly his chair slid back to hit the bench behind him. “It's Fawkes. Dumbledore's in trouble. You two take the Floo to Grimmauld Place immediately and wait for me there.”

“What -”

“Now, Harry!” Severus snapped.

As if in agreement about the urgency of the situation, Fawkes gave a high trill and waved his tail.

Fear swept through Harry at Severus' tone. He stood up as well, pulling Hermione up with him. “What do we say when we get there?”
Severus took an impatient breath. “Tell them Dumbledore's in trouble and has asked for my aid. If I need back up I'll send a Patronus message. Now go!”

Harry hurried over to the fireplace and grabbed the bowl of Floo powder. He held it out to Hermione, who took a handful and disappeared into the green flames. Before he followed her, Harry chanced a quick look behind himself. The last thing he saw was Severus drawing his wand and taking hold of Fawkes' tail feathers. They both disappeared in a burst of bright flame, leaving Harry staring out at an empty room.
Harry stumbled through the Floo and straight into Hermione, who staggered but kept them both upright. Ladon grumbled in annoyance and resettled himself on Harry’s shoulders.

“Sorry,” Harry said, straightening up.

He looked around the kitchen, which was entirely devoid of both people and house-elves.

“Do you think anyone's home?” he asked.

No sooner had he spoken than Tilly Apparated into the room. “Good evening, sir and miss! Is you wanting Tilly to show you to the family?”

“Er, yeah, thanks,” said Harry.

Tilly nodded. “You is following Tilly, please.”

She led them out of the kitchen and up the stairs. Harry almost didn't recognise the hallway into which they emerged. Sparklingly new chandeliers were filled with candles, giving off a warm glow that lit up the entire hallway. The walls were lined in a bright, floral paper in blues and pinks that matched the plush blue rug running over the polished floorboards. All of the old family portraits had been removed. Apart from a large mirror in a gold frame by the front door, there were no other decorations.

“You and the other elves have been busy here, Tilly,” said Hermione, also looking around herself.

“Oh, yes, miss. Mistress has had many jobs for us to do here! Tilly is being decorating every day!” Tilly said.

Her evident happiness momentarily distracted Harry from his worry over Severus, and he couldn't help smiling back at Tilly. “It looks really good,” he said.

Tilly stopped and turned abruptly to beam at him. “Sir is very kind. We is no where near to being finished, but Tilly is enjoying decorating!” she said. Her smile turned shy. “If you is not minding me saying, Tilly is being the one who Mistress chose to help her decorate the lounge room.”

“Is that where you're taking us now?” asked Harry.

Tilly nodded and nervously smoothed down her pillowcase.

“I can't wait to see it, then,” said Hermione.

Tilly smiled again and led them up to the second floor. The only room on this floor that Harry had ever entered was the library. Tilly opened the door opposite the library and stepped inside, holding the door open.

“Mistress, Miss Hermione Granger and Mr Harry Potter are here,” she said.

Harry and Hermione walked into one of the cheeriest rooms Harry had ever seen. The walls were painted a buttery yellow, contrasting nicely with both the dark wooden floorboards and the white couches and chairs. The windows were open wide, their white curtains fluttering lazily in a balmy summer breeze. Crystal vases littered the room, each filled with a multitude of white flowers that filled the air with a subtle, sweet scent. Ladon stretched his head out of the collar of Harry's T-shirt to
The room was evidently where the residents of Grimmauld Place retired after dinner. To Harry’s right, Draco and Theo were lounging on the floor in front of Draco’s television, with Sirius and Kingsley sharing the couch behind them. All four of them were engrossed in whatever they were watching. To Harry’s left was a large coffee table, with more seating around it. Narcissa and Remus were having a quiet, intense conversation, though she immediately stood up when Harry and Hermione were announced.

“This is a lovely surprise – what’s wrong?” she asked. “Where’s Severus?”

Her question reminded Harry of why he was there, and his worry came flooding back.

“We don’t know,” said Harry.

Narcissa immediately hurried over and ushered both him and Hermione onto a couch.

“Tell us what happened, from the beginning,” Narcissa said. “Tilly, we’ll take tea now, please. Draco, turn that thing off and join us.”

In no time at all, everyone had gathered round to listen to Harry explain why he and Hermione had arrived unannounced. The minute he saw Draco, Ladon slithered out of Harry’s shirt and onto Draco’s lap.

When Harry had finished, Kingsley leaned forward. “I doubt Severus is in any danger, Harry,” he said.

“You sure?” asked Harry.

Kingsley nodded. “If Dumbledore was caught in an ambush and was able to call on an Order member for backup, he would have sent a Patronus, and to more than one person. Since no one else has contacted us here to inform us they’ve gone to help him, you can rest assured that Severus hasn’t gone off into a fight.”

Harry slumped in relief. “Good.”

Remus cleared his throat. “Dumbledore may be hurt, though.”

“What makes you say that?” asked Draco, looking up from patting Ladon.

“Fawkes,” said Remus. “There are only two reasons why Severus would be summoned by Fawkes and not a Patronus message. It could just be that Dumbledore needed Severus to arrive at Hogwarts immediately, and didn’t have the time to spare waiting for him to Apparate to the gates and walk up to the castle. The other option is that Dumbledore is hurt, possibly unconscious, and Fawkes went to retrieve the person he thought his master needed most.”

“So either way, it's probably not good for Dumbledore,” Theo summarised.

“I don’t think so, no,” Remus said grimly.

“We should do something, shouldn’t we?” Hermione asked.

“Such as?” asked Draco.

Harry shrugged. “Get in touch with Dad, see if he needs any help?”
The adults all looked at each other, considering this, then Kingsley shook his head. “He would've gotten in touch with us here at headquarters if he needed assistance.”

Harry nodded, thinking to himself that if Severus still hadn't arrived by morning, he'd go home and take the emergency Portkey to Hogwarts to find him.

Narcissa clapped her hands together and forced a smile. “I'm sure we'll find out what's happened soon enough, but in the meantime, all we can do is wait, I'm afraid. I'm sure the time will fly by, given the company.”

“Course it will,” Sirius said, also overly brightly. “Harry ought to be congratulated for getting one over Scrimgeour, for a start.”

“Thanks, but I think I got enough congratulations in the mail today,” Harry said with a strained laugh.

“Got some interesting mail, did you?” asked Draco.

Both he and Theo started sniggering together. Harry looked between them suspiciously.

“Yes, actually. How – you sent that letter! The one that said I was Jesus!” he said.

“We thought it was from some barmy Muggle-born,” said Hermione.

Sirius joined in the laughter at that. “Nah, just two barmy pure-bloods. You should've figured it out when Draco mentioned that vampire killer.”

“Slayer,” Draco corrected.

Sirius shrugged. “Same thing.”

Seeing Draco angrily open his mouth, Harry quickly jumped in before he could respond. “Tilly told us she helped you decorate this room.”

Narcissa smiled. “Yes, she's turned out to be rather good at decorating. She's got marvellous taste. The picture wall was a particularly nice touch.”

“Picture wall?” asked Harry.

In response, Narcissa gestured to the wall behind the couch facing the television. There was a collection of mismatched picture frames dotted all over the wall in a charmingly random manner. Harry got up for a closer look, with Hermione beside him.

The frames all held moving photographs of the Black family. The biggest was in the centre of the wall, showing everyone who currently lived at Grimmauld Place. Narcissa and Kingsley stood in the middle of the photo, with Draco and Theo next to Narcissa, and Sirius and Remus next to Kingsley. Standing in a neat row in front of them were all the family elves in their matching pillowcases, save for two. Dobby was in the centre, clad in a Falmouth Falcons robe, a purple feather boa, and his golden sandals, while Kreacher was standing off to the side, wearing his usual grimy rag. He glared at all the other subjects of the photograph when they began waving out at Harry and Hermione.

“Mother insisted we take a family portrait when Theo and I got home from Hogwarts. She thinks it will help make this place seem more homey,” Draco said, walking up behind Harry. “I think the effect is slightly marred by the fact that Sirius literally had to order Kreacher to stand there.”
“Surely he was happy to be included,” said Hermione.

“Oh, yes, he was thrilled. He made Winky burst into tears as soon as the photo was taken,” Draco said sourly.

“What's he got against her?” asked Hermione.

“He looks down on her because Crouch freed her,” said Draco. “He looks down on everyone here, actually, even the other elves because they belong to Mother. She and I are blood-traitors, you see, as are Sirius, Kingsley and Theo, but he doesn't hate us anywhere near as much as he does Dobby and Remus.”

“Yeah, I've heard him talking about them before,” Harry said.

“Kreacher's a hateful little shite. The only reason I haven't given him clothes is because he knows too much about the Order,” said Sirius, joining them. “But Narcissa wanted him in the photo, so he's in the photo. I'm not sure when she became the boss of this house and everyone in it -”

“When she moved in,” said Draco.

“...but it means making this place liveable is her job now, not mine, so I shouldn't complain,” said Sirius.

Harry turned his attention to the other photos. They ranged from recent ones, including some of Tonks and her parents, to older ones showing the inhabitants as children: Narcissa and Andromeda having a tea party; a baby whose hair was rapidly changing colour had to be Tonks; a nappy-clad Kingsley beating a rattle on the ground; Sirius at the age of four or five, sliding down the balustrade of the staircase at Grimmauld Place; a young Remus, clad in a bright yellow anorak, toddling around a garden with a basket of Easter eggs held in one hand.

Harry watched Draco as a toddler zooming around the grounds of Malfoy Manor on a tiny broomstick. It didn't even go a metre above the ground, but even so, a twenty-something Narcissa kept pace behind him, ready to catch him if he fell.

“You had your own broom when you were a baby,” Harry said enviously.

“So did you,” said Sirius.

Harry turned to look at him. “I did?”

“I gave you one for your first birthday. I've got a photo of it, if you want to see it,” Sirius offered.

It sounded like the perfect way to keep Harry's mind off worrying over Severus. “Sure.”

He followed Sirius out of the room, pretending not to notice Hermione silently holding out a hand to stop Draco from following them.

Harry had never been in Sirius' bedroom before. He looked around curiously when he entered. The walls had the same silvery wallpaper as Regulus' old room – Draco's room now, Harry corrected himself – had used to have, but that was where the similarities ended. Where Regulus had gone overboard with the Slytherin decorations, Sirius had faded Gryffindor banners stuck to the walls.

“Narcissa hasn't re-decorated this room yet, huh?” Harry asked.

Sirius shut the door and pulled a box off a shelf. “She will eventually. Remus and I just don't know
what we want yet, so she's working on the other rooms first. She did make me take down all my posters though. Said I was too old for posters of bikini models.”

Sirius sat down on his bed and began riffling through the box. While he did so, Harry walked over to look at the one photograph left on the walls. It showed Remus, James, Sirius and Pettigrew, standing arm in arm, laughing in front of the castle at Hogwarts. Harry's gaze lingered on James' smiling face. With his glasses and untidy hair, he really did look uncannily like Harry.

“We were about your age, in that,” Sirius said from behind him. “On our way to Hogsmeade one weekend.”

“With a whole lot of rule-breaking planned, I bet,” Harry said.

“Of course. We always made very good use of our Hogsmeade weekends,” said Sirius.

Harry finally tore his eyes away from his father's image and joined Sirius on the bed. He watched as Sirius kept sorting through the odds and ends he had in the box, before he pulled out a photograph.

“Here you go,” Sirius said.

Harry took the photo and gazed down at it. A toddler with a shock of black hair was darting around on a toy broomstick, similar to the one that Draco had had in his picture. Lily was laughing in the corner, while a pair of legs that must have belonged to James chased after Harry, who was giggling madly.

“James was so proud of the way you flew that thing,” Sirius said.

Harry smiled up at him. “Yeah?”

“Yeah. You were all in hiding at this point, but your parents wrote to me. James had such plans for your Quidditch career. He could never make up his mind what position he thought you'd play. One week it was Seeker, the next week he was sure you'd be a Chaser... Course, he thought you'd be playing for Gryffindor like he did,” said Sirius.

Harry looked back down at the photo. “You don't think he would've minded that I'm a Slytherin, do you?”

“No,” Sirius said at once. “He loved you, Harry. He and Lily adored you. They might've been a bit surprised, but they wouldn't have cared what house you ended up in. Not as long as you were happy.”

“You still miss him, don't you,” Harry said softly.

“I've missed them both every damn day since they died, and will do until the day I die,” said Sirius.

Harry swallowed the lump in his throat. “At least you got to know them.”

Sirius put his arm around Harry's shoulders and gave him a squeeze. “True, I did. And so I know that they both would have been bloody proud of who you've become. Don't you ever doubt that, not for a second.”

“I just – I wish I could remember them. The only memory I have of them is of them dying,” Harry said in a small voice.

Sirius' hand tightened on him, and it was a moment before he spoke. “I know, and that's not fair on
“Yeah, I know. Thanks,” said Harry.

“Here,” Sirius said. He drew his wand and tapped the photo, creating a copy, which he handed to Harry.

“Thanks,” Harry said again.

“No problem. We should probably be getting -”

Sirius was cut off by Severus' Patronus landing in the room. The silver doe walked gracefully over to Harry and spoke in Severus' voice. “Harry, I've got the situation under control. Dumbledore is hurt but stable. I'll be here for a while though, so you'll need to spend the night at Grimmauld Place. I'll come fetch you when I'm done here.”

With her message delivered, the doe faded away, leaving the room feeling cold and dark in her absence.

Sirius nudged Harry. “There, you see? Snape's fine, and it sounds like Dumbledore's going to be okay, too.”

Harry sighed in relief. “Yeah.”

Sirius stood up. “Come on, let's go join the others.”

********

Narcissa and Kingsley went to bed at midnight, as Kingsley had to be up by six, and a yawning Theo went up to his room not long after that. Remus made a half-hearted attempt to convince the remaining kids to go to bed, but Harry refused, wanting to be awake when Severus arrived.

“We'll move to the kitchen, then,” said Sirius.

“Why?” asked Hermione.

Sirius shrugged. “Closer to the coffee.”

“And the Floo,” Harry said, standing up.

“Tilly will be upset,” Draco commented as they walked down the stairs.

Tilly had been the house-elf to serve the family that night. Since she knew Harry was good at drawing, she had been anxious to get his feedback on her decorating. Every time she had popped in to serve drinks or nibbles, she had pointed out something else in the room to Harry, fishing for compliments.

“I've run out of things to say. There are only so many ways to say she's done a good job before I start repeating myself,” Harry protested.

“I don't think she'd mind that, to be honest,” Remus said.

It came as no surprise to Harry when, a minute after they had all sat down at the kitchen table, Tilly popped into the kitchen.
Her ears drooped as she looked around at everyone. “You is being in here now?” she asked.

“Harry wanted to be closer to the Floo, that's all,” Draco said quickly.

“Right,” Harry said, nodding. “Otherwise we'd still be in the lounge.”

Tilly's ears perked up again. “Can Tilly be fetching anything?”

“We'll be fine. You should go to bed, it's late,” Sirius said.

Tilly nodded. “Goodnight, sirs and miss!”

It wasn't that bad a wait, in the end. Sirius produced a pack of cards, and the five of them spent the rest of the night playing card games, drinking coffee and eating the sweets Draco unearthed in the pantry. Ladon had left Draco to return to Harry, and had fallen asleep coiled around his shoulders. Harry wouldn't say the time flew, exactly, but it certainly didn't drag as slowly as it could have.

It was almost four o'clock by the time the fireplace flared with green flames. A swirl of black heralded Severus' arrival, and then he was stepping out of the fireplace. He sank into the closest chair with an audible thump and slumped down wearily.

“Do you want some coffee?” Harry asked at once.

“Something stronger, if it's available,” Severus said.

“What's wrong?” Ladon asked blearily.

“I'll tell you later,” Harry said quickly.

“I'll get some Firewhisky,” said Remus, standing up.

“What happened?” Harry asked. He tried not to let his voice shake, but Severus' pallor was unnerving him.

Severus took a breath. “Albus is dying.”

There was a clunk: Remus had dropped the glass he was about to hand to Severus. He righted it on the table, put the bottle of Firewhisky next to it, and then went to get more glasses.

“What do you mean he's dying?” Sirius demanded.

Severus poured a healthy measure of Firewhisky into his glass as he spoke. “He's been cursed.”

“With what?” asked Hermione, the same moment Draco asked, “By whom?”

Remus put five more glasses on the table. “Why don't you start at the beginning.”

Severus knocked back his drink and refilled his glass. “Fawkes took me to Dumbledore's office, where I found him unconscious and slumped over his desk. I immediately checked him over. He was breathing shallowly and had a weak pulse, but it was his hand that scared me. It was blackening before my eyes.”

“What do you mean it was blackening?” asked Harry uneasily.

“The flesh was necrotising. There was a ring lying on the desk in front of him which was evidently the source of the curse. I took the Floo down to my office to fetch a bottle of Draught of Living
“Isn’t that counter-productive?” asked Remus, pouring drinks for everyone else.

Severus shook his head and took another sip. “The potion slowed Albus’ circulatory system, which in turn helped slow down the progression of the curse. I used the time to send you a Patronus, Harry, and then I inspected the ring and began casting counter-curses.”

“And? What was the curse?” asked Harry.

“Dark magic. Very powerful dark magic, designed to kill swiftly and painfully. Using a mixture of spells and potions, I was able to keep the curse trapped within the one hand, but it will eventually spread. All I’ve managed to do is prolong his suffering,” Severus said bitterly.

Hermione put her hands to her mouth. “Oh, no...”

“How long?” asked Remus.

“A year,” said Severus.

“Jesus,” said Sirius.

For once, neither he nor Severus seemed inclined to flare up at the other, for which Harry was grateful. Instead, Severus, Sirius and Remus seemed momentarily united in grim resignation. Harry shared worried looks with Draco and Hermione as all three adults drained their glasses in tandem. He wasn't used to seeing this defeatist attitude from anyone at that table.

“There has to be something you can do,” said Harry.

“I can brew him pain relievers. With a little research, I might be able to find something that can help him keep mobility in his hand, but that's about it,” said Severus.

“What about St Mungo's? They might have someone better qualified,” Hermione suggested.

Severus shook his head. “It's got nothing to do with medical knowledge, or he would've been better off being tended to by Poppy. No, what Albus needs is someone with extensive knowledge of cursed objects.”

“Has he still got the ring?” Remus asked, leaning forward.

“He has it, yes. It was lying on his desk when I got there. Next to the basilisk fang he stabbed it with,” said Severus.

“He stabbed it with a basilisk fang?” Harry asked.

Severus nodded. “When he regained consciousness, he told me he had been delirious and thought that destroying the ring would break the curse.”

“I can see the logic in that, I suppose, especially if he was delirious..” Remus said. “But why on earth did he have a basilisk fang handy?”

“I asked him the same thing. It was the one lodged in Riddle's diary – that was on the floor next to his desk – though why he had either of them there, he refused to say,” said Severus.

There was a puzzled silence while everyone thought about this. Harry felt a chill go over him at the mention of the diary.
“I'd still like to have a look at the ring,” Remus said eventually.

Severus snorted. “You can try. I asked to have a closer look at it after he regained consciousness but he refused. He didn't seem at all interested in finding a cure.”

“Could he have been in shock?” suggested Hermione.

Severus frowned in thought. “It's possible, but I don't believe so. He was a little woozy when he first woke up but he soon seemed to be functioning normally. I tried to convince him to get Poppy to examine him but he refused that too.”

“He's just ready to die, is that it? Without even trying to fight?” Harry demanded.

“He seems to have accepted that he will die,” Severus said slowly. “He may later change his mind, but for now, his attentions are focused on defeating the Dark Lord.”

“How's he supposed to help with that if he's dead?” asked Harry. He instantly regretted his words when a pained expression flitted across Severus' face.

“Harry!” Hermione scolded him.

“Sorry,” Harry said to Severus.

“No, it's a fair point,” said Severus, recovering his composure.

“I really hate it when he goes all secretive like this,” Sirius said.

“Won't be the last time. Speaking of which,” Severus said, looking around at everyone in turn, “this entire conversation is not to leave this house. Dumbledore didn't want me to mention it to you at all until I asked him to provide me with a believable story as to why I may have sent Harry and Hermione here and then disappeared with Fawkes.”

“May I tell Mother and Kingsley? And Theo?” asked Draco.

“Dumbledore agreed that I may tell Harry, Hermione, and the residents of this house,” said Severus.

“Including the house-elves?” asked Hermione.

Severus paused. “He didn't mention them. I suppose it best to just make them swear their silence on the matter.”

Draco nodded. “Mother will sort that out in the morning.”

“Make sure she is specific,” Severus said. “Dumbledore was very strict on the matter. The rest of the Order is not to learn what happened to his hand, nor that any of us know.”

“She'll sort it out, and Sirius can deal with Kreacher,” Draco said.

“I don't like keeping secrets from the rest of the Order,” Sirius grumbled.

“We have no choice, unless you want to disobey Albus,” said Severus.

Sensing that maybe Severus and Sirius' temporary truce might be about to break, Harry opened his mouth to intervene, only to release a huge yawn. Severus stood up straight away.

“We're leaving,” he said, then nodded stiffly at Remus. “Thank you for looking after Harry.”
“Any time,” Remus said.

Harry stood up too, but Hermione only half-rose from her seat. “Is it alright if I stay here again?”

“Of course,” Draco said at once. “Your room's ready for you whenever you want it, you know that.”

Hermione smiled at him. “I'll fetch my things from Harry's and be right back.”

Once home, it didn't take long for Harry to help Hermione gather up her things. He carried her suitcase downstairs for her, where they found Severus flicking through the pile of threatening letters Harry had received earlier that day. He looked up at their entrance.

“Thank you for having me, Severus,” Hermione said.

He inclined his head. “You're welcome.”

Hermione hugged Harry and took her suitcase off him. “I'll see you on your birthday, if not before.”

“Sounds good,” he said.

Hermione disappeared back through the Floo, leaving Harry and Severus alone.

“Well, the one good thing I can say about today is that none of these seem serious,” Severus said, throwing the letters onto the coffee table. “I'll go through them again tomorrow when I'm less exhausted to be sure.”

“You okay?” asked Harry.

“Tired, but I'll survive,” said Severus.

“I was talking about you finding out that Dumbledore's dying,” Harry said.

“Ah,” Severus said. He sat down on the couch and rested he head in his hands, only looking up again when he felt Harry sit down next to him. “It still hasn't quite sunk in yet. I just can't quite believe that he's going to die. He's been such a large presence in my life for so long, I'm not sure I can envision a world without him in it.”

“I know what you mean. Hogwarts will seem really weird without him there,” said Harry.

“It's not just that... If it wasn't for Albus, I likely would have been killed when I defected from the Dark Lord. Albus despised me back then, and rightly so, but he still took me in. He offered me both his protection and a chance to redeem myself...” Severus sighed heavily. “He doesn't deserve to die like this.”

Harry hated the pain he saw etched onto Severus' face, and wracked his brain to think of something comforting to say. “Maybe there's a cure for the curse.”

Severus shook his head. “There's no cure for something like this. And Albus won't let anyone near that ring, so there's no way to even research it further.”

“Maybe -”

“Enough, Harry. I don't want to talk about it any further,” Severus said sharply, then sighed again. “Sorry. I know you mean well.”

“It's okay,” Harry said. “Can I ask you about something else, though?”
“Go ahead.”

“Do you know why he had the diary out? He doesn't think that there might still be some lingering magic from it, does he? Should Ginny and I be worried that we're going to somehow get possessed again?”

“He wouldn't say why he had it out, but I shouldn't think either of you have anything to worry about. Albus would inform you if he thought there was a chance that the diary could still have a hold on you,” Severus said confidently.

“Good,” Harry said in relief.

“One more thing, before bed,” said Severus. “Albus needs your help Wednesday night. He'll be arriving here shortly before midnight.”

Harry frowned. “What's he need me to do?”

“He wants you to help him convince Horace Slughorn to return to teach at Hogwarts,” said Severus.

Harry froze. “Slughorn? Your old Head of House? I thought he was a Potions teacher.”

“He was,” Severus confirmed.

“So what, he's firing -” Harry's eyes widened. “He's giving you the Defence position!”

Severus smiled. “If he can fill the Potions position, yes.”

Severus' satisfaction outweighed the weariness in his face. Harry couldn't help smiling back at him. “I'll do my best.”

*******

Since he hadn't gotten to sleep until just before dawn, Harry slept well into the afternoon the next day. After a quick shower he walked down into the kitchen to grab some breakfast. Judging by the dishes washing themselves in the sink, Severus had had his own breakfast not too long ago, before disappearing out into the barn.

That day's issue of the *Daily Prophet* was left on the table, and Harry flipped through that as he ate his breakfast. He sighed with relief at the lack of reports of new deaths or disappearances. He couldn't help looking uneasily out the window at the mention of the latest (thankfully unsuccessful) Dementor attacks. There wasn't any unusual mist outside as far as Harry could see – making a nice change – and he resolved to go find Ladon once he'd finished eating.

Unsurprisingly, Ladon was in the oak tree. He slid down through the leaves when Harry climbed up onto his usual bough.

“Have you come to tell me what happened last night?” Ladon asked.

“Yeah,” said Harry.

“Good,” Ladon replied.

It didn't take long for Harry to relate the events of the previous night, finishing with Dumbledore's request that Harry help him recruit Slughorn.
"You don't sound very happy about that. I thought you'd be pleased that Severus might finally get the Defence job," Ladon said.

"I was at first, last night," Harry said. "But then I remembered the curse. I don't want anything bad to happen to him."

"Another curse? How many curses do you humans use on each other?" cried Ladon.

Harry laughed. "A lot, sometimes... No one's really sure if there is actually a curse on the position or not. Dad doesn't believe in it, but the rumour's been going around Hogwarts for years, and McGonagall believes in it, so there might be some truth to it..."

Ladon thought this over. "And what does this curse do?"

"Er, it gets rid of the Defence teacher after a year."

"Gets rid of them? How?"

Harry shrugged. "Depends. I've had five Defence teachers since I've been at Hogwarts. The first – Quirrell – he got possessed by Voldemort, and, er, I kinda hurt him in a fight, and then Voldemort left his body and he died."

Ladon reared up in surprise. "You helped Voldemort kill someone?"

"I didn't know he'd die. And I wasn't working with Voldemort... It was... complicated," said Harry.

Ladon eyed him suspiciously. "Uh huh. You're giving me the full story on that later. But for now... What happened to the next teacher?"

Harry grinned. "Lockhart. He turned out to be a complete fraud and ran away with his reputation in ruins. Oh, and before he left he pissed off Draco, who got Peeves to throw all his things in the Black Lake."

"I'm sure Draco was very pleased with himself," said Ladon.

"Very. After that was Remus. He forgot to take his Wolfsbane potion one night, and was loose as a full-blown werewolf. He decided the next day to resign so he wouldn't endanger anyone again. It was a shame, he was a brilliant teacher," Harry said wistfully.

"I like Remus. He has an interesting smell. So does Sirius," declared Ladon.

"They do?" asked Harry.

"Oh, yes. They both have a faint canine smell to them," said Ladon.

Harry stared down at him. "You can smell that Remus is a werewolf, and that Sirius is an Animagus?"

"Of course I can," Ladon said. "Humans really have a shocking sense of smell, you know that, right?"

"So, you can smell someone and if they're an Animagus, you'd be able to tell what animal they turn into?" asked Harry.

"Yes. It's really not difficult," said Ladon.
“What's McGonagall's Animagus form, then?” Harry asked.

“A cat. Ask me something harder,” said Ladon.

“I don’t know any other Animagi. Well, none that you've met, anyway,” said Harry.

“Good. What happened to the next teacher?” asked Ladon impatiently.

“Huh? Oh, er... Moody was imprisoned by a Death Eater who impersonated him for the year. When he was finally freed he quit,” said Harry. “then the last one was Umbridge, who got sent to Azkaban. And I seem to recall something about her getting bitten by a snake...”

“That was fun, even if she did taste terrible,” Ladon said happily.

“I did enjoy watching you bite her,” Harry agreed. “But do you see now why I'm worried something bad will happen to Dad if he takes the job?”

“Well, I'm not going to bite Severus. And I doubt you're going to team up with Voldemort to kill him,” said Ladon.

“Yeah, but who knows what else might happen to him?” asked Harry.

Ladon thought about that for a moment. “I think you should just wait and see if he gets the job, first of all. And if he does, well, maybe he'll quit willingly at the end of the year, alive and well.”

“Why would he quit Hogwarts?” asked Harry.


Harry shook his head. “McGonagall's the Deputy Head, she'd be the one to replace him. And I think the Board of Governors would probably be involved somehow...”

“I still think you should just wait and see,” said Ladon.

“Not much else I can do. Well, not unless I sabotage Dumbledore's attempt to convince Slughorn...” Harry said slowly.

Ladon raised himself so that he was eye level with Harry. “Yes, you could do that. But would you be able to face Severus afterwards, knowing that you're the reason he didn't get the job he's wanted for so long?”

“No,” Harry admitted.

Ladon lowered himself back down. “Didn't think so.”

Harry shifted uncomfortably, feeling guilty over even having had the idea. “So, er, when you say you can smell Animagi... If they're in their animal form, would you be able to smell that they're actually a human?”

“I don't see why not. I don't think I've ever come across one before,” Ladon said thoughtfully.

“If you are able to do that, do you think you'd also be able to recognise which human they were?” asked Harry.

Ladon nodded. “If I've met them before, sure, I'd recognise them. You all have very distinct scents,
you know. And with the Animagi, I can tell what animal they are. It's not just that Sirius smells like a
dog.”

“It's not?”

“No. Hermione and Millicent both often smell like cats, but I can tell that that's just from them being
near real cats. McGonagall's different...” Ladon twitched his tail as he tried to think of an
explanation. “It's like Hermione has her own smell, and then the cat smell over that, just like
sometimes she has a perfume smell on top, or shampoo. Same with Millicent. With McGonagall
though, the cat smell is mixed in with her human smell. It's part of her.”

“That's incredible,” said Harry.

Ladon flicked his tongue out. “If you say so. Not as incredible as hearing that you killed someone
when you were only eleven. I'd like to hear that story now, please.”

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Severus sat forward with interest. “Ladon is able to detect Animagi?”

Harry hadn't been expecting such a strong reaction when he'd mentioned that fact over dinner that
evening. “Yeah. Why?”

“You're going to take Ladon over to Grimmauld Place on Thursday and use your godfather to test
whether or not Ladon can detect an Animagus in their animal form,” said Severus.

“Okay... Why?”

“We know that the Dark Lord has at least one Animagus amongst his followers,” said Severus. “If
Ladon is able to distinguish between an ordinary animal and an Animagus, then that will prevent any
Animagi being used to spy on us.”

“I didn't think of that,” said Harry.

Severus sat back in satisfaction. “The fact that Pettigrew's Animagus form happens to be that of an
animal Ladon eats is a pleasant bonus.”

Harry dropped his fork. “You want Ladon to kill and eat Pettigrew?”

“Not necessarily eat, but kill? Why not, should the opportunity arise?” Severus asked calmly.

“Because it'd make him a murderer!” Harry cried.

Severus raised an eyebrow. “This from the boy who set him on Umbridge a little over a month ago.”

“That was different,” Harry argued. “I knew she had time to get to the infirmary and take some anti-
venom. I just needed her out of the way. This is murder.”

“Of the man who betrayed your parents to the Dark Lord,” Severus countered.

“True, but -”

“You need to get over this squeamishness if you are to kill the Dark Lord,” said Severus.

Harry sat back and glared at Severus, who merely stared back at him.
“I know I have to eventually kill Voldemort,” Harry said quietly. “I know that I will have to deliberately take a human life. But that doesn’t mean that Ladon needs to as well.”

“Harry -”

Harry pushed his chair back and stood up. “I've lost my appetite.”

He ignored Severus calling his name and ran up the stairs to his room, where he shut the door and lay on his bed. He fumbled for his Walkman, jamming his headphones in and turning up the volume. He stared up at the ceiling and cleared his mind, trying to ignore the churning in his stomach. He half-expected Severus to burst through the door after him, but it never opened, and Harry ended up falling asleep on top of the covers.
In Which Harry Goes Recruiting and Severus Gets His Dream Job

Harry woke up the next morning temporarily confused to find himself lying fully clothed on top of his covers. It didn't take long before he remembered the argument he and Severus had had the night before. He groaned and sat up, untangling his headphone cord from around his neck and ignoring the guilt now coiling in his stomach. Neither Hedwig nor Ladon were in his room, so with no one friendly to talk to, Harry considered going straight back to bed. Knowing he couldn't avoid Severus forever, Harry sighed, got changed into a fresh T-shirt, then headed downstairs. Hopefully there wouldn't be too much yelling.

To Harry's surprise, the moment he stepped outside his room he smelled the delicious scent of frying bacon. Now bemused and hungry, he walked into the kitchen to find the table laid out with a full English breakfast. Severus was sitting at the table nursing a cup of tea, which he put down at Harry's arrival.

“Good morning,” he said stiffly.

Harry's heart sank at his tone; he was evidently still cross. “Good morning,” he said, warily sitting down in his chair. He looked down at his full plate, wondering what to say.

Severus surprised him again. “I wish to apologise for last night.”

Harry's head snapped up. “You do?”

Severus nodded. “I realise that I was out of line last night. Your reaction to my suggestion was entirely understandable and I should not have implied that it was in any way unreasonable.”

“I... er, thank you,” said Harry, running a hand through his hair. “I'm sorry for storming out like that.”

Severus smirked. “You're a teenager. I believe you're all contractually obliged to storm out on your parents at least once a year.”

“Yeah, well, I thought you'd come after me, actually,” said Harry.

“You did?” said Severus.

“You did?” asked Harry.

Severus nodded. “I gave you half an hour to calm down and then knocked on your door. When you didn't respond I figured you were too angry to talk to me so I left you alone.”

“Oh,” said Harry, slightly stunned. “I had my headphones in, I didn't hear you.”

“Ah, that would explain it.”

“How come you didn't just barge in? My door wasn't locked – well, not unless I did it accidentally by magic, but I don't think I did...”

“Locked or not, if your door's shut I shan't barge in on you unless I have a very good reason to. I didn't consider the argument sufficient reason to violate your privacy like that,” said Severus.

“Oh. Thanks,” Harry said, trying and failing to hide his surprise.
“I am not like the Dursleys, Harry,” Severus said quietly. “I shan’t ever treat you the way they did.”

Harry bent his head. “I know. I do. I just... forget, sometimes, that...”

“That the way they treated you wasn't normal?” asked Severus.

Harry nodded. “I don't mean to suggest that you're anything like them. I know you're nothing like them and that what they did to me was abuse and -”

“Harry, I understand,” Severus said, interrupting Harry's babbling. “I know that it can take time for abused children to properly trust that other adults won't mistreat them. I'm not upset with you.”

Harry finally raised his head again. One look at Severus' face told him that he wasn't speaking theoretically. “You were the same?”

“I was.”

“Oh.”

After a short silence, Severus cleared his throat. “Now that we have moved past our first fight, let's have breakfast before I have to renew the Warming Charm.”

Harry grinned at that, and happily dug into his food. There was no conversation for a few minutes, until Severus set down his knife.

“Last night's argument has made me think more closely on your situation,” he said.

Harry swallowed his mouthful of egg. “What do you mean?”

“We need to plan how you're going to kill the Dark Lord,” said Severus.

Harry went cold, but nodded. “Okay.”

Severus seemed to be watching him closely. “I've come up with three possible strategies. I'm sure we'll probably be able to come up with more, but it's a start.”

Harry nodded. “What are they?”

“Either you use the Killing Curse, some other fatal spell, or you incapacitate him and then use poison,” said Severus. “What do you think?”

“I think this is an odd conversation to be having over breakfast,” Harry said, in a poor attempt at a joke.

Severus inclined his head. “True.”

Harry munched on some toast as he thought about what Severus had just said. “Okay, the Killing Curse, or something just as deadly, would be quickest. And Disarming him or Stunning him so that I could feed him poison means that he could potentially have time to escape or launch a counter-attack.”

“Those are good points,” said Severus.

“But I don't know if I could cast the Killing Curse, even against Voldemort. Don't you really need to mean them for them to work?” asked Harry.
“You do, yes.”

“And I'd need to practice casting it, too. Which means killing a bunch of animals, right?”

Severus nodded slowly. “We would need to test the lethality of your spell casting, yes.”

Harry took a sip of tea. “I think I could do that. I mean, it'd be okay if I killed a mouse and then fed it to either Hedwig or Ladon. It's not like I'd just be killing for fun.”

“You do not need to make any decisions just yet,” said Severus.

“I know,” said Harry. “Would you be teaching me?”

Severus blinked. “What?”

“Someone has to teach me, right? Would you be okay doing it? I know you don't want to ever cast an Unforgivable Curse again. Or have you changed your mind about that?”

“I'm going to have to, if I want the Defence position, in order to demonstrate all three curses to the fifth years in class...”

Harry frowned. “I thought that was fourth year. Crouch showed us in fourth year.”

Severus shook his head. “Technically, the Ministry dictates it to be part of the sixth year curriculum, but you've all already seen them. In any case, I believe that fifth year would be better. They'll be mature enough to handle the subject, and it means I can demonstrate them to the entire year level, not just the students who choose to continue Defence in their NEWT years... I will, however, be casting the Imperius Curse on your year and the seventh years, to train you all how to resist it – your Occlumency should help with that, incidentally.”

Harry popped some bacon in his mouth and waited.

Severus shook his head. “No, I would not be comfortable training you to cast the Killing Curse. I had actually thought that, if you choose that strategy, we might ask Narcissa to teach you. She's used the curse against another human being before, she'd know what to tell you.”

“I guess, yeah. And what if I choose the other options?” asked Harry.

Severus shrugged. “We're already working on your duelling abilities, and you performed admirably against him in the graveyard. I think that with enough practice, you should be able to get to the point where you would be able to best him in a duel.”

“Oh really?” Harry asked, feeling a blossom of pride at the praise.

“I see no reason why you couldn't,” said Severus.

“Er, because it's Voldemort? The man so terrifying that most people refuse to even say his name?” said Harry.

Severus went very still. “I followed the Dark Lord for years, Harry. I saw him torture and kill innocent people, sometimes for gain, other times just for pleasure. I saw him perform Dark magic that I couldn't even put a name to, let alone emulate.”

“I didn't mean -”

“But I gave you my word that I would help prepare you to kill him. I can hardly expect you to do so...”
if I am unable to call Voldemort by his name,” said Severus.

His voice had been steady enough, but Harry saw his fear in the way Severus' mouth had tightened for a moment, and decided to change the subject.

“What poison do you think I could use?” he asked, knowing the topic of potions would distract Severus nicely.

Sure enough, Severus' eyes lit up at the question. “I'll need to do some research... We'll want something fast-acting with a near perfect mortality rate... I think a composition of more than one poison, to safeguard against him having a suitable antidote on hand... Perhaps a rare or antiquated poison, or one with rare ingredients...”

“What about that poison you gave us when we killed all the Blast-Ended Skrewts?” asked Harry.

Severus shook his head. “I invented that one while I was a Death Eater, along with its antidote. There is a chance that Voldemort may have the antidote. It's a slim chance, admittedly, but one I would rather not take.”

Harry nodded. “I still think I'd prefer the incapacitate then poison option. I don't have a problem practising Disarming or Stunning my friends, and I trust you to find the best poison for the job.”

“Well. I'll begin going through my books today. You may join me if you want to,” said Severus.

Harry nodded. “Sure.”

“As you wish. I do still want you to take Ladon to test his abilities on your godfather.”

“I'll pop over tomorrow.”

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Harry and Severus spent the day in the lounge room, scouring Severus' darker potions texts for possible poisons to use. Harry couldn't help thinking that it would be a shame if Severus ended up taking the Defence job, given how knowledgeable he was about Potions. Harry only had to read out the name of a poison for Severus to tell him why it would be unsuitable for the task: this one was too slow; that one only worked during a waning moon; that required the drinker to ingest it willingly.

By the time they stopped for the day, they had a list of some half dozen poisons that Severus wanted to research further. They had a simple dinner of shepherd's pie and vegetables, then returned to the lounge room to await Dumbledore's arrival. The chilly, Dementor-caused mist had returned, stronger than usual, so Severus lit the fire. Its crackling warmth soon lured Ladon to the hearth, where he curled up contentedly next to Harry, who was lying on the floor. He looked up from the picture of Tilly he was drawing.

“I wanted to ask you something,” he said.

“What?” Ladon asked.

“Would you ever kill a human?”

Ladon stopped inspecting the drawing and looked at Harry. “Depends on the circumstances.”
“In the middle of battle?”

“Sure.”

“Okay... What about in cold blood?”

“Probably not. So far I've only killed for food,” Ladon said thoughtfully.

“You didn't have a problem biting Umbridge,” Harry pointed out.

“You told me to bite her.”

“That's it? That's all it took?”

“With her? Yes. I'd offered to bite her more than once before that. Even though we both knew the Hogwarts infirmary is well stocked with anti-venom, you always said no. So then when you told me to bite her, I knew it must have been for a good reason,” said Ladon.

Harry nodded. “What if I told you to bite someone else?”

“Who do you want me to bite?”

“I'm talking hypothetically.”

“Well that's just stupid. How am I supposed to give you a proper answer if you don't give me a proper question?” Ladon asked.

“Okay, fine. If we ran into a Death Eater tomorrow and I told you to kill them, would you?” asked Harry.

“If they attacked us, yes. I don't just bite things because I can. I like to have a proper reason,” said Ladon.

“Fair enough,” said Harry.

He relayed Ladon's answers to Severus, who hummed thoughtfully. “I never knew snakes were capable of having their own system of ethics.”

“I think it depends on the snake. I can't see Nagini having a similar outlook, can you?” asked Harry.

“Certainly not,” Severus said. He returned his attention to his book, but looked up again when he felt Harry still watching him. “What is it?”

“I was just thinking about why Dumbledore wants me to go meet Slughorn with him,” said Harry.

“Oh,” said Severus. He tapped his mouth with his finger while he thought about it. “He did not share his plans with me, but I would assume that it is because of your fame. Slughorn likes to surround himself with people he believes will go on to enjoy great success, fame, or fortune. When he was a teacher, he used to pick out favourites – the smart, the talented, the charming – and bring them into his club.”

“A club?” Harry echoed.

“He called it the Slug Club,” Severus said, making a face at the name. “Those he selected usually went far in whatever field they chose, and they all had Slughorn to thank for making those first vital introductions for them, for getting them started. In turn, they would pay him favours when in a
position to do so, and his influence grew, allowing him to continue the cycle.”

“And you think he wants me in this club,” Harry said flatly.

“Undoubtedly.”

“Were you in this club when you were at school?”

“Partially. He recognised my skill with Potions, but I was never any good at the networking side of things. It annoyed him, I think, more than if I had had no skill at all,” said Severus.

Harry fiddled with the pencil he was holding. “So... I can help recruit him by making him think he can recruit me?”

“I believe so, yes,” said Severus.

“Well, okay. But I'm not making him any promises about this club of his,” said Harry.

“I wouldn't expect you to,” Severus assured him.

At precisely eleven o'clock Harry heard the garden gate squeak as it was opened. He got up and looked out the window to see Dumbledore walking up the garden path, the silver embroidery of his purple robes glinting in the moonlight.

“Dumbledore's here,” Harry said, on his way to the door.

Severus marked his page in his book and stood up as Harry opened the door. “Good evening, Professor,” he said.

Dumbledore smiled down at him. “Good evening, boys.”

Harry stood aside so that Dumbledore could enter, then shut the door behind him.

“How's your hand?” Severus asked.

Dumbledore shook back his right sleeve and held up his hand. Harry bit back a gasp of horror when he caught sight of the blackened, shrivelled flesh. He'd known it must be bad, but this didn't look like it could possibly belong to a living human.

Dumbledore seemed unconcerned about his hand. “There has been no change, Severus.”

Severus walked over and took Dumbledore's hand, gently turning it over to inspect it. “And the pain?”

“Tolerable.”

Severus let go of the hand. “I can brew you a stronger potion if you need one.”

Dumbledore shook his head. “I'd prefer to keep all my wits about me and stick with the lower dosage, but thank you. I shall keep your offer in mind.”

“As you wish.”

Dumbledore smiled and shook his sleeve back over his hand. “Now, Harry. Has Severus told you what I require of you tonight?”
“Er, yes, sir. You want me to help you convince Slughorn to come back to teach Potions. How am I supposed to do that, sir?” Harry asked. He was curious to know if Severus’ theory was correct.

“You'll see soon enough,” Dumbledore said airily. Behind him, Harry saw Severus roll his eyes. “We'd best be going.”

“Have you got your wand?” Severus asked at once.

“Yes, Dad,” Harry said.

“I'll return him to you unscathed, Severus,” Dumbledore said, his eyes twinkling.

Severus didn't smile back. “I would expect no less.”

“We shall be back within the hour, if everything goes as planned,” Dumbledore said.

With that, he gestured Harry to the door and followed him out into the night. Harry gave a shiver at the chill of the air and pulled his cloak tighter around himself. When they stepped through the gate Dumbledore held up his uninjured hand to Harry.

“You have been Apparated before, I believe?”

“Yes, sir,” Harry said. He didn't feel the need to tell Dumbledore that he now knew how to Apparate by himself.

He grasped the proffered arm, and after a few moments of constriction, found himself standing in a village square. A war memorial was lit up in the centre of the square, with a few benches surrounding it. Apart from that, all was dark and silent.

“Where are we, sir?” Harry asked.

“The lovely village of Budleigh Babberton. I understand it is famous in the region for its chutney,” said Dumbledore. “This way.”

Harry followed him past an empty inn, a row of picturesque Tudor-style houses, and a church. There was no sign of anyone else; whether or not that was normal, or due to the presence of the unseasonable mist, Harry had no way of knowing.

“How is your Occlumency coming along?” Dumbledore asked.

Harry blinked at the unexpected question. “Fine, sir. I can block Dad from my mind, and I'm beginning to practise duelling while shielding my mind. I'm not very good at that yet, but I'm getting better.”

“Marvellous. And your scar has not been hurting at all?”

“No, sir. No more visions, either.”

“As I thought...” Dumbledore said. When he caught sight of Harry's questioning expression he elaborated. “I expected Voldemort would begin to use Occlumency himself, to guard against you having any further access to his thoughts. Though you and Severus are, of course, to be commended for your hard work.”

“Thank you, sir.”

They fell silent for a few minutes, as they walked up increasingly steep streets. Harry couldn't help
being impressed with Dumbledore's stamina, considering he was both extremely old and recently injured with a nasty curse.

“Sir, do you mind if I ask you a question?” Harry asked.

“Not at all, Harry. That was remarkably inoffensive so far as questions go,” said Dumbledore, chuckling. “I'll even invite you to ask another one, if your curiosity remains unchecked.”

Harry laughed too. “Yes, sir. I wanted to know... What made you finally give Dad the Defence job?”

Dumbledore stopped laughing. “An excellent question, Harry, and one that I wish I had a happier answer for. To put it simply, we rather need a competent teacher in that discipline this year.”

“Because Voldemort's back?” asked Harry.

“Mostly, yes. There's no mistaking the fact that learning to defend oneself is more important now than ever,” Dumbledore said, then sighed heavily. “Then there's the deplorable damage that Dolores Umbridge did in that subject last year. I need someone who will work hard to make sure you all have the knowledge and skills that may save your lives – and who isn't afraid to work you and your colleagues just as hard. Your father fits that bill, don't you agree?”

“Definitely,” said Harry. It was more than mere loyalty that had him agreeing so readily. He knew from first hand experience that Severus would be just as good a teacher in this subject as he was in Potions. “But what about the curse?”

Dumbledore glanced at him. “Is that rumour still making the rounds of Hogwarts?”

“Yes, sir. I know Dad doesn't believe in it, but McGonagall does,” said Harry.

“Professor McGonagall, Harry,” Dumbledore said, looking at the stone house ahead of them.

“Yes, sir,” Harry said, nonplussed. Severus had never cared how Harry referred to any of his teachers, and neither had McGonagall herself, during conversations when she'd come over to visit Severus.

Dumbledore stopped abruptly when he reached the garden gate of the stone house. Harry stopped next to him, staring in dismay at the front door. It was hanging off its hinges, with no sign of life coming from within the building. Harry drew his wand and looked up to see Dumbledore nodding with approval.

“A wise precaution. Follow me closely, Harry,” Dumbledore said in a low voice.

He opened the gate silently and walked up the stone path, quickly and noiselessly. Harry followed right him behind him, thankful to Severus for his stealth lessons. Dumbledore manoeuvred the front door out of the way, lit his wand, then stepped inside with Harry at his heels.

Dumbledore held his wand above his head, casting its light down a narrow corridor. On the right, picture frames hung on the wall, showing still, Muggle paintings. To the left, a door stood ajar, the room beyond gloomy. Dumbledore pushed it open to reveal a completely destroyed sitting room.

A couch lay on its back, a matching armchair on its side. Both of them had been slashed, their stuffing leaking out into the room. Cushions lay scattered around the floor, most in tatters, their feathers floating through the air. A chandelier had been wrenched from the ceiling to lie in a tangled mess on the floor. A grandfather clock had been tipped over, as had a piano. Harry had to step
carefully to avoid treading on its keys. Shards of glass and pottery were likewise strewn around the room. All the window panes were smashed, letting in the cold night air and making the net curtain flutter. Harry firmly put the thought of Dementors out of his mind and gazed at the far wall, which was covered in something red and shiny.

Harry frowned at the wall in front of him. Something about the blood on it didn't look right to him. He leaned in and sniffed. The coppery tang told him it was definitely real blood, no faking that, but there was something about it that he just didn't like. The light behind him shifted suddenly, illuminating the blood in silver.

“What is it, Harry?”

Harry glanced over his shoulder to see Dumbledore watching him, then returned his attention to the blood. “This isn't human,” he said slowly. The moment the words left his lips, he knew them to be true. Harry had cleaned enough blood off himself over the past few weeks, after duelling with Hermione, to know what it should look like.

“How can you be sure?” asked Dumbledore.

“It's too thick and too silvery, sir,” said Harry, turning back around.

“Astute observation,” Dumbledore murmured.

He too turned around, to inspect the overturned armchair. Harry looked around the room more closely, searching for more signs that the destruction around him had been staged. He realised what it was almost immediately. The devastation of the room was too perfect, too complete. There wasn't a piece of furniture in the room that was upright; not a knick knack that wasn't smashed; not a window pane that wasn't broken. No fight could have so utterly ruined this room, yet left the corridor outside almost untouched, down to the perfectly straight picture frames on the wall.

Before Harry could point any of this out, Dumbledore had leaned down to the armchair and plunged his wand into it.

“Ouch!” the chair protested.

“Good evening, Horace,” said Dumbledore, taking a step back.

Harry's eyebrows shot up as the armchair was replaced by an old man crouching on the floor. Completely bald but with a very impressive, silver moustache, the man rubbed his vast stomach with one hand and glared up at Dumbledore.

“You didn't need to poke me that hard,” Slughorn grumbled.

He hauled himself to his feet with some difficulty. He was one of the fattest people Harry had ever seen, and only came up to Dumbledore's chin. Coupled with his moustache, he made Harry think of a walrus.

Slughorn scowled up at Dumbledore. “Was it just the dragon's blood that gave me away?”

Harry could have hit himself in the head – he used dragon's blood when brewing potions all the time, he should have recognised it instantly.

Dumbledore chuckled. “No, my dear Horace. I knew before we set foot in the house that you hadn't been attacked, at least not by Death Eaters. There was no Dark Mark.”
Slughorn sighed. “I knew I forgot something. No matter. I wouldn't have had time anyway. I barely finished my upholstery before you walked into the room.”

“Shall I help you set the room to rights?” asked Dumbledore.

“May as well,” Slughorn said, still clearly nettled at having been caught out.

He and Dumbledore stood back to back in the centre of the room and waved their wands in a slow circle. The room instantly repaired itself. The couch righted itself and tucked itself against a wall; the piano also stood upright once more, all its keys flying into their rightful positions; feathers flew back into cushions which sewed up their rips; shards of glass returned to their panes; and the chandelier reformed and screwed itself back into the ceiling. It lit itself, as did a table lamp.

Slughorn crossed to a sideboard and picked up a vial into which the dragon's blood had siphoned itself. “What a waste, the price of this is through the roof right now... Still... maybe I could reuse it... it's only a bit dusty...”

“You want to reuse dusty dragon's blood?” Harry blurted. He reddened when both men turned to stare at him. “Sorry,” he muttered.

Dumbledore twinkled at him. “Horace, allow me to introduce Harry Potter. Harry, this, as I'm sure you've gathered, is my old friend and colleague, Horace Slughorn.”

Harry went to shake hands, only to drop his hand when Slughorn didn't move. Slughorn merely looked at his scar, then turned grumpily to Dumbledore. “Nice plan, Albus, but it's not going to work.”

“May we at least stay for a drink? For old times' sake?” Dumbledore said.

Slughorn eyed him suspiciously, then jerked his head. “Just one drink, then. For old times' sake.”

Dumbledore beamed at Slughorn's grudging acquiescence, then steered Harry into an armchair right next to the table lamp. Harry got the impression that Dumbledore wanted to keep him as visible as possible, and tamped down his annoyance. Considering what Dumbledore had planned, it would have been nice for him to have told Harry about it beforehand. Instead, Harry was left feeling like little more than a tool, to be wielded by Dumbledore as he pleased.

Slughorn returned from the sideboard with a tray loaded with three glasses. He handed two to his guests with undisguised irritability and sat down on the couch with his own drink. He made no attempt to begin the conversation, and Harry bit back a smile. At least he wasn't the only one annoyed with Dumbledore.

“How have you been, Horace?” Dumbledore enquired solicitously.

Slughorn shook his head sadly. “Poor, Albus, poor. I've a weak chest, you know, very wheezy. I'm very susceptible to colds, I've had four this year alone... I get tired far quicker than I used to. And I think I'm developing gout. Or possibly some other type of arthritis. Everything creaks when I get up in the morning. You know how it is, Albus. Once you get to a certain age your body just stops working.”

Harry had to hand it to Slughorn – he had a brilliant poker face. Every complaint he had just listed was easily treated with potions, all of which should be simple enough for a former Potions teacher to brew, gout or no gout.

“Come now, Horace, old age isn't that bad,” Dumbledore said mildly. “You'll make young Harry
here terrified of growing old.”

He gestured to Harry with his good hand, and Harry caught sight of an old, ugly ring on his hand. Made of gold, it had a large black stone set in it. The stone was cracked down the middle. Harry would bet his last Galleon that it was the ring that had cursed Dumbledore, though why he was now wearing it, he couldn't say. He made a note to mention it to Severus when he got home, and returned his attention to Slughorn, who had also noticed the ring. He frowned again, this time in thought, rather than in annoyance, then his eyes flicked once more to Harry. When he met Harry's gaze he looked away quickly.

“Tell me, Horace, the anti-intruder precautions... were they designed to fool the Death Eaters, or me?” asked Dumbledore.

“What would the Death Eaters want with a half-crippled, weary old husk of a man like me?” asked Slughorn.

“I would wager that they would be very interested in your brewing capabilities, for a start,” said Dumbledore. “Are you honestly saying they haven't tried to recruit you?”

Slughorn's moustache drooped momentarily. “Wouldn't know, would I? Haven't stayed in one place long enough for them to find me. I've been in hiding for a year now. Staying exclusively in Muggle homes – less chance of me running into someone who'll recognise me. The ridiculous burglar alarms they all seem to use are no match for a little Freezing Charm. Hardest part is bringing in the piano without the neighbours catching sight of me, to be honest.”

Dumbledore nodded slowly. “An admirable system, but don't you find it tiring moving around so much? You could settle in one place if you returned to Hogwarts -”

“Hogwarts? Balderdash. If you're so concerned with my weariness, you can drink faster. I'd like to get to bed sometime before midnight,” Slughorn said brusquely.

Both Dumbledore and Harry politely took a sip. Harry's eyes barely watered at the smooth liquid; it burned far less than the liquors one usually found smuggled into the Slytherin common room.


Slughorn's expression cheered slightly and he nodded. “Aged sixteen years.”


“Not for another two weeks, sir,” Harry said. He was beginning to feel uncomfortable with how Dumbledore kept directing attention to him. He no longer felt like a tool; more like a worm on a hook, baited to catch Slughorn.

“My apologies, Harry,” Dumbledore said.

He stood up, causing Slughorn to look up hopefully. “You're not leaving so soon, are you?” he asked, his tone clear that he very much wished that they were.

“Not quite, Horace. I was merely hoping to use your bathroom,” said Dumbledore.

Slughorn slumped in disappointment. “Out in the corridor, second door on the left.”

Dumbledore walked out of the room and closed the door behind himself. Slughorn looked briefly at Harry, opened his mouth, closed it again, then got up to stand in front of the fire. He held his hands
out to warm them, then turned to look once more at Harry.

“I know why you're here, don't think I don't,” he announced.

Since Harry himself was quite aware why he was being dangled in front of Slughorn, he ignored this. “You aren't really going to use that dragon's blood to brew anything, are you?”

Slughorn's eyebrows shot up. “I don't see why not. I'll siphon the dust out of it and it'll be good as new.”

“How? If you use magic it will disrupt the purity of the blood and render it useless, but sieving it will leave traces of dust in it,” said Harry.

“A little dust won't hurt if the rest of the potion is brewed correctly,” said Slughorn.

Harry stared at him. “Yes, it will. Unless you're making some sort of sleeping aid, but even then, you run the risk of the dust lessening the effectiveness of the potion.”

Slughorn chuckled suddenly. “Fancy yourself something of a brewer, do you?”

Harry shrugged. “Potions is my favourite subject.”

“Your mother liked it, too,” Slughorn said. “Lily Evans was one of my favourite students. We teachers say we don't pick favourites, of course, but everyone does.”

“I know, my dad told me you liked her,” said Harry.

“Ah, yes, Severus. How is he? One of my most talented students, of course – even more so than your mother. He replaced me as Potions teacher when I retired, of course. I taught him everything he knows,” Slughorn said.

Harry privately doubted this, if Slughorn thought it acceptable to use contaminated ingredients. “He's always spoken very highly of you.”

That was a complete lie, but one which Slughorn seemed to eat right up. “He speaks about me often, does he?”

Harry nodded. “He's told me stories about when he and Mum were at school. Did you know she sometimes used to copy off him in Potions?”

To his surprise, Slughorn burst into delighted laughter. “Did she really? I never would've picked that! I always told her she should've been in my house... Oh, she used to give me the most impudent answers... She was full of sass, your mother. She would have done marvellously in Slytherin.”

“A Muggle-born in Slytherin? Even us half-bloods are pretty thin on the ground,” said Harry.

“If anyone could have made a go of it, it would have been Lily Evans. She was such a bright student, I could scarcely believe it when I found out she was a Muggle-born,” said Slughorn.

That hadn't been what Harry had meant at all. “My best friend is a Muggle-born, and she's the best student in our entire year.”

“Funny how that can happen,” Slughorn said.

“No, it isn't,” Harry said shortly.
Slughorn shook a finger at Harry. “Ah ah ah, don't go thinking I'm prejudiced! How can you, when I've just said your mother was one of my favourites? And she wasn't the only one, oh, no... Let's see, there was Dirk Cresswell, a Muggle-born in the year below her... He's Head of the Goblin Liaison Office now, of course... He was a very bright student, and still gives me all the insider gossip of Gringotts!”

Slughorn began bouncing again, while pointing to the collection of recently repaired silver photo frames on the sideboard. There were so many crowded together that Harry struggled to see which specific frame Slughorn was pointing to.

“All of them are signed by my most successful ex-students. Plenty of Muggle-borns there, let me tell you... Look, there, Gwenog Jones, Captain of the Hol -”

“You knew Gwenog Jones?” Harry asked, wide-eyed.

“Oh, a Harpies fan, are you?” asked Slughorn.

Harry nodded eagerly. “You really knew her? She's deadly with a Bludger.”

“She sends me free tickets whenever I want them,” Slughorn said proudly.

“Did you make it to the match against Wigtown last season? I listened to it on the wireless, it was brilliant. Best match of the entire season, I reckon,” said Harry.

“No, I didn't. I haven't been to a single match in over a year,” said Slughorn, his smile fading. “I've been avoiding going into public at all, unless it was essential – why do you think I need to hold onto what dragon's blood I've got, eh?”

“Wouldn't you feel safer living at Hogwarts, then? Dad never has a problem going to the apothecary when he needs to, and if you returned to teaching Potions, you know any apothecary would deliver whatever you asked for,” said Harry.

“Returning to Hogwarts would mean publicly declaring my support for Dumbledore. I may as well join the Order of the Phoenix and stick a target on my back. I wouldn't last a year,” said Slughorn.

“Not all of the staff is in the Order. Most of them aren't, actually,” Harry argued. “And anyway, everyone always says that Dumbledore's the only person Voldemort -” Harry ignored Slughorn's squeak of fear “- ever feared. If you're worried that Voldemort might come after you, surely the safest place you could be would be Hogwarts?”

“Well, yes, there is a certain logic to your argument...” Slughorn said slowly. “And it's becoming clear that You-Know-Who sees anyone who isn't allied with him as a potential enemy... I've had a good run of it so far, but I heard about Amelia Bones... Terrible, absolutely terrible... if they could get to her...”

Before Harry could say anything, the door opened and Dumbledore walked back into the room. “My apologies, Horace. I got distracted by the collection of Muggle magazines. I do love a good knitting pattern... Now then, Harry, I think it high time we got going. We do not want to detain Horace from his slumber for any longer.”

Harry got up somewhat reluctantly, acutely aware that he had failed to secure the Defence position for Severus. Slughorn frowned unhappily as Harry and Dumbledore refastened their cloaks. “Going so soon, Albus? You haven't even finished your drinks,” he said.

“And an excellent drop it was, but I am afraid that I must get Harry home before Severus begins to
worry,” said Dumbledore.

Slughorn turned to Harry, who smiled at him. “It was nice to meet you,” he said politely, if untruthfully.

“Yes, and you, too...” said Slughorn. For all he had resisted his visitors arriving, he now seemed just as put out at their departure.

“While I can't pretend I'm not disappointed you don't want the position, it was good to see you again, Horace. You would have been a welcome addition to our faculty. I hope you know that you are always welcome to visit us at Hogwarts,” said Dumbledore.

He led Harry out of the room. They were at the front door when the sound of lumbering footsteps made them stop and turn. Slughorn was standing in the doorway to the sitting room.

“I'll do it, Albus. I'll come back to teach Potions,” he said. “I'm sure I'll regret it, but I'll do it, at least for this year.”

“Marvellous, Horace. I look forward to seeing you on the first of September,” said Dumbledore.

“I'll want a pay rise, mind,” said Slughorn.

“I think you'll find that the wages of a Hogwarts teacher have increased since you last taught there,” said Dumbledore. “Goodbye.”

With that, he opened the front door and stepped back out into the night. Harry once again followed him along the path, then they walked back down the road.

“Well done, Harry,” said Dumbledore.

“Thank you, sir. Does this mean that Dad's got the Defence job?” asked Harry.

“Yes, it does. I must say, it will be a nice change to give someone good news for once,” said Dumbledore.

“It's good to hear some,” Harry said.

They were quiet for the rest of the walk. When they reached the village square again, Dumbledore held up his arm for Harry. He almost said he could Apparate himself home thank you very much, but again, some instinct told him to keep quiet.

A few seconds later they were standing in the field in front of Fen House. Harry hurried forward and opened the garden gate. It squeaked loudly in the quiet night, and Harry was unsurprised to see Severus' face appear at the lounge room window after only a few seconds. He disappeared from view a moment before the front door opened. Severus looked at Harry, who grinned at him, then at Dumbledore.

“He said yes?”

“He did, Severus. Which means the Defence position is yours,” said Dumbledore.

Severus smiled. “Thank you, Albus. Would you like to come in?”

Dumbledore shook his head. “No, thank you, I've many things to do tonight... I do, however, have one last request of you, Harry. I would like you to join me for private lessons this year.”
“Private lessons? Will you be teaching me things that will help me defeat Voldemort?” Harry guessed.

“That is my intention, yes,” said Dumbledore.

“How often will you be meeting with him?” asked Severus. “I myself have plans to continue training Harry after we have returned to Hogwarts.”

“I will endeavour not to interrupt your training schedule, but I do have important lessons to give Harry,” said Dumbledore.

Severus nodded, clearly recognising the futility of asking for any further information.

“Very well. Oh, and Harry, I think it would be wise if you kept your Invisibility Cloak with you at all times from now on, both here and at Hogwarts,” said Dumbledore.

“Er, yes, sir,” said Harry. “Although I should probably tell you that it’d be useless against Voldemort's snake, Nagini.”

“How so?” asked Dumbledore.

“She's a pit viper of some sort, though unnaturally big... The point is pit vipers can sense heat. The Cloak wouldn't do a thing to hide me from her,” said Harry.

Dumbledore frowned. “Are you sure? Forgive me for saying this, but the one time you came into contact with her you were under an extreme amount of stress.”

“I think I can recognise a pit viper when I see one, sir,” Harry said tightly.

“Albus, he's a Parselmouth who reads about snakes in his spare time. I'd take his word on this if I were you,” Severus said.

Dumbledore smiled. “Very well, I'll keep that in mind. I do want you to keep your Cloak on you though, Harry. It will still work on humans. Severus, I'll contact you soon about increasing the protections around Hogwarts.”

With that, he walked out of the door, shutting it behind him. Harry immediately spun around to hug Severus.

“You got it!” Harry said, his voice slightly muffled by Severus' shoulder.

Severus was smiling when he drew away. “So I did. Thanks to you, I assume.”

Harry shrugged. “Not sure how much I actually did, to tell the truth.”

“How did you find Slughorn?” asked Severus.

“I don't like him,” said Harry.

Severus raised an eyebrow. “Oh? What did he do?”

“I don't think he's that great of a Potions teacher, for a start,” said Harry.

Severus frowned. “What makes you say that?”

“When we arrived, he'd made the place look like it'd been attacked, and he'd splashed dragon blood...”
on a wall. Dumbledore caught him out and helped him clean the place up. And Slughorn wanted to reuse the dragon blood! Who the hell would use dusty dragon blood?” Harry cried indignantly.

Severus shook his head. “I certainly wouldn't, and I'm pleased you wouldn't, but he is a skilled, knowledgeable brewer. What else?”

“I dunno... The whole wanting to collect me thing's pretty creepy, but I think I was more annoyed with Dumbledore, to tell you the truth. You saw him refuse to tell me how he expected me to convince Slughorn to return, and then when I asked him about the curse on the Defence job he completely blew me off,” said Harry.

Severus sighed. “He likes to tell people only that which they need to know, and as for the curse –”

“I know you don't believe in it,” Harry said quickly, “but will you at least promise you'll be careful this year?”

“I promise that I will not take any unnecessary risks,” Severus said.

Harry nodded, happy to get that concession. “Good. Oh, one last thing. The ring that cursed Dumbledore – was that gold with a black stone, cracked down the middle?”

“Yes, it was. Why?” Severus asked sharply.

“He was wearing it tonight,” said Harry.

“Wearing it...” Severus echoed. His frown intensified as he thought that over. “Well, I can't think of any reason why he would want to wear that again, but it can't hurt him any more. Still...”

“Something to look into?” asked Harry.

Severus nodded. “One more thing in an increasingly long list. I can't say it's a priority, but I'll see if I can pry any more information out of him about it, if I get the chance.”
When he woke up and saw the sunshine on Thursday morning, Harry told Ladon not to go outside. They were heading over to Grimmauld Place, to test whether or not Ladon could detect Animagi, and Harry knew it would be hard to get Ladon out of the garden to go to Grimmauld Place once he saw what a beautiful day it was. He had a quick breakfast, then fetched a reluctant Ladon from his room and returned to the lounge to say goodbye to Severus.

“Is it okay if Apparate over there?” he asked.

Severus looked up from his book. “Of course. Any practice you can get is beneficial. Wear your Invisibility Cloak, though, until you reach the doorstep of Grimmauld Place.”

“I’ll see you later then,” Harry said.

He fetched his Invisibility Cloak then walked outside into an uncommonly mist-free day. Ladon raised his head from Harry's shoulder and looked around.

“Can we hurry back? I want to enjoy the sun today,” he said.

“Sure. This shouldn't take long,” Harry promised him. He walked through the gate and shut it behind himself, swung his Cloak over himself and Ladon, then took a deep breath. “You ready?”

Ladon coiled himself tighter around Harry's arm and nodded. “Yes.”

“Let's do it,” Harry said.

He shut his eyes and focused hard on the patch of grass in the centre of Grimmauld Place. He pushed through the constriction of Apparition and opened his eyes when he felt the pressure ease. He checked himself over then grinned down at Ladon.

“All in one piece?”

“Yes,” said Ladon, then flicked his tongue agitatedly. “This place smells almost as bad as Cokeworth.”

Harry looked around the deserted square in which they'd landed. “It's better inside, remember?”

Ladon shuddered and tucked his face into Harry's collar. “It can't get much worse.”

Harry grinned at Ladon's petulance and set off for Number 12, where he used the serpent-shaped door knocker to bang on the door. While he waited for someone to answer the door, he took his Cloak off and shoved it into his robe pocket.

“I like that, at least,” said Ladon, eyeing the door knocker appreciatively. “And this garden smells nice.”

Narcissa and the elves had clearly been busy cleaning up the exterior of Grimmauld Place, as well as the interior. The front door had been repainted a pale purple. On either side of the front step was a row of white rose bushes, with the flowers releasing their sweet fragrance in the warm summer air. Before Harry could reply to Ladon, the front door was opened by a house-elf.

“Good morning, sir,” said the elf glumly.
“Hi. Er, it's Winky, right?” asked Harry.

The elf nodded. “Yes, sir. Can Winky be helping sir?”

Harry blinked, not accustomed to such a melancholy attitude from a house-elf. “Yeah, is Sirius home?”

Winky nodded again. “Winky is taking sir to see Mr Sirius.”

She led Harry down to the kitchen, where she pushed through the door and held it open for Harry. “Mr Sirius, Mr Harry Potter is here to see you,” she said. She curtseyed and Disapparated with a particularly loud crack, leaving Harry standing in the doorway with Ladon peering curiously from his shoulder. Before he'd even taken half a step into the room, someone gave a loud shriek.

“HARRY!” Hermione rushed over to him and gripped his upper arms painfully tight. “Oh my god, you got yours already?”

Ladon swiftly slithered inside Harry's shirt, coiling himself around his torso, leaving Harry staring at a panicked Hermione. She was so close that her bushy brown hair obscured his view of anyone sitting at the table.

“His dad's a teacher, he probably got his last night,” came Theo's voice.

“You got yours last night and you didn't say anything?” Hermione actually shook Harry at that. “Why didn't you get ours, too?”

“Some friend you are,” said Draco from somewhere in the room.

“Alright, what the hell are the three of you on about?” Harry demanded.

“OWLS!” Hermione cried, shaking him again. “What else could it be? OWLS!”

Sirius appeared behind Hermione and gently but firmly prised her hands off Harry. “He clearly doesn't have his results yet, Hermione. Why don't you go see if Remus has gotten your envelope untied yet?”

Hermione whimpered and whirled around, dashing over to the window where Remus was soothing a tawny owl whose feathers were all ruffled. A large, square envelope lay on the bench next to it. Beside Remus, Draco and Theo were in the process of untying their own envelopes from two more tawny owls. Narcissa was standing behind Draco, holding tightly onto a suit-clad Dobby's hand while they both watched Draco trying to remove the envelope.

Sirius smiled at Harry. “Welcome to the nut house. Hermione's been beside herself, and the boys aren't much better.”

Harry swallowed. “The results just arrived I take it?”

“About thirty seconds before you did. Your results should be on their way to you in Wales,” said Sirius.

“Why'd this lot get theirs so much earlier?” Harry asked indignantly.

Sirius laughed. “Geography, Harry. They're all being sent out from the Ministry. We're a tad closer to Westminster than you are.”

“Oh, right,” Harry said.
Draco and Theo had both untied their envelopes and were opening them up. Hermione was trying to do the same, but her hands were shaking so badly she seemed more likely to rip it instead. Remus reached out to help her, only to have his hands slapped away for his trouble.

“I don't reckon yours will reach your house for another couple of hours, at least,” said Sirius.

“Great, so I've got a while to stew,” said Harry.

Sirius slung his arm around Harry's shoulders. “You'll have done fine, Harry.”

Harry's stomach twisted unpleasantly. “I've fallen asleep in pretty much every History of Magic class I've ever had.”

“Most people do,” said Sirius.

Hermione and Theo were both reading their results in silence. Draco had taken one look at his parchment, paled dramatically, and then given it to Narcissa to read.

“I spent all of Divination gossiping with Pansy and Daphne,” Harry went on.

“From what I've heard about Divination – and about your friend Pansy – that would've been far more educational than if you'd paid attention,” said Sirius.

Harry looked at him with increasing dread. “Sirius, my dad's a teacher. What if I've failed something? Oh god, what if I've failed Potions? I'll be disowned!”

Sirius laughed and squeezed Harry's shoulders. “You can't've failed Potions, and Snape would never disown you. Now come on, let's go take your mind off it.”

“You want to distract me from my results by seeing how my friends did?” Harry asked incredulously.

“So it's not the best distraction,” Sirius said, steering him forwards, “but I want to see how they all went.”

“Okay,” Harry said, trying to calm himself down. “Okay.”

Draco looked up at his approach and reached out to grab his hand. “Mother?” he asked.

Narcissa lowered the parchment and pulled Draco into a hug. “Darling, I'm so proud of you.”

Draco released Harry's hand and hugged Narcissa back, before pulling away. “I passed?” he asked.

Narcissa handed him back his results. “You did brilliantly, darling.”

Draco snatched his results back off her and read them. He looked up again beaming. “I'm a genius!”

“Did you get straight Outstandings, too?” asked Theo.

“Don't be ridiculous,” Draco scoffed. “Wait, you did?”

Theo nodded. “So did Hermione. Ten Outstandings each.”

“I knew you would,” Harry said, grinning at both of them.

Hermione finally looked up, and gave Harry a relieved smile. “Thanks. What about you, Draco?”

“You passed everything!” Harry said.

Draco raised an eyebrow. “Did you think I'd fail?”

“No,” Harry said quickly. “Well, maybe History of Magic. You slept through that nearly as often as I did.”

“Fair point,” Draco conceded, over the sound of Sirius and Remus' laughter.

Theo cleared his throat. “Narcissa, may I go and visit Tracey? She should've gotten her results by now.”

“Of course, Theo,” Narcissa said. She hugged him briefly. “I'm proud of you, too. We're having a celebratory dinner tonight, though you're welcome to stay at Tracey's if you want to. Just let me know.”

Theo nodded, wished Harry luck, then left via the Floo.

Narcissa watched him go and heaved a sigh. “I suppose I had best be off too. Congratulations, darling, and you, Hermione. And I'm sure you've done well, Harry.”

“Go easy on her this time,” Remus said.

“I will if she will,” Narcissa said, then vanished through the Floo with Dobby at her heels.

“Er, what're your mum and Dobby doing?” Harry asked.

Draco huffed a laugh. “They're off to the Ministry to see if Mother can get any information out of her contacts there. She's going to pick a fight with Gemma while she's there.”

“Why would she want to do that?” asked Harry.

Remus shook his head. “She doesn't want to. Gemma's trying not to let on that she's in the Order. We think there may be Ministry employees who have their suspicions about her, so she and Narcissa have decided to begin a very public feud. Last time Narcissa went in, a couple of months ago, they had an argument that culminated in Gemma calling Narcissa a bleached blonde bimbo and charming her desk to chase her out of her office.”

Harry and Hermione both burst into laughter at that.

“Mother gave as good as she got,” said Draco.

“Yes, Draco, she did. Narcissa held her own in an entirely staged fight,” said Sirius.

“Oh, go chase your own tail,” Draco shot back.

Sirius just laughed, but Harry groaned. “Oh, I forgot about that.”

Sirius stopped laughing. “You forgot that I need to go chase my own tail? I mean, that's fun when I'm bored...”

“No, that I need to experiment on you,” said Harry.
There was a moment of complete silence while everyone stared at him.

“Do I get a say in this?” Sirius asked.

“It's nothing bad. Ladon said that he can smell that you two are an Animagus and a werewolf,” Harry said, looking between Sirius and Remus. “Dad wanted me to see if Ladon can smell that you're not an actual dog when you're in your other form. Because if he can, that'd mean that Voldemort can't send a certain rat to spy on us without Ladon spotting him.”

“That's actually a good idea,” Sirius said. “I was expecting electric shocks or something.”


“I haven't abandoned them, I've just run out. For now. I'm sure the Muggles will make more,” Draco said confidently.

Sirius clapped his hands together. “Alright, let's go experiment. Where's Ladon?”

“Give me a sec,” said Harry. He held out the collar of his shirt and looked down at Ladon, who was still coiled around his chest. “It's safe to come out now.”

“Why was Hermione cross with you?” Ladon asked.

“I'll explain later,” Harry said.

Ladon began to rise up through Harry's collar, to curl around his arm.

“Is he ready?” Sirius asked.

Harry relayed the question to Ladon, who nodded. Sirius immediately transformed into his canine form and fell to all fours. He gave a single bark, which echoed in the kitchen.

Harry held his arm out to Sirius. Ladon crawled along it, stopping when he got to Harry's hand. His black tongue flicked out rapidly as he rose up in order to get closer to Sirius, who was sniffing the snake curiously.

“Well?” asked Harry.

“Definitely not a normal dog,” Ladon said.

Draco laughed. “He says Sirius isn't a normal dog,” he translated.

Hermione and Remus both laughed. Sirius whined and cocked his head.

Harry ignored them all. “Care to elaborate?”

Ladon continued to smell Sirius. “It's the opposite of when he's a human. Right now, he's a dog, with human mixed into him.”

A loud meow made Harry turn around to see Crookshanks enter the kitchen. He rubbed up against Hermione's legs, then walked over to Sirius, purring loudly. Sirius woofed quietly and wagged his tail.

“While we're on the subject, Crookshanks isn't a normal cat,” Ladon said, staring intently at Crookshanks.
“No, he isn’t. He's half-Kneazle,” said Draco.

“Interesting,” said Ladon.

“Yeah, it is...” Harry agreed, then translated for those unable to speak Parseltongue.

“If Ladon can smell Animagus, then we must assume that any snake has that same capability,” Hermione said slowly.

Harry nodded. “Which means your disguise isn't safe, Sirius. Nagini would be able to sniff you out.”

Sirius sat down with a thump, his tail stilling.

“It was never entirely safe, Harry. Wormtail could recognise him, for a start,” said Remus.

Sirius transformed again and stood up, picking up Crookshanks as he did so. “Yeah, well, that was Wormtail. He'd have to see me, whereas Voldemort's snake could smell me even if I was out of sight. Still. We'll bring this up at the next meeting. It could be useful somehow.”

Harry nodded, pleased. “I better be going, I guess. I want to be home when my OWL results arrive.”

“Do you want to come over for dinner tonight?” asked Draco.

“Nah, I'll probably be celebrating with Dad,” said Harry.

“You sound more confident about having passed,” said Sirius, scratching behind Crookshanks' ear.

“Well even if I've failed everything, I reckon we'll still do something. Dad finally got the Defence job,” Harry said proudly.

“Dumbledore said yes?” asked Hermione.

“Yeah. Last night. Dad's thrilled,” said Harry.

“We finally have a good teacher in that subject,” said Draco.

“Thanks, Draco,” Remus drawled.

“I meant apart you, obviously,” said Draco.

“Yeah, you were great, but everyone else has been a joke,” said Harry.

“Fake Moody was alright, even if he turned out to be a Death Eater,” said Hermione.

“Maybe for you. He spent our classes insulting anyone with Death Eater relatives and implying that we were all going to turn out evil,” Draco grumbled.

“Do you know who'll be taking Potions?” asked Hermione.

“Slughorn. Dumbledore took me to meet him last night, to help convince him to return,” said Harry.

Sirius and Remus shared a surprised look. “Slughorn's coming back?” asked Sirius.

“Do you know him?” Hermione asked.

“He was our Potions teacher when we were at school,” said Sirius.
“And Head of Slytherin,” Harry added.

“Is he a good teacher?” Hermione asked.

“If he likes you,” Remus said, the same time that Harry said, “I don't think so.”

Sirius chuckled. “You can tell that already, can you?”

“I don’t think he'll be as good a Potions teacher as Dad was,” said Harry.

“At least give him a chance before you write him off,” said Sirius.

“Yeah, alright,” said Harry. “I really should get going. I promised Ladon we'd be home quickly. There's no Dementor mist for once and he wants to spend the day in the garden.”

“Of course he does,” Draco said, reaching up to stroke Ladon.

“Let us know when you get your results,” Hermione said.

Harry nodded. “I'll use my magic mirror.”

“You can't. I'm going out, and I'm the only one who can activate it from this end,” said Sirius.

“What are you on about? I've spoken to Draco on it before,” said Harry.

“Yes, he used mine to call you. Anyone can pick it up and call you, but you're the only one who will hear them, and vice versa if you want to call my mirror. Only once we've answered can someone else join in the conversation,” Sirius explained.

“Huh. Well, er, I'll send you a Patronus then,” said Harry. “I hate talking through the Floo.”

“Great idea. Except for the fact that Hermione and I won't be able to reply,” said Draco.

“I'm staying at home today, I can teach you both if you've got time,” Remus offered. “Well, I could, if I wasn't such a terrible teacher.”

“What will it take to make you forget about that?” asked Draco.

“Those chocolates you stole from the pantry two days ago,” Remus said at once.

“What? Why do you just assume that was me?” Draco cried. When Remus merely crossed his arms, Draco heaved a great sigh. “Fine, I'll go get them.”

Harry burst out laughing. “You just got busted. By a Gryffindor!”

“Shut up,” Draco muttered.

“What's that supposed to mean, Harry?” asked Remus.


Harry looked from him to Remus, then to Hermione. “Me? Nope, not at all. Gotta go!”

He walked out of the kitchen with Draco. The door shut behind them, but not before they heard the sound of the three Gryffindors within start laughing again.

“We're leaving?” Ladon asked hopefully.
“We’re leaving,” said Harry.

“Good. I have things to do,” said Ladon.

Harry grinned at Ladon, then looked back up at Draco. “Sorry for leaving you with them.”

Draco shrugged. “It’s fine. Sirius is leaving soon, and Hermione will be distracted by learning something new. As for Remus, I’ll give him the chocolate and have him eating out of my hand. Probably literally, if I feel like it...”

“What, he likes chocolate that much?” Harry asked sceptically.

“More than I do,” said Draco.

Harry snorted. “No one likes chocolate more than you, Black.”

Draco raised an eyebrow. “How do you think he knew I stole the chocolate, Potter? Because he intended to steal it himself, but I got there first.”

“Remus steals chocolate from the pantry?” Harry couldn’t help but laugh.

“All the time. It’s why I stole this lot – to make sure I got some,” said Draco.

“Sirius was right. This place is a nut house,” Harry muttered, before he leaned forward and kissed Draco goodbye.

Not five minutes later, Harry had Apparated Ladon and himself back home. Just like he had when they’d returned from Cokeworth, Ladon immediately dropped to the ground and raced over to the oak tree. Harry wasn’t much slower as he headed up the garden path. He burst through the front door, making Severus jump.

“What’s wrong?” he demanded, reaching for his wand.

“Have any owls arrived for me?” Harry asked.

“No. Why?”

“OWL results went out today. I got to Grimmauld Place just as they were all opening theirs,” said Harry.

“Ah. You’ll have to wait a while, I’m afraid. I’ll make us some tea, and then we’ll work on your Occlumency until your results arrive,” said Severus. “Did you remember to test Ladon?”

While Severus brewed the tea, Harry told him what had happened with Ladon, then how his friends had done on their OWLs. He gratefully accepted a cup of cardamom fragranced tea, then spent the next hour or so doing his best to block Severus’ Legilimency attacks. Harry was at the point where Severus was usually unable to penetrate his defences, but today he was so distracted by the prospect of his OWL results that Severus broke through his barrier a handful of times.

At last, another tawny owl flew in through the window. It fluttered down to rest on the back of the unoccupied armchair and hooted at Harry.

“Shit,” he said, getting up on suddenly numb feet.

“You’ll be fine,” Severus said, also getting to his feet.
Harry barely heard him, he was so focused on the envelope tied to the owl's right leg. He untied it as quickly as he could and ripped it open.

**ORDINARY WIZARDING LEVEL RESULTS**

Pass Grades: Outstanding (O)
Exceeds Expectations (E)
Acceptable (A)

Fail Grades: Poor (P)
Dreadful (D)
Troll (T)

**HARRY JAMES POTTER HAS ACHIEVED:**

Astronomy: A  
Care of Magical Creatures: E  
Charms: E  
Defence Against the Dark Arts: O  
Divination: A  
Herbology: O  
History of Magic: P  
Potions: O  
Transfiguration: E

Harry re-read the parchment before handing it over to Severus with a grin. “I got Outstandings in Potions, Defence and Herbology!”

Severus read the results then reached out to hug Harry. “I knew you'd do well.”

“I did better than I'd expected... I've even passed Divination, and I made up my answers for the entire practical exam. I must've gotten better at lying than I thought I had,” said Harry.

Severus laughed and let him go. “Good. Being able to lie convincingly will be far more useful to you than being able to see something in a crystal ball.”

“You're not mad that I failed History of Magic?” asked Harry.

“I never expected you to pass that subject,” said Severus. “You did brilliantly, Harry. I'm very proud of you, and you should be, too.”

“I am, yeah. I've gotta tell Draco and Hermione,” said Harry, then drew his wand. “*Expecto patronum*. For Draco Black. I failed History of Magic, but passed everything else and got Outstandings in Potions, Defence and Herbology!”

His fawn waited patiently throughout his message, then bounded out of the room. Harry watched it disappear then turned back to face Severus.

“We're celebrating tonight, yeah?”

Severus nodded. “I thought we might have dinner at one of the pubs in town. Unless you've other plans?”

“No, that sounds good,” said Harry.
“Good, because we have a lot to celebrate,” said Severus.

“Yeah, I passed my OWLs and you're the new Defence teacher, I know,” said Harry.

“And you're going to be the new Quidditch Captain,” said Severus.

Harry blinked at him. “I'm what?”

“Do you not want the position? My apologies, I merely assumed you would,” said Severus, his eyes glinting in amusement.

“Very funny. I'd just forgotten the position was going to be vacant, that's all. Thank you!” Harry hugged Severus again, then pulled away with a frown. “Aren't you worried that people will say I've only got it because I'm your son?”

“No one who has seen you fly could possibly say that you are unqualified for the position,” Severus said dismissively. “Besides which, you're the most senior player on the team, and Adrian recommended you to me himself before he left Hogwarts.”

Harry smiled at that, but was prevented from replying by the arrival of Draco's Patronus. It scampered through the air to stop in front of Harry. Draco's voice issued from its mouth.

“Congratulations! By the way, you should begin all future messages with the announcement that you've failed something. Hermione's reaction was priceless.”

Severus watched the Patronus in amusement. “Please tell me Draco no longer claims that his Patronus is a Jarvey. That is clearly a normal ferret,” said Severus.

Harry sniggered, then Hermione's magpie materialised and took the place of the ferret. “Ignore Draco, he's being a berk. But I'm very happy for you, Harry! We're all NEWT students now!”

Harry cast his Patronus again and beamed at his fawn. “For Hermione Granger. Thanks, guys. Draco, my dad just made me Quidditch Captain! I get to boss you around for the next two years!”

Draco's ferret returned a few minutes later. “I'm resigning from the team in protest at this blatant display of nepotism,” came Draco's drawling voice.

“I highly doubt that this is what Albus had in mind when he discovered how to send messages via Patronus,” said Severus.

Harry just shrugged. “What he doesn't know won't hurt him.”

“Indeed. We'll take the day off from training. I'll be in the barn taking refuge from the influx of Patronuses,” said Severus. He stopped and put his hand on Harry's shoulder. “I really am very proud of you.”

Harry smiled. “Thank you.”

Harry spent the rest of the afternoon reclining on the couch going through his Quidditch books, with the radio set to a Muggle station playing upbeat pop music. He hummed along to the few songs he knew as he jotted down new training drills and game strategies he wanted to try, every now and then replying to a Patronus message from either Draco or Hermione.

Severus returned to the house at sunset. “What on earth is that racket?”

“It's called music,” Harry said, kneeling up to look at Severus over the back of the couch.
Severus shook his head. “That is not music.”

“When did you get so old?” asked Harry.

“Don't try the age card, Harry. I don't have a problem with most of the music you listen to. This is just tripe,” said Severus.

“It's by some new girl group. I like it,” Harry said stubbornly.

“You've clearly taken leave of your senses,” said Severus.

“No, you're –”

Severus was spared what Harry was sure was a devastatingly witty comeback when yet another Patronus burst into the room. This one was a massive, shaggy dog that looked very familiar. Sure enough, when its mouth opened, it was Sirius' voice with which it spoke.

“Just got home and heard the news. Good work, Harry! James and Lily would be damn proud of you.”

Its message delivered, the dog faded from the room, leaving Harry swallowing around the sudden lump in his throat. Severus walked forward and squeezed his shoulder lightly.

“He's right. They would be.”

“I know,” Harry said quietly.

Walking to Cerrigydrudion at twilight, Harry couldn't help be relieved about the rare lack of mist. The empty moors and sheep-filled fields through which he and Severus were walking would have been rather creepy if filled with chilly mist.

“Does this mean that the Dementors have stopped breeding?” Harry asked.

“I doubt it. They've probably just relocated,” said Severus.

“Permanently?” Harry asked hopefully.

“I think that's too much to ask. Just enjoy their absence while it lasts,” said Severus.

“Oh, I will,” Harry said emphatically.

When they arrived in Cerrigydrudion they found the village winding down for the night. Shopkeepers were closing up their businesses; children playing in the street were being called home by their parents; and the few streetlights were flickering on. The White Lion was just beginning to fill up, and after ordering at the bar, Harry and Severus carried their drinks over to a table in a corner, far from the crowd gathered around the television. Harry peered momentarily at the screen, which was showing a cricket match, before shaking his head slightly. Cricket no longer seemed that exciting after having played Quidditch.

After their food had arrived, Severus cast a Muffling Charm. “Have you decided which subjects you wish to study this year?” he asked.

Harry nodded and swallowed his mouthful of steak and kidney pie. “Yeah, I think so. I definitely
want to continue Defence, Potions, Herbology, Charms and Transfiguration... I don't have to make a
decision just yet though, do I?"

Severus shook his head. “You have until the first day of class to finalise your choices. What are you
undecided about?”

“Er, Astronomy and Care of Magical Creatures,” said Harry.

“I thought you wanted to drop Astronomy,” said Severus.

“I do. But you want me to continue it,” said Harry.

“It's not my choice to make,“ Severus said simply.

Harry pushed his food around. “Hopefully Hagrid has a similar attitude. I mean, I'm not taking these
subjects in order to get a specific career. They're just the ones I like, or are the most useful in
general.”

Severus sipped his beer as he thought this over. “Why don’t you simply tell him that you cannot take
his class because you'll be busy training to defeat Voldemort? It is the truth, after all. There's no need
to tell him that you dislike the subject.”

“I don't dislike it as such... Apart from the Skrewts, most of what we studied was kinda fun. I just
don't really think any of it would be all that useful to me,” said Harry.

“You don't need to justify your choice to me. If you're so worried about Hagrid's reaction, I can take
you to Hogwarts and you can talk to him about it before term starts,” Severus offered.

“Yeah?” Harry said, perking up.

Severus nodded. “I'll need to go up at some point to remove anything I need from the Potions
classroom and to set up the Defence classroom. You're free to come with me.”

“Yeah, okay,” Harry agreed.

It wouldn't be a fun conversation, not in the slightest, but hopefully Hagrid would understand.

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The next morning Severus watched as Harry set up the wards in front of their house. When he was
done, Harry turned to face Severus. “What are the rules?” he called.

Severus gave a very unsettling smile. “What makes you think there will be any rules?”

“No rules. Got it,” Harry muttered. No rules meant absolutely no protection against anything Severus
might throw at him, but it also gave Harry absolute freedom in what he could do.

“I will grant you one concession: I shan't use Legilimency upon you, which means you do not have
to Occlude,” said Severus. “On three.”

Harry nodded, and they counted together. As soon as they reached three, Harry felt his glasses fly off
his face. He squinted at Severus, who quickly walked over to return them.

“That's been annoying me for a while now. I'd hoped by now that you would have anticipated
someone Summoning your glasses,” he said reproachfully
Harry put them back on his face and frowned. “How do I defend against that?”

“A Temporary Sticking Charm will do,” said Severus. “Only an extremely strong Summoning Charm could break that, and most people wouldn't even bother, just as they wouldn't bother attempting to Summon their opponent.”

Harry immediately charmed his glasses, then looked up at Severus, who was still smirking.

“Again?”

“Again.”

This time, Harry immediately cast a Shield Charm. Less than a second later the shield was hit by Severus' Stinging Charm. Harry smirked when his shield held, and watched Severus as he sent a quick flurry of spells at Harry, testing the strength of his shield.

Harry's smugness was short-lived. When Severus was unable to find a weakness in the shield, he Disapparated. Before Harry could properly search for him, he felt the tip of a wand press against the back of his neck.

“You lose.”

Harry stepped away from Severus' wand and spun around. “Yeah, but now I know that I can Apparate within these wards without Splinching myself.”

“Using a defeat to your advantage... Well done,” said Severus.

“Thanks.”

“Return to your position.”

The revelation that he could Apparate freely within the wards was extremely helpful – in prolonging Harry's defeat. Try as he might, he just couldn't manage to get an advantage. Severus was faster than Harry, at both offensive and defensive spells. He could Apparate with greater precision than Harry could, and again was quicker about that, too. Harry had known that Severus wouldn't hold back, but he'd hoped that he might be able to win a round or two.

A few hours later, Harry realised just how foolishly optimistic he'd been. By the time Severus called an end to the lesson, Harry had completely lost count of how many times he had been Stunned, Petrified, tied up, or simply lost his wand.

“I don't think I believe you when you said you wouldn't use Legilimency on me,” Harry grumbled, once again lying flat on his back.

Severus leaned down and helped haul him to his feet. “I wasn't.”

“So then how come I failed so spectacularly? I knew I wouldn't be as good as you but I thought I might at least Disarm you a few times,” said Harry.

“Apart from the fact that I have two decades' worth of experience more than you do, you telegraph your moves,” said Severus.

“How?” Harry demanded.

“You can't cast non-verbal spells. It gives me a minuscule warning about what you are about to do,” Severus explained.
“Well that's not fair,” said Harry.

“No, it isn't.” Severus agreed.

“I have to practise non-verbal spells for homework, don't I,” Harry said flatly.

“Correct.”

“Shouldn't a teacher's favourite student get less homework than everyone else?” asked Harry.

Severus laughed. “If it makes you feel better, you get to hex your teacher with no repercussions.”

Harry brightened. “It does, yeah.”

“I thought as much. Now, I want you to begin trying to cast simple spells non-verbally. Levitation Charms... Warming and Cooling Charms, that sort of thing,” said Severus.

“Okay.”

“You did well today, Harry,” Severus said.

“Right, that's why I'm the one covered in bruises and grass stains, and you don't have a scratch on you,” said Harry.

“I'm serious. You were quick, sure-footed and used a variety of spells. Your Apparition has greatly improved and I was unable to get a single spell past your Shield Charms,” said Severus.

“Thanks,” Harry said, brightening. “I think as a reward I should get the shower first.”

Severus reached up and plucked a rather large clump of grass out of Harry's hair. “Agreed.”
Harry watched with unbridled glee as Severus' wand came soaring through the air towards him. “Yes! I did it!” he crowed, reaching up to catch the wand.

“Good work,” said Severus, striding forward.

“The student becomes the master!” Harry continued.

“I wouldn't go that far.”

“I am the champion my friend,” Harry sang, using both wands to drum against his legs.

“Do not use my wand as a drumstick – or yours, for that matter,” Severus snapped, snatching his wand back.

“Hey, you've been thrashing me for a fortnight. I think I've earned the right to celebrate getting one over you for once,” said Harry.

“Care to repeat your achievement?” Severus asked.

“You got it,” said Harry.

He and Severus walked back to their starting positions. Harry made sure his Occlumency shield was still at full strength. He might not yet be capable of casting non-verbal spells whilst duelling, but he was now expected to Occlude during his duels, as Severus had begun employing Legilimency against him. Satisfied his shield was impenetrable, Harry raised his wand and prepared for victory.

Severus had Disarmed Harry twice before Harry managed to win another round. The second time had been close, Harry told himself, and he felt more confident as he and Severus counted down together.

“Three... two... one!”

“Stupefy!” Harry cried. He immediately dove right, tucking himself into a somersault before popping up wand first. “Impedimenta.”

Severus blocked that spell, just as he had the first, then retaliated with a Full-Body Bind. It bounced harmlessly off Harry's Shield Charm, as did his Disarming Charm. Harry threw a volley of hexes at Severus, all of which he deflected, before he almost hit Harry with a Stunning Spell.

Harry ducked under the spell, then dodged left a few metres. “Expelliarmus. Stupefy. Impedimenta. Depulso.”

The barrage of spells hit Severus' shield in multi-coloured bursts of spell light, momentarily obstructing Severus from view. Harry took the opportunity to dart further left, then launched another lot of spells. This time, when Severus disappeared from view, Harry took the opportunity to Disapparate, aiming to land behind Severus.

He was a little off-target, and ended up slightly to Severus' left. Before Severus could fully turn around, Harry shot another Disarming Charm at him, and once again caught Severus' wand.

“I think you lost something,” Harry said.
“Well done,” Severus said, holding his hand out for his wand.

Harry gave it to him. “Again?”

Severus nodded. “Last round for today.”

This time Severus cast first. Harry threw up a hasty Shield Charm, holding it up after he’d deflected the Disarming Charm, waiting to see what Severus would do next.

He Disapparated.

Harry immediately dove forward and flattened himself in the grass. “Serpensortia,” he whispered. “Bite him,” he said to the black snake that emerged from his wand.

“Stand up and fight, or I'll hex you while you lie in the grass,” Severus said from behind him.

Harry cast another Shield Charm and stood up slowly, careful to keep himself completely shielded. Severus didn't wait for him to fully emerge from the grass before he began shooting spells at him. Harry's shield held, however, and when the spell-light cleared he smirked at Severus.

“Are you just going to hide behind your Shield Charm, or are you going to actually mount an attack?” asked Severus.

“I already have,” Harry said simply.


Harry grinned. “Thought you might.”

Severus dismantled the wards they'd set up, then they walked back to the house together.

“Those snakes you conjure are a good strategy, but I don't want you relying on them too much. They may very well be useless against Voldemort.”

“Yeah, I figured as much,” said Harry. “But they're very effective against you and Hermione.”

“Indeed. Go get lunch started while I go and take yet more anti-venom,” said Severus.

Harry had the lunch things out on the kitchen table and was halfway through making himself a sandwich by the time Severus walked downstairs from the bathroom. He turned off the radio that Harry had turned on before joining Harry in the kitchen, putting an empty vial of anti-venom on a benchtop.

“Oi, I was listening to that,” Harry objected.

“That song is driving me insane. Must you listen to it so often?” Severus grumbled.

Harry shrugged. “The Muggles keep playing it on the radio, and I like it. Plus it's funny how much you hate it. Just think what all the Muggle-borns at school could do with the information that Professor Snape hates the Spice Girls.”

Severus glared at him. “If I hear a single person singing that abominable song at Hogwarts I will hold you personally responsible.”

Harry didn't bother to point out the unfairness of that. If he got in trouble because someone else had
sung “Wannabe” within Severus' hearing, he'd get even by teaching the song to Peeves.

“I used the last of the generic anti-venom just now. Since you insist on ordering snakes to bite me, you can brew the next batch,” said Severus.

Harry nodded. “I'll make some after lunch.”

“Thank you. Don't forget to practise your non-verbal spell casting afterwards,” said Severus.

“No, Dad,” Harry sighed. He'd been practising non-verbal spells for over a week now, and all he had managed to cast was a simple Wand-Lighting Charm.

“Good. Now, you did well this morning. Can you think of any reason why your performance has improved?” asked Severus.

“Er, yeah. Apart from the whole snake thing, which is obvious, I've been watching you. You might be faster at casting spells and Apparating than I am, but I'm physically faster. I thought I'd try to be more athletic today, move around a bit more,” said Harry.

“A strategy that paid off. Did you feel your Occlumency shield faltering at all?” asked Severus.

“No, it felt solid the whole time,” said Harry.

“Excellent. I was unable to breach it with Legilimency but I had thought it may have slipped when you were diving around on the ground... You're already a highly capable duellist. Master non-verbal spells and you'll be a truly formidable opponent,” said Severus.

Harry hastily raised his sandwich to his face to hide the way he reddened at the praise.

After lunch Harry grabbed his Walkman from his room before heading out to the barn. It didn't take him long to brew the anti-venom – he'd made so much of it over the last year that he moved almost on autopilot, his mind more occupied by thoughts of his birthday, which was the following day. He and Severus were going over to Grimmauld Place for a birthday diner, after which Harry would spend the night, and he was greatly looking forward to it.

After decanting the anti-venom and putting the bottles aside, Harry determinedly aimed his wand at the dirty knives. Keeping his mouth firmly shut, he tried with all his might to cast a simple Scouring Charm. After a few minutes' effort, he gave up and cleaned the equipment by hand. He thought that he might have managed to clean a few smears off one of the knives, but he also thought it equally likely to have merely been a trick of the light.

That night he practised non-verbal spells again before bed, trying to clean the base of Hedwig's cage. She watched curiously from the back of his desk chair as he stood in front of his desk, his wand aimed at her cage. After a minute or two, he definitely saw a decrease in the layer of filth at the bottom of the cage.

“There you go, Hedwig, I can cast a non-verbal Scouring Charm,” he said.

Hedwig tilted her head and gave a low trill.

“Well, I thought it was impressive,” Harry muttered. He cast a verbal Scouring Charm, leaving the cage pristine, then moved over to stroke Hedwig. “Have fun hunting.”

Hedwig allowed him to stroke her for a while, then gave his finger an affectionate nip and took off through the open window. Harry got into bed and spent a few minutes lighting and extinguishing his
wand, all without saying a word.

“You're quite odd sometimes,” Ladon said from the headboard, where he was watching the light show.

Harry laughed up at the snake and set his wand on his bedside table. “Goodnight to you, too.”

“Goodn – oh, not another one,” Ladon grumbled.

Harry sat up when an unfamiliar owl came flying through the window, with a large package tied to its talons. It landed on Harry's desk and hooted. While Ladon watched warily from the bed, muttering angrily about this new owl, Harry untied the package it had brought and opened it. He found a large box of assorted sweets from Honeydukes and a note scrawled in Hagrid's messy writing.

Happy birthday Harry!
I know there's no need to smuggle you presents anymore, but old habits die hard.
Hope you're enjoying your holidays.
Looking forward to seeing you again.
Love,
Hagrid

Harry smiled at Hagrid's note. No, there was no longer any need to hide the fact that he was receiving gifts, but he was touched that Hagrid had kept up the tradition of sending Harry his birthday present at midnight.

******

The morning of his birthday, Harry woke up to what was the coldest, mistiest day of the summer so far. He sighed and closed his window as much as he could, leaving just enough room for Hedwig to get in and out as she pleased. He got dressed quickly, getting out his slippers for the first time that summer.

“Want a fire?” he asked Ladon.

“Yes, please,” Ladon said sleepily.

Harry picked Ladon off the bed and draped him around his neck, then headed downstairs. He found the fireplace already lit up, warming the lounge room. He put Ladon down on the hearth, then walked into the kitchen.

Severus was cooking something on the stove, but he turned around at Harry's entrance. “Happy birthday, Harry,” he said. He put down his spatula and gave Harry a quick hug.

“Is it?” Harry asked gloomily, pointing out the window.

Severus grimaced. “It will be. I'm making chocolate pancakes.”

Harry brightened; he had never had them before, but they sounded delicious. “Can I help?”

Severus turned back to the stove. “You can make some coffee if you feel like it. Getting up early on your birthday is evidently to be a habit.”

“Er, I guess,” said Harry, flicking the kettle on. “But at least I haven't attacked you like I did last
year. I think that shows personal growth.”

“I should have thought that your recent growth spurt shows enough personal growth for one person,” said Severus.

“I'm the same height as Narcissa now, and she's not exactly short,” said Harry happily.

Severus flipped a pancake. “I expect you'll be taller than me within the year.”

Harry grinned. “You reckon?”

Severus shrugged a shoulder. “I don't see why not. Lily was only of average height, but James was taller than me, and you take after him in almost every physical aspect. Apart from your eyes, of course.”

“Yeah, I've been told before I've got my mum's eyes. You know, once or twice... a week... by everyone I've ever met,” said Harry.

“Stop exaggerating,” Severus said.

“Hey, if I can't exaggerate on my birthday, when can I?” countered Harry.

“Why don't you open your presents instead?” Severus asked, using the spatula to point at the presents sitting on the table.

Harry abandoned the coffee to rip open the neatly wrapped gifts. Severus had given him a pair of Quidditch boots in black dragonhide, with matching gloves, and a copy of *Flying with the Harpies*. Harry flicked through it eagerly, watching the pictures of the team flying.

“Thank you, this'll come in really handy this year,” he said.

“That was the idea,” said Severus.

He put two plates piled with pancakes down on the table, then returned with the cups of coffee Harry had begun to make.

Chocolate pancakes turned out to be as good as Harry had been expecting. He scarfed down an entire pancake before he paused long enough to speak. “Are we duelling this morning?”

Severus shook his head. “You may have the day off. Given the strength of the mist today, I fear there may be some Dementors in the immediate area. I don't want either of us to be attacked on your birthday.”

Harry raised an eyebrow. “But Dementor attacks are fine any other time?”

“It would be invaluable to your training if you were to face off a Dementor in the middle of a duel,” said Severus.

“So if it's still this misty tomorrow...”

“We'll be duelling as usual. Though I would still like you to spend some time practising your non-verbal spell casting today.”

Harry nodded, unsurprised, and helped himself to another pancake.

After breakfast they both moved into the lounge room. While Severus settled into his chair with a
stack of books, Harry put the record player on, then lay down with his sketchbook in front of the fire. He pulled out his wand and aimed it at a pencil, trying to cast a simple Levitation Charm. This proved to be an easier spell to cast non-verbally than a Scouring Charm, but it still took Harry an embarrassingly long time for him to get the pencil to lift off the floor.

“Did you put music on in order to fool me into thinking you're casting non-verbal spells?” Severus asked.

“No,” Harry said, letting the pencil fall back to the floor.

Severus cocked his head, then drew his own wand. “Silencio.”

Harry glared at him indignantly and mouthed a long string of swear words that he was unable to verbalise due to the Silencing Charm with which he’d been hit.

“You're lucky that I can't lip read,” said Severus. “I'll remove the charm once you've shown me that you are indeed capable of casting a non-verbal Levitation Charm.”

Harry rolled his eyes, but dutifully did as he was told. A minute or so later, he had the pencil hovering in mid-air. He smirked triumphantly at Severus, who cancelled the Silencing Charm.

“Good work,” he said.

“I can't believe you just used a Silencing Charm on me,” cried Harry.

Severus raised an eyebrow. “I've spent the better part of a month sending all manner of hexes and curses at you, but it's a Silencing Charm to which you object?”

“A duel's different. I'm fairly certain most parents don't go around using magic on their kids all willy-nilly,” said Harry.

Severus laughed. “I can guarantee you that most parents will have used that spell on their squalling infants at least once.”

Harry grabbed the floating pencil and began drawing. “I don't believe you.”


“I will,” Harry said.

*******

That evening Harry and Severus took the Floo over to Grimmauld Place. Harry stumbled out of the fireplace and managed to somehow bump into both Severus and a chair, only narrowly missing a passing house-elf.

Harry straightened up and brushed soot off his robes. “Sorry, Nossy.”

Nossy bowed. “Nossy is sorry for getting in sir's way. Dobby will show sirs to the lounge in a moment.”

Nossy scurried off to join the gaggle of house-elves working feverishly in the far end of the kitchen. A second later, Dobby Apparated into the room. “Happy birthday, Harry Potter! Good evening, Professor Snape. You is to be following me to the lounge, please.”
He led them out into the brightly lit hallway (Harry still half-expected it to be dank and gloomy), which was startlingly quiet after the bustle of the kitchen. Harry grinned at Dobby's outfit, which today consisted of a child's Batman costume, a woollen hat with ear holes cut into it, and his golden sandals.

"Where'd you get that, Dobby?" Harry asked.

"This, sir?" Dobby asked, gesturing to his batsuit. "Mr Draco bought it for Dobby, sir, when he was out buying Harry Potter's birthday present."

Harry hadn't been expecting that answer. "He got me something Muggle?"

Dobby's eyes widened. "Oh, yes, sir. Mr Draco and Mr Theo are going into Muggle London all the time, sir. Mr Draco needs to buy more video tapes and Mr Theo usually joins him. Of course, they is never going out alone, no, sir. Mr Sirius usually goes with them, or sometimes Miss Narcissa or Mr Kingsley or Mr Remus. Dobby has a lot of Muggle clothes now, sir."

Severus snorted. "If only Lucius were around to see his son shopping for Muggle clothes to give to a house-elf. He must be rolling in his grave."

"Yes, sir. Dobby is hearing Mr Sirius say the same thing last week," said Dobby.

Harry had to press his lips together to keep from laughing at Severus' expression.

When they got to the lounge Dobby held the door open and ushered them inside. "Miss Narcissa, Professor Severus Snape and Mr Harry Potter are here," he said formally.

Harry walked in to find Narcissa, Sirius, Draco, Hermione, Theo and a tired-looking Remus sitting around the coffee table, which was piled with presents. The windows were closed tightly against the mist tonight, with the gauzy curtains pulled shut, but thanks to the lamps lining the yellow walls, the room still somehow seemed filled with sunshine.

"Thank you, Dobby. We'll have the appetisers in here," said Narcissa, getting to her feet.

Dobby bowed and Disapparated, and Harry was soon engulfed in hugs and birthday wishes. He couldn't help feeling a little embarrassed as everyone watched him open his gifts.

Draco's Muggle present turned out to be a stereo. Theo had given him a stack of CDs to go with it.

"The sales assistant at the electronics store told me that soon all the Muggle music will be on these discs. We thought we should replace all your tapes before they stop working," Draco said.

Hermione grinned at Harry. "I tried to explain that your tapes will continue to work just fine, but neither of them listened to me."

Hermione's own present was a pair of books on advanced duelling strategies. After Harry had put them back on the coffee table, he saw Severus inspect one of them and give an approving nod.

Narcissa and Kingsley had given him a beautiful set of warm winter robes in dark green.

"Kingsley probably won't get home until late," Narcissa said apologetically, after Harry had thanked her.

Harry assured her he didn't hold Kingsley's absence against him, then opened his last present. A gigantic box from Sirius and Remus, he had left it until last at Sirius' insistence. It turned out to be
crammed full of all manner of Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes stock – far more than Harry would have felt comfortable taking for free off the twins. Harry was well acquainted with Weasleys' Wildfire Whiz-Bangs, Skiving Snackboxes and Extendable Ears, but much of the rest of the objects' purpose he could only guess at. He couldn't wait to go through it properly.

Harry grinned at Draco and Theo. “We are going to have the best parties when we win Quidditch this year. Look at all these fireworks – and prank snacks – brilliant!”

“Sirius and Remus gave me the same thing for my birthday,” said Draco.

“Good luck getting them into Hogwarts,” said Severus.

All three boys turned to look at him in dismay. “What d'you mean?” asked Harry.

“One of the new security features this year is mandatory searches of all students upon your arrival in September,” said Severus.

“Just students?” Harry asked.

“I'm not smuggling Skiving Snackboxes in for you,” Severus said at once.

