The Shadow Lord

by ArissAvion

Summary

In 1981, Voldemort burned down the old magical world and built his own empire on top of it. A decade later, a scarless but powerful Harry Potter begins his education, determined to prove himself. But chaos and violence rule this new Hogwarts, and making it out alive won't be easy.

Especially not for the boy destined to be the Dark Lord's nemesis.

Notes

In this AU, there is no Boy-Who-Lived and no prophecy, but Harry is special in other ways. Also note that there will be a strong focus on the developing friendship and romance between Harry and Draco (and the story will be told in both their POVs), so expect a lot of pre-slash and slash.

THE RATING IS MATURE FOR A REASON. I purposely made Hogwarts as horrible as possible. Heed the tags and warnings.

Thank you for reading!
The Boy With No Scar

PROLOGUE

HIS WORLD

A hundred newspapers have been hastily tacked onto the walls, all of them yellowed and smudged after years of neglect.

But that doesn't matter. They show exactly what they need to.

January 3rd, 1979. THE DARK LORD, CAPABLE OF ABSORBING MAGIC? Beneath the headline is a picture of a dozen Muggle-borns trembling and sobbing, freshly turned into Squibs.

June 10th, 1980. HANGINGS IN HOGSMEADE. Two men named Remus Lupin and James Potter swing from the rafters, their expressions of defeat and exhaustion clearly visible in the image, burned on their faces even in death.

July 31st, 1980. There is no headline for this picture of a red-faced and bawling newborn. Tacked next to it is the birth certificate of a boy named Harry James Potter. It does nothing to brighten the room.

September 2nd, 1980. BATTLE OF HOGWARTS LOST. The castle burns bright with flames. A triumphant skull and serpent hovers in the sky, washing the bodies littering the ground with eerie green light.

September 10th, 1980. DUMBLEDORE'S FUNERAL DRAWS THOUSANDS OF MOURNERS. A white casket sinks into the ground. Countless figures in black robes stand around it, their heads bowed.

April 1st, 1981. THE MINISTRY HAS FALLEN. The highlight of this picture is a statue made of black stone, a statue of a witch and wizard sitting on an intricate throne of naked Muggles. Engraved at the statue's feet are the words MAGIC IS MIGHT. The Ministry in which the statue sits has been rebuilt from the ground up. The old Ministry currently lies crushed beneath a thousand feet of dirt.

April 2nd, 1981. BRITAIN SURRENDERS. There is no picture for this particular headline. There is no need for one.

After April 1981, the images and words blur together, and the new Daily Prophet makes it clear where it stands. Its articles all convey the same message now.

MUDBLOODS TO APPEAR BEFORE COURT.

THE DARK LORD TO REDEFINE EDUCATION, APPOINTS NEW HOGWARTS PROFESSORS.

BLOOD DOMINION ESTABLISHED.

The countless pictures tell a bleak story, and no recent pages have been tacked onto the wall, as if the person putting them up no longer sees any point. The story of the most powerful Dark wizard of all time has already been told to death, after all. There is nothing left to tell. In fact, there is
nothing left at all.

This is Voldemort's world now.

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CHAPTER ONE

THE BOY WITH NO SCAR

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\textit{THE DARK LORD CONQUERS FRANCE} was the headline ten years later. Beneath it was a picture of the former Eiffel Tower, cleaved clean in half and surrounded by dancing flames.

Eleven-year-old Harry Potter traced the edges of the photo with his finger, his breath catching. Serpents and chimaeras rose from the fire, dwarfing the Eiffel Tower in size and might. Fiendfyre? Harry had read about it, in one of the books Snape had given him—

His mother dropped the plate she was holding, and Harry winced at the sound of shattering glass. Putting the paper away, he turned to face her.

Lily stood frozen in the middle of the kitchen among shards of porcelain. Her blank eyes stared off into the distance, focusing on nothing in particular. Then she raised her spidery hands to tear at her own face.

Dread pulsed sluggishly through Harry's veins.

"Mum?" he tried, hopping off his stool and approaching her like he would a sleeping dragon. "Mum, let's go. Stop that—stop!" He clasped her hands in his to prevent her from ripping her skin off and led her away from the dangerous shards.

She bent her head down and went with him obediently, letting out gasps as jagged as the pieces of plate on the ground. Her hair was lank and greasy, gray-streaked. Harry supposed she must have been pretty a long time ago. He had seen the pictures of his parents—his father had died a month before Harry was born—and they had both been glorious in their prime.

After depositing his mother in one of the chairs, he went back to the broken plate, trying to determine the best way to get rid of the mess.

He snuck a look at his mother, biting his lip. She seemed preoccupied. Her little choked gasps had turned into full-fledged sobs by now, but he would go to comfort her in a second.

First, he had to clean up a bit. She wouldn't notice. Probably. If she did, he was dead.

Harry closed his eyes and concentrated. Magic rushed through him like wind through a tube, sending sparks flying across his skin and heating up the air around him. He flicked his wrist, and every single piece of the plate disappeared. He took a deep breath, allowing himself a small smile. Using his magic exhilarated him. He could use it all day and never get tired.

But Lily had noticed.

In a split second she was upon him, scrabbling at his arms with her ragged nails. "Don't you \textit{dare}, Harry! Don't you dare use that unnatural, \textit{obscene} magic in my house. It's magic like the Dark
Lord's, and I can't breathe when you use it. But you won't stop doing it, no matter how many times I beg you to stop!"

Harry stumbled backwards, covering his face and trying to escape her outstretched claws. "I'm sorry! I'm sorry! I just—I didn't want to cut myself cleaning it up—"

Lily grabbed him by the hair, and he stopped talking.

He knew what was coming. He'd gone through it a hundred times, every time he had dared to use his wandless magic in front of her.

She slapped him—hard. He tore himself away from her, and Lily collapsed to the floor, sobbing harder than ever, as if the slap had hurt her more than it had hurt him.

Playing the victim, is she? screamed a voice in Harry's head.

"Oh, Harry, I'm so sorry. Please, please don't use that magic. Oh, it smells so awful in here when you do that. Please believe me. Harry, I don't want to hurt you. Don't do it. Please don't do it. It's not natural. It's wrong, wrong, wrong, it's exactly like his…” Lily rocked back and forth, cradling her head in her arms.

Harry dabbed at his smarting cheek, shaking violently, more with rage than fear. His magic didn't stink. He had never smelled anything. He turned his head away so she couldn't see the hard expression on his face.

He knew his mother's instability was the effect of countless horrifying memories and Dark curses and years of torture from the First War. He knew it wasn't her fault.

But it didn't change how much he hated her.

He so desperately wanted to leave this house and never see Lily again. He'd been counting down the days until he could go to Hogwarts, no matter what Lily said about it being the most hellish place on earth after the Dark Lord took it over. Any place, even Hogwarts, would be better than being here, with his mother, having to clean up her messes and then getting yelled at for it.

Harry took a moment to dream of going to Diagon Alley to get his school supplies, then soured. Snape was supposed to visit today and take them there, but of course Lily was in no state to go right now.

"What will people at Hogwarts say, if they see you using your magic?" said Lily unexpectedly, jolting Harry out of his thoughts. He stared at her, and she held his gaze.

"The professors there are the eyes and ears of the Dark Lord. They'll watch you, and when they find out about how you can use wandless magic so unnaturally, so filthily, they'll think you're a threat. They'll come for you at night, Harry, so you'd better keep it a secret." She started laughing, and it was a wild, brittle sort of laugh. "They'll come for you, like they came for your father and Remus, and strip you of your flesh, and keep you alive while they do it, just like they did to them—"

At that moment, green flames burst to life in the fireplace. Snape stepped out of it, his black robes swirling behind him. His eyes lingered on Harry's red cheek and Lily's tear-stained face.

"Go upstairs, boy," said Snape curtly, not wasting a minute. It wasn't the first time he'd walked into Lily and Harry fighting, and everyone was quite used to the routine by now. "Your presence only aggravates her further. Why can you not do what she asks? Is your mother's well-being worth less
than showing off your magic?"

"You know she has no reason to hate my magic," Harry spat out, stung by Snape's tone.

He wasn't sure why he was so hurt in the first place. He'd hoped for years that Snape would take
Harry's side over Lily's, but the world was more likely to end. Snape looked at Lily like she was
the sun, and looked at Harry like he was something on the bottom of a shoe.

"She is your mother," Snape said, helping Lily to her feet while Harry retreated to the bottom of
the stairs. "And you will listen to her orders, no matter what her reasons for those orders are."

He turned his back on Harry, his full attention on Lily now. He murmured soothing words to her as
he led her into the parlor, the harsh lines of his face softening. Lily rested her head on his shoulder,
taking deep breaths.

Harry watched their entwined figures for a moment, not sure what the expression on his own face
was, then climbed up to the stairs as quietly as he could.

Snape had never liked him, Harry knew that much. But unlike Lily, Snape had never hurt him, and
he was the only one who could calm Lily down during one of her episodes, which was why he
visited the little hut in Godric's Hollow at least once a week. And even though he was a Death
Eater, he had been the one who had convinced the Dark Lord to leave both Harry and Lily alone
after the war was won.

Snape even brought Harry books sometimes, books on the Dark Arts that were filled with
information on fascinating curses, little presents that made it clear he acknowledged Harry's
existence. Then again, he hadn't ever been the sort of father figure that Harry had always fantasized
about, and he would never become that figure. He tolerated Harry only because of Lily, something
Harry had painfully realized after years of failed attempts to earn Snape's affection.

Harry stumbled into his room and slammed the door shut behind him. He caught a glimpse of his
reflection—and his glowing red cheek—in the vanity mirror and felt his rage stutter back to life,
more potent than ever.

He hadn't ever used his wandless magic against his mother. Sometimes he wanted to, especially on
days like today. He could hurt her back, avenge all the slaps, the hair-pulling, the screaming.

But she was so fragile, so broken, that Harry could not raise a hand against her. Hurting her
would've been like kicking a yapping, biting little dog. He would have been pleased with himself
for about five seconds, and then he would have felt like a monster.

And perhaps he still held onto that little sliver of hope that her sanity would return and she would
finally be a real mother to him. She would look upon his powerful magic with glowing pride, not
disgust and terror, and would praise him for standing still and taking all her slaps and screams
without ever striking back.

She would owe me, thought Harry with a small smile.

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Harry was rudely interrupted from his reading *Dark Curses for the Body and Mind*, one of Snape's
oldest presents, an hour later when someone knocked on his door. It was probably Snape, since
Lily would've just barged in. "Come in," said Harry, closing the book and looking up expectantly
as the door swung open.
Snape stood there, looking rather worn. He gave a curt nod toward the book in Harry's hand, but did not mention it. "Your mother is well now. We will be leaving for Diagon Alley in fifteen minutes time. See that you are ready and waiting downstairs with your booklist."

He moved to close the door again and leave Harry alone to change, but Harry stopped him with a snarl. "I don't suppose you'll ever tell me, sir. Why's she like this? Tell me what happened to her. Tell me who did it to her."

Snape stilled and turned slowly, fixing Harry with a look as cold as frost. "You ask me this again?" he said, in a dangerous sort of voice. "Your mother has been through many trials. You, a mere child who cannot comprehend even the slightest of what she has suffered, are not old enough to know the details."

"Not old enough?" hissed Harry, getting to his feet. "I'm not 'old enough'? You're never here, sir, so you have no idea what I've had to do. I fix everything Mum breaks when she's throwing things, I clean the house, sometimes I even cook, and you won't even tell me why she's like this? I deserve to know, and you just—you wish I wasn't here, don't you, so Mum could love you without me there to mess up your perfect imagined family?"

"I have no responsibility to speak of this with you," Snape breathed through gritted teeth.

He moved to close the door, but Harry didn't want to give him the satisfaction. He flicked his hand, slamming the door shut wandlessly, not really caring if Lily "smelled" his magic from downstairs. Maybe on his deathbed, Snape would tell him, but by then, Harry would be far, far away from this miserable place.

When Harry was dressed, he walked down the stairs, unfolding his booklist as he went. Lily was wearing pale pink robes, but otherwise she looked as if she'd put as much effort into her appearance as Snape had. Then again, with his messy hair, crumpled shirt, and pallid face, Harry wasn't any more appealing.

We make such an attractive family picture, he thought with a sneer as Snape guided Lily into the fireplace with little fanfare, shouting "Diagon Alley!" Harry followed, and soon he was stepping out of the fireplace and into the Leaky Cauldron, hurrying to keep up with Snape and Lily.

Hooded figures with wrinkled, strained faces shrank away as Snape crossed the tavern. A few whispered, but most fell utterly silent. The tiny bald barman gave a little squeak and lowered his head deferentially as Snape passed, then widened his eyes when he saw Harry trotting behind them, as if he couldn't believe Snape would ever be seen with such a young child.

Harry looked around, wishing his head could turn in all directions, completely entranced by the dirty pub. Then again, it didn't take much to impress Harry. He rarely left the house in Godric's Hollow, and he'd never been to Diagon Alley before.

They stopped walking in a chilly courtyard outside the pub, and Harry watched eagerly as Snape tapped his wand on the bricks, which folded and slid out of place to reveal a great archway. And beyond the archway was a dark, desolate road. Harry craned his head to look around his mother's side to see better, and found his stomach sinking in disappointment. Lily had spoken of Diagon Alley as a bustling, grand place, but she must have been mistaken.

"Hurry," snapped Snape, waving a hand impatiently at Harry, who started and followed the adults under the arch.

Shuttered, narrow stores lined the edge of the street, their curtains drawn tight. A few rats skittered
over the cobblestone ground, their squeals loud in the silence. Hushed groups of wizards and witches hurried past, few with children, most hooded.

"Your booklist, boy," said Snape, holding out a hand.

Harry gave it to him without comment, biting his lip. Would they be able to find everything here? Diagon Alley didn't look like it had a lot of places to shop, but Harry supposed it did, or Snape wouldn't have wasted their time in bringing them here. He was a professor at Hogwarts, so he would know where to get the items on the booklist.

"Hmm." Snape shuffled through the letter with pursed lips. "We will go to Knockturn Alley when we finish getting your wand. Stay close to your mother and me at all times. Do not wander out of the alley. I will not repeat myself."

Harry nodded, resisting the urge to roll his eyes. Where else would he go? Out into London? Half the city was abandoned now, ever since the Dark Lord set Fiendfyre on it several years ago. According the news this morning, Paris would probably go the same way, and Germany's Berlin had long fallen.

Snape had mentioned, conversationally, to Lily a few weeks back that Italy and Spain were next, though the Dark Lord was particularly hungry for the United States, a great behemoth of a country that was finally preparing to send aid after a decade of waiting and watching the chaos unfold in horrified, fearful silence. Lily had laughed madly and said it was all too late, and that there wasn't any Ministry of Magic left to accept any aid.

After a few minutes of tense silence, they arrived at a dingy store with its name written in peeling paint. Ollivanders: Makers of Fine Wands Since 382 B.C. "In," said Snape, but Harry was already pushing open the door, bouncing on the soles of his feet.

No, Harry did not especially think he needed a wand, but it would help him look normal, and there were quite a lot of spells he was itching to try. He could barely contain his excitement as he slammed his hand down on the bell on the countertop, calling the wizened old man sorting through the boxes at the back of the store to the front counter.

He looked very tired, and very pale, and his eyes were huge and glassy. Harry wondered how the wands could be of good quality when the man who made them was so…empty.

Ollivander shuddered a bit when he caught sight of Snape, but controlled himself at once. "Your son, sir?" whispered Ollivander in a feeble sort of voice, bowing deeply, every limb in his body shaking as he did so.

"Go, boy," said Snape, ignoring Ollivander's question. Harry stepped forward and cleared his throat.

"Yes, yes," said Ollivander distractedly, gesturing for Harry to come with him into the back of the store. Harry looked to Snape for permission, and followed Ollivander after Snape gave him a nod.

"Now that I look at you," murmured Ollivander, turning to Harry with a narrow box in his hand, "I realize you look much like James Potter. Am I correct in assuming that you are his son, not Master Snape's?"

Harry wasn't too sure what to say to that, so he said nothing at all and just stared at the box as Ollivander opened it and handed the wand inside to Harry.

"Eleven inches, walnut, with a dual core of basilisk heartstring and mermaid scale. The element is
water."

Harry waved it, but nothing happened. Ollivander took the wand back at once, muttering, "Your mother's wand was willow, swishy, good for Charms—well, they called it Charms back then."

Ollivander paused. Harry stared.

"The wands as I made them before were nice. Simple, but powerful. Not as powerful as dual cores, you know, and with no element, but they did well, they did very well...of course, the Dark Lord's orders must be honored. With these new wand designs, students at Hogwarts now are much more powerful than previous generations. But how much power is really necessary?"

He trailed off with a sigh, evidently done talking to himself, and handed Harry another wand.

"Twelve-and-a-quarter inches, cherry, with a dual core of thestral hair and dragon heartstring. The element is air. Good for those with an inclination for Transfiguration."

This time, the several boxes toppled out of the shelves, and Ollivander chuckled. "Temperamental, temperamental. You are quite different from your parents, I surmise."

Harry wished Ollivander was back with Snape so that he wouldn't dare make such out of place, unsettling comments. Ollivander handed him wand after wand, chattering all the while, and Harry grew steadily more irritated as the pile of rejected wands grew high.

"Are you sure," said Harry in a nasty voice, "that these are real wands?"

"Yes, yes, yes indeed," said Ollivander, positively beaming and not insulted in the slightest. "You are a tricky customer. I haven't been so entertained in years!"

Harry gritted his teeth and hoped that this torture would be over soon. No doubt Snape and Lily were getting impatient, and he didn't want to have to deal with a scolding for something that wasn't his fault.

At last, Ollivander handed Harry a wand that completely arrested him. Harry's breath caught as he admired its smooth, pure red surface. "Eleven-and-a-quarter inches, padauk wood, with dual cores of lethifold tooth and acromantula fang. Its element is shadow. A very rare element indeed, I say. Energy, time, and shadow are the three rarer elements, you know."

Harry ignored what Ollivander was saying completely and gave the wand a wave. Dark sparks erupted out of the end, showering Ollivander and making him sneeze. Warmth rushed through Harry like a desert wind, and the ends of his fingers and toes began tingling. He grinned despite the uncomfortable prickling sensation all over his body.

"Ah," said Ollivander, nodding wisely, "I thought so. If any element fit you, Mr. Potter, it would be shadow."

Harry thought Ollivander was just pretending to know anything about him, considering that he had spent half an hour handing him wands with elements other than shadow, but he was so eager to leave the store that he decided not to challenge the point.

When he emerged from the back of the store, Snape glared at him, as if it was Harry's fault this excursion had taken forever. Harry opened the box to peek at his wand again, his heart pounding, as Snape turned to Ollivander to haggle galleons at the counter.

"Your robes, then," said Snape once they were back outside on the dimly lit street. "Madam
Malkin's, I believe, was closed down last year, so everything else on your supplies list we'll find in Knockturn Alley."

Harry shuffled his feet, suddenly realizing how uncharacteristic it was for Snape to be putting this much effort into shopping for Harry's school supplies. It made him uncomfortable. He didn't want to be indebted to anyone, least of all Severus Snape, who had never been the father he'd wanted. Even though he sometimes acted like one in small fits and bursts like this.

Snape took them into a side alley, and down a winding, narrow road. Soon they emerged onto a completely differently street, one that took Harry's breath away. This was Knockturn Alley, and it was glorious. There were stalls selling gaping, shrunken heads; stores whose windows displayed stuffed monsters of the most terrifying variety, jaws wide and eyes glassy; a little street-cart smelling of rubber, manned by a short, pudgy, pockmarked woman who waved a giant lollipop in Harry's face as he walked past.

It was loud here, loud and bustling, packed full of Dark wizards wearing equally dark robes, and Harry could hear swear words he had never known of intermixed with their laughter. Knockturn Alley was so much livelier, so much more real than Diagon Alley, and Harry could not keep from turning his head, dazzled by every single thing on the street.

Snape was watching Harry, looking faintly amused at his reaction. Harry quickly plastered a blank expression on his face. He was quite sure he made a very stupid picture, swiveling his head around with a wide open mouth. Even then, Harry couldn't restrain himself from going up to every shop's window and perusing the items on display—at least until Snape snapped at him to get a move on and stop holding them all back.

Almost disappointed to be entering a store and leaving the street, Harry stepped into Twilfitt and Tatting after Snape and his mother, his eyes lingering on a particularly impressive set of black robes with a hood fashioned after the head of a bat. A willowy woman with a withered old face approached Snape. "Master Snape, how nice to see you, how nice… Master Malfoy is here as well, how lovely…" She bowed deeply, still muttering.

Harry was getting very bored of this bowing-to-Snape business, and he entertained himself by looking around the store.

Almost at once, he spotted a man with long white-blond hair and angled features browsing a set of navy blue robes, a beautiful and equally blond woman at his side. The man looked up, his eyes sliding completely over Harry as if he didn't exist. He gave Snape a tight nod before gliding over to him.

Harry stared and wished he could listen to their conversation, but the employee who had greeted Snape at the entrance of the shop pulled Harry to the back, still muttering under her breath.

He stepped up onto one of the stools lining the back wall of the shop, next to a boy with pale blond hair, who was also getting measured. Harry watched him, noting that the boy had similar features to the older man who was currently talking to Snape. His nose was just as pointy, and so was his chin, but his cheekbones were soft, and his eyes were gray and big. When he turned his head slightly, revealing a very noble profile, Harry saw he had long but barely visible eyelashes.

"So, who are you?" drawled the boy, finally noticing Harry.

"Harry." Harry turned his eyes downwards, cheeks heating up rapidly, hoping that the boy hadn't caught him staring. The seamstress witch shuffled to the side to measure the length of his arms with magical measuring tape.
"Oh?" The boy raised an eyebrow. "Common sort of name, isn't that? My name is Draco. Draco Malfoy." He paused, a slight smirk on his face, as if expecting Harry to be amazed by this for some reason.

Harry scowled. "Whatever." He looked back at his shoes, teeth clenched. Draco's voice grated on his nerves.

"So that's Professor Snape, apparently, Potions Master at Hogwarts," continued Draco, still smirking as if this entire conversation was amusing on some deeper level that Harry couldn't possibly hope to understand. "You came with him, didn't you? How do you know him?"

"He's my mother's… friend," said Harry shortly, holding his arm out so that the seamstress could measure it.

Draco's eyes lit up with recognition. "Oh, so you're the Potter boy, aren't you? Father mentioned you and your mother a few times. Apparently, she's Snape's Mudblood pet. He keeps her around for entertainment"—Draco paused, curling his lip—"though I can't see why he would bother. She's not very pretty. Guess the Professor has low standards."

"You shut up about my mother, Malfoy," snarled Harry, turning to face Draco, breathing heavily. The seamstress let out a squawk of indignation as he shuffled his feet, messing up her measurements. "You don't know anything—anything about her, or their relationship."

Unimpressed, Draco stepped down from the stool. His seamstress had finished working on him. "So sorry," he sneered. "Didn't mean to insult your half-blood sensibilities."

Harry glared after Draco, who made his way to where the adults were standing, moving so smoothly that he seemed to be gliding. Harry could see more of Draco's father in him now. When he finally reached his parents, Draco's mother put a hand on his hair and simpered at him, and Harry felt his insides squirm. Lily never looked at him like that.

He fidgeted, straining to hear what they were all saying, impatient for the witch to finish working on his clothes. A minute or so later, she gave a conceding little huff. "Young master, I'm done measuring you. Wait up by the front while I assemble—"

But Harry was already hopping off the stool and making his way to the front as fast as he could, hoping that his gait wasn't jerky like it usually was. He noticed Draco watching him, one corner of his lips upturned, clearly judging him. Harry wished he could imitate the other boy's gliding walk, but he doubted he'd look anywhere near as graceful doing it even he could. At least Harry was taller. That had to count for something.

"Ah, Severus," Harry heard Mr. Malfoy say as he approached, "I'd hoped that you would have dropped the Mudblood deadweight by now."

Harry clenched his fists, stepping into place beside his mother, keeping his back straight. He couldn't believe that Mr. Malfoy was talking about Lily like this, right in front of her face. Fuming, Harry waited for Snape to defend her.

But Snape merely inclined his head. "One takes small pleasures where one must, Lucius," he said, voice smooth as butter. "Surely you understand?"

Harry stiffened, unable to believe his ears. He snuck a peek at his mother, and saw that she was tight-lipped, her gaze flitting everywhere but at Lucius Malfoy, her head bent down. She looked more aware and sane than Harry had ever seen her, and more terrified.
"Ah, but we may agree to disagree on what those small pleasures could be," said Lucius.

Harry saw Snape's eye twitch, slightly, imperceptibly.

Lucius did not notice it, having finally registered Harry's presence. He gazed down, looking even more amused than before, if that were even possible. "Potter's boy?" he chuckled. "You'll be attending Hogwarts this year, I presume?"

Harry didn't want to nod, didn't want to acknowledge this horrible man's existence, but Snape gave him a sharp nudge, and he had no choice. "Yes, sir."

"Get along with him at school, Draco," said Lucius. "You have plenty of friends. I'm sure young Mr. Potter here doesn't. Remember what I told you about being gracious to those less fortunate than you, my son."

"I remember, Father," said Draco, giving Harry a smile that didn't look like a smile at all.

Harry wanted to say something, anything. Something scathing, something so insulting that it would wipe the mask of calm superiority and arrogance right off all three of the Malfoys' faces. Instead he stared at his shoes, seething. He had never felt a hatred so deep, so vile, as this one. He hated this perfect little blond family and that perfect little Pureblood boy, and the sheer injustice of it all made him want to scream.

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Two hours later, Harry's fury had simmered down.

They'd bade goodbye to the Malfoys and bought everything else on Harry's list of supplies, except for the books. Now they were in the Serpent's Spine, a vast, multi-storied bookstore half aboveground and half underground. A good amount of the books were Dark Arts books, and Harry had slipped away from his mother and Snape upstairs and barricaded himself in a tiny room lined with bookshelves on the second lower level. Now his head was currently buried in a thick tome detailing the Dark Lord's rise.

_The Dark Lord brought cursed, flesh-eating rain down upon Muggle villages on the Sussex coast, decimating their population._

Harry flipped through the pages feverishly, hands shaking, more fascinated than he had ever been. He couldn't believe Lily and Snape hadn't told him about any of this, though he'd gathered enough clues from their conversations to put together a basic picture. But this book—this book had everything. It was written reverentially, as if the author had been shivering in awe as he wrote it, and portrayed the Dark Lord as a god.

But then, he _was_ a god.

_The Dark Lord cursed his chosen name, Lord Voldemort, and any who dares to speak the name out loud will burn from the inside out._

Finally, Harry reached the section in the book he was looking for. The fall of the Ministry of Magic and Hogwarts. The more he read, the faster his heart beat. Part of him was terrified. The other part of him was inspired that just one person had managed this, all this chaos.

_For seven days and seven nights, the Dark Lord meditated, immersed in the darkest of rituals. He emerged from the cold silence with the ability to suck magic from the world._
In the year 1980, the Dark Lord marched into Hogwarts, shattering the ancient wards that had kept the castle protected for thousands of years, and drank Albus Dumbledore's magic until the hero of the light turned to ash. All the students and professors who fought alongside their Headmaster were rewarded first by having their magic drained, then their lives taken. Their screams were reportedly heard on live radio.

In the year 1981, on a warm Tuesday morning in April, the Dark Lord rose into the sky above the Ministry of Magic. He swallowed the magical shields surrounding the Ministry, yanked the base from out underneath it so that it collapsed deeper into the earth, and sucked the magic from every single wizard caught in the rubble. That day, a good portion of the wizarding population in Britain became Squibs.

That same day, Britain surrendered, and Lord Voldemort took his throne as the most powerful wizard in the world, and those who wished to have a part in his new age took the Dark Mark.

"There you are."

Harry hastily put the book away and turned to face Snape, who had just entered the room. "We will be leaving now."

"All right," said Harry, a bit breathless, running a hand through his hair. "Um, sir?"

Snape stared, an ugly scowl flooding his features.

"Thank you, sir. For protecting us from the Dark Lord."
On the morning of September 1<sup>st</sup>, Draco picked at his breakfast, feeling chillly in the huge, empty dining hall of Malfoy Manor.

“Now Draco,” said Lucius, his voice harsh, “what did I tell you about playing with your food? Are you nervous?”

“Sorry, Father. And I am <i>not</i>.” Draco tried to keep his tone respectful, he really tried, but his voice came out as a high whine. He put his fork down on the table and folded his hands in front of him, noticing that they were shaking. Why did his father have to lecture him, every day, every minute, every sec—

There was a clang and Lucius stood up, his chair clattering backwards, his wand out. A second later, a tiny cut appeared on Draco’s hand, then immediately and painfully scabbed over, its healing sped up by a thousand. He flinched, and knew from the look on his father’s face that showing even such a small sign of weakness was a terrible mistake.

<i>I’ve failed this test</i>, thought Draco in despair, unable to look away from his hand, which was smooth again, leaving no evidence of the cut behind.

“Do not disappoint me at Hogwarts, Draco,” said Lucius, relaxing easily back into his glittering glass chair as if all he had done was reach for the jug of pumpkin juice. “You show your fear, your trepidation, with every syllable you utter. You are nothing but sneers and blusters around those beneath you, but when faced with someone who can challenge you… you falter. Look at you now, shivering like a Kneazle in the rain.”

Draco didn’t say anything.

“The children of many of my colleagues are at Hogwarts, as you know, Draco. They will be watching you,” continued Lucius, wiping daintily at his mouth with a handkerchief made of the finest silk. “By no later than fourth year, I expect you to have earned a place among the Skull Masks. Of course, you will be a Death Eater eventually, but those who graduate Hogwarts as Skulls get the most recognition from our Lord. The Malfoy honor should not die with me, Draco. And so far, you have shown yourself quite soft. Bark and no bite.”

“When have I shown myself soft, Father?” Draco’s fists were clenched underneath the table.

Lucius smiled unpleasantly. “Shall I list all of your failed tests, Draco? The last time I tried, you ran into your mother’s arms, sobbing.” He paused, cocking his head. “Narcissa is another problem. She is far too lenient with you, as I’ve been far too lenient with her.”

<i>I said</i> I can <i>handle</i> it, Father,” said Draco, standing up.

“Sit down, Draco.” Lucius looked only mildly disapproving now. “You haven’t finished your sausages.”
Draco sat down, breathing hard.

“Do not use such a tone with me, ever.” Lucius’s voice was dangerously low. “From now on, if you whine in front of me, you will find your cuts…paining you a bit more when they heal. This cannot go on any longer.”

To Draco’s credit, he didn’t flinch this time.

“Just two weeks ago, you tried to rescue a baby bird with broken wings you found on the Manor grounds. You tried to bring it inside, though it was covered in blood and mud. Do you see where you failed here?”

“I was showing—sympathy to a creature that was already marked for death,” Draco began in a toneless voice that nevertheless halted slightly, “and therefore compromising my own precious resources.”

“Good, Draco, good,” said Lucius, sipping his tea. “Now apply those words to this particular situation.”

“If I’d tried to save the bird, I’d have wasted a lot of time. But you could’ve—you and Mother, you know healing spells—”

Lucius’s next spell cut Draco’s pinky. He bit down on his lip, drawing blood, but did not let out a single sound.

“Your mother and I,” said Lucius mildly, “will not be on the battlefield with you. We will not be at Hogwarts with you. Consider this scenario. A friend of yours, a weak friend, is injured in a fight. Do you help him, opening yourself up to danger, or do you leave him, keeping yourself clear-headed and free to fight?”

“Leave him,” said Draco.

“And remember, Draco, while you show loyalty to no one, sacrifice yourself for nobody, the opposite must not be true. You must command respect, loyalty, and admiration from others. Never do for others what they should do for you. How are your friendships with young Vincent and Gregory?”

Here, Draco smirked. “They follow me around like dogs on leashes, Father. They’re not very smart, and everything I say astounds them—”

“Useless, then,” said Lucius sharply, and Draco stopped talking at once. “They are big boys, good for intimidating the already weak. But those who are clever, who see beyond the façade, will be able to get through your feeble defenses. How is your friendship going with the Theodore boy? Nott told me that his older sons passed Skull Mask Initiation last year. They have quite a reputation. Earn their respect, and your path to the top will be clear.”

Draco looked away, the color draining out of his face.

Theodore, Draco’s friend, was the son of Oscar Nott, a Death Eater who was infamous for stringing Mudblood and Muggle children up and crucifying them on stone crosses that he conjured. But what he did to lesser beings did not matter to Draco, who was more concerned with how the older man looked at him.

While Theo was the only boy with whom Draco could carry a conversation, he hated going to the Nott Manor, and not just because of Mr. Nott. No, Draco was terrified of Theo’s older twin
brothers Nathaniel and Sebastian, who would be entering their fourth year and had completed the Skull Mask initiation process. They had inherited their father’s madness, and liked to put Draco through tests ten times more sadistic than what dear old Lucius could come up with on his best days. Years ago, Draco had made the grave mistake of insulting the twins on their appearance, or something equally inane, and they’d had a sick fascination with tormenting him ever since.

“Pretty little bird.” Draco remembered what Sebastian Nott had said a few months back with frightening clarity. Sebastian had slammed Draco against the wall of the Nott drawing room and grabbed his pinky finger, then began bending it with luxurious slowness, nearly snapping it. His voice ghosted against Draco’s neck, his lips alarmingly close to his skin, the fingernails of his other hand digging into his waist. Draco let out a little cry, one that was half yelp, half breathy gasp. Sebastian’s eyes darkened noticeably at the sound. “Scared, are you? That’s a sweet noise you make.”

Theo had watched the scene from the door, white-faced, his older brother Nathaniel beside him, leering. Draco hadn’t dared tell anyone what happened that day. The glint in Sebastian’s eye had promised worse if he did, and Draco didn’t ever want his father to find out how weak the twins made him.

“Answer my question, Draco,” snapped Lucius.

“Theo and I get along fine,” said Draco, who was not lying. Even though that time was plagued by the ominous shadow of the Nott twins, he did enjoy spending it with the quiet, intelligent boy, or at least he found him far more interesting than Vince and Greg.

“Familiarize yourself with his older brothers. If you impress them, they will take you under their wing. Having the favor of those who are feared by all others is not a bad thing, Draco. Your family name will work to help you gain such allies when you begin your Skull Mask Initiation.”

Draco wondered what exactly having the favor of the Nott twins would entail, and quickly squashed that line of thought. His stomach was already churning; there was no need to make it worse.

At last, Lucius stood up. Draco followed suit, his eggs and sausages only half finished. Lucius walked around the table, resting a thin, spidery hand on Draco’s downy hair. “Do me proud, son. When you conquer every test thrown at you, you will finally become a worthy heir.”

“Yes, Father.”

Draco needed a test that he could pass, a test that would make him feel better about his own abilities. With a smirk, he remembered that pathetic half-blood Potter boy he’d met in Twilfitt and Tattings. Winding him up will be so easy.

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Platform Nine and Three-Quarters was packed. Parents hugged their children, tears leaking from their eyes. The older children marched onto the train with pale but set faces, looking like soldiers marching off to war. It was a warm, breezy morning, but the atmosphere was still and tense.

Harry could tell that most of the parents here didn’t want to let their children go, but attendance at Hogwarts was mandatory, especially for wizarding families unwillingly under the Dark Lord’s regime. Knowing their children were under close watch at Hogwarts, where they could be killed at any time, kept those families in line. Harry remembered Lily mentioning the Weasleys, who had tried to resist a Death Eater raid some years ago and had been punished promptly with the
executions of their two oldest sons.

“Harry.” His mother gazed down at him, her eyes especially clear today.

Harry toyed with the handle of his luggage. “I’d better be off, Mum. Bye.”

Lily outstretched a hand and stroked his hair. He let her do it for a moment before tearing himself away and making his way to the train. As he reached the steps leading onto it, he looked over his shoulder at her.

She was wringing her hands and worrying her lower lip, her back hunched. She looked so small, so alone. He felt a stab of uneasiness. Would she be all right, without him to take care of her? Snape was busy during the school year, and he didn’t come over often enough as it was.

*Or maybe she’ll be saner,* thought Harry, his stomach twisting, *without having to deal with my magic.*

There was no point in thinking about it. In ten minutes, the train would be gone, and he would be free of her. Like he’d always wanted.

“Harry!” His mother was hurrying forward, her hair flying. Her eyes were wild, anxious, and the look in them made Harry freeze with both longing and fear.

“Mum—?”

“Don’t let them break you like they broke me, Harry,” said Lily, grabbing his hands and bringing them to her lips. “They’ll try to break you, every day in that hell—”

“I won’t let them,” whispered Harry, his voice cracking. “Mum, be careful at the house. Don’t go outside after dark, and—”

The train’s horn went off, signaling for all the students left on the platform to hurry up, and suddenly there was a mad rush for the train doors. Harry and Lily, who were standing right in front of one of the entrances, were separated as several students pushed past them. Harry turned his back on her, and stepped inside the Hogwarts Express, his heart sinking with an emotion he couldn’t quite name.

Half an hour later, he was sitting alone in one of the compartments, surrounded by sweets from the trolley, slowly chewing his way through them. He crossed his legs, shifted a bit, and then uncrossed them, mourning the fact that he couldn’t get comfortable at all. He gazed out the window to take his mind off his apprehension, watching the green fields speed past. He let out a breath and reached for yet another chocolate frog. At that moment, the compartment door slid open, and a short, pudgy boy with crooked front teeth stumbled in, looking harried.

“Um, hi, excuse me. My name is Neville Longbottom. Have you seen a toad?”

Harry stared, then slowly shook his head.

Neville sighed, running a hand through his hair. “All right, thanks. If you see him… could you give him to me, please?” He trudged out of the compartment, but ran back into it at once, his chin trembling.

Close behind him were two boys that reminded Harry of great lumpy boulders, and between those two was a small, lithe figure Harry recognized as Draco Malfoy. He stood up, raring for a fight. He *hated* this boy. “What do you want, Malfoy?” he said, raising his wand.
Draco eyed it, his face splitting into an utterly delighted grin. The boys on either side of him cracked their knuckles. Neville slipped behind Harry and covered his face like he thought that would help protect him, resembling a leaf shaking in the wind.

“That Longbottom boy’s been really annoying, popping into everybody’s compartment to ask for his stupid toad, and I thought I’d come take care of the problem.” He looked at Neville with what could only be described as sadistic glee, then focused that terrible look on Harry. “And I remember you, Potter. I didn’t appreciate your tone when we met over the summer. I think you should apologize for that. If you do that and step aside, I’ll spare you while I teach Longbottom a lesson.”

“Tempting offer,” sneered Harry, who remembered that meeting with great bitterness. “But no thanks. You insulted my mother, you sodding little brat—”

“Fine then, Potter,” said Draco, smiling as if he were watching a show that was playing out exactly the way he expected it to. “Then I deal with you first. Tarantallegra!” He spoke with a certain confidence, as if he’d practiced this spell plenty of times before, and Harry wondered, bitterly, if the children of the Dark Lord’s followers had grown up with extra training.

But still, Harry was ready for him. He ducked, pushing Neville out of the way with such vigor that the other boy fell, sprawling, onto the line of seats. Harry looked over his shoulder, aiming carefully. “Ventus!” This was his first time using the spell, but his powerful magic funneled straight through his wand, and he prayed it would work.

It did. A jet of spiraling wind shot from the tip of Harry’s wand, confusing Draco for a precious moment, giving Harry enough time to turn around and get off another spell. “Petrificus Totalus!” It hit one of Draco’s cronies, who froze with an expression of dumb befuddlement and crashed to the ground like a toppling column of stone. The other boy let out one high scream, uncharacteristic for someone of his huge build, and ran from the compartment, leaving his leader completely unprotected.

Pleased with himself, Harry observed Draco, whose face was flushed and terrified, his hair windswept. He wasn’t nearly as put-together now. It was Harry’s turn to gloat, to grin down at his prey.

Oh, it feels so good to finally hurt someone who deserves it.

“Apologize, Malfoy,” said Harry, twirling his wand, more for dramatic effect than anything else. “Or you go the same way as your friend on the ground there.”

Draco’s lip curled into a snarl. “Bulla Aqua!” A ball of water bubbled from the tip of his wand and headed towards Harry, growing rapidly in size. He tried to think of a shield spell, but he didn’t know any, the ball was too big and he couldn’t duck out of the way in time, and he didn’t want to get his new robes wet—

Harry panicked. A dark, plasma-like material blossomed from the center of his non-wand hand, spreading rapidly into a curved, pulsing shield that covered him head to foot. Draco’s water bubble splattered against it with such force that the shield rippled like a disturbed curtain of shadows. Then it shattered, and the resulting explosion blasted both boys backwards. Harry smashed into the window, Draco into the compartment door, and Neville whimpered on the seats, sopping wet.

Harry rubbed his throbbing head, fear overwhelming his thoughts like many tiny pinpricks of light, or maybe that was just because his brain had been knocked around. He’d done wandless magic in front of Draco bloody Malfoy, baby Death Eater extraordinaire. Lily’s words pounded in Harry’s ears, turning his heart to ice. “When they find out about your magic, they’ll think you’re a threat.
They’ll come for you at night, Harry.”

He recovered himself, jumping to his feet, gathering his rage like a tornado gathering wind. Why, why did this little ferret have to come bothering him when Harry hadn’t even done anything to him? Draco stirred feebly by the door and started to lift his head, but Harry refused to give him an opening. He wanted to see him suffer.

“Levicorpus,” hissed Harry, recalling a spell Lily had used on him in one of her fits. As if it had been caught by an invisible hook, Draco’s leg lurched. A second later, he was dangling upside down, suspended in the air by his ankle, gasping and struggling.

Harry approached him, narrowing his eyes. “Breathe a word of what happened here to anyone, ever, Malfoy,” he said, voice deadly, “and I make what I did to you just now look like a party.”

Draco’s upside down face was screwed up in pain and shame, and his lips were pressed together like he was trying not to burst into tears. His hair was a mess, his robes crumpled. If Harry hadn’t been so afraid of his secret getting out, he would have reveled in seeing the infuriating prat he’d met in the robe shop so thoroughly beaten.

“Promise not to say anything,” growled Harry, pressing the tip of his wand into Draco’s cheek, hard. “Or I start the second phase of this duel.”

Draco closed his eyes. “I promise,” he whispered in a vulnerable, breathy sort of voice that made something in Harry’s chest twist.

Harry pushed that thought of his mind and whirled on Neville, who squeaked. “And you?”

“I won’t tell, I swear to Merlin! I don’t even know what happened!” wailed Neville, stumbling to his feet. Looking more terrified than grateful, he ran from the compartment, water trailing behind him.

Satisfied, Harry used a Levitation Charm he’d learned from one of his schoolbooks to get his suitcase down, took it, stepped over the body of the frozen boulder boy, and stalked out of the compartment, intending to leave the scene of the crime in case any older students came knocking to see what all the noise had been about. Before he left, he turned to decide what to do with Malfoy. After a short pause, Harry gave him a cruel smile, and left him hanging there.

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As he blinked back tears and swung upside down, Draco wondered how his plan had gone so spectacularly wrong. Potter knew far more magic than Draco had expected, not to mention that shadow shield he’d conjured wandlessly. Draco dwelled on that thought, obsessed, his chest aching. When Potter had done that, he’d positively radiated magic. It had sent a wave of hunger through Draco so strong that he’d felt woozy for several minutes afterwards.

He tried to remember what the odd reaction had reminded him of, then stiffened. The only other time he’d felt that intense, overwhelming craving was when he’d been in the close presence of the Dark Lord several years ago; Lucius had wanted to introduce Draco to him. The Dark Lord, though seeing his face gave Draco many awful nightmares, emanated that attractive magic in the same way Harry did, and Draco wanted to be near it, needed to be near it—

The compartment door opened, jerking Draco out of his reverie. There was a gasp, and he wriggled a bit to see who it was.

“Draco, what happened here?” groaned Theodore Nott, noticing Gregory next, who was lying face
down and frozen.

“How did you find me?” asked Draco, not answering the question.

“Vincent came to get me,” said Theo. “He announced to the whole compartment that you were in trouble, and damn it, that Parkinson girl was there. She’ll tell all the Skull Masks on the train before the day is over that you lost a duel—is that what happened?”

“You can’t tell anyone,” blubbered Draco. “If they find out, if the Skulls—”

“Liberacorpus,” said Theo. Draco would’ve fallen straight down and cracked his neck, but Theo helped cushion his fall, and the two of them stumbled to the floor next to where Gregory was lying stiffly.

As he lay there, Draco cursed himself mentally. How could he have forgotten the counterspell? It was a jinx the Death Eaters liked to use to humiliate captured Muggles, and Draco found himself wondering how Harry had learned it. Then he remembered that Harry knew Professor Snape.

“Calm down, Draco,” said Theo soothingly, getting to his feet and helping Draco up. “You know I won’t tell. But what story will we tell the Skulls, if they find out?”

“How do we fix Greg?” muttered Draco, still not answering any of Theo’s questions.

“Finite,” said Theo, unsurprisingly knowing the spell, turning his dark eyes back on Draco. He was still evidently waiting for an answer. Gregory stirred, confused, asking what the hell had happened since he’d been face down and missed everything.

Draco scowled. He’d long suspected Theo had a photographic memory. The sheer amount of spells he knew was astounding, and he’d also had the added bonus of being trained by his father and older brothers. Draco was quite sure Theo would be able to beat a good amount of Dark Arts OWL students in a duel. He probably would’ve beaten Harry easily.

If only I wasn’t so damn stupid and weak.

“Draco.” Theo narrowed his eyes. He wasn’t much taller than Draco, but now he loomed over him in his silent disapproval.

“Leave me and Theo alone for a moment and go back to the compartment, Greg,” Draco ordered, using his voice like a whip. “And don’t blab about this like stupid Vince.”

When Greg was gone, Draco turned back to Theo, still pouting. “I don’t know what to say to you. I fought some first year like us. His name’s Harry Potter or something. I didn’t expect him to be so good.”

“You should have taken me with you,” said Theo, and it sounded like a whine. “I would’ve made sure this”—he gestured at the spot in the air where Draco had been hanging moments before—“wouldn’t have happened.”

Like you do a fantastic job of protecting me from your psycho brothers, thought Draco with carefully concealed bitterness, remembering all those times Theo had just stood there, watching with a war of emotions on his face, as Sebastian and Nathaniel—though it was usually Sebastian—messed with Draco. Theo got all righteous about defending Draco from Potter, but faced with the brothers he respected (and feared to death), Theo just trembled and looked aside.

Draco pushed the shameful thought out of his mind. Not that I want his stupid defense. I can
handle my enemies, pass the tests without anyone’s help. And Father will never find out about any
of this. Draco had begged not to go to the Nott Manor several times, but his father always wanted a
good explanation why, and Draco wouldn’t dare tell him, or he’d be seen as weak. He had long
since decided to deal with his problems on his own.

“If I took you with me, it wouldn’t have been my victory, would it?” he snapped, stepping forward
so that he and Theo were nearly nose to nose. “Okay. Here’s the story. I came to fight Potter. He
ended up using the Body-Bind Curse on Greg, and Vince panicked and ran out. In the meantime, I
managed to get Longbottom with a Water Bubble Jinx—he got completely wet, anyway, so that
part of the story checks out—and chased Potter out with a… with a Lightningbolt Spell. He freaked
out when saw it and ran straight out.”

“Do you even know how to do a Lightningbolt Spell?” asked Theo, raising his eyebrow.

Draco gave him a disgusted look. “Of course I do,” he lied. “Do you understand the story?”

“That’s the story I’ll stick to,” agreed Theo. “But what happened, really?”

Draco swallowed, remembering Harry’s threat clearly. “Pretty much what you can guess. He hit
me with the stupid Levicorpus and stalked out, grinning. That’s really it. I did manage to hit
Longbottom with a Water Bubble Jinx, even though I was aiming for Potter.”

“Are you sure that’s all that happened? How did you hit Longbottom if you were aiming for
Potter?”

“Merlin, Theo, get a life,” said Draco, his tone signaling that this conversation was over, and
grabbed Theo by the arm to drag him out of Potter’s old compartment. Two minutes later, they
were back in the compartment of children he’d known, though never really liked, his whole
childhood. Pansy Parkinson was not-so-mysteriously missing—probably squealing to her older
brother, that gossiping bint, thought Draco with gritted teeth—but Millicent Bulstrode, the traitor
Vincent, and Greg were all there.

Millicent leaned forward eagerly when he entered. Draco tried not to look at her large fists. Unlike
Vince and Greg, he didn’t have her wrapped around his finger, and she was known for being a
loose cannon. She seemed to particularly dislike him, and he thought it was because he was much
prettier than her, despite being a boy. “So, did wittle baby Draco get crushed by a dirty blood?”

“You don’t know anything, Bulstrode,” said Draco through gritted teeth. “Let me enlighten you,
and make sure you tell Parkinson everything I say, exactly as I said it, when she comes back.” He
told the story, with Vince and Greg and Theo all nodding at helpful moments to supplement it.

“Lots of holes in that tale you just spun, Malfoy,” said Millicent when he’d finished, her grin
revealing pointed teeth. “First of all, why would just seeing the Lightningbolt Spell make Potter
run out of the compartment? And why are your robes all rumpled?”

Draco quickly fixed his robes, and arranged his face into a most convincing arrogant sneer. “How
the hell should I know how half-blood cowards think? But maybe you’d know, Millicent. Maybe
your mother laid with a Muggle, and you’re its spawn”—Draco stopped talking.

The loud chatter in the neighboring compartments died. Millicent, who had opened her mouth to
furiously discredit Draco’s insult, shut it with an audible smack and began to bite her lip. The
entire train seemed to have gone utterly, completely silent in fear.

“They’re here. It must be the Skulls.” Theo’s voice was barely more than a whisper.
Draco’s breath caught. “Vince, go look.”

“Hell no, Draco.”

Draco showed him a certain rude finger, gathered all his courage, and slowly got up. He pressed his nose against the glass, bracing himself to peer down the train aisle. And then he saw them, the Skull Masks, the junior Death Eaters.

Only a dozen of them marched down the aisle with their backs straight and in a neat line, though Draco knew there were about a hundred in total at Hogwarts. Every now and then, they opened a compartment door. Sometimes the inhabitants of the compartments screamed, only to have their scream abruptly cut off. But mostly they stayed silent. Each Skull wore a bronze-colored mask covering the top half of his face, and Draco knew that the metal of the mask was a magical alloy that shaped and molded itself to each one’s unique features, making a Skull look like he had a second layer of skin.

“It’s them,” breathed Draco.

“What tier?” asked Millicent urgently.

“Bronze.” Thank Merlin it wasn’t Gold.

“My brothers must be among them. They became Bronzes last year when they finished initiation,” said Theo quietly. “This is supposedly routine, checking every compartment every trip.”

Draco gasped. One of the Bronze Skulls, the one in the very front, seemed to have sensed Draco peeking. When the Skull turned to look at him, he scampered back to his seat, his heart thumping wildly in his chest. Even with half the Skull’s face covered by that creepy mask, Draco could have recognized the grotesquely twisted features of Sebastian Nott anywhere in the world.

“They’re almost here,” said Draco, hoping his voice didn’t sound too squeaky.

One day, he promised himself, I’ll be one of them. And then I won’t be the one cowering in fear. Everyone else will cower in front of me.

The first years waited, holding their breaths, all equally terrified. A few slow, agonizing seconds later, the compartment door clicked open, and the four Skulls at the front of the delegation slipped inside, silent as the breeze, the sunlight filtering through the window glinting off those monstrous metal masks. Draco knew Sebastian was one of them, and did not dare look up to meet his eyes.

“Ickle first years,” hissed one of them, one that Draco didn’t know, though he suspected that it was a fourth or fifth year. The Skull reached into the pocket of his robe and pulled out five shiny golden pieces of parchment.

The other three Skulls chuckled, and Draco felt his body go rigid. Yes, one of them was definitely Sebastian, all right. Draco knew that awful, nerve-freezing laugh intimately; he’d heard it so many times in his ear throughout his childhood.

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“Thanks to your family names, you’ve been invited to begin Skull Mask initiation,” continued the first Skull, sounding almost bored. Then he grinned, a horrible sort of wide grin that changed his face so much that the metal of the mask sticking to his skin was forced to ripple and change with it.

“But your family names won’t help you survive it.”

The Skull who had spoken, the one Draco hadn’t met before, began to slowly pass out the initiation letters. Draco took his with trembling fingers. Then he finally looked up, unable to ignore
the burning gaze that had been on him this entire time. Sebastian was leaning against the
doorframe, staring straight at him. His sickly pale eyes hadn’t looked away from Draco once since
he’d entered the compartment, and his crooked, cracked lips were curved in an even more crooked
smile.

The Skull next to him was Nathaniel, who was also looking at Draco, his face only differentiable
from his twin’s because it was broken in a different way. Theo had told him that his father had
made their faces like that, punched and cursed their features into a gnarled, lumpy, scarred mess,
but Draco found that he couldn’t muster up much sympathy for them.

As he watched, Sebastian licked his lips, and Draco broke eye contact at once, a voice in his head
screaming at him in despair and fury. Don’t you dare think about them. You are not weak. Father
will destroy you if he finds out how much you let them scare you.

Draco took a deep breath and opened the golden initiation letter, his hands shaking so much he
almost cut one of his fingers on the sharp edge of the parchment. It was completely plain on the
outside, but an intricately printed black skull decorated the inside, and beneath the skull were
words written in curly, surreal font.

Gold. Silver. Bronze. United in control, united in power.

The Skull Masks invite the Chosen Initiates to Dungeon Seven at midnight.

Prove yourself, prove your control, and prove your power.

And Draco swore to himself that he would, and that day his masked father would look at his
masked son with pride.
The sticky summer breeze hit Harry as he stepped off the Hogwarts Express and found himself in a flood of students. It was so crowded that, for a few panicked seconds, he couldn’t step anywhere without stepping on someone else’s foot. His head was still spinning from his encounter with the Skull Masks. They hadn’t entered his compartment, thank Merlin, but the very air in it had gone cold and still when they had passed by, or at least it had felt that way to Harry.

At the same time, he couldn’t help but envy them, couldn’t help but imagine how empowering it would be to have the ability to make a whole train go silent in trepidation. Shaking the thought out of his head, he followed the high screechy voice in the distance.

“FIRST YEARS! GET OVER HERE, FIRST YEARS!”

A large crowd of pale-faced first years had assembled around a spindly woman with hawkish yellow eyes, bony arms, and fraying golden hair, who also looked like she hadn’t bathed in about a century. Someone brushed past Harry’s arm and he flinched, but it was only Neville, who was pushing through the crowd and tapping people on the shoulder to ask if they’d seen his toad. Harry snorted, wondering why Neville bothered, also noting that he was still wet from Malfoy’s rebounding water spell.

A few seconds later, he realized that the chatter among the first years had slowed to a gradual stop as more and more people noticed what was happening near the front. The woman with the hawkish yellow eyes had raised a toad high above her head.

“To whom,” she said, her voice suddenly saccharine sweet, “does this toad belong?” There was something off about the way she said it, something warped, but Harry couldn’t put his finger on what it was.

“Trevor!” Neville shouted, running forward, an expression of exultant joy washing over his features. Then he stumbled, horrorstruck, and fell to his knees.

The woman had begun to squeeze the toad. Its eyes bulged madly as it struggled and squirmed, desperate to escape her iron grip. Her fingers were so tight around its throat that it could not even let out a croak. Soon, the toad went limp, and the woman opened her slime-covered—or was that the toad’s blood?—hand. The dead toad fell to the muddy ground with a sickening plop.
There was complete and utter silence.

“Disgusting things,” hissed the woman, wiping her hands daintily on her stained dress. “Not in my school, those creatures. Not in my school, half-blood creatures and blood-traitors.” She started muttering, running her dirty hands through her hair, her pupils dilated.

Neville was sobbing openly. Someone helped him to his feet—a red-haired boy with dirt on his nose—and snapped something to him, and the sobs eased at once.

“I am the gamekeeper,” the woman was saying, and her voice, if possible, was even higher than before. “I am a pureblood, direct descendant of the pure, holy Peverell line—oh, everyone’ll deny it, but it’s true, I swear it’s true…” She went off into another insanity-fueled muttering spree.

Harry couldn’t believe he’d already found someone madder than his mother, and it hadn’t even been five minutes since he’d gotten off the train. Some of the students were snickering, some were whimpering, Neville among them. Harry heard a hissed conversation a few feet behind him, and tensed when he recognized one of the speakers.

“What’s she on about? She isn’t even pureblooded, Theo,” Draco Malfoy was saying to a skinny, dark-haired boy. “Father told me about her. Norta Arweeda, a bastard daughter of some minor, distant Black. Barking mad, too. No wonder she’s the gamekeeper. Apparently the old one was worse, a great big half-breed oaf.”

“You’d know a lot about the Blacks being barking mad, wouldn’t you, Draco?” said a girl with a square jaw and thick arms. “Isn’t your mother a Black?”

“Bulstrode, I will shred you…”

Arweeda turned and abruptly began to walk down a dark, winding path, still muttering to herself. The first years all looked at each other, silently asking whether to follow or not, but then someone at the front decided to go after her, and soon all of them were carefully stepping around and over the rocks that littered the path.

Finally, the road straightened, and Harry—and most of the first years, for that matter—let out a gasp when Hogwarts came into view. It loomed over them, blocking out the sky, the backdrop of a glittering black lake in front of it, its many dark turrets and towers blending into the night.

“I dunno if it looks like a castle or a prison,” the red-haired boy who had helped Neville mumbled under his breath.

Harry edged closer to him as they reached the shore of the lake, joining him and Neville in one of the waiting boats. A sandy-haired boy settled into the last spot. “I’m Seamus Finnigan,” he said as their boat jerked forward and began to glide across the lake, holding a hand out to Harry, who shook it.

“Ron Weasley,” said the red-haired boy, shaking Harry’s hand too.

Neville just gave a choked sob.

Seamus leaned towards them. “Do… do you know what it’s like inside that place? Did you see those students with the bronze masks on the train? Most terrifying thing I’ve seen in me life. Me Mum doesn’t want me to go here, she wanted to leave the country and everything when I got the letter. We have family in New Zealand, you see.”

“Can’t do that,” said Ron darkly. “You-Know-Who has the country under lockdown. My parents
tried everything, after what… after what happened to my brothers Bill and Charlie.”

“What happened?” asked Seamus, leaning even closer. “What did they do to your brothers?”

Ron’s lip trembled, and Harry, who knew they had been executed at Hogwarts, spoke up, trying to rescue Ron from answering. “Do you see that? Down there, in the water?”

Something huge, something black, was gliding underneath the surface of the lake, large enough to make their boat shudder as it passed. Neville, right on cue, let out a little yelp.

“It—it could be a sea serpent, or a giant squid,” said Ron, grateful for the distraction, leaning out the side of the boat.

“Oi, be careful!” barked Seamus as the boat began to tilt sideways. “Or we’ll fall into the water and be a snack for whatever that is!”

Ron steadied himself, embarrassed, and Harry gazed up at the castle, unable to look away. Many lights shone through the windows, but the very air around the castle seemed darker, as if the night was extra potent around the school’s edges.

After passing through an underground tunnel guarded by ivy, they arrived at a gloomy shore within the cliff the castle stood on, and all the boats jerked to a stop. Harry climbed out, and then turned around to help a hiccupping Neville get his leg over the side of the boat. The pebbles were wet and slippery, and Harry nearly lost his balance for one horrible moment.

Arweeda, not even looking back to see if they’d all made it, stepped up to a large oak door and knocked on it three times. It opened at once, and a stocky, handsome man with carefully styled dark hair stood behind it, wearing what could have been a top hat—or was that a bowler? Harry widened his eyes. The man held a bejeweled silver cane, but he didn’t seem to need it for health-related reasons, considering that he stood straight and walked with no limp that Harry could see.

“They’re here, Deputy Headmaster Dolohov, sir.” Arweeda’s voice trembled as she bowed her head.

“Get out of here, filthy half-blood,” said Professor Dolohov, in a perfectly pleasant tone, sounding so much like he’d just politely thanked Arweeda that it took Harry a few seconds to realize what he had actually said. He had a light, low, and smooth voice, like simmering butter, and he struck Harry as the sort of man who was always the center of attention at gatherings, the sort of man who ensured everyone heard him even when he whispered.

Arweeda bowed again and scurried away, heading deeper into the dark tunnel, leaving the first years alone with the man. He stepped back, giving them room to get inside, and when they were all accounted for, the great oak doors closed themselves with a forbidding click.

Harry suddenly felt very trapped. The first years were in a long marbled corridor lined with flickering torches, which did little to brighten the place. Dolohov, without saying a word, led them into a side room, and as a result nobody spoke, unsure if they were allowed to make any noise.

“I want you all lined up in several neat rows.” Now Dolohov’s voice was as sharp as a whip, and they all jerked into movement, frantic to follow his orders as he paced at the front of the room, impatiently thwacking his cane on the ground while he waited for them to assemble themselves.

“Good.” His voice was pleasant again, and Harry relaxed a bit, letting his shoulders uncurl from their taut position.

“I am your Deputy Headmaster and your Charms and Curses professor, Antonin Dolohov. You are
at Hogwarts, and in seven years, you will emerge from this school as brilliant, hardened warriors, prepared to fight for the Dark Lord’s noble cause, whether it be on the battlefield or in the political arena. Those deemed *unworthy* will die within these walls, or in obscurity once they leave.”

With every few words he spoke, Dolohov smacked his cane against the ground, and the resulting thuds echoed especially loudly through the silent room.

Nobody moved.

He continued in the same calm, matter-of-fact tone, clearly unaware—or perhaps, perfectly aware—that his speech terrified all of the eleven-year-olds in the room to the bone. “Some of you, due to your traitorous family name or impure blood, are already unworthy, and will be treated as such. However, those of you who wish to move beyond the shackles your families have placed on you will be welcome among the Dark Lord’s forces… if you choose to submit yourself. We value blood, but we value talent, and loyalty to the Dark Lord, above all else. Prove yourself, and your half-blood or blood-traitor status will be naught but a bad memory.” Dolohov paused and cocked his head to the side, considering an errant thought fluttering for his attention. “Of course, Mudbloods are far too dirty-blooded to be accepted among the Dark Lord’s ranks, but since we don’t allow filth like them at Hogwarts, mentioning them is quite pointless, isn’t it?”

He laughed, and to Harry his laugh resembled sunlight filtering in through a dark, grimy window, warped and scattered. Harry felt his heart stutter and quiet, as if it was sentient and capable of fear, afraid to beat too loudly in case that awful man heard it in the silence and turned on him like a serpent struck at prey.

He knew, of course, from reading parts of the book on the Dark Lord’s rise this summer, what exactly his regime had done to Muggleborns. He’d forcibly gathered all of those who lived in the wizarding world, hundreds of those who had held onto hope and had not gone into hiding, in one big prison-like antechamber, and told them they would be tried for the crime of stealing magic from worthier wizards. But instead of being called to a courtroom and a fair trial within it, rain began to fall from the ceiling, and it had not been water. No, it was a hellish liquid that slowly and agonizingly ate the flesh of the Muggleborns, scraped their skin off until they resembled nothing but lumps of red muscle and organs, flayed alive, treated like cattle in both life and death. Harry suspected his mother had escaped from this gruesome fate only due to Snape’s warning, and he was sure that she was one of the hundred or so adult Muggleborns in Britain left intact, or as intact as someone crazy as her could be.

As for the Muggleborns—usually children—who still lived in Muggle society and knew nothing of their magical status, Harry had read that the Dark Lord considered finding them and hunting them an enjoyable sport, an amusing way to spend his scarce free time. He liked to suck their magic out and absorb it into himself before he killed them, saying that in doing so, he reclaimed the magic that had always belonged to him, not the Muggle children who had stolen it.

Harry pondered if the Dark Lord really, truly believed in all of that with his whole heart, or if he was just a madman who would say anything to explain himself as long as he could continue to kill and conquer.

Dolohov smacked his cane on the ground one last time, then ushered them out of the room. When they crossed the threshold, several of them gasped. Harry looked around for a moment, wondering why, then noticed that most people’s gazes were transfixed downwards at their robes. He glanced at his own just in time to see his tie turn silver and green.

“*There were once four Houses at Hogwarts,*” drawled Dolohov, leading them down the corridor, his blasted cane still making that Merlin-damned thudding noise, “*but now there is only Slytherin,*
the wisest and greatest of all the four Founders.”

Harry’s mouth dropped open as they stepped into the Great Hall, all other thoughts temporarily driven out of his mind. For one mad moment, he was blinded by bright lights and thought he was on a busy Muggle street, then realized that the lights were countless candles hovering high above four great long tables. The ceiling above them was domed and pitch black, reflecting the starless night above Hogwarts.

And at the front, behind a long table where the staff members sat, was an enormous, forbidding, looming statue of a man, carved into the very front wall of the Great Hall. He was ancient, draped in sweeping robes of stone, with monkeyish features and a long, thin beard.

The huge silver words engraved into the wall behind his head read SALAZAR SLYTHERIN, FOUNDER OF HOGWARTS.

“Sit down at one of the tables, wherever there is space,” hissed Dolohov, lifting his cane and using it to point distractedly at the four great tables in turn. “The Judgement Ceremony is about to begin.”

The first years all moved at once, too afraid to argue or ask questions, scrambling when they reached the tables in a frantic attempt to find an open spot. There were a few moments of confusion in which several first years sat on older students, but Harry avoided most of the chaos by sticking with Ron, Neville, and Seamus, and eventually found himself seated at the middle-left table, where he noticed the atmosphere was particularly glum.

In wake of all the clamor, the Great Hall fell silent again. Harry craned his neck, looking around, trying to drink everything in. All of the four tables, including his own, were headed by a group of Skulls who sat at the back end of each table. But these Skulls didn’t all have bronze masks like the ones who had walked through the train, though there were plenty of those visible as well. Some of the Skulls had silver and gold masks, and Harry wondered if there was a ranking system amongst them, and that the youngest and most inexperienced Bronze Skulls were stuck with the duty of checking the train compartments.

Hell, if the Bronze Skulls had inspired so much terror in the students simply by walking around the train, Harry shuddered to think of what the Silver and Gold Skulls were capable of.

A first year boy who was sitting a few seats away dragged Harry out of his musing by saying, “What Judgement Ceremony? If we’re not going to be Sorted into Houses, then what’s that old hat for?”

“Quiet, it’s starting, and I don’t want to miss the name,” hissed a red-haired boy wearing old robes and glasses on Harry’s left side. There were heavy circles under his eyes and, as Harry watched, he rubbed his forehead as if trying to soothe a knot in his brain.

Harry stared where everyone else was staring. There was a lone stool at the front of hall, near the staff table, and upon it sat a tiny, frayed, limp, singed hat. Harry had never seen anything so defeated, so utterly ruined, in his entire life.

Harry leaned towards Ron, who was on his right side. “What… what is it, do you know?”

“The Sorting Hat,” explained Ron through teeth gritted in grim anticipation. “It used to sort us into Houses. But the Dark Lord corrupted it, I think, don’t know what he did. Now, each year, at each Welcoming Feast, it yells out the name of one student from a family who hasn’t yet pledged its allegiance to the Dark Lord.” Ron spat out the last three words.
Harry still didn’t understand any of this. “But what happens if the hat yells out your name, if you get picked?”

“You have to put the hat on, and—” Ron began.

“DANIEL ABBOTT!” the hat screamed.

There was a ripple up and down Harry’s table. A pink-faced girl with blonde pigtails who sat near Harry, within a tight clique of first year girls, burst into hysterical sobs. “Hannah, Hannah, I’m so sorry,” cooed one of the girls around Hannah, rubbing her shoulder and looking more relieved for herself than sorry for Hannah.

There was a strangled shout from the table to Harry’s right. A boy with hair as blond as Hannah’s stood up, tears running down his cheeks. He looked around, meeting the faces of his sympathetic but resigned peers, silently pleading with his eyes for someone, anyone, to rescue him from this hell.

“Please,” he choked out, stumbling to the ground, his eyes wheeling madly. “I—I can’t die—I have a little—I have a little sister—I’m her only family left! Please, oh God, oh God oh GOD—” His rambling cut off at once; he had frozen the moment he noticed a commotion at the back of his table where the Skulls were holding court.

One of the Bronze Skulls stood up and stalked towards Daniel, his shiny shoes clacking loudly in the silence with each step, and Harry was reminded at once of a cool, collected predator stalking its cowering gazelle prey. Daniel let out a strangled scream and tried to run, but the Skull was upon him in seconds. He grabbed Daniel by the neck, and turned his whole body to face the staff table. Daniel staggered with him, wriggling in vain to pull himself free, his feet scrabbling for purchase on the floor.

Harry held back a gasp as he took in the sight of the Skull. Because the mask he wore stuck to his skin, it was easy to see that he had a hideous, deformed, flattened face, like someone had taken a hammer to it and pounded at it until it didn’t resemble anything remotely human anymore.

“Fuck, it’s Sebastian Nott,” said a fourth-year boy at Harry’s table. “Abbott is dead, he’s fucking dead already, he ought to just kill himself now to spare himself the pain—”

Sebastian’s face split into a morbid smile, or at least it looked like one—his face was so messed up that it was difficult for Harry to discern exactly what expression he was making.

“Don’t worry, Abbott.” Sebastian’s voice was low and warm, with a slight quality of hoarseness. It conjured up images in Harry’s mind of blazing hot, oozing, bubbling magma, deadly to the touch. “I’ll take care of your sister. Where is she, Abbott, hmm? Point her out for me, won’t you?”

“I’ll—I’ll never tell you, you monster, you filth, you ugly—”

Something in Sebastian broke, a final fragile thread of sanity snapped, and Daniel began to choke and sputter as Sebastian closed his fist on his throat. “Don’t—call—me—ugly,” he snarled, incandescent with rage. Daniel’s face began to turn blue, and he grabbed desperately at his captor’s hand, trying to pry it off so he could breathe.

Hannah lost her head and rushed forward, escaping the grip of the girl who had been comforting her. “Let him go!” she wailed, covering her face with her hands to avoid meeting Sebastian’s dead, pale eyes.

Sebastian did as she asked, turning on Hannah with his usual savage smile firmly back in place,
and Daniel fell to the floor like a marionette with its strings cut, gasping for breath.

Harry looked at the staff table, biting his lip. They can’t let this happen, can they? How can they let this happen? An obscenely huge man, the Headmaster Thorfinn Rowle—Harry remembered his name on the Hogwarts letter—sat in the center of the high table. As Harry watched him, he leaned forward, the rolls of his fat draping over the wood, obviously amused—and perhaps even delighted—at the proceedings. A few of the professors were snickering, enjoying the show, while others seemed bored. Snape, Harry noticed with a start, was among those who looked like they were about to fall asleep from the sheer routine nature of it all. Dolohov stood near the hat’s stool, tapping his watch with one spindly finger as though he were impatient to get all this over with.

“Headmaster Rowle, these blood-traitors never go quietly when they’re picked from the hat. They always squeal and cry and beg, and it’s all so very boring. I find myself snoring.” Sebastian slunk forward, his eyes never leaving the trembling figure of Hannah Abbott. “If I may… suggest something, sir?”

Headmaster Rowle laughed, setting his jowls aquiver, and clapped his hands together like a child eagerly waiting to hear his favorite funny story. “Yes, Mr. Nott, do tell us. You always have the best suggestions! One of these days, I’m going to make you in charge of the Judgement Ceremony instead of this dirty old hat!”

The Skulls at all four tables chuckled, and some of them went even further than that in their approval, whooping and stamping their feet while shouting his name, pounding their fists on the table. Dolohov rolled his eyes and leaned more heavily on his cane, but his gaze on Sebastian was tender. It didn’t look like anyone was going to come to the Abbotts’ rescue, not even the students who seemed sympathetic. Nobody, it seemed, wanted to face Sebastian’s wrath.

Unbidden, a surge of envy struck at Harry. How must it feel, to hold so much influence, to garner so much fear and respect? Sebastian and the Skulls ruled the school, and Harry wanted that irresistible, captivating power, the ability to send people to their knees screaming and crying when they saw him in a rage. He yearned for it, ached for it—

“Why doesn’t anybody say anything?” Neville wailed to Ron.

Like Harry, Ron startled, forcing himself to look away from the scene. “Look, he’s going to die anyway; the hat called out his name. He wouldn’t have gotten his sister in trouble if he hadn’t made a scene.”

Harry was appalled by the callous tone in Ron’s voice. He seemed irritated, but beneath that irritation was a great resignation. He had expected something like this to happen, had probably heard stories of the morbid affairs at Hogwarts from his numerous older brothers, or at least the brothers who were still alive.

“Well, sir,” began Sebastian, drawing Harry’s attention once again, “since dear Daniel here said that he and Hannah are the only members of their family left, I think we should end the Abbott line cleanly. We need to be neat about this.” He nodded very seriously at the professors, then gave them a little bow.

Does that mean he’s going to let them go? Harry thought for one wild second.

Sebastian seized one of Hannah’s pigtails and dragged her close, pulling her until his chest was flush against her back. Daniel stirred at his feet and lifted his head, but collapsed again in a fit of wheezes when Sebastian gave him a swift kick to the belly. He took out his wand and pointed it at Hannah’s head, caressing her hair with his other hand.
As Harry watched, Sebastian murmured sweet nothings in Hannah’s ear, his lips so close to her skin that it looked like he was about to kiss her. “Avada Kedavra.”

Harry’s head throbbed, his stomach reeled, the starless ceiling above him seemed to spin, the world flipped on its axis, and he knew he was going to throw up, could feel his lunch rising—

Hannah went limp in Sebastian’s arms, the light gone from her eyes. Daniel let out a scream and tried to curl in on himself, but Sebastian would not even give him the small pleasure of mourning in peace. He grabbed Daniel’s collar and pulled him to his feet. For one long second, he let Daniel drink in the sight of Hannah’s blank, tear-stained face, then dropped her to the floor and kicked her body aside.

“Don’t try to interfere in the Judgement Ceremony, Abbott,” said Sebastian in a gentle, fatherly sort of voice, and now it was Daniel’s turn to get his hair caressed. He wasn’t fighting back; he must have gone into shock. “If you’d just gone quietly, your sister would still be alive, you know.”

Letting the other boy lean on him, Sebastian led him to the stool where the Sorting Hat lay, limp as Hannah’s body. He grabbed the hat, then gestured for Daniel to sit down, completing the picture of politeness by bowing halfway like a servant guiding his master to a seat.

The irony of it all made Harry sick.

Daniel sat and buried his head in his hands, lost in his sobs. “Hannah, I’m sorry, I’m so, so sorry, Hannah, please forgive me...”

Sebastian placed the Sorting Hat on Daniel’s head, and grinned as it began to burn. The flame consumed Daniel from top down, turning his clothes, his skin, his entire body to ash, and it was almost a mercy that it happened so fast, not giving him any time to scream or feel pain. A second later, there was the only the hat and the stool, but no more Daniel.

“That,” said an unimpressed Dolohov as Sebastian strolled back to his seat amid delirious cheers from the Skulls and tremulous silence from everyone else, “took far longer than it needed to. Headmaster, might I remind you not to allow such frivolities during the Judgement Ceremony? Let the hat scream the name, let the student burn, but don’t encourage such a gaudy show.”

“You never let me have any fun,” chuckled Rowle, waving a dismissive hand at his deputy. “I need to work up my appetite, you know.” Half the professors howled at this joke along with him, as if the very idea of Headmaster Rowle needing to work up his appetite was absurd. After wiping tears of mirth from his eyes, Rowle snapped his fingers, and food appeared on the plates.

Harry found that, unlike Headmaster Rowle, he no longer had much of an appetite. Ron was busy shoveling food into his face, but Neville was clutching his mouth like he expected to be sick all over the table any minute now.

The other red-haired boy, the one with the glasses who looked like a fourth year to Harry, said to one of his friends, “Thank Merlin it wasn’t one of us.”

“It’s only a matter of time a Weasley gets picked, Percy,” said his friend, a girl with curly dark hair.

“Our family’s been through enough,” Percy snapped back at her.

“I want to go home, I want to go home, I want to go home,” Neville said in monotone, his eyes wide and teary.

Ron stopped eating for a moment to glare at him. “You can’t go home, Neville. None of us can truly go home, even if we do get holiday leave. We’re stuck here until we die or graduate. Don’t
you get it? This is *normal* here."

“How do *you* know it’s normal? You’re a first year like the rest of us,” said Harry, still unable to believe anything that had happened so far. It was the only way he could keep his lunch in his stomach.

A first year girl and her brother had just died. Nobody even seemed to care except for the first years, all of whom looked utterly stunned and several of whom were crying, including the girl at his table who had been the last to touch Hannah. None of the older students had even raised an eyebrow when it had all gone down; in fact, from the conversations Harry was overhearing, they seemed to resent Daniel Abbott for taking up so much time and being foolish enough to get his sister killed along with him. They’d all just watched the show with morbid fascination and some mild sympathy, and now they were having a *damn feast*. Did they have a feast every time someone died at this place?

“I know it’s normal because my brothers were *killed!*” yelled Ron, his face purpling rapidly. “Someone dies every other week here!”

“Quiet, Ron. Don’t waste your breath trying to convince him. He’ll find out soon enough,” hissed Percy. “And if you’re too loud, you’ll attract the Skulls’ attention. Fred and George already piss them off, and they’re looking for a reason to come for us.”

Harry looked back down at his plate, but the sight of the food was enough to make his stomach roil. He turned around, trying to see how the people at other tables were reacting, then gave a start when he spotted Draco Malfoy sitting a mere table away.

He was hunched in on himself, paler than usual and his gray eyes wide as saucers, looking just as sick as Harry felt. *But still beautiful*, Harry’s traitorous mind piped up, his gaze drawn inexplicably to Draco’s angled features and his feather-soft, white-blond hair, which gleamed golden in the candlelight.

The dark-haired boy that Draco had spoken to earlier on the way to the castle—Theo or Ted or something—tapped him on the shoulder and whispered something in his ear, and Draco’s blank, shell-shocked expression changed at once, rippling into a calm mask. A Skull near him told a joke and Draco’s resulting laugh, bright as ringing bells, was loud enough for Harry to hear it from his seat.

Harry turned away in disgust. Minutes passed, then half an hour, then an hour. The feast seemed to drag on, and he never managed to muster up the slightest bit of hunger, but at last the dessert disappeared off the plates sometime before ten o’clock.

The chatter faded from the Great Hall. Percy, Ron, and the rest pinned their gazes on the Skulls sitting at the end of their table, and Harry focused on them as well, waiting with bated breath.

The Skulls at all four tables stood up in one massive wave, their backs snapping straight, their arms flush against their sides, their eyes alight with a fervor unlike anything Harry had ever seen before. In those repulsive masks, they resembled the soldiers of a vast beast army, unrivaled in their might, their mission, and their inhumanity.

Everybody stood up after the Skulls did, completing the wave of moment. Nobody spoke, not even a hapless first year, too afraid to disturb an atmosphere so close to the edge of collapse. Harry felt as though he were taking part in some sacred ritual, a precise dance during which anyone could misstep at any moment.
The Skulls from all four tables marched forward, converging at the back of the Great Hall, and the rest of students surged after them in neat rows, moving just as stiffly as their masked leaders. Harry kept looking straight ahead with a rigid neck as he walked behind Percy, his feet pounding on the ground in tandem with his beating heart.

The Skulls led them right out of the Great Hall and down a dizzying spiraling staircase, past paintings with shivering, cowering inhabitants, past false floors and false walls, past yawning dark doorways. Harry didn’t know where they were going, except that they were going down, or where they were going to be sleeping; the Dark Lord had destroyed the Gryffindor, Hufflepuff, and Ravenclaw common rooms when he attacked the school, leaving only Slytherin’s intact, and it was doubtful that Slytherin’s common room could hold all thousand students at the school.

The part of the castle they were in now had no portraits and no doors, just never-ending winding stone tunnels. Harry noticed the floor was tilting downwards, and was sure they were deep underground now.

Finally, descending from yet another tight spiral staircase, they arrived in the center of a gigantic circular room—a room big enough to hold hundreds of students—with four enormous stone doors marking North, South, East, and West. It took a few minutes for all of Hogwarts’ students to walk down the stairs and line up, and Harry itched the back of his neck impatiently.

He took a moment to study the symbols on the four doors. A shiny black skull emblazoned the North door, and a glittering silver serpent decorated the West one. How well that fit, serpent and skull. The East and South doors, however, were unmarked.

Four Skulls slipped out of their spots in the ranks and took up post at each of the four doors, but the rest of them went into the skull-marked North door. They probably all lived there together in murderous harmony.

“Elite students,” shouted the Skull guarding the West door, “in here!”

Harry saw Draco Malfoy, his dark-haired friend, and the other first year students he’d been sitting with at dinner all stumble towards the shouting Skull, trailing meekly behind a large group of older students who walked with much more of a spring in their step than someone like Percy Weasley or Daniel Abbott had.

“The rest of you! Get a move on!” said the Skull, closing the serpent-marked West door when the “elite students” were all safely inside.

Harry watched carefully as the girls broke away from the boys and slipped into the East door. The boys, on the other hand, filed into the South door a dozen at time, causing a bottleneck effect. After a few anxious minutes of waiting for the line to lessen, Harry emerged into an immense square room crammed wall to wall with hundreds of bunk beds. Since he’d been near the end of the line, it was already full of hundreds of boys, and many of the beds that did not already have a boy lounging on them had already been claimed with luggage—the luggage of the boys still waiting in the line outside, most likely. The magic of Hogwarts must have moved the suitcases of returning students to their beds from the train, Harry supposed.

The atmosphere here was far lighter, far more celebratory. Paper airplanes carrying messages fluttered through the air, sometimes smacking into bedposts or faces. People were talking animatedly, muttering profanities about the Skulls, and even laughing. Harry guessed it was because none of the Skulls had come inside with them, and they were finally free and unmonitored for the first time that night. Nobody seemed to care that they were all squashed like sardines in a can, like pigs in a pen.
There’s no space to move, or breathe, or think, thought Harry with a sinking feeling, realizing that there were only about three feet of walking space between each ratty bunk bed.

“First years!” shouted a tall seventh-year with dreadlocks, pointing his wand to his mouth and using a spell to make his voice loud enough for everyone in the huge room to hear him. “First years! Your luggage is against the back wall because you haven’t claimed a bed yet! Find a bunk that’s not taken—and that means there’s no luggage or anything else on it! It’ll be your bed for the next seven years!”

Harry made his way to the back with great difficulty, navigating through the bunk beds and the overwhelming number of boys who thought it acceptable to stand in and block the little amount of free space there was. He found and grabbed his luggage, turned to find a free bed with a long sigh, and was unsurprised to find none in the immediate vicinity. After saying “excuse me” and “sorry” and “coming through” about a hundred times each, Harry finally spotted an unclaimed top bunk in the left corner of the room.

“Best be careful about that one, mate,” said a boy on a bunk Harry was passing on his way to the left corner.

Harry stopped abruptly, causing several people behind him to bump into him and swear. “What’s wrong with it?”

“Are you going for that left corner bed, the top bunk?” the boy asked.

“Yeah,” said Harry, nodding slowly.

“It’s cursed, that top bunk. Nobody’s who’s ever slept in it has lived through all seven years at Hogwarts,” explained the boy, shaking his head. “Bill Weasley had that bed when he was here, and he was executed when his parents tried to fight You-Know-Who. Caleb McLaggen took it next, and he was killed by a Skull he challenged to a fight. Then it was Louis Flannery’s bed, and well… he threw himself off the Astronomy tower last year.”

“That’s superstitious nonsense,” said Harry, though he was sweating a bit. “And there aren’t many free bunks left. I don’t see any.”

“Your funeral, not mine,” said the boy with a shrug, closing his curtains in Harry’s face.

Harry swallowed and made his way to the bed. He refused to let scary stories intimidate him. It was just an ordinary bed, and he would prove it to everyone who thought otherwise. He left his luggage by the bed and looked around, wondering where he should change.

“Oi! First year! Bathroom’s on the right side, if you have to go! But everything’s communal, everything!” a boy a few beds away guffawed at him.

Harry groaned, saw that all the boys were changing into their bedclothes in full view of everyone else, and climbed up the ladder after extricating his pajamas from his luggage. He would rather die than undress in front of anyone, and spent a few unproductive minutes struggling into his pajamas on the narrow top bunk under the cover of his sheets, managing to smack his head on the low ceiling twice in the process. Then he lay down, trying to make himself as comfortable as he could in the scratchy and thin blankets. There was a suspicious stain near his pillow that looked like blood, but no, no, no, he was not going to believe in that stupid story.

Harry closed his eyes and enjoyed a few minutes of peace, using them to mull over everything that had happened that day. The Abbotts’ murders, the Skulls, the unsympathetic professors. People
had mentioned these topics—Harry could hear their conversations pretty clearly in the complete lack of privacy that was the boys’ dormitory—but they had not dwelled on any of them. The students seemed to have moved on, as though atrocities occurred so often that they were no longer shaken by anything.

Then, disturbing Harry’s thoughts as thoroughly as a rampaging elephant would have managed to disturb the dormitory, the fourth-year boy who slept in the bunk beneath Harry’s began to noisily kiss his boyfriend, making unpleasant squelching sounds in addition to causing the entire bed to creak and bounce.

Harry groaned again and buried his head in his pillow, knowing his face was turning red and fervently thankful nobody could see it.

“YOU TWO! Stop snogging already! There’s an innocent first year above you!”

“Shut up, he appreciates it! He’s in the cursed bunk, so he’ll be dead by next year and won’t ever get to snog anyone—”

“WILL YOU ALL SHUT UP, SOME OF US ARE TRYING TO READ!”

“OI! If you want peace and quiet in the damn dormitory, go suck a Skull’s or Elite’s cock and jump into bed with them—they’re the ones who get the nice private bedrooms, not us, the ‘dirty-blooded treasonous plebeians’—”

“STOP TALKING ABOUT SUCKING COCKS, THERE’S A FIRST YEAR LISTENING TO US!”

Harry wasn’t sure how he was ever going to fall asleep in this head-pounding din, but finally, despite the loud chatter of hundreds of boys, the whizzing paper airplanes, and the blazing lights overhead, he managed to drift off. And when he dreamed, he dreamed of sitting under the Sorting Hat in front of an audience of jeering Skulls and burning, burning, burning. Draco Malfoy stood among them and laughed as Harry turned to ash, his eyes beautiful and cruel.

Chapter End Notes

To clarify a few things... fear not, Hagrid is NOT dead. He just isn't at Hogwarts anymore. Also, because Muggleborns are not allowed at Hogwarts and a lot of them are hunted down, Hermione will not be a character. She may have survived Voldemort's purge and might make an appearance in later years... I haven't decided yet.

Also, JK Rowling stated in an interview that there are a thousand students at Hogwarts (even though realistically that doesn't make much sense to me...), so that's what I'm using. Subtracting the Muggleborn students that no longer attend and adding the once-homeschooled students that are forced to attend because Hogwarts education is now mandatory, I feel like the total evens out back to a thousand.

And yes, as you will discover next chapter, all of the professors have been replaced by Voldemort's puppets and Death Eaters.

Not sure what my update schedule is going to be now that school is starting, but I
should be able to update at least every weekend for now. :) 

Thank you for commenting! I really appreciate it! Please let me know what you think and if you would like to see this story continued.
Break, Shatter, and Destroy

Chapter Notes

Thank you all so much for all the sweet comments! <3 They make my day!

I meant for this chapter to contain both Draco's Skull Mask Initiation and Harry's first week of classes, but ended up having to split up the chapter into two because the initiation was getting too long. But I promise that next chapter, we'll finally get to the classes and back to Harry's POV!

That being said, enjoy a Draco-centric chapter.

CHAPTER FOUR

BREAK, SHATTER, AND DESTROY

o

His first night at Hogwarts, Harry slept in a creaky bunk bed and dreamed of burning under the Sorting Hat. His first night at Hogwarts, Draco slept in a luxurious private bedroom and dreamed of becoming a Skull Mask.

He stared at himself in the mirror, preening. He was much older and taller, and his eyes were harsh. He wore a golden Skull Mask, and he looked glorious, his father’s son at last. Draco grinned at his reflection, reveling in how the mask’s magical alloy rippled to accommodate every twitch in his appearance.

No. The mask controlled his face, monitored his every expression. Draco’s real face, his real expressions, fought for dominance behind the mask, but the metal tightened on his muscles painfully, keeping him in line.

Draco panicked. He grappled with the mask, trying to pry it off, but it wriggled like a sentient creature, never letting his fingers grab onto it for long, desperate to command him—no, to consume him. Draco caught it at last and ripped it off, but—

He let out a wail of disbelief.

The top layer of his skin was stuck to the mask, the hands holding it drenched in his own flesh and blood. The mask had been so thoroughly attached to his skin, so integral a part of him, that he’d peeled his face right off when he’d tried to remove it.

Draco woke up screaming, his hair matted with sweat, his cheeks damp with tears.

It took an excruciatingly long second for him to realize that he was wrapped in silk sheets, safe within his dark and cool private bedroom. A dream. Just a stupid, silly, dumb dream. I don’t even have a mask yet. He patted his hands over his face, letting out a great sigh of relief after reassuring himself that all of his skin was still in its proper place. He took a few moments to rub his hair dry and wipe his tears away, taking deep breaths to keep himself calm as he did it.
Then he remembered that Skull Mask Initiation would begin at midnight tonight, and felt sick all over again, nearly as sick as he’d felt just after Sebastian murdered the Abbott siblings. It was eleven-thirty, which meant he would have to get going soon. Draco reached under his pillow, feeling around for his golden invitation letter he’d stashed underneath it. He unfolded it, skimming it to refresh himself on the details, and saw that the location of the first meeting would be Dungeon Seven.

Wherever the hell that was.

Draco sighed and looked up at the ceiling. He knew the three-year-long Initiation period would contain several grueling Trials, each of which would assess a different aspect of an Initiate’s power and abilities. After passing all the Trials and completing his third year, he would earn his Bronze Skull mask.

His first Trial would probably take place tonight. It would be his first real test, the test that his father had been preparing him for his entire life.

Draco wanted to faint.

Somebody knocked on his bedroom door, rescuing him from his misery. “Draco? Are you awake? It’s almost time for Initiation, and we should go together.”

Draco nearly cried with relief and threw himself off the bed so he could open the door. Theo stood behind it, his eyes glinting with barely concealed eagerness.

Draco tried to make his own face show the same eagerness, shoving that ridiculous nightmare out of his mind. “Are the others awake? Bulstrode, Vince, and Greg? Did Parkinson get a letter too?”

There were quite a few more Elites in their year, Tracey Davis, Daphne Greengrass, and Blaise Zabini among them, but their families were not part of inner Death Eater society despite having pledged their allegiance to the Dark Lord, and as a result Draco didn’t really know them well. If they wanted to, they could request to join the Skull Masks, but not until next year—and they would need a sponsor, a Skull that could vouch for their abilities and trustworthiness. Draco and his friends had been luckier than most; his family name had gotten him the invitation on the first day of school.

Theo shook his head. “I think Parkinson’s brother got her out of it. But the rest are waiting in the common area. You’re the last one.” He raised an eyebrow, making Draco feel like a misbehaving three-year-old. “And you’re in your pajamas. Are you really ready for this?”

Draco glowered, his stomach churning, and tried not to show how much that last question had gotten to him. “I just wanted to take a nap, okay? And I was already awake!” he barked, swelling up to his full height and fury. “Now go wait in the common room while I get dressed.”

Then he gave Theo a coy smile, deciding to entertain himself with a small bit of revenge. “Unless you want to stay and watch me change, that is.”

Theo blushed scarlet, muttered something uncomplimentary under his breath, and stumbled out of the room, slamming the door behind him.

Most satisfied with this reaction, Draco went about his room, looking for his uniform and a matching pair of socks. Each Elite had been gifted with a lovely private bedroom, spacious but cozy, with walls that changed color to whatever Draco wanted—they were a Slytherin dark green right now, thank you very much—and an enchanted window that reflected the weather outside
even though the room was deep underground. Yes, Draco was very pleased with Hogwarts’ accommodations.