“What about fireworks?” Harry asked.

Severus shrugged. “Fireworks I can live with. We'll negotiate the rest later.”

Harry nodded, satisfied. He'd figure something else out for anything Severus refused to take for him.

********

Dinner that night was held in the dining room instead of the kitchen as usual. While not as grand as even the smaller dining room at Malfoy Manor, the dining room was still beautifully decorated and comfortably seated eight. House-elves bustled around serving everyone with their usual cheerful efficiency, and conversation flowed freely around the table.

Harry was seated between Sirius and Draco. Together with Theo, they spent much of the meal discussing Quidditch. The Slytherin team may have had a new Captain, and needed to replace a Chaser, but that was nothing compared to the other houses. Sirius was disheartened to learn that Gryffindor needed to replace four players, including their Captain.

“Guess they don't have much of a shot in this year's cup,” he said.

“You never know,” Harry said, trying to be fair.

“You should be supporting Slytherin, anyway. For our sake,” said Draco, gesturing to himself, Harry and Theo.

Sirius sighed dramatically. “I know. And I do want you three to succeed... but if my younger self could see me, cheering when I get a letter saying that Slytherin's trounced Gryffindor...”

Theo raised an eyebrow. “Kingsley manages to support us without having an existential crisis, and he's a Ravenclaw.”

“Oh now that's not fair, don't try to pit us against each other,” Sirius said, though he was grinning.

“You do remember that you're the one who gave the Slytherin Seeker his Firebolt, right?” asked
Harry.

Sirius nudged Harry. “I was on the run and living on rats when I sent you that. I clearly wasn't thinking straight.”

“You were living on rats?” asked Harry.

“Sometimes I pretended to be a lovable stray and begged food off people, but yeah, mainly rats. I got pretty bloody good at catching them by the end of that year,” said Sirius.

“I'll bet,” Harry said, thinking of how awful an existence that must have been.

Sirius nudged him again. “Hey, cheer up, birthday boy. That's all in the past now, and besides, I wasn't entirely alone. I had Crookshanks for company.”

“And we all know how much Sirius loves that cat. I'm surprised Remus isn't jealous,” Draco teased.

Sirius just laughed. “I wouldn't go that far, but Crookshanks is a great cat. I've half a mind to nick him off Hermione.”

Across the table, Hermione had been talking to Remus, Narcissa and Severus, but she turned around at Sirius’ words. “Am I going to have a pet when I get back next week?” she asked.

“Cross my heart, I won't steal Crookshanks,” said Sirius.

“Where are you going?” Harry asked.

“Pansy's. She's broken up with Millicent so she's asked Daphne and I to spend a few days there. I think we're all supposed to commiserate over being single and cheer each other up,” said Hermione.

“Pansy and Daphne are single?” asked Harry.

“Pansy and Millicent fought all the time, you can't be surprised that Millicent eventually got fed up,” said Hermione.

“Well, no, but Daphne and Adrian seemed happy,” said Harry.

“Blaise said they were having problems,” said Theo.

“How would he know?” Draco scoffed.

“Blaise always knows those sorts of things,” Harry mused.

“Yeah, that and Daphne told him,” said Theo.

“Why would she tell Blaise?” asked Hermione.

“Because they talk about this stuff all the time,” said Theo. “Why do you think they've never dated each other? It's because they each know every single trick the other has up their sleeve. They'd be bored within five minutes.”

Harry thought Theo might be onto something there, but before he had a chance to say anything, Tilly Apparated into the room. She whispered something to Narcissa, who nodded, excused herself, then followed Tilly out of the room.

“No point worrying until she gets back, Draco,” said Sirius.
Harry looked around the table, which had turned grave at Narcissa's exit. “What's going on?”

“Order business,” Remus said quietly.

Draco gave Harry a wan smile. “Welcome to life at Grimmauld Place. Hopefully it's not someone on our side this time.”

Harry nodded and stared down at his plate, no longer very hungry. He'd never really thought about what it must be like living at the headquarters of the Order of the Phoenix. He'd assumed that it wasn't that bad at Grimmauld Place, now that Narcissa was redecorating, but he'd forgotten that it was still the first port of call for any Order members who had news of someone disappearing or turning up dead.

After what seemed like a lifetime, but in reality couldn't have been more than a few minutes, Narcissa returned. She was followed by Tilly and, to Harry's delight, Gemma. Narcissa smoothly had everyone move around the table so that Tilly could set up an extra chair for Gemma, in between Harry and Draco.

“Happy birthday, Harry,” Gemma said.

Her smile was a ghost of its usual brilliance, and Harry's attempt to return it turned out more of a grimace. “What's happened?” he asked.

Gemma cleared her throat. “Karkaroff's body's been found up north.”

“Oh. Is that all?” asked Draco.

“Draco!” Narcissa hissed.

“What? It's not like he was on our side,” said Draco.

Remus ignored them both. “Is your source reliable?”

Gemma nodded. “Tonks told me. The Aurors are heading out now to search the area, but she managed to speak to me before she left. He was in a remote shack with the Dark Mark in the sky overhead. He... he was in bits.”

Gemma's queasy expression suddenly made sense to Harry, whose own stomach lurched unpleasantly at that bit of information.

“They're sure it was him?” Severus pressed.

“Two parts of him were left undamaged: his face and his left forearm,” said Gemma. “It's him alright, and they want us to know it.”

Severus was a little paler than usual, but he didn't show any other sign he was troubled by the news. “We knew they would be after him. He did, too, it's why he ran away.”

“I'm surprised he made it this long, to tell the truth,” said Remus. “Regulus only made it a couple of days before Voldemort caught him, didn't he?”

Sirius nodded curtly. “I think so. Kind of hard to tell since we never found a body.”

“I can't see Regulus living long once the Dark Lord decided to hunt him down,” said Narcissa.

“Don't tell me you believe that tripe, too,” Severus said scornfully. “Voldemort didn't kill Regulus,
and neither did any of the Death Eaters."

“You'd know all about that, wouldn't you,” Sirius muttered.

“Yes, I do, and so would you if you thought about it for one moment,” Severus snapped.

“Boys,” Narcissa said warningly. She glared at both Severus and Sirius, then nodded at Severus.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean you've just heard about what happens to someone who personally angers Voldemort. Their bodies are found in pieces, with the Dark Mark hovering in the sky,” said Severus.

Suspicion and hope mixed on Sirius' face as he met Severus' gaze. “Are you saying that Regulus might still be alive?”

“I don't think so, no,” Severus said quietly. “I think Regulus wanted to leave the Death Eaters, and in order to save himself from a grisly death like Karkaroff, he committed suicide.”

Sirius frowned. “He killed himself? How?”

“I've no idea. Personally, I'd use poison – something fast acting, preferably painless, but I cannot speak for what means Regulus chose, if indeed he chose at all,” said Severus.

Narcissa clapped her hands. “Enough! This conversation is over. It's Harry's birthday and it's time for cake. If you must continue this morbid speculation, you will do so elsewhere.”

Everybody obediently fell silent, and a minute later the elves had whisked away the dinner dishes, immediately returning with a large cake. “Happy Birthday” was sung, cake was served, and the mood gradually lightened once more.

Gemma licked some icing off her dessert spoon and grinned at Harry. “You know, I thought about bringing you a gift, but then I thought, why do that, when I can bring incredibly morbid conversation instead?”

“Good thinking, no one else brought me morbid conversation this year,” said Harry.

“Right? This way, I stand out from the crowd,” said Gemma.

“Oh please, because you're usually such a wallflower,” Draco said from her other side. “Nym told me what you did at that Muggle club last week.”

“Yes, Gemma, rest assured I'll be incorporating that little titbit of information into our next public spat,” said Narcissa.

“Go for it,” Gemma laughed.

“What'd you do?” Harry asked curiously, over the sound of both Draco and Theo sniggering.

“Nothing that needs to be repeated in front of my old Head of House,” Gemma said, glancing at Severus, who smirked but said nothing.

Sirius waved his hand dismissively. “Gemma, one of the best things about being out of school is that your old teachers no longer have any authority over you.”

Gemma arched a brow. “Oh, really? In that case, you won't mind if, at the next Order meeting, I have a nice little chat with McGonagall about that time you almost got arrested by the Muggle
police.”

Sirius' grin faded. “There's no need for that,” he said quickly.

“What did you do to get arrested?” Harry asked.

“Almost arrested,” Sirius corrected.

Remus chuckled. “Sirius and James went flying through Muggle London on Sirius' bike, without using the invisibility function. It went about as well as you'd expect.”

“There were extenuating circumstances,” said Sirius.

“Yes, they were drunk,” said Remus.

Sirius sighed. “Okay, boys, here's what really happened...”

********

After everyone had eaten their fill of birthday cake, the party relocated to the lounge. Remus went to bed quite early – he was still recovering from the full moon the previous night – well before Kingsley had returned home from Downing Street. He sank into an armchair, eating a late dinner of leftovers brought by Iggy, and joining in every now and then to Severus and Narcissa's conversation. Severus stayed for an hour or so, before he got up to head back home. He came over to Harry and rested his hand on his shoulder.

“Enjoy the rest of your birthday, Harry. I expect you home before dinner tomorrow,” Severus said.

Harry nodded. “Goodnight, Dad.”

Harry spent the rest of the night happily listening to stories about the Marauders' youthful misadventures. With Severus gone, Gemma readily added her own stories, much to the amusement of the four teenagers. By the time he bid goodnight to Sirius and Gemma, who were staying up drinking and chatting in the lounge, Harry's sides were sore from laughing so much. He quickly forgot his amusement, however, when he asked where he was sleeping that night.

“In my room, of course,” said Draco, taking Harry's hand and leading the way upstairs.

Behind them, Theo sniggered. Harry didn't have to turn around to know he was smirking. “Shut it, Nott.”

“Looks like someone's going to have a very happy birthday,” said Theo. A second later there was a loud thwack, and Theo yelped. “That hurt, Granger.”

“Leave them alone or I'll hit you again,” Hermione said.

“What? Why? They're obviously going to shag. I'm entirely within my rights to take the piss,” said Theo.

“I'll keep that in mind next time you go off to spend the night at Tracey's house,” said Draco.

Harry could feel his face burning and tightened his hold on Draco's hand. Thankfully, they'd reached the third floor, where Hermione and Theo both disappeared into their own rooms. Harry and Draco continued up the stairs, walking across the fourth floor landing in silence, lest they wake Remus in his room. Draco ushered Harry into his room and shut the door quietly.
“Ignore Theo. He can be a complete arse sometimes,” Draco said.

“Yes, I know,” Harry said, giving a lopsided smile.

Draco leaned forward and kissed him softly. “We can just go to sleep if you want. I promise I won't kick you out of my room if you don't want to have sex.”

Harry shook his head. “No, I want to. God, Draco, of course I want to have sex.”

Draco smiled. “You do?”

“Yes, I do,” Harry said, nodding for extra emphasis. “I didn't learn that diagnostic charm for nothing.”

Draco raised an eyebrow. “Well that was seductive.”

Harry huffed a laugh and pulled Draco over to the bed. “Let's just get it over with.”

“Maybe you should give up on dirty talk altogether,” said Draco. He sat down on the bed and looked at Harry expectantly. “Alright. Diagnose me.”

“Okay,” Harry said, aiming his wand at Draco's head. “Ostendo venerea infectio.”

Pink light emanated from the tip of Harry's wand as he slowly ran it down the length of Draco's body. He repeated the process with himself, then grinned. “We're both perfectly healthy.”

“Are you sure?” asked Draco, who had watched the process with interest.

“Yeah. The light would have gotten a lot darker if we had any infections,” Harry explained.

In one fluid movement, Draco had swept up Harry's wand, placed it on a bedside table, and pressed Harry back into the pillows. He lay on top of him and kissed him, harder this time. “I don't know why, but that was oddly attractive, having you examine me like that,” he murmured against Harry's lips.

“For real?” said Harry. “Do you have a crush on Pomfrey I should know about?”

Draco bit Harry's bottom lip. “I mean it. You were very... intense.”

“And that's a good thing?” asked Harry, sliding his hands down Draco's back.

“When it means you're focusing on me like that, yes, it's a very good thing,” said Draco, arching into Harry's touch.

“You're such an exhibitionist,” said Harry.

“Are you complaining?”

“No...”

“Good,” Draco said.

He nuded Harry's leg to the side, then slid his own leg in between Harry's. He moved up a bit, so that he ground his thigh into Harry's rapidly firming penis even as he latched his teeth onto Harry's earlobe and began to nibble it. Harry slid his hands further down Draco's back, grabbing hold of his arse and pulling Draco even more firmly against himself.
Draco swirled his tongue around the shell of Harry's ear. “What -” he breathed, then swirled his tongue again, “- do you -” another swirl, “- want?”

Harry raised his hands to the buttons on Draco's robe and began unbuttoning them. “You.”

Draco chuckled and bit Harry's earlobe again. “That's very flattering... but I meant do you want to top or bottom?”

“Oh,” Harry said, his hands stilling. “I don't know... What do you want?”

“It's your birthday, I think you should decide,” said Draco. He slowly licked up Harry's neck, further hindering his ability to think.

“Er... I... I liked it when you used your finger last time,” Harry said, feeling his cheeks flush once more.

“You want to bottom?” Draco asked in surprise.

“I guess,” said Harry. A wave of heat rolled through his body at the thought. He reached up and pulled Draco's head up so that he could meet his eyes. “Yeah, I really do,” he said, far more confidently.

Draco's pupils dilated, and then he was kissing Harry again, harder and more urgently than before. He slipped his tongue inside Harry's mouth, sliding over Harry's own tongue. Harry moaned and ran his hands through Draco's hair, down his neck, then resumed unbuttoning Draco's robe, needing to feel skin.

Draco pulled away and sat up, making quick work of the rest of buttons. Harry followed him, pulling his own robe over his head without bothering with the buttons, quickly followed by his T-shirt. Bare chested, he reached for Draco again, feeling another pulse of lust as his pressed himself against warm skin. He trailed kisses down Draco's neck, interspersed with bites. He had just begun to lick the hollow above Draco's collar bone when he was pushed backwards to lie once more on the bed.

Draco deftly undid Harry's jeans and began tugging them off, taking his boxers with them. Harry lifted his hips to help him, then lay back when Draco pulled off his shoes and socks. He ran his hands up Harry's bare legs, pushing them apart and settling himself in between his knees to gently knead Harry's thighs. Harry's cock twitched with anticipation as Draco's hands drifted closer.

“Please...” he whispered.

Draco raised his eyes to meet Harry's. “Please what?”

“Please touch me,” said Harry.

Draco reached out to grasp Harry's cock and squeezed the head. “Like this?”

Harry's eyes drifted shut. “Yes.”

“Or like this?”

Harry's eyes flew back open when he felt Draco's other hand begin rubbing the sensitive skin behind his balls.

“That's good, too,” he said breathlessly.

Draco smirked and, before Harry could stop him, withdrew completely and leaned over to the
bedside table.

“Oi!” Harry cried. “Get back here, you git!”

Draco pulled something out of the bottom drawer and returned to his kneeling position. “I was getting this, you prat.”

He held up a bottle so that Harry could read the label.

“Where did you get lube from?” Harry asked, curious despite himself.

Draco rolled his eyes. “Sirius gave it to me after his sex talk. It was completely mortifying, though I can’t say it wasn’t helpful.”

Harry only half heard that explanation. As he’d been talking, Draco had unscrewed the lid to pour some lube out, and Harry was suddenly very focused on where those fingers would be in a moment. Some of his apprehension must have shown on his face, because Draco frowned.

“Do you still want to...?”

Harry blinked. “Yeah, of course. Just a little nervous.”

“Me too,” Draco admitted.

“You are?” asked Harry.

“Oh course I am,” said Draco. He placed the lube between his knees and leaned down to kiss Harry. “But I’m not going to hurt you. I love you.”

Harry smiled up at him. “I love you too.”

Draco kissed him again, then knelt back up and pressed his finger to Harry’s arsehole. It slid in with some resistance, but once it was in, it Draco twisted his hand, easily wriggling his finger around inside Harry. It felt... well. Harry wasn’t quite sure how he’d describe it. Good, just like the first time, but at the same time, very odd.

After a few seconds Draco worked in a second finger. It was tighter, but not painful, and Harry’s eyelids fluttered shut once more as he accustomed himself to the feeling.

“Alright?”

“Yeah.”

Draco began to move his fingers even more, twisting and pressing them inside Harry. It didn’t feel as good as having Draco’s hand on his cock, but it was pleasurable despite the strangeness.

Harry was just getting used to the feeling when Draco pressed against something that made Harry arc up and cry out in pleasure. “Do that again,” he ordered breathlessly.

Draco repeated his movement. “You like that?” he asked smugly.

Harry nodded frantically and gripped the sheet beneath him. He used the leverage to press himself more fully onto Draco’s fingers, wanting more of this amazing new sensation.

“That’s your prostate, by the way.”
Harry really didn't give a flying toss what it was called – all he cared about was how good it felt. After a minute or so, Draco's movements changed. No longer twisting his fingers, he was instead wiggling them, scissoring them in order to open Harry up. Draco's other hand was resting on Harry's thigh. The steady, gentle heat of it helped Harry remain calm, until he felt a new pressure. He gasped as he opened his eyes again.

“That's three,” said Draco.

Harry nodded, panting slightly now. Three fingers inside him. He felt full, now, full but he wanted more, and he wanted it now.

“I'm ready,” he said.

Draco's eyes met his. “You sure?”

“Yes. Please. I want you inside me,” said Harry.

Draco made a strangled noise and withdrew his fingers quickly – too quickly, giving Harry a small twinge of pain.

“Sorry!” he said.

“I'm fine,” said Harry.

Draco's brow furrowed, but he nodded. “Bend your knees, I think.”

Harry obediently bent his knees, putting his feet flat on the bed and letting his legs fall open even further. Draco nodded approvingly, and gave one of Harry's knees a reassuring rub. He poured out more lube and slicked his cock with it. Harry watched, transfixed, barely aware when Draco leaned over to return the bottle to the bedside table. All he could focus on was the long, thin shaft that would shortly be buried inside him. It wasn't that thin, now he looked at it from this position, and it seemed twice as long as he'd thought it was.

Harry tore his eyes away and watched Draco's face instead. His nervousness was alleviated somewhat when he saw the fierce concentration on Draco's face as he lined himself up at Harry's entrance. Trusting that Draco wouldn't hurt him, he managed a small smile.

“Let's do it,” he said.


Harry let out a weak laugh, which turned into a low groan when he felt Draco begin to push inside. “I'm fine,” he said, before Draco could ask yet again.

Draco nodded, and, biting his lip, continued to slowly press inside. Despite all his careful preparation, there was still a burn as Harry opened up. He took a deep breath and forced himself to relax his muscles. It helped, and before Harry knew it, Draco was fully sheathed inside him, his thighs pressing against Harry's arse cheeks.

Draco let out a relieved huff of air and looked up at Harry. “Alright?”

Harry had to swallow a few times before he could speak. “Yeah, okay.”

He'd thought he felt full earlier – that was nothing compared to this. It felt as if all the air had been driven from his lungs, and he took a few hasty gulps. “Move, please,” he managed to say. “Slowly.”
Draco wasted no time pulling back out halfway, before pressing back inside. “So tight...”

Harry merely panted, unable to speak due to this strange new feeling. He had a fleeting thought that perhaps he should move too, but it was taking all his effort just to lie there and remember to breathe. Thankfully, Draco seemed happy to do all the work. He moved his hands from Harry's hips to rest them on the bed and gradually sped up his jerky movements. Harry couldn't help grunting softly every time Draco thrust inside him. The burn was fading – he must have been loosening up, he thought – and though he doubted he'd be able to come from this, it was beginning to feel good.

Just then, one of Draco's hands slipped, changing the angle with which his cock plunged back inside Harry. It hit that magical spot he'd reached before with his fingers, making Harry cry out with mingled surprise and pleasure.

Draco froze. “Was that good or bad?”

Harry licked dry lips. “Good, yeah. Keep going.”

“I don't think I can last much longer,” Draco said.


A drop of sweat ran down the side of Draco's face as he started to move again. His rhythm was just as erratic as it had been when he'd started, but his pace increased. “Oh fuck,” he breathed. “Fuck – fuck – fuck – oh, god...”

Harry echoed him when he hit that spot again, and then before he knew it, Draco stiffened and let out a long, low groan. He shuddered a few times and then Harry felt hot liquid shooting into him. A few seconds later and Draco collapsed on top of Harry, crushing his cock between them. He lay there with his eyes shut, panting heavily for a minute, before he pushed himself back up.

“I didn't mean to come so quickly,” Draco muttered.

Before Harry could say anything, Draco was drawing out of him one last time, leaving Harry both relieved and empty. Draco shuffled down the bed and sucked Harry's cock into his mouth. Harry moaned in pleasure. This, now, was something that Draco knew how to do. There was no hesitation, no uncertainty in the way he licked and sucked the cock in his mouth, quickly moving into a smooth, sure rhythm. He raised a hand to play with Harry's balls, rolling them in his warm palm as he took Harry deeper into his mouth. Harry raised both hands to Draco's head and threaded them through his sweaty hair and pulled him down further. It didn't take long before Harry was arching up in orgasm.

He let go of Draco and lay back on the pillows in lazy satisfaction. Draco joined him a moment later, leaning in for a slow, sloppy kiss.

“You alright?” he asked, yet again.

Harry smiled and kissed him again. “I don't think I'll be getting on my Firebolt any time soon, but I'm fine. I liked it.”

“Even though I had to blow you to get you to come?” Draco asked, his cheeks turning pink.

Harry swept a lock of hair from Draco's forehead and rested his palm on his neck. “It was our first time. We'll get better – both of us. I didn't exactly do much, if you recall.”

“True,” Draco agreed, “though to be fair, I'm not sure I'd be able to do much with your cock up my arse, either.”
Said cock gave an interested twinge at the thought, despite Harry's exhaustion. “Are you saying you want to try it the other way?”

“Right now I just want to sleep,” said Draco.

“Oh thank god,” Harry said. “Me too.”

He kissed Draco again, and together, they pulled the covers up and over themselves. Harry took his glasses off and put them on the bedside table, then rolled over onto his side and pulled Draco’s arm over his chest. He kissed his hand and snuggled down into both Draco and the pillows.

Draco pressed a kiss to Harry’s neck, then lay his head down on the pillow behind him. “Happy birthday,” he murmured.

Harry smiled. It had been.
Harry woke up face down in the pillows with a weight pressing on his back and a dull ache in his
arse. He turned his head to the left to find Draco still fast asleep, with one arm slung possessively
over Harry. While he wanted nothing more than to stay in bed and go back to sleep, Harry's bladder
was protesting rather vehemently. With a sigh, he began inching to the edge of the bed to get up,
wincing slightly when that made his arse twinge with pain.

Draco's hand tightened on his waist. “Come back here,” he grumbled hoarsely.

Harry turned to face him again. “I need the loo. And my glasses.”

“So early,” was the grumpy reply.

“I never said you had to come with me,” said Harry.

He slid out from under Draco's grip and sat on the edge of the bed, shivering immediately in the cold
morning air. Unlike Draco's old room at Malfoy Manor, there was no fireplace in here. He rubbed
his eyes and put his glasses on, then hunted on the floor for his boxers. After disentangling them
from his jeans, he pulled them on and shuffled barefoot into Draco's bathroom.

As he peed, Harry looked around the room, impressed with its makeover. Gone were Regulus'
overtly Slytherin decorations. Instead, the room was done up in a mix of green and blue, slightly
darker than the wallpaper in Draco's bedroom. The round window was stained glass, a multi-
coloured abstract pattern. The pieces of glass were enchanted to move, swirling slowly in the frame
and dappling the room in blue and green light. Together with the wavy mosaic on the floor, it made
Harry feel like he was underwater, reminiscent of being in the Slytherin common room or
dormitories. He washed his hands and made his way back into the bedroom, where he was
unsurprised to find that Draco hadn't moved a muscle. He got back into bed, glad to be back under
the covers in the chilly morning, and cuddled up to Draco, who finally opened his eyes.

“Your feet are cold,” he said, glaring blearily.

“You're so cheerful in the morning,” said Harry.

“It's barely morning,” said Draco.

“It's around seven o'clock, judging from the sun,” Harry countered.

“See? Middle of the night,” said Draco, punctuating this statement with a yawn.

Harry rolled his eyes. “You can stay in bed all day if you want, but I'd like a shower. Where are your
extra towels?”

Draco groaned. “Tilly!”

A moment later there was a quiet crack when Tilly Apparated in. “Good morning, Master Draco,
good morning, sir. How can Tilly be helping, sir? Is Master Draco wanting breakfast in bed?”

Draco half rolled over to face her. “Just some guest towels, please.”

“Yes, sir,” Tilly said. In the time that it took Harry to sit up, Tilly had Disapparated, Apparated into
the bathroom with a quiet crack, then walked back through the bathroom door. “Can Tilly be doing anything else, Master Draco?”

“Yes, make Harry go back to sleep,” Draco said peevishly.

Tilly turned to Harry earnestly. “Master Draco is joking, sir.”

“Of course I'm sodding joking,” said Draco. “Yes, that's all.”

“Thanks, Tilly,” Harry said.

“It is being Tilly's pleasure, sir,” she said, before Disapparating once more.

Harry picked up his pillow and whacked Draco with it. “You are such a git in the morning.”

Draco whimpered and buried himself under the covers.

“Oh, no, you don't. You're coming with me,” Harry said stubbornly.

“What happened to letting me sleep in?” Draco asked plaintively.

“That was before I saw you be an arse to Tilly,” said Harry.

He got out of bed and wrenched the covers down to the foot of the mattress. Draco curled up into a ball and glared properly at Harry.

“Come shower with me,” said Harry.

Draco stopped sulking and sat up. “Fine. Let me use the loo first.”

Harry quite happily waited by the side of the bed as Draco walked into the bathroom stark naked. He hadn't been told he couldn't enjoy the view, after all. He waited until he heard the toilet flush and the shower turn on before walking in himself.

Steam was already rising and heating the room when Harry joined Draco in the shower, but it was still a relief to step under the hot water. He slid his arms around Draco's waist and kissed him.

“Am I forgiven for waking you up now?” he asked.

“I suppose,” said Draco. He pushed wet hair out of his eyes and rested his hands on Harry's chest. “How are you feeling?”

Harry gave an experimental wriggle, which had the delightful bonus of rubbing himself against Draco. “Okay. A bit sore, but nothing I can't deal with.”

Draco trailed his hands down Harry's chest. “That's good. And here I was prepared to take your mind off it... by whatever means necessary...”

“Did I say okay? I meant agonising pain,” Harry said quickly.

Draco chuckled and got to his knees. Water streamed over him as he smirked up at Harry. “Let's see if I can't do something about that.”

*******
Breakfast at Grimmauld Place was a busy affair, as Harry discovered. Last time he'd spent the night there, he'd had breakfast alone, in the dank, grimy kitchen. Now, the kitchen was bright and airy, with handsome new cupboards, granite benches, and a huge, shiny new stove. It was also completely filled with people and house-elves.

Harry and Draco sat down at the end of the table opposite Kingsley, who was finishing his breakfast. He was flipping through a Muggle newspaper, with more piled on the table next to him. Hermione was sitting beside him, reading the papers as he finished with them.

“Do you need to read those for work?” Harry asked, helping himself to the coffee.

Kingsley nodded. “Best way to blend in as a Muggle. I can keep up with large scale political events as well as technological advances and human interest stories. I've heard too many stories from co-workers who knew all about the Muggle government – some even knew how to drive a car – but then got caught out because they'd never heard of Coronation Street.”

“That would be a bit of a give away,” said Harry, laughing with Hermione.

“I also watch movies with Draco and Theo. Just in case I get caught in a conversation about James Bond,” Kingsley added with a grin.

“At least, that's his excuse,” Narcissa said from his other side.

“One that I'm sticking with,” Kingsley said. He shut the paper, added it to the pile and stood up. “I better get going. Nice seeing you again, Harry. Bye, Draco, Hermione.”

The three teenagers uttered their farewells, and Kingsley leaned down to kiss Narcissa goodbye. A house-elf Harry didn't recognise hurried over and held up a paper bag to him. “Your lunch, sir,” he said, in an unusually deep voice for an elf.

“Thank you, Rory,” Kingsley said. He put his lunch into a briefcase, snapped it shut and strode out of the room, looking for all the world like a Muggle bureaucrat.

Narcissa covered her mouth as she yawned, then reached for the coffee. “Will you be staying for lunch, Harry?”

Harry shrugged. “Sure, if that's alright with you. Dad wants me back before dinner though.”

Narcissa nodded. “You're always welcome here, you know that.”

Harry smiled. “Thanks. Speaking of Dad, he used a Silencing Charm on me yesterday, and when I protested he said that everyone does that with their kids, and to ask you about it.”

Narcissa laughed. “I used Silencing Charms on Draco constantly when he was a baby.”

“Excuse me?” Draco cried.

“Darling, you were the fussiest baby I've ever seen. You could cry for hours on end when you felt like it. Tilly and I would have gone insane if it weren't for Silencing Charms,” said Narcissa.

“Seems to me like it's the magical equivalent of giving a baby a dummy. Except this wouldn't run the risk of damaging the baby's teeth,” Hermione said thoughtfully.

“Of course, I got off lucky,” Narcissa mused. “Andromeda and Ted had a Metamorphmagus to look after. At least Draco couldn't change forms on me.”
“I think there are enough people changing forms around here,” Remus said as he walked in. He sat down with a groan and pulled a teapot towards himself.

“You're up before midday,” Narcissa said in surprise.

“Yes. This month wasn't so bad since I had Wolfsbane,” said Remus.

Harry watched in astonishment as Iggy and Nossy began laying platters of food in front of Remus. He doubted even Dudley would be able to eat that much food in one sitting. There was a stack of buttered toast, a dozen boiled eggs, a mound of fried mushrooms and tomatoes, a plate of kippers, and half a pig's worth of bacon and sausages. Nossy deposited a jar of homemade strawberry jam next to the toast and stepped back.

“Is sir wanting anything else?” she asked.

“I think I'll be right for now, thank you,” Remus said.

Nossy curtseyed and hurried down to the far end of the room, where there was a load of dishes waiting to be washed. Harry's amazement grew when Remus began to methodically work his way through the enormous meal, though no one else at the table blinked an eye. It was clearly part of Remus' recovery from his werewolf transformation; Harry just hadn't seen it before.

Theo wandered in when everyone but Remus had finished eating, though there was still no sign of Sirius.

“Well of course he's not up yet,” Draco scoffed, when Harry asked. “He's not a morning person, and unlike someone, he doesn't have a boyfriend who thinks it perfectly acceptable to drag an innocent person from their bed in the middle of the night.”

Harry rolled his eyes. “Are you ever going to drop that?”

“Yes, after you play Monopoly with me,” Draco said.

When there was widespread wincing at this, Harry frowned in confusion. “What's wrong with Monopoly?”

“Nothing, unless you're playing against Draco,” said Theo. “Narcissa and Dobby are the only ones who'll play with him.”

“Dobby plays Monopoly?” Harry asked, laughing.

“He's become quite the little capitalist since he was freed,” said Narcissa.

“You need more than two players, and Mother won't let any of the other elves play,” Draco pouted.

“I said they would no longer suffer cruel and unusual punishments after Lucius was arrested,” Narcissa said. “Dobby can at least say no.”

“Er, what exactly does a game of Monopoly with you involve?” Harry asked.

“Do you remember the game we played in the Room of Requirement?” Hermione asked.

“Yeah. You thrashed us at Trivial Pursuit, and then Draco walloped us at Monopoly,” Harry said with a shrug.

“He's gotten better,” Hermione said darkly.
An hour later, Harry found out that Hermione had been understating things. A game was set up in the lounge room, and it didn't take long for Draco to bankrupt his mother, before targeting Harry.

“I would've thought you might've gone a bit softer on me, considering you had your cock up my arse last night,” Harry muttered, handing over the last of his money and property.

Draco turned a very satisfying shade of pink at that, making Harry feel slightly better. “We're even, now.”

“About time,” said Harry. “Good luck, Dobby.”

Dobby stopped counting his Monopoly money and nodded at Harry. “Thank you, sir.”

Harry sat back on the couch next to Sirius to watch the remainder of the game.

“Got anything exciting planned for the rest of the week?” Sirius asked him.

Harry shrugged. “Not really. Dad's taking me to Hogwarts at some point, but that's about it.”

“What for?” Sirius asked.

“All the staff are working to strengthen the wards, and Dad needs to move all his things out of the Potions classroom and set up the Defence classroom. I'm tagging along to visit Hagrid. I'm dropping Care of Magical Creatures and want to tell him in person before school starts,” said Harry.

Hermione looked up at that. “Can you please tell him I'm also dropping his class? I just can't fit it into my class schedule.”

“Sure,” said Harry.

“Me too,” Draco said. “And tell him I've started to learn Gigantus, so I can teach him a few phrases next term.”

“Okay. But I thought you were still learning Mermish,” said Harry.

“No, I'm pretty much done with that. Arista was a big help,” said Draco.

“Arista?”

“The mermaid painting in the Prefects' bathroom,” said Draco.

Hermione's eyes widened. “You're friends with her?”

“Yes, we always have a chat if she's around when I bathe in there,” said Draco, grinning. “Arista's almost as big a gossip as Pansy.”

“Is she really,” Hermione said faintly.

Draco's grin turned wicked. “Oh, yes. She's most informative about people's bathing habits. I know all about who wanks in that bathroom and who sings.”

Judging by how red Hermione's cheeks turned, Harry gathered that she was in the former group. She hurriedly raised her book and hid her face behind it.

“Draco!” Narcissa snapped.
Draco gave her a nervous look, then turned his attention to Sirius. “She's also told me tales about non-Prefects over the years, who have somehow snuck in with their girlfriends to shag.”

Sirius just grinned. “If they'd made me a Prefect I wouldn't have had to sneak in.”

“No one in their right mind would have made you a Prefect,” said Remus.

“Thank you,” said Sirius.

“I hardly think your disciplinary record is something of which to be proud,” Narcissa said archly.

“That's your opinion,” Sirius countered.

There was a loud crack and a visibly upset house-elf Apparated into the room with a bundle of mail in her arms. “The mail has arrived, Mistress,” she said in a high-pitched, quavering voice.

Narcissa took the proffered letters and set them on the couch beside herself. “What's wrong, Lolly?”

“Kreacher is in the kitchen, Mistress,” Lolly said. “He is not being nice, Mistress.”

Narcissa sighed. “Sirius and I will be there in a minute.”

“Thank you, Mistress,” Lolly said in relief, before Disapparating away.

“These are your Hogwarts book lists,” Narcissa said, before standing up with Sirius.

“I'm getting so sick of this,” Sirius growled as they left the room.

As the closest to the mail, Theo leaned over and grabbed the letters. He took his own, then handed one each to Hermione and Draco. “Yours must be waiting for you at your house,” he said to Harry.

Harry nodded, unsurprised, and watched as Theo and Hermione ripped open their letters. Draco merely put his on the chair next to him and frowned down at whatever Dobby was doing on the game board.

“Lots of new books this year,” Hermione said. “What's Confronting the Faceless like, Harry?”

“How should I know?” he asked.

“Because your dad's the one who set it as our textbook,” she said.

Harry shrugged. “He's been reading a lot of Defence books lately, maybe he was trying to figure out which ones to assign.”

“You didn't ask him?” Theo asked.

Harry laughed. “Of course not. Unless he's out in the garden or the lab, Dad spends most of his time at home reading. I never really pay much attention to what he's reading.”

This answer earned him incredulous looks from both Hermione and Theo.

“Let's go see if we have old copies of any of these in the library,” Theo suggested.

Hermione readily agreed, and they hurried out of the room. With Draco and Dobby still engaged in their game, Harry turned to Remus.

“How has Severus been finding it, preparing for a new subject?” he asked.
“Fine, yeah. He's had to rewrite the entire curriculum, but I guess you'd know what that's like,” said Harry.

Remus nodded. “The curriculum was a complete shambles when I took over the subject. I don't know which of us will have had it worse, actually – me, taking over from Lockhart, or Severus taking over from Umbridge.”

“You,” Harry said at once. “Umbridge was awful, but at least Dad knows that he had a decent teacher a few years ago when you took the subject. I don't know who the last decent teacher would've been before you got there.”

“Thank you, Harry,” Remus said.

Harry shrugged. “You were a brilliant teacher.”

“It's always nice to hear, especially for someone who finds it as difficult to find employment as I do,” said Remus, getting a bit flustered.

“The Ministry is stupid. I'm not the only one who thinks you were the best Defence teacher we've had,” Harry said.

“Will you be saying that after Severus has begun teaching the subject?” Remus asked.

“I don't think it's really fair to compare the two of you. You taught me about Dark creatures, whereas Dad will teach us about whatever he's put on the sixth year curriculum,” Harry said, as diplomatically as he could.

Remus chuckled. “Nice dissembling. I suppose you picked that up from your dad.”

Harry wasn't quite sure what dissembling was, so he gave a noncommittal shrug. “Er, I've been wanting to ask you something about when you taught Defence, actually.”

“Yes?”

Harry glanced over at Draco and Dobby and found them busy haggling over properties. He turned back to Remus and lowered his voice. “How did you handle it when you had to demonstrate the Unforgivable Curses in class?”

“Ah,” said Remus. His eyes flicked over to the others, then he stood up. “Come with me.

Bemused, Harry followed Remus out of the lounge and into a study on the floor below. Remus shut the door behind them, and gestured for Harry to take a seat, while he himself leaned against the desk.

“I thought you might want some privacy... Now, I gather Severus has misgivings about casting those curses,” Remus said.

“I never said that,” Harry said quickly.

Remus raised his eyebrows. “You didn't have to.”

Harry slumped at getting caught out. “He'll be cross if he finds out I've said anything to you.”

“I won't betray your confidence, even to Sirius, you have my word,” said Remus.

“Especially not Sirius,” Harry said.
“I promise I won't say a thing,” said Remus.

“Alright,” Harry said, appeased. “Dad's a bit... He had to cast one of them when he was a Death Eater, and when he defected he said he'd never cast any of them again. And he hasn't, not even when we were at the Ministry... but now he'll have to, to teach the subject properly, and I thought maybe you might have some advice...”

“Advice which I assume he would not want to hear straight from me,” Remus said drily.

“Probably not, no,” said Harry.

Remus nodded thoughtfully. “The first lesson was the worst, but it wasn't as bad as I had been expecting. Severus' won't be as bad as he's dreading, either. I did have to have rather a lot of tea and chocolate immediately afterwards, though, and a stiff drink at the end of the day.”

“Dad says you need to be full of hatred to cast those curses,” Harry mumbled.

Remus shook his head. “Only when using them against another person. For spiders, or other invertebrates, one just needs to mean them. I didn't hate the spiders I used. If anything, I pitied them, especially when casting the Cruciatus Curse.”

Harry winced. “I think that's the one that'll give him the most trouble. It's the one he had to cast for Voldemort. Initiation thing.”

Remus grimaced. “Charming... Well, I can't say I have any experience with that aspect... Which year level will he be demonstrating these for, do you know?”

“Fifth year, mainly, but he'll be casting the Imperius on us and the seventh years, to teach us how to fight it.”

“At least he won't be demonstrating the Killing Curse and the Cruciatus Curse in front of you. I imagine that would be even more difficult...” Remus said. “All I can really say is that it's a necessary part of teaching the subject. Far better that the students are shown the curses in a controlled environment, instead of suffering themselves at the hands of Voldemort or his followers.” He gazed off in thought, then snapped back to focus on Harry. “Tell you what. I'll have a word with Minerva, and get her to speak to Severus. How's that?”

“Don't tell her I said anything,” Harry implored him.

“I won't,” Remus assured him. “I'll tell her that I had some trouble myself – which is true – and thought he might benefit from talking to someone, but knew he wouldn't listen to me.”

“Okay. Thanks, Remus,” Harry said in relief.

Remus gave him a small smile. “Not a problem. I may not necessarily like Severus all that much, but I don't wish him ill, and I certainly don't want to see you worrying yourself over something like this.”

“Yeah, well, I appreciate it,” said Harry.

“Thank you,” said Remus. “Now let's get back before we're missed. That game must surely be drawing close to its bitter end.”

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Harry Apparated home that afternoon, taking advantage of the absence of Dementor mist in the streets surrounding Grimmauld Place. He landed exactly where he had intended to, a few metres in front of the gate of Fen House, and he opened up the gate with a smile.

“You're back!”

Harry turned to find Ladon hanging off a branch of the oak tree. “Did you miss me?”

“Not at first. Severus was very helpful, even if he can't speak to me. But then an adder came by and asked for directions. He turned out to be a complete moron, and made me miss intelligent conversation,” said Ladon.

Harry walked over and held up his arm so that Ladon could climb down onto him. “You didn't want to come with me, remember? You don't like Grimmauld Place.”

“I would have been perfectly fine if it wasn't for that idiotic adder,” said Ladon.

His cool tone was belied by the fact that he coiled himself tighter than usual around Harry's upper arm. Harry reached up to stroke Ladon's head, resolving to spend a little longer than usual talking to the snake before bed that night. Hedwig never seemed to fret if she didn't see Harry for days on end, but Ladon had always been more needy.

Harry walked into the house to find Severus reading in the lounge room. “I'm back,” he said, heading for the kitchen. “Want a cuppa?”

“Yes, please,” said Severus. “Your book list arrived this morning. It's on the coffee table.”

“Yeah, the others got theirs while I was at Grimmauld Place,” said Harry.

He busied himself brewing up a pot of rich, cardamom-infused tea, and brought it into the lounge. He set the tea things down on the table, then removed his shrunken presents from his pockets, putting them down next to his book list.

“Engorgio,” he muttered, making his gifts grow back to their proper size. “Why aren't Shrinking and Engorgement Charms taught until fifth year? It'd make packing for Hogwarts so much easier if they were one of the first spells we learnt.”

“You'll have to ask Filius that. A better question is why didn't you try to cast that spell non-verbally?” Severus asked pointedly.

“Because I'd be here all day. Engorgement Charms are a bit harder to cast than Levitation Charms or Wand-lighting Charms,” said Harry.

“I think you've answered your own question there,” said Severus. “You need to start practising non-verbal spells more often, Harry. You'll be expected to do so at Hogwarts this year. More importantly, the ability will aid you in defeating Voldemort.”

“Yeah, I know,” Harry sighed. He reached for his book list and opened the thick envelope. Something heavy fell out onto his lap; a small, silver badge with a C on it. “My Captain's badge,” he said in delight. It was so brightly polished he could see his own reflection on its surface. He held it up to show Severus, grinning widely.

“It's official now,” Severus said, giving him a small smile. “What have you been assigned for Potions?”
“Missing your old subject already, are you?” Harry teased.

“Merely professional curiosity over whether or not Slughorn has set you the same texts I assigned to sixth years,” Severus said.

Harry scanned the list. “Er... *Advanced Potion-Making*”

Severus leaned forward. “*Advanced Potion-Making? Written by whom?*” he demanded.

Harry blinked, not having expected such a strong reaction. “Er, Libatius Borage.”

“Unbelievable,” Severus said.

“What is?” asked Harry.

“That book was outdated when I was your age. I used Mum's old copy and it hasn't been revised since her time. I don't understand how Slughorn can still be assigning it,” said Severus.

“How bad can it be?” asked Harry.

“One moment,” said Severus.

He walked over to one of the bookcases and searched the shelves, before sitting back down grumpily. “I thought I had my copy here but I must have left it at Hogwarts. Suffice to say I had to alter most of the instructions myself in order to brew anything remotely resembling a proper potion. I'll fetch it for you when I clean out my old rooms next week – you'll be better off using that this year instead of a new copy.”

“Okay,” Harry said, as neutrally as he could.

Harry had no doubt that whatever improvements Severus had made would be invaluable, and he was very grateful to be receiving them. He just wished they weren't necessary. Once again, he was annoyed with Slughorn's lackadaisical attitude towards Potions. And term hadn't even started yet.

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Harry and Severus waited until Monday to go to Diagon Alley, as according to Severus, it would be quieter and thus safer than over the weekend. Despite his lecture on the danger they were about to walk into, the pair were not ambushed in Flourish and Blotts; Harry wasn't kidnapped from Quality Quidditch Supplies; and Severus wasn't murdered in Madam Malkin's.

In fact, the only noteworthy occurrence was the reaction of the apothecary owner when he caught sight of Severus and hurried over at once. Having heard that Severus was no longer teaching Potions, the owner seemed genuinely upset by the news, and was only placated when assured that Severus had no intention of giving up brewing altogether. Talk soon turned to how other prominent brewers in Great Britain might react to Slughorn coming out of retirement.

It was a good thing Harry knew what ingredients he and Severus needed, for he quickly grew bored with the conversation. He methodically gathered up all the necessary items, but it was still a few minutes before Severus was ready to leave.

“I never knew you were such a gossip,” Harry said as they left the shop.

Severus gave him a withering look. “I'm not. The potioneers community in Britain is small and
competitive. The appointment of a new Potions professor at Hogwarts will always be a point of contention amongst our number. There will be some who think Slughorn too old for the job, just as there were some who thought I was too young when I started. The fact that Albus offered the position directly to Horace without advertising will have ruffled more than a few feathers.”

Harry merely bit his lip; Severus could deny it all he wanted, but it still sounded like gossip to him.

On Friday morning Harry and Severus Apparated to the gates of Hogwarts. It wasn't as quick as taking the Floo directly into the castle, but the Hogwarts Floo network had already been shut to all outside connections as a safety measure.

“All body parts accounted for?” Severus asked.

“Yeah,” Harry said proudly.

It was the longest distance he'd personally Apparated himself, and he'd been nervous about it, especially since he had some excess baggage: Ladon was wound around his shoulders – Harry was taking the chance to finally introduce him to Hagrid. Unbeknownst to Severus, there was also a shrunken package of Weasleys’ Wizard Wheezes hidden in his pocket.

“You okay?” Harry asked.

“Yes. That was fun,” Ladon said happily.

Harry shook his head; he'd never understand how anyone could enjoy Apparition.

Severus muttered the spell to unlock the school gates, securely locking them behind himself before he and Harry set off up the drive.

“Can just anyone unlock the gates if they know the right spell?” Harry asked curiously.

“No, the wards on the gate were designed by the four founders of Hogwarts to only recognise Hogwarts staff. Borrow Hermione's copy of *Hogwarts, a History* if you want to read up on them properly,” said Severus.

Harry laughed. “I can't do that. Draco and I have agreed to never read that book just to annoy Hermione. Don't tell her, though.”

“Your secret is safe with me,” Severus drawled. “Now, the rest of the staff and I are meeting in the staff room to discuss the new security features, before we come back outside to set up the spells. I'm not sure how long it will take, but you'll need to amuse yourself for the duration. Without eavesdropping on the meeting.”

“Okay,” Harry said, thinking of the Extendable Ears he had in his pocket that would now be going to waste. “I'll go visit Ollie. Ladon will like that.”

They split up when they got inside the castle, Severus walking up the grand staircase to the staff room, while Harry walked down into the dungeons. He took a detour to his dorm to drop off his contraband. It was cold and dark in the common room, with the lamps unlit and the fireplace empty, and his dorm was the same. The beds were stripped of all bedding and curtains – clearly, the elves did a thorough clean during the holidays – and Harry couldn't shake the feeling that the room had been abandoned. He didn't linger, merely stashed his loot in his bedside table and set off for Ollie's portrait.

Ollie was sleeping on a sun-drenched rock, and took longer than usual to wake up. “Is it September
“Still August, don't worry. Dad and I have a few things to do here, and Ladon and I thought we'd pop by to see you while we're here,” said Harry.

“That was thoughtful of you. It gets so boring here during the holidays with just Hatshepsut and the snake-charmer to talk to,” said Ollie.

“You don't get bored enough to talk to Hatshepsut, surely,” Ladon said.

“Er, is that that Egyptian cobra you told me about? The one who refused to talk to me?” asked Harry.

“Yes, Harry. She has been nicer to me since I introduced her to Ladon, but Hatshepsut still looks down on me for my weaker venom,” said Ollie.

“That, and she still hasn't forgotten that fight you had over Tom all those years ago,” said Ladon.

“That too,” Ollie conceded.

Harry frowned. “Do you mean Tom Riddle?”

“Yes, Harry,” Ollie said.

“You knew Voldemort?” Harry pressed.

“He tried to get me to call him by that ridiculous title, but I refused. One cannot turn oneself into a lord. The Bloody Baron was a lord. Tom Riddle was not,” Ollie said stuffily.

“Tom was Voldemort? You never told me that!” Ladon cried.

Harry didn't blame Ladon for being so upset. He reached up to stroke Ladon, then returned his attention to Ollie. “Were you friends with him, like you are with Draco and me?”

Ollie gave his tail an irritated flick. “Not like you and Draco, no. He was never friendly like you are. Flattering, yes, and he had many questions about Hogwarts, which I of course answered. Parselmouths are so rare that I will always speak to those who find my portrait. But I never befriended him. He never told me anything of himself. Hatshepsut adored him, though. I never understood why.”

“Because she's evil, too,” said Ladon.

Ollie rearranged himself on his rock before he answered. “She's not evil, Ladon, just snobbish. Manipulative. Mean. But not evil.”

“Sounds pretty evil to me. She sounds just like Voldemort,” said Ladon.

Ollie's head drooped. “I'm still not sure I believe all you say about him, Ladon.”

“What have you been telling him?” Harry asked in amusement.

“Just what you've told me,” Ladon said.

“How come you never told Ladon that Tom Riddle became your Lord Voldemort, Harry?” asked Ollie.
“Firstly, he's certainly not my Lord Voldemort. Secondly, it's never come up, I suppose. It's not like I've deliberately set out to tell Ladon Voldemort's life story,” said Harry.

“Please don't,” Ladon said.

“Let's change the subject, then,” Ollie said. “What have you been doing during your holidays?”

The rest of the conversation was spent on more light-hearted topics, until Ladon let slip that Ollie had been trying to convince him to bite Mrs Norris.

“It's been nice seeing you again, but we need to go see Hagrid now,” Harry said, trying not to be too abrupt.

“I'll see you both in September, I expect,” Ollie said, settling down to go back to sleep on his rock.

Once they were safely out of earshot, Harry looked down at Ladon. “You know you can't bite Mrs Norris, right? Or any other cats you see around here, for that matter.”

“I know,” Ladon said sulkily. “But I can dream, right?”

Harry laughed. “Yeah, you can dream. Come on, let's go wait for Hagrid.”

Hagrid's cabin was empty, but it was a friendly sort of empty which suggested that the cabin's occupant would be home any minute now. Harry sat down on the front step to wait – it seemed rude to just wander into house without him, even if he knew Hagrid wouldn't mind – and spent the time telling Ladon about Hagrid.

By the time Hagrid himself actually appeared, Harry had told Ladon all about how Hagrid had informed Harry that he was a wizard, terrifying the Dursleys in the process. He was just getting up to how Hagrid taken him to Diagon Alley, and introduced him to the magical world, when he saw Hagrid walking towards him.

Harry stood up and waved cheerfully. He instantly regretted it when Fang caught sight of him and came racing towards him, barking loudly. Ladon had been sunning himself on the stone step next to Harry, but he quickly wound himself up Harry's leg to take refuge under his robes. By the time Fang had jumped up and began licking Harry's face, Ladon was coiled tightly around his chest, silent and unmoving.

“It's okay, Ladon, you're safe,” Harry hissed, then pushed Fang off him so that he could pat him properly. “Down, Fang.”

“Hullo, Harry!” Hagrid said. He nudged Fang out of the way and leaned down to hug Harry. “Come and have a cuppa. How've yeh been? Not bored waitin' fer me, were yeh?”

“Nah, I had Ladon to keep me company,” Harry said, following Hagrid into his cabin and sitting at the table.

Fang immediately came over to continue licking Harry, drooling all over his robes in the process.

Hagrid put the kettle over the fire. “Who's Ladon?”

“My snake. Dad got him for me for my birthday last year. He's currently hiding from Fang, but he'll come out once Fang calms down,” Harry explained. As he said this, he made another effort to get Fang away, or at least down.
Hagrid chuckled, then rummaged through a cupboard. He straightened back up and threw a bone onto the floor. Fang gave Harry's cheek one last lick then dove for the bone.

“That should keep 'im busy,” Hagrid said.

“Thanks,” Harry said, wiping the dog drool from his face. “Ladon, it's safe to come out now. Hagrid wants to meet you.”

“Where is that beast?” Ladon asked quietly.

Harry glanced at Fang, who was paying no attention to their hissing. “Hagrid's given him a bone. He won't pay any attention to you.”

“Okay,” Ladon said.

He slowly uncoiled himself from around Harry's chest, rising up through the neck of his robes, before dropping onto the table and curling up in front of Harry. Hagrid carried two steaming, bucket-sized mugs of tea over, and sat down. He slowly reached out a hand to Ladon, allowing him to sniff it warily.

“He's a bit shy,” said Harry.

“'e's a beauty,” Hagrid crooned.

Harry grinned. “He says you're a beauty.”

Ladon immediately got closer to Hagrid and allowed him to pat him.

“What'd yeh say ter him?” Hagrid asked.

“Told him you said he's a beauty. He's really vain,” said Harry.

“Ah, can yeh blame 'im? 'e's gorgeous. Not full grown yet, is 'e?” asked Hagrid.

“He's about a year old. Boomslangs aren't fully mature until they're around four,” said Harry.

Hagrid nodded, transfixed by the snake.

“I wanted to bring him to meet you sooner, but we couldn't really risk it with Umbridge around,” Harry said apologetically.

Hagrid waved a hand in dismissal. “That's alrigh'. She's gone now... You feedin' 'im dead animals or does 'e catch 'is own prey?”

“Both. He mostly hunts when we're at home, and then I usually feed him when we're up here, since he can't hunt as well in the castle.”

Harry and Hagrid spent the next half an hour chatting about Ladon, and snakes in general, while Ladon basked in Hagrid's attention. Harry couldn't believe how much Hagrid knew about snakes, and said as much.

“I might not know as much as a Parselmouth, but I reckon I know a thing or two. I am the Care of Magical Creatures professor, yeh know,” said Hagrid.

“Right,” Harry said weakly, remembering why he was here. “About that... I'm really sorry, but I won't be continuing your class this year.”
Hagrid's face fell. “Yer droppin' me class?”

Harry nodded miserably. “I just won't have time for it.”

“But I had some really interestin' creatures lined up fer this year,” said Hagrid.

“I'm sorry,” Harry said again. “But I'm Quidditch Captain this year, and both Dad and Dumbledore are giving me extra lessons to help prepare me to defeat Voldemort.”

“I can't say that's not important,” Hagrid said grudgingly.

Harry gave a tentative smile. “I really did enjoy your class. And, hey, if you ever study some sort of snake I'd be happy to come help out.”

“I have been thinking about gettin' me hands on a Runespoor...” said Hagrid. “What about Draco and Hermione? They stayin' on?”

“Er, no,” said Harry. “Hermione's already taking seven subjects. Draco's only doing six, but he's also teaching himself Gigantus.”

Hagrid smiled. “Is he really?”

“Yeah. He said he can teach you a few phrases this term,” said Harry.

Hagrid beamed at him. “That's right kind of 'im, Harry. I'll write to 'im and thank 'im later.”

“How is Grawp, anyway?” asked Harry.

“'E's great. Dumbledore found 'im a nice cave up in the mountains. Bit of a trek for me ter get there, but 'e's got plenty o' prey, and no people ter disturb 'im,” said Hagrid.

Looking at Hagrid's once again cheerful face, Harry made a mental note to thank Draco for his love of languages later himself. He stayed at Hagrid's for a while longer, drinking tea and chatting, before he eventually stood and picked up Ladon.

“I'd better go see how Dad's going. Thanks for the tea,” Harry said.

“Any time, Harry. See yeh in a few weeks,” said Hagrid.

Harry found Severus in the Defence classroom. He had put heavy black curtains over all the windows, blocking out the summer sun and leaving the room dimly lit by candles. He was in the process of fixing pictures to the walls.

“What's with the makeover?” Harry asked, walking inside. Ladon looked around curiously, his tongue flicking out rapidly.

Severus glanced at him over his shoulder. “The curtains are to block out the view of the grounds and thus diminish distractions for my students. The pictures are to impress upon you all the seriousness of the subject,” said Severus.

Harry looked at a picture of a woman screaming in agony. “And giving us nightmares is a bonus?”

“These aren't any worse than the stories currently filling the Daily Prophet,” Severus pointed out.

“Good point. So just how long did it take you to get rid of all the pink from your new office?” asked Harry.
“I'm keeping my old one since it's closer to the Slytherin dormitories,” said Severus. He stuck one more picture up and turned around. “Did you smooth everything over with Hagrid?”

“All good.”

“Very well. Let's go home.”

“You got all your things out of the Potions classroom?” asked Harry.

“Yes. Here,” said Severus, handing Harry an extremely battered textbook.

Harry looked down at *Advanced Potions-Making* curiously. With a faded title and a peeling spine, it definitely looked like a third-hand book. He opened and flipped through it. The majority of the pages had been dog eared and scribbled all over in cramped, spidery writing. Harry knew that Severus often wrote in his books, but this was extreme even by his standards.

“You weren't kidding when you said you'd fixed up the instructions,” Harry said.

“You'll thank me for that later,” Severus said.

“I don't doubt that. I'll also be throwing this at you next time you tell me my writing's messy,” said Harry.

“Your handwriting is messy,” Severus shot back. “Although I will admit that my own has improved as I've gotten older... Incidentally, I used that book to record the spells that I invented. Do not, under any circumstances, cast an unfamiliar spell without first asking me its effects.”

Harry snorted. “What kind of idiot would do that?”

“The world is full of dunderheads,” said Severus.

“True,” Harry agreed, still going through the book. He got to the end and stopped. There, on the bottom of the back cover, was an inscription.

*This Book is the Property of the Half-Blood Prince*


“It was a nickname,” Severus said.

“Who the hell came up with that?” asked Harry.

“I did,” said Severus.

Harry laughed. “Don't you think it's a bit, er -” wanky, he wanted to say “- pretentious?”

“That's rich, coming from the Chosen One,” Severus said archly.

“Hey, I didn't come up with that,” Harry protested.

“No, you didn't...When I was at school, I was a lone half-blood in a house of bigoted pure-bloods. I came up with this as a way of emphasising that, while I may have been saddled with my dad's Muggle surname, Mum's family was pure-blood,” said Severus.

“Oh,” said Harry, now feeling guilty for laughing. “That couldn't have been fun.”
“No, but I survived,” said Severus.

Harry cast around for a change of subject. “So, er, what are some of the new security features?”

“You won't like this, but Hogsmeade visits have been banned indefinitely,” said Severus.

Harry winced. “That'll suck, but I can't say I disagree with that decision. Not after what happened to Draco.”

“Precisely. There will also be Aurors constantly patrolling in pairs around the perimeter of the grounds,” said Severus. “Apart from that, the main upgrade is the increase of protective enchantments on the grounds.”

“Like the ones we have at home?” Harry asked.

“Funny you should ask. One of them is a jinx of Albus' own invention, to protect against non-Hogwarts house-elves Apparating onto the grounds. Apparently there was some sort of incident in June that highlighted some of the dangers of allowing random house-elves to Apparate in whenever they felt like it...”

Harry put on his best innocent expression. “I've no idea what you're talking about.”

Severus merely raised an eyebrow. “Curious. In any case, I'll be adding that particular jinx to the protections on our home, and informing Narcissa that her elves will no longer have access.”

Harry grew serious. “The Fidelius Charm doesn't work on elves?”

“No, only humans. It's why owls can still reach us, though the charm works on Animagi and werewolves,” said Severus.

“So how come it doesn't work on elves?” asked Harry.

“Albus thinks that the house-elf magic that binds them to obey their masters is strong enough that it will overcome a general protective spell. This jinx is specifically targeted towards elves, so it should be strong enough to overcome that,” said Severus. “I'll Floo call Narcissa later and ask her to send an elf over to test it. If it works, it can be added to the protections on the homes of the other Order members as well.”

Harry frowned in thought. “If normal spells don't work against elves, how come people don't just use elves to pop in wherever they want? If Voldemort got an elf – from, say, Theo's dad, before he got arrested – he could have sent it to abduct me any time he felt like.”

“Most people overlook house-elves the majority of the time. However, you thought of summoning Dobby, so there is no reason to believe someone else couldn't come up with the same plan. As loathe as I am to admit it... you inadvertently alerted us of a possible security breach.”

“Are you saying I did good when I summoned Dobby here?”

“Completely accidentally.”

“I did good.”
On the last Monday of the holidays, Harry dragged himself back up to his room to finish off the last of his holiday homework. He hadn't touched it since Hermione had left, over a month ago, and he still had three essays to write before he could even think about skimming through his new textbooks. He turned on his new radio, thankful that Hedwig had the ability to sleep through even the loudest of music, and sat down at his desk, determined to get at least one essay finished by lunch.

He decided to write his Defence essay first, figuring that that would be the easiest. Even so, it was well past lunch time before he was done. Stomach growling, he aimed a hasty Drying Charm at the ink and took his parchment downstairs, singing happily.

"Yo I'll tell you what I want, what I really really want, so tell me what you want, what you really really want, I wanna, I wanna, I wanna, I wanna really really really wanna zigazig ah!"

“I really, really want you to stop singing that atrocious song, “Severus grumbled.

Harry jumped, not having seen Severus crouching in front of the bookcase under the stairs. “I didn't see you there.”

“And that's cause to assault my ears with that garbage, is it?” Severus asked.

Harry just shrugged. “I had it stuck in my head.”

“As do I, now,” said Severus.

“Sharing is caring,” Harry said with a grin.

“Share that song with me again and I'll share a Silencing Charm with you,” Severus shot back.

Harry huffed. “Fine, I'll shut up. Here's my Defence essay.”

Severus took the parchment and rolled it up. “I'll read it tonight.”

“Pretty pathetic Achilles heel, by the way. Would you pitch a hissy fit in the middle of a duel if your opponent began singing 'Wannabe'? asked Harry.

“Have your lunch and we'll find out,” said Severus.

As it turned out, Severus' response was to simply Stun Harry mid-lyric. It wasn't Harry's best duel overall, and for the first time in almost a month, he failed to win a single round against Severus. He was mightily relieved when Severus finally called a halt to the afternoon's duel and helped Harry get back to his feet one last time.

“Have you been going easy on me so far?” Harry asked suspiciously.

“I would hardly call relentlessly attacking my son going easy,” drawled Severus.

“You know what I mean,” Harry said, pausing to gingerly feel out a tender spot on his head.

“Let me see that,” said Severus. He gently examined Harry's head before letting him go. “There's no blood, but you should put some salve on it when you get inside.”

“I think we're nearly out,” said Harry.
“We’ll make some more tomorrow,” said Severus. “And no, I have not been going easy on you. You were more stationary than usual today, which made it easier to anticipate which spells you were going to use, because -”

“I can’t duel non-verbally yet,” Harry groaned.

“Precisely.”

“I’m getting better at non-verbal spells.”

“You are, but you need to continue practising them,” Severus chided him.

“I am. It’s just frustrating to struggle to cast something as simple as a Warming Charm. I feel like a first year all over again,” Harry complained.

“The rest of your year will soon be experiencing the same frustration you currently are,” said Severus.

“That’s not exactly encouraging,” said Harry.

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The next day, Harry and Severus skipped duelling practise in order to brew some medicinal potions: bruise paste, antiseptic salve, pain relievers, burn salve, anti-inflammatory balm, anti-venom and blood replenisher. They were all potions that one or both of them had used after duelling practise, and Harry no longer needed instructions when brewing any of them.

With Ladon watching from his shoulder (the snake had expressed a curiosity about brewing), Harry gathered the ingredients for the antiseptic salve and began to crush some lavender flowers. He frowned curiously when he saw Severus place an iron cauldron on the other side of the bench.

“What do you need an iron cauldron for?” he asked.

“Pepperup,” Severus said.

“That’s what I thought. We have plenty of Pepperup, we don't need any more,” said Harry.

“It's not for us, it's for Poppy,” Severus said, lighting a fire under the cauldron.

“What? Shouldn't Slughorn be making all her potions now? Why do you still have to do it?” Harry asked indignantly.

Severus stilled, then extinguished the fire with a scowl. “I don't. I was operating out of pure habit. You're right, Slughorn will be tasked with making all of Poppy's potions now.”

He returned the iron cauldron to its place and returned with a pewter cauldron.

“That will take some getting used to,” he mused.

Harry grinned. “Yeah, but think of all the extra free time you'll have.”

Severus raised an eyebrow. “I shan't have any extra free time.”

“What do you mean? Not brewing Pomfrey’s potions will free up heaps of time for you,” argued Harry.
“Yes, time which I will spend training you,” said Severus.

“Good point,” said Harry, sweeping his lavender into his cauldron. “Where are we going to be training? I doubt it'd be a good idea to let people see us duelling all the time.”

“If you can run an illegal defence group without anyone finding out for the better part of a year, I think I can manage to teach you how to duel in secrecy,” said Severus.

“We'll be using the Room of Requirement? I should've thought of that,” Harry muttered.

“One would assume so, yes. In any case, if that room does all you say it can, it will be of incalculable assistance in your training,” said Severus. “Thus far, we have only duelled in an empty field. I'm looking forward to utilising that room to provide a bit more variety in our surroundings.”

“That sounds like fun. Except for the part where I won't have any free time,” Harry grumbled.

“You're studying four fewer subjects than last year and no longer running the DA. Do your homework during your free periods and you'll have plenty of free time,” said Severus.

Harry nodded slowly. He'd have to carefully manage his time, but it sounded doable, once he got into a routine. He stirred his potion in a careful figure eight motion, which caused it to emit a burst of violet sparks into the air, startling Ladon.

“Sorry, I should've warned you about that,” he said.

Ladon slowly relaxed the tight grip he had on Harry's shoulders. “That's okay. Why did it do that?”

Harry spent the next hour or so chatting to Ladon about what he was doing, explaining how the different ingredients reacted with each other. Ladon thought it a shame that the potion required flowers to be harvested from the garden, but was nonetheless interested to see how the potions turned out.

When his salve was completed, Harry took the cauldron off the heat and set it aside to cool down before decanting. While he waited, he took the rest of his equipment over to the trough to wash them, humming idly while he waited for the water to heat up.

All of a sudden his voice stopped. Harry dropped the ladle he was holding and raised both hands to his throat, feeling for any swelling. He hadn't had a sore throat, but maybe he'd contracted a fast-acting pox – dragon pox, maybe, he'd read that that could render a victim bedridden before they even knew they were sick.

“There's nothing wrong with your throat.”

Harry whirled around to stare at Severus. He tried to ask him how he knew that, but again, no sound came out.

“I warned you that I would cast a Silencing Charm on you if I heard that wretched song again,” Severus said.

Harry blinked, then started mouthing demands to have his voice restored.

“I'm sorry, I didn't quite catch that,” Severus said, clearly amused.

Harry made a very rude, very obvious hand gesture.

“I'll let that slide this once,” Severus said.
Harry took a deep breath, then mouthed a calmer request.

“You want me to remove the charm?” asked Severus.

Harry nodded emphatically.

“No.”

Harry's eyes widened and he threw his hands up in a questioning gesture.

Severus remained unfazed. “You have been practising non-verbal spells for some time now. You should have no difficulty in removing this charm with a General Counter-Spell.”

Harry stared at him, searching for any sign that Severus was joking, and found none. He gave a curt nod, then turned back to finish washing up in the sink, his mind ticking over furiously. While it was true he could easily cast a General Counter-Spell, he'd never tried to do so non-verbally. Given the slow rate at which he had so far been learning to cast non-verbal spells, he imagined that he had a good few days of silence ahead of him.

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As he had predicted, Harry spent the rest of the day in silence. By evening, he had resorted to carrying scrap parchment and a pencil around so that he could communicate with Severus when he wanted to. Unfortunately, since Ladon was unable to read, Harry had to resort to mime to explain to him why he was currently incapable of conversation. The experience left him absurdly grateful to himself for having taught Ladon what it meant when he nodded or shook his head.

Harry had planned on spending the evening in his room, listening to music and trying to lift the Silencing Charm (definitely not sulking, thank you very much), only to have Severus call him back downstairs. There, he found Severus waiting for him in the lounge, a pot of tea steaming on the coffee table.

“Sit down.”

* I'm not in the mood for a chat,* Harry scribbled out on some parchment and handed it to Severus, who laughed and began pouring out the tea.

“Are you in the mood to allow me to assist you in casting non-verbal spells?”

Harry nodded and sat down.

“Very well.” Severus pushed Harry's cup over to him, then leaned back with his own tea. “I know you're annoyed with me, but you'll thank me for it when you return to Hogwarts and are expected to cast non-verbal spells in class.”

* I wouldn't go putting any money on that right now,* Harry wrote.

Severus' eyes glinted with amusement. “We'll see. Now, how many spells have you managed to cast non-verbally?”

Harry immediately held up three fingers, wobbled his other hand, and changed it to four fingers.

“Three cast correctly, and one with less than perfect results?”

Harry nodded.
“Alright. Care to demonstrate?”

Harry drew his wand, easily lighting up and then extinguishing the tip. He then aimed it at his tea cup and, concentrating fiercely, successfully made it float up from the table towards his outstretched hand. He snagged it out of the air and smiled at Severus, who nodded encouragingly.

“And the other spell?”

Harry frowned over at the fireplace and the thick soot covering its base. It took him a few minutes just to skim off the top layer of soot. He sat back and scowled. He was particularly irritated with his inability to cast this spell non-verbally. Surely all the Scouring Charms he had cast after wanking should help him cast the spell non-verbally?

“Well done, Harry,” said Severus. When Harry gave him a disbelieving look, he leaned forward. “I know you don't think it a great achievement, but it is. Your practise has clearly paid off. Your Scouring Charm was weak, I'll admit, but your Levitation Charm was most impressive. You didn't spill a drop, which shows great control.”

Harry smiled, appeased, and raised his eyebrows questioningly.

“Well, I want you to continue attempting to remove the Silencing Charm. After a few attempts – let's say after every fourth attempt – I want you to cast a Levitation Charm.”

Harry shrugged and shook his head.

“Because it will reinforce to you that you are capable of casting spells non-verbally.”

Harry nodded slowly. He could sort of see the logic in that.

“Try to increase the size of the objects which you Levitate, too.”

Harry nodded again, then stood up.

“You're going back upstairs?”

*I don't want you watching me fail to cast an easy spell. It's off-putting.*

“I see your point. In that case, don't put any music on, it will only distract you.”

Harry nodded once more, then took his cup of tea upstairs. Hedwig was readying herself for her nightly hunt, so he spent a few minutes patting her before settling down at his desk to work on his spell casting.

He had no luck with removing the Silencing Charm, but he did improve his Levitation Charm. Ladon had been watching as Harry made his belongings float around his room, and eventually asked to be Levitated himself. Harry watched in amusement as Ladon floated around the room. His old model Hungarian Horntail also took an interest in the proceedings. It had been curled up in its nest on the top of Harry's chest of drawers, but it soon got up to fly around too. Ladon was perfectly happy with this until the Horntail blew out a jet of fire, at which point he demanded to be returned to the safety of Harry's bed.

The next day Harry amused himself by making the breakfast things float around the table. As a reward for his improvement (and, Harry suspected, because he was feeling a little guilty about charming Harry), Severus took Harry out to the lab and finally altered the ward on the locked cabinet so that Harry could access the ingredients contained within.
“I know I don't have to warn you to be careful with these.”

Harry shook his head, wide-eyed. The cabinet was heavily stocked with all manner of dangerous goods: poisonous ingredients; ingredients with a propensity to explode when handled incorrectly; illegal ingredients; and a few bottles of lethal poison. Harry pointed to these last questioningly.

“They're left over from my days as a Death Eater,” Severus said quietly. “I had brewed them for Voldemort, but he disappeared before ordering their use. I figured I may as well keep them just in case.”

Harry raised his eyebrows.

“I've thrown some out after they expired, but no, I've never had cause to use any of them.”

Harry nodded in relief. While he had come to terms with the fact that Severus had brewed poisons for Voldemort, poisons which had been used against Voldemort's enemies, the thought of Severus poisoning someone himself was somehow much worse.

That evening, at Severus' suggestion, Harry abandoned Levitation Charms for Cooling and Warming Charms. He was unsurprised that he was first able to cast a Warming Charm, given how often he cast them for Ladon.

Despite all his practise, it wasn't until Friday morning that Harry succeeded in getting his voice back. He gave an excited cheer, earning himself an irritated glare from Hedwig, who had been dozing in her cage, and ran downstairs to find Severus.

He was in the garden gathering the last of the harvestable potions ingredients. Harry skidded to a stop beside him, beaming.

“I can talk again!”

Severus knelt back on his feet and returned Harry's smile. “I knew you could do it.”

“Yeah, well, I still think you're a jerk,” said Harry.

Severus raised an eyebrow. “Do you deny that it was beneficial?”

“Well, no, but still. Don't do it again,” said Harry.

“I won't,” Severus promised him. “And we'll go into town tonight and get fish and chips for dinner.”

“On second thought, maybe you should use that charm on me again. A few days of silence and now I'm getting fish and chips and I can get into the locked cabinet. Who knows what I could wrangle out of you next time,” said Harry.

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On Sunday morning, Harry had just finished packing his trunk to take to Hogwarts when Severus appeared in his doorway.

“Are you almost ready to leave?”

Harry slung his backpack over his shoulders. “All set.”

“Do you still want me to take those fireworks for you?” Severus asked resignedly.
Harry shook his head. “All sorted, thanks.”

“What -” Severus broke off and narrowed his eyes. “You took them to Hogwarts the other week.”

“Yeah.”

“You sneaky little brat.”

Harry just grinned. “As if you aren't proud.”

“Of course I am. Just don't use any of those products in my classes,” Severus said.

“I won't,” Harry promised.

He cast a non-verbal Levitation Charm on his trunk and picked up Hedwig's cage. He followed Severus down the stairs and out of the house, before stopping under the oak tree.

“Time to go, Ladon.”

Ladon slithered down a branch to drop heavily onto Harry's shoulder, where he immediately coiled himself around Harry's neck. “Are we Apparating?”

“Just to King's Cross,” said Harry.

“Good enough for me,” Ladon said happily.

When they walked through the garden gate, Severus grasped Harry by his elbow.

“I can Apparate to King's Cross from here;” Harry said indignantly.

“Legally, you cannot Apparate at all,” Severus reminded him.

“Oh yeah,” Harry muttered.

He tightened his grip on both his trunk and Hedwig's cage, and then a second later Severus Apparated them all onto platform 9 ¾. It was as busy as it ever was, with students dragging luggage and pets around, calling out to their friends, while their parents tried to say their farewells. Despite all the chaos, people still managed to notice Harry's arrival, and turned en masse to stare at him.

Harry sighed. “At least the stares are friendlier than last year.”

Severus squeezed his shoulder briefly. “Ignore them. Come on, I can see Kingsley not too far away. Your friends will undoubtedly be with him.”

Harry craned his neck and saw Kingsley standing a couple dozen metres down the platform. Harry thought he could see the top of Remus' head near him. Harry and Severus walked quickly through the crowd, which parted for them with unabashed whispering, and found Kingsley easily enough. He was standing tensely, eyes scanning the platform, while beside him, Narcissa was fussing over Draco, playing with his hair and collar and talking quietly to him; Dobby was nodding along with whatever she was saying; and Hermione and Theo were talking with Sirius and Remus. Harry couldn't help noticing that all four adults had their wands out; he glanced at Severus and saw that he also had his wand at the ready.

When Kingsley spotted Harry and Severus he nudged Sirius, and soon Harry was enveloped in one of Sirius' bear hugs.
“I remember when your dad wore one of these,” Sirius said, pulling back and prodding Harry's Captain's badge, which he had pinned to the front of his uniform. He frowned suddenly. “Wait, there's something wrong with it.”

Harry looked down in alarm. “It looks alright to me.”

“No, see here? That green should be red, and that silver part should be gold. Want me to fix it for you?” Sirius asked.

Harry swatted his hand away with a laugh. “I'll think of you when we crush Gryffindor in November.”

“Yeah, we'll send you a signed team photo,” Theo added.

“How do you know I haven't sabotaged Draco's and your broomsticks over the summer?” asked Sirius.

“Because there's no way Remus would let you,” Hermione said, making Harry, Theo and Remus laugh.

“Sad but true,” Sirius said with a sigh.

Remus cleared his throat. “You’d better get on board if you want to find a good compartment.”

Harry looked down the platform, which was beginning to empty as students got on board the train. “Right, yeah.”

Everyone said their goodbyes, and then Harry, Hermione and Theo got on the train. Draco joined them a minute later; Narcissa had been very reluctant to be parted from him.

“What's up with your mum?” Harry asked quietly as they set off in search of a compartment.

“She's been fretting for the past week or so, on account of the kidnapping,” Draco said.

“Will she be okay?” asked Harry.

“Of course she will,” Draco said, sounding offended. “Except, well, she's put a few conditions on my return to Hogwarts.”

Harry frowned. “Like what?”

“She was going to ban both Theo and me from going to Hogsmeade, but then you told us Dumbledore's already decided to cancel Hogsmeade visits for the entire school.”

“So what else is she demanding?”

“I have to write to her every week.”

“You do that anyway.”

“She might hijack Sirius' mirror on occasion, in order to speak to me in person.”

“You've hijacked mine to speak to her before.”

“I know. I never said her demands were unreasonable,” said Draco. “In fact -”
The rest of his words were cut off by the train whistle blowing.

“We need to go to the Prefects' compartment,” Hermione said at once.

Draco nodded. “Hopefully we won't be too long. Save us some seats, Harry.”

He and Hermione began to squeeze their way down the crowded corridor, leaving Harry and Theo to claim the nearest empty compartment. They'd just got themselves settled by the window when the door opened and Tracey walked in, followed by Daphne and Millicent. Tracey flashed a smile at Harry before sitting next to Theo and half crawling into his lap in order to snog him.

Harry went to point out this uncharacteristic behaviour to the other girls, only to snap his mouth shut when Daphne crossed her arms and narrowed her eyes at him.

“Hello,” he said warily.

Millicent smiled at him. “Hi. Good summer?”

“Yeah. You?”

Millicent nodded, then bent to pull her cat, Goliath, out of his basket.

“You're a liar, Potter,” Daphne said.

“What are you on about?” asked Harry.

“You told us in June that you never heard the prophecy. And then you gave that interview to Pansy's mum claiming to be the Chosen One,” she said.

At this, Tracey and Theo stopped snogging in order to listen.

“Oh, that,” said Harry.

“Yes, that. Either you're lying about never hearing the prophecy, or you're lying when you say you're the Chosen One,” Daphne said. “Which is it?”

“He's telling the truth,” said Theo.

Everyone looked at him in surprise.

“How do you know?” asked Harry.

“Every single other person I live with was involved in the battle at the Ministry. They've told me exactly what happened there. I just don't know the specifics of the prophecy,” said Theo.


Daphne tossed her hair in annoyance. “Whatever. Tell us the truth, Harry.”

Harry held up his hands in surrender. “Okay, okay... Technically, I never lied to you. I said I didn't hear the prophecy before it got smashed, and I didn't.”

“But you know what's in it?” asked Millicent.

“Yeah...” Harry said slowly, trying to come up with a way to phrase it without being too specific. “After the battle, when we got back to Hogwarts, Dad and I went up to Dumbledore's office and he
explained everything... It basically comes down to kill or be killed.”

There was a silence at that, broken only by Goliath’s purring and the sound of the train beginning to move.

“So you really are the Chosen One?” Tracey asked.

“Dumbledore never used those words,” said Harry.

“You did in that interview,” Daphne pointed out.

“Yeah, because I made a deal with Scrimgeour to pardon Narcissa,” said Harry.

Theo had evidently told Tracey all about the deal, as they went back to snogging and whispering together in the corner. Millicent and Daphne were curious, however, and so Harry found himself having to rehash all the details of the deal he made with Scrimgeour.

When he was done, Millicent gave an impressed whistle. “And I thought I had a productive summer when I finally dumped Pansy for good.”

“About that. Can you two please try to be civil to each other? At least in our dorm?” asked Daphne.

Millicent scowled. “I'll try, but if she starts something, I'm finishing it.”

“Yay, this year will be fun,” Daphne said sarcastically.

Harry snorted. “Our dorm's worse. We've had to put up with Greg and Vince being absolute dicks for a year already. I can't see either of them having improved over the summer.”

Daphne frowned. “Have any of you actually tried talking to them?”

Harry stared at her. “Are you kidding? They've chosen their families over all of us, they've made that pretty clear.”

“I'm not so sure,” said Daphne. “Anyone can be saved, and we all need to stick together.”

Harry stared at her. “I don't believe it. You actually listened to Dumbledore's speech at the end of term, didn't you?”

“Slytherins stick together, Potter,” Daphne said.

Harry shrugged. “You can try talking to them if you want but I reckon you'd just be wasting your time.”

“I'm with Harry on this,” said Millicent.

Daphne raised her chin stubbornly. “You just wait, I'll prove you both wrong.”

“Great. Can we talk about something else now?” asked Millicent.

“Like what?” Harry asked.

Daphne giggled. “How about why those two are all over each other?”

All three of them looked over at Tracey and Theo, who were still entwined and paying no attention to anyone else.
“Yeah, I thought that was weird,” said Harry.

Millicent cocked her head. “Maybe they're worried because all their friends have broken up and they think they'll be next.”

“I doubt they'll break up. Neither of them would be able to find anyone as swotty as they are, for a start,” said Daphne.

“There's always Hermione,” said Harry.

“It would take her mind off Krum...” Daphne mused.

“I can't see Hermione and Theo getting together,” Millicent said.

“No, I could see that working,” said Daphne.

Tracey pulled away from Theo and glared over at them. “Would you three mind not talking about my boyfriend going off with someone else when I'm right here?”

“We'll shut up if you tell us why you're suddenly all over each other in public,” said Daphne.

“None of your business,” Tracey said.

Theo smirked. “Someone's trying to make up for forgetting our anniversary last month.”

Tracey turned bright red. “Theo!”

Daphne and Millicent both laughed, but Harry gave Tracey a sympathetic smile. “If it makes you feel any better, I don't even know when my anniversary is.”

Daphne stopped laughing and frowned at him. “How can you not know when it is?”

Harry shrugged. “I dunno... It's during winter sometime, I know that...”

“Sometime in winter?” Tracey echoed.

“Draco's never mentioned it either,” Harry said defensively, to no avail.

“That's pathetic, Potter,” Theo laughed.

“It really is,” Millicent agreed.

Harry and Tracey put up with their friends' good-natured teasing for a minute or two, before the conversation thankfully moved on to other topics. Tracey evidently felt that she had sufficiently apologised to Theo, as she didn't return to snogging him. Ladon took the opportunity to make his way to her lap, where he curled up happily.

It was almost lunch by the time the door slid open with a rattle, revealing Draco, Pansy and Hermione. Pansy took one look at Millicent and walked right back out of the compartment.

Millicent watched her leave. “I didn't say a thing!”

In the doorway, Hermione sighed. “I'll go see if she's okay.”

“Good luck,” said Daphne.

Draco slowly shut the door behind himself and sat down next to Millicent. “We haven't missed the
lunch trolley, have we?”

“No sign of it yet,” said Harry.

Tracey looked at Draco curiously. “Did you know that Harry doesn't know when your anniversary is?”

Draco blinked at the question. “It's the 29th of January.”

Harry frowned. “The day before my mum's birthday?”

“I didn't plan it, but yes,” said Draco.

“How come you've never mentioned it before?” asked Harry.

Draco shrugged. “Something else has always come up.”

“Like what?” asked Daphne.

“Well, for the first one, Harry was in the Triwizard Tournament and we were trying to help him survive that,” said Draco.

“Pretty good reason,” said Millicent.

“And then last year all the Death Eaters broke out of Azkaban and my father tried to murder my mother,” said Draco.

“Also a good reason,” said Millicent.

“Yeah, okay, I'll give you a pass,” Daphne said.

“You're too kind,” drawled Draco.

The door opened again, and Harry looked up eagerly, expecting either the lunch trolley or Hermione. Instead, there was a fourth year Hufflepuff boy standing in the doorway.

“Yeah, uh, I'm supposed to give you this,” he said, holding out a small, beribboned scroll to Harry.

“Er, thanks,” said Harry, taking the parchment.

The boy nodded and left, leaving Harry to untie the purple ribbon from the scroll.

“What is it?” asked Draco.

Daphne had read the parchment over Harry's shoulder, and answered before he could. “It's a love letter,” she said, giving Draco a sly look and giggling.

“Funny,” Draco sneered.

“Slughorn's invited me to have lunch with him,” said Harry.

“Who's Slughorn?” asked Millicent.

“New Potions teacher,” said Harry, standing up.

“Potions? But what about your dad?” Millicent asked.
“He’s teaching Defence,” said Harry. He looked from Ladon, who was dozing on Tracey's lap, to Draco. “If Ladon wakes up while I'm gone can you tell him where I've gone?”

When Draco nodded, Harry reluctantly left the compartment and headed down the corridor. He knew exactly why Slughorn had asked him to lunch. Despite his unwillingness to go, he was rather impressed with how quick Slughorn was to begin recruiting for his little club. Harry had been under the impression that Slughorn was lazy, but maybe he'd been too quick to judge him.

The corridor was crowded with students catching up with their friends or simply waiting for the lunch trolley. No matter what they were doing, though, they all stopped to stare at Harry, before breaking into whispers once he had passed. Some people even poked their heads out of their compartments to get a better look at him. Not all the looks were friendly, either: some were curious, other appraising, while a few were downright hostile. He did his best to ignore them all, keeping his eyes fixed straight ahead until he got to Slughorn's compartment, where he was relieved to discover that he wasn't the only student invited.

“Ah, Harry, there you are!” Slughorn cried. “Sit down, sit down, make yourself comfortable m'boy! I believe you know my other guests?”

Harry slowly sat down in the nearest seat, opposite Slughorn, and smiled at the other guests. Next to him was Blaise, with Ginny on his other side, and Neville was wedged in the corner next to Slughorn. Maybe this wouldn't be so bad after all.

A minute later the door opened again to emit two seventh years. The first was Cormac McLaggen, a tall, muscular Gryffindor who had played Seeker for Gryffindor when Harry was a first year. He sat down next to Slughorn and smirked at the other students, reminding Harry how much he had disliked him when he had played opposite him. The other seventh year was a thin, jumpy Ravenclaw who took the only remaining seat, on Harry's left. He swallowed nervously when Slughorn introduced him as Marcus Belby.

Introductions made, Slughorn beamed around at everyone. “This is nice, a chance for me to get to know you all before term officially starts. Please, take a napkin everyone. I've supplied my own lunch – I'm afraid I'm too old to subsist on the sweets from the trolley…”

The food was delicious, Harry could admit that much. Unfortunately, that was the only highlight of an extremely long lunch. Slughorn dominated the conversation, systematically questioning everyone about the famous or important connections they all seemed to have.

McLaggen turned out to know Scrimgeour – and liked him, thus cementing Harry's unfavourable opinion of him. Belby's uncle was the inventor of the Wolfsbane Potion. Harry was momentarily interested, until Belby confided that he didn't know his uncle all that well. Slughorn's face lost its warmth at that, and when he handed round some mini quiches, he somehow managed to miss Belby entirely.

Things turned decidedly awkward when Slughorn turned to Neville and began asking about his parents, who had been well-known Aurors before being tortured into insanity by Death Eaters. Neville mumbled and stuttered most of his answers, clearly wishing Slughorn would focus on someone else.

Slughorn didn't seem to have made up his mind about Neville, but he was clearly impressed with Ginny. She hadn't been invited due to any influential relations, but because Slughorn had witnessed her hitting someone with a Bat Bogey Hex. He had been so impressed by her spellwork that he had invited her to lunch instead of taking points off her. He seemed to warm to her even more after questioning her.
Blaise's interrogation wasn't much better than Neville's: Slughorn was most interested in the marital history of Lucrezia Zabini, which was a touchy subject for Blaise at the best of times. When Slughorn asked about the death of Blaise's most recent stepfather, Blaise's voice was frigid when he answered, and Harry saw Ginny silently reach out to hold his hand.

Having seen that, Harry was in no mood to humour Slughorn when he finally got around to questioning Harry. Naturally, Slughorn wanted to discuss Harry's status as the Chosen One. Harry supposed he had himself to blame for that, since he was the one who publicly confirmed the rumours. He answered as little as he possibly could without becoming rude, until Slughorn eventually had enough of him. He spent the rest of the train ride telling stories about various ex-students of his who had all gone on to become rich, famous or powerful. Harry sat there silently cursing himself for not having asked one of his friends to come by with some excuse so that he could leave.

Finally, when it was fully dark outside and the train must have been nearing Hogwarts, Slughorn called an end to his little meeting. He exhorted them all to feel free to visit him in his office for tea (everyone except Belby, that is), and then Harry was blessedly free. He waited outside in the corridor for his friends, and they set off for their compartments together.

“That was fun,” Ginny said sarcastically.

Harry sniggered. “Bet you're regretting that Bat Bogey Hex.”

“No way. Zacharias Smith completely deserved it,” she said.

“What, that Hufflepuff in my year?” asked Harry.

“Yeah, he was asking me questions about what happened at the Ministry. He wouldn't shut up, so I thought I'd shut him up myself,” Ginny said, grinning.

“Fair enough,” said Harry.

“Slughorn wasn't that bad,” said Blaise.

Harry stared at him. “Are you kidding? The questions he was asking you and Neville were completely uncalled for!”

Neville turned red and nodded, but Blaise shrugged. “Yeah, but he's obviously well connected. A friendship with him would come in very handy.”

“True. If he's serious about inviting Gwenog Jones to one of his dinner parties...” Ginny said wistfully.

“Yeah, it would be worth it to meet her,” Harry admitted.

“Well, this is us,” Neville said, opening a compartment door.

He walked inside and sat down, making the occupants look up at the new arrivals.

“Harry! Come in and meet Ginger!”

Blaise and Ginny walked in to retake their seats, leaving Harry to stand in the doorway faced with a very excited Scarlett. He couldn't help grinning back at her, even though he was shocked to see how vivid the scar on her face still was. While the outer edges of it had faded to a dusky pink, it was still a dark red over her eye, and her left eyebrow hadn't grown back. Harry doubted it ever would, given
the amount of scar tissue. Her parrot was perched on her left shoulder, swaying to remain upright through Scarlett's bouncing. Despite the constant jostling, Ginger seemed perfectly happy on her unsteady seat.

“We've met already, Scarlett. I was with Draco when he bought her,” said Harry.

“Yeah, but that was before she could talk!” Scarlett said. “Go on, Ginger. Say it!”

Everyone looked expectantly at the parrot, who remained silent.

“I told you, Scarlett, you need to get rid of the Wrackspurts flying around her before she'll talk,” said Luna.

“My parrot does not have Wrackspurts!” Scarlett said. “Well, I don't think she does...”

“She does. Even Draco should have noticed them when he bought her,” said Luna.

Ginger suddenly flapped her wings. “Hello, tosser!”

Scarlett beamed. “You did it!”

Harry laughed incredulously. “You taught your parrot to say 'hello, tosser’?”

Scarlett reached into her pocket for some sort of food pellet, which she fed to Ginger. “I only taught her to say 'tosser'. She learned 'hello' all on her own. Because she's not infected with Wrackspurts!”

“Hello, tosser,” Ginger said, as if in agreement.

“And this is the sort of conversation we were having before Slughorn summoned us,” Blaise said to Harry.

Ginny rolled her eyes and picked up a squeaking ball of purple fuzz from the seat next to Luna. “You're the one who spent half an hour trying to teach Ginger to say your name!”

“That was different,” Blaise said sulkily.

Harry laughed, though he was now watching Ginny pat the purple fuzzball on her lap. “Er, Ginny? What is that?”

“This?” Ginny smiled down at it. “This is Arnold, my Pygmy Puff. Fred and George have been breeding miniature Puffkeins for their shop. Isn't he cute?”

Arnold mostly looked round and fuzzy to Harry, but he nodded anyway. “Very cute.”

“And completely free from Wrackspurts,” Archie said drily.

“Right,” said Harry. Between Ginger, Arnold, and Neville's toad, Trevor, he was beginning to feel like he was in a very odd, very small zoo. “I better get back to my compartment.”

“Wait up a second.”

Harry turned around to see Archie follow him out of the compartment and shut the door behind herself.

“We weren't just talking about Ginger before,” she said. “We also spent a bit of time talking about how I've realised that I'm not actually a girl. Never have been. It's just taken me a while to realise
why, exactly, I felt so different.”

“You're a boy?” asked Harry. “Cause, we have a new Potions teacher now, but I really think you'd be better off if you asked Pomfrey to ask my dad if he could brew your potions instead.”

Harry had first heard of transgender people when Pomfrey had taught him sex education in his third year. There were potions that people could take, if they wanted to permanently alter their bodies, that Pomfrey administered to transgender students while they were at Hogwarts. When he had been the Potions teacher, Severus had been responsible for brewing those potions, which, while complicated to brew, were far cheaper than the Muggle alternatives.

“No, I'm not a boy, and I'm not taking any potions,” Archie said patiently, “I'm genderqueer.”

“Er,” said Harry, “not to sound thick or anything -”

Archie laughed. “I'm not a girl or a boy. I'm just a person.”

“Okay,” Harry said slowly. “Er, so are you changing your name, or...?”

“Nah, I'm lucky that Archie’s gender neutral, and one really calls me Archana anyway,” said Archie. “But I would like that instead of using she, her or hers pronouns, you use they, them or theirs when talking about me.”

“They, them, theirs,” Harry repeated, nodding. “Okay, I can do that. How's your family taking it?”

“They're fine. Dad wasn't fussed at all, just apologised in advance if he messes up my pronouns. Mum's biggest concern was that I might not want to wear saris on formal occasions anymore. She was fine as soon as I said I'm not giving them up,” Archie explained.

Harry smiled at them. “Good.”

Archie grinned. “Thanks, Harry. And, hey, I'm going to speak to your dad tomorrow about telling the staff, but feel free to tell whoever you want. Means there's fewer people I have to tell. I'm already sick of repeating myself.”

Harry frowned at them. “Why don't you just tell Pansy?”

“I can't believe I didn't think of that,” said Archie. “Do you know which compartment she's in?”

“All I know is that she's far away from Millicent,” said Harry.

Archie winced. “Bad breakup?”

“Bad breakup.”

Archie nodded. “I'll go for a walk and see if I can find her – after I go in and ask Blaise why the hell he didn't think to suggest this a couple of hours ago.”

They turned and re-entered their compartment, leaving Harry to make his way back to his own.

Upon his return, Harry was questioned by his friends, who wanted to know all about Slughorn's lunch. He spent the rest of the train ride answering their questions, as well as telling them about Archie, but it wasn't long before the train was pulling into Hogsmeade Station. Draco disappeared to help the other Prefects get everyone off the Hogwarts Express, leaving Harry to carry both Hedwig and Thoth to a nearby carriage.
He couldn't help staring at the Thestrals at the front of the carriage. While he now knew to expect them, they were still eerie, though he thought he could see Hagrid's fascination with them. They were certainly striking, and given how patiently they were waiting, the herd had clearly been well trained.

The crowd was thinning out by the time Draco, Pansy and Hermione joined Harry in his carriage. As soon as the three of them were settled, the Thestrals took off for the castle, the carriage trundling sedately along the well-path.

There was a hold up at the front steps of the castle, where Filch was using a Probity Probe on all the arriving students. After putting Hedwig, Crookshanks and Thoth with the other waiting pets, Harry and his group joined the jostling line in front of Filch.

When Harry got to the front of the line, he was poked none too gently by Filch's Probe. When he was done, Filch scowled at Harry.

"You can't take that into dinner," he said, pointing at Ladon, who was once again riding on Harry's shoulders.

Harry looked down in surprise. He was so used to having Ladon wrapped around himself, he'd all but forgotten that it wasn't exactly normal for people to walk around wearing a snake. "I'll send him to my dorm," he told Filch, then relayed the message to Ladon.

Ladon obediently slithered down to the ground and sped off to the dungeons, clearly eager to get away from the noisy crowd. Harry waited for his friends to get past Filch, then they headed into the Great Hall together. Hermione split off to go to the Gryffindor table, leaving the three Slytherins to join their other friends at their own table. Pansy very deliberately sat next to Harry, which was as far away from Millicent as she could possibly get while still remaining with the group.

It didn't take too long before McGonagall led in the first years for their Sorting. The waiting crowd fell silent when she placed the Sorting Hat at the front of the room. Its song was similar to last year's: it warned the students to beware external dangers and to join together in friendship and unity.

Harry couldn't help glancing down the table towards Greg and Vince, who were sitting sullenly together, away from the other sixth years. Harry couldn't help thinking about what Daphne had said on the train. Maybe he should make more of an effort with them this year, try to win back their friendship.

Glancing around the table, Harry saw that some of the other years were similarly split. While the younger year levels seemed to unaffected, there was a definite schism in the fifth years. Scarlett and Archie sat together, chatting with Ella Wilkins and Spencer Whiddon, who had a shiny Prefect's badge pinned to his robes. The Carrow twins were at the other end of the table, whispering about something with Ursula Penkridge. The remaining fifth years were grouped together in the middle. Harry couldn't help wondering if that were a deliberate attempt not to show favour to either side, or if it were merely coincidental.

Harry looked over at Daphne, to see if she was similarly affected by the Sorting Hat's song, but she wasn't paying it any attention. Instead, she was smiling flirtatiously at someone further up the table. Craning his neck, Harry could see both Vikram and Xander smiling back at her. Harry sat back with a smirk. Xander had been in the Inquisitorial Squad; there was no way Daphne was smiling at him.

The Sorting Hat's song ended, and McGonagall began calling up the first years to be Sorted. Harry clapped for each new Slytherin when they were announced, though he couldn't help feeling a little sorry for them as they huddled together at the end of the table. Most of them looked nervous, if not
downright scared, and Harry knew that they had a lecture from the Bloody Baron to sit through before they could properly begin to relax.

Harry's reverie was broken by the arrival of the food. There was a commotion as everyone helped themselves from the heaped platters in the centre of the tables, before the volume lessened when people began to eat. Harry spent most of the meal talking to Pansy, who was initially a little downcast. Harry didn't know what exactly had gone down between her and Millicent, but it was clearly a bad break up if Pansy was this upset about it. She perked up, however, when she brought up the topic of how Harry's statement had given *Witch Weekly* a massive boost in sales.

“So really, you need to give Mum another interview,” she said. “I think she'd pay you, if that helps.”

“No, Pansy,” Harry said.

“Just a little one?” Pansy wheedled. “I'll give you the rest of this treacle tart if you say yes.”

“Nice try, Parkinson, but there's another treacle tart in front of Blaise,” Harry said. “And if there's ever anything in that magazine about me, from an unnamed source, I'll be blaming you.”

Pansy pressed a hand to her chest. “I'd be offended if you didn't.”

They were still laughing when Dumbledore rose to his feet at the staff table. The crowd hushed, then gasped when Dumbledore spread his arms. The sleeves of his robe drew back, revealing the blackened skin on his right hand.

Dumbledore merely smiled. “It's just a flesh wound,” he said, shaking his sleeves back down over his hands. “Welcome back to Hogwarts, all of you. I have a few announcements to make while you all finish your desserts.

“First, I must inform you all that we are in need of new Quidditch commentators. Anyone wishing to take on this challenging role is to talk to their Head of House. Likewise, Quidditch try outs will be held in the next few weeks. Sign up sheets will be on the notice boards in your common rooms for anyone in second year or above.

“Second, I would like to welcome Professor Horace Slughorn. He has graciously agreed to come out of retirement in order to teach you all Potions.”

At the staff table, Slughorn got to his feet and smiled around the hall. The usual polite clapping from the students was drowned out by whispering as everyone realised that, instead of being hired as the latest Defence teacher, Slughorn was replacing an existing staff member.

“His appointment,” Dumbledore continued, “is possible only due to Professor Snape agreeing to take over the position of Defence Against the Dark Arts teacher.”

Murmuring once again swept the hall, though there was enthusiastic clapping at the Slytherin table. Unlike Slughorn, Severus didn't stand up, merely acknowledging the Slytherins' applause with a wave of his hand. He didn't quite smile, though he did nod at Harry, who beamed up at him.

This time, Dumbledore waited for complete silence before speaking again. “As you are all no doubt aware, Voldemort -” there were more than a few gasps at the name “- and his followers are once again gaining power outside the Hogwarts grounds. In June, the Death Eaters brought their reign of terror to the very gates of Hogwarts, and abducted one of your number.”

Harry's wasn't the only head that swivelled to look at Draco. He raised his own head and kept his gaze fixed on Dumbledore.
“As such, there have been numerous improvements to the security here. You will already be aware that Mr Filch is searching anyone who enters the castle. Aurors posted in Hogsmeade are currently searching your trunks for contraband, and all mail will likewise be searched. Perhaps most upsetting to you, visitation rights to Hogsmeade have been suspended until further notice.” Here, Dumbledore had to wait for angry muttering to die down before he continued. “You are safe within the Hogwarts grounds, provided that you obey any orders given to you by the staff, but I cannot guarantee your safety outside our walls.

“But enough. I'm sure you're all eager to get to bed, so I shan't delay you from your dreams any longer.”

Pansy and Draco got up with the rest of the Prefects. “The password's 'deadly webcap',” Draco said. “Don't tell Bulstrode,” Pansy added.

They walked off to attend to the younger students, leaving Harry to walk down to the dungeons with the rest of his friends. Harry didn't linger in the common room, merely waved at a few friends on his way to his dorm. Blaise and Theo walked in shortly afterwards, followed a few minutes later by Draco.

“Have you done the wards?” he asked.

Theo shook his head. “We were waiting for you.”

Together, the four of them erected protective barriers between their beds and those of Greg and Vince. Harry added a few of the wards that Severus had taught him over the holidays, much to Theo's admiration.

“They'll never be able to mess with us now,” he said smugly.

While Blaise and Draco happily agreed with him, Harry went and joined Ladon on his bed. True, he had picked up some useful wards. He just wished he didn't have to use them in his own dormitory.

A scratching sound caught his attention. For a second, Harry felt like he was a first year again, when he saw Draco sliding out from under his bed with a knife clenched in his fist.

“Christening your new bed?” Harry asked.

Draco nodded. “Mine's the only name under there. It's odd.”

Blaise sauntered over. “That's really not how you christen a bed. If you want some pointers -”

“Good night, Zabini!” Draco snapped.
Over breakfast on Monday morning, Severus walked down the Slytherin table, handing out everyone's class timetables. He made quick progress through the younger students, but slowed down when he got to the sixth years. Since some subjects required students to have achieved a certain OWL grade to continue, and people were able to drop subjects they didn't like, Severus had to question everyone individually before manually tailoring their timetables with his wand. Naturally, he already knew what subjects Harry would be taking, so handed him his timetable without any fuss.

As Severus moved down the table to question Daphne about her subjects, Harry grinned delightedly at his timetable.

“Any particular reason you're grinning like a loon?” Millicent asked him.

“Yeah. This is the first year that we don't have History of Magic first thing in the morning,” said Harry. “In fact, I have the next period completely free!”

Severus overheard him. “Your free periods are to be used for studying,” he said sternly to all the sixth years, before handing Daphne her timetable.

Breakfast ended soon after that. Hermione came over and, together with Draco, Tracey and Theo, set off for Ancient Runes. Pansy walked up to Divination alone, with Greg and Vince ambling after her. Harry headed back down to the Slytherin common room with Daphne, Millicent and Blaise. Since the room was empty, they had their pick of the seats near the windows, where they could watch the fish swimming in the lake outside. Harry was surprised to see the giant squid lazily swim past; it usually stayed closer to the surface in warmer weather.

A few minutes later the sixth years were joined by the seventh years who also had the period free. While Daphne smoothly began flirting with Vikram, Blaise chatted with Nerissa and Bastien. Harry, Millicent and Imogen struck up a conversation about Quidditch, though Harry couldn't help surreptitiously studying Agnes, who had been on the Inquisitorial Squad last year. She was sitting silently in the corner next to Imogen, half-hidden behind a large library book. She didn't speak to anyone but Imogen for the whole period – unsurprisingly, really, since apart from Imogen, everyone else in the room had been a member of the DA, and Agnes had helped Umbridge try to catch them the year before.

When the bell rang, the sixth years gathered their book bags and left to go up to Defence together. Eager to get to the class, Harry hurried ahead with Blaise, leaving the two girls to trail after them.

“Well that was awkward, having Monkleigh there,” Blaise muttered to Harry. “You'd think shagging someone would be enough to deter them from trying to get you expelled.”

Harry sniggered. “Maybe you weren't any good.”
Blaise glared at him. “Excuse me?”

“It was a joke, Zabini. Lighten up,” said Harry.

“That wasn't funny. I have a reputation to maintain,” Blaise said haughtily.

“I'm sure your reputation is fine,” said Harry. “You know sex-based diplomacy isn't a real thing, right?”

Blaise's eyes lit up. “Not yet, it isn't.”

Harry laughed. “Yeah, good luck with that.”

“I don't need luck, Potter, I have skill. I can show you if you like,” Blaise said, leering, before his shoulders slumped. “It's no fun flirting with you when Draco's not around to get riled up.”

When they got to the Defence classroom they found the rest of the class lined up outside. It was the biggest class Harry had ever been in. Apart from Greg and Vince, all of the Slytherins in their year were there, along with all of the Gryffindors, five Ravenclaws and four Hufflepuffs. Every single person had been in the DA, and Harry felt a rush of pride when he joined Hermione and Draco at the front of the queue.

A minute later the classroom door opened and Severus walked out, making the class fall silent. “Inside,” he said.

Harry flashed him a smile as he passed, then made for the front row of the gloomy, candlelit room, with Hermione and Draco right behind him. There was silence as everyone found their seats, broken by Severus shutting the door.

“There will be no need to take out your books. I want you all paying complete attention to what I am about to say,” he said, sweeping to the front of the class.

Hermione quickly shoved her copy of Confronting the Faceless back into her school bag and nudged it under her desk with her foot. Severus took his place behind his desk and regarded the class silently, making eye contact with every pupil before continuing.

“You have had five teachers in this subject, only two of whom had any idea of what they were talking about. Lupin and Crouch Jnr, the Death Eater posing as Moody, were effective teachers because they had first hand experience of the Dark Arts; Lupin in fighting them, and Crouch in using them.” Again, Severus paused, watching the class, and when he continued his voice was even quieter than usual, making everyone strain to hear it. “You all know that, many years ago, I was a Death Eater.”

This time, Harry distinctly saw the glint of amusement in Severus' eyes at the gasps from the class. He stepped out from behind his desk to prowl around the room before speaking again.

“Last summer, I fought in the battle at the Ministry of Magic, as did the entire first row here,”
Severus gestured to Neville, Hermione, Harry and Draco as he passed them in turn. “I can tell you personally that those who practise the Dark Arts have a powerful advantage over those who fight them. The Dark Arts are myriad, multifarious, constantly evolving, and undying. Each time they are beaten back, they will rise up again, stronger and more dangerous than before. They are limited only by the power and imagination of those practising them – and I can assure you that Voldemort is both incredibly powerful and highly imaginative.”

Harry couldn’t help remembering the ease with which Voldemort had possessed him at the Ministry, and forced him to use the Cruciatus Curse on Severus. He tried not to shudder at the memory as, like the rest of the class, he twisted in his seat to follow Severus’ progress around the room.

“Voldemort uses whichever means necessary to achieve his aims. He is utterly ruthless and lacks even a shred of compassion. I have witnessed him inflict horrors you couldn't imagine in your worst nightmares, all without showing any remorse, and he is not squeamish about targeting children like yourselves. As evidenced by the kidnap of Mr Black -” here, everyone turned to stare at Draco, before returning their attention to Severus “- by his own relatives, no one is safe. Nowhere is safe. Despite the Headmaster's assurances to you all last night, Hogwarts is not safe. It is undoubtedly safer than the vast majority of locations in Britain, but if Voldemort really wanted to get in here, he would find a way.”

Deadly silence met this pronouncement. The class seemed hardly to breathe as they stared wide-eyed at Severus.

“And so,” said Severus, acting as if he hadn't just terrified the entire class into immobility, “your defences against the Dark Arts must be just as strong, just as adaptable, just as resilient as the horrors that await you.”

He returned to his desk and faced the class, who still hadn't moved.

“Who can tell me the advantage of non-verbal spell-casting?”

Hermione's hand shot into the air before anyone else registered that Severus had even stopped lecturing to ask a question.

“Miss Granger?”

As Hermione's hand returned to her desk, Harry raised his own.

“Your adversary will have no warning about what kind of magic you're about to use, which gives you a minute advantage in a fight,” said Hermione. “Unless they're a Legilimens, that is.”

“As it happens, Voldemort is an extremely talented Legilimens... Mr Potter?”

Harry lowered his hand and smirked up at Severus. “You can keep fighting even if your opponent cheats and uses a Silencing Charm on you.”

Severus' mouth twitched. “I would not call that cheating, but you are correct, as was Miss Granger. Five points to both of you. Yes, those of you who manage to cast non-verbal spells will gain an advantage in duelling, though not everyone has the capability to do so. It requires a level of concentration which some people are sadly lacking. Naturally, it is even more difficult to cast non-verbal spells in the middle of a deathly duel.

“You will now separate yourselves into pairs and spread out. One of you will attempt to non-verbally jinx your partner, who will attempt to cast a Shield Charm, also non-verbally.”
There was a scraping of chairs as everyone stood up. Harry turned automatically towards Draco, only to have Severus hold up a hand.

“Mr Potter, you will partner with Miss Granger.”

“Ten Galleons she jinxes you within five minutes,” Draco whispered on his way over to Neville.

“How stupid do you think I am? There’s no way I’m taking that bet,” Harry whispered back.

He got into position and tried not to gulp at the determined look on Hermione's face. Harry could see the logic behind Severus’ order. Hermione was far more closely matched to Harry in duelling skill than Draco was, and would therefore be a more challenging partner. The problem was that Harry was still pretty useless at non-verbal spells.

It took Hermione a whole ten minutes to hit Harry with an Impediment Jinx. Severus had been circling the room, snapping at anyone who was cheating by whispering their spells. He awarded Hermione ten points, then told her and Harry to switch roles.

It took Harry until the end of the lesson to send a non-verbal Impediment Jinx at Hermione, only for her to counter with a silent Shield Charm. Nevertheless, Severus gave Harry ten points for his achievement, and despite the large amount of homework they were given, Harry left the lesson in a good mood.

At lunch the Slytherin table was abuzz with the news that Severus had begun his sixth year class by talking about his past as a Death Eater. Harry supposed people in the other houses were talking about it as well. Up at the staff table, Severus was calmly reading a book, but Harry was sure he was acutely aware of the stir his teaching method had wrought.

“Hi, Harry.”

Harry turned around to find Daphne's little sister standing behind him. “Hi, Astoria.”

She held out a rolled up piece of parchment. “Dumbledore asked me to give you this.”

Harry took the parchment off her; she blushed when her fingers brushed over his as she took her hand away. “Thanks.”

Astoria smiled, showing off her dimples. “You're welcome, Harry.”

“Don't you have somewhere else to be?” Draco asked pointedly.

Astoria's smile faltered when she caught the nasty look Draco was giving her. She gave a nervous little giggle, gave Harry another dimply smile, then walked off to join her friends further down the table. As soon as she sat down, they put their heads together, then started giggling as a group.

Draco glared down at them, then looked at Daphne. “If she wasn't your sister I'd be hexing her right about now.”

“Well she is, so you can back off,” Daphne snapped.

“Er, what was that about?” Harry asked Daphne.

She rolled her eyes. “My sister and her friends have a crush on you. It's the whole Chosen One thing. You're all heroic or whatever.”

“It's not just Slytherins, either. Some of Ginny's friends suddenly think you're fit, too,” Blaise chimed
“Mental,” Harry muttered, shaking his head. He unrolled the parchment and read it quickly, angling it so that Pansy couldn't look over his shoulder.

_Dear Harry,_
_I would like begin our private lessons this Saturday night._
_Please come to my office at eight o'clock._
_I hope you are enjoying your return to Hogwarts._
_Yours sincerely,_
_Albus Dumbledore_
_PS. I enjoy Fizzing Whizzbees._

“He didn't waste any time. What do you think he'll be teaching you?” asked Draco, who had read the note.

“No idea...” Harry mused.

Harry and Draco spent the rest of lunch discussing what Dumbledore's first lesson would involve, before walking down to the dungeons with Hermione, Blaise, Theo and Tracey. When they got to the Potions classroom, they found there were only five other students going into NEWT Potions: Morag, Padma, Michael and Terry from Ravenclaw, and a sole Hufflepuff, Ernie.

They hadn't been waiting long before the classroom door opened and Slughorn came out to usher them all in. He greeted everyone cheerfully, positively beaming when Harry and Blaise passed him. Inside the classroom, Harry was surprised to see that Slughorn had done away with the long benches that had used to grace the room. Instead, he had set up large stone-topped tables that could easily seat four people with their assorted potions equipment and ingredients. He had also somehow managed to make the dungeon classroom bright and welcoming. Clearly, Slughorn wanted to facilitate conversation in his classroom; a far cry from the strict silence Severus had preferred.

There were four cauldrons set up around the room, each of them containing a different potion, all bubbling and turning the air hazy with their steam. The Ravenclaws took the table closest to a cauldron containing a mudlike potion; Blaise, Theo and Tracey sat next to a cauldron of what Harry was sure was Veritaserum; Harry, Hermione and Draco sat down next to a potion that had the most enticing scent Harry had ever encountered. He was fairly certain he knew what it was; Severus had told him about a potion that gleamed like this one did. He was so engrossed by its smell that he barely registered Ernie sitting down next to Hermione.

“Ever since Dad mentioned Amortentia to me, I've wondered what it'd smell like,” Harry said dreamily.

“Apples,” Draco said, taking a deep breath, “and the honey and lemon drink Mother used to make me when I was ill as a child. And your shampoo.”

Harry smiled. “I can smell your cologne, and the cardamom tea Dad brews, and broomstick polish.”

They both turned to Hermione, who had an odd expression on her face.

“Well?” Draco prompted her, when she didn't immediately respond.

“What? Oh, er, freshly cut grass and new parchment,” Hermione said vaguely, not meeting their eyes.

Before either Harry or Draco could question her further, Slughorn called the class to order.
“Welcome, everyone! We’ve much to do today, so equipment out, and you mustn't forget your copies of *Advance Potion-Making!*”

Fat chance of that, Harry thought as he got his things out of his bag.

“Well now. To start us off, I've prepared a few potions for you to have a look at, just to give you an idea of the sort of potions you'll all be brewing this year. I don't imagine any of you will have brewed any of these potions yet, but I do expect that all of you will have heard of them... So, then, who can tell me what this one is?”

He pointed to the cauldron of Veritaserum. Hermione's hand shot into the air, well before Harry and the rest of the class. Slughorn smiled at her.

“It's Veritaserum, a completely odourless and colourless potion that compels the drinker to tell the truth,” Hermione said.

“Quite right, quite right,” said Slughorn, moving to the mudlike cauldron. “Now this potion is fairly infamous... it's been featuring in a lot of the Ministry's safety brochures as of late. Can anyone – yes, miss?”

Hermione lowered her hand. “It's Polyjuice, a potion which allows you to assume for an hour the form of any person, provided that you have also added a small part of them to the potion.”

“Yes indeed,” said Slughorn. He moved over to Harry's table and gestured at the Amortentia, ignoring the rest of the class entirely as he watched Hermione expectantly.

“It's Amortentia, the most powerful love potion in existence. It's said that no two people will smell the same thing, as it smells like what each person is most attracted to,” said Hermione.

“Correct again, my dear,” said Slughorn. “May I ask your name?”

“Hermione Granger, sir.”

Slughorn's eyes lit up. “Granger, you say? I don't suppose you're related to Hector Dagworth-Granger, the founder of the Most Extraordinary Society of Potioneers?”

“I doubt it, sir. I'm a Muggle-born.”

“Oh!” cried Slughorn, smiling from Hermione to Harry. “Could this be your Muggle-born friend of whom you spoke so highly? The best student in your entire year, I believe you said?”

“Yes, sir,” said Harry.

“I see you weren't exaggerating... Ten points to Gryffindor, Miss Granger,” said Slughorn.

Hermione turned to Harry, glowing. “You didn't really tell him that, did you?”

“Of course I did. You are the best in our year,” said Harry.

Hermione was faintly pink when she turned back to listen to Slughorn.

“Of course, Amortentia can't truly create love. There is no power on this earth that can create true love. No, all this can do is create a powerful infatuation – more of an obsession, really. It is therefore probably the most dangerous potion in this room, make no mistake... But enough. It's about time we got down to business.”
Ernie raised his hand and pointed at the last cauldron. The golden potion within was the noisiest in the entire room, with large drops bursting out and splashing around the surface of the potion, all without spilling over. “Sir, you forgot about that potion.”

“So I did, so I did,” said Slughorn, chuckling. “You'll have to make allowances for an old man’s memory…”

Harry suspected that Slughorn had not so much forgotten about that potion as he had deliberately left it out for added drama.

“Ah, yes. This one, ladies and gentlemen, is a pleasant little potion named Felix Felicis,” said Slughorn.

Hermione gasped. Harry couldn't blame her. He had read about that potion, and couldn't believe that Slughorn would leave it out on his desk like that. He was either incredibly trusting or, perhaps more likely, had safeguards in place to prevent any students from stealing it.

Slughorn smiled at Hermione. “I gather you know what Felix Felicis does then, Miss Granger?”

“Yes, sir. It's liquid luck!” said Hermione.

The rest of the class all sat up straighter. If they hadn't been paying attention before, they certainly all were now.

“It is indeed. Another ten points for Gryffindor, Miss Granger,” said Slughorn. “It's a tricky little potion, old Felix. Frightfully difficult to make, of course, and downright catastrophic if brewed incorrectly... A perfectly brewed batch such as this, however, will grant you success in anything you attempt, until the effect wears off, of course.”

“Why don't people just drink it all the time, sir?” asked Terry.

“Too much of a good thing is never a good thing, young man…” Slughorn said, wagging a finger at Terry. “In this case, Felix will cause you to become overconfident – dangerously so, in fact. People have acted so recklessly under its influence that they've seriously injured themselves or others... it's toxic too, in all but the smallest of doses. One must use this potion only rarely if one wishes to remain safe.”

“Have you ever taken it?” asked Michael.

“Only twice. Once when I was twenty-four, and again when I was fifty-seven. Two tablespoonfuls with breakfast, leading to two perfect days,” said Slughorn, smiling in apparent fond remembrance. He gave his head a shake and snapped out of it. “This will be the prize up for grabs during today's lesson.”

All around the room, eyebrows shot up and mouths dropped open.

“One little bottle of Felix Felicis,” said Slughorn. He withdrew a tiny glass bottle from his breast pocket and held it up to them all. “This dose is enough to provide you with twelve hours of pure luck. I should warn you that this potion is banned in all organised competitions, so no taking it before examinations or Quidditch games – but I'll turn a blind eye if you're on the Slytherin team!”

He chuckled at his own joke, before stopping and returning the bottle to his pocket. “In order to win this magnificent prize, you'll need to turn to page ten of Advanced Potion-Making. We have just over an hour left together, which should be enough time for you have a jolly good crack at brewing the Draught of Living Death. This will be more complex than anything you've attempted before and I
don't expect perfection... but the person who comes the closest will win a twelve hour date with Felix! Good luck!"

There was a loud flurry of activity as everyone began setting up their cauldrons and other equipment. Harry flipped through his book, then leaned down to read Severus' scribbled annotations. The margins on the page were entirely filled with messy script that hardly resembled Severus' current handwriting at all. After ascertaining that Severus had had no problem with the first line of instructions, Harry got out his valerian roots and began chopping them up into even portions.

Ten minutes later, the air was filled with blue-tinged steam, making it hard for those who were trying to see what their neighbours were doing. Harry could see that Hermione's potion was the same dark indigo as his own, which was the shade the book specified as being ideal at this stage; Draco's was more of a true blue, as was Ernie's.

Finished with his roots, Harry looked at the next instruction, the first which Severus had amended. While the book suggested cutting up a Sopophorous Bean, Severus had noted that crushing the bean with a silver dagger would release its juice far more effectively.

Harry got out his knife set, which included a palm-sized silver dagger, with which he carefully crushed the bean. Even though he was expecting a fair bit of juice from the bean, Harry was shocked by the sheer amount which spurted out. He quickly scooped it all into the potion. The effect was instantaneous, the potion lightening into the shade of lilac described in his book.

The next line of instructions had also been modified. While the book said to stir counter-clockwise until the potion was as clear as water, Severus advocated adding in a clockwise stir after every seventh counter-clockwise stir. Harry dutifully did as instructed, pleased when a single clockwise stir made the potion change from lilac to pale pink.

“How did you do that?” Hermione demanded irritably.

Harry glanced from his potion to answer. “Stir clockwise after -”

“The book says counter-clockwise!” she cried.

“My dad says otherwise,” Harry responded.

“Your father says what, exactly?” asked Draco, whose potion was even more purple than Hermione's was.

“One clockwise stir after every seventh counter-clockwise stir,” said Harry, continuing the stirring.

“I'll take Snape's instructions over a book's any day,” Draco said to Hermione, copying Harry's pattern.

Hermione bit her lip, clearly torn, and looked to see what Ernie was doing. He looked down at his dark blue potion and shrugged in resignation.

“Mine's a lost cause, I'm afraid,” he said.

“Time's up, everyone! Stirring rods down please!” Slughorn called.

He moved around the room inspecting everyone's potions, every now and then pausing to take a closer look, lean down to sniff, or give a stir. When he reached Harry's table, he barely even looked at Ernie's blue potion. He nodded approvingly at both Hermione's lilac potion and Draco's pink one, but beamed when he got to Harry's, which had only the faintest pink tinge to it.
“Our winner, ladies and gentlemen! Bravo Harry, a truly marvellous effort! I'll be telling Severus about this at dinner tonight, mark my words!” Slughorn said happily. He pulled out the bottle of Felix Felicis and handed it to Harry, patting him on the back in the process. “Very well done, Harry. Now don't get up to too much mischief with this!”

Harry put the thumb-sized bottle into his pocket and made no promises as to what he may or may not plan to do with the potion. Behind Slughorn, he could see Draco rolling his eyes.

“Honestly, how is he that surprised?” Draco demanded, once they were out in the corridor. “Your father's the old Potions teacher, of course you're going to be good at brewing!”

“And you cheated,” Hermione grumbled.

“No, I didn't. I just used different instructions – instructions that I tried to share with you, I might add,” said Harry.

“What precisely did your dad write in your textbook?” Hermione asked.

Harry shrugged. “He mostly just improved some of the recipes.”

“How? What sources did he use to do so?” Hermione pressed.

“Probably experimented with them himself, I guess. He used to do that when he was our age,” said Harry.

Hermione pursed her lips. “And you're sure they're all safe? What if he was wrong about something? What if -”

“Hermione, I think my dad knows what he's about when it comes to Potions,” Harry said testily. “If you want to keep using the out-dated book Slughorn set us, fine. Have fun with that. I'm going to keep using Dad's alterations.”

“Me too,” Draco chimed in. “I have no problem with using different instructions as long as they're better.”

“But you don't know that they are!” cried Hermione.

“If Snape wrote them, they probably are,” said Draco in exasperation. “Clearly, we're not going to agree on this, so let's drop the subject, shall we? You could tell us why you went all funny over that Amortentia.”

“I didn't go funny,” said Hermione.

“You kinda did,” said Harry.

Hermione sighed. “If you must know, I could also smell baklava.”

“Baklava?” asked Draco.

“It was served at the Yule Ball. Viktor saw how much I liked it, so when I visited him in Bulgaria he made some for me,” said Hermione.

Harry gave her a sympathetic grimace. “I thought you were getting over him.”

“I am,” Hermione said, a little defensively. “I just wasn't expecting to smell that in the middle of a classroom. It threw me a little.”
“Want us to sneak you into our dorm this evening to cheer up with Firewhisky and poker?” offered Draco.

Hermione goggled at him. “You can't be serious! You know how much homework we already have to do! We need to get started as soon as possible before it overwhelms us! I'll be going straight to the library after dinner, and I'd advise you to do the same!”

“Sorry for asking,” Draco said sulkily.

“I won't be there, either. I'm going to Dad's after dinner, to see how his first day teaching Defence went,” said Harry.

“Of course you are,” sighed Draco.

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Theo, Tracey and Millicent all chose to join Hermione in the library after dinner. Blaise disappeared to meet up with Ginny, so Draco sat down in the common room with Daphne and Pansy to begin their Defence homework. Harry dumped his school bag on the floor next to Draco.

“I won't be too long,” he said, before walking off with Ladon draped around his neck.

When he walked into Severus’ quarters he found him seated by the dark fireplace, reading a novel and drinking Firewhisky. There was a bottle of Firewhisky and another glass sitting on the coffee table.

“Well, if it isn't the Potions prodigy himself. To what do I owe the honour?” Severus asked, marking his place in his book and setting it aside.

Harry sat down on the couch. “I saw you speaking to Slughorn at dinner.”

“He spent the entire meal raving about your brewing talents,” said Severus.

“Proud?” Harry asked, watching Ladon slither off him onto the floor.

“Naturally,” said Severus, then sniffed. “I did not appreciate him implying that you are a better brewer than I am.”

Harry snorted. “He didn't say that.”

Severus raised an eyebrow. “I said implied.”

“Well we both know that’s not true,” Harry said dismissively. “The only reason I did so much better than everyone else is because I was following your instructions.”

“You didn't share them with Draco or Hermione?” asked Severus, holding still when Ladon began climbing up his leg.

Harry shrugged. “I tried to. Draco started to copy me after he saw how much better my potion was turning out compared to his, and he said he'll keep doing that, but Hermione refused. She wanted to keep using the official instructions, no matter how useless they might be. She also wanted to know what sources you used to alter the instructions.”

Severus rolled his eyes. “I experimented myself.”
“I told her that,” Harry interjected.

Severus huffed and patted Ladon, who was now curled in his lap. “Well, if she wants to pass up the opportunity to avail herself of clearly superior resources, that's her problem. It's an entirely foolish position to take if you ask me.”

“Pretty much,” Harry agreed. “So, come on. How was Defence? You missing teaching Potions yet?”

“It was fine, and no, I'm not,” said Severus, taking a sip of Firewhisky.

Harry watched the liquid slosh in the glass. “Did you have to cast any Unforgivables today?”

“Fifth year Ravenclaws,” Severus said curtly. “I survived the experience.”

Harry nodded and pointed to the other glass. “McGonagall's coming down?”

“She should be here any minute,” Severus admitted.

Harry nodded again, pleased. “Well, I won't stay, then. Just wanted to see how your first day was.”

“I appreciate the gesture,” Severus said quietly.

Harry smiled, then stood up to fetch Ladon. “Are you going to tell her that you deliberately scared everyone half to death by telling them Voldemort is going to kill them in their dorms tonight?”

“I said no such thing,” said Severus.

“Just about. The entire school's been talking about the way you're telling all your classes that you used to be a Death Eater”

“Then I am sure Minerva is also well aware of what I've been saying. I spent some time wording that speech, I'll have you know.”

“And it was a good speech. Very effective. But your Potions speech about brewing glory and stoppering death was just as effective while far less likely to cause nightmares,” said Harry.

Severus smirked. “Where's the fun in that?”

“You called us all dunderheads.”

Severus shrugged and had another sip.

Harry rolled his eyes. “Have fun terrifying the rest of the school, then.”

“I believe I shall. Oh, we'll be continuing your duelling practise this weekend. Hermione and Draco are welcome to join us, if they wish,” said Severus.

“Er, I've got my first lesson with Dumbledore this Saturday night,” said Harry.

“Very well,” said Severus. “We'll meet outside the Room of Requirement at ten o'clock Sunday morning. I want to hear everything he tells you.”

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The rest of the week's lessons went similarly to Monday's. Slughorn again fawned over Harry and
Hermione in their Thursday Potions class, much to Draco's annoyance; Severus continued to use the spectre of Voldemort as motivation when instructing the class on non-verbal spells; and both McGonagall and Flitwick also expected their sixth year students to be casting non-verbally. Sprout, thankfully, allowed her students to speak – and swear – as much as they liked when dealing with the dangerous plants in her greenhouse.

Harry spent Saturday evening studying in the common room with his friends. Hermione had been right, that first day back, about how much homework they would be getting this year. Even though he had dropped four subjects and had free periods on every day but Tuesday, Harry still had a mound of homework to complete that weekend. He managed to complete his Transfiguration essay before he had to set off at quarter to eight to see Dumbledore.

“Assicco,” he said, casting a Drying Charm at his parchment. He rolled it up and shoved it back into his school bag. “Just in time, I need to go see Dumbledore.”

“I'll wait up for you, I want to know what he tells you,” Draco said.

The rest of the group were all listening, and nodded their agreement with this.

“Sure,” Harry said vaguely, swinging his bag over his shoulder. Somehow, he didn't think Dumbledore would approve of him telling everyone what he was about to tell Harry.

Harry didn't imagine there would be many people out in the corridors at this time – something he was rather hoping would be the case, given the increased attention he had been receiving ever since returning to Hogwarts. In fact, Harry didn't come across a single other living soul the entire way. He did, however, encounter the Bloody Baron near the stairs out of the dungeons. He heard the clanking of the ghost's chains before he rounded the corner, giving him some warning.

Remembering what Severus had said a few months ago about addressing a baron, Harry inclined his head. “My Lord,” he said politely.

To his astonishment, the Bloody Baron gave a shallow bow. “Good evening, Mr Potter,” he said in his raspy voice, before floating through the wall.

Harry couldn't help the incredulous smile that crept over his face as he walked on. That was the friendliest encounter he'd ever had with the Bloody Baron.

Harry didn't see anyone else on his trip up to Dumbledore's office, and before long he was standing in front of the gargoyle that guarded the entrance.

“Fizzing Whizzbee,” he said.

The gargoyle leaped to the side and the wall behind it slid open to reveal the moving spiral staircase. Harry stepped onto and allowed it to speed him to the top of the tower, where he used the griffin-shaped knocker.

“Come in,” Dumbledore called.

Harry stepped in and closed the door behind himself. “Good evening, sir.”

Dumbledore smiled at him from his seat behind his desk. “Good evening, Harry. Please, sit down. I hope you have had a pleasant first week back at school?”

“Yes, sir,” Harry said, walking forward.
As he did so, he looked for any clue as to what they might be doing that evening, but he found nothing unusual in the office – nothing unusual for Dumbledore, at any rate: the office was filled with all manner of interesting looking devices, none of which Harry could identify the name or function of; the walls were lined with portraits of the previous Heads of Hogwarts, all of whom appeared to be sleeping in their frames; and Fawkes was perched on his stand, watching Harry keenly. Harry sat down in a plush armchair, trying not to be disappointed with the lack of anything new. After all, for his extracurricular lessons with Severus they had needed only their wands and the occasional pot of tea.

Dumbledore leaned forward and folded his hands together on his desk. “So, Harry, I imagine that you have been burning with curiosity over what we shall be doing during these lessons?”

“Yes, sir,” said Harry, sitting up straighter. “My friends and I have been talking about it all week.”

“Ah,” said Dumbledore. He studied Harry for a moment, so intently that Harry instinctively began to Occlude. “Well,” said Dumbledore, making no sign of whether or not he had been attempting Legilimency, “I fear you shall have to disappoint your friends. I do not want the information that I am about to impart to you to be swept up into the turgid waters of the Hogwarts gossip network.”

“But I can tell Dad, right? And Draco and Hermione?” Harry asked.

Again, he had the impression that Dumbledore was attempting to pry into his mind. “Yes, I think it will be safe to tell them. Make sure that you impress upon them the importance of keeping this information amongst yourselves. I do not want word getting back to Voldemort about how much I know – or rather, suspect – about him.”

“Of course, sir,” Harry said automatically, before Dumbledore's words fully registered. “Wait, so you're going to be telling me about Voldemort?”

“Yes, I will,” said Dumbledore, standing up. “And I shan't be the only one.”

Harry watched in confusion as Dumbledore crossed the room to open up a cupboard next to the door. He turned around a moment later holding his Pensieve. A tendril of unease went down Harry's spine at the sight. He'd seen that Pensieve used twice; the first time, he had learned that he was fated to either kill Voldemort or be killed by him, while the second time, he had listened to the sound of himself being tortured.

“Is something wrong, Harry?” Dumbledore asked.

“No, sir,” Harry lied, forcing his face into a more neutral expression. “Just not what I was expecting.”

“I flatter myself that I have a few surprises up my sleeves,” Dumbledore said, placing the Pensieve on his desk. “Now then, tonight we shall be entering the Pensieve. I believe you have seen Severus use it in this way?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Excellent,” Dumbledore said brightly. He reached into his robes and pulled out a small bottle, filled with a swirling silver substance Harry recognised as a memory. “This belonged to Bob Ogden.”

“As in the brand of Firewhisky?” asked Harry in confusion.

Dumbledore chuckled. “I believe Ogden's Firewhisky was invented by a relative of the Ogden in whom we are interested... Bob Ogden used to work for the Department of Magical Law
Enforcement. He is now sadly deceased, but before he died, I managed to persuade him to part with this memory. It is of a visit he conducted for work, a visit which he thought rather routine, if unpleasant. If you will stand, Harry…”

Harry stood, watching Dumbledore struggling with to uncork the bottled memory. His blackened hand wasn't working properly, and Harry wondered, not for the first time, why he didn't take Severus up on his offer of further healing potions – or at least a stronger pain reliever.

“Sir, do you want me to do that?” he asked.

“No need to trouble yourself, Harry,” Dumbledore said.

He placed the bottle on his desk and uncorked it with his wand, then poured its contents into the Pensieve. The gaseous liquid swirled around the basin, throwing silvery light up into the room.

“After you,” Dumbledore said.

Harry swallowed, then took a deep breath and submerged his head. He felt his feet leave the floor, and then he was falling through total darkness. He hadn't been expecting the darkness, but before he could get properly unnerved, his fall ended abruptly, and he was left squinting against blinding sunlight. A moment later Dumbledore landed next to him, as calmly as if he had walked there himself.

“It takes some getting used to, I'll admit,” he said, looking down at Harry.

“Still not as bad as Flooing, sir,” said Harry, looking around himself.

They were standing in a country lane on a bright summer's day. The lane was lined on both sides by high, unkempt hedges, preventing Harry from making out anything else about their surrounds. A few metres in front of them was a portly little man, who had to be Ogden. He was dressed in Muggle clothes, though he clearly didn't know a thing about Muggle fashions; he had paired a frock coat with a striped Victorian bathing suit that covered him from neck to ankle, with old-fashioned dress shoes on his feet. Completing his outfit were extraordinarily thick glasses that made Harry's old frames look positively fashionable in comparison.

Ogden made no sign that he had noticed the appearance of Harry and Dumbledore. He was peering at an old wooden signpost which was protruding from the hedge in front of him. Having evidently found the directions he was looking for, Ogden turned and marched off.

Harry and Dumbledore followed him. As he passed the signpost, Harry glanced up at it. The arm pointing in the direction from which they had come read: Great Hangleton, 5 miles. The arm pointing in the direction Ogden was heading read: Little Hangleton, 1 mile.

Little Hangleton. The name reverberated in Harry's mind. It was here that Voldemort had been resurrected; here he had tortured Harry; here he had come so close to killing Harry. He had never thought he would be returning, even in a memory, and he had a flash of irritation towards Dumbledore for not warning him about their destination.

They came around a bend in the lane, and suddenly their view expanded. They were at the top of a steep hill, down which the path continued, twisting and turning along the slope. In front of Harry was a lush valley, with a picturesque village at its base. Across the valley was a gentler hill, on which was perched a manor house. Harry's eyes were drawn towards the church and graveyard of Little Hangleton. It looked so peaceful – a far cry from how Harry remembered that particular location. He clenched his jaw and kept quiet, thankful that he was already Occluding.
He was even more thankful when he rounded another bend and saw Ogden disappearing through a small gap in the hedge. Harry let out a quiet sigh of relief as he and Dumbledore followed Ogden onto a thin, dusty path. This path was nowhere near as well maintained as the one they had just left – the hedges were even more overgrown, and there were potholes and loose rocks dotting the way. The path could have been bordered by lava for all Harry cared – they weren't going to Little Hangleton after all, which meant he could stop worrying about the sodding graveyard.

Ogden came to a stop in front of a small group of trees and drew his wand. The trees were so large and close together that their canopies completely shaded the ground below from the bright summer sun. It took Harry a moment to realise that there was a house hidden amongst the twisted trunks. Well, house was a generous word, Harry amended. It was about the size of Hagrid's cabin, but that was where the similarities ended. Hagrid's hut was warm and welcoming; this place was anything but. Tiles were missing from the roof, exposing the rafters to the elements; moss covered the walls, which were barely visible over metre-high nettles; the windows were covered with a thick layer of filth; and the wooden door was half rotted, with – Harry swallowed down his revulsion – a dead snake nailed to it.

A tiny window was opened noisily to emit a thin tendril of smoke; somebody seemed to be cooking inside. The noise seemed to jolt Ogden into action, for he began to quietly, carefully walk towards the hut. He stopped when he too noticed the dead snake on the door.

A second later there was a rustling overhead, then with a crack, a rag-clad man jumped out of a tree to land in front of Ogden, who stumbled in his haste to back away. Harry didn't blame him. The man was covered in filth, with matted hair and missing teeth, and eyes that stared in opposite directions. He seemed utterly wild.

"You're not welcome," the man hissed.

"Did you want me to translate, sir?" Harry asked.

"That won't be necessary. I can understand Parseltongue, though I cannot speak it myself," said Dumbledore.

Harry couldn't help glancing at him in surprise, and made a mental note to tell Draco about this. The two of them were so used to only Ladon being able to understand their Parseltongue that they didn't think twice before having private conversations in front of people.

Meanwhile, Ogden had retreated further, but hadn't fled. "Er – good morning. I'm from the Ministry of Magic -"

"You're not welcome."

Ogden shifted his grip on his wand nervously. "Er – I'm sorry – I don't understand you."

Whether or not he could understand the man's exact words, Harry felt his meaning was clear, as he stepped forward with a wand in one hand and a bloodied dagger in his other.

"Now, look -"

There was a bang, and suddenly Ogden was lying on the ground with his hands pressed to his nose, trying in vain to stem the flow of yellow pus from his nose. The knife-wielding man began to laugh maniacally at Ogden's distress. Behind him, the door to the house flew open and an old man came rushing out. He was shorter but just as odd-looking as the other man, with broad shoulders and oddly long arms.
“Morfin!” he said angrily, hurrying over to the cackling man. His attention, however, was on Ogden.

“Ministry, is it?”

Ogden looked up at him from the ground. “Correct! And you, I take it, are Mr Gaunt?”

“S right. Got you in the face, did he?” asked Gaunt.

Ogden glared. “Yes, he did!”

Gaunt gazed down at him angrily. “Should've made your presence known, shouldn't you? This is private property. Can't just walk in here and not expect my son to defend himself.”

“Defend himself against what, man?” Ogden asked in exasperation, struggling to get upright again.


While Ogden used his wand to finally stop the pus pouring out of his nose, Gaunt muttered to his son. “Get in the house. Don't argue.”

Morfin seemed as if he was going to refuse, but a glare from his father had him slouching into the house. He slammed the door, making Harry wince when the dead snake flapped obscenely.

Ogden was cleaning the pus from his clothes, but was clearly getting his mind back on business. “It's your son I'm here to see, Mr Gaunt. That was Morfin, wasn't it?”

“Ar, that was Morfin,” Gaunt said, then glared at Ogden suspiciously. “Are you pure-blood?”

“That's neither here nor there,” said Ogden.

Gaunt didn't like that answer, and stared rudely at Ogden. “Now I come to think about it, I've seen noses like yours down in the village.”

Ogden was unfazed by what was clearly meant to be an insult. “I don't doubt it, if your son's been let loose on them. Perhaps we could continue this discussion inside?”

“Inside?”

“Yes, Mr Gaunt. I've already told you. I'm here about Morfin. We sent an owl -”

“I've no use for owls. I don't open letters.”

“Then you can hardly complain that you get no warning of visitors,” said Ogden, making Harry snigger appreciatively. “I am here following a serious breach of wizarding law which occurred here in the early hours of this morning.”

“All right, all right, all right! Come in the bleeding house, then, and much good it'll do you!” Gaunt shouted.

Harry wouldn't have blamed Ogden for turning on his heel and walking straight back out of the house into which they stepped. The room they were in served as both the lounge room and the kitchen, with two closed doors that presumably led to bedrooms. Morfin was sitting in a stained armchair, playing with a live adder and singing to it.

“Hissy hissy, little snakey, slither on the floor, you be good to Morfin or he'll nail you to the door”

Harry glared at Morfin, before a shuffling in the corner of the kitchen caught his attention. There was
a girl cooking something on the filthy stove, the source of the steam Harry had seen rising out of the window. She was wearing a grey dress that was more rags than an actual garment, had dirty, mousy hair, and like her brother, her eyes stared in two different directions. She was a little cleaner than either Gaunt or Morfin, but even from across the room, Harry could see how utterly miserable she was.

“M’daughter, Merope,” Gaunt grunted.

“Good morning,” Ogden said politely.

Merope didn’t reply, merely gave her father a scared glance and returned to searching through a shelf of pots and pans.

Ogden turned back to Gaunt once more. “Well, Mr Gaunt, to get straight to the point, we have reason to believe that your son Morfin performed magic in front of a Muggle late last night.”

A crash rang through the room as Merope dropped a pot. She hastily crouched to pick it up as her father spun to face her, suddenly furious.

"Pick it up!" he shouted. "That's it, grub on the floor like some filthy Muggle, what's your wand for, you useless sack of muck?"

Ogden tried to remonstrate with Gaunt as his shouts made Merope drop the pot once more. Bright red now, she pulled a wand from her pocket and aimed a quiet spell at it. The pot promptly sped across the floor towards the far wall, where it cracked in two, making Morfin cackle yet again and further infuriating Gaunt.

"Mend it, you pointless lump, mend it!"

Before Merope could take two shaking steps, Ogden had used his own wand to repair the pot where it lay. Gaunt sneered at his daughter.

“Lucky the nice man from the Ministry's here, isn't it? Perhaps he'll take you off my hands, perhaps he doesn't mind dirty Squibs...”

Merope scuttled over to the pot, avoiding all eye contact, and picked it up to return it to the shelf from which it had fallen. She then backed herself into the corner and froze, staring down at the floor. Her grimy dress was the exact colour of the crumbling stone walls behind her, and Harry got the impression she was wishing herself invisible. He was reminded forcibly of how Severus had told him how he had used to hide from his own father to avoid incurring his wrath.

Ogden looked more troubled than ever. “Mr Gaunt, as I've said: the reason for my visit -”

“I heard you the first time! And so what? Morfin gave a Muggle a bit of what was coming to him – what about it, then?”

“Morfin has broken wizarding law.”

“Morfin has broken wizarding law,” Gaunt said in a mocking, singsong voice. “He taught a filthy Muggle a lesson that's illegal now, is it?”

Ogden stared at him stonily. “Yes. I'm afraid it is,” he said, then pulled a rolled up piece of parchment from his frock coat pocket.

“What's that, then, his sentence?”
“It is a summons to the Ministry for a hearing -”

“Summons! Summons? Who do you think you are, summoning my son anywhere?”

“I'm Head of the Magical Law Enforcement Squad.”

“And you think we're scum, do you? Scum who'll come running when the Ministry tells 'em to? Do you know who you're talking to, you filthy little Mudblood, do you?”

“I was under the impression that I was speaking to Mr Gaunt.”

“That's right!” Gaunt bellowed.

He held up his hand to Ogden, showing off a black-stoned ring he was wearing. With a jolt, Harry recognised it as the ring that had cursed Dumbledore. He cast a sharp glance at the him.

“No, Harry,” Dumbledore said quietly.

Pursing his lips, Harry turned back to Gaunt, who was still yelling.

“Centuries it's been in our family, that's how far back we go, and pure-blood as the way! Know how much I've been offered for this, with the Peverell coat of arms engraved on the stone?”

Ogden tried once again to return to business, Gaunt rushed towards Merope. His hand shot towards her face, making Harry flinch, but Gaunt wasn't trying to strangle her. He instead took hold of a heavy gold chain round her neck and dragged her towards Ogden, with Merope gasping for breath the entire time.

“See this?” Gaunt yelled. He shook the chain, making the locket on it bounce on the chest of a rapidly reddening Merope.

“I see it, I see it!” Ogden said quickly.

“Slytherin's! Salazar Slytherin's! We're his last living descendants, what do you say to that, eh?” Gaunt demanded.

“Mr Gaunt, your daughter!” Ogden cried.

Gaunt let go of the chain. Merope stumbled away from him to take refuge in her corner once more. She was bright red, gasping for breath and rubbing her neck; she did not seem at all unused to this sort of treatment from her father.

Gaunt ignored her completely. “So! Don't you go talking to us as if we're dirt on your shoes! Generations of pure-bloods, wizards all – more than you can say, I don't doubt!”

He spat at Ogden's feet, making Morfin cackle once more. Merope merely retreated further into her corner.

Gaunt ignored her completely. “So! Don't you go talking to us as if we're dirt on your shoes! Generations of pure-bloods, wizards all – more than you can say, I don't doubt!”

He spat at Ogden's feet, making Morfin cackle once more. Merope merely retreated further into her corner.

“Mr Gaunt, I am afraid that neither your ancestors nor mine have anything to do with the matter in hand. I am here because of Morfin, Morfin and the Muggle he accosted late last night. Our information,” he checked his parchment, “is that Morfin performed a jinx or hex on the said Muggle, causing him to erupt in highly painful hives.”

Morfin laughed; Gaunt hissed at him to be quiet. “And so what if he did, then? I expect you've wiped the Muggle's filthy face clean for him, and his memory to boot -”
“That's hardly the point, is it, Mr Gaunt? This was an unprovoked attack on a defenceless -”

“Ar, I had you marked out as a Muggle-lover the moment I saw you,” Gaunt said, before spitting on
the floor again.

“This discussion is getting us nowhere. It is clear from your son's attitude that he feels no remorse for
his actions,” said Ogden. He again checked his parchment. “Morfin will attend a hearing on the
fourteenth of September to answer the charges of using magic in front of a Muggle and causing harm
and distress to that same Mugg-”

Ogden fell silent when the sound of horse hooves and loud laughter came through the open window.
The three Gaunts all had very different reactions to the passersby: Gaunt froze like an animal sensing
a predator, ready to fight or flee; Morfin hissed with excitement, clearly wanting nothing more than
to go outside again; and Merope looked up from her corner, white-faced and terrified.

A young woman's voice came in through the window. “My god, what an eyesore! Couldn't your
father have that hovel cleared away, Tom?”

A young man, presumably Tom, replied. “It's not ours. Everything on the other side of the valley
belongs to us, but that cottage belongs to an old tramp called Gaunt and his children. The son's quite
mad, you should hear some of the stories they tell in the village.”

The woman laughed and the sound of the horses grew closer. Morfin moved to get out of his chair,
only to have Gaunt hiss an order to remain there.

“Tom, I might be wrong – but has somebody nailed a snake to that door?” the woman asked.

“Good lord, you're right! That'll be the son, I told you he's not right in the head. Don't look at it,
Cecilia, darling,” said Tom.

As the clopping of the horses' hooves grew fainter, Morfin looked gloatingly at his sister. “Darling,'
'Darling', he called her. So he wouldn't have you anyway.”

Merope trembled when Gaunt looked between his children, Ogden completely forgotten. “What's
that? What did you say, Morfin?”

“She likes looking at that Muggle. Always in the garden when he passes, peering through the hedge
at him, isn't she? And last night -” Merope shook her head desperately, but Morfin continued with a
malicious smile. “Hanging out of the window waiting for him to ride home, wasn't she?”

“Hanging out of the window to look at a Muggle?” Gaunt asked in a low voice, slowly moving
towards his petrified daughter. “Is it true? My daughter – pure-blooded descendant of Salazar
Slytherin – hankering after a filthy, dirty-veined Muggle?”

Merope again shook her head beseechingly.

Morfin cackled. “But I got him, Father! I got him as he went by, and he didn't look so pretty with
hives all over his face, did he, Merope?”

“You disgusting little Squib, you filthy little blood traitor!” Gaunt screamed.

He lunged towards Merope, and this time, he really was trying to strangle her.

“No!” Harry shouted futilely.
Ogden aimed his wand at Gaunt. "Relashio!"

The Revulsion Jinx threw Gaunt backwards, away from Merope, sending him tumbling over a chair to land flat on his back. Enraged, Morfin ran screaming at Ogden, firing hexes at him and holding his bloody knife in his other hand. Ogden turned and fled; Dumbledore gestured to Harry for him to follow.

They emerged with Merope's screams ringing in their ears, in time to see Ogden running with his hands held protectively over his head. He burst onto the main lane, running straight into the side of a chestnut horse ridden by a very attractive, dark-haired young man. Ogden ricocheted off the horse and sprinted up the lane. Both the dark-haired man and the young woman riding the grey horse next to him burst into laughter at his bizarre appearance.

“That will be all, Harry,” said Dumbledore.

He grasped Harry's elbow and tugged. A second later and Harry's feet left the ground and he was rising back up through total darkness, before he was deposited neatly back in Dumbledore's office. Dumbledore lit some extra lamps with his wand (it had grown darker in their absence) and waved Harry towards a seat.

“What happened to Merope? Was she okay?” asked Harry.

Dumbledore sat back down behind his desk. “She survived. Ogden returned to the Ministry for reinforcements. Within fifteen minutes they had converged on the Gaunt house. Morfin and Gaunt endeavoured to fight but they were quickly overpowered. They were both arrested and convicted by the Wizengamot. Morfin, with his history of attacking Muggles, was sentenced to three years in Azkaban. Marvolo had no such record but had injured Ogden and other Ministry employees, and was sentenced to six months.”

Harry's eyebrows shot up. “Marvolo? As in Voldemort's middle name?”

Dumbledore smiled approvingly. “I'm glad you're paying attention.”

“So the old man was, what, Voldemort's grandfather?” asked Harry.

Dumbledore nodded. “Yes, he was. Marvolo and his children Morfin and Merope were the last of the Gaunts, a very old pure-blood family who, due to their custom of marrying their cousins, were prone to be both violent and unstable. The family had once had a large fortune, but it had been frittered away long before Marvolo was born. As we witnessed, he was left in miserable poverty with just a couple of family heirlooms left, which he valued as much as he did his son, and far more than he did his daughter.”

“His daughter – she became Voldemort's mother?” asked Harry.

“She did. We also had a brief look at Voldemort's father. Did you happen to notice?”

“The man on the horse?”

“Yes, that was Tom Riddle Snr, a handsome Muggle who used to ride his horse past the Gaunts' house. Merope had a secret infatuation with him,” said Dumbledore.

“And they got married?” Harry asked, unable to figure out how that could have happened.

Dumbledore chuckled. “I believe you have forgotten that Merope was a witch. Her magical powers were not displayed terribly well just now, when she was petrified of her father and brother. Once
Marvolo and Morfin were taken away, however, I believe that both her abilities and her confidence would have improved, allowing her to plan her escape from her thus far miserable existence. Have you any idea how Merope could have made Tom Riddle forget all about the charming Cecilia in order to fall in love with Merope in her place?

“A love potion?” Harry guessed.

“I believe so, yes, though the Imperius Curse could have achieved the same results. But I think a love potion would have seemed a more romantic option to Merope. It would have been fairly simple for her, on a hot summer's day, to offer young Tom a drink of cool water as he went riding past her home,” Dumbledore mused. “However she achieved it, within a few months after the events we just watched, the village of Little Hangleton was rocked by scandal when the squire's son eloped with the tramp's daughter.

“Six months later, Marvolo was released from Azkaban. He returned home expecting to find his meek little daughter waiting for him. Instead, he found an abandoned cottage, in which Merope had left a note of explanation for her actions. As far as I have been able to discover, Marvolo never once mentioned Merope's name, or indeed her very existence, ever again. He died shortly after returning home – perhaps the shock of her elopement drove him to an early death, or perhaps he simply didn't have the necessary skills to survive on his own. Coupled with the toll Azkaban took on his body, Marvolo didn't live to see his son released.”

“Merope died too, right? I mean, Voldemort told me that he grew up with Muggles,” said Harry.

“And so he did... at an orphanage, in fact,” said Dumbledore. “Again, I do not know any of this for certain, but I am fairly sure that my guesses are, in fact, correct. A few months after their elopement, Tom Riddle returned to his home in Little Hangleton – without his bride. The village gossips reported him as claiming to have been “taken in” and “hoodwinked”. It does not take much effort to figure out that what he was trying to say – but couldn't, for fear of being labelled insane – was that he had been under an enchantment of some sort, an enchantment that had now been lifted, allowing him to leave. Naturally, the villagers assumed that Merope had somehow tricked him into marriage, by claiming to be pregnant with his child.”

“But she was pregnant with his child – or would be, anyway,” said Harry.

“She was pregnant when he abandoned her,” said Dumbledore.

“Why did she let him leave her? If the love potion stopped working, she could have tried something else to keep him,” said Harry.

Dumbledore sighed. “I have no firm evidence, but my theory is that Merope chose to discontinue her method of magical enslavement. She was deeply in love with her husband, and I believe that she disliked having to bend him to her will. Perhaps she had even convinced herself that he had grown to love her back, without the potion; perhaps she thought he would do the proper thing and stay with her for the baby. If so, she was sadly mistaken. Once free to think and act for himself, Tom left her, and never once attempted to see her or their son.”

Harry sat there silently, thinking about the awful people Voldemort's parents had been.

“I think that is enough for one night, Harry,” said Dumbledore.

Harry immediately got to his feet. “When will we have our next lesson?”

“I shall let you know closer to the date,” said Dumbledore.
“Yes, sir,” said Harry. “Is it important that I know about Voldemort's past?”

“Very much so.”

“And this ties in with the prophecy somehow?”

“Yes indeed.”

Seeing that Dumbledore wasn't going to elaborate, Harry turned to leave. He was almost at the door when he caught sight of the black-stoned ring, sitting on one of the delicate tables scattered around the office. He turned back around.

“Sir, the ring that cursed you – that's the same ring Gaunt showed Ogden, isn't it?” he asked.

“Well spotted, Harry,” said Dumbledore.

“But it didn't curse him, did it?”

“It did not.”

Harry mulled that over as he stepped onto the moving staircase. If Dumbledore didn't want to tell Harry what Voldemort's past had to do with the prophecy, or why he had Gaunt's ring, well, he'd just have to ask Severus and Hermione.
On Sunday morning, hidden away in the Room of Requirement (which was in the form of a large, empty, echoing chamber), Harry told Severus, Draco and Hermione everything he had learned about Voldemort the night before. When he finished speaking, everyone else was frowning; Severus and Hermione in thought, and Draco in confusion.

“Apart from finding out that the ring that cursed Dumbledore used to belong to the Dark Lord’s grandfather, I don’t see how any of this helps us. We already knew he’s a half-blood who didn’t grow up with his parents,” said Draco.

“The more information that we have, the better we will be able to understand what drives him,” Hermione pointed out.

“What, seeing his mother’s home is more helpful than having an ex-Death Eater on our side?” Draco asked sceptically.

Severus scowled. “The more additional information we have, the better equipped we are against him. We now know that mental instability, a hatred of Muggles, and a propensity towards violence and cruelty ran in his maternal family.”

“And we know that both of his parents were awful people,” added Hermione. “Don’t get me wrong, I do feel sorry for Merope, growing up in an environment like that, but that doesn’t change the fact that she magically enslaved Riddle and raped him at least once.”

It was Draco’s turn to scowl. “What, anyone with awful parents is doomed to turn evil themselves?”

“No one’s saying that, Draco,” Hermione said patiently. “But it’s certainly interesting, and if Dumbledore thinks it’s important to helping us understand how Voldemort became who he is, I’m sure it will be helpful.”

“I’m more interested in learning that Dumbledore can apparently understand Parseltongue,” Draco said sullenly.

“Then you may go and ask him,” said Severus abruptly. “If Harry doesn’t have anything else to report from last night, I would like to get on with today’s duelling practise.”

Harry shook his head. “That was it.”

“Very well. Choose your positions and prepare yourselves. Harry, bring up your Occlumency shield,” Severus ordered.

Harry took a moment to begin Occluding before he took off for the opposite side of the cavernous room from Hermione.

Draco remained in place. “What are the rules?”

“The last one of us standing wins,” said Severus.

“That’s it?” asked Draco, backing away to the last free side of the room.
“You may cast Shield Charms, provided that you do so non-verbally,” said Severus.

Draco looked downright nervous now, and even Harry's confidence dipped a little. Despite practising all week, he had only managed to cast a non-verbal Shield Charm at the end of Friday's Defence class, and Draco hadn't yet succeeded at all. In stark comparison, Hermione was now so good at casting non-verbal Shield Charms that Harry had failed to hit her with a single offensive spell in that same Defence class. Severus, naturally, had no trouble at all with non-verbal spells.

Severus turned to Harry. “Since we are now at Hogwarts, you will be unable to Apparate.”

“I figured as much,” said Harry.

Severus raised his wand. “Begin!”

When Severus eventually called an end to the morning's practise, all four of them were covered with scrapes, cuts, bruises and burns. Though he had no intention of ever saying so, Harry was pleasantly surprised by how good Draco had been. Harry had known Severus would be the biggest danger (even though Harry could tell he was clearly holding back today), and after the past summer, Harry now had a healthy fear of Hermione's battle skills. He had, however, forgotten that Draco had had plenty of duelling practise in the DA the year before. He may not have been as skilled as Harry, or even Hermione, but he was quick, entirely ruthless, and even managed to win a few rounds.

Severus opened up a first aid kit and held it out. Harry and Hermione quickly grabbed the bottles they each needed, but Draco took a little longer to read the labels, unused to Severus and Harry's home-brewed medicines.

“Is that what you did when you Hermione stayed at your house? Try to kill each other all day?” Draco asked.

“Not all day. Now hold still,” Harry ordered. Draco obediently froze, allowing Harry to heal a cut underneath his eye. “All good,” Harry said. While Draco's hand flew up to touch his cheek, Harry set about healing the welts on his own left arm and repairing the sleeve of his robe – both were courtesy of the same nasty jinx from Hermione.

“Sorry,” she said, rubbing bruise paste onto her elbow.

Harry laughed. “No, you're not.”

Hermione grinned. “Well, you should have been quicker with your Shield Charm...”

“You all performed tolerably, though there is of course much room for improvement,” Severus interrupted. “Harry, you keep using the same spells. Utilise a greater variety so that it is more difficult for your opponents to anticipate and thus block your spells. Hermione, you need to work on your footwork and balance. As for you Draco, you rely too much on offensive spells. Do not neglect your defensive spells.” When they all nodded, Severus turned back to Harry. “Our next session will be the same time next week.”

“Er, could we do Saturday instead? We have Quidditch try-outs Sunday morning,” said Harry.

“Very well,” Severus agreed, then looked at Hermione and Draco again. “The two of you are welcome to join Harry for any of his future duelling practises if your schedules permit you to attend.”

“Yes, sir,” Hermione said eagerly.

“Are you just teaching him duelling, sir?” asked Draco.
“I’m also continuing his Occlumency lessons,” Severus said, ignoring Harry's groan. “Having two extra opponents for Harry to duel is good experience for him, and the added practise is beneficial for the two of you, as well. I do intend to teach him a few other skills – depending on what they are, you may be able to attend those lessons as well. We will discuss that at a later date.”

“When do we start Occlumency again?” Harry asked in resignation.

“Come to my quarters next Sunday. With Umbridge gone, there is no reason why we may not resume having fortnightly dinners,” said Severus.

“Okay,” said Harry. At least he’d enjoy the dinner part of their Occlumency lessons, he supposed.

“Good,” said Severus.

With that, he swept out of the room. Harry looked at his friends. “It’s a nice day. Feel like visiting Hagrid?”

“As long as we don't stay too long,” Hermione said. “I have a lot of reading to get through this afternoon.”

“We'll leave before lunch,” said Harry.

“Damn right we will,” Draco said darkly. “I have no intention of chipping my teeth on his atrocious rock cakes.”

It was a pleasant walk through the sunny grounds. They found Hagrid's front door open, but the cabin itself was empty.

“Hagrid?” Harry called.

A bark answered him. Seconds later, Fang came racing around the corner of the cabin. He licked the faces of both Harry and Hermione, depositing a large amount of drool on them in the process, before launching himself at Draco.

“Down, Fang,” Draco said sharply.

Fang immediately sat down, his wagging tail whipping up clumps of dirt from the ground as he panted happily up at Draco.

“Good dog,” said Draco, patting the boarhound on the head.

“Never ’ave figured out why ’e obeys you like that,” Hagrid said, appearing at the corner which Fang had raced around.

“He just needs a firm hand, Hagrid,” Draco said smugly.

“So yeh say,” said Hagrid. “Come in fer a cuppa, won't yeh?”

He led the way into his cabin and went to put the kettle on the fire. Harry, Hermione and Draco sat down at the over-sized table, where Fang immediately stretched up to lick Draco's neck. Draco grimaced and ordered him to sit, only patting him when he took his drooling mouth far from Draco's robes.

Harry had been watching them in amusement, but a loud slurping sound behind him made him twist around in his chair. He instantly wished he hadn’t: in the corner behind him was a large barrel, filled to the brim with what looked like foot-long maggots. While Hermione and Draco both gagged in
disgust, Harry quickly got to his feet and switched seats, moving around the table to put as much distance between himself and the barrel.

“Hagrid,” he said, breathing deeply lest he began gagging himself, “they – they aren’t for a class, are they?”

“Guess we dropped that subject just in time,” Draco muttered, earning himself a kick under the table from Hermione. He hissed in pain then shifted his chair away from both Hermione and the barrel.

Hagrid set a plate of rock cakes and four enormous mugs down on the table, then began pouring out the tea. “Nah. They're just giant grubs. I've bin usin' 'em ter feed Aragog.”

“The Acromantula?” Draco asked in a high-pitched voice, looking around as if he expected the giant spider to be inside the cabin.

Hagrid nodded and then promptly burst into tears. Hermione jumped to her feet and guided Hagrid down into the chair Harry had vacated, careful to stay as far away from the maggots as she could.

“What's wrong, Hagrid?” she asked, rubbing his shoulder.

Hagrid pulled a picnic blanket-sized handkerchief out of his pocket and wiped his eyes with it. “It's – it's Aragog. 'e's not well – got sick over summer... I thought 'e'd get b-b-better b-but... 'e's gettin’ worse.”

While Harry felt bad for Hagrid, he completely failed to muster up any sympathy for Aragog. Hagrid had always loved dangerous creatures, and Harry could see the appeal of something like a dragon or a Hippogriff. A giant, man-eating spider, however, was a complete mystery to Harry. He'd seen Viktor lying unconscious in the infirmary after being bitten by an Acromantula in the Triwizard Tournament, and seen the staggering amount of potions Pomfrey had had to give him to counteract the venom. The thought of one of those monsters dying was an incredible relief, if Harry was to be honest. He could tell by their faces that Hermione and Draco felt the same.

“Can we do anything to help?” Hermione asked unwillingly.

Luckily, Hagrid still had his head buried in his handkerchief, so he didn’t see Draco mouthing death threats at Hermione, complete with hand gestures. After sobbing for another minute or two, Hagrid blew his nose with a deafening trumpet and raised his head to look at Hermione through streaming eyes.

“That's... that's right kind of yeh, Hermione,” Hagrid said. He reached up and patted the hand she had on his shoulder. “But I don't think there is... Aragog's family are gettin' a bit... unfriendly... they're probably just upset about 'im bein' ill... All the same, I don't reckon it'd be safe for anyone but me ter go near 'em for now.”

“I'm sure he'll get better soon, with you taking care of him,” Hermione said supportively.

Hagrid gave a watery smile. “Yeah... Tell yeh what, when 'e's right again, I'll take yeh inter the forest ter meet 'im. Aragog'd like that, 'e would.”


Harry cleared his throat loudly. “Draco, why don't you teach Hagrid some of the Gigantus you've been learning?”

Draco smiled. “Brilliant idea, Harry. Alright, Hagrid, let's start with the basics...”
On Tuesday evening Harry and Millicent were walking out of the Great Hall after dinner, when Scarlett suddenly stepped into their path.

“Scarlett! Millicent and I were just talking about Sunday's Quidditch try-outs,” Harry said.

Millicent nodded. “Have you seen the sign up sheet? You and Draco can pretty much just veto anyone you dislike, and we'll still have half the house to choose our new Chaser from.”

Scarlett gave a pained smile. “That's great. I need to talk to Harry, so...”

“I'll just bugger off, shall I?” Millicent asked.

“Cheers,” Scarlett said, grabbing Harry's arm and dragging him away.

Harry twisted his head around to see Millicent scowling after them. “I'll meet you in the common room in a bit!” Harry called to her.

He didn't have a chance to see if she had heard him, as Scarlett had pulled him through the crowd at the doors, into the Entrance Hall, and then down the corridor that led to the Transfiguration classroom. It was empty at this time of day, and only dimly lit by the odd wall-mounted torch. The sounds of conversation drifting from the Entrance Hall faded away as they walked further into the semi-darkness.

“Scarlett, you realise that you've just pissed off Millicent, yeah? She's -”

“Shut up!” Scarlett said sharply, finally letting go of his arm.

Harry did so in surprise; he'd never heard her speak in that tone before. Scarlett frowned up at him, then ran both her hands through her hair. It momentarily flattened before springing back up into its usual shaggy spikes.

“Sorry. I didn't mean to snap. I just need to tell you something and I need you to not interrupt me or I'll lose my courage,” said Scarlett. When Harry nodded, she took a deep breath. “I'm quitting Quidditch.”

“You're what?” Harry yelped.

Scarlett glared at him. “No interruptions, Potter!”

“Sorry.”

“Right. So. I'm quitting Quidditch. You'll need to find two new Chasers on Sunday,” said Scarlett.

Sensing that she was about to leave, Harry chanced speaking again. “Don't I get an explanation?”

Scarlett crossed her arms. “I don't want to play any more.”

Harry stared at her. “But you love Quidditch.”

Scarlett thrust her jaw out stubbornly. “Changed my mind,” she said.

And then her lower lip quivered.
Harry frowned. “Scarlett, is someone making you quit? Because no one can do that except for your Captain or a professor. And Dad would've told me if anyone on the staff even thought about doing that, and I -”

“It's fucking Bellatrix fucking Lestrange, alright?” Scarlett cried, her eyes growing watery.

Whatever Harry had been expecting – her parents pressuring her over OWLs, perhaps – it certainly hadn't been this. “What does she have to do with anything?”

Scarlett pointed at her left eye. “This isn't fully healed. Curse scar and all that. I can't remember the name the Healer gave it, but basically, the muscles that move my eye get tired. If I'm using it a lot, like reading or playing Quidditch, or when it's dark, the movement gradually slows down. I wouldn't be able to see the Quaffle or the Bludgers properly and I'd have limited depth perception. And I sometimes have trouble with colours.”

“And there's nothing you can do?” Harry asked, aghast.

Scarlett sniffed. “I have eye drops that help me regain movement. I have to take them when I'm studying for long periods of time, and I'll need them to get through my exams.”

“Well, you can just take them before each Quidditch match,” Harry said.

Scarlett shook her head. “They'd wear off in a couple of hours, maybe quicker.”

“So I'll call a time out for you,” said Harry.

For the first time, Scarlett looked a little hopeful. “You can do that?”

“Sure. It's not like you're cheating, is it? You're just taking medicine to help your eye get back to normal,” said Harry. “Plus I'm assuming that Pomfrey knows about it?”

Scarlett nodded. “The Healer I saw at St Mungo's wrote to her. I had a meeting with her and your dad, actually, our first week back, to go over everything.”

“So then there won't be a problem,” Harry said. “We'll go talk to Hooch about it tomorrow, okay?”

Scarlett bit her lip. “You're sure? I'll understand if you want to cut me from the team.”

“Scarlett, do you want to stay on the team?” Harry asked.

“Yes.”

“Then you're on the team.”

“But -”

“You're a brilliant Chaser, Scarlett. Brilliant. If you want to stay on the team, you stay on the team. Anyone who has a problem with that can take it up with me,” Harry said firmly.

Scarlett blinked at him, then broke into a wide grin and launched herself at Harry, who automatically caught her. She threw her arms around Harry's neck and wrapped her legs around his waist. “Thank you thank you thank you thank you!” she exclaimed.

“No problem,” Harry panted. “It's a good thing you're still the size of a twelve year old.”

Scarlett giggled and let go of him, sliding back down to the floor. She bounced on the balls of her
feet and grinned up at him. “Imagine if Millicent had tried to do that to you!” she said, giggling again.

Harry couldn't help giggling along with her, pleased to see her back to her usual excitable self. “I would've been crushed. But speaking of Millicent -”

“Yeah, yeah, I'll go apologise to her now,” Scarlett said. “Thanks again!”

With that she took off, sprinting back up the corridor, leaving Harry to follow behind at a much slower pace, feeling very old and very, very tall.

********

Duelling practise the following Saturday was more challenging than the first session had been. Severus had requested the Room of Requirement take the form of the same cavernous room as it had last time, but with large stone pillars dotted throughout. This made it easier for one to duck unfriendly spells – and to be snuck up on by one's opponent. There was also the added danger of a spell going astray and hitting a pillar, showering anyone unlucky enough to be underneath with rocks and dust.

By the time they'd had enough, they were all covered in a thick layer of dust, which necessitated cleaning charms before anyone could begin to heal their injuries. When they were all once more presentable they left the Room of Requirement, splitting up to go have proper showers.

Back in his dorm, Harry was in the middle of pulling clean clothes out of his trunk before heading to the bathroom, when Draco sidled up to him.

“Fancy coming to the Prefects' bathroom with me?” he murmured.

Despite his exhaustion, Harry nodded eagerly. “Sounds good.”

The walk up to the bathroom was far more painful than the walk down to the dungeons had been. Harry winced most of the way up the stairs.

“Everything hurts,” he muttered.

Draco sniggered. “I'm not surprised. That last dive you did was one of the most ridiculous things I've ever seen. It would've been less painful if you'd let Hermione's hex hit you.”

“Your sympathy is overwhelming,” drawled Harry.

“I'll give you a massage, how's that?” asked Draco.

Harry laughed. “Are you using my injury as an excuse to get into my pants?”

“Are you complaining? Squeaky clean,” said Draco, opening the bathroom door.

Harry followed him inside, locked the door behind himself, then turned around and gave a low whistle. He'd only ever been in here at night, when the room was lit with scores of candles. During the day, the white marble room was so filled with sunshine that it would have been uncomfortably warm, if not for the breeze coming in through the open windows. The long white curtains were drawn back, and when Harry crossed the room he saw that it afforded a fantastic view of the Hogwarts grounds. He stood at the window for a few minutes, enjoying the view, while Draco had a conversation with Arista, the blonde mermaid painting.
When Harry stepped away from the window, he caught Draco pointing at him while smirking at Arista. “Something I should know, Black?”

Draco blushed and screeched something else at Arista, who giggled and swam out of her painting. “Just getting rid of her,” Draco said innocently.

“By telling her in detail what you plan to do with me?” asked Harry, beginning to turn on the taps.

“Not in detail...” Draco said, joining him.

“You're such a git.”

“And you're the prat who loves me.”

“Only you would use something like that against me.”

“I'm a Slytherin. We're supposed to be resourceful.”

Harry merely rolled his eyes, put his glasses on the pile of his clean clothes, and began undressing. Despite the numerous cleaning charms he had cast upon his clothes, they were still filthy, and it was a relief to get out of them. He peeled off his sweaty socks with a grimace, pulled off his pants, and then clambered quickly into the bath.

He sank down with a groan of pleasure at the fragrant heat of the water. When he hit the bottom he opened his eyes just in time to see Draco dive into the bath. Harry's vision was rather blurry, being underwater without his glasses, but he could still make out the sleek lines of Draco's naked body as he shot through the water. Harry kicked off the bottom of the bath, rising through the water until he rose out of the surface, into a world filled with bubbles.

“I think we overdid it a bit with the bubble bath,” he said.

There was a splash behind him. Harry spun around to see Draco's head burst out of a bank of bubbles. There was a path behind him, where he had swum through the metre high layer of bubbles.

“Maybe a little,” Draco agreed. “But I think we can overindulge in bubble bath after that duel this morning. I had dust in my pants. My pants, Harry. How did it even get in there?”

“No idea,” Harry said lazily.

He tilted backwards to float on his back and kicked slowly through the water. It felt lovely after the morning's exertions, and he could feel his muscles starting to relax in the soothing heat. The masses of bubbles helped him remain afloat, and Harry thought idly that he could very well fall asleep in the water.

“We should come here after Quidditch matches,” he commented some time later.

“But then we'd miss the house parties,” Draco replied, sounding just as relaxed as Harry.

“Oh yeah...”

“Maybe after training. Or the try-outs tomorrow.”

Harry righted himself with a splash. “Don't mention try-outs right now.”

“Why, you nervous?”
“Yes! It's my first year as Captain and I have half the sodding house signed up to try out for one position!”

Draco laughed and swam over. “You know most of them have only put their names down because of you, don't you?”

Harry groaned. “I know. I never should have come out as the Chosen One.”

“What, and leave Mother hidden at home for all eternity? No, you did the right thing. People are just idiots, you know that,” said Draco.

Harry batted at some bubbles in frustration. “Easy for you to say. You don't have to put up with everyone staring at you and whispering behind your back.”

“I endured plenty of that whenever I went out in public this summer,” Draco countered, “but you're right. I'm lucky most people have forgotten about my family drama by now. Look on the bright side: at least you were able to tell Slughorn that you had to spend today planning for tomorrow's try-outs.”

Earlier that week, Slughorn had invited Harry, Hermione and Blaise to a dinner party that Saturday. While Hermione and Blaise had both readily accepted, Harry had claimed he would be too busy planning how he was going to run try-outs. It wasn't a total lie, and Slughorn had seemed to believe him, albeit grudgingly.

“True...” Harry allowed.

“So... how about that massage?”

“Yeah, okay.”

“Let's see... Alright, put some towels down on the edge of the bath,” Draco instructed.

Harry climbed out of the bath and fetched a stack of fluffy white towels. He laid them down neatly on the diving board, then lay down on top of them on his stomach, resting his head on his folded arms. He heard Draco walk across the room, clink some glass, then walk back to the bath. The diving board dipped when Draco stepped out onto it to sit on the backs of Harry's thighs. Harry was fairly sure that it didn't take quite so much wriggling for Draco to get settled, though he certainly wasn't going to complain about it. He could feel Draco's half-hard penis pressing against his butt, and felt his own begin to harden.

“Comfortable?” Draco asked.

“Very,” said Harry, his voice muffled by the crook of his elbow.

“Good.”

With that, Draco drizzled cool liquid onto Harry's back.

“You brought lube with you?” Harry asked with a laugh.

“It's bath oil, you prat.”

There was a clink of glass in front of Harry. He raised his head to see that Draco had placed the bottle of bath oil on the wood in front of him, clearly having forgotten that Harry couldn't read the label without his glasses. He lowered his head again when Draco began to smooth the oil over his back and shoulders.
“Why would I bring lube? We're both going to be sitting on broomsticks for hours tomorrow,” Draco continued.

“Good point.”

They lapsed into silence. Draco's hands felt wonderful. Slick with oil, they glided over Harry's skin, pressing firmly but not painfully into the muscles. He gave a sigh and surrendered himself to the sensation.

Harry had no idea how long it was before Draco leaned forward for the oil, then scooted back down Harry's body to kneel between his feet. More oil was poured out, onto Harry's thighs and buttocks this time. Draco's hands followed, kneading the sore muscles. Harry shifted slightly to relieve some of the pressure on his cock.

“Where did you learn how to do this?” he asked.

Draco chuckled. “I didn't. I'm making this up as I go along.”

“Oh. Feels good,” said Harry.

Draco gave his butt a firm squeeze. “Yes, it does.”

“Draco...”

“Roll over,” Draco said abruptly.

Harry did so with some effort, his body too relaxed to work properly. He flopped onto his back, his cock bouncing against his stomach, and looked down his body to see Draco kneeling at his feet.

“Come here,” he said.

Draco slid up his body, lying firmly on top of Harry in order to kiss him. It was a slow kiss, with no urgency, just lips and tongues pressing gently against each other. Harry gave a happy little sigh against Draco's mouth and grabbed his arse when Draco began to rut against him. Like their kissing, it was slow and leisurely, a far cry from the usual speed with which they did this.

There was some oil on Draco's lower stomach which made his movements smooth and easy. His cock was pressing against Harry's, rubbing up and down in a steady rhythm. It felt absolutely divine; Harry was quite sure that he could have done this for the rest of the day. He could feel himself getting closer to his orgasm, but like their movements, it seemed to be in no hurry. When he came all over their stomachs, it was with a quiet sigh, Draco following seconds later. Their kisses grew even slower and lighter, until Draco dropped his head to lie on Harry's shoulder.

“We got dirty again after our bath,” Harry murmured.

Draco gave a breathy little chuckle. “Only one way to fix that.”

Before Harry could figure out what he meant by that, Draco had rolled off into the bath, taking Harry with him. When Harry burst back above the surface he glared at a laughing Draco.

“Why are you so fond of trying to drown me?” he demanded, swimming closer in what he hoped was a threatening manner.

Judging by the fresh peal of laughter, he'd failed miserably. “Because you're quite fit when you're wet and angry,” Draco said, swimming back out of reach with ease.
“You'll pay for that, Black,” Harry said.

Draco just laughed again. “I’m a much better swimmer than you are, Potter.”

“Who said I’d be getting revenge in the water?”

Draco hesitated at that. It was just enough time for Harry to reach him and begin trying to enact said vengeance. Judging by the amount of kissing and laughter that followed, Draco thoroughly enjoyed Harry’s idea of vengeance.

********

On Sunday the Slytherin table was more crowded than usual at breakfast. Usually, breakfasts on the weekend were quiet. Food was served from six o’clock to ten o’clock and both students and staff were free to come and go whenever they felt like, if at all. Today, however, it seemed like all of Slytherin was at breakfast by nine o’clock, most of them with broomsticks propped against the table.

At a quarter to ten Harry stood up, joined immediately by Draco, Theo and Millicent. They made their way out of the Great Hall, with Harry signalling Scarlett and Malcolm on their way. Outside, Harry walked in silence as the rest of the team happily debated who they thought would secure the open Chaser position. They walked onto the pitch and stopped near the changing rooms.

“Millicent and Theo, get the ball chest, please,” said Harry.

While they hurried off to the storage shed, Harry turned to the rest of the team.

“So what's the plan, boss?” Scarlett asked.

“Don't call me that,” said Harry. “I'm going to stick with what Adrian used to do. Get them flying, then make sure they can catch the Quaffle, then set up a match.”

“A match?” Malcolm asked.

“Yeah. I'll work out the rules when I see how many Chasers are left when we get up to it,” said Harry. “Now, we've got a few minutes before we're due to begin. Let's get in the air and warm up.”

Draco and Malcolm immediately mounted their brooms and kicked off, but Scarlett hung back.

“Can you help me with my eye drops? I'm not real good with them yet,” she said quietly.

“Sure. Let's go into the changing room,” said Harry.

They passed Millicent and Theo coming back with the ball chest. Harry told them to join the rest of the team in the air, then followed Scarlett into the changing room.

“You're going to have to tell the rest of the team about this,” he said.


Harry loaded up the dropper and held it over her left eye. “You're going to stop calling me that, Lympsham.”

Scarlett froze as he carefully squeezed three drops onto her eye, then blinked rapidly to spread the potion. “You going to order me as my Captain? Kinda makes me think I should keep calling you 'boss.'”
“No,” Harry said, handing her back the bottle. “But if you don’t stop, I’m going to start calling you ‘princess’.”

Scarlett screwed her face up. “Princess? Why?”

“You look like the princess from a Muggle movie. Princess Jasmine. She was pretty cool,” said Harry. “Her hair was a lot longer than yours, and she would’ve been taller than you, but apart from that you look very similar.”

Scarlett laughed. “Everyone’s taller than me. But I’d rather not be a princess. A queen on the other hand, well, that I could enjoy.”

“I’m not sure she ever became a queen. Her dad was a sultan, so what would make her -”

“A sultana. Fine, I’ll stop calling you ’boss’,” Scarlett sighed. “Although Adrian never had a problem with that.”

“Yeah, well, Adrian didn't have people calling him the Boy-Who-Lived and whatever else they sodding well call me,” said Harry.

When they returned to the pitch they had time to join the rest of the team for a quick couple of laps before all the hopeful Chasers arrived. Harry called the team down, and they landed a few metres away from the applicants, all of whom were talking loudly amongst themselves. Harry estimated that about three quarters of Slytherin had turned up. More people were making their way into the stands; evidently the other houses were taking an interest in proceedings.

Harry dug an old whistle out of the ball chest, grimacing at the state of it and wishing he could whistle with his fingers like Adrian could. He cast a Scouring Charm on the whistle, then stepped in front of the team and faced the gathered crowd. The people in the front quietened when they spotted him, but most of the crowd was still talking.

Harry blew the whistle as hard as he could, silencing all the hopeful Chasers. “Er, hi. We don't want to be here all day, so let's get started. As usual, you need to be in second year or above. Sorry to any first years – you're welcome to try out next year though.”

What looked like every Slytherin first year in the school slipped away to sit in the stands. At least none of them seemed particularly put out by being turned away, Harry thought.

“Okay, for those of you in second year and above, you also need to have good grades to get on the team. Professor Snape will kick off anyone who's failing, so don't waste our time if you reckon that's you,” said Harry. “And as it said on the sign up sheet, we're only after a Chaser today.”

About a dozen people walked off, some shooting dirty looks at Harry. He ignored them; he still had over fifty people to deal with.

“Right, then. Mount your brooms and fly around the pitch clockwise. If I don't think your flying's up to scratch, I'll ask you to land. On my whistle,” Harry said.

He blew his whistle again, causing a mad scramble as everyone clambered onto their brooms. There was a bit of confusion with so many people taking off at once, but most people were soon flying around the pitch. Four second years were still trying to take off. Harry told them not to bother, then flew into the air himself.

With so many people in the air trying to show off, collisions were inevitable. They actually made Harry's job easier – anyone unable to avoid running into someone flying in the same direction was
unlikely to fare any better in an actual Quidditch match, when people would be flying every which way. Harry hovered in one spot and easily picked out the worst fliers as they came past.

“Sadie, Astoria, Olivia and Adelaide, I saw that crash!” he called.

A group of five girls began to giggle as they descended.

“Not you, Viola, you're doing fine,” Harry amended.

Viola looked from him to her friends, then shrugged and took off again, her long blonde hair streaming behind her. She may have only been there to muck around with her friends, but Harry was impressed with the ease with which she had avoided running into the other four girls when they had tangled together.

When he'd thinned the crowd down to about twenty, he began flying in a slow anti-clockwise direction. He made no attempt to stay out of anyone's way, forcing them all to dodge around him. He could identify the less skilled fliers by their panicked expressions when they saw him coming towards them.

Eventually, Harry was left with a group of seven hopefuls. Imogen and Vikram were talking casually to each other, giving Harry the impression neither of them really cared whether they got on the team or not; fifth years Ella Wilkins and Spencer Whidden were standing quietly together; next to them was Viola Richmond, discreetly edging away from two third years, Hirohisa Kubo and Grant Sparkford, who were jostling each other in place. After shooting a warning look at Malcolm, who was laughing at his friends' antics, Harry picked up the Quaffle from the ball chest and passed it to Ella, who caught it one-handed.

“Time for a drill. Line up at either end of the pitch and take turns flying out to pass the Quaffle,” said Harry.

The seven would be Chasers took off and got into formation, while the team flew up to watch from the side lines. It was clear all the potentials knew how to handle a Quaffle, passing it quickly and seamlessly amongst themselves.

“This is boring,” Scarlett whined after a minute.

“You're right, it is,” Harry said. “Millicent and Theo, go liven things up a bit.”

“Gladly,” Millicent said, diving down with Theo.

A minute later they returned with their bats and a pair of Bludgers, which they began belting through the air. Grant gave a startled yell when the first of them almost hit him on his pass. Harry frowned: a Quidditch player needed to be aware of their surroundings, no matter how focused they were on the task at hand.

Ten minutes later, Harry called a stop to the drill. There had been no direct hits, but a few people had gotten grazed. While the Quaffle had been dropped twice, there had also been some rather spectacular dodges.

“Grant, Vikram and Spencer, I'm sorry but you just didn't cut it,” Harry said.

The three of them flew down to join their friends in the stands, which were still filled with noisy spectators. Imogen, Ella, Viola and Hirohisa were left facing Harry nervously.

Harry turned the Quaffle over in his hands as he thought about how to set up the match. “Alright, er,
let's split you up. Imogen and Ella, you're with Draco. Viola and Hirohisa, you're with Scarlett. Rules are simple: get the Quaffle through one of the hoops Malcolm's guarding. If you intercept from the other team, you have to fly around the hoops at the far end before coming back for your own attempt at goal. Got it?"

When everyone nodded, Harry sent the potentials to get into position. “Draco and Scarlett, try to let your team mates do as much work as you can, okay? I know you're both brilliant – I want to see how they fly, handle the Quaffle, and if they fly well with you two. Just support them.”

“Sure thing, b- er, Potter,” Scarlett chirped.

Harry grinned. “Go on, then. Millicent and Theo, you're not on any team. Just aim for whoever's in possession.”

Millicent grinned. “This is going to be fun!”

She and Theo flew off, having a whispered conversation about tactics, leaving Harry with Malcolm.

“Which end do you want me at?” he asked.

Harry shrugged. “Up to you. And hey, don't go easy on Hirohisa because he's your friend.”

“Mate, you really think I'd do that?” Malcolm asked.

“Not sure, so I thought I should probably say it all the same,” Harry said.

“Fair enough,” Malcolm said with a grin, then set off for the nearest set of goals.

Harry flew to the centre of the pitch and stopped with each team to either side of him. He threw the Quaffle up as high as he could, then hurriedly got out of the way of the six Chasers now speeding towards him, backing away to watch from the sidelines. The crowd in the stands was louder than ever now, which pleased Harry. The noise coming from below was a good simulation of the cheers and jeers the players would face during a proper match.

In the end, Harry's decision was simple. Hirohisa was clearly nervous and fumbled the Quaffle a few times; Imogen didn't manage to score a single goal; and Ella just couldn't keep up with her team mates. Viola was the clear stand out, flying well with Scarlett, gracefully dodging the Bludgers and scoring more goals than any of the other potentials.

No one seemed at all surprised when Harry welcomed Viola to the team, save for Viola herself.

“I only came out today for a laugh,” she said, blushing as her friends cheered from the stands.

“You out flew everyone else,” Harry said.

Viola somehow blushed even harder, but smiled. “Thanks. I won't let you down.”

“Well,” Draco said later, when he and Harry were the last to leave the pitch, “was that as bad as you'd been dreading?”

Harry grinned. “Not at all. In fact, bugger teaching. When I grow up I want to do Quidditch professionally.”

*******
That Thursday was Hermione's seventeenth birthday. Coincidentally, Thursday afternoon was one of the two free periods a week which Harry, Hermione and Draco all shared. Using a mixture of bribery, threats (and yes, okay, a bit of begging) during the morning's Potions lesson, Harry and Draco had managed to convince Hermione to take a break from the library that afternoon.

“I’m going back there after dinner, Potter, no matter what you or Black say,” she said, following Harry out of their Transfiguration class. Draco had already gone on ahead to get the Room of Requirement ready.

“Whatsoever you want, Granger. It's your birthday, after all,” he said.

“Oh, so I can go to the library now then?” Hermione asked brightly.

Harry grabbed her arm as she spun around. “Except that.”

Hermione slipped her arm into his. “You're beginning to make me nervous.”

“Blame Draco. He's the one who says your seventeenth is such a big deal,” said Harry.

Hermione shook her head. “Eighteen just makes so much more sense.”

“Tell me about it.”

“But I suppose one arbitrary number is as good as any other.”

“I guess. And hey, pretty soon you can Apparate! It's awful, but quick,” Harry said brightly.

“Try not to hurt yourself in your enthusiasm there,” Hermione said drily.

“I could say the same to you, Granger. It's your birthday and your two best friends have gone to great lengths to come up with a birthday surprise for you,” said Harry.

Hermione looked at him in amusement. “We're going to the Room of Requirement for lunch.”

“Well... yeah... when you say it like that, nothing's impressive,” said Harry. “But you don't know the risks we took! The dangers we faced! There was bribery and smuggling and fighting!”

“Oh my,” Hermione drawled, her shoulders shaking.

“Just wait,” Harry said confidently.

When they reached the Room of Requirement Harry knocked on the door. “It's us.”

“Give me... two minutes,” Draco called from inside.

Three minutes later Draco opened the door with a bow. Hermione's jaw dropped when she walked inside. Harry and Draco grinned delightedly at each other at her reaction.

“Happy birthday,” they said together.

Before either boy knew what hit them, Hermione had enveloped both of them in a tight hug. “It's beautiful,” she said, her voice muffled by Draco's shoulder.

She wasn't wrong, Harry mused, looking around the room. It had taken hours of planning, but he thought they had far outdone the sunny meadow they had come up with for Hermione's last birthday.
They were in the same meadow, or one very like it, only now the sun was setting in a brilliant burst of orange and pink and purple. A simple wooden gazebo stood in the centre of the room. Jasmine covered the white wooden structure, softening its angles and releasing a sweet but subtle scent into the air. Hundreds of paper lanterns, in every colour of the rainbow, floated in the air around them, illuminating the white silk cushions scattered underneath the gazebo.

In the centre of the cushions was a little clearing, on which stood a low table, laid out with everything one might wish for high tea: cucumber sandwiches, mini quiches, both sweet and savoury scones, mini tarts, and a vanilla birthday cake just big enough for three people. A tea service stood to one side, with two teapots, a sugar bowl, milk jug, cups and saucers, all made of a delicate white china.

“Still want to go to the library?” Draco asked, winking at Harry over the top of Hermione's head.

She pulled back at once. “Forget the library. I'm moving in here.”

Harry grinned. “Come on, let’s sit down.”

They sat down on the cushions and helped themselves to the food.

“Mmm, the house-elves have really outdone themselves this time,” Hermione said, nibbling on a scone.

“I think they liked having something a bit different to make, to be honest,” said Harry.

“Yes, the Hogwarts menu is rather repetitive, isn't it?” Draco agreed.

“There's so much food here... I think we're going to have to eat dinner in here as well,” Hermione said with mock sadness.

“Excellent!” Draco cried.

He leaned back and produced two bottles of champagne and three flutes. He popped the cork of one of the bottles and began pouring.

“Where on earth did you find champagne?” asked Hermione. “Surely the house-elves wouldn't give alcohol to students.”

“Probably not, we didn't ask them,” said Harry.

“It's from Mother's collection,” said Draco, handing out the glasses.

“Ah, so this would be the smuggling of which you spoke?” Hermione asked Harry.

He nodded. “Draco got them in past Filch.”

Draco grinned. “I got Sirius to charm the labels so that they say they're non-alcoholic. Filch never knew the difference.”

“And your dad's okay with you drinking alcohol on school grounds, is he? Or have you not told him?” Hermione asked.

“I told him. That would be the bribery part,” said Harry.

“And what did he say?” she asked.
“Thank you.”

Hermione blinked. “Pardon?”

Harry laughed. “He wasn't exactly happy about it, but he knows we usually have booze at our house parties. But he appreciated me telling him – not just because I was being honest, but because I also pointed out a gaping flaw in the security here. If some incorrect labels are enough to get contraband into Hogwarts, who knows what else might be coming in. He's gone to Dumbledore about it, actually, so that they can get rid of that loophole. Naturally, he's not saying what gave him the idea.”

Hermione frowned. “That's smart, but I don't see how that's bribery.”

Harry sighed. “I promised I'd have a doubly long Occlumency lesson next time to make up for it.”

Hermione flashed him a sympathetic smile. “And the fighting?”

“Draco and I had a few disagreements over how to decorate this place,” said Harry.

“Potter has no taste,” Draco sniffed.

“Hey, I'm the one who came up with the lanterns!” Harry cried.

“It's all very lovely,” Hermione said quickly. “I feel quite spoiled.”

“You say that without seeing any of the gifts we have for you,” said Draco.

It was Harry's turn to reach behind himself, for the bag of presents. He reached inside for one wrapped in silver and white wrapping.

“This is from Draco and me,” he said, handing it over.

Hermione unwrapped an ornate silver frame, displaying a watercolour picture Harry had drawn of the three of them, sitting at their rock by the lake.

“You drew this?” Hermione asked, touching the glass gently.

Harry nodded. “I'm not that great with watercolour, but it seemed to suit the picture. Draco's the one who got the frame.”

“The frame's dust-proof and the glass is shatter-proof,” said Draco. “And it's an antique,” he added as an afterthought.

“It's gorgeous, thank you,” Hermione said. She laid it carefully on a cushion next to her and leaned over to hug them both again.

“This is from Mother and Kingsley,” said Draco, giving her a small jewellery box.

Hermione opened it and gasped. “Draco, this must be very expensive. I can’t -”

“Yes, you can,” Draco said firmly. “Mother always wanted to have a daughter, she enjoys giving you all the pretty things she would have given my sister. And this is your seventeenth birthday.”

Hermione lifted up a delicate silver bracelet, wrought in the form of a vine. The silver flowers dotted along its length were inlaid with tiny sapphires. Draco took it off her and clasped it around her wrist.

“I'm sure your parents gave you something just as impressive,” he said.
“Just some books. Seventeen isn't a big deal in the Muggle world,” Hermione said absently, busy admiring the way the bracelet sat on her wrist.

“Told you,” Harry muttered.

Draco rolled his eyes and gave Hermione another gift. “This is from Sirius and Remus.”

It turned out to be a three volume set of Arithmancy books. “This is why you told me not to buy them when we were in Flourish and Blotts!” Hermione cried.

“One should never buy anything immediately before one's birthday or Christmas, everyone knows that,” said Draco

“This is from Dad,” Harry said, giving Hermione a plainly wrapped package, which turned out to be an old, rare book about runes.

“This is from your dad? Snape got me a gift?” Hermione asked in disbelief.

Harry laughed. “He is, and I quote, 'resigned to the fact that societal norms dictate that I must give gifts to two of my students'. As well as me, obviously.”

Draco smirked. “Which means that Mother told him to.”

Harry nodded. “I figured as much.”

“I'll thank him after class tomorrow,” said Hermione.

Harry shook his head. “Don't do that. He's not great with the whole present thing. He tried to pass this off as him having two copies of this book, which he did, but still.”

Hermione's eyes turned determined. “I'm thanking him whether he likes it or not, Harry. To not do so is just rude. I'll be writing to everyone at Grimmauld Place to thank them for their gifts.”

“And so you shall,” Draco declared, raising his glass. “But right now, we have delicious food, illegal alcohol, and fabulous company. Let's enjoy it while it lasts.”

Chapter End Notes

I'm posting this a day early because I'm going to be spending all of Monday in the hospital with my grandpa, who will probably die in the next few days. I'm going to be spending a lot of time with my family in the next week or so, so there might be a delay in the next chapter going up.

I'm more than happy to get comments on this chapter (anything to cheer me up at this point, to be honest), and will respond when I'm able to. But please don't bug me if the next chapter is late. I hope it won't be, and I don't think it will, but if it is, I apologise, and will post as soon as I'm able.
In Which Severus Gives Harry an Unpleasant History Lesson, and Blaise Makes a Lot of Predictions

Chapter Notes

I just want to say a quick but entirely heartfelt thank you to everyone for all your lovely comments and messages over the last few weeks. Reading them all brought some light into what turned out to be some pretty dark weeks. Grandpa died after a truly horrendous week in the hospital, and his funeral was last Monday. It's been tough, but now that he's at peace we're getting back to normal. Thank you all so, so much for all your well wishes. It's been truly humbling reading them all.

And now we return to your regular programming!
Milly xoxo

PS. I forgot to mention when I first posted this chapter that all the dialogue contained within Dumbledore's memory is taken verbatim from *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince*

September bled into October in a blur of homework, duelling practise and Occlumency lessons. Harry dreaded the latter more than he ever had before, for Severus was now attacking him with the full strength of his Legilimency. Where once Harry had been at the point that he could keep Severus out of his mind the majority of the time, he was now only able to do so half the time. No allowances were made if Harry was tired or stressed, and he was back to needing headache relieving potions after every lesson. The only thing stopping Harry from becoming truly despondent was the fact that Severus seemed pleased with his progress.

Duelling practises, on the other hand, were getting increasingly more fun, if also more dangerous and difficult. Gone was the blank, empty chamber in which they had held their first session. Now, Severus was getting the Room to transform itself into series of different landscapes: a grassy hillside; the stony edge of a lake; and a shadowy forest. Sometimes they fought in simulated rain, while other times, in the near total darkness of a moonlit night. The variety certainly kept things interesting, and all three teenagers were allowed to suggest new landscapes to try.

Harry had not had his second lesson with Dumbledore, nor had he been told when their next lesson would take place. When Harry had asked Severus one night, he had been told that Dumbledore was off on Order business much of the time. Since then, Harry had noticed how often Dumbledore was absent during meals. Exactly what he was up to, Harry had no idea; his usual source of information on the staff – Severus – hadn't been told either.

For the first time since he had come to Hogwarts, Harry was no longer enjoying Potions very much. He still enjoyed the actual brewing, that hadn't changed, but he was rapidly getting fed up with the way Slughorn fawned over those students he deemed to be connected or talented – in this case, Harry, Hermione and Blaise.

Draco spent most lessons sulking; while he wasn't as good a brewer as Harry, nor as strong with the theory as Hermione, he was still very good at the subject, and was resentful that Slughorn fawned over both his best friends whilst ignoring him. His attitude wasn't helped by the fact that he wasn't as
good at reading Severus’ altered instructions as Harry was, and often relied on Harry to read them out to him. If Slughorn was anywhere near their table – and he often lurked there to praise Harry or Hermione – Draco had to stick with the official instructions from his own textbook.

As for Hermione, she was still refusing to use Severus' instructions. While she had admitted that they were probably perfectly safe to use, she insisted on using the official instructions, even though they yielded poorer results.

“I never thought I'd say this, but Hermione is being completely stupid,” Harry grouched.

It was a Sunday night, and Harry had just finished having dinner with Severus in his quarters. While Severus busied himself getting some tea, Harry pulled his copy of *Advanced Potion-Making* out of his schoolbag in order to ask Severus about some of the spells he had come across. If the ensuing discussion went for so long that they would have to cut short their Occlumency lesson, well, that was a price Harry was happy to pay.

“You of all people should not be complaining about someone else's stubbornness,” Severus commented as he took his seat.

“Yeah, but she's being stubborn to the point of stupidity! I'm not that stubborn,” said Harry. When Severus' only response was a snort as he poured the tea, Harry rolled his eyes. “Am not. Anyway, can't you just teach both subjects?”

“Not without a Time Turner, and the *Daily Prophet* reported that they were all destroyed during the battle at the Ministry,” said Severus.

Harry sighed. “I think Slughorn's annoyed with me, anyway. I had to tell him I can't go to his second dinner party because I've got to meet with Dumbledore. He straight up told me that I'd regret it.”

“Do you have a lesson with Dumbledore at that time?” Severus asked.

“Yeah, Malcolm gave me a note from Dumbledore this morning. But that's not the point,” said Harry.

Severus pushed a teacup over to Harry. “No, my point is that it would have been unfortunate if Slughorn had spoken to Dumbledore and discovered that you had been lying to him.”

“You really think I would tell a lie that was so easy to disprove?” Harry demanded.

Severus regarded him over his own teacup. “I would hope that you know better than to do that. Now, then. What spells have you found in there?”

“Right, well, I know the Muffling Charm, obviously,” said Harry, flipping through the book to the pages he'd marked, “and I've seen you use *Sectumsempra* -”

“Do not use that spell on anyone whom you do not mean to kill,” Severus said sharply.

“Well, duh, I saw what it did to the basilisk,” said Harry.

Severus leaned forward. “I'm serious, Harry. That spell is dangerous. It's irreversible.”

“Irreversible?” Harry echoed.

“Your Latin really is appalling,” Severus muttered. “The incantation translates as 'sever forever'. Unless you know the specific counter-curse, any wounds caused by this spell are irreversible. Even
with the counter-curse, any bodily parts which are severed will be unable to be reattached or regrown.”

Harry stared at him. “And you invented that? ’For enemies’?”

“I began working on it shortly after I was almost killed by a werewolf,” said Severus.

Harry let out a long breath. He didn’t blame Severus for feeling threatened after the Shrieking Shack incident, but – “Did – have you ever used it on anyone?”

“Yes,” Severus said quietly, becoming very interested in his teacup.

“In Death Eater raids?” Harry asked tentatively (he wouldn't say hopefully, he wouldn't).

“Most of the time.”

Harry's heart sank. “You used it at school, didn't you? Against my dad – or Sirius?”

There was a pause, then, “Potter. Once.”

Harry registered the renewed use of his dad's surname – Severus had been referring to James by his first name ever since he had adopted Harry – and ran a hand through his hair in frustration. It was times like this when he felt like sitting Severus, James and Sirius down and asking them why they'd all been such utter dicks whilst young. Maybe give them all a smack on the back of the head while he was at it. He didn't say anything about that, though.

“Who started it?” Harry asked as neutrally as he could.

Severus' head jerked up in surprise. “He did. He – he humiliated me in front of half the school. Of course, that was nothing new... it does not excuse what I did.” This last sentence was muttered honestly, if unwillingly.

“I wasn't going to say it did,” said Harry. “How badly did you hurt him?”

“I missed my first shot. He ensured that I did not get another.”

“Didn't anyone step in?”

Severus gave a short, bitter laugh. “Lily did. In return, I called her a Mudblood and ruined our friendship forever.”

Harry looked at him in dismay. “So a pretty shite day all round,” he said.

“Quite.”

Harry ran his hand through his hair again, then returned his attention to his book. “Okay, so what's the counter-curse?”

Severus frowned at him. “You don't have any further questions about this incident?”

“Not right now, no. I don't think I'll ever want to know much more, to be honest. It seems like anytime any of you tell me about the past, one or more of you was trying to kill someone else. I'm really beginning to understand the whole ignorance is bliss thing,” said Harry.

Severus stared at him a moment longer before he jerked his head in a shallow nod and he slipped into lecture mode. “The incantation is vulnera sanentur. You need to wave your wand over the wound
and repeat thrice. Dittany must then be applied to the wound in order to prevent scarring."

Harry’s eyebrows rose at the complicatedness of the counter-curse. “So really, don’t use this curse unless I want to cause some serious harm.”

“No.”

“But it would be okay to use on a certain Dark Lord I need to kill?”

“Yes,” Severus said slowly, “however, there would be problems with that. This is not a spell that you should practise in our duelling sessions, since you could quite easily kill one of us.”

“True,” Harry nodded. “I'll think about it... Right, I was able to figure out that Levicorpus is some sort of levitation charm, and liberacorpus is the counter-spell.”

“Perhaps your Latin isn't as bad as I had feared,” Severus said, clearly eager to move on to safer topics.

Harry gave a crooked grin. “Guess there's hope for me after all.”

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On Monday night Harry walked up to Dumbledore's office, still with no idea about what exactly they would be discussing. There had been no clue in the note that Malcolm had given Harry, merely an invitation to present himself at Dumbledore's office at eight o'clock.

Whilst on the moving staircase up to Dumbledore's office, Harry made sure to bring up his Occlumency shield. He still didn’t know if Dumbledore had tried to use Legilimency against him during their last lesson – and he really should ask Severus about that, now that he thought of it – but he wasn't going to take any chances.

When he walked in he found Dumbledore sitting at his desk, with his Pensieve already sitting out in front of him. He seemed tired, perhaps due to his cursed hand, or whatever he was getting up to during his frequent absences from the school. Harry was wondering for the umpteenth time what Dumbledore did on these trips, when the Headmaster spoke.

“Good evening, Harry. I trust that you are ready for yet another journey into Voldemort's past.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Marvellous. Now, as you will recall, the last we saw of Lord Voldemort's origins was that his Muggle father, Tom Riddle, had abandoned his witch wife, Merope Gaunt, while she was pregnant. He returned home to his parents' home in Little Hangleton, leaving Merope penniless and friendless in London.”

“There was no mention of London in that memory, sir,” said Harry.

Dumbledore smiled. “So there wasn't. I know that she was in London due to the testimony of Caractacus Burke. He was a co-founder of Borgin and Burkes, a shop on Knockturn Ally which specialises in secondhand items of great value or power, many of which have a less than pleasant history.”

“So, like the sort of things that Narcissa's clearing out of Grimmauld Place?”
“Precisely,” said Dumbledore. “With no one else to turn to and no other means with which to make money, a desperate Merope decided to pawn her only possession of any value.”

“Slytherin’s locket,” said Harry.

Dumbledore’s eyes twinkled. “Correct again, Harry. After confirming the authenticity of the locket, Burke bought it from Merope for ten Galleons.”

“What? But he was one of the founders of Hogwarts! The locket had to have been worth more than that,” Harry objected.

“Indeed it was, but unfortunately for Merope, Burke declined to inform her of the true worth of her locket, and so she accepted his insultingly meagre offer.”

“That wouldn’t have lasted her very long, even if she used magic as much as she could.”

Dumbledore shook his head. “I do not believe that Merope used magic after Tom left her. I admit that this is further guesswork on my part, but I believe that Merope lost all interest in being a witch after her Muggle husband left her. Whether it was indeed by choice, or because her powers were weakened due to despair, as can occasionally happen, we do not know. What we do know, however, is that Merope didn't use magic to save her own life.”

“She chose to die? Even thought it meant leaving her baby an orphan?” Harry asked.

Dumbledore gave him a surprised, searching look. “Do you feel pity for Lord Voldemort?”

“Voldemort? No, not at all,” said Harry, even as he made sure his Occlumency shield was strong. “But the little boy he once was, who was abandoned by both his parents? Yeah, I do pity him. I know what it's like to grow up without parents. I wouldn't wish that on anyone, sir.”

Dumbledore bowed his head. “Once again, you have proven just how great your capacity for love is.”

“I don’t love Voldemort!” Harry cried, disgusted at the very suggestion.

“No, but you empathise with him, and understandably so in this instance,” said Dumbledore. He must have realised just how offended Harry was, for he hurriedly stood up and walked to the front of his desk. “Let us wait until we have seen tonight's memory before we continue our discussion. If you will stand, we shall dive into one of my own memories. After you.”

Harry got up and, taking a deep breath, plunged his head into the Pensieve. He plummeted once more through featureless darkness before his feet hit solid ground. He opened his eyes to find himself on a busy, old-fashioned London street. One or two old cars trundled along the cobblestone road, far outnumbered by people riding horses or driving horse-drawn carts.

Dumbledore landed next to him and after getting his bearings, pointed towards a tall man crossing the road towards them. “There I am.”

Harry would have recognised the younger Dumbledore anywhere. Though his hair and beard were auburn, not white, they were both just as long as they were in Harry’s time, and he still had the same extravagantly bad fashion sense as the Dumbledore Harry knew. Many people were stopping to stare at the odd figure in the suit of deep purple crushed velvet.

Dumbledore appeared accustomed to such attention and strode briskly along the footpath. After a block or two he walked through an open set of wrought iron gates. They led into an empty courtyard
belonging to a bleak, perfectly square building which was separated from the street by high metal railings.

Dumbledore climbed the few steps to the front door and knocked once. The door was presently opened by a teenage girl. A little younger than Harry, she was wearing an apron which had clearly seen better days. She gaped unapologetically at Dumbledore's appearance, while he smiled politely, introduced himself, and asked to meet the matron, Mrs Cole. The girl continued to stare at him for a few seconds before she yelled for Mrs Cole and invited Dumbledore inside.

Dumbledore entered a narrow hallway tiled in black and white and lined with faded wallpaper; while clearly old and run down, the floor had been swept and washed recently, and the window sills and skirting boards were free from dust. Harry and Dumbledore stepped inside just as a rail-thin, harried-looking woman emerged from the other end of the hallway, giving orders to another apron-wearing girl. When she turned to give her attention to her visitor her mouth dropped open.

Dumbledore extended his hand. “Good afternoon.” When Mrs Cole merely stared, he continued. “My name is Albus Dumbledore. I sent you a letter requesting an appointment and you very kindly invited me here today.”

Mrs Cole blinked, then in a faint voice, said, “Oh, yes. Well – well, then – you’d better come into my room. Yes.”

The room into which she led Dumbledore was just as old and shabby as the hallway. It seemed to serve for both business and pleasure; there was a scuffed desk covered in papers, with a spindly chair on either side of it. The other half of the room sported a sagging couch with a tiny end table, on which rested a pack of cards and a newspaper.

Mrs Cole gestured for Dumbledore to sit down before doing so herself, staring at him the entire time. She made no move to begin the conversation, so after a brief pause, Dumbledore took over.

“I am here, as I told you in my letter, to discuss Tom Riddle and make arrangements for his future.”

Mrs Cole’s eyes narrowed shrewdly. “Are you family?”

“No, I am a teacher. I have come to offer Tom a place at my school.”

“What's this school, then?”

“It is called Hogwarts.”

“And how come you're interested in Tom?”

“We believe he has qualities we are looking for.”

“You mean he's won a scholarship? How can he have done? He's never been entered for one.”

“Well, his name has been down for our school since birth.”

“Who registered him? His parents?”

Harry couldn't help sniggering at Mrs Cole's barrage of questions. Dumbledore smiled down at him. “I confess I wasn't expecting such an interrogation,” he murmured.

In front of them, the young Dumbledore had evidently realised he was not going to be able to placate Mrs Cole with half-truths and vagueness. He discreetly pulled his wand out of his purple suit and
picked up some blank paper off the desk, waving his wand at it.

“Here,” he said, handing Mrs Cole her own paper, “I think this will make everything clear.”

Mrs Cole's gaze went blank for a moment while she read the paper, then the life snapped back into her eyes and she looked up at Dumbledore again. She gave him back the paper quite calmly. “That seems perfectly in order,” she said, then spotted the bottle of gin and two tumblers which Dumbledore had conjured onto the desk. “Er – may I offer you a glass of gin?”

Dumbledore smiled cheerfully. “Thank you very much.”

Mrs Cole poured two healthy glasses of gin, then downed hers in one large swallow. Harry gave an impressed nod; he might not be the world's most experienced drinker, but he'd seen enough drinking competitions in the common room to recognise that she knew what she was about. She made an appreciative noise and smiled at Dumbledore for the first time since he had arrived.

Not touching his own gin, Dumbledore leaned forward. “I was wondering whether you could tell me anything of Tom Riddle's history? I think he was born here in the orphanage?”

Mrs Cole reached for the gin bottle. “That's right. I remember it clear as anything, because I'd just started here myself. New Year's Eve and bitter cold, snowing, you know. Nasty night. And this girl, not much older than I was myself at the time, came staggering up the front steps. Well, she wasn't the first. We took her in and she had the baby within the hour. And she was dead in another hour.”

Mrs Cole nodded and drained her second glass.

“Did she say anything before she died? Anything about the boy's father, for instance?” asked Dumbledore.

Mrs Cole now seemed to be warming to Dumbledore – or at least to his gin – and readily continued her story. “Now, as it happens, she did. I remember she said to me, 'I hope he looks like his papa,' and I won't lie, she was right to hope it, because she was no beauty – and then she told me he was to be named Tom, for his father, and Marvolo, for her father – yes, I know, funny name, isn't it? We wondered whether she came from a circus – and she said the boy's surname was to be Riddle. And she died soon after that without another word.

“Well, we named him just as she'd said, it seemed so important to the poor girl, but no Tom nor Marvolo nor any kind of Riddle ever came looking for him, nor any family at all, so he stayed in the orphanage and he's been her ever since,” said Mrs Cole. Her cheeks were now pink, but her hand was quite steady as she poured more gin into her glass. “He's a funny boy,” she mused.

Dumbledore inclined his head. “Yes, I thought he might be.”

“He was a funny baby, too. He hardly ever cried, you know. And then, when he got a little older, he was... odd.”

“Odd, in what way?”

“Well, he -” Mrs Cole snapped her mouth shut and narrowed her eyes at Dumbledore. “He's definitely got a place at your school, you say.”

“Definitely.”

“And nothing I say can change that?”
“Nothing.”

“You'll be taking him away, whatever?”

“Whatever.”

Mrs Cole watched him suspiciously for a few moments before evidently making up her mind that she believed him and blurting out her next sentence. “He scares the other children.”

Dumbledore frowned slightly. “You mean he is a bully?”

Mrs Cole's eyebrows had also drawn together. “I think he must be, but it's very hard to catch him at it. There have been incidents... nasty things...” She took another large swallow of gin before speaking again. “Billy Stubbs' rabbit... well, Tom *said* he didn't do it and I don't see how he could have done, but even so, it didn't hang itself from the rafters, did it?”

“I shouldn't think so, no,” Dumbledore agreed softly.

“But I'm jiggered if I know how he got up there to do it. All I know is he and Billy had argued the day before. And then -” Mrs Cole spilt some gin down her chin with her next drink, “on the summer outing – we take them out, you know, once a year, to the countryside or to the seaside – well, Amy Benson and Dennis Bishop were never quite right afterwards, and all we ever got out of them was that they'd gone into a cave with Tom Riddle. He swore they'd just gone exploring, but *something* happened in there, I'm sure of it. And, well, there have been a lot of things, funny things... I don't think many people will be sorry to see the back of him,” she said with certainty.

“You understand, I'm sure, that we will not be keeping him permanently? He will have to return here, at the very least, every summer.”

“Oh, well, that's better than a whack on the nose with a rusty poker,” said Mrs Cole. She hiccupped, but when she stood she did so without swaying. “I suppose you'd like to see him?”

Dumbledore stood too. “Very much.”

He followed he out of her office and up the staircase. She called out to helpers and children as she passed them, giving orders or telling off those misbehaving, though she did so without malice. It couldn't be an easy job, Harry reflected, and she seemed to do what she could for her charges, though he couldn't help feeling sorry for the children who had grown up there.

Mrs Cole stepped onto the second landing. “Here we are,” she said. She knocked twice on the first door in the hallway then entered. “Tom? You've got a visitor. This is Mr Dumberton – sorry, Dunderbore. He's come to tell you – well, I'll let him do it.”

Harry slowly followed both Dumbledores into the room. Mrs Cole shut the door behind them, and Harry hung back warily. The small room was empty but for an old wardrobe, an uncomfortable-looking wooden chair, and a narrow bed, on which a boy was sitting with a book in his lap.

Eleven-year-old Tom Riddle looked nothing like his mother, taking strongly after his Muggle father. Tall for his age, with dark hair and pale skin – the sight of him forcibly reminded Harry of waking up in the Chamber of Secrets. The thought of what this boy would be like in a few short years made him feel ill.

Dumbledore walked forwards with his hand outstretched. “How do you do, Tom?”

After hesitating briefly, Riddle shook his hand. Dumbledore pulled the chair closer to the bed and sat
“I am Professor Dumbledore.”

Riddle immediately turned suspicious. “Professor’? Is that like 'doctor'? What are you here for? Did she get you in to have a look at me?” he asked, jabbing his finger at the door through which Mrs Cole had just exited.

Dumbledore smiled gently. “No, no.”

“I don't believe you. She wants me looked at, doesn't she? Tell the truth!”

Harry couldn't help staring at Riddle. He'd never seen a child give an unfamiliar adult an order like that – and he'd grown up with Dudley. What was more, from Riddle's reaction, Harry could tell that he was used to his orders being obeyed. He glared at Dumbledore when his calm smile didn't falter, and eventually Riddle stopped glaring at him. Instead, he seemed to become even more suspicious of Dumbledore than he had been.

“Who are you?”

“I have told you. My name is Professor Dumbledore and I work at a school called Hogwarts. I have come to offer you a place at my school – your new school, if you would like to come.”

Riddle jumped off the bed and backed away, spitting mad. “You can't kid me! The asylum, that's where you're from, isn't it? 'Professor', yes, of course – well, I'm not going, see? That old cat's the one who should be in the asylum. I never did anything to little Amy Benson or Dennis Bishop, and you can ask them, they'll tell you!”

If Dumbledore was at all shocked at the speed with which Riddle's emotions changed, he didn't show it, and continued on just as calmly as ever. “I am not from the asylum. I am a teacher and, if you will sit down calmly, I shall tell you about Hogwarts. Of course, if you would rather not come to the school, nobody will force you -”

“I'd like to see them try,” Riddle scoffed.

“Hogwarts is a school for people with special abilities -”

“I'm not mad!”

Not yet, Harry couldn't help thinking.

“I know that you are not mad,” said Dumbledore. “Hogwarts is not a school for mad people. It is a school of magic.”

Again, Riddle's emotions shifted abruptly, from contemptuous anger to a mix of hope and suspicion.

“Magic?” he whispered.

“That's right.”

“It's... it's magic, what I can do?”

“What is it that you can do?”

Riddle was now pink with excitement. “All sorts. I can make things move without touching them. I can make animals do what I want them to do, without training them. I can make bad things happen to
people who annoy me. I can make them hurt if I want to,” Riddle said in a rush, before sitting down on his bed and staring at his clasped hands. “I knew I was different. I knew I was special. Always, I knew there was something.”

At Riddle's words, Dumbledore's smile faded, and he was left watching Riddle closely. “Well, you were quite right,” he said levelly. “You are a wizard.”

Riddle's head shot up. He looked happy for the first time, but not in a good way – he looked almost feral. “Are you a wizard too?” he demanded.

“Yes, I am,” said Dumbledore.

“Prove it,” Riddle ordered.

This time, Dumbledore raised his eyebrows at the boy's rudeness. “If, as I take it, you are accepting your place at Hogwarts -”

“Of course I am!”

“Then you will address me as 'Professor' or 'sir'.”

An ugly expression flitted over Riddle's face before it became more neutral. When he spoke, it was far more politely than he had thus far. “I'm sorry, sir. I meant – please, Professor, could you show me -?”

Dumbledore drew his wand and aimed it at the wardrobe. Once flick of his wand and the entire wardrobe went up in flames. Riddle jumped to his feet with a cry of rage, but before he could articulate anything the flames died off, leaving the wardrobe unharmed.

Harry had to bite his tongue to stop himself from saying anything to Dumbledore. Who went about setting an orphan's possessions on fire like that?

Riddle pointed at Dumbledore's wand. “Where can I get one of them?”

“All in good time. I think there is something trying to get out of your wardrobe,” Dumbledore said pointedly.

Harry looked at the wardrobe, from which he could now hear a quiet scuffling. Riddle clearly heard it too, and whatever was in there had him frightened.

“Open the door,” Dumbledore said.

Riddle hesitated, then hastened to do as he was ordered. When he opened the wardrobe Harry saw a small cardboard box shaking and bouncing on the top shelf within.

“Take it out.”

Again, Riddle did as he was told, looking very nervous now.

“Is there anything in that box that you ought not to have?” asked Dumbledore.

Riddle coolly studied Dumbledore before replying. “Yes, I suppose so, sir.”

“Open it.”

Riddle opened the box and tipped its contents onto his bed. Knowing the older Voldemort, Harry
had been expecting something magical, or powerful, or simply old. Instead, there was just a mess of ordinary items and toys. Released from the box, they lay still and silent upon the bedclothes.

Dumbledore slipped his wand back into his jacket pocket and regarded Riddle. “You will return them to their owners with your apologies. I shall know whether it has been done. And be warned: thieving is not tolerated at Hogwarts.”

Riddle was still studying Dumbledore with cool detachment. “Yes, sir.”

“At Hogwarts, we teach you not only to use magic, but to control it. You have – inadvertently, I am sure – been using your powers in a way that is neither taught nor tolerated at our school. You are not the first, not will you be the last, to allow your magic to run away with you. But you should know that Hogwarts can expel students, and the Ministry of Magic – yes, there is a Ministry – will punish law-breakers still more severely. All new wizards must accept that, in entering our world, they abide by our laws.”

“Yes, sir,” said Riddle. He swept the stolen trophies back into their box, then turned back to Dumbledore. “I haven't got any money.”

Dumbledore took a leather money bag from another suit pocket; Riddle took it from him without a word. “That is easily remedied. There is a fund at Hogwarts for those who require assistance to buy books and robes. You might have to buy some of your spellbooks and so on second-hand, but -”

Riddle looked up from the Galleon he was inspecting. “Where do you buy spellbooks?”

“In Diagon Alley. I have your list of books and school equipment with me. I can help you find everything -”

“You're coming with me?”

“Certainly, if you -”

“I don't need you,” Riddle said decisively. “I'm used to doing things for myself, I go round London on my own all the time. How do you get to this Diagon Alley – sir?”

Dumbledore handed Riddle the envelope that contained his book list and explained how to get to the Leaky Cauldron. “Ask for Tom the barman,” he concluded. “Easy enough to remember, as he shares your name -”

Riddle jerked with annoyance.

Dumbledore's eyebrows rose. “You dislike the name 'Tom'?”

“There are a lot of Toms,” Riddle said contemptuously, then his mood changed once more and he asked almost desperately, “Was my father a wizard? He was called Tom Riddle too, they've told me.”

“I'm afraid I don't know,” Dumbledore said.

“My mother can't have been magic, or she wouldn't have died. It must've been him. So – when I've got all my stuff – when do I come to this Hogwarts?”

Dumbledore explained that all the instructions were on the train ticket in Riddle's envelope, then stood up and held out his hand once more.
Riddle took it. “I can speak to snakes. I found out when we've been to the country on trips – they find me, they whisper to me. Is that normal for a wizard?” he asked.

His tone was casual, but a gleam in his eye told Harry that Riddle expected a reaction from this last question, the oddest display of his abilities.

He was to be disappointed. Dumbledore hesitated for only a moment before answering. “It is unusual, but not unheard of,” he said slowly. He studied Riddle for a second or two, then released his hand. “Goodbye, Tom. I shall see you at Hogwarts.”

“This is where we make our own goodbyes, Harry,” said the older Dumbledore, taking Harry's elbow.

They rose up and out of the Pensieve to be deposited back in Dumbledore's office.

“Have a seat,” Dumbledore said, walking around to his own chair.

“He was very easily persuaded,” Harry commented.


Harry nodded. “Yeah, I do – at least, he was when you told him he was a wizard. When Hagrid told me that I was a wizard, it took far longer than that for me believe him. Riddle didn't take long to believe it at all.”

“No, he didn't,” Dumbledore mused. “For all his suspicions of me, Tom Riddle was very easily persuaded when I told him that he was a wizard. But then, he had long suspected that he was 'special'. I merely gave him a name to use for his exalted status.”

“Was that normal? To believe so quickly?” Harry asked.

Dumbledore clasped his hands in thought. “No, not at all. I have visited quite a few Muggle-born students in my time – Tom Riddle was the only half-blood raised amongst Muggles I visited – in order to inform them of their magical status, and none of them believed me as readily as Tom Riddle did.”

“Did you know what might happen? What he'd turn out to be?” Harry asked.

“I hadn't the foggiest,” Dumbledore admitted. “I was unsettled by the tales of his bullying, and resolved to keep a close eye on him once he arrived at Hogwarts – as much for his classmates' sakes as for his – but I had no idea that I had just met the most dangerous wizard in history, though I could tell that he would powerful. His use of his powers was far more advanced and precise than is usual for underage witches and wizards. Most troublingly, he had no qualms about using those powers to exert his will over others, to frighten them, and to punish those he felt had wronged him.