Five minutes later, he stepped into the Elite common room, which was furnished with white leather sofas, sturdy oak tables, and a softly burning fireplace. The walls were made of glittering marble, and if you looked closely, you could see tiny serpents engraved into the stone. Draco could have stared at them for ages, but Millicent Bulstrode’s low growl jerked him back to reality.

“So, our resident princess graces us with his presence at long last. Did you get enough beauty sleep, Draco?” she sneered, rising like an oversized bat from one of the sofas and crossing the common room, Vincent Crabbe, Gregory Goyle, and Theo close behind her.

“As a matter of fact, I did. But you could use a bit more, Bulstrode,” Draco sniffed, opening the common room door and stepping out into the massive circular room with the North, South, East and West doors.

Millicent leapt at Draco, probably aiming to strangle him for the insult, but Theo held her back and they all made it up the spiral staircase at the center of the giant circular room without any injuries.

“Where’s Dungeon Seven?” mumbled Greg, rubbing his eyes sleepily.

“This way,” said Theo, shepherding them up another staircase that Draco suspected would lead them closer to the Great Hall.

“How do you even know?” snapped Draco, turning his head to catalogue all the portraits, the inhabitants of which cowered when they walked past, so he could use them as landmarks for the next time he came through this area.

“Oh, I memorized the map an hour ago,” said Theo as if this feat was neither difficult to accomplish nor extraordinary at all, and Draco just barely resisted the urge to slap him.

A twenty-minute trek later, they arrived at the ominous dark doors of Dungeon Seven, which Theo informed them had once been a Potions classroom before it was enlarged and renamed to become the Skull Masks’ official meeting room. Draco wondered what unpleasant surprises Dungeons One through Six contained, and decided he really didn’t want to know.

Draco stepped in front of Theo to knock on the door, his heart in his throat. The doors swung open before his knuckles could even touch the wood, and he let out a startled squeak. Green torches illuminated the dungeon, but Draco couldn’t see anything beyond the ghastly shadows they cast on the stone-brick ground.

All five first years looked at each other in turn, silently daring the other to go into the room first. At last, Millicent took the plunge and stepped inside, Draco at her heels, Theo at his. They emerged into a high-ceilinged room full of Skulls in neat rows, what looked like at least a hundred of them. With a quick glance at Millicent, Draco registered that there were barely any girls among their number. A little more than half of the Skulls wore Bronze, but Silver was fairly common too. It was the glint of gold that was difficult to spot, but then Draco spotted it. About a dozen Gold Skulls—thirteen, actually, Draco counted to make sure—stood in a line at the front of the room, up on a raised platform. They looked tall, really tall, and were most likely sixth or seventh years.

Draco swallowed thickly.

“Look! Over there,” said Millicent, pointing at and leading them to the back of the room, the only place in the entire dungeon where an unmasked face could be seen. About twenty new Initiates
milled about there, nervous and twitchy. Most of them were second years who hadn’t gotten an invitation in their first year, Draco supposed, and he puffed up his chest and straightened his back. He was better than them, after all, and he ought to act like it, as was befitting of someone of his status.

“Are you okay, Draco?” said Theo a few minutes later, giving Draco a pitying look. “You seem kind of tense, holding your shoulders like that.”

Draco deflated. He didn’t have this posture thing figured out yet. He looked around a bit more. Obviously separate from the group of the brand new Initiates stood another clique of unmasked students, but these looked to be mostly third years, on the verge of passing the Initiation period and earning their Bronze Skulls. They looked far more confident, far more at ease than Draco’s group.

“Draco, look up,” said Theo in a breathless voice.

Draco did, and gasped. A black, green, and silver mural of the Dark Mark, a skull and serpent entwined in an intricate dance, decorated the ceiling. It loomed over them like an artificial sky.

“So beautiful,” said Draco. And together they stared at the defining symbol of the Dark’s victory, unable to look away, and not really wanting to.

Then silence smothered the dungeon like a blanket, marking the moment when the clock struck midnight.

The Skulls all swiveled towards the thirteen Gold Skulls at the front of the room, reminiscent of the way flowers turned to face the sun. Now that he had somewhat overcome his initial trepidation, Draco could scarcely stop himself from salivating with envy at the sight of them. To be a Gold Skull was a great honor and rarity—only the most brilliant and ruthless managed it; the majority of Skulls topped out at Bronze, while the above average topped out at Silver—and the Golds would immediately be welcomed into the Dark Lord’s inner ranks upon graduation for the achievement. If Draco managed such a feat right out of school, his father would probably die of pride right there and then.

The dark-haired Gold Skull in the very middle of the line of thirteen stepped forward. He held himself with an easy sort of grace, not too stiff, but not too casual either. His movements were fluid. Draco wondered with awe what he would look like when he dueled, and knew it would be a breathtaking sight.

“He’s the Skull King, Adolphus Lestrange,” Theo hissed out of the corner of his mouth to Draco. “He’s the most powerful Skull at the school in the moment, the one chosen to lead all the students.”

“How do they pick the king?” Draco hissed back, eyes wide.

Theo bit his lip. “The Golds fight over it. My brothers told me that Lestrange challenged the old Skull King last year and killed him when he refused to surrender after a lost duel. Sebastian plans to be the Skull King someday, when he’s in sixth or seventh year. He’s the Executioner right now, which means he’s the highest-ranked Bronze Skull. Actually, he’s the youngest Executioner in Skull Mask history; he got the title at the end of last year, just after passing Initiation. He impressed everyone a lot during his Initiation, so much that he beat most of the older students in rankings when he finally got his mask.”

Draco’s head spun at the very idea of Sebastian as an Executioner or King or the highest-ranked anything, and he might have swayed on the spot. Theo took his arm in concern, but Draco yanked
himself free, muttering some lie about being fine.

“Shut up,” snarled Millicent, elbowing Draco in the ribs. “Watch! They’re starting the anthem!”

Adolphus was putting a closed fist on his chest, right above his heart. The other Skulls, even the Gold Skulls behind him, copied his movements without falter. They chanted in monotone at first, their voices flat and harsh. “In gold, silver, bronze, we stand united, devoted weapons of the Dark Lord. We strive to prove ourselves, our control, and our power. To challenge those who are impure, traitorous, and unworthy.” They stamped their feet in tandem with every word, making the ground and walls vibrate. Then their voices rose like a surging wave, soaring to overwhelming heights in both pitch and fervor, making Draco’s head pound along with the floor. “To break, shatter, and destroy those who defy us and our Lord.”

An expectant hush fell over the room again, and at last Adolphus spoke, his voice as cold and hard as ice. Draco shivered, deeply affected. “Welcome to the first meeting of the year, Skulls and Initiates. First of all, let us spend a moment appreciating the honorable actions of our brand new Executioner, who has certainly lived up to his title so far and proved wrong all those who were skeptical of his age and experience—and I admit I was one of those skeptics, until this evening. Thanks to Sebastian Nott, I severely doubt that the next piece of scum the Sorting Hat picks will try to hinder the Judgement Ceremony, and you have to admit, it all made for an exciting show.” He grinned then, and his mask rippled.

The Skulls cheered, clapped, and stomped their feet, hooting Sebastian’s name during it all like they had at the Welcoming Feast. Eerie light cast from the green torches danced on their masks.

Sebastian’s voice came from the front row, and Draco stiffened at the sound of it. “I assure you, I only did what was required of me as a weapon of the Dark Lord, as the Executioner, and hopefully… as your future King.” Draco couldn’t see him from the back, but he could vividly imagine the quirk of Sebastian’s ruined lips.

“Liar!” shouted someone from the middle of the crowd. “He just did it because he wanted to have some fun!”

More laughter.

Sebastian said, and now Draco could definitely could hear him smiling, “Well, that was mostly the reason, I confess. Abbott’s whimpers and sobs got me… a bit, hard, shall we say? I had to do something to ease my… discomfort.”

The laughter turned into howls of mirth. A few catcalls and whistles rose above the clamor. At the same time, bile rose in Draco’s throat.

“Killing makes those psycho Nott twins just as horny as sex does,” muttered one of the Bronze Skulls standing in the row in front of Draco.

“Tell me about it. I swear the only thing those two’ve talked about since they turned fourteen is wanting to fuck and torture someone at the same time,” another Skull sniggered back.

“Apparently they want to do a pretty little blond boy together. They keep saying that’s their type, won’t shut up about it for even five seconds.”

“Oddly specific, isn’t that? Think they already have someone in mind?”

“Merlin, if they do, I don’t envy that poor son of a bitch.”
Draco’s consistent attempts to block out this conversation all failed, but fortunately he was
distracted by Adolphus’s starting to speak again.

“Settle down, settle down,” said Adolphus. “Now, while some Skulls, like our Executioner,
exemplify our ideals flawlessly, others are… disappointing, to say the least. Bring out the traitor.”

A few Silvers emerged from a corner of the room and stepped onto the stage, holding ropes
wrapped tightly around a weedy, shifty-eyed boy wearing a bronze mask. He looked like a sixth or
seventh year, but it was difficult to discern his height when he was cowering so much.

“Bodus Burke,” drawled Adolphus, leaning down and grasping the other boy’s chin hard enough to
bruise. “You warned a blood-traitor family of our planned raid at the end of last year, failing your
second exam rather spectacularly, and betraying your fellow Skulls. Unfortunately, certain sources
only informed me of your… mistake last week, or we’d have taken care of you before previous
term ended.”

Draco looked to Theo for an explanation, who gave it. “There are three Skull Exams, and you need
to pass the first to become a Bronze, the second to become a Silver, and the third to become a Gold
—but not all Skulls get the opportunity to take the Silver and Gold exams, only the best do, I’ve
heard. The exams usually take place at the end of the year, and make you use your skills in the real
world, so you’re practicing being a Death Eater. Mostly you’re given a blood-traitor or dirty-
blooded family to attack, and usually several Skulls who want to get to the next mask level go after
that family as a group. Burke must have chickened out on the second test, but I’m not sure why he
didn’t drop out earlier if he was afraid of killing.”

“Why, you ask?” continued Adolphus, almost as if he had heard Theo’s question. “Why did Bodus
warn this family?” He dug his fingers into Bodus’s cheek until it bled.

Bodus mumbled something, and Adolphus kicked him in the stomach. “Repeat that for all of us,
will you, Bodus? A little louder now!”

“Myra, you bastard,” Bodus choked out, tears running down his face, struggling in vain against the
ropes that bound him. “She lived there, and you were going to kill her—” Adolphus kicked him
again, repulsed, and Bodus curled into a ball.

Adolphus straightened up. “See?” he shouted, holding up his hands as if to say “Look at this idiot!”
The other Skulls burst into laughter yet again.

“He did it for love,” sneered Adolphus. “He fell in love with a filthy little dirty-blooded girl, and
warned her family before the attack. So when he and the Skulls in his group, all hoping to get their
Silver masks and not suspecting in the slightest that they would be betrayed by one of their own,
arrived at the house, they found it empty.”

The laughter died almost at once, and a tangible sort of fury, a sheer and passionate rage, replaced
it, swelling and intensifying the way a thunderstorm did before it struck.

“Not only did he betray us, he betrayed us for a most pathetic reason,” said Adolphus, running a
hand through his hair like an exasperated but well-meaning grandfather. “Really, Bodus? I’m sure
she was a good fuck, but you didn’t have to keep her alive just for that.”

Bodus didn’t say anything. He had stilled, almost as if he knew what was coming.

“I’m sure all of you are drooling to see what his punishment is going to be,” Adolphus went on, his
expression now one of sadistic glee. He grabbed Bodus by the hair and yanked him to his feet, and
turned him to face the jeering and taunting audience of Skulls.

“THE COUNT! THE COUNT! THE COUNT!” they yelled, stamping their feet.

Adolphus waved a dismissive hand, but his mouth quirked, revealing his pleasure. “All right, since you all insist. We’ll punish him with the Count.”

Bodus let out a little moan.

“Here are the rules of the Count. Bodus has ten seconds to escape the dungeon, and if he gets through the doors by that time, he lives to see another day. If he’s still in this room when the counter hits zero…” Adolphus paused, slowly taking out his wand. “Well… then, we’ll have to punish him, won’t we, boys?”

He waved his wand, and a glittering number ten appeared in the air above Bodus’s head. The doors on the opposite side of the room swung open invitingly, freedom glowing past them. Everyone seemed to stop breathing in anticipation.

The Count began with the bong of an invisible bell, and the ropes binding Bodus fell away. He struggled to his feet and jumped off the platform, using a precious second to steady himself after he hit the ground.

_Eight._

The crowd of Skulls parted neatly to give him space to run, and Draco craned his neck to get a better look. Bodus had a clear path, and if he didn’t mess up or trip, he could get to the doors in time.

_Seven._

Bodus bolted, the thud of his shoes on the stone floor echoing in the silence.

_Six._

He was halfway across the large room now, and Draco held his breath.

_Five._

Nathaniel Nott’s voice split the silence. _“INCARCEROUS!”_ 

_Four._

The jet of light from Nathaniel’s spell slammed into Bodus when he was feet from the door.

_Three._

Bodus toppled to the ground, his arms and legs bound with thick rope.

_Two._

Bodus tried to get up, but failed. He began to crawl, to pull himself across the rough stone.

_One._

The Skulls whooped and crowed, preparing themselves.
The dungeon doors slammed shut, and the Skulls descended on the trembling figure of Bodus like hyenas. Draco couldn’t see what happened to him, so great was the amount of the Skulls surrounding the spot where Bodus lay. He could just hear screaming, the cracking of bones, the incantations of spells that tore and shredded skin. A few seconds later, there was blood on the ground, so much of it that it leaked beyond the congregated circle of Skulls.

“But it wasn’t fair,” said Draco, looking fixedly at a point on the wall nearby to keep himself steady. “Your brother… he used that spell to stop Burke from reaching the door, and—”

“Stop it, Draco,” said Theo with clenched fists, and Draco had never heard his friend sound so vehement. “Fair? It was never meant to be fair. That bastard betrayed us, all for a dirty-blood, and you think he should escape with his life?”

“No—I just—the rules of the Count—” spluttered Draco.

Theo turned to him, a manic gleam in his eyes. “No, Draco, he’s going to die. Just like he’s supposed to. He’s a traitor, and he deserves the worst kind of punishment for that. Even if he’d gotten out the doors, we’d have killed him. I’m sure the Count was just for show. We all knew, and so did he, that he wasn’t going to live.”

“I—I understand,” said Draco. He looked at the floor.

“Draco?” Theo’s voice was tender now. “You’re shaken, aren’t you? I think I am, too. But we have to stop seeing people like Bodus, and Muggles and Mudbloods and blood-traitors and dirty half-bloods, as human, or we’ll never stop being shaken. Our fathers killed every day, and they’ve made things so much better for wizards because they did what needed to be done, even if they looked like monsters doing it.”

“I know, Theo,” said Draco. “That’s what Initiation is going to teach us, right? To be harsh, to kill the people who deserve to be killed, to—what was it, what did they say in their—our—anthem?”

“To break, shatter, and destroy those that defy us and our Lord.” Theo whispered it like it was a prayer.


Theo squeezed Draco’s hand. “One day, we’ll be the best Skulls in the school, the two of us.” When he said it, not only did it sound like a promise, it sounded like a prophecy. “We’ll be up there on that stage, with the Golds. And nothing will shake us ever again, and we’ll remember our first meeting and laugh about how scared we were.”

Draco squeezed Theo’s hand back. A few minutes later, the horde of Skulls around Bodus dispersed, finished with their fun. Draco glimpsed a mangled and torn corpse, which no longer resembled anything human, before someone threw a blanket over it and dragged it into a discreet corner.

Adolphus Lestrange was still standing, calm as ever, on the raised platform at the front. “You are dismissed—most of you, at least. The new Initiates, if they still wish to join us after seeing exactly what we do to traitors, will stay to begin the first Trial of their Initiation.”

Most of the Skulls filed out of the dungeon then, chattering and laughing. Soon, only the Initiates, Adolphus, and a smattering of Silver and Bronze Skulls stayed behind, most likely to watch the Trial.
Sebastian and Nathaniel lingered near the platform, among those who stayed. Now that the crowd had cleared somewhat, Draco could feel them watching him in the same creepy way they always did, but he kept his gaze unfocused, not wanting to reveal that he had sensed their presence.

“Initiates,” said Adolphus, “move forward now.”

The new Initiates followed his instructions, marching in two neat lines towards the front. Draco raised his head as he approached the platform, caught Sebastian’s eye for one horrible second, and quickly dropped his head again.

Adolphus’s call rang out. “Stop!”

They stopped at once, trying not look at each other. Adolphus jumped off the platform, landing with a thud and somehow managing to look elegant while doing it. He paced in front of them, his hands crossed behind his back.

“Most of you,” he began in a low, toneless voice, “have been sponsored by a Skull, or an older Initiate, while some of you are here because of the fame of your family name. However, at this moment, you are all equals, worthy of absolutely no respect. Right now, you have the standing of a common-born dirty blood.”

Draco scowled. What utter nonsense—

“You scoff, but you won’t still be scoffing at the end of this first Trial,” growled Adolphus. “Today, only about half of you will prove yourselves worthy. The other half of you will show that you are weak, all bark and no bite. And we’ll see how many of you are still proud of yourselves for merely being born with the right last name.”

Adolphus snapped his fingers, and a Silver Skull hurried forward, a small container in his hands. He presented it to Adolphus, kneeling. Adolphus took the plain wooden box and waved the Silver away, then turned back to the Initiates. With gentle fingers, Adolphus opened the box and tilted it forward to show them its contents. Inside were about twenty tiny bottles, equal to the number of Initiates.

“This potion will aid you in your first Trial tonight,” said Adolphus fervently, stroking one of the bottles. “Effringo, Elido, Exscindo.”

“That means break, shatter, and destroy in Latin,” whispered Theo, widening his eyes.

“Correct.” Adolphus removed a bottle and held it up in the light. The murky black potion within it swirled. “As you all surely know, a Boggart is a creature that turns into your greatest fear, and can easily be dispelled with laughter.” His tone had started out pleasant enough, but now it hardened with deepest disdain. “It is a weak creature, a useless creature. You will never learn to confront your fears practicing on it. Laughter fixes nothing, and will never help you overcome your fears. Happiness merely covers fear up, sweeps it under a dusty rug. That fear will come back to bite you the very second you stop smiling. This is why the Light failed, why they crumbled beneath the Dark Lord’s forces when they lost the slim hope that powered them. Do you know what does combat fear, my dear Initiates?”

Nobody answered. Adolphus hadn’t expected them to, it seemed, because he went on talking, his eyes shining.

“Rage. Hatred. Ambition. That instinctual urge inside each and every one of you to crush, to conquer, to eradicate everything that has ever scared you. We are Skulls. We break, shatter, and
destroy our enemies, our victims, and our fears.”

*Just like they did to Bodus*, thought Draco, recalling, unwillingly, the twisted lump of flesh the boy’s body now resembled.

Adolphus handed the box of bottles to the Initiate at the end of the line, who picked a bottle from it and passed the box down. When the box reached Draco, he took out his bottle with slightly quivering fingers.

“Our Trial tonight will require you to break, shatter, and destroy your fears,” continued Adolphus. “Drinking the potion *Effringo, Elido, Exscindo* will put you in a nightmare simulation, a world full of your worst fears and memories. It will not release you until you have conquered your fears. You have exactly half an hour until I feed you the antidote, forcing you awake if you haven’t torn yourself out of your nightmare by then. If you have to be fed the antidote, it means you are nothing but a sniveling child, despite your illustrious heritage or family name. It means that you still have a long way to go to become a real Skull.”

Adolphus shot Draco a sharp glance, confirming that his scoffing scowl earlier had not gone unnoticed.

“Some of you will fail this first Trial, and some of you will pass with flying colors. But no matter what side of competence you are on, each of you still has weaknesses. For the next three years, you will be trained, and every single weakness you have will be beaten out of you. You will be trained to destroy anything that threatens you, that defies you, instead of running away from it. And if you have not conquered your fears by the time Initiation comes to a close, at the end of your third year, you will have lost the opportunity to become a Skull.”

The Initiates stared at him in silence.

“Now,” said Adolphus pleasantly. “*Drink.*”

They fumbled for a moment, hastily uncorking their bottles. Slowly, tremulously, they all drank.

And then all twenty of them fell to the ground, writhing and screaming.

The first Trial had begun.

***

Millicent Bulstrode stood in a world of color, beauty, and grace, but she was gray, drab, and gawkish. And the world laughed at her, every person in it—man, woman, girl, and boy, all united in their derision—held up a mirror to show her what she looked like, never letting her forget it, not even for a single second.

“*Who would ever want that thing?*”

“*Mummy, look, look! Is that a troll?*”

“*Does this girl do nothing but eat?*”

“I dare you to kiss her for fifty galleons. That’s not worth it? Fine, make it a hundred galleons.”

A faceless boy materialized in front of her, an early, innocent crush of hers. They’d been ten, and were sitting at a table at some boring adult party. Millicent had worn a dress made of fine silk. Her brown hair was braided with red ribbons. She was excited. She wanted to tell him how she felt, was
sure he’d feel the same way.

He wrinkled his nose when he looked at her, his gaze gliding over her plain, wide, oily face, down her dress, which rested awkwardly over her lumpy body. She realized, in that same moment, that nobody could ever find her beautiful.

He laughed in her face when she confessed, then told his friends, who gave him pitying looks. **BREAK HIM,** something hissed in her head. She pulled back her fist, and smashed it into his face, relishing in the blood that splattered over her knuckles. He fell to the floor, covering his nose, eyes wide in terror, blubbering useless apologies. **Shatter him, shatter them all,** the voice howled. **Make them as ugly as you are, make them all fear you if they won’t ever want you.**

Millicent raised her fist again and destroyed, and her nightmare world splintered, cracked, and fell away.

***

Five-year-old Theodore Nott barricaded himself in the closet and clamped his hand over his mouth. He couldn’t let himself make any noise, or his father would notice him, would open the door and drag him out.

Eight-year-old Nathaniel and Sebastian were screaming and sobbing outside, begging, pleading, calling their dead mother’s name—**anything** that would get **him** to stop. Theo knew what their father was doing to them. Cursing their skin into lumps and carving their faces up, one hand holding a wand and the other an enchanted knife, the cuts of which could not be undone by magic or medicine, slowly but surely tearing their sanity to bloody shreds along with their faces.

**“Hide, Theo,”** Sebastian had whispered, moments before their father came lumbering into their room, smelling of alcohol and sweat, in an unholy rage after the Dark Lord tortured him for yet another failure.

**“We’ll distract him,”** said Nathaniel, pushing him into the closet and giving him a fleeting kiss on the forehead.

Theo shut himself into the closet, and just as he did, his father kicked down their bedroom door and Nathaniel’s and Sebastian’s screams and cries began. Theo felt his throat and eyes burn as if he were screaming and crying along with them.

**“We won’t ever let him hurt you, little brother.”** Sebastian.

**“He’ll have to carve us up a million times before he touches you.”** Nathaniel.

Years later, their voices grew resentful, bitter.

**“Do you see what we sacrifice, every day we make him torture us instead of you?”**

**“You’ll owe us forever, Theo.”**

A shrill voice blossomed in his head, a voice that washed over him like a dark wave, carrying every fragment of fury, of desperation, of helplessness he had ever felt in his life. **Break him, shatter him, destroy him—**

Theo opened the door. He wouldn’t hide ever again. The room in this nightmare world danced with grinning, evil-eyed shadows, the biggest of which was their father’s. The man straightened, his hands drenched with his sons’ blood, and leapt.
Theo ran at him, the voice in his head chanting. *KILL HIM. KILL HIM. KILL HIM.* The shadows gathered around him, narrowing into a sharp, deadly tip, a surreal and giant knife that impaled the man who had impaled so many others. His father fell to the floor, convulsing as the shrieking shadows feasted on his body, dragging him back to the hell he came from, and Theo felt the delicious bloodlust overwhelm him. He laughed, laughed, laughed so hard that he had to clutch his sides as the nightmare melted away.

*This is vengeance.* But no, it wasn’t.

It was justice, and Theo had executed it, and he would continue to kill those who deserved to be killed.

***

Draco sat at the dinner table, deep within Malfoy Manor. His father sat across from him, his thin fingers clenching and unclenching as if they longed to be around Draco’s throat. The afternoon light shone through the window, making the glass tables and chairs glitter and sending darting reflections across the wall.

“How many times have you disappointed me, Draco?”

“Soft like a girl.”

“All you do is whine and complain, you spoiled brat. I should have used a cane to raise you, like Nott does with his sons.”

Draco stumbled off his chair, tears streaming down his face. He apologized over and over again as the dream world spun around him, promising he’d do better, promising that he’d be worthy.

“Don’t cry in front of me! CRUCIO!”

The pain felt like a hundred hot wires pressed against his skin, a thousand curved nails embedded in his flesh, a million serrated shards shredding his nerves—

*Fight him,* growled a voice.

The Cruciates Curse kept him insensate, glued his mouth shut, shuttered his courage. *I CAN’T FIGHT I CAN’T I CAN’T GET ME OUT GET ME OUT!*

*Fine,* snarled the voice. The dining hall of Malfoy Manor swirled and rippled like a disturbed lake, and Draco fell out of his home into another as the nightmare world shifted to accommodate him.

Nott Manor.

Draco began to run at once, knowing what was coming, seeing their tall, muscled figures and grotesque faces in the distance.

DON’T RUN. FIGHT. FIGHT. BREAK, SHATTER, DESTROY.

Sebastian and Nathaniel ran after him, laughing, describing in detail what exactly they would do to him when they caught him. Draco kept running, but the house moved with him, trapping him in the same room he started in.

The Nott drawing room, the twins’ favorite place to torment him.

Draco collapsed, panting, his energy exhausted, and the fireplace burst to life, its flames
resembling writhing serpents. The twins crept into the room, completing the horrible picture. Sebastian moved first, like he always did, and pinned Draco to the wall. “It’s too warm in here, my pretty little bird,” he whispered, his fingers slipping under Draco’s shirt, his skin almost hotter than the fire.

**DESTROY HIM, DRACO!**

Draco couldn’t move. He couldn’t speak. He went limp, his mind frozen, and the voice battered against his skull, desperate to jolt him into action. Nathaniel watched from a few feet away, eyes dark and lidded. Sebastian moved against Draco, moaning his name, pressing his cracked, cut lips to Draco’s neck and biting until he drew blood, until his shirt was lying on the floor, until all Draco could feel was sweat and heat and skin and a dull sort of pain in his chest.

*You don’t fight it because you want it,* sneered the voice, tinted with disgust. *You like it.*

*Take me out,* whimpered Draco, unable to move, unable to breathe. *Take me away, I can’t… I can’t…*

*This is your final chance,* promised the voice.

The nightmare world whirled around him again, reassembling itself at top speed, and Draco found himself on the Hogwarts Express, in a private compartment.

No, that wasn’t right. There was someone else with him. A boy with messy black hair, hiding his face behind a newspaper.

Draco could feel the boy’s magic pulsing like a living thing. He emitted it like the sun emitted light, and he was a simmering, white-hot core of power, dangerous to touch, dangerous to approach, but so seductive, so alluring…

*No!* screamed the voice. *He will burn you if you touch him, Draco! Destroy him!*

Draco reached for him, enraptured, and the boy flipped the newspaper down as if he sensed Draco coming. His eyes blazed bright green, and he gave Draco a look of such hatred, of such violent rage, that Draco knew he would be vaporized by the boy’s devastating power right on the spot.

But when the blast came, he didn’t even care.

***

“Those of you just waking up, you failed the first Trial.”

Draco jerked awake, gasping. Adolphus stood over him, holding the antidote and shaking his head. “You were under the potion for thirty whole minutes, and couldn’t fight your way out of it. You failed to turn your fear into rage and destruction.”

“No,” whispered Draco. He looked around, noticing that about ten of the twenty Initiates were standing up while the other half lay on the ground, just now coming to. Vince and Greg were groaning on the floor next to Draco, but Millicent and Theo leaned against the wall, staring at him as if they couldn’t believe that he wasn’t with them.

“There must be some sort of mistake,” Draco continued as he struggled to his feet, a haze of panic blurring his vision. “I’m a Malfoy, there’s no way—” He swallowed, holding back tears, remembering that terrible nightmare world, and how every fear in it made his mind go silly and useless.
“That’s right,” choked out an Initiate lying on the ground, blinking back tears of his own. “You’re just like the rest of us failures now, Malfoy, aren’t you?”

“You SHUT THE HELL UP!” Draco yelled, jumping at him.

Theo grabbed his arms, holding him back. “Draco, calm down. He’s not worth the effort.”

“Let go,” breathed Draco, praying for patience. “Let go of me, Theo. You piss me the hell off. You don’t understand anything about me, you’ve never understood because you’re so bloody perfect at everything!”

Theo let him go like Draco had burned him, his lip trembling. A second later, his eyes hardened, and he stepped away. “Have it your way, then.”

Draco stood there for a second, breathing hard. He’d failed the most important test in his life so far, just as he’d failed the countless tests his father had imposed on him throughout his childhood. That was what Draco was, a failure.

The Initiates who hadn’t passed the Trial started to get up. Greg was sniffling, and Vince was rubbing his eyes.

“Look at your fellow Initiates,” said Adolphus. “Not only look, but also observe. Observe who is strong, and who is weak.”

"WEAK WEAK WEAK," Draco’s mind screamed at him.

Adolphus grinned. “Those of you failed, you will have to retake this Trial before you finish Initiation. Study hard, children.”

Somebody laughed. It sounded like Millicent.

Adolphus snapped his fingers again, calling forth his Silver Skull servant. The Skull presented him with another wooden box.

“Your second Trial is called the Hunt, and it is not so much of a Trial as it is an experience. It will not be confined to a single evening, like the first was. It will train you to break, shatter, and destroy those who defy you, and our Lord. Inside this box are slips of parchment with the names of students in first and second year who are not Pureblooded, or whose families have not pledged allegiance to the Dark Lord. They are defiant, and they are threats to our cause. You will be the Hunter, and the student on the slip of parchment you pick will be your first Target. You will… teach them exactly what happens to those who resist our Lord.”

Adolphus paused, and nodded at Sebastian and Nathaniel. “The Nott twins’ first Targets committed suicide, so they had to get new ones. Of course, those new ones committed suicide too, so we decided to stop giving them Targets, or Hogwarts wouldn’t have any students left.” There was a light chuckle from the onlookers, the older Skulls who had stayed to watch the Initiation. “What they did is the perfect example of what it means to break, shatter, and destroy someone, so thoroughly that they can’t go on living.”

Draco shuddered visibly when the twins were mentioned, their nightmare versions still vivid in his mind. His dinner rose in his stomach, and he tried to shove the vision—that was all it had been, a potion-induced vision, and he needed to get over it, because it hadn’t been real—out of his mind.

“Of course, few of you are as talented as our Nott twins, and we don’t expect you all to push your Targets that far. After all, traitors have more mettle than we give them credit for, and driving them
to death is a far more difficult task than Sebastian and Nathaniel made it look,” continued Adolphus. “All the Hunt requires you to do is to break, shatter, and destroy them. In any and all ways that you can imagine. Despite your status as Skull Initiates, you are still superior to most of the students at Hogwarts, and this year you will show them exactly how much power you hold over them.”

Draco felt himself nodding. He could do this. He could make someone’s life difficult, even if he couldn’t kill someone yet. His Target would be someone who deserved it, like most of the dirty-blooded and traitorous that roamed the school. Theo had told him that he needed to stop seeing these people as human, and this was a good place to start. Soon Draco would be as brutal as the rest of the Skulls, capable of exterminating a filthy traitor like Bodus without flinching.

Adolphus passed the box around. The name Millicent picked from the box read *Ron Weasley*. Theo’s slip of parchment read *Neville Longbottom*. Draco waited, his heart pounding, for the box to come to him.

Seconds later, it did. Draco picked a slip and held it up to the light to read it.

His heart sunk.

*Harry Potter.*
On the morning of his first day of classes, Harry stared down at his bowl of cereal. He was at breakfast, and the mail owls were currently fluttering through the Great Hall, hooting and leaving feathers everywhere.

His classmates talked animatedly, making fast friends, and moments like this one reminded Harry of his own complete social ineptness. Ron was already buddy-buddy with both Seamus Finnigan and Dean Thomas, and was holding court with several other first year boys at their table. Harry tried to inject himself into the conversation on several occasions, but he found that he was not very good at talking to people his own age—or people at all, really. Whatever comments he made would get talked over, or ignored, or nodded at and then forgotten.

People simply did not find him interesting, or charismatic, or funny, or any of those things he had wanted to be when he arrived at Hogwarts. Back in Godric’s Hollow, he hadn’t had any friends, most likely because of his… situation. The Muggles had sensed something was off about the Potters and avoided them. Meanwhile, Godric’s Hollow’s wizarding population was very well aware Lily had a Death Eater benefactor, the infamous Severus Snape, and as a result they shunned her and Harry even more than the Muggles did.

Harry had spent too many years in isolation, and now there was some inherent flaw in his personality that made people forget him and look over him. Harry needed to identify it and correct it. Was he too cold? Too serious? Too oblivious to social cues like when to shut up and when to talk? Was it the way he looked? Was it his expressions?

“My older sister told me the scariest professor of them all is Deputy Headmaster Dolohov. You know, his nickname’s the Gentleman Bastard,” said Anthony Goldstein, nodding at the staff table.

“That’s fitting,” said Dean with a snort. “With that stupid top hat he wears, and that cane of his.”

“It kind of looks like a bowler to me, not a top hat,” Harry said to Dean.

Dean stared at him. “You’re… Harold, right? I guess it could be a bowler. What’s a bowler, anyway?”

Gleeful he was finally being asked a question, Harry seized the chance to explain. “My name’s Harry, not Harold, by the way. I already said it like three times—were you even paying attention?” Dean looked stricken, but Harry could not fathom why, so he went on. “And the difference is that a top hat has a flat top, and a bowler has a round top. If you look closely, the top of Dolohov’s hat is round, so—"

“What makes him a bastard?” interrupted Kevin Entwhistle, as if Harry did not exist. “He must be a highborn Pureblood, right, if You-Know-Who made him Deputy Headmaster?”

Harry scowled and went back to his breakfast. Meanwhile, looking quite relieved that he didn’t have to listen to Harry talk anymore, Dean turned his attention back to the main conversation.
“It doesn’t have anything to do with whether his parents were married or not,” said Ron, answering before Anthony could. “It’s just because he’s a bastard, an arse. You get what I mean?”

“Yeah, but what does he do?” snapped Harry. “What makes him a bastard, that’s the question that Kevin was trying to ask, I think—”

“I was just getting to that, mate,” said Ron, giving him a sidelong glance. “No need to go off like that.”

“No, I—I wasn’t—” stammered Harry, wondering, miserably, where he’d gone wrong this time.

The atmosphere suddenly became very awkward and tense. Dean snickered into his plate. Anthony cleared his throat. Harry returned to his cereal, no longer hungry.

***

It was Harry’s first lesson.

Amycus Carrow paced at the front of the Dark Arts classroom, his footsteps heavy and his gait mismatched. He was a squat, pig-faced sort of man with a jaw that looked like it had been broken multiple times, then healed by multiple amateurs, each amateur a poorer healer than the last. “Dark Arts is the most fearsome and fascinating of all subjects taught here at Hogwarts,” he grunted, prowling around the room and smacking his wand into his palm to complete the ominous picture. “In this class, you will learn how to completely annihilate your enemy, in the most creative and twisted ways possible.”

Harry clasped his hands in his lap and looked up, his interest captured at last. He noticed that Draco Malfoy, who sat a few seats diagonally from him, was watching Carrow with rapt attention, his lips parted slightly. Then Harry asked himself why he cared what the blond brat was doing.

Carrow did not say anything else. Instead, he took out a small glass ball, one that fit perfectly in his palm, and held it in the air. The ball glittered with refracted rainbow light, mesmerizing the first years, who all oohed and ahhed and leaned forward in their seats. Carrow grinned, and tapped the ball with his wand. At once, a vision blazed over the entire class, emanating from the little ball like Muggle projections Harry had heard of, but ten times more immersive.

The students screamed as they plummeted straight into an inferno. Harry choked and doubled over as smoke burned his throat and nose. Giant serpents made of flames writhed and whirled around him, growing in size and speed as the seconds passed, morphing into snarling chimaeras and dragons with spiny wings. The fire rose and fell like a great tide, sentient and intent on their destruction. It blazed through the classroom, toxifying the air. Harry could smell hair and skin burning, and the floor beneath his feet seemed to have fallen away, had transformed into an endless abyss of fire—

With a woosh and a click, the ball sucked the vision back in. Harry gulped in mouthfuls of clean, fresh air. Everyone seemed to be winded, and several of his classmates had fallen out of their seats and were curled up on the ground, Neville among them. Draco kept touching his neck, as if he was assuring himself he could breathe now.

“Fiendfyre,” hissed Carrow. “Extremely difficult to control, but extremely destructive.”

And then he tapped the ball again, and again, and again, submerging the class in horrifying vision after horrifying vision. They saw once-verdant fields charred into wastelands, entire armies of people killed only to rise again as the undead, icy lakes filled with the blackest poison, flesh-
peeling rain falling from unnaturally blood-red sky. Carrow flipped through them all, as if he were flipping through television channels, a smile of sadistic pleasure on his face as he watched the first years scream and squirm anew with each vision.

Somehow, Harry had ended up on the ground, near the corner of the room. His desk was about ten feet away, so he wasn’t too sure how he’d gotten from there to here. He had probably fled from his desk during the vision of the Inferi rising, which had seemed so disturbingly real to him that he’d forgotten it was an illusion and had run like a madman for a good five seconds, before he’d snapped back to reality and sat down where he stood to avoid knocking himself out on a wall or a desk.

Others hadn’t been so fortunate. Neville was cradling a bruised arm, Ron, Seamus, and Dean had ended up in tangle of limbs, Susan Bones and Ernie Macmillan were both crying softly, and Draco Malfoy was dabbing at a bleeding cut on his forehead. His friend, the brown-haired boy Harry did not know the name of, clicked his tongue at it and tried to wipe it off with his sleeve.

“Ouch! Get off—what the?—I thought you weren’t talking to me, Theo.”

“Stay still, or it’ll bleed more! How did you manage to cut it so bad?”

“Last I checked, you weren’t my bloody mother!”

“If you’d just tell me what I did wrong, what I did that made you so mad at me—”

“Oh, where do I start?”

“You’re not being fair, Draco.”

“Let me tell you what’s not fair.”

“Merlin, I don’t know why I even bother with you. You’re an ungrateful—”

Harry found their hissed argument utterly absorbing and wanted to continue eavesdropping, but Carrow’s next words plunged everyone into silence.

“Few of you will ever be able to cast spells as powerful as the ones you have seen today,” said Carrow, resuming his pacing at the front. “Few of you will ever effectively utilize your anger and hatred to cause destruction. Many of you will leave each class in tears, horrified and shaken”—he sent a sneer that nobody missed toward where Susan Bones and Ernie Macmillan were sniffling—“and many others will never master the Dark Arts spells taught in this room, secure in their righteous belief that the Dark Arts are evil and better left unknown and unstudied.”

Carrow paused his speech but kept walking, one of his feet thudding on the ground harder than the other. He scoured over the first years with his eyes, then twirled his wand, raking up the tension.

“But some of you”—Carrow’s voice was barely a hiss now, and Harry leaned forward subconsciously—“will flourish here. Some of you will learn to raise armies of the dead, summon waves of fire and poison, scorch down cities and mountains. And you will be the ones who win. Study history, children. Some of your parents fought hard to keep the Dark Arts out of Britain, to banish it from the world. Study how thoroughly they failed, and study how the Dark Lord won, and has continued winning, right up to this very day. And then, once you have studied the history of our country, once you have considered every argument, decide whether you will take and use the weapons and knowledge handed to you, or shy away from them. You need not all follow your parents into despair and death, into sin and impurity. You may choose a different side—the side that has won.”
Ron’s ears were purpling rapidly, and Susan Bones shook her head, her cheeks still stained with tears. But others, like Terry Boot and Lisa Turpin, stared at Carrow with wide, beseeching eyes. The Elites, meanwhile, had not looked away from Carrow since the moment his speech had begun, and now some of them were nodding. Draco Malfoy, however, was quiet and still.

“I will watch you all closely during these lessons,” said Carrow, his focus lingering on the students who showed the most interest as if to prove his point, including Harry. “I will report straight to the Skull King, the leader of our student body and the keeper of discipline. Impress me with your talent and determination, and you might just find yourself recruited into the mightiest organization in the school. Dark Arts is power, and those of you who recognize that will find the prestige and glory you seek among the Skulls. This is your first class of the year, but you will soon learn that every student at Hogwarts is not equal, and rightly so. You may scream at the unfairness of it all, may resent the privileges the faculty gives students of the purest blood and loyalty. But those who complain and beg, who yearn for the past, will accomplish nothing, will be doomed to a life of being trampled on and abused, both within the walls of this school and outside it. But if you fight, and practice, and observe, and learn, and you will find your life a great deal easier. Welcome the Dark Arts with open arms, and you will survive here at Hogwarts and in the new, great world the Dark Lord is building.”

With that, Carrow flicked his wand, and the word Secco appeared on the chalkboard, accompanied by a picture of a hand, which moved to display a complicated wand movement. Harry took a deep breath, not sure if he was more disappointed that the speech had ended or more excited that they were finally going to be learning a spell.

“All we will have time for this lesson is a demonstration. The Cutting Curse can be destructive enough to carve out your victim’s intestines or, if you are weak and wavering, barely capable of giving that victim a paper cut. It can be a debilitating weapon in battle, or at the very least a distraction for your opponent.”

Carrow grinned that horrible grin again, his beady gaze now pinned on the quivering Susan Bones. “Of course, I need someone to… help me with my demonstration. You seem very opinionated about the Dark Arts, Miss Bones. Perhaps you’d like to volunteer to be our victim today?”

Susan shook her head and scooted her chair back. It screeched.

Carrow pulled his lips back, revealing pointy teeth. “I insist, Miss Bones.”

Susan stared desperately at the girls sitting near her, but all they did was stare back at her, their eyes full of pity. At last, her legs shaking almost violently, she stood up and made her way to the front of the classroom. Harry couldn’t help but feel a pang of contempt. Why had she been so obvious, why had she cried, why had she let Carrow smell her fear? Breaking her had been so effortless.

Susan now stood in front of the classroom. She could not look at Carrow, which turned out to be her undoing. She didn’t get any warning when he struck. “Seco!”

A thick, deep cut split the skin from Susan’s wrist to her shoulder. Blood gushed out of the wound, and Susan’s shrill scream tore through the room, making the hair on the back of Harry’s neck rise. He gripped the edge of his seat so hard that his knuckles went white, and Susan’s screams quickly turned into wretched, weak sobs.

***

Carrow, cruel as he was, was not an anomaly. Their History of Magic teacher, Larissa Rakley,
punished any students who failed to pay attention while she was lecturing by using Blood Quills. Dean Thomas was her first victim, but in the first half an hour both Ernie Macmillan and Mandy Brocklehurst had joined him in writing the words *I will not be distracted* on the back of their hands in their own blood. By the end of the period, nobody dared to glance away from her for even a second, afraid of inciting her wrath. Of course, the Elites Vincent Crabbe and Gregory Goyle had both fallen asleep, and Rakley had not even given them a second look.

Their Herbology professor, Ginger Zinnia, had made the first years clean the teeth of a Venomous Tenctacula, though she separated the Elites from the rest of the class beforehand and permitted them to relax and talk amongst themselves for the period. Draco Malfoy—Harry noticed, with great bitterness, that not a single strand of his hair was out of place—and his Elite friends left the greenhouses clean, unbitten, and chattering happily, whereas Harry and the rest of the students trudged out after them, covered head to foot in mud and nursing numerous wounds.

And the blatant discrimination didn’t stop in the classroom. In fact, it got worse.

On the way to their first class on Tuesday, Harry saw a clique of older Bronze Skulls—seventh years, maybe—gang up on a small fifth-year girl in the middle of a crowded corridor. For a few minutes the five Skulls catcalled her and blocked her way out of the corridor, but when she took out her wand and gave the Skull who had tried to grope her a pig’s tail, it killed their amusement at once. Harry and the group of non-Elite first years he was with watched, horrified, as the Skulls froze the girl with a *Petrificus Totalus* and dragged her into a broom closet.

The first years looked at each other, white-faced, all of them wondering why nobody in the packed corridor was running into the closet to rescue the girl from her masked captors. None of the older students walking past the scene had defended the girl before, either, back when the Skulls were first leering and pawing at her. They hadn’t even stopped walking to watch the commotion like the first years had, instead preferring to keep their eyes averted and their backs turned, as if they’d rather not confirm that it was happening right under their noses, as if they’d rather not admit to themselves that they were cowards for not doing anything to stop it.

Parvati Patil ran to get a teacher, but came back five minutes later, miserably telling the rest of them the two adults she had asked for help had both refused to interfere. The professors had informed her that the Skulls were in charge of discipline, and if they had taken the girl into a closet to “punish” her, it was for a good reason.

“Good reason, my arse,” said Ron, storming past the closet as the grunting noises coming from within intensified. The rest of them followed, muttering angrily, all of them aware and also ashamed of the fact that they were too scared of the seventh-year Skulls to do anything to help the girl.

*Nobody else did anything, either*, thought Harry, but he was beginning to understand why. He wondered how many days, months, or years it would take for him to stop caring, to become as jaded as the older students. Incidents like this were commonplace, a bleak but unchangeable fact of life at Hogwarts.

And what drove this new lesson home like nothing else had so far happened on Wednesday morning at breakfast. The first years in Harry’s group had just arrived, and were eating and minding their own business, when Neville’s glass of pumpkin juice shattered. He suddenly fell to the ground, convulsing and clutching his throat, his eyes bulging.

For one long agonizing moment, nobody did anything. Harry just stared at Neville choking on the ground a few feet from him, too much in shock to understand what he was seeing. Then, snapping back to sanity, he slid off his seat and fell to his knees so he was at the right height to slip an arm
under Neville’s neck, intending to prevent him from cracking his head open on the ground as he convulsed.

Neville’s eyes were wide and bloodshot. He raised a trembling finger and pointed at the table.

“What?” said Harry. Everything seemed to be moving in slow motion around him. The sounds from the Great Hall around him had dulled, as if everything in the world had narrowed to a single, blazing point in time, and that point was just him and Neville and whatever he was pointing at on the table.