“I shan't keep you from what I am sure is a staggering amount of homework awaiting you in your dormitory, but I first want to discuss some interesting titbits that you will surely have noticed in the memory we just viewed,” said Dumbledore. “It did not, I hope, escape your notice that Riddle reacted rather contumaciously when I mentioned another person who shared his first name?”

“No, sir.”

“Already, Riddle disliked anything that he had in common with others, or proved him ordinary. He thought himself special and unique, and did not want anyone or anything to prove him otherwise. Only a few years after this memory, he created the title 'Lord Voldemort' for himself, to set himself
apart and above everyone else.”

Harry nodded. He could vividly remember being trapped in the Chamber of Secrets, watching a teenaged Tom Riddle writing his name in mid-air.

“I hope you also noticed that, young as he was, Riddle was already secretive and fiercely independent. He did not appear to have any friends, nor did he seem to want any. He spurned my offer to accompany him to Diagon Alley, preferring to fend for himself in what must surely have been a daunting experience. As an adult, Lord Voldemort is the same. He has never had a friend, not in the way that you or I would understand the word. He has followers, minions, those who would fight for him and his beliefs. Some of them may believe that he cares for them or trusts them, but they are deluding themselves. Voldemort cares for them only as tools to wield; he trusts only that their fear of him is enough to keep them loyal.”

“What about Nagini, sir?” asked Harry.

Dumbledore looked at him over the top of his glasses. “Nagini?”

“Yeah, his snake. I mean, she calls him 'master', but he speaks a lot nicer to her than to any of the Death Eaters,” said Harry.

Dumbledore nodded thoughtfully. “I do believe that he is fond of her, perhaps more so than anything else in his life, but I would hardly think that one could be friends with a snake.”

“Parselmouths can, sir,” said Harry, thinking of Ladon and Ollie and the grass snake from Little Whinging.

Dumbledore bowed his head. “My apologies, Harry. Finally, Riddle had a magpie-like tendency to collect trophies. The items hidden in his wardrobe were stolen from victims of his bullying, corporeal reminders of some rather nasty uses of magic against innocent children. Remember this habit of his, Harry. It will be important later on,” said Dumbledore.

“Yes, sir.”

“That will be all for tonight.”

Harry got up and headed for the door but stopped in front of it. The little table which had used to hold Marvolo Gaunt's ring was now empty.

“What is it, Harry?” asked Dumbledore.

Harry made sure his Occlumency shield was still strong before he turned around. “The ring's gone. I – I thought you had it here to study, to try to figure out a way to cure the curse it gave you.”

“Ah,” Dumbledore said. “No, that's not why I kept the ring.”

“And you got rid of it?”

“I have no further need of it.”

It was only when Harry was already on the moving staircase that he realised that Dumbledore hadn't answered his last question. Typical, he thought, and brought down his Occlumency shield. As he was swept along by the staircase, Harry began to replay the night's lesson.

It had definitely been more interesting than the first lesson, despite the creepiness of the young
Voldemort. Part of him couldn't help wondering if his childhood would have been happier if he had grown up in an orphanage, instead of with the Dursleys. Aunt Marge had frequently told Uncle Vernon that he should send Harry to one, and she had always made them sound nightmarish. But the orphanage Harry had just seen didn't seem that bad. Grim, yes, but the children had all seemed well-fed, and their clothes, while a uniform grey, had fitted them properly without a hole or frayed hem to be seen. Harry had spent a decade living in a cupboard under the stairs, wearing worn out and oversized hand-me-downs, always with the constant threat of starvation hanging over him.

When he walked into his dorm Harry found Draco and Blaise sitting on the floor playing chess, sharing both a box of sweets and a bottle of Firewhisky. Theo was lying on his stomach on his bed, reading. There was no sign of Vince, but Greg's bed curtains were pulled shut.

Harry's face must have reflected his troubled thoughts, for when he sat down next to him, Draco immediately asked him what was wrong.

"Nothing," Harry said, shaking his head. "How come you're back from Slughorn's party, Blaise? And what's with the Firewhisky?"

"Ginny dumped me," Blaise said, taking a swig of said Firewhisky.

"You okay?" Harry asked.

"Yeah, I knew it was coming," said Blaise, handing him the bottle.

"You did?" Harry asked.

"Yeah, she's falling for Dean Thomas," said Blaise.

"You don't seem upset about it," Harry said slowly.

Blaise shrugged. "It's not like Ginny can help who she likes. Started happening after he got on the Quidditch team – all that training together, getting all hot and sweaty... I can see how it happens. She didn't cheat on me, if that's what you're thinking. Besides, I've never been dumped before. Thought I may as well see what it was like. You gotta try everything once, right?"

The other three boys all shared bemused looks.

"Most people don't set out to get dumped, Blaise," Theo said eventually. "I certainly don't have any curiosity about it."

"Me neither," said Draco.

Harry grinned at Blaise. "A couple of months ago, Draco was being a drama queen and broke up with me for a couple of minutes. It was pretty funny."

Draco opened his mouth angrily as Blaise and Theo burst out laughing. "That – you – there were extenuating circumstances, as you bloody well know, Potter!"

"Yeah, you're a drama queen," Harry said, sniggering and taking a drink of Firewhisky. It burned going down, and his eyes watered as he handed the bottle to Draco.

"I hate you all," Draco muttered, before taking an extra large swallow.

Harry just grinned. "So, who's winning?"

"I am, of course," Draco sniffed.
“You were,” Theo corrected. “Blaise has moved three pieces since Harry walked in.”

“You wanker!” cried Draco.

Blaise smirked. “Not my fault you got distracted by your boyfriend.”

Draco narrowed his eyes at him, then snatched up a chocolate. “We'll call it a draw.”

Harry took back the Firewhisky. “So who’s next, Blaise?”

“I don't know,” Blaise said thoughtfully. “I've got a few potentials in mind.”

“Plenty to choose from, given how many couples have broken up recently,” Harry said.

Draco nodded. “Hermione and Viktor... Millicent and Pansy... Daphne and Adrian... Gemma and Terence -”

“Wait, Gemma and Terence broke up?” Harry asked.

“Yes, a couple of months ago,” said Draco.

“Doesn't matter anyway. For every break up there's been someone else getting together,” said Blaise.

“Like who?” asked Harry.

Blaise began counting on his fingers. “Well, Daphne's with Vikram, you have to know that. Please tell me you all know that.”

“Pansy's told us,” Theo said, then Summoned the Firewhisky.

“Good. Well, I give Millicent and Imogen three weeks before they get together... Pansy's asked me to set up her and Hermione -”

“What, together?” Draco asked.

“No, separately, although I'm pretty sure Pans would go there if Hermione wasn't straight,” Blaise said. “I'm not sure if she's told Hermione about this, but I've been keeping an eye out for anyone I think might work for them. Then, of course, Gin's going to go after Dean – probably in a month or so. Fuck, even Ron has Lavender after him, though I don't think he's noticed yet -”

“How do you know all this?” Harry interrupted.

Blaise shrugged. “Everyone has a talent. Theo's a genius, Draco speaks a zillion languages, you're going to save us all from You-Know-Who... This is my talent. Well, this, and being really good in bed. Sex and romance in general, really.”

“I don't think I can physically roll my eyes any harder than I am right now,” Theo drawled.

“Jealousy's an ugly emotion, Nott,” Blaise said.

Now it was Harry's turn to roll his eyes. “Yeah, sure, Zabini. If you're done bragging, you want to tell us how Slughorn's party went? How lucky am I that I had an excuse not to go?”

Blaise grimaced. “Er, rather unlucky, actually.”

Harry frowned. “It can't've been that good.”
Blaise glanced at Theo and Draco before replying. “Gwenog Jones was there.”

Harry almost choked on the chocolate he had in his mouth. “What?”

Blaise nodded. “She was the guest of honour. Ginny's eyes just about popped out when she walked in. Spent most of the night talking to her and ended up getting her autograph.”

“Sod it all,” said Harry. “Slughorn told me I'd regret not going, but I just thought he meant there was going to be delicious food.”

“There was that, too,” Blaise said not-at-all-helpfully.

Draco nudged Harry. “It's not that bad. You already have her autograph. You have the whole team's.”

“Yeah, I know. But I've never met any of the Harpies before,” said Harry. “What was she like?”

“Obsessed with Quidditch,” said Blaise. “You really should've come.”

“I couldn't, I had a lesson with Dumbledore,” sighed Harry. “I really hate being the Chosen One.”

“It gets worse,” Theo said.

“How can it get worse than missing an opportunity to meet one of the greatest Beaters in history?” Harry demanded.

It was Blaise who answered. “Slughorn's throwing a Christmas party. He said that if he needs to, he'll reschedule the entire thing so that you can make it. So just fucking go, yeah? We're allowed to bring a guest, so you can drag Draco along.”

Draco threw a chocolate at Blaise. “What am I, a security blanket?”

Blaise smirked. “Harry does sleep with you whenever he's upset over something...”

It was Harry's turn to throw a chocolate at him. “Fine, I'll go. And I would like my non-security blanket boyfriend to come with me, if he wants to.”

“I would love to,” Draco said, before leaning over to kiss Harry.

“Good work, Zabini. Now they've started snogging and won't be any use for the rest of the night,” Theo grumbled.

Blaise chuckled. “I don't know, they're putting on a pretty good display from where I'm sitting.”

Harry pulled away from Draco and aimed his wand at Blaise. “Langlock,” he said, using one of the more frivolous spells Severus had written in *Advanced Potions-Making*.

When he felt his tongue glue itself to the roof of his mouth, Blaise made an impressively long series of rude hand gestures in Harry's direction, before slumping back against Draco's bed.

“Ah, peace at last,” Harry said.

He supposed he shouldn't have been surprised that Blaise chose that moment to hit him in the face with one of Draco's pillows.
After dinner on Tuesday, Harry, Hermione and Draco had met Severus in his office, where Harry had told them all about what Dumbledore had shown him the night before. Like Harry, they all thought that the second lesson had been more informative than the first. Severus disagreed that Harry had any reason to fret over the whereabouts of Gaunt's ring.

“If Dumbledore doesn't want to attempt to find a counter-curse, that's his business. Furthermore, you already have more than enough to be worrying about.” Severus had said.

Harry certainly couldn't argue with that. On top of his school work (never-ending), duelling practise (fun but painful) and Occlumency lessons (not as painful as they had been), the Slytherin – Gryffindor Quidditch match was quickly approaching and Harry was doing his best to get the team ready. By mid-October he had the team training three times a week, mainly focusing on getting the Chasers up to scratch.

As Harry was well aware, it was always more difficult to bring in a new Chaser or Beater. Unlike a Seeker or Keeper, they had to work so closely with their fellows that even the best fliers took some time to slip into the seamless teamwork required. Viola was a brilliant flier, both quick and graceful, who took direction well. Her handling of the Quaffle wasn't quite up to the standards of Draco and Scarlett, but she was quickly improving.

The main problem was that Viola just didn't have much experience flying with Draco and Scarlett. Harry knew it was unfair of him, but he couldn't help comparing this year's Chasers to last year's. After flying together for two seasons, Adrian, Scarlett and Draco had almost seemed to read each other's minds in the air. Still, the current Chasers were coming along nicely, and Harry was confident that Slytherin had a good chance at the cup this year.

His confidence increased when he came up for breakfast on the day of the match. The Great Hall was as boisterous as it always was before a Quidditch match. When they entered the room, every member of both the Slytherin and Gryffindor Quidditch teams were applauded by their respective houses, all of whom were decked out in their house colours. A few Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs were sporting green or red, too, though someone evidently found it hard to choose sides; Luna had painted the left side of her face a deep green, while the right side was a bright red.

Twenty minutes before the match was due to start, Harry decided it was time that the team went down to get ready. He got to his feet, and while waiting for the rest of the team to follow suit, looked up at the staff table and caught Severus' eye. He nodded over his teacup at Harry, who smiled back, then headed down to the changing rooms with his team mates.

Harry's mind was racing as he trudged down the frosty grass. In front of him, Viola was uncharacteristically quiet on the way down, clearly feeling the nerves before her first match. Scarlett and Malcolm flanked her the entire way, making obnoxiously bad jokes in an effort to distract her. Millicent and Theo were quietly talking tactics, leaving Harry and Draco alone.

Draco took Harry's hand and squeezed it. “You'll be fine.”

Harry had been in the middle of considering the day's weather and how it would affect the match. “Huh? What?”

Draco snorted. “I said, you'll be fine. In your first match as Captain. We'll crush them.”
“I think so. I hope so,” Harry said.

They joined the rest of the team in the changing rooms, where they got changed into their Quidditch robes to the sound of the rest of the school making their way to the stadium. Harry smoothed his robes down and looked at Scarlett.

“You right with your eye drops?”

Scarlett nodded. “Malcolm's said he'll do it. You just focus on your big inspiring speech.”

“Right, yeah,” Harry muttered. He waited until Malcolm had applied Scarlett's eye drops, then cleared his throat. “Okay, so, first match of the year... er, let's make it a good one, yeah?”

“Yeah!” Scarlett cried, causing everyone to laugh.

“We've got good conditions so there's nothing to stop us from flying at our best. Chasers, keep the pressure on Weasley. He gets flustered after letting in a goal, so if you score, hit him again quickly before he can recover. Hopefully you won't have too much trouble from their Chasers – only one of them has any experience – but remember you've got two fantastic Beaters backing you up. And Malcolm, you just play like you usually do,” said Harry. He paused, trying to think if he'd missed anything. When he came up blank, he clapped his hands together. “Let's do it!”

He led the team onto the pitch to a huge cheer from the Slytherins and boos from the Gryffindors. They lined up opposite the Gryffindor team, then Harry and Ginny walked forward to Hooch.

“Captains, shake hands,” she ordered.

“I'm going to thrash you, Weasley,” Harry said with a grin.

Ginny grinned back and squeezed his hand in a surprisingly hard grip. “I'd like to see you try, Potter.”

“On my whistle,” Hooch cried. “Three... two... one...”

Harry kicked off the ground and soared into the sky, above the rest of the players, to search for the Snitch from the edge of the pitch. Below him, one of the new Gryffindor Chasers had the Quaffle, but the commentator wasn't talking about that.

“And there they go, ladies and gentlemen, the Gryffindor and Slytherin Quidditch teams, about to show us all that nepotism is alive and well at Hogwarts. Are any of today's players here on talent alone? We've got Harry Potter as Slytherin Captain – coincidentally the son of the Head of Slytherin – and we've got Ginny Weasley letting her brother stay on the team despite his lacklustre performance last ye-”


Harry looked down to the commentator's box to see an irate McGonagall looming over Zacharias Smith, a blond sixth year who had played Chaser for Hufflepuff. Harry sincerely hoped he was playing again this year so that he could have the pleasure of beating him.

“We're all thinking the same thing, Professor,” Smith said.

“Fuckwit,” Harry growled.

“Focus on the game, Smith,” McGonagall ordered.
Across the pitch, Harry saw Ginny take both hands off her broom in order to stick both middle fingers up at Smith, but it seemed like she and Harry were the only players who had heard Smith's comments – they were the only ones reacting, at any rate. The crowd was grumbling angrily, with many Slytherins and Gryffindors shouting and making rude gestures at Smith, who hastily began to commentate on the actual match.

“Alright, well, Gryffindor's Thomas is in possession, heading for goal. Bulstrode hits a Bludger at him. He drops the Quaffle but it's saved by Robins who – yes, she's scored the first goal of the match,” said Smith, sounding heartily bored by the game.

The cheers of the Gryffindors in the stands drowned out the groans of the Slytherins. Harry swore and resumed his search for the Snitch, trying not to listen to any more of the commentary. Unfortunately, Harry was so used to listening to the commentary to keep track of the score that this proved all but impossible. Smith kept up the snide comments, and by the time Harry called a time out he was fuming.

“Two minutes, Potter,” Hooch said.

“Yes, ma'am,” he replied as he landed.

The rest of the team flew down to huddle around Harry, while on the other side of the pitch, the Gryffindor team was doing the same, clearly taking the opportunity to discuss tactics. Scarlett hiked up her robe and pulled her eye drops out of a pocket in her trousers.

“You had them on you during the match?” Malcolm asked.

Scarlett handed Draco the bottle and tilted her head back. “Unbreakable bottle.”

“Does anyone else want to punch that commentator?” Millicent asked.

“Oh yeah,” said Harry. “Pretty sure that's a foul though, so let's settle for proving him wrong by winning. We're not trailing by that much, there's no reason why we can't make a comeback.”

“They've doubled our score,” said Malcolm.

“It's a low-scoring match, that isn't hard to do,” said Theo.

“Exactly,” said Harry. “We're only fifty points behind. We can do this.”

Hooch's whistle cut through the noise of the crowd, and the teams rose back into the air to begin playing again.

“Gryffindor leads on one hundred points to Slytherin's fifty as play resumes after time out. Lympsham's in possession – I guess whatever she took during time out has boosted her playing ability somehow.”

“Eye drops for a medical condition, Smith,” McGonagall said. “Stick to commentating the match.”

“Sorry, Professor,” Smith said, sounding anything but. “I'm sure Lympsham wasn't cheating, and it's a complete coincidence that she's just scored -”

“SMITH!”

“- bringing Slytherin up to sixty.”

Harry clenched his jaw and sped up as he flew around the perimeter of the pitch. He just wanted to
catch the Snitch and end the damn match so that Smith would shut up. Down below, the action had picked up as both teams seemed to have developed a second wind during time out, with Gryffindor extending their lead. They scored three times in quick succession before Viola broke their streak. Play evened out after that, though the scoring rate slowed as the turnover rate increased.

The Beaters also picked up the pace, and Bludgers were flying through the air even more viciously than usual. Both Keepers took a hit to the stomach; Draco got caught in his left shoulder; and one of the Gryffindor Chasers was hit in the thigh with such force that she and her broom were spun around in a complete circle before she managed to straighten out again.

Harry was flying about the Gryffindor goals when he had to come to a screeching halt to avoid getting hit by a Bludger. It rocketed up past him, and Harry reflexively watched it go past, only for a glimmer of gold to catch his eye. The Snitch was fluttering around high above him.

Harry tore after it, hoping Ginny didn't see his rapid ascent. He had to swing out to the right to avoid the Bludger on its descent, but he didn't take his eyes off the Snitch. He straightened back out just to get hit hard in the side by something larger and softer than a Bludger. Ginny had caught up to him.

They flew after the Snitch, going almost completely vertical to reach it, bumping and elbowing each other the entire way. The Snitch dodged from side to side as it rose even higher; if Harry didn't know any better, he would have sworn the little ball was laughing at the Seekers' efforts to catch it.

All of a sudden the Snitch darted over and behind the Seekers. Without a second thought, both Harry and Ginny pulled their brooms up and back in a half-loop. Now hurtling upside-down, they both took a hand off their brooms to reach the Snitch, and a few seconds later, Harry's hand closed around it.

He gave a triumphant yell and rolled back upright before slowing down. The Slytherin portion of the crowd began cheering when they realised that they'd won, but it wasn't until Hooch blew her whistle that the other players realised what had happened. Harry flew down to meet the rest of the team, holding the Snitch up victoriously. The Slytherins all gathered in mid-air for a group hug, while the Gryffindors began making their way back down to the ground – all except two players. Millicent had sped off after a Bludger for some reason, and Ginny was zooming across the pitch.

“What are they doing?” Scarlett asked.

A slow grin spread over Theo's face. “Revenge.”

Harry frowned at him in confusion, then grinned himself when he realised that Ginny was headed straight for the commentator's box. She slammed into it without slowing down, crashing through the wood to knock Smith onto his arse amongst the rubble.

“Weasley, what on earth do you think you're doing?” McGonagall demanded.

“Sorry, Professor, forgot to brake,” said Ginny.

She was spared McGonagall's retort by the arrival of a Bludger. It rocketed between Ginny and McGonagall to punch straight through the floor of the box a scant few centimetres from Smith's head, who threw his hands over his head with a wail. Ginny covered her mouth with her hand as she started laughing, while McGonagall whirled around to glare at Millicent.

“Bulstrode, the match is over!”

Millicent shrugged a shoulder. “No harm done, Professor. It's not like I'm talented enough to actually hit him.”
“No harm done? Between the two of you, this box is absolutely destroyed!” McGonagall shouted. “You both have detention every night next week. Now get out of my sight!”

Neither Millicent nor Ginny wasted any time doing that just, but Harry saw them give each other a thumbs up as they fled. Harry waved the Snitch at Severus, who was on his feet and clapping proudly, then dove down to the changing rooms with the rest of the team.

“That was fucking amazing, Millicent,” Theo crowed.

Millicent threw her bat onto the bench beside her. “What are you talking about? I missed him.”

“What a load of wank. That Bludger landed exactly where you wanted it to,” Malcolm said.

“Yeah, alright, it did. I just thought it sounded better if I'd been aiming to actually hit him,” Millicent said.

“But that would mean your aim was off,” Theo pointed out.

“And we all know that your aim is better than that,” Harry chimed in.

“Good point,” said Millicent. “He does it again though, and I'll be aiming right for him.”

Everyone but Viola laughed at that; she was sitting on a bench, already changed out of her Quidditch robes, staring wide-eyed at Millicent. Scarlett noticed and nudged her with her shoulder.

“Welcome to the Slytherin Quidditch team, where we celebrate wins by having Millicent pretend she's harder than she actually is,” she said with a giggle.

“Oi!” said Millicent, standing up.

Scarlett stood up too, making everyone laugh. Millicent was more than a foot taller than Scarlett, and weighed about twice as much, most of it muscle. It looked like a house-elf facing off against a troll.

Scarlett wasn’t cowed. “Got a problem, Bulstrode?”

“Yeah, I got a problem, Lympsham,” Millicent growled.

Before anyone could do a thing, she bent down, scooped up Scarlett, flung her over her shoulder, and strode out of the room.

“Is Scarlett alright? Should we go after them?” Viola asked uncertainly.

“Of course we should. We don't want to miss the party in the common room,” said Draco.

“Scarlett will be fine,” Harry assured Viola. “You'll see.”

Sure enough, when they left the changing rooms they could see Millicent running around the lawn with Scarlett now sitting on her shoulders shrieking with laughter.

“They had the right idea, though, Millicent and Ginny. Smith needs to pay for what he said today,” Theo said.

“We'll crush Hufflepuff when we play them,” Harry said.

“We don't play them until May. I want vengeance sooner than that,” said Theo.
Malcolm cracked his knuckles. “What'd you have in mind?”

“We can still sign up to commentate Quidditch, can’t we? It's fairly obvious that Smith won't be getting another shot after the shit he said today... I figured I could have a crack at the Hufflepuff – Ravenclaw match,” said Theo.

“You want to commentate a match?” Harry asked in disbelief.

“Why not?” asked Theo. “I'm articulate and knowledgeable about Quidditch.”

“You also hate being the centre of attention,” said Draco.

Theo shrugged. “It'll be fine. Everyone will be focused on the match, not me. You'll see.”

When they got to the common room they found the party still in its early stages. People were Levitating the furniture to the sides of the room, to create a dance floor. The wall that looked out into the lake had a long row of tables lined up in front of it, with a group of sixth and seventh years loading down one end of it with bottles of Butterbeer, Firewhisky, and a massive punch bowl that was currently empty.

“We're not going to blow the entire year's stash of booze tonight, are we?” Harry asked. “It's not like we can just get more on the next Hogsmeade weekend anymore.”

Draco gave him a scornful look. “Honestly, Potter, have you never heard of a Refilling Charm?”

“You know I have. I suggested you use it on the champagne we smuggled in for Hermione's birthday and you called me an idiot,” said Harry.

“Because it was an idiotic suggestion,” said Draco. “Don’t you listen to Flitwick during class? The quality of anything degrades when you use a Refilling Charm, and anything with bubbles is very, very tricky to begin with. It's fine for the Firewhisky or elf-made wine over there, but champagne? Absolutely not.”

“I listen during class. It's just that pretty much everything Flitwick and McGonagall say this year is complicated gibberish,” said Harry.

“Be thankful you're not doing Ancient Runes,” Draco muttered. “Alright, now that we've established that we will not deplete the house's supply of alcohol in one night, may we please go and have some of it?”

“I thought you'd never ask,” Harry drawled.

They walked over to the drinks table, which was currently being managed by Daphne, Vikram, Nerissa and Bastien.

Daphne beamed at them. “Hi, boys. We're just setting up now and don't have the goblets yet, so all we can give you is Butterbeer.”

“Butterbeer's fine,” said Harry.

Bastien popped the caps off two bottles and handed them over. “Enjoy, gentlemen. We've sent some second years off to the kitchens, so the food should be here in about fifteen.”

Harry and Draco said their thanks and wandered off to find a couch. They were eventually joined by Millicent and Imogen, who curled up together on their end of the couch. They began rehashing the
day's match with the boys, but it soon became evident that Imogen was mostly interested in Millicent's performance. The girls soon abandoned the conversation to whisper to each other, at which point Harry got up and dragged Draco over to get something to eat.

“We don't do that to people, do we?” asked Harry. “Ignore them to whisper to each other?”

“If we do, we at least have the decency to do it in Parseltongue so that others don't have to listen,” said Draco, stepping up next to Pansy at the food table.

“You? Decent?” Pansy laughed.

“We're a damn sight more decent than those two,” Draco said, jerking his thumb over his shoulder. He was too busy inspecting the sweets to notice Harry's efforts to shut him up.

Pansy looked over at the couch from which they'd come. A second later her face fell, then she stalked off. When Harry looked back at the couch, he saw that Millicent and Imogen had abandoned all pretense of conversation for snogging.

“Fuck,” he muttered, hurrying after Pansy.

He caught up to her in front of the drinks table in time to see her snatch up a bottle of wine and begin gulping it down.

“Steady on, Pansy!” cried Nerissa.

Pansy held up a finger and kept drinking, only lowering the bottle when she'd drunk a good quarter of it. “I just saw my ex snogging some slag. I need this.”

Bastien frowned. “Don't call Imogen a slag.”

Pansy scowled at him over the bottle. “Why not?”

“Because she isn't one,” said Bastien.

“She didn't mean it,” Harry said quickly.

“Yes I did,” said Pansy.

Nerissa cleared her throat and handed Pansy a goblet of water. “Here. You can keep that wine as long as you promise you'll have some water as well.”

“Yeah, sure,” said Pansy, taking both the water and wine and walking off in the direction of the girls' dorms.

Harry looked around for Daphne, hoping that she might be able to help. “Where's Daphne?” he asked.

“Disappeared with Vikram a while ago,” said Bastien.

“Of course she did,” Harry muttered.

He hurried after Pansy once more. Draco had wandered off, so Harry walked into the corridor to the girls' dormitories alone. When he got to Pansy's room he knocked on the closed door, to no response. Hoping that Pansy wouldn't hex him, he opened the door and cautiously stuck his head inside.

“Pansy? You okay?”
“Peachy.”

It had been a stupid question, Harry had to admit. “May I come in?”

“If you want.”

He entered the room and shut the door behind him. Pansy was sitting on her bed, tears rolling down her face as she drank straight from the wine bottle. When Harry reached her side, Pansy shuffled over and pulled him down to sit next to her. Her sobs got louder as she lay her head on Harry’s shoulder. He silently put his arm around her and let her cry. After a few minutes Pansy gave a large sniff, sat back up and drank some more wine.

“Do you want to talk about it?” Harry asked.

“No,” said Pansy. She took another drink, then blurted, “It just hurts, you know? Seeing her with someone else.”

“I know,” said Harry.

“I mean I knew they were together – of course I knew that, but seeing it...” Pansy sniffled again.

“So this is the first time? Millicent hasn’t brought her into your dorm or anything?”

“No, she’s been good about that,” Pansy said, very begrudgingly. “I just... Why did she stop liking me? What did I do wrong?”

“Well,” Harry said, before he could stop himself, “I think she just had enough of the drama.”

“Drama? I’m not dramatic!” Pansy cried.

“Pans, you’ve just necked half a bottle of wine and stormed out on a perfectly good party to hide on your bed crying over your ex. I’d say that's pretty dramatic,” said Harry.

Pansy made a sound that was half giggle, half sob. “When you put it like that...” She laughed again, properly this time. “And you’d know about drama, wouldn't you, dating Draco.”

“Exactly,” said Harry, squeezing her shoulders.

Pansy sniffed again, had some more wine, then held the bottle out for Harry. He took a swig, then looked at the nearly empty bottle.

“Can you please have that water now?”

“God, when did you and Nerissa become such Hufflepuffs?” Pansy scoffed, but drank the water all the same. She put the empty goblet down on her bedside table then got up to go look at herself in the mirror. “Ugh, I'm a mess. Daphne does this thing where she can cry without messing up her mascara...” She wiped away the smudged make up underneath her eyes, reapplied her lip gloss and turned to Harry. “Can you tell I've been crying?”

“You look fine,” Harry assured her, not mentioning that anyone who had seen her rush in here would probably assume she’d been crying.

“Okay, let's go.”

Harry stood up. “You're not going to do anything stupid, are you?”
Pansy laughed. “Already tried to. I propositioned Blaise.”

“What? *Blaise*? I cannot see you two together,” said Harry.

“Neither could he, apparently,” Pansy muttered.

“What happened?” asked Harry.

Pansy huffed. “It was after Ginny dumped him, so he was fair game... I asked him if he wanted to – you know – and he turned me down! Bastard.”

“Blaise turned you down?” Harry asked incredulously.

“Right? I mean, it's Blaise!” Pansy cried. “But he just went on and on about how I was trying to make Bulstrode jealous and he wasn't going to help me with that because he's friends with her too...”

“That – that's actually really nice of him,” said Harry. “You know he cares about both of you.”

Pansy pouted. “Doesn't mean I have to like it.”

“No, but hey, he has agreed to set you up with someone,” said Harry.

“He's taking his sweet time with that,” Pansy grumbled.

“Which probably just means he's waiting for someone he actually thinks you'll like.”

“I guess...”

“Come on. Let's go get something to eat, and then we'll have a dance,” said Harry.

Pansy nodded and walked over to him, swaying a little. “Thanks for coming after me.”

Harry shrugged. “It was nothing.”

Pansy swatted his arm. “Don't say that! I'm trying to be nice here, and it's not just the wine talking, okay? I just... I appreciate it. Really.”

Harry pulled her into a hug. “You're welcome.”

Pansy returned the hug, then pulled away, taking the wine back in the process. “Mine, I think.”

She turned, raised her chin, and led the way out of the room. After the quiet of the girls’ dormitory, the common room was startlingly loud. The Weird Sisters were blaring from a gramophone and people were shouting and laughing with their friends. Harry and Pansy skirted the edge of the dance floor to reach the refreshment tables.

“You better not be after more wine, Parkinson,” Nerissa said.

Pansy shook her head. “Food, actually.”

Harry moved down the table, stopping when he realised he was about to bump into Greg. He leaned down to select some food, hoping that Greg would leave soon so that Harry could reach the sausage rolls that were sitting in front of him.

“You flew well today,” Greg said quietly.

Harry froze with his hand over a bowl of crisps. “Thank you.”
Greg merely grunted and walked off, seemingly unaware that he had just flabbergasted Harry. Feeling a little guilty now, Harry lowered his hand, no longer hungry. Maybe Daphne was right; maybe they should make more of an effort with Greg and Vince.

“Nerissa, do you want any help here?” he asked.

Nerissa sagged with relief. “That would be fantastic, Harry. I'm supposed to have a couple of helpers but they seem to be rather distracted at the moment.”

She threw a dirty look at Bastien, who, while still standing behind the drinks table, was too busy flirting with Blaise to actually serve anyone. Harry smirked and walked around to join Nerissa; to his surprise, Pansy did the same.

“I'm just here to enjoy the show,” she said, pointing at Blaise and Bastien with a giggle.

Nerissa raised her brow at her slurred speech. “And to have easy access to the alcohol, no doubt.”

“I can multi-task,” Pansy said, happily helping herself to an éclair and ignoring the crowd in front of the table.

Nerissa rolled her eyes. “Alright, well, the main thing you need to do is not let anyone younger than fourth year have any strong alcohol – Butterbeer's fine though. Apart from that, just pour people goblets of what they ask for, give them water if they look like they need it, and keep spiking the punch.” She paused, glanced at Pansy, then added, “Pansy, you should leave that last one to Harry and me.”

Pansy shrugged. “Less work for me? Sounds good.”

“I don't think she's going to be much help,” Harry murmured, handing out bottles of Butterbeer to some first years.

“No, I expect not, but you will be. You do know how to cast Refilling Charms and Water-Making Spells, yes?” asked Nerissa, passing goblets of red wine to Imogen and Xander.

“Water-Making Spells, yes, but we're only just learning Refilling Charms this term and I haven't managed to cast one yet,” Harry admitted.

“You can do all the pouring, then,” said Nerissa.

“Deal,” said Harry, ladling out goblets of punch. “So, why'd you volunteer to do this if it's so much work?”

Nerissa laughed. “It's not really. Plus it means I get to help myself to whatever I want, whenever I want. What about you?”

Harry shrugged. “You looked like you needed some help and I was right here. Plus, like Pansy says, there's a pretty good show behind you.”

Nerissa turned to see that Bastien and Blaise were now snogging.

Nerissa cleared her throat. “I... mmm, yeah, I... I see what you mean,” she said somewhat breathlessly.

“We should get them to be the entertainment at all our house parties,” said Pansy.

She was too loud, and got the attention of both Blaise and Bastien, who broke apart. Bastien turned
bright pink when he saw Pansy, Harry and Nerissa all watching, but Blaise just smirked.

“Let's go somewhere more private,” he said. He took Bastien's hand and led him off towards the boys' dormitories, winking at Pansy as he passed her.

Pansy gaped after them, then shouted, “Come back here where I can watch, you dicks!”

“Here, this'll numb the pain,” said Nerissa.

She handed a shot of Firewhisky to both Harry and Pansy, and they knocked them back together. Pansy put her glass down and sidled back to the platter of éclairs, leaving Harry and Nerissa to serve drinks to everyone waiting. When they finally got a bit of a breather, they gathered over the punch bowl to replenish its contents and increase its alcohol content.

“Can we get a drink already?”

Harry and Nerissa looked up to see the Carrow twins standing in front of them, arms crossed impatiently.

“Sure. What'd you want?” Harry asked curtly.

One of them, he wasn't sure which one, wrinkled her nose. “Not to be served by you, Potter.”

“You'll do,” the other said to Nerissa.

Nerissa's eyebrows shot up. “Excuse me?”

“Two red wines,” the first twin said.

Nerissa crossed her arms. “Listen, Hestia -”

“I'm Flora,” the first twin said.

“I don't care,” Nerissa said coolly. “Apologise to Harry and me if you want a drink, or you can fuck right off.”

“Oh look, it's the Carrow twits!” Pansy cried, stumbling over with the platter of éclairs.

Harry and Nerissa laughed; the twins looked furious.

“Oh look, it's a drunk blood traitor,” sneered Hestia.

“I'm not a blood traitor,” said Pansy, then turned to Harry. “Am I?”

Harry nodded. “Hermione's a Muggle-born, and you're friends with her, so that makes you a blood-traitor. You're also currently drunk.”

“Oh,” said Pansy, then giggled. “I guess I am.”

“I can't believe I'm watching a half-blood explain to a pure-blood what a blood traitor is,” said Flora.

“Know what,” Harry said, whirling back to face the twins, “Pansy's right. You're both twits – and bigoted twits at that. Now get lost.”

Hestia gave an exaggerated sniff. “Flora, can you smell something?”

Flora also made a show of sniffing the air. “Must be the dirty blood in the area.”
Harry's angry retort was drowned out by the clatter of the tray of éclairs crashing onto the table.

“If you think something in here smells, maybe you need to get your heads out of your arses,” said Pansy, then pulled out her wand. “Or I could curse your noses off?”

“I'd go with the first option if I were you,” Nerissa said conversationally. “Pansy's aim probably isn't all that great right now. She might accidentally take off a little more than yours noses.”

“I might,” Pansy said, nodding agreeably.

The twins gave identical sneers. “You'll regret this,” said Flora.

Harry laughed. “I've duelled Voldemort,” he said, ignoring how all four girls flinched, “and you think the two of you are going to scare me? Right.”

The twins turned and stalked off to huddle in a corner, muttering angrily and shooting glares back at Harry and the girls. Pansy giggled again and returned to eating éclairs.

Nerissa frowned at Harry. “Do you get that rubbish a lot?”

“Usually only from Death Eaters, but I do know that some people here don't like me and the other half-bloods in Slytherin,” he said.

Nerissa's frown deepened. “That's horrible.”

Harry shrugged. “Could be worse. Imagine being a Slytherin Muggle-born.”

Pansy suddenly patted him on the cheek. “It's okay. We look out for Hermione. It's what Slytherins do for each other.”

Harry laughed and pulled her hand off him. “Hermione's a Gryffindor, Pansy.”

Pansy blinked, then giggled yet again. “Oh yeah.”

“Here,” said Harry, giving Pansy another goblet of water. “Drink all of this.”

“Okay,” Pansy said.

Harry smiled at her in amusement, then turned to Nerissa. “I have éclair smeared all over my cheek, don't I?”

Nerissa nodded and cast a Scouring Charm on him. “It's not right.”

“Please tell me you're talking about the Carrows and not my face,” said Harry.

“Of course I am,” said Nerissa, still looking troubled.

“It's fine. At least these two didn't try to kill me,” Harry joked.

Nerissa's eyes widened. “True. Um... right... well... I know what'll fix this. Shots!” she cried, holding up a bottle of Firewhisky.

“Yay!” Pansy squealed, clapping her hands.

“I'm good, thanks,” said Harry. “Pansy, you are going to regret this tomorrow.”

Pansy grinned. “That's future Pansy's problem. Right now, Pansy is going to do shots with Nerissa!”
Harry shook his head with a laugh. “Have fun with that.”

He picked up a bottle of Butterbeer and went in search of his friends. The crush in the common room was thinning out, with a fair few of the younger students going off to bed, and some of the older ones retreating to beds for far less innocent reasons. Harry was halfway around the room before he found Tracey and Theo curled up in an armchair. They were just watching the remaining dancers, not snogging, so Harry plopped down on a couch next to them.

Tracey twisted around to face him. “Harry! What have you been up to?”

“Just finished up a stint at the drinks table.”

Tracey's eyes lit up and she nudged Theo. “We should go help out.”

“Why? I'm perfectly comfortable here,” said Theo.

“You get free access to all the alcohol,” said Harry.

“I'm good if you are,” said Theo said to Tracey.

She smiled. “I'm always good, you know that...”

“I do...” Theo said, pulling her down for a kiss.

Rolling his eyes, Harry got up from the couch and set off to find Draco. He hadn't gotten very far before Scarlett popped up in front of him with Archie right behind her.

“Harry! We need fireworks!” Scarlett said.

“You don't have any?” Harry asked.

Scarlett huffed. “No, mine got confiscated by Filch our first day back. At least I was able to tell Fred and George that they need to work on their concealment spells, I guess.”

“Plus you got paid for your effort,” said Archie.


“Okay,” said Harry.

He led them into the corridor leading to the boys' dormitories. He was about to just push his door open, when he remembered that he had seen Blaise and Bastien disappear down this corridor earlier that evening.

“Wait here,” he said, then slipped inside the room. Blaise's bed was empty, as were all the others, so he opened the door fully. “Coast is clear.”

“From what, exactly?” Archie asked as they walked in.

“From Blaise and Bastien doing... whatever they're doing,” said Harry.

“Blaise and Bastien, huh? Didn't see that coming,” said Archie.

“Ugh, who cares?” Scarlett asked impatiently. “Where's your stash, Harry?”

Harry fished his fireworks out of his trunk and handed them over. “Don't use them all tonight. I'm
hopping we have more Quidditch wins to celebrate this year.”

“Don't worry, I know what I'm doing,” said Scarlett. “These all multiply if you try to Vanish them, so we don't actually need very many to put on a good show.”

“How the hell did you get them into Hogwarts?” asked Archie.

Harry smirked. “One of the perks of having a teacher for a parent.”

Archie sighed. “The only perk from my parents is that I can speak Hindi.”

“At least your parents taught you another language,” said Scarlett. “My mum never bothered to teach my brother or me Farsi.”

Archie laughed. “I don't blame her, you and Rupert both have the attention span of a pixie. Teaching either of you another language would be a nightmare.”


She skipped out of the room holding a bundle of fireworks. Archie helped Harry pack up his remaining fireworks, then they followed Scarlett back to the common room. She was already setting off fireworks when they got there, while people began to extinguish the lamps in the room.

Harry jumped when someone grabbed his hips from behind, then relaxed when he smelled Draco's cologne. He leaned back against Draco's chest and wrapped Draco's arms firmly around his waist. “I was looking for you.”

“Really? Because it looks to me like you just came out of our dorm with Scarlett and Archie,” Draco murmured.

Harry chuckled. “Oh, yeah, we just had a whole bunch of sex. You jealous?”

“Not in the slightest,” Draco said, before biting Harry's ear. “Because now you're going to fuck me.”

Heat pooled in Harry's stomach and he shivered. “I am?”

One of Draco's hands began creeping lower. “Is that a problem?”

Harry closed his mouth, which had dropped open, and swallowed. “No problem...”

“Excellent,” said Draco.

With that, he let got of Harry's waist and spun him around. Harry caught a glimpse of Draco's smug face glinting in the flickering light of the fireworks before he dragged Harry off to their dormitory. When they got there Draco hurriedly shut the door behind them and pulled Harry over to his bed.

“What's the rush?” Harry asked. “We have all night.”

“I know. I – I've just wanted to do this for ages, that's all,” said Draco as he sat on his bed and kicked his shoes off, then pulled off his socks.

Harry followed suit. “Why tonight? Not that I'm complaining. I'm just curious why you decided that tonight was the night.”

Draco shrugged a shoulder. “I didn't much fancy getting buggered if I had to ride a broomstick a day or two later. But now we don't have another match until February and our training schedule will be
“You've put a lot of thought into this,” said Harry.

Draco frowned uncertainly and drew his legs up onto his bed. “You haven't thought about it?”

“Of course I have. Just more in a while wanking sort of way, instead of planning out every detail like you apparently have,” said Harry.

“One of us had to, and you didn't seem to be in any rush.”

“Because I didn't want to pressure you!”

“Oh.”

“Plus there is nothing wrong with your blow jobs.”

Draco smirked. “You're not so bad yourself.”

Harry leaned over and took hold of Draco's hands. “It doesn't hurt as much as you seem to think it does.”

“Good,” Draco said, then pulled Harry forward.

He landed hard on top of Draco, who didn't seem to care. He let go of Harry's hands to slide his own hands around Harry's waist and pull him even more firmly on top of himself.

“You're already hard,” he breathed.

Harry gave a soundless laugh. “Have been since you whispered to me in the common room.”

“Mmm, really?” Draco said, kissing his way up Harry's neck. “It wasn't because I did this?”

He bit down on Harry's earlobe again.

“That may have played a part,” Harry managed to say.

Draco chuckled and did it again, then sucked the lobe into his mouth. Harry gave a small moan and ran his hands down Draco's sides. While Draco did marvellous things to Harry's ear, Harry slipped his hands underneath Draco's jumper and slowly pulled it up. Draco had to stop what he was doing when Harry tugged his jumper over his head, but the second his head was free again Harry swooped down to kiss him.

Draco tasted of the punch he'd been drinking all evening, sweet with a hint of alcohol. It went well with the taste of Draco himself, Harry decided. He licked across Draco's lips until they opened and he could slip his tongue inside. Draco immediately sucked it, while Harry unbuttoned Draco's shirt. When he had the top few buttons undone he bent to lick Draco's neck as he worked his way through the remaining buttons.

Harry nipped Draco's neck then sat back, pulling Draco with him. He took Draco's shirt off, then pulled his own jumper off, quickly followed by his T-shirt. He took a moment to pull the bed curtains shut then pushed Draco back onto the pillows and scooted down the bed a bit so that he could swirl his tongue in Draco's bellybutton.

Harry bit the side of his bellybutton. “Does it now.”

The little mewling sound Draco made at that was so delightful that Harry bit the other side of his bellybutton in order to hear it again. A third bite followed, and presently Draco was writhing on his bed with a ring of red marks around his bellybutton.

“Why are you suddenly so enamoured with my navel?” Draco asked.

“I like the sound you make when I do this,” Harry said, biting again.

Draco whimpered then yanked Harry's head up by his hair. “I am not your plaything!”

“No?”

“No! Now take your trousers off!”

Harry grinned. “Ask nicely.”

Draco raised his eyebrow. “Take them off so that you can stick your cock up my arse.”

A bolt of lust shot through Harry at the words. “Yes, sir,” he said, scrambling to get out of his jeans. When did zips become so complicated?

Draco watched him struggling, while effortlessly unbuttoning his own trousers. He slid them off along with his pants, then sat up and batted Harry's hands away. “So uncoordinated.”

Harry let Draco finish stripping him. “You sure you want someone this uncoordinated doing this with you?”

“Yes,” Draco said firmly. “I love you, you clumsy prat.”

“I love you too, you bossy git,” said Harry.

Draco smiled, then twisted around and leaned out of one of the closed curtains. Harry heard a drawer open and its contents being rummaged through, before Draco returned brandishing the bottle of lube. He handed it to Harry then lay back to make himself comfortable.

Harry shifted so that he was kneeling between Draco's stretched out legs and opened the bottle and set it carefully on the bed. He coated his fingers with lube and trailed them down Draco's bollocks to reach his arse. He teased Draco's hole for a few seconds before he pushed his middle finger inside. Then he paused. He had fingered Draco before, a couple times now, but just to play with his prostate while going down on him. He'd never done it in order to get Draco ready to take Harry's cock; he suddenly felt as nervous as he had the first time.

Draco wriggled further down the bed, forcing Harry's finger to go deeper until it reached his prostate. He gave a little moan and looked at Harry through half-closed eyes. “Another.”

“You're extra pushy tonight,” Harry commented, even as he did as asked.

Draco's breath caught at the addition of a second finger. “I'm horny,” he managed to say.

“I can see that,” Harry said, eyeing Draco's erection as it leaked onto his stomach.

“And you're going too slowly.”

“Because I don't want to hurt you.”
Harry began to slowly wiggle his fingers as best he could. He made sure to brush against that hard nub inside every now and then. It didn't take long before Draco was moaning and trying to push himself down even further.

“Another.”

Harry went a little slower when he squeezed a third finger in. Draco was still very tight, and Harry didn't want to rush through stretching him. Draco, however, had other ideas, and was soon whining for Harry to hurry up.

“I just want to make sure you're ready,” said Harry.


“Trust you to be a bossy bottom,” Harry muttered.

He withdrew his fingers and fumbled for the lube. After slicking up his cock he leaned forward on his left arm, lined himself up with Draco's arsehole with his right and slowly, carefully, eased his way inside into one of the most glorious sensations of his life.

“Fuck me,” he breathed.

“Other way round,” Draco replied.

Harry barely heard him. This felt amazing. Was there a word stronger than amazing? Because that's what this was. Hot and tight and slick – this was so much better than wanking! This was better than treacle tart – it was almost better than flyi-

Draco swatted his arm. “Stop babbling and fuck me.”

Mortified at what he'd been saying aloud, Harry lowered his head and set to work. It was hard at first – Draco was still very tight, and Harry couldn't quite find the proper angle or rhythm – but after a few minutes of clumsy yet enjoyable thrusting, Harry gradually found his movements evening out. He shifted his hands a bit then focused on moving his hips smoothly, while Draco wrapped his legs around Harry's waist and used them to encourage him to go faster.

Harry needed no such encouragement. He could have happily continued as he was forever. Judging from the steady stream of panted swear words and blasphemies pouring from Draco's mouth, he was enjoying himself just as much. Harry was almost disappointed when he felt his orgasm drawing near. Willing himself not to come just yet, he opened his eyes – when had he shut them? He couldn't remember – to watch Draco's face.

“Touch yourself.”

Draco didn't reply, didn't open his eyes, but he immediately let go of the sheet to grip his cock. It only took a few seconds before he gave a strangled moan and came over both their stomachs. His arse spasmed around Harry's cock; coupled with the sight of Draco's slim hand stroking himself, this sent Harry over the edge. He groaned and managed a few last, erratic thrusts before collapsing on top of Draco. They lay there together for a few minutes, sweaty and panting, before Draco spoke.

“That was amazing.”

“Mmm hmm.”

“Is there a stronger word than amazing?”
Harry cracked open an eye. “Shut up.”

“I never knew my arse rated somewhere between treacle tarts and flying,” Draco continued, beginning to shake with laughter.

“How is that worse than you? ‘Fuck, fuck, fuck, god, fuck, Merlin, fuck, fuck,’,” said Harry, also beginning to laugh.

“I was just giving you simple instructions,” Draco said innocently.

Harry kissed him. “Your innocent face doesn't really work when I'm still inside you and you're covered in your own come.”

“Much as I enjoy your dirty talk, can you please get out of me? I'm starting to get sore,” said Draco.

“Sorry,” Harry said.

He gently pulled out, then ducked his head out of the curtains in search of his jeans. He untangled them enough to find his wand to cast Scouring Charms on Draco and himself. After putting his wand on Draco’s bedside table, he pulled the curtain shut again and turned to cuddle up next to Draco, who was busy pulling the blankets over himself. It took some manoeuvring for both of them to get settled in the bed.

“This is much easier to do in a double bed,” Harry said as he pulled Draco's arm over his chest.

“It is,” Draco agreed, curled up against Harry's back. “But I don't really mind the close proximity.”

“I should hope not.”

“Take that tone again and I'll throw you out.”

“You wouldn't.”

“No. I wouldn't.”
In Which Theo Gets Revenge and Draco Achieves His Dream

Harry didn't know how Theo managed to pull it off, but somehow, Theo was approved to commentate the next Quidditch match, between Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff. Perhaps McGonagall was unaware that Theo wanted to get back at Smith for what he'd said about the Slytherin team; perhaps she secretly wanted to see Smith taken down a peg, since he'd also insulted the Gryffindor team.

There was a furtively excited air at the Slytherin table during breakfast before the match. People kept coming up to Theo to suggest insults he could use, ranging from outrageously rude comments to those just sly enough that he might stand a chance of slipping them past McGonagall's supervision. Theo merely nodded at each interruption to his breakfast, apparently more concerned with his cornflakes than with any of the offered suggestions.

Like most of Slytherin house, Pansy was wearing a blue scarf to show her support for Ravenclaw, but her support was a little more personal than most: Blaise had finally come good on his promise to set up her and Hermione, and had found two seventh year Ravenclaws he thought they'd like. He had arranged for the girls to sit in the Ravenclaw stand for the match, and Pansy was waiting nervously for the two boys to show up, though she was trying to appear calm. In contrast, Hermione had sat down next to Pansy with an air of resignation; she had only agreed to be set up in order to please Pansy, and had told Harry and Draco that she had no real interest in the entire affair.

“I'm immensely hurt that neither of you has any faith in my matchmaking abilities,” said Blaise.

“You have to admit that there is only a limited pool of potential partners at Hogwarts,” said Hermione.

“I'm fairly certain that I'm living proof that the opposite is true,” Blaise replied.

“That's putting it mildly,” drawled Draco.

“I never put it mildly, Black,” Blaise said, leering. Beside him, Bastien blushed but hid a smile behind his teacup.

Tracey rolled her eyes. “Have you ever gone a day without making a sexual innuendo?”

“No, and I have no intention of ever doing so,” said Blaise. He turned in his seat and smiled at two tall, good-looking Ravenclaw boys who had walked up behind him. “Right on time. Girls, this is Eddie Carmichael,” he gestured to a boy with light brown hair and bright blue eyes, then to the pale, dark-eyed brunet next to him, “and Ethan Bexley.”

Pansy smiled, but Hermione's eye narrowed at Eddie. “Didn't I confiscate an illegal potion off you during exams last term?”

“Yeah, you did,” Eddie said, scowling at the memory.

“All in the past,” Blaise said quickly, “and in any case, Eddie, I was introducing you to Pansy here.”

Pansy smirked. “My morals are far more flexible than Hermione's are.”

“Pleased to hear it,” Eddie said, smirking back at her. “Shall we?”

Pansy got to her feet and walked out of the Great Hall with him. Hermione regarded Ethan
suspiciously. “I suppose you share his fondness for illegal stimulants during exams?”

“Not at all. Anyone with any sense will tell you that an extensive and intensive study regime is the only way to truly succeed academically,” said Ethan.

Hermione smiled and stood up. “I totally agree.”

Harry shook his head as Hermione and Ethan walked off together. “How did we get such a giant swot for our best friend?” he asked Draco.

Draco shrugged. “I’ve no idea, but I’m fairly certain those two are going to talk about school work all throughout today's match.”

“Probably,” Blaise said smugly. “I did say that I was good at matchmaking.”

It was bitterly cold out in the grounds. The late November sky was filled with dark grey clouds and a sharp wind was blowing. Harry was wearing two jumpers, his thick winter cloak, gloves, a scarf and a beanie, and was still half frozen by the time he sat down in the Slytherin stand. He huddled next to Draco for warmth, thankful that at least he didn't have to fly today. Draco spread out a blanket over them, which Harry immediately hit with a Warming Charm. It helped dispel the biting cold, but he knew he'd have to renew the charm a few times over the course of the match.

“Why have we never asked Hermione to teach us that blue fire spell she does?” Harry asked.

“Because we're complete morons,” Draco said through chattering teeth.

Tracey, Daphne and Vikram sat down on the other side of Draco, whilst Blaise and Bastien sat next to Harry. By unspoken agreement, they all crowded together for warmth. In the row ahead, Scarlett, Archie, Luna, Ginny and Dean had been smart enough to bring along a blanket that covered their entire group. Harry noticed Bastien looking very put out when Blaise leaned down to speak to Ginny and Dean; Blaise, on the other hand, smiled at both Ginny and Dean, and soon the three of them were laughing together in anticipation of Theo's vengeful commentary.

“Someone's jealous,” Harry whispered to Draco and Tracey.

Tracey sniggered. “They're not going to last. You can't be with Blaise and get upset anytime he speaks to an ex. He'd never be able to talk again.”

The three of them jumped when a shriek sounded from the row in front. Luna had a very realistic eagle perched on the top of her woollen hat, and had been entertaining Scarlett and Archie by showing them how she could make it flap its wings or give a piercing scream.

“We are never again sitting near her when Ravenclaw's playing,” Draco muttered.

Tracey, however, leaned forward to compliment Luna on her creativity. Luna had just launched into a detailed explanation of the spells she had used when a cheer went up: the teams were walking out onto the pitch. A second later Theo's amplified voice rang out over the stadium.

“Welcome to the second match of the year.”

“He sounds nervous,” said Tracey.

“He'll be fine,” Daphne assured her.

“Both teams have new Captains this season. For Ravenclaw, it's seasoned Seeker Cho Chang,” said
Theo. He waited for the Ravenclaws' applause to die down before continuing. “Hufflepuff have chosen Chaser Zacharias Smith. If you're anything like me, you'll be watching him closely throughout the match. After the commentary in the last match, I'm expecting to be blown away by his sheer talent.”

Jeers rang out from the Slytherins and Gryffindors in the crowd. Harry and his friends all laughed, and Tracey smiled proudly. “Yeah, he's going to be fine.”

“And they're off! Davey Cadwallader has first possession for Hufflepuff, but wisely passes the Quaffle to the ingenious Smith -”

“Nott,” said McGonagall.

“That's a half-hearted warning if ever I've heard one!” Harry said.

“- who heads off to goal. Cadwallader and Tamsin Applebee close ranks beside him – they seem to think Smith needs protecting from the Beaters. Surely he's capable enough to fend off a pesky Bludger all on his own?”

“Try to be a little objective, Nott,” said McGonagall.

Harry grabbed Draco's binoculars and zoomed in on the commentary box. Theo was looking very smug, while beside him, McGonagall seemed to be fighting back a smile. In the staff box behind them, Severus was sitting next to Sinistra; they were both clearly enjoying themselves.

“Right you are, Professor,” Theo was saying. “Smith shoots for goal but misses, Ravenclaw Keeper Grant Page somehow blocks him and passes the Quaffle to Heather Chambers.”

“Page's quick,” Draco commented.

“Yeah, he is,” Harry said. Slytherin would be playing Ravenclaw in their next match. He leaned down and tapped Scarlett on her shoulder. “Take note of how Page plays today.”

“Aye, aye, Captain!” Scarlett chirped.

“And Rosie Bradley scores! It's ten points for Ravenclaw, while Smith – I mean, Hufflepuff – is still on zero,” said Theo.

The blue-clad supporters cheered; Luna's eagle gave a triumphant scream.

Despite the weather, Harry found himself very much enjoying the match. It was a good opportunity to size up the competition without all the sneaking around required to spy on their training. More importantly, the combination of Theo's commentary and McGonagall's perfunctory admonitions towards him turned out to be even funnier than anyone had anticipated.

“And Bradley scores again, bringing Ravenclaw up to one hundred. Hufflepuff is still in the lead by forty points, no doubt due to Smith's gifted leadership and superior flying skills.”

Harry couldn't help feeling a little sorry for the Hufflepuffs. They were getting booted by a large portion of the crowd anytime Smith scored, drowning out the cheering of the Hufflepuffs in the stands.

“I don't believe it! Smith has dropped the Quaffle! I don't think any of us here thought him capable of such an error! And just because Inglebee hit a Bludger at him... Chambers takes possession for Ravenclaw. She turns for goal with Brooks and Bradley blocking the Hufflepuff Chasers from
getting anywhere near her. She takes aim and – ooh, nice save by Fleet there!”

Draco’s mouth actually dropped open at that. “Scarlett, did you see that?”

Scarlett nodded. “His arms are like ten feet long!”

It was a fast, close match, and Ravenclaw was only in the lead by ten points when the Seekers spotted the Snitch.

“Chang and Summerby are neck and neck! They know what's at stake – whoever gets the Snitch will win the match for their team with a tidy little lead. And – yes, Chang’s got it! Ravenclaw win, two-hundred and eighty to one-hundred and forty! Poor Smith – I guess he just wasn't talented enough to win.”

“I can't wait to see who's going to commentate the rest of the season,” Draco said gleefully as they made their way back out of the stand.

“I don't know about all the matches, but I'll be commentating for the Gryffindor – Hufflepuff match,” said Luna.

“Do you know much about Quidditch?” Draco asked sceptically.

“No, really. I only go for the Caerphilly Catapults because I like the colours of their uniform,” said Luna.

Draco and Daphne looked at each other and shuddered: Caerphilly's uniform had vertical stripes of bright green and red. It was was widely regarded as one of the least pleasant uniforms in the league.

“Luna, how do you think you'll go if you don't know much about Quidditch?” Harry asked.

“I expect I'll learn as I go,” said Luna. Her eagle flapped its wings for added emphasis.

There was a stunned silence, then Blaise laughed. “I love it. You gotta try everything once, right?”

Luna smiled at him. “That's my philosophy.”

Scarlett wrapped an arm around her waist. “You'll be great, I know it.”

“I can't be any worse than Theo,” said Luna.

“Theo was brilliant!” Tracey cried.

Luna stared at her. “He was too fixated on the match. He missed mentioning a lot of other, more interesting things.”

“He was supposed to focus on the match,” said Bastien. From his tone, it was clear that he was not at all used to Luna.

Blaise shushed him, then smiled at Luna. “It sounds like it'll be memorable.”

Luna smiled back. “I hope so.”

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The last week of November was so cold, with such heavy snowfall, that Harry called off Quidditch
training for the rest of the year. With the arrival of winter, Ladon began brumating. This year, Harry knew what to expect, and didn't worry when his usually friendly snake began spending the vast majority of his time sleeping. Harry, Draco and Hermione bundled themselves up to go have tea with Hagrid one weekend, but apart from that, the three of them only ventured outside the castle for Herbology lessons.

During the first week of December, the Heads of House went around collecting the names of their students who would be staying at Hogwarts over the Christmas break. Harry was not at all surprised when Severus told him that there wasn't a single student spending the break at Hogwarts. Given the increasing danger from Voldemort and his Death Eaters, parents all across Britain wanted their children at home with them.

“With no students at Hogwarts, the Heads of House can leave for the full duration of the break, like the rest of the staff,” Severus had said. “Do you want to go home?”

Harry had leapt at the chance. “Yes, please, I need a break from here. I'm so sick of all the stares and whispers.”

Severus had raised an eyebrow. “I believe I just said that everyone is leaving the castle.”

“Yeah, I know. So none of my friends will be here. Hermione's going home, and Draco and Narcissa are spending Christmas with Kingsley at his parents' house,” Harry had said.

“And your godfather?” Severus had asked.

Harry had shaken his head. “It's a full moon on Christmas Eve, so Remus will be recuperating on Christmas Day and Sirius will be looking after him. I'd like to go over for a night or two at some point during the break though.”

Severus had nodded. “Acceptable.”

Outside of class and their weekly duelling sessions, Harry and Draco didn't see very much of Hermione these days. On top of her heavy load of school work, she had begun spending quite a bit of time with Ethan. Harry tried not to resent the absence of his best friend; he'd seen how sad she'd been after dumping Viktor, and was pleased to see her happier again.

“I never thought I'd say this, but I'm actually glad that Pansy asked Blaise to set me up,” Hermione said one Sunday.

She was in the Room of Requirement with Harry and Draco, enjoying a morning tea they'd sourced from the kitchens. Harry and Draco were playing a game of wizard chess, while Hermione was knitting, a hobby she'd taken up a few months prior. Harry thought she was attempting to make a black scarf, but it was hard to tell: what she had knitted wasn't exactly straight. It could have just as easily been half of an overly large sock.

“You like him,” Draco said with a grin.

“I do, yeah,” Hermione said, with a bashful smile.

“I'm glad for you,” said Harry.

Hermione smiled properly. “Thank you.”

“Are you taking him to Slughorn's party?” Draco asked.
Hermione nodded. “He's really looking forward to it. More than I am, to tell the truth. He doesn't take Potions so he's never had anything to do with Slughorn.”

“Lucky him,” Harry muttered.

“Lucky you, you mean. At least Slughorn pays attention to you,” Draco said sulkily.

Harry rolled his eyes; this was not the first time they'd had this particular discussion. “Yeah, well, hopefully this party's good.”

Harry might not have been looking forward to Slughorn's Christmas party, but he was in the minority. Invitations were in hot demand, and those who had been invited were fielding multiple offers from those wanting to be their dates. Harry's fame was once more a thorn in his side; despite the fact that his relationship with Draco was common knowledge, he'd still had a few optimistic offers from people in other houses.

Daphne's sister Astoria had spent the last two nights sitting with the sixth years in the common room, flirting broadly with Harry and dropping hints about the party. He'd been playing dumb so far, but was beginning to get worried that Draco might snap and hex her if she kept it up.

Hermione cleared her throat before Draco could say anything. “So how are things between Pansy and Millicent?”

“Better, thank fuck,” said Draco. “They're almost back to being friends again.”

“They haven't had a fight since Pansy started with Eddie, and she can even be in the same room as Millicent without making a single snide comment,” said Harry.

“That's great,” said Hermione, then scowled down at her knitting, which seemed hopelessly lumpy to Harry. “Now if only we get them to take their snogging somewhere private. They're giving Lavender and Ron a run for their money.”

Both Harry and Draco made sympathetic noises. Blaise's prediction that those two would get together had turned out to be correct; he hadn't, however, been able to warn anyone that neither Lavender nor Ron seemed to have any sense of decency or skill. They were frequently found snogging in the Great Hall, corridors, and even classrooms, unheeding of those around them. Harry had never seen Draco laugh as hard as he did when Ginny cruelly but accurately commented that Ron and Lavender each looked to be trying to eat the other's face.

“If only Blaise would teach them how to be discreet...” Harry said plaintively.

Hermione shot him an amused look, before frowning back down at her knitting. “You still haven't figured out who his new girlfriend is?”

After breaking up with Bastien, who had been unable to deal with Blaise remaining friends with so many of his exes, Blaise had begun dating someone new. For once, he hadn't told his friends who it was. All they knew was that most nights, he didn't return to his dormitory until well after midnight. Naturally, the Slytherins were betting on who the mystery partner could be.

“We don't even know if it is a girl. He could've gone for another boy after Bastien,” said Harry.

Draco shook his head. “No, it's a girl, I'm sure of it. We'd know exactly who it was if someone would let us use his map that shows the location of everyone in Hogwarts.”

“We are not using the Marauder's Map to spy on Blaise!” said Harry. “Apart from the fact that he's
our friend, it'd be cheating in the betting pool.”

Draco rolled his eyes. “Do you see what I have to put up with?” he asked Hermione.

“A boyfriend with actual morals? You poor, poor thing,” Hermione drawled.

Draco gave an exaggerated sniff. “No one has suffered as I suffer.”

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The mystery of Blaise's new girlfriend was solved when Harry woke up early on the last day of term. He got up and hurriedly pulled on his dressing gown and slippers, then stumbled out to the loo. It wasn't until he was returning to his bed that he noticed someone sitting on the floor staring out of the window next to his bed. He wandered over slowly, unsure whether or not he was actually awake or still sleeping, and sat down next to her.

“What are you doing?” he asked in a whisper, not wanting to wake anyone else up.

“Watching the giant squid,” Luna said serenely.

Harry peered out the window, through which he could see the squid swimming in the murky water.

“Right, yeah,” he said slowly. He shivered, so Summoned his duvet from his bed. He wrapped it around himself and Luna, who hummed her thanks. “But why here? Shouldn't you be in Scarlett and Archie's dorm?”

Luna turned her protuberant eyes on him. “But I'm not sleeping with either of them.”

Harry's eyebrows shot up. “Who are – you're Blaise's new girlfriend?”

Luna chuckled and tucked her toes under the duvet. “Were you expecting someone else?”

Harry sighed. “I had a Galleon on Viola, actually. I know he likes Quidditch players and blondes, and she's a blonde Quidditch player, so...”

“One plus one equals two? Life doesn't work like that,” said Luna.

“I guess not,” said Harry.

“Did anyone guess correctly?” asked Luna.

Harry shook his head. “Not the last time I saw the betting sheet. Although if either Scarlett or Archie had money on you there are going to be a lot cheating accusations.”

Luna smiled. “They didn't know.”

“Does Ginny mind?”

Luna chuckled. “I don't think she particularly cares how you Slytherins run your betting pools.”

“I meant about you and Blaise,” Harry clarified.

Luna tilted her head to the side and studied him. “Why would Ginny mind?”

“Because she and Blaise went out for ages, and you're her friend.”
“She broke up with him weeks ago, and wants him to be happy. I like to think I make him happy,” said Luna.

“You make it sound so simple,” said Harry.

Luna shrugged under the blanket. “It is simple, Harry.”

They sat there in silence for a few minutes, staring out into the bottom of the Black Lake.

“I think he is,” Harry said eventually. “Happy, I mean. I've seen Blaise date a lot of people, and while I've seen him smug or flirty about it, I've never seen him like this before. He's... content.”

Luna pressed a hand against the glass. “I know.”

“But why the secrecy?” asked Harry. “Wouldn't it be easier to just be out in the open?”

Luna shrugged again, then pulled the blanket up higher, over the top of her head. “Blaise is used to easier. Blaise is easier. I decided to have a little fun before we let people know we were together.”

A thought suddenly occurred to Harry as Luna pulled the duvet over the top of his own head. “It wasn't an accident that I saw you here this morning, was it?”

Luna smiled at him, under the duvet cave she had created. “Maybe it was and maybe it wasn't. Maybe it was fate.”

“Fate?” Harry asked sceptically.

Luna's smile widened. “Alright, you caught me. We decided last night that it was time to come clean.”

“And I was the first person you chose to tell? I'm flattered,” said Harry.

“Oh, well...” Luna traced a shape into the condensation on the glass. “To be honest, I just woke up early and couldn't get back to sleep, so I decided to get up and sit here. It could have just as easily been one of the other boys who saw me. Or maybe I would've gotten cold and climbed back into bed with Blaise.”

Harry looked past her fingers, to the dark water beyond the glass. “Or maybe it was fate that I woke up early.”

“I guess we'll never know,” Luna said happily.

Harry stared at her in the dark under the duvet and smiled. This relationship was certainly going to be interesting.

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At eight o'clock that evening, Harry stood in front of his mirror and tried in vain to tie his bow tie correctly.

“Draco, it's not working,” he said.

Draco groaned but walked over straight away. “Bow ties are really not that difficult,” he said, before deftly tying up the offending silk.
Given that Harry hadn't even picked out his black dress robe (he'd outgrown his old one, so at Draco's insistence, had written to Narcissa asking her to please buy him a new one) he supposed that he didn't really have any say in his current state of ties. Still...

“Are you quite done dressing me?” Harry asked, fidgeting under Draco's fussing.

Draco straightened Harry's tie and glanced up at his hair. Harry clearly saw the moment in which he gave up on doing anything about it.

“All done. You look good,” said Draco.

“You too,” said Harry.

“I think we all know who the best looking one of us is,” said Blaise, sauntering over.

Harry and Draco both rolled their eyes, but Harry had to admit that Blaise did look very good in his blue dress robe.

Blaise looked over at Theo. “You sure you don't want to crash the party? I'm sure the three of us could sneak you in somehow.”

Theo looked up from the book he was reading on his bed. “I'll be fine. The girls are coming in soon to play poker and raid Draco's sweets stash with me.”

Draco shot him a dirty look and walked over to his trunk. He pulled a box out and dropped it on Theo's bed. “Don't touch my things, Nott.”

Theo peered inside the box and grinned. “Cheers, Black.”

“Come on,” Blaise said impatiently. “I'm meeting Luna in the Entrance Hall.”

Harry and Draco followed him out of the dormitory and through the common room, where more than a few people enviously watched them leave. They found the Entrance Hall unusually busy for that time of night. There were students milling around, seemingly there just to gawk at those who, like Blaise, were meeting their dates. Harry was not at all surprised to see Pansy and Daphne watching from near the entrance to the dungeons.

“Have fun,” Daphne said gloomily.

“I'd much rather trade places with you,” Harry said.

Draco huffed and took Harry's hand. “It's going to be fun, you'll see.”

“We're leaving early,” said Harry.

“Maybe,” said Draco.

They came to a stop in front of Luna, who was wearing spangled silver robes. They tinkled faintly when she moved, and Harry noticed a few people sniggering at her. Blaise ignored them and kissed her on the cheek. Luna greeted Harry and Draco, then hooked her arm through Blaise's and set off.

“You look beautiful,” Blaise said to her, “but I thought you were going to wear your Dirigible plum earrings.”

“He actually means it. Zabini actually likes those atrocious earrings of hers,” Draco said, staring at the back of Blaise's head in utter disbelief.
“Be nice,” Harry admonished him.

“Don't tell me you like those earrings, too,” Draco said.

“Don't be daft,” said Harry.

They fell silent when they reached the corridor to Slughorn's office and the sound of music and conversation reached their ears. The crowd within sounded far too large to be capable of fitting inside a professor's office, which would struggle to hold ten people comfortably. When Harry got to the threshold of the office, his eyebrows shot up.

“How'd Slughorn swing this?” he muttered.

Having successfully avoided all of the Slug Club dinners to which he had been invited, Harry had never before been in Slughorn's office. The room he was about to enter was many times bigger than most professors' offices; it looked more like Slughorn had commandeered an abandoned classroom for his office, which was currently lavishly decorated for Christmas. Silk hangings adorned the walls and ceiling, making Harry feel like he was in a large marquee, not inside a castle.

The entire space was softly lit by a single lamp hanging from the centre of the ceiling. Large and intricately decorated, the lamp held live fairies, whose luminescence bathed the room in a red glow. Coupled with the warmth and stuffiness caused by the crowd, the dim light reminded Harry of Divination lessons. Those lessons had never been catered by a swarm of house-elves carrying silver trays laden with all manner of delicious smelling food, though. Maybe this party wouldn't be so bad after all, Harry thought.

Luna and Blaise slipped into the crowd with no fuss, but Harry and Draco were immediately stopped by Slughorn, who seemed to have been lying in wait for Harry.

“Ah, here you are, Harry! Come in, come in, I've many people I want you to meet,” Slughorn said, ignoring Draco entirely.

He reached out and caught hold of Harry's arm, dragging him off. With his other hand, Harry tightened his hold on Draco's hand and pulled him along with them. Slughorn huffed to a stop in front of short man wearing a pair of the thickest glasses Harry had ever seen. Next to him was a tall man, with shadows under his eyes and gaunt to the point of illness. Harry didn't recognise either of the men, but Draco seemed to: he gave a small sound of excitement and squeezed Harry's hand.

“Harry, allow me to introduce the author of Blood Brothers; My life Amongst the Vampires, Eldred Worple,” said Slughorn, gesturing to the shorter man, “and his dear friend, the vampire Sanguini.”

Now Draco's excitement now made sense; he had been wanting to meet a vampire for years. Harry felt a stab of annoyance that Slughorn was evidently not going to introduce him.

“Delighted to meet you, Harry!” Worple said, enthusiastically shaking Harry's hand.

Sanguini merely gave him a cursory nod of the head then looked away, clearly bored.

“Nice to meet you,” Harry said to Worple, then pointedly said, “this is my boyfriend, Draco Black. He's a big fan.”

“Are you, indeed?” Worple asked.

“Yes, I read your book when it first came out. It must have been a fascinating experience, living amongst a community of vampires, though it's a shame you didn't get to meet Dracula!” said Draco.
Sanguini finally showed some interest in the conversation. “Dracula? You don't want to meet him.”

“Have you met him?” Draco asked reverently.

“Met him? Poncy bugger owes me eleven Galleons,” Sanguini said.

Draco's eyes widened. “Really?”

“Harry,” Worple said, drawing Harry's attention away from what seemed likely to be an interesting conversation. “I was just asking Horace this the other day – when will you be gracing us with a biography?”

Harry blinked. “A biography? Of me?”

Worple beamed at him. “I see Horace wasn't lying about your modesty, dear boy!”

Harry stared at him, at a complete loss of what to say to that. Beside him, Draco was now talking animatedly with Sanguini, who seemed only too happy to answer Draco's questions, and Harry hoped Worple would let him join that conversation before very long.

Worple's demeanour suddenly became serious. “I would be honoured to write it for you, Harry. People are simply wild to know more about you – surely you would not deny them? All you need to do is sit with me for a few interviews – only four- or five-hour sessions, nothing too onerous – and I'll take care of the rest. I would be ready to publish in a few short months, and then we'll split the profits!”

“I'm not interested,” said Harry.

Worple looked shocked. “But the gold! My dear boy, have you any idea how many copies we would sell?”

Harry shrugged. “Any press I have is handled by Polly Parkinson. She's the editor of *Witch Weekly*, and -”

“Yes, yes, I know who she is,” Worple said impatiently, before making a visible effort to calm himself. “Harry, Parkinson is fine for a trifling magazine interview, but a *biography* well -”

“She's also my friend's mum, so I'm sticking with her,” Harry said, finally fed up. “Excuse me.”

He turned to join Draco, only to find that both he and Sanguini had disappeared. Swearing under his breath, Harry set off through the crowd to find someone he actually knew. He grabbed a goblet of mead off the tray of a passing house-elf as he navigated the packed room. At least the refreshments were good, he thought, taking a sip.

He caught sight of a flash of blonde hair and wormed his way past a group of elderly witches, only to find that it was Luna he had spotted, not Draco. She was standing next to Blaise, who had his arm around her waist, chatting to someone Harry couldn't see over Blaise's shoulder. Harry wandered over to them, only to realise too late that they were talking to Trelawney, who reeked of cooking sherry. Trapped, Harry smiled politely at her, but luck was on his side for once: Trelawney seemed too drunk to recognise him, and she kept talking to Luna.

“I've thought about writing to the Ministry about the horse, since the Headmaster won't get rid of him,” she was saying.

“Horse?” Harry asked Blaise quietly.
Blaise sighed. “She's bitching about that centaur, Firenze, and has been for a while now. Apparently the two of them have to split the Divination classes by year level, and she wants them all.”

“I'm so glad I ditched that subject,” said Harry.

“Speaking of ditching things, where's Draco?” asked Blaise.

Harry rolled his eyes. “We met a vampire and they've wandered off together. I doubt Draco's going to want to talk to anyone else for the rest of the night.”

Blaise's eyebrows shot up. “You're not worried?”

“Why would I be worried?” Harry asked.

“Harry, he's disappeared with a vampire! What if he wants to eat Draco?” Blaise demanded.

“Sanguini can't attack him in here, it's too crowded. And Draco's not stupid enough to leave alone with a vampire,” said Harry.

“Unless this Sanguini puts Draco under his thrall,” said Blaise.

Harry went cold. “Shit, I didn't think of that. I need to go find him. If you see him tell him I'm looking for him, yeah?”

“Sure.”

Harry pushed his way back through the crowd, trying to remain calm. He decided to head for the door in case Draco had already left the party. He didn't find Draco on his travels, but he did find the next best thing.

“Dad!” he cried, skirting around a couple of warlocks to reach Severus by the open door. “Have you seen Draco?”

“Not since he left you with Slughorn,” said Severus, taking a sip of wine.

“You've been here the entire time? Next to the door?” Harry pressed.

“Since I arrived, yes,” Severus said with a frown. “What's wrong?”

“Slughorn introduced me to some writer and his vampire friend, Sanguini, and he and Draco have disappeared and I wasn't worried but then Blaise said that Sanguini might've put Draco under his thrall and dragged him off somewhere and -”

“Harry, breathe,” Severus ordered. “Draco is somewhere within this room, entirely uneaten, I assure you. I can help you look for him if you don't believe me. But I have seen him since my arrival here, and I have not moved from this door, which is the only exit to the office.”

Harry ran a hand through his hair and sighed in relief. “No, I believe you.”

He finished his mead and handed his empty goblet to a passing house-elf, picking up a fresh goblet and a mince pie in the process.

“Apart from working yourself into a panic,” drawled Severus, “how are you finding the party?”

Harry shrugged. “That writer Slughorn introduced me to wanted to write my biography.”
Severus raised an eyebrow. “A biography? Of you?”

Harry snorted. “That’s what I said. I got rid of him by saying all my press goes through Polly. I don't think he liked that very much.”

Severus smirked. “I should imagine not.”

“What about you? Have you even spoken to anyone?” asked Harry.

“I'm speaking to you now, am I not?” said Severus, sipping his wine.

“That'd be a no, then,” said Harry.

“I've no desire to speak to any of the gathered students, nor to anyone I don't know, which leaves Horace and Sybil. The latter is insufferable and both of them are intoxicated,” said Severus.

“None of the rest of the staff are coming?”

“Minerva, Pomona and Filius have said that they would attend, at least for a while, and Aurora will arrive a little before midnight. You needn't babysit me until they begin to arrive.”

“There isn't anyone here I want to talk to. Draco's going to be with Sanguini, and Blaise and Luna are stuck with Trelawney.”

Severus pointed off to Harry's right. “Hermione is right over there.”

Harry turned around to see Hermione and Ethan talking quietly near the band. Hermione looked very pretty in her lilac dress robes, and she'd smoothed down her hair, leaving it hanging down her back in sleek curls. She and Ethan were standing very close together, and Hermione was smiling in a way that Harry hadn't seen in a while – not since Viktor.

“Yeah, I'm not interrupting that,” said Harry. “Plus if I stand next to you, most people will be too intimidated by your glares to come bother me.”

“Do not wish to mingle?” Severus asked. His tone clearly conveyed his distaste for the idea.

“The twit that Slughorn introduced me to has put me off talking to anyone else here. Unless Gwenog Jones comes to this party. I'd talk to her,” said Harry.

“I have no idea who may or may not be on the guest list,” said Severus.

Harry grinned. “I guess I'll just have to stay here and keep eating the delicious food the elves are carrying around.”

“The food is rather good,” Severus agreed.

Standing next to Severus, on the edge of the crowded room, Harry found that he could actually enjoy the party. They had a steady supply of food and drink from the house-elves, and just as Harry had predicted, strangers seemed disinclined to talk to Harry when he was in presence of Severus' glowering. They spent an hour or so mostly discussing their plans for the winter break. Every now and then, Severus recognised someone in the crowd, and wasted no time in informing Harry of that unfortunate person's particular shortcomings.

Their solitude was too good to last, however, and eventually a very red-faced Slughorn spotted them and staggered over.
“Harry! What are you doing all the way over here! This is your influence on him, Severus,” Slughorn said, wagging a finger at Severus.

“I encourage my son to avoid socialising with fools, true,” said Severus.

Harry sniggered into his goblet while Slughorn roared with laughter.

“You haven't changed a bit, have you, Severus? Still as taciturn as when you were a teenager!” Slughorn chortled.

Severus shifted uncomfortably. “I've changed quite a bit since my youth.”

Slughorn flapped a hand at him and turned to Harry. “He was a sullen little thing in class, but by Merlin did he brew every potion absolutely perfectly.”

Harry smiled proudly at Severus. “Sounds about right.”

Severus rolled his eyes. “Paying attention in class instead of prattling to my classmates allowed me to improve my brewing, Horace. As a Potions teacher I would have thought that you would be familiar with that basic concept.”

Slughorn hiccupped and ignored Severus' rude tone. “Ah, now, Severus. Harry here talks to his friends in class yet is a talented little brewer. Why, he might even be better than you were at his age!”

Harry choked on his mead and came up spluttering.

Severus aimed his wand at Harry's throat. “*Anapneo.*”

Harry's airway immediately cleared and he was able to breathe normally once more. “Thanks.”

Severus nodded at him. “Horace, Sybil appears to be having difficulty remaining standing.”

“Blast,” said Slughorn. “I'll be back in a trice, don't go anywhere!”

He waddled off to where Trelawney did indeed seem to be swaying on the spot. Harry watched him go with a frown.

“Dishonest or stupid?” he asked.

“What?”

“Slughorn,” said Harry, turning to Severus. “I'm nowhere near as good as you, we both know that. So is he trying to butter me up at your expense or does he actually think that I'm better than you are?”

“The former, I believe. Alcohol has dulled his skill at flattery,” said Severus, clearly still irritated with Slughorn. “I'm moving before he comes back for further reminiscing.”

Harry nodded. “I'll see you tomorrow then.”

“Don't stay up too late or drink too much,” Severus said at once.

“I'll try not to,” Harry said, before walking back into the crowd.

He didn't get far before he ran into Hermione and Ethan.

“Harry, where have you been? I haven't seen you all night!” Hermione exclaimed.
“I've been around,” Harry said. “Hi, Ethan. You look really pretty, Hermione. Having fun?”

Hermione blushed at the compliment. “I am, yes. Where's Draco?”

Harry laughed at his earlier paranoia, and told them the story. Ethan looked at him like he was crazy, which Harry couldn't really blame him for, but Hermione laughed and shook her head in exasperation.

“Honestly, Harry. A vampire attack?”

“Hey, it's Blaise's fault. I was fine until he opened his mouth,” Harry protested good-naturedly.

Hermione pursed her lips. “You have a point there, but you really should talk to someone other than your dad, you know. There are so many interesting people here, and think of the connections you could make!”

“Yeah, some writer has already offered to write my biography,” said Harry.

“You're having your biography written?” Ethan asked with a faint sneer.

“I figured it was about time, yeah. Someone as famous as me with no biography? It was getting a little ridiculous,” said Harry.

Judging from Ethan's expression, Harry had just confirmed everything he had ever thought about Harry.

“He's being sarcastic,” Hermione said.

“Of course I am,” Harry said. “You didn't actually think I was serious, did you?”

“Of course not,” Ethan said quickly.

Harry gave him a tight smile, then turned to Hermione. “I'm off to find Draco. Have a good Christmas, and if I don't see you tomorrow morning, I'll see you next term.”

“You're not coming on the train with us?” she asked.

“Dad's Apparating us home,” said Harry, then leaned in to hug her.

“Sorry about Ethan,” she whispered into his ear, then drew back. “Have a good holiday.”

Harry smiled at her, then walked off in search of Draco. This time, it didn't take him long to find him. He was standing near the band, watching Luna and Blaise dancing. He grinned when he caught sight of Harry.

“Harry! This party is brilliant, don't you think?” he said excitedly.

Harry swapped his goblet of mead for a fresh one and wrapped an arm around Draco's waist. “I prefer the parties we have in the common room, to be honest.”


Harry laughed. “I take it you enjoyed getting to meet a vampire?”

Draco nodded, grinning again. “He was so interesting! And he actually knows Dracula!”
Harry sipped his mead and listened to Draco rave on about Sanguini. Harry didn't seem to be required to do anything more than nod occasionally, which meant he was free to sample more of the tasty food the house-elves were still carrying around.

It was a good quarter of an hour later before Draco finally ran out of things to say about Sanguini. “So what have you been up to since I last saw you?” he asked.

“Well, I had a bit of a panic when Blaise told me you were probably getting eaten -”

“Excuse me? He said what?” asked Draco.

Harry rolled his eyes. “That Sanguini was going to try to attack you.”

Draco opened and shut his mouth before speaking. “Harry, I've no desire to actually become a vampire, and I certainly don't want to be eaten. Even if Sanguini had tried to make me leave this room with him – which he didn't, I'll have you know – I think I'm intelligent enough not to do anything so idiotic.”

“That's what I said, and then Blaise mentioned vampiric thrall...” Harry said, feeling incredibly foolish.

“Which only works on weak-willed morons!” Draco cried.

Harry winced. “Sorry.”

“You will be, Potter,” said Draco. “Did you have any other adventures without me?”

Harry quickly told him. Draco was shaking his head by the end.

“Merlin, you're hopeless. You spent most of your time with your father, were rude to Hermione's new boyfriend -”

“He's an idiot,” Harry muttered.

“- and made no effort to meet anyone useful. Have I got that right?” Draco asked.

“Yeah,” Harry said sheepishly.

Draco shook his head again, then forced a smile. “It's alright. I can salvage this.”

“How?” asked Harry.

“You may never have seen my mother at any important social events, but I have, and I've picked up a few things about working a crowd,” said Draco. “All you need to do is just do exactly what I tell you to.”

“Why am I not surprised that your plan involves bossing me around?” Harry asked.

Draco's smile became genuine. “Because it's fun.”

Harry sighed and allowed Draco to pull him back into the crowd. So much for leaving early.
In Which Severus is, Very Briefly, Actually Optimistic About Something, and Harry Parties Like a Muggle

After seeing his friends off in the Entrance Hall on Saturday morning, Harry made his way up to the owlery, which was almost empty – most owls had clearly left with their owners, leaving just the school owls behind. When she noticed him, Hedwig flew down to Harry's outstretched arm.

“Hello,” Harry said, as he stroked her sleek feathers. “We're going home today. Do you want to fly or go in your cage?”

Hedwig tightened her grip on Harry's arm and gave a low trill.

“I thought so. It's pretty cold out there,” Harry said.

With Hedwig on his arm, Harry wandered back down to his dormitory. One or two stragglers for the Hogwarts Express came hurrying past him, but apart from that, the dungeons were completely empty. He got Hedwig settled in her cage, then turned his attention to Ladon. It took some time for Harry to wake him up long enough to get the snake curled around his neck. Ladon immediately went back to sleep, leaving Harry to make sure that he was covered by his cloak and scarf. Satisfied that Ladon wouldn't freeze on the walk down to the school gates, Harry shrank down his school trunk and pocketed it, then picked up Hedwig's cage and headed for Severus' quarters.

Ten minutes later Harry and Severus were walking down the icy drive to the front gates. They kept to the edge of the drive, as the centre had been churned into sludge by Thestral hooves and carriage wheels. Despite the freezing temperature it wasn't snowing, so the walk wasn't as bad as it could have been.

That changed when they got home. Just like last Christmas, it was snowing heavily in Wales. Harry and Severus picked their way through the shin-high snow into a freezing cold Fen House. Severus made straight for the kitchen to put the kettle on, while Harry quickly got a fire going in the fireplace, before joining Severus in the kitchen.

“Coffee for me, thanks,” he said with a yawn.

Severus spooned coffee and sugar into one of the two mugs. “What time did you get to bed last night?”

“I'm not quite sure, although I do know that it was technically morning,” Harry admitted, glad that Severus had his back to him and couldn't see Harry's cheeks turn red. Harry and Draco hadn't gone to sleep for quite some time after they had tumbled into Draco's bed together the night before. “But I'm more tired because of the party.”

Severus turned and leaned against the bench. “Avoiding Slughorn was that tiring?”

Harry snorted. “Hardly. I eventually found Draco and made the mistake of telling him I hadn't been networking the entire night.”

Severus smirked. “So he rectified that?”

Harry huffed. “It was exhausting. And he did most of the work!”

“Was it beneficial?” Severus asked, turning back to the kettle.
Harry ran a hand through his hair. “I don't know... We spoke to so many people I can't remember most of their names, but Draco was in his element. All flattery and charming anecdotes and 'do you know my mother?'... He swears that the introductions were helpful, so I guess I have to believe him.”

“Do you still want to be a teacher?” Severus asked.

“I dunno. I have to kill Voldemort before I can begin to think about any sort of career – if I even survive, that is,” said Harry.

Severus stood up straight. “You are going to survive this war.”

“You can't know that,” said Harry.

“I do. I couldn't save Lily last time. I'll die before I fail you, too,” Severus said fiercely.

Harry swallowed, unable to think of losing Severus. “Don't say that.”

Severus stared intently at him. “I won't let anything happen to you while I have breath in my body.”

“And what, I live to be orphaned a second time? No thank you!” Harry said hotly.

There was a angry silence, broken only by the crackling of the fire in the lounge room. Then Severus sighed.

“I'm sorry. I didn't mean to distress you. I should not have said that,” he said.

“No, you shouldn't have,” Harry agreed.

Severus turned back to the tea and coffee. Ladon chose that moment to wake and poke his head up above Harry's scarf.

“What's going on?” he asked sleepily.

“Nothing. Do you want me to put you by the fire?” Harry asked.

Ladon flicked out his tongue and tasted the air. “We're home? I missed Apparating?”

“You were fast asleep,” said Harry.

Ladon sank back down. “I'll stay here, thank you. Wake me next time you Apparate, please.”

“I tried to,” Harry objected.

“Not hard enough,” came Ladon's muffled reply.

Harry rolled his eyes, then accepted the cup of coffee Severus was holding out. He gratefully wrapped his hands around the hot mug and followed Severus into the lounge.

“Are we duelling today?” Harry asked as he sat down on the couch.

Severus sank into his chair. “Naturally. It's the perfect opportunity to practise duelling in the snow.”

“And tomorrow?”

“Tomorrow we're going to Holyhead to get the food for Christmas Day. Hopefully they're not sold out and we won't have to go all the way to Cardiff. We may duel when we get back, or perhaps just continue your Occlumency training, but we'll be duelling on Christmas Eve.”
Harry nodded slowly. “But we have Christmas and Boxing Days off?”

“Yes. I was also thinking that you may like to visit your godfather on New Year's Eve, possibly staying the following night as well,” said Severus.

Harry looked at him shrewdly. “You've made plans with McGonagall.”

“I have, though I can of course cancel them if your godfather is busy,” said Severus.

“I'll use my mirror and ask him now,” Harry said, standing up and taking his coffee with him.

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Duelling in the snow was far more difficult than Harry had imagined. The falling snow limited his vision, and on the ground it came halfway up his shins hindering his movement; it also meant that when he did move, his footing was far less secure – he had no way of knowing if there was a sharp stone or other hazard lying underneath the smooth white blanket onto which he was stepping. Denied his usual strategy of Apparating or even just running around, Harry found himself ducking and blocking far more than he usually did. By the time Severus called an end to the duel, Harry was chilled to the bone. He had been knocked over enough times that his clothes were soaked through, and he was unable to stop shivering.


Harry obeyed without arguing. He hurriedly collected his pyjamas and jumped into the shower, turning the water as hot as he could stand. He simply stood under the steaming water for a long while, feeling himself warm up, before he actually washed himself and reluctantly got out. He quickly dressed and dumped his dirty clothes in his room. He put on his thickest pair of socks and a jumper before wrapping his dressing gown around himself and returning downstairs.

“All yours,” he said, walking into the lounge room.

Severus immediately left his post in front of the fire and headed upstairs. Harry threw another log onto the fire, then went to the kitchen to make up a pot of tea. He carried it into the lounge room, then settled on the floor in front of the fire, where Ladon was sleeping on the hearth. He stirred when Harry opened up his sketchbook in front of him, but went straight back to sleep.

A quarter of an hour later Severus walked back downstairs. He sat down and poured his own cup, and drank in silence for a few minutes.

"I need to speak with you," he said eventually.

Harry raised his head. "Am I in trouble?"

"No, not at all. I actually have good news," said Severus.

"Good news? We don't hear enough of that," said Harry.

"Do you remember when I told you that I have been tasked with using Legilimency upon older students whom we fear may be tempted to join Voldemort?" Severus asked.

"Yeah..." Harry said. “I still think that's an invasion privacy.”

“It's necessary, Harry. I do not enjoy poking into the minds of hormonal adolescents,” Severus said.
"Yeah, I know," said Harry. He put down the charcoal with which he was drawing and sat up. "How is this good news?"

"I believe that Gregory is beginning to waver in his loyalties," said Severus.

"What? You mean he's thinking about going against his dad?" asked Harry.

Severus nodded slowly. "It will come as no shock to you that he is unaccustomed to thinking for himself about matters of this import."

"Pretty sure he mainly thinks about food and Quidditch," said Harry.

"And Daphne," said Severus.

Harry frowned. "Daphne?"

"She has been making friendly overtures to him for some time now," said Severus.

"Yeah, she mentioned something about that at the start of term," said Harry.

"It's working," Severus said.

Harry gave a tentative smile. "What does that mean?"

"It means that instead of the mixture of ambition and bigotry that I would expect to find in the mind of a potential Death Eater, Gregory is filled with doubt, and Daphne features prominently in his thoughts," said Severus.

"That's fantastic!" said Harry.

"Do not get too optimistic," Severus cautioned him. "Gregory still has expectations from his father that he adheres to his beliefs."

"What about his mum? They're divorced, and she's living in Northern Ireland, isn't she? So she can't be a Death Eater," said Harry.

"No, but that doesn't mean she disagrees with them. If Gregory sought her out, she may very well turn him over to his father," Severus said slowly.

"You think so?" asked Harry.

Severus shrugged a shoulder. "Perhaps, perhaps not. It's been too long since I was a spy, I no longer know the political and social intricacies as I once did."

"If you were still a spy, you'd be in even more danger than you are now," Harry said sharply.

"I know that, Harry," Severus said wearily.

When he was certain Severus wasn't going to argue, Harry relaxed a bit. "And what about Vince?"

Severus pursed his lips. "He is set to become a Death Eater after he graduates."

Harry frowned. "What can we do?"

"Until he actually joins Voldemort and engages in Death Eater activities, there is nothing we can do," said Severus. "I think it best if Daphne leaves him alone."
Harry nodded slowly. “But she should keep working on Greg?”

“I think she has a chance to persuade him back to our side,” said Severus.

Harry gave a small smile. “He spoke to me a few weeks ago. Greg, not Vince. After we won Quidditch. He told me I’d played well.”

“That’s promising,” said Severus.

“Do you think I should start trying to talk to him more?” asked Harry.

Severus hesitated, then shook his head. “I think it best to leave it up to Daphne for now, as she’s more of a neutral party. Gregory probably thinks it safer to talk to her than you, with whom his father is specifically warning him against socialising. I think you should respond if he talks to you, but do not press him if he becomes uncomfortable.”

“Okay. I’ll let her know when we’re back at Hogwarts,” Harry said. He lay back down and resumed drawing, looking forward to being able to tell Daphne the good news.

********

When Harry woke up on Christmas morning, it was so cold that he seriously considered spending the entire day in bed. He lay there for five minutes, stroking Ladon (when it was this cold, Ladon slept under the covers with Harry instead of on the headboard) before steeling himself to get up. He got dressed as quickly as he could, woke up Ladon and got him wrapped around his neck, then lifted Hedwig off her perch on the back of his desk chair.

"Happy Christmas, Hedwig," he told her, then gave her an Owl Treat. 

Hedwig gulped it down then gave a happy trill.

"There'll be lots more food today," Harry told her, patting her as he carried her downstairs. "You like roast goose, don't you, girl?"

Hedwig cooed and gave his finger an affectionate nip.

"I'll take that as a yes,” said Harry.

When he got into the lounge he found Severus sitting in his chair with the fire already lit and the tea things on the coffee table.

"Happy Christmas, Dad," Harry said.

"And to you, Harry," Severus replied.

Harry placed Hedwig on the back of an armchair, and Ladon on the hearth, then sat down on the couch. He reached for his tea cup and took a large, grateful sip, letting it warm him up. “We need fireplaces upstairs,” he said.

“Why bother? We only spend a week or two here in winter, and most of that time we spend downstairs,” said Severus.

“Trust you to bring logic into it,” said Harry. “Can we do presents now?”

“If you like.”
Harry set his tea down and headed for the corner behind Severus' chair. Neither of them had seen the point in getting a Christmas tree for their short time at home, so Harry had drawn one instead. His drawing was stuck to a window, with weak winter sun filtering through the paper, and a pile of presents on the floor underneath it. It was unorthodox perhaps, but it brought Christmas cheer into their house all the same.

Harry flopped down on the floor and took the gift that Severus handed him. He unwrapped it to find a sketchbook and a wide, flat tin of pencils. Opening the tin, he found hundreds of pencils arranged on four trays within. Hinges kept each tray in place, allowing them to easily be lifted out of the way of the trays beneath. He didn’t need to recognise the brand to realise what good quality they were.

“Thank you,” he said, running his hand over one of the trays.

Severus sat down next to him. “That's only part of it. When you go to stay at Grimmauld Place next week, I'll take you clothes shopping in London beforehand. You're outgrowing half your wardrobe.”

Harry looked down at his jeans, which now ended well above his ankles. “That’d be great.”

He set down his present to find the one he'd bought for Severus. He was gratified to see the impressed look that crossed Severus' face when he unwrapped the three-volume set of Potions books.

“How did you get these? They aren't even published yet,” he said.

Harry shrugged. “Contrary to what Draco says, I don't have a problem using my name to get what I want. I wrote to Flourish & Blotts asking about these, and they forwarded my request onto the publishers. They were more than eager to send their new books to the Boy-Who-Lived. I guess it's good advertising if I'm seen reading their books, and somehow they got the impression that I wanted to.”

“And how did they come to that conclusion, I wonder?” asked Severus.

“No idea,” Harry said, smiling innocently.

Severus smirked. “Well done, Harry, and thank you. I was going to buy these when they were published.”

“Thought as much,” Harry said, then gave Severus another present. "This is for you as well."

Severus frowned as he read the tag on the present, then his eyes widened and he looked up at Harry. "Hermione's given me a gift?"

"You gave her one on her birthday," Harry pointed out, unwrapping his next present.

"Only because Narcissa told me to," Severus muttered, then sighed. "I'm caught in a gift-giving cycle now, aren't I? With both her and Draco."

"And Theo," Harry said cheerfully.

"Wonderful."

"You know, most people enjoy getting presents," Harry said, admiring a black marble mortar and pestle from Draco.

"I know that. I'm just not used to exchanging gifts with many people. For years the only person with
whom I exchanged gifts was Minerva - apart from the staff Secret Santa, of course," said Severus.

Harry laughed. "There's a staff Secret Santa?"

Severus nodded. "The gifts are very hit or miss. Most of us give something - often a book - relating to the subject which the recipient teaches, or a bottle of alcohol, but some give more eccentric presents."

"Trelawney?"

"And Albus. The entire thing is his idea, naturally, and he delights in dreaming up outlandish gifts."

"Well, I think you're safe with Hermione. Pretty sure that's a book," Harry said, pointing at the still-unopened gift Severus was holding.

Severus took the hint and unwrapped the parcel, which was indeed a book. Harry stifled another laugh at Severus' continued discomfort, then went searching for his next present.

Hagrid had given him a large box of home-made toffee. Having experience with Hagrid's toffee, Harry immediately put the tin on the hearth to soften by the fire. He sat back down to open up his gift from Narcissa and Kingsley, which turned out to be a silver razor, enchanted to never break the shaver's skin.

From Hermione he received a set of paintbrushes; and from Sirius and Remus, a box of Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes. He opened it up to find a range of fireworks (some of which must be new, since he'd never seen them before), a few of their gag products, and a bottle of Firewhisky.

"Are we Apparating back to Hogwarts?" Harry asked.

Severus narrowed his eyes. "Why do you ask?"

"Sirius and Remus sent me some stuff that I don't think I could get past Filch," said Harry.

Severus leaned over and peered inside the box. After a minute or two he sat back and looked at Harry sternly. "No drinking on school nights."

Harry grinned. "Done."

Severus smiled. "As it happens, you're in luck. We're Apparating back next Saturday."

"I thought we went back on the Sunday," said Harry.

"The Heads of House need to be back on the Saturday. The Ministry has arranged for the fireplaces in our offices to be opened to the outside network on Sunday so that the student body may return quickly and safely. I need to be in my office to supervise the arrival of the Slytherins," said Severus.

Harry frowned. "But everyone just left on the Hogwarts Express. Has something happened since then?"

Severus rolled his eyes. "The Ministry has finally decided to work on increasing the security of platform 9 ¾. Naturally, the most convenient time to do so is in the middle of the Christmas holidays."

"Hey, it wouldn't be the Ministry if it made sense," said Harry.

"No, it wouldn't," Severus agreed.
It was a quiet day with just the two of them. After a light breakfast, they prepared the goose and put it in the oven to roast, then returned to the lounge for the rest of the morning. Harry put a record on and lay down in front of the fire to draw with his new pencils, while Severus settled in his chair with one of his new books. Ladon was fast asleep next to Harry, and Hedwig was dozing on the back of Severus' chair.

Every now and then Harry got up to change the record, or Severus rose to brew a fresh pot of tea or check on the roast, but for the most part they remained where they were. After a while the mouth-watering smell of roast goose wafted in from the kitchen. Harry's stomach was growling by the time Severus declared that lunch was ready and told him to set the table.

They had just begun eating when Hedwig swooped in from the lounge to perch on the empty chair next to Harry. She gave a low trill and eyed the roast sitting in the centre of the table.

"I did promise you some meat, didn't I?" Harry said, then carved a slice off and fed it to her.

Severus pointed his fork at Hedwig. "Do not get used to being fed at the table."

Hedwig looked at him, then trilled at Harry. He reached up to stroke her then cut her some more meat. "There you go."

Hedwig swallowed it happily then settled down on the chair back, obviously hoping Harry would indulge her some more.

Severus shook his head. "Neither of your pets have hands, and yet they both have you twisted around their little fingers."

Harry just grinned and helped himself to more Yorkshire pudding. "I don't mind."

"I suppose it is entertaining to watch..." Severus said with a faint smile.

After lunch Severus cleared the table, putting the leftovers in the fridge and sending the dirty dishes to wash themselves in the sink, while Harry set about making a treacle tart. When the kitchen was once again spotless and the tart was baking in the oven, they both returned to their previous positions in the lounge. The pot of tea that Severus had brought with him was never drunk; filled with good food and wine, and warmed by the roaring fire, both he and Harry quickly drifted off to sleep.

Harry awoke some time later to the oven timer dinging. "Shit," he muttered when he realised what the sound was.

"I've got it," Severus called from the kitchen.

"Thanks," Harry replied. He felt a weight on his side, and opened his eyes to find Ladon curled up in the dip of his waist. "You perfectly comfortable there?"

Ladon shifted lazily. "You're warmer than the hearth."

Harry rolled onto his back so that he could sit up, then moved Ladon to his shoulders so that he could join Severus in the kitchen. He was delighted to find that his tart – the first one he had ever made himself – had turned out perfectly.

It tasted as good as it looked, and both Harry and Severus had second helpings, despite all they had
Harry spent Boxing Day in the barn with Severus, brewing medicinal potions. They had been running out of those that they used after duelling practises, and it took them both all day to fully replenish their supply.

Harry’s thoughts took a morbid turn as he brewed. The first time he had brewed Skele-Gro, it had been to help Severus restock the Hogwarts infirmary; the first time he had encountered bruise paste had been due to his tendency to leave Draco with hickeys. Now, he was brewing both potions in order to use them in his training to kill someone. True, the person that he was training to kill was a mass-murdering psychopath who had to be stopped, but still... part of him wished that he could go back to those simpler times.

Another part of him wondered how he could have ever been that naïve.

After a silent dinner, during which Harry continued to brood and Severus read, Harry walked upstairs to his room. He shut the door and lay down on his bed, staring up at the ceiling. He had no idea how long he’d been there before there was a knock on his door.
“Come in,” he called, not moving.

Severus walked in slowly. “I've brought you some tea.”

“Thanks,” said Harry, not bothering to get up.

“I'll just leave it on your desk, shall I?”

“Thanks.”

Severus placed the cup on the desk, then turned around to stare down at Harry. “The last time I saw you acting this apathetic, you had been possessed by the diary.”

“I'm not possessed,” Harry said.

A second later his feet were unceremoniously shoved to the far side of the bed so that Severus could sit down. “I know. What I don't know is what's bothering you.”

“Nothing.”

“Don't lie to me, Harry,” Severus said wearily. “You've barely spoken all day, and now you're doing your best impression of someone who had been Kissed by a Dementor.”

Harry jerked his head up to glare. “Do you think you could use a different metaphor? Literally anything else would do.”

“It got a reaction, did it not? Now tell me what's wrong.”

“You'll think it's stupid.”

“Try me.”

Harry sighed, but dragged himself up to lean against his headboard. “I was just thinking, when we were out in the barn... This time last year, we were brewing those sorts of potions for Pomfrey. Today we did the exact same thing, except now we're brewing them because we need them in my training to kill Voldemort...”

Severus took his time answering. “While you are faced with a task few people your age could conceive of even attempting, growing up quickly is one of the unpleasant necessities of war.”

Harry bit his lip. “Is this what it was like last time?”

Severus grimaced. “At this point in proceedings, I was on the other side last time.”

“Yeah, but still...”

Severus eventually nodded. “Yes, I believe so.”

Harry drew his knees up to his chest. “No one's ever really told me what it was like. I mean, I'm sure Sirius would if I asked him...”

“Very well,” Severus said abruptly. He Summoned his own cup of tea from downstairs before he began talking again. “As you know, when I was your age, I fully intended to join the Death Eaters.”

Harry nodded. “But not for a while, right?”
Severus shook his head. “I was planning on joining as soon as I graduated. And I did.”

Harry poked his finger into a hole in his jeans. “So, what, you just asked to join up and that was it?”

While he knew this was going to be an unpleasant conversation, Harry was curious. Severus had often spoken about his past as a Death Eater, but not so much about the circumstances in which he had joined in the first place.

“Hardly. Voldemort would never trust someone who initiated contact with him. Unless he took a personal interest with someone, a potential Death Eater had to be introduced to him by an existing Death Eater. I imagine that to still be the case. It's part of why the vast majority of Death Eaters were Slytherins – we were introduced by our friends and family.”

“Who introduced you?”

“Lucius Malfoy,” Severus said quietly.

Harry felt a stab of renewed hatred towards Draco's father. “Even though you're a half-blood?”

“He felt that my brewing skills outweighed my blood status. Voldemort agreed with him,” said Severus.

“What was it like? Meeting him for the first time?” asked Harry.

“Terrifying yet... exhilarating,” said Severus.

“Exhilarating?” Harry echoed.

Severus saw his sceptical expression. “You may not believe it, knowing what he is, but back then... I was poor, with no family and few friends, and the common room was filled with tales of the power and wealth that Voldemort's followers enjoyed... Those followers were not faceless, nameless strangers, they were known to us; they were people's parents and older siblings... recently graduated students... And they had a world of opportunities theirs for the taking. If they could benefit, why not me?”

“Yeah, I can see how that'd be appealing, but what about the bigotry? The disappearances and murders? How could you want anything to do with him?” Harry asked.

Severus stared down at his tea. “His victims were said to have deserved whatever they got. All lies, of course, and I knew that... But his worst atrocities were glossed over, dismissed as rumours, and since the Muggle I knew best was my abusive father, well... it wasn't hard to convince myself that perhaps the world was better off without people like that.”

“But you knew that wasn't true,” said Harry.

“Of course I did. I just didn't care,” Severus said bitterly. “I was ambitious, what did it matter to me if some unknown Muggle suffered when it meant I would finally have some power? That I would be important, I would matter... And Lily would be so impressed that she would have to forgive me and resume our friendship.”

Harry stared at him in disbelief. “You thought my mum would be impressed that you'd joined a group that wanted to kill her and her family?”

Severus sighed. “I thought that she would be safe, that even Voldemort would see her brilliance and leave her be... In my wilder moments I even entertained the idea that she would be invited to join
him, that he would overlook her blood status, as he had done with me.”

“That's mental,” Harry said. “I mean, you sound absolutely barking right now.”

Severus shook his head. “I was perfectly sane. Foolish, angry and ambitious, but I have no one to blame for my choices but myself.”

Harry took a sip of tea, grimacing when he felt how cold it was. He cast a non-verbal Warming Charm on his cup, then on Severus’, and took another sip. “When did you meet him?”

“The summer before my seventh year. Lucius and I had been corresponding, and he invited me to meet Voldemort,” said Severus. He took a sip of his now hot tea before continuing. “He came to see me at Spinner's End. He made no effort to hide his distaste for the house, but told me I would soon be moving on to greater things. He Apparated me to the house that Voldemort was residing in at that time – I found out later that the original occupants had been murdered.

“Lucius led me in to the drawing room that had been repurposed as an audience chamber. I was instructed to keep my head down as I approached Voldemort, before kneeling at his feet. I was to remain silent until spoken to, and was to address him as 'my Lord'. He bade me rise, and proceeded to, well, charm me. He both flattered and insulted me, a mixture that left me craving his approval. Eventually he declared that he was impressed with what he saw, and that after I graduated I would be initiated.

“The year dragged like no other. I was filled with impatience to join him. I threw myself into studying, dreaming of the day when I could use my skills and knowledge to his benefit. It was a highly effective motivator – I got straight Outstandings on my NEWTs.

“And then the school year was over, and Lucius was once again taking me to Voldemort's presence. It was a different house, and we weren't alone; other Death Eaters had brought prospective recruits, and more Death Eaters were in attendance simply to watch the proceedings.”

“That's when you had to use an Unforgivable on a Muggle?” asked Harry, feeling ill.

Severus nodded. “There was a Muggle for each of us. Eight innocent people, used as pawns before being tossed aside like garbage. Luckily for me, I was to go third. The man before me – I don't know who he was, he had been recruited from Germany – he used the Imperius Curse. The Muggle woman fought it off. Voldemort killed both her and the German, and I learned quickly not to try that curse.”

“So you used the Cruciatus Curse,” Harry said quietly.

Severus swallowed. “He was a boy about my age, maybe a little older. I'll never forget his face, or the sound of his screams, the way he seized up in agony... But it was enough. I was accepted. Voldemort killed the Muggle even as he congratulated me, casting the Killing Curse as easily as you or I would gesture to make a point. I joined Evan Rosier, the first successful recruit, on the sidelines, and watched the others perform. They all passed, Voldemort killed the remaining Muggles, and then we were personally Marked by Voldemort. The pain was excruciating, but we were prohibited from using any pain relievers – it was a test of our loyalty. I told myself I deserved to suffer, after what I'd just done, and I did. And that was that. The stupidest thing I have ever done, or will ever do, and all I could think about was how it would benefit me.”

“Jesus.”

“He had nothing to do with it.”
There was a silence, during which they both had more tea, before Harry spoke again.

“Does it hurt now? The Mark?”

“Not particularly, no,” said Severus. He rolled up his left sleeve and contemplated his arm. “No, it would seem that even Voldemort takes Christmas off.”

“You mean it does hurt you at other times?” asked Harry.

“Of course it does. Unlike you, I can’t just use Occlumency to shield myself from Voldemort. Nor would I. I deserve every ounce of pain it causes me,” said Severus.

Harry frowned. “Is that healthy?”

“It’s hardly going to kill me,” said Severus.

“I didn’t mean that, I meant... is it healthy to – to punish yourself like that?” asked Harry. “You can’t wallow in guilt forever.”

“I’m not wallowing,” said Severus. “Anyway, if Albus hadn’t spoken in my defence, I’d likely still be in Azkaban, if not dead. This is nothing in comparison.”

Harry wasn’t at all convinced that that attitude was healthy, but decided not to argue the point. “What did you do as a Death Eater? Were you very involved in the fighting?”

“Not particularly, no. I went on raids, of course, we all did, but for the most part I was ordered to brew. Medicinal potions for those of us who were injured by Aurors or members of the Order of the Phoenix; poisons for use on enemies; Veritaserum for interrogations; Polyjuice... When I wasn’t brewing, I was researching ancient, obscure potions which could benefit Voldemort, or experimenting with ways in which I could improve what I was brewing,” said Severus. “Then, of course, there were meetings to attend, in which we reported our progress to Voldemort. Those of us who pleased him were rewarded, whilst those of us who displeased him were punished.”

“So, not actually that different to what you do now, for the Order, really,” Harry said thoughtfully. “You’re still the Potions genius and have meetings to attend...”

“Superficially, no, my role hasn’t really changed, although Albus doesn’t torture us if we bring him bad news, and now it is my allies who are disappearing without trace,” said Severus.

Harry cocked his head. “I thought the Aurors back then were allowed to kill?”

“They were, but those kills were always reported in the *Daily Prophet*. We never had to wonder what had happened to a missing Death Eater. Except for Regulus Black, that is,” said Severus.

“Who you think killed himself.”

“It’s the only explanation that makes any sense.”

Already knowing Severus’ opinion on that subject, Harry moved on. “And then what? You heard the prophecy?”

“Yes, shortly after Regulus’ disappearance. I took the information straight to Voldemort, who was immensely grateful. For a few months, I was his favourite Death Eater. I sat at his right hand, he asked my advice... It was a dizzying experience,” said Severus.

“I’ll bet,” said Harry.
Severus voice turned harsh and bitter. “And then you and Neville were born. There was much debate amongst Voldemort's inner circle as to whom the prophecy referred. Most of them favoured Neville, the pure-blood, but Voldemort believed it was about you. And I realised that I had written my best friend's death warrant.”

“So you defected.”

“Eventually. First, as you know, I begged Voldemort for Lily's life. I was still his favourite, so he agreed to spare her.”

“But you didn't trust him, so you went to Dumbledore.”

“Yes. I was terrified that he would kill me, or simply hand me over to the Aurors, but instead he agreed to hide you all in return for my service.”

Harry jerked bolt upright. “Wait, what?”

Severus frowned. “Well, I found out later that you were already in hiding, and he just arranged an increase in your security, but -”

“No, no, no, that's not what's confusing me,” said Harry. “What did you just say? He agreed to help us in return for your service?”

“Yes.”

“Why the hell did he demand that?”

Severus shrugged. “He walked out of that meeting with a spy, when he was under no obligation to even meet with me in the first place, let alone acquiesce to my request.”

“No, but what about his obligation to me, my parents? They were in the Order – shouldn't he have made their safety a priority, whether or not you agreed to spy for him? If you'd refused to do what he asked, would he have not even bothered to keep us safe?” Harry demanded.

He felt sick even thinking the questions, let alone asking them.

“Of course he would have,” said Severus.

“So he just used my mum's safety to manipulate you into working for him? That's pretty messed up,” said Harry.

Severus shook his head. “After what I had done, what I had been, it was the least I could do. And it's not like he just blindly threw me into my role as a spy. He immediately taught me Occlumency in order to protect myself from being discovered as a traitor.”

“Well yeah. What's the point of manipulating someone into spying if they immediately get themselves caught? He would've had to start all over again if you were killed,” said Harry.

“He did what he had to do. I don't fault him for it,” said Severus.

“And you're sure that he would've kept us safe if you'd refused to turn spy?” Harry asked.

“Yes, I am. He had no reason to want any of you harmed,” said Severus.

“You're completely sure about that?” Harry pressed.
“I trust Albus, Harry. He manipulated me, true, but it was in the middle of a war. People do what they have to in order to win, to survive,” said Severus. He paused, then said quietly, sadly, “You'll soon learn that lesson the hard way.”

Harry looked away. “I think I'm beginning to.”

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Harry spent most of New Year's Eve in both Diagon Alley and Muggle London with Severus, shopping for Harry's new clothes. By the time they reached Grimmauld Place, Harry's hands were laden down with a multitude of shopping bags. Even Severus had a few bags of his own shopping in his hands. He had to lift the knocker, since Harry could barely lift his arms. They waited nearly thirty seconds – longer than Harry had ever waited at Grimmauld Place – before Kreacher eventually answered the door. He didn't say anything, just glared up at them.

“Can we come in?” Harry asked.

“Master is with his pet monster,” Kreacher said.

“Don't call him that,” Harry said. “Anyway, they're expecting us.”

Kreacher's glare somehow intensified, but he reluctantly opened the door wider to let them in, muttering the entire time. Harry clenched his jaw and ignored the steady stream of slurs, heading upstairs to where he could hear loud laughter, with Severus trailing behind him.

When he walked into the lounge room it was to find not just Sirius and Remus, but Tonks and Gemma sitting around the coffee table.

Sirius was facing the door, and thus was the first to spot the visitors. "Harry!" he cried, getting up and walking over.

Harry dropped his shopping bags when he was pulled into a fierce hug. "Hi," he said, his words muffled by Sirius' shoulder.

Sirius stepped back and held Harry at arm's length. "About time you got here."

"Shopping took longer than we'd thought," Harry said.

"Shopping took longer than we'd thought," Harry said.

Sirius gazed at the bags surrounding them. "And I thought Narcissa was bad."

Harry shrugged. "I've outgrown most of my stuff."

"I'm not surprised, you've grown about a foot since I last saw you. Come on, sit down," Sirius said, then looked past him. "Snape."

"Black, Lupin" said Severus, nodding stiffly. He walked past them, "Good evening Gemma, Tonks."

"Wotcher," Tonks said.

"I didn't know you were joining us, Severus," Gemma said cheerfully.

"I've merely come to drop off Harry and have a word to Black," said Severus.

Sirius rolled his eyes, but Remus spoke first. "What was on your mind?"
"Where are you taking him?"

"Muggle London," said Sirius.

"We're going out to dinner, then going to watch the fireworks from the bank of the Thames," Remus elaborated.

Severus nodded slowly. "I assume you are Apparating?"

"Yes."

"Drinking?"

"Maybe one or two over dinner."

"Acceptable." With that, Severus turned to Harry. "Keep your wand on you."

"I will."

Severus gave a small smile. "Have a good time."

Harry grinned. "You too. See you next year!"

"I'll see you in a few days," Severus said, then turned and left.

Harry shoved all his bags against the wall so they were out of the way, then sat down next to Gemma. "It's good to see you again."

"You too, though we're not staying long," said Gemma.

"A mate of mine's having a party not too far from here, so we thought we'd pop in on our way," said Tonks.

"Right," said Harry, trying to hide his disappointment.

Gemma nudged him. "Now you're here, you can help us decide what colour hair Tonks should have for the night."

"What's wrong with pink?" Tonks asked.

Gemma screwed her face up. "You've had pink for ages. If I was a Metamorphmagus, I'd have different hair every day."

"But I like pink," Tonks said. Her sulky tone sounded remarkably like that of Draco.

"What about red? You could be twins," Harry suggested.

Gemma's eyes lit up. "That's it! We can be twins for the night!"

Tonks laughed. "Are you saying what I think you're saying?"

"Do it!" Gemma urged her.

"Only if I get to pick what shots we do tonight," said Tonks.

"Deal," Gemma said at once.
Harry watched with interest as Tonks stood up and shut her eyes. She slowly grew a few inches taller; her shoulders and hips widened while her waist shrank; her skin grew freckly; and her hair darkened from pink to red, then grew wavy and tumbled halfway down her back. When she opened her eyes again, they were no longer brown, but a light blue.

Harry's mouth dropped open. In less than a minute, Tonks had turned herself into a perfect replica of Gemma.

Gemma got up and stood in front of Tonks, circling her and peering at her closely. “This is amazing,” she said reverentially.

“You've seen me alter my appearance before,” Tonks said.

She still sounded like herself, Harry noticed.

“Well, yeah, but not into me,” said Gemma.

While the girls continued to discuss Tonks' transformation, Sirius glanced at Remus. “You know, those two are going to get up to a lot of trouble tonight.”

“Most likely,” Remus agreed.

“We should -”

“No,” Remus said firmly.

“But -”

“Sirius, you're in your late thirties -”

“Mid thirties!”

“Late thirties. You are not crashing the party of a twenty-something,” Remus said. “We'll have a good time by the Thames, don't you worry.”

Sirius slumped back against the sofa. “I guess so.”

Remus was right: he, Sirius and Harry ended up having a great time. After a delicious dinner at a nearby Italian place, they Apparated into an alley a few blocks from the Thames. The streets were crowded, and Harry made sure his hand didn't stray too far from his wand, but his worries were for naught.

The crowd on the river bank was friendly, with a mix of people all intent on having a good time. Harry got his face painted by a woman dressed like a fairy; bought an armful of plastic glow sticks off a man who seemed to be dressed as a rainbow; and shared a big bag of roasted chestnuts with a couple of elderly women leaning on their walkers next to him.

There was music playing from somewhere, 80s pop which got people dancing and singing along. No one in the crowd seemed to have any skill with either activity, which made Harry feel better about his own lack of talent in those areas. By the time the crowd began counting down to midnight, Harry was sweaty from dancing so much, Remus was wearing a glittery hat that a complete stranger had placed on his head, and Sirius had joined all the glow sticks together to loop around his neck.

The fireworks, when they came, were not quite as spectacular as anything the Weasley twins could dream up, but impressive all the same. The London skyline was illuminated in bursts of colour,
which were reflected in the water of the Thames. Sirius had kissed Remus at the stroke of midnight,
then wrapped an arm around Harry's shoulders and pulled him close. As Harry stared up at the
fireworks, he made a wish that this new year would remain as happy as it had began. He knew it was
futile, knew that soon he would have to go back to training for a war, to checking the *Prophet* to see
if anyone he knew had died or disappeared, but for tonight, at least, he could pretend he was just a
normal boy.
Harry and Severus returned to Hogwarts on Saturday night, after dinner. Severus retired to his quarters, leaving Harry to go to the Slytherin common room alone. Feeling a little bereft in the large, silent room, Harry decided to keep Hedwig down there with him for the night. He sat down by the fire, dragging a couch and coffee table as close as he could, and spent the rest of the night drawing, with Hedwig and Ladon sleeping nearby.

On Sunday morning Harry walked into the Great Hall to find the Slytherin table, like the other house tables, completely devoid of any tableware. He looked up at the staff table uncertainly to see Hagrid and the Heads of House already tucking in to their food. Severus noticed his entrance and crooked his finger.

"Guess we're eating with the teachers today," Harry said.

Ladon slipped his head above Harry's collar. "Is that the plant teacher?"

Harry laughed. "Yeah, that's Sprout."

"Good," said Ladon.

The walk up to the stage reminded Harry of when his name had come out of the Goblet of Fire, and he couldn't help glancing at the door to the trophy room at the back of the stage as he passed.

"Good morning," he said, feeling a little awkward.

There was a chorus of polite responses, and then Hagrid drew out the empty chair next to himself.

"Saved yeh a seat," he said.

"Thanks," Harry said, sitting down with a grin. "Have a good break?"

"Too short for my liking," Sprout said, leaning around Hagrid.

Harry laughed. "I know what you mean. What about you, Hagrid?"

"Was alrigh'. Got in a couple o' griffins fer me sixth year class so I've been spendin' me time gettin' them settled," said Hagrid.

"They're studying griffins?" Harry asked enviously.

Hagrid chuckled. "Sorry yeh dropped me class, are yeh?"

"Yeah, I am," Harry said, buttering his toast.
Hagrid shrugged one massive shoulder. “If yer not doin' anythin' today, yeh can come help me feed ’em after breakfast. Got ’em in a paddock near the Forbidden Forest.”

“Sounds good. I'll just have to take Ladon back to my dorm so he can keep warm,” Harry said, pointing to Ladon, who was peering at Sprout with friendly curiosity.

“I'd offer to have him join me in one of the greenhouses, but I'm afraid we're all office-bound today,” said Sprout. “Some other time, perhaps.”

Harry smiled. “He'd like that.”

When he finished breakfast, Harry got up to return to his dorm, but stopped to speak to Severus first.

“Dad, when Draco gets here can you tell him to come find Hagrid and me outside?”

Severus nodded. “Of course.”

“I'll tell Miss Granger to do the same,” said McGonagall.

“Thank you, Professor,” Harry said.

“It's no trouble, Mr Potter,” McGonagall said.

A quarter of an hour later, Ladon was safely curled up by the fireplace near Harry's bed, and Harry himself was struggling to keep up with Hagrid as he strode through the snow. He was relieved when they passed Hagrid's cabin and the griffin paddock came into view. The creatures were huddled together for warmth, and it was only when Harry was at the fence that he was able to discern each animal individually.

“Aren't they beautiful?” Hagrid asked.

“Yeah, they are,” Harry said.

For once, he was entirely in agreement with Hagrid regarding a creature. There were three of them, two adults with what must be their baby. They had the head, talons and wings of an eagle, but with the back half of a lion. They were very similar to Hippogriffs, but quite a bit smaller than those creatures, with the adults around the size of a Labrador.

“Come on, then,” said Hagrid, swinging a leg over the fence.

“Wait,” Harry said, startled. “They're like Hippogriffs, right? Do I need to bow to them?”

“Nah, won't make no difference,” said Hagrid.

“Surely we can't just walk up to them,” said Harry.

“Course not. We give 'em some o' this,” said Hagrid, holding up the bag of raw meat he had picked up from the kitchens.

“Okay,” said Harry.

He clambered over the fence and followed Hagrid over. The adult griffins got warily to their feet, with the larger of the pair putting the baby behind itself.

“That's the female. They're bigger'n the males,” said Hagrid.
“Like some owls,” Harry said.

“Lots o’ birds, actually. It's the eagle in 'em,” Hagrid explained.

The male griffin suddenly reared up on its hind legs. Its front talons slashed through the air, then it fell back to the ground with its wings spread.

“Hagrid!”

“That's a good sign. If 'e was properly threatenin' us 'e'd've given a shriek. That's more ter reassure 'is mate than ter scare us,” said Hagrid.

He reached into his bag and pulled out a chunk of bloody meat. He crouched down to hand it to the male. The griffin eyed the meat, then lunged forward and yanked it from Hagrid's grasp, settling down in the snow to eat it. Hagrid did the same with the female, until the baby was once more in view.

“Here, give 'er this,” Hagrid said, holding out a smaller piece of meat for Harry.

He took it and gingerly walked towards the baby. She was slightly larger than Crookshanks, with tufts of down still visible in her feathers. She was eyeing Harry curiously, though she was sticking close to her mother.

Harry knelt down and held the meat out to her. “Here you go.”

The baby looked at her mother, who must have given her some sort of sign that it was safe, for all of a sudden she rushed forward clumsily and snatched the meat from Harry. She gulped it down messily and sniffed his hand for more.

“That's all there is, sorry,” he said.

She kept sniffing his hand for a few seconds before giving up. She flopped down into the snow, then rested one talon on Harry's knee.

“She wants yeh ter pat 'er,” Hagrid said.

Harry gently stroked her head. It was soft and warm, sort of like patting Hedwig. The griffin shuffled closer, her bottom wriggling in the snow, and then Harry felt a vibration on his knee. It took him a second to realise what it was.

“They purr?” he asked, looking at Hagrid in surprise.

Hagrid was leaning over the female griffin, brushing her flank. “They purr,” he said.

A tugging on Harry's neck made him look down again. The baby griffin had the end of his green and gold Harpies scarf in her beak and was shaking her head from side to side.

Harry laughed, pulled the scarf out of her beak and unwound it from his neck, then dangled it in front of her, with the golden Harpies talon swinging before her face. “It's just like your talons, isn't it?” he said.

The griffin growled and lunged for the scarf, which Harry pulled out of range. He stood up and backed away, shaking the scarf for her. He laughed again when she pounced towards it. The griffin's parents were both watching them intently, but neither seemed inclined to step in, and the female was still letting Hagrid brush her fur. Laughing again, Harry took another step back, with the baby griffin
leaping after him.

“Don't lead 'er too far from 'er parents!” Hagrid yelled.

“Got it!” Harry called back.

He spent the rest of the morning playing in the snow with the baby, who had developed a fascination with his scarf. He didn't know if it was the glinting of the golden talon in the weak sunlight, or if she just liked the way the scarf dangled from his hand, but she followed him all over the paddock, pouncing and snapping at the scarf under the watchful gazes of her parents while Hagrid rhapsodised about griffins. Harry thoroughly enjoyed himself, and resolved to visit Hagrid a little more frequently than he had been.

“Please tell me you know that scarves are meant to be accessories, not toys.”

Harry looked up to see both Draco and Hermione leaning against the fence to the paddock. He walked over to them at once, trailing his scarf for the griffin.

“She likes it,” he said.

Draco shook his head with mock dismay. “You try, Hermione, I give up on him.”

Hermione just laughed. “Have a good break, Harry?”

Harry reached the fence and leaned against it, shaking his scarf above the griffin's head. “Yeah, I did. You?”

Hermione shrugged. “Nothing exciting.”

When Harry looked enquiringly at Draco, he smiled. “You knew I was going to Kingsley's parents' house. I've met them before, of course, but this was the first time I've seen them over Christmas... I – it's nice, having grandparents again.”

Having never known any of his grandparents, Harry didn't know what to say to this.

“They have no other grandchildren so you got spoiled rotten, you mean,” Hermione said.

Draco grinned. “Exactly.”

Hermione laughed and shook her head.

A loud crunching sound heralded Hagrid's approach through the snow. “Hermione, Draco, good ter see yeh. Feel like a cuppa?”

“Yes, please,” Hermione said.

“Guess this means goodbye,” Harry said to the griffin.

He gave her one last pat then stood up straight. She watched him wind his scarf back around his neck, making one last swipe for it, then scampered back to her parents, butting her head into her father's chest. He draped a wing over her back protectively, while the mother began grooming the baby's face.

Harry climbed back over the fence to find Draco watching him in disgust. “What?”

“That scarf is covered in griffin spit,” said Draco.
“Yeah, and Fang's about to cover you in dog drool, so I guess we're a good match,” Harry shot back.

Hermione laughed and handed Harry a scroll. “Dumbledore gave me this.”

“So he's back, huh? He wasn't at breakfast today,” Harry said, unrolling the scroll. He read it then pocketed it. “I'm seeing him tomorrow night.”

“Hopefully you'll learn something that's actually helpful this time,” Draco muttered.

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The next morning there was a commotion amongst the sixth years when they discovered a sign pinned to the noticeboard in the common room, advertising Apparition lessons. Harry did his best to look as excited as the rest of his friends, and not like someone who had frequently Apparated illegally. Luckily he only had to keep the act up until they had gotten up to breakfast and could huddle together under the cover of a Muffling Charm.

“You can Apparate already?” Tracey asked enviously.

Harry nodded. “Dad taught me over summer.”

“He can Side-Along Apparate other people, too,” Draco added.

Millicent's eyes widened. “Did it take you long to learn?”

“Just under a week, but then I had a one-on-one lesson every day. I don't think that's going to happen here,” Harry said.

“What's it like?” Blaise asked.

“You've all been Side-Along Apparated by a parent, haven't you?” Harry asked.

Everyone nodded.

Harry shrugged. “It's just like that, only you're the one responsible for the horrible crushing feeling.”

Harry spent his morning free in his dorm, being hounded for more information about Apparition by Daphne, Millicent and Blaise. He was relieved when it was time to head up to Defence; no one was foolish enough to try to talk through a class that Severus would be teaching. Lunch was the same as breakfast, but Potions in the afternoon brought another reprieve, as Harry still shared a table with Hermione, Draco and Ernie. Not only had both of his friends already grilled him about Apparating months earlier; neither of them were going to mention in front of Ernie that Harry had been illegally taught how to Apparate.

The questions tailed off during dinner, and Harry was able to get a bit of distraction-free study done in the common room before he was due to go up to Dumbledore's office. When he walked through the door he found Dumbledore seated behind his desk, with the Pensieve already sitting out before him.

“Good evening, Harry. You will forgive me if I go straight to business,” said Dumbledore.

“Yes, sir,” said Harry, quickly checking the strength of his Occlumency shield.

“Well, then. I have two memories I wish to show you this evening, both of which were extremely difficult to obtain. The latter is possibly the most important memory I have in my collection,” said
Harry had already been paying full attention, but he sat up straight at that.

Dumbledore also leaned forward in his seat. “The last you saw of Tom Riddle, he had been excited to learn of his magical heritage; had refused my own company to Diagon Alley – or indeed that of any teacher; and had sullenly sat through my warning against further thievery once he arrived at Hogwarts.

“And so on 1st September, 1938, Tom Riddle arrived at Hogwarts with all of the other first years. Apart from his second-hand robes, there was nothing to set him apart from his school-mates. He was Sorted into Slytherin as soon as the Sorting Hat touched his head. How long it took him to realise that his ability to speak to snakes was one that he shared with Salazar Slytherin himself, I do not know. Undoubtedly it only served to enhance his feelings of superiority.”

Harry fleetingly thought about saying about something about that, but decided to give Dumbledore the benefit of the doubt. Maybe his comment had been aimed at Voldemort, not Parselmouths in general.

“If he was using displays of Parseltongue in the common room to scare or amaze his fellow Slytherins, they kept that information from the staff.”

Harry bit his tongue and somehow refrained from rolling his eyes. Of course they did, he thought, Slytherins stick together. Seeing someone speak Parseltongue wasn't nearly enough to cause a Slytherin to betray a member of their own house.

Dumbledore showed no sign that he was aware of Harry's annoyance. “No, all the staff saw was an intelligent and talented child, good-looking, with a tragic background. He was polite and well-behaved, and very eager to learn all he could. More than a few of our number were very impressed with and sympathetic towards him.”

“Did you tell anyone what he'd told you at the orphanage? What you'd learned from Mrs Cole?” asked Harry.

“No, I didn't. Though Riddle showed no remorse for his actions, I decided to let him begin Hogwarts unencumbered by his past, to let him change his ways if he wished to. As I've told you, I had already resolved to keep a close eye on him, and I did just that,” said Dumbledore. “I never encountered any evidence that he continued his bullying and intimidation whilst at Hogwarts, but I never trusted him. He sensed that, I think. He was very careful not to be as unguarded near me as he had been at the orphanage, and he certainly never attempted to charm me as he did the other professors.

“It did not take him long to attract a group of loyal followers. Not friends – I have told you that he had no interest in friendship – but those who sought his protection, or the power he could give them, or simply new and inventive ways of tormenting those they disliked. They were a primitive foreshadowing of his Death Eaters, and many of that group ended up becoming the first Death Eaters after graduating,” said Dumbledore.

“Theo’s dad?” Harry guessed.

Dumbledore nodded slowly. “Yes, Edmund Nott was among their number. Like the rest of them, he was closely controlled by Riddle. Though Riddle's seven years at Hogwarts were marred by a string of increasingly cruel incidents, finally culminating in the death of a Muggle-born girl, no one ever caught him or any of his minions in any misconduct. Even the rumours that swirled around them were quieter and vaguer than usual.”
“That's what it was like when Voldemort was in power, isn't it?” asked Harry.

“All the elements that would define the later Lord Voldemort were present during his youth. We just didn't see him for what he was at the time,” said Dumbledore. “Those who knew him as a boy are, for the most part, far too scared of Voldemort to talk about him. It has taken me much time and effort to track these people down, whether they be magical or Muggle, and then to persuade or trick them into divulging what they know.

“As a boy, Riddle was obsessed with his parentage. This is hardly surprising from an orphan who never knew his family. I understand that he spent fruitless hours searching for mentions of his father in the records of Hogwarts, on the shields and cups in the trophy room, even in the history books of our world.”

Harry knew all too well that need to learn about one's dead parents. Harry's own parents were in history books, and one night, whilst exploring Hogwarts under the cover of his Invisibility Cloak, Harry had found both his parents' names in the trophy room, on a list of Hogwarts Head Girls and Boys. James' name was also listed on a plaque as a Chaser for the Gryffindor Quidditch team, who had won the cup in 1976. Harry fought down yet another disturbing flash of empathy for Voldemort, who had even less of a connection to his dead parents.

“Eventually, Riddle accepted the fact that his father had not been his magical parent. I believe it is at that time that he abandoned his father's name, choosing to permanently use the title by which his early followers already knew him, Lord Voldemort, and then turned his attention to his mother's family,” said Dumbledore. “He had previously shunned her memory, believing her to be a Muggle purely because she had been, in his eyes, weak and pathetic enough to die.

“The only information he had about her was her father's first name, Marvolo, but it was enough. Hours of careful reading of books of wizarding families led him to the discovery that Salazar Slytherin had surviving descendants, and that he himself was one of them. That information first led him to finding and opening the Chamber of Secrets, and then to tracking down the Gaunt family. It is a memory of this meeting which I would like to show you,” said Dumbledore, rising to his feet.

He drew a small bottle from within his robes and poured a memory into the Pensieve. Harry silently leaned into the Pensieve. There was the usual fall through darkness, but this time, the memory in which he found himself and Dumbledore wasn't much brighter. It took him a long moment to recognise his surroundings as the Gaunts' shack. It was dirtier than ever, filled with cobwebs and grime, dust and mouldy food.

It was lit by a single sputtering candle, set at the feet of a man as filthy as his surroundings. His hair and beard were both so overgrown and unkempt that his eyes and mouth were completely obscured from view. He was slumped over in a threadbare armchair, so still that he could very well have been dead. Harry had no idea if it was Marvolo or Morfin at whom he was staring. It wasn't until there was a knock on the door, startling the man awake so that he raised his head, bringing up both his wand and a knife, that Harry recognised him as Morfin.

Before Morfin could answer, the door swung open on creaky hinges, displacing a shower of dust and spiders. Standing in the doorway, holding an old oil lamp, was a young Riddle. He was only a few months older than he had been when he preserved himself in his diary, and Harry had to take a deep breath and remind himself this particular memory couldn't hurt him.

For a moment Riddle and Morfin stared at each other, until the latter lurched to his feet. “YOU!” he shouted. “YOU!”

He had only taken a step forward when Riddle commanded him to stop in Parseltongue. Morfin was
so surprised that he crashed into the table, sending a stack of mouldy dishes crashing to the floor.

“You speak it?”

“Yes, I speak it,” said Riddle. He stepped further into the shack, letting the door close behind him. He didn’t appear at all afraid of Morfin, merely contemptuous. “Where is Marvolo?”

“Dead. Died years ago, didn’t he?”

“Who are you, then?”

“I’m Morfin, aint I?”

“Marvolo’s son?”

“Course I am, then...” Morfin said. He pushed his matted hair out of his face in order for Riddle to get a better look at him, and Harry noticed that he was wearing Marvolo’s black-stoned ring. “I thought you was that Muggle. You look mighty like that Muggle.”

“What Muggle?” demanded Riddle.

“That Muggle what my sister took a fancy to, that Muggle what lives in the big house over the way,” said Morfin, spitting on the floor before continuing. “You look right like him. Riddle. But he's older now, i'n ’e? He's older’n you, now I think on it... He come back, see.”

Riddle had been studying Morfin with a cool detachment, as though weighing up his usefulness, but now he moved closer. “Riddle came back?”

“Ar, he left her, and serve her right, marrying filth!” Morfin cried, spitting again. “Robbed us, mind, before she ran off! Where’s the locket, eh, where’s Slytherin’s locket? Dishonoured us, she did, that little slut! And who’re you, coming here and asking questions about all that? It's over, innit... it's over...”

He staggered to the side, and Riddle moved even closer. The second he did so, the memory went dark, entirely so, even the candle and the lamp dying out, leaving Harry in the darkness. Luckily, Dumbledore apparently had excellent spatial awareness, as he found Harry’s arm a second later. He took a firm hold and pulled them both up and out of the dark memory, back into his office. Though it was only dimly lit, it was blindingly bright after the complete darkness of the memory.

Dumbledore signalled for Harry to sit down, then took his own seat. “That, Harry, is all the memory of that encounter I was able to extract from Morfin. He had no recollection of what happened next. He awoke the next morning to find himself lying on the floor, with no sign of either Riddle or Marvolo's ring.

“At the same time, the village of Little Hangleton was waking up to the cries of a maid running along the high street, screaming that she had found three corpses in the drawing room of the big house: Tom Riddle Snr and his parents.

“Naturally, the Muggle authorities were mystified. Barring one infamous exception -” Dumbledore gestured to Harry's scar “- the Killing Curse doesn't leave any physical marks or injuries. The Ministry, however, knew how the Riddles had died. They also knew that there was a wizard living in the area, a wizard known to hate Muggles, who had already been sent to Azkaban for attacking one of the murder victims.

“When the Ministry went to question Morfin, he confessed straight away, with details only the actual
murderer would know. He showed no remorse, saying that he was proud to have finally killed the Riddles, that he had wanted to do so for years. He willingly surrendered his wand, which was immediately proven to be the murder weapon. He cooperated completely as he was arrested and taken to Azkaban. His only apparent concern was the loss of Marvolo's ring, crying repeatedly “He'll kill me for losing it”. It's the only thing he ever said for the rest of his life. He languished in Azkaban, mourning the loss of his father's ring, eventually dying there and being buried outside its walls.”

“So Voldemort stole Morfin's wand, murdered his family, then returned it to Morfin to frame him and steal the ring?” asked Harry.

“To begin with, yes. When he returned the wand he also implanted a false memory of the murder into Morfin's mind – a difficult piece of magic for an adult, let alone a sixteen-year-old boy,” said Dumbledore.

Harry frowned. “And Morfin never learned the truth? Even though he had this real memory along with the fake one?”

“Never. I confess that I myself struggled to extract this memory using Legilimency. Why would anyone else have bothered? Morfin had been found with the murder weapon and had given a full confession. There was no need for anyone in the Department of Magical Law Enforcement to do any further investigation,” said Dumbledore, then sighed. “I visited Morfin in Azkaban only a few weeks before he died. When I realised what this memory contained, I tried to use it as evidence for his release, but before the Ministry could act, he had died.”

“So another innocent person is sent to Azkaban because the Ministry can't be bothered to do its job properly,” said Harry.

Dumbledore's gaze sharpened. “Do you really think Morfin was entirely innocent?”

Harry made sure his Occlumency shield was still at full strength before answering carefully. “He was innocent of the murders he was locked up for.”

“Quite right,” said Dumbledore, then stood up and pulled yet another phial from his robes. “One more memory for tonight. It is quite short, but rather important, as you are about to find out.”

He tipped the bottle into the Pensieve. This memory didn't flow out smoothly, in the strange half liquid, half gas substance which Harry was expecting. It seemed thick, gluggy, like spoiled milk. Harry tried not to wrinkle up his nose as he lowered his head into the Pensieve once more.

This time, Harry was relieved to land in a clean, well-lit space that he recognised as Slughorn's office. Slughorn himself was sitting in front of him in a well-padded, richly brocaded armchair, his feet resting on a velvet pouffe. He was far younger than the man Harry knew: he had thick, dark-blonde hair, though there was a large bald patch on his crown; his moustache was a gingery-blonde, not silver, and less impressive than the moustache Harry was used to; and while far less overweight than he would later become, the buttons on his waistcoat were straining over his stomach. One hand held a glass of wine; with the other, he was searching through a box of crystallised pineapple.

Half a dozen teenage boys were sitting around Slughorn, all of them on hard wooden seats far less comfortable-looking than Slughorn's. Harry tried to pick if one of them was Theo's father, but never having seen him without a Death Eater mask on, he was unable to do so. He was unsurprised to see Riddle at Slughorn's right hand, lounging in his chair like it was a throne. His right arm lay on the arm of his chair, with Marvolo's ring prominent upon his hand.

Harry wondered if any of the other boys knew that Riddle had killed his father.
“Sir, is it true that Professor Merrythought is retiring?” asked Riddle.

“Tom, Tom, if I knew I couldn't tell you,” Slughorn said, wagging a sugar-covered finger at Riddle. He winked before continuing with a smile, “I must say, I'd like to know where you get your information, boy; more knowledgeable than half the staff, you are.”

Riddle smiled as the other boys laughed and looked at him worshipfully.

Slughorn smiled chuckled. “What with your uncanny ability to know things you shouldn't, and your careful flattery of the people who matter – thank you for the pineapple, by the way, you're quite right, it is my favourite...”

The other boys were all sniggering when suddenly the entire room filled with a thick white fog, obscuring from Harry's view everyone but Dumbledore, who was standing next to him. A second later Slughorn's voice boomed through the air.

“You'll go wrong, boy, mark my words.”

An instant later the room was clear, looking exactly as it had before the fog's appearance. None of the inhabitants seemed confused or wary like Harry now was; nobody even mentioned the bizarre occurrence.

A small carriage clock chimed eleven o'clock, startling Slughorn. “Good gracious, is is that time already? You'd better get going, boys, or we'll all be in trouble. Lestrange, I want your essay by tomorrow or it's detention. Same goes for you, Avery.”

The group obediently left the room, save for Riddle. He lingered by his chair while Slughorn carried his empty wine glass over to his desk. When he turned back around he didn't seem overly surprised to find Riddle still there.

“Look sharp, Tom. You don't want to be caught out of bed out of hours, and you a Prefect...”

Riddle merely stepped closer. “Sir, I wanted to ask you something.”

Slughorn waved a hand. “Ask away, then, m'boy, ask away...”

“Sir, I wondered what you know about... about Horcruxes?”

Before Slughorn replied, the room once again filled with a thick fog, obscuring both himself and Riddle from Harry's view. Again, Slughorn's voice cut through, far louder than it needed to be.

“I don't know anything about Horcruxes and I wouldn't tell you if I did! Now get out of here at once and don't let me catch you mentioning them again!”

“That would be our cue to leave,” said Dumbledore, taking hold of Harry's arm one last time.

They returned to Dumbledore's office, Harry frowning in confusion. “I don't get it. Why was that memory so important? What was that fog? And what are Horcruxes?”

Dumbledore returned to his chair and gestured for Harry to do the same. “You may have realised that that memory has been tampered with.”

“Tampered?” Harry repeated. “That's why it was gluggy when you poured it? And the fog?”

Dumbledore nodded. “Professor Slughorn has tampered with his own memory, to obscure the parts in which, I assume, he does not come across well. Luckily for us, he is not particularly skilled at the
“So, you can find the true memory in it, sir? With Legilimency or something?” Harry asked.

“I'm afraid not. The only way to view the true memory is to get Professor Slughorn to part with it,” said Dumbledore. “Which is where you come in, Harry. For the first time, I shall be assigning you homework. Your task is to convince Professor Slughorn to part with the real memory.”

“Why me?” asked Harry.

“I believe that you are the one person who will be able to play to Professor Slughorn's weaknesses,” said Dumbledore.

“How am I supposed to do that, sir?” Harry asked.

Dumbledore steepled his fingers. “I trust that you'll figure it out. But I must impress upon you the importance of what I am asking you to do. This memory could prove to be the one piece of information that I need to confirm my theory. Do you understand?”

“Yes, sir,” Harry said, tamping down his frustration.

Dumbledore smiled. “Excellent. Good night, then, and good luck.”

Harry gave what he hoped was a convincing smile on his way out of the office. As soon as he was out on the stairs, his smile disappeared and he took down his Occlumency shield. He glared down at the stairs as they carried him away from the office. If this memory was so important for him to obtain, it would have been nice to have been given even a hint as to how he was supposed to obtain it.

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On Tuesday night, after dinner, Harry led Hermione and Draco down to Severus' quarters to discuss his latest lesson with Dumbledore. It didn't take him long to relate the events of the first memory, with which Draco was not at all impressed.

“What was the point of taking you into the Pensieve for that? Why couldn't he just tell you what happened?” he asked.

“It does seem a bit unnecessary,” Hermione agreed.

Severus ignored them both. “And the second memory?”

Harry described the second memory, skipping the start to focus on Riddle's questions about Horcruxes and Slughorn's alterations. By the time he finished, Hermione and Draco were both frowning in thought. Severus, on the other hand, had gone completely white.

“You're sure he asked about Horcruxes?” he asked.


“I'm not sure exactly, but I gather that they are a means by which to make oneself immortal,” said Severus.

“The Dark Lord's immortal?” Draco cried.

“Possibly,” said Severus.
There was a short but tense silence as that information sunk in, before Hermione spoke.

“What do you know about Horcruxes, Severus?” she asked.

“Not much,” Severus admitted. “They’re very Dark magic, I know that much. The topic is banned at Hogwarts. Albus has removed all books that mention them from the library, and all staff members are to report to him any student who enquires about them. I’ve read more than my fair share of books on Dark magic, and have never come across any that delve into the subject.”

“Pretty bloody Dark, then,” said Harry. “Can you ask Dumbledore about them?”

“I think I shall have to. He knows you’ll be talking to me about them, and would likely find it odd if I didn’t question him myself. But I doubt he’ll tell me anything,” said Severus. “Therefore, Draco, when you get back to your dormitory, I want you to use Harry’s mirror to get in touch with your mother. Ask her to search through the Malfoy and Black libraries for anything about them. If anyone has books on Horcruxes, it would be -”

“My family,” Draco said with a grimace. “Alright. May she tell Kingsley, Sirius and Remus?”

“Yes, I think so. But I don’t think they should speak about it to anyone else, nor tell Dumbledore what they know,” said Severus. “None of us are supposed to tell anyone else about what Harry and Dumbledore are discussing.”

Hermione frowned. “I don’t understand why we have to be so secretive with members of the Order.”

“Dumbledore will have his reasons,” said Severus.

“There’s one other thing,” said Harry. “He wants me to get the real memory off Slughorn.”

“How?” asked Hermione.

Harry spread his hands. “Beats me. He just said that I’m the only one who can, and to play to his weaknesses.”

“Well, what are you good at?” Hermione asked briskly. “Defence Against the Dark Arts and Potions -”

“So’s Dad,” said Harry.

“Quidditch,” said Draco.

“There are plenty of other good Quidditch players here,” said Harry.

“You’re a Parselmouth,” said Hermione.

“So am I,” said Draco.

“Drawing,” Hermione said.

Harry threw his hands up. “What am I supposed to do, draw him a picture of himself telling me?”

“Are you really all this dense?” Severus asked impatiently.

“Well what is it, then?” asked Harry.

Severus sighed. “It is not a matter of what you are good at. It’s a matter of who you are. Or rather,
who your mother was.”

“My mum?” Harry asked.

“Yes,” said Severus. “Lily was one of Slughorn's favourite students. I think you should start by
reminding him of her. Play on his affections towards her.”

Harry nodded slowly. “That could work.”

“Begin by mentioning her in conversation... perhaps play up the similarities between you and her.
Just don't over do it and make him suspicious,” said Severus.

“How? Turn my hair red and borrow Hermione's uniform?” asked Harry.

Draco raised an eyebrow. “Why is cross-dressing your immediate response?”

“I wouldn't go that far,” said Severus.

“Slug Club,” said Hermione.

“What about it?” asked Harry.

“Go to the dinners,” said Hermione. “You can't very well remind him of your mum in the middle of
class.”

“Yeah, okay, as long as you come too,” said Harry.

Hermione rolled her eyes. “They're not that bad, but yes, I'll be there, and I'll try to help you as best I
can.”

Severus nodded approvingly. “Good idea. I think if you are subtle enough, you will have him
frequently thinking of her. In a few weeks we can regroup and think about how best to manipulate
him into giving you the memory.”

Harry nodded, finally relaxing a bit now that he had an idea of what he was doing. Maybe this
wasn't such an impossible job after all.

“Hatshepsut,” said Draco.

“What?” asked Hermione.

“That snake painting. The Egyptian cobra that hates Ollie,” said Draco.

“You reckon she'd know something?” Harry asked.

Draco shrugged. “Maybe not about this, but she might be able to tell you something about the Dark
Lord that no one else can.”

“It's worth a try,” said Severus.

“Yeah, okay,” Harry said doubtfully.

Ollie and Ladon, when told of the plan that night, were even less confident than Harry.

“She's not going to tell you anything,” Ladon predicted.

“I don't think Riddle would've told her much to begin with,” Ollie added.
“No harm in giving it a shot,” said Harry.

He and Draco trudged up to the Transfiguration corridor, where Hatshepsut's frame hung on the wall. Ladon was wound around Harry’s shoulders, and Ollie kept pace with them, slithering in and out of various portraits that lined the way. Both Harry and Draco were amused by the reactions various portraits had to the sudden arrival of a venomous snake, though they turned serious when they approached Hatshepsut's frame.

Her painting was nothing like Ollie’s. While he had a painted pile of rocks in a savannah, with a river winding through the background, Hatshepsut had been painted a large, imposing Egyptian building lined with columns. Harry thought it might be a real place, some sort of ancient palace or temple, though given Hatshepsut's past rudeness to him, he'd never asked. A dark brown snake, with bands of tan crossing her neck, dozed on a cushioned throne. She raised her head when she heard their footsteps stop in front of her.

“Well, well, well, if it isn't Ollie and his human boy. I see you've brought your little worm with you tonight – oh, and another human boy.”

Ladon curled tighter around Harry. “I'm not a worm,” he said quietly. Harry reached up to pat him.

“Pleased to meet you,” Draco said, bowing.

Hatshepsut flared out her hood. “Why, Ollie, this one grovels almost as well as you do.”

“I don't grovel,” Ollie muttered from the side of her painting, not wanting to get too close.

“Nor do I – I was being polite. Clearly manners are lost on the likes of you,” Draco sneered.

“Oh, you have a bit of spirit,” Hatshepsut said.

“Hatshepsut, we would like to ask you some questions,” Harry cut in.

“How unfortunate for you, because I still don't want to answer them,” said Hatshepsut.

“It's about V- Lord Voldemort,” said Harry.

Hatshepsut raised herself even higher. “Lord Voldemort? He was a damn sight more interesting than you two, I can tell you that.”

“What else can you tell us about him?” asked Harry.

“Why do you want to know?” Hatshepsut asked.

“We're trying to piece together his past,” said Draco.

“To what end?” Hatshepsut demanded.

This was going even worse than he'd expected, Harry realised. “We're, er, great admirers of his. The greatest Parselmouth who ever lived -”

“Yes, he certainly is that, though I don't for a second believe that you two admire him,” Hatshepsut interrupted. “You're a liar – all of you. You're nosing into places you shouldn't, aren't you? You thought you could win me over with your bowing and your scraping, and I'd spill all I know to you? I don't think so.”

“Please, Hatshepsut!” Harry cried, abandoning all pretence. “He's evil. He's killed people – he's
killed snakes! If you know anything that might help us stop him, please tell us.”

He held his breath as he waited for her answer. Hatshepsut seemed to consider his words, before she lay her head back down on her coils.

“You're out of luck. I don't know anything. Lord Voldemort never told me anything about himself. You'll have to do your own research if you want to defeat him – and that I'd like to see! You wouldn't stand a chance against him!”

She refused to speak further, ignoring all their pleas until they eventually gave up.

“Well, that was a bust,” Harry grumbled.

Draco nodded. “Then again, she's never liked you. Slughorn fawns over you every lesson. How long could it possibly take?”
In Which Harry Begins Working on Slughorn

Harry's first opportunity to see Slughorn was during class on Thursday morning. Harry didn't fancy his chances of being able to really talk to Slughorn during class, but until Slughorn invited him to another of his dinners, he'd have to take what opportunities he got.

As it turned out, that morning's lesson was one of the more difficult of the year, and Slughorn got straight down to business.

“Hurry up now, please, there we are. We've lots to get through today,” he called out as everyone was taking their seats. “Who can tell me about Golpalott's Third Law?”

Hermione's hand shot into the air. “Golpalott's Third Law states that the antidote for a blended poison will be equal to more than the sum of the antidotes for each of the separate components.”

Slughorn nodded. “Precisely. In light of this theory, your potions must transcend each individual poisonous ingredient through almost alchemical means to create something capable of counteracting the entire poison.”

Alchemical my arse, Harry thought, it's just a few extra ingredients. Glancing around the room, though, everyone else seemed to be intimidated by Slughorn's words.

“And so for today's lesson, you are all to take one of these poisons, identify the poisonous components within using Scarpin's Revelaspell, and brew an antidote capable of fully counteracting the poison's effects.”

There was a chaotic scuffle while everyone rushed to select one of the phials of poison which were lined up on Slughorn's desk. Harry picked up a small bottle that contained a bright pink liquid and took it back to his table. He uncorked it, poured it into his cauldron, then cast a Revelaspell over the lot of it.

He wrote down the ingredients which the spell had informed him were in his poison. Beside him, Hermione was in the process of actually separating and removing each of the ingredients in order to individually bottle them – a complicated process which Harry thought more time-consuming than actually helpful, but which he had to admit did look impressive.

Turning his attention back to his own ingredients, he read through the list a few times until one of the rarer ingredients – Augurey feathers – caught his attention. There weren't many potions which contained that, and those that did were invariably unpleasant poisons of some sort. Harry flipped through his copy of *Advanced Potion-Making* until he found the instructions to Petrification Poison, an extremely nasty poison which turned its victims to stone. There, halfway down the page: Augurey feathers.

Harry cross-checked the rest of the ingredients in that poison against the list he had written down, ticking off those that appeared in both lists. Eventually he was left with a list of ingredients, which a quick flip through his book informed him made up Strangler's Stew, a poison that slowly choked its victims. He turned the pages to find the antidotes for the two poisons, scanned the ingredients lists, then headed for the supply cupboard in the corner of the classroom to fetch what he needed.

He began brewing the first part of the antidote as quickly as he could. He doubted he would have time to finish the second part, and he still had to think of what to add to the entire mixture to bind it all together as well as increase its effectiveness against the blended poisons. He cast his eye around
the room as he worked, hoping to see inspiration in the myriad ingredients on the workbenches.

Harry was working on the second half of the antidote when Slughorn called a five minute warning. Harry dropped his knife and tossed his chopped up eucalyptus leaves into his cauldron, then hastened back to the ingredients cupboard to get his last few items. When he returned, his antidote was simmering in its final stages, so he hurriedly dumped what he was carrying into a spare bottle and set it down on the bench. He knew he couldn't finish now, so focused on stirring his potion to get it as close to finished as possible. To his left, Draco was swearing continuously under his breath; to his right, a red-faced Hermione was feverishly adding more ingredients to her cauldron.

“Time’s up!” called Slughorn.

Harry his potion one last stir and stepped back from the bench. Looking around the room, no one else appeared to have completed their antidotes either, which made him feel a little better. Slughorn began to inspect everyone's potions, starting at the Ravenclaw table.

“You have soot on your nose,” Draco whispered to Hermione.

Hermione wiped at it with her sleeve. “You spilled kelpie bile all down your front.”

Draco looked down in horror at the thick beige liquid sluggishly dripping down his robes. “Ugh!”

He quickly cast a Scouring Charm on himself, just as Slughorn finally reached their table. He gave a cursory glance into Ernie's cauldron, from which green smoke was billowing, and coughed when he caught a whiff of Draco's mixture, which had a horrible medicinal smell to it. His eyes were watering slightly when he turned to Hermione, but he smiled when he saw her cauldron.

“Well done, my dear,” Slughorn said, “this is brewed marvellously, though this particular method would not be the wisest course if you had actually been poisoned – bit on the tedious side, you know...”

“Yes, sir,” Hermione said tightly.

Slughorn turned to Harry expectantly, then beamed when he saw his cauldron. “Another flawless potion, Harry! You almost finished it, too... Tell me, what were you planning to use as your bonding agent?”

Harry picked up his bottle, which now contained a lumpy, pale yellow liquid inside it. “Silk worms dissolved in Runespoor venom, sir.”

“An inspired choice!” Slughorn cried. “A bit unorthodox but certainly most effective! You simply must get that from your mother, Lily was never afraid to try something new...”

Harry nodded. “Yes, sir. Everyone always tells me how much I remind them of her.”

He was uncomfortably aware that everyone was staring at him, but he held the smile he'd plastered on his face.

Slughorn grew a little pensive. “Yes, yes of course... your eyes...” There was a heavy silence, broken by the bell ringing. “Ten points to Slytherin, Harry, and time to pack up everyone!”

Harry packed up as quickly as he could, eager to get out of the classroom and away from all the odd looks he was getting from everyone but Hermione and Draco.

“God, I hope he gives me that memory soon,” Harry muttered, once he was out in the corridor.
“Well, maybe next time it won’t be in front of the entire class,” Hermione said consolingly.

Harry laughed humourlessly. “I never thought I’d actually look forward to being invited to one of his dinners.”

“You’ll like the food,” Hermione assured him. “And I’ll be there, as will Ginny and Blaise.”

“I suppose so,” Harry said, brightening a little.

“It won’t take you long,” said Draco.

Harry stared at him. “What makes you so confident?”

Draco smirked. “You have us helping you.”

******

Draco’s confidence turned out to be misplaced. Despite Harry attending two dinners with Slughorn, at which he made sure to talk about Lily for as long as he could, by the end of January he was no closer to getting the memory. Slughorn was as affable as ever, but at no point did he give the impression that he was about to confess all to Harry.

Nor had Narcissa, Sirius or Remus been able to find out anything helpful about Horcruxes in the library at Grimmauld Place. Sirius had given Harry the bad news via his mirror one evening.

“The best we could find was a warning not to let your enemies make a Horcrux,” he’d said.

Harry’s heart had sunk. “Too late for that, isn't it? It sounds like Voldemort already has one.”

“Sorry, Harry, that’s all there was. We searched every book we had – and they're pretty awful, for the most part. I came across charmingly detailed instructions on how to decapitate house-elves and stuff their heads, among other delightful reading, but nothing else on Horcruxes,” Sirius had said.

One Sunday, while they were patching themselves up after another duelling practice, Harry brought Severus, Hermione and Draco up to speed on his latest attempts to work on Slughorn.

“I have an idea, but you may not like it,” Severus said at last.

Something about his tone made Harry pause in his ministrations to Hermione's split lip. “What is it?”

“You know what this Thursday is,” said Severus.

Harry stared at him. “Mum's birthday.”

Severus nodded. “It would be an ideal time to prey upon Slughorn's emotions.”

“We have Potions first thing Thursday. You could start crying in class. I'm sure Pansy would be happy to teach you how to cry on command,” said Draco.

“I'm not crying in class,” said Harry.

“Such an outburst would likely arouse his suspicions in any case,” said Severus.

“And anyway,” Harry went on, “I'm not sure if I'm comfortable doing it on her birthday. I feel bad enough as it is using her memory like this.”
“Understandable,” said Severus. “In that case, I'll talk to him myself at dinner.”

“You don't think that that would strike him as odd?” asked Draco.

Severus raised an eyebrow. “I spied on Voldemort and lived to tell the tale, I think I can have a conversation with a colleague without giving away my true intentions.”

Draco turned pink. “I just meant -”

“That's probably a better idea anyway,” Hermione cut in, her voice a little slurred from her injured lip.

“Why?” asked Harry.

“Well, because you – you don't have any memories of your mum's birthday, to actually talk about,” said Hermione.

“Whereas I do,” said Severus.

“But Dumbledore said that it needs to be Harry, that he's the only one Slughorn will talk to,” said Draco.

“I don't expect him to tell me anything. I shan't even mention the memory we need. But I can reminisce about Lily, and talk about how much Harry has missed out on, never knowing her,” said Severus. “Harry can't very well say anything like that to a teacher, particularly one he doesn't know very well, but myself, talking as a concerned parent to my old Head of House? Entirely plausible.”

And so during dinner on Thursday night, Harry picked at his food, while covertly watching Severus and Slughorn up at the staff table. They were deep in conversation, and when dinner was over they got up and left together.

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Harry never asked what, exactly, Severus had said to Slughorn; that was private, and if he wanted to hear about Lily, he'd ask in his own time. He knew the gist of the conversation, and that was all he needed to know.

At the end of his next Potions lesson, Harry was held back by Slughorn. He packed up his equipment, careful not to allow a triumphant smile to creep onto his face.

“Harry, m'boy,” Slughorn said, once they were alone.

Harry put on his best guileless expression. “Yes, Professor?”

Slughorn rocked on his feet before answering. “I just wanted to tell you that if you – if you ever need to talk – if you're ever upset, or need help – you can always come to me for advice.”

Harry smiled regretfully. “Thank you, Professor, but my dad's my Head of House...”

Slughorn chuckled. “That's precisely why I'm offering, Harry! I remember what it's like to be your age – I'm sure you have plenty of little secrets you'd rather Severus never found out about!”

Harry didn't, of course – he would in fact be telling Severus about this very conversation – but he nodded. “Thank you, sir. I might just take you up on that one day.”

Slughorn beamed. “My pleasure, m'boy, my pleasure.”
When Harry had relayed Slughorn's offer to Severus, Draco and Hermione, all three of them agreed with Harry that he should wait before going to Slughorn for anything. To do so immediately would be too conspicuous; far better to allow some time to pass, to make Harry's approach more organic and believable.

Harry was grateful for the reprieve, as Slytherin's next Quidditch match was coming up at the end of February, and the team was already struggling to get in any training sessions: Harry had had to reschedule one session so that he could attend a Slug Club dinner, all the team bar Malcolm and Viola had heavy workloads, and there was the usual atrocious February weather to deal with. Since their return to Hogwarts, the Slytherins had only had one training session in which they didn't get absolutely drenched.

Yet another impediment arrived on the first Saturday of February: Apparition lessons for the sixth years. Normally these would have been held out in the grounds, but given the pouring rain, the lessons were relocated to the Great Hall. Consequently, Harry hung around in the Entrance Hall after breakfast, then returned to the Great Hall once it had been cleared of the house tables. The entire year was present, as were all four Heads of House, and a short, wispy-looking wizard who must be the Apparition Instructor from the Ministry. He waited until the Heads of House had silenced their students before speaking.

“Good morning. My name is Wilkie Twycross and for the next twelve weeks, I shall be your Ministry Apparition Instructor. My aim is to get you all ready to take your Apparition test at that time. Before we begin, a word of warning. While the Headmaster has lifted Hogwarts' anti-Apparition ward for your lessons, that freedom exists only within the walls of this hall. Attempts to Apparate outside of this room would be unsuccessful and I strongly advise you all against them. Now, I would like you all to spread out so that you have five feet of clear space in front of you.”

There was a commotion as everyone hastened to get into an advantageous position. Harry would have been content up the back, but Hermione dragged both him and Draco to the front, behind a row of Ravenclaws. It took a few minutes before everyone was organised, and the Heads of House had to again call for silence.

Twycross nodded at the teachers. “Thank you. Now then...” He waved his wand, conjuring old-fashioned wooden hoops onto the floor in front of each student. “The important things to remember when Apparating are the three Ds! Destination, Determination, Deliberation!”

Since he didn't need instructions on how to Apparate, Harry tuned out the rest of Twycross' speech. He surreptitiously studied the enchanted ceiling above, through which he could torrential rain. He was in the middle of wondering if he really needed to start dragging the Quidditch team out to train in weather as bad as this, when Draco elbowed him.

“At least pretend to pay attention,” he whispered.

Harry focused on Twycross, who was counting slowly. On three, the hall was suddenly filled with whirling bodies as the assembled students all spun around on the spot. Harry hastily did so too, promptly losing his balance and nearly falling into Hermione. He wasn't the only one who had trouble. He glanced over his shoulder and saw Neville spread-eagled on the floor and Pansy sitting on her bottom, pulling her skirt back down.

Twycross didn't seem at all surprised by such wholesale failure. “Never mind, never mind. Adjust your hoops, please, and back to your original positions...”
And so it went on, with people spinning and stumbling with varying degrees of coordination. It wasn't until the fourth attempt that anything interesting happened. A terrible shriek ripped through the hall, and everyone turned around to see Susan inside her hoop, wobbling on one leg and crying with terror. Her left leg was five feet away in her starting position.

The Heads of House all rushed towards her, obscuring her from view. There was a loud bang, and a large puff of purple smoke, which cleared to reveal a newly-whole Susan, sobbing and shakily running her hands over her reattached leg.

“Splinching,” Twycross said loudly, clearly annoyed that anyone had found the spectacle at all distracting, “can occur when you have insufficient determination. You must concentrate on your hoops, and move with deliberation, like so.”

He spun on the spot, Apparating a couple of metres to his right. Harry met Severus’ eyes and raised his eyebrows questioningly. Severus gave his head a minuscule shake. Harry sighed and went back to spinning futilely on the spot.

When the lesson eventually came to an end, Harry suggested going down to Hagrid's for tea. It was still bucketing down outside, so Hermione conjured up a large umbrella for the three of them. Harry pulled his cloak tighter around himself and shivered as they set off down the lawn.

“I really hope someone manages to Apparate soon so that I can stop pretending I can't,” Harry grumbled. “Get a move on, will you, Hermione?”

“It might not be me,” said Hermione.

Draco gave her an incredulous look. “Please. When have you ever not been the first in our year to pick up whatever it is that we're learning?”

“Patronuses,” Hermione said at once. “Tracey, Theo, Pansy, Millicent and Daphne all produced theirs before I managed to.”

The boys both stared at her. “You really don't like it when you're not first at something, do you?” Draco finally said with a laugh.

“No, I don't,” Hermione admitted.

“Well, that's the only time it's happened to you,” said Harry, “which means, by the law of averages or whatever, that you'll be the first to Apparate and save me from falling on my arse all the time.”

“I'm not sure it works that way,” said Hermione.

Harry gave her his best puppy-dog eyes. “Please, Hermione. Help me. I'm so very dizzy.”

Hermione laughed. “You're such a dork. Fine, I'll Apparate as quickly as I can in order to save you from yourself.”

“How about time someone did,” said Draco.

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The day of the Slytherin – Ravenclaw match was just as wet as the rest of February had been. The Slytherin team sprinted down the lawn to their changing room, which was covered in mud and puddles in seconds. They got changed into their Quidditch uniforms and sat on the benches waiting for Harry's speech. He cast an Impervius Charm on his glasses then gazed around at his team mates.
“Okay then. I know none of us want to be flying when it’s pissing down like this, and I’d love to say let’s make it a quick game, but we need the points. We’re tied with Ravenclaw, and Gryffindor aren’t too far behind, so we need to have a decent win today. It could always be worse: it could be windy, or there could be a storm.”

“Shut up before you jinx us, Potter,” Malcolm grumbled.

Everyone else looked confused at the Muggle phrase, but Harry grinned. “Fair call. Alright. We know their Keeper’s fast, but we’ve got the quickest damn Chaser at this school. You ready to show Page what real speed is, Scarlett?”

“Sure am,” said Scarlett.

“Signal me when you need a time out for your drops,” said Harry. “Alright guys, it’s just like we talked about. Draco and Viola, once Scarlett’s got the Quaffle, your job is to keep the Ravenclaw Chasers out of her way. Millicent and Theo, that leaves you to target Page.”

“Does he have any injuries we should know about?” asked Millicent.

“Not that Malcolm and I could see when we spied on their last training session,” said Harry.

“Bugger,” said Millicent.

“Guess we’ll just have to give him some ourselves,” said Theo, sharing a smirk with Millicent.

Harry stood up. “Let’s do it.”

The team trudged outside onto the muddy pitch to the usual mixture of cheers and boos from the crowd. Harry went and stood next to Hooch, across from Cho, whose ponytail was already plastered to her neck.

“Ma’am, I might need to call a time out a little sooner than usual for Scarlett to take her drops. The low light might make her eye worse,” said Harry.

Hooch nodded. “Noted, Potter. Alright, shake hands you two.”

Cho had a calculating expression on her face as she and Harry shook hands; she clearly thought that Harry had let slip a weakness her team could exploit. Harry smirked, then shot into the sky at Hooch’s whistle.

“It’s a miserable day so let’s all hope for a good match, eh? These two teams are tied for first place in the cup and neither of them will be wanting to give any ground today.”

Harry looked down at the commentator’s box to see Seamus huddled under a large umbrella. At least this match should have some decent commentary, Harry thought.

“Slytherin’s Richmond has first possession. She’s heading for goal with the other Chasers all speeding after her.”

Harry began circling the pitch, aware that Cho was following him closely. At least the Snitch would stand out against the grey of the sky, he thought. Even the green and blue uniforms of the teams were dulled to an almost identical grey in the rain.

“Richmond passes to Lympsham, who – oh, that was unexpected! Richmond and Black block Bradley and Brooks, leaving Chambers as the only Ravenclaw Chaser able to defend! She’s too far
behind to catch Lympsham, who ducks around Page to score the first points of the match.”

The Slytherins in the stands erupted into cheers. Harry grinned, pleased that their unusual game plan was working, at least for now. Given the impressive speed that Page had displayed in the match against Hufflepuff, the Chasers would normally have been passing the Quaffle quickly amongst themselves before going for goal. The torrential rain made this impractical – as good as the Chasers were, quick passes in the rain had a very high chance of being dropped from slippery hands. Instead, the current plan was to give Scarlett as many scoring opportunities as possible, since she was the fastest of the three Chasers. Draco and Viola were to clear her opposition, and Millicent and Theo were to take care of Page.

They all knew it couldn't last, that the Ravenclaws would eventually figure out that they needed to be focusing on blocking Scarlett. The Slytherins were banking on being able to get in a series of quick goals before that happened. They had a few different plays planned out, and thought they might be able to get through them all at least once.

“Chambers takes possession and rejoins her fellow Chasers. The Slytherins are closing in beside them – Nott hits a Bludger at Chambers – she ducks – Samuels hits the Bludger back at the Slytherins, hitting Black – Chambers is hit with the other Bludger by Bulstrode – she drops the Quaffle and there's a tussle. Richmond and Bradley both have their hands on it and -” Hooch blew her whistle twice “- that's two fouls, one by each team if I'm not mistaken...”

He wasn't. Bradley took her penalty shot first, fooling Malcolm with a feint to score. Viola wasn't as lucky.

“Nice save by Page! He passes to Brooks who – ooh, that's gotta hurt! Nott nails her with a Bludger – the Beaters are all on fire today – and she drops the Quaffle, with Black scooping it up. He heads to goal with Richmond and Lympsham flying up beside him. The Ravenclaw Chasers are catching up... Black passes to Lympsham – Black and Richmond immediately block the Ravenclaws again, and Lympsham scores!”

Slytherin quickly pulled away from Ravenclaw. The Ravenclaw Chasers were struggling with the weird plays from the Slytherin Chasers, and Scarlett scored more often than not. Eventually the Ravenclaw Beaters began to target Scarlett, and Ravenclaw began to catch up. They'd narrowed Slytherin's lead to sixty points by the time Scarlett signalled to Harry that she needed her drops. He asked Hooch for a time out, and both teams landed in the mud and huddled together.

While Millicent and Theo tried to shield Scarlett's face from the rain, Malcolm applied her eye drops. Harry, Draco and Viola gazed across the pitch at the Ravenclaw team, who were all staring back at the Slytherins while Cho spoke to them, gesturing a lot to her face.

“What do you think that's about?” Viola asked.

Harry sniggered. “Cho overheard me telling Hooch that Scarlett might have trouble with her eye today. She's obviously telling them that it's a weakness they can work with.”

Viola and Draco laughed. “Let's keep them thinking that,” said Viola.

Draco nodded. “They're going after her anyway. Now we know which side they'll be coming from.”

“Exactly what I was thinking,” Harry said, then turned to face the rest of the team. “You okay to keep going, Scarlett?”

Scarlett grinned. “They haven't hit me yet.”
“Don't get cocky,” Harry warned, then relayed what he'd just seen.

“So what's the plan?” asked Millicent.

Harry considered this. “Theo, shadow Scarlett. Keep on her left, because that's where they'll be coming from. When she's in possession, you can help Draco and Viola block their Chasers and get all three of them out of the way. Millicent, you keep going after Page.”

Scarlett looked up at Theo. “Don't stick too close to me. I need to be able to move.”

Theo nodded. “Got it.”

Not ten seconds later Hooch blew her whistle and the teams took to the air.

“And we're back for more of what's turned out to be a one-on-one battle between Lympsham and Page,” said Seamus. “Slytherin are leading one hundred and ten to fifty, but Ravenclaw were having a resurgence before that time out – can they keep their momentum and make a full comeback? Brooks is in possession and she's looking pretty confident.”

Harry looked down to see all six Chasers flying towards the Ravenclaw goals, with Theo tagging along next to Scarlett.

“Inglebee shoots a Bludger at Lympsham – Nott blocks it – no, he deflects it towards Brooks and hits her square in the back! There's not much power behind it at such close range, but she drops the Quaffle all the same, and it's picked up easily by Richmond and the entire group turns for the Slytherin goals.”

Harry grinned as he watched his backup plan working, then resumed searching for the Snitch. He kept listening to the commentary as he did so, in case Ravenclaw overtook them and he needed to stall, but the Slytherin team kept their lead. When Harry caught the Snitch to end the match, the final score was three hundred and ten to ninety.

Back in the changing room the team got changed out of their muddy Quidditch robes, then raced back up to the castle, where they cast Drying Charms on themselves before entering the common room. Millicent immediately crouched down and pulled Scarlett onto her shoulders.

“Three cheers for our star Chaser!” she shouted.

Scarlett grinned and held her arms up victoriously, milking the attention. “Who's getting me a drink?” she asked, after the cheering had died down.

“On it,” Malcolm said at once, darting away to the drinks table.

“Oh, I could get very used to this,” Scarlett said happily.

“You know he only volunteered so that he could get a Firewhisky for himself, right?” asked Draco.

“Duh, he's always moaning that third years have to stick to Butterbeer. Doesn't bother me. If he wants to be my drinks slave for the night he can have all the booze he wants,” Scarlett said, then giggled. “This is brilliant, I won't have to fetch a drink or walk anywhere all night!”

Theo shook his head. “You've created a monster, Bulstrode.”

Millicent just laughed. “I don't think so. She'll jump down as soon as she realises she can't dance up there.”
“Will not! Oh, who am I kidding. A party with no dancing is worse than no party at all,” Scarlett said, then jumped down. “But I’m keeping my drinks slave!”

She sped off to find Malcolm, high-fiving a few people in the crowd as she went. Theo and Millicent wandered off to find their girlfriends, leaving Harry and Draco with Viola. Before Harry could suggest they get their own drinks, Viola’s friends appeared out of nowhere and swarmed around her, whispering and giggling.

Astoria broke away from the others and gave Harry a dimply smile. “You played really well today, Harry,” she said, batting her lashes.

Draco cleared his throat pointedly.

Astoria glanced at him. “Frog in your throat, Draco? Maybe you should go get a glass of water.”

“Maybe you should mind your own business, Greengrass,” Draco snapped.

Astoria huffed. “I can compliment whoever I like, Black.”

“You should go talk to Scarlett, then,” said Harry. “She was our best player today, hands down.”

Astoria blinked, then smiled again. “I was just about to. See you later, Harry.”

She walked off, signalling for her friends to follow her. Draco watched her leave through narrowed eyes.

“I don't care whose sister she is, if she flirts with you in front of me one more time, I'll hex her,” he said.

“You know nothing's going to happen,” said Harry.

“Oh, I trust you, of course I do. She's the one I don't trust. What if she slips you a love potion or something?” asked Draco.

Harry laughed. “I thought I was supposed to be the paranoid one in this relationship.”

“You are,” said Draco.

Harry smirked. “Well in that case, you have nothing to worry about, because I'm not worried. So let's drop it and go get something to eat. And if you see me acting weird, you can always just take me to Dad for a love potion antidote.”

“Count on it,” Draco said.

********

On Sunday morning Harry and Draco rushed into the Room of Requirement, late for duelling practise due to having slept in after the previous night's party. They found Severus and Hermione talking just inside the doorway, both of them looking rather impatient.

“How nice of you to join us,” said Severus.

“Sorry we're late, we only got to bed a couple of hours ago,” said Harry.

“Please tell me that you are not also hungover,” said Severus.
“Nope, just tired,” said Harry.

“How fortunate for you,” said Severus. “Very well. Since she is the only one of you to arrive on time today, Hermione, you may choose today’s terrain.”

Hermione frowned in thought. “What about your house, sir? An attack there isn’t out of the question, after all.”

Severus gave her an impressed look. “Good suggestion. There are myriad protections and concealments upon the property, but no place is ever fully secure.”

They all gathered in one corner to stay out of the way as the room changed around them. Grass spread across the floor, then the house and the barn shimmered into being, before being surrounded by the chaotic jumble of the garden, around which a stone fence wound itself. In less than a minute, Harry was staring at a perfect replica of his home.

“Wow,” he said faintly.

“This place is definitely impressive,” Hermione agreed.

“Indeed,” Severus agreed. “Now, since Harry and I will naturally have an advantage in this simulation, we'll fight in pairs. Harry and Hermione against Draco and me. We'll take it in turns attempting to invade the house.”

"We'll defend first," Harry said.

Severus shrugged. "So be it. You have two minutes before we attack. Draco, follow me."

While they walked off around the inside of the fence, Harry and Hermione ran into the house. They shut the door behind themselves and looked around. The lounge room looked as it always did, down to the coffee table being covered with a pile of books, two teacups, a teapot, a sketchbook, and some scattered pencils.

"Where to?" asked Hermione.

"Upstairs," said Harry.

They raced up to Harry's room, where he wrenched open the replica of his school trunk.

"Now we're talking," he said, grinning up at Hermione.

They won that round easily, sitting on the roof behind the shelter of the chimney, lobbing various Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes down at Severus and Draco. They all regrouped in the corner of the room, waiting for the Room to return everything to their proper appearances, then it was Harry and Hermione's turn to attack.

Once he got over seeing large areas of his home being repeatedly destroyed, Harry enjoyed the day's practice. Fighting in a building gave both sides more shelter, as well as more weapons. Kitchen knives were hurled through the air; roof tiles were dropped onto the ground, narrowly missing Draco; and the kitchen chairs ran after Harry, kicking him in the shins until he and Hermione managed to set them all on fire. After Severus set off an explosion that obliterated the barn as a distraction, they called it a day.

“What was that?” Hermione asked shakily.
“Erumpent horn,” said Severus.

Hermione’s eyes widened. “Do you have Erumpent horn in your real barn?”

“Of course,” said Severus.

“In a locked cabinet that’s warded to hell and back,” said Harry.

“I assure you, Hermione, that it’s perfectly safe,” said Severus. “Now, Harry. I think it’s about time that you tried to speak to Slughorn about a topic approaching Horcruxes.”

Harry nodded. “There’s a Slug Club dinner on Saturday, and I think I’ve got a plan.”

“Excellent. What is it?” asked Severus.

Harry ran a hand through his hair, making a face when it came out bloodied. “It mostly involves a lot of lying. You’re not going to like it.”

Severus raised an eyebrow. “I have no qualms about you lying to Slughorn.”

Harry grinned. “I know that. It’s more the content of the lies that you’re not going to like.”

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Saturday’s dinner wasn’t that bad in the end. Slughorn spent quite a while talking to Melinda Bobbins, a third year Ravenclaw whose family owned a chain of apothecaries. Harry found the conversation halfway interesting, and when Slughorn turned his attention to McLaggen, Harry and Ginny began talking about the Harpies’ chances that year.

Slughorn’s carriage clock chimed eleven o’clock from his desk.

“Eleven already, is it? You’d best be getting back to your common rooms, then, before you get caught out after curfew,” said Slughorn.

“You coming, Harry?” Blaise asked as he stood up.

“Not yet, I wanted to ask Slughorn something,” Harry said.

Blaise shrugged. “Suit yourself,” he said, then walked out with Ginny.

“Good luck,” Hermione whispered, before hurrying after them.

As he waited for everyone else to leave, Harry was reminded of Voldemort doing the exact same thing half a century earlier.

“Now, now, Harry, I know your father’s your Head of House but that doesn’t mean you can stay out until all hours,” Slughorn said, waving a finger at him.

“I know, sir. I just – I wanted to take you up on your offer. To talk, I mean,” said Harry.

Slughorn smiled. “Of course, m’boy. What can I do for you?”

“I wanted to ask you about a potion, and to get a pass to the Restricted Section, please, sir,” said Harry.

Slughorn’s eyebrows shot up. “Oh? And what do you need in there that you don’t want Severus
finding out about?”

Harry bit his lip. “Will you promise not to tell him?”

Slughorn chuckled. “You're not up to any mischief, are you?”

“Oh, no, nothing like that,” Harry said quickly. “I'm trying to look up an obscure potion. Dad hasn't been able to figure out what it was. I suggested he ask you about it, actually, but -- well, he got a bit offended. He said he could figure it out himself, only he's been working on it for over a year and hasn't got any closer. It's really important that we figure it out. I thought maybe I'd get lucky -- a fresh set of eyes, you know.”

“Oho, a puzzle, is it?” Slughorn leaned forward, his face bright with interest. “I can certainly write you a pass, Harry, but why don't we see if I can help you first?”

“So you promise you won't tell my dad?” asked Harry.

“It'll be our little secret,” Slughorn assured him.

“I'd really appreciate that, sir,” said Harry, running a hand through his hair. He had to tread carefully now. “Okay, well, it's about Voldemort.”

Slughorn flinched. “You-Know-Who? Harry -”

“It's about the potion he used to come back,” said Harry, ploughing on before Slughorn could stop him. “I've told Dad all I can remember about it, but he hasn't been able to figure out what it was. We're hoping if we find out what he used to regenerate himself, we might be able to find a weakness.”

Slughorn paled. “Harry, if he finds out -”

“Don't you know Occlumency, sir?” Harry asked innocently.

“Well, yes, as a matter -”

“Me too. He'll never know. We're both safe here at Hogwarts, under Dumbledore's protection,” said Harry, thinking that he deserved a medal for saying that with a straight face.

“Does Dumbledore know about this?” Slughorn asked suspiciously.

“Not really. I mean, when I first got back from the graveyard, I told him about the potion. But I don't think Dad's told him that he's trying to figure out what the potion was. You know what he's like -- he's no good asking for help. He'd be cross if he even knew I was talking to you,” said Harry.

Doubt flickered across Slughorn's face. “That does sound like Severus...”

“Please, sir,” Harry said, “I know I'm asking a lot. I swear I won't even tell Dad that I asked you -- I'll pretend I snuck into the Restricted Section. But if you know anything, anything at all, it could really help me.”

Slughorn hesitated, then took a large gulp of wine from his goblet and nodded. “Very well, Harry, I'll give you your pass, and answer your questions if I can.”

Harry smiled, his first genuine expression since they'd started their conversation. “Thank you, sir.”

“Yes, yes,” Slughorn said, refilling his goblet. “What can you tell me about this potion?”
“Well, it was in a stone cauldron – maybe granite, I'm not sure – but it was definitely big enough for an adult to sit in... I don't know what it looked like cold, but when Pettigrew lit a fire under it a lot of thick steam came pouring out, before it began to sparkle, getting so bright that I couldn't look directly at it,” said Harry.

He had to stop to take a drink of water as the memory of that terrible night came rushing back. Next to him, Slughorn also took a drink, though his earlier distress seemed to be giving way to academic curiosity.

“He put Voldemort into the cauldron – he was about the size of a large baby, but wrong – I know he drank unicorn blood on at least one occasion, to keep himself alive, and Firenze told me that drinking it will curse you...” said Harry.

Slughorn nodded jerkily. “Yes, it would...”

Harry decided to move on quickly, far away from any talk of Horcruxes. “Well, he looked pretty cursed to me... Then Pettigrew added a bone from Voldemort's father to the potion – bone of the father, unknowingly given, he said. It let off more sparks and turned blue... then he chopped off his own hand – flesh of the servant, willingly given – and added that, which turned the potion blood red... then he took my blood – blood of the enemy, forcibly taken – and added that, and the potion turned bright white... there was more smoke, and – and then...”

“And then he was back,” Slughorn said quietly.

Harry nodded. “Yeah.”

“Well,” said Slughorn. He cleared his throat before continuing, “I'm afraid you're not going to find that potion in any book in Hogwarts, not even in the Restricted Section.”

“I didn't think I would. I was hoping to find maybe something that could point us in the right direction, though. Maybe there's a book that mentions a similar potion, or regenerative magic or something,” said Harry.

“This goes beyond regenerative magic, Harry. This is very, very Dark Magic,” Slughorn said.

“I know, sir,” Harry said somberly. “Is there anything you can tell me that might help identify the potion?”

Slughorn spread his hands. “I've never heard of anything like it. Bringing someone back from the dead – or almost dead, I suppose – like that... it shouldn't be possible. All I can tell you is what you probably already know – and what Severus definitely already knows – regenerative potions need at least one ingredient with regenerative properties, such as caterpillar cocoons, or invertebrates that can regrow limbs...”

“What about the three ingredients we do know about? Dad says that using human blood in a potion doesn't automatically make it Dark,” said Harry.

“That's a matter of some debate – the Ministry disagrees, and naturally I must agree with their assessment, you understand – but in this instance? With the directive 'blood of the enemy, forcibly taken'? That's undeniably Dark magic...” Slughorn trailed off in thought.

Harry tried not to fidget, hoping his face looked suitably innocent.

Slughorn shook his head. “I really can't tell you much more than that, I'm afraid. The ritualistic words make me think it's something very ancient, but other than that, I can't think of anything.”
Harry gave what he hoped was a disappointed smile. “I understand, sir. May I still get a pass?”

“Certainly, though what good it'll do you...” Slughorn lumbered to his feet and shuffled over his desk. He scribbled out a pass and handed it to Harry. “And not a word to anyone, Harry.”

“Of course not, sir. Thank you,” said Harry.

Slughorn nodded. “Off to bed with you, then, m'boy.”

“Goodnight, sir,” said Harry.

Outside in the corridor, he shut the door and let out a relieved sigh. That had gone far better than he had hoped. Slughorn hadn't told him anything new about the potion that he hadn't already discussed with Severus, but then, Harry had never expected him to. Most importantly, Harry had managed to get Slughorn to aid him in his attempt to take on Voldemort, without him catching on to the fact that Harry had spent most of their time lying through his teeth.
By the day of the Gryffindor – Hufflepuff Quidditch match, the rain had finally eased off. The clouds in the sky were white and fluffy, not dark with water, and frequently parted to let through a few minutes of sunshine. Like the rest of the Slytherin team, Harry was still feeling resentful towards Smith for what he'd said when commentating the Slytherin – Gryffindor match, and was wearing red to show his support for Gryffindor. While most of them had found red jumpers or scarves to wear, and Draco had borrowed some red gloves off Blaise, Scarlett had painted both her own and Malcolm's faces in red and gold.

“Gin told me that her team all want to get back at Smith for what he said,” Scarlett chirped.

Malcolm laughed. “Should be a good match, then.”

Harry grinned. “Don't forget to take note how Hufflepuff play today. It's not that long before we'll be facing them.”

Scarlett saluted. “Sure thing. We'll tell Viola, too!”

With that, she and Malcolm walked off to go find their friends. A second later Hermione appeared, decked out in her house colours and holding a spare Gryffindor scarf. She held it out to Harry.

“Put this on,” she ordered.

Harry stood up. “Isn't my red jumper enough?”

“No,” Hermione said, then wrapped the scarf around his neck herself. “There, that'll work perfectly.”

“Perfectly for what?” asked Harry, looking down at himself swathed in red and gold. “This feels wrong.”

“I'll say,” Draco agreed.

Hermione rolled her eyes. “Oh, for heaven's sake, it's not for long. Now shush.”

“Yes, ma'am,” Harry said, sharing a bemused glance with Draco.

“Good morning, Professor,” Hermione said loudly.

Harry and Draco turned around to see Slughorn waddling towards them. “Now, now, Miss Granger, you aren't trying to turn young Harry into a Gryffindor, are you?” he asked with a chuckle.

“Oh, no, sir,” Hermione said earnestly. “He asked to borrow a scarf. I think it suits him, don't you think?”

Slughorn blinked owlishly at Harry. “You're the spitting image of James at your age, save for your eyes, of course.”

Of course, Harry thought. “Yes, sir. I've got my mum's eyes,” he said.

“Do you usually wear Gryffindor colours if they're playing?” Slughorn asked.

“Not usually,” Harry said, wishing he knew what Hermione's plan had been.
“But he usually supports us when we're not playing Slytherin,” Hermione cut in. “He's got a lot of friends in my house, like Ginny Weasley, our Quidditch Captain.”

“That's admirably loyal of you,” said Slughorn. “Enjoy the match, all of you.”

With that, he walked off slowly, leaving Harry and Draco staring at Hermione questioningly.

“So that was weird,” Draco said as soon as Slughorn was out of earshot.

“I thought it might remind Slughorn of Harry's parents,” Hermione said, beginning to walk out of the Great Hall.

“Hermione, I already look exactly like my dad. I don't think a scarf is going to make much difference,” said Harry.

“No harm done, then,” said Hermione, then smirked. “Either way, you're now stuck wearing Gryffindor colours.”

They passed through the Entrance Hall out into the grounds. Despite the sunshine, it was still cold out, and Harry was secretly glad of his Gryffindor scarf.

“What did Ginny have to do with anything?” asked Draco.

Hermione laughed. “Isn't it obvious? She looks exactly like Harry's mum.”

“No, she doesn't,” said Harry.

“Oh, no, I can see that,” said Draco.

Harry gave him a shove. “You just think all redheads look alike.”

Draco shoved him back. “Do not. I'd never say Gemma looks like your mother, because that would be ridiculous. Ginny, though... there's a definite resemblance.”

Harry shook his head. “You're both mad.”

“Doesn't mean we're wrong,” Hermione said.

“We're also going to look entirely sane in comparison to Luna's commentary today,” said Draco.

“Wouldn't let Blaise hear you say that if I were you,” said Harry, looking over his shoulder.

Draco whipped his head around, then swore when he saw that Blaise was still a good fifty metres behind them. “Prat.”

Harry laughed. “Just 'cause I'm wearing a Gryffindor scarf doesn't mean I'm not a Slytherin.”

“Yes, because making Draco think Blaise is looming up behind him takes such cunning,” Hermione said drily.

They found seats near the front of the Slytherin stands, next to Daphne and Vikram, and were soon joined by Blaise, Theo and Tracey.

“How come we're not in the Gryffindor stand?” Harry asked Hermione.

She pulled a face. “Because if I have to spend an entire match listening to Lavender squealing over
Ron's Quidditch skills, I will vomit.”

Harry shuddered. “Fair enough. You didn't want to sit with Ethan?”

Hermione shook her head. “I was going to tell you today. I broke up with him last night. He turned out to be a complete pillock.”

“Oh,” said Harry, unable to pretend to be sad about this information.

Hermione smiled. “It's alright, you can say what you really think of him.”

“I think you were pretty accurate with 'pillock',” said Harry.

“What did he do?” asked Draco.

Hermione sighed. “He really didn't like Harry. I thought he'd get over that, but apparently not.”

“You broke up with him because of me?” Harry asked, now feeling guilty.

“Would you date someone who disliked me?” asked Hermione.

“Of course not,” Harry said at once.

“Depends. How fit is this hypothetical someone?” asked Draco.

Harry elbowed him in the side and gave a mock glare. “What was that?”

Draco smiled innocently. “I said of course not.”

“That's more like it,” said Harry.

Blaise leaned past the boys to catch Hermione's eye. “This isn't my fault. I shouldn't be expected to check that any potential matches don't dislike your friends.”

“It's fine. I never wanted to be set up in the first place, remember?” said Hermione.

Blaise nodded. “I know. Just trying to protect my reputation.”

Draco sniggered. “I really don't think your reputation is as good as you seem to think it is.”

Blaise raised an eyebrow. “And yours is?”

Draco grinned. “Never said it was, did I?”

Just then there came a huge cheer. Harry looked down to see the Gryffindor team walking out onto the pitch, and applauded. A few seconds later the Hufflepuffs walked out to a far smaller cheer. Harry watched in amusement as Ginny and Smith shook hands; given Smith's wince, Harry was fairly certain that Ginny had just caught his hand in a crushing grip. Moment later Hooch blew her whistle and both teams rose into the air.

Luna's vague, magically-amplified voice floated through the stadium. “Zacharias Smith of Hufflepuff flies off with the Quaffle. I don't think he's a very nice person – he was quite rude when he commentated the first match of the season, wasn't he? I know all the Gryffindors and Slytherins were very cross with him... Ginny Weasley even flew into him at the end of the match and I don't think it was an accident... oh, look, now Dean Thomas has taken the Quaffle off him. I guess he's still cross with Smith, too..."
“Can you blame him?” Draco muttered.

“Dean’s a very good artist, he drew me a picture of a Nargle last week – oh, I think Gryffindor have scored,” said Luna.

Demelza Robins had indeed scored for Gryffindor, drawing cheers from the red-clad supporters.

“One of the Hufflepuff Chasers has the Quaffle now. I’m not quite sure what his name is – I’ll call him Bobbit -”

“It’s Cadwallader,” McGonagall cut in, drawing laughter from the crowd.

“Mmm, I like my name for him more,” said Luna. “Bobbit gives the Quaffle to Smith – oh, no... he’s dropped the Quaffle because something startled him – it looked like a Dabberblimp -”

“Cootes hit a Bludger at him,” said McGonagall. “Bell takes possession.”

“No, it was definitely a Dabberblimp. They’re drawn to people who are unhappy – Smith must be suffering from Loser’s Lurgy. He needs to call a time out so that he can drink some Billywig tea, it’s the only way to get rid of Loser’s Lurgy,” said Luna.

Down in the commentary box, McGonagall was now shaking her head in resignation. A fair few people in the crowd were laughing, but Blaise was nodding thoughtfully.

“You know there’s no such thing as Loser’s Lurgy, don’t you?” Draco asked.

“You sure about that?” asked Blaise.

Draco laughed. “Yes! Fuck, Blaise, ever since you got together with Luna, you’ve – what’s that?”

Blaise looked down at where Draco was pointing at his chest, then grinned. “What, this?” he asked. He pulled a chain out of the neck of his jumper and held it up. It was threaded with three Butterbeer corks. “Luna made it for me. It’s to protect me from Nargles.”

Draco stared at him. “I don’t even know you any more.”

Harry burst out laughing, earning himself a glare from Blaise.

“Oh, and you’re so sure that Nargles don’t exist, are you, Potter?” Blaise snapped.

“Me? No, I’ve got no idea, and I don’t care either way,” said Harry. “I’m laughing at Draco.”

“You don’t honestly believe in Nargles, though, do you?” Hermione asked.

Blaise shrugged. “I’m with Harry – I’m not really fussed. If they don’t exist, then Luna’s made me a cool necklace. If they do exist, Luna’s made me a cool necklace that will protect me from Nargles.”

“I give up,” Draco said, moving closer to Hermione and turning his attention back to the game.

Harry shared a grin with Blaise before they, too, turned back to the game, and Luna’s commentary. While she certainly wasn’t the most knowledgeable commentator Harry had ever heard, she was certainly entertaining, continuing to talk about Smith’s Loser’s Lurgy and describing the shapes she could see in the clouds. McGonagall once more spent much of her time interrupting the commentary; this time to inform the crowd of the scores.

A couple of hours later, Ginny easily beat Stuart Summerby to the Snitch, winning the game by over
a hundred points. Hermione was too busy cheering her house's victory to pay any attention to Draco, who promptly decided he was talking to Harry again.

“T'll tell you one thing,” he said, wincing when Hermione accidentally elbowed his shoulder, “McGonagall’s got to be missing Jordan’s commentary right about now. I shudder to think who we’ll have to listen to next.”

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On Monday morning Luna wandered over to the Slytherin table, where she squeezed in between Blaise and Millicent, and told Harry that she had something for him.

Harry blinked at her over his breakfast. “You do?”

Luna nodded as she rummaged through her bag, jostling those on either side of her. Millicent shifted away in annoyance, but Blaise put down his tea to hold open her bag for her. “Thank you,” she murmured, digging through it. Eventually she straightened up and passed a small scroll across the table to Harry.

“Thanks,” he said. He unrolled it to find an invitation to join Dumbledore that night for their next lesson. “I'm seeing Dumbledore tonight,” he said to Draco.

“Lucky you,” Draco drawled, going back to his cereal.

Harry smiled at Luna. “Did you enjoy commentating?”

“It was alright,” said Luna, who was now helping herself to Blaise's porridge. “Everyone's been telling me I was terrible though, so I don't think I'll do it again.”

“Who's said that?” Blaise demanded.

Draco and Millicent suddenly found their breakfasts required much closer attention.

“Oh, lots of people. It's okay, I much prefer sitting with my friends anyway,” said Luna.

Blaise put his arm around her and kissed her cheek. “Well, I thought you were great.”

“Me, too. I learned a lot about clouds,” said Harry.

“Which is what one looks for from Quidditch commentary,” Draco muttered.

Harry kicked him under the table. It was far too early to be much more diplomatic than that.

That evening Harry had just given the password to the gargoyles protecting Dumbledore's office when someone came down the winding staircase towards him.

“So it's you!” Trelawney cried.

“It's me what?” Harry asked.

“You're the one for whom Dumbledore is throwing me out of his office!” said Trelawney, pointing a wavering finger at Harry. “You probably like the horse, too? Old Dobbin and his stupid fake forest!”

Harry was sorely tempted to say yes. “I don't take Divination any more,” he said instead.

Trelawney harrumphed, threw one of her many shawls back over her shoulder, and wobbled off
down the corridor, muttering under her breath. Harry shook his head and hopped onto the staircase, spending the ride making sure that his Occlumency shield was firmly up.

“Ah, Harry, come in,” said Dumbledore.

“Good evening, sir,” said Harry, still feeling a little confused by Trelawney.

Dumbledore chuckled. “I gather from your bemused expression that you ran into Professor Trelawney as she was leaving.”

“Yes, sir. Bit unexpected.”

“A slight staffing disagreement. Please, sit down.”

Harry did so. Sitting on the desk were two crystal vials, ready to be tipped into the Pensieve beside them.

“Now, then, to business. Have you succeeded in completing the task which I set for you?”

Dumbledore asked.

“Not yet, sir, but I have a plan,” said Harry.

“You have a plan,” Dumbledore said flatly.

“Yes, sir,” Harry said warily, not liking Dumbledore's expression.

“I thought I stressed to you the importance of this memory, Harry. Getting it is crucial to our future success. Without it, we are wasting our time,” said Dumbledore.

The injustice of this last remark rankled. “You never said that, sir,” said Harry.

Dumbledore looked taken about. “I beg your pardon?”

“You said it was important. You never said that we'd be wasting our time without it,” said Harry.

Dumbledore's gaze sharpened, leaving Harry absolutely certain that he was attempting Legilimency. His Occlumency shield felt strong, though, so he met Dumbledore's eyes unflinchingly.

Finally, Dumbledore blinked. “I do hope that this plan of yours will be executed shortly.”

Harry raised his chin. “With all due respect, sir, you never gave me any advice about how I could go about this when I asked you, so I've been left to work on Slughorn in my own way. Maybe it's taking longer than you'd hoped, but if you wanted someone to mess it all up by just asking him outright the next day, you should have asked a Gryffindor, not a Slytherin.”

“And what does the Slytherin way entail?” Dumbledore asked.

“Success,” Harry said simply.

“I hope so,” said Dumbledore.

Harry saw the exact moment in which Dumbledore decided to drop the argument; the twinkle returned to his eyes, and he spread his hands with a sudden smile. “Let us argue no more, but instead return to our narrative. You remember what you learned last time?”

Harry nodded tightly. “Voldemort killed his Muggle father and grandparents, then framed his uncle
for their murders. When he got back to Hogwarts he asked Slughorn about Horcruxes.”

“Just so. I hope you also remember that when we began these lessons, I mentioned that at some point we would exhaust my supply of factual evidence, and move onto theories and speculation?”

“Yes, sir.”

“So far, what I have shown you has been fairly straightforward, but now it becomes even harder to track Voldemort’s whereabouts and actions. I have struggled to find anyone willing to tell me about their dealings with an adult Voldemort, but I have two last memories that I wish to show you tonight,” said Dumbledore, gesturing to the two bottles on the desk.

“Before we plunge once more into the Pensieve, I must tell you how Voldemort left Hogwarts,” Dumbledore went on, leaning back in his seat. “It will come as no surprise to learn that he received top marks in every subject that he studied. Prefect, Head Boy, recipient of a Special Award for Services to the School – everyone had high hopes for young Tom Riddle. Many teachers, including Professor Slughorn, suggested that he begin a career at the Ministry of Magic, and even offered to introduce him to influential Ministry employees. He turned them all down, and the next time anyone heard of him, he was working at Borgin and Burkes.”

“Borgin and Burkes?” asked Harry.

Dumbledore smiled. “I believe that when we enter our first memory, you will see the attraction the job held for him. It was not, however, his first choice. Not many people know this – I am one of the few in whom Headmaster Dippet confided – but upon graduating, Voldemort originally met with Professor Dippet and requested a teaching position here at Hogwarts.”

“Voldemort wanted to be a teacher?” Harry asked. He hadn't thought it was possible to be worse than Umbridge.

“I doubt he wished to remain here indefinitely, but I think there are a few aspects of the job that would have appealed to him,” said Dumbledore. “Firstly, I believe that his attachment to this school is the strongest he has ever felt for anything in his life, outweighing even his affection for Nagini. This was where he had spent his happiest times, his first and only home at that point – and indeed, I believe he still feels that way.”

Once again, Harry saw an unsettling parallel between himself and Voldemort. Until he had gone to live at Fen House, Hogwarts had been Harry's only home.

“Secondly, the castle itself is imbued with a multitude of powerful, ancient magics. I have no doubt that he had discovered many of the secrets within these walls, but perhaps he felt there was more he could learn, more power to take for himself.

“And thirdly, as a teacher, he would have been in a prime position from which to mould younger generations to his liking. Professor Slughorn’s example was likely an influence, but I think he wanted to take it further than that. I think he planned to use his position to begin amassing his army of devoted followers,” said Dumbledore.

“But he got turned down?” Harry asked. He was sure Severus would have mentioned it if Voldemort had been a teacher here.

“He did. Professor Dippet felt he was too young at just eighteen, and invited him to reapply in a few years' time if he still wanted the position,” said Dumbledore.

“The position – it was Defence Against the Dark Arts, wasn't it, sir?” guessed Harry.
“Indeed it was. Even then, the thought of Riddle teaching that subject was particularly worrisome to me,” Dumbledore confided. “But as I said, he was turned down, and took a position at Borgin and Burkes. Those who had known him thought it was a waste of his talent and intellect, but the proprietors recognised his potential. It wasn't long before he was entrusted with the job of persuading people to give up their treasures. Polite, handsome and clever as he was, he was uncommonly skilled at the task.”

Harry snorted. “No surprises there.”

“No,” Dumbledore agreed, “which brings us to our first memory. This came to me courtesy of Hokey, a very old house-elf in the service of a very rich, old witch named Hepzibah Smith.”

With that, Dumbledore used his wand to uncork one of the bottles, then poured its contents into the Pensieve. “After you, Harry.”

Harry plunged into the Pensieve and found himself in a sitting room that was crowded with all manner of furniture and knick knacks. There were shelves of gilt-covered books, cabinets of intricately carved wooden boxes that no doubt held priceless artefacts, tables covered with magical items Harry couldn't even name, and numerous brass plant holders.

Directly in front of him was an incredibly fat old woman on a couch. She was wearing a towering ginger wig that clashed horribly with her pink robes. Already garishly made up, she was patting yet more rouge onto her cheeks, while a tiny house-elf laced her fat feet into satin slippers.

“Hurry up, Hokey!” Hepzibah commanded. “He said he'd come at four, it's only a couple of minutes to and he's never been late yet!”

She finished her makeup and put away her powder puff. At her feet, Hokey straightened up to her full height, which was far below that of most elves. Harry wondered briefly if she had always been that small, or if she had shrunk with age. She was the oldest elf Harry had ever seen, even older than Kreacher, with thin, papery skin hanging off her thin frame.

“How do I look?” Hepzibah demanded, now admiring herself in the mirror.

“Lovely, madam,” Hokey said in a high-pitched voice.

Harry assumed that Hokey had standing orders to lie when asked questions like that one, because Hepzibah certainly did not look lovely.

The doorbell rang, making both Hezpibah and Hokey jump.

“Quick, quick, he's here, Hokey!” Hepzibah cried.

Hokey immediately hurried out of the room, wending her way along the narrow aisles that criss-crossed the room. She returned in a few minutes, followed by Voldemort. He was in his early twenties, thinner than he had been as a teenager, and he'd grown his hair out. Dressed in a plain but well-tailored black suit, he was just as handsome as he'd been in the other memories Harry had seen of him.

Voldemort navigated the room with ease to reach Hepzibah. He stopped in front of her and gave a low bow, kissing her hand in the process. He straightened up and murmured, “I brought you flowers,” before producing a bouquet of roses from thin air.

Harry couldn't help admitting that the whole thing was very smooth. He wasn't surprised when Hepzibah squealed with delight.
“You naughty boy, you shouldn't have!”

Voldemort politely ignored the fact that there was an empty vase sitting on the table next to her.

“You do spoil this old lady, Tom...” Hepzibah went on. “Sit down, sit down... where's Hokey... ah...”

Hokey came rushing back towards them, carrying a tray of sweets which she set on a table.

“Help yourself, Tom. I know how you love my cakes,” said Hepzibah. “Now, how are you? You look pale. They overwork you at that shop, I've said it a hundred times...”

Voldemort gave a small smile and made no move to take any of the cakes.

“Well, what's your excuse for visiting this time?” asked Hepzibah, furiously batting her lashes.

Voldemort was politely businesslike when he spoke. “Mr Burke would like to make an improved offer for the goblin-made armour. Five hundred Galleons, he feels it is a more than fair...”

“Now, now, not so fast, or I'll think you're only here for my trinkets!” Hepzibah said with a dramatic pout.

Voldemort continued calmly. “I am ordered here because of them. I am only a poor assistant, madam, who must do as he is told. Mr Burke wishes me to enquire...”

“Oh, Mr Burke, phooey!” Hepzibah said. She waved her hand playfully. “I've something to show you that I've never shown Mr Burke... Can you keep a secret, Tom? Will you promise you won't tell Mr Burke I've got it? He'd never let me rest if he knew I'd shown it to you, and I'm not selling, not to Burke, not to anyone! But you, Tom, you'll appreciate it for its history, not how many Galleons you can get for it...”

“I'd be glad to see anything Miss Hepzibah shows me,” said Voldemort.

Hepzibah giggled. “I had Hokey bring it out for me... Hokey, where are you? I want to show Mr Riddle our finest treasure... in fact, bring both, while you're at it...”

“Here, madam,” Hokey replied.

The only sign of her was two leather boxes, one on top of the other, gliding across the room; Hokey must have had them stacked on top of her head in order to carry them through the cramped room. She came to a stop in front of Hepzibah, who took the boxes from her without even glancing at her.

Hepzibah placed the boxes in her lap and smiled coquettishly at Voldemort. “Now, I think you'll like this, Tom... oh, if my family knew I was showing you... they can't wait to get their hands on this!”

She opened the lid to reveal a little gold cup with two handles, nestled in white silk wrapping.

“I wonder whether you know what it is, Tom? Pick it up, have a good look!” breathed Hepzibah.

Voldemort reached out with one slim hand and picked up the cup. Harry thought he saw his eyes turn red, but then he blinked, and Voldemort's eyes were their usual dark brown as he greedily examined the cup. Hepzibah had an identical expression on her face as she watched Voldemort, and Harry couldn't help a stab of pity for him.

Voldemort traced a long finger over the engraving on the front of the cup. “A badger. Then this was...?”
“Helga Hufflepuff’s, as you very well know, you clever boy!” said Hepzibah. She leaned forward and actually pinched Voldemort's cheek; Harry's eyebrows shot up but Voldemort didn't even blink. “Didn't I tell you I was distantly descended? This has been handed down in the family for years and years. Lovely, isn't it? And all sorts of powers it's supposed to possess, too, but I haven't tested them thoroughly, I just keep it nice and safe in here...”

And with that, she took the cup off Voldemort and fussed over putting it back in its case, entirely missing the ugly look on Voldemort's face when he lost the cup.

Hepzibah snapped the lid shut on the box and looked around. “Now then, where's Hokey? Oh yes, there you are – take that away now, Hokey.”

Hokey did as commanded, leaving Hepzibah with the second box, which was much flatter and wider than the first.

“I think you'll like this even more, Tom. Lean in a little, dear boy, so you can see... Of course, Burke knows I've got this one, I bought it from him, and I daresay he'd love to get it back when I'm gone...”

She opened the delicate gold clasp and lifted the lid, revealing a golden locket lying on a bed of crimson velvet. Voldemort didn't wait for an invitation before reaching for the locket and holding it up reverentially.

“Slytherin's mark,” he said, staring at an ornately carved, serpentine S. It looked very similar to one of the letters Draco had come up with when he had invented a written form of Parseltongue.

Hepzibah beamed at Voldemort. “That's right! I had to pay an arm and a leg for it, but I couldn't let it pass, not a real treasure like that, had to have it for my collection. Burke bought it, apparently, from a ragged-looking woman who seemed to have stolen it, but had no idea of its true value.”

Harry definitely saw Voldemort's eyes flash red this time, at the same time that his fingers tightened on the locket. Harry supposed he didn't like hearing about his mother being cheated out of what was rightfully hers. Hepzibah didn't notice and continued to prattle on.

“I daresay Burke paid her a pittance, but there you are... pretty, isn't it? And again, all kinds of powers attributed to it, though I just keep it nice and safe...”

She reached for the locket, and for a second, Harry thought Voldemort would refuse to let go of it. Then he loosened his grip, and Hepzibah slid the chain out of his fingers and carefully placed the locket back in its case.

“So there you are, Tom, dear, and I hope you enjoyed that!” she said, then her smile dimmed when she looked at him straight on. “Are you all right, dear?”

“Oh yes. Yes, I'm very well,” Voldemort said softly.

His voice sent a chill down Harry's spine, and Hepzibah looked unsettled.

“I thought – but a trick of the light, I suppose. Here, Hokey, take these away and lock them up again... the usual enchantments...”

Harry watched Hokey carry the boxes back across the labyrinthine room, then felt a hand on his elbow.

“That's all there is,” Dumbledore said, then he and Harry were soaring back out of the Pensieve.
Back in his office, Dumbledore sat down in his seat and gestured for Harry to follow suit. “Hepzibah Smith was killed two days after that scene. The Ministry convicted Hokey of accidentally poisoning her mistress’ evening cocoa.”

“What? She wouldn't!” said Harry, outraged.

Dumbledore inclined his head. “I agree with you. Hepzibah's death shares many similarities with that of the Riddles. In both cases, Voldemort framed an innocent, leaving them to face the consequences of what he had done. In this case, Hokey confessed to putting something in her mistress' cocoa, something that was not sugar, as she normally used, but an obscure and lethal poison.”

“Voldemort modified her memory, too, like he did with his uncle,” said Harry.

Dumbledore nodded. “I believe so. And just like as he had with Morfin, Voldemort chose someone who the Ministry would be predisposed to suspect, decreasing the odds of them investigating properly.”

“Because she was a house-elf,” said Harry in disgust, thinking of Tilly or Dobby or any of the other elves he knew suffering similar prejudice.

“As soon as she confessed the case was closed,” said Dumbledore. “The one mercy she was granted was that she was imprisoned in one of the Ministry's holding cells, rather than at Azkaban. Since she was such an elderly elf, she was deemed to be a minimal threat, and in any case, was not expected to live much longer. I managed to meet her before she died, and retrieved this memory. Sadly, this memory does not prove her innocence, and she died in her cell not long afterwards.”

Harry tried very hard not to think about how lonely Hokey must have been.

“While Hokey was being convicted, Hepzibah's family was coming to the realisation that two of her most priceless treasures had disappeared. It took them some time to be certain, as she had always zealously guarded her possessions, and had been prone to hiding them. Before her family were sure that the cup and the locket were missing, the assistant at Borgin and Burkes, the handsome young man who had visited and charmed Hepzibah so many times, had quit his employment and likewise disappeared. The proprietors had no clue as to his whereabouts; indeed, they were just as surprised as anyone that he had vanished. It was some time before anyone saw or heard of Tom Riddle again.

“Before we examine the next memory, I want to point out some aspects of this story,” said Dumbledore. “When Voldemort murdered his family, he did so out of revenge. This time – and I think this was his next murder, though I can't be certain – this time, he killed for personal gain. Poor old Hepzibah Smith had two immensely valuable items that he coveted, just as he had stolen from other children at the orphanage, just as he had made off with Morfin's ring, now he robbed an old lady of a cup and a locket.”

“I don't understand why he'd risk everything for a cup and a locket,” said Harry. “What is it about them that made them worth murdering for?”

“Surely you can see how Voldemort would have viewed the locket as his by rights?” asked Dumbledore.

“Yes, sir, but the cup?” asked Harry.

“It belonged to another founder of Hogwarts,” said Dumbledore. “I believe that his attachment to this school was still so strong that he could not resist the lure of an item so closely tied with one of its founders... And now, let us enter the last memory I have for you, at least until you collect Professor
Slughorn's true memory. This is one of my own memories, and it takes place ten years after Hokey's – ten years in which I have been unable to learn anything of Voldemort's activities.

This time, Harry fell through darkness to land in the same office he had just left. Fawkes was dozing on his perch, just as he had been in the present time, and the Dumbledore sitting behind the desk was just as wrinkled and white-haired as the one standing beside Harry. The only difference Harry could spot was the snow drifting past the window.

Someone knocked on the door, and was invited in by Dumbledore. Harry couldn't help gasping when he saw how Voldemort's appearance had changed. While he was not yet the bone-white, snake-eyed, noseless monster that Harry knew he would become, he was no longer the handsome young Riddle he had once been. He looked like one of the women in one of Aunt Petunia's gossip magazines, the ones who had had too much plastic surgery. His eyes were incredibly bloodshot, his nose was a bit flatter, and his skin seemed like clay, as if Harry could reach out and mould it with his hands.

This meeting had clearly been prearranged, because the younger Dumbledore showed no sign of surprise at Voldemort's presence; nor at his unnerving appearance, but greeted him politely.

Voldemort sat down in the same seat which Harry would sit in, decades later. “I heard that you had become Headmaster. A worthy choice,” he said. His voice was higher and colder than in the last memory, closer to how it sounded in the present day. He accepted a drink when Dumbledore offered, and soon they were both holding a goblet of wine.

“So, Tom... to what do I owe the pleasure?”

Voldemort took a sip of wine before replying. “They do not call me 'Tom' any more. These days, I am known as -”

“I know what you are known as,” said Dumbledore, smiling blandly as he interrupted, “but to me, I'm afraid, you will always be Tom Riddle. It is one of the irritating things about old teachers, I am afraid, that they never quite forget their charges' youthful beginnings.”

Harry smirked as Dumbledore raised his glass to Voldemort, who made no sign he was displeased, though the atmosphere in the room became far less benign. Dumbledore's refusal to address Voldemort the way he had wanted was a subtle reminder that here, at least, Voldemort was not in charge.

There was a silence, during which Dumbledore's pleasant smile didn't falter, that was eventually broken by Voldemort. “I am surprised you have remained here so long. I always wondered why a wizard such as yourself never wished to leave school.”

“Well, to a wizard such as myself, there can be nothing more important than passing on ancient skills, helping hone young minds. If I remember correctly, you once saw the attraction of teaching, too.”

“I see it still. I merely wondered why you – who is so often asked for advice by the Ministry, and who has twice, I think, been offered the post of Minister -”

“Three times at the last count, actually, but the Ministry never attracted me as a career. Again, something we have in common, I think.”

Voldemort took another sip of wine, and again, Dumbledore made no move to break the silence.

“I have returned,” Voldemort eventually said, “later, perhaps, than Professor Dippet expected... but I
have returned, nevertheless, to request again what he once told me I was too young to have. I have come to you to ask that you permit me to return to this castle, to teach. I think you must know that I have seen and done much since I left this place. I could show and tell your students things they can gain from no other wizard.”

Dumbledore studied Voldemort for a minute before replying. “Yes, I certainly do know that you have seen and done much since leaving us. Rumours of your doings have reached your old school, Tom. I should be sorry to believe half of them.”

Voldemort didn't even blink. “Greatness inspires envy, envy engenders spite, spite spawns lies. You must know this, Dumbledore.”

“You call it 'greatness', what you have been doing, do you?”

“Certainly. I have experimented; I have pushed the boundaries of magic further, perhaps, than they have ever been pushed -”

“Of some kinds of magic. Of some. Of others, you remain... forgive me... woefully ignorant.”

Voldemort smiled unpleasantly. “The old argument. But nothing I have seen in the world has supported your famous pronouncements that love is more powerful than my kind of magic, Dumbledore.”

“Perhaps you have been looking in the wrong places.”

“Well, then, what better place to start my fresh researches than here, at Hogwarts? Will you let me share my knowledge with your students? I place myself and my talents at your disposal. I am yours to command.”

“And what will become of those whom you command? What will happen to those who call themselves – or so rumour has it – the Death Eaters?”

Voldemort clearly hadn't thought Dumbledore had heard that name. His skinny nostrils flared with anger, and his eyes once more flashed red.

“My friends will carry on without me, I am sure,” he said coldly.

“I am glad to hear that you consider them friends. I was under the impression that they are more in the order of servants.”

“You are mistaken.”

“Then if I were to go to the Hog's Head tonight, I would not find a group of them – Nott, Rosier, Mulciber, Dolohov – awaiting your return? Devoted friends indeed, to travel this far with you on a snowy night, merely to wish you luck as you attempted to secure a teaching post.”

For a moment, Voldemort's anger shone through, stronger than before, then he regained control. “You are omniscient as ever, Dumbledore.”

“Oh, no, merely friendly with the local barmen. Now, Tom,” Dumbledore leaned forward and steepled his fingers, “let us speak openly. Why have you come here tonight surrounded by henchmen, to request a job we both know you do not want?”

“A job I do not want? On the contrary, Dumbledore, I want it very much.”
“Oh, you want to come back to Hogwarts, but you do not want to teach any more than you wanted to when you were eighteen. What is it you're after, Tom? Why not try an open request for once?”

“If you do not want to give me a job -”

“Of course I don’t -” Harry couldn’t help snorting appreciatively at this “- and I don't think for a moment you expected me to. Nevertheless, you came here, you asked, you must have had a purpose.”

Voldemort got to his feet, seething. “This is your final word?”

Dumbledore also stood up. “It is.”

“Then we have nothing more to say to each other.”

“No, nothing. The time is long gone when I could frighten you with a burning wardrobe and force you to make repayment for your crimes. But I wish I could, Tom... I wish I could...”

There was a moment when Harry thought Voldemort was going to draw his wand, but then he turned and stalked out of the room. As the door shut behind him, Harry felt Dumbledore once more take his arm and lift him out of the Pensieve.

“Did you ever find out why he came back? What he was after?” Harry asked.

“I have a theory. I shall tell you once you retrieve the memory from Professor Slughorn,” said Dumbledore.

He walked over to the door and held it open. Harry followed, then paused in the doorway.

“Sir, he never mentioned which subject he was after. Was it Defence Against the Dark Arts again?” asked Harry.

“Most assuredly,” said Dumbledore. “Ever since I denied Voldemort's second application for the position, I've been unable to keep a Defence Against the Dark Arts professor for longer than a year.”

Harry's blood ran cold. “The curse is real?”

“I'm afraid so,” said Dumbledore.

“But – but then Dad's in danger!” said Harry.

“I think Severus can take of himself, don't you?” Dumbledore asked.

Harry just stared at him, unable to understand how he could be calm about this. Visions of Severus getting injured or killed flashed through his mind as he stood there.

“I rather think you're doing Severus a disservice by fearing for him like this,” Dumbledore said.

Harry blinked, then nodded. “Yes, sir. Goodnight.”