Neville made a strangled noise, and kept pointing at the table, and Harry opened his mouth again, but—

Someone shoved him out of the way. Harry vaguely registered that it was Percy Weasley and a few older students. Percy and his friends lifted Neville and carried him straight out of the Great Hall, not even wasting a single second to inform Harry what the hell was going on, though it was likely even they didn’t know.

When Harry spoke, his voice was hoarse. “What—what happened?” he asked, to nobody in particular, suddenly aware of the fact that he was sitting on the ground.

The other first years stared at him, mouths gaping, still unmoving. It must have only been ten or so seconds since Neville first started convulsing, but it had felt like a good hour to Harry, who was exhausted and shaking.

“Merlin,” said Ron finally, standing up to help Harry to his feet.

Harry pushed him off at once. “I’m fine, let go.” He nearly stumbled back to the ground the moment Ron released him, his legs weak, but Ron caught him just in time and raised his eyebrows. So, without complaining this time, Harry let Ron maneuver him to the table, and when the two of them were seated again, everyone burst into conversation as if some switch had been flipped.

“What the hell—”

“Did you see his eyes?”

“What the hell?”

“What happened to him, all of a sudden—”

“What the HELL?”

“D’you think it was an allergic reaction—?”

An allergic reaction. Something was pounding inside Harry’s head like a small trapped animal, screaming at him to understand something, to concentrate—then something clicked like a lock.

Lavender Brown was reaching for the jug of pumpkin juice sitting on the same part of the table Neville had been pointing at during his convulsions. And Neville had dropped a glass of pumpkin juice, the remains of which were splattered all over the floor.

Harry lunged, not even thinking through a plan. He knocked the jug over, spilling its contents down the table.

The conversation died, and Lavender squealed.
“Poison,” Harry panted, then collapsed back into his seat. “Someone has to tell Percy that’s what it is, someone should go after them—”

“They must’ve taken Neville to the Hospital Wing,” said Ron, recovering from Harry’s outburst the fastest. “We can trust the matron, Madam Pomfrey.” He lowered his voice to a whisper and leaned closer to Harry. “She’s not like the rest of the professors. She pledged her allegiance to You-Know-Who so she could continue to protect the students.”

“Why did they help Neville?” asked Harry, remembering how nobody had come to the aid of Broom Closet Girl.

“I dunno, mate,” said Ron. “I guess Percy didn’t think it had anything to do with the Skulls, that Neville had just had an accident or something. If Percy knew it was poison that the Skulls put there, I doubt he’d’ve helped. Nobody messes with the Skulls’ victims.”

“Do you know for sure it was the Skulls, then?” said Harry, looking around suspiciously. The Skulls at end of their table had barely paid attention to Neville, and they hadn’t tried to stop Percy from rescuing him. In fact, all of it had gone down so fast that few others outside the circle of first years and the older students sitting closest to them seemed to have noticed that anything out of the ordinary had happened at all. Nobody else at any of the other tables had fallen into a convulsing fit, either; only the first years at Harry’s table seemed to have been targeted.

“Who else could it’ve been?” said Seamus, rolling his eyes. “Probably a fun prank for them. Poison the pumpkin juice, put on another show at breakfast!”

“But we’re first years. Why would they care about us?” said Harry, unable to get over the fact that the Skulls hadn’t noticed Neville, as they surely would have if they had actually been after him. He looked around again, seeking clues, trying to find who could’ve been the culprit. It would have to be someone sitting far away who had noticed that Neville had been poisoned, someone who was likely watching them right now—

Harry gave a start as his eyes met a very scared-looking Draco Malfoy’s. Draco, who was sitting a whole two tables away, broke the gaze immediately, his cheeks reddening. The dark-haired boy, Theo, whispered something to him, and Draco snapped something back. A big girl sitting with them sniggered.

Harry turned back to Ron and the rest, his head throbbing with fury. “It’s them,” he spat out. “Three of the Elites. Malfoy and that boy and that girl, they’re staring at us, and Malfoy was being really obvious about it too. There’s no reason for them to be looking. They’re way too far away to have noticed anything.”

Ron let out a gasp, his eyes clearing with understanding.

“What?” asked Harry impatiently.

“Hunting Season,” Ron said, and Anthony Goldstein and Terry Boot, both of whom had older siblings at Hogwarts, groaned loudly at this announcement.

“What?”

“Look,” began Ron, but Anthony interrupted.

“This is bad, really bad,” he said, rubbing his forehead. “My sister told me about it all, told me how Skull Initiation works. Well, the rumors about it, at least.”
“Spit it out,” said Harry, who wished they would all stop dancing around the bush and get to the point.

“To become a Skull,” began Ron, clenching his fists, “you need to pass these tests of some kind. Those of us on the outside don’t really know the details, but we can guess, since we’re affected by all of it. Basically, one of the tests makes the future Skulls—Initiates, they’re called, I think—hunt down other students and bully them, and make their life miserable, basically. It’s called the Hunt. Each Initiate gets a student to mess with, and I’m assuming some of the Elites in our year are Initiates right now, and some of us at this table are their targets, which is why they poisoned our pumpkin juice.”

“Doesn’t look they cared about the rest of us drinking it, either,” said Seamus, slamming his hand on the table. “Who knows if Neville was a target? He was just the first one to drink the juice.”

“They could’ve killed us,” said Harry, thinking of Neville’s bulging eyes and writhing body. “Is that what they wanted? To kill us?”

Ron shrugged, distressed. “It could’ve been any kind of poison, not just a fatal one. But I’m sure there’s been deaths before. I doubt it’s against the rules. This is Hogwarts, after all, and they’re the Skulls.”

“It could be any of us,” said Lavender Brown, her voice shaking. “We don’t know who they’re after.”

“I think we can safely assume that they’re after all of us,” said Harry, his tone deeply sarcastic, gesturing at the spilt pumpkin juice.

The rage caged inside of him was swelling in strength now, rattling its bars and snarling. What had happened to Neville could just as easily have happened to him, and he wouldn’t have been able to defend himself, wouldn’t even have seen it coming.

All his dreams, his entire future, snatched right out from beneath his feet because of a stupid game the baby Skulls wanted to play? Hannah Abbott, killed, for what? Susan Bones, suffering from blood loss in the Hospital Wing, for what? Neville Longbottom, injured and poisoned, for what?

Harry wouldn’t have it. He wouldn’t take it. He wouldn’t harden himself like the older students, wouldn’t let this school, this hell, make him feel powerless.

“Don’t let them break you, Harry,” his mother had told him.

He was going to destroy Draco Malfoy. No, he was going to destroy all the Skulls.

If they wanted a Hunt, they’d fucking get one.

***

For the next few days, Harry plotted, and plotted some more. He stayed up all night reading about Dark curses in the library and practicing them on nearby chairs when Madam Pince’s back was turned. The spell he had planned for Draco Malfoy was particularly vicious (it involved intense vomiting), and he promised himself that he would be the one to strike first. He would not go on the defensive. He would drive Malfoy over the edge, over a cliff, before he let himself be pushed back even a few steps.

Transfiguration on Thursday was a welcome break from all the madness, which was ironic because their professor, Regulus Black, seemed borderline mad himself. Regulus spent their first lesson just
nattering about stuff he liked to do in his free time. And that would have been somewhat normal on its own, if it hadn’t been punctuated by Regulus stuttering and constantly looking behind his back, as if he feared someone was watching him. He jumped about a foot in the air at a loud noise, and nearly fainted when Theodore Nott—Harry had finally learned who he was after several roll calls, and was not emboldened upon learning his last name was Nott—asked him a question. Professor Black ended the lesson by turning into a yapping little black dog, true to his name, and waved them out of the class, still twitchy.

Harry wondered what his problem was, but was at least grateful that Regulus hadn’t yelled at or punished anyone like the other professors had. There seemed to be at least one teacher at Hogwarts who wasn’t a sadistic son of a bitch.

Their next lesson was Potions, and it was not nearly as pleasant as Transfiguration had been. Snape was a ruthless teacher and was fond of throwing questions at unsuspecting students like gladiators threw spears. Harry noticed, with no small bit of irritation, that Snape never asked any of the Elites an unexpected question. But he couldn’t help but appreciate that Snape was completely ignoring him, which meant that Harry hadn’t been subjected to the unfair questions.

Twenty minutes later, Snape was done interrogating the first years and had put up the instructions for a potion on the board. All of them were now bent over their cauldrons and were painstakingly counting the notches in their beets while Snape prowled around the room like some large and winged creature of prey.

Harry saw a flicker of movement out of the corner of his eye. The big girl, Millicent Bulstrode, had thrown something, something at Ron, he was sure.

Then everything happened very quickly and in a very confused fashion. First, Ron’s cauldron exploded, showering him and the students near him in sizzling lumps of goo. He yelled as bright purple pimples appeared all over his face, and Snape descended on him, hissing like an angry snake and waving his wand around. Harry turned just in time to see Draco Malfoy taking something out of his pocket.

Let the Hunt begin.

Harry caught his eye, and gave him a nasty grin. Draco blanched. Harry raised his hand slightly, imperceptibly, and flicked his wrist. As if it had been lifted by a great wind, Draco’s arm rose into the air and dropped what he was holding into his own cauldron. To the innocent bystander, it would look as if Draco had accidentally thrown it in, but Draco would know the truth. With a bang and a crash, his cauldron exploded in the same way Ron’s had, giving him a face full of toxic sludge. He fell to the ground, clawing at his face and making a little whimpering noise.

Snape turned around to scream at Draco next, his face livid, and Harry ducked his head under his desk to hold in his howls of laughter.

And then something started burning in Harry’s chest like a kindling fire, something subtle, something he barely noticed in his sadistic joy. And as Draco writhed on the ground, that same something started flickering in his chest too, but he was sure it was just a side-effect of the potion that was all over his face.

In a few seconds, the peculiar sensation faded, and neither boy remembered it.

***

In hindsight, Harry really shouldn’t have used his wandless magic on Draco.
But there was only one thought in Harry’s mind in the moment he struck. Draco already knew what Harry was capable of, since he had been his first victim. And if anyone deserved to see Harry in his full fury, his full glory, it was Draco, the boy he hated most.

And in that exact moment, Draco’s thoughts were remarkably comparable. He was dreaming about how wonderful it would be to feel Harry’s power again—that devastating, seductive, dangerous power—and couldn’t help but resent that a boy he hated so much was the source of it.

So when Harry used his magic on Draco in that single, blazing moment of mutual hate and obsession, of rage and desire, unknowingly they forged a vengeful and unstoppable magical connection.

***

That night, Harry studied more spells in the library, so giddy in his victory that he forgot to sleep. He couldn’t get Draco’s purple and pimpled face out of his mind, and was prone to bursting into giggles at the very memory of it. He couldn’t wait to see Draco tomorrow to gloat, maybe to use that vomiting spell he had researched. His magic thrummed underneath his skin, eager to show off in front of Draco again.

Several hours later, Harry was no longer as enthusiastic. Now in his first Charms and Curses class bright and early on Friday morning, Harry dearly wished he had slept last night. Professor Dolohov was droning on about discipline and obedience and the great Dark Lord—the usual rubbish, Harry was sure—and Draco wasn’t in class, no doubt still recovering from the effects of the potion explosion. As amusing as he found that, Harry was bored without the blond boy to watch and torment.

The last thing he remembered was dozing off, right in the middle of class—

“Mr. Potter,” hissed Dolohov, the cane he was rapping on Harry’s desk waking him rudely.

Harry jolted upright, mumbling and wiping drool from his chin. He paled at the utterly calm look on Dolohov’s face. It was the look of the calm before the storm. The rest of the class fell silent and held their breaths, though some of the Elites were snickering.

“Mr. Potter, please explain to me why you were sleeping in my class,” said Dolohov in a dangerous voice, smacking his cane on Harry’s desk again.

Harry flinched at the sound. “I’m sorry, sir. I didn’t mean—”

“No, clearly you did not mean to fall asleep in the middle of my lesson,” whispered Dolohov, bending down so that he and Harry were nearly nose to nose. Harry could see each and every hair on Dolohov’s face, and just barely resisted the urge to lean backwards. “Clearly you did not mean to disrespect your professor in such a way.”

Harry wished he were dead.

He had ridiculed Susan Bones and the other students who had attracted the ire of Hogwarts’ batshit insane professors earlier that week, but he had committed the worst offense of them all, and for no good reason. In a kind of dawning horror, he recalled what Anthony Goldstein had said about their Charms and Curses teacher. The scariest professor of them all is Deputy Headmaster Dolohov. You know, his nickname’s the Gentleman Bastard…

“Sir,” said Harry, breathing heavily, “I’m really sorry. I stayed up all night. I couldn’t sleep.”
To Harry’s relief, Dolohov stepped away from him and straightened up, removing his cane from
Harry’s desk. He turned back to the rest of the class, smiling pleasantly. “See, I find that a
completely acceptable excuse. I am a reasonable man. Talk to me after class, Mr. Potter, and we
shall discuss what you will do to make up for your mistake today.”

“Thank you, sir,” said Harry, sagging in his seat, unable to believe his good luck. The Gentleman
Bastard, they called Dolohov? The Gentleman, maybe, but Harry couldn’t imagine what Dolohov
could have done to earn the nickname bastard. He seemed far more forgiving than most of the
other professors. “Thank you so much. I won’t ever fall asleep in your class again, I promise.”

“No, you certainly will not,” said Dolohov with a light chuckle, returning to the front of the room.
He began to drone on again, but this time Harry plastered an expression of rapt attention on his
face, determined to appear the model student.

Anthony Goldstein was shaking his head at him, eyes wide in terror.

Harry had no idea why, and after class he approached Professor Dolohov, still in high spirits. It was
Friday, and he’d be free to learn new spells this weekend without having to worry about classes.

“Mr. Potter, yes,” said Dolohov, shuffling through some papers on his desk. “I will not make you
serve a detention. I find such methods crude and ineffective.”

“I agree, sir,” said Harry quickly, then mentally slapped himself.

Dolohov narrowed his eyes, and did not respond for a long moment. When he spoke at last, Harry
started.

“I drink tea every evening at eight o’clock on the dot, including Saturdays and Sundays,” said
Dolohov, going back to his parchment. “Each year, I choose a different student to bring me tea
from the kitchens. That will be your job from now on.”

Of course he wants tea. Where would a gentleman be without his tea? Harry thought with a
swallow. This wasn’t so bad, was it? It would probably only take, at most, half an hour of his time
each day. He didn’t know where the kitchens were, but he could ask one of the older students. “Of
course, sir. What kind of tea do you like?”

“The house elves will know how to make it the way I like it,” said Dolohov, waving his hand

“Yes, sir,” said Harry, who had heard it properly the first time and wondered why Dolohov kept
repeating it.

“Off with you then, Mr. Potter,” said Dolohov, gesturing to the door in a clear dismissal.

Harry left, taking a deep breath. He had survived an encounter with Dolohov through the skin of
his teeth, had fallen asleep in his class and escaped with nothing more severe than a part-time job.

But at dinner, Anthony informed him just how wrong he was.

“You’re the Tea Servant,” said Anthony, and Ron—who had just returned from the Hospital Wing
and was now pimple-free—nodded vigorously beside him. “Dolohov has a nasty temper; he puts
his Tea Servant through a ton of hell if they make him angry. This is the worst punishment he
could’ve given you. If you’d gotten a detention, it would have been over in a day. But now that
you’re the Tea Servant, he’ll suck everything out of you for an entire year.”
Harry’s face went white. “I just have to not make him angry. I just have to be perfect from now on.”

“Mate, you fell asleep in his class, right when he was in the middle of a prayer about Our Savior the Dark Lord,” said Seamus. “There’s no way he’s not furious. I don’t think he’ll let you get out of it. There was a mad glint in his eye—I swear I saw it.”

Harry shook his head. “Just tell me where the kitchens are,” he sighed, standing up and running a hand through his hair. He would get through this. He would.

Dolohov had been perfectly fair to Harry earlier—what was the worst he could do? As long as Harry didn’t piss him off, he would be safe.

So Harry resolved not to piss him off, and made his way down to the kitchens. It was seven forty, and he would probably be on time. The house-elves, odd large-eyed and large-eared creatures who were covered head to foot with horrible bruises, starting bleating in panic when they learned whom the tea was for, but gave it to him without protesting.

Careful to keep the tray holding the teacup balanced, Harry walked to Dolohov’s office as fast as he could without spilling the tea. It was seven fifty, and he had badly misjudged the time. He could still make it, though only just—

At exactly eight o’clock, Harry raised his fist to knock on the door, rather satisfied with himself. But before his knuckles could connect with the door, it swung open.

Dolohov stood behind it, a look of utmost disappointment on his face, tapping his watch. “It’s ten seconds after eight, Mr. Potter. And it’s your first day, too. What a pity.”

He grabbed Harry by the ear and yanked him into the office, slamming the door behind him. The force of the pull unsteadied Harry and caused the tray he was holding to tilt. The piping hot tea spilled down his front, burning him. Harry let out a strangled squeak from the pain, but a worse pain replaced it at once.

“Crucio.”

For one wonderful moment, Harry dreamed he was with his mother, and she was slapping him and tearing at his face. Pain like that was so ordinary, so pleasant, that Harry would have given anything to be back in Godric’s Hollow, at his mother’s mercy.

Then he felt the pain of the real world slam back into him, and Harry screamed.

“Mr. Potter, Mr. Potter, Mr. Potter,” murmured Dolohov, expressionless, staring down at Harry’s writhing form. “Couldn’t you be on time your first day? It really does upset me that I won’t get my tea today.”

Don’t let them break you, Harry.

“I knew your father in passing, you know,” continued Dolohov in a conversational tone, still staring at Harry. “I helped kill him myself. Don’t worry, it’s not personal. He was hiding in a forest with his friend Remus Lupin, in his Animagus form. We hunted both of them down and skinned them alive—that part was Evan Rosier’s idea; he is quite creative, so pray you never meet him, dear boy.”

They’ll try to break you every day in that hell, Harry.

“And after that, we brought them to Diagon Alley and hung them in the middle of the street. It was
an exquisite scene. Two of the last surviving members of the Order of the Pheonix, finally caught and put to justice. But silly me, I’m forgetting to give somebody credit for the hangings. Who arranged that, again?

Don’t—let—they—break—

“Oh yes, I remember now. Severus Snape helped kill them, too.”

Harry could feel his magic begging, screaming, howling to get out, to devour the Gentleman Bastard where he stood, calmly and shamelessly torturing Harry. But Harry couldn’t kill him, he had to rein his fury in, or they’d know how powerful he was. He threw his head back, sucking his magic back in, desperate to control it, desperate to make it go away just for a short amount of time. Miraculously, it did, disappearing into a passageway deep inside of him, going—somewhere. Where, he didn’t know.

“Are you listening, Harry? You seem distracted. Hmm, maybe the curse wore off. I might be out of practice. Crucio!”

Harry let himself break at last, and cried for his mother.

***

Draco was in an awful mood. That bastard Potter had messed up his Hunt, and Theo had shouted at him for a good hour in the Hospital Wing for being a clumsy idiot and ruining everything. Both the poison and the potion fiasco had been Theo’s ideas, and he was probably bitter everything didn’t go according to plan. Draco dearly wanted to pin the blame on Harry, where it belonged, but he didn’t want Harry to vaporize him, as Harry surely would if he ever found out Draco had squealed.

Harry was going to make Draco fail his second Trial, and then he would never be a Skull, and then his father—oh God, his father, what would his father do to him?

Draco wanted to lie in his bed and sob until dawn, and decided he would. It was only eight o’clock, but he had a lot of crying to do.

At that moment, every single hair on his body stood up on edge, and Draco screamed as a foreign, alien magic funneled into his body. He twisted and flailed on the bed, every vein on fire, and his chest—his chest burned like there was a smoldering hot coal rubbing against his heart, scorching his insides.

Every single light in his room went out as the magic that was not his exploded out of him in a destructive, glowing ring. Draco lay sweating and panting on the ground, in the epicenter of the carnage. His chest of drawers was now nothing more than a pile of splinters, and so was his desk.

Then, as quickly as it had come, the magic drained out of him, retreating to the tunnel from which it had emerged, back to the person who was its source.

Draco held his trembling hands to his face, then tore off his shirt. There was a mark in the shape of a swirling red vortex over his heart. It faded the longer he looked at it.

Draco threw himself down on his bed and screamed.
Damus et Accipimus

Chapter Notes

Thank you so much for the sweet comments! The (relative) lateness of this chapter can be blamed on the inhumane amount of Calc 3 homework I was assigned this week. Also, I went back and made some light edits to the first chapter. There are no big changes besides me polishing up the writing style a bit.

WARNINGS: Somewhat graphic descriptions of torture. Also, Harry completely loses his shit, if that wasn't obvious from the previous sentence.

CHAPTER SIX

DAMUS ET ACCIPIMUS

During the first week of October, Draco could be found stalking Harry in the library. This meant his life had reached an all-time low.

*There he is. There’s the filthy son of a Mudblood,* thought Draco. He peeked around a bookcase so he could glower at Harry, who was reading a book at one of the dusty tables, oblivious to Draco’s presence.

He stroked the wand in his pocket, allowing himself one blissful fantasy of hexing that book so that it lodged itself into Harry’s skull. The last three weeks had been hell for him, and it was a hundred percent Harry’s fault. Many things had happened in these past twenty days, and none of them had been good.

First of all, Harry had struck him with some Dark vomiting curse two Tuesdays ago, and Draco had been confined to the Hospital Wing for five whole days, puking up his insides.

Second of all, Harry was now officially known as Dolohov’s newest Tea Servant, which was the most hazardous occupation in the school. Many of the previous Tea Servants had lost their minds, and Harry’s impending insanity did not bode well for Draco, considering that Harry seemed to be planning something nasty for him.

Third of all, Theo had yelled at him for not attacking Harry back once in these three weeks, and Draco had told him, very clearly, to go soak his damn head. The stupid second Trial could wait. Draco valued his life; he wasn’t going to go ambushing Harry just yet, not until he had a plan.

Of course, Draco didn’t ever think he’d have a plan to attack Harry, because fourth of all, he was quite sure the two of them had a magical connection.

The evidence had been mounting steadily.

Harry’s first meeting with Dolohov had been the first Friday of term, at eight o’clock. That was the first day Draco’s magic had exploded out of him, also at eight o’clock, wrecking his furniture. The
house-elves had fixed everything at once and hadn’t asked any questions, and nobody outside his room had heard anything suspicious thanks to the privacy wards, so Draco had hoped it—and the freaky red vortex mark on his chest that had since disappeared—was part of some fever dream that would be soon forgotten. But it had happened again on Sunday. At eight o’clock. And again, that Wednesday. At eight o’clock. And again. And again. And again.

It hadn’t happened every day, but when it did, it was always at eight o’clock—Dolohov’s infamous tea time. And every time it happened, the tiny vortex symbol would appear on Draco’s chest and he would rub and scratch at it in a panic, only for it to vanish a few minutes later, leaving flawless and unmarked skin behind.

Draco couldn’t ignore the evidence any longer, no matter how desperately he wanted to. The magic explosions matched up with Harry’s tea sessions with Dolohov, and the explosions were far too powerful to be Draco’s. Whatever Dolohov was doing to Harry during the sessions, or at least some of the sessions, caused Harry to lose all control and send his magic to Draco… somehow.

Luckily, Draco had learned quickly and had made sure that he was alone in his private room at eight o’clock every day, in case that day happened to be a day where he exploded. The house-elves had to keep fixing Draco’s furniture, and soon even they would start to doubt the story that he was just “practicing spells.” They probably thought he was the clumsiest, stupidest student in the school at this point, not that Draco cared what house-elves thought. But still, it was humiliating, not to mention worrying.

Harry could really lose it one day—and then what would happen to Draco?

He needed to fix this problem, and fast. To do that, he had to first figure out what this unnatural connection was. He had tried to research it in the library, but his search hadn’t yielded any fruit. The first—and real—reason for this failure was that Draco was terrible at any kind of researching or reading, but what made it even more difficult for him was that there were countless types of magical bonds in the wizarding world, and all them seemed just as likely as the next to be the one Draco had with Harry. He needed more information to narrow down the possibilities, and for more information, he had to ask Harry his side of the story.

And approaching Harry to ask him what the hell is going on was going to be the hardest part of this whole mess, which was the reason why Draco was currently spying on him in the library, looking for an opportunity to talk to the sociopathic dirty-blooded bastard without getting hexed all the way to the Hospital Wing.

Draco gulped, still hiding behind the bookshelf, and risked another glance at Harry. He was bent over a book, completely absorbed in it. The dark strands of his shaggy hair covered his eyes. What a slob, thought Draco, appreciating his own smooth and neat hairstyle.

He lingered for a moment longer, bracing himself. Madam Pince was hovering nearby, so Harry would probably not kill him on sight.

Probably.

Draco took a deep breath and stepped out from behind the bookshelf. Harry didn’t register his presence for several long seconds, but when he finally did, his reaction was instantaneous. He bristled like an offended cat, and his eyes sparked. He would doubtless start hissing any moment now. Draco couldn’t help but note the dark circles under Harry’s eyes and the cuts and bruises on his arms.

“I’m not here to attack you, Potter,” Draco whispered, keeping his voice low and soothing. “I just
want to talk. I’m offering a truce. It’s really important, I promise. I swear on—on my mother’s life.”

Harry’s scowl intensified. “Do you think I was born yesterday? You tried to poison me, you tried to get me in trouble in Potions, and—”

Draco prayed for patience.

“You got me back for that ten times over, didn’t you, with the vomiting? I really am telling the truth, Harry. I’m not going to do anything. All I want is to talk.” He jutted out his lower lip, trying to look innocent and harmless.

Harry seemed unaffected by Draco’s charms. “We can’t talk in here, anyway,” he growled, every muscle in his body on edge. “The old hag Pince won’t let us. There’s an abandoned classroom on this floor. We’ll talk in there.”

“You over there! Quiet!” screeched Madam Pince, proving Harry’s point.

Draco nodded, unable to believe his good luck. He had thought the maniac would have put up a bigger fight, but maybe Harry wasn’t insane enough to be beyond all hope after all. Yet. He probably would be in a few months, after Dolohov was done with him, and if the dark circles under his eyes and the cuts and bruises were anything to go by. But Draco did not much care what happened to him, as long as the magical connection between them was broken by the time that he fell off the edge.

_Why doesn’t he use his wandless magic on Dolohov?_ Draco wondered as they walked silently out of the library. If Harry revealed his potential to the professors, Draco bet a thousand galleons that the Dark Lord would arrive at Hogwarts the next morning to whisk Harry away for training. Or maybe to kill him, the possibility of which, Draco admitted, had most likely made Harry keep his power a secret all this time.

_But he used it on me._ Why? Maybe it had been an accident at first, but definitely not the second time. Perhaps Harry didn’t see him as a big enough threat, and Draco frowned, resenting that. He could tell his father that Harry was capable of controlled wandless magic, and in doing so, rid himself of a dangerous enemy.

But some intrinsic part of him just couldn’t do it. _I love feeling his magic. I’m the only one he showed it to. I want to feel it again._

Draco stepped into the abandoned classroom, and Harry shut the door behind them. Draco turned to face him and opened his mouth, not sure where to start the whole morbid tale of the magic explosions and the vortex mark.

And then, just as Harry grinned predatorily at him, it dawned on Draco that walking into a room alone with someone who hated his guts was not a smart idea.

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Harry had been far too preoccupied surviving Dolohov’s punishments these past few weeks to keep up a constant stream of attacks on Draco, but now that the opportunity had presented itself on a golden platter, how could he resist? He had been itching to beat someone up for this whole hellish month, and Draco had eagerly fallen into his trap—it was almost as if the brat had really just wanted to talk to him, though there was no way that could be true.

And now they were alone together. In a room that nobody ever checked up on. Vengeance would
be sweet.

Draco lunged for the door, realizing that Harry had deceived him, but it was jammed shut. Harry had done that wandlessly a moment earlier, of course. He couldn’t have his prey escaping so soon after it had been captured.

*Behold, how the hunter and hunted have switched places,* thought Harry with glee, wielding his magic like a great and heavy wind to pin Draco high against the wall. This was going to be so much fun. But before he sent the twit back to his fancy private Elite room in a nice gilded coffin, Harry would make sure to let him know exactly what he thought of him.

“So,” said Harry, pacing the room and keeping Draco pressed against the wall at the same time, “you’ve come to ‘talk’ to me, have you?”

“Please, please, please,” whimpered Draco, trying to break free of the smothering hold Harry’s magic had on him in the air and failing miserably. “Please let me down, Potter—Harry. Please.”

Seeing Draco immobilized and helpless made Harry’s entire body thrum with excitement, and he liked it when Draco called him by his name so desperately. He hadn’t felt this alive in—well, ever, really.

“No, I don’t think so,” said Harry in a pleasant voice. “See, while you and your merry band of Skulls have been—”

“I—I just want to talk!” Draco cried. “I promise it’s important, I promise, I promise—”

“SHUT UP!” Harry screamed, tightening the pressure of his magic on Draco to reinforce his order. Draco shut up, widening his eyes.

When Harry was calm again, he continued, though he had lost his train of thought. “You’re scum, you’re filth, that’s what you are. And don’t go spewing ‘But I’m a Pureblood!’ at me. You’ll bleed and bruise the same way as a Muggleborn does when I’m done with you. Do you want me to describe to you, in detail, what I’m going to do you? Dolohov’s taught me a lot these past few weeks about torture, and punishment, and about people who deserve it. I think you should have a little taste of what I go through every single day. I don’t think you’ve ever been under the Cruciatus Curse, have you? Or had to use the Blood Quills? Or been at the mercy of one of Dolohov’s Justice Whips, or his Iron Wizard? No, of course you haven’t, because you’re a spoilt brat.”

Draco didn’t say a word. Fear seemed to have glued his mouth shut.

“You’ve never had to worry about being chosen by the Sorting Hat. You’ve never had to sleep in a tiny bunk bed, crammed with three hundred other people. You’ve never had to watch a bunch of Elite bastards prance around like they own the school, even when they don’t deserve it, even if all they’ve ever done in their pathetic, useless lives is been born.”

Harry took a deep breath to steady himself, and then raised his wand. “All right. Okay.” He started laughing. “I know a lot of spells. I’ve been practicing for this moment. I’m going to try to recreate the effect of one of Dolohov’s inventions, the Iron Wizard, on you. Do you want me to tell you what the Iron Wizard is?”

“You’ve gone insane—” Draco began.

“The Iron Wizard,” Harry said, talking over him, “is a really interesting. Dolohov told me—while I was being tortured by it, mind you—that it was inspired by a medieval Muggle torture device
called the Iron Maiden. And that’s kind of funny, because you Death Eaters hate Muggles and all that, but you steal their ideas. So anyway, the Iron Wizard is a vertical coffin, sort of, and you have to stand inside it and be as still and quiet as you can. The inside of it is lined with little thin spikes. It’s really cramped in there, too, so every time you move, you’ll brush up against one of the spikes. And you’ll bleed, and it’ll hurt, so you’ll flinch and jerk around automatically, which will make you scrape up against even more spikes. And it keeps going, and going, and going, until you’re covered in cuts, until Dolohov hears you crying and tells you to shut up or he’ll make the spikes longer and thicker—"

Harry let out a shuddering gasp, swallowing the sick threatening to rise in his throat. Recounting his torture was not a pleasant experience.

“Anyway,” Harry choked out. “Anyway, I know a variation of Seco, the Dark Cutting Curse. You know, that spell Carrow taught us the first week of school? That spell he used on all the non-Elite students last week while you and your prissy friends just stood off to the side and laughed at us? Well, I found a variation of that spell in a book, and I’m going to use it on you. Do you know what it does?”

“Harry,” whispered Draco, and Harry looked up at him, his heartbeat speeding up when he heard Draco say his first name like that. Draco was biting his lip, and no longer struggling against the magic that bound him. “It’s not my fault. It’s not my fault that Dolohov did that to you.”

Harry shook with barely contained fury. Was that it, was that all he had to say? He’d thought Draco had been about to apologize and show some compassion, but no, he was a cruel bastard who only cared about himself, who wasn’t capable of empathy like a normal human being.

Oh yes, Harry was going to enjoy beating him black and blue. Or rather, red.

“This variation of Seco,” Harry went on, as if Draco hadn’t said anything, “will put little shallow cuts all over your body, just like the Iron Wizard did to me. Your punishment is long overdue, in my opinion, since Carrow didn’t lay a hand on you precious Elites during class. This variation doesn’t hurt nearly as much as I’d want it to, as much as Carrow hurt the rest of us and Dolohov hurt me, but this is hardly going to be the last time I teach you a lesson, and I figure the pain will add up, so I’ll go easy on you today.”

Draco burst into tears.

“I—I hate you,” he blubbered. “I hate you, Potter. I hate you, and I w-want you t-to leave me alone, and w-why can’t you just b-be dead—”

Harry narrowed his eyes. How dare Draco play the victim? “Milleminimus Sec—”

He let out a little choking gasp. Something strange was happening to the magic coiled in his chest. It was being sucked from him, being tugged at by something or someone far away, leaving him in the same direction it did whenever he was being tortured by Dolohov.

Then every single torch in the room went out.

Harry and Draco stared at each other in the darkness, open-mouthed. The air between them sparked, alive with energy and gathering more with every passing second. Magic without form wasn’t supposed to be visible, and yet, within that single point in time, both boys swore they could see it swirling around them, unable to describe what they saw in words, but also unable to deny its existence.
And in that same moment, Draco shattered the hold Harry had on him.

The recoil from the sudden break sent Harry staggering backwards, and he smacked his head against a desk. Stars danced in front of his eyes. His brain seemed to have been knocked into mush, and he lay there for a moment, collecting his scattered thoughts and gritting his teeth against the pain.

He had never wondered where his magic had gone during those tea sessions. He had just assumed it had gone deeper into himself, closed itself off just like he closed off his own mind when he was in agony.

He had been so very, very wrong.

Draco stirred on the ground, recovering from the shock of having fallen from the fairly high spot where Harry had held him. Harry let out a war cry and leapt at him, propelled by fear. He didn’t have his magic, and without his magic he had nothing, was nothing—

Draco looked up, his gaze scorching, his face mirroring Harry’s own rage. He blasted Harry back with a burst of wind, and Harry fell to the floor, screaming at the top of his lungs, unable to believe that his greatest weapon had been turned against him by the boy he hated most. Draco stood over him, his face stained with tears, as beautiful and cruel as he was in Harry’s worst nightmares.

Harry’s brain stuttered and failed. For a second, he felt nothing other than a suffocating terror.

Then his sanity slammed back into him. Desperate to get his magic back, desperate to never be powerless again, he seized the magical connection he had just realized existed between him and Draco and pulled it with every piece of mental strength he possessed, until it was taut and strained like a rubber band about to snap, until he was nearly sobbing with the effort.

He felt the very moment in time where the flow of magic traveling through the pulsing connection reversed on itself and surged back into his body, where it belonged. A wave of magic swelled and soared inside him as his initial shock transformed into a frantic, all-consuming fury, and in the next second, Draco was on the ground for daring to take what was not his, pinned there by the sheer force of Harry’s will.

The air around them calmed. The torches flickered back on, one by one.

Harry stared down at Draco, and Draco stared back up at Harry. At some time during their fight, both of them had started crying.

Harry fled.

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Draco lay shivering in bed, his sheets wrapped tightly around him. It was dinnertime, but he couldn’t summon the energy to go upstairs. The memory of the look in Harry’s eyes had killed his appetite. It was the look of a cornered and abused animal, ready and hungering to kill. The theft of his magic had been the final straw.

Wincing, Draco mentally probed the connection. It was bruised and wounded, but still intact, still quivering and connected to who was now confirmed without a doubt to be Harry. He couldn’t describe where exactly the bond was in relation to his physical body, but he had known it was there since that first fateful explosion—though clearly it had been a surprise to Harry—and it was just like being aware of a hand you could wave around.
He had never dared to manipulate that connection, and in all honesty, he hadn’t even known he could. But Harry had driven him over the edge, and Draco didn’t think he regretted doing it. The magic had felt wonderful thrumming under his skin, so wonderful that he had feared he would burst from the overwhelming mix of energy and ecstasy.

But even that thrill couldn’t compare to the thrill Draco experienced when he watched Harry unfold his power. Stealing Harry’s magic was all well and good temporarily, but it would never truly be his, and he had known that the moment it rushed into his body. Draco trying to wield Harry’s innate gifts was reminiscent of him trying on his father’s clothes: he didn’t fit, and didn’t at all come close to the grandeur of the person he was trying to resemble.

And despite being scared to death when he had been pinned to the ground, just after Harry had gotten his magic back, Draco had forever wanted to bask in the blinding, blazing glory of Harry’s rage, had wanted to stretch that single second into an eternity.

Draco buried his head in his pillow, which was soaked with his tears. He couldn’t understand how everything had gone so wrong so fast this year, and now he had the added misfortune of being madly obsessed with a boy who wanted to kill him. Draco was an idiot who deserved everything he got.

Somebody knocked on his door, rudely interrupting his pity fest, and he groaned.

“Draco? Why weren’t you at dinner? What’s wrong?” And yes, just as he had predicted, it was Theo, coming to badger him as always.

Draco paused, and grinned. He could use this to his advantage. After taking a quick second to stealthily blow his nose, wipe his tears, and check his face in the mirror to make sure he was presentable, he opened the door.

“What happened?” asked Theo, not fooled.

Draco held back a sneer. So now he cares? After he spent weeks yelling at me? But now was not the time to tear into Theo, as much as he dearly wanted to. He had to swallow his pride and get what he needed from him.

“I need your help,” said Draco in a flat voice.

Theo puffed up. “It’s about time you asked me to help you strike Potter down. Millicent and I were thinking of—”

“Do you spend your days thinking of nothing but the Skulls? That’s not what I’m talking about. I don’t care about the Hunt right now,” said Draco, unable to hide his irritation. He discovered a moment later that it was exactly the wrong thing to say.

Theo kicked the wall, and Draco stumbled, widening his eyes.

“This is the problem with you, Draco!” Theo snarled, lunging forward to grab him by the collar.

“Oh boy, I’m really getting knocked around today, aren’t I?”

“You make all these big promises, don’t you, Draco? You said you’d become a Skull with me, but all you’re doing these days is hiding in your damn room, and whining, and hiding again, and then whining some more! You’re going to fail the second Trial, after you already failed the first. Do you understand that? What the hell do I have to say to get that through your thick head?”
“Get. Off. Me,” hissed Draco, grinding his teeth. He didn’t have time to deal with another lecture. The Trials were the last thing on his mind right now because, oddly enough, surviving the wrath of a powerful boy who was after his blood took priority over the Skulls’ stupid game. And yes, Harry was still a threat, even though Draco could summon his magic now. That didn’t change the fact that Harry could call it right back, and knew how to use it ten times better than Draco did.

Anyway, Draco didn’t need to pass all seven Trials to become a Skull. He would be cutting it a little close, but there was no way he was going to attack Harry in the way the second Trial dictated he should.

Theo’s lip trembled, and he let go of Draco’s shirt. “Don’t you even want to be a Skull anymore?” He narrowed his eyes, and clenched the hand that had been holding Draco’s collar earlier into a fist. “Have you given up? Is it because you’re tired? Is it too much for you?” His breath hitched. “Are you weak, Draco?”

Now it was Draco’s turn to kick the wall. “Shut up! Shut up! You have no clue what I’ve gone through this past month, and now you DARE tell me—”

“Oh yes! Because I’m so bloody perfect according to you that I can’t possibly have any problems, and can’t understand any of yours!” Theo sounded a bit hysterical now.

“You’re not perfect,” Draco agreed, smiling viciously. “You’re a bastard, and that’s why you can’t understand any of my problems.” He moved to push Theo out of his room, regretting his decision to talk to him. He had hoped to employ Theo’s excellent research skills to figure out what his and Harry’s strange magical connection was, but that plan wasn’t going to work when Theo was determined to be as difficult as possible.

Before Draco could close the door in his face, however, Theo stopped him by jutting a foot out, making it clear that this conversation was not over and he wasn’t leaving without a proper fight.

Draco took a deep, calming breath. “Theo, for Merlin’s sake, go away. I wanted to ask you for help, but it’s obvious you don’t want to give it unless it has to do with the stupid Trial, which is all you care about. Even more than me, apparently.”

Theo looked so stricken at this last accusation that he didn’t even bother to protest when Draco finally managed to slam the door shut.

Draco leaned against the wall of his room and rubbed his forehead. A part of him mourned the complete disintegration of their relationship this past month. He had sorely missed talking to Theo, the first and only real friend he’d ever had.

At the age of six, they’d met at one of those fancy Pureblood balls that Lucius never forgot to drag Draco to, and the two boys had connected immediately. Draco saw in Theo what he saw in himself, though he hadn’t realized it at the time: a boy struggling to live up to his father’s legacy, who looked at high Pureblood and inner Death Eater society with a head-spinning combination of fear and desire. Even at such a young age, both of them had sought each other out.

At first their friendship had been a casual one. Their fathers, delighted with their sons’ budding relationship, arranged playdates for them, and Draco and Theo spent countless sunlit days exploring the grounds of both the Malfoy and Nott Manors, practicing magic and telling stories and playing games. Draco did the same things with his other friends, Vince and Greg, but he never got as much enjoyment out of spending time with them as he did with Theo.

But that ignorant bliss ended when they turned nine. Up to that point, Theo’s older brothers
Sebastian and Nathaniel had never really bothered Draco, though they had always watched him wistfully. Back then, Draco had only feared them because of their hideous faces, not because of their actions, and had ignored their attempts at friendship as a result.

But during their first year at Hogwarts, something changed the twins, and when they returned to the Nott Manor the following summer, they were utterly unrecognizable. Draco didn’t know, though he could guess, what occurred that year to transform them from the little boys who cowered in front of their father into the murderous psychopaths they were now. When they came back from their first year, their faces had been wrecked far beyond what their father had done, and Draco could imagine what had happened to them, could clearly visualize the rabid older Skulls seizing the opportunity to “test” two broken and ugly eleven-year-old boys until they proved themselves worthy of their monstrous faces.

Whatever the reason, they no longer cowered in front of their father. They no longer cried when Draco ignored them. They no longer treated Theo like a brother. And Theo and Draco’s sunlit childhood drowned to an early death in the looming, ever-growing shadows of the twins, whose favorite pastime had become terrorizing the boy who had rejected their friendship and the brother they envied for his flawless face. The nail on the coffin was the constant threat of their fathers, who had decided the age of nine was old enough for Draco and Theo to learn about the Dark Lord’s cause and began to mold them into a life of servitude under him.

And now, largely due to the Skull Mask Initiation, Draco’s and Theo’s innocence was marred like a dirty glass, and their once unbreakable, simple friendship had cracked under all the pressure, only sustained by the tattered threads of duty and nostalgia. The admiration Draco had once held for Theo’s genius had turned into jealousy, and the adoration Theo had once showered on Draco had turned into condescension. And Draco still couldn’t forget all the times Theo had done nothing except stare while Sebastian and Nathaniel tormented Draco, couldn’t help but resent that Theo had never even mentioned those incidents, never mind apologized for them.

Resigned, Draco squeezed his eyes shut and slid back into bed. Yes, some part of him would miss Theo. But not most parts of him. He had better things to do than cling to doomed past relationships, relationships that meant nothing to him in the big scheme of things.

He needed to figure out what to do with Harry bloody Potter, the single most important problem in his life right now. He would just have to keep trying to talk the other boy, and trying some more, until he got what he wanted—and what he wanted was to be free of the other boy forever.

It was time to stop crying and get out of bed. It was time to face his fears, and find Harry. Again.

And maybe this time, he’d listen.

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Harry, meanwhile, was frantically researching magical bonds. He’d been in the library for five hours straight, ever since his scuffle with Draco that afternoon, and his efforts hadn’t yielded any concrete answers so far. He currently had a book on magic-sharing connections open on his lap, but all the connections sounded the same to him, and now exhaustion was making his eyelids heavy and the words blur on the page.

Don’t fall asleep, Harry moaned to himself. He needed to find out what the connection was so that Draco couldn’t exploit it and steal his magic again. Harry would be vulnerable as long as it was there, and he would never, ever allow that to happen.

“You won’t find what you’re looking for without my help, Potter.”
Harry jumped about a foot, then turned slowly to face Draco Malfoy, who had crept up behind him. Draco was shuffling his feet, and his hair, usually so perfectly smooth, was mussed. There was a distinct sense of déjà vu in the air. They were in the library again, just like they had been five hours ago, before that disastrous fight.

A thousand different scenarios fluttered through his mind, most of them involving him strangling Malfoy in some way or the other and hiding his body in the dungeons. Then Harry deflated. He was so tired. He was tired of Dolohov, he was tired of the never-ending torture in both classes and out, and most of all, he was tired of Hogwarts. He wanted to go home and sleep for a century. He was done fighting, so he wouldn’t attack Draco this time.

And if Malfoy wanted to hurt him, he would have done so already. He hadn’t hexed Harry these past few weeks, or tried anything else related to the Hunt, now that Harry thought about it. And the last thing Harry needed was another confrontation, especially now that he knew that Draco could use his power against him.

Harry glowered up at a slightly shaking Draco. “Give me your help, then,” he said, handing over the book on magical bonds he was holding. A truce would have to do for now. Both of them knew that neither of them could win, as long as they were connected this way.

After a flinch of surprise, Draco relaxed and took the book. He sat down at the table Harry was at, and the two of them bent over it, keeping their voices low so as not to attract Madam Pince’s ire, and fortunately at the moment she was occupied on the other side of the library.

Draco laid a piece of parchment on the table, then took out a quill. “I’m going to write everything I know about our bond on this page. If we put all our information together, we can find out exactly what it is.”

And then he wrote. Harry watched him do it, though his gaze was admittedly focused more on Draco’s face and eyes than what he was writing. Finally, Draco sat back and dropped the quill, and Harry gave a start and drew the parchment towards him.

There was a crudely drawn tornado on the page in red ink, and a small paragraph below it describing the explosions Draco experienced whenever Harry was being tormented by Dolohov. Next to that was a list of dates.

“This little vortex mark,” whispered Draco, pointing at the picture of the tornado—or vortex, whatever—“appears on my chest just after our connection is used. It appeared again after our… argument today. It goes away after a few minutes, though. I think you marked me in some way, and that has everything to do with this connection.”

Harry looked at the dates and kneaded his forehead. His first meeting with Dolohov was the first day their connection had been used, but it wasn’t necessarily the day the connection had been created. If he remembered correctly, he hadn’t even seen Draco that day.

What had been the last time he had seen Draco before that first tea session with Dolohov? Harry voiced this question out loud to Draco, then closed his eyes and tried to remember.

Draco let out a little gasp, getting there before Harry did. “Potions. I was about to throw a Filibuster firework into your cauldron, to get you into trouble with Snape. Millicent had just thrown one into Weasley’s. You used your magic to control my hand, making me throw it into my own cauldron. I was in the Hospital Wing for that whole day, and the nearly the whole of the day after. I’d just come back to my room when your magic exploded out of me.”
Harry grabbed the book and began to feverishly page through it. All the pieces were coming together. He was sure what their connection was now, and had suspected it just a bit earlier, when he had first come across the passage in which it was mentioned. A few hours ago, when he’d been skimming chapter four of the book, he remembered seeing something about—

“Yes,” hissed Harry, shoving the book at Draco. “Read that, quick!”

_Damus et Accipimus_

“Give and take?” said Draco, raising an eyebrow.

“Keep reading,” urged Harry.

_The Cursed Bond of Damus et Accipimus accidentally manifests between two wizards with very strong and mutual feelings of hatred. The bond is only created when the more powerful of the two wizards uses highly volatile and powerful wandless magic on the other with the intent to display and present his magic to his opponent, and only to his opponent. Meanwhile, the wizard being attacked must want to be in the presence of the other wizard’s magic, enough for his yearning to overcome his loathing._

_Therefore, this bond is called Give and Receive, or Damus et Accipimus, and the two wizards caught in it are called the Giver and the Receiver. Though it is an accidental bond, both the Giver and Receiver must subconsciously agree to it. The magic, recognizing the secret desires of both its master and its target, constructs a connection between the two. Because it is accidental and forms between two wizards who are entangled in feelings of both infatuation and hatred, it is known as a Cursed Bond, and forever ties the feuding wizards to each other._

_Because the Giver must be powerful enough to use controlled wandless magic—and must also be over the age of eleven, the age at which a wizard’s capability for wandless magic is drastically reduced—it is extremely rare. The rarity of the bond is further increased due to the strict conditions for the connection to materialize, and there have only been twelve cases of it, the most recent in 1658._

Draco, for some reason, was blushing. “There’s no proof yet that this is our bond. It says it forever ties us, and that can’t be true.”

Harry turned the page and pointed. There was a long list of the symptoms and effects of the bond, which matched up exactly with Harry’s and Draco’s situation. The Giver of the bond, Harry in their case, marked his target with a unique symbol, which would appear on the Receiver’s chest in the color red. The Giver controlled the bond at first, and could send the magic to his Receiver, which Harry had unknowingly—but willingly—done during his torture sessions with Dolohov. If this happened enough, the Receiver would begin to gain equal command of the connection, and would eventually be able to summon his Giver’s magic at will.

Harry swallowed, his stomach sinking down all the way to his shoes. How could he have let this happen?

“There’s no way to break it,” whispered Draco, his voice hoarse. “At least, no one’s ever managed to break it before. There’s only been twelve cases, so there must be a way.”

“We’ll have to find it, then,” said Harry.

“We,” repeated Draco. He put the book down and faced Harry, his gaze intense and thoughtful. Harry looked away, feeling uncomfortable under his scrutiny.
“Do you even want to break it?” said Harry, scratching the back of his neck. “It gives you power.”

“I don’t want to be tied to you,” Draco snapped back. “Anyway, it’s dangerous for me. When you send it to me, I keep exploding things. I can’t handle that amount of magic as well as you can. In the meantime, we’ll have to practice keeping our connection under control. This book doesn’t have details on how to do that, so we’ll have to find one that does.”

Harry looked at the pile of tomes on his desk and sighed. “I can’t stay here for much longer. I have to go bring Dolohov his tea soon.”

“That’ll be our first test, then.” Draco stood up. “Either keep your magic with you, or if that’s too much for you while you’re being tortured, try to send it to me without making me wreck all my furniture. I’ll be in my room, hoping it works. After that’s all over with, we’ll meet again at the library to find a better book. Nine o’clock. Don’t be late.”

Harry stood up too, and gently grabbed Draco’s arm. “Wait.”

“What?”

“I don’t like this,” said Harry through gritted teeth. “And I don’t believe you. You act like you don’t want my magic, but I know you do. That’s how the Giving and Receiving thing works. You’re going to trick me into helping you learn how to control it, and then you’re going to steal it from me—”

Draco whirled around, eyes blazing. “Look,” he spat, edging closer and closer to Harry until they were nose to nose. “You don’t have much of a choice. I don’t have much of a choice. We have to learn how to control this stupid connection, and if that means I have to use your magic, then too bad. And besides, I don’t think it’s possible for me to steal your magic permanently. So you can expect the worst from me, or you can trust me.”

“Trust you?” snarled Harry. “In what world would I trust you? You’re a Skull, you’re the son of a Death Eater…” He trailed off at the look on Draco’s face.

Draco was smiling at him, but it was a nasty sort of smile. He brought his lips close to Harry’s ear, and Harry shivered at the feeling of Draco’s breath on his neck. “Look, Potter,” he whispered, his voice low and soft. “I hate you. You hate me. But we’re stuck with this for now. So deal with me, even if you won’t trust me.” He stepped away and turned his back on Harry.

Harry stared after him, his thoughts fuzzy.

“And Potter?” Draco’s tone sounded different now, less teasing and more genuine. “Good luck with Dolohov.”

Harry waited until Draco was out of the library, and then he groaned loudly enough for Madam Pince to hear him.
It had only been three days. Harry had made a truce with Draco three days ago.

And now this happened, and he hadn’t even gotten to eat his breakfast yet.

Harry had taken a total of three steps out of his dormitory before he was blocked by a hushed crowd of people lingering in the great circular room that was attached to the four dormitories. Everyone was looking up and whispering, and slowly, tremulously, Harry looked up too.

He was greeted by the morbid sight of Seamus Finnigan hanging upside down from the ceiling, completely knocked out—or maybe dead, but Harry really didn’t want to think of that possibility right before breakfast—and his face painted to resemble a clown’s.

Harry closed his eyes and took a deep breath, but opened them again when he heard Ron’s voice.

“The stupid Hunt.” Ron gritted his teeth.

“Somebody’ll get him down from there eventually, won’t they?” asked Ernie. He, Dean, Anthony, Terry, and Neville were congregated around Ron, all pale-faced and miserable. Harry edged closer to them so he could join their conversation, and tried to swallow the bitterness he felt at not being part of their little group in the first place.

They were never mean to him, of course. They gave him the obligatory pitying looks when he came to class bruised and bloody, and Ron always got Percy to bring Harry some pain-numbing and infection-prevention bandages to help with the cuts from the Iron Wizard. Madam Pomfrey was explicitly forbidden to treat Dolohov’s Tea Servant, so Harry’s injuries had been accumulating as they healed very slowly these past few weeks. And of course, Harry couldn’t find someone else to fully heal his wounds, because Dolohov would notice and reapply them, and he would surely make that reapplication ten times more painful.

In any case, the other first year boys felt quite sorry for him and assisted him in the little things they could do to alleviate his pain, like giving him homework answers. But they stayed away from him otherwise, and it wasn’t just because Harry was an overall cold and unsocial person. No, his
isolation could be blamed on the rumor—which had a lot of evidence behind it, if the horror stories concerning the previous Tea Servants were true—that Dolohov liked to torture his victim’s closest friends. He was researching psychological torture and was curious to see if it would hurt children more to see their best friends hurt, so anybody who was close to the Tea Servant would burn along with him.

Lately, Dolohov had been asking Harry—in a perfectly polite tone, of course—if he’d made any friends at Hogwarts. Harry wanted to kill the sick bastard, and at night, he fantasized about torturing Dolohov to keep himself going.

“Theodore bloody Nott,” Ron was snarling, jerking Harry out of his reverie. “He won’t give it a rest, will he? I swear it’s gotten worse.”

“What’s gotten worse?” asked Harry, making his presence clear.

All the boys stared at him as if they couldn’t believe he had uttered such a stupid question.

“The Hunt,” said Dean. “It’s Hunting Season. It’s been Hunting Season all of September and this month, you know.”

“Hey!” Neville piped up. “It’s not his fault he doesn’t know. He’s been out of it all last month. I don’t think he’s been paying attention to what the Elites have been doing to all of us, and they’re not bothering him because… well, I’ve always wondered why they never bothered him…”

Harry blushed, not sure if his face was red from anger or embarrassment. He’d seen the world through a blurred lens of agony ever since the tea sessions started, and the very last thing on his mind had been his classmates’ problems. He hardly ever talked to any of them, either, so that didn’t help.

“Okay, Harry,” Ron said with a sigh. “Let’s go to breakfast. I’ll tell you on the way there.”

“I know what Hunting Season is,” Harry muttered, following the other boys out of the circular room. “You all told me a long time ago. The Skull Initiates each get a target to screw with for a few months, and—”

“Yeah, I know you know about that,” said Ron. “You’ve been busy… with… with Dolohov’s tea stuff and all, and we didn’t want to make your burden any heavier, so we didn’t… so we didn’t tell you what’s been going on, uh, though I’m not sure how you missed it…”

“Spit it out, will you?”

“Look, Potter,” said Anthony, “you know that Nott fellow in our year, the Bulstrode girl, and Crabbe and Goyle?”

Harry vaguely remembered the dark-haired boy who was close to Draco, the tall girl, and the two boulder-sized boys. “They’re the Initiates in our year, aren’t they? And Draco Malfoy, too.”

“Yeah—wait, Malfoy?” Ron said, biting his lip. “Oh. I guess he probably is. He hasn’t really been doing anything to us though, I don’t think.”

Harry turned red. “Forget it. Nott, Bulstrode, Crabbe, and Goyle then.”

“Right. So after around a week or so of constant attacks back in September—when was it, the second week of school?—we figured out that Nott’s target was Neville, Bulstrode’s is me, Crabbe’s is Anthony, and Goyle’s is Parvati.”
And I’m Draco’s target, Harry realized, remembering Draco had admitted during their talk a few days ago that he’d been trying to get Harry in trouble the first day of Potions.

“But never mind that target stuff,” continued Ron, leaning towards Harry. “It doesn’t matter to Nott anymore. Last week, he started going after everyone, which is why Seamus is dangling from the ceiling, even though he’s not anyone’s target. We’ve figured out from overhearing their conversations that Nott’s basically the mastermind behind all these attacks, and the other Initiates are just doing what he says. And recently”—he lowered his voice conspiratorially here, as they had now emerged onto the first floor—“we’ve started to suspect that he’s roped some of the other first year Elites into his little game, because two days ago Zabini and Smith hexed Dean behind the greenhouses, and they’re definitely not Initiates—at least not yet.”

Dean shuddered at the memory. Harry just then noticed that he had a swollen and cut lip.

“I swear that if there’s some sort of Skull awards they give out,” muttered Terry darkly, “Theodore Nott would win them all. He tries too bloody hard. I bet he doesn’t stop plotting even when he sleeps.”

“And Malfoy?” asked Harry, before he could stop himself.

Ron gave him a strange look. “What about him?”

Harry reworded his question, reddening again. “You said the Initiates were attacking everyone. Why didn’t they attack me? I think I’m Malfoy’s target, but even then, they would’ve attacked me if they were just attacking everybody.”

“I dunno.” Ron shrugged. “Maybe Malfoy has something big planned for you and told the rest not to interfere.”

I’ll bet he does, Harry snorted to himself.

“Oh maybe he chickened out, and just told them that just to save face. It doesn’t matter. They haven’t been bothering you.” He sounded a little jealous for a second, then the pitying expression returned to his face when he glanced over Harry’s fresh cuts from yesterday.

Harry preferred the jealousy, but he didn’t have time to brood about this now. Dark Arts was today, and he would have to keep alert. He was slipping in all of his classes—funnily enough, being in acute agony every single day made studying rather difficult—but Dark Arts was the one class he could not afford to be distracted in. And after lunch, he would be meeting with Draco to research their “little problem,” and Harry was determined to interrogate him about the Skulls.

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Draco’s lunch wasn’t going down properly. He felt as if there was something lodged in his throat, making it difficult for him to swallow. And the reason for this was Theo glaring at him from across the table, in the same way he’d been doing for the past few days, ever since their argument.

“What do you want?” Draco spat, slamming down his spoon.

“To talk.” Theo’s voice was infuriatingly soft.

Draco stood up and sniffed. He didn’t have time for this. He had to meet Harry in about ten minutes. “You can talk to my empty plate.” He’d gone a whole five paces before he heard the clatter of cutlery and hurried steps behind him. He sped up, hoping desperately that it wasn’t Theo who was following him, but no luck. The moment Draco was out of the Great Hall, Theo seized
him by the arm and dragged him into a secret broom closet behind a tapestry.

“I don’t want to talk about the Second Trial.” Draco tried to yank his arm out of Theo’s vice-like grip. “I have places to be, people to meet. I’m a busy man—let me go!”

“I have something important to give you,” said Theo, utterly placid.

Draco wanted to thrash and kick like a toddler, but, well, he’d already lost most of his dignity this year, and he didn’t want to lose all of it. “Let go of my arm and make it quick.”

Somewhat reluctantly, Theo released Draco and stepped back. And then he reached into his pocket to remove a golden letter.

Draco gulped. “From the Skulls.”

Theo handed it to him. “This is for you. You weren’t in the common room when the Skulls came in to give the letters to us yesterday.”

Draco hastily opened the letter, his heart pounding in his throat. He skim-read it while Theo watched him with burning, piercing eyes.

“Another meeting,” Draco whispered at last, looking up. “The week before holiday break starts.”

“I know.” Theo shifted his feet. “I got the same letter. And I also know the letter says that the next meeting will be a checkpoint of sorts, where they’ll track our progress with the Second Trial. You’ll have to tell them what you’ve been doing, and you won’t be able to lie. They’ll give you Veritaserum.”

“I know what the letter says!” Draco’s head hurt. “I don’t need to pass the Second Trial to become a Skull, so it doesn’t matter.” He shoved the letter into his pocket and made for the tapestry, feeling his lunch rise up and trying to swallow it back down. Failing the first two Trials wouldn’t look good, but it wasn’t like he had a choice. Attacking Harry was out of the question, especially now that they’d made a truce.

Maybe Draco could trick Harry somehow, sneakily break the truce, but that defeated the purpose of the Second Trial. It was meant to be an obvious and indisputable show of power, not cunning… but nobody had ever said it couldn’t be cunning, had they? The gears in Draco’s head began to turn, but his plan was too half-formed right now to voice to Theo.

“Say that again,” hissed Theo, his tone deadly.

“Say what?” Draco pivoted around, bristling. “That I don’t need to pass the Second Trial? There. I said it again. I’m not happy about it, but it’s a possibility.”

Theo slammed his palm against the wall, and Draco flinched at the sound. “Something’s changed you. You used to have more ambition than this. You’re the one who went after Potter on the first day of school, on the train, and now it’s like all the ambition you ever had has been sucked out of you, and I don’t understand why you don’t care about anything anymore.”

His voice softened then, and that made Draco flinch worse. “It’s Potter, isn’t it? You’re scared of him?”

Draco’s response was as cold as frost. “Get your nose out of my business, Theo.”

Theo straightened up to his full height and grabbed Draco’s arm again. “It’s okay, Draco. You can
tell me. I’ve suspected for a while now, but I have a solution. You saw what I did to Finnigan this morning, right?"

“That was you?” spluttered Draco. But now that he thought about it, it wasn’t that surprising. Only Theo could’ve pulled something like that off so flawlessly.

Theo narrowed his eyes. “Of course, you’ve been so distracted these past few weeks that you haven’t noticed what I’ve been doing at all. You don’t care.”

*I’m very sorry for being distracted because Harry bloody Potter’s magic spews out of me at eight o’clock every night and he looks like he wants to murder me all day.*

“You’ll notice that Finnigan’s not anybody’s target. I convinced the Initiates to start going after all the other first years—and not just our targets—last week so you could join the rest of us.” Theo bounced on the soles of his feet. “Isn’t it a brilliant idea? I’ve asked around, and I’ve heard that if you end up varying your targets and not just sticking to one, and the Skulls will take that into consideration, too. Just go after Potter once or twice to satisfy the conditions and then help us go after the rest of the dirty-bloods. We’ve already started doing that, so it’ll be an easy transition for you. It’ll probably get us all extra points.”

Draco paused, both impressed and touched now, even though he’d been furious a few days ago. Maybe Theo did care about him. And he wasn’t yelling at Draco today, so that was nice of him.

“That is a good idea. You’ve been doing this for a week?”

Theo brightened. “Yeah, and I talked to Zacharias Smith and Blaise Zabini, too. They’re interested in joining the Skulls next year, so I told them I’d get them sponsors if they helped us. And we’re planning something really big for the dirty-bloods on Halloween.” His eyes were glittering now, wide and eager.

“I’ll help you with whatever it is you have planned for Halloween,” promised Draco, feeling a little eager himself. He’d been so depressed this past month, juggling the magic explosions and his crippling fear of Harry. But more than anything else, he mourned the loss of his self-esteem. He’d been so confident once upon a time, so assured in his ability to wind up deserving dirty-bloods. Then Harry bloody Potter had happened, and made Draco feel more powerless than anyone else had before.

And Draco *could* do what Theo was asking of him. It wouldn’t be hard, if Harry wasn’t involved. Of course, he wouldn’t be able to put off attacking Harry forever if he wanted to pass the Second Trial, but in the meantime he’d do what he could to make himself feel better.

“And Draco?” Theo sounded nervous for some reason. “If you’re scared of Potter, I can go after him for you. I can help you pass the Second Trial, and make it look like you did it all your own. I even have a plan for it.”

Theo was speaking very quickly now, and in a very scattered and repetitive manner, making Draco’s head spin.

“I’ve been asking everyone to hold off on Potter, waiting for you to do something, but you’re too scared of him. So I’ll do it for you, if you want. Just because I’ve been yelling at you lately—and I’m sorry about that, I really, truly am—doesn’t mean I’ll yell at you if you ask nicely that you need help. You’re not weak, Draco. I’m sorry I said that. You know I didn’t mean it. You just need some guidance to be stronger. I can help you with that, and I promise I’ll try my best. I’m your friend, and I care. So don’t be afraid to ask me for help, is what I wanted to say.” He stopped talking abruptly, out of breath, and gave Draco a beseeching look.
Draco blinked, trying to sort out the mess of emotions in his head. The most prevalent of them was indignation. Who did Theo think he was, a child who needed hand-holding? “I don’t need you to go after Potter for me,” Draco said with a hiss, rolling his eyes to the ceiling. “I have a plan for him for now. Don’t worry.” A plan he’d come up with about thirty seconds ago, one that he was going to keep secret until he was sure of all the intricacies of it.

*And if it doesn’t work, I won’t be able to pass the Second Trial. I’ll have to live with that.* “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I’m leaving.”

Not giving Theo a backward glance, Draco made his way to the tapestry. A few seconds later, he was hurrying down the hall to where he and Harry were meeting to skim through huge, heavy, and dull books, looking for tips on controlling their bond. Draco would rather be anywhere else.

They’d only had about two meetings so far, since it had only been a few days since they’d made their truce, and said meetings had been largely useless. But at least they had been peaceful so far, and neither boy had tried to kill the other.

Yet.

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Unfortunately, the peaceful streak did not last, and their third meeting was a disaster. A week afterwards, Harry glowered at Draco over a tray of Maleficent Magnolias in Herbology, hoping that his gaze was intense enough to set the brat on fire. For the first time ever, Professor Zinnia had paired the non-Elites up with the Elites and asked them to pot the newly budded Maleficent Magnolias, an assignment which had been met with much complaining from the Elites.

Usually, Zinnia caved and did what they asked, but she seemed particularly distracted and jittery today and kept looking out the greenhouse windows. For some reason, the creatures on Hogwarts grounds were getting restless and acting strangely, ambushing random students who ventured outside the school walls. It had gotten so bad two days ago that Care of Magical Creatures classes had to be canceled. But Harry didn’t take that subject, so he didn’t really care, and was using this opportunity to intimidate Draco as much as he possibly could.

During that last catastrophic meeting, Harry had asked Draco what he knew about the Initiates’ plans, and why they hadn’t been attacking Harry, and what Draco was planning for him. None of these questions were answered at all, of course, and when Harry began his speech on how the Skulls were the scum of the earth and nothing but mindless and bloodthirsty sheep, Draco threw a book at his head and started screaming about dirty-bloods, as if he thought that was a sufficient insult.

Then Harry used his magic to make all the books in the room attack Draco. A bruised Draco tried to steal Harry’s magic again in retaliation, but Harry had been practicing in secret with the bond a bit and was prepared. When Draco struck, Harry pinched the connection shut. He only managed to do it for about three seconds, but those few seconds were enough to throw Draco off and send him running out of the room, near tears.

A week later, Harry was still glowing from the achievement. They hadn’t had any meetings since, and he didn’t really miss them. Of course, they would have to make up eventually and get back to working on the bond, but Harry wanted to have a bit of fun with Draco first.

Making sure Draco was watching him, he grasped a Maleficent Magnolia around the stem and squeezed. The flower writhed in his fist, opening its jaws to gape for air, but Harry squeezed harder, giving Draco a threatening smirk as he did it, relishing in the terrified expression on the
stupid prat’s face.

“MR. POTTER!” shrieked Professor Zinnia. “YOU LET GO OF THAT RIGHT NOW!”

Harry loosened his fingers, still sneering at Draco, and the plant plopped limply into the dirt. It was dead.

Draco’s face went white.

“What?” said Harry in an innocent voice. “I didn’t mean to do that. My power just ran away with me there.” He seized another Maleficent Magnolia, this time one from Draco’s side of the tray, and Draco jumped. Harry grinned sinisterly at him.

Tormenting Draco gave him so much joy, and Harry decided to snatch him away after class, not wanting to let the other boy go free so soon. He’d done it discreetly enough that none of the other Elites had even noticed that Draco wasn’t among their ranks anymore.

Gleefully, he cornered Draco against the outside wall of the greenhouse, still giving him that malicious grin. “Want to apologize about all that stuff you said about dirty-bloods, Malfoy? If you do, I won’t hex you too much.”

“You know I can steal your magic,” squeaked Draco, looking around hopelessly for somebody to help him. The rest of their classmates were across the grounds by now, and Professor Zinnia was inside the greenhouse and therefore not aware of their presence.

“You tried to do that last week, didn’t you?” said Harry, twirling his wand. “And remember how well that worked?”

“You did something,” Draco gasped out, trying to melt into the wall. “You’ve been practicing with the bond, and you did something.”

Harry rolled his eyes. “It’s fairly obvious that I did something, Malfoy. But you’re missing the point, which is that you can’t steal my magic anymore.” Of course, Draco still could and would discover that sorry fact eventually, but he didn’t need to know it right now, especially when Harry was having so much fun toying with him.

“Well, you still send your magic to me when Dolohov’s torturing you,” Draco spat out, edging along the side of the greenhouse. Harry followed him, seething. “So clearly you don’t have the bond as under control as you say you do.” He took a breath, puffing up like a bird about to burst into song. “You—you son of a Mudblood.”

Harry lunged at him, and Draco made a run for it, slipping around him and heading in an aimless direction. Harry bolted after him, screaming bloody murder. Forget his wand, forget his magic, he would use his damn fists. Draco deserved nothing less than the beating a Muggle would get.

Distantly, he was aware of the fact that they were heading in the opposite direction of the school, towards the Forbidden Forest, and now they were in its outskirts, but found that he didn’t care. He wouldn’t care about anything until Malfoy’s face was sufficiently black and blue.

Draco stumbled on the uneven forest floor, long enough for Harry to catch up and grab him around the waist, causing them to topple to the leaf-covered ground in a tangle of limbs and fists and swear words. Harry gave him one good punch in the stomach, and Draco cried out, digging his nails into the delicate skin on Harry’s wrist. Now it was Harry’s turn to cry out, and Harry’s turn to be on the ground, getting punched. Draco took out his wand and started an incantation, but Harry deflected it with a flick of his hand, sending it flying several feet away. He flipped their positions again, and
now Draco was writhing under him, but his nails were still in Harry’s arm, and they were drawing
blood. Harry yanked his hair, hard enough to tear out some white-blond strands, and Draco bit
down, just as hard, on the hand that was holding his face to the ground. Harry retracted it, letting
out a girlish squeal, and now both of them were throwing their fists around at random. Harry
might’ve caught Draco’s nose, and Draco smacked Harry’s glasses off, and now Draco was
kneeing him in the stomach, and now Harry had Draco’s hand and was bending it backwards,
trying to snap it—

Then both of them noticed that a certain sound was multiplying rapidly around them, filling the air
and the making the leaves rustle.

*Click. Click. Click.*

Slowly, Harry raised his head, and what greeted him made him scream at the top of his lungs.
Right on cue, Draco started screaming too. The two of them scrambled to their feet, their little
scuffle forgotten, and looked around the clearing wildly in an attempt to figure out which direction
they’d come from, realizing too late that they were fenced in by trees on all sides.

Well, not just trees. Harry wished it were just trees.

Because, surrounding them in a ring of many-eyed, many-legged horror, were countless, massive
spiders, standing so close together that there was no space for even light to shine between their
hairy bodies.

But, miraculously, they weren’t attacking. They were just staring at the two boys and clicking their
pincers.

“I—I thought acromantulas lived deeper in the forest,” said Draco in a quiet voice. Harry started;
he’d forgotten that Draco was even there.

“Clearly, they decided to go exploring,” Harry snapped back. He dug in his pocket for his wand,
ready to tear his way through the hellish things if they wouldn’t move out of the way, but then the
spider in front of him spoke.

“You are what awakened us,” it said, shifting its legs. Its gaze was maddened and gleamed red, and
all the spiders had that same rabid spark in their eyes.

“Everything in the forest has been stirring. Because of you,” hissed another. Vaguely, Harry
remembered something about Care of Magical Creatures classes being canceled this week because
the animals were acting up, but resolved that he could think about what that meant when he wasn’t
in mortal danger.

With a determined twitch of his hand, he blasted a gaping hole in the circle of spiders, then
scrambled through it. The spiders he displaced screeched and slammed into the trees behind them,
falling to the ground in crumpled black heaps, but still their kin did not strike him. They all just
continued staring, rotating slowly to keep him in their line of sight.

Having no idea what was going on but not about to question it, Harry took the opportunity to run,
Draco hot on his heels. Undeterred, the spiders tailed them, their many legs rustling over the dead
leaves on the forest floor. “We cannot kill you yet, Colossus,” they hissed all at once, their voices
blending into one horrible, long song that Harry did not understand. “But soon, you will be mortal.
On Samhain.”

And then he heard a scream and whirled around, his heart lodged somewhere in his throat. Draco
had tripped over a branch and stumbled to the ground, his scream getting cut off abruptly. Two of the biggest spiders, their pincers out and their eyes madder than ever, scuttled over him, pressing him into the ground with their weight.

“We cannot kill you yet,” repeated the spiders as one, their words interspersed with clicks, “but we are hungry. We will eat this one today, and then you on Samhain.”

Harry didn’t breathe. He didn’t even think. He just willed. The two spiders went flying off Draco, then burst into flames that consumed them from the inside out, leaving nothing but fried corpses behind. Draco whimpered on the ground, touching his face and neck to make sure everything was still in place. The rest of the spiders paused, considering the two boys, and then scurried away, apparently deciding that dinner was more trouble than it was worth.

Harry and Draco crouched there, on the edge of the warm, sunlit clearing, staring wide-eyed at each other. Draco tried to get up, but his legs were shaking too much to support him, so he fell ungracefully back to the ground. Harry almost held out a hand to help him up, but then remembered that he wasn’t supposed to be helping Draco.

“You—you came b-back for me,” stuttered Draco at last, wrapping his arms around himself. “I… did?” Pieces of memory drifted across Harry’s brain. It had all happened so fast that he hadn’t registered everything properly. “Oh.” He realized that they were both messed up from their fight earlier—before the spiders, that was. Draco’s cheek was red and scratched, and Harry’s arm throbbed. He didn’t feel like apologizing for that; Draco had deserved it, but he hadn’t deserved to die, and beyond that, Harry didn’t want him to die. Seeing the spiders crawling over Draco had filled him with an inhuman, all-consuming rage—

“What were they saying?” said Draco, interrupting Harry’s confused thoughts. “The spiders. They didn’t attack you the entire time, even though they attacked me. They called you something. What was it, that word?”

“Colossus.”

“And they—they said they couldn’t kill you until Samhain, whatever that means.” Draco was breathless.

“Of course they couldn’t kill me,” scoffed Harry, gesturing to the burnt corpses of the spiders. “Now, get up. We have to go back to the castle before anyone misses us. Are you going to tell a professor? I’m not.” He didn’t expect them to help or do anything or even care, but Draco was an Elite, so maybe he would.

Draco shook his head, laying rest to Harry’s fears. “No. We got out of it. And it’s not anything that the professors don’t know already. Everybody knows something’s been going on with the magical creatures. But—but why?” He looked suspiciously at Harry, narrowing his eyes. “They said you’re the one who awakened them, I remember. What did you do?”

His voice had an accusatory tone to it, and Harry lost it at him. “I don’t know any more than you do, all right? Now, get up, you ungrateful brat, or I’ll leave you here for the spiders to find.”

Draco got up, dusting off his clothes, looking a bit abashed. “I’m not ungrateful. I’m sorry for calling… calling you what I did. You saved my life.”

Harry froze, but did not reply, not wanting to give Draco the satisfaction of hearing one. He strode out of the clearing, furious at himself for being so affected by an apology that he wholly deserved.
He wasn’t a sniveling maiden, for Merlin’s sake.

“Harry?”

“Don’t call me that!” Harry spat over his shoulder, his face brilliantly red.

“Tonight, at nine, our usual place?” asked Draco in a small voice. “Our meetings, remember? We still have to work on that, Harry. We have to make it work. I won’t throw books this time. I promise. I’ll try.”

And when Draco said it like that, sounding sheepish and nervous and so genuine, Harry couldn’t stop himself from nodding.

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Later that day, Harry dragged himself into the Hogwarts kitchens. It was thirty minutes to eight o’clock, and he wanted to make sure he was plenty early to Dolohov’s tea session so that the psychopath didn’t have a reason to torture him. Any more reason than usual, at least.

A house-elf named Dinky led him to the tray of tea without fanfare, bowing and squeaking something. Like most of the other house-elves, she was covered in bruises and cuts. Harry bleakly wondered if Dolohov was in charge of house-elf discipline, or if it was one of the other professors.

“Sir will be careful?” asked Dinky, blinking her huge blue eyes at him.

Harry stared at the tray with blank eyes. “I’ll try. Thank you, Dinky.”

“Please, sir, be careful. Halloween is coming,” whispered Dinky.

Then, all at once, all the other house-elves started babbling at this, drowned out the kitchen in high and shrill voices. Harry’s head spun at the sudden noise, and he grabbed the tray and hurried out of the kitchen as fast as he could. The house-elves had been behaving oddly all of October, panicking at the smallest things.

Shaking his head as though shaking off a fly, he made his way to Dolohov’s office, holding the tea tray precariously. He got there fifteen minutes early, and knew from experience that Dolohov would not be happy if he walked in when it wasn’t exactly eight on the dot, so he milled around outside and tried to think about anything other than what he was going to suffer in fifteen minutes.

“Fuck you… don’t… dare tell me… lying bastard!”

Harry jumped, taken aback, then moved closer to the door of Dolohov’s office and pressed his ear to it. He really shouldn’t be listening to this conversation, but Dolohov was distracted for maybe the first time in his life—and Harry wouldn’t get an opportunity to eavesdrop as good as this one ever again, would he?

“Headmaster, how many times must I tell you that I don’t know who it is?” Dolohov was saying, sounding exasperated.

Thorfinn Rowle’s guttural voice seeped through the door. “Hogwarts is preparing for a Purge, and you don’t know who triggered it? It’s been a week since the creatures have lost their minds, and it’s only getting worse. You’d better find out, Dolohov, or I swear I will sack you and skin your filthy hide—”

“It will stop on Samhain,” said Dolohov in a calm voice, “and the cycle will either end or begin
anew, depending on whether or not the Purge manages to eliminate its target.”

Rowle growled, and Harry heard the clatter of chairs. “And if the Purge can’t eliminate the Colossus”—Harry stiffened, his breath catching—“then we call the Dark Lord?”

Dolohov no longer sounded calm, and there was a telltale thunk as he smacked his cane against the table. “If you tell the Dark Lord, we’re all dead. The Purge was meant to be an unnecessary safety measure. It was never meant to occur, and a Colossus should have not been allowed to live long enough to attend Hogwarts. If the Dark Lord couldn’t sense it and didn’t kill it when it was born —”

“But how?” spluttered Rowle, and Harry could imagine spittle flying from his mouth. “A Colossus’s power shines like a beacon; something must be blocking the signals, which is why it survived for so long and why nobody felt its aura—”

“The point is, my dear man,” interrupted Dolohov with a snarl, “the Dark Lord will shred us to pieces if he discovers there is a Colossus at Hogwarts and we are no closer to discovering who it is. We let the Purge continue. A few students may die in the crossfire, but it will end on Samhain, and with it, so will the Colossus.”

“And if the Purge doesn’t manage to kill it?” spat Rowle.

“The Purge will restart on Beltane,” said Dolohov simply. “And then Samhain next year. And then Beltane again. Over and over again, until the Colossus is finally dead. And the Dark Lord will never find out that it ever walked these halls.”

“You are speaking of heresy—” began Rowle.

“If you want to tell our Lord, be my guest,” said Dolohov, tapping his cane again. “But then you will find the entire school, and us with it, going up in flames. The Dark Lord is terrified of nothing in this world—a world he has already conquered—except the possibility of another Colossus being born in it. He will hardly be rational.”

“You dare speak of him in such a way, when he has trusted you with such information—”

“That’s right. Get out of my fucking office, Headmaster. And Mr. Potter? Please bring me my tea now. I’m sure you must be tired of standing, even though you did get to lean against the door.”

Harry’s veins turned to ice, and for a moment he stopped breathing, his head feeling weightless, as if the rest of his body had fallen away from it. Dolohov had caught him eavesdropping.

The door burst open and Rowle lumbered out of it, pinning Harry in place with his tiny, beady eyes, which were sunken deep into the copious amount of flesh on his face. He took out his wand, and Harry’s mouth gaped in horror—

“Headmaster, may I request that you do not kill my Tea Servant? His sanity’s lasted longer than the rest, and I’ll admit I’m quite fond of him. I’m unlikely get a research subject as strong as him for several more years, since he’s the only one who’s never blacked out during any of his punishments. He never begs, either, which I appreciate. In any case, he just came, he’ll hardly have heard anything worth repeating. Come on, now.”

Headmaster Rowle gave a snort and stumped away, still throwing Harry suspicious looks over his shoulder. Harry was still too terrified to move, but sweet relief warmed his veins. Dolohov thought
he had just arrived; he didn’t know how long Harry had truly been standing outside.

“I said, Mr. Potter, that you can come in,” said Dolohov.

Harry hurried inside the office and set the tray on the desk. He kept his head bowed and his eyes lowered, not daring to meet Dolohov’s gaze like an equal would. Harry had made that mistake before, and was not anxious to repeat it.

Dolohov circled him, tutting. “If I find that your tongue has slipped, and that the school is suddenly rife with rumors about what I and the Headmaster discussed here today, you will find your tongue—and your head—woefully separated from your body. Is that clear, Mr. Potter?”

Harry nodded, so hard and fast that his neck cricked. Internally, he grinned. Dolohov kept underestimating him, looking down on him, believing him to be a harmless child, and Harry swore that he would one day make Dolohov regret ever even thinking such a thing. Harry had valuable information now, and he would use it.

“Good,” said Dolohov warmly, and his footsteps receded. Harry snuck a peek at him from beneath his eyelashes, and saw him rummaging through his desk. “Very good, Mr. Potter. I am very glad that I don’t have to kill you, but you do understand that I have to punish you for how naughty you’ve been, don’t you?”

Harry’s heart sunk.

“I’m sorry, it’s nothing personal. But I can’t let you go without punishment when you’ve done something that requires punishing, do you understand what I mean? If you don’t punish the child, he doesn’t learn. That is the most basic principle of child psychology, and I have confirmed it in my studies again and again.”

Harry gave him another vigorous nod, wanting to reach out and strangle him.

“Very good, boy. I have told you about the Justice Whips before, haven’t I?”

The colors in the room blurred, and Harry’s breaths came out uneven. “Yes, sir. But you haven’t—haven’t—”

“No,” agreed Dolohov, straightening up and turning to face Harry. “I haven’t used them on you yet, have I?”

Harry caught sight of the Justice Whips at last, and nearly fainted on the spot. At first glance, they looked like normal whips, and that was quite awful enough on its own. But a closer look revealed they were much, much worse. Made of a thin and flexible silver-colored metal, perhaps even the same magical alloy of the Skull Masks, they glimmered in the light, deceivingly pretty.

Dolohov waved his wand, and then the whips whirred to life. As Harry watched, the metal morphed, forming countless serrated, jagged edges along the whip that each sharpened to a deadly tip.

“Designing a whip this way,” said Dolohov in a clinical voice, rolling up his sleeves, “is quite ingenious, if I do say so myself. Each strike will not only blister the skin like a normal whip, it will also hook deep into the flesh, causing maximum possible injury and agony. And the edges can be retracted at command, so I will be able to blister your skin with one strike and rip it with another. Tell me, Mr. Potter, what do you think of this strategy?”

“Very clever, sir,” Harry choked out.
Dolohov gave him a dazzling smile, and Harry thought of a hundred ways to kill him, right there and right then. “Thank you, Mr. Potter. Because I am not needlessly cruel, you will be allowed to keep your shirt on for the first five minutes of the procedure. Just to get warmed up, you know. Then you must take it off, of course, otherwise the punishment will not have the maximum effect. Now get on the ground, Mr. Potter, and make haste. I would like to finish up here before my tea gets cold.”

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Draco tapped his foot and checked his watch. Harry was late; he was supposed to be here at nine. They were meeting in an abandoned classroom, and Draco wanted to ask him how he’d managed to close their connection—or at least, it had seemed like he had, but the massive explosion Draco had suffered through at eight o’clock today and all week proved that it was still clearly open.

The door opened, and Harry stumbled in, his hair and clothes a complete mess.

Draco opened his mouth to admonish him, and then shut it with an audible smack as Harry took off his robes. Beneath them, his shirt was soaked through with blood.

“I’m sorry, Malfoy,” said Harry in a slightly trembling voice, “but I don’t think I’m in any condition to deal with you today. I just came to tell you why. I-I’m going—I’m going to bed.”

Draco couldn’t speak. His tongue felt like it was glued to the roof of his mouth. At last, after what felt like an age, but was probably only a split second, he pried his lips open. “Dolohov?”

“Who else?” Laughter bubbled from Harry’s throat, and he wavered a bit on his way back out of the room.

“Wait!” Draco cried, jumping to his feet and reaching out to grab him, before realizing that wasn’t the best idea right now and pulling back his hand. “Who’s going to fix it? You’re losing a lot of blood.”

Harry shrugged. “Dolohov used a spell to clot it a bit. I won’t die.”

Draco’s breath was coming faster now. Harry had saved his life. He didn’t want to be in Harry’s debt, and more than anything else, he didn’t want—oh, dear Merlin, he didn’t want him covered in blood, why was that so hard to admit? He vividly remembered the Skulls descending on Bodus Burke during Draco’s First Trial, tearing the older boy’s body apart like they were starving cannibals. He couldn’t even stand to watch that, forget enjoying it, no matter how hard he tried to convince himself he could.

“Come with me,” said Draco, surprised at how strong his voice sounded just then. “The Elites get private rooms that come with a med kit. You only have to ask it for the medicine you want, and it’ll appear in the kit.”

Harry stilled, as if daring Draco to repeat the request.

“I said, come with me,” snapped Draco, taking the bait. “I can help you. You saved my life today, even though you did try to beat me up. I have honor. I’m not going to forget that.”

Harry’s tone was deadly. “I can’t heal my wounds, or Dolohov’ll notice tomorrow when he checks my back. He doesn’t want them healed. If they are, he’ll use the Justice Whips again. So thank you, but no thank you.”

Draco tried to swallow back the sick rising in his throat. He had wondered, distantly, why Harry
never healed his cuts and bruises, and had supposed it was because he didn’t know how to. And those had been little cuts, not gaping, gushing ones like the ones Harry obviously had right now. He had never imagined Dolohov would do something like this. “He… he doesn’t let you heal? Ever?”

“No, Malfoy, he doesn’t. So if you’ll excuse me—”

“My med kit probably comes with some stuff that can… help with the pain,” whispered Draco, following Harry out of the room.

Harry tried to run from him, and then let out a little gasp and doubled over.

“Don’t!” said Draco. “Here, lean on me. I’ll take you to my room.”

“I don’t need your help,” snarled Harry, straightening up and wincing as he did so. “I got here on my own, didn’t I? And I can find others to help with the pain. There are bandages and stuff that older students get me, so I don’t need you to be my hero, thank you very much.”

“But it won’t be as good as my medicine will be, and you won’t get it right away. You’re bleeding really badly. Let me do this,” said Draco softly. “Let me repay my debt, Pott—Harry.”

“Why’re you doing this? It’s creeping me out. You’re going to trick me somehow, and I don’t trust you.”

Well, there is my plan for the Second Trial, so he’s right about that.

But oddly enough, that hadn’t been what Draco was thinking of when he saw Harry wobble into the room, in intense pain. He had been thinking of how wrong, how obscene, it looked to have someone as powerful and unstoppable as Harry reduced to a quivering, bloody wreck. As for why he was helping Harry, he didn’t know if he was doing it because he was grateful the other boy had saved his life, or because he resented the fact that someone who had threatened him so much on a daily basis could allow himself to get so thoroughly beaten.

“Is it so hard to believe that I don’t want you bleeding all over the floor? What do you take me for?”

“A Skull.”

Draco had no response to this for a moment except a blinding flash of guilt, but he quickly buried it and recovered himself so fast that he doubted Harry had even noticed that he had faltered. “All right. Fine. I’m a Skull, and the real reason I’m doing this is because I want you sane so you don’t lose it one of these days and kill me.” Draco rolled his eyes. “Does that convince you?”

“A little,” Harry grumbled. “But I’m sorry, it’s too late—for the sane part, I mean.”

“I’ll amend my earlier statement. I meant to say ‘slightly less insane,’ not sane. There. Now, come on.” Draco held out his arm, but Harry retreated from it, spitting like an offended goose.

“I don’t need an escort, thanks.”

Draco rolled his eyes again and led the way down the hallway. Harry followed him, limping and tottering and swearing under his breath. Halfway down to the dormitories, Harry nearly fainted, probably from blood loss—if Dolohov had actually clotted Harry’s back properly, Draco would eat his stupid bowler hat—and tripped on a step. If Draco hadn’t been there to catch him when he stumbled, he probably would’ve fallen down the spiral staircase and broken his neck on the
“Good thing I was here, isn’t it? There’s my life debt repaid,” sighed Draco, trying to arrange his arm around Harry’s waist in a way that would cause him the least amount of pain, and also trying to ignore the fact that his own arm was now slick with Harry’s blood. Harry murmured something unintelligible in his ear and buried his face in Draco’s neck, too exhausted to support the weight of his own head.

At an achingly slow pace, they climbed down the stairs. Harry was heavy, and he had practically given up on walking by the time they reached the Elite dormitories. When they made their way into the common room, Draco realized, like a splash of ice-cold water to the face, what a huge mistake he had made in bringing Harry here. He had let his emotions get away with him as usual, and now he would pay dearly for his weakness.

Theo was sitting smack dab in the middle of the common room, and neither he nor anyone else had failed to miss the fact that Draco was half-carrying, half-supporting a limp and bleeding Harry Potter—his target and a dirty-blood—into the shiny Elite common room.

Theo stood up, and Draco was too ashamed to look at him. But he could feel the waves of rage, of indignation, of betrayal emanating from him. Theo spoke, then, and his voice had never before sounded so ugly and twisted.

“So you’re not scared of him,” Theo spat. “I was a fool for thinking you were. This past month, you were afraid to hurt him because you’re his friend—”

“Theo, I swear this isn’t what it looks like,” pleaded Draco as he backed out of the common area to the corridor with the private bedrooms, trying to escape Theo’s searing, hateful gaze. “I’ll explain later.”

Theo didn’t say anything in response. He just stood at the end of the corridor, glaring holes into the back of Draco’s head. Draco wanted to throw up, and felt like he was suffering from blood loss himself.

“This is exactly what it looks like,” Harry whispered into his neck.

“You heard that?” said Draco shrilly.

“Thank you, Draco. I didn’t want to be alone for this,” said Harry, and passed out just as they reached the door to Draco’s room. Draco staggered inside, struggling under Harry’s dead weight, and dumped him as gently as he could on his bed. Harry grunted and blinked a bit, but did not completely return to consciousness.

Draco rummaged in his chest of drawers and took out the med kit, asking for Essence of Dittany—he’d use just enough to make Dolohov think that the scabbing was natural—and some pain-relieving paste. He peeled Harry’s shirt off as carefully as he could, but Harry woke right up and screamed anyway as the fresh scabs tore off with his shirt, which had been glued to his back with blood. Draco drizzled the dittany over Harry’s back without looking at it too much, not wanting to see the mangled, ripped flesh any more than he absolutely had to. Harry cried out in agony as the dittany scabbed his biggest and most gaping lacerations over and writhed on the bed, risking reopening his wounds, and Draco had to press a firm hand to his head to keep him still.

“I’m sorry, Harry,” Draco said, and he was shocked to discover that he was almost sobbing with the pain of seeing Harry in pain. “I’m sorry. It’ll be over soon.”
“It won’t be over, Draco. Not ever. Not for me,” said Harry, and then let out a gasp of relief as Draco began applying the paste.