He turned and left without another word. He jumped onto the moving staircase, putting his Invisibility Cloak on as he rode downstairs, then hurried off down the corridor. He was all but running by the time he reached Severus' quarters. He pushed aside the tapestry of Merlin and the centaurs and slammed his hand down on the guard stone. As soon as the door shimmered into view he shoved it open and wrenched off his Cloak as he walked in.
Severus had been reading by the fire, but he shot to his feet at Harry's noisy entrance. “What's wrong?”

“The curse is real. The one on the Defence job,” Harry blurted.

Severus shut his book with a snap. “Harry -”

“Dad, it was cursed by Voldemort. Dumbledore just told me himself!” Harry cried.

Severus frowned. “What?”

Harry ran a hand through his hair in frustration. “Voldemort applied for the Defence position – that was one of the memories I saw tonight – and when Dumbledore refused him, he cursed it. That's why no one lasts more than a year. Quirrell sodding died!”

“Unlike Quirrell, I don't have Voldemort sticking out of the back of my head,” said Severus.

“No, but he wants to kill you. And I seem to recall being told at the start of the year that if Voldemort wanted to get into Hogwarts, he'd find a way,” said Harry.

“Albus -”

“He knew. He knew the curse was real when he offered you the job,” said Harry.

Severus dropped back down into his chair and stared down at his hands. Harry slowly came over and sat on the couch near him.

“I'm sorry,” he said quietly, “but you needed to know.”

Severus nodded jerkily. “Thank you for telling me.”

There was another silence, during which Harry watched as Severus sat completely unmoving. Finally, Harry couldn't take it any longer.

“Are you okay?”

Severus' head jerked up. “I'm fine. I can't say I'm happy, but I'll live.”

Harry winced at the words he'd chosen, since that matter was suddenly very much in doubt. Severus noticed.

“Sorry. But I know now, don't I? I can be on my guard, though I like to think that I was already suitably cautious, and I trust Dumbledore won't deliberately put me in harm's way,” said Severus.

Harry stared at him. “Don't you think he should've warned you?”

Severus frowned. “I – I'm sure he had his reasons. He probably thinks that I can take care of myself, which I can, Harry.”

“Yeah, but still... are you going to say anything to him?” Harry asked.

Severus shook his head. “Why bother? I'm sure he's realised that you've come straight to me. There's nothing more to say.” With that, he stood up. “You should get to bed.”

Harry stood up too, and threw his arms around Severus. “I don't want you to die,” he mumbled.
Severus slowly returned the hug. “This isn’t a death sentence, Harry. There was a teacher about a decade ago who left when she fell pregnant; another quit to travel abroad.”

Harry pulled back and peered at Severus suspiciously. “You’re not just making that up to make me feel better, are you?”

Severus sighed. “I’ve never lied to you, Harry, and I’m not about to start now. Stop worrying.”

Harry chewed his bottom lip, then nodded. “Okay.”

“Good. Now, you should be going to bed,” said Severus.

“Yeah, okay. Goodnight,” said Harry.

As he walked slowly back to the common room, Harry wondered what, exactly, it would take for Dumbledore to finally lose Severus’ trust.
In Which Harry Successfully Acquires the Memory, Only to Receive the World's Worst Reward

Chapter Notes

As of this chapter, sinntowin and caraakame have begun to beta this series. My old beta, Charlie_Paloma, finished Sixth Year before she had to stop, so the rest of Sixth Year will have been read by all three of them. A massive thank you to all three! Any remaining mistakes are entirely my own.

During Saturday's Apparition lesson, Harry was overjoyed when Draco finally Apparated. Harry congratulated Draco then looked at Severus, who gave him a slight nod, and promptly Apparated into his own hoop.

“I did it!” he said, grinning, pretending to be as pleased as Draco was.

“Congratulations,” drawled Hermione, who had already Apparated twice.

“I can Apparate,” Draco said happily. “And I didn't Splinch myself once!”

About a dozen people had Splinched themselves over the course of the lessons. Neville had been shaky for days after temporarily losing his fingertip, and Blaise had described leaving behind a foot as the worst pain he'd ever felt.

Lunch was a dull meal for Harry. Draco, Tracey, Theo, Daphne and Millicent spent the meal congratulating each other for having Apparated at least once, and discussing when they could try for their licenses. The first test was on 21st April, and like Harry, neither Draco nor Pansy would be of age at the time. Unlike Harry, they were peeved off about that fact. Harry couldn't care less about getting his own license. Severus already let him Apparate, after all, and Harry didn't give a toss about what the Ministry thought.

There was a lot of excited chatter amongst the sixth years the next evening, when a notice was posted in the common room. Extra Apparition lessons would be held in Hogsmeade (under heavy Ministry supervision) for those who would be of age when the first took place. While the rest of his friends once more began discussing Apparition, Harry retreated to his bed to read through one of the books he'd borrowed from the Restricted Section. While ostensibly about Defence Against the Dark Arts, a lot of the spells within it felt pretty bloody Dark to Harry, but it outlined some strategies that he thought could be useful in a fight. Most importantly, it was a lot more interesting than listening to everyone going on about bloody Apparition.

Since Severus had had such luck with Slughorn on Lily's birthday, Harry decided it might be auspicious if he next tried to speak to Slughorn on James' birthday. It was also the last day of term, so if he failed, he had all of Easter break to come up with a new strategy.

Harry waited until an hour after dinner before he grabbed his schoolbag and slipped out of the common room. If Slughorn's evening marking schedule was anything like Severus', he should have been working for long enough that he would welcome any excuse for a break.
Sure enough, when Harry knocked on Slughorn's office door, he was quickly bid to enter. He allowed himself a triumphant smile, then composed himself and walked inside.

“Harry! Come in, come in. What can I do for you? Would you like to join me for a nightcap?” Slughorn said.

Harry blinked, having never been offered alcohol by a teacher like this before, then smiled; it could only make Slughorn more malleable. “If you're offering, sir.”

“I've been marking essays all evening, I think I deserve a bit of a treat, and I'm sure Severus won't mind,” said Slughorn. “Please, sit down, make yourself at home.”

Harry's smile was genuine as he sat down on one of the chairs in front of the desk; everything was going according to plan so far. He put his bag down on the chair next to him, and accepted a small goblet of mead.

“A cheeky little oak-matured mead with dessert never hurt anyone,” said Slughorn, sitting back down and pushing a box of crystallised pineapple towards Harry.

“Thank you,” said Harry, taking a piece.

Slughorn took a sip of his mead and leaned back in his chair, smacking his lips appreciatively. “That's the ticket. So, what can I do for you, Harry? Don't tell me you have a question about your holiday homework already?”

“No, sir, I haven't even thought about my holiday homework yet,” said Harry.

Slughorn chuckled. “Refreshingly honest.”

Don't get used to it, Harry thought. “I actually had a few more questions about what we discussed a few weeks ago, sir.”

Slughorn's smile dimmed a little. “With the potion that You-Know-Who used?” he asked nervously.

“Yes, sir,” said Harry. “I think I might have found something in the Restricted Section that answered a few things, but also gave me more questions.”

Slughorn hesitated. “Have you gone to Severus with this new information?”

“No, sir. Not yet. I wanted to ask you about it, first,” said Harry.

Slughorn shifted nervously in his seat, then nodded. “Alright, I'll – I'll try to answer your questions.”

“Thank you, sir,” Harry said earnestly. “Okay... one of the texts that I was reading made me think – what if we've been going about this the wrong way? What if, instead of focusing on the potion, we should be focusing on who used it?”

“How do you mean?” asked Slughorn. Like last time, Harry could tell that his professional curiosity was rearing its head.

“Hang on, let me grab my notes...” said Harry. He pulled out a sheaf of parchment, which was covered in some of the notes Draco had made when designing a written form of Parseltongue.

“You've written this down?” Slughorn asked in alarm.

“In Parseltongue,” said Harry, waving a sheet of nonsense at him. “Draco invented the writing – he
and I are the only people in the world who can read this, I swear.”

“Talented boy...” said Slughorn.

Harry smiled. “Yeah, he is. Anyway, this potion, whatever it is, seems to be designed to bring people back to life, right? Or at least, to bring non-corporeal people back to normal.”

“How do you know that he was non-corporeal?” Slughorn asked.

“That's not quite the right word for it...” said Harry. “He wasn't fully human, I guess you could say. Or... he had a very primitive body. I don't really know what he was – but that's my point.”

Slughorn had paled at the turn in the conversation. “What's your point?”

“That we don't know what he was,” said Harry. “After he killed my parents, he tried to kill me. Mum's sacrifice protected me, deflecting the curse back on him. It should have killed him – but it didn't. I want to know why. Why didn't the Killing Curse kill him? He said himself that it was extremely painful, that he was ripped from his body – but why did that happen? Why was he, well, immortal?”

“You-Know-Who isn't immortal,” said Slughorn, taking a large gulp of mead.

Harry made a show of flicking through his notes. “No, he must be. I was protected by Mum, but there wasn't anyone else in the house to sacrifice themselves for him... He must have done something, before he came after us - something that kept him from dying.”

“Dumbledore put you up to this,” Slughorn whispered.

“Dumbledore?” Harry looked up with feigned bafflement. “What's he got to do with this?”

“What does he – he's leading the fight against You-Know-Who! He's told you about Horcruxes, hasn't he?” Slughorn said, beginning to sweat.

“Horcruxes?” Harry repeated, turning over another sheet of parchment. “I don't think I've heard of that type of potion before.”

“They're not a potion,” Slughorn said.

Triumph lit through Harry at the admission, but he kept a puzzled look on his face as he raised his head. “Not a potion? Then... are they used in potions? What've they got to do with this, sir?”

“Nothing – I misspoke, that's all,” Slughorn said quickly.

“Does Dumbledore know about Horcruxes?” Harry asked eagerly, half standing up. “Should I go ask him, instead?”

“There's no need for that,” said Slughorn.

Harry sat back down. “So you do know about these Horcruxes. Can you tell me, sir?”

“I – I can't, Harry,” Slughorn said shakily.

“Can't, or won't?” Harry asked.

Slughorn looked trapped. “Harry – please – you can't ask this of me. If You-Know-Who found out...”
“Professor,” Harry said slowly, “this is something important, isn’t it?”

Slughorn pressed his lips together and shook his head. It was now or never, Harry realised. If Slughorn didn’t give him the memory tonight, he was never going to get it.

“Are Horcruxes something I can use against Voldemort?” Harry pressed. “Can I use them to defeat him?”

“He can’t be defeated,” Slughorn said.

“He can be defeated, I know he can,” Harry said firmly. “Because I’m the Chosen One.”

“I thought that was mostly gossip,” Slughorn said weakly.

Harry shook his head. “I’ve been the Chosen One my entire life. It’s why Voldemort tried to kill me as a baby. Why he murdered my parents.”

“Harry...”

“He killed my dad first,” Harry said quietly, looking down at his lap. “Dad tried to hold him off, told Mum to grab me and run. They never got a chance for a proper goodbye. Voldemort murdered Dad then came after me.”

“Harry, please...”

“Voldemort told Mum to get out of the way. He didn’t intend to kill her – he’d made a promise to Dad – Severus, that is – to spare her – but she refused to move, to stop protecting me. He ordered her to move three times and still she refused to give me up, so he killed her. Murdered her and stepped over her lifeless body so he...”

“Enough!” Slughorn cried. “I don’t want to hear any more. How do you even know all this?”

“A few years ago, we had Dementors posted around Hogwarts. Whenever I got too close to one, I’d pass out to the memory of my parents being murdered,” said Harry.

Slughorn pressed a hand over his mouth. “Oh, Harry...”

“Ever since then, I’ve heard them in my nightmares... Every time I go to sleep, I hear my parents screaming and see the green light of the curses... I hear Voldemort laughing as their bodies thud to the ground,” said Harry. “When Dad first found out, he offered me Dreamless Sleep. For two weeks, I could sleep without having the nightmares. Two whole weeks, and then I had to stop taking it, or risk long-term side-effects. Dad taught me Occlumency, but that can only do so much against nightmare. I was so terrified of going back to the nightmares that I forced myself to stay awake for three straight days.”

“That’s horrible,” breathed Slughorn.

“That’s my life,” said Harry. “That’s the life Mum died for me to have. Do you think she would be happy, if she knew? Do you think she would regret having died for me? I do, sometimes. Sometimes – sometimes, I think she’d be happier if I joined her and Dad.”

“You’re not talking about hurting yourself, are you?” Slughorn asked, appalled.

“Hurting? Nah. Dad’s got plenty of poisons that’d kill me before I could feel anything,” said Harry.

For a moment, he thought he’d gone too far, that Slughorn would realise that he was making this all
“Harry,” Slughorn said gently, “Lily wouldn't want that.”

“What does it matter what she wanted? She's dead,” Harry said. He ignored his guilt at his own words and continued, “She didn't want Voldemort to kill me, but that's what's going to happen. I'm the only one who can kill him, and I don't know how to... Mum sacrificed herself for nothing.”

There was a silence, then Slughorn sniffed. “I won't tell you what I know about Horcruxes, but I'll show you.”

“Sir?”

Instead of replying, Slughorn Summoned a small potions vial. He uncorked it, then raised his wand to his temple and withdrew a memory. His hand moved slowly as he dragged the silvery thread out, and he gave his head a little shake at what Harry knew was an odd sensation. He lowered it into the vial and carefully stoppered it again. He gazed at it for a few seconds before holding it out to Harry.

“This contains everything I know about Horcruxes,” he said, still staring at the bottle. “Take it to Dumbledore – he also wants the information it contains. I hope that it helps you both.”

Harry took it carefully; Slughorn let go with some reluctance. “Thank you, sir.”

Slughorn raised his gaze from the vial to meet his eyes sadly. “Just don't think too badly of me, once you see what it contains.”

“I won't, sir,” Harry said, unsure if that was true or not.

When he left the office, he shut the door behind himself and sagged against the stone wall in the empty corridor, screwing his eyes shut. “Sorry, Mum. Sorry, Dad. I didn't mean what I said,” he whispered.

He took a deep breath, opened his eyes and again and pushed off from the wall, heading for Dumbledore's office. On the way, he wondered if he should feel bad for lying that much to Slughorn. When he's been talking, he'd found it easy to say what he needed to in order to manipulate Slughorn - a little too easy, perhaps.

Harry had no problem lying to people when he needed to, but playing upon someone's emotions this ruthlessly... surely he should be feeling some remorse, some guilt? But he didn't. He'd needed the information, and he'd done what was necessary to get it. He felt uncomfortably like Voldemort.

"This is different," Harry said firmly, "I did this for good, not evil."

"Ooh, it's wee Potty, talking to himself," came a sing-song voice. "Out after curfew and up to no good."

Harry looked up to find Peeves floating in front of him. "Sod off, Peeves."

"Why would I do that, when I can do this?" Peeves asked, then floated over to blow a raspberry in Harry's ear.

Harry ducked away. "Because I'm on my way to meet the Bloody Baron. I don't think he'd be very happy with you if you made me late."

Peeves stopped at once. "Pass on my compliments to his bloodiness," he said, then zoomed away.
"Gotta remember that one next time," Harry muttered.

He didn't encounter anyone else on his way to Dumbledore's office. He gave the password to the gargoyle and stepped onto the revolving staircase. When he knocked on the office door, there was a longer than usual wait before Dumbledore responded.

"Come in."

Harry walked in to find Dumbledore standing in front of Fawkes' perch. He appeared to have been pacing around his office.

"Harry. You're out rather late tonight," he said.

"Before you give me detention, you might want to watch this," said Harry, holding up the vial.

Dumbledore smiled. "Well done, Harry! I knew you could do it!"

That's not what you said last time, Harry thought. "I had to lie quite a bit, so, er, don't worry if Slughorn tells you that he thinks I'm going to kill myself. I'm not.”

An odd expression crossed Dumbledore's face, but he nodded. “Thank you for the warning.”

Dumbledore waved his wand at his desk, which was covered with scattered scrolls and pieces of parchment. They flew up and stacked themselves neatly on one of the shelves lining the office, while Dumbledore fetched his Pensieve and placed it on the now neat desk. He took the vial off Harry and poured the memory into the Pensieve.

"After you, Harry."

Harry quickly plunged his head into the Pensieve's contents, eager to finally see the memory which had been plaguing him for so long. He fell once more into Slughorn's office, joined momentarily by Dumbledore. The beginning of the memory played out identically to the doctored one Harry had already seen, until Riddle asked about the retiring teacher.

“What with your uncanny ability to know things you shouldn't, and your careful flattery of the people who matter – thank you for the pineapple, by the way, you're quite right, it is my favourite -” said Slughorn, while the gathered boys chuckled “- I confidently expect you to rise to Minister for Magic within twenty years. Fifteen, if you keep sending me pineapple. I have excellent contacts at the Ministry.”

The groups of boys laughed again, all save Riddle. He smiled politely and waited for silence. “I don't know that politics would suit me, sir. I don't have the right kind of background, for one thing.”

Slughorn's moustache shook. “Nonsense, couldn't be plainer you come from decent wizarding stock, abilities like yours. No, you'll go far, Tom, I've never been wrong about a student yet.”

Harry raised an eyebrow at that. Either he had changed by the time Harry met him, or he believed more strongly in the superiority of pure-bloods than he said he did.

The little clock on the desk chimed eleven, and Slughorn began chivvying the students out, until it was just himself and Riddle left.

“Look sharp, Tom, you don't want to be caught out of bed out of hours, and you a Prefect...”

“Sir, I wanted to ask you something.”
“Ask away, then, m'boy, ask away...”

“Sir, I wondered what you know about... about Horcruxes?”

When before the office had filled with unnatural fog, now Slughorn regarded Riddle thoughtfully.

“Project for Defence Against the Dark Arts, is it?” he asked.

Harry didn't for a second believe that Slughorn truly thought that.

“Not exactly, sir. I came across the term while reading and I didn't fully understand it.”

“No... well... you'd be hard-pushed to find a book at Hogwarts that'll give you details on Horcruxes, Tom. That's very Dark stuff, very Dark indeed.”

Riddle was the picture of detachment when he spoke. “But you obviously know all about them, sir? I mean, a wizard like you – sorry, I mean, if you can't tell me, obviously – I just knew if anyone could tell me, you could – so I just thought I'd ask -”

Harry grimaced at the similarities in the way Voldemort and himself had worked this information out of Slughorn. The only difference seemed to be that Harry had pretended to be overcome with emotion, while Riddle was hiding his.

Slughorn didn't meet Riddle's eyes as he answered. “Well... well, it can't hurt to give you an overview, of course. Just so that you understand the term. A Horcrux is the word used for an object in which a person has concealed a part of their soul.”

“I don't quite understand how that works, though, sir.”

“Well, you split your soul, you see, and hide part of it in an object outside the body. Then, even if one's body is attacked or destroyed, one cannot die, for part of the soul remains earthbound and undamaged. But, of course, existence in such a form...”

Harry's blood ran cold at this description. So it was true. Voldemort had become immortal by creating a Horcrux.

“... few would want it, Tom, very few. Death would be preferable.”

“How do you split your soul?” Riddle asked eagerly, his mask of nonchalance entirely gone.

“Well, you must understand that the soul is supposed to remain intact and whole. Splitting it is an act of violation, it is against nature.”

“But how do you do it?”

“By an act of evil – the supreme act of evil. By committing a murder. Killing rips the soul apart. The wizard intent upon creating a Horcrux would use the damage to his advantage: he would encase the torn portion.”

“Encase? But how -”

Finally, Slughorn became agitated, upset at Riddle's persistence. “There is a spell, do not ask me, I don't know! Do I look as though I have tried it – do I look like a killer?”

“No, sir, of course not. I'm sorry... I didn't mean to offend...”
Just as quickly as he'd become animated, Slughorn deflated. “Not at all, not at all, not offended. It's natural to feel some curiosity about these things... wizards of a certain calibre have always been drawn to that aspect of magic...”

“Yes, sir. What I don't understand, though – just out of curiosity – I mean, would one Horcrux be much use? Can you only split your soul once? Wouldn't it be better, make you stronger, to have your soul in more pieces? I mean, for instance, isn't seven the most powerfully magical number, wouldn't seven -”

“Merlin's beard, Tom! Seven! Isn't it bad enough to think of killing one person? And in any case... bad enough to divide the soul... but to rip it into seven pieces...”

Slughorn was looking thoroughly disturbed now, staring at Riddle as if he'd never seen him before.

“Yes, sir, of course,” Riddle said.

“But all the same, Tom... keep it quiet, what I've told – that's to say, what we've discussed. People wouldn't like to think we've been chatting about Horcruxes. It's a banned subject at Hogwarts, you know... Dumbledore's particularly fierce about it...”

“I won't say a word, sir,” said Riddle, turning to leave.

His words were belied by the fierce, triumphant joy on his face, unseen by Slughorn.

“That's all, Harry,” said Dumbledore.

Once again, he guided Harry out of the Pensieve to return to his office. Dumbledore gestured for Harry to take a seat, then sat down behind his desk. He folded his hands in front of him and stared down at them, clearly deep in thought. Harry waited patiently for him to speak, noticing as he did so that every single one of the portraits of old Heads of Hogwarts were likewise paying keen attention.

Finally, Dumbledore sighed. “I have been both hoping and fearing to get this piece of information for quite some time. I now know that the theory on which I have been working, on which I have been basing my strategy for fighting Voldemort, is correct. Unfortunately, this also means that we have a long and difficult road ahead of us.”

Because killing Voldemort was supposed to be quick and easy? Harry thought.

“I'm sure that you've grasped the significance of this memory. While he was around the same age you currently are, Tom Riddle was researching ways by which he could make himself immortal,” said Dumbledore.

“And he succeeded,” Harry said dully. “That's why he didn't die, when he tried to kill me as a baby. Because he'd made himself a Horcrux.”

“Horcruxes, plural,” said Dumbledore. “You heard him just now: Riddle wanted to know whether or not Professor Slughorn thought it possible to create multiple Horcruxes, what he thought would happen to a wizard who was so desperate to live that he was willing to commit murder multiple times, ripping apart his soul in the process. This is not information that he would have been able to find in a book, and I am unaware of anyone ever doing so before now.”
“But you think Voldemort has, sir?” asked Harry.

“I do,” Dumbledore said heavily. “It was four years ago that I first came across evidence that Voldemort's immortality was due to Horcruxes. The diary that Severus retrieved from the Chamber of Secrets, the one that had possessed both you and Miss Weasley.”

“The diary was a Horcrux?” Harry asked, horrified at the thought: he'd kept a piece of Voldemort's soul in his dorm for months.

“Most certainly, Harry. No mere memory would have been able to do what that diary did. Controlling both you and Miss Weasley; burying your memories of your own actions; finally, draining you of your life force... All this had to be the work of something else, something far more worrisome: a fragment of Voldemort's soul. More worrisome still was the way in which it had been designed and utilised: it was as much a weapon as it was a safeguard.”

“Opening the Chamber of Secrets?” Harry guessed.

“Precisely. It seemed obvious to me that, although the diary had fulfilled the purpose of a Horcrux – to keep its maker alive – it had a secondary purpose, one which relied on some innocent child finding it. Tell me, Harry, if you had placed part of your soul into an object for safe keeping, would you want anyone to find it?”

“No, sir.”

“No, indeed. To do so would be to run the risk of that person damaging or perhaps even destroying the Horcrux. You yourself only happened upon the Horcrux because Miss Weasley had mustered the strength of will to attempt to destroy it; later that year, you destroyed it for good, ironically by means of the very monster that the diary had called forth,” said Dumbledore. His eyes twinkled for a moment before growing serious again. “This carelessness with his Horcrux was troubling. No one would go to the trouble of creating a Horcrux that would be in such danger – unless they had made – or planned to make – more Horcruxes.

“I was convinced that the diary could not possibly be the only Horcrux that Voldemort had made, but it wasn't until earlier this year that I received any further evidence of that. When Severus returned my Pensieve last summer, I asked him if he had learned anything useful from your memory of Voldemort's resurrection. He repeated some of Voldemort's words to me: 'No wizard in history has come closer to immortality than I have!' Naturally, Severus was unsettled by these words, but he did not grasp their implication, as I did: Voldemort was speaking of his multiple Horcruxes. It would explain both his treatment of his diary and his own physical transformation, which must be caused by his repeated mutilation of his soul.”

“How many of them are there?” asked Harry.

“You heard him, just now. 'Isn't seven the most powerfully magical number?' I think it likely that he split his soul into seven pieces; one left inside his body, and six within Horcruxes,” said Dumbledore.

“Six Horcruxes?” Harry cried, echoed by the portraits on the walls.

“Four, now,” said Dumbledore. “You destroyed the diary, and I destroyed the ring.”


Dumbledore nodded and raised his blackened, withered hand. “It was heavily protected, both by magical concealment and a terrible curse, but I managed to destroy it.”
“With the Basilisk fang,” Harry said slowly.

“Yes, Basilisk venom has proved to be quite effective at destroying Horcruxes. That was a lucky discovery on your part, as information on how to destroy Horcruxes is almost as difficult to come across as information on how to create them,” said Dumbledore.

“Do you know what the other Horcruxes are, sir?” Harry asked.

“I have a fairly good idea about three of them,” said Dumbledore. “As we have seen, Voldemort liked to collect trophies, and he had a predilection for items that were steeped in magical history. I believe that he would have chosen his Horcruxes with particular care, leaning towards those that would inspire awe, in and of themselves.”

“Gaunt's ring was originally Slytherin's... How does the diary figure into that theory, Professor?” asked Harry.

“It was proof that Voldemort was Slytherin's heir. For that reason alone, I imagine that it held great significance to Voldemort,” said Dumbledore.

Harry nodded slowly. “So are the rest of the Horcruxes related to Slytherin, then? Should we go search the common room?”

Dumbledore shook his head with a chuckle. “No, Voldemort would not leave a second Horcrux lying where any curious Slytherin could stumble across it. But I do think that his other Horcruxes are likely connected to Hogwarts in some way, which is why I have been collecting memories of his past, in search of other artefacts that have disappeared in his vicinity.”

“Like the locket and the cup!” said Harry.

“The very same. I am unaware of any known relics with a connection to Rowena Ravenclaw, but the two remaining items known to have belonged to Godric Gryffindor are quite safe,” said Dumbledore. He pointed to the Sorting Hat, sitting silent and still on a high shelf, and a silver sword, its handle inlaid with glittering rubies, displayed in a protective glass case. “The Sorting Hat and the Sword of Gryffindor have remained at Hogwarts for hundreds of years, and there are no other items that have been verified as having belonged to Gryffindor.”

“Okay, so he's got Slytherins' ring and locket, Hufflepuff's cup, and his own diary,” said Harry, ticking them off on his fingers, “and we don't know that the other two are, but they're probably not something that belonged to Ravenclaw or Gryffindor. Do you think he found more things of Slytherin's, maybe?”

“It's possible, though I have been considering that one of the others is his snake,” said Dumbledore.

“Nagini?” Harry asked in surprise. “Can you make a Horcrux out of a living animal?”

“Yes, though such a course of action brings its own risks, since animals have minds of their own and don't always do as they're told,” said Dumbledore.

“They'd also be easier to destroy, wouldn't they? I mean, anything that would kill the animal would destroy the Horcrux, right, sir?” asked Harry.

“Yes, killing the animal would destroy the Horcrux,” Dumbledore said, with that same odd expression from earlier, “but I do think he used Nagini. As we have discussed, he has more affection for her than I think he has ever had for anything else, save Hogwarts, and she reinforces his connection to Slytherin. He also has an incredible amount of control over her, pronounced even for a
“No offence, sir, but snakes can be very obedient if they like you,” said Harry.

Dumbledore smiled. “Severus has told me tales of your pet, Harry, but do you think it would kill for you, if you commanded it to?”

Yes, Harry thought. He shook his head. “No, sir. Ladon only kills to eat.”

Dumbledore leaned back in his seat. “I am quite certain that Nagini is one of his Horcruxes. In any case, given that she is quite happy to kill for him, it would be to our advantage to kill her even if she isn’t a Horcrux.”

“Yes, sir,” said Harry. “What about the last one?”

Dumbledore spread his hands. “I am still searching for clues, as well as for the locations of the Horcruxes. They will be hidden and protected, but I flatter myself that I will eventually be able to find their whereabouts and destroy them.”

“When you find one, sir... May I please join you?” Harry asked.

Dumbledore peered at him over the top of his half-moon glasses. “I don't see why not.”

“Thank you, sir,” Harry said in surprise. “Er, can he feel them when they're destroyed?”

“An excellent question. Without a spy close to him, it's hard to be sure, but I do not think so. With his soul split into so many parts, some of which were removed from his body decades ago... I doubt he has any real awareness of them. No, I think we are safe in that regard, at least.”

“And then once they're all destroyed, I can kill him?”

Dumbledore's gaze sharpened. “Yes, once his Horcruxes have all been destroyed, Voldemort will be mortal once more.”

“So this isn't impossible,” Harry said.

“Difficult and dangerous, but not impossible,” said Dumbledore. “And on that note, I believe you should be getting back to your common room. No doubt your friends wish to celebrate the end of term.”

“Yes, sir. Good night,” said Harry.

Since it was now well after curfew, Harry threw his Invisibility Cloak over himself for the trek back down to the dungeons. He didn't come across anyone, human, ghost or otherwise, and it wasn't long before he was pulling off his Cloak and walking into the common room. It was unusually busy for a Thursday night, being the last day of term, and Pansy called out to ask Harry to join a group of sixth and seventh years on the couches.

“Maybe later,” he called back, hurrying towards his dorm. The last thing he felt like right now was a big group of people, not after once more seeing similarities between himself and Voldemort.

He found Theo and Blaise sitting on the floor next to Blaise's bed, playing a game of Exploding Snap and sharing a bottle of Firewhisky.

“Harry, want to join us? We've changed the rules so we get to drink more.” Blaise grinned up at him.
“No, thanks. Draco around?” Harry asked.

“In bed,” said Theo.

“Don't forget to put up a privacy charm,” said Blaise, sniggering.

Harry couldn't help laughing along with him. Earlier in the week, Tracey had spent the night in Theo's bed, and somehow, neither of them had remembered to put up any sort of privacy charm. It had certainly been an eye-opening experience for the other boys in the dorm, before Blaise had eventually shouted out for the couple to either keep it down or open the curtains.

“That was one time, Zabini,” Theo grumbled. “Now shut up and take a shot.”

He pushed the bottle over to Blaise, who held it up in a toast before swigging from it.

Harry dumped his bag on his bed, then walked over to Draco's. “You awake?” he asked.

The curtain was pulled back, and Draco shuffled over on his bed. “I was just practising my Gigantus,” he said.

Harry gazed around at the sheets of parchment covering the bed, and the thick book in Draco's lap. “And you say Hermione's a swot,” he said fondly. “That reminds me, I've still got your Parseltongue notes.”

“I'll get them tomorrow,” said Draco. “How'd you go with Slughorn?”

“I got the memory. Just got back from Dumbledore,” said Harry.

Draco frowned. “You don't sound very happy about it.”

“I'll tell you all about it tomorrow, along with Hermione and Dad. You done with this for the night?” Harry asked, lifting up a page of neatly written notes.

“I wanted to do some more noun declensions,” said Draco, flipping a page in the textbook.

“How about you save those for tomorrow,” said Harry, shutting the book, “and declen me instead?”

“That isn't even a word,” said Draco.

“Then make it one,” said Harry, pushing the book off the bed with a thump.

“Oi! Privacy charms!” Blaise shouted.

Harry smirked and cast a Muffling Charm, then returned his attention to Draco, who was gathering up his notes. He leaned out of bed to put them neatly on his bedside table, then pulled the curtain shut tight.

“Since you rudely interrupted my work, I get to choose who tops tonight,” he said smugly.

Harry leaned over and kissed Draco's neck. “And how is that any different from usual?” he asked, trailing kisses down to his collar bone.

Draco tilted his head to give better access. “You're not allowed to complain about it,” he said.

Harry bit him. “When do I ever complain about having sex?”
“All – oh – all the time,” said Draco, undoing Harry's robe.

“That must be difficult for you,” said Harry.

“Immensely,” Draco said, pulling the robe off and tossing it aside. “I'm a martyr to the cause.”

Harry collapsed in laughter against Draco, squashing him into his pillow. “A martyr – a martyr who suffers by getting off?” he managed to say.

Draco started laughing, too. “It's entirely plausible.”

Harry raised his head and looked at Draco. “You're ridiculous,” he said, then kissed him.

This – laughter and snogging, with the promise of more – this was exactly what Harry needed; a reminder that, despite any similarities between himself and Voldemort, Harry was perfectly capable of love and affection.

“I love you,” Harry added in a sigh.

“If I'm ridiculous, you are too,” Draco murmured, nibbling Harry's lower lip.

“How d'you figure that?” Harry asked coyly, pulling away from the kiss to get a better view of Draco’s face..

“You're the one who's about to shag me,” Draco pointed out.

Harry sat up. “I'll just leave then, shall I? Maybe I should go find Bastien...”

Draco caught him by his tie. “You wouldn't.”

Harry grinned. “Why not? He's blond – if I took my glasses off I could pretend you were topping me...”

He laughed when Draco used his grip on Harry's tie to drag him down onto his back. Before Harry could move, Draco straddled him and undid his tie. “My hair is much nicer than his,” he growled petulantly, then kissed Harry.

Harry ran a hand through said hair. “It is,” he agreed. “I love you.”

“And there is no way that Queensbury is anything but a bottom,” Draco added, kissing him again, more forcefully this time. Harry sighed happily into the kiss and pressed back harder in kind.

When they broke apart a few minutes later to breathe, Harry gave a dazed smile, eyes slightly glassy. “Bastien who?”

Draco smirked and ran his tongue along Harry's lips until he opened them, meeting Draco's tongue with his own. He tried to stretch up to get closer, but Draco moved away, shuffling down Harry's body to unbutton his shirt, kissing and licking Harry's skin as he went. Harry moaned and started unbuttoning Draco's pyjama top.

“I love you,” he said.

“I love you, too,” Draco said, then scraped his teeth over Harry's nipple.

Harry arched his back, then pulled off Draco's top. He ran his hands down the smooth skin on his back, but Draco slid further down Harry’s body, now intent on getting his trousers off. He made
quick work of them, taking Harry's pants off at the same time. He crawled back up to kiss Harry again, rutting against one of Harry's legs. He tangled one hand in Harry's hair while he used the other to fondle Harry's balls.

Harry ran his hands over Draco's chest, pinching a nipple in his explorations, before lowering them to Draco's waistband. He untied his pyjama pants and pushed them down, along with Draco's pants. He couldn't reach very far from his position, only getting them under Draco's arse.

“A little help here,” he said, nipping at Draco's bottom lip.

Draco sat up and quickly shucked the remainder of his clothes, before leaning over to get to his bedside table. He sat back a few seconds later with the bottle of lube, which he uncorked and placed on Harry's stomach. Harry raised a hand, only to have it slapped away.

“I've got this,” said Draco, shuffling around so that he was facing Harry's feet.

Harry's mouth fell open as he watched Draco grab the lube. A few seconds later he brought his hand behind his back and pressed two glistening fingers inside himself, giving Harry a clear view of where his fingers were disappearing into his own body. Draco gave a soft, pleased sigh and widened his legs, trying to press deeper into himself.

Harry ran his hands up Draco's back, gently squeezing the muscles beneath the skin. Not being able to see past Draco, he jumped when he felt a slick hand close around his erection. He bit his lip and tried desperately not to come then and there.

“I love you,” Harry choked out again.

Draco's only reply was a moan, before he withdrew his fingers. He shuffled forward and gripped Harry's cock, lined it up, and slowly sank down onto it. He paused briefly when he'd sank to the hilt, letting his body adjust to the intrusion, then raised himself up and began to move. Harry brought his hands up to Draco's hips to help support him.

Their movements were hesitant to begin with – they'd never had sex in this position before – but it wasn't long before they began to get the hang of it. With Harry helping him rise up, Draco increased his pace, dropping back down with more and more force until he was fairly slamming onto Harry.

“I'm close,” Harry panted.

Draco squeezed in response, throwing his head back with a steady stream of panted obscenities. Draco's weight was hot and heavy in an entirely new way. Harry could swear he saw stars behind his eyelids when he sank down fully onto him, his insides locking down hard. It was all too much for Harry, and he came with a cry. When Harry's brain started functioning again he noticed Draco's movements getting less coordinated. He reached around to grip Draco's cock firmly, stroking it just the way he liked it. Seconds later Draco gave a low moan and spat all over Harry's hand, before turning around to collapse next to Harry.

A few minutes later Harry stirred and pressed a kiss to Draco's temple. “You better move before we get stuck together.”

“I'm good,” Draco mumbled.

Harry kissed him again and shut his eyes, immensely thankful that someone had invented Scouring Charms.

*******
After spending a rather gloomy Friday and Saturday discussing with Severus, Draco and Hermione what he had learned about Voldemort's Horcruxes, Harry was all too happy to agree to Hermione's suggestion of a picnic on Sunday. It was a nice enough day for late March, overcast without being too cold, and there were quite a few other students out in the grounds.

“It's a shame Viola and Scarlett have gone home for the break. Today would've been good for a quick training session,” said Harry, looking up at the sky.

“Oh, no, no Quidditch talk today,” Hermione dismissed immediately.

“What can we talk about, then?” asked Harry. “We've all already vetoed Horcruxes, and I refuse to discuss homework with you.”

“What about the continuing mystery of how Draco has any natural teeth,” said Hermione.

Draco was in the middle of unwrapping the huge parcel of Easter chocolates Narcissa had sent him, and didn't even look up to reply. “I floss and brush, Granger, it's not difficult.”

Hermione smirked. “Really? Because your mum's told me that a lot of your underage magic when you were little involved you disappearing when she or Tilly tried to brush your teeth.”

While Draco turned pink, Harry laughed and threw an arm around Hermione's shoulders. “I love you, Hermione.”

“I love you, too, Harry,” she said, patting his knee.

“No, I'm serious,” he said.

Hermione gave a puzzled frown. “As was I…”

“What's with you lately?” Draco burst out. “The other night you told me that you love me about a thousand times.”

“Yeah, we were in the middle of having sex. That's normal,” said Harry.

Draco shook his head. “Not that often. Why are you acting so weird?”

“Weird love's better than no love,” said Harry.

“Is it the war? Are you afraid you're going to die? Or that we will?” Hermione asked gently.

“No, not -” Harry sighed and ran a hand through his hair. “Promise you won't get weirded out?”

“I'm already weirded out,” Draco muttered.

Hermione glared at him, then nodded. “You can tell us anything, Harry, you know that.”

Harry unwrapped the chocolate egg that Draco handed him and took a bite before answering. “All the memories of Voldemort that I've seen this year... he keeps reminding me of myself.”

“In what way?” asked Hermione, accepting a chocolate bunny.

Harry shrugged. “We're both orphans... half-bloods who grew up amongst Muggles... both Parselmouths... Slytherins... we manipulated Slughorn the same way to find out about Horcruxes – we even look a little bit alike.”
Draco moved to sit in front of Harry, then leaned forward to take his hands, looking him square in the eyes. “Looking like someone doesn't mean that you're anything like them. You told me that, and I look far more like my father than you do the Dark Lord,” he said, squeezing Harry’s hands for emphasis.

Hermione nodded. “As for the rest, well, I think your dad might have a thing or two to say about you being an orphan now, don't you agree?”

“I guess,” said Harry.

“I remember when you told us that you were getting adopted,” Hermione continued. “You were so happy – you couldn't stop smiling. Do you think Voldemort would have had the same reaction if he were in your position?”

“Fat chance,” Harry said.

“Roughly a quarter of the British magical population is in Slytherin, so you can forget about that meaning anything,” Hermione said.

Harry bit his lip. “But Parselmouths are rare, and the way Dumbledore talks about us...”

“Oh, fuck Dumbledore,” Draco said irritably. “You're not evil because you're a Parselmouth, and I didn't become evil when I became a Parselmouth. That's just a ridiculous belief from ignorant people who are probably just jealous that they can't talk to animals themselves.”

“But a lot of Parselmouths have been evil,” Harry couldn't help but point out.

“Correlation does not equal causation,” said Hermione, “so that just leaves how you both dealt with Slughorn. While I agree that there may be similarities in what you both said, the reasons you were asking couldn't be more different. He was preparing to kill multiple people in order to benefit himself, while you're working to destroy the most evil wizard in history.”

“Kill,” Harry said. He pulled his hands out of Draco's grasp and wrapped his arms around himself. “You may as well call it for what it is. I'm not training to destroy him. I'm training to kill him. I have to become a killer. Like him.”

“Being a killer doesn't necessarily make you evil. Mother's killed, and there's nothing wrong with her,” said Draco.

“That was in self-defence,” said Harry.

“There's no real alternative,” said Hermione. “It's not like anyone could catch him and lock him up in Azkaban, is it? If what Dumbledore said last year was true, if he could escape from Azkaban even without a wand, then it stands to reason that the Dark Lord would be capable of doing the same, don't you think?”

“I guess,” said Harry.

“Anyway, the fact that you're even concerned about this should prove that you're nothing like him,” said Hermione. “Do you think Voldemort worries about being evil before he goes off to murder someone?”

Harry couldn't help snorting. “No way.”

Hermione put her arm around him and rubbed his back. “You're nothing like him, Harry. Not in any
“way that matters.”

“Yeah, but -”

“Harry, when was I last wrong?” Hermione asked.

“Er...”

“Exactly,” Hermione said smugly, pulling away to pick out some more chocolate.

“Just because you're a genius, doesn't mean you can use that as an argument,” said Harry, a smile tugging at his mouth.

Hermione smirked. “Yes, it does.”

“No, it doesn't,” said Harry.

“But that's not fair. How are we supposed to win an argument against you?” Draco asked with a pout.

“You can't,” said Hermione, her smirk widening.

“Fine,” said Draco, sticking his nose in the air. “Then I won't give you any more Easter chocolate. Harry and I will have it all, and you just have to sit there and watch.”

“Watch you both be sick, you mean,” said Hermione.

“Er, do I get a say in this?” asked Harry.

“No,” said Hermione and Draco in unison.

Harry sighed. “There are worse fates, I guess.”

“There, you see?” Draco crowed. “If you were really evil, you wouldn't have let us tell you what to do like that.”

“Exactly,” said Hermione.

Harry looked between his two best friends, who were now sharing smug smiles with each other, and felt part of his worry slip away; neither of them would have held back if they had honestly thought he was anything like Voldemort.

“Thank you,” he said quietly.

“You're welcome,” said Hermione.

Draco nodded. “Now have some more chocolate. It's good for you.”

“It absolutely is not,” said Hermione.

“Yeah, you've lost me there,” Harry said.

“No, it is,” Draco insisted. “Ask Remus if you don't believe me.”

Harry and Hermione both burst out laughing at that, but before either of them could reply, Severus' Patronus materialised a few metres away. The doe trotted delicately over to Harry to deliver her message.
Severus' voice was shaky when it issued from the Patronus. “Come to Dumbledore's office immediately,” the doe said, then dissolved into nothing.

“Something's wrong,” Harry said, immediately getting to his feet.

“Maybe he's been discussing Horcruxes with Dumbledore,” said Hermione.

Harry shook his head. “Dad sounded really upset. I better go.”

“We'll probably still be here when you're done,” said Draco.

“Yeah, I'll try to be as quick as I can,” said Harry.

He quickly set off towards the castle, with a heavy feeling of dread in his stomach. The feeling got stronger as he went, and soon Harry was running through the corridors with his heart hammering in his chest. He skidded to a stop in front of the gargoyle and panted out the password. The moment the entranceway began to open up an argument echoed down to Harry.

“- OTHER OPTIONS!” Severus roared.

“Severus, calm down!” Dumbledore shouted back. “Harry wouldn't want -”

“DON'T YOU FUCKING FINISH THAT SENTENCE! HOW DARE YOU!” Severus screamed.

Harry tore up the staircase and wrenched the office door open. Both Severus and Dumbledore were on their feet, the former with his back to the door, the latter behind his desk, both with their wands aimed at each other. Before either of them fully registered Harry's arrival, his duelling training kicked in.

“Expelliarmus!” he cried, easily catching Dumbledore's wand when it soared towards him.

Severus whirled around to face him. He was angrier than Harry had ever seen him, his face twisted with rage, with a vein throbbing in his forehead and two red spots on his cheeks, but at the sight of Harry, he sagged. His wand arm shook and dropped, and when he opened his mouth, his voice was low and broken.

“Tell him. Tell him what you told me,” he said.

“Tell me what?” Harry asked, looking nervously between the two men.

Dumbledore held out a hand. “Why don't you give me my wand back, and then I'll explain everything,” he said placatingly.

Severus' wand shot up again and he spun back around. “Quit stalling. Look him in the eye and tell him.”

Harry sidled over to Severus, who put a hand on his shoulder. For once, it didn't do anything to comfort him. “Tell me what?” he asked again.

Dumbledore sighed. “This is not how I had planned to tell you this -”

“Now,” Severus snarled.

“Very well,” said Dumbledore. “Harry, I have not been entirely honest with you. Voldemort doesn't have six Horcruxes. He has seven.”
Harry glanced back at Severus, who now had a pained expression on his face. “Why are – that's not great news, but it's not that bad, is it?”

Severus made a choked sound as his fingers tightened on Harry's shoulder. He turned back to Dumbledore.

“I'm afraid it is,” he said. “For you see, Harry... it's you.”

A cold trickle of fear ran down Harry's spine, but he shook his head, certain he'd misunderstood. “What's me?”

“You're the last Horcrux,” Dumbledore said.

Harry went numb, and the office seemed to fade away, until all that remained was Dumbledore's sad face. “What?”

“When the Killing Curse rebounded off you onto Voldemort, a piece of his horribly damaged soul broke away, and latched onto the only other living being in the room: you,” said Dumbledore.

His voice sounded very distant to Harry, as if he were speaking from the end of a very long tunnel. Harry blinked and shook his head, and the rest of his surroundings came rushing back into focus.

“I'm a Horcrux?” His voice in the room was quiet, but in his head it was loud, echoing like he was standing at the end of a long hallway.

Dumbledore nodded mournfully. “I'm afraid so.”

“No,” said Harry. “No, you're wrong.”

Dumbledore frowned. “Harry -”

Harry turned his back on him. “Dad, tell me he's wrong. Please, he has to be. I can't be a Horcrux. I can't. Please, Dad. Please, tell me I'm not a Horcrux.”

Severus' black eyes were glittering with tears, and one slipped down his cheek when he spoke. “I'm sorry, Harry. I can't.”

Harry swallowed down the fear now choking him. “I – I have to die?”

“I won't let that happen,” said Severus.

“If we are to have any chance of defeating Voldemort -”

“No,” said Severus, looking back at Dumbledore with an expression of pure loathing. “There has to be another way. There has to be. And I'm going to find it.”

Dumbledore looked pained. “Severus, please -”

“I quit,” Severus said quietly.

Dumbledore frowned. “I beg your pardon?”

Severus' face was stony. “I quit, and I am withdrawing my son from your school.”
In Which Harry is Understandably Distressed and a Faction Forms Within the Order

Chapter Notes

Holy fucking shit, the responses from the last chapter have absolutely blown me away. I was expecting a few more comments than usual, but nowhere near that many! Thank you very much to everyone who commented - your swearing, screaming, crying, keyboard smashing and capslock rants have been honestly made this last fortnight so much fun.

I do feel a little bit bad about ending on a cliffhanger like that................................................ but there's at least one more coming up. *ducks for cover*

“Don't be rash, Severus,” said Dumbledore.

“I am no longer your employee and hence under no obligation to obey you,” said Severus.

He led Harry over to the fireplace. Harry stumbled after him on numb feet, barely aware of his own movements.

“I won’t stop you from leaving, as is your right,” Dumbledore said, “but I do need my wand back.”

Severus looked at him coldly, then gently pulled Dumbledore's wand out of Harry's rigid hand. He placed it on the top of the mantle, next to a bowl of Floo powder, then grabbed a handful of the glittering powder and threw it onto the fire. “Slytherin common room,” he said, pulling Harry into the fire with him.

They stepped out of the Floo – Severus' grip being the only thing keeping Harry upright – to the shock of the Slytherins sitting on the couches and chairs nearby. Conversation came to an abrupt halt when everyone saw their Head of House emerge from the fireplace.

“As you were,” said Severus, steering Harry towards his dorm.

They walked in to find Blaise and Luna lying on Blaise's bed. They had clearly been interrupted whilst snogging.

“Out,” said Severus.

Blaise sat up nervously. “Sir -”

“I don't care what you were doing, just leave,” Severus barked.

Blaise scrambled to obey, pulling Luna along with him. Neither said anything, but both of them looked at Harry in concern as they passed him. When the door shut behind them, Severus turned to Harry and pulled him into a tight hug. Harry's arms hung stiffly by his sides. Though he tried, he couldn't quite seem to raise them in order to return the hug.

Eventually Severus slowly drew away and studied him. “We're going home. I'll pack your things,
but I need you to get Ladon. Can you do that?"

Harry nodded jerkily and walked over to his bed. It took a few tries for him to speak – his throat was tight with fear and his mouth dry – but he finally managed to hiss at Ladon. By the time the snake had dropped down from the top of Harry's bed and wound himself around Harry's shoulders, Severus had gotten all of Harry's possessions packed into his trunk, which he shrank down and slipped into a pocket.

“I need to fetch my own belongings, and then we'll leave, alright?” said Severus.

Again, Harry simply nodded, and followed Severus out of the room. The common room was silent when they returned, with the dozen or so people there all watching curiously as Severus and Harry walked through the room.

“Why do you reek of fear?” Ladon asked as soon as they were out in the corridor.

“I – I,” Harry's throat closed over as he tried to explain.

Severus heard him struggling and stopped immediately, putting his hands on Harry's shoulders.

“Breathe, Harry. In... and out... copy me... in... out... that's it.”

Harry did as he was told, trying to match Severus' breathing, and eventually his own slowly evened out to something approaching normal. Severus drew back, giving Harry's shoulders a squeeze before letting go of him.

“Good, just focus on that. We'll be home in fifteen minutes,” he said.

In Severus' quarters, Harry leaned against the wall where Severus had left him. Ladon had given up asking him what was wrong, choosing to instead coil a little tighter around him, with his head resting against the pulse point in Harry's neck. With Ladon's comforting weight on his shoulders, and a solid stone wall holding him up, Harry was free to concentrate on keeping his breathing steady. Focusing on that helped prevent him from thinking about what Dumbledore had told him.

“Let's go,” Severus said, putting his own shrunken belongings in his pocket.

On their way out, Harry wondered if this was the last time he'd ever see those rooms. Would he ever again sit on that couch, drinking tea after Sunday dinner? For that matter, would he ever walk these corridors, or sit around the fire in the common room with his friends -

“Dad,” he whispered, coming to a stop.

“What is it?”

“Draco and Hermione – they – I told them -”

“Do you want them to come with us?” asked Severus.

To Harry's embarrassment, tears came to his eyes at the thought. He nodded.

“Where are they?”

“Rock – by the lake.”

“Very well.”

He put a hand on Harry's shoulder, next to Ladon's tail, and they resumed walking. When they got
into the Entrance Hall they came across Susan and Ernie coming in through the front doors.

“Miss Bones, Mr Macmillan, I need you to run and fetch Miss Granger and Mr Black. They should be sitting near a rock by the lake. Tell them to meet us by the school gates at once,” Severus ordered.

“Yes, sir,” Susan and Ernie said, turning and running off together.

Harry and Severus were almost to the gates before they heard Draco and Hermione calling after them. Harry turned to find Draco running towards them, with Hermione a little ways behind him.

“What's going on?” Draco demanded as soon as he stopped.

“I can't explain here, but I need to get Harry home, and he wants you both to come with us,” said Severus, just as Hermione caught up to the group.

“Of course,” she said at once.

Draco nodded and took Harry's hand, gripping it tightly when Harry only managed a feeble squeeze.

They were slowed down at the gates, where Severus murmured the spells to unlock them. Once outside, he resealed the gates, then took hold of Harry's arm, held out his hand for Hermione, then Apparated the entire group to Fen House.

When he walked through the front door, Harry almost sagged straight onto the floor in relief at being home. Severus guided him over to the couch and sat him down, then straightened up. “Draco, use the Floo to contact your mother and tell her where you are, then ask her to inform Hermione's parents of the same. Hermione, there's a chest of blankets next to the record player. Get Harry warm while I make us some tea.”

Everyone hurried about their tasks, leaving Harry alone on the couch with Ladon. With some difficulty, he kicked off his trainers, then drew his feet up onto the couch and hugged his knees. While Draco knelt down and stuck his head into the green flames of the Floo, Hermione sat down next to Harry and tucked a blanket around him. It was Harry's favourite blanket: old and worn down to softness but not threadbare; it smelled of home, of winter days and nights spent in front of the fire. He tugged it tighter around himself, wishing he could hide under it and forget about the last hour. Hermione gave him a worried look, but didn't press the matter, merely put her arm around him. On the hearth in front of them, Draco was waving an arm around as he spoke to Narcissa. Harry and Hermione watched him silence, until a couple of minutes later he pulled his head out of the fire and stood up.

“Mother's doing as you asked, but she expects a full explanation later tonight,” Draco told Severus, before sitting on Harry's other side. Like Hermione, he wrapped an arm around Harry.

“Naturally,” said Severus, carrying a tray of tea things over.

He set it on the table and poured a cup, then held it out for Harry. Harry wormed one hand out of the confines of the blanket and took the cup gratefully, though it did nothing to alleviate the numb hopelessness that had spread through his body. He rested the cup on his blanket-clad knee and stared at the tendrils of steam rising up from the cup. After everyone else had a cup of tea, Severus cleared his throat.

“Harry, I need you to Occlude for the duration of this conversation. Can you do that?” he asked.

Harry didn't answer, just shut his eyes and concentrated as hard as he could on his Occlumency
shield. When he eventually got it up, with more effort than usual, he opened his eyes and nodded.

“Very well... You know that I was not best pleased yesterday to learn that Dumbledore had told Harry that he could leave school grounds to destroy a Horcrux with him,” Severus said quietly. “Staff cannot remove students from the grounds without permission from a parent or guardian.”

Draco frowned. “But you just -”

“Why do you think I had you Floo call your mother, Draco?” Severus asked wearily. “In any case, I went to discuss the matter with Dumbledore this morning. The fact that Dumbledore would willingly take Harry to find a Horcrux was worrisome. Such a trip would undoubtedly be dangerous – why risk the safety of the one person who can kill Voldemort? Unless, of course, Harry’s death wouldn't be as catastrophic as we had been led to believe,” said Severus.

“What do you mean by that?” Hermione asked.

“Dumbledore wants to kill me,” Harry mumbled.

“What?” cried Draco and Hermione.

“He doesn't want to kill you, Harry. He thinks that in order to defeat Voldemort, you need to let Voldemort kill you. Dumbledore doesn't think there's any choice in the matter. But he's wrong,” Severus said.

“Why? Why would he think that?” Hermione demanded.

“Because he has come to the conclusion that Harry is a Horcrux,” said Severus.

Harry flinched when two arms tightened around him, slopping tea onto his knee. While Hermione used her wand to siphon the tea out of the blanket, Draco turned to Severus.

“Harry can't be a Horcrux,” he said.

“I'm afraid that all the available evidence suggests that he does carry a piece of Voldemort's soul,” said Severus.

“What evidence is that?” asked Hermione.

Severus glanced at Harry, who stared back curiously. He wanted to hear this, but couldn't think of a single thing to say.

“You're a natural-born Parselmouth, which as far as we know is hereditary, and yet there is no evidence that either of your biological parents were,” said Severus.

“It could skip a generation... a recessive gene, maybe,” said Hermione.

Severus inclined his head. “By itself, it is not strong evidence... Far more compelling is your connection with Voldemort, which you know I've been curious about for quite some time. Legitimacy alone simply cannot explain how you could have visions of Voldemort, and certainly not of Nagini. But take into account the likelihood that she, too, is a Horcrux, and it suddenly makes sense.”

“Voldemort used Harry's blood to resurrect himself,” Hermione pointed out.

“True, but he had been having the visions before that, as you well know,” said Severus. “Finally, Harry, there's your scar. I've never heard of a curse scar acting like yours does, bursting into pain
whenever the caster is nearby or particularly emotional.”

“I've never heard of anyone else surviving the Killing Curse at all. Maybe all of this is normal,” said Draco. “When would the Dark Lord even have made Harry into a Horcrux? I think that's the sort of thing Harry would've noticed.”

“Not if he was an infant at the time,” said Severus.

“When Voldemort tried to kill me as a baby, he made me into a Horcrux,” said Harry.

“Voldemort's soul was so unstable after creating multiple Horcruxes that the rebounding Killing Curse shattered it yet again. Part of it left Voldemort's body and entered the only other body in the room,” Severus explained.

“Merlin,” breathed Draco.

Hermione ran her hands over her face. “Alright, so there's a lot of evidence that points towards this being true, but we need to be sure about this. There has to be something we can do to test this theory somehow.”

“No, it's true,” said Harry.

“How do you know?” asked Draco.

Harry shrugged. “Like Dad says, it certainly explains a lot of things. But it's more than that... I just know it's true... I can't really explain it, but I'm usually right when it comes to Voldemort – which, hey, that in itself is probably another sign it's real.”

“Or maybe you just have good instincts,” said Hermione.

“Either way, it works out the same. I'm a Horcrux,” said Harry, his throat tightening at his own words, “and in order to defeat Voldemort, I have to die.”

“No, you don't,” said Severus.

“But when Dumbledore told me that Nagini's a Horcrux, he said it would be destroyed by anything that killed her,” said Harry.

“That doesn't mean killing her is the only way to destroy the soul fragment,” said Severus.

“Dumbledore didn't even know how to destroy a Horcrux until I placed the diary and the Basilisk fang on his desk. For all we know, there could be numerous means to destroy the piece of soul in a Horcrux without damaging the container. Maybe there's only one. But I promise you that I will find a way to get that piece of him out of you without harming you.”

“You can't know that. Not for sure,” said Harry.

“Yes, I do,” Severus said.

He spoke with such certainty that Harry felt a small tendril of hope break through the numbness that surrounded him. It settled in his stomach, warm and comforting, and he managed a small smile.

“Where do we start?” asked Hermione.

“Research,” said Severus in his classroom voice. “We'll begin with my books, then go to Grimmauld Place tomorrow. There has to be something in that library.”
“Mother wanted an explanation tonight,” said Draco.

Severus nodded slowly. “Very well. I'll invite her over.”

“And Sirius and Remus, they should know,” said Harry.

“Agreed,” Severus said, somewhat reluctantly.

“Kingsley and Theo should be told, too,” said Draco.

Severus scowled. “The more people we tell, the greater the risk that one of them will choose loyalty to Dumbledore over Harry's well-being. We have to be careful about who we tell.”

“He may not have married my mother, but Kingsley is my step-father. If it came down to a choice, he'd be on our side,” said Draco. “Besides, he's an Auror: not only would it be difficult to do any research in his house without him noticing, he can probably help.”

“Theo has no loyalty to Dumbledore,” said Harry.

“He's also very clever. If we're researching something, we want his help,” said Hermione.

“You all make good points,” Severus said grudgingly. “Very well. But we wait until the summer holidays before telling Theodore. I don't trust Dumbledore with him – with any of you.”

“What exactly did he say to you today?” asked Harry.

Severus' lip curled. “He hadn't wanted to tell me just yet, but he was afraid that I would figure it out myself soon enough. He told me that your death was necessary to kill Voldemort, and thus avenge Lily.”

White hot fury swept over Harry, shattering the numbness entirely. “He tried to use Mum's memory to get you to agree to let me die?”

“He was under the impression that, once my pragmatism overcame my shock, I would agree with him, and even help break the news to you. He thought that if it came from me, you would be more inclined to believe it, and also easier to calm down,” Severus said bitterly.

Harry simply stared at him, unable to think of a single thing to say to that. Draco was swearing under his breath, and Hermione had her head bowed, her face entirely obscured by her hair.

“Draco, how is your Occlumency?” asked Severus.

Draco blinked at the sudden topic change. “Decent. I can clear my mind well enough, though I doubt I could block a strong Legilimency attack.”

“And you, Hermione? Have you been taught?” Severus asked.

“No, but I read up on the theory when Harry was learning,” said Hermione.

Severus nodded. “Good. I'll begin teaching you the basics tonight, then. The last thing we need is Dumbledore rifling through your minds when you return to Hogwarts. And Harry, I want you to bring up your Occlumency shield any time you're thinking about Horcruxes, alright? I know Voldemort hasn't utilised his connection with you in almost a year, but we can't take the chance that he may begin again. I also want you to keep your mind cleared the rest of the time, but let me know if you experience any headaches or mental fatigue.”
Harry abruptly pushed the blanket off himself and got to his feet, putting his half-drunk tea on the table. “I’m going to have a bath.”

Severus frowned. “Are you alright?”

“I’m fine,” Harry said. “I just really want – no, need – a bath. I feel dirty and gross. You can explain to them what happened without me, and I owe Ladon an explanation.”

Five minutes later, Harry was sinking into a steaming hot bath. He slid down until his shoulders were covered by the water and shut his eyes, letting the heat seep into his bones and dispel the last of the numbness that had engulfed him in Dumbledore’s office.

It was some time later before he felt ready to tell Ladon what had happened. He opened his eyes to see Ladon curled up on the toilet lid, waiting patiently.

“Are you feeling better?” Ladon asked.

“Yeah,” Harry said, and it was mostly true. If Severus said he was going to find a solution, then he would. There was absolutely no need for Harry to die after all.

Harry took a deep breath, and set about telling Ladon what had happened that morning. By the time he finished, Ladon was listening with his fangs bared, flicking his tail agitatedly.

“If you want the old man bitten, just say the word,” he said.

Harry laughed. “I don't think biting him would help. He's already dying, anyway.”

“Good,” Ladon said, more viciously than Harry had ever heard him.

“Anyway, we're not going back to Hogwarts. I never have to see him again,” Harry said.

“Good,” Ladon said again, more calmly than before.

He settled back down then, allowing Harry to start washing himself in peace. Once he had finished scrubbing himself, he climbed out and dried off. He got into his pyjamas, then picked up Ladon and wrapped him back around his shoulders. He put his dressing gown on, wrapping it securely around both himself and the snake.

“You know,” said Ladon, poking his head above the collar, “there is one good thing about you being a Horcrux.”

Harry looked at him askance. “There is?”

Ladon nodded. “If you weren't, then you wouldn't be a Parselmouth, and I never would have met you. I can't imagine what my life would be like without you.”

For what felt like the millionth time that day, Harry's eyes filled with tears. “Me neither,” he said.

Ladon stretched up a bit more. “Why are you crying? You told me humans do that when they're sad.”

“Sometimes we do it when we're happy,” said Harry.

Ladon stared at him, then lay down over his collar bone. “You humans make no sense.”

Harry chuckled and reached up to stroke Ladon before walking out of the bathroom. When he got
downstairs, he was surprised to see that only new arrival was Hedwig, who was sitting on the back of Severus' chair. Severus himself was preparing some food in the kitchen, while Hermione and Draco were pulling books off the shelves and sorting them into neat piles around the lounge room.

Harry side-stepped a pile to walk over to Hedwig. She gave a low trill when she saw him, though the nip she gave him was a little harder than usual.

“Hi, girl. Sorry we didn't tell you we were leaving,” he said softly, then looked up. “Where is everyone?”

“I decided that it would be best if we waited until tomorrow. After the shock you had today, I didn't think you would be up for a large group of people,” said Severus.

“Not really, no,” said Harry.


Harry frowned. “How is that good timing?”

“Dumbledore has put it about that our flight this morning was because you were suddenly taken ill. We can't have the truth getting out, so we have decided to continue the ruse,” said Severus.

“You now have a terrible case of Scrofungulus,” Draco said with a grin. “You've completely lost your voice, have a fever, and will be sleeping twenty hours a day for anywhere between one and four weeks. Oh, and you have tiny purple mushrooms sprouting from your throat and chest.”


“Your dad sent her a Patronus, asking her to bring some of our things,” Hermione said, gesturing to herself and Draco. “We put them in your room, but we can sleep elsewhere if you like.

“Hermione can always come home with me,” said Draco.

“No, stay,” said Harry, then frowned at Severus. “You lied to McGonagall?”

“I had to,” said Severus with a pained expression. “She's too close to Dumbledore.”

“But she's our Secret-Keeper!” said Harry.

“She'd never betray us to Voldemort, but I can't be sure that she wouldn't side with Dumbledore over me. You know how manipulative he can be,” said Severus.

“Yeah... You okay?” asked Harry.

Severus waved a hand. “My feelings are immaterial. Your safety is paramount. On that note, Draco and Hermione are working on preliminary research.”

“Yeah, I can see that,” Harry said, staring at the books filling the room.

Hermione added a book to the pile in front of the record player, then smiled at Harry; she was clearly in her element. “We've broken it down into a few categories: theoretical magic; medical and biological; and Dark Arts,” she said, pointing each out to Harry.

Harry glanced at the shelves, which were now mostly empty. The only books to escape unscathed were the novels, poetry, plays, cookbooks and Muggle biographies. “You've certainly been busy,” he said.
Draco laughed. “You were in that bath for over an hour.”

Harry blinked. “I was? Huh. Er, what do you want me to do?”

“Nothing, we're nearly done,” said Hermione.

“I take back what I said. You have suspiciously good timing,” Draco said.

“Damn, you caught me,” Harry joked weakly.

“You can help me in here,” Severus called.

After a dinner cobbled together from what was available in the pantry, the rest of the evening was spent working in the lounge. After some discussion, Harry and Draco began reading through the medical books, as they all agreed that those books were the most likely to hold the information that they needed. While they obviously wouldn't mention Horcruxes, perhaps one of them would have a magical way to destroy something similar within a person without hurting them.

While the boys read, Severus started teaching Hermione to clear her mind. Harry was a little disgruntled at how much quicker she picked it up in comparison to himself, though he couldn't claim to be surprised.

Finally, when all three teenagers were yawning, Severus handed Hermione a pain reliever and stood up.

“You've made good progress,” he said. “How have you two gone?”

“We've got three books that we think might have something in them,” said Harry.

Severus nodded. “We will resume in the morning, after I go into town for some groceries.”

“Actually, it might be better if we had breakfast at my house,” said Draco. “We'll have plenty of food, and if we're early enough we'll be able to catch Kingsley before he goes to work.”

“What time does he leave for work?” asked Severus.

“Usually around a quarter to eight,” said Draco.

“Very well. We'll leave here at seven, so you'd best not stay up late talking,” said Severus, before heading upstairs.

It took some time for everyone to get ready for bed, given that there were four people sharing one bathroom, but they got it sorted in the end. Harry went after Hermione and Draco, and when he opened the bathroom door, he found Severus waiting for him.

“Do you need some Dreamless Sleep?” he asked quietly.

Harry shook his head. “I'm okay. Really.”

Severus nodded and put a hand on Harry's shoulder. “It'll be fine. We'll find a solution.”

“I believe you,” said Harry.

Severus squeezed his shoulder, then edged past him into the bathroom. Harry walked into his room to find Draco in his bed, and Hermione in a camp bed that she had transfigured from Harry's desk chair. Harry opened the window for Hedwig, put his glasses on his bedside table, then climbed into
bed with Draco and turned off the lamp. He snuggled up to Draco, who wrapped an arm around his waist with a sleepy murmur.

Harry lay there, watching Hedwig readying herself for the hunt, and listening to his two best friends drifting off to sleep. He envied them for a moment, being able to sleep so quickly. Despite his rejection of Dreamless Sleep, Harry didn't think he would sleep quickly or easily, not after what he had learned that day. He hadn't counted on his emotional exhaustion catching up to him. He fell asleep as soon as he had cleared his mind.

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Harry felt like he had no sooner gotten to sleep than there was a persistent knocking on his bedroom door. He sat up rubbing his eyes, then put his glasses on.

“I'm up,” he said in a raspy voice.

“You have fifteen minutes,” was Severus' reply through the door.

Harry yawned and looked at his friends. Hermione was already getting out of bed, but Draco was still dead to the world. Rolling his eyes, Harry got out of bed and ripped the covers off Draco, making him whimper.

“Was that really necessary?” Hermione asked in amusement.

“If you want him out of bed this early, yeah, it really is,” said Harry.

Draco finally sat up, if only to better glare at them. “Why are we up this early?”

“It was your idea, remember?” Hermione said.

“Well, why'd you listen to me, then? Clearly I'm a fucking idiot,” said Draco.

Harry grinned. “I'm going to remind you that you said that next time you try to boss us around.”

In the end, they only took ten minutes to get ready. They trooped downstairs to meet Severus by the fireplace, where Draco went first through the Floo. Harry followed him, half-tripping out of the Floo into Draco's waiting arms.

“At least you're awake enough to catch me,” Harry said.

“Please, your inability to use a Floo is so predictable I could catch you in my sleep,” said Draco. He let Harry go, then turned around when one of the elves working in the kitchen hurried over.

“Welcome home, Master Draco!” Iggy squeaked.

“Hello, Iggy. We need coffee, please, and someone to wake up Mother, Sirius and Remus. I assume Kingsley is already up?” said Draco.

“Iggy thinks so, sir. Iggy will be doing that now,” the elf said, then dashed away.

By the time Hermione and Severus had come through the Floo, Iggy had laid out coffee, milk and sugar on the table. Everyone helped themselves, and they were sipping their coffees when Narcissa walked into the room, closely followed by Kingsley, Remus and Sirius. After the usual greetings were taken care of, the elves served breakfast before being banished from the room at Severus' request. Once they were gone, Severus explained over breakfast what had happened the day before, from Dumbledore's bombshell, to his fight with Dumbledore, to his and Harry's flight from
Hogwarts. By the time he finished, Sirius and Narcissa were furious, and Remus was looking troubled.

Kingsley got up and came over to where Harry was sitting. “Hold still, this won't hurt,” he said, then held his wand to Harry's scar. He muttered a spell under his breath, then pulled back with a frown. “Sorry, Harry, there's most definitely something Dark there.”

“But is it a Horcrux?” asked Sirius.

Kingsley shrugged as he returned to his seat. “I'm not sure what reading a Horcrux would give me, but even if it isn't a Horcrux, it's still not good. Certainly nothing you'd expect to find in a teenage boy, that's for sure.”

“Occam's razor would suggest that it is indeed a Horcrux, then,” Severus said.

Harry felt dread settle into his stomach at the confirmation.

“Are you okay, Harry?” asked Sirius.

Harry blinked, then nodded. “I was shocked at first, especially since Dumbledore was telling me I had to die, but now that we're working on finding another answer, I'm okay, I guess. I still feel pretty gross knowing that I've got a piece of Voldemort's soul inside me.”

“I've half a mind to go up there and give Dumbledore a piece of my mind,” Sirius growled, stabbing a sausage with unnecessary force.

“That wouldn't accomplish anything,” Remus said.

“I wouldn't say that,” Narcissa said darkly.

Kingsley rubbed her back, but addressed Severus. “Did he threaten Harry directly?”

Severus reached for the kippers. “No, but Harry did have Albus' wand, and I got Harry out of there fairly quickly.”

Kingsley nodded slowly. “That's a good sign, I think. Perhaps he can be reasoned with.”

“Who else knows about this?” asked Sirius.

“Just us, and Ladon,” said Harry, peering down at where Ladon was dozing under his scarf.

“You told your snake?” asked Sirius.

Harry looked up with a frown. “Of course. I tell him everything. I told him about Horcruxes in general as soon as I learned about their existence.”

“Their relationship is... unique,” Severus said drily.

“We're also planning on telling Theo once we're home for summer holidays,” Draco added.

“But that's it,” said Severus. “We cannot tell anyone else in the Order, and we cannot let your house-elves know, either. The fewer who know, the safer for Harry.”

“Agreed,” said Sirius.

“As nice as it is to see you two finally agreeing on something, I think you're wrong,” said Narcissa,
spreading avocado onto her toast. “Wouldn't it be better to inform more of the Order, so that we may have more people searching for a solution?”

“We're not telling anyone else,” said Severus.

Narcissa frowned. “You can't just -”

“Yes, I can,” Severus interrupted. “If it were Draco we were talking about, you would have the same attitude as I have.”

“If it were Draco, I would tell Andromeda, Ted and Nymphadora,” Narcissa shot back.

“But we're not talking about Draco, we're talking about Harry,” said Sirius. “We can't tell them.”

Harry watched the argument, wide-eyed. He knew that Narcissa was one of the few people whom Severus considered a friend, and yet now they were glaring at each other, while Sirius, rather than backing up his cousin, was taking the side of someone he loathed. Harry pinched himself under the table, and winced at the pain. This was real.

“Mother, they're right,” Draco said quietly. Narcissa looked at him, shock plainly written on her face, but said nothing, so he took her hand and continued. “I'd like to tell them, too, but we don't know that they wouldn't agree with Dumbledore. None of them have any real attachment to Harry. Andromeda and Ted have only met him a couple of times.”

“I know you don't want to distrust your sister after reuniting with her after so long, but you can't trust her on this,” said Sirius.

Narcissa pressed her lips together as she looked at Sirius, then turned back to Draco. “Your cousin -”

“Is close to Mad-Eye,” said Kingsley, “who is in turn close to Dumbledore. I know she likes Harry, Cissy, but Mad-Eye was her mentor. We can't risk it.”

Narcissa arched a brow. “But a snake can be told?”

“Ladon would never betray me,” Harry said. “His only loyalty is to me, and those I love.”

Narcissa shut her eyes before nodding. “Very well.”

“This argument is resting on the idea that Dumbledore would sacrifice an innocent boy in order to defeat Voldemort. Do any of you really think that's likely to happen?” Remus demanded, staring hard at everyone in turn.

“Yes,” said Harry, the same time Draco said, “Absolutely,” and Hermione said, “Probably.”

Narcissa reopened her eyes. “I wouldn't put anything past that man.”

“If he thought it was necessary...” said Kingsley.

Remus looked at Sirius, who merely shrugged, then at Severus. “You can't believe that. You've worked with him for over a decade, you know him better than any of us.”

“Funny you should mention my previous employment,” said Severus. “It just so happens that the position to which he hired me is cursed, and he knew that all along.”

Remus dropped his fork. “What?”
“The Defence Against the Dark Arts position, Lupin. It was cursed by Voldemort himself. It's why no one lasts more than a year. Dumbledore knew that when he offered me the job in July, and he knew that when he hired you, a mere year after Quirrell died on the job,” said Severus. “I didn't get any sort of warning from him. Did you?”

“He wished me luck,” Remus said slowly.

“But failed to mention why you'd need it, I wager,” said Severus.

“That's enough,” said Kingsley. “We're all upset with Dumbledore right now, and understandably so, but I need to leave for work. What's the current plan?”

“Research, primarily,” said Severus. “We began with my books yesterday and hope to begin going through the books in this house today. I've also begun teaching Hermione Occlumency for when she returns to Hogwarts. I think it prudent that we all develop strong enough Occlumency to at least withstand a light Legilimency attack from Dumbledore.”

“Sounds like a good start to me,” said Kingsley, before standing up. “I can do some digging at work to see if I can find anything that might help, but I'm still covering the Muggle PM and only get into the Ministry about once a week.”

“That might actually work in our favour,” said Narcissa. “If we can find a specific area for you to look into, there's less chance that someone will notice and become suspicious than if you were looking into half a dozen different theories.”

“Good point,” said Kingsley, then leaned down to kiss Narcissa. He bade everyone farewell and strode out of the room, only to stop in the doorway. “Oh, and there's no need to worry about my Occlumency. It's covered in Auror training.”

Narcissa drained her coffee cup. “Severus, if you can continue training Hermione, I'll continue teaching Draco. Between the two of us, we should have them ready by the start of term. I can begin teaching Sirius and Remus when the children have gone back to Hogwarts.”

“I think that's our best option. Are you agreeable?” Severus asked Hermione.

She nodded. “As long as I have time to finish my holiday homework.”

“Naturally,” said Severus.

Narcissa twisted around in her seat and called for Dobby, who immediately Apparated in front of her with a quiet crack. “Yes, Miss Narcissa?” he asked politely, before grinning. “Mr Draco is home!”

“Hello, Dobby,” said Draco.

“And Mr Draco brought guests. Good morning, Harry Potter, Miss Hermione, Professor Snape!” Dobby said happily.

“Hello, Dobby,” said Hermione.

“Nice hat, Dobby,” said Harry, earning himself a kick from Draco.

Dobby was once more wearing his Falmouth robes and his golden sandals, teamed with a black top hat that rested on the tops of his bat-like ears.

“Thank you, sir! Miss Narcissa is finding it in the attic,” said Dobby.
Narcissa cleared her throat. “Dobby, we need to go through the books we have stored in the attic. Please get two or three other elves to help you bring them all down to the library. Let's see... Tilly and Winky will be available, and maybe Lolly and Nippsy. Absolutely not Kreacher. We'll be up in a few minutes.”

“Yes, Miss Narcissa,” Dobby said, then Disapparated.

Narcissa turned back to the table. “That gives us enough time to have one more cup of coffee before heading up.”

Five minutes later Narcissa led the way upstairs to the library. Harry hadn't been in the room since it had been redecorated, and he couldn't help but be impressed with the changes he saw. The old rotten shelves had been replaced with floor-to-ceiling bookcases made of a rich, reddish wood. The same wood had been used in the floorboards, which were so brightly polished that they reflected the books on the lower shelves. Plush couches and armchairs dotted the room, upholstered in a soft green material that matched the pillows in the window seat in the far wall. Small tables were scattered around the room, variously holding small sculptures, photo frames, or writing material, but all with enough space for a stack of books and a cup of tea. The entire room was lit by a large chandelier, wrought to resemble vines twisting down from the ceiling; the light emanated from the leaves, bathing the room in a soft green glow that reminded Harry painfully of the Slytherin common room.

The books that the elves had brought down were piled neatly in front of the window seat, roughly one metre high and deep, and running the length of the wall. Harry gulped when he saw it. That lot would take months to get through, and Hermione and Draco would be going back to Hogwarts in less than a week.

“That's a lot of books,” said Draco.

“Yes... too many, I think,” said Sirius.

Narcissa nodded. “You're right... Dobby!”

Dobby Apparated in. “Yes, Miss Narcissa?”

“Where did all those books come from?” she asked.

Dobby tilted his head in confusion. “From the attic. We is getting the books that you asked for, Miss Narcissa.”

“That seems like more than what we stored in there,” said Sirius.

“Begging sir's pardon, but they is not all coming from the library,” said Dobby. “Some of them is from sir's brother's possessions.”

“Some of these belonged to Regulus?” Sirius yelped.

“Yes, sir.”

“Dobby, can you please separate Regulus' books from the rest?” Narcissa asked.

“Of course, Miss Narcissa.”

Dobby snapped his fingers, and Harry was, not for the first time, left in awe of house-elves' magic as about a dozen books extricated themselves from the piles and stacked themselves on a table near Narcissa.
“Thank you, Dobby. That will be all.”

Dobby bowed and Disapparated. Narcissa, Sirius and Remus immediately shared excited smiles with each other.

“This is it,” said Sirius.

“It must be,” Remus agreed.

“Er, what's going on?” Harry asked.

“When you asked us in January to look through the books here for anything that mentioned Horcruxes, we forgot about the books that had belonged to Regulus. They were stored away when we cleaned out his old room, well before we touched the library,” said Sirius. “Can you think of anyone more likely to own books about Horcruxes than a Death Eater growing up in this house?”

Hope sparked in Harry. “You think there'll be an answer in here?”

“Only one way to find out,” said Remus. He walked over to pick up the topmost book. “Secrets of the Darkest Art. Could be worse, I suppose...”

Draco picked up the next book. “Magicks for Enemies,” he said. “Sounds interesting, actually.”

Narcissa frowned as she watched him sink into one of the couches. She pulled a pair of silver-framed reading glasses out of her robe and put them on in order to read the cover of the next book. “I'm not sure the children should be here for this...” she said, looking up at the other adults.

“It's up to you whether or not you want Draco to leave, but I think Harry can handle it, and Hermione is of age,” said Severus.

“Mother...” whined Draco.

Narcissa gave him a long look before sighing. “Fine.”

Draco smirked and opened his book. Harry grabbed a book and sat down next to him. Dark Arts for Dark Hearts, he read. Please don't be poetry, he thought. He was relieved when he opened it up to find it completely devoid of any further rhymes.

Half an hour later, Harry would have welcomed some poetry. Some of the things he was reading about were absolutely revolting: curses to boil an enemy's insides or flay them alive; multiple curses for different methods of decapitation, some quick, others torturously slow; curses to send people mad; and all manner of different diseases which one could inflict upon one's enemy.

“Did you know you can curse someone with leprosy?” Harry asked the room at large.

“Yes,” said Severus. “I never saw it used, but I am familiar with that type of curse.”

“I think I'm going to be sick,” said Remus.

“They're not that bad, Lupin,” Severus said scornfully.

“No, I just read detailed instructions of how to create a Horcrux,” said Remus, who did indeed look rather nauseous.

“Does it say how to destroy them?” Hermione asked.
“I didn't get that far. Here,” said Remus, shoving the book at Sirius.

Sirius held the book gingerly, and carefully flicked through until he found the page Remus had been on. “Ugh, that's – that's disgusting,” he said with a wince. “I'm not reading the rest of that... Ah, here we are. Horcrux destruction... *In order to destroy a Horcrux, one must cause such damage to the container that it is beyond the capacity for magical repair.*” He looked up. “This is useless. We already knew that; that's why Dumbledore thinks what he does.”

“On the contrary, what you just read out is in fact very helpful,” said Severus.

“How?” asked Harry.

“Fiendfyre fits that description. We now have two methods by which we can destroy the other Horcruxes,” said Severus.

“Isn't Fiendfyre incredibly dangerous to use?” asked Draco.

“Not if we took the necessary precautions,” said Remus.

“That's great, but I don't much fancy being set on fire,” said Harry.

“I don't think we're going to find the answer in a book on Horcruxes,” said Hermione. “I think we need to approach this differently. Find a solution somewhere else, and adapt it to use on a Horcrux.”

“I agree,” said Severus.

Narcissa leaned forward with a frown. “May I see that book?”

Sirius shrugged and handed it over. “There's nothing else in there.”

Narcissa ignored him, flipping the page over. “This page is dog-eared. You don't think Regulus...”

“He wouldn't have,” said Sirius.

“You don't sound too certain,” Remus said.

Hermione bit her lip. “It would explain his disappearance, if he's now incorporeal like Voldemort used to be...”

“No, he wouldn't have made a Horcrux,” said Severus.

“He was a Death Eater, though,” said Harry.

“I don't care,” said Severus. “Regulus wasn't a murderer. He's dead, Black. He's not coming back.”

“Never thought I'd be relieved to hear that,” Sirius muttered.

“How do you explain the dog-earining of this page, then?” asked Narcissa.

“Are there other pages similarly marked? Maybe he just liked to dog-ear pages to keep his place,” said Hermione, her tone making clear her disapproval of such a practice.

“Some,” said Narcissa, flipping further through the book.

“It's just a coincidence,” said Draco.

Harry nodded and went back to his own book, but his mind was racing. Part of him felt sorry for
Sirius; it must be terrible to not know for sure what had happened to his brother. Harry had previously agreed with Severus' theory – Severus and Regulus had been Death Eaters together, after all – but Narcissa's discovery was making him reconsider. It seemed too coincidental for his liking.
In Which Harry Spends Most of His Time Either Sulking or Skulking

After the initial excitement the discovery of Regulus' books had caused, the rest of the Easter holidays blurred together in hours upon hours of research. It wasn't all that successful. True, they now knew that Fiendfyre would destroy a Horcrux, but they hadn't found anything that they could use to get rid of the one in Harry without killing him in the process.

Every day, Harry and Severus would Floo over to Grimmauld Place, where they joined Draco, Hermione, Narcissa, Sirius and Remus in the library. Kingsley was never home by the time they arrived, and they left well before he returned from work. The three teenagers spent some time everyday working on their holiday homework together, but apart from that, all their time was spent trawling through the Black and Malfoy texts for anything that could help Harry.

As long as he didn't think about the horrific reason behind the research, Harry found that he enjoyed the time he spent at Grimmauld Place. He had laid claim to the Black family's medical texts, and though they were rather darker than Severus' books (these were more likely to detail how to cause gruesome illnesses and injuries, as opposed to how to heal them), he was finding them incredibly interesting. He was also just happy to get to spend so much time with Sirius, Remus and Narcissa.

The biggest downside was the fact that Grimmauld Place was headquarters for the Order. As far as everyone else was concerned, Harry was seriously ill at home, being nursed back to health by Severus. Consequently, Harry was forbidden from coming downstairs unless he was hidden under his Invisibility Cloak, in case other members of the Order wandered in through the Floo. Even this wasn't too bad, since there were more than enough house-elves happy to fetch him anything he wanted from the kitchen.

On Saturday night, Harry and Severus stayed for dinner. Hermione and Draco would be returning to Hogwarts the next morning, and Harry would be spending the night. Harry was seated between Draco, who was being fussied over by Narcissa, and Hermione, who was talking to Sirius about Animagus transformations. Harry wondered if she was considering attempting to become one herself, but their conversation was so technical and specific that Harry only understood about half of it. Not wanting to interrupt Draco's time with his mother, he turned to Severus, who was discussing the Defence position with Remus and Kingsley.

“Maybe Mad-Eye will go back and actually get a chance to teach this time,” said Kingsley.

“He's more useful working for the Order,” said Severus.

“After what happened to him last time, I can't see him volunteering for the job,” said Remus.

“Maybe someone should have warned him that his job was cursed,” Severus said waspishly.

“Could they ask an Auror to do it?” asked Harry.

“It's a thought,” said Kingsley. “They could rotate it between the Aurors who patrol the perimeter of the grounds, perhaps.”

“But would the Ministry agree to that? They haven't always had the best relationship with Hogwarts,” said Remus.

“After they made us suffer through Umbridge, I should think that they would be keen to make amends, if for no other reason than to improve their own public image,” said Severus.
“As long as it's not Tonks,” said Harry.

“What's wrong with Tonks?” asked Kingsley.

“She'd be a really fun teacher, and I wouldn't be there to enjoy it,” said Harry.

“Are you saying you've never had a fun teacher in that subject?” asked Remus.

Harry looked between him and Severus and laughed. “I wouldn't say that.”

Kingsley grinned. “Diplomatic.”

“As well he should be, especially considering that one of his previous Defence teachers is about to begin home-schooling him in five subjects,” Severus said.

“Bit of a daunting task,” said Remus.

“Hardly,” Severus said scornfully. “I've taught two of those subjects to hundreds of adolescents, most of whom were about as intelligent as your average mountain troll. Teaching one adolescent who not only possesses but uses his brain will be a welcome reprieve.”

Harry and Kingsley both laughed, and even Remus looked amused. Then Draco grabbed Harry's arm and shook him.

“What about Quidditch?” he demanded.

Harry's eyes widened. He had been refusing to let himself think about the fact that he wasn't going back to Hogwarts, and so hadn't even thought about Quidditch. He felt a pang of almost physical pain at the thought of never playing again.

“We're going to need a new Captain and a new Seeker,” Draco continued.

“You don't have reserves?” Kingsley asked.

“No. I don't think any of the other teams do, either,” said Draco.

“You'll have to ask someone who tried out for Chaser this year,” Harry said, thinking rapidly. “Imogen would be my pick, and I'd imagine that Millicent would be able to convince her to join the team. That'd leave Viola to go to Seeker.”

Draco blinked. “Viola?”

“Yeah, Viola,” said Harry. “I know you're the more experienced flier, but you and Scarlett fly so well together, it'd be mad to split you up.”

“I guess,” said Draco.

“And obviously you should replace me as Captain,” Harry added.

Draco brightened. “Really?”

“Who else would you suggest? I have a feeling Theo will do what Gemma did, and quit next year to focus on his NEWTs, Scarlett has the attention span of a pixie, Viola doesn't have the experience, I can't see Millicent wanting the responsibility, and Malcolm's a bit young. But you'd do a brilliant job,” said Harry.
“You would, you've got a good head for strategy,” said Kingsley.

“He certainly does,” Narcissa said, reaching over to stroke Draco's hair.

Draco’s eyes lit up. “I'd get to tell everyone what to do.”

“That poor team's not going to know what hit them,” said Kingsley.

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After dinner the group moved to the lounge room for the rest of the evening. Severus left not long afterwards, but everyone else stayed up past midnight, until finally Narcissa declared everyone needed to go to bed.

After brushing his teeth, Harry got settled in bed while Draco took his turn in the bathroom. He'd just put his glasses on the bedside table when there was a quiet knock on the door.

“Come in,” he said, then squinted at the blurry figure in the doorway. “Hermione?”

“Your eyesight really is shocking,” she said.

She shut the door and came to sit on the bed, by which time Harry had his glasses back on.

“Were you after Draco or me?” asked Harry.

“You. I wanted to say a proper goodbye tonight, instead of when we're all rushing around tomorrow morning,” said Hermione.

Harry smiled, ignoring the pang in his chest. “Good idea.”

Hermione's answering smile was sad. “It's going to be strange not having you at Hogwarts.”

“I'll say,” said Draco, walking back in from the bathroom.

“I'm going to miss you both,” said Harry. “I'm going to miss everyone, actually. But you two most of all.”

“Maybe the curse in Dumbledore's hand will speed up and kill him, and then you can come back,” said Draco as he sat down next to Harry.

“That's a horrible thing to say,” said Hermione.

Draco shrugged. “He told Harry that he needed to die. I'd say that's more horrible.”

“Can we not talk about that right now?” asked Harry.

“Sorry,” Hermione and Draco muttered in unison.

“Thanks,” said Harry. “Anyway, it's only for three months, and then you'll both be home for the summer holidays.”

“And we'll write, of course,” said Hermione.

“See? It'll be fine,” said Harry, wishing he believed his own words.

Hermione nodded as well, then lurched forward to hug Harry, encompassing him in a cloud of hair. “I really will miss you,” she said.
“I'll miss you, too,” he said around a mouthful of her hair.

She gave a squeeze then knelt back up and slid off the bed. “I'll see you both in the morning,” she said, before walking out of the room.

“It's only for three months now, but what about next year?” Draco asked quietly.

Harry looked down at the duvet, tracing a silver thread with a finger. “Maybe Dumbledore's hand will have got him by then, and Dad and I can go back,” he said.

“I thought saying that was 'horrible',” said Draco.

“Hermione said that, not me,” said Harry. “After what Dumbledore said to me and Dad the other day, I'm finding it hard to muster any sympathy for him.”

“It'll be alright. We'll find an answer,” said Draco.

“I don't want to talk about Horcruxes right now,” said Harry.

“No talking, I can work with that,” said Draco, before pushing Harry into the pillows and snogging him senseless.

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After being woken up early Sunday morning by Tilly, Harry and Draco had dressed and gone down to the kitchen, which was a hive of activity. All four adults were going to King's Cross Station to see off Draco and Hermione, and house-elves were bustling around serving everyone breakfast. Narcissa immediately called Draco to sit next to her, to Harry's relief. He had woken up feeling dejected about not returning to Hogwarts, and didn't want his mood to bring down either Draco or Hermione. To that end, he chose to sit next to Sirius, who was sleepily patting a purring Crookshanks.

“You sure you don't want to come to the station with us?” Sirius asked.

“I'm sure,” Harry said quietly. “It'll be too crowded to use my Cloak.” He didn't mention that he had a feeling he would be tempted to jump aboard the Hogwarts Express.

Sirius just chuckled. “It is a bit of a mad house there.”

Harry just nodded and went back to nibbling on his toast. He had a sudden, overwhelming urge to be home, but knew he'd regret it if he didn't wait to see his friends off.

Finally, it was time for everyone to leave. Harry hugged both Hermione and Draco, forcing a smile onto his face when they drew apart.

“Have a good term,” he said.

“I'll write to you tonight, alright?” said Draco.

“Don't worry about me tonight. I know what the first night of term's like,” Harry said lightly.

He thought he had sounded convincingly cheerful, but Narcissa shot him a curious look. “When can we expect you back here to continue our research?”

“Er, Wednesday morning, I think. Dad said he wants to pretty much keep to my Hogwarts class schedule, and I had most of Wednesday free,” said Harry.
Narcissa nodded. “We'll see you then.”

There was a chorus of goodbyes as everyone headed for the front door, and Harry was left alone in the kitchen. He gazed around at the dirty dishes abandoned on the table, then spun around and grabbed the jar of Floo powder off the mantel. He threw it into the fireplace and, calling “Fen House,” stepped into the green flames.

When he emerged from the fireplace at Fen House he only stumbled slightly. He gave a small, proud smile, only to straighten up and find Severus watching him in amusement from the armchair.

“That was good by my standards,” he said defensively.

Severus snorted. “I know.”

Harry resisted the urge to stick out his tongue. “What are we doing today?”

“You may take today off if you like. I'll read through your holiday homework, and we'll begin Defence and Potions tomorrow,” said Severus.

“You're not taking the day off?”

“I'm reading five essays, not a few dozen. This is a day off.”

“Fair enough. I'll be outside.”

Harry walked out of the house into a lovely spring day. It was sunny but not too warm, and the garden was coming into bloom. Bees swarmed around the lavender bush and bird song filled the air. Harry scowled at it all. A Dementor-caused mist was closer to how he was currently feeling.

“Don't think like that,” he muttered to himself as he walked down the garden path.

He hauled himself up into the oak tree and settled onto his usual bough. “Ladon?”

There was no answer, and Harry sighed. Ladon must still be sleeping on Harry's bed. He lay down himself, face down on the bough, with all his limbs dangling off it. This seemed as good a place as any from which to think about what else he felt like doing that day.

He didn't know how long he lay there for, but it was long enough for the warm breeze to lull him into a light doze. He was awakened by the feeling that he was no longer alone. His eyes popped open and he looked down, expecting to see Severus standing at the foot of the tree, but there was no one there.

“I thought I was the one who was supposed to sleep in trees. Or have I finally convinced you how much better they are than your human beds?”

Harry twisted around to see Ladon coiled on the bough behind him. “I came out here to find you, and when I realised you weren't here, I couldn't really be bothered moving.”

Ladon began slithering further along the bough, climbing over Harry to reach the far side of the bough. “Good. I've always thought you humans move around too much. Far better to find a nice, comfortable spot and curl up there.”

Harry huffed a laugh and lay back down. “That's the plan for today.”

He watched Ladon climb up a smaller branch and disappear behind a clump of leaves. Harry shut his eyes again, idly swaying his arms and legs while he brought up his Occlumency shield.
The sun was setting when he opened his eyes again. This time, Severus really was standing underneath the tree, with his arms crossed and a scowl on his face.

“It's dinner time. I've been calling you for five minutes,” he said irritably.

Harry sat up and dropped his Occlumency shield. “Sorry. Fell asleep.”

Severus' scowl turned into a concerned frown. “Is this what you've been doing all day? Sleeping in a tree?”

“Yeah,” said Harry, then switched to Parseltongue to call Ladon out of the tree. Once he had the snake wrapped around his neck, he jumped down to land next to Severus. “I had my Occlumency shield up.”

Severus' eyebrows shot up. “The entire time you were sleeping?”

Harry shrugged. “Yeah. First time I've been able to do that.”

“Perhaps I should have held your Occlumency lessons in the oak tree,” Severus mused.

Harry's home-schooling began the next day, with Severus telling him to sit down at the kitchen table for his Defence lesson.

“I guess this is a theoretical lesson,” said Harry, sitting down and preparing to take notes.

Severus sat down and placed a small, dark green bottle in the middle of the table. “Not at all.”

“Veritaserum?” asked Harry.

“I'm deviating from what I would be teaching your class at Hogwarts this week, but you're already perfectly capable of throwing off the Imperius Curse,” said Severus in his classroom voice. “Today we will be working on your Occlumency. I had originally intended to give you Veritaserum much earlier, when I first began teaching you Occlumency.”

“But you changed your mind when you found out how pants I am at it,” said Harry.

“Was,” Severus corrected. “You took longer to learn it than I had anticipated, since you don't have a natural aptitude for the skill as I do. But you worked hard and are now quite a good Occlumens.”

Pride blossomed in Harry's chest. “Thank you.”

Severus nodded. “When using Occlumency to fight Veritaserum, there are two methods which an Occlumens can utilise, depending on both their skill and objective. An accomplished Occlumens can lie under the influence of the potion.”

“Is that what you're teaching me today?” asked Harry.

“No. In order to be able to lie under Veritaserum, one needs to be able to hold the lie in their mind first, so that anyone using Legilimency upon them would in fact believe it to be true,” said Severus.

“That's what you did when you were spy,” said Harry.

“Exactly,” said Severus.
“How come you're never taught me how to do that?” asked Harry.

“How to stop yourself from blurtling out the truth whilst under Veritaserum,” said Severus. “It obviously won't stop someone who is prepared to use torture, but it will be perfectly serviceable against someone more benevolent.”

“How to stop yourself from blurtling out the truth whilst under Veritaserum,” said Severus. “It obviously won't stop someone who is prepared to use torture, but it will be perfectly serviceable against someone more benevolent.”

“Like who, the Ministry?” asked Harry.

“I was thinking more of Dumbledore,” said Severus.

“Oh. Right.”

“This method is fairly simple. You need to bring up your Occlumency shield, but instead of using it to block out a Legilimency attack, you use it to keep the truth trapped within your mind,” said Severus.

“Okay, I think I can do that,” said Harry. He took a moment to bring up his Occlumency shield, then nodded. “Ready.”

Severus gestured to the bottle. “Three drops will suffice.”

Harry opened the bottle and poured three drops into his mouth. He tried to time how long it took before the potion took control of him, but after a short while, he found he no longer cared. His hands relaxed on the table and he gazed complacently across at Severus, who leaned forward.

“I am going to ask you a series of questions to which I know the answers. I want you to resist the urge to answer me. Don't try to lie, just try to remain silent. Do you understand?”

“Yes.”

“What is your name?”

Harry pressed his mouth shut, but the urge to open it, to tell Severus the truth, was simply too strong. “Harry James Potter.”

“Harry, clamping your mouth shut won't fight the compulsion. You need to use your Occlumency. Imagine that you have the truth with you on your broom, and that the compulsion to answer me is chasing after you. Understand?”

“Yes.”

“Again. What is your name?”

This time, Harry tried to do as he was told. He soared through the air, holding the truth tightly under his arm like a Quaffle. He could feel the force of the potion chasing him through the air, and while he wanted to get away from it, something else was drawing him back. He spun around on his broom.

“Harry James Potter.”
“That was much better than your first attempt. What is your name?”

Severus repeatedly asked Harry the same question. Each time, Harry tried to keep from answering truthfully, but the compulsion to do so was simply too strong, until eventually, after about a quarter of an hour, he was able to keep his mouth shut and simply stare at Severus.

“Is the potion wearing off?” Severus asked.

“Yes,” said Harry.

Severus nodded. “We'll wait until it's completely worn off before we discuss your performance.”

Harry merely sat there, as he hadn't been asked a question, and waited. After a while, he began to feel curious about how he'd done.

“I can think properly again,” he said.

“Good,” said Severus. “You did well for your first time. I didn't think you would be able to fully resist the urge to answer, but on your last effort it took you almost two minutes to answer.”

“That doesn't sound very impressive, considering all I had to do was keep my mouth shut,” said Harry.

“That's more difficult to achieve than you may realise. I think we'll practice your resistance every day until you are capable of at least refusing to answer,” said Severus.

Since Harry was too worn out to duel after the Veritaserum, he and Severus spent the rest of the morning discussing duelling tactics, and the afternoon brewing in the barn. They had spent so many days in a similar way that Harry could almost fool himself into thinking that he was home over summer holidays.

His mood improved further that evening, when Draco's Patronus materialised in his bedroom.

“You'll never guess who's teaching Defence,” said the ferret. “Dumbledore.”

Harry blinked when the ferret disappeared, then cast his own Patronus. “For Draco Black. What?”

He waited impatiently after his fawn bounded away, then Hermione's magpie burst into the room. “Dumbledore's taken over the class. He announced it at breakfast this morning. He didn't say if it would be permanent, just that he would be teaching the subject until further notice.”

“And you'll never guess what we did in class today,” said the ferret

“Er, tried to fight off the Imperius Curses he used on you all?” Harry said to his fawn.

“How'd you know that?” asked the ferret on its return.

Harry shrugged and cast another Patronus. “Dad never got a chance to get his things from his classroom, or his office, so if Dumbledore found his class plans, he would've known that that's what Dad intended to teach our class this week.”

“We have an entire week of having him curse us?” the magpie asked.

“If he's following Dad's plans, then yeah,” said Harry. “Did you guys throw it off?”

Their Patronuses returned together.
“I did, eventually,” the ferret said proudly.

Hermione's response was sour. “I did not.”

“I'm sure you'll get it in the end,” said Harry.

“You can't be the best all the time,” Draco added.

Hermione was clearly sick of the subject, because her magpie changed the topic. “What about you, Harry? How was your first day getting home-schooled?”

Harry spent the rest of the night having a stilted, Patronus-based conversation with Draco and Hermione. The rest of Harry's friends had not questioned the cover story about him being sick, and everyone had asked for their well wishes to be passed on to him on his sickbed. While he felt guilty over the lie, Harry couldn't help feeling cheered by his friends' messages.

His mood came crashing back down the next day. After battling a Venomous Tentacula together for Herbology, Harry and Severus sat down at the kitchen table for Transfiguration and Charms. Severus was obviously far less confident teaching those subjects than he was Herbology. He spent the first ten minutes of each lesson grilling Harry in order to find out where he was in the curriculum, then had to use the textbooks to actually teach, something Harry had never seen him do in class before. By the time Severus called a halt to the day's lessons, Harry was feeling more keenly than ever his absence from Hogwarts.

“I realise that I have no experience teaching Charms or Transfiguration, but my performance will improve before too long,” Severus said later that evening.

Harry looked up from the dinner he was pushing around his plate. “What?”

“You're upset. I assumed it was related to my rather lacklustre teaching today,” said Severus.

Harry shook his head. “No, you were fine in Herbology, and as for the others... I know you've never taught either of those subjects before. I didn't think you'd be brilliant straight off the bat.”

“Then what's troubling you?” asked Severus.

Harry poked his mashed potato with his fork. “It just made me miss Hogwarts, that's all. I'm sure I'll get over it in a few days.”

Severus nodded. “It's only for three months, and then you will be reunited with your friends.”

“I know,” said Harry.

“In the mean time, instead of focusing on the fact that you won't see them as much as you are used to, why don't you focus on how much more you will see of your godfather, and the others at Grimmauld Place,” Severus suggested.

“Yeah... that's a good idea,” said Harry, forcing a smile. “Thanks, Dad.”

Severus nodded again and returned to his dinner, but Harry felt him watching him throughout the rest of the meal. As soon as they were done, he retreated to his room, eager to get away from Severus' watchful gaze.

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The next day, Harry returned to Grimmauld Place for more research. He curled up in the window
Harry sat with a stack of books and immediately began to read, blocking out the sounds of the adults chatting as they got settled with their own books.

A couple of hours later Harry reached the end of yet another medical book and shut it with a snap. He added it to the pile of other unhelpful books, then stood up to stretch. It was only then that he realised both Severus and Narcissa were missing.

“Where are the others?” he asked.

Sirius and Remus both looked up. “Narcissa said she wanted to talk to Snape about something,” Sirius said.

“They've been gone a while though,” Remus added.

“I'll go find them. I need a break,” said Harry.

“Probably a good idea to stretch your legs, you've hardly moved for hours,” said Sirius.

Harry nodded vaguely and wandered out of the library. The lounge room was empty, and the only other rooms on this floor and the ones above were bedrooms and bathrooms, so Harry walked downstairs, thinking that they might be in the kitchen.

A low murmur of voices on the first floor drifted up the stairs, and Harry slowed his steps when he heard his own name. The door to the dining room was open, while the door to the study was shut, so he walked silently towards the latter.

“- what you're asking of me, Narcissa,” Severus was saying.

“He's miserable, Severus, you can't deny that,” Narcissa replied.

There was a pause, then Severus said heavily, “No, I can't, but he's better off miserable and safe, than happy and in danger.”

“Is that what you're telling yourself?”

“What else can I do? I don't like seeing him moping around like this any more than you do, but I have to protect him.”

There was a long silence. Harry took the opportunity to cast a silent Disillusionment Charm on himself and crept closer to the study, wishing he could see through the door. He felt a moment of guilt for eavesdropping, then shook it off. There were plenty of spells that could be utilised to prevent him from listening in, and anyway, Severus was the one who had taught Harry how to move around stealthily in the first place.

“It's just Dumbledore that you're worried about, isn't it? You don't think he's told Minerva or Hagrid?” asked Narcissa.

Severus sighed heavily. “He'd never tell Hagrid – he'd take the news about as well as I did, if not worse. I don't believe he'd tell Minerva yet. She wouldn't easily agree to sacrifice a student like that – he'd have to work on manipulating her into seeing his perspective, and even then, she would probably demand evidence... He'd have a hard time convincing her – she'd see it a betrayal of Lily and James' memories, not to mention Harry and myself... If I had to guess, I'd say he'll tell her on his deathbed, so that he could try and guilt her into following his plan. I still don't want to tell her until after he's dead, but we don't need to worry about her.”
“In that case, I'm sure we can come up with some safeguards against him,” said Narcissa.

“Like what?”

“An Unbreakable Vow?”

“He's already dying, that wouldn't change anything. In fact, with a death sentence hanging over him, I'm not sure any threats against his person could help.”

“So we don't threaten his person,” said Narcissa. “We threaten his reputation.”

“How?”

“If he hurts Harry, you go to the press.”

“And if he hurts me to keep me silent?”

“Then I go to the press.”

There was another silence as Severus considered this, and Harry crouched down to put his ear to the keyhole.

“That would probably work,” Severus said slowly. “He likes to be seen as an eccentric, kindly old man... Having the threat of his own ruthlessness becoming public knowledge could just stay his hand... It would also mean his position against the Ministry would be weakened, and he'd be loathe to give up the moral high ground with them... We could never tell the press about Horcruxes though.”

“Of course not. But then, Dumbledore wouldn't want that knowledge getting out any more than we do.”

“True... And I don't think he has it in him to kill a child... He'd be more likely to try and convince Harry to hand himself over to Voldemort than to do anything himself...”

“Did you even ask Harry if he wanted to leave Hogwarts?”

“I didn't stop to think. I just wanted to get him home, to safety.”

“Which is entirely understandable. I would have reacted the same way. But you haven't answered my question, Severus.”

“He was in shock, Narcissa. He could barely speak until we got home.”

“But afterwards?”

“No.”

“Don't you think you should?”

Outside in the corridor, Harry nodded his head emphatically.

“You know he'll want to return,” said Severus.

“What's the alternative? Keeping him cooped up at your house, only letting him out to come here?”

“Is that so bad?”
“After what his relatives did to him?”

“How can you even – this is for his own safety!”

“I understand that, Severus, believe me... but I remember seeing that cupboard they kept him in. And I remember that when you saw it two years ago, Minerva and I had to remind you of the consequences should you curse the Dursleys.”

Harry’s eyebrows shot up; none of them had ever mentioned that to him.

“I still say I could have gotten away with it,” Severus muttered rather mutinously.

“That wasn’t my point. I merely meant to point out that given his childhood, Harry must be chafing under this confinement more than most people would. Face it, Severus: that boy belongs at Hogwarts with his friends,” Narcissa said firmly.

Unable to take it any longer, Harry ended the Disillusionment Charm and opened the door.

“I agree,” he said.

Narcissa jumped slightly when she saw him, but Severus didn't seem surprised. “How long were you listening for?”

“Long enough,” said Harry.

“You understand the danger you would be in if we return?” asked Severus.

Harry shrugged. “As far as I can see, I'm not safe anywhere. None of us are.”

Severus’ mouth turned down as he glanced between Harry and Narcissa. “I understand why Harry wants to go back, but why are you pushing this?”

“Because I think it's the right thing to do,” said Narcissa. “You've just said yourself that Dumbledore won't attack Harry directly. Set up a few safeguards just to be sure, and I see no reason why Harry cannot return to Hogwarts to be with his friends.”

Harry smiled gratefully at Narcissa then looked at Severus hopefully. “Please?”

He could see that Severus was wavering. “Do you promise to obey any order I give you?”

“Yes.” An immediate response.

“And you won't go anywhere near Dumbledore without me?”

“I won’t.”

“You'll have to lie to all your friends and stick to the story that you've been ill.”

“I can do that.”

“It would mean that I have access to the Hogwarts library...” Severus said unwillingly.

Harry nodded. “And the Chamber of Secrets.”

“What?” asked Severus and Narcissa.

“We need to be able to destroy Horcruxes. If Fiendfyre is as dangerous as everyone says it is, why
"Not stock up on basilisk fangs?" asked Harry.

"That's a good idea," Severus said grudgingly.

"It seems to me like the benefits of Harry – and yourself – returning outweigh the benefits of you both remaining at home," said Narcissa.

Harry crossed his fingers while Severus thought it over, and breathed a sigh of relief when he nodded curtly.

"Only if Dumbledore is able to step onto our property," Severus said.


Narcissa raised an eyebrow. "What's the significance of that?"

"There's a blood-based protection spell on the property," said Severus. "If Dumbledore means to harm either one of us he will be repelled."

Narcissa blinked, then nodded. "Understandable. Let's go join Sirius and Remus, and brainstorm some safety measures for your return."

Severus swept out of the room with a billowing of his robes, but Harry hung back. "Thank you," he said earnestly to Narcissa, then hugged her. "I'm not sure Dad would've listened to me if I'd asked to go back."

Narcissa squeezed him back. "I know what it's like to be trapped in this place. I couldn't stand by and watch you suffer a similar fate."

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On Saturday morning Severus sent Hedwig to Hogwarts with a note to Dumbledore, inviting him to come over that evening to discuss terms for Harry and Severus' return to the school. Hedwig had not returned by the time Dumbledore Apparated into the field outside Fen House.

Harry and Severus were waiting for him; the latter standing in the doorway, while the former was hidden underneath his Invisibility Cloak, watching through a window with Ladon wrapped around his shoulders. They both had their wands in their hands as they watched Dumbledore approach their property. Harry held his breath as he waited for Dumbledore to unlatch the gate. Seconds later it swung forward with its usual squeak, and Dumbledore stepped through, crossing the blood ward with ease.

Harry silently breathed out in relief. He saw Severus' hand unclench, though he kept his own wand drawn. He crept over to hide in the corner next to the record player, where he would be out of the way.

"Good evening, Severus," Dumbledore said, as genial as ever.

Severus stepped out of the doorway. "Dumbledore."

"Is Harry not at home?" Dumbledore asked, looking around the room before sitting down on the couch.

Severus shut the door and took his own seat. "He's with his godfather."

"You don't think he should be here to discuss terms?" asked Dumbledore.
Harry's eyes narrowed at the blatant hypocrisy of Dumbledore, of all people, telling Severus not to keep Harry in the dark.

Severus was calmer. “I know his opinions. He trusts me to respect them.”

Dumbledore folded his hands. “Very well. What are your demands?”

“I want permission to collect Fawkes’ tears,” said Severus.

“Phoenix tears? Am I to understand that you will be using them as an antidote to basilisk venom?”

“Yes.”

Dumbledore sighed. “Severus, you are wasting your time in that endeavour. There is no way to destroy a Horcrux without completely destroying its container.”

Even though he already knew Dumbledore's opinion on the matter, Harry had to press his lips together to prevent himself from gasping at the cold finality in Dumbledore's voice.

“You're wrong,” Severus said quietly. “Do I have your agreement?”

“Yes, you may collect Fawkes' tears if you insist,” said Dumbledore.

“Thank you. That brings me to my next demand. You will stop saying that Harry has to die, and you will not interfere with our research or experiments,” said Severus.

“Severus, your denial...”

“Do you agree?”

There was a long silence, during which Dumbledore stared at Severus, and Harry's hand tightened on his wand.

“Very well, I shall stop speaking to you of the matter, and I shan't hinder your efforts,” said Dumbledore.

“Good. I don't want you alone with Harry under any circumstances,” said Severus.

“Oh, come now, is that really necessary?” Dumbledore asked. “Surely the fact that I was able to cross your blood ward proves I'm no threat to the boy?”

Harry watched, impressed, as Severus showed no surprise at Dumbledore's words.

“Not a direct threat, no,” Severus allowed, “but I certainly don't trust you with him.”

Dumbledore's face fell. “It hurts me to hear you say that, my boy, but I give you my word... That does, however, go against Harry's wishes, does it not? He did want to come with me when I find the next Horcrux.”

“And he may do so, provided that I come too,” said Severus.

“As you wish,” said Dumbledore.

“Thank you,” said Severus. “In that case, Harry and I will return tomorrow.”

Dumbledore smiled. “Excellent. Now, I assume that you have told the residents of Grimmauld Place
about Horcruxes.”

“Just the human ones.”

“I don't want that information spreading.”

“Nor do I.”

“Good. I have to say, I'm very happy that you have decided to come back to Hogwarts,” said Dumbledore.

“I acted in what I thought was Harry's best interest,” Severus said stiffly.

A pained expression flitted across Dumbledore's face. “I'm not the enemy, Severus.”

Severus nodded. “I know who our enemies are. But I feel I should warn you that if any harm befalls Harry, I will not hesitate to go to the press. If for some reason I am unable to do so, Narcissa will go in my stead. Neither of us have any qualms about destroying your reputation should the need arise.”

Dumbledore's eyes hardened. “You would threaten the work of the Order for the sake of one boy?”

“I'm perfectly capable of destroying your reputation without hindering the war effort, as is Narcissa,” Severus said softly.

Dumbledore gazed at him for a moment, as if waiting for something, then got to his feet. “I'll pop by your office tomorrow evening to discuss what I taught your classes in your absence. Good evening.”

Severus followed him to the door, then watched him through the window. “He's gone,” he reported a minute later.

Harry pulled off his Cloak and sat down on the couch. “That went well.”

“Yes, it did... He's undoubtedly relieved that he doesn't have to look for yet another Defence teacher,” Severus mused. “I can't say that I'm happy he's aware of the blood ward, but I should have anticipated that he would detect it.”

“That's not a problem though, is it?” asked Harry.

“He can hardly bemoan us protecting our home,” said Severus.

“I think he was fishing for an apology there,” Harry said.

Severus shrugged. “He'll be waiting a long time if he wants an apology from me for acting to protect you.”
In Which Severus and Our Trio Loot a Corpse, and Hagrid Buries Another

Hedwig hadn't returned to Fen House by the time that Harry, Severus and Ladon left for Hogwarts; she had clearly remained at Hogwarts, figuring that Harry would join her there soon enough. They Apparated to the gates of the school, which Severus was still able to unlock.

“It appears that Dumbledore assumed I would be returning,” Severus grumbled.

“Probably, but at least you got your point across,” said Harry.

Severus just grunted, then began interrogating Harry about Scrofungulus, in order to ensure that he would be able to stick to their cover story should anyone ask. Harry answered him easily, having thoroughly read up on his supposed illness, and Severus declared himself satisfied when they walked into the Entrance Hall. He left to head down to his office, while Harry headed into the Great Hall to join his friends for dinner.

“You're back!” Draco cried.

“Yeah,” Harry said, huffing a laugh as he sat down next to him. “I'll tell you and Hermione the real story later.”

On his other side, Tracey leaned back warily. “You're not still contagious, are you?”

“Nope, Dad gave me the all clear a couple of days ago, when my fever broke. I still get tired easily, but I'm safe to be around,” said Harry.

He darted a glance up at the staff table, and was relieved to see Dumbledore absent. He wasn't scared of him, not exactly. But he didn't think he would ever forget the way Dumbledore had tried to convince Severus to let Harry die. The sight of him would always be a reminder of what Harry was carrying around in his scar.

“I'm really, really glad you're back,” said Millicent, startling him out of his thoughts.

“Er, thanks,” said Harry, taken aback by how strongly she said that.

“We had Quidditch training yesterday, and it did not go well,” said Millicent.

“I'll second that,” Theo added.

Draco reddened. “It wasn't that bad,” he said sullenly.

“It was a nightmare,” Millicent said bluntly. “Not your fault, but it was still a nightmare.”

“What exactly happened?” Harry asked, now getting concerned.

“What do you think happened?” asked Theo. “It was Draco's first day as acting Captain, all while he was trying to get a new Chaser to fit in with him and Scarlett, and Viola was playing a position she isn't used to. It was a shambles, but an expected shambles.”

Harry nodded slowly. “We'll train this Saturday. Millicent, will Imogen be upset over losing her position?”

“Nah, she only agreed to do it as a favour to me,” said Millicent.
Theo frowned. “But she's tried out for the team for the past two years.”

It was Millicent's turn to grow bright red, and she mumbled something down at her dinner plate.

“What?” asked Tracey.

“I said, she only tried out because she fancied me,” Millicent said quietly.

“Really?” Harry asked, vaguely impressed.

“You're the last person who should be surprised by that,” said Millicent.


Tracey sniggered. “Because there were a fair few people trying out this year just because they fancied you.”

“I'd bet my entire inheritance that Greengrass was only there because she wanted to get into your pants,” Draco muttered.

Not wanting to have that argument yet again, Harry hastily changed the subject back to Quidditch. When the meal was over, he and Draco got up and walked over to talk to Hermione. The three of them found an empty classroom in which they could talk uninterrupted, though they cast a Muffling Charm just to be sure.

“Come on, then, spill,” said Draco. “I've been dying to ask you since you arrived.”

Harry grinned and quickly filled them in on the conversation he had overheard between Narcissa and Severus, and the terms that the latter had presented to Dumbledore.

“And he's agreed to them all?” Hermione asked.

“We wouldn't be here if he hadn't,” said Harry.

“What did he want in return?” asked Draco.

“Nothing, really, except that we're not allowed to tell anyone about Horcruxes. But then, we don't want that information getting out, either,” said Harry.

“It means we can't tell Theo,” Hermione pointed out.

Harry smirked. “Dad made it sound like we'd told all the people who live at Grimmauld Place. As far as Dumbledore's concerned, Theo already knows.”

“Unless he uses Legilimency on him,” said Draco.

“How does he know that Theo isn't naturally gifted at Occlumency, and has been taught how to create false memories?” Harry countered.

“I suppose,” said Draco. “I still think Dumbledore will want something.”

“Maybe he thinks he can talk Dad around to seeing his point of view, but that's a lost cause if ever I've seen one,” said Harry. “I've never in my life seen Dad as angry as he was when I walked into that office and he was in the middle of telling Dad to let me die.”

“He could try blackmail,” said Draco.
“With what? Everyone already knows he was a Death Eater. What could be worse than that?” Harry asked.

“Telling people that your father was the one who took the prophecy to the Dark Lord,” said Draco.

“True,” Harry allowed, “but Dumbledore doesn't want Voldemort learning the contents of that prophecy. He'd never go for that.”

“Can we go back to the phoenix tears? What exactly is your dad planning on using them for?” Hermione demanded, her tone making it clear that she already knew the answer.

“Experimenting with basilisk venom,” said Harry.

There was a silence, during which Hermione and Draco stared first at Harry, then at each other.

“You're going down into the Chamber of Secrets, aren't you?” Draco finally asked.

Harry nodded. “Later this week. Do you want to come with us?”

“Yes,” Hermione said immediately, while Draco nodded.

“Thank you,” Harry said in relief. He really wasn't looking forward to returning to the subterranean cavern in which he had almost died, and would feel much better if his friends were with him.

“Do you know that when you weren't here, we had an entire week with no adventures, danger or rule-breaking?” asked Hermione.

“You're on your own with that last one,” Draco muttered.

Harry grinned at them. “Aren't you glad I'm back to liven things up?”

********

After dinner that Friday, Harry led Draco and Hermione up to Moaning Myrtle's bathroom, hoping that the ghost wouldn't be in attendance.

No such luck.

Myrtle was hovering above one of the stalls, and she gave a morose smile when she saw Harry. “You came to visit me again,” she said, floating down to him and ignoring Hermione and Draco entirely.

“Hi, Myrtle,” Harry sighed.

“You're still alive,” Myrtle said mournfully.

“Planning on staying that way,” Harry replied.

Hermione cleared her throat. “Myrtle, we're here on a sensitive matter. Do we have your word that you won't tell anyone we were here?”

A sly look crossed the ghost's face. “Will you come and visit me more often if I keep your secret, Harry?”

“Er -”
“I've got a better idea,” Draco said. “You piss off and keep your mouth shut, and I'll cancel the school-wide tournament of Let's Throw Things At Myrtle that I was organising.”

Myrtle gave a wail and flew away to dive into a toilet, sending a geyser of water out over a few of the stalls. Hermione cast a Shield Charm to protect their shoes, and glared at Draco. “You shouldn’t have said that.”

“No, I shouldn't have,” Draco agreed. “Because now I really want to organise that tournament.”

Harry couldn't help laughing at that. Hermione was glaring at both boys when the door opened and Severus slipped inside.

“Is Moaning Myrtle present?” he asked.

“We're alone,” said Harry, over the sounds of Draco's renewed sniggering, and a soft thud that he'd bet was Hermione's elbow hitting Draco's ribs.

Severus ignored their antics. “And you all have your dragon-hide gloves?” They all nodded. “Good. Open up the entrance.”

Harry walked over to the sink from which he and Severus had emerged four years earlier, noting that one of the taps had a small snake etched onto the metal.

“Open,” he hissed.

The tap immediately lit up with a bright, white light, and began to spin around. Harry stepped back as the sink silently lowered into the floor, revealing a dark, yawning pipe. He looked up to see Hermione just as intrigued as he was, but Severus and Draco were far less impressed: they'd both seen this before, after all. Harry himself had no idea how he had gotten down there last time; his first memory of the Chamber of Secrets was of waking up lying on the cold stone floor of the cavern.

“Dad?”

Severus stepped in front of Harry and crouched by the opening. “This slide goes all the way down to the bottom. If you use an Impervious Charm to protect yourselves from the filth, and a Deceleration Charm at the bottom of the pipe, you will be perfectly safe. I'll go first.”

Severus cast an Impervious Charm on himself then lowered himself into the pipe, sliding rapidly out of view. Harry waited ten seconds then copied him. He quickly picked up speed on the slippery pipe, sliding through trickles of rank water, and patches of mould and other muck. There were other pipes shooting off the main one, smaller and darker than the one through which Harry was rushing – it was no wonder the basilisk had remained undiscovered for so long, with such a plethora of pipes from which to choose.

Harry slid for a long time, far longer than he would have thought. He was just beginning to think that maybe he had somehow taken a wrong turn when the pipe levelled out. Harry cast a Deceleration Charm just in time, slowing to a stop a metre away from Severus, who was waiting to the side with his wand lit. Harry didn't waste any time scrambling to his feet and moving to join him and lighting his wand. Not a minute later, Hermione and then Draco had joined them and lit their own wands.

“This way,” Severus said briskly.

They set off carefully down the tunnel, the floor of which was littered with loose rocks and the bones of small animals. Draco looked down at his robes and pulled a face; evidently Impervious Charms didn't protect robes to his satisfaction.
“This doesn't seem right,” Harry said after a while.

Severus looked at him sharply. “In what way?”

“Haven't we gone too far? I don't remember it taking us that long to get out last time,” said Harry.

“That isn't surprising, you would have been in some amount of shock,” said Severus. “It actually took us some time to get out.”

“If you think this took a long time, try waiting alone, tied up and hidden in a sodding bathroom,” said Draco.

Harry almost walked into Severus when he came to an abrupt stop. “Draco, my priority that day was to save Harry and to keep you out of danger. I confess that I didn't even consider what you must have felt, waiting for our return, and for that I apologise.”

Draco blinked. “Thank you,” he eventually said, faintly pink.

Severus nodded and turned around, leaving all three teenagers to share surprised glances before following him.

“This has to be the oddest school excursion I've ever been on,” Hermione commented.

“This is the only school excursion I've ever been on,” Harry replied.


“I don't get it,” said Draco.

Harry gave a bitter smile. “There was always a fee to go on excursions. Usually only a couple of pounds, but the Dursleys never let me go. I had to stay in the school library while my class left to go to the zoo or museum or wherever.”

Draco cocked his head. “And these excursions were fun to go on?”

Harry shrugged. “My classmates were always pretty excited. That was probably an added bonus for the Dursleys, the fact that I had to miss out on the fun.”

“Every time I think they can't get more petty, you mention something else like this,” said Draco.

“Petunia, at least, had a lot of practise being petty and vindictive,” said Severus.

“That's one way of putting it,” Harry said.

Some time later, they came across a snake skin that stretched across the tunnel, shed by the basilisk four years earlier. Both Draco and Hermione's steps faltered at the sight of it.

“It's huge,” breathed Draco.

“Yeah,” Harry said, then, “Dad, what are you doing?”

Severus was crouched over the skin, peering closely at it. “May as well collect some skin while I have the opportunity,” he said without looking up. He quickly used his wand to slice up half a dozen metre-long patches of skin. He folded them carefully and pocketed them, then stood up again.

“Come on.”
“Why do you need basilisk skin?” asked Harry.

Severus shrugged. “No idea. Perhaps I shan't need it at all. But a few months ago I didn't know that I would one day have a need for basilisk venom. I'd rather not need to come back down here again if I can avoid it.”

“What kind of potion would require basilisk skin?” asked Hermione. “I don't think I've ever read about anything that uses that.”

“Nor have I, but I have no doubt that anything that does would be a very Dark potion,” said Severus.

“What, you think there could be a Dark potion to destroy Horcruxes?” Harry asked.

“It's possible,” said Severus.

“Fight fire with fire,” Draco said.

“To put it in the most simplistic terms possible, yes,” said Severus.

Harry frowned. He wasn't sure that he liked the idea that he may have to ingest a potion containing basilisk skin. Still, if his only other option was death...

A few minutes later they rounded a bend in the tunnel and came face to face with a dead end. In the middle of the wall were two intricately carved snakes, entwined with each other. Both of them had enormous emeralds for eyes. There could be no doubt that this was the entrance to the Chamber of Secrets.

Harry turned to Severus. “How'd you get in last time, if this was shut? I'm assuming it opens to Parseltongue.”

Severus smirked faintly. “I imitated the Parseltongue that Draco had used to open the sink. It took me a few attempts, but I got there eventually.”

“Smart,” said Harry. “Open.”

The snakes immediately slithered away from each other, a split second before the rock parted. It glided out of sight, in much the same way as the entrance to the Slytherin common room opened up from featureless rock.

Now that Harry was here and thinking clearly, not possessed or in shock, he took the chance to have a proper look at the Chamber of Secrets. It was dimly lit with a greenish glow, making Harry wonder if it had distant windows that opened into the Black Lake, like the Slytherin common room. Given that this place had been built by Salazar Slytherin, he felt that was probably the case. Columns were spaced out along the room, with more snakes carved around them. Dotted around the base of some of them were piles of fallen rock, remnants of Severus' struggle against the basilisk.

At the far end of the chamber, Harry could make out the enormous statue of Slytherin. He had only really seen the base of the statue last time. Now, as he walked closer, he could make out the distant face, which was surprisingly poorly rendered. He wondered if the stone mason was just rubbish at carving anything that wasn't a snake.

The group set off down the centre of the chamber. There was a decidedly creepy atmosphere, and even though the basilisk was long dead, no one lowered their wand as they drew closer to a long shape stretched out at the foot of the statue.
“Too bad we had to kill it. Would've been great to send this thing up against Nagini,” Harry said weakly.

“It would've defected to Voldemort,” Hermione pointed out.

Draco shuddered. “Let's not give the Dark Lord a basilisk.”

They reached the head of the basilisk and came to a stop. It was mostly skeleton, but there were still large patches of skin clinging to some of the bones. Some of the skin must have still had minute amounts of flesh clinging to it, judging from the dozen or so large, black beetles that scuttled around the corpse. Everything else had either rotted or been eaten away.

“Put your gloves on, all of you,” Severus ordered.

“Lots of fangs,” said Draco.

“Not as many as I would like,” said Severus.

“How many do we need?” asked Harry.

“As many as possible... I imagine we'll be conducting a great many experiments with the venom...” said Severus.

He conjured a large leather bag, which he handed to Draco. “Hold this,” he ordered. “Hermione, there should be a fang lying around that broke off when the basilisk hit the floor. Fetch that and put it in the bag, but do not allow it to touch your skin. Harry, help me remove these fangs.”

Hermione spun around to search the floor for the missing fang, while Harry moved next to Severus.

“We need to keep them as intact as possible, which means we need to prise them out gently,” said Severus.

Harry carefully took hold of the nearest fang and gave it an experimental wiggle. “It won't budge.”

“No matter. Aim a small, localised Reductor Curse at the surrounding bone, like so,” said Severus.

Harry watched closely as Severus raised his wand to the jaw bone and cast the spell silently. A small section of the bone crumbled away in a fine powder. It took five more small curses around the root of the fang, but before long Severus was placing the fang into the bag.

Harry turned his attention to the fang he had wiggled. He pressed his wand to the bone next to it. “Reducto,” he whispered; he didn't trust himself with non-verbal spells, not on something so delicate.

To his immense relief, Harry didn't accidentally break any of the fangs. When the last of the fangs had been placed in the bag, Harry knelt down beside the skull and leaned inside the mouth.

“What the hell are you doing?” Draco demanded.

“Trying to see if the venom glands are still here,” said Harry. “They're usually located somewhere under the eyes. I don't think rats would eat them – they would've figured out quick enough that they'd kill them.”

“They would have rotted long ago, like all the other organs the rats didn't want,” said Hermione.

“Bugger,” said Harry, then got back to his feet. “Are we done here?”
Severus nodded. “There’s nothing else we can scavenge from the corpse.”

“Thank Merlin,” said Draco. “I need a shower. And chocolate. And then possibly another shower.”

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Harry spent most of Saturday on the Quidditch pitch, training the team for their last match of the year. They would be playing Hufflepuff in two weeks’ time, and while there was only a very slim chance that Hufflepuff could win the cup, Slytherin was trailing Gryffindor by ten points. They had to score enough points in this match that Gryffindor wouldn’t be able to overtake them when they played Ravenclaw a fortnight later. It was a tall order – Scarlett, Malcolm and Viola had spied on the Gryffindors’ last training session, and reported that they were playing flawlessly. Everyone was exhausted by the end of practice.

“We’ll take a break tomorrow, then practise again Monday after classes,” said Harry.

“We’re going for our Apparition licences in Hogsmeade on Monday afternoon,” said Theo, pointing to himself and Millicent.

Harry nodded curtly. “Fine. Malcolm, myself and the Chasers will train Monday.”

With the Apparition test on Monday, it was all most of the sixth years could talk about. Harry couldn’t decide who was more annoying: the majority of his friends, who were excited about being able to take the test; or Draco and Pansy, who were still bitter that they were too young to try for their licences.

In the end, Harry escaped them all on Sunday. After spending the morning duelling in the Room of Requirement, Harry retreated to Severus’ quarters, where, once he had finished his homework, he spent his time reading through the stack of books Severus had taken from the Restricted Section. That day’s selection was primarily potions-based, and Harry found to his surprise that he was slightly disappointed by that. While he didn’t borrow any library books unnecessarily (unlike Hermione, he thought), he usually didn’t mind reading through potions texts at home. Now, though, he found himself missing the medical books he had been reading over the Easter break.

“That doesn’t surprise me,” Severus replied, when Harry had mentioned it. “You’ve always been good at Potions, but you’ve also shown a real aptitude for healing magic of late.”

Harry shrugged. “That’s just because you lot keep attacking me when we duel. I’ve had a lot of practice healing my injuries.”

“Firstly, I think you’ll find that you attack us back,” said Severus. “Secondly, you always heal your own injuries, and then move on to healing at least one other person’s, sometimes two, if you’re especially quick.”

“Well, I had a good teacher,” said Harry.

Severus gave him an odd look. “You’re better at healing magic than I am, Harry.”

“I am?”

“Yes. On my next trip to the library, I’ll keep an eye out for some medical texts for you.”

Harry nodded absently and bent back over his book, already forgetting the conversation he had just had.
On Monday, Harry, Draco and Hermione had a picnic lunch by the lake. Hermione was obsessively re-reading a Ministry pamphlet entitled *Common Apparition Mistakes and How to Avoid Them* in preparation for her test that afternoon. Harry was of the opinion that she was only making herself more nervous, but extensive experience told him to keep his mouth shut when Hermione had any sort of test for which to prepare, or risk getting smacked. Draco was sulkily reading through his Gigantus book, grunting along softly under his breath, leaving Harry to sketch the giant squid as it lazed in the shallows of the lake before them.

Harry's head jerked up when someone rounded the rock behind which they were all sitting. It was a young Hufflepuff girl, holding out a scroll of parchment.

“Harry Potter? I was asked to give this to you,” she said.

“Thanks,” Harry said, taking the parchment with as neutral an expression as he could.

He waited until the girl had walked away, gave her a few more seconds to make sure she was out of earshot, then frowned at his friends, who had both stopped reading.

“Dumbledore can't think I'd go up for a lesson with him, can he?” Harry asked.

“Maybe your dad's agreed as long as he's there, too,” Hermione suggested.

“Maybe...” said Harry, unrolling the parchment. “Huh, it's from Hag – oh, no...”

Hagrid's writing, never neat at the best of times, was messier than ever, as if his hand had been shaking, and large tear stains covered the parchment, blurring the ink and making Harry struggle to read it.

*Dear Harry, Hermione and Draco,*

*Aragog died last night. I know none of you ever got to meet him, but you would've liked him if you had. It would mean a lot to me if you could pop by to join me for the burial today. I'm going to hold it at dusk – that was always his favourite time of day. I know you're not allowed out of the castle that late, but you've got that Cloak of yours. I don't want to get you into trouble but I don't know if I can do this alone.*

*Hagrid*

Harry silently handed the note to Hermione, who read it quickly.

“He's got to be kidding,” she said, then passed it to Draco, who scoffed after he'd read it.

“He can't honestly think any of us would -” Draco stopped when he caught sight of Harry's face. “Oh, for fuck's sake, Potter.”

“It's Hagrid,” said Harry.

“I'm aware of that,” said Draco.

“Well, I can't let him do this by himself!” said Harry.

“You can and you will,” Hermione said firmly.

“It's an Acromantula. They eat people,” said Draco.
“Not when they're dead, they don't,” Harry argued.

“All the more reason not to mourn one,” said Draco.

Harry snatched the parchment back and waved it at them. “Look at this! He was obviously crying as he wrote this – he's probably holed up in his cabin as we speak.”

Hermione sighed. “Harry, I understand that this is a difficult time for Hagrid, but think how much trouble you'd be in if you got caught wandering outside after dark.”

“I've done it plenty of times,” said Harry. “You've done it plenty of times.”

Hermione shook her head. “Not this year. Not since security was tightened.”

“You'd have detention for the rest of the year,” said Draco, then added, “and your father would kill you.”

Harry shook his head. “Only if I got caught.”

Hermione turned sceptical. “Do you honestly think you can circumvent all the security measures that are in place?”

Harry shrugged. “Only one way to find out.”

“This is ridiculous. It's a giant spider that would've tried to eat you if you ever got near it. It's not worth getting detention for,” said Draco.

“No, but Hagrid is,” Harry said stubbornly, and, ignoring his friends' exasperated expressions, settled down to plan.

When the bell rang the trio walked back up to the castle. Hermione lined up in the Entrance Hall with all the other sixth years who were old enough to take their Apparition test, while Harry and Draco headed down to Potions. When they arrived, they found the only other student was Ernie.

“All too young to go for your licences, eh?” Slughorn asked. Both Draco and Ernie nodded resentfully, making Slughorn chuckle. “Ah, well, let's make this a fun lesson. Why don't you all try your hand at brewing me something amusing?”

“Could you be more specific?” asked Draco.

Slughorn waved a hand through the air. “Surprise me.”

Draco muttered under his breath as he opened up his textbook and flipped through it, annoyance radiating off him in almost palpable waves. Harry was more sanguine; all he had to do was copy Severus' altered instructions, giving him plenty of opportunity to plan how he was going to sneak out to see Hagrid without getting caught. He had the bare bones of a plan, and this lesson seemed like it would be the perfect time in which to flesh it out.

He found a heavily-edited recipe for Elixir to Induce Euphoria and figured that was good enough for what Slughorn wanted. He gathered his ingredients and set down to brew the potion, ignoring Draco's continued petulance. On his other side, Ernie had decided to attempt to invent his own potion. Not having all that much faith in Ernie's inventiveness, nor in Slughorn's ability to prevent an explosion, Harry carefully shifted so that there was a bit more space between himself and Ernie, and made sure his wand was in reach if he needed to cast a Shield Charm.
The lesson progressed uneventfully, however, and by the time the bell rang, Harry had what he considered to be a foolproof plan worked out. As soon as Slughorn was finished gushing over Harry's potion he took off for his dorm with Draco hot on his heels. They quickly got changed into their Quidditch gear, then Harry grabbed the Marauder's Map and the penknife that Sirius had given him, the one that would open any lock.

“These are for Hagrid, to cheer him up,” said Draco, holding out a box of chocolates. He placed an apple on top of the chocolates. “This is for you, because you're skipping dinner.”

Harry smiled. “Thanks.”

“I still think it's a stupid idea,” Draco said.

Harry shrunk the food down and slipped it all into a pocket. “I know.”

With both Beaters absent for this practice, the remainder of the team began running drills, until, in an effort to liven things up, Harry devised a sort of mid-air obstacle course. It didn't take long for the team to decide to hold races through the course, with penalties awarded to people when they hit an obstacle.

“I thought you lot were supposed to be practising!”

Harry looked down to see Millicent and Theo standing by the side of the pitch. He blew his whistle and signalled for the team to fly over to them.

“Doesn't look like you're working that hard,” Millicent continued.

“Shut it, you bawbag,” said Malcolm with a grin.

“How'd you go?” asked Scarlett.

Theo grinned. “We both passed. Most people did.”

“Greg and Vince didn't,” Millicent said.

“Neither did Blaise. He Splinched a pinkie,” said Theo.

Harry winced. “He okay?”

“Yeah, they fixed him up no trouble. He's just a bit pissed, is all,” said Theo.

Scarlett scrunched up her face. “Apparition sounds horrible.”

“It is,” said Harry. “Since you're here, let's have a quick match. Draco, Viola and Millicent against Scarlett, Theo and me. Usual half match rules apply – get the Quaffle to the far goals before coming back to try to score against Malcolm.”

The sun was dipping towards the horizon by the time Harry called an end to practice. Everyone had flown well, and after they'd all showered, Harry told them that they had a good shot against Hufflepuff.

“But don't get cocky,” he warned them.

“Yeah, yeah,” said Malcolm, on his way out with Viola and Scarlett.

“You coming?” asked Theo.
Harry shook his head. “Not yet. I want to write up some new ideas for our next training session before I forget. I'm not really hungry anyway.”

Theo just shrugged and walked out with Millicent, leaving Harry alone with Draco. “Want to tell me one more time I'm being stupid?”

“You're being stupid,” Draco said at once, then rolled his eyes. “But if you get stuck, send me a Patronus message in Parseltongue.”

“Will do,” Harry said cheerfully. “You better get going before you get locked out.”

Draco nodded. “Good luck.”

After Draco left, Harry paced around the changing room, eating his apple and planning the team's next practice. He threw his apple core into the bin, then pulled out the Marauder's Map and scanned the grounds, relieved to find them deserted. On a whim, he examined the Great Hall, which was filling up with people for dinner. There was no sign of Severus at the crowded staff table, so Harry turned his attention to the dungeons, where he eventually found Severus sitting in his lounge room; researching, most likely, just as he did most evenings nowadays. Harry felt a stab of guilt even as he thanked his lucky stars that Severus wasn't in the Great Hall to notice Harry's absence.

“Mischief managed,” he muttered, tapping the Map with his wand.

He folded the Map into his pocket, swung his Cloak over himself and his Firebolt, and set off for Hagrid's, keeping his wand at the ready. The Map may have showed no humans in the grounds, but that didn't mean there weren't any creatures lurking around. The grounds were quiet, however, and apart from a steady stream of owls flying out of the castle for their nightly hunting, Harry didn't come across anyone or anything on his walk to Hagrid's.

He kept his Cloak on while he waited for Hagrid to answer his knocking, only revealing his face when Hagrid opened his door.

"Yeh - yeh came," said Hagrid, stepping back so Harry could squeeze past him.

"Of course I did," said Harry, taking off his Cloak when Hagrid shut the door. “Draco and Hermione wanted to come, too, but after he was kidnapped last year, if Narcissa found out that Draco was out of the castle at night...”

Harry wasn't even sure if that was a lie or not – Narcissa would be cross, and that may very well have been part of why Draco hadn't wanted to come.

“I understand,” said Hagrid. “I'm touched yeh came though, Harry. It means a lot ter me.”

Harry patted Hagrid's elbow. “You okay?”

Hagrid's eyes were red and puffy from crying, and there were tear tracks on his cheeks, disappearing into his beard, but he nodded. “I'll be righ'. 'S'not like it was a surprise - he was sick fer a while...”

Not knowing what else to say, Harry pulled the chocolates out of his pocket and unshrunk them. “These are from Draco,” he said, holding them out to Hagrid, who promptly burst into tears.

“That's - that's - that's righ' kind of 'im,” Hagrid said between sobs.

“Here,” Harry said. He pushed Hagrid over to the table, where he dropped heavily into a chair. “I'll make us some tea, okay?”
Hagrid nodded and pulled an enormous handkerchief out of his pocket. While he blew his nose with a loud trumpeting sound, Harry leant his Firebolt against the wall then busied himself making tea in two of Hagrid's bucket-like mugs. The noise he made clattering the tea things drew the attention of Fang, who was curled up in his basket, but it wasn't enough to tempt the boarhound to get up to greet him.

“What's with Fang?” Harry asked, partly out of curiosity and partly as a distraction.

Hagrid blew his nose once more before replying. “He's bin mopin’ ever since I brought Aragog’s body back today. Bit scared, see.”

Harry sat down with a frown. “You brought him here? I would've thought you'd want to bury him in the Forest, where he lived.”

Hagrid wrapped his hands around his mug. “S probably what ‘e would’ve wanted, but I couldn't. The other Acromantula won’t let me near their colony now that – that Aragog's gone. Turns out ‘e was the only thing stoppin' the rest of ‘em from eatin' me! And after all I've done fer ‘em... I had ter get Grawp ter help me get Aragog's body out o’ there – they would've ripped me apart if I'd bin alone…”

“You were attacked?” Harry asked in concern.

Hagrid waved a hand. “Ain't nothin' the two of us couldn't handle together. Grawp's none too happy with me though... Hightailed it back ter ‘is cave once we were done, and I can't say I blame ‘im. Things got pretty hairy in there at one point.”

Harry suppressed a shudder at the mental image that brought up.

“Never bin driven out o' the Forest – never bin any part of it I couldn't go before – not even when the centaurs got their goat up... Acromantula usually eat their dead, but I c-couldn't let that hap-happen to Aragog,” said Hagrid, bursting into tears again.

Harry leaned over to pat his elbow. “Of course not,” he murmured. “I'm sure he'd appreciate you retrieving his body.”

Hagrid nodded, tears splashing onto the table. “He deserves a proper burial...”

“Right,” said Harry.

They didn't speak for a few minutes. Hagrid was too busy crying, and Harry couldn't think of a single thing to say. He just kept patting Hagrid's elbow and waited for the tears to subside.

Finally, Hagrid blew his nose again and took a large gulp of tea. “Might as well get it over and done with, then.”

Harry stood up and followed Hagrid outside and around the back of his cabin, where Harry came to a sudden stop at the horrific sight in front of him. Lying on its back, with its legs tangled above its stomach, was a monstrous spider about the size of a small elephant. Looking at its pincers, clearly visible in the moonlight, it was all too easy for Harry to imagine the thing catching and eating a human. There was a freshly dug grave beside it, about ten feet long, with a large mound of dirt on the other side.

Hagrid knelt down on the other side of the corpse. Even with his giant strength, it took him some effort to roll it into the grave. It hit the bottom with an all too audible crunch, making Hagrid begin to cry once more.
Harry stood next to him, patting his elbow and resolutely not looking into the grave. “Do you want me to say something?” he asked. Hagrid nodded, so Harry cleared his throat. “Here lies Aragog... I never met you, but Hagrid has told me a lot about you... You were a good friend to him, for many years, and he'll miss you. Rest in peace.”

Harry Levitated the mound of dirt into the grave, then walked over to the far side of the pumpkin patch, where there were a few dandelions growing. He picked them, then walked back to place them on top of the grave. It was a meagre display, but one which Hagrid clearly appreciated, for he pulled Harry into a suffocating hug. With his arms pinned to his sides, Harry was yanked off his feet for a few seconds, before Hagrid set him back down.

They returned to the cabin, where Harry spent the the next hour or so drinking tea and listening to tales of Hagrid's friendship with Aragog. Told by anyone else, the stories would have been horror stories, but Hagrid spoke with real (if bewildering) affection for the giant spider. Harry sat there in silence for the most part, patting Fang, who had finally emerged from his basket to lay his head in Harry's lap.

“Yeh'd best be gettin' to the castle before yeh're missed,” Hagrid eventually said.

Harry nodded. “Are you going to be okay?”

“Yeah. I'll go inter Hogsmeade and have a drink,” said Hagrid.

“Is it safe there?” asked Harry.

“Course it is. It's only students who've been banned from goin' there,” said Hagrid. ‘‘Thanks fer comin'. Means a lot.”

Harry gave a small smile. “Sure. Don't go taking any eggs off strangers in the Hog's Head.”

Hagrid gave a watery chuckle. “Won't make no promises on that.”

While Hagrid set off for the village, Harry picked up his Firebolt and decided he may as well fly back to the castle. It was getting properly dark now, and he just wanted to join his friends in the dormitory or the common room.

He hopped off his broom at the front doors and, balancing his broom against himself under his Cloak, pulled out the Marauder's Map. He checked that Filch wasn't lurking on the other side of the doors, then stowed the Map and got out his pen knife. He ran it down the crack between the two doors, then pulled it back in horror. It had melted, presumably due to some enchantment or other that had been set on the doors.

Harry shoved his knife back in his pocket, hoping he could fix it later, and considered his options. He could send a Patronus to Severus, begging to be let back in, but really didn't fancy having that conversation... Nor did he fancy staying outside, or spending the night in Hagrid's cabin. No, he had to get in by himself somehow...

Harry looked down at the broomstick he still held in one hand and grinned. He jumped back on it, then kicked off the ground, shooting up the castle wall almost vertically. He had to slow down when his Invisibility Cloak threatened to flap open, but a quick Sticking Charm kept that closed, and soon he was soaring over the castle rooftop. Light spilled out of the windows in the towers, and he circled the castle simply to enjoy the view before he landed on the Astronomy Tower.

He congratulated himself on getting back into – or at least, onto, the castle – before a thought struck him, and he cast his Patronus. “For Draco Black. I'm couldn't get through the front doors, so I've
flown up to the Astronomy Tower. Meet me up here.”

Half a minute later Draco's ferret materialised and scampered over to him. “Give me two minutes.”

It was ten minutes before Draco stepped out of the entrance of the hidden staircase. He glanced around and saw Harry leaning against the parapet. “You don't look worried about being trapped up here,” he said, sauntering over.

Harry smirked. “Never said I was stuck up here.”

“No? Why ever did you tell me to come up here, I wonder?” Draco asked.

“Because it occurred to me that, unlike most of our friends, we've never shagged up here, and I wanted to see what the fuss is all about,” said Harry.

Draco came to stand in between Harry's feet. “You say the most romantic things,” he drawled.

Harry plastered an overly earnest expression on his face. “I'm sorry. What I meant to say was, will you please make sweet, tender love to me under the light of the constellation you're named after?”

Draco laughed. “That is the sappiest thing I have ever heard.”

“You asked for it.”

“Did I now?”

“Yes,” said Harry, using Draco's tie to yank him forward, “you did.”

Draco's lips were still curved in a laugh when Harry kissed him. At the touch of Harry's lips, though, Draco opened his mouth to eagerly suck on Harry's tongue. He leaned forward, pressing Harry against the parapet and deepening the kiss. A thrill shot through Harry as Draco's weight pinned him to the stone behind him.

Harry loosened Draco's tie then undid his top button. Pushing the collar open, he trailed kisses down Draco's jaw and neck, then sucked hard on his exposed collarbone. He moved his hands down to the next button, only for Draco to grab his hands.

“Don't,” he said.

Harry raised his head. “What's wrong?”

“We can't take off too many clothes – anyone might walk up,” said Draco.

“I've got my Cloak,” said Harry, who had pocketed the Cloak after landing on the tower.

Draco's eyes glinted. “Where's the fun in that?”

“Fuck,” Harry breathed, a frisson of excitement shooting through his body.

“Mmm,” Draco leaned forward to swirl his tongue in the shell of Harry's ear. “I rather think I might.”

“You're topping for once?” asked Harry.

“Don't you want me to?” Draco asked, before biting down on Harry's earlobe.

“I want you to,” Harry said quickly, shivering at what Draco was doing to his ear. “It's just been a
while, that's all.”

“Because we both usually prefer it the other way round,” said Draco.

He let go of Harry's hands to start on his belt buckle, never taking his mouth off Harry's ear.

“Yeah... but... just because my favourite dessert is treacle tart doesn't mean I don't want to eat an éclair every now and then.”

Draco bit Harry's ear sharply. “Did you just call me a tart?”

Harry shivered. “I just put it into terms you'd understand.”

“I'm perfectly capable of conversations that don't revolve around sweets.”

“Yeah, but it got your attention, didn't it?”

“You don't need to mention sweets to get my attention,” Draco said softly. He pulled away and met Harry's eyes. “And if you want to switch more often, we can.”

“Good.”

With that, Draco got Harry's trousers open, and pushed them down his thighs, along with his pants. Then he reached into his own trousers and pulled out the bottle of lube.

“You git! You knew exactly why I told you to come up here!” Harry said accusingly, even as he started to rut against Draco.

Draco scraped his teeth down Harry's neck. “Of course I did, you prat. I'm not an idiot. And since I know that you're not an idiot, I know you won't complain that I came prepared.”

As if to reinforce the point, Draco bit down on the junction between Harry's neck and shoulder. Harry gasped at the sharp pleasure. Just as the pain threatened to become too much, Draco withdrew his teeth to suck on the bite. Harry had no doubt that he'd have a mark the next day.

All of a sudden, Draco stepped away. Before Harry could object, Draco grabbed him by the waist, spun him around, and applied pressure to his back until he bent forward. His cock was painfully hard, and Harry reached down to touch himself.

“Don't,” Draco said sharply. “Not yet.”

With a wordless whine, Harry raised his hands and rested them on the cold battlements in front of him. The lube was placed on the parapet, just to the right of where Harry's hand was pressed against the rough stone. He stared at it as Draco uncorked it one-handed and covered two of his fingers with the viscous fluid.

“Spread your legs,” Draco ordered.

Harry did his best to do so with his pants around his knees. He wiggled his bum and was rewarded with a light slap to his left cheek. Draco gripped that cheek to spread Harry open, then teased his hole with his other hand. Harry's eyelids fluttered at the slick, circling finger, but Draco didn't seem to be in any rush to actually put it inside. Harry shifted backwards, doing his best to force the finger inside, making Draco chuckle.

“You're eager tonight.”
“Yeah. I also don't want to get caught.”

“Oh. Right.”

Draco quickly slipped two fingers inside Harry, who let out a soft moan. He was stretched quickly, but even so, by the time Draco withdrew his fingers Harry was bucking back onto his hand, his own fingers curling against the parapet. He heard Draco make quick work of undoing his own belt and trousers, then held still while Draco lined himself up. Harry couldn't help letting out a hiss as he was breached.

Draco froze. “Alright?”

“Yeah. Just a little rusty. Get moving,” said Harry, forcing his muscles to relax.

Draco ran a soothing hand up Harry's side, then gripped his hips and started to move. He went slowly at first, changing the angle of his hips every few thrusts until he hit Harry's prostate, making him cry out in pleasure.

“Shh!” Draco hissed, even as he sped up.

Harry bit his lip to stifle another cry that threatened to break free. He stared blindly over the parapet into the starry night and pushed back against Draco. Something cold and hard kept hitting the side of his butt; it took him a while to realise that it must be Draco's belt buckle. Harry ignored it and focused instead on the delicious slide of Draco's cock in his arse, on the sparks of pleasure that danced up his spine whenever Draco hit his prostate.

Draco let go of Harry's hip to grasp his cock. He began stroking it in counter rhythm to his thrusts.

“Oh fuck,” Harry moaned, his desperation mounting.

“I'm close,” Draco panted.

Harry took a hand off the parapet to place it over Draco's. Together, they stroked Harry's cock until he cried out in orgasm. When Harry's hand fell from his cock, Draco removed his own, taking Harry's hip again to speed up even further. It wasn't long before he shuddered and came with a strangled cry, sending a flood of warmth shooting into Harry's arse.

Harry hung his head down as he caught his breath. Draco simply collapsed on top of him, panting heavily against his shoulder. Eventually, he pressed a kiss into Harry's neck and got off him. A moment later Harry straightened up and turned around, grinning.

“That was definitely more fun without my Cloak.”

Draco smirked back. “I always have the best ideas.”

Harry snorted. “If you're so keen to not use my Cloak, how about we sneak back to dungeons without it?”

“And show Blaise just how easy it is to do that without getting caught? Not a bad idea, Potter.”
In Which Severus Learns the Answer to a Five-Year-Old Question, and Daphne Deploys Drunken Diplomacy

“You what?” Severus demanded.

Harry gulped at his quiet tone; it never heralded anything good for the recipient. “I visited Hagrid last night,” he repeated.

It was Tuesday evening, and Harry had gone to Severus' quarters to help with research.

Severus' face was stony. “Why did you feel the need to visit him at night and not during the day?”

“Because he wanted to bury Aragog – the Acromantula – at dusk. I couldn't ask him to change the time just for me,” Harry said.

“You snuck out of the castle at night to bury a spider,” Severus said flatly.

“Technically, I didn't sneak out,” Harry said quickly. “I just didn't come back in after Quidditch practice.”

“And that makes what you did all right, does it?” Severus snapped.

Harry began to get annoyed. “You can't give me stealth lessons and then get annoyed when I use the skills I've learned.”

Severus' eyes narrowed. “I did not give you those lessons so that you could traipse about the school grounds after curfew.”

“I wasn't traipsing,” said Harry, “and anyway, if you'd stop being cross for one second, I'll tell you about the security flaw I noticed.”

Severus leaned forward. “What flaw?”

“I tried to get in by the front doors. When I couldn't, I flew up to the Astronomy Tower and walked right in,” Harry explained.

Severus inhaled sharply. “If someone got onto the grounds... I'll let the Headmaster know.”

“So... I'm not in trouble?” asked Harry.

Severus pointed a finger at him. “This time. Do it again -”

“I won't,” Harry said quickly.

“See that you don't,” Severus said in a milder tone, appeased.

The atmosphere lightened, Severus got up to make some tea. By the time he had carried it back into the lounge room, Harry was stretched out on the sofa reading through another medical textbook, *Hidden Dangers: Parasites of the Wizarding and Muggle Worlds*.

An hour later Harry sat bolt upright. “Dad.”

Severus continued reading his own book. “Hmm?”
“Dad!” Harry said more loudly.

Severus looked up with a frown. “What?”

“What if we don't destroy the Horcrux while it's inside me?” asked Harry.

“I'm not following you,” said Severus.

Harry shuffled closer on the couch and held out his book. “Here. It's talking about getting a tapeworm out by holding a saucer of milk in front of you.”

“That's a myth,” said Severus.

“Yeah, I know that. But what if there's some way to do that with the Horcrux? Lure it out of me into something else, and then destroy that?” asked Harry.

Severus stared off into space as he considered that. “It's a possibility,” he finally said. “I've no idea how we could lure it out, but that doesn't mean there isn't a way...”

“What if we had another Horcrux? Maybe the two pieces of his soul would want to join back up or something,” Harry suggested.

Severus' eyes widened. “The idea has merit...”

Harry grinned. “It does?”

Severus nodded slowly, clearly thinking hard. “Yes... we were already planning on experimenting with the basilisk venom when we find a Horcrux... I see no reason why we cannot also experiment with this theory at the same time.”

“On top of inventing a new poison to use on Voldemort,” Harry said with a sigh, then he brightened. “Why don't you make a poison with the basilisk venom?”

“Absolutely not,” Severus said at once. “We need to conserve that venom for experimenting on Horcruxes.”

“Yeah, but -”

“No buts, Harry. Getting that Horcrux out of you is my priority. I won't do anything that jeopardises our success in that endeavour,” Severus said firmly.

Harry fidgeted. “If I wasn't a Horcrux -”

“Then I would be telling you what a good idea you've had. Basilisk venom has only one, extremely rare antidote. I could use it to create a perfect poison. And if your theory holds, and we are able to remove the piece of Voldemort's soul from you, I will happily work on inventing that poison. But as it is, we just cannot afford to waste any of the basilisk venom,” said Severus.

Harry nodded, appeased now that he had at least been told his idea had been a good one. “I better go and do my homework. Can I take this with me?” he asked, holding up his book.

“Just leave it here for tomorrow,” said Severus.

“I've got Quidditch training tomorrow evening,” said Harry. “Actually, we're now going to be training every day until the match.”
Severus' eyes narrowed. “And will you be returning to the castle after training?”

Harry rolled his eyes. “Yes, Dad.”

“Then you may take that book with you,” said Severus. “How is the team going, incidentally? Have we a chance at the cup?”

Harry smiled. “I think we do, yeah.”

“I'm glad to hear that,” said Severus. “Even if you don't win, you've performed admirably as Captain this year. I'm very proud of you.”

“Thank you,” said Harry.

He ducked his head in order to hide his face. He was still getting used to having a father to tell him how proud Harry had made him, and he tended to be left with a rather goofy grin on his face whenever it occurred.

“But I'm afraid you can't leave just yet,” said Severus.

Harry looked up to see Severus holding out the bottle of Veritaserum. “Oh yeah,” he said sheepishly.

It was another half hour before Harry was permitted to return to the common room, after another successful practice. He was now getting quite good at resisting Veritaserum. Unfortunately, this had led to Severus hinting that he would one day be slipping Harry a dose in the Great Hall and leaving him to the mercy of his friends. While Harry trusted his friends with most things, he absolutely did not trust them to not ask him embarrassing questions should they realise he was unable to lie.

When he had mentioned this, Severus had just laughed. “You'll be thoroughly motivated to practice, in that case.”

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The following Sunday, the Slytherin Quidditch team were gathered in the changing room before their final match of the year. There was none of the usual light-hearted talk or laughter that normally preceded a match: they all knew there was too much at stake. Harry leaned against a wall, impatiently waiting for Viola to finish with Scarlett's eye drops; Draco was pacing on the other side of the room; Millicent was hitting her leg with her own Beater's bat, jostling Theo beside her; and Malcolm was obsessively checking that his shin guards were tightened properly.

Finally, Viola corked the bottle of eye drops and handed it back to Scarlett. “All done,” she said, turning a nervous face towards Harry.

“Right,” he said, nodding. He pushed off from the wall and ran a hand through his hair before he spoke. “We all know that it's not Hufflepuff we have to worry about today. We should beat them easily enough, and neither they nor Ravenclaw have any real chance of catching us up in points.”

“Too right, they don't!” Scarlett cried. There was real, if nervous, laughter at her words.

Harry managed a fleeting grin. “What we need to worry about is Gryffindor. They're ten points ahead of us, and they'll probably thrash Ravenclaw in a fortnight. We need a big enough score that they won't be able to match it. It doesn't matter if we only get a few points more than Hufflepuff – or even if they beat us. What matters is our total, so I hope you're all prepared for a long match. Gryffindor got four hundred points in their last match and I reckon we need to at least equal that today.”
Everyone nodded, and Harry grinned again, properly this time. “You’ve all been flying so well that I don’t have to tell any of you what to do. You know what to do, and you’re all fantastic at it.” He surveyed his team proudly. “Our Chasers can out-fly anyone else in this school; our Beaters are deadly with a Bludger; and our Keeper can block anything they throw at him.”

“And our Seeker has never once missed the Snitch,” Draco piped up.

Harry felt his cheeks heat. “Right, yeah. We’re the best team in this bloody school, so let’s go out there and show everyone exactly why we’re going to be the champions this year!”

The team gave a cheer, then Harry led them out onto the pitch to cheers from the Slytherins in the stands, and loud boos from the Hufflepuffs. Harry ignored them all as he marched over to line up next to Hooch. The Hufflepuff players were already there, and Harry gave them a quick once over on his way. No last minute changes to the line up to worry about, he thought in relief.

“Captains, shake hands,” Hooch said.

Harry stepped forward and shook Smith’s hand, not bothering to stop his lip from curling at Smith’s sneering expression.

“On my whistle,” called Hooch.

Seconds later the teams were rising up into the air. Despite the pressure they were all under, Harry instantly felt exhilarated the moment his feet left the ground. He grinned as he set off, not in search of the Snitch, but of Stuart Summerby, the Hufflepuff Seeker. Stuart was flying slowly around the pitch, and Harry bit back a sigh before speeding up to join him.

While Harry really didn’t like the games when he had to shadow the other Seeker, instead of searching for the Snitch himself, he supposed it could be worse: at least Stuart was fit. He was more muscular than Seekers usually were, with dark curly hair and light brown skin, but his bright blue eyes narrowed in annoyance when he noticed Harry heading towards him.

“Thought this’d be your plan,” he said in resignation.

“I’d not happy about it, either,” said Harry, slowing down to match Stuart's speed.

“Thought you were the Captain,” Stuart muttered.

Harry crooked a grin. “Which means I better stick to my game plan if I want the rest of my team to stick to theirs.”

Stuart huffed a laugh. “I get that. Doesn’t mean I’m going to make this easy for you.”

It was Harry's turn to laugh. “I hope you don’t.”

At that, Stuart picked up speed and started zigzagging lazily on his circumference of the pitch. Harry followed him closely, while at the same time keeping an ear on the commentary.

“Applebee swoops in out of nowhere to intercept a pass from Richmond. She passes it on to Cadwallader, and they’re turning back for the Hufflepuff goals, both teams yet to score.”

Harry glanced at the commentary box the first time he and Stuart flew past it, and saw Katie sitting being the megaphone. McGonagall looked relaxed for only the second match that season – the first being the one Seamus had commentated. Harry was almost as relieved as McGonagall that the commentator for the match knew what she was talking about, since he needed to keep track of the
An echoing cheer went up from the crowd below, with Katie's amplified voice rising above it. “Cadwallader scores for Hufflepuff and it's ten – zero.”

Harry found himself enjoying the match far more than he had expected. He had envisioned trailing an irritated Seeker around the pitch. Instead, once he had gotten over his initial annoyance, Stuart didn't seem fazed by Harry's close proximity. Harry himself didn't forget that his primary goal was to keep Stuart from catching the Snitch – and he could see that Stuart was searching for it – but for the most part, they were flying in almost companionable silence, a fact that Katie noticed.

“Slytherin's Baddock makes a nice save and passes to Lympsham. Black and Richmond close in for a Hawkshead Formation, flying straight under the passing Seekers. Has anyone else noticed that the two Seekers haven't left each other's side all match?” she asked. “The usual reason for that play is to prevent the other Seeker from catching the Snitch, in order to allow your own team to score big – and that's definitely gotta be Potter's strategy today. We might be in for a long match today.”

Harry grinned; Katie didn't sound at all displeased at the thought.

Some time later, Hufflepuff had just scored another goal when Harry spotted the Snitch hovering in the middle of the pitch. Stuart was cheering for his team, but any second he would refocus. Harry didn't stop to think, just swerved right. There was a startled yell behind him, and risking a glance over his shoulder, Harry saw that Stuart had taken the bait and was chasing after him.

“The Seekers have spotted the Snitch!” Katie called excitedly. “Potter's in the lead, but Summerby's right behind him.”

Harry grinned and flattened himself over his broom, aiming for the Hufflepuff goals. The Chasers had all left the area – Draco had the Quaffle and was heading for the Slytherin goals – leaving just Malcolm circling the goal posts. He squinted when he saw the Seekers racing towards him, and looked around himself for the Snitch.

Harry turned into a steep dive, as if the Snitch had just dropped down in front of him. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Stuart following him down. Harry swerved between the goal posts, banking tightly, before pulling up and shaking his head and pouting. He rose slowly back up to his original height and resumed flying around the pitch; the Snitch was no longer anywhere in sight.

“And they've lost the Snitch again,” Katie announced.

“That was a ruse, wasn't it,” Stuart said flatly as he caught up to Harry. Harry wasn't about to apologise for playing the game. “Not my fault if you didn't see the Snitch.”

“Don't think I'll fall for that again,” was all Stuart said.

It was almost two hours into the game before Scarlett signalled to Harry that her eye was beginning to bother her. He immediately abandoned Stuart to fly over to Hooch.

“And Potter's calling a time out,” Katie announced. “After nearly two hours of play the teams are neck and neck, with Slytherin leading by ten points on one hundred and fifty.”

Harry joined the rest of the team on the ground. While Malcolm took care of Scarlett's eye drops, Harry got the rest of the team to huddle around them.

“Okay, they're a bit tougher than we were expecting, but we've still got this,” said Harry. “Viola,
how's your leg?"

Viola gingerly felt her thigh, which had suffered a solid blow by a Bludger. “Not too bad. I'll make it through the match, but I'm going to have a massive bruise tomorrow.”

“I've got some bruise paste I can give you after we're done,” Harry said. “Anyone else got any problems?”

“Not apart from the occasional strong urge to whack Smith in the face with my bat,” Millicent muttered.

“Well don't, you know that's a foul,” Harry said, though he laughed along with everyone else. “Alright. Let's do it!”

They remounted their brooms, and once more took off at Hooch's whistle. Harry made a beeline for Stuart, who was flying faster than earlier. Below them, the play was likewise faster than before – it seemed everyone had gotten a second wind after their short time out.

“Smith puts the Quaffle through the middle hoop and now both teams are dead even,” said Katie.

Play had been going back and forth for quite a while, with neither team getting a lead, when Stuart suddenly turned into a steep dive. Despite not seeing the Snitch, Harry immediately dove down after him. If Stuart had seen the Snitch, he needed to block him; if he hadn't, well, it gave him a chance for a bit of excitement.

Harry flattened himself against his Firebolt until he was descending perfectly vertically. He ignored the ground rushing up towards him – he’d caught up to Stuart, was level with his feet – then all of a sudden Stuart pulled out of the dive. Harry swore and did the same, blasting across the ground with his feet less than a metre above the grass.

He looked up to see Stuart grinning down at him. Shaking his head, Harry shot up to join him.

“Thought I'd give you a taste of your own medicine,” said Stuart.

“That was a great Wronski Feint,” said Harry, adrenaline still coursing through his veins.

Stuart blinked. “Really?”

“Well, you pulled out a little early, but yeah,” said Harry.

“I pulled out too early?” Stuart laughed, but stopped when he saw that Harry was serious. “You're a bloody nutter.”

Harry grinned. “I've heard that before.”

Stuart shook his head and took off again. Harry followed him closely, but tuned back in to the commentary.

“False alarm everybody!” Katie was saying. “Summerby just pulled off a flawless Wronski Feint – and Potter fell for it! Both Seekers are unharmed and back to cruising around the pitch. Scores still locked on one hundred and eighty, with Black in possession.”

The scores were still tied when Harry once again had to call a time out for Scarlett to get her eye drops. The team huddled together while Malcolm once more applied the drops.

“Okay, I know we're all getting tired, but we can't give up,” said Harry.
“Can't you catch the Snitch already?” asked Draco.

“Gryffindor got four hundred against Hufflepuff, there's no reason to think they can't do the same against Ravenclaw,” Theo pointed out.

Harry nodded. “Theo's right. Just a few more goals, and we're good.”

“Assuming it's you who catches the Snitch, and not Summerby,” said Viola.

“That's not an option,” Harry said, thinking fast. He looked at the Beaters. “What if one of you concentrates on Summerby?”

Millicent and Theo looked at each other. “And leave the rest of the team vulnerable?” asked Theo.

“We can handle it,” said Scarlett.

Draco nodded. “It's not like we haven't done something similar before.”

“Right,” said Harry, “and it doesn't matter if they immediately get a bunch of goals, so long as we still score big... Everyone okay with this plan?” When everyone nodded, Harry looked at the Beaters. “Okay, Millicent, you're on Summerby. Keep up a steady barrage but try not to hit me. Theo, you're more agile, you look after the rest of the team. Now let's do it!”

Hooch blew her whistle to end the time out, and seconds later everyone was back in the air. Harry once more rose higher than the others, but this time, Millicent was trailing behind him. He resisted the urge to look behind himself – he had to put his faith in Millicent's skill and trust that she was too accurate to hit him if he came close to Stuart.

“Scores are tied at two hundred as we resume play – Smith has possession, heading for goal,” Katie reported.

With Millicent busy with Stuart, the game changed. Hufflepuff began pulling away, scoring two goals for every one that Slytherin scored. Theo did his best – and his best was very good – but he couldn't be everywhere at once, and more than once Slytherin lost possession because a Chaser had to duck a Bludger.

Harry couldn't worry about that – with Slytherin's score finally getting high enough, and Stuart under constant attack from Millicent, he could begin to look in earnest for the Snitch. His eyes scanned the pitch as he flew quick laps around it, searching for that ever elusive glimmer of gold. Even unhindered as he was by an opposing Seeker, it wasn't easy to find. Eventually, though, he saw it fluttering just above the ground on the other side of the pitch.

A whistling sound came out of nowhere. Acting on instinct, Harry immediately dropped into a Sloth-Grip Roll. Upside down with the ground rushing by metres from his head, he saw a Bludger rocket above his broom and in front of Stuart, who skidded to a stop just in time to avoid getting hit. Harry couldn't celebrate for long, though. He knew Stuart would soon be resuming his chase, and the Snitch was still close enough that he could catch it easily. Hoping that his team had scored high enough, Harry reached out and curled his hand around the cool metal of the Snitch.

Harry gave an inarticulate cry of triumph and raised the Snitch into the air. He jumped off his broom,
tossing it onto the pitch beside him and looking up into the sky, where he saw Millicent hurtling towards him. She landed heavily beside him, then dropped her broom and bat and swept him up into a hug. Harry held on for dear life as she spun him around, his feet flying out from under him.

“You did it!” Millicent shouted.

“We did it!” Harry shouted back.

“Applebee puts the Quaffle away, bringing Hufflepuff up to three hundred and twenty, but it's no use! Potter's caught the Snitch, ending the game! Slytherin win on four hundred and ten!” Katie shouted.

The rest of the Slytherin team came down to join Harry and Millicent, who finally put Harry back on the ground. They were soon engulfed in a messy, sweaty group hug as the team celebrated, screaming happily in each other's ears.

“Let's have a victory lap!” cried Scarlett, once the team finally began to get themselves under control.

“We haven't won the Cup yet. Not for sure,” Harry said.

“Who cares? We deserve it,” said Draco.

Shrugging, Harry remounted his broom and took off with the rest of the team. They flew as a group, with their arms around each other or waving at their friends in the stands.

“Slytherin seem to think they've won the Cup, but there's still one more game to go, and I don't think I'm bragging when I saw the Gryffindor team is in fine form,” Katie said as they flew past the commentary box.

While the rest of the team shouted back that that was debatable, Harry ignored her. He'd just caught sight of Severus on his feet, clapping madly and with a proud smile on his face. Harry grinned back, feeling happier than he had in months.

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If Harry had thought he would have some free time now that he no longer had Quidditch training, he was sorely mistaken. As well as the annual increase in studying in the lead up to exams, he now also had duelling practice three times a week, as Severus took advantage of the lack of Quidditch training. Harry, Draco and Hermione were also spending more and more time in Severus' quarters, poring over the books that he had taken from the Restricted Section.

After Harry's idea of using another Horcrux to draw out the piece of soul from himself, they had had no further advancements in their research, and neither had anyone at Grimmauld Place. Harry tried to stay positive, to focus on the things he was learning, but there were times that doubt and fear began to trickle through him.

One evening, he was spiralling into just that way of thinking, staring blankly at the text he was supposed to be reading and trying to convince himself that it would all be alright, when Hermione put her hand over his. Her skin was warm and soft, and just the feel of it against his made Harry feel marginally better. He stared at her hand for a moment, then dragged his head up to meet her brown eyes, which were filled with compassion.

“We'll find what we're looking for, Harry. We always do,” Hermione said, giving him a small smile.

Harry did his best to return it. “You think?”
“Of course. Remember in first year, when we were researching Flamel? It seemed hopeless at times, but we got there in the end, and we'll do it again this time,” said Hermione.

“Hopefully Hermione won't need to set anyone on fire this time,” Draco sniggered.

Harry knew Draco was trying to cheer him up, but after one look at Hermione's suddenly apprehensive face, Harry could have quite happily killed the prat.

“What the hell is wrong with you? Why'd you bring that up when Dad's right next to us?” Harry demanded.

Draco paled, but to his credit, didn't immediately look guiltily at Severus. “I wasn't thinking.”

“Damn right you weren't thinking!” Harry shot back.

They both fell silent when Severus cleared his throat loudly. “You two,” he said, pointing at the boys, “are far less subtle when speaking Parseltongue than you think you are. Your switch to another language did nothing but confirm to me that you wish you hide something from me.”

“Now who isn't thinking?” Draco muttered to Harry.

“Neither of you, apparently,” Severus said in a quelling voice, “but I am, and I find myself very curious about the circumstances under which Hermione set someone alight. From what I gather, it was in your first year at Hogwarts?”

Hermione swallowed nervously. “It was just a small fire,” she said.

“I see. And did this 'small fire' happen to take place at a Quidditch match, by any chance?” Severus asked, watching Hermione closely.

There went Harry's one hope that Severus wouldn't figure it out. “Dad -”

“Quiet, Harry,” Severus snapped, his eyes never leaving Hermione's.

Hermione swallowed again, then raised her chin. “Yes, it did. I thought you were trying to kill Harry. Clearly, I was wrong about you, but I had no way of knowing that at the time. I did what I thought I had to do to protect him.”

There was a long, uncomfortable silence, during which Severus stared at Hermione, who stared resolutely back, and Harry and Draco watched the pair of them.

All of a sudden, Severus smiled. “Ten points to Gryffindor.”

Hermione's mouth dropped open. “What?” she gasped, echoed by both boys.

Severus shrugged. “It was an effective scheme, if slightly misguided. Furthermore, you remained undiscovered for over five years until Draco's thoughtlessness betrayed you. In comparison, these two idiots,” here he waved his hand at Harry and Draco, “along with Millicent, were caught in less than a day when they caused Lockhart's office to go up in flames.”

“That's not fair,” Harry objected.

Severus raised an eyebrow. “No, it's not. If it were fair, I would have taken points from Slytherin for your foolishness.”

Harry snapped his mouth shut.
“Er, thank you?” Hermione said in obvious confusion.

Severus picked his book back up. “No need to thank me. I now have the pleasure of informing the rest of the staff why my robes caught fire back then.”

Hermione’s eyes widened. “You're telling the rest of the staff?”

“Of course,” said Severus, flipping a page. “We were at a loss as to how it had happened.” He chuckled suddenly. “I can't wait to tell Poppy. She thought Peeves had somehow snuck into the stand.”

Hermione and Draco stared at him. Harry grinned. “I told you Dad's got a weird sense of humour.”

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Every single Slytherin was decked out in their house colours for the Gryffindor – Ravenclaw match, with the team sitting together in the front two rows of their stand. It was a lovely sunny day, but Harry was far too nervous to enjoy any of the sun's warmth. If Gryffindor scored four hundred points, they would have a play off with Slytherin for the Cup. If they scored more than that amount, they would win it automatically. The entire Slytherin team was a tense knot of nerves, with all their hopes pinned on Ravenclaw's defence – Harry didn't for one second believe that Cho could beat Ginny to the Snitch.

“Gryffindor's two-hundred and thirty points ahead of Ravenclaw in the cup,” Theo said.

“Yeah, but they both beat Hufflepuff by the same margin,” Viola argued.

Unable to take the endless discussion of statistics as Draco, Viola and Theo argued over who would win, Harry climbed over the back of his seat to squeeze in between Daphne – who was too busy flirting with Vikram to talk about statistics – and Millicent, who was listening to Scarlett babbling at Malcolm.

“Not a word about stats, I can't take anymore,” Harry muttered to her.

Millicent sniggered. “Right there with you. Besides, it's far more fun listening to Scarlett planning our house party.”

“You're that confident we'll win?” Harry asked.

“Of course we will!” Scarlett said in an overly cheerful voice.

On her other side, Malcolm's face was drawn with worry. Harry was prevented from asking him anything by a huge cheer going up. They all turned around in time to see Ginny leading the Gryffindors onto the pitch. Seconds later, Cho led the Ravenclaws out. The two Captains shook hands, then Hooch blew her whistle to start the match.

Both teams flew superbly, and the scores were locked the entire match, with neither side getting more than a ten point lead. Harry was so nervous that he could barely stand to watch the action as the scores increased. It was a different story when he was actually playing – on his broom, he never felt this nervous. Sitting and watching helplessly like this, hoping desperately that one of the Seekers would catch the damn Snitch already, was most definitely not Harry’s strong suit.

In the row in front of him, Draco was swearing continuously; Viola had a death grip on both his and Theo's hands; and Theo had frozen as soon as the match had begun. Scarlett, on the other hand, was on her feet cheering for Ravenclaw – she was so short that this didn't inconvenience those behind her
– while Malcolm was just as loud but remained seated. Next to Harry, Millicent was mumbling under her breath. Harry leaned towards her, thinking she must be swearing like Draco was, then pulled back and gave her a confused look.

“I didn't know you were religious,” he said in surprise.

“I am today,” Millicent said.

Harry understood that feeling all too well. Every time Gryffindor got another goal and Tamsin Applebee announced the score, he felt a jolt in his stomach. He could see the Cup slipping through his fingers.

“Come on, Cho, come on,” Harry muttered, searching out the two Seekers.

He wasn't surprised to find Ginny and Cho flying side by side – he knew it was a favoured tactic of Cho’s, and Ginny especially couldn't afford to miss the Snitch today. Draco had brought a bag of binoculars for the team to use, and Harry had been using his pair to watch the Seekers throughout the match. Both Seekers were looking a little worse for wear – they'd been flying for well over two hours at this point – but they both had determined expressions on their faces.

“Thomas scores for Gryffindor, bringing them to two hundred and forty – scores are once again tied,” Tamsin announced.

There was mass swearing from the Slytherin team, but Harry jerked forward, his binoculars now jammed painfully against his glasses. “They've seen the Snitch!”


“There!” Harry cried, pointing.

Ginny and Cho had suddenly sped up, cutting diagonally across the pitch. Neither girl was giving the other any ground – Harry was expecting Hooch to call them both out for cobbing any second. They darted left, then rose in a sharp ascent, speeding off into the sky to such a distance that Harry couldn't see them, even with his binoculars.

“What's happening?” Theo asked, searching the skies along with the rest of the team.

“I can't tell – they're too far away,” Harry said.

“Oh, I can't take this,” Viola cried, letting go of Draco and covering her eyes with her free hand.

“Is that them?” Daphne asked, nudging Harry.

He lowered his binoculars to follow where she was pointing. There was a speck in the sky, growing rapidly larger. He jammed his binoculars back into his face and was able to make out the two separate Seekers as they flew back down.

“Neither of them look happy,” Harry reported.

“They lost the Snitch!” Scarlett wailed.

“Did they?” Harry asked

“No they didn't!” Draco shouted.

He was right. Ginny had the Snitch in her right hand, her arm hanging loosely at her side as she flew
sullenly back down to earth – she'd clearly only caught it in order to prevent Cho from doing so.

“GINNY’S GOT IT! SHE’S GOT IT!” Scarlett screamed, jumping so enthusiastically that she almost toppled onto Theo.

Millicent punched Harry's shoulder repeatedly in her excitement. “WE'VE WON THE CUP!”

Harry was so happy he barely felt the impact, merely put his arms around her and Draco's shoulders as the team hugged each other, screaming and jumping with excitement. All around them the other Slytherins were likewise noisily celebrating their victory, shouting with triumph or congratulating the team. It was so loud that Harry couldn't make out a single thing anyone was saying. His entire world had become a blur of flushed, happy faces, bouncing and shouting in celebration.

The press of bodies around him changed, grew firm with purpose, and before Harry knew it, the team was being ushered out of the stand by a sea of green-clad supporters. Once clear of the stadium, every member of the team was hoisted onto the shoulders of their fellow Slytherins, who carried them up the lawn.

Someone, somewhere, started chanting “SLYTHERIN! SLYTHERIN!” Within seconds, the rest of the house had joined in, their voices echoing out over the school grounds. Harry lay flat on his back with a dozen hands supporting his weight, grinning happily up at the sky as he was jostled the entire way back to the castle.

After everyone had swarmed into the common room, it was some minutes before the chanting died down and the Quidditch team were lowered to the floor. Still laughing and shouting with excitement, people began to get the common room set up for a party. Pansy was by the entranceway, giving orders to a group of first years who were to fetch food from the kitchen. Daphne, Vikram and Imogen were lining tables up along the far wall to hold drinks and food, while a large number of the older students carried bottles of carefully preserved alcohol over to them. Harry walked into his dormitory to find his own stash, passing Scarlett and Archie as they snuck out of the common room behind Pansy's back.

“Was it like this when we won the Cup in first year?” Harry asked as he rooted through his trunk.

“I guess,” said Draco.

Harry found his Firewhisky and stood back up. “What d'you mean?”

Draco looked at Harry like he was an idiot. “One of my best friends was unconscious in the infirmary. I wasn't exactly in a partying mood.”

“Oh,” said Harry.

“Oh,” Draco echoed mockingly.

“Shut it, you git.”

“Make me, you prat.”

Harry stepped forward, crowding Draco, and gave him a quick kiss. “Maybe later. Right now I want to join what looks set to be a pretty spectacular party.”

“I can't argue with that,” said Draco.

They walked back out to find the dance floor cleared of furniture. Anyone not setting up the
refreshments table were hanging around in little groups, animatedly discussing the win. Harry and Draco hurried over to add their Firewhisky to collection, accepting congratulations every step of the way.

“You guys didn't have to do that – this party's in your honour, after all,” Vikram said when they arrived.

Draco raised an eyebrow. “Are you turning down extra alcohol?”

“Of course he isn't,” Daphne said, snatching the bottle and adding it to the rest. “Thanks, boys.”

Harry and Draco spent the next few minutes talking with Daphne and Vikram, before the first years returned with the food. When Vikram began directing them where to place their food, Draco took Harry's hand and pulled him away from the table.

“I'm not in the mood to help them sort that out,” he murmured.

“But I wanted a drink,” whined Harry.

Draco raised his other hand, which was clutching two bottles of Butterbeer. “Will this do?”

Harry grinned. “You're the best.”

“And don't you forget it,” Draco said, giving him one of the Butterbeers.

They stood off to one side of the room, watching the commotion around them. There was a bit of a fuss near the entrance, and Harry chuckled when he saw that Scarlett and Archie had returned with the colossal Slytherin banner that usually hung in the Great Hall at the start of year feast. Together, they unfurled it and attached it to one of the walls with their wands, while a group of younger children gathered around them to watch. When they were done, Scarlett grabbed Archie's hand and pulled them into a bow, drawing the applause of those watching. Archie was blushing when they straightened up, while Scarlett started offering autographs to the first years.

“Now why didn't we think of nicking that banner?” asked Harry.

Draco shrugged and raised his bottle to his lips. “We can do it next year.”

If I live that long, Harry thought, rather morbidly.

He froze at the unbidden thought, then cast a wary glance at Draco, worried he'd know what Harry was thinking. Draco wasn't paying him any attention – he was too busy laughing at Scarlett's antics – so Harry took a long drink and forced the thought from his mind. There was absolutely no reason for him to be having such dark thoughts, especially not at a time like this, he told himself firmly.

No reason at all.

Half an hour later, Harry and Draco had joined Pansy and Blaise on a couch, where they watched the dance floor begin to fill up. Unsurprisingly, Scarlett was one of the first on the floor, dragging Archie and Ella with her. They were quickly joined by Malcolm and his friends Grant and Hirohisa.

“He's persistent, I'll give him that,” Blaise drawled.

“Who is?” asked Pansy.

Blaise tipped his bottle of Butterbeer towards the dancers. “Malcolm. He's got it bad for Scarlett, who hasn't even noticed.”
“I'll take your word for it,” said Harry.

Blaise rolled his eyes. “You're all hopeless, you realise that, right?”

Draco grinned. “This is why we keep you around.”

“Cheers,” Blaise said drily, taking a sip of his Butterbeer.

“Oh, don't be like that.” Pansy said, laying her head on his shoulder. “Now be nice and tell me who else likes who while Harry goes and fetches us all more drinks.”

Harry raised a brow. “While I what?”

“What, you think just because you've won the Cup you're suddenly too good to get your friends drinks?” asked Pansy, smirking.

“No, I think we wouldn't even be having this party if we hadn't won the Cup,” Harry retorted.

“He's got you there,” Draco chimed in.

Pansy opened her mouth, but snapped it shut when the music suddenly died. All across the room, people looked around in confusion, until they saw Severus standing in the entrance with his hands behind his back, and Sinistra and Slughorn on either side of him.

“We're not here to put an end to your celebrations,” said Severus. “We'd like the Quidditch team up the front here.”

Harry and Draco got off the couch, squeezing through the crowd to join the rest of the team line up in front of the teachers.

“As Head of Slytherin, I take great pride in presenting you with the Quidditch Cup. The other two Slytherin staff members, Professors Sinistra and Slughorn, have come here to join me in offering sincere congratulations to you all. The seven of you have played exceptionally well all season, and you have been justly rewarded today,” said Severus.

Sinistra smiled warmly at the team. “You've done our house proud, and have increased our standing in the House Cup.”

“Although we'll need that banner back if we win in June!” Slughorn chortled.

Sinistra looked straight at the banner, then at Slughorn. “What banner?”

Slughorn chuckled. “My mistake – my old eyes must be playing tricks on me... Jolly good show, all of you.”

Severus mouth twitched as he said, “Mr Potter, step forward.”

Sharing a bemused look with his teammates, Harry walked over to Severus. “Yes, sir?”

“As Captain, you are hereby presented with the trophy for which you have fought so hard,” said Severus.

He brought his hands out from behind his back, handing Harry the gleaming Quidditch Cup. The silver was so shiny that Harry could clearly see his face reflected in the metal. He took the Cup and tucked it under his left arm, then shook the hand Severus was holding out to him. Once released, Harry turned around and raised the trophy above his head with both hands. The room once more
erupted with cheers, and the rest of the team surrounded Harry, grabbing for the Cup. He lowered it gratefully – that thing was heavy – and passed it to Viola.

Once everyone in the team had had a chance to hold the Cup, Severus held his hands out expectantly.

“We don’t get to keep it? Not even for the night?” Harry asked, handing it back reluctantly.

“During a house party? Absolutely not,” said Severus. “No, the trophy will spend the next year in my office, safe from whatever shenanigans you all have planned for tonight.”

The widespread snickering that these words caused led Harry to concede that this was probably for the best.

“There will be an official team photograph taken next week, to commemorate your victory,” Severus continued. “As for tonight, do try to keep your carousing within the common room. I would hate to mar the celebration by assigning detention to revellers found out after curfew.”

Everyone murmured their agreement, and the three teachers turned to leave. Harry grinned at Severus, who flashed him a small smile in return before slipping out after his colleagues. The music was turned back on and everyone went right back to what they’d been doing earlier. Harry skirted around the dancefloor to rejoin Pansy and Blaise on their couch.

“Three teachers and not a single one of them said a thing about the underage drinking in here,” Pansy said, shaking her head in mock dismay.

Harry laughed. “Dad's philosophy is to let us do whatever we want. If we know we're not going to get into trouble for it, we're more likely to go to him for help if anything goes wrong.”

“Good philosophy,” Blaise said, raising his bottle.

Harry shrugged. “He's a Slytherin – he knows that if we were forbidden, we'd just go behind his back. When Sinistra filled in for him as Head of Slytherin last year, he told her all the little tricks he's picked up, but I can't see her being stricter than him anyway.”

“And we all know Slughorn would never dare criticise something that you're doing, oh Chosen One,” drawled Draco.

Harry swatted him on the arm. “Shut it, Black. Besides, I'm not the only one here who gets his arse kissed, am I, Zabini?”

Blaise smirked. “No, but you're his favourite and you know it, Potter.”

“You're the jewel in his crown,” said Pansy.

“The apple of his eye,” Draco added.

“Oh, sod off, the lot of you,” Harry said.

Pansy giggled, then stood up. “Come on, it's time for shots!”

Shots turned into many, many drinks, as half the house seemed to want to have a drink with Harry. At one point, the Quidditch team converged to have a drink together. They’d just put down their glasses when the opening strains of “Do the Hippogriff” came out of the gramophone. The only Weird Sisters song to have a dance routine, it was a perennial favourite at Slytherin parties, and the
entire house was on the dance floor in seconds.

It was a silly dance, Harry supposed – one had to imitate a number of magical creatures, not just the eponymous Hippogriff – but it was impossible to feel embarrassed when he was surrounded by scores of people all making the same ridiculous movements and singing the same inane lyrics. Someone charmed green and silver confetti to fall from the ceiling. Within minutes, the crowd was covered in glitter, their bodies glimmering as they danced in unison.

Things got a bit blurry for a while after that. Harry had flashes of dancing with different people, in groups or one-on-one; of setting off the last of his stash of fireworks with Draco, Theo, Millicent and Imogen; of spectacularly losing a sculling competition with the other sixth years, which was won, surprisingly, by Daphne; of sharing an armchair with Scarlett, who had Ginger perched on her shoulder, laughing uproariously as the parrot squawked rude phrases at passersby.

Harry and Blaise outright cheered when Archie finally worked up the nerve to approach Spencer Whiddon, whom they’d fancied for the last year and a half, and got thoroughly snogged for their forwardness; Harry and Blaise were told in no uncertain terms to shush, before Archie and Spencer disappeared for a more private corner. There were numerous toasts to the Quidditch team; “Do the Hippogriff” was played yet again, with rather less coordinated dancing the second time; and sometime in the early hours of the morning, Pansy and Millicent finally reconciled amidst much crying.

“I’m sorry I was such a bitch to you,” Pansy sobbed into Millicent’s shoulder as they sat on a couch. “I missed you.”

Millicent patted Pansy’s arm clumsily. “I forgive you. I missed you too.”

“And you,” Pansy said, reaching out to Imogen, who was sitting on Millicent's other side. “I don’t miss you ’cause we were never friends, but I’m sorry for being a bitch to you, too.”

“We can be friends now,” Imogen said with the earnestness that only a very drunk person could achieve.

“I hope they bloody well remember this when they sober up, I am not going through this with them tomorrow,” muttered a very red-cheeked Tracey.

She was sitting on the floor with Harry and Daphne, leaning against the wall and sharing a goblet of water, watching the tearful reunion as the party begin to wind down. The younger students had all gone to bed hours ago, as had most of the older students. Those still around were mostly collapsed on couches or chairs, or the floor, talking quietly or picking over the last of the food.

“I’ll do it,” Daphne sighed. “Anything’s better than them going back to hating each other.”

“Thanks, Daph,” said Tracey.

“You owe me though,” Daphne replied.

“I know,” said Tracey. She spotted Theo walking unsteadily towards them and grinned. “And that’s my cue to get this idiot to bed. Good night.”

She clambered laboriously to her feet and joined Theo, who immediately gave her a sloppy kiss on the cheek. Tracey giggled, put her arm around his waist, then guided him towards the boys’ dormitories.

“Where’s Draco?” asked Daphne.
Harry waved a hand vaguely. “He said something about chocolate. Where's Vikram?”

“He went to bed ages ago. Drank too much,” said Daphne. “Be nice,” she suddenly whispered.

Before Harry could reply that he had been perfectly nice, thank you very much, Daphne gave a little wave. Harry followed her gaze to see Greg waving back at her. Greg began walking over to them, but his steps faltered when he realised who Daphne was sitting with.

“Come sit,” Daphne said, patting the ground next to her. “Harry won't bite.” When Greg just shifted nervously, she sighed. “Vince passed out ages ago and the Carrows just went to bed. It's safe.”

Greg relaxed a bit at her words, then shuffled over to drop heavily to the ground, sloshing some of his Butterbeer out of his bottle.

“Enjoying the party?” Daphne asked.

Greg nodded. “Yeah. You?”

“Yes, but I think it's my bed time. See you both later,” Daphne said.

“Subtle, Greengrass,” Harry muttered as she got to her feet.

Daphne just flashed him a smile and took off for her dormitory, leaving Harry and Greg sitting alone on the floor. Harry couldn't help looking around the room, checking for someone who might tell tales to Death Eaters. No one was paying them any attention, and in any case, they were mostly hidden from view by the three girls still hugging on the couch in front of them.

“Good party,” Harry said.

“Yeah,” said Greg.

Unable to think of anything to say, Harry aimed his wand at the now-empty goblet and cast a non-verbal Water-Making Charm. He took a slow drink; beside him, Greg did the same.

“Good party,” Harry said.

Greg gave him a funny look. “You already said that.”

“Oh, er, right, yeah,” said Harry.

He ran a hand though his hair.

“Daphne's nice,” Greg said quietly.

Harry was so surprised that he looked straight at Greg for the first time since he'd sat down. “Yeah, she is,” he agreed.

Greg grunted and lowered his head, focusing on peeling the label off his Butterbeer, his uncomfortableness palpable. A sense of guilt swept over Harry for letting them get into this situation – he could've, should've, tried harder. Before he could think about what he was doing, he scooted closer towards Greg.

“I don't blame you, you know,” he said quietly.

Greg looked up at him briefly. “What?”
“I don’t blame you for not talking to us,” Harry said.

Greg frowned. “I – I, uh...”

“I know Voldemort threatened your dad. I was there. So I don’t blame you. Theo does, and Draco, but I don’t. Never have. Not really,” said Harry.

“My dad – no one’s threatening my dad,” said Greg.

Harry gave a small smile; he’d been expecting a denial. “Okay. Well. I just wanted you to know.”

“Okay,” said Greg.

Harry glanced around, saw no one near them, then leaned closer. “We can help you, if you want. If you ever want to get away like Theo did. We'd help you. I promise.”

Greg looked stricken, and Harry decided he’d said enough. He climbed to his feet, swayed a little, and walked off to go to bed.

Just before he headed into the corridor that led to the boys’ dormitories, he turned around to look at Greg. He was sitting where Harry had left him, looking more confused than Harry had ever seen him before.
The Quidditch season over, Hogwarts turned its attention to exams. Those students taking their OWLs or NEWTs were as stressed as they always were. This year, however, the rest of the school was just as tense, as the news that filtered in from outside grew progressively grimmer. It seemed like every edition of the *Daily Prophet* now contained the news of abductions, dismemberments, Dementor attacks, or murders, and more and more students were being withdrawn from school by their worried parents.

Harry began to chafe under his inaction. Guilt gnawed at him every time he caught wind of another atrocity in the *Prophet*. He was the one who needed to kill Voldemort, and yet instead of doing anything about it, he was stuck at Hogwarts, doing his homework like a good little boy.

He could have jumped for joy when, on the last Sunday of May, his evening study in the common room was interrupted by Sadie approaching him with a rolled up piece of parchment.

“Sorry to interrupt, but Dumbledore told me to give you this. He said it was urgent,” Sadie said.

Harry happily abandoned his Transfiguration notes to take the parchment. “Thanks.”

He waited until Sadie had joined Viola and Adelaide by the windows, then unrolled the scroll.

*Dear Harry,*

*I should like you to join Severus and me in my office at once.*

*We shall be snacking on sherbet lemons.*

*Yours sincerely,*

*Albus Dumbledore*

Harry slipped the parchment into his pocket and stood up, excitement thrumming through his body. Catching Draco's eye, he headed for the dormitory, where he dug out the Marauder's Map from his trunk.

“I solemnly swear I am up to no good,” he muttered, tapping the Map with his wand.

“What is it?” Draco asked, catching up to him.

“Dumbledore wants me to go meet him in his office. He said Dad's there, but I want to double-check before I go up there,” said Harry, waiting impatiently for the Map to finish coming into view.

“Good idea,” Draco said. “What do you think he wants?”

“Maybe he's found a Horcrux,” Harry said. He frowned down at the Map. Severus was in Dumbledore's office all right, but he was pacing up and down as if agitated.

“But that's good news, isn't it? Why are you frowning like that?” asked Draco.

Harry wiped the Map clear and looked up. “Last time I met them both in Dumbledore's office he told me that I needed to die,” he pointed out.

Draco winced. “Yes, alright, you have a point – but surely there can't be any worse news than that?”

Harry just shrugged. “I'll tell you soon enough, I guess.”

Draco stepped forward and gave Harry a quick kiss. “Good luck.”
Harry pressed the Map into Draco's hand. “Just in case I'm gone a while – you can find me.”

With that, Harry spun around and hurried from the room. Only a few people paid any attention to him slipping out of the common room – it wasn't unusual for people to suddenly develop a need to visit the library at this time of year, though it was admittedly getting close to curfew – and once in the dungeon corridors, Harry swung his Invisibility Cloak over himself.

He had to press himself against the wall when a group of fifth years came down the corridor towards him, returning to the common room, but apart from that, he came across no one else on his way through the castle. When he got to the gargoyle guarding the entrance to Dumbledore's office, Harry looked up and down the corridor before leaning in.

“Sherbet lemon,” he muttered.

The gargoyle looked around itself even as it slid out of his way. “Who's there? Peeves, you know you're not allowed up here...”

Harry ignored the gargoyle and stepped onto the moving staircase, taking off his Cloak as he travelled upwards. There was no shouting echoing down to him this time, and when he knocked on the door Severus opened it within seconds.

“Before you say anything, I used the Map to check that you were actually here,” Harry whispered.

Severus nodded approvingly, and moved aside to let Harry enter the office, shutting the door behind him. Dumbledore was standing next to Fawkes' stand, the pair of them staring out of the window, though Fawkes turned around to stare at Harry. Both Dumbledore and Severus had cloaks in their hands.

“Well, my boys, I did promise that you could both come with me when I located the next Horcrux,” said Dumbledore.

Harry stepped forward eagerly. “You've found one?”

“I believe so, yes,” said Dumbledore, turning to face him, “and I'm usually right about these sorts of things.”

“Which one? Where is it?” asked Harry.

“I do not know which Horcrux – though I think it safe to say that it is not Nagini – but whichever it is, I believe it to be hidden in a cave on the English coast, a cave for which I have been searching for many months now – the cave in which Tom Riddle once frightened two young children on their annual trip from the orphanage – you remember the tale?”

Harry nodded. “What protections has it got?”

“I don't know for certain, though we can be sure that whatever protections Lord Voldemort put around this Horcrux, they will be unpleasant for us,” said Dumbledore.

Harry glanced at Severus, who though calm, was also clearly tense – like a coiled spring, ready to leap into action when provoked. Harry realised that he had never before seen Severus preparing for a dangerous mission – he had always come to Harry's aid when he was already caught in the middle of some life or death situation. Harry wasn't afraid, but he was beginning to buzz with adrenaline. He took a deep breath, attempting to mimic some of Severus' calm aura, before he turned back to Dumbledore.
“I wouldn't expect any less from him,” he said.

Dumbledore's expression was grave. “You are accompanying us on one condition: that you obey any order that I give you, even if you personally find it distasteful. This includes running, hiding, or even leaving me and saving yourself. Do I have your word?”

Harry again glanced at Severus, and when he gave a minuscule nod, nodded himself. “Yes, sir.”

“No,” said Severus, speaking for the first time, “I tell you otherwise.”

“Very well. Harry, put your Cloak back on and we shall leave,” was all he said.

Harry did so, and followed Dumbledore and Severus out of the office. Dumbledore drew Severus into a conversation about the upcoming exams on the way out of the castle – it would have looked strange if he and Severus were seen walking out in silence, after all – with Harry silent beside them.

Once out in the grounds, their conversation petered off, and Harry piped up.

“What's your cover story for leaving Hogwarts?”

“Why, that Severus and I are off for a drink in Hogsmeade. I often appear to do so by myself – on occasion I actually do – and sometimes I ask a colleague to accompany me – although it has been some time since Severus has consented to join me,” said Dumbledore.

“I have been too busy researching Horcruxes to do so,” Severus said curtly.

Dumbledore gave Severus a sad look, but said nothing. The rest of the trip into the village was in silence. Hogsmeade was quiet when they arrived, with the sun having properly set during their walk. All the shops were closed and dark, save for the Three Broomsticks. The windows of the pub were filled with warm light, and even with the door shut, laughter and loud conversation drifted out onto the street.

The volume increased suddenly when a couple of drunken men stumbled out of the Three Broomsticks, arms around each other's shoulders as they laughed at some joke. The shorter of them made an attempt to stand up straight when he spotted Severus and Dumbledore walking past.

“Don't mind us, gentlemen,” Dumbledore said mildly.

Severus said nothing as they passed. Harry turned around to see that the taller of the two men had collapsed in laughter onto the shoulder of the shorter man, who was still looking troubled. Perhaps he was about to sick up, Harry thought, turning back around in a hurry.

A minute later they walked around the corner into the small side street that housed the Hog's Head. All three of them looked around themselves, then, seeing no one in sight, Dumbledore took Severus’ arm and held his injured hand out to Harry, who grasped it by the elbow. A second later they were spinning through the crushing sensation of Apparition.

When Harry opened his eyes again, he found himself standing upon a small outcropping of rock in the middle of a choppy sea. The waning moon was bright enough to light up Harry's stark surroundings. A dark sea stretched out in front of him; turning around, he saw sheer cliffs stretching
up towards the sky. More rocks, smaller than the one on which Harry was perched, dotted the way towards the cliff face, half-submerged under the turbulent water. Craning his head back, Harry could make out the top of the cliffs, which seemed to be covered in grass; there were no trees, rocks, buildings or any landmarks of any sort visible, as least not from this vantage point.

“You may take your Cloak off now, Harry,” said Severus.

Harry did so with some difficulty, trying not to elbow anyone – the rock they were on was barely big enough to hold the three of them. He bundled it into his pocket and shivered as the wind hit him.

“Not far now,” Dumbledore said.

With that, he stepped over the edge of the rock. Following him, Harry saw that there was a trail of hollows in the rock – erosion from the water, perhaps, or some animal – that created a path down to the waterline. It was covered in water and algae, and Harry had to tread very carefully to avoid slipping on the narrow footholds. With his withered hand, Dumbledore had an even harder time of it.

When he got to the base of the rock, Dumbledore stepped out onto the first of the smaller boulders, and began to make his slow way towards the base of the cliffs. Harry watched where he placed his feet and made sure to plant his own in the same spots.

Once on the last rock, Dumbledore lit his wand and held it up. “There, you see?”

Coming up behind him, Harry followed the light of the wand to see a thin, dark fissure in the side of the cliff. Water rushed into it, swirling and crashing against the sides, disappearing into the blackness within.

“And now I am afraid we shall get wet,” said Dumbledore.

He put his wand between his teeth and slipped into the water, setting off from the rock with a flawless breaststroke. Harry was just about to follow him in when a hand on his shoulder stopped him.

“Impervius,” said Severus, running his wand over Harry's robe.

“Good idea, thanks,” Harry said.

Severus merely rolled his eyes and cast the same charm upon his own clothes. Harry slid off the rock into the water and began to swim, with Severus splashing in after him. The Impervius Charm kept Harry's clothes from getting too waterlogged, but did nothing to protect him from the cold. He swam as fast as he could, eager to get out of the water, but even so, Dumbledore was pulling away from both him and Severus, who was as poor a swimmer as Harry.

The fissure turned into a dark tunnel, low enough that it would entirely fill with water at high tide. Harry hoped they were long gone by that time. The walls were a rough stone that shone with moisture in the light of Dumbledore's wand. Barely a metre apart, Harry's hands brushed against the walls with every stroke.

The tunnel curved to the left, and then Dumbledore was rising out of the water, climbing up a set of stairs carved into the stone. Harry clambered up after him, finding himself in a large cave. Shivering, Harry immediately cast a Drying Charm on his clothes, repeating it until he was properly dry.

When he looked up, he saw Dumbledore standing in the centre of the cave, his wand held above his head, revolving on the spot in order to inspect the walls and floor.
“This is it,” Dumbledore said.

“How can you tell?” asked Harry.

“There are traces of magic,” said Dumbledore.

Severus lit his own wand and joined him. “This can't be it, surely... it was far too easy...”

“Quite right, Severus,” Dumbledore replied, now touching the wall with his blackened hand. “This is merely the antechamber... we shall have to contend with Voldemort's defences in order to get into the inner sanctum.”

Harry lit his wand and watched as Dumbledore walked around the cave, touching the walls and murmuring in a language Harry didn't recognise. Severus also watched Dumbledore closely, frowning with concentration as he tried to follow what he was doing.

Finally, Dumbledore held his hand against a blank piece of rock. “We go through here.”

Harry took his word for it – it looked like every other stretch of wall that Dumbledore had inspected so far. Even Severus looked impressed.

Dumbledore stepped back and aimed his wand at the wall. A moment later the outline of an archway appeared, glowing with a dazzling white light, before it was snuffed out as quickly as it had appeared. Dumbledore lowered his wand and stared intently at the wall, while Harry and Severus waited silently lest they distract him.

After a couple of minutes, Dumbledore sighed. “Oh, really, Tom? You always were crude.”

“What is it?” Severus demanded.

“I believe we must make a payment if we wish to enter,” said Dumbledore said. He pulled a short, silver knife from a pocket in his robes. “A blood payment.”

“Makes sense. Blood is powerful, after all,” said Severus.

Dumbledore shook his head. “I rather think the idea is for Voldemort's enemies to weaken themselves before attempting to gain entry. Voldemort has always placed far too much importance on the physical, and not enough on the spiritual...”

“I'd much prefer to splash a bit of blood on the rock than to damage my soul,” Severus said.

“Very true,” said Dumbledore.

Without another word, he slashed the knife at his blackened hand. Blood arched through the air and splattered on the rock. In the time it took Dumbledore to stow his knife and heal his cut with his wand, the outline of the archway had reappeared. This time, it stayed in place, and the blood-splattered rock within it melted away to reveal yawning darkness.

Dumbledore led them through into another cave, far bigger than the one from which they came. They were standing on the shore of a lake filled with still, inky water that reflected the light of their wands. The darkness within this cavern was so overwhelming, it felt almost tangible, like Harry could reach out and grasp it. He told himself that he was imagining things, that his wand was lighting up just as well as it ever did, but he couldn't shake the idea that its light (and that of Severus and Dumbledore's wands) wasn't doing as much to combat the dark as it normally would.
Looking up, Harry was unable to discern the ceiling of the cave, nor could he see the far side of the lake. In the centre of the water there was a greenish glow. Unmoving, it didn't seem to be any sort of fire. The water directly below the light source was illuminated, showing a completely non-moving surface, more like glass than any body of water Harry had ever encountered. He jumped slightly when Dumbledore spoke.

“Let us explore. Be very careful not to step in or otherwise touch the water, and stick close together.”

Dumbledore once again led the way, with Harry behind him, and Severus bringing up the rear. The edge of the lake was made of the same rough stone that had lined the tunnel and previous cave, just wide enough for the three of them to walk in single file. Their footsteps in the silent cavern seemed impossibly, dangerously loud to Harry, like they would catch the attention of some slumbering monster that would rise up to protect the Horcrux. He told himself firmly that he was being ridiculous, that it was just a dark cave, but he only grew more and more disquieted the further they walked.

Their surroundings never changed. On Harry's right was the stone wall of the cavern; to his left, the glassy water, with that odd greenish glow in the centre of it. The lake must have been perfectly circular, for the greenish glow didn't seem to draw any closer or further away to Harry.

“Couldn't we just try a Summoning Charm?” Harry asked quietly.

Dumbledore stopped so fast that Harry almost walked into him, and Severus into him. “By all means, Harry.”

Harry blinked. “Me? Er, okay... Accio Horcrux!” he cried, far louder than he would have wished under the circumstances.

A great boom sounded through the cavern as something large and pale flew out of the water a dozen metres away. It arced up into the air and then fell back under the water with a colossal splash. Severus grabbed Harry by the shoulder and wrenched him back against the wall. It had all happened far too quickly for Harry to get a good look at whatever it was. Even the ripples in the water dissipated quickly – far more quickly than was natural, Harry was certain.

“What was that?” he whispered.

“Something that is prepared to attack us if given the opportunity,” said Dumbledore.

Severus' hand tightened on Harry's shoulder. “Albus, if you know -”

“I don't know what it is,” Dumbledore said, setting off again, “but I highly doubt that it is the only one of its kind within that lake.”

As he walked, Harry stared at the once again unmoving water, imagining it teeming beneath the surface with kappas and kelpies, sea serpents and giant squid. “We don't have to go in there, do we?” he asked.

“I shouldn't think so. I'm fairly certain that the Horcrux is in the centre of the lake,” said Dumbledore, pointing out at the green light.

Harry breathed a silent sigh of relief, and Severus' hand fell from his shoulder. They walked in silence for a few minutes, until Dumbledore once again came to an abrupt stop.

“Both of you against the wall, if you'd be so kind,” said Dumbledore.
Harry had no qualms about obeying that order – against the wall meant further away from the water – and he didn't think Severus did, either. They watched curiously as, once more, Dumbledore examined something that neither of them could detect. He ran his hand through thin air, searching for something, and exclaimed with delight when he found it.

His hand curled around something invisible, and he stepped forward, towards the water. Harry watched nervously as Dumbledore stood on the very edge of the rock, but nothing emerged from the water to hurt him. With his blackened hand still holding the invisible something, Dumbledore tapped his fist with his wand.

The effect was instantaneous: a thick chain of green copper materialised in Dumbledore's hand, running out of his grasp and below the black surface of the lake. Dumbledore tapped the chain with his wand, and it began to rush through his hand, coiling neatly but noisily on the ground behind him. Where the chain stretched out over the lake it was taut, clearly pulling something, until eventually a small wooden boat burst through the surface of the water. Made of a rickety-looking wood, it nevertheless had the same green glow as the chain. Once again, the water calmed down unnaturally quickly, and seconds after the prow of the boat hit the bank, the lake was still once more.

“Residual magic?” asked Severus.

Dumbledore nodded. “Faint, but easily identified by those who know the signs. I have the added bonus of having taught Tom Riddle – I could recognise the signs of his magic anywhere.”

“Will we be attacked in the boat?” Severus asked.

“I shouldn't think so. If I have the measure of him – and I flatter myself that I do – Voldemort needed a means by which he could visit his own Horcrux, should he need to,” said Dumbledore. “Perhaps more pertinently, I also believe he would want to trap anyone who got this far, in order to question them. I doubt we shall be harmed on our way to the Horcrux. But at some point, Voldemort's defences will activate upon realising that we are not Voldemort, and I don't imagine that their response shall be at all pleasant for us.”

Harry looked down at the boat, which was very small. “Er, will that thing hold us all?”

“Physically, yes, though it would be a tight fit,” said Dumbledore, “but I don't think that Voldemort would be overly concerned with the weight the boat was to carry, as to opposed to the magical power of his enemies. If I were to hazard a guess, I would say that this boat has been enchanted to only carry one adult wizard at a time.”

“We have to go one at a time?” Harry asked.

“One of will have to, yes,” said Dumbledore. “You though, Harry, will be able to travel with -”

“Me,” Severus said firmly.

Dumbledore hesitated briefly before he nodded and turned back to Harry. “As I was saying, an under-age and unqualified wizard such as yourself will not have enough magical power for the boat's enchantments to register your presence. An oversight on Voldemort's part; like many of us do as we age, he has underestimated youth to his own detriment. You should be perfectly safe travelling with Severus – provided that neither of you touch the water.”

“Send us your Patronus when it's safe for us to haul the boat back,” said Severus.

Dumbledore smiled. “I'll see you on the other side.”
On that note, he stepped into the boat and sat down. As soon as he was settled, the boat took off from the shore, moving swiftly and smoothly over the water and leaving only the faintest of wakes in its path. In seconds, Dumbledore was invisible but for the light of his wand, and Harry and Severus were left alone in the darkness. Beside them, the chain unravelled as the boat travelled further away. 

“Can you do that thing he did? Finding the traces of magic?” asked Harry.

Severus shook his head. “I’ve read of it, but never tried it myself. I have no delusions that I would be able to perform as Dumbledore did. Despite his erroneous beliefs about certain matters, he is still an uncommonly wise and powerful wizard.”

Harry nodded. “How long will it take him, do you reckon?”

Severus frowned out over the water. “I cannot say. It's too dark to properly judge the distance, but that boat's going at a decent speed.”

“Do you think all the Horcruxes will be in places this creepy?” asked Harry.

“The ring was hidden in the Gaunts' shack, which while dilapidated, wasn't creepy. And the diary would have been somewhere in Malfoy Manor whilst in Lucius' possession,” Severus said thoughtfully.

“Good point,” said Harry.

“I'm just as eager to get out of here as you are,” Severus said.

Harry didn't know how to take that. On the one hand, Severus' admission made Harry feel less of a coward for being so unnerved by the cave. On the other hand, it also meant that, instead of being a figment of Harry's imagination, the cave really was as creepy as he thought it was.

With nothing to say, Harry looked down at the coil of chain, which was quickly getting lower and lower. Not long now, he thought.

He didn't know how much longer it was, but eventually the last coil slid into the water and the chain went taut. Harry and Severus both tensed, but it was half a minute before anything else happened. Across the dark water, a bright light popped into view – white, this time, and quickly growing larger. It wasn't long before Harry could make it out as Dumbledore's phoenix Patronus.

“I have disembarked safely upon a small island,” the phoenix said, then faded away.

Severus didn't waste any time, bending down to tap the chain with his wand. It immediately began to recoil itself on the rock, just as it had before.

“It seems as if we shall be able to join him after all,” Severus said, straightening up again.

Harry looked at him in surprise. “That was in doubt?”

“Why do you think I kept you back here with me?” asked Severus.

“I just thought you didn't want me alone with Dumbledore,” said Harry.

“While that's true, I also wanted you to remain here with me in the event that the boat would only manage one trip,” said Severus.

“You gambled on whether or not he would stuck there alone?” asked Harry.
“I wouldn't say gamble so much as experiment,” said Severus. “In any case, my priority is your safety, not his.”

Harry raised his eyebrows and went back to watching for any sign of the boat. When it eventually bumped back into the shore, Severus gestured for Harry to go first.

“Don't touch the water,” he said.

Harry stepped carefully into the boat, moving to the front in order to give Severus room behind him. Neither of them were able to sit properly in the tiny vessel, instead having to crouch awkwardly, their knees pressed against the sides of the boat. As it had with Dumbledore, the boat took off at once, moving towards the green light at a brisk pace.

It wasn't long before they'd travelled far enough that Harry was no longer able to make out the walls of the cavern. The world seemed shrunken down to just himself and Severus, the boat, and the water directly under them. To avoid looking out into the looming darkness, Harry stared down at the water, watching the little waves the boat made in its journey.

Only it wasn't just waves beneath them.

“Dad!” Harry whispered.

“What is it?” Severus asked.

“I saw something under the water. I couldn't tell what it was,” Harry said shakily.

Together, they peered over the edge of the boat, holding their wands out. Black waves danced in front of their eyes, and then their wand light fell upon what was unmistakably a human corpse. White and bloated, a man's face stared sightlessly up out of the water.

Harry gasped. “They're bodies. The lake's full of bodies.”

Severus' hand closed over Harry's wrist, pulling him further into the centre of the boat. “Not bodies. Inferi.”

Harry stared at him in horror. “Are you sure?”

Severus nodded grimly. “What use is a body? Corpses cannot help defend anything. Inferi, on the other hand…”

Harry swallowed thickly, unable to help from looking out for more Inferi floating under the surface. “Why aren't they attacking us?” he whispered.

“As Dumbledore said, they will allow us passage to the Horcrux, and attack later, once we are trapped,” said Severus. “Do you remember how to fight them?”

“Er... they...” Harry couldn't think; they'd just passed a little girl. She could have been sleeping, if not for the fact that she was a foot under water. She couldn't have been more than five years old when she had died.

“Harry, look at me.”

Harry jerked up. “What?”

“You know how to fight Inferi. You've learned about them in class,” Severus prompted.
Harry blinked. “Right, yeah. Er... fire. They hate fire.”

“Precisely. Just don't touch the water, and keep your wand at the ready,” said Severus.

Harry nodded, wide-eyed. He was no longer unnerved – he was properly scared, now. He couldn’t help remembering with awful clarity the tales he had heard of the Inferius attack on Tracey’s family when she had been an infant.

“You told me once that you’d seen Voldemort make Inferi,” said Harry.

“I did. Some of them may well be here, if that was what you were going to ask,” said Severus.

It had been. Harry looked back at the water, wondering how many people lay beneath its surface. There must be hundreds of them under there, if not more.

Hundreds of people who had never returned home to their loved ones.

Hundreds of people whose corpses were now employed in safeguarding the immortality of their murderer.

“We're here,” said Severus, breaking Harry out of his thoughts.

He looked up to see that the boat was pulling up to a small island in the middle of the lake. Formed from the same rock as the rest of the cavern, it was about ten metres across and only rose about a foot above the waterline. In the centre of it was a stone basin, set on top of a pedestal, over which Dumbledore was bent, waving his wand over its contents. When he got closer, Harry saw that the basin contained a glowing green potion.

Dumbledore looked up at their approach. “Severus, have you any insight to offer?”

Severus frowned and leaned over the basin himself. He sniffed deeply, then raised his wand over the basin. He slowly waved his wand in complicated patterns, muttering under his breath, his frown intensifying until he was glaring at the potion. He tried to poke his wand into the potion, only to be rebuffed by some invisible barrier. This incited another bout of irritated muttering and wand-waving, until finally, he raised his head to meet Dumbledore’s gaze.

“This potion is unlike anything I’ve ever encountered, or even read about. It doesn't react to any spells... I can't even identify a single ingredient. All of that leads me to believe that it is something Voldemort invented himself.”

“I was afraid of that,” said Dumbledore.

“Are you sure the Horcrux is in there?” asked Harry.

“Most definitely,” said Dumbledore. “Getting it out is going to difficult... most difficult...”

“What have you tried?” asked Severus.

“Vanishing, siphoning, evaporating, scooping... All attempts were unsuccessful. Likewise, I cannot transfigure or charm it... I cannot alter it in any way,” said Dumbledore.

Severus scowled at the uncooperative potion. Dumbledore, however, merely looked thoughtful.

“Have you any antidotes with you?” he asked.

Severus’ eyes widened. “Anti-venoms for both Ladon and Nagini’s venom. Nothing that would help
anyone who drank this.”

“We're drinking this?” Harry asked.

“No,” Severus said at once.

“Neither of you are. I am,” said Dumbledore.

“Albus, don't be a fool. Drinking this will likely be fatal,” said Severus.

Dumbledore smiled. “I do not think Voldemort made this potion to be lethal.”

Harry gaped at him. Not lethal? “Sir, this Voldemort we're talking about. This has to be poison.”

Dumbledore held up a hand. “Forgive me. I misspoke. I do not think this potion will kill me immediately – he would want to be able to entrap and then interrogate anyone who found this Horcrux, remember?”

“You are placing a lot of faith in your understanding of him,” Severus said.

“Faith that has thus far been justified,” said Dumbledore. “As I was saying, this potion shouldn't kill me, but rather incapacitate me in some way, whether it disorients me or paralyses me, or something else entirely. Therefore, in the event that I am unable to continue drinking it by myself, you and Harry will make sure that I finish. Once we have the Horcrux, we can leave and return to Hogwarts, where I will undoubtedly need your medical assistance.”

“But sir, surely there's another way,” Harry protested.

“If you know of one, by all means, enlighten us,” said Dumbledore.

Unable to think of anything else to do, Harry looked helplessly at Severus, whose jaw clenched.

“Fine. But I want it noted that I am against this plan.”

“As you wish,” said Dumbledore. With that, he conjured a crystal goblet out of thin air. He held it over the basin and lowered it effortlessly into the glowing potion. “To your good health, boys.”

Harry and Severus both stepped closer to Dumbledore, one to either side of him, watching as he drained the goblet. He closed his eyes as he drank, and lowered the goblet back into the basin without opening them.

“What does it taste like?” asked Severus.

Dumbledore shook his head. “No... no taste.”

While Severus thought that over, Dumbledore drank another goblet. He drank two more before he showed any signs of distress, lurching forward against the basin. The goblet almost fell from his hand, until Severus steadied it.

“Albus, what is it? What's it doing to you?”

Dumbledore didn't reply. His eyes were now screwed shut, as if in pain, and his face was twitching oddly.

“Sir, can you hear us?” asked Harry.
“I don't want to,” Dumbledore said.

Harry sucked in a breath. Dumbledore didn't sound anything like his usual self. He sounded lost and scared, almost like a little child. Harry looked across the basin at Severus, who had all of his attention focused on Dumbledore.

“Albus, I know you don't want to, but you have to keep drinking. You said so. Just keep drinking, and it will all be over quicker,” Severus said in a low, firm voice.

“Want it over...” Dumbledore said.

“I know. So take another drink, and then we can leave, and I can give you all the pain relievers I have,” said Severus.

Dumbledore jerked his head in a nod, and with Severus guiding his hand, raised the goblet and drank it all down. He immediately tried to lean back, away from the basin, but Severus had too strong a grip on his wrist. With his free hand, he took the goblet from Dumbledore's grasp.

Dumbledore started to cry. “No... no... please... no...”

Harry looked desperately down into the basin, but although it was now half empty, there was still no sign of a Horcrux. “You're nearly done,” he lied, “not long now, sir.”

“Harry, help support him,” Severus said.

Harry put one arm around Dumbledore's waist, and with his other hand, held his elbow, careful to stay well away from the painful cursed hand. Dumbledore sagged into him, forcing Harry to take most of his weight as Severus raised the goblet to his lips once more. As soon as he had emptied the goblet, Dumbledore resumed his begging.

“I'm sorry. Please, no... stop it, please... I'm sorry, so sorry...”

Severus lowered the goblet. “Albus, listen to me. Whatever you're seeing, whatever you think is happening, isn't real. Do you hear me? It isn't real. Just listen to me. I'm real. Harry's real. Anything else is an effect of the potion. It can't hurt you.”

Dumbledore began to shake in Harry's arms. “I'm so sorry. Please... please forgive me. I know I was wrong... I'm so sorry. Please stop, I'll never... never again...”

“I know you are, Albus, I know;” said Severus.

“All my fault... I'm sorry.”

“It's not your fault, Albus, nobody blames you.”

After the seventh goblet, Dumbledore collapsed completely in Harry's arms, jerking and shaking more strongly than ever.

“Dad, I think he's having a seizure,” Harry said, trying to twist his neck in order to see Dumbledore's face.

“No, please... don't hurt... hurt me instead... kill me instead...”

Severus' hand shook as he dipped the goblet back into the potion. “Albus, drink this. It will make you feel better,” he said loudly.
Dumbledore did as he was told. As soon as the goblet was taken away from his mouth he began to scream, his pleading getting more and more desperate. “Please no... please... I don't...”

A ninth drink, and Dumbledore tried to curl in on himself. Harry had the awful feeling that the potion was eating him away from the inside.

“Come on, sir, one more drink will make you feel better,” he said.

Severus poured another gobletful down Dumbledore's throat, refilling it quickly under the sounds of Dumbledore's screams.

“Kill me! Please, kill me, just kill me!”

“Drink, Albus, it will help,” said Severus, forcing the goblet back to his lips.