Bizarrely, Draco was reminded of the conversation he had with his father the morning before he had come to Hogwarts. Lucius had mentioned an injured baby bird Draco had rescued from the Malfoy gardens and tried to convince his parents to heal. He had felt so useless then, staring at the bird’s broken body, and he felt just as useless now. Lucius had called him weak for trying to save it, but Draco had thought himself weak for not being able to.

Weak. He was, in both ways.

But he’d deal with being weak, and Theo’s fury, tomorrow. Tonight, he’d sit and watch Harry drift into the peaceful sleep that he fully deserved.
Oh my gosh, thank you so much for all the comments! Each and every one makes me so happy and urges me to open up my Word document to write, even when I'm supposed to be doing homework... ugh.

However, this chapter is pretty much all set up. I meant for this to be the action-y and plot-heavy Halloween chapter, but if I had crammed both Halloween and the set up for it into one chapter, it would be waaaay too long. So, alas, you all must endure a split chapter and the obligatory cliffhanger. But hey, next weekend's chapter should be satisfying!

CHAPTER EIGHT
GAME PLANS

Harry awoke and stiffened at once, keeping his eyes shut tight. His back felt cool and sticky and didn’t hurt at all, and he was wrapped in silk sheets that were most definitely not from his ratty bunk bed. He shifted, fretting, trying to recall what had happened last night after Dolohov used the Justice Whips on him.

“You’re awake.”

Harry blinked and looked straight into the eyes of Draco Malfoy, who was sitting next to his bed. Memories flooded into him, and he bolted upright, panting, trying to look anywhere but at Draco. Last night, Harry had been too out of it to pay any attention to his surroundings, but now he could fully appreciate—and envy—the Elite private rooms. Doing so would allow him to avoid Draco’s gaze, and the last thing Harry wanted right now was to meet it.

“Jealous, Potter?” The corner of Draco’s lip quirked upwards. “Enjoy that bed while you’re in it. You’re never going to get to sleep in it again. I had to sleep on the floor, all because of you.” But he didn’t seem all that bitter about it.

There was a lump in Harry’s throat that he tried and failed to gulp down. “Wh—what time is it?”

“Seven in the morning,” said Draco, stretching lazily. “We have a lot of time until class.”

Harry looked down at himself and winced. His dried blood dappled the sheets, and his shirt, which was spread out on the edge of the bed, was soaked in it. Seeing it made him realize that he wasn’t wearing anything to cover his chest, and he tried to cover it with the sheets, thankful that at least he still had his trousers on.

Then he felt rather stupid. Draco had already seen everything, hadn’t he? Harry thought of his mangled back. And besides, it’s not like there’s much of my skin left to see.
“I reapplied the pain-relieving paste just before you woke up,” said Draco, giving him an intense stare. His cheek was bruised and scratched from where Harry had hit him yesterday during their little scuffle, and guilt impaled Harry like a spike.

“You—you should put some on too,” said Harry.

“Oh. Right. It’s not that bad.” Draco gave his head a little shake.

“Look… about that fight,” said Harry, and Draco stared. Harry’s voice had come out louder than he had meant it to. “You were just saying some stupid words, not hurting me. You’ve never really hurt me. But I’ve hurt you and threatened you, over and over again.” His unspoken apology was heavy in the air.

Draco ducked his head. “If we’re throwing around the blame, I should mention that I was the one who started all of this, back on the train. Or in Twilfitt and Tattings, if you want to go that far back.”

Harry couldn’t argue with that, but he couldn’t believe that Draco had admitted it. He cleared his throat. “Malfoy?”

“What?”

“You can’t sense my magic, can you?” he asked, then realized he hadn’t worded his query the right way.

“Huh?” Draco spluttered, completely taken aback by the random question. “What do you mean?”

“Can you feel something different about me, about my magic, when I use it? You can’t, right?” Harry scratched the back of his neck, remembering what he’d overheard Headmaster Rowle say to Dolohov yesterday. “A Colossus’s power shines like a beacon; something must be blocking the signals, which is why it survived for so long and why nobody felt its aura.”

“Yes,” Draco said at last, and Harry’s mouth fell open. “When you… do wandless… stuff, or whatever you call it, your power washes over me. I felt it the first time on the train.

“How does it feel, my magic?” Harry leaned forward eagerly.

“I don’t know how to describe it, exactly. It’s kind of a stretch, but maybe like heat? It’s not really a physical sensation, more of a mental one.”

“Does it hurt, or burn?” asked Harry. “That heat?”

Draco inhaled, going slightly pink. “No. It’s not really like heat, now that I think about it. It’s pleasant. It felt good when you burned those spiders. And I can feel it more and more around you now, or at least more than I used to.” His shoulders fell, as if revealing this secret to Harry had taken a great weight off his back.

Harry nodded, but he was panicking inside. So his power didn’t shine like a beacon, as it was supposed to—or he’d be long dead—but Draco could somehow feel it. Could anyone else? Did that mean he was getting more and more powerful?

But that couldn’t be it. Nobody else had mentioned sensing his magic besides Draco, and Harry had spent enough time in Dolohov’s presence for the man to notice if Harry’s magical aura was strengthening. Dolohov clearly didn’t know, so the beacon was still off.
Then why could Draco feel it?

It was possible that certain witches and wizards had a natural sensitivity to magic, a sensitivity that increased if Harry used his wandless magic more and more often on them, like he had on Draco. Harry’s mother liked to say that his magic made the house smell, though Harry had never smelled anything. He’d always assumed she’d been lying, but maybe she was even more attuned to his magic than Draco was, having lived in the same house as Harry for eleven years.

It doesn’t smell bad to Draco like it does to Mum, even though I’ve threatened him and hurt him with it. My magic still makes him feel good.

Giddiness threatened to overwhelm Harry at this thought, but he sat on it. He needed to focus on the problem at hand: what—or who—had blocked the “signals” of Harry’s magic? They must have done it to protect him, and it had worked for eleven whole years. Did Harry’s mother know he was a Colossus? And though Harry didn’t want to even think of that horrible man right now, did Snape? Those two, besides Draco, were the only ones who knew of his power.

And what even was a Colossus, exactly? Harry could guess it meant a super powerful wizard of some kind, but it would be nice to have a formal definition.

“The Dark Lord is terrified of nothing in this world—a world he has already conquered—except the possibility of another Colossus being born in it,” Dolohov had said. Another Colossus? Did that mean that there were more, or just one other? Was the Dark Lord himself one?

“You look like you’re asking about a hundred questions in your head, Potter,” said Draco, dryly. “Why did you even ask me that question about how your magic felt, anyway?”

Harry started. “Sorry. I was just curious.” And then to distract Draco from his suspicion at this particularly pathetic explanation, Harry went on. “And right now, I was, uh—I was thinking about what happened with the spiders. They said something about Samhain.”

Samhain, a word that Dolohov had also mentioned.

Harry wanted to throw up. He’d been putting off thinking about it, had been far too preoccupied with the Justice Whips and coming to terms with the fact that Draco Malfoy was a helpful git when he wanted to be. But Harry couldn’t ignore what he had learned yesterday any longer, not if he wanted to live.

The Purge would occur on Samhain, and the Purge—whatever that was supposed to be—would try to kill him.

“Samhain,” said Draco, his eyes lighting up, and Harry was pleased to see that the distraction had worked. “That’s right. It sounds kind of familiar to me. It must be a date of some kind.”

Harry shrugged. “There’s probably a book in the library that explains it. I need to find out what it is. Listen—” He stopped.

He’d been about to tell Draco about what he’d heard Rowle and Dolohov discussing, but now he realized that it wasn’t the wisest idea. Though Draco had saved him, even after everything Harry had done to hurt him, his father was still a Death Eater. If Draco discovered that the Dark Lord wanted to kill the Colossus and that the school was having a Purge to get rid of Harry, what was stopping him from going straight to his father and presenting Harry on a shiny platter? He already knew that Harry was a Colossus, thanks to the stupid spiders, but he didn’t know what it meant, and Harry wasn’t about to enlighten him.
Harry did not trust him. He couldn’t trust him. It didn’t matter that Draco had saved him in his darkest, most vulnerable moment. It didn’t matter that Draco liked how his magic felt. It didn’t matter that Draco had let Harry sleep on his bed. It didn’t matter that Draco was looking at him with those genuine, shining eyes—no, damn it, that part especially did not matter.

It didn’t matter because Draco was still on the Dark Lord’s side. Just yesterday, he’d called Harry the son of a Mudblood, and half the words out of his mouth were blood slurs. There was no way Draco had changed so much in a single day, and behind those eyes was the mind of an entitled Elite, a bully, a future killer. In a few years, Draco would be a fully-fledged Skull. And a few years after that, he’d be a Death Eater.

Harry forced himself to imagine Draco’s fair and elegant features covered by one of those horrible masks, seared that image into the forefront of his thoughts so he’d never dare forget it.

“Oi! Listen to what?” said Draco, snapping Harry’s attention back to the conversation.

“The spiders said they’d be able to kill me on Samhain, remember?” said Harry, resolving to utilize whatever help Draco could give him without revealing his own secrets. “I want to be prepared for it, so they can’t kill me.”

Draco snickered, and Harry found himself enjoying the sound. “But you seriously don’t think it’s a threat, do you? There’s no way an acromantula could kill you. You completely destroyed them.”

“They said they’d be able to, but only on Samhain,” Harry insisted, though he privately agreed with Draco. If the spiders were all that the Purge had to offer, Harry was sure he would be okay, but, somehow, he didn’t think it would be that easy.

“That’s why they didn’t try to hurt you yesterday. They knew they couldn’t do it,” said Draco, chewing his lip. “Find out what Samhain is, then. Stay away from the Forbidden Forest, and they can’t get you. If what they said was true, and you’re the one who has ‘awakened’ the forest, you shouldn’t go anywhere near it in the first place. Maybe everything in there’s after you, maybe something even worse than the creatures. In the meantime, we should practice with our bond. We’ve been neglecting it lately, and that’s all your fault. If something happens, we’ll be able to use the bond to protect ourselves, but we won’t be able to use it if we don’t know how to.”

“We?” said Harry. “There’s no ‘we.’ The P—the spiders are only after me.” He snorted to himself. “And I doubt I need the bond for protection, though you probably do.”

Draco glowered at him, and when he spoke his voice was laced with sarcasm. “Okay, fine. You can singlehandedly defeat any enemy in the whole wide world. Whatever helps you sleep at night, Potter. But I’m connected to you, whether you like it or not, so we’re going to be figuring out how to control that damn bond. Like I said before, you’re stuck with me, and you said you’d work with me. We made a truce, before your little stunt with the bond a week ago. So you’d better let me have access to your magic again, or I swear—”

“All right, all right,” said Harry, letting his irritation out. “I didn’t do anything to it, I promise. I just managed to close it for a second, the second when you were trying to use it, and that tricked you. Nothing’s changed. I’ve just been trying to manipulate it a bit.”

“Wow, I appreciate that,” drawled Draco. “If you could manipulate it to actually do something useful—like stopping those annoying magic explosions, for Merlin’s sake—instead of just screwing with me, that would be nice. It’s a good thing all the rooms have privacy wards and the house-elves don’t gossip, or I’d have taken the fall for your power on day one. Now, get up and start practicing with me. We have at least an hour before we have to go to breakfast. I said, get
“Oh, shut up. I heard you the first time,” Harry grumbled, sliding off the bed gingerly.

“Did you just tell me to shut up?” said Draco in a shrill voice.

Though he had managed to be almost friendly to Harry for about five minutes this morning, it seemed that some things never changed, and Draco Malfoy’s personality was one of those things.

Theo held himself back for thirty whole minutes that morning, before finally caving and accosting Draco in the hallway after breakfast. Harry and Draco had entered the Great Hall together earlier, and even though they’d sat down at different tables to eat, it still looked suspicious. Especially to Theo, who had been glaring the entire time Draco had been trying to swallow his sausages.

“I’m giving you one—and only one—chance to explain to me why you took Harry Potter to your bedroom last night, and healed him even though he’s your target. It looked like you two were friends.” Theo’s voice was utterly calm, but it was the calm before the storm, and there was a great bitterness swirling beneath it. He moved like a silent but furious wildcat, backing Draco up against a corner of the hallway.

For one heart-stopping moment, Draco was vividly reminded of Sebastian on the prowl, and shoved the comparison out of his mind. He did not need to be thinking about the Nott twins right now.

Then he forced himself to swallow down the indignation of being scolded by Theo like he was some sort of misbehaving child. He had made a huge mistake by helping Harry in plain sight of the other Elites, and if he had to give up his pride doing damage control, so be it.

Draco plastered a most convincing sneer onto his face. “Have you gone utterly mad, Theo? Remember how he sent me to the Hospital Wing during the second week of school with that vomiting curse? Why the hell would we be friends? Just listen to yourself talk for a moment. You’re jumping to conclusions.”

And it wasn’t a lie. Harry wasn’t all bad, but they weren’t—and could never be—friends. They were dealing with each other because they had to, and for no other reason. Of course, Draco was still hopelessly obsessed with the other boy’s power, and often found his gaze drawn to Harry, and he admired him for reasons that he couldn’t even explain to himself, and he didn’t want to see someone as unbreakable as Harry Potter broken like that ever again or he would tear Dolohov apart, and—stop thinking, Draco, this is all beside the point.

“Oh, I’m ‘jumping to conclusions,’ am I?” Theo’s sneer right now surpassed all of Draco’s put together. “Tell me, then, what it looks like when you’re helping him walk and he’s leaning all over you. It was nauseating, that entire scene. And you let him stay the entire night, and you even walked into breakfast together.” Theo lowered his voice, and it shook with barely concealed rage. “Were you holding his hand too, while you were healing him? Did you kiss his tears away?”

Draco’s mouth fell open. “I did not! You take that back!” he screeched, trying to grab Theo’s collar and hopefully get a few seconds of strangulation in. But Theo seized his hand in midair before he could and crushed it against the wall behind him, and Draco let out a whimper of pain as his knuckles were rubbed into rough stone.

Theo released him and took a step back. His face was a mask of calm again. “You were supposed to be participating in the Hunt. You were supposed to be punishing him for the past month and a
half, but instead you’ve been hiding in your room. I thought it was because you were scared of him, but I look away for a week and the next thing I see is you damn well carrying him into your room! You said that you had a plan to deal with Potter, to pass the Second Trial, but I see now that you were lying.”

The calm mask cracked just then, and the hatred simmering beneath it transformed his face. “You’re a liar, Draco, and a dirty little traitor, and a brat who’s ungrateful for everything I’ve done for you, who’ll throw the future we could have had with the Skulls away for some disgusting mutt who shouldn’t even be allowed to look at you, much less get his dirty blood all over you—”

“SHUT UP!” yelled Draco.

Theo shut up, viciously satisfied by Draco’s loss of composure.

And that, more than anything else, drove Draco over the edge.

Why was he standing here and taking all of this? Why was it always him, stretched and tugged between Harry and the Skulls? Why had he been so stupid as to bully Harry on the train, to attract his ire? Why had he been unlucky enough to get Harry as his target? Why had Harry saved his life, and why had Draco succumbed to weakness and saved Harry’s? And why did the universe give them a fucking magical bond, as if it couldn’t stand to let them have a break from each other for a single second?

Draco had a job to do. He’d always had that job. And he was not going to let the world back him into a corner. It didn’t matter that he cared about Harry, was obsessed with him for some twisted and incomprehensible reason that probably had everything to do with his power. It didn’t matter that he had a magical bond with him. It didn’t matter that the spiders—and perhaps all the creatures in the Forbidden Forest—were hunting Harry, and by extension, Draco.

Draco would do his damn job, and his job was to become a Skull, then a Death Eater. A week ago, he’d come up with a hazy, half-baked plan for the Second Trial. He was going to use it.

He was not a traitor, and he was not a liar.

“You’re wrong,” he snarled, his mouth moving a mile a minute and not really listening to his mind, which was screaming at him from several different directions. “I do have a plan to deal with Potter and the Second Trial. Helping him last night was part of my plan. I saw him bleeding when he was coming out of Dolohov’s office, and he looked really pathetic. He doesn’t have any friends or anybody to help him. Not even the other dirty-bloods and blood-traitors like him. So I got a great idea.”

Theo started to laugh, unpleasantly. “Oh shut up, that’s the funniest story I’ve ever heard. Healing him, carrying him, was part of your plan? Don’t try to save face, Draco. There’s no way you can twist the truth into something as stupid as this.”

Now it was Draco’s turn to grin with vicious satisfaction. “I will be delighted to explain myself. To pass the Second Trial, you need to break, shatter, and destroy your target, don’t you? What better way to break, shatter, and destroy someone than to pretend to be their friend, then reveal that it was all a lie? I can’t duel him and beat him, Theo. He’s too powerful. But there’s a hundred ways to break someone. Just because you like to hex and hang your victims from ceilings doesn’t mean I have to do it the same way. I can get him on my side, gain his gratitude, and then yank it all out from underneath him. So I helped him last night, and healed him. We’re not friends right now, but I’m moving towards it, and don’t you dare interfere with my plan, Theo, because there’s no other way I can pass the Second Trial!”
Draco ended his speech with a pant. The more he went over the plan in his head, the more brilliant it sounded. If he pretended to be Harry’s friend, his life would become much easier. Right now they had an uneasy truce, but that was sure to break the next time one of them got angry. If they were bound by friendship, not just magic… Draco’s breath sped up at the very thought of Harry caring about him, sharing his magic with him because he wanted to, spending time with Draco because he enjoyed his company—stop it, Draco.

The point was that Harry would be more amenable to working with the bond, which was the only thing Draco cared about, obviously. And if Theo accepted the plan, he wouldn’t question why Draco was spending so much time with Harry, which Draco would have to do anyway to work on their bond.

Of course, he would eventually have to break off the friendship with Harry to fulfill the terms of the Second Trial, but he would worry about that when he had to. Right now, he needed to get Theo off his back and pass the Second Trial’s Veritaserum checkpoint the week before holiday break.

He peered up at Theo, praying that the stubborn boy had understood.

“I see,” said Theo at last, but his voice sounded strange. “That’s… that’s a really good plan, Draco. I’m disappointed I didn’t think of something like that myself.”

There’s something wrong with him, thought Draco, his heart pounding somewhere in his head.

“I shouldn’t have underestimated you,” continued Theo, giving him a smile that seemed utterly fake. “I’ll leave you to it, then. We’d best be getting off to Potions now.” He turned to leave, but threw a look over his shoulder. “You’re still helping me and the other Initiates with the little prank we’re going to pull on Halloween, aren’t you? I won’t interfere with you and Potter, I promise. Your plan’s a good one, but I don’t want you to get too used to solving all your problems with sneaking around. Sometimes you need to be able to hand out a good punishment, and that’s what we’ll be doing on Halloween to blood-traitors and dirty-bloods. It’ll make sure that you’re not out of practice.”

“I’ll be there,” said Draco easily, his heartbeat relaxing. Theo was back to his normal self. “You worry too much, and you think too much. Stop looking for things between me and Potter that aren’t there.”

With that, the two of them headed off to Potions, chattering like the old friends they were, and Draco felt as though he was floating. He had really outdone himself today. All his plans were beautiful and brilliant, his brain was beautiful and brilliant, and, above all, he was beautiful and brilliant.

It’s truly a tragedy that I can’t marry myself.

***

Harry, along with Draco, discovered what Samhain was the next day and wished he hadn’t.

He and Draco hadn’t fought yet today. This meant that their truce had lasted more than twenty-four hours, which was quite frankly a miracle. The two of them sat, heads close together, in a corner of the library, paging through dusty tomes on Dark rituals and hoping to come across the word Samhain.

Then Draco finally did.

“Harry? Look at this.” He shoved an open book on old blood rituals in front of Harry’s face. “This
is the Wheel of the Year.”

Harry looked at it, and widened his eyes. On the page was a circle with a strange eight-pointed star, and each point led to a different word. At the top of the circle was the word Yule and, going clockwise, were the words Imbolc, Ostara, Beltane, Litha, Lammas, Mabon, and lastly, Samhain. And beneath that circle was a list of dates and descriptions.

_Yule._ The winter solstice, on the twenty-first of December.

_Imbolc._ The beginning of spring, on February second.

_Ostara._ The spring equinox, on the twenty-first of March.

_Beltane._ The beginning of summer, on the first of May.

_Litha._ The summer solstice, on the twenty-first of June.

_Lammas._ The harvest, on the first of August.

_Mabon._ The autumnal equinox, on the twenty-first of September.

And finally, _Samhain._ The beginning of winter, on the thirty-first of October.

Harry’s heart sunk. _Halloween._ Samhain was Halloween, and it was barely two weeks away.

Draco went white as a ghost. “Is that right? Did I read that right? Samhain’s on Halloween?” He looked a lot more shaken about this than Harry had expected.


Draco squirmed. “What? No. I’m just… upset that we won’t have a lot of time to prepare for it.”

Harry didn’t believe him for a second. There was something happening on Halloween that Draco wasn’t telling Harry about, and it might have to do with the Purge.

Or may _be it has something to do with the Skulls_, said a small voice in Harry’s head. _And Draco’s never going to tell you what the Skulls are planning, is he?_ Could the Skulls have something do with the Purge? From what he remembered Dolohov saying, Harry doubted that they did. That meant Draco’s secret was something unrelated.

But Harry still didn’t like it.

“I might have a plan to help you,” said Draco, cutting off Harry’s depressing train of thought.

“All right, Malfoy, what’s your brilliant plan?” asked Harry, leaning forward on the table with mock eagerness.

Draco scowled. “Stop making fun of me before I’ve even told you my plan, Potter. Anyway, I’ve been thinking, maybe we could somehow trick the creatures, or whatever’s awakened in the forest, by distracting them from their real goal, which is you. So we need a dummy, something to make them think they’ve got you, while in reality you’re safe in the castle. If they think they’ve already killed you, they won’t keep chasing you.”

Harry’s mouth dropped open. It was a good idea. And it would work for the Purge as well. Dolohov said that if the Colossus wasn’t killed on Samhain, the Purge would repeat on Beltane, then the next Samhain, and so on. If Harry could somehow trick the Purge, whatever the hell it
was, into thinking it had won, he would be free.

“So, how’s my plan, Potter?” said Draco with a smirk.

Harry quickly wiped the stupefied look off his face. “It would be impressive, Malfoy,” he said disdainfully, “if you actually had the details worked out, and not just the vague idea of it. It’s not really a plan right now.”

Undiscouraged, Draco gave him a dazzling smile. Harry found himself unable to look away.

“So, how’s my plan, Potter?”

***

The next two weeks passed in a whirl of sunlight and warmth for Harry, even though the air was getting colder and the sky cloudier as October drew to a close. His standard of living had improved beyond recognition these past two weeks and, for once, his truce with Draco was progressing without any hiccups.

Draco was being almost frighteningly nice—or as nice as someone like Draco could be, at least—to Harry, and every evening after Dolohov’s tea sessions, Draco would invite Harry into his bedroom where he would help him apply pain-relieving paste. This particular brand was much more potent than the stuff the non-Elites could get him, and it was available in infinite quantities. Draco’s med kit never seemed to run out of the stuff.

Harry tried to refuse his help, not wanting to be further in Draco’s debt, not wanting his budding admiration for the other boy to grow any more than it already had, but he could never say no—who would?

After Harry’s cuts were soothed, the two of them would work on their plan for Samhain late into the night. Often Harry would fall asleep on Draco’s bed, drooling over a book, and Draco would yell him awake and splash water on his face in the mornings, but Harry could tell he wasn’t really that upset.

And all those late nights paid off, because the puzzle pieces of their plan were finally coming together. They would use an illusion of Harry as bait and send it out into the middle of the Forbidden Forest to distract whatever was stirring in there. Harry wasn’t sure how well it would trick the Purge, but it was the best idea they had, and the only thing that had a chance in hell of working.

After a few days of exhausting practice, Harry was able to use his wandless magic to weave a mirror image of himself out of shadows, but the illusion wasn’t very convincing and kept flickering. Creating an illusion out of actual spells was even harder, as it required about a hundred sensory spells working in tandem, and two weeks wasn’t long enough for Harry and Draco to learn the complex art of Illusiomancy.

And if the illusion failed, at least they were working on a backup plan: the bond. Their control of it had increased remarkably. Now Draco was able to pinch it closed like Harry could, and Harry had finally figured out how to stop explosively sending Draco his magic when Dolohov tortured him. It required a bit of concentration, but all Harry needed to do was widen the connection—which he visualized as a tube of sorts—so that the magic had more room to tunnel through to Draco.

Now Draco received the magic without any explosions, and got to carry it around with him while Harry was suffering in Dolohov’s company. This way, Harry didn’t risk losing control and
revealing his powers to Dolohov, and Draco’s furniture didn’t keep getting broken. It was the perfect compromise, and Draco never asked to keep the magic longer than Harry wanted him to. If worst came to worst on Samhain and Harry was somehow taken out of commission, Draco would be able to summon Harry’s magic to help.

*Draco.*

Harry couldn’t believe that this was the same boy he’d met in Twilfitt and Tatting’s, who’d tried to hex him on the Hogwarts Express. Well, he still sneered at the dirty-bloods, and he muttered “son of a Mudblood” underneath his breath whenever Harry did something to annoy him, and he was a Skull Initiate, and he only really met up with Harry in private, as if he were ashamed to be seen with him in public, which he probably was—

Well, all right. He hadn’t changed that much, but he wasn’t what he looked like on the surface, either. Harry had to shamefully admit that he didn’t mind spending time with Draco, despite all his faults. Draco was useful and intelligent. The illusion had been his idea, and he’d been the one to guide Harry through weaving it, telling him where the image faltered.

He seemed committed to helping Harry, even if his only reason for doing so was their unfortunate and accidental bond. Half their conversations were arguments, but Draco always kept civil and didn’t let them devolve into screaming fights, as if he were determined not to return to the savage-brawling stage of their relationship of two weeks ago.

Harry would never dare tell him, but he was grateful. They weren’t exactly friendly, but Harry knew he wouldn’t want to hex or hurt Draco anymore, not after everything Draco had done for him these past two weeks.

“Do you think you’ll be able to make it work by tomorrow?”

It was the day before Halloween, and Draco was lying on his bed, propped up on his elbows, while Harry was leaning against the foot of the bed. Draco had kicked him off a few minutes ago, claiming that he didn’t want Harry to fall asleep and drool all over his pillows again.

“I’ll have to, won’t I?” snapped Harry, closing his eyes and concentrating as hard as he could. The illusion of himself flickered to life and paced the room. Its movements were stiff and unnatural, but it looked just like Harry. It would have to do.

The creatures, if possible, had gotten even more riled up in the past two weeks. Herbology classes had been canceled, and after two girls snogging in the pumpkin patch by the forest had been mauled by some rampaging hippogriffs, leaving the castle without a professor was banned. It was getting unbearably cold outside, however, so nobody found this a difficult rule to follow.

“One hour,” said Draco with a snort, checking his watch when the illusion finally melted away and Harry panted. “You can keep it on for one hour, Potter. See the great Colossus at work! Really powerful wizard here!”

“Oh, shut up,” said Harry, burying his head in his arms. “One hour will be enough to trick them. It has to be. Watch the clock again, I’m gonna try a second time.”

“No, you’re not,” said Draco with a huff. “Go back to your dorm, Potter. I have to get up early tomorrow, and I don’t want you stealing my bed again.”

“Early? For what?” said Harry, disappointed. He didn’t want Draco to find out, but he was purposely falling asleep in Draco’s room because it was so much more peaceful and comfortable
than the boys’ dormitory.

“For something that’s none of your business, so go away. It’s nearly one o’clock.” Draco flopped down on the bed and threw the sheets over his head. The room was plunged into darkness; the bewitched lamps sensed Draco’s desire for them to turn off.

Harry frowned at him for a second, then got up with a sigh. The illusion would have to work tomorrow. There was no other option. He didn’t know what the Purge was, didn’t know easily it could be tricked. And one hour might not be enough time to do it. But he had tried his best, so it would have to work. Because there was too much Harry needed to do in his life for him to die tomorrow.

He shuffled out of Draco’s room and down the corridor, his eyelids growing heavy. This late at night, the Elite common room was nearly empty, but a few first years were milling around near the fireplace.

*That’s odd.* Besides him and Draco, he didn’t think other eleven-year-olds made a habit of staying up past midnight. But he was too tired to care, and found himself more occupied with wishing his rubbish bunk bed was as soft as Draco’s. Why couldn’t Draco have had a little pity on him and let him stay? What did he even have to do tomorrow that was more important than helping Harry?

Then, driving all thoughts of sleep from Harry’s mind, a boy’s cold voice cleaved the silence.

“Get him.”

A Stunning Spell hit Harry in the back, and he toppled to the ground. The last thing he saw was Theodore Nott’s face looming above him, his eyes just as cold as his voice.
Ahhh! Thank you so much for the comments!! Each and every one completely derails me from my homework. Please have mercy, guys. (I'm kidding, keep commenting.) This chapter is another huge one, nearly 10,000 words, which is why it took 6 days to write. Hope that cliffhanger wasn't too painful.

WARNINGS: Intense bullying and VIOLENCE. This is a dark chapter, and I might've made myself a bit uncomfortable writing some parts, so tread with caution if stuff like this might trigger you.

CHAPTER NINE
SAMHAIN

Halloween morning brought the worst storm Draco had ever seen in his life. The very walls of the school itself gave little shudders every now and then, as if they were struggling to stay upright in the midst of an earthquake, and Draco’s hearing was nearly drowned out by the howling gale. This was not a good sign, and he couldn’t help wondering if the weather had anything to do Harry’s forest problem.

At breakfast, Draco’s eyes stung with exhaustion. Theo had wanted the Initiates, plus Zabini and Smith, all up before sunrise so they could wrap up their little prank before class started. Besides them and a few dead-faced older students who looked like they had pulled all-nighters, the Great Hall was empty.

Draco was privately pleased with the timing. He could finish punishing dirty-bloods and get back to Harry before the other boy even noticed he was gone. They’d planned to send the illusion outside at dawn, the time at which the day officially started in the old wizarding cultures, and Draco didn’t want to miss it.

“Sleep well last night?” asked Millicent, taking a break from shoveling oatmeal into her mouth to sneer at Draco, who had dark circles under his eyes.

“Why is he here, anyway?” said Zacharias Smith with a scowl. “He doesn’t help us with anything.”

Theo placed his glass of pumpkin juice down on the table with a resolute thunk. “Don’t worry, Smith. He’ll be working with us more often from now on. Right, Draco?”

Draco hadn’t agreed to that, but decided it wouldn’t be prudent to argue with Theo in front of everyone. “Yeah. How exactly are we going to be doing this, exactly?”

Blaise Zabini snorted. “You don’t know? Seriously? Why did we invite this pansy, tell me again?”

“Because,” said Draco, making his tone as chilly and deadly as the Antarctic, “I am actually an
Initiate, unlike you. I’m also a Malfoy, whereas you, Zabini, are the no-name bastard of a woman whose greatest ability is slipping poisons into her husbands’ drinks.” He rolled his eyes and returned to his breakfast. Puffed up wannabes did not intimidate him.

Zabini’s mouth tightened, but he didn’t dare say anything else. An awkward silence permeated the air, but Theo shot him an admiring glance, and Draco felt emboldened.

“Odd, Malfoy, that you’ll go off on Zabini, a Pureblood, but take a half-blood to your room,” said Millicent at last, pulling back her lips to reveal sharp teeth. “He’s been there every day, hasn’t he, that Potter fellow? Do you let him sleep on your bed? Did you think we all didn’t notice?”

Draco went an ugly shade of red and balled up his fists. Damn you, Millicent. The bitch liked seeing his reputation burn for her own sick pleasure.

“We all saw Potter leave Malfoy’s room really late last night. Nearly one o’clock,” piped up Smith. A knowing chuckle spread throughout the Initiates, though Draco felt utterly out of the loop. Why had they all been up that late?

“What do you two do in there so late into the night, Malfoy?” Millicent sniffed in an exaggerated fashion. “Ugh, judging by the dirty-blood stench I can smell from here, I can guess. You must’ve not taken a shower this morning, Draco.”

Everyone burst into laughter—everyone except Theo, whose gaze was fixed on his plate.

But Draco had resumed control of his mouth, and now they were all going to pay. No, he wasn’t going to sink to Millicent’s level and insult her about her family name or her looks, because he was above such childish antics. He would completely annihilate her—and all of the morons who were laughing at him—in the cleverest way possible: by elevating himself.

“You think I’m snogging Potter, Millicent? Please. Your unoriginality appalls me. Of course, I shouldn’t be surprised, because you’re hardly smart enough to figure out the truth. You must’ve been driving yourself mad wondering what I’ve been doing with him. So, I’ll ease your suffering and tell you.”

Draco leaned forward and, subconsciously, everyone else did too. He nearly started preening at the attention, but restrained himself.

“You see,” he drawled, “while you fools have been hexing a bunch of snotty first years all day long, I’ve been relaxing and enjoying my personal slave. Anything I want, he does for me. He tells me all his secrets. I’ve been gathering useful information about Dolohov and the other dirty-bloods. I’ve been gaining his trust, and soon I’ll completely control him. I’ll probably be able to command him to attack his own kind. Oh, but you all can go on with your little pranks. I’m sure it’ll get you far one day.”

Draco had sort of just made this speech up on the spot, but now that he thought about it, using Harry sounded a lot better than breaking up with him for the Second Trial. Harry could be a valuable resource, and if Draco was going to put in the effort to befriend him, he would prefer not to throw it all away.

Trying not to think too hard about what Harry would think if he could hear him right now, Draco went on. “Why fight your own battles, when you can make others fight them for you? Why destroy the dirty-bloods and the blood-traitors and the filth, when you can own them? We’re kings, not pawns.” He quirked his lips into a lazy, crooked smile, one that he knew made him look completely irresistible. “Well, at least I am. Don’t know about you idiots.”
They all stared at him, open-mouthed and wide-eyed. Theo put down his fork with a clatter, and Draco faced him eagerly, sure that he would get support. Theo had accepted his plan for the Second Trial, after all, and this was only a slight modification to it.

“Careful, Draco,” said Theo, his voice icy. “Keep talking and someone might think that you don’t agree with the Skulls’ philosophy.”

“I do agree with it,” snapped Draco, trying not to show his hurt at Theo’s automatic rejection. “I’m just saying that change could be a good thing. See, if the Dark Lord hadn’t changed the world, the Muggles and the Mudbloods would’ve ruined wizarding culture. I want to bring about change, too.”

“You’re not the Dark Lord, Draco,” said Theo, voice going even colder. “But I’m going to forgive that slip of tongue—”

“I don’t need your bloody forgiveness,” Draco snarled, standing up and stalking off, not in the mood to stay with these fools any longer.

Theo ran after him, so abruptly that Draco couldn’t resist the urge to turn around. They were near the entrance of the Great Hall now, out of the earshot of the others. “So, that’s it, then? You’re not going to participate? Even after you promised me that you’d help me on Halloween?”

“All I wanted today was a little bit of respect, Theo,” said Draco, quite sure he was near tears but hoping he didn’t show it, “and this is what I get? A bunch of nobodies questioning me and ridiculing me, and you always looking down on me, always thinking that I’m wrong if I don’t do things your way?”

“It’s not just my way,” Theo spat. “It’s the way of the Skulls, of our fathers, of the Dark Lord. And do you know what I think, Draco? I think that you know, deep inside, that I’m right. You know that you’re the one who’s changing, who’s going weak, and you’re trying to justify it to yourself. And do you want me to tell you why you’ve become this way?”

“Oh, tell me,” Draco said in a low hiss. “I dare you.”

Theo walked over to him and leaned down to hiss into his ear. “You’ve been spending too much time with Potter,” he said. “He’s just a son of a Mudblood. I told you what my plan was. I just… it would be a waste of my time, to become his friend and then break it up with him for the Second Trial. I just thought there could be a better way.”

“What? No!” Draco sounded faint and unconvincing, even to himself. “He’s just a son of a Mudblood. I told you what my plan was. I just… it would be a waste of my time, to become his friend and then break it up with him for the Second Trial. I just thought there could be a better way.”

“Fine. I get your point. I’ll drop—it would be a waste of my time, to become his friend and then break it up with him for the Second Trial. I just thought there could be a better way.”

“There isn’t,” Theo growled. “What were you going to do? Walk up to the Skull King and tell him that you want a dirty-blooded personal knight, and that he should let you pass the Second Trial with just that? Really? No, Draco, you’re going to do things the old-fashioned way.”

“Theo shook his head. “I don’t trust you, Draco. You’ll grow too close to Potter, and then you’ll chicken out at the last moment, and then you’ll never become a Skull. You’ll turn your back on us.”
Draco gaped at him. “What? No! I wouldn’t—what’re you even on about?” He got ahold of himself, then pinned Theo with a fierce glare. “You’re making stuff up now, assuming the worst of me. Why do you always do this to me, Theo? Why do you think so little of me? I can do this without your meddling. Leave—me—alone!”

Theo narrowed his eyes right back. “Say whatever you want, Draco, but I don’t believe that you won’t chicken out, come the Second Trial. You might grow too attached to your half-blood dog, like you already have.”

“Look, if you don’t believe me,” Draco snarled, “then there’s nothing I can do to convince you.”

“But there is something you can do to convince me, Draco. Prove to me that you don’t care about the blood-traitors and the dirty-bloods. Show me how well you can destroy them today, and I’ll never doubt you again. I’ll even trust your plan for the Second Trial, and I won’t bother you about Potter anymore. Do we have a deal?”

Draco let out a huge sigh. “Look, Theo, I already agreed to this, two weeks ago. I said I’d help you today, didn’t I? I’ve said it about three times now. I don’t know what else you want from me.”

“Just a little enthusiasm, Draco!” said Theo, dropping his calm demeanor. “Just once, I’d like you to show a little more interest in the Skulls, in Initiation, in me”—Theo’s voice broke, but he recovered quickly—“instead of whatever you’re doing with Potter.”

“I’ll show enthusiasm!” Draco stamped his foot. “I’ll show it today, right now! And I’m not just going to show it, I’m going to feel it. Okay? And do you want me to spend more time with you, too, you whiny git? Fine, I will. Are you happy now?”

“Very. That’s all I wanted you to promise. Was that so hard?” Theo reached out, maybe to run his hand through Draco’s hair, but Draco smacked it away before he could, still fuming.

Theo’s gaze hardened.

“Are you guys done arguing over there?” Millicent shouted all the way from the table. “I find it very rude of you to leave us out of the conversation.”

“I find everything about you, Millicent—” Draco began, but Theo put a warning hand on his shoulder.

“It’s time to start,” he said. “Let’s go.”

***

So hungry. For thousands of years, I have been so hungry.

Wake up, Colossus.

Come here, Colossus.

Feed me, Colossus.

***

Harry stirred, groaning as he registered his aching joints and muscles, sure that he had been having the wildest dream. The first word that clinked into his mind was Samhain. What time was it? Was it already morning, or still in the middle of the night?
But all thoughts of Samhain were driven from his mind when he opened his eyes and saw nothing. He panicked for a second, sure he had gone blind, but then realized that it was too dark to even see his own hand in front of his face.

_I do not have time for this today_, Harry thought, trembling in rage. If he survived Samhain, he was going to shred Theodore bloody Nott and his gang into pieces.

After taking a few calming and deep breaths, Harry felt around in order to figure out where the hell he was, running his palms over the rough stone floor. His hand brushed against clothing that was not his.

“OI! Who’s that?” said the person he had accidentally touched. It sounded a lot like Anthony.

“Nghhhh, where am I?” said a voice Harry recognized as Neville’s.

“Why’s it so dark? This must be one of the dungeons…” A girl’s voice.

“Shit, shit, shit, the last thing I remember is that ugly Bulstrode girl hexing me in the back after class.” This one was Ron, Harry was sure of it.

“Oh God, oh God, the Initiates put us here. I remember Smith coming up behind me, oh God, I can’t do this anymore—” The voice was familiar, but Harry couldn’t attach it to a face. Maybe the Macmillan guy?

“Everyone SHUT UP and say your names!” Was that Dean?


“Dean Thomas,” said the one who had told everyone to shut up, confirming Harry’s earlier hunch.

“Harry Potter,” he finished.

“Does anyone have any idea where we are?” whimpered Neville.

“As I was saying just now,” Parvati snapped, “that this might be one of the dungeons. There’s a glass wall right next to me, I think. I can feel it, but I can’t see what’s past it—or much of anything really.”

“Glass wall?” said Ron. “Oh, shit. This must be Dungeon Two. It’s separated into two parts by a glass wall, I’ve heard. My brothers—Fred and George, I mean—were taken here once or twice. The Skulls take rule-breakers here and put them on trial, to decide whether they’re guilty or not, and what punishment they deserve.”

“What’s the glass wall for?” Ernie interrupted, before Ron could get too far into his story.

“It’s where they hold the people waiting to be put on trial,” said Ron. “The glass is enchanted, Percy told me. We can see outside, but they can’t see inside.”
“Hypothetically, of course,” Harry felt the need to point out, “since we can’t see anything right now.”

“Shut up, Harry,” said about three people at once.

Then the lights turned on, and Harry blinked rapidly to adjust his vision. He squinted, trying to ignore the pinpricks of pain in his head, and saw they were in a massive rectangular room. Well, no, that wasn’t quite right. They were actually in a smaller antechamber, cut off from the rest of the room by the glass wall.

Everyone pressed their face against the wall, eager to see into the rest of the room. It had a high and domed ceiling, like a church’s, and resembled a mini-stadium or theater, complete with rows of seats of descending height, all arranged around a small raised platform in the very center of the room.

“A courtroom, my arse,” said Anthony. “It looks like an execution chamber or something.”

“Don’t say that!” Neville wailed.

“Over there!” said Parvati, pointing unnecessarily at the clique of Elites that had just entered the room from the opposite end.

Harry’s heart gave one weak thump and sunk to his feet when he saw who was among them.

Draco.

What?

Harry hadn’t realized he was pounding on the glass hysterically, trying to get Draco’s attention, until Ron grabbed his arm to stop him.

“Mate, they can’t see or hear us,” Ron reminded him with a little shake of his head. “I think the walls are like that so we don’t distract anyone outside.”

Harry slumped back, panting, still not willing to believe that Draco had aided in his kidnapping. Draco wouldn’t do this, would he? He knew how important Samhain was. They had been preparing nonstop for it. He wouldn’t agree to Harry’s capture for this… this twisted game the Initiates were playing, especially not on a day like today.

But last night, when Draco had kicked Harry out of his room, Nott and some of the others had seemingly been expecting him in the Elite common room. The timing was suspicious, too suspicious to be denied. Draco had forced Harry to leave his room, almost like he had known Theo was going to be waiting for him outside.

It was so perfect, so obvious, that he felt like an utter fool for not seeing it before. Draco was playing him like a fiddle. Healing Harry, letting him sleep on his bed, helping him with Samhain, working with him on the bond, all of it was part of the Initiates’ game, orchestrated to trap Harry in Draco’s web—

Wait. The bond. Harry grasped at this lifeline like a drowning man. Draco wouldn’t betray him because of the bond. He had tried too hard to make it work—for his own sake at the very least, if not for Harry’s—and he wouldn’t throw away all their progress for this game.

Would he? Would he throw me—and our bond—into a fire if it would help him join the Skulls?

Harry asked himself desperately.
The answer came to him at once. Draco would. He’d let Harry burn and then stomp on his ashes if it got him that creepy metal mask. Harry didn’t know Draco Malfooy all that well, but he knew this much.

But even then, today’s Samhain, Harry repeated to himself, still unable to come to terms with Draco’s betrayal despite all the evidence. He wouldn’t break the truce so suddenly. It didn’t make any sense.

Something just didn’t add up.

A sudden movement on the periphery of Harry’s vision drew his attention, pushing all other thoughts from his mind. Theodore Nott stepped behind the podium on the raised platform, and when he spoke, his voice rang out across the empty chamber. “Let there be justice, though the heavens fall! Fiat justitia, ruat caelum, Parvati Patil!”

The words were apparently some kind of code, because the glass wall separating the captives from the rest of the room rippled like the surface of a lake. Possessed ropes sprung out of the ground and wrapped themselves around Parvati, who shrieked as they half-dragged, half-carried her through the temporarily-liquid glass. After depositing her on the raised platform, they fell still, and the glass returned to its solid state.

Parvati wriggled feebly within the ropes like a moth stuck in its cocoon, whimpering. Theo looked down at her unpityingly. “Parvati Patil. State your blood status.”

She glared up at him from the ground, her gaze hateful. She didn’t bother to answer his question.

Theo didn’t hesitate a single second. He gave her a swift kick to the head, and Harry, Ron, Anthony, Ernie, Dean, and Neville all winced as Parvati cried out.

“I don’t think you understand your position, girl,” said Theo, his voice emotionless. “You’re a half-blood. Your mother’s a Mudblood, and your father is a traitorous Pureblood. You’re being brought here today to face up to their crimes against wizardkind, and your own.”

“What crimes?” Parvati screeched. “What did I do? Your people killed my mother years ago! I never even knew her, and now you’ve brought us all here for a bit of fun, and you’re pretending—”

Theo kicked her again, and Harry didn’t think she was going to be saying anything else anytime soon.

“Time is running out for you, Patil. You haven’t proven your innocence yet, and you’re blaming us for your crimes,” said Theo, his face still empty of all emotion. “We’re the ones who cleansed the filth from your family in the first place. Your disgusting mother brought Muggle culture into your home, defiled your blood and mind. She stole magic from a more deserving wizard, and filled your head with poison about how she was a real witch. You’re the one who owes us for killing her. Now, tell me one good reason why we shouldn’t find you guilty and give you the same sentence we gave your mother. Prove to us, Patil, that you’re not like her.”

That’s it, thought Harry. He’s fucking insane.

The other Initiates burst into laughter, as if they thought Theo’s little act at being judge was hilarious. They didn’t take this as seriously as Theo did, and Harry wasn’t sure if he should be relieved about that. They weren’t as deluded as Nott was, but they appreciated the game for what it was—a chance to torment, and to be utterly in control. Draco—who had been blank-faced a moment earlier, abruptly started laughing, as if he had just remembered he was supposed to.
Harry’s chest gave a pang of disappointment. Why did it hurt so much? He had always known what Draco was, had never fully trusted him. He had told himself over and over again in these past two weeks that Draco was going to become a Skull, but nothing really drove home the point except this. Seeing Draco standing there, a smile lighting up his face, made Harry feel like a hot poker was jabbing into his skin.

“Hurry up, Nott!” hooted Bulstrode. “Stop with all the theatrics. I want all the bitch’s pretty hair cut off already! Can we make that the sentence, Theo?”

At this, Parvati finally broke and started crying. Dean and Anthony both had their heads buried in their arms, and tears were dripping down Neville’s cheeks. Ernie stared resolutely at his feet, too afraid to look up. Ron, on the other hand, was glaring at the Elites with a look of blazing hatred. Harry supposed the expression mirrored his own. He didn’t have much in common with Ron, but he had this.

“The jury has to vote guilty or not before we decide on a sentence,” said Theo, yanking a half-conscious Parvati to her feet. He was still unsmiling, still dead serious.

While all the Initiates screamed out “GUILTY,” including Draco, Harry gulped down his fury long enough to wonder how it was possible for nature to create someone like Theodore Nott. Then again, if Theo was even half as psychotic as his brother, Harry shouldn’t have been surprised.

But at least Sebastian—from what Harry had seen of him at the Welcoming Feast, anyway—seemed to enjoy causing pain, as did the rest of the Initiates. But there wasn’t the slightest flicker of pleasure on Theo’s face, just a grim sort of determination, as if he really thought that he was nobly carrying out justice.

Unless it was all an act. And if it was, it was a very good one.

“Damn it!” Ron said, slamming his fist against the glass. Harry couldn’t pry his gaze away as Theo’s spell sheared off all of Parvati’s waist-long, shiny black hair. It was an ugly and rough cut, and she barely had any hair left, just a layer on her scalp.

“Justice has been served,” said Theo, over Parvati’s wracking sobs, and the ropes wrapped around her sprung to life again, rolling her towards the glass wall. After she was back inside the ante chamber and the ropes had released her, Anthony and Dean immediately started trying to comfort her, but she was crying too loudly to hear their words.

“They have to vote guilty,” said Theo, over Parvati’s wracking sobs, and the ropes wrapped around her sprung to life again, rolling her towards the glass wall. After she was back inside the ante chamber and the ropes had released her, Anthony and Dean immediately started trying to comfort her, but she was crying too loudly to hear their words.

“Fiat justitia, ruat caelum, Ronald Weasley!” said Theo. And as the ropes bore Ron away, hissing, Harry turned down his boiling rage and let it simmer instead. He tore his gaze from Theo, who was now interrogating Ron and reciting a long list of his family’s crimes against the Death Eaters, and focused it on the other Initiates. Draco was watching Theo with rapt attention, worrying his lip, but Harry wouldn’t that horrible image distract him right now.

Harry needed to find—yes. Crabbe. Crabbe’s back pocket was stuffed with wands, the captives’ wands. Harry knew he could use his wandless magic to get out, but he couldn’t do anything too flashy without his wand. If he revealed his power to these people, especially Theodore Nott, he was as good as dead. He needed to be careful, very careful.

His eyes roamed the room, and the gears in his head began to turn, achingly slow at first, then faster and faster.

Fiat justitia, ruat caelum, Harry thought, grinning nastily as the final pieces of his plan clicked and locked in place.
Draco couldn’t shake off his discomfort. Theo kept shooting him glances out of the corner of his eye, watching his reactions. Draco knew his expression was disappointingly stoic, but he couldn’t muster up any emotion. Millicent shrieked with glee as Theo began kicking Weasley, and Draco knew the Weasleys were a family of the worst kind of wizard filth, but now Theo’s shoe was a bit bloody, and—

Draco swallowed down his rising breakfast and joined in the cheers, shouting “GUILTY” with the rest as they voted on Weasley. Smith and Zabini were watching him like Theo was, something a bit predatory in their eyes. If he kept acting like a little baby, they would be able to smell his fear, and he wouldn’t be able to rely on his smart mouth to evade them forever.

“For his punishment, make every one of his freckles into boils!” yelled Millicent, pumping her fist up and down.

Weasley looked up, his face covered in blood but his eyes blazing, and Draco was impressed despite himself. “Pity that if you did that to me, you’d still be the ugliest person at this school.”

Draco’s breath caught. Millicent stiffened next to him.

Weasley was so, so dead.

Millicent stalked forward, hackles raised, looking like a bear rearing up for a fight. Theo stepped aside with just the slightest smile on his face, only visible if you knew where to look for it. Weasley’s eyes widened, and Draco could tell from his hair-raising scream a second later that he hadn’t been prepared for Millicent to stomp down on his arm and snap it clean in half.

“Ooohhh!” gasped the other Elites, their faces twisting with varying degrees of disgust and fascination as they caught sight of the bloody mess on the platform.

As Millicent brought her foot down again, this time on Weasley’s leg, Draco couldn’t hold back his wince, couldn’t stop himself from clenching his eyes shut. When he opened them again, Weasley was being rolled off the platform by the ropes, and Theo was staring—no, glaring—straight at Draco, and Draco knew at that moment that his less than favorable reaction to Weasley’s punishment hadn’t gone unnoticed.

His icy gaze still fastened on Draco, Theo shouted, “Fiat justitia, ruat caelum, Harry Potter!”

And then the weight of what Theo had just said came crashing down on Draco like the sky falling.

Harry did not struggle as the ropes transported him to the platform, knowing he had to save his energy. He went over his plan for the millionth time, trying not to let himself think of—don’t think his name, Harry.

But Harry couldn’t resist. The moment the ropes plopped him down on the platform, he turned his head to face the Elites, who were all jeering as usual. He sought out Draco, locking eyes with him, and—

Harry wanted to cry with relief. Draco’s expression was that of blank shock, one that melted into dawning horror when he realized Harry was watching him. He hadn’t known anything about this.

“Dr—” Harry began, desperate to confirm that Draco did care about him, that he hadn’t wanted this.
to happen, but at that moment, Theo’s shoe caught him on the side of the head, hard, and Harry couldn’t say anything—or think anything, for that matter—for the next few agonizing seconds.

“Don’t you DARE speak to him!” Theo snarled, kicking him again, and again, his voice shaking with rage, and Harry realized through a haze of pain that this was the first time he had seen Theodore Nott show any emotion at all.

Then Draco’s words, as sharp and hard and cold as the Justice Whips, rose up above the Elites’ cheers. “I hate you, Theo, I hate you so fucking much—”

“If you take another step toward me, or say another word, Draco,” said Theo, his voice cracking with something other than rage this time, “I’ll tell your father what you’ve been up to.”

The noise Draco made was somewhere between a sob and scream.

Fingers scrabbled at Harry’s hair, and Theo harshly yanked his head up. Harry stared up into the other boy’s dark and soulless eyes, unable to believe that he was on the receiving end of such black loathing. Snape had looked at him with distaste, Dolohov with disinterest, and neither of them could ever compare to this, this uncontrollable, insurmountable, insatiable wave of hatred, a wave borne on nothing but irrationality and insanity.

“State your blood status,” said Theo, digging his nails into Harry’s scalp.


Theo kicked Harry in the stomach. “The term”—kick—“we”—kick—“use”—kick—“is”—kick—“Mudblood.”

“M-Mudblood,” Harry corrected with a broken gasp. He only had to stand this humiliation a little longer, until just the right moment, and then he would have his justice. He would rip this bastard apart limb by limb, would make Nott’s funeral pyre the very courtroom he so worshipped.

“Good, Potter,” said Theo with a humorless smile, putting his foot back down at last. “I could go into your parents’ misdeeds for ages, but I figure it’d be more interesting to talk about your own crimes.”

“What are they?” snapped Harry, and groaned when Theo kicked him again for speaking out of turn.

“Defiling the Elite dormitories, first of all,” Theo continued a moment later, once he had calmed himself. His eyes were alight with a mad sort of fervor now, and dread curdled deep in Harry’s belly. “Defiling Draco, brainwashing him, making him go soft. He’s not the same since you two dueled that day on the Hogwarts Express, and it’s because of you. You’ve ruined him, made him into one of you, stolen him from me, and I swear I’ll punish you for it, Potter, I swear you won’t get away with this—”

“Theo,” Draco said, in a voice that sounded very faint and far away. “Please, Theo.”

And when Theo turned to answer Draco, Harry struck. He writhed on the ground as if possessed, tearing himself out of Theo’s grip. Subtly, he used his magic to unravel the ropes, giving the impression that he had managed to loosen them somehow earlier, and before Theo could even turn back around, before he could even point his wand, Harry was upon him like a force of nature. He knocked Theo to the ground, taking great care to ensure that Theo’s head smacked against the podium on the way down, and ripped his wand out of his hand.
“Incarcerous,” Harry said, panting hard, and the ropes bound Theo like they had once bound Harry, Parvati, and Ron.

After taking a second to admire his handiwork, Harry aimed his wand. “Release the others, or I swear I’ll use Avada Kedavra.” He knew he could, knew it wasn’t an empty threat. All he needed was hatred, and he had enough hatred inside of him to last several lifetimes.

Theo let out a wordless scream, and Harry put a foot on his head and pressed down. “DO IT! NOW!” he screamed back.

Theo made a pained gasping noise, but did as Harry asked. The wall on the right side of the room rippled and turned into glass, allowing everyone on the outside to see into the waiting chamber. The wall slid aside like a screen, and the captives came shuffling out, Ron being supported by both Dean and Ernie.

“Reducto!” shouted one of the Elites while they thought Harry was distracted, and Harry turned to face them with what he knew was an eerie grin.

“Protego!” A glass-like shield blossomed around him, and the Reductor Curse bounced back towards the Elites, causing the ground beneath their feet to erupt into shards of stone and dust. The aftershock of the blast sent everyone in the room staggering, but Harry recovered quickest.

“Crabbe,” he growled, his voice lower and more dangerous than he had ever heard it. “Come up here and give me the wands, or I’ll slice what little brain you have out of your skull.”

Crabbe waddled forward, eyes wide in terror, and handed the wands over to Harry without a single word. Triumph soared in Harry’s heart, but at that very moment, Theo threw himself sideways, resembling a wriggling caterpillar in his ropes, and knocked Harry off the platform. Harry crashed to the floor, gasping, dropping Theo’s wand but managing to keep ahold of the rest.

“Finite!” said the Bulstrode girl, and the ropes binding Theo disappeared. He lunged to his feet, his wand back in his hand, his gaze burning with bloodlust.

Harry got up too, gripping one of the other wands, more ready than he had ever been in his life.

But he wasn’t ready for a duel. No, that would be far too easy. Instead, he deftly dodged one of Theo’s curses and pointed his wand at the ceiling, knowing he was cackling and not really caring how it looked.

Everyone figured out what Harry was going to do a split second before he did it.

And everyone—the Elites, the captives, even Theo—bolted towards the exit, screaming.

“BOMBARDA MAXIMA!”

The ceiling cracked like a spider’s web, then blew apart like it had been hit by a meteor. And Harry started running after the rest, still laughing as the perverse mockery of a courtroom was buried underneath layers of stone, crushed and flattened as if the very sky had crashed on top of it.

Fiat justitia, ruat caelum.

Let there be justice, though the heavens fall.
It wasn’t even six-thirty in the morning yet, and Samhain had already been a disaster. Several Skulls were congregated around the entrance to the destroyed Dungeon Two, interrogating a hysterical but tight-lipped Theo about what had happened. The other Elites stood around Draco, whispering and muttering and nursing their cuts from the raining shards of stone. It was a miracle nobody had died.

Harry, along with the other captives, had fled down the corridor, and Draco intended to go after them. He definitely didn’t want to confront Theo right now, or preferably ever, and he needed to talk to Harry.

“OI! DRACO!” Millicent called as he tore away from the group, but he ignored her.

He sprinted down the hall, clutching a stitch in his side, wishing his legs could go faster, and turned the corner—

A hand shot out beside him and dragged him behind a tapestry and into a secret closet. He opened his mouth to scream, but then Harry hissed, “Shut up, Draco, it’s just me!”

But Draco didn’t shut up. Instead, he started blubbering. “Harry, I promise I didn’t know, I promise I had no idea Theo was going to do this—”

Harry’s glare was cold and unforgiving. With a shiver, Draco remembered his mad cackle back in the courtroom, just before he had blasted the ceiling apart.

“But you knew what the Initiates were planning, didn’t you?” said Harry, crossing his arms and leaning against the wall. “You would’ve let them play their game—with Parvati, and Ron, and Neville, and everyone else. You only said something when Nott brought me out.”

Draco wanted to sink to his knees in despair, but kept himself upright with great effort. “What did you want me to do, Harry? Rush in and rescue the Patil girl like a knight in shining armor? Duel Millicent? Duel Theo? I’m an Initiate, Harry. I have to do this. There’s no turning back, and there’s no other way to go.”

Harry stared at him for a moment, expression inscrutable. There was still a glint of that something not-quite-sane in his eyes. “Whatever. I don’t really care.” He cleared his throat and tore his gaze away from Draco’s, as if he couldn’t bear to look at him any longer.

“Samhain,” said Draco weakly, changing the subject. “It’s almost dawn, I think. It’s difficult to tell, because of the storm, but it should be starting just about now.”

“I don’t need your help sending out the illusion,” said Harry at once. Draco noticed that his face was a bloody mess, and how was he still walking after taking so many kicks in the stomach from Theo?

“Okay,” Draco choked out, and stepped out of the way as Harry swept past him and through the fake tapestry.

He didn’t know how long he stood there, alone in that closet, wrestling with the urge to run after Harry and beg for forgiveness. But he didn’t need Harry’s forgiveness. He didn’t care, just like Harry didn’t care. They had worked together for Samhain, but they were done now.

Harry wasn’t ever going to be his friend, and Draco was okay with that, was even happy with it, because he didn’t deserve to be Harry’s friend. If Harry had trusted him with friendship, Draco would have eventually betrayed him for the Second Trial, because Draco was an Initiate, a future Skull, the son of a Death Eater, and there was nothing else for him to be.
He hadn’t even realized that he had started crying, or that he had finally let himself sink to the ground.

Then the storm howled, dawn broke out, and Draco’s bond with Harry went taut.

***

The voice that called out to Harry was pure seduction. It traveled through his thoughts like a gentle pulse, driving everything else from his mind. He forgot about his plan with the illusion. He forgot about Draco. He forgot about the Purge.

*Come to me, Colossus. I’m so hungry.*

Harry’s feet moved. His magic thrummed underneath the surface of his skin, eager to serve the voice, begging him to move faster. In minutes, he was out the castle doors, and the unrelenting gale buffeted him towards the Forbidden Forest. Soaked to the bone but unable to feel the wetness or the cold, Harry walked forward. The clouds were so thick that it was nearly pitch black outside, even though it was around dawn.

Nobody watching from the castle windows would be able to see outside in this storm. Nobody would follow him, nobody would even know he was gone. He would be just another disappeared student, and he would be free, free from this hell. The voice had promised him.

*Come, now.*

Harry went, smiling.

***

Draco stumbled out into the entrance hall as if he were being dragged by something, and took a second to thank Merlin that there was nobody around this early to witness his strange behavior. The bond was going mad, utterly mad, and where the hell was Harry? He wasn’t in the entrance hall, where the bond’s pull had taken him, but that meant—

*No.* Harry wasn’t stupid enough to go outside. He *wouldn’t.*

But the bond was still tugging, and Draco knew that he had.

He held back a scream by covering his mouth with his hand and started hyperventilating. He needed to go after Harry. Something told him that when the spiders had said they could kill him on Samhain, they had meant it. Something told him that the spiders were the least of their worries. Something told him that the storm was getting worse, and that Harry was running out of time.

The bond tugged one more time, and Draco steeled himself.

In hindsight, he should have thought about this a little more. He should have come up with a plan. Instead, he slipped out the castle doors and ran into the freezing, wet, and windy chaos like an idiot. The wind battered him, trying to throw him off his feet, making it impossible to see. Every inch of skin on his body exposed to the icy gale was stinging in protest, and after a few seconds Draco couldn’t feel his face or his hands, and had to keep his eyes shut tight.

It didn’t matter. The bond quivered like the string of a harp, and Draco knew exactly where he needed to go.

Long seconds passed. Then even longer minutes. Maybe fifteen. Now Draco was in the outskirts of
the Forbidden Forest, where the gale had nearly bent the trees in half, though admittedly the presence of all the foliage lessened the wind’s pressure on Draco.

The leaves rustled ominously, but Draco kept moving. He wouldn’t be intimidated now. He had fallen too far into the swirling vortex that was Harry Potter, and he knew he’d never have the chance to swim out if Harry died, knew that he’d be pulled right along through the bond to where the other boy was.

The leaves rustled again, and this time Draco knew it wasn’t the wind. A serpent with three heads slithered out of the bushes, its three pairs of eyes all red and rabid. Draco fell back, seizing up with terror, trying to scream but finding that no sound would come out of his mouth. The thing approached him, hissing all the while. It reared backwards, preparing to strike, and Draco heard the clop clop of hooves, and now the owner of those hooves was grinding the serpent into smithereens on the forest floor.

Draco let himself breathe again, realizing that he had almost just passed out from lack of air. A centaur leaned over him, holding out his hand.

“Are you all right?” asked the half-man, half-horse.

Draco made a noise in the back of his throat like a dying cat. He had heard horrible things about centaurs, how they were uncontrollable beasts who deserved to be killed, and that most of them had indeed been killed. But here was one now, and he had saved Draco’s life.

“F-Fine,” Draco stammered. “I—I just—thank you, sir, p-please don’t hurt me.”

“My name is Firenze. And I will not hurt you,” said the centaur, “It is a pity, to kill a creature as fine and as proud as a Runespoor, but it has fallen to the Insanitas now, like everything else in this forest.”

“The Insanitas?” Draco repeated, lifting his head, his voice growing stronger now that he was sure the centaur wasn’t going to hurt him.

Firenze raised his head to the sky, looking up into the swirling clouds. “The Lord for whom Pluto shines placed this Insanitas in the depths of the forest,” he said, shifting his hooves. “And the new Lord, for whom Mars shines, has awakened it, and now the Insanitas has infected the mind of every living thing in this forest. My species has the mental strength to resist, but most others do not.”

“What is it?” said Draco.

“Insanitas is a disease,” said Firenze. “After today, I believe it will pass, but it will never be gone. It will lie dormant in our minds, until it is called awake once more. And next time, we may not be strong enough to fight it off.”

“Does it make you want to attack Harry—I mean, the new Lord?” Draco gasped out. “Have you seen him, another boy?”

Firenze cocked its head to consider the question. “No, but he must be here. After today, he will be dead. The Hunger will not be denied him. It has needed to eat for millennia.”

“What’s that?” Draco asked desperately. “How do I destroy it? Please! You have to help me, please—”

“The Hunger is the source of Insanitas, and it is a creature that is enslaved by the Lord that Pluto
favors,” interrupted Firenze, placing a hand on Draco’s shoulder to calm him down. “There is no way to destroy it. Ah—perhaps, but no.”

“If there’s any way—” Draco began, but stopped. “Can you take me there? Can you take me to where it is?”

“Its lair is in the depths of this forest,” said Firenze, shaking his head. “Everything that approaches it will be consumed.”

“Take me as close to it as you can,” Draco begged, falling to his knees. The bond was pulling him, and it led further into the forest than he was willing to go alone.

Firenze stared down at him, and gave him a short nod. He lowered himself, allowing Draco to clamber on top of him. Infuriatingly slow, they ventured deeper into the forest, and the deeper they went, the more Draco could see the effects of the Insanitas. The leaves here were frayed and infected, the trees gnarled, their trunks covered in gloopy decay. Lines of glittering blackness, all pulsing in the same direction, were imposed over the dirt ground of the forest, shining through the layer of leaves.

“What are those lines?” Draco murmured. “They look like they’re leading towards the same place.”

“The lines are part of a giant web that covers the floor of the entire forest. They converge in its very center, where the Hunger waits,” said Firenze. “If we follow them, we will reach it, but we can only go so far before we are caught in its gravity. And if we are caught in its gravity, we will never break free.”

Draco’s breath hitched. Harry wasn’t caught in its gravity yet. He couldn’t be. Draco would not let himself think up the worst case scenarios, not right now, not when he was trying his hardest not to panic.

At last, Firenze stopped. “I am afraid this is as far as I can go. Your weight is far less than mine, so you will be able to go further in before the gravity overcomes you, but the pressure at this point makes it unbearable for me to go forward.”

“I understand,” said Draco, sliding off the centaur’s back and plopping onto the ground. “Thank you. And if there’s anything else at all that you can tell me about the Hunger, please, please tell me now.”

Firenze paused. “The Hunger does not only eat solid matter. I wonder if you had assumed that.”

“I did,” Draco spluttered.

“No,” Firenze continued. “Its preferred meal is magic.” Then he turned around, and disappeared into the leaves.

Draco stared into the pitch black darkness of the forest, trembling. The trees here were too thick for the storm to reach him, but it was still freezing. He knew there was nothing living left in this part of the forest, nothing that hadn’t yet been consumed. Here, he would be safe from vengeful creatures, but there was a far more fearsome enemy in that abyss.

He needed to find Harry and drag him back as soon as possible. Was the Hunger after him, was that why it had infected all the creatures with Insanitas? Would their pathetic illusion even have worked on something that fed on magic like the Hunger? Why had Harry even come here? Surely he would have been safe in the castle, which was far out of the Hunger’s gravity.
Draco took a step into the blackness, but kept to the edge. The bond was yanking him to the left, so he had no need to travel deeper right now. Thanks to Firenze’s speed, Draco had caught up to Harry even though Harry had come here first.

Quietly, he crept through the forest, paying attention to the vibrations in his bond. And then, Draco could’ve sobbed with relief. Harry had emerged from a bush and lumbered past Draco, not giving him a single look.

And then Draco could’ve sobbed with terror, because Harry’s eyes were blank and dead, and Draco knew he was trapped in what could only be the Hunger’s gravity.

“Harry, stop walking,” Draco tried, knowing it was in vain. He grabbed Harry’s shoulder and tried to pull him back, but Harry tore out of his grip and kept walking. He didn’t even look back at Draco, didn’t even acknowledge his existence.

Draco took a deep breath. If Harry wouldn’t stop, Draco would make him stop. It didn’t matter that it was impossible.

He dipped into the bond and began summoning Harry’s magic. Harry stiffened for a second, but the moment passed, and he did not attack Draco. He just kept going, and Draco kept conducting Harry’s magic into himself, following closely behind him so he didn’t lose sight of him.

Finally, the transfer of power was complete, and Harry’s magic throbbed in his veins, singing and joyous. It wanted him to do something, maybe to go deeper into the forest, but it wasn’t Draco’s magic, so he didn’t have to listen to it.

He wrapped his arms around Harry’s waist, and assembled the magic around them like a cocoon of shimmering silver light. It was hastily and roughly made, but it was powerful, and Harry couldn’t move an inch forward. Draco bit his lip, wondering if this possessed Harry had enough presence of mind to think of snatching his magic back. After minutes passed and he didn’t, Draco relaxed.

He gently began to drag Harry backwards, still holding him by the waist. Harry struggled feebly, but Draco maintained the cocoon around them even as they backed out of the forest, so Harry couldn’t take one step closer to that horrid center.

Minutes passed. Maybe an hour. They were out of the empty part of the forest now, and back into the wind, not that it mattered when the cocoon was protecting them from everything.

Dragging Harry was like dragging a rock, so Draco switched to pushing him instead. Harry twisted and flailed and tried to hit Draco as well as the walls of the cocoon, but he never made a sound, and his eyes were still frighteningly dead.

Draco had no idea what to do, and wasn’t sure if Harry would ever stop struggling, if he’d ever break free of this curse. Would Draco have to hold him in this cocoon forever? All day? He was already growing tired, and wasn’t sure how much longer he could keep it up. Despite all his practice with the bond in these last two weeks, he still wasn’t used to this much magic, and his body ached with the effort of controlling it.

Something banged on the walls of their cocoon, and Draco halted. Harry made a weak attempt to seize his throat, but Draco swatted his hand away in irritation.

“Who are you?” hissed the voice, its words interspersed with clicking. “You are not the Colossus, but the magic comes from you.”

The acromantulas. Great. He would have to ignore them. Draco pushed forward, but the cocoon
wouldn’t budge another inch. Something was blocking it from moving forward, possibly a body of spiders.

“MOVE!” Draco screamed, losing it. “MOVE NOW!”

“We will tell the Hunger it will not be fed as long as you exist,” said the spiders, clicking angrily. “We will shred your bond, and then the Colossus will be ours. We will infect him with Insanitas, and he will become one of us, and then he will kill you.”

Draco dropped the cocoon and tightened his grip on Harry’s waist. The sight that awaited him once the cocoon was down was a sea of spiders, all clicking, all staring at him. One of them jumped at Harry, its many legs scratching madly at his face, but Draco blasted it into a tree.

He clenched his eyes shut. If the spiders wouldn’t get out of his damn way, he would destroy every single one of them. He raised the hand that wasn’t gripping Harry and gathered as much of his energy as he could into a white-hot core inside of him.

Then he released the pressure he had on the core, and it exploded in a massive ring of heat and light, with him and Harry as its epicenter. The spiders all burned as the heatwave hit them, just like they had when Harry had saved Draco from them earlier that month, and Draco wasted no time in constructing the cocoon again. He couldn’t let Harry slip back into the forest when they were almost out.

Damn it, he was so tired. Why wouldn’t Harry stop struggling? What did he want?

And then Draco found out, because Harry leapt at him and slammed him into the ground. His eyes weren’t dead anymore, Draco noticed vaguely as he jabbed his elbow into Harry’s stomach. Now they had a red glint, like the creatures of the forest did in theirs, and his blows were far stronger than they had been earlier.

Somehow, he’d been infected with Insanitas. The spider that had attacked him must have given it to him, but now wasn’t a good time to wonder about that, not when Harry’s fingers were scrabbling at Draco’s throat.

Despair nearly overwhelmed him then, but one last, desperate idea flickered on in his head. He reached into the bond, and started swishing the magic between them as violently as possible, trying to jolt some kind of reaction out of Harry. Taking his magic hadn’t done it, but receiving magic—at least to Draco—caused a stronger reaction than getting it sucked out. This was the last thing that could work.

Draco closed his eyes. The hair on the back of his neck prickled, and Harry went still above him.

“Harry,” said Draco, his voice as faint as his energy, “do you feel it? Your magic? If you stop now, I’ll give it back. You want it back, don’t you?”

Harry’s eyes cleared, and he collapsed on top of Draco, shaking with silent sobs.

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The Insanitas bug was very irked as the Colossus tried to push it out of his head. There was another who was helping him, who was bonded with him. That could not do. Master needed to eat.

So the Insanitas bug burrowed itself deep into the Colossus’s brain and decided to stop fighting, letting its victim think he had won the war, when he had in fact only won this battle. The bug told its Master that it wouldn’t get to eat today, because of the other dratted boy, and the Master
released the Colossus, sighing in disappointment.

Meanwhile, the Insanitas bug would take a rest. It had a plan, a very good plan, and later, on Beltane, its Master would be very happy, and they would all get to eat the Colossus.

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Harry remembered everything he’d done—and everything Draco had stopped him from doing—since that terrible moment Samhain had dawned. They lay in the forest in silence, him lying on top of Draco, Draco’s arms around him.

Then Draco started telling Harry about his meeting with Firenze, and what the Hunger was. Harry realized that it had caught him in its gravity from far away—because, as the Colossus, he was not safe from it, not on Samhain—but Draco had done the impossible and dragged him back out.

“I think,” said Draco, his hand threading through Harry’s hair, where Harry wanted him to keep it, “that the Hunger won’t bother you anymore. Samhain will be over. Its gravity can’t reach you.”

“It’s not over yet,” Harry pointed out. “But I don’t feel the pull of the gravity anymore. Do you think it’s given up?”

Harry felt rather than saw Draco smile next to him. “I bet I scared it off. I bet it said you were too difficult a meal, with me around to protect you. Maybe it won’t bother you again.”

Harry let out a sigh. “I think it will.” He hesitated only a brief second before telling Draco everything he had heard Dolohov and Rowle talking about a few weeks ago. Draco deserved to know, especially after he had risked everything to bring Harry back to sanity. Draco deserved to know everything Harry could tell him, because he needed Draco’s help. He could see that now, and had been stupid to ignore it for so long.

“Beltane,” said Draco after he had heard the story, shifting underneath Harry, who rolled off him, suddenly embarrassed that they had been lying in that position for so long. “May first. We’ll be ready by then. We know what we’re fighting now. We know what the Purge is now. We can make a better plan.”

We, Harry thought.

“Harry? Now that you’ve finally gotten off me,” Draco said, grinning as Harry blushed, “let’s go back to school and get you healed.”

“It’s still stormy out,” Harry whined, not really wanting to leave this relatively warm little area in the forest. Yes, his whole body hurt, but moving it would hurt more.

“Oh! We’ll miss class! It’s probably almost nine. Do you want Dolohov or one of the other professors to notice that both of us are gone on Samhain? He’ll be suspicious, you idiot!”

His crass tone should have annoyed Harry. It really should have. But, as usual, Draco Malfoy spoke sense, and Harry would have been dead a thousand times over if not for him.
Thanks for all the comments. I apologize if this chapter has more typos/is more scattered than usual. I have been extremely sick all week and throwing up all over the place, and was not really in the mood to edit. Also, if I don't update next week, it's probably because I've died... I'm joking, kind of.

CHAPTER TEN

AT ANY COST

“So, is that it then? The Purge went dormant before nine o’clock in the morning? Does that mean it’s done?”

“No, Headmaster. Everyone survived yesterday. The Purge did not succeed. Either there is no Colossus and the Purge awakened on its own, or the Colossus escaped and shut the Purge down before the end of Samhain. Choose whichever option helps you sleep at night.”

“So we call the Dark Lord? It’s his... thing. If it’s malfunctioning—”

“No. We wait, and we watch. There’s no need to poke a sleeping dragon if it doesn’t need to be woken.”

“Antonin, sometimes I doubt your loyalty.”

“Thorfinn, sometimes I doubt your sanity.”

***

“His name, Nott, his name. Out with it!” snapped Adolphus Lestrange, looming over Theo, his golden mask glittering in the eerie green light of the Skull Mask headquarters.

Theo kept his gaze focused on the ground. “Harry Potter, sir.”

“What year’s he in?” queried one of the Silver Skulls standing behind the king.

“First year,” said Theo, shifting his feet. It was the day after Halloween, and Adolphus had called the other Gold Skulls and some select Silver ones to hear Theo explain why Dungeon Two had been decimated. It had been mostly fixed by now, but still. He regretted that so many high-ranking Skulls were here to witness his humiliation, including his goddamn brothers, who were the only Bronze Skulls present.

Adolphus threw his head back and laughed, and Theo took a step back in alarm. The other Skulls all stared.

“Ahahaha! The little babies have been fighting among themselves, have they? Looks like you bit
off more than you could chew, Nott! Dirty-blooded though they are, you should never underestimate your enemies. Have you learned your lesson, little boy?"

Theo hid his scowl behind a blank mask. “Yes, sir.” It hadn’t been his fault. The ropes of Dungeon Two had been faulty, and Potter had escaped somehow—*how* had he escaped? How had he managed to unravel the ropes without Theo noticing? An itch started up in his brain, telling him he was missing something important.

“Sir, should we kill Potter?” asked a Silver Skull eagerly. “For daring to destroy our property—”

Adolphus waved a hand, shutting the other Skull up. “No. We have to teach the little babies that they have to fight their own battles. Nott, I find your antics mildly amusing, which is the only reason you’re not writhing on the ground under the Cruciatus Curse for your slip up. Next time, don’t let those antics destroy one of the dungeons. Now get out of my sight.”

Theo turned to go, internally fuming. Why was *he* being blamed instead of Potter?

“And Nott?”

“Sir?”

“I don’t want the first-year dirty-bloods blasting the ceiling off even more dungeons. Keep them in line. Especially Potter.”

Theo swallowed, and the fury that had been simmering in his stomach started boiling at the thought of Potter getting off scot-free. “Yes, sir,” he said, turning to leave a second time.

He was almost at the door before he felt his brothers appear behind him, dark and silent as the shadows dancing across the stone floor. He stiffened and closed his eyes, counting to ten in his head before opening them again.

“Sebastian. Nathaniel,” he whispered, looking fixedly at the wall to avoid looking at them.


Theo refused to wince. You didn’t show weakness in front of his brothers, not if you wanted to survive the hour.

“Have you been playing with someone who hasn’t been playing fair?” hissed Sebastian, his nails digging into Theo’s skin. “Would you like your big brothers to take care of him for you? We’ll require payment, of course."

“A few cuts on that handsome face of yours with Father’s knife will do,” murmured Nathaniel. “Cuts made with that don’t heal, you know. But you have a lot of face to offer it, so I think you’ll be fine… for a while.”

“No,” Theo choked out, yanking himself out of their grip and hurrying towards the door. He struggled with the knob, panicking when it didn’t turn right away. But after a few frantic seconds, he managed to slip out and shut the door in Sebastian’s and Nathaniel’s faces.

He was all the way down the corridor before he realized that he was running and made himself stop. *They won’t hurt me*, he told himself, taking a gusty breath.

No, it wasn’t because they loved him. It was because they fed on fear, the same way the Dementors did, and if Theo lost his face, they’d lose some of their power over him.
He straightened his back and set off down the corridor. He’d escaped punishment by the skin of his teeth this time, but Potter was still at large since Adolphus was too arrogant to do anything about him, and Theo needed to figure out how to handle him. Of course, he would have to tread carefully now that Potter considered him an enemy.

In a way, Draco had been right. His silly little plan to befriend and then betray Potter for the Second Trial was the only one that had a chance in hell of working, at least where someone as powerful and unpredictable as Potter was concerned.

But that didn’t mean Theo thought Draco was capable of pulling it off come the end of the Second Trial. Potter would ensnare Draco in his thorny vines and never let him go—because why would anyone ever let Draco go, once they had him?

It was already happening. Draco was… entranced with Potter, had been ever since that day on the Hogwarts Express. And Potter’s presence was changing him subtly, in ways that Theo would’ve missed if he hadn’t been looking out for Draco. Potter made Draco weaker, less devoted to the Pureblood cause.

But Theo wasn’t stupid. He knew when he was trapped in a corner. He’d misstepped badly in his desperation to rescue Draco from Potter, and had earned Draco’s enmity because of it.

“I hate you, Theo, I hate you so fucking much.”

Theo would forgive that slip of tongue, even though it had hurt his feelings like nothing Draco had said in all their years of friendship, and if he let himself dwell on the words, he might end up bursting into tears right there in the middle of the hallway. He reminded himself that Draco hadn’t meant it. He had only lashed out at Theo because he feared that his plan wouldn’t work now that Potter had seen him punishing dirty-bloods.

Of course, in hindsight, Theo could see he’d been wrong to try and turn Potter against Draco in such an obvious fashion, but he didn’t think Draco would have to work too hard to gain Potter’s forgiveness. In fact, during class yesterday and today, Potter had barely been able to take his eyes off Draco, and as far as Theo could tell, the two of them were still meeting up at night.

Theo’s stomach crawled at the idea. It was disgusting, and just plain wrong, for a dirty-blood like Potter to even think he could be friends with someone as pure and highborn as Draco, and ludicrous of Draco to even entertain the thought of such a friendship.

And Theo wasn’t going to let him. He’d ensure Draco didn’t stray from his duty, and would watch Potter closely to prevent him from sinking his claws into Draco even further than he already had. Soon, Draco wouldn’t be able to pry himself free of Potter, wouldn’t be able to betray him. Theo already feared he was too late to separate them.

He had a letter to write to Lucius Malfoy… just in case he was.

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It was almost worrying how calmly the week after Halloween went by for Draco. The magical creatures in the forest had resumed their natural state, almost as if the entire month of October had never happened, and Herbology classes were back on.

The Care of Magical Creatures professor was telling everyone that the creatures’ behavior could be attributed to a “stomach bug” and they were healed now because he’d finally been able to administer the cure he’d been working on for a month. Whatever made him feel better, Draco
The next day, he made up some excuse to spend time with Harry even though they really didn’t need to anymore, convincing him that it was of vital importance to figure out exactly what the Hunger was in preparation for Beltane. They didn’t find anything in the library, of course, and ended up retreating to Draco’s room to play chess. Harry was abysmal at it, but considering that he’d just come back from an hour of torture with Dolohov, Draco hadn’t expect his mind to be in top chess-playing shape.

“What’re you going to do?” Harry asked him quietly, that first day after Samhain, while Draco’s white knight was crushing Harry’s black bishop.

“How about what?” said Draco, satisfied that the amount of broken black pieces far outnumbered the white.

“About Nott, the Elites, the Initiates?”

“I’m still part of them,” said Draco, going still.

Harry’s eyes hardened. “Even though they tried to hurt me and the rest?”

“That’s what we’re supposed to do, Potter. Punish dirty-bloods and blood-traitors.” Draco’s voice was trembling slightly. “I’m just… I just can’t sometimes, not in the way they do it.” He took a deep breath, but Harry didn’t back down.

“And Nott?” he said, unable to hold back a snarl.

“He used to be my friend, but I hate him now, after what he did to you. There’s nothing else to say. Your turn, Potter.”

Harry’s eyes softened. “Yeah. Right. I’m gonna lose this stupid game anyway.”

So they continued playing, and Harry didn’t ask about the Skulls again that week. Maybe he thought Draco had proved his loyalty by saving his life, or maybe he didn’t want to push him away. Either way, Draco didn’t question it.

Theo attempted to get Draco’s attention several times each day, but Draco was determinedly ignoring him. As far as he was concerned, Theo had given up the rights to his friendship by meddling in his affairs—constantly, no matter how many times Draco had begged him to stop. Draco was done with him, and the sooner Theo came to terms with that, the easier both their lives would be.

But it didn’t look like Theo was giving up on badgering him, and he had been glaring at Harry all week. Harry always glared right back. Draco suspected the only reason Theo hadn’t attacked Harry yet was because he was afraid of making Draco even angrier, and Harry hadn’t struck first because he wasn’t a war-mongering fool. He was also preoccupied with Dolohov, who was in a particularly bad mood after Samhain and had used the Justice Whips on Harry twice this week. Harry basically lived in Draco’s bed now, and Draco was sick of mopping up blood and sleeping on the floor.

Meanwhile, November had arrived with even more rain than October, which meant December was looming. And December meant the Veritaserum checkpoint for the Second Trial, something Draco had been conveniently forgetting to think about this whole blissful week.

Until something happened—like a dungbomb to the face—that forced him to think of it on Friday.
Though the other Elites had been giving a Harry a wide berth, they hadn’t extended the same polite treatment to Draco. At least not Smith and Zabini, who seemed to think Draco’s support of Harry on Halloween was proof of his betrayal to the cause. Draco wondered if they had forgotten his big speech on befriending and using Harry or if he had really been that obvious in his worry for the other boy. Or maybe they were just looking for an excuse to hate Draco.

Whatever the reason, Zabini and Smith had been making snide comments all week, but Draco hadn’t expected them to go as far as to leave dungbombs in his schoolbag, which exploded spectacularly on the way to Charms and Curses and splattered smelly brown liquid all over his books, the nearby walls, and his face.

All the Elites laughed, but Zabini and Smith laughed the hardest, confirming Draco’s suspicion that they were the culprits.

“You smell a lot better now that the dung’s covered up the stench of dirty-blood,” sneered Zabini, while Smith doubled over, wheezing with mirth.

Draco wiped the dung out of his eyes and set out trying to put his bag back together, hating everybody. Theo waited for him pick up his scattered textbooks in silence while the other Elites went on to class, though he didn’t bend down to help.

Fortunately, Harry wasn’t here to witness his humiliation. He traveled to class with the non-Elites, and Draco wasn’t—and would never be—desperate enough to join them. He still had some pride left after Halloween, however little of it.

And even if he could admit to himself that he cared about Harry for reasons beyond his alluring magic and the bond, Draco was still an Initiate, and he still had to think about the Second Trial—but not right now. He would not think about it right now. No.

“Scourgify,” muttered Draco once he’d collected everything, and the spell scrubbed his clothes, face, and bag clean.

He started to make his way down the hall, Theo hot on his heels. They would be late to Charms, but Dolohov didn’t care if an Elite was late, so they could take their sweet time. Not that Draco wanted to be stuck in a corridor alone with Theo.

“I’m not going to interfere in your plan this time. I promise.” Theo’s voice was infuriatingly quiet. “I—I just panicked. I thought you wouldn’t be able to betray Potter for the Second Trial, which is why I tried to break up… whatever it is that you two have going on by reminding him you were an Initiate. I’m sorry.”

Draco froze. He hadn’t expected Theo to apologize, not so sincerely.

Theo walked past him, his head bent towards the ground. For once, he had ended the conversation without harassing Draco about the Trial.

Somewhat gratified, Draco followed him into the Charms classroom. Maybe Theo was learning, now that he’d realized yelling and lecturing didn’t work on Draco. Of course, Draco wasn’t ready to forgive him any time soon, but the perhaps the situation was salvageable.

“You’re late,” spat Dolohov, and Theo and Draco took their seats, muttering “Sorry” under their breaths. Even when they were fighting, they shared a desk in all their classes, something that Harry had pointed out to Draco with a scowl the night before. (“He’s insane, and basically tried to kill me, and you’re still sharing an inkwell with him?”) Theo was a certifiable genius, and copying off
his assignments had done wonders for Draco’s grades. He wasn’t about to throw that advantage away, no matter how much he detested Theo these days.

Anyway, where else would Draco sit, if not with the Elites? With Harry and the rest of the dirty-bloods? Draco would rather sit on top of the Giant Squid out in the middle of the lake.

“And Mr. Malfoy?” said Dolohov all of a sudden, jerking Draco out of his thoughts. The Headmaster wishes to see you in his office. Go now. I’m sure Mr. Nott will catch you up on what you missed in class when you return.”

Draco’s heart stopped. “The Headmaster, sir?”

Dolohov frowned at him. “Yes, the Headmaster. I just said that, Mr. Malfoy. Was my voice not clear enough for you? Class, turn to page 139. We will be working on changing the color of the ink in our quills today…”

Millicent, who shared a desk with Pansy, leaned over. “What did you do now?” she sniggered as Draco stood up, his legs shaking.

“Nothing!” Draco snapped.

Did it have to do with the Purge? Had they been caught? Harry, who was sitting in the back of the classroom, shot him a terrified look, but Draco didn’t dare meet his eyes.

A few minutes later, he arrived at the third-floor corridor where he knew the Headmaster’s office was. There was a suspicious-looking gargoyle sitting in the middle of the corridor, and Draco remembered his father telling him you needed to have some sort of password to get inside, but if he was invited, maybe he didn’t need one?

“Draco Malfoy,” he said importantly, crossing his arms.

“Cleared for entry,” said the gargoyle in a very monotone and dead voice, hopping aside to reveal a moving spiral staircase.

The moment Draco entered the office, he almost ran back out of it again. The problem wasn’t the room itself, which was magnificent, circular and furnished with dark wood, its walls lined with portraits of famous Pureblood wizards.

The problem was that Lucius Malfoy was sitting in one of the high-backed, red-velvet guest chairs.

“What’re you doing here, Father?” said Draco, realizing a second too late that he had been rude.

“Manners, Draco,” hissed Lucius, right on cue, standing up.

Thorfinn Rowle sat behind the Headmaster’s desk, clapping his hands together as he regarded Draco. “Adorable boy you have there, Lucius. The last time I saw him properly, he was a little baby in his blankets, remember?”

“Thank you, Thorfinn,” said Lucius through gritted teeth. “If you would… step out for a moment? I would like some privacy to speak to my son.”

“When I said I’d let you use my office to talk to him, I didn’t mean you could kick me out, Lucius,” he whined, but got up laboriously from his chair anyway. He lumbered to the door and tried to pinch Draco’s cheek on the way out. Draco dodged his stubby fingers with great difficulty.
“Sit,” said Lucius to Draco, gesturing to the chair he had just vacated.

Draco sat. “Father?”

“Bumbling fool, that Rowle,” Lucius muttered under his breath, and Draco snorted.

“Do not snort in public, Draco.”

“Sorry, Father.” Draco cooled his voice, making it as formal as he possibly could. “Why have you called me here today?”

Lucius smiled thinly. “I have recently discovered that the letters you have sent home about the Skull Initiation process were missing crucial information. For one, you did not notify me that you failed the First Trial, nor did you see fit to tell me that you are not pursuing the Second Trial with as much enthusiasm as you should.”

Draco inhaled, clenching his hands into fists. Theo. Somehow Theo told Father about all of this, and he just said he wouldn’t interfere anymore—

“Are you paying attention?” Lucius’s voice was as harsh as a whip.

Draco nodded rapidly, his heart pounding in his throat.

“Good. I am only telling you once, Draco. I have been informed on what you plan to do for the Second Trial—”

“By Theo,” Draco snarled.

“Do not interrupt me,” said Lucius, then continued as if Draco hadn’t spoken. “And I will admit your plan is amusing, if unconventional. The Potter boy is a particularly dirty specimen. A Mudblood and a blood-traitor’s spawn is a potent mix of wizarding filth. Dealing with his kind will be good practice for you. You will need to learn how to control and manipulate this sort of riff-raff if you wish to go into politics, since dirty-bloods make up the masses. All in all, I am impressed at your ability to think up such a plan.”

“Thank you, Father,” said Draco dully.

Lucius held up a hand. “I was not done speaking yet, Draco. I want to know why you came up with a plan like this.”

Draco swallowed. “Har—Potter is… strong. So I believed befriending him, and then breaking it off, would be the most painless way for me to pass the Second Trial.”

Lucius inclined his head. “Ah. I am disappointed you cannot handle him with spells, but sometimes these things happen. You will come across many opponents that are magically stronger than you, and you will need to learn how to outmaneuver them without losing your head. I think it will be a good exercise for you. As long as you are not pursuing his friendship because you are… interested in the boy. Are you?”

Draco went completely pink and shifted on the chair. “Interested? What do you mean by interested?”

Harry was sort of nice to look at, Draco could not deny that fact. He had nice eyes, and nice skin—when it wasn’t bleeding all over the place, anyway—and his glasses were hideous, but you got used to them, and Draco couldn’t imagine his face without them, and now that he considered it
they also looked kind of nice, on Harry’s face at least, which was also quite nice—where was he, again?