Dumbledore drank obediently. Harry braced himself for more screams, but they never came. Far more worryingly, Dumbledore passed out, leaving Harry to brace himself under him.

“A little help,” he gasped out.

A second later he heard the goblet clatter into the basin, and then Severus was hauling Dumbledore up and off Harry. Together, they got him laid out on the ground, flat on his back. He didn't move.

“Can you hear me?” Harry asked, fumbling for Dumbledore's wrist and almost sighing in relief. “I've found a pulse!”

“Rennervate,” said Severus. He had to cast the spell again before Dumbledore's eyes flickered open.

“Water,” he croaked.

Harry jumped to his feet to get the goblet. There was a golden locket lying under it in the basin. He grabbed both, slipping the locket around his neck for safe-keeping, and dropped to his knees beside Dumbledore, handing Severus the goblet. He tapped it with his wand, then frowned when the water that filled the goblet disappeared a second later.

“Aguamenti,” he said.

Again, the goblet filled with water, only for it to disappear again.

“Why isn't it working?” Harry asked, his eyes flicking between the stubbornly empty goblet and Dumbledore's pale, clammy face.

“Another protection of Voldemort's, no doubt,” Severus said, standing up. “Harry, get on the other side of Dumbledore, away from the water, and get ready to take the goblet off me.”

Harry hastened to do as he was told, then tensed when he saw Severus take the goblet down to the edge of the water. Severus raised his wand in his other hand and cast a Fire-Making Charm before crouching down and plunging the goblet into the lake.

The moment Severus' hand touched the water, the surface of the lake began to churn as dozens of Inferi rose from their watery graves. The ones closest to Severus hesitated when confronted with the wall of fire he had cast, but the ones further away staggered forward, pushing those in front into the flames as they tried to breach the island.

Severus walked sideways back to Harry, holding the goblet out for him to grasp. With his other hand, he kept waving his wand at the creeping mass of Inferi, leaving metre high flames in his wake.
Harry took the goblet off Severus, allowing him to focus on strengthening the wall of fire he was building. Harry gently raised Dumbledore's head and poured the water into his mouth. Not wanting to tire Dumbledore out, he only gave him a little bit to swallow at a time, until he felt Dumbledore struggling to sit up.

Dumbledore took the goblet off Harry and drank the rest of the water down greedily. By the time Harry was helping Dumbledore to his feet, Severus had a ring of fire completely surrounding them. On the other side of the flames, the Inferi were trying to back away from the fire, only to be pushed forward by the army of the dead behind them. Unable to feel pain, the Inferi at the front made no sound as they began to catch on fire, though they did twist inhumanely as their bodies went up in flames.

Severus spared a quick look for Harry. “The Horcrux?”

“Got it. Can we make it to the boat?” Harry asked.

“It won't hold all three of us,” Severus said.

Harry stared at him in horror. “We can't leave someone alone in this.”

“We'll have to go under the water,” said Dumbledore.

“That will extinguish the fire,” Severus pointed out.

“But it won't harm Fiendfyre,” said Dumbledore.

Severus jerked his head in a nod. “Bubble-Head Charms? We'll lose verbal communication.”

“I fear I cannot walk unaided at the moment,” said Dumbledore.

“I'll carry you,” Harry said.

Dumbledore smiled faintly. “Thank you, Harry.”

He slung his good arm around Harry's shoulders. Harry reached up with his left hand to hold onto Dumbledore's hand, hitching him up a little higher until he was comfortable and Harry could walk properly under Dumbledore's taller frame. He took a step forward, finding it difficult but possible to walk under his weight. It would be easier once they were under water, he knew.

Severus held out his left hand to Harry. “Give me your hand and I'll cast a Sticking Charm on us so that we cannot be separated underwater. You'll need to switch your wand to your other hand – we cannot risk my accidentally casting Fiendfyre from yours as well.”

Harry did as he was told, slipping his wand into his left hand as it held onto Dumbledore's, then reaching for Severus' hand. His palm was warm and dry, though it was shaking slightly. Harry held on tightly as Severus cancelled his Fire-Making Charm. The Inferi that weren't on fire immediately began to close in on them. With five quick waves of his wand, Severus stuck Harry and Dumbledore's forearms together, joined his own hand to Harry's, and cast Bubble-Head Charms over all three of them.

Severus took a deep breath within his own bubble, then cast Fiendfyre. Even surrounded as he had been by a ring of fire, Harry was unprepared for the sheer ferocity of this new spell. Where previously the fire had given off a pleasant heat, Harry could feel himself already beginning to sweat from the furnace-like atmosphere that quickly surrounded them.
The flames themselves were no ordinary flames, he could see that much. They were unnaturally huge, stretching at least ten metres above the island, and they were alive – there was simply no better word for it. A horde of magical creatures danced within them, phoenixes and dragons and chimaera, all roaring and snarling and biting the air as they circled around Severus.

With an intense look of concentration, Severus directed the ring of Fiendfyre out, away from the island. It swept through the Inferi that had left the water, burning them to ash in seconds. As soon as they had a clear path to the water, Severus tugged Harry's hand, and he immediately began to walk, carrying Dumbledore as he tried to stumble forward.

Harry watched with more than a little amazement as the Fiendfyre met the water and simply plunged into it as if it were air. Vast clouds of steam billowed up from the points at which the fire met the water. When Harry stepped into the lake, instead of the freezing cold he had been expecting, the water was pleasantly warm from the fire. His robes clung to him, but with his wand hand trapped against his own shoulder, Harry was unable to cast a new Impervius Charm. The further out Harry waded, the lighter Dumbledore became, as the water took more of his weight.

Just before his head finally submerged, Harry opened his mouth to light his wand, but immediately realised that he didn't have to worry about that – the Fiendfyre did a perfectly good job of illuminating everything. Harry would really rather it hadn't.

If there was a hell, this is what it would look like.

The bottom of the lake was rocky, with rough, jagged boulders strewn across the floor. Severus picked his way between them, with Harry following as best he could. The Fiendfyre burned around them, heating the water and lighting up the pale faces and writhing bodies of the Inferi that filled the water.

There were simply hundreds of them, stacked on top of one another from the floor of the lake right up to the surface. They crawled over each other, bumped into each other, their mouths gaping open as they tried to get to Harry and Severus and Dumbledore, only to recoil when they got to the Fiendfyre. The sheer weight of them worked against them, though, and those at the front were forced into the flames, just as they had been on land.

Harry couldn't help feeling sorry for them, even though he knew each one of them could easily rip him limb from limb. These had been innocent people, once upon a time; innocent people who had been murdered by Voldemort and denied even a peaceful afterlife. He knew they couldn't feel pain – they'd covered that in class – but the way that they flailed when they burst into flames made it very difficult to remember that fact.

On and on it went, a never ending parade of mindless automatons who were forced to rush towards the very flames that would put an end to their pitiful existence. Through it all, Severus had no choice but to maintain the Fiendfyre: the slightest weakness, one small gap in the wall of fiery creatures, and the army of the dead would rush through to slaughter the trapped humans. Harry tightened his grip on both Dumbledore and Severus’ hands, thankful for the Sticking Charms: without them, he could very well have lost his grip on either Severus or Dumbledore in the strong currents caused by the swirling Fiendfyre. Pushing that thought from his mind, Harry lowered his head, doing his best to ignore the horrific scene playing out around him. He already knew that Occlumency alone wouldn't be enough to prevent him from having nightmares about this.

Finally, after what what seemed like hours, the lake floor began to slowly, miraculously, gloriously rise up. Harry's thighs burned with the effort of hauling both himself and Dumbledore up the rocky incline after the long walk through the turbulent water. Ahead of him, Severus was slowing down, clearly exhausted by the effort of controlling Fiendfyre for so long.
When Harry's head and shoulders broke through the surface, he breathed a sigh of relief. Somehow, they'd made it through the Inferi-riddled lake unscathed. They staggered out onto the shore, where Severus finally let the Fiendfyre fall, cancelled the Bubble-Head and Sticking Charms, then slumped over with both hands on his knees, his face obscured by the black curtain of his hair.

“Dad?”

“Controlling Fiendfyre isn't easy, Harry... especially not for such an extended period of time,” said Dumbledore.

“I'm fine,” Severus said, pushing himself upright.

He looked uneasily out at the lake. Harry twisted around to see that the Fiendfyre still raged beneath the surface, the fiery creatures rampaging through the masses of Inferi. It last an eerie reddish light out into the cavern, making it seem as if the entire space was aflame.

“Is that just going to keep burning?” Harry asked.

“It will die out eventually... with any luck, after it has burned through all the Inferi... those poor souls deserve to finally rest in peace,” said Dumbledore.

“Let's not remain here that long,” said Severus.

He walked over and put his arm around Dumbledore's waist, helping Harry guide him back around the lake. Given how much taller Dumbledore was than either of them, it was awkward and slow going, and Harry couldn't help sneaking looks at the lake, just to make sure they weren't about to be surprised by any surfacing Inferi.

They reached the entranceway uneventfully. Severus used his own knife to cut his finger, and the archway opened up for them at once. It was a short trip through the entrance cave, and then they were swimming back through the freezing sea and clambering back onto the outcropping rock.

“Harry, Apparate to the gates of Hogwarts. I'll be just behind you with Albus,” said Severus.

Harry nodded, and slipped out from under Dumbledore's arm. Stepping carefully away on the slippery rock, Harry Disapparated. He opened his eyes and found himself precisely where he wanted to be: right in front of the Hogwarts gates.

He just hadn't expected to also find himself in the middle of a small battle.
A red spell shot past Harry towards the Hogwarts gates. A loud gong-like sound reverberated through the air when the gates' wards repelled the attack, and Harry winced as he ducked to avoid the ricocheting spell. As he shook off the lingering disorientation of Apparating, he spun around to take stock of the situation as quickly as he could.

The moon was a thin sliver in the dark sky, so most illumination came from the multi-coloured jets of light from the different spells that were flying through the air. About a hundred metres away, amongst the rambling bushes just to the left of the road to Hogsmeade, was a group of four people fighting. Harry could make out Tonks' pink hair – unmistakable even from this distance – next to Charlie's red hair. They were fighting two masked and hooded Death Eaters. Tonks was in her red Aurors robes – she had must have been assigned the Hogwarts patrol tonight. Behind her, crumpled on the ground, Harry could just make out someone in identical robes – Tonks' partner for the night. Whoever they were, they weren't moving, but they were half-hidden from the Death Eaters by a large bush, as if they'd been dragged there for safety, so hopefully that meant they were still alive.

On the other side of the road, in a clear patch of ground, Harry could see Moody and another Weasley, Bill, standing back to back, battling another two Death Eaters. Bill looked like he was injured, moving slowly and throwing up more Shield Charms than offensive spells.

To Harry's immediate right, Sirius had his back to the high stone wall that ran around Hogwarts' perimeter. He was fending off the only unmasked Death Eater, a man Harry had never before seen, and very much would like to never see again. He was physically imposing – not overly tall but very muscular – and had long, matted grey hair, and whiskers that couldn't quite hide the bestial snarl on his face. He was also a very good duellist and was driving Sirius inexorably closer to the wall.

“Sirius!” Harry cried, running over to join him.

“Harry?” Sirius yelped, shooting a Stunning Spell at his opponent. “What are you doing here?”

The Death Eater deflected the spell and eyed Harry up and down, then sniffed. “Smells a bit fresher than you, Black. Reckon I'll have him for dessert.”

Harry swallowed down a strong wave of revulsion as the Death Eater licked his lips. His teeth were stained a revolting red.

“You won't touch him, Greyback!” Sirius snarled.

Harry's stomach boiled with hatred when he realised who he was looking at: Fenrir Greyback, the werewolf who deliberately bit people, and who especially liked preying on children.

The werewolf who had bitten Remus.

Greyback smiled, showing off his red-stained teeth. “You'll be dead before I get to enjoy him.”

Sirius bared his teeth as he cast his next spell. “Incarcerous.”

Thick black ropes flew through the air towards Greyback. He ducked, but too slowly: the end of one rope wrapped itself around his neck. Choking, Greyback raised his hands to his throat to pull the rope away. Sirius took advantage of his momentary distraction to bark an order at Harry.

“Harry, get out of here.”
“But -”

“He hurt Remus. I won't let him hurt you, too.”

Harry opened his mouth to argue, then snapped it shut. Behind the struggling Greyback, a couple of hundred metres down the road towards Hogsmeade, Harry caught sight of two Death Eaters closing in on Narcissa. She was putting up a good fight, but the Death Eaters were coordinating their attack, splitting up to come at her in a pincer movement.

“I'll go help Narcissa,” he said to Sirius.

“Narcissa? What are -”

Harry Disapparated halfway through Sirius' reply, aiming for a spot a metre to the left of Narcissa. He immediately shot a Disarming Charm at the Death Eater in front of him, then turned to greet Narcissa, only to find himself standing next to someone completely different.

“Fleur?”

Fleur pushed her long, blonde hair – the very thing that had caught Harry’s eye, had made him think she was Narcissa – out of her face as she turned to him in surprise. “’Arry? What are you doing here?”

“What are you doing here?” Harry countered.

It was a good question, he felt. When he had passed through here only a couple of hours earlier, the road to Hogsmeade had been deserted, and the town itself peaceful.

“Zere was an ambush,” said Fleur, firing off a Disarming Charm of her own.

“And you guys decided to ambush the ambush?” asked Harry, throwing up a last minute Shield Charm against his Death Eater's purple curse.

“Oui,” said Fleur.

“I think I was one of the targets of the original ambush,” Harry said.

“Ah,” said Fleur. “Zen where are -”

“AVADA KEDAVRA!” screamed the taller of the Death Eaters.

“Get down!” Harry yelled.

He leapt forward and tackled Fleur to the ground. A split second later, a Killing Curse shot over them, precisely where they had been standing.

“Serpensortia,” Harry whispered. A long black snake erupted from his wand, coiling in the long grass in front of him and Fleur. “Go bite that woman.”

The snake took off at once, winding its way towards the Death Eater who had just tried to kill them.

“What are you doing, Alecto? That was Potter – you know the Dark Lord wants him for himself!”

Harry twisted around to see the shorter of the two Death Eaters glaring across at his partner from behind his mask. As he watched, the short Death Eater rolled up his left sleeve.
“Stupefy!” Harry shouted.

He knew it was hopeless before he even finished the incantation. His hand wasn’t even fully out of the grass, and his spell went high, shooting harmlessly into the sky as the Death Eater pressed his hand to his Dark Mark. Harry hissed in pain as his scar immediately began to burn.

“What is it?” asked Fleur, crouching over him.

“My scar,” said Harry. He brought up his Occlumency shield with some effort and looked up at her; behind her, Alecto yelped in pain. “Voldemort’s on his way.”

“What is it now?” the short Death Eater demanded irritably.

Fleur swallowed once, then nodded. “Zen we need to get out of here.”

“Something bit me, Gibbon!” Alecto shouted.


“Oh, for – focus, you idiot!” Gibbon roared.

“One...” Harry shifted, crouching in the opposite direction from Fleur.

“Two...”

“Three!”

Harry surged to his feet, firing a Disarming Charm at Alecto before he was fully upright. Beside him, Fleur rose in the opposite direction, shooting a Stunning Spell at Gibbon. Alecto blocked Harry’s charm, but Harry followed it up with a flurry of other spells, forcing Alecto to block or dodge them all, giving her no chance to launch a counter-attack. He stepped after her as he drove her back, finally hitting her square in the chest with a Stunning Spell.

“Yes!” Harry hissed, then turned around, just in time to see Gibbon hurl a fireball at Fleur.

Time slowed down as Harry watched Fleur bring her wand down to cast a Shield Charm. She was too slow to properly cover herself, and the fireball shot past the edge of her Shield Charm to hit the ends of her hair. Harry stared, frozen, as the memory of Scarlett getting hit with the same curse assaulted him. He could see the flames engulf Scarlett's face – smell her flesh burning – hear her shrieking in pain.

Before he knew what he was doing, Harry had darted past Fleur and aimed his wand at Gibbon. “Sectumsempra!”

A thin red line slashed across Gibbon's chest as if he had been cut by someone wielding an invisible sword. He looked down at himself in shock as blood began to gush out of the wound, then crumpled to the ground without a word. Harry immediately turned back to Fleur, relieved beyond words to find her extinguishing the flames. Harry ignored the tremor in his hand as he lowered his wand.

“Yes!” he asked anxiously, ignoring the faint whimpers from Gibbon.

“Oui,” said Fleur, pulling some burnt strands out of her hair.

“Are you sure?” Harry pressed.

Fleur let go of her hair and looked at him. “Oui, 'Arry. I'm fine. I was zinking of cutting my 'air,
anyway.”

When Harry just looked at her, Fleur sighed. “Let's go help ze ozzers.”

Harry blinked, then looked back up the road towards Hogwarts, where the fighting was still ongoing. He'd been so caught up in the memory of Scarlett, of making sure that what had happened to her didn't happen to Fleur, that he'd almost forgotten that there were other people around. “Right, yeah. I, er, I think Bill's hurt. Not too badly, but -”

Fleur had already taken off up the road, racing towards where Bill and Moody were still fighting a pair of Death Eaters. Harry ran after her, intending to help her, but he was easily outstripped by Fleur on her longer legs. By the time Harry had caught up to her, she had already reached Bill's side and sent a yellow hex at the Death Eater who had been attacking him. The curse broke through the Death Eater's Shield Charm and hit him in the shoulder, sending him crashing to the ground with a yell of pain. Fleur sent another hex at him for good measure, then crouched down next to Bill, who was sitting on the ground holding onto his left leg. His trousers were covered in blood.

“Can you stand?” Fleur asked him.

Bill grimaced. “Not by myself, no.”

“Want some help? Harry asked, crouching down on Bill's other side.

Bill shook his head and pointed up the slope. “He's worse off than I am.”

Harry twisted around to see that Severus and Dumbledore had finally arrived, and were standing in front of the school gates. Well, Severus was standing – Dumbledore was leaning heavily on him, his good left hand slung over his shoulders, looking even weaker than he had been back at the cave.

“You sure?” asked Harry, even as he began to stand up.

Bill nodded. “I'll be safe with Fleur.”

Hoping that he had never gazed at Draco as sappily as Bill and Fleur were currently gazing at each other, Harry took off, his wand up at the ready to block any stray spells. All around him, the fighting continued, and the bushes to the right of the road were now on fire. Harry cast a quick Water-Making Charm on them as he passed, but didn't slow down to see if the fires went out completely.

“Sir, are you okay?” Harry asked, coming to a stop in front of Severus and Dumbledore.

The latter managed a weak smile. “I've been better.”

“What happened?” Severus demanded.

“There was an ambush for you two,” said Harry. “I think those two drunks we saw in Hogsmeade must've been Death Eaters.”

“Of course,” Severus said bitterly. “I should've paid more attention – I've gotten sloppy, careless.”

“Not your fault,” said Dumbledore faintly.

“It gets worse. Voldemort's on his way,” Harry said grimly.

“Put your Cloak on,” Severus ordered.

Harry obeyed at once, before Severus could order him to leave completely.
Dumbledore raised a weak hand, pointing behind Harry. “He's here.”

“Do you have your Occlumency shield up?” asked Severus.

“Yeah,” said Harry, spinning around to face Voldemort.

It was worse than he had thought: Voldemort hadn't come alone, but had instead brought Bellatrix with him. They had Apparated into a spot down the road, well out of the fighting, just behind where Gibbon and Alecto lay in the grass. Bellatrix skipped forward and bent over her fallen colleagues, while Voldemort stood still, his eyes scanning the area. Twice his gaze slipped over Harry where he stood, invisible, at Severus' side, before he stared at Dumbledore. A small smile appeared on his face as he registered Dumbledore's weakened state, and he began to walk forward, seemingly unconcerned about the fighting he was heading towards.

Bellatrix stood up and hurried back to Voldemort's side, gesturing behind at Gibbon and Alecto. Voldemort listened to what she had to say, then gave a single nod, at which Bellatrix immediately stepped back respectfully. She followed him up the road, a deranged smile on her face as she looked at the destruction around her.

“Call off your followers, Dumbledore. I want to speak to you,” said Voldemort.

He must have magically amplified his voice, for Harry heard him as clearly as if he had been standing next to him.

“A ceasefire?” Dumbledore asked. His voice, too, was unnaturally loud, though the volume did nothing to mask the weakness. “How... unexpected.”

“I am not uncivilised, Dumbledore.”

“Present company excluded,” Dumbledore said, glancing at Greyback. “You've piqued my curiosity, Tom... We shall lower our wands after you and your followers have done so.”

“And allow your followers to attack mine while unprotected?” Voldemort asked.

“I give you my word... none of your followers will be attacked... while their wands are lowered,” said Dumbledore.

For a moment, Harry thought Voldemort would refuse, that he would insist the Order lowered theirs first, but instead he spread his hands. “Very well. Stand down, Death Eaters.”

The Death Eaters immediately lowered their wands, slowly followed by the Order, leaving everyone standing in a very tense ceasefire. Although all wands were lowered, no one let their guard down as they watched Dumbledore and Voldemort square off with each other. Underneath his Cloak, Harry kept his wand raised, moving the tip of it to the fold of the Cloak, ready to whip it out if needed.

“You needn't have gone to all this trouble for a simple conversation, Tom,” said Dumbledore.

Voldemort was now close enough that Harry could see the gleam in his red eyes. “I came here because I was under the impression that Harry Potter was here.”

“As you can see, your informant was mistaken,” said Dumbledore, sweeping his hand around.

“So it appears,” Voldemort said slowly. “I would punish the culprit, but I found him already dead upon my arrival. Tell me, who killed Gibbon?”
Harry went cold all over at Voldemort's unfeeling confirmation that Harry had just killed someone. While he had known exactly what that spell would do, he found himself unprepared to learn that he had been successful, that he had deliberately taken another human life.

“I'm afraid I haven't met this Gibbon,” said Dumbledore, after the briefest of hesitations.

Voldemort looked from him to Severus, and his lip curled. “Was it you, traitor? Are you killing your old allies now?”

“Not yet,” said Severus.

“No?” Voldemort stared at Severus a moment longer before turning his attention back to Dumbledore. “Was it the dog? Or have one of the Aurors turned rogue? I hardly think Gibbon would have sliced his own chest open.”

“It seems unlikely,” Dumbledore agreed. “Perhaps one of your own turned on him? They are rather fond of murder, after all.”

“Your side isn't so innocent, Dumbledore!” Bellatrix cried. “How many people has Cissy killed by now?”

“Less than you, Bellatrix,” Sirius growled.

He raised his wand a fraction, eliciting a growl from Greyback.

“Quiet, Bella. Greyback, you may play with your food later,” said Voldemort, not taking his eyes off Dumbledore. “I'm asking politely, but I am quickly losing patience.”

Unable to take it any more, Harry slipped his Cloak off. “It was me.”

“What?” gasped Sirius.

Harry couldn't look at Sirius, couldn't bear to see the shock he knew would be etched on his face. While Bellatrix giggled, Harry glanced at Severus, whose face was carefully blank, then at Dumbledore. Even though the majority of his weight was being supported by Severus, he seemed almost pleased by Harry's revelation.

Voldemort looked just as satisfied as Dumbledore when he turned to Harry. “My, my, little Harry Potter's all grown up and killing... Whatever will your adoring public have to say about that?”

“He had it coming,” Harry said, with a bravado he didn't feel.

“You liked it,” said Voldemort.

“No, I didn't,” Harry said, bundling his Cloak and stuffing it into a pocket.

“You lie,” said Voldemort. “You could have used the Killing Curse, and killed him instantly. Instead, you chose to carve him open, to gut him like a fish, to leave him to bleed to death in the dirt.”

“He got what he deserved,” Harry said stubbornly. He refused to allow any of the nausea that Voldemort's words caused to show on his face.

“Listen to your little protégé, Dumbledore. Did you teach him to kill? Or is this your influence, traitor?” Voldemort continued.
Severus, who had indeed spent many hours training Harry in preparation to kill, didn't even flinch. "What do you want?"

"Many things, traitor, not the least of which is your death... but at the moment, I want to speak to Dumbledore," said Voldemort.

"So you keep saying, Tom," said Dumbledore.

Voldemort's eyes flashed with anger, but his tone was calm when he spoke. "I have a proposition for you, one to which you would do well to acquiesce."

"A proposition?"

"I want the boy."

Harry went cold with fresh fear – different from the panicked fear that had been driving him through the battle so far – and watched Dumbledore closely. Considering that Dumbledore thought that Harry needed to die anyway, what was stopping him from handing Harry to Voldemort right now?

"Well, yes, Tom... that's been apparent for some time now," said Dumbledore.

"This is no time for your flippancy," Voldemort said, still in that oddly soothing tone.

"I agree," said Dumbledore.

"If you give me the boy, I'll leave here at once, along with all my followers. No more fighting or killing," said Voldemort.

As he watched, Harry saw Severus move his hand. It was a small motion, and neither Voldemort nor Bellatrix seemed to have noticed it, but Severus' wand was now pointed directly into Dumbledore's midsection.

"Except for poor Harry," Dumbledore pointed out.

Voldemort smiled, and for a fleeting moment, Harry saw the ghost of the handsome, charming boy he had once been. "You don't understand me. Give me the boy, and there will be no more fighting or killing at all. I'll call off my Death Eaters, the Inferi and the Dementors, the giants and the werewolves. This war will be over before it truly began. What is the life of one boy compared to the lives of thousands? Surely you can see that it will be for the greater good."

Bellatrix gave Voldemort a wounded look, as if he had just cancelled Christmas. To Harry's left, Dumbledore swayed slightly, his face even more pale, though he remained upright.

"And then what, Tom? You'll kill Harry and... let the rest of us go about our business?" he asked.

"Yes," said Voldemort. "I've no quarrel with the rest of wizarding Britain. I give you my word that I shall not harm anyone who does not attempt to harm me. Just give me the boy."

Dumbledore shook his head with some effort. "You know I can't do that."

Voldemort's smile began to slip. "Don't be a fool, Dumbledore. Give me the boy, and you'll be a hero. You will have single-handedly ended this war!"

"And I will have single-handedly handed over an innocent boy to die," said Dumbledore.

"He has blood on his hands."
“Your concern is touching, Tom.”

“You are sentencing hundreds to die, Dumbledore,” Voldemort snapped.

“Perhaps... perhaps not,” said Dumbledore. “Perhaps you'll be stopped before you can do any more damage... perhaps this very night...”

All trace of warmth had now left Voldemort's voice. “Is this your final word on the matter?”

“It is, Tom,” said Dumbledore.

“So be it,” said Voldemort. “Now, Wormtail!”

Harry raised his wand, ready to defend himself, but the attack wasn't for him.

A cry from Severus made Harry spin to his left in time to see Dumbledore sway on his feet. His long white beard fluttered to the ground, hacked in two, and then blood began to pour out of a gash in his throat that ran from just below his left ear, down to his right collar bone. Before he had time to even raise his hand all the way to the wound, he had slumped over onto Severus. A good half a foot shorter than Dumbledore, Severus immediately sank to the ground, with his wand hand trapped between him and Dumbledore.

As they fell, they revealed Pettigrew standing behind them, brandishing a bloody dagger. He gave a triumphant smile before he shrunk in on himself, turning back into a rat to escape into the night.

Bellatrix aimed her wand up into the sky. "MORSMORDRE!" she shouted.

Green, glittery smoke shot out of her wand, coalescing to form the Dark Mark. It hovered in the sky above Dumbledore, an awful, silent testimony to his death.

Harry took advantage of Bellatrix's momentary distraction to rush over to Severus. At the same time, fighting resumed, with everyone trying to get the slip on their opponent.

Bellatrix hurled a curse at Harry – the same blue, lightning-like curse that had so hurt his arm at the Ministry a year earlier. Harry brought up the strongest Shield Charm he could manage, which cracked under the strength of Bellatrix's curse. It wouldn't withstand another.

Harry sped up, trying to reach Severus' side, only for the green light of a Killing Curse to hit the ground in front of him. Harry immediately dove to the side to take shelter behind a bush. It wouldn't block another curse, but it would at least give him some cover while he tried to regroup.

“Naughty, naughty, Potter, trying to run away from us,” Bellatrix called.

“Leave him to me, Bella,” Voldemort said.

“Yes, Master,” Bellatrix said, her voice no longer mocking but submissive.

While Voldemort and Bellatrix were distracted, Harry took the opportunity to look over at Severus and Dumbledore. The latter was lying on top of the former, face down and completely still. As Harry watched, Severus managed to roll Dumbledore off himself. Harry couldn't help but gasp. Dumbledore's neck was sliced down to the bone, a raw, gaping hole in the wrinkled flesh. Blood was still pumping out quickly, though it was slower than the initial deluge, congealing in his beard where it lay crumpled on the ground. Harry didn't understand how there was any blood left in his body. Severus was absolutely covered in the stuff: light splatters on his forehead grew into a thick, solid layer on his lower face, while his black robes glistened.
“Come out and face me, Harry Potter. Must you hide from me every time we meet?” said Voldemort.

“Well, you keep trying to kill me, see,” Harry replied, peering through the bush at him.

“Get out of here, Harry!” Severus said.

“No, Potter stay,” said Bellatrix. “I'd like an audience while I torture the traitor to death. Crucio!”

Harry whipped around to see Severus, unable to block the spell magically, levitate Dumbledore's body in front of his own. Bellatrix's curse hit the corpse and made it jerk around in mid-air like a rag doll. Blood flew everywhere, and his head flopped obscenely on the half-severed neck.

Bellatrix laughed delightedly at the display. She lowered her wand and let Dumbledore's corpse crash to the ground, then smiled dementedly at Severus, who looked as nauseated as Harry. “What's wrong, traitor? Are you jealous that your old master is having all the fun? Don't worry, there's plenty more where that came from. Crucio!”

Again, Severus used Dumbledore's corpse to protect himself from the curse. Unable to stomach the sight any longer, Harry turned away to look through his bush again. His queasiness may very well have saved his life, for Voldemort had his wand pointed directly at Harry's meagre shelter. Without thinking, Harry Disapparated.

He didn't go far, only fifty metres of so down the road, but it was enough. From his vantage point behind Voldemort, he saw the bush he had been hiding behind get torn apart by a curse. Before Voldemort could realise that Harry hadn't been there when it was hit, Harry aimed his wand at his back.

“Sectumsempra,” he said.

Harry felt sick using the curse again so soon after Gibbon, but if he could just hit Voldemort now, his personal feelings about the issue wouldn't matter. Not if he could end the war here and now.

He didn't know if Voldemort heard him, or if he sensed the spell itself, but he whirled around and blocked the spell just before it could hit him. He lowered his wand and glared at Harry.

“You would attack me while my back is turned?” he demanded.

“You're one to talk,” Harry retorted.

“You're supposed to be the Chosen One,” said Voldemort.

“I am,” said Harry. “Expelliarmus!”

“Avada kedavra!”

Harry had a sense of deja vu when the two spells collided in mid-air. Unlike during their duel in the graveyard, their wands didn't connect via Priori Incantatem, but rather ricocheted off each other, zooming off into the night.

“New wand?” Harry asked.

“Custom made,” Voldemort replied, twirling said wand between his fingertips.

Harry nodded grimly as his fear increased; he could no longer rely on the connection between their wands to protect him from the Killing Curse. He had known since Ollivander had been abducted that there was a possibility of Voldemort finding a solution to this particular problem, but it was a blow
nonetheless.

“I did as you commanded. Have you any other commands?”

Harry blinked in surprise at the voice by his feet. Under the pretence of ducking yet another Killing Curse, Harry came face to face with the black snake he had conjured against Alecto. She looked quite proud of herself.

“Thanks. Would you mind going and biting the other Parselmouth?”

“With pleasure.”

The snake slithered off briskly, leaving Harry alone. He didn't think this would actually work, not against Voldemort, but it was worth a shot. Maybe he'd get lucky. He took a breath, then lurched to his feet.

“Sectumsempra!” he shouted.

Voldemort Apparated out the way, reappearing to Harry's right, in front of where Severus was still fending off Bellatrix. “That spell again, Potter? You really have acquired a taste for murder, haven't you?”

“I have a job to do,” said Harry.

“Likewise,” said Voldemort, before sending another Killing Curse.

Harry Apparated out of the way, again reappearing behind Voldemort, back in front of the school gates. He spun around with the incantation to a Stunning Spell on his tongue, only to stop when he found Voldemort laughing. He had the black snake floating in mid-air in front of him.

“Potter, you fool. You think to send a measly worm like this against the heir of Slytherin?” Voldemort asked.

“Who are you calling a worm, you pale-faced twit?” the snake demanded, twisting to get free.

Harry couldn't help but snort with laughter at the surprised expression on Voldemort's face. It was instantly replaced with a look of cold fury as he Vanished the snake with a flick of his wand.

“Foolish little boy, I will crush you like the infant you are.”

Harry tensed, ready to duck or dodge. “Really? You couldn't even do that when I was an infant.” Voldemort's face twisted with rage. “Crucio!”

Harry once again threw himself onto the ground. “Okay, taunting Voldemort maybe not the best idea, Potter,” he told himself.

He pushed himself back to his feet, shooting a Disarming Charm at Voldemort as he went. Voldemort dodged it easily, retaliating with a Killing Curse. It hit the ground behind Harry, who had to dive forward to escape it. He hit the ground hard this time, scraping his hands and arms.

Just as Harry went to stand up again, an enormous explosion ripped through the air. Harry threw his hands over his head not a moment too soon. Debris rained down on him – the ground trembled – and over it all, an eerie gong-like sound reverberated before it all stopped abruptly.

Harry cautiously raised his head. Dust and smoke had rapidly filled the air, thick and gritty and a
purplish-grey, obscuring everyone else from his view. His mouth was filled with blood – he must have bitten his tongue – and his ears rang, but apart from that he was unharmed. It was only when he stood up again that he realised that the explosion had occurred right where he had last seen Sirius.

“No,” Harry croaked.

He spat out some blood and stumbled forward, coughing when he inhaled smoke. He couldn't see a thing other than the mixture of smoke and dust roiling through the air, nor could he hear anything. Voldemort could have been two feet in front of him and he wouldn't have noticed until he literally bumped into him. Wand up, Harry wandered blindly, before a dark shape loomed out of the smoke and made him jump. He cursed his foolishness when he realised that it was just the ancient stone wall that ran around Hogwarts. He was heading in the right direction, then.

After another metre or two he stopped suddenly. He had reached the site of the explosion: a huge crater, easily ten metres in diameter, had ripped the earth open. It was perfectly round, as if a god had reached down from the heavens with an ice cream scoop, until it had come to an impenetrable barrier in the Hogwarts wall.

Harry knew the wards around Hogwarts were strong, but he had had no idea that they were this strong. Though the crater had carved through dirt and rock and tree roots with ease, the grey stone of the wall was left completely unscathed. A small purple fire, the source of the thick smoke, was dying out in the very centre of the crater, but the stone wall wasn't even singed.

“Sirius?” Harry called out hoarsely.

There was no answer, but he hadn't really been expecting one. If Sirius had been anywhere near this blast... no, best not to think like that, Harry told himself firmly. He spun in a circle, looking for anyone, anything, through the swirling dust. It was finally beginning to thin out, and he caught a glimpse of a tall shadow. He immediately headed towards it, only for his heart to fall when he realised it was just a tree. It was charred from either the explosion or the earlier fighting, and as he watched, a branch snapped and fell to the ground.

Right next to a dark, unmoving shape.

“Sirius!”

Harry raced over and dropped to his knees next to Sirius' prone form. He was lying on his front, with his face turned away from Harry and his limbs splayed out at unnatural angles. His wand was abandoned on the ground next to one of Harry's knees, inches from Sirius' outstretched hand.

“Sirius, can you hear me?” he asked loudly.

There was no indication whatsoever that Sirius had heard him. With a sickening jolt in his stomach, Harry spotted a trickle of blood leaking out of Sirius' ear.

“No, no, no, no,” he moaned.

He frantically grabbed Sirius' closest wrist and felt for a pulse.

“Oh thank fuck,” he sighed.

The pulse was weak and irregular, but it was there, and that was all that mattered right now. Harry aimed his wand at Sirius and cast a Reviving Spell.

Nothing happened.
“Rennervate!,” he said more loudly.

When Sirius still didn't respond, Harry began to seriously panic.

“Come on, wake up,” he sobbed.

He took a deep breath to get himself under control, to try the spell again, when his hand suddenly jerked up and behind himself. Harry swung around with the force of it, just in time to see a jet of golden fire shoot out of his wand, heading straight for Voldemort, who was looming out of the dissipating smog. He watched in astonishment as the fire shot unerringly towards Voldemort's wand hand – straight to his wand, in fact – and cracked it lengthways.

For a long moment, Harry and Voldemort simply stared at each other, their gaze broken only by the drifting dust. Then Voldemort threw the shattered wand to the ground in disgust and held his hand out expectantly.

“Bella! I need your wand!” he yelled.

“Yes, Master!” she replied.

Harry couldn't see her, but he could hear her footsteps getting closer. Knowing he couldn't possibly duel Voldemort without risking Sirius getting hit by a stray spell, he did the only thing he could do: picked up Sirius' wand, wrapped an arm around Sirius' chest, and Disapparated.

Harry needed to get to St Mungo's, but couldn't Apparate directly there, since he'd never been there before, so he aimed for the next best thing: home.

They landed in a heap in the field in front of Fen House. Harry got to his feet, quickly checked their surrounding to make sure no one had followed them, then bent over Sirius. He was still unconscious, even after Apparating, and Harry could see that there was blood in his right ear, too. He swallowed down his fear, and with some effort, hauled Sirius to his feet. Holding tightly to Sirius' waist, Harry slung his arm over his shoulders, just as he had done with Dumbledore earlier that night. Sirius was much heavier to carry, though. Where Dumbledore had at least been conscious and able to help support himself, Sirius was just dead weight.

“Don't think that word,” Harry whispered, appalled at himself. “He'll be fine. He has to be fine.”

The front door had never seemed so far away, nor the garden path so overgrown and winding, as it did tonight. Harry struggled up the gravel, with Sirius' heels dragging along on the ground behind him, until he was finally standing on the front step. He unlocked the front door with his wand and walked through.

The house was dark, but Harry didn't need light to make his way to the fireplace. He negotiated his way around the couch with ease and lit a fire. He grabbed some Floo powder from the mantel and threw it onto the fire, which flared green. Harry manoeuvred Sirius and himself into the fireplace then called out, “St Mungo's!”

He tightened his grip on Sirius as they spun through the Floo Network. The trip seemed to take longer than usual – did St Mungo's even have a fireplace? What would happen if they didn't? – but soon enough they slowed down, and were spat out of the flames.

Harry looked up to find himself sprawled on the floor of what was unmistakeably a waiting room – a very crowded waiting room. More than a dozen people were sitting on two rows of wooden chairs to either side of him, many of whom had cried out with shock at Harry and Sirius' entrance. A witch and a wizard in lime green robes hurried over at once. The witch knelt next to Sirius and began
casting diagnostic charms over him, while the wizard helped Harry to his feet.

“What happened?” he asked.

“Explosion,” said Harry.

The Healer nodded. “Do you know what caused it?”

“A curse, I think,” Harry said helplessly. “I don't think it hit him – it hit the ground then the wards around Hogwarts – I think he just got caught in the blast. I didn't see it, just found him afterwards.”

“Was he conscious when you found him?” asked the Healer.

“No. I tried to Revive him but he won't wake up,” said Harry, his voice hitching.

“Do you know if he has any existing medical conditions? Allergies?” the Healer asked.

“No. No, wait – he's an Animagus,” said Harry.

The wizard nodded, then bent down to have a quiet discussion with his colleague, who had by this time carefully rolled Sirius onto his side. Try as he might, Harry couldn't hear a thing they were saying. The patients sitting on either side were all craning their necks to see what was going on, and Harry heard his and Sirius' names being whispered repeatedly.

Finally, the Healers stood up. The witch Levitated Sirius up to waist height, and she hurried off.

The wizard turned back to Harry. “We'll look after him from here. I'll get someone to come out and clean up those cuts for you -”

“What? No!” Harry cried. “I have to stay with him.”

“We don't allow -”

“Please!”

The Healer shook his head. “You'd only distract us as we work.”

“But -”

“Healer Hammond said you needed some help,” said a new voice.

The Healer sighed with relief. “Brilliant timing.”

With that, he hurried off after the other Healer, leaving Harry alone with a girl not much older than he was. She smiled at him, put her hand in his back and gently but firmly guided him out of the waiting room.

“First things first. I'll get you cleaned up, and then I'll need to ask you some more questions about – he's your godfather, right?” When Harry just nodded, she continued. “You're covered in blood and dirt. Which isn't that unusual when it comes to you, but still.”

Harry blinked, and for the first time, looked at her properly. “Do I know – Zubeida?”

Zubeida flashed a smile. “I didn't think you'd recognised me. Bit of a rough night I take it? Well, you can rest now. You're safe. Just come with me and I'll get you patched up in no time.”
And Harry, who had been fully intending on giving her the slip and tracking down Sirius, was so overwhelmed to be talking to someone he knew and trusted that he did exactly as she said.
In Which Everyone Waits to See if Sirius Wakes Up

A quarter of an hour under Zubeida's brisk ministrations, and Harry was once more plotting his escape.

They were in a small examination room. Harry was perched on the edge of a hospital bed, while Zubeida was standing in front of him. Annoyingly, that meant she was also between him and the only door. While she busied herself healing his collection of cuts and bruises – and he had more than he had realised – and questioning him about which spells he had been in contact with, Harry eyed the door, wondering if he could slip past her the next time she turned her back.

Finally, Zuebeida sighed. “Don't try it, Harry.”

“Try what?” he asked in his most innocent voice.

Zubeida laughed. “Please, you've been thinking of how to best get past me for the last ten minutes.”

“I'm not -”

“Not only is that insulting to me – I was a Slytherin Prefect for three years, remember – it's also pretty damn foolish considering I already have my wand aimed at your face,” she said.

“Yeah, to heal me,” Harry said.

Zubeida paused said healing. “One move from you and the next spell out of my wand is a Stunning Spell.”

“You can't Stun a patient,” Harry said.

“Can so. You wouldn't be the first,” said Zubeida.

Harry scowled. “I just want to know how he's doing.”

“I understand that, I do,” Zubeida said earnestly. “But you need to let the other Healers do their job without any distractions.” She pulled back and looked him over, then smiled. “There, all done. I'll let you clean your own clothes and -”

She snapped her mouth shut when a Patronus in the form of a jack rabbit hopped into the room, then spoke in Tonks' voice.

“Harry, I've got your dad with me. He wants to know where you are and if you're okay.”

Harry had already pulled out his own wand before the Patronus disappeared. “Expecto patronum. For Nymphadora Tonks. I'm in St Mungo's. I'm okay, but Sirius is hurt pretty bad.”

His fawn took one bounding leap then disappeared through the wall. Zubeida stared after it.

“I never knew they could talk! Why didn't you teach us that in the DA?” she asked.

“We got busted before I could. Blame the toad,” said Harry.

“Will do,” said Zubeida. She shook her head and was once more all business. “Well, I was going to ask how to get in touch with your dad, but it looks like you've got that sorted yourself. So -”
Tonks' Patronus had returned. “He's on his way with Narcissa and Remus. Stay where you are.”

Zubeida grinned. “There, see? Your dad agrees with me: you're staying put.”

“Fine,” Harry said sulkily, finally admitting defeat.

“Okay, am I right in thinking that Narcissa and Remus are Draco's mum and Professor Lupin?” asked Zubeida.

“Yeah.”

“So one of them should be Sirius' next of kin, right?”

Panic gripped Harry. “Why do you need his next of kin? Don't you only ask that if someone's dying?”

“No, no, no,” Zubeida said hastily. “It's completely routine, Harry. I would've asked you for yours if I hadn't already known your dad... You okay? Do you need a Calming Draught?”

“I'm fine,” said Harry.

Zubeida eyed him sceptically, then nodded. “Well, we're done here. Let's go back down to the waiting room to meet your dad before he terrifies all the patients in there.”

Harry followed her out of the examination room, and into an empty, windowless corridor. It was lit by candles that floated in multi-coloured bubbles underneath the ceiling. The walls were lined with portraits of renowned Healers, each with little plaques underneath their frames. Harry looked around himself with interest; he hadn't really taken in any of this when he had walked down here half an hour or so earlier.

“I can't believe you're a Healer only a year after leaving school,” said Harry.

“For good reason: I'm not,” said Zubeida.

Harry stared at her. “You're not?”

Zubeida laughed. “A year after graduating? It takes longer than that to complete Healer training. But I am fully trained in first aid, so I'm perfectly capable of patching you up after whatever fight you've just gotten yourself into.”

Harry ignored her attempt at fishing for information. “Lucky me.”

Zubeida pushed open the double doors into the waiting room, and sat down on a stool behind the reception desk, pointing at another stool for Harry. He ignored the way all the waiting patients stared at him, and scooted his stool closer to Zubeida's.

“I'll tell you what happened tonight if you let me go see Sirius,” he said in a low voice.

A pained expression crossed Zubeida's face. “I can't, Harry, I'd get in trouble with my boss. But nice try, very nice try.”

Just then Severus, Narcissa and Remus burst through the far wall, which had looked perfectly solid up until then. Those waiting gasped and stared shamelessly when they saw Severus' bloodied appearance. Even Zubeida, who had surely seen her fair share of blood in her job, gave a small gasp, though her face was perfectly composed by the time they reached her desk.
To Harry's great astonishment, Severus – who rarely initiated overt displays of affection, and certainly never in front of other people – rounded the end of the desk and swept Harry into a fierce hug.

“I've been so worried about you. Don't you ever disappear like that again,” he whispered. “Not without telling me where you've gone.”

“I won’t,” Harry said somewhat breathlessly.

“Promise me,” said Severus.

“I promise,” said Harry.

Harry returned the hug as best he could given that his arms were pressed to his sides, and listened – he was unable to turn his head to watch – to Remus asking Zubeida about Sirius.

“The Healers are still with him. I can take you through to the Spell Damage Department, but I can't take you into his room yet, not even his next of kin – Harry wasn't sure which one of you it was –“

“Excuse me,” said Narcissa. “I was wondering if Healer Quinn is available?”

“No, he's not working tonight,” said Zubeida.

“That's a shame. I want my dear cousin to have the best treatment – as I'm sure you understand – and I was most impressed with Healer Quinn when I met him at the Ministry last month,” said Narcissa.

At this, Severus finally released Harry, though he kept one hand on Harry's shoulder, who sucked in a much-needed lungful of air and turned in time to see Zubeida's eyes widen.

“You know what? I think I can make an exception for – for my old Head of House. Follow me.”

Remus immediately followed her, but Severus hesitated.

“I hardly think my presence will help Black.”

“No, but it will help Harry,” Narcissa replied.

At that, Severus nodded, and they set off. Harry didn't know how Severus had been planning on staying behind: that would have required him to let go of Harry's shoulder, which didn't seem to be happening any time soon.

They walked back into the corridor that led to the examination rooms, but instead of turning right, Zubeida led them straight ahead to a set of stairs.

“So what was the deal with this Quinn bloke?” Harry asked.

“He's the Healer with whom I negotiated a generous donation,” Narcissa said, waving a hand. “It had been a year or two since I had given any money to this hospital, and I thought that, given the escalating war, it might be prudent to do so sooner rather than later.”

“It would've been nice to know about this half an hour ago when I was trying to convince Zubeida to let me in to see Sirius,” Harry grumbled.

Beside him, Severus snorted. “I would advise you to take it as granted that Narcissa has made sizeable donations to most establishments with which you ever have cause to deal.”
“Except for Gringotts,” said Narcissa. “Bribery doesn't work with goblins. They're quite happy to take my gold, but never keep up their end of the bargain.”

“I'll keep that in mind,” said Harry.

They fell silent at that. Harry, at least, was getting increasingly anxious over Sirius the closer they got to him. Their footsteps echoed on the otherwise empty stairs, until Zubeida got off at the fourth floor landing. There was a large sign above the doors that read *Fourth Floor – Spell Damage*. Taking a deep breath, Harry followed Zubeida and Remus over the threshold.

He was standing in yet another corridor, identical to those on the floors below save for the fact that, rather than being deserted, there was a hive of activity centred around a room halfway down the corridor. As Harry approached, three Healers hurried out of the room and shut the door. Seconds later, bright purple light shone out from the gap under the door, before disappearing abruptly a moment later. As soon as it was gone, the Healers rushed back into the room, leaving the door open behind them.

“Just wait here, and I'll go see if anyone can come and speak with you,” said Zubeida.

She walked down the corridor and entered the room, leaving them alone. Narcissa stepped over to Remus, who was as pale as he was the day after a full moon, and rested a hand on his arm.

“He'll be fine,” she murmured.

“You can't know that,” Remus said hoarsely.

Narcissa didn't reply – a Healer had just walked out of Sirius’ room behind Zubeida, the same Healer who had questioned Harry when he had originally arrived. They walked briskly, and Zubeida introduced him as Healer Singh.

Healer Singh didn't bother with the niceties. “We're still in the middle of diagnosing the magical damage Sirius has sustained, but we think we've treated most of his physical injuries. He had numerous broken and fractured bones which have been mended, and we've given him some Skele-Gro to further strengthen those bones. He had countless contusions, scrapes, and minor cuts all over his body which we've also repaired.

“There was a great deal of internal bleeding which we have stopped, and we're currently feeding him a Blood-Replenishing potion. Some minor swelling on the brain, but that's best left to go down by itself, and should only take a couple of days.”

“Is he awake?” asked Remus.

“No, he's not,” Singh said. “We haven't actually attempted to Revive him since his arrival. Given the extent of his injuries, we would have had to give him a great deal of pain relieving potions if he were conscious. We'll Revive him as soon as we've finished negating the spell damage that he's suffered.”

“How long will that take?” Remus demanded.

Singh spread his hands. “I'm afraid I don't know. There's some residual Dark magic from the curse that caused the explosion, but more worrying are the traces from the Hogwarts wards themselves. Our Head of Spell Damage believes that Sirius must have been standing on or even within some of the wards.” Singh hesitated, then said gently, “I'm sorry to tell you, but we believe that Sirius will suffer some permanent spell damage. We won't know anything for sure until he wakes up. My suggestion would be to go upstairs to our visitors' room and makes yourselves a cuppa while you wait. I really do need to get back in there.”
“That's it? We're stuck drinking tea until you deign to tell us anything more?” asked Remus.

Harry stared at him in shock. He'd never heard Remus talk to anyone in this tone – he sounded more like Severus at his most irritated than he did himself.

“Your other option is to stay in this corridor, but you won't be nearly as comfortable, and I cannot guarantee that you wouldn't be disturbed by witnessing some of the treatment.”

“We'll go upstairs. Thank you, Healer,” said Narcissa, giving Remus' arm a gentle squeeze. “Come on.”

She pulled Remus away, back towards the stairs. Singh turned and headed back to Sirius' room, but Zubeida walked out with Harry and Severus.

“I've got to get back down to reception, but come find me if you need anything,” she said.

“Okay,” said Harry.

“Thank you for looking after my son, Miss Khan,” said Severus.

“Just doing my job, sir,” Zubeida said, then headed downstairs.

Harry and Severus walked up to the fifth floor, where they found a plain visitors' room. Mismatched armchairs lined the walls, their upholstery faded and stained, but they were more comfortable-looking than the hard wooden chairs in reception. A fireplace – much too small to be hooked up to the Floo Network – had a welcoming fire burning within it, with an old cast iron kettle bubbling away over its heat. A table to the right held tea and coffee paraphernalia. Finding that they had the room to themselves, Narcissa immediately shut the door, then cast a few privacy charms for good measure.

“Sit down, everyone, I'll make the tea,” she said.

Harry sat down at once in the closest chair. After the night he'd had, even its threadbare cushions felt decadently comfortable. Remus dropped heavily into a chair across the room and stared off into space, while Severus sank down next to Harry and slumped over to drop his head into his hands. Harry looked up to meet Narcissa's worried gaze. She jerked her head questioningly at Severus, but Harry could only shrug. Narcissa pursed her mouth and continued to busy herself with the tea, then beckoned Harry over once she was done.

“Are you alright?” she asked.

Harry nodded. “Just worried about Sirius.”

“Can you look after Severus while I take care of Remus?” Narcissa asked quietly.

“Of course,” said Harry.

Narcissa gave him a sad smile. “Hopefully we shan't have too long a wait before we can go in.”

With that, she picked up two cups of tea and a plate of chocolate digestives, and walked over to Remus, leaving Harry to deal with Severus. Harry picked up his own tea and biscuits, then sat back down in his chair and held out a cup to Severus.

“Here's your tea.”

“I don't want any.”
Harry frowned – he'd never seen Severus refuse a cup of tea before – and slowly put the tea and biscuits down on the floor in front of them.

“Dad, are you okay?” he asked softly.

“No,” Severus said shortly.

It took Harry a few seconds to realise that Severus' shoulders were shaking. “Are you crying?”

There was a long silence, during which Severus somehow hunched further in on himself, as if trying to disappear.

Harry tentatively reached out to put a hand on Severus' shoulder, making a face at the coldness of the blood-soaked cloth. “Dad -”

“It's my fault.”

The words were so quiet that Harry had to lean forward. “What's your fault? Sirius?”

“No, Albus. His – his death.”

“How'd you figure that?”

“I should've been able to stop it.”

“How?”

Severus finally raised his head out of his hands. There were two tear tracks down his face, bright white lines that cut through the blood still caked on his skin. “I should've noticed those men in Hogsmeade – I could've prevented the ambush.”

Harry thought about this. “Have you ever met either one of them before?”

Severus glared at him through red-rimmed eyes. “That's irrelevant.”

“It's entirely relevant,” Harry argued. “How were you supposed to know they were Death Eaters if you've never seen them before?”

Severus hung his head again. “If I were still a spy -”

“I'd still be living with the Dursleys,” Harry said sharply. “Are you saying you want to give me back?”

Severus' head shot up. “No – never – Harry -”

“So if you can't be a spy because you adopted me, and you never met either of those men, how is any of this your fault?” asked Harry.

“I should've been able to stop Pettigrew,” Severus said bitterly.

“Even if you'd seen Pettigrew in time, you couldn't draw your wand on him without dropping Dumbledore,” Harry pointed out.

“I could've done both,” Severus said.

Harry doubted that, but let it pass. “Right – but even so, that would've left you vulnerable to an
attack from Voldemort or Bellatrix. You did the best you could – that anyone could.”

Severus scowled. “You’re just saying that to make me feel better.”

“I’m really not. I honestly don’t think there was anything anyone could have done,” said Harry. “This was obviously planned in advance somehow.”

“We’ve thwarted their plans before,” Severus said stubbornly.

Harry ran his clean hand through his hair. “Do you – do you think maybe you're blaming yourself because you feel guilty that you never made up with him after your fight?”

Severus spluttered. “He told me – us – that you had to-”

“I know, Dad,” Harry said, squeezing his shoulder. “That was one of the worst days of my life, and-”

“Then how can you say-”

“Because unlike me, you cared about him,” said Harry. “He kept you out of Azkaban all those years ago – kept you safe from Death Eaters seeking revenge – I know how much you owe him, how much he meant to you.”

“I can’t imagine a world without him in it. I keep thinking that he’s going to walk in any minute – will give us an explanation that raises more questions than it answers in that maddening way of his – but he won’t,” said Severus. He sniffed and wiped at his eyes, further smearing the blood there. “He’s gone – he died on top of me, in my arms – and I couldn't save him... I don't know what my life will be like without him in it.”

“Well, I'll be here to help you figure it out,” said Harry. “I'm not going anywhere.”

Severus took a shuddering breath. “I don't deserve you.”

Harry gave a crooked smile. “I don’t know about that. You put up with my singing, don't you?”

“I wouldn't call those sounds you make singing,” said Severus.

Relieved to see Severus’ distress had dissipated somewhat, Harry set about cleaning the blood off his face. It took him numerous Scouring Charms, but he finally got all the blood of Severus’ face and out of his hair and robes.

“Thank you,” said Severus.

He bent forward and picked up the teacups, handing one to Harry. Severus took a sip and grimaced.

“It can’t be that bad,” said Harry, before drinking his own and blanching. “Oh, Merlin.”

Severus harrumphed at him, then looked across at Narcissa. “Just how much sugar did you put in these?”

“You're both likely in need of some sugar after what you've been through tonight,” Narcissa replied.

Beside her, Remus didn't seem to have a problem with his tea, and there was a scattering of biscuit crumbs on his robes. Harry tried another sip and screwed his face up again. Giving up on the tea, he grabbed a digestive instead.
“Now, then,” said Narcissa. “What happened tonight? Remus and I – along with Hestia – were asked to patrol the corridors of Hogwarts while Dumbledore left the school, but he never told us where he was going.”

“Albus -” Severus choked and cleared his throat.

Harry jumped in. “Dumbledore had found the location of a Horcrux. He took the two of us along with him – I had to stay under my Cloak. When we got to Hogsmeade, we passed two blokes stumbling out of the Three Broomsticks. We just assumed they were drunks, but at least one of them must’ve been a Death Eater. He must’ve told Voldemort that Dad and Dumbledore had gone out together.”

“And the Dark Lord ordered an ambush, unable to resist two such strong targets,” Narcissa mused. “Where did you go from Hogsmeade?”

“A cave in a cliff somewhere in England – Dumbledore never told us exactly where,” said Harry. He glanced at Severus, saw that he was just staring at his too-sweet tea, and continued. “It was protected by a bunch of Dark magic, including a lake full of Inferi” – twin shudders from Narcissa and Remus – “and the Horcrux itself was in some potion that neither Dad nor Dumbledore could identify.”

Narcissa leaned forward. “Did you get it? Did you get the Horcrux?”

“Yeah,” Harry said with a grin.

“At great cost to Albus,” Severus croaked.

“Er, yeah,” said Harry, shuddering. “The only way we could get through the potion was to drink it. It – it gave him hallucinations and physical pain, then he fell unconscious. Then we got attacked by the Inferi, but Dad held them off with Fiendfyre while we crossed through the lake.”

“Through?” Narcissa asked.

“Through,” Harry said, trying not to remember that horrific trek. “Anyway, we got out and Apparated back to Hogwarts, only to find ourselves in the middle of a fight.”

Narcissa nodded. “Nymphadora was one of the Aurors patrolling around Hogwarts tonight. She came across the Death Eaters as they were in the process of preparing for their ambush. She almost got caught – she’s never been good at the stealth part of her job – but she managed to meet back up with Dawlish and send two Patronus messages: one to me inside Hogwarts, and one to Moody, who as luck would have it, was dining at the Burrow.”

“Not Grimmauld Place?” Harry asked with a frown.

“She knew that Sirius was home alone. Remus and I were at Hogwarts, and Kingsley’s with the Prime Minister in London,” said Narcissa. “Moody was her mentor, so it’s natural that he was her second choice to speak to.”

“So then why was Sirius there?” asked Harry.

“Molly Floo-called him, while those she was dining with left to fight,” said Narcissa.

“And naturally, Sirius rushed off as well,” Remus said, with fond exasperation.

“Okay, so that’s about when we got there,” said Harry. “Where were you two?”
“As soon as I got Nymphadora's message, I went straight to Minerva. She ordered all students and staff to the Great Hall for their safety. Remus, Hestia and I stood guard in the Entrance Hall,” said Narcissa.

Guilt stabbed through Harry's stomach: he'd been so caught up worrying over Sirius and then Severus, he hadn't even thought about his friends. “Draco and Hermione -”

“They're fine,” Narcissa said quickly, making Harry slump in relief. “Worried, naturally, as was everyone else. We were there for, oh, an hour or so before we got word that it was all over, that the Death Eaters had all left.”

“Voldemort had Bellatrix Disapparate with him immediately after you left,” Severus told Harry.

“Must've been because his wand had been destroyed,” said Harry.

“Destroyed?” Remus asked.

Harry nodded. “It was really weird. He was coming up behind me, and my wand somehow swung around to attack him on its own.”

Narcissa frowned. “Your wand attacked him on its own?”

“You must've done it subconsciously,” said Remus.

“No, it was my wand. I was too busy trying to Revive Sirius to notice anything going on around me,” said Harry. “I don't even know what spell it was – some sort of golden fire. It shot straight at his wand and shattered it.”

“It could have had something to do with your wands sharing a core,” said Narcissa.

Harry shook his head. “He said he had a new one. Custom made.”

“Which means our suspicions were correct: he has Ollivander somewhere,” said Severus.

“Are you sure you didn't cast a spell somehow? I've never heard of anything like this happening before,” said Remus.

“You have now,” said Harry. “What happened next?”

Narcissa blinked, gathering her thoughts before she resumed her tale. “The other Death Eaters – those that were still conscious, at least – Disapparated when they realised that the Dark Lord had left them. Nymphadora got in contact with her boss, and a squadron of Aurors arrived to help the Order clean up. Severus unlocked the school gates and the injured went to the infirmary -”

“Is everyone okay?” asked Harry.

“Bill had been injured in his left leg. Pomfrey did what she could for him, but he'll have a limp for some time, possibly for the rest of his life... Dawlish was still unconscious when we left, but Pomfrey said she'd have him sorted out before too long... Moody had a fractured wrist, and Charlie had cracked a few ribs... Other than that, there were just a few scrapes and bruises, some cuts and a few minor burns,” said Narcissa.

“Apart from Albus,” said Severus.

Narcissa inclined her head. “Yes, apart from him.”
“And the Death Eaters?” asked Harry.

“We only know about those who were unable to Disapparate away,” said Remus. “Carrow – Alecto, not Amycus – had been Stunned and bitten by some sort of snake – she’s been taken to Azkaban, where I assume she’ll receive medical treatment – and Gaius Gibbon was cut open and bled to death.”

“That was me,” said Harry.

“The snake? I thought as much,” said Narcissa with a wry smile.

“No, both. I killed Gibbon, too,” Harry said quietly.

“You – oh,” said Remus, his eyebrows shooting up.

Narcissa glanced at Severus, all trace of her smile gone, then looked back at Harry. “Are you alright?”

Now that the adrenaline from the fight had faded away, the enormity of what he had done was truly beginning to dawn on him. For all that his loved ones had done their best to dispel any similarities between himself and Voldemort, in the end, Harry wasn't much younger than Voldemort had been when he had killed for the first time – and Harry knew he had to kill again. He felt like a yawning darkness was looming behind him, hoping to swallow him down to its depths.

“I'm fine,” Harry lied.

Narcissa nodded slowly. “Well... we haven't much information on this Gibbon, but any one of them we can kill is an advantage in my book. You did well, Harry.”

“He did brilliantly,” said Severus, “but it was still their victory, and a resounding one at that. From what we can tell, Gibbon wasn't very high up in the Death Eaters' hierarchy, whereas we've lost our leader.”

Harry glanced over at him, but Severus didn't seem on the verge of falling apart again.

“Mad-Eye will take over, won't he?” Remus asked.

“I would imagine so,” said Severus.

While the adults began discussing the change in leadership, Harry let his eyes drift shut. Just to rest them for a second...

“Harry.”

“Mmm...”

“Come on, wake up.”

“I'm not asleep.”

“Oh, so you were conscious when you drooled all over my shoulder, were you?”

At that, Harry's eyes shot open. He found himself leaning on Severus' shoulder, which was indeed rather damp.

“Sorry,” he muttered, sitting upright and wiping his mouth with his hand.
“No matter,” said Severus. “It's time to go.”

“No one is awake?” asked Harry.

Severus didn't reply, but he didn't have to. Remus' drawn face was answer enough for Harry.

“What's happened?” he asked shakily. “How long was I asleep?”

“No,” said Severus. “Only a couple of minutes.”

“What's happened?” he repeated.

“Healer Singh came back to speak to Remus,” Narcissa said slowly. “Sirius – they’ve tried to wake
him up, but he's not responding. He's in a coma.”

Harry stared at her, unable to think of a single thing to say. He barely felt it when Severus laid a hand
on his shoulder.

“The Healers are letting us go in for a few minutes, and then we're going to go back home to get
some sleep,” Narcissa continued.

Harry walked downstairs on numb feet, the word “coma” echoing through his mind. He'd never
known anyone in a coma, but he knew they were bad. Sometimes, alone in his cupboard, he'd
listened to the soaps that Aunt Petunia liked to watch. People were always falling into comas on
those shows, and often stayed that way for months or even years.

Back on the fourth floor, the mass of Healers had dispersed, leaving just one Healer, an old white
man with thick glasses waiting outside Sirius' room for them. He opened the door without a word
and gestured them inside. As Harry stepped through the doorway, Severus' hand slipped off his
shoulder; he was staying outside. Harry stood next to Narcissa, who took a firm hold of his hand.

It was a four-bed room, with two empty beds, and a blue-skinned witch sleeping fitfully in the third
bed. Sirius was in the bed closest to the door. His eyes were closed and he was breathing peacefully.
If it were not for the startling paleness of his face, he could have been sleeping. He was dressed in a
plain white hospital gown, his bare arms resting on top of the thin blanket. Both ears were entirely
covered with thick bandages, with his hair pulled out of the way and tied on the top of his head in a
loose bun.

“Sirius?” Harry said in a small voice.

Narcissa squeezed his hand. “Darling, he can't hear you.”

Harry was suddenly reminded of when, four years ago, he and Draco had gone into the Hogwarts
infirmary to find a Petrified Hermione. Just as the frozen girl in that bed hadn't been his best friend,
the man in this bed wasn't his godfather. He couldn't be. There was no sign of his cocky grin, nor his
bark-like laugh. The still, pale arms didn't look strong enough to steer a motorbike or to wrap Harry
in a rib-crushing bear hug.

Without a word, Harry pulled his hand out of Narcissa's and came around the side of the bed. He
reached into his pocket and withdrew Sirius' wand and placed it in Sirius' unresponsive right hand,
wrapping the cool fingers around the wood. “For when you wake up,” he said, then left the room.

He joined Severus outside and leaned against the wall, tiredness washing over him. Harry didn't
know how long they waited before Narcissa and Remus walked back out. He didn't take any notice
of the walk back down to the waiting room, nor of the patients sitting there. He stepped into the Floo
behind Severus, who caught him before he could fall face first onto the kitchen table at Grimmauld Place.

“Harry, you can sleep in Draco's room. Severus, you can have one of the guest rooms on the second floor,” said Narcissa. “I'll have an elf bring you both some Dreamless Sleep.”

Somehow, Harry dragged himself up the stairs, despite exhaustion beginning to overtake him. On the second floor landing Severus hugged him again as he said goodnight. Narcissa hugged him on the third floor landing, kissing him on the forehead before heading into her own room, leaving Harry to follow Remus up to the fourth floor. When they got there Remus put his hand on the doorknob of his bedroom door, then hesitated.

“Are you okay?” Harry asked.

Remus let his hand fall, then turned around. “Tonight won't be the first time I've slept in here without Sirius, but... in the past, it's always been when he's been on a mission of some sort. Naturally, I was worried about him, about what could happen to him. Tonight I know. He's lying in a coma in St Mungo's and there's nothing I can do about it.”

Having nothing to say to this apart from empty platitudes, Harry simply walked forward and hugged Remus.

“Thank you for getting him to St Mungo's,” said Remus, pulling away.

Harry shrugged. “He would've done the same for me.”

“Yeah, he would have,” said Remus, then forced a smile. “Get some sleep, I'm sure we'll get good news later this morning.”

“Yeah,” said Harry, answering Remus' smile with one just as forced.

Harry walked into Draco's room, kicked his shoes off, put his glasses on the bedside table, then crawled into bed, pulling the covers over his head. He took a deep breath in the hopes that some trace of Draco remained, but the sheets just smelled of clean, crisp cotton.

“Begging your pardon, sir, but Tilly is bringing sir his medicine.”

Harry pulled the covers down to see Tilly standing by the bed. She had put a pitcher of water and a goblet on the bedside table next to his glasses, and was holding out a small vial expectantly.

“Thanks, Tilly,” he said.

Harry reached out, uncorked the vial and swallowed the contents in one go. He handed it back to Tilly, then fell back onto the pillows.

“Sir is to call for Tilly if sir is needing anything else,” Tilly said.

“Okay...” Harry mumbled, just before the potion pulled him into a deep sleep.
Harry woke up struggling to breathe. He sat up with a start, ready to fight off his attacker, only to 
realise that he was being choked by the heavy gold chain of the Horcrux. He'd been so tired the night 
before that he had gone to sleep without even taking it off. He did so now, turning the locket over in 
his hands, then frowned.

Something wasn't right.

He leaned over for his glasses and shoved them on his face, then lifted up the Horcrux. Now that he 
had time to look at it properly, he could see at once that it didn't quite match the locket that he had 
seen in the Pensieve all those months ago. That had been carved ornately, with a prominent S on the 
front of it – Slytherin's mark. This locket had no such mark and was a lot smaller than Harry 
remembered. He gripped it tightly, a horrible feeling settling in his stomach, then gave a small cry 
when the locket suddenly sprung open and a piece of parchment fluttered out onto the bedspread. He 
picked it up and read the faded cursive that covered it.

To the Dark Lord
I know I will be dead long before you read this
but I want you to know that it was I who discovered your secret.
I have stolen the real Horcrux and intend to destroy it as soon as I can.
I face death in the hope that when you meet your match,
you will be mortal once more.
R.A.B.

Harry re-read the note with horrified disbelief. The locket wasn't a Horcrux at all – just a poorly 
made copy, a fake. All that they had gone through the night before – the lake of Inferi, Dumbledore's 
suffering and eventual grisly death, Sirius' injuries – that was all for nothing.

Harry picked up the imitation Horcrux, jammed his feet into his shoes and hurried downstairs to the 
kitchen. He found Severus, Narcissa, Kingsley and Remus all seated at the long table, lunch laid out 
between them, though no one seemed particularly hungry. Remus was staring blankly into his tea, 
while Narcissa watched him from across the table, worry etched onto her face. Next to her, Kingsley 
was in quiet conversation with Severus, who was sitting at the end of the table, a copy of the Daily 
Prophet spread out between them. They all looked up at Harry's entrance, but he ignored their tired 
greetings and held up the locket.

“It's a fake,” he said.

“What?” asked Kingsley.

“It's a fake,” Harry repeated, sitting down on the corner seat between Severus and Remus. “Someone 
made a copy of the Horcrux and went to destroy the real thing.”
“How do you know this?” Severus demanded.

“Here,” said Harry, passing both the locket and note to Severus. “Last night was a complete waste of time.”

“Oh, god,” Remus groaned, putting his head in his hands.

Severus threw the locket and note onto the table in disgust. “So now we have to figure out who wrote this, then track down the Horcrux all over again. Albus’ death was entirely in vain.”

Kingsley picked up the locket to inspect it, leaving Narcissa the note. She slipped on her reading glasses, read the note quickly, then gasped.

“What is it?” asked Harry.

“It wasn't entirely in vain,” Narcissa said, taking her glasses off again.

“How can you say that?” asked Severus.

“Because,” said Narcissa, now smiling widely, “the Horcrux – if it hasn't already been destroyed – may very well be in this house.”

Kingsley plucked the note out of her hand in order to read it himself. Harry glanced at Remus, who looked just as nonplussed as he felt, then at Severus, who had his eyes narrowed in thought.

“You think it's Regulus,” he said.

Narcissa shrugged. “Who else could it be?”

“Anyone with those initials,” said Severus.

Narcissa took the note back off Kingsley and smoothed it out in the centre of the table. “Read the epithet,” she said, pointing a finger at the note. “The Dark Lord’. Most people who use that particular epithet are either a Death Eater themselves, or related to one – or a former Death Eater,” she added, with a nod at Severus. “Everyone else either calls him Voldemort, or He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named, or You-Know-Who. And I can't think of another Death Eater with those initials, can you?”

“No,” Severus said, “but that doesn't necessarily mean that the writer was a Death Eater.”

“Maybe not by itself,” Narcissa allowed, “but who better placed than a Death Eater to discover Voldemort's secret? Apart from Dumbledore, who was one of a kind, I can't think of anyone else who might have made such a discovery.”

“You're right,” Severus said slowly.

“I can't see Regulus going against Voldemort,” Remus said doubtfully. “He was always so... he was always a big believer in pure-blood supremacy.”

“And how often did you discuss politics with Regulus, Lupin?” asked Severus.

“Well, never, I don't think,” Remus admitted.

“I think it's safe to say that of the five of us here, I'm the one who knew Regulus best,” said Narcissa.

“Yeah, and I've never once heard you say anything nice about him,” Harry argued. “Didn't you say
“Voldemort would've killed him for being a moron or something?”

Narcissa reddened. “Well, yes, I have been rather critical of him in the past... but even I can be wrong on occasion.”

“Can you repeat that last bit?” Kingsley asked, flashing her a grin. “I want to savour this moment.” Severus rolled his eyes. “The two of you can flirt later. We have more pressing matters.”

Kingsley cleared his throat while Narcissa poured herself another cup of coffee.

“I also knew Regulus rather well,” said Severus, “and I have long thought that he may have defected.”

“Yeah, but you also thought he killed himself to escape Voldemort's vengeance for said defection,” said Harry.

Severus inclined his head. “True. But in light of this new evidence” – he jabbed his finger down on the note – “I'm reassessing my opinion. Regulus was never a fanatic like Bellatrix. It's not inconceivable that there was some sort of catalyst that drove him not only to leave the Death Eaters, but to attempt to weaken Voldemort in the process.”

“Such as?” asked Remus.

“I've no idea,” Severus admitted.

“It's not much of a lead, but it's enough to convince me that we ought to pursue this as our first line of investigation,” said Kingsley.

“Ever the Auror,” murmured Narcissa.

“Where do we start looking?” asked Harry.

“Given what you've told us about the potion Voldemort used, I think it's a safe bet that Regulus was unable to do this by himself,” said Kingsley. “We look for his accomplice.”

“We can try tracking down his old school friends,” Remus suggested.

“Has he any family he may have gone to? A distant cousin, perhaps?” Severus asked.

Narcissa spread her hands helplessly. “I don't know. We know he didn't come to myself, Andromeda or Sirius, and Bellatrix is obviously out of the question... I don't think either of his parents would have helped him though...”

“What about that uncle, the one who left some money to Sirius?” asked Remus.

“Uncle Alphard?” asked Narcissa. “No, he died a couple of years before Regulus disappeared.”

“Regardless, I think the Black vault in Gringotts would be our best place to start,” said Kingsley.

“Second best,” said Narcissa. “I still think it could be in this house. Just because Regulus may have had an accomplice doesn't mean that he would have given the Horcrux to them.”

“Are you trying to say that we need to search the attic in this place?” Remus asked, looking up at the ceiling in dismay, as if he could see all the way into the crowded, jumbled mess that Harry imagined lay upstairs.
Narcissa chuckled. “Not us. Dobby.”

Severus glowered at her. “No house-elves can know.”

“Oh, shush,” Narcissa said impatiently. “I know your opinion on the matter, and I won't say anything about Horcruxes. I'll just say it's a family heirloom that I would like to give Draco for his seventeenth birthday.”

“Draco would never wear anything like that locket,” said Harry.

“No, but Dobby's taste in fashion is questionable at best,” Kingsley said, eliciting a few chuckles.

Narcissa shot him an annoyed look. “Dobby is an individual with unique taste.”

“That's one way of putting it,” Severus muttered.

“Quiet, the lot of you,” Narcissa ordered. “Dobby!”

Dobby Apparated into the room seconds later, in all his questionable sartorial glory: pale blue pyjama pants covered in moving, cartoon dragons that Harry thought might have once belonged to a young Draco; a Tutshill Tornados scarf (no doubt a gift from Theo) over a bare chest; and, of course, his gold plastic sandals.

“Yes, Miss Narcissa?” he said, before he caught sight of Harry and beamed. “Hello, Harry Potter!”

“Hi, Dobby,” Harry said. Despite all the talk of Horcruxes, he couldn't help returning the elf's wide smile.

“Dobby, I have a special job for you,” said Narcissa.

Dobby somehow stood up even straighter. “Does Miss Narcissa have another reporter she is wanting Dobby to spy on?” he asked eagerly.

“Nothing so exciting, I'm afraid,” said Narcissa. “No, I'm after another gift to give Draco for his birthday. I think that my cousin Regulus may have had a priceless family heirloom hidden in his room. It's a gold locket, with an S carved on the front. I'd like you to search through Regulus' old possessions that were moved into the attic and find it for me.”

“Dobby is finding this locket for Mr Draco's birthday!” Dobby said.

Narcissa held a hand up. “Please don't discuss this with the other elves. If Kreacher were to overhear he might deliberately tell Draco and spoil the surprise.”

“Dobby is not telling a soul, Miss Narcissa,” Dobby said solemnly.

He bowed, then Disapparated with a crack, leaving Narcissa frowning unhappily after him.

“I don't like lying to Dobby,” she told Severus.

“We're in a war, Narcissa, we all have to do things we may not like,” he said irritably.

Narcissa's eyes narrowed dangerously, but Remus jumped in before the argument could pick up steam. “I agree with Kingsley: we should search the Black family vault.”

“Which we can't get into without Sirius,” Kingsley said.
“If we're to leave a Horcrux lying around indefinitely, Gringotts is probably the safest place for it,” said Severus.

“True,” Kingsley agreed.

“And Sirius will be up and about before too long,” Narcissa said firmly.

“So there's been no news?” Harry asked. According to his watch, it was a quarter to two, which meant Sirius had been unconscious for around twelve hours.

“No,” Remus said shortly.

There was a silence, broken by Severus scraping his chair back. “We should get back to Hogwarts, Harry.”

“But Sirius -”

“There's nothing you can do for him here,” said Severus.

“We'll contact you as soon as he wakes up,” Narcissa said.

Harry ran a hand through his hair, then nodded reluctantly. He exchanged goodbyes with Remus and Kingsley, then Narcissa walked him and Severus to the front door, where she pulled Harry into a tight hug.

“Give my love to Draco, Hermione and Theo,” she said, once she'd pulled away. “Tell Draco that I'm sorry I had to leave, but I'll be back in a few days – in time for his birthday.”

“You will?” Harry asked in surprise.

Narcissa nodded. “Kingsley and I will come up for Dumbledore's funeral on the 6th. Severus has kindly offered up his couch for us to sleep on the night before, so we'll have a family dinner for Draco's birthday.”

“What about Remus?” asked Harry.

Narcissa sighed. “I don't think he'll come. I'll try to convince him, but I think he'll want to stay here near the Floo, waiting for news of Sirius. If that's the case, I'll ask Andromeda or Ted to keep him company, maybe Nymphadora if she's not too busy at work.”

Harry nodded, pleased that Remus wouldn't be left alone if he chose to stay home. He watched with some amusement as Severus awkwardly returned the hug Narcissa gave him, then they stepped outside into the glorious early summer sunshine. Harry went to step off the front stoop, only to be stopped by Severus grabbing his arm.

“T’ll Apparate us from here,” he said.

“In full view of the street?” asked Harry.

“We're still hidden by the Fidelius Charm. It extends to the front step,” Severus explained.

“So how come T’ve been Apparating into that alley round the corner?” asked Harry.

“Because that takes less precision than landing on a single step,” said Severus. “When we get home, remind me to show you the area in front of our gate that's under the Fidelius Charm. I think you're skilled enough now to land there.”
Harry nodded and took hold of Severus' arm, before being Apparated away. To his surprise, they didn't arrive in front of the Hogwarts gates, but a good few hundred metres down the road to Hogsmeade.

"Why so far away?" he asked as they began walking.

"This is a crime scene. The last thing we'd want to do is Apparate into the midst of some jinx-happy Aurors as they investigate," said Severus.

As it turned out, his fears were unfounded. The only sign of the previous night's fighting was the large crater where Greyback's curse had hit the ground, and a few burnt trees and shrubs. Some Ministry officials were in the process of filling in the crater. The blood stains on the ground where Dumbledore and Gibbon had died had already been cleaned away.

A hard-faced Auror stood guard in front of the school gates, his wand upraised. He stepped aside at once, telling them he was under orders to let them pass no questions asked – orders from the Headmistress.

"So McGonagall's officially Headmistress?" Harry asked, once they were out of the Auror's hearing. "Provisionally. Her appointment will need to be confirmed by the Board of Governors, and I highly doubt that they have had time to meet just yet," said Severus.

The grounds of Hogwarts looked just as they had the last time Harry had seen them – only yesterday, he realised with a jolt. It seemed much longer. How could so much have changed in less than twenty-four hours?

"I'll need to go and see Minerva. If you like, you may use my quarters to inform Hermione, Draco and Theodore about what has happened. They will afford you far more privacy than your dormitory," said Severus.

"So Theo can be told about Horcruxes?" Harry asked.

"Yes – but none of your other friends," Severus cautioned. "If anyone asks – and I'm sure they will – simply tell them that Albus and I had taken you out for some advanced training, and we were ambushed upon our return."

"Got it," said Harry. "Are you okay?"

"I'll survive," said Severus.

"I didn't ask if you'll survive, I asked if you are okay," said Harry.

"No, not really, but I will be," said Severus. "I'll be taking Dreamless Sleep for the next few days, and I think you should do the same."

Harry frowned. "Why can't I just Occlude the nightmares away like usual?"

"Occluding doesn't prevent you from having nightmares, it just allows you lessen their effects or shorten their duration. The reason it has been so successful with your nightmares is because so many of them were caused by your link with Voldemort," said Severus. "I would be very surprised if you didn't have nightmares of our trek through the Inferi infested lake. In a few days' time the memory won't be so immediate, so any nightmares either of us have will be easier to control with Occlumency."

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“I'll get some from your stash later,” said Harry, shuddering at the memory of the lake. He hesitated a moment, then voiced a question that had been bothering him for some time. “Last night – why did Tonks send me her Patronus? How come you didn't send me yours?”

“Because try as I might, I couldn't cast a corporeal Patronus,” Severus said.

Harry's feet faltered in his surprise. “What?”

“It was rather difficult to think of a happy memory when I had just had Albus die on top of me,” Severus said.

“Oh,” said Harry. “I guess it would be.”

They walked the rest of the way in silence, each caught up in his own thoughts. Harry resolved to keep a close eye on Severus over the coming weeks, while he grieved over Dumbledore.

They were both jerked out of their thoughts when they reached the Entrance Hall and heard someone calling Harry's name. He looked over to see Draco and Hermione rushing towards him from the stairs that led to the dungeons, the former clutching a very familiar piece of old parchment in one hand. Neither of them looked as if they had slept very much the previous night, if at all.

“You're back!” Draco cried, launching himself at Harry. “Where have you been all day?”

“What happened? Are you alright?” asked Hermione, throwing her arms around him as well.

“Not here,” Severus said at once.

Harry didn't move, allowing himself some time to relish the feel of his friends' embrace, before he reluctantly pulled away. “Let's go. I'll see you later, Dad.”

Severus nodded and swept off, his robes billowing behind him as he climbed the Grand Staircase. Harry turned to Draco. “Where's Theo?”

“Theo?” Draco asked in surprise.

“Yeah, Theo. I've already explained what happened once, to your mum and Remus. I'm not going over this a third time,” said Harry.

“He's in our dorm,” said Draco. “Not many people have left their dorms or common rooms today. Hermione snuck into ours this morning, and we only left when we saw you appear on the Map.”

“Well, can you go get Theo and bring him to my dad's quarters?” asked Harry.

Draco's eyebrows shot up but he nodded. “Sure.”

They all walked down to the Slytherin common room together. Draco ducked inside to fetch Theo, leaving Harry and Hermione out in the empty corridor.

“Your dad's letting you tell Theo about Horcruxes?” Hermione asked.

“Yeah. Makes sense, given that his main concern was Dumbledore using Legilimency on Theo. We don't have to worry about that anymore,” said Harry.

“No, I guess we don't,” Hermione said slowly.

The entrance to the common room opened up, and Draco and Theo walked out. Theo looked just as
sleep deprived as Draco and Hermione – and even more curious. Harry turned and led them all to Severus’ quarters. Having spent so much time in there researching Horcruxes, Hermione and Draco were almost as at home there as Harry was, but Theo looked around himself with interest.

“Take a seat,” Harry said to him, pointing to the couch, before heading into the kitchen for tea.

He grabbed a tin of biscuits as well – having skipped breakfast, he was ravenous, and he knew that Draco, at least, would help him eat the sugary biscuits. He carried it all out to the lounge, where the other three were waiting impatiently for him, and set it down on the coffee table.

“THEO, WHAT WE'RE ABOUT TO TELL YOU IS TOP SECRET,” SAID HARRY.

THEO NODDED. “I FIGURED AS MUCH.”


“NARCISSA HASN'T EVEN TOLD DOBBY ABOUT WHATEVER THIS IS?” ASKED THEO.

“No. Snape's orders,” said Draco.

“Blimey,” said Theo. “Alright, I swear I won't tell anyone.”

Harry took a fortifying gulp of tea, then leaned forward. “I never had scrofungulus...”

Over the next half hour, aided by Hermione and Draco, Harry told Theo everything they knew about Horcruxes: that their creation ritual required a murder; that Voldemort had seven, two of which were already destroyed; that they knew what four of the remaining ones were, but the fifth was a mystery; and that two of them were living beings, Nagini and Harry.

“Merlin,” Theo whispered, putting a hand over his mouth. “Harry, does that mean – do you have to...?”

“Die?” Harry asked. “No. Dad reckons we can get the piece of Voldemort's soul out of me without killing me.”

“But Dumbledore disagreed,” Draco said, angrily picking up another biscuit.

Theo managed a faint smile. “That's good news...”

“Don't get used to it,” Harry said darkly.

He launched into the tale of the trip to the cave. Here he was on his own, and Draco and Hermione were just as horrified as Theo as they listened to the description of the lake full of Inferi, of the potion that Dumbledore had drank, and of the subsequent battle in front of the gates of Hogwarts. A deathly silence met his ears when he explained how he had killed Gibbon.

“Can someone please say something?” he finally asked, unable to take their shocked stares a moment longer.

“You killed him?” Hermione asked shakily.

“Yes.”

“Deliberately?”
“Yes.”

To Harry's annoyance, tears filled Hermione's eyes. “Oh, Harry...”

“What?” Harry demanded. “You knew this day would come – I've been training all year to kill Voldemort – but now you're going to cry because I killed a Death Eater?”

“That doesn't mean I'm happy to see my best friend become a killer!” Hermione said.

Harry looked at her coldly. He hadn't expected them to be thrilled at his news, but nor had he anticipated such disapproval. “Did you not hear the part where he tried to set Fleur on fire?”

“I did, and obviously I'm not sorry he's dead. I'm just sorry you had to be the one to do it,” said Hermione. “We've been researching Horcruxes all year: we know that taking a human life can irreparably damage your soul.”

“There's nothing wrong with my soul. It's not like I stopped to make a sodding Horcrux,” Harry snapped.

“Did you worry about my mother's soul?” Draco asked.

Hermione blinked at the question. “What?”

“When she killed my father under similar circumstances. Did you worry about her soul?” asked Draco.

“That was different,” said Hermione.

“How?” Draco demanded.

“Your mum's an adult, for a start,” she said.

“I'll be seventeen in less than two months. Should I have waited until then to start killing Death Eaters?” Harry asked.

“That's not what I meant!” Hermione cried. She took a deep breath, then reached for Harry's hand. “I'm sorry, I'm not... I don't blame you for what you did, Harry, not at all. I know we're in a war, fighting enemies who would happily kill us all. I'm just... I'm just worried about you. I don't want to see the kind-hearted boy I know grow up to become a cold-blooded killer.”

Harry squeezed her hand. “I have no intention of doing that. I know I have to kill Voldemort, and I won't lie to you – I want to kill him, to avenge Mum and Dad. But anyone else... no. I don't want to kill anyone else. But if they force my hand, I'll do what is necessary to win.”

“Just promise you won't allow yourself to start killing as a first resort,” Hermione said.

“I promise,” Harry said.

Hermione sniffed and gave him a smile, and Harry extracted his hand from her grasp in order to drink some more tea before he took up his story once more. The wide-eyed stares came back when he described the tense stand off that had taken place.

“I don't get it. Why didn't Dumbledore just hand you over?” Theo asked.

“Cheers, Nott,” said Harry.
Theo rolled his eyes. “I didn't mean that he should have. But from his perspective, wouldn't it have solved a lot of his problems? I mean, that'd be one more Horcrux down, and with little effort on his part – he might even have gotten out alive. It just makes sense.”

“You're terrifying sometimes, have I told you that?” asked Draco.

Theo just shrugged. “Doesn't mean I'm wrong.”

“Dad said at Easter that he thought Dumbledore would be too worried about ruining his own reputation if he did anything to me,” said Harry. “That, and the fact that when Voldemort made his offer, Dad aimed his wand straight at Dumbledore. He must have known that he'd be in a world of pain if he handed me over.”

“How exactly did he die?” asked Draco. “Rumours have been flying around all day. He didn't actually get eaten by a werewolf, did he?”

“It wasn't a full moon last night,” Theo muttered. Hermione murmured her assent.

“A werewolf?” Not for the first time, Harry marvelled at how distorted the truth got in the Hogwarts gossip network. “No, it was Wormtail.”

“Wormtail?” Draco asked in surprise. “But – but he's hopeless! From what I've heard, he's about as smart as Crabbe.”

“He managed to resurrect Voldemort by himself,” Hermione pointed out.

“Wormtail must have arrived in his Animagus form, hidden, carried by either Voldemort or Bellatrix,” said Harry. “When Dumbledore refused to agree to Voldemort's offer, Voldemort must've given some sort of signal, and Wormtail resumed his human form, directly behind Dumbledore, and slit his throat before turning back into a rat. He ran off before anyone even realised what he'd done.”

“Oh, my god,” Hermione said, horrified.

Draco frowned. “So, where have you been all day? Once the Death Eaters had all left, Nym stayed outside to talk to her superiors, but the rest of our side all came inside the castle and met in the infirmary. Everyone except for you and Sirius.”

Pain lanced through Harry at the mention of Sirius. He had been so caught up in his story that he had, momentarily, forgotten about Sirius' injuries.

“We all had to spend the night in the Great Hall – like we did that Halloween when Sirius was on the run – us Prefects had to keep watch inside the hall, while Mother, Remus and Hestia were on guard in the Entrance Hall,” Draco continued, oblivious. “They came in to tell us when the fighting was over, before going up to the infirmary. A bit after that rumours started going around about how Dumbledore had died, and then the next thing we knew, your father burst in, absolutely covered in blood, demanding to know where you were!”

“St Mungo's,” Harry managed to say.

Hermione's brow creased in concern. “Were you hurt?”

Harry shook his head. “No, it was Sirius.”

Draco stilled. “What was Sirius?”
Harry swallowed. “He – he was caught in an explosion. Greyback sent a curse at him that hit the wards on the school wall and got repelled back and hit Sirius.”

“But he’s alright, isn’t he?” Draco demanded.

“He’s in a coma,” Harry whispered.

Draco’s face turned stark white, Hermione clapped her hand over her mouth, and Theo simply stared in wide-eyed horror.

“Dad and I hung around Grimmauld Place for as long as we could, but he needed to come back here. Your mum said she’d tell us as soon as Sirius wakes up,” said Harry.

Draco shook his head in disbelief. “No, he can't be in a coma. He can't be. Those Healers are just incompetent.”

Hermione laid a hand on his arm. “I'm sure they're -”

Draco shook her off and stood up. “Harry, where’s your mirror? I want to speak to Mother.”

“You can't. Sirius is the only one who would hear us activating it from our end,” said Harry.

“Fine, I'll just go home then,” said Draco.

“Draco, you can't just leave,” said Theo.

Draco just laughed bitterly. “Why not? Everyone else is.”

“What are you on about?” asked Harry.

Draco shrugged. “People have been getting picked up by their parents all day. Daphne and Astoria left this morning, and they don't have any uncles lying in comas!”

“Carrow twins are gone, too,” Theo said with a grin. “Something about their aunt getting carted off to Azkaban?”

“It's been a very weird day,” Hermione said. “The Great Hall's hung in black, and all the staff are wearing black. Exams and classes have been cancelled for the rest of the year, and anyone who doesn't want to stay around for Dumbledore's funeral has been going home.”

“The Minister arrived this morning, along with a delegation from the Ministry. They're staying somewhere in the castle. More people are trying to find accommodation in Hogsmeade,” Hermione added.

“Scrimgeour's here? Shouldn't he be in London, where he, you know, works?” asked Harry.

“One can be ineffectual in the Scottish highlands just as well as in London,” said Draco. He sighed, then nodded slowly. “Fine, I'll stay. But I do want your mirror.”

********

With no classes to fill up the days, Hogwarts took on a surreal atmosphere, heightened by the fact that a good quarter of the students had already returned to their families. Those who did remain had nothing with which to occupy their time, and so the common rooms and dormitories of the school quickly became filled with bored, listless teenagers as they waited around for Dumbledore's funeral.
Harry knew that he didn't really have any time to spend just sitting around like his friends: he should be researching how to remove the Horcrux from his head, or trying to track down the remaining ones, or simply practising his duelling. But he was finding it difficult to get motivated when all he could think about was Sirius lying unconscious in St Mungo's. Draco was just as worried about him as Harry was, so it fell to Hermione to fill Theo in on all that they had learnt so far.

Though he was grieving over Dumbledore's death, Severus was just as focused as Hermione. He was unavailable for duelling practice during the day – the staff had endless meetings to decide how to run the school without Dumbledore, most of which Harry suspected may have been lengthened due to the staff trying to come to terms with their loss – but each evening he spent in research, not allowing any grief he felt over Dumbledore to impede his progress.

Harry made sure to pop in each night, even if only for half an hour. He wasn't much use with research, but he thought that his presence might have been comforting to Severus in his grief. They worked primarily in silence, other than one or the other occasionally declaring that he would make another pot of tea. Harry was therefore surprised one evening when Severus told him to put his book down.

“I'm leaving Hogwarts, for good, this time,” he said. “My time will be far better spent in researching a way to get that piece of soul out of you, and then hunting down the remaining Horcruxes, than in teaching snot-nosed brats how to cast Disarming Charms.”

Harry snapped his book shut, startling Ladon, who had been dozing on his shoulders. “I'm coming with you.”

Severus leaned forward. “If you want to join me, you may. I will certainly appreciate both your company and your help. But I want you to think about this. You didn't take it very well when we left Hogwarts at Easter.”

“That was different. I'd only just found out that I'm a Horcrux, and you also didn't give me any choice in the matter,” said Harry, patting Ladon as he spoke. “I'd been meaning to tell you the same thing, actually. Well, not the bit about snot-nosed brats. But I've been thinking of leaving Hogwarts. Dumbledore's gone, so there's no point in either of us remaining here. He told us all he knew about Horcruxes, and we've gone through the library here, so what's left? Nothing. Why waste our time?”

“Precisely my sentiments,” said Severus, “but it will be dangerous.”

“When has that ever stopped me?” asked Harry.

Severus didn't crack a smile at his quip. “You won't miss your friends?”

“Of course I will. But this is more important than what I feel,” said Harry. “What's our cover story going to be? Has my Scrofungulus come back or something?”

“We tell the truth, or at least part of it. Plenty of other students have been withdrawn from Hogwarts by their worried parents. You may tell Draco and Hermione what our true plans are – and Theodore, now, I suppose – but you cannot tell anyone else why we won't be returning,” Severus warned him.

“Are you telling McGonagall?” asked Harry.

“The truth? No. I think it's better for her that she doesn't know, for her own safety. Who knows who she'll find to replace me – Hogwarts may once more get saddled with a Ministry employee, if she can't find anyone,” said Severus. “I'll tell her tomorrow that we're leaving straight after the funeral. I just wanted to speak to you about it first.”
Harry gave a small smile. “I appreciate it.”

********

On his birthday, Draco walked down to the school gates to meet his mother and Kingsley, accompanied by Harry, Hermione and Theo. Alone in the grounds, Harry took the chance to tell his friends that he was leaving Hogwarts.

“I'm leaving, too,” said Draco.

“What?” Harry asked, not having expected this reaction.

Draco shrugged. “I want to be with my family.”

“I hope you won't mind an extra house guest,” said Hermione.

“Or two,” added Theo.

“You're not a guest, it's your home,” Draco said to Theo, then to Hermione, “and we have plenty of room for you.”

Harry frowned at his friends. “Don't leave Hogwarts because of me.”

“We're not, Harry, and even if we were, it's our decision to make,” Hermione said.

Theo nodded. “Plus you can use our help with the research, right? I mean, I don't think it's an exaggeration to say that Hermione and I are very, very smart.”

Harry snorted. “Humble, too.”

Theo ignored this. “Anyway, now that I'm finally getting told everything, I want to help. I want to help bring down the Dark Lord, and I want to get revenge on my father.”

“And soon we'll all be seventeen, and can join the Order properly,” Draco said firmly.

“True,” Harry agreed.

“Good, that's settled. Now let's not say anything else about this today. I don't want an argument with Mother,” said Draco.

Though he never argued with Narcissa, it was clear that Draco wasn't really enjoying his birthday. After being hugged by both Narcissa and Kingsley, Draco immediately asked after Sirius.

“No change,” Kingsley said.

“And Remus?” Harry asked.

Narcissa sighed. “He's not handling it very well. I've been going to St Mungo's to keep him company during the day. When visiting hours are over, he returns home to spend all his time in the kitchen, so that he's closer to the Floo. Andromeda and Ted are keeping him company today.”

“The worst thing has been Kreacher,” Kingsley said in disgust. “He's been gloating over Sirius being injured.”

Harry felt sickened. “Gloating?”
Narcissa nodded. “Dobby got so cross with him the other day that they got into a physical fight.”

“So Sirius is in a coma, Remus is worrying himself sick over him, and the house-elves are brawling. Sounds delightful,” Draco muttered.

Narcissa put her arm around his shoulders and gave him a squeeze. “Don't worry, darling. It'll all work out in the end, you'll see.” She kissed his cheek, then smiled. “Enough doom and gloom. Let's get to Severus' quarters and we can celebrate your birthday, hmm? Most of your presents are still at home, but I've brought you something small today.”

The something small turned out to be the watch traditionally given to witches and wizards by their parents upon reaching seventeen. Draco’s was silver, with a dark blue face that had silver numbers around the edge. Diamonds glittered in the middle of the face, making up the stars of the Draco constellation. The three hands were also silver, inlaid with thin strips of moonstone. It was easily one of the most expensive items Harry had ever seen, but when Draco raised his head to thank Narcissa, his smile was forced.

Dinner was a subdued affair, despite the excellent food and Narcissa's attempts to facilitate cheerful conversation.

Kingsley was clearly exhausted – the Aurors would have been busier than ever in the aftermath of the battle – though he readily answered Theo's questions about how the search for Regulus' unknown accomplice was going. It had evidently been slow going, as Kingsley had Auror business to attend to, and Narcissa's time was spent breaking up fights between the house-elves and looking after Remus.

Never given to cheerfulness on a good day, on the eve of Dumbledore's funeral Severus was a veritable black cloud of misery at one end of the table. He said little during the entire meal, although Harry hoped that he would feel better once the funeral was over and they were back at Fen House.

Harry and Hermione spent the meal chatting with Narcissa and Draco, but it was clear this wasn't going to be one of Draco's better birthdays. Pauses were a little too long, laughter was a little too strained, and light-hearted topics were a little too scarce. Draco barely even managed to finish his slice of birthday cake.

All in all, Harry had never before been so relieved to leave Severus' quarters as he was when told to go and pack his things. After saying his goodbyes to Narcissa and Kingsley, Harry hurried out into the dungeon corridors, with Hermione and Theo beside him, while Draco stayed back with his parents.

Harry had packed all his belongings and gotten changed into his pyjamas by the time Draco wandered into the dorm. Once he was in his pyjamas he came over to Harry, who was sitting on his bed patting Ladon.

“May I sleep with you tonight?” he asked quietly.

“Of course,” said Harry.

They got settled in bed, pulling the curtains on the sounds of the other boys getting ready for bed. Harry twisted around to kiss Draco goodnight, then lay down, pulling Draco's arm tight across his chest. He shut his eyes, hoping that sleep would come quickly.

“It means nothing,” Draco said, after a few minutes.

Harry opened his eyes. “What does?”
“My family's money. Mother can shower me with gifts all she likes, but at the end of the day, our money's entirely useless when it comes to anything that matters. All the Galleons in the world can't wake up Sirius.”

Harry couldn't think of a single thing to say in response to that.

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The day of Dumbledore's funeral was a bright, warm, early summer day. Fluffy white clouds dotted the blue sky, drifting lazily in the same soft breeze that gently rustled the leaves in the trees. The students, wearing their dress robes, filed out into the sunny grounds in neat rows, following their Heads of House down to the lake.

Harry had never been to a funeral before, and was a little worried about what this one might entail. Were there some universally known rites of which he was unaware?

When Harry asked his friends, Draco merely shrugged. “Last funeral I went to, I was only little. All I can remember is that everyone wore a lot of black, and that there were a lot of sweets at the wake afterwards.”

“We all wore white when we went to my grandmother's funeral in China,” said Tracey.

“It pretty much depends on the person,” said Blaise. “If they were religious, then they would likely have a religious ceremony, though those can vary. I was too young to remember my dad's funeral, or those of my first two step-dads, but I remember the funerals of my last three step-dads. Marco was Catholic, so his funeral was held in a church, where the priest held a mass for his soul. My next step-dad, Gabriel, was Jewish, so his funeral was held only two days after he died, and there weren't any flowers at the service. And then Giovanni was an atheist, so there wasn't any religious stuff at all. They just played a lot of his favourite music. But people gave eulogies at all three of those funerals. Marco and Gabriel's eulogies were all sombre and serious, but Giovanni's were mostly light-hearted and funny, celebrations of his life.”

“What about, er, an open casket?” asked Harry.

“They don't do that at Jewish funerals, but Christian or atheist ones sometimes do. Again, it depends on the person – both on what they wanted, and whether or not the body's, er, fit to be seen,” said Blaise. “Giovanni had an open casket. The mortician did such a good job, you couldn't even tell he'd been sick. He just looked like he was sleeping peacefully.”

Harry thought of the way Dumbledore's throat had been ripped open, and shuddered. Somehow, he doubted that there would be an open casket that morning.

Next to the lake, hundreds of chairs had been set out in neat rows, with an aisle running through the middle, leading to a white marble table. Some of the chairs were already occupied. Harry could see most of the Order of the Phoenix was in attendance: Narcissa and Kingsley were joined by Tonks and Gemma; Moody, Hestia Jones, Mrs Figg and Mundungus Fletcher sat by themselves; and Mrs Weasley was surrounded by Fleur and her eldest children – all but Percy, who, Harry saw, was sitting with Scrimgeour and the rest of the Ministry delegation up the front.

Madame Maxime took up two and a half seats by herself – she had arrived two days ago, her enormous blue carriage and troop of Abraxans causing much excitement amongst the younger students who had never seen them two years previously.

It seemed as if all of wizarding Britain had turned out. Not a single business must have been left
open, with the exception of Gringotts. Madam Malkin was here, as were the older couple who ran Honeydukes, the apothecary owner, and Tom from the Leaky Cauldron; Ernie, the driver of the Knight Bus, sat up the back, as did the trolley witch from the Hogwarts Express; Pansy's mum sat behind the Ministry, along with the rest of the press corp.

Harry couldn't help but stare at Aberforth Dumbledore, who seemed remarkably unperturbed to be burying his brother. Harry scowled, wondering if Aunt Petunia had been similarly unfazed when she had attended Lily's funeral. Banishing the thought, Harry followed his friends as they took their seats. Hovering in mid-air behind the last row were the Hogwarts ghosts, almost invisible in the bright morning sun.

The staff were the last to arrive, walking in single file down the centre aisle behind McGonagall. Other than Severus, only Filch and Pince were entirely in black. The rest of the staff were, for the most part, in their house colours, while McGonagall was wearing her green family tartan. She led them to the front rows, where they sat amongst the Ministry group. As soon as she had sat down, Scrimgeour turned to speak to McGonagall. She replied briefly, before turning her back on him in order to speak to Severus on her other side.

All conversation fell away when haunting, eerie music swept over the crowd. Like everyone else, Harry craned his neck, searching for the source of the strange music.

"It's the merpeople," Draco whispered, pointing towards the lake.

Harry looked across to see a group of merpeople floating just under the surface of the lake. For a moment, they reminded him of the Inferi, but then he blinked, and the resemblance disappeared. The merpeople were very much alive, their faces expressive as they sang, their voices making the hair on Harry's neck prickle. He didn't need Draco to translate their words – the tune of their song easily conveyed the loss and grief they felt.

Harry only looked away from the lake when he heard slow, heavy footsteps approaching. He spun in his seat to see Hagrid walking slowly up the aisle, tears pouring down his face into his beard. Cradled in his arms was a long, thin shape wrapped in a purple velvet that glittered with golden stars. Harry had been expecting a wooden coffin, but this was much more fitting; never a fan of plain clothes in life, of course Dumbledore would be buried in a brightly patterned cloth.

Hagrid laid the body gently on the marble table then walked straight past the rest of the staff. He blew his nose as he walked. Harry turned in his seat to see Grawp sitting in the very last row. Clad in the largest suit Harry had ever seen, Grawp looked almost civilised. When Hagrid sat down next to him, he patted him sympathetically on the head, accidentally causing Hagrid's chair to sink into the soft ground. Harry couldn't help smiling at the sight.

A small wizard with flyaway hair got up and stood in front of Dumbledore's body, where he proceeded to give a speech. Harry couldn't hear a thing he said, but judging from the complete lack of laughter coming from the front of the crowd, the eulogy wasn't one of the funny ones Blaise had mentioned earlier. He wondered if that was how Dumbledore, who had given plenty of eccentric speeches in his time, would have wanted it.

The merpeople rose above the surface of the lake to listen, though as far as Harry knew, none of them spoke English. Over by the Forbidden Forest, the herd of centaurs had appeared, where they hung back in the shadows of the trees, with their bows by their sides.

When he at last finished his speech, the little wizard sat down again. Moments later, a few screams came from the crowd when the table on which Dumbledore lay burst into flame. A bright, searing white, the flames rose up into the summer sky, completely blocking Dumbledore's body from view.
Thick white smoke rose up in tight spirals before it all disappeared, leaving behind a white marble tomb.

A few more people cried out when a flock of arrows flew through the air towards the tomb, only to fall peacefully into the ground. Their tribute completed, the centaurs returned to the Forest; on the other side of the crowd, the merpeople sank back into the depths of the lake.

The crowd began to disperse. Those students whose parents were in attendance made their way over to them, while everyone else was to leave on the Hogwarts Express in an hour. Harry said his goodbyes to his friends, then wandered over to Hagrid. Both he and Grawp were crying so hard that it took Hagrid almost a full minute to realise that Harry had sat down next to him. As soon he did, he engulfed Harry in a hug, crushing him against his massive chest. Hot tears began dropping onto the top of Harry's head, plastering his hair to his skull.

“Sorry, Harry,” Hagrid mumbled, when he finally pulled back.

Harry cast a Drying Charm on his hair and smiled. “Don't mention it. Are you going to be okay?”

Hagrid blew his nose again and nodded. “I'll be righ'. I've got Grawp 'ere ter keep me company.”

Grawp patted Hagrid on the shoulder, driving his chair a little further into the ground. “Grawp like Hagger,” he said, before grunting something in Gigantus.


“I better go find Dad,” said Harry, standing up, “but I hope you feel better soon.”

Hagrid just nodded and blew his nose again, so Harry set off for the castle. He ducked into his dorm to pick up his belongings, slung Ladon over his shoulders, then made his way to Severus' quarters. He wasn't at all surprised to find McGonagall sitting on the couch. She tucked a handkerchief into her sleeve when she noticed him walk in.

“Have you come to see Dad off, Professor?” Harry asked.

“I couldn't very well let him leave Hogwarts without saying goodbye,” McGonagall said.

“Have you started looking for his replacement yet?” asked Harry.

McGonagall shook her head. “Not for the Defence role, no. To be honest, I've no idea where I would even begin. Anyone half-way competent is probably already an Auror, or in the Order, and I could hardly ask them to step away from the fight against You-Know-Who in order to teach. Then, of course, there were plenty of board members who thought that the school should be closed entirely – if Hagrid and all the Heads of House hadn't argued otherwise...”

“What about Head of Slytherin?” asked Harry.

“Professor Sinistra has agreed to take on that role,” McGonagall said.

“Good. She was great last year – not as good as you, though, Dad,” Harry hastened to add.

Severus merely raised an eyebrow at him as he walked out of his bedroom, then stopped in front of McGonagall. “I'm pleased she's agreed. Aurora will be far better for my snakes than Horace. Thank her for me, would you?”

“Of course,” said McGonagall. She hesitated, then said, “Severus...”
“Minerva, please don't ask me again. You're far safer if you don't know what we're doing,” Severus said.

His weary tone told Harry that this was a topic that had been much discussed.

“I wasn't going to,” said McGonagall, a trace irritably, “though I do expect a full explanation once this is all over.”

“If we all survive, you'll get it,” Severus promised.

McGonagall's lips thinned at his words. “I just wanted to say – to both of you, actually, Harry – that if there is anything I may do to help, you need only ask. I shall remain your Secret-Keeper for as long as you want me to, but if there is anything else I can do...”

“Thank you, Professor,” said Harry.

“Please, I'm no longer your professor, Harry. I think you may call me by my given name,” said McGonagall.

Harry blinked, then smiled. “Right, okay... Minerva.”

“There is no one else whom I would trust as much as I do you to be our Secret-Keeper,” said Severus.

Minerva sniffed and gave a watery chuckle. “Do you know, Severus, that when you first started teaching here, I didn't think you would last the year, let alone more than a decade. You made no attempt to befriend the other staff, clearly disliked your students, and there were still the odd rumours about your Death Eater activities floating around the school gossip system. If someone had told me then, that you would one day become my closest friend, I would have thought they had taken leave of their senses.”

“I would have agreed with you,” Severus said.

Minerva stepped forward and took his hands. “I was terribly wrong then, and now I find myself dreading the prospect of Hogwarts without you, and fearful that I shall never see you again. So please, if you would be so kind, prove me wrong once more.”

“With pleasure,” said Severus.

They remained holding hands for a few more seconds, before they broke apart, both looking vaguely embarrassed. Clearing his throat, Severus picked his already shrunken belongings and pocketed them all.

“Time to go, Harry. Farewell, Minerva.”

Harry silently followed Severus out of his quarters. He paused in the doorway and turned back to see Minerva watching him unhappily. He raised his hand in a wave and received a nod in return, then turned and hurried to catch up with Severus.

“Are you okay?”

“I'll live,” Severus said quietly.

Harry reached up and put his hand on Severus' shoulder. “Let's get home and put the kettle on.”

Severus glanced at him, nodded, and together, they walked out of the dungeons and into the sunny
grounds.

The weather had somehow gotten even nicer while they'd been inside. As he looked around at the sun sparkling on the lake and the fluffy white clouds floating lazily in the sky, Harry found himself thinking that maybe, just maybe, they'd get through the coming months alive.

Chapter End Notes

A big, sincere thank you to my betas: Charlie_Paloma (I'll miss working with you!), and caraakame and sinntowin (it's been great getting to know you both!). All three of you have been such a huge help in writing this series, and it is so much the better for all your input. I honestly cannot thank you enough.

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And thank you very, VERY much to all of my readers! Thank you for every last comment, kudos, fic rec and fan art - it makes it all worthwhile. You've made me smile and laugh, some of you have made me cry (in a good way - I've been very touched by some of your comments). Thanks for every overly detailed debate (no such thing as too detailed!) and random tumblr link!

I wish I could tell you that I've almost finished writing Seventh Year, but that would be a big fat lie. It'll be at least half a year away at this stage, if not longer. Real life has a terribly rude habit of taking up my time. Let me assure you that I will finish this - I'm far too stubborn to give up now. Please subscribe to me or the series, or follow me on tumblr.

Thank you all again!!

UPDATE: I've been getting a lot of people asking if I'm still writing this. I am. It's January 2019 and this is taking far longer than I expected but I haven't abandoned it in the slightest.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!