Oh. Right. He was in the Headmaster’s office. Having a conversation with his father.

Lucius looked as if he were trying not to roll his eyes. “I meant interested in general, Draco, though your reaction worries me. Please tell me you have not acquired a crush on a dirty-blood. You don’t want to go the same way as Professor Snape, do you? Brilliant man, terrible taste. Terrible indeed. What a waste.”

“I haven’t,” said Draco, and scowled furiously while his father started up a long lecture on how lovesick fools like Snape were infecting wizarding blood.

“… Of course, Draco, if you wish to fool around in the future, I will turn a blind eye. But the man or woman you bring into the Malfoy family will be of good wizarding stock, and your children will be Pureblood. I have already been collecting marriage offers for you from various Pureblood families who wish to join with the Malfoys. Of course, I find such ancient customs reproachable, and would much prefer it if you were courted in person. I doubt you will be thirsting for offers. Just look at you. Give it a few years, and half the school will be smitten. I remember when I was in the spring of my youth. Hogwarts was quite the playground—”

“I understand, Father,” said Draco, brilliantly red by now, and wondering what on earth he had done to deserve this speech. “Can we get to the point?”

Lucius adjusted himself. “Ah, yes, how maudlin of me. Where was I?”

“You were asking whether I’m interested in Potter,” said Draco, face still burning, trying to keep the strain out of his voice. “Which I’m not. In any way.”

“Yes, that’s right. Though you claim to have no ties to the boy, I am merely concerned that you will grow too attached to him and be unable to pass the Second Trial when the time comes. From what I’ve heard, you two have been inseparable for the past two weeks—”

“Whatever Theo’s been telling you about me and Potter, he’s lying!”

“Do not interrupt me,” said Lucius, and Draco shut up. “Be grateful that I am even leaving you room to play games with the Potter boy or whoever else strikes your fancy. The Trials are tests, nothing less and nothing more. You failed a majority of the tests I administered in your childhood. I will not accept any more failures. Your most important test is finally here, and if you fail to become a Skull, I promise to disown you. You have been a complete and utter disappointment so far, and I will not allow it any longer. You will either act like my heir, or you will no longer be one. Choose.”

Draco stopped breathing and felt the world tilt on its axis, making his stomach lurch. A second later, he realized he was on the verge of puking.

“I… I’ll pass the Second Trial and become a Skull, Father.”

“At any cost?”

“Yes, Father. At any cost.”

***

November went by like September and October had for Harry—that is, in a haze of pain.
But for the first time at Hogwarts, he wasn’t on the edge of despair. He even found himself tolerating some of Dolohov’s nastier punishments, if only because he knew Draco would give him pain-relieving paste later. And Draco always insisted on carefully applying it on every single cut himself, every single night, though Harry could never really figure out why.

Then again, Harry couldn’t figure out why Draco had risked his life to bring Harry back from the brink of death in the Forbidden Forest either, nor could he figure out why Draco was helping him with his homework, and playing chess with him, and talking with him into late hours of the night. Harry had pretty much moved into Draco’s bedroom by now, and Draco had asked the house-elves for an extra mattress so Harry could sleep in his room without hogging his bed.

It felt like having a friend.

“Harry?” whispered Draco, one night at the end of November. Their—well, technically Draco’s—room was in pitch darkness, but neither of them had fallen asleep yet.

“M’awake,” Harry mumbled.

“Tell me about your mother.”

Draco, the self-centered prat, usually never asked Harry—or anyone else, for that matter—about themselves, but he got in these moods sometimes, and would throw piercing and awkward questions at him. Harry couldn’t decide whether he should feel flattered or uncomfortable.

“Why do you want to know? She’s a Mudblood, according to you.”

“Can’t I want to know what your mother’s like? I’m just curious. If it helps, I’ll tell you about my mother first.”

Harry rolled his eyes. Leave it to Draco to turn every conversation back to himself. He didn’t think Draco was capable of letting someone else talk about their life for more than three seconds.

“Feeling homesick?” he teased, playing along, trying to ignore the lump in his throat.

“A little,” Draco admitted, rustling his sheets. “Mother spoils me. She lets me go to bed after midnight and wake up at noon. Father gets so mad at her when she does that, but he loves her. At least he used to. They fight a lot now. About me, I think. She wanted to send me to a school in America, you know?”

Harry laughed derisively. “Why? You get everything you want here. She must’ve known that.”

Draco let out a little whine. “That’s not the reason why. She didn’t want the Skulls… the environment here for Purebloods, to pressure me. She stopped fighting Father a long time ago, but she really fought to send me abroad. In the end, Father made her agree to send me here. He said it would be good for me. Maybe she was right. Mother usually is.”

When Draco said things like this, Harry found himself fantasizing about Draco abandoning Theo Nott and the rest of the Elites and joining Harry in some glorious fight for half-blood rights, though he knew it was just that—a fantasy, one of many that he was having about Draco these days. Just because Draco was nice to him didn’t mean that he was going to throw everything away for him.

But it was nice to pretend, sometimes.

Draco still spent most of his day with the Elites, though the atmosphere around him and them was icy and tense. He tried to avoid speaking to Harry in public, though they were fooling nobody.
Enough people saw them huddled together in the library or sharing covert glances during class that their friendship—alliance, whatever it was—wasn’t a secret anymore.

The reception to this was understandably lukewarm.

Seamus had asked Harry if he enjoyed being the “charity project” of an Initiate, but the other non-Elites left him alone, as usual. They probably hadn’t forgotten what he’d done to help them in Dungeon Two, and he didn’t think they’d be bothering him about Draco or anything else anytime soon.

Theodore Nott, surprisingly, had left Harry alone these past few weeks, though he didn’t let a single day go by without giving him a baleful look. According to Draco, the older Skulls blamed Nott for letting Harry destroy the dungeon, and he had retreated into a corner to lick his wounds. Draco wasn’t speaking to him anymore outside of class, which made Harry irrationally happy. He still couldn’t get his head around the fact that Draco had actually been best friends with someone as batshit insane as Theo. Heck, if this ridiculous trend continued, next Harry would find out that Draco was buddy-buddy with the Nott twins.

That reminded him of something he’d been meaning to ask. “How’s Skull Initiation working out, now that you’re helping me instead of targeting me? What do the rest of them think?” He heard his own heart thud in the silence as he waited for Draco’s answer.

Draco shifted restlessly in his bed. “I don’t know, Harry. I don’t know what I’m doing anymore. Let’s not talk about this. Tell me about your parents.”

Harry sighed. “Fine. There’s not much to say. My dad’s dead, you know that. Mum’s… not well. She doesn’t like my magic. She says it smells bad when I use it, but I always rebelled and used it anyway. She didn’t like that.”

“Typical Mudblood—” Draco started, but Harry’s snarl cut him off.

“The reason she’s not well is because your kind killed everyone she loved. What would’ve happened to you, if your parents and your friends were dead? Do you really think you would’ve been much better off?”

“I wouldn’t have hated your magic, no matter what,” said Draco adamantly, and Harry blushed, glad it was dark so Draco couldn’t see him.

“The specifics don’t matter,” he finally managed to say. “Anyway, I don’t really miss her, most of the time, but I liked it much better back at home than I do here.”

When Draco spoke next, he sounded odd. “Harry… I’m sorry we destroyed your family. I know she’s a Mudblood, and I think maybe she would’ve acted the way she did no matter what, but your father might’ve been nicer, or maybe your parents’ friends.”

“You’re not the one who killed them,” said Harry, thinking about what Dolohov had said about Snape helping kill Harry’s father and somebody named Remus. He wondered what it must do to his mother, knowing that her husband’s murderer had saved her life. Did she even know? Did she even have the capacity to care anymore, after so many years of madness?

“I know I didn’t kill them,” said Draco. “But I’m going to destroy more families, aren’t I? When I become a Death Eater. Some of them deserve it, for letting Muggles into our culture, but—”

“No, they don’t,” said Harry.
“But—”

“NO.”

“Let me finish—”

“Good night, Draco.”

“…Good night, Harry.”

“You know who deserves death, Draco?” said Harry after a minute.

“I thought we were supposed to be sleeping, Harry.”

“Your father. Dolohov. The Skulls. The Death Eaters. The Dark Lord, most of all, because he started all of this. And I swear I’ll put them through justice.”

“Don’t talk about my father or the Dark Lord deserving death. Go to bed, Potter, or I’ll kick you out.”

Harry felt his stomach sink to the ground at Draco’s dismissal, at the confirmation that, yes, Draco really did think him inferior, no matter how much he seemed to care about Harry on the surface. That was the end of their first and last conversation on blood purity. Harry didn’t think this fragile sort-of-friendship could survive another.

Sometimes it was just easier to bury his head under the pillow and pretend Draco didn’t believe what he did believe, wasn’t what he was. It was easier to see Draco as the boy who chattered nonstop about pointless things like clothes and Quidditch, who spent hours looking through the library to help him with the Purge, who squeezed Harry’s hand while he screamed and cried after Dolohov’s punishments, who saved his life and sanity over and over again without asking for anything in return.

It was easier than seeing him as the boy who would one day grow up to be a Death Eater.

***

The first week of December, Harry finally had his chance to repay Draco for everything he’d done. He only wished that it hadn’t taken him this long to figure out that Draco needed help.

Between classes on Thursday, Harry dropped by Draco’s room to “borrow” some fancy peacock-feather quills that he was sure would not be missed from Draco’s massive collection, but didn’t get past the threshold. Draco was standing in the middle of the room, sniffling and attempting to wipe slime off his face. He tried “Scourgify” several times, but that only made the slime stretch further across his face, like some sort of sentient alien creature.

“What happened?” Harry spluttered from the open door, finally resuming control of his mouth, and Draco jumped about a foot in the air, registering Harry’s presence.

“Close the door!” Draco growled, his eyes pink and puffy like he’d been crying. “And why’re you even here? Class is in fifteen minutes!”

“I forgot …uh, my textbook. Anyway, we have class at the same time, so you shouldn’t be in here either,” Harry said, approaching Draco slowly as if trying not to spook him.

Draco shrunk away, but Harry was fed up with his antics. He snapped his fingers, and the slime
disappeared off Draco’s face.

“Can you tell me what happened now?” asked Harry, sitting on Draco’s bed with his shoes still on, something he knew drove Draco mad.

Draco spared him one withering sneer, the effect of which was ruined slightly by his trembling lower lip, before bending down to grab his schoolbag. “None of your business, Potter.”

“Who did that to you?” said Harry, narrowing his eyes.

“I don’t need you to fight my battles for me, Potter—” Draco began.

“Stop calling me Potter when you get mad at me!” Harry barked. “It’s annoying, and it’s childish.”

Draco ignored him and walked out the room, slamming the door shut behind him. Harry quickly grabbed the peacock quills he’d come here for in the first place and sprinted after Draco, his schoolbag swinging wildly from his shoulder.

“Draco, I won’t do anything to them, I promise,” said Harry, catching up to him. “I just want to know because I’m curious.” He chewed on his lip. “Well, all right, I might do something to them. But if you tell me who they are very nicely and politely, I’ll consider not doing anything.”

“I’m not telling you!” Draco yelled over his shoulder, breaking out into a run. Harry, whose legs were longer, kept up with him easily and pulled him into a side hallway.

“We’re going to be late to Potions, Harry,” said Draco, trying in vain to escape Harry’s grip.

“They’re doing this stuff to you because of me, aren’t they? The other Initiates?” Harry threw out.

Draco’s eyes widened, confirming Harry’s guess.

“Is it Nott?” Harry asked hopefully, raring for a fight. “The Bulstrode girl?”

“No,” said Draco, after a long pause. He seemed to have decided that Harry wasn’t going to let him go unless he gave in. “It’s not any of the Initiates. It’s Zabini and Smith. They think—they think I’m soft, that I don’t deserve to be an Initiate. They think they can intimidate me, which they can’t, and you’ll make it worse for me if you go after them. Now, can you get out of my way so we can get to Potions on time?”

Harry was quite certain there would be too little left of them to “make it worse” for Draco once Harry was finished with them, but it wouldn’t be wise to mention this fact right now.

“How long has this been happening?” he asked, following Draco out of the hallway and up the stairs.

Draco shrugged. “Since Halloween, pretty much.”

Harry’s mouth fell open. “How come I didn’t know about this until now?”

“Because,” Draco hissed, “they usually do this stuff between classes. Also, I don’t want you going after them and blowing up any more dungeons. It’s a miracle you got out of that as easily as you did. You can’t just hex Elites like Zabini and Smith in plain daylight, you idiot! You’re a half-blood. If you hurt them, they’ll tell the professors, and you’ll get punished.”

“Oh no,” Harry drawled. “They’ll give me to Dolohov. Again. The horror. Whatever shall I do?”
“Don’t test them,” said Draco. “I doubt Dolohov’s the worst thing that can happen to you here.”

“Are you worried about me?” Harry asked, a grin spreading slowly across his face.

Draco’s ears went pink. “No, I secretly hate your guts and want you to die, Potter. Besides, I can deal with them myself. They know what you’re capable of since they were in Dungeon Two on Halloween, and they’ve told me if I get my ‘dirty-blooded dog’ to go after them, it’ll prove that I’m not a true Initiate. Sorry, but I’m not in the mood to deal with that right now. Don’t do anything to them, Harry. Please. I can handle their dumb pranks on my own.”

“Oh, I see,” said Harry, “because you weren’t crying in your room just now.”

“I was—panicking. Scourgify wasn’t working on the slime, so I was worried I was going to be late for class, that’s all,” Draco sniffed, opening the door to the Potions room in the nick of time.

Harry took his seat in the back of the classroom as usual, his eyes following Draco to where the Elites were. As usual, Draco sat down next to Nott, who resembled nothing more than a kicked puppy these days, and Harry’s gaze wandered over to where Zabini and Smith were snickering.

Harry leaned back in his chair lazily, sifting through knowledge of countless Dark spells that he had gathered in these past few months. He chose the spells he was going to use on Zabini and Smith with care, and even beamed at Snape when he glided over to criticize Harry’s potion.

Two hours later, both Zabini and Smith were tied up in the middle of an empty hallway Harry had cornered them in after class. He’d wasted no time in using Incarcerous, and was now circling them like a particularly large vulture.

“So,” he said, his voice dangerously calm, “you’ve been bothering Draco for how long? A month now? You should’ve known I would’ve found out eventually, even though Draco tried to keep it from me. You saw what I did to Dungeon Two, didn’t you?”

“You’re barmy if you think Malfoy’s your friend, Potter,” Smith gasped out, struggling hopelessly against his bindings. “He’s just using you; he told us himself on Halloween. You’re making a huge mistake hurting us, when he’s the one making a fool out of you—”

Harry faltered, almost dropping his wand. For a moment, all the colors in the world bled sideways, like a wet painting that had been smeared by a hasty hand, and his head burned.

***

The Insanitas bug jerked awake just in time to see a jagged tear appear in the magical bond, which manifested as a shimmering, thrumming braid of multicolored light in the boy’s subconscious mind. The Insanitas bug lunged and sunk its teeth into the little rip, and an infection spread out from the wound in inky tendrils, tainting the rainbow bond a murky gray.

The bond began to sicken and unravel and fray—slowly, ever so slowly—and the Insanitas bug sunk back into sleep, satisfied with itself. Distantly, it wondered how many blows the bond would be able to take and hoped it would be fully shredded by Beltane, so that the bug’s master could enjoy a hearty feast.

***

“Holy shit! Did you see his eyes?” Zabini was howling when the world came back into focus for Harry a second later. “I swear they went red—did you see that, Zach? Holy shit, what the hell is he __—?”
“SHUT UP!”

Zabini and Smith both shut up, white-faced, and Harry took a moment to praise himself for having cast a Quieting Spell on the area around them beforehand so that nobody wandering past the corridor could hear all this commotion.

“Stop wasting my time with your stupid little stories,” Harry spat, kicking Smith in the leg for good measure, then firing off two spells in succession at both boys. “Arcana Verba, Inverto Corporis!”

Smith and Zabini squealed like stuck pigs when the spells hit them, but calmed somewhat when they realized that nothing had happened. Knowing it was too good to be true, they shifted in their ropes to face Harry, eyes wide and terrified.

Harry resumed his pacing, lowering his voice to deadly levels. “The first spell forces you to never speak of what I did to you here, not to a professor, not to a Skull, not to your parents, not to anyone at all. And if you do—or if you ever harm Draco again, in any way—the second spell will turn your body inside out. You won’t be able to say much with your mouth on the inside of your head and your brains and organs dripping out onto the ground, will you?”

Zabini and Smith shook their heads. Zabini was letting out little gasping sobs, but Harry had no pity for either of them. They had been tormenting Draco for a whole month. All those nights he had diligently healed Harry’s back and taken his mind off the pain with absurd stories and bright smiles, had he been returning from a long day of suffering at Zabini’s and Smith’s hands?

And Harry hadn’t even known because Draco had wanted to protect him from getting into trouble, and these bastards were telling him that Draco wanted to use him?

Draco hadn’t asked Harry to do a single damn thing for him. In fact, he’d straight out begged Harry to not do anything.

Unable to contain his rage, Harry whispered, “Displodo Vultus!” Zabini’s and Smith’s faces swelled like balloons, threatening to burst.

Harry left them tied up in that corridor, keeping the Quieting Spell on so nobody could hear their wailing. He wondered how long it would take for someone to find them, and decided he didn’t really care.

***

Draco wasn’t sure how Harry had done it, but he’d managed to take Zabini and Smith out of commission without getting caught. They’d spent about three days in the Hospital Wing before coming to class with lumpy faces, which regrettably returned to normal within a week.

And now they were too afraid to even look at Draco, much less taunt him and spread rumors about him about being a traitor. Theo hadn’t managed to get anything out of them about who had given them such a bad scare, but he had probably guessed.

Draco hadn’t expected Harry to go this far, and to pull everything off so well that he had laid rest to every one of Draco’s fears about Zabini and Smith getting back at him or getting Harry in trouble. But that he had done all this proved that Harry cared. He showed that much in all the little things he did, like listening to Draco blabber on and on about topics Harry found uninteresting, and in all the big things, like hexing Zabini and Smith to within an inch of their lives.

In fact, Draco often found himself wishing that Harry wasn’t turning out be such a good friend. The guilt was eating him alive, especially because he knew that everything he did to get Harry to like
him was part of his complex plan and flawless act to become the ideal friend, to gain Harry’s ultimate loyalty and affection.

Well, that wasn’t actually true. It wasn’t an act. But it was supposed to be an act, and that was what mattered most.

Harry’s friendship reduced Draco to a sappy, giddy fool, but he knew he had to make that a friendship a lie, even if it wasn’t. Because the week before Christmas break was finally here, and the Veritaserum checkpoint for the Second Trial was coming up in two days.

The Veritaserum would pull the truth out of him, and Draco knew what that terrible truth had to be if he wanted to become a Skull.

He was going to break off this friendship with Harry when the Second Trial ended in April or May —neither he nor any of the other Initiates had been informed of the precise date—and that was all that mattered to the Veritaserum. Draco didn’t have to like it. He didn’t have to want it. All he needed to do was pass this checkpoint.

Then maybe he could figure something out with Harry come spring. Maybe he could get Harry to pretend to be all broken, shattered, and destroyed. But surely the Skulls would have some way to see through lies like that? How exactly would the Second Trial end, anyway? Was there going to be some big finale of torture and mayhem?

Draco was dreading it, and he was dreading what he would have to do Harry to pass.

So it was with a heavy heart that he descended to Dungeon Seven the day before Christmas break, Theo, Millicent, Vince, and Greg with him. It was funny how much this scene reminded him of the one on the first day of school. He had been on much better terms with all of them back then, but now cold silence thickened the air where there had once been camaraderie.

Theo had long since given up trying to get Draco’s friendship back, but he hadn’t stopped watching him and talking to him. Sometimes he’d make annoying comments like, “Make sure you stick to your plan, Draco,” and “You know I sent that letter to your father for your own good. I wasn’t interfering.”

Draco wanted to strangle him, and he’d suspected for a while now that Theo had secretly approved of Zabini and Smith’s little crusade on him. Theo hadn’t done anything to stop them, that was for sure, almost as if he thought that Draco deserved it for ignoring him for more than a month.

“Draco, are you ready?” Theo said when they reached the door of the dungeon, the sound of his voice making Draco’s stomach crawl.

Draco didn’t respond, pushed the door open, and stepped inside. It was mostly empty, since this was only supposed to be a meeting for the Initiates. A few Silver Skulls were the only others present, and mercifully Sebastian and Nathaniel were nowhere to be seen. Not even the Skull King was here for this relatively unimportant event.

Theo sighed at Draco. “We’ll be seeing each other during the holidays, you know. Christmas parties and stuff.”

“I know,” said Draco. “Doesn’t mean I have to talk to you.”

“Draco, why can’t you forgive me already? Is it because of Potter?” Theo’s eyes flashed. “Because if you think you don’t need me because you already have him, you’d do well to remember that you’re going to break it off with him soon. When you do, you’ll be friendless. Do you really want
“Oh, stop talking already,” Draco snarled. “Has it ever occurred to you that I’m no longer friends with you because you’re a shit friend to me, and a tattle—no, a rat, that’s what you are—and a badgering, meddling, whiny little—”

“Shhh!” Millicent hissed. “They’re passing out the Veritaserum.”

Draco took his bottle with trembling hands, remembering how he’d held a different bottle—with a very different potion—for his First Trial with these same trembling hands. He’d hoped, back then, that he would’ve been less scared the second time around, but he was even more terrified now. He wanted to throw up everything he’d ever eaten and run out of this dungeon, out of this school, out of this damn country.

One of the Silver Skulls cleared his throat and began to speak. The sound echoed in the deserted chamber, sending shivers down Draco’s spine. “You will be called up one by one to the stage, where you will take the Veritaserum. We will ask you a series of questions. If you fail this checkpoint, you will have to modify your behavior in order to pass the Second Trial. If you pass the checkpoint, you will have our approval to continue.”

Draco waited for ages. The fifteen second-year Initiates were with them, so he definitely wasn’t ahead in line. From their first-year group, Millicent was the first to be called. She went on and on about the many things she’d done to punish Ron Weasley, and Draco felt sicker and sicker with every word she spoke. It got even worse when it was Theo’s turn; his target was Neville Longbottom, and while Draco thought the boy was a sniveling fool, some of things Theo had done had been a bit… well, they didn’t call Theo the best at Dark magic in first year for nothing. Additionally, Millicent and Theo elaborated on what they had done to non-targets, and the Silver Skulls seemed extremely impressed with their proactivity.

Then it was Draco’s turn, and he found his legs dragging him up to the stage against his will. He shoved the bottle of Veritaserum against his lips, forcing the clear, tasteless liquid down his throat.

He clenched his eyes shut and waited for the questions.

“Name?” the Silver Skull prompted.

“Draco Malfoy.”

“Target’s name?”

“Harry Potter.”

“Tell us how you’ve been working on the Second Trial so far.”

And Draco did, going into detail about all the things he had done to gain Harry’s admiration and devotion. Luckily, because this was an open-ended question, he could twist the Veritaserum to be vague about the whole Samhain business, equating it to saving Harry’s life. The Skull nodded as Draco spoke, intrigued, calling some others over to discuss Draco’s unconventional methods.

“We approve, Draco Malfoy,” said the Skull at last. “Break, shatter, and destroy. Complete emotional destruction and trauma, instead of physical. Nothing will punish this half-blood more than being reminded that he does not deserve to be your friend or your equal. We find this technique of yours fascinating, Mr. Malfoy, and are eager to see if it succeeds. You may step down now.”
And Draco did, feeling like he’d left his entire body and sense of self back on that stage.
Thanks so much for all the comments! Next weekend's chapter might be a couple days late because of all the midterms and essays I have due this upcoming week. This chapter and the next will be the two "calm before the storm" chapters, so enjoy the fluff while it lasts, I guess?

CHAPTER ELEVEN

MARS BRINGS WAR

Christmas morning was not a cheery affair in the Potter household. Harry, Lily, and Snape—who’d arrived last night in time for a gloomy Christmas Eve dinner—were sitting in the parlor, not speaking to each other unless it was absolutely necessary. The wireless was playing Celestina Warbeck, and the glittering star on top of their sad Christmas tree did little to brighten the room.

“Your present, Harry,” said Lily, handing him a roughly wrapped package. Harry took it and stared at it with blank eyes.

Lily hadn’t screamed at him much for the week he’d been home, though Harry suspected part of it was because Hogwarts forbade everyone except Elite students to use magic during the holidays. Harry wasn’t sure if they would be able to incriminate him if he used wandless magic, but he wasn’t about to take the risk. He was already walking on thin ice, being a Colossus and all.

Snape, as usual, wasn’t talking to him, not that Harry minded anymore. He hated Snape now, and he hadn’t forgotten what Dolohov had said about Snape helping kill his father.

I bet he’s upset he can’t find some way to kill me off, too, thought Harry, his fingers twitching, yearning to wrap themselves around Snape’s sallow throat. He couldn’t believe he’d once been naïve enough to think Snape could be a father to him.

“Here, boy,” said Snape, handing him a thick and glossy black book. “It includes the instructions for many basic and useful potions. You have shown yourself to be atrocious at my subject, but perhaps this will inspire you.”

Not meeting Snape’s eyes, Harry took the book and placed it on his lap with his mother’s package. Potions was one of his worst subjects, probably because he couldn’t be bothered to study for it or put any effort into his essays. Snape never yelled at him during class, though, nor did he assign him detention for all his failed essays and tests. He almost treated him like he did the Elites.

Still, he had killed Harry’s real father, and he was still a piece of shit who ignored him whenever possible. Harry wouldn’t feel guilty for hating him. He wouldn’t.

“Open my present,” Lily whispered. “I went all the way to Gringotts to get it for you. It was lying in your father’s vault for years. I figured you could use it.”
Harry ripped open the brown wrapping paper and sucked in a breath when he saw what lay within. Running his fingers over what looked like liquid silver and felt like cool silk, he asked, “An Invisibility Cloak? Dad’s?”

Lily gave a curt nod.

This was going to be so useful. He was already imagining all the different places he would explore in secret with Draco.

Harry cleared his throat. “Thank you, Mum.” He shifted on the sofa and leaned towards her. Instead of hugging her, he awkwardly patted her arm.

An hour passed. A romantic song started playing on the wireless, and Snape and Lily stood up to dance. Harry left them in privacy and retreated up to his room to investigate his presents, especially the cloak.

A large eagle owl was using its beak to knock on the sole window in his room. Hastily, Harry crossed his room and slid the window open. The eagle owl gave a soft hoot and held out its leg to reveal a letter with a tiny package attached to it. Harry took both items and closed the window in the owl’s face, ignoring its indignant squawk at being so rudely dismissed.

He unfolded the letter, his heart pounding, unable to believe it. Draco’s neat and thin cursive writing filled the page. Harry read it, his face growing warmer and warmer with every sentence.

Harry,

How have your holidays been? This letter better get to you in time for Christmas. So far, this week has been awful. Mother and Father took me to all these useless and boring parties, and I had to stand there and deal with crazy old ladies trying to pinch my cheeks.

Anyway, I’ve been looking in Father’s library for stuff on You-Know-What. I’ve told him that I’ve taken an interest in learning the Dark Arts, and he’s been more than happy to supply me with reading material. I found these really old book on Summoning Arts that I think you’ll find relevant to You-Know-What. I’ll try to convince Father to let me bring the book to school, but if he doesn’t, I’ll have to copy down that chapter so I can show you. I seriously think we have a lead, Harry. You’d better kiss my feet in thanks.

Speaking of thanking me, I also got you a present, and it should probably be with the letter. I’m sure you forgot to get me one, but I’ll forgive you this one time.

Face red and still unable to believe that Draco had thought of him enough to get a present, Harry ripped open the little package, which was wrapped in fancy gold paper, and extricated what looked like a small silver coin. It wasn’t a Sickle, that was for certain. It had a curly M on it, but was otherwise blank.

Harry bit his lip. After Samhain, he had hinted to Draco that the Dark Lord wanted to kill him, but Draco was still helping him survive. Either he had purposely not dwelled too much on that part of the story, or he cared about Harry more than he did about his duty to the Dark Lord.

Heart pounding, Harry picked Draco’s letter back up to continue reading.

I’ve given you a Connecting Coin, one in a pair. I have the other one. They’ve been in my family for ages, lying in the basement among piles of the other Malfoy artifacts. We have so many of these dusty old objects that I doubt Mother or Father will even notice two little coins missing. I’m not exactly sure how they work, but I think if you hold your coin in your hand and ask for my help, the
coin that I have will burn and alert me. It’ll also help me find out where you are, somehow. We’ll practice with them when school’s back on. Of course, we have the bond, so these coins won’t really be necessary, but I figured they might prove useful at some point.

*Merry Christmas, Harry.*

—*Draco*

Harry put the letter down and squeezed the coin. Then he threw himself onto his bed and rolled around a bit, smiling so hard his face hurt. All in all, this had been a good Christmas.

***

The night before New Year’s Eve, Harry mustered up enough courage to approach his mother. He’d been itching to ask her whether she knew about the whole Colossus business, but he suspected that reminding her about his magic would shatter the calm. His mother was pleasant to him these days, and he didn’t want to ruin that.

But he knew a better opportunity wasn’t going to come along. He would have to beat down his fear and ask her.

“Mum?”

Lily sat on the sofa with her legs crossed, reading a book. The warm light of the fire softened the usually harsh lines of her face, and for a moment Harry could almost see the beautiful woman she had surely been in her prime.

Snape wasn’t here, but he would be arriving tomorrow for New Year’s Eve, so it was a good thing Harry was asking Lily now instead of later. He didn’t want Snape, Death Eater extraordinaire, to overhear. He could only hope that his mother would have the sense to keep it from her boyfriend, partner, lover… whatever Snape was.

“Mum?” Harry asked again, raising his voice, trying to grab her attention from the book she was reading.

“What is it, Harry?” Lily asked distractedly, turning a page.

Harry bit his lip and edged closer to her. “Mum, do you… have you heard of the word ‘Colossus’?”

Lily froze. For a long moment, the two of them stared at each other.

“You know,” she whispered at last, and the firelight flickered, drawing attention to the dark circles underneath her eyes.

“I… know, yes,” Harry started. “And I—”

“So you’ll know that you’re not my son.” Tremors consumed Lily’s hands. At some point she had dropped her book, and now it was lying face-down on the floor.

“What?”

“Y—you know. You know you’re n-not him, not my real son. They took him and k-killed him and replaced him with you, like they thought I wouldn’t notice. It was so obvious you were a copy. You were so powerful and not human and not *Harry*. I tried to see him in you. I *tried* I *tried* I *tried*,”
please believe me when I say I tried so hard, Harry.”

Lily burst into hysterical sobs. Harry wanted—no, he needed—to run far away and never come back, but some sick fascination with Lily’s rambling kept his feet rooted to the ground.

“I-I shouldn’t have done it. God, oh God, I made a deal with the d-devil, and I got exactly what I deserved. I wanted so desperately to save my son, but they killed him, and every night I go to bed I see Harry in his crib, crying for me, and I can’t think of anything else because they took my mind. They took everything and gave me a monster, and they said you’d b-be the one—you’d be the one to kill—to kill…”

Lily’s words were no longer comprehensible. She was blubbering now, her face a mess of tears and snot.

Harry backed away, his head spinning, his lunch rising in his throat.

He was Lily’s son. He had her eyes. He looked exactly like his father.

He was wasting his time, listening to the nonsensical raving of a madwoman. Lily had lost her sanity years ago because of all the torture and emotional turmoil she had suffered during the First War, not because “they” had taken it from her, not because she had made a deal with the devil and lost her son. Lily hadn’t ever had another son. He was her only son, Harry James Potter, and he wasn’t a monster.

Harry ran up the stairs and didn’t look back.

***

Unsurprisingly, Harry returned to school depressed and moody.

Draco was not discouraged.

“Harry? Harry? Harry!”

“Yes?” Harry said tersely, looking up from the library floor to glare at Draco, who had approached him from behind and was now tapping his shoulder incessantly.

Undeterred by Harry’s attitude, Draco said, “You won’t believe what I found in the old Malfoy library. You got my letter, right?”

“Oh, right,” said Harry, running a hand through his hair. “Thanks, Draco. I really appreciated the coin. I have it with me right now, actually—”

“Oh, right,” said Harry, running a hand through his hair. “Thanks, Draco. I really appreciated the coin. I have it with me right now, actually—”

“Forget about that,” said Draco impatiently, tugging at Harry’s sleeve. “Come down to my room. I need to show you something. Hurry! I’ll explain on the way.”

Grumbling underneath his breath, Harry followed Draco—or rather, was dragged by him—down the spiral staircases and into the Elite dorms. Draco chattered the entire way there, melting away Harry’s bad mood like nobody else could have.

“The ancient Malfoy books have some really obscure information, stuff there’s no way the Hogwarts library has. There are a few unique books in Father’s archives, and I think I found us a lead on what the Hunger is in one of them. Half of the pages are ripped out, but it’s better than nothing. I asked Father if I could bring it to school, and he said I could, as long I bring it back at the end of term,” Draco was saying as they finally reached his room.
He grabbed the tattered black book lying on his desk and waved it in Harry’s face. “The Lost Artes of Summoning. Father said that thousands and thousands of years ago, ancient wizards used to summon demons from different realms—I’m serious, Harry, don’t laugh!—but it’s impossible for modern wizards because we’ve evolved to do magic by refining it into spells, and demon summoning requires the ‘rawest’ form of magic, whatever that’s supposed to mean. That’s why the Summoning Arts are lost, because we’re physically incapable of performing them now.”

Draco turned to a page near the front of the book and cleared his throat importantly, holding the book open in the air so Harry could see the words and pictures on the page.

“This,” said Draco, “is kind of a prologue to the text. It’s an ancient legend about the Seven Royal Demons. Ancient Summoners tried really hard to track down the seven demons and summon them, but in the end decided that they were just a legend.”

“What does this have to do with—”

Draco pointed to the bottom of the page with a flourish, and Harry squinted. The book was moth-eaten and written in slightly smudged and blurred ink, and he thought it miraculous that it was still readable after years of neglect.

“According to legend, the Seven Royal Demons are magical manifestations of humanity’s worst weaknesses and threats, both internal and external,” Draco explained. “So they’re called the Disease, the Envy, the Rage, the Storm, the Sloth, the War, and the Hunger. The Hunger.”

Harry seized the book and traced the list of demons with a shaking finger. “But this is just a legend. They don’t actually exist, according to this book,” he spluttered. “And even if they’re not just a legend, this Hunger isn’t necessarily the same Hunger in the Forbidden Forest. There’s probably a lot of things with the name the Hunger, right? I mean, it’s not an uncommon word.”

Draco scowled, crossing his arms. “You could be a little more trustworthy, you know. Won’t you let me finish? Turn to the next page.”

Harry did, widening his eyes when he read what was on the page. Half of it was burned, but he could make out a single paragraph clearly. The description was vague in that poetic sort of way, but it matched exactly what they knew: The Hunger emanated a sort of “gravity,” and everyone caught in it would be eaten.

“It must be the same one,” said Draco, practically hopping up and down. “The book even uses the same word Firenze did—gravity!”

Draco really was amazing. Harry opened his mouth to tell him that, but found his lips unable to form words when he caught sight of Draco’s flushed face and bright eyes.

“And guess what else?” said Draco. “Turn to the page after that.”

Harry did, and in the center of it was a picture of a little red-colored squiggle, surrounded by incomprehensible text in a different language that didn’t look like anything Western, or Eastern, or human.

“What’s this supposed to be?” Harry asked, frowning.

“It’s the same vortex mark that appears on my chest whenever our bond is in use,” said Draco. “And the text surrounding it is in Ancient Runes. The next page has a translation. Apparently, the red vortex is the mark of the War. I think you must have some sort of connection to that particular demon. I mean, it looks exactly like the mark on my chest, and you gave me that mark when you
gave me the bond.”

“It can’t be the same,” said Harry, shaking his head so hard his brain felt like it was rattling in his skull. “I didn’t know about these demons until today. If they’re legends—well, maybe the Hunger isn’t—then why would they have something to do with me?”

The memory of Lily’s words washed over him, making his stomach curdle.

“You know. You know you’re not him, not my real son. They took him and killed him and replaced him with you, like they thought I wouldn’t notice.”

“I made a deal with the devil, and I got exactly what I deserved. They took my mind. They took everything and gave me a monster.”

No. He did not have any connection to any of this… supernatural demon stuff that Draco had pulled out of this random old book he’d found under piles of dust. (Why did Draco’s father even have this book, anyway?) Harry was a normal human, and Lily irrationally hated his magic because she was mentally unstable.

Yes, he was powerful, but that was due to random chance. Wizards capable of controlling magic without a wand were born every century, and entire books had been written about the exploits of the most famous ones throughout history. They were fairly rare, but they weren’t anywhere close to an impossibility.

But the creatures called me Colossus, said an annoying voice in Harry’s head. If I was just a wizard capable of controlling magic without a wand, I doubt the Dark Lord would be so desperate to kill me, would he?

“Your mark is the mark of the War, Harry,” said Draco, stubbornly. “I’m sure of it. It makes perfect sense. Everything fits! Why’re you so against it, anyway?”

“I mean, you’re the one with the mark,” Harry barked, deliberately not answering Draco’s question. “Maybe it doesn’t have anything to do with me. To think of it, how do I even know you’re telling the truth?”

For a second, Draco looked murderous. Then he gave Harry a sickly sweet smile. “Oh, you don’t believe me, do you? I’ll take my shirt off, then.”

Harry squeaked, covered his eyes, and backed away, so hastily that he tripped over something and crashed to the floor. He heard the rustling of clothes over skin and did not dare look up, quite sure his face’s temperature rivaled the sun’s. Why was Draco doing this? Why did he want Harry to suffer? He knew that Harry hated seeing him change and hated changing in front of him; it was the reason why Draco always woke up early to get ready.

Draco let out a sigh. “Harry. Will you look already? I’ve prodded at the bond, and that’s enough to activate the mark. Look at it and tell me it doesn’t match the one in the book exactly. It’s too similar to be coincidence, Harry!”

Harry buried his head in his arms, intensely curious to see Draco’s bare chest but ashamed to admit that fact to himself. “Draco, put your shirt back on. This is indecent. We’re only eleven. We’re not supposed to be undressing in front of each other.”

Draco gave an unimpressed sniff. “For Merlin’s sake, Harry, you’re impossible. You have some sort of problem, I swear. It’s just skin.”
Harry peeked at Draco’s pale and smooth chest through his fingers, turned the color of puce, and clenched his eyes shut again. “All right. I admit it. I admit everything. It’s the exact same mark. I’m connected to the demon called the War, which is totally real. I should also tell you that the Dark Lord is secretly my father and Dolohov is secretly my mother. Are you happy now? Put your shirt back on!”

Rolling his eyes, Draco dressed himself again. Of course, Harry didn’t know that Draco was rolling his eyes, because Harry was most certainly not watching him.

“Now that we’ve established that,” said Draco a moment later, buttoning up his shirt, his hair distractingly messy, “we need to find out how to destroy the Hunger so that it doesn’t kill you on Beltane. If you’ve got a connection to the War, you might be able to exploit it.”

Harry straightened up. “Does the book tell us what the War does?”

Draco sighed and paged through it. “No. Half of this book is completely ruined. The only material on the War is the picture of the vortex symbol and the Ancient Runes. The translations say something about the War being able to suck color from the world—you know, the usual dramatics you have in legends like these. But it’s not really useful information.”

“Does it tell us more about the Hunger, then?” asked Harry, leaning forward.

Draco shook his head and flopped down on his bed. “No. I swear this book is totally useless. Why was I even excited in the first place?”

“At least we have a lead,” said Harry, weakly.

“A lead that leads us into a dead end,” Draco added.

“You tried,” Harry said, patting him on the arm. “What’s the book even about, besides the legend of the Seven Royal Demons?”

“It goes into detail on how to make Summoning Circles. The pattern and stuff looks like a really, really, really old version of Ancient Rune circles,” said Draco, waving his hand animatedly in the air. “To a summon a demon, you need to do something called a tithe of magic, whatever that’s supposed to mean. I only think ancient wizards were able to do it. Kind of sad. A lot of the demons seem really useful. There’s a particular demon that multiplies every time you try to kill it. If we could summon something like that, we’d be totally unbeatable. We could send it out to fight duels.” Draco’s eyes shone at this idea.

“A tithe,” Harry repeated, chewing on his lip. “That means a small payment or something? A tax? So a payment of magic?”

Draco curled his lip. “That would mean you have to give up some of your magic to summon a demon. How does that even work? How do you ‘give away’ magic?”

“The Dark Lord can suck magic,” said Harry slowly. “It’s how he destroyed the wizarding world so quickly.”

“The Dark Lord,” Draco began in a heated voice, “didn’t destroy anything. He fixed—”

“Oh, save your preaching for another day,” Harry snapped. “You’ve missed my point. I remember that early on in the First War, he stole magic from Muggle-borns and absorbed it into himself. It made him insanely powerful. If he managed to summon the Hunger, which is supposedly a demon, he can do stuff with magic that a normal wizard can’t. And he definitely has enough magic to make
a tithe, especially if he can keep replenishing his supply by sucking out other people’s magic.”

Draco, of course, wasn’t listening. “The Dark Lord didn’t steal magic from anyone. He was just taking back what was rightfully his. There’s no way a Muggle could ever be born with magic. Mudbloods aren’t natural, Harry! If you think about it, it’s obvious that they got the magic from somewhere, stole it from another wizard—”

“Does that help you sleep at night, Draco? No, really, does it? Does it make you feel better to think that all the children your father murdered were thieves?”

“You don’t understand. You’re a half-blood who’s never learned the truth—”

“Then EXPLAIN it to me!” Harry roared, his magic shaking Draco’s bed threateningly.

A part of him was begging himself not to continue this conversation, terrified that he would lose Draco if he did. But the braver part of him won out. He couldn’t let this go on.

Draco was silent for a few long seconds, and Harry could hear him panting, could see his chest heaving with rage.

“I shouldn’t have to,” Draco said at last, making Harry’s belly squirm with disgust and contempt.

“Why are you even helping me?” he snarled. “You do realize that the Dark Lord wants me dead, that he’s scared of me? What’re you going to do about that, Draco?”

“First of all,” Draco huffed, “since I’m connected to you, I’ll probably die if you do, so it’s not like I have a choice in keeping you alive. Second of all, the Dark Lord isn’t scared of anyone. I’m doing him a favor by helping you. You’re so powerful, and you’d be a useful addition—”

The walls rattled as Harry lost it. “You think I’d join you? You and Nott and Bulstrode and the rest? Do you think they’re going to hold hands with me, and we’re all going to sing happy carols as we murder everybody? Are you insane?”

“No, I-I just—”

Harry didn’t let him speak. “Why’re you even being nice to me, if you think I’m so dirty-blooded and so unworthy of your naturally magical Pureblood arse? I am not your damn charity case, Draco!”

Harry still didn’t know why Draco was being so friendly to him; he understood the reasons for his own fascination with Draco, of course. But what reason did Draco have to be loyal to him, to give him Christmas presents, to heal him every day? Harry had tormented him for weeks at the beginning of last term. Why was he going above and beyond? What reason did he have?

Harry was missing something big, and he didn’t like it.

“Harry, I just said the Mudbloods were thieves, n-not you—”

“Oh please, you look stupid when you try to defend yourself. You think all dirty-bloods are scum. And you can’t actually believe I’d join the side that thinks I’m an inferior being.”

“There’s no other side to join!” Draco shouted, his voice breaking.

“Well, I’m already on his kill list, so I don’t think he’d be too happy to have me in his inner circle. That possibility’s out for me,” Harry sneered, making his way towards the door. “And by helping
“me, you’re going against your lord. Just remember that.” He paused by the threshold for a second, waiting for Draco to call him back and apologize.

Draco didn’t. He buried his face in his pillow instead, hiding from his problems like an ostrich sticking its head into the sand.

At that moment, the illusion shattered, and Harry saw Draco for what he really was: a weak and pathetic little boy. For weeks, he’d constructed Draco as a kind of glorious savior, the sole blazing light in the dim and flickering world that was Harry’s miserable existence at Hogwarts. He’d helped Harry in his darkest moments and pulled Harry back from the brink of death. And if that wasn’t enough, he’d become his first and only friend. The last thing Harry wanted was to lose Draco’s favor, as he knew he would if he pushed Draco too much about his allegiance to the Skulls and the Dark Lord.

But their friendship was built on shaky foundations, and he wouldn’t disrespect himself any longer by letting it tremble like this. He didn’t know what exactly what he wanted from Draco, but he didn’t want this, this pitiful half-heartedness and wishy-washiness.

Harry slammed the door shut on his way out. Then he realized that Draco’s shoulders had been quivering with what could’ve been quiet sobs.

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“Harry?”

It was mid-January, two weeks after their little spat, and Harry was refusing to speak to Draco until he apologized for being wrong, which of course he hadn’t yet. The two of them lay in cold silence in every night, simmering. Despite Harry’s rudeness, Draco still let Harry sleep in his room and dutifully applied pain-relieving potion on his cuts.

But Harry wouldn’t let himself turn into an adoring, mindless puppy who licked Draco’s shoes for showing him basic human decency, even though sometimes he wanted to, especially on the days where he came back from an hour with the Justice Whips. Even during the height of their argument, Draco would sprinkle Dittany on him and tell him stories to make him feel better while his wounds scabbed over. In those feverish, agonizing moments, Harry wanted to grab Draco’s shirt and offer to be his slave for eternity, but he wasn’t about to admit that to anybody, ever.

Harry gave his head a little shake. “Are you going to say sorry?” he asked, turning to face Draco with a scowl. They were sitting in the library, working on History on Magic homework and not speaking to each other unless it was necessary.

Draco took a deep breath and closed his eyes, as if praying for patience. “What do you want from me, Harry? Do you expect me to stop serving the Dark Lord, to argue with my father on blood purity? Because if you expect that, you can just give up. Anyway, that’s not why I’m trying to talk to you right now. I wanted to tell you that we should visit the Forbidden Forest to investigate the Hunger, unless you plan on dying on Beltane.”

“But won’t I get caught in its gravity if I go in there?” asked Harry.

Draco shook his head. “As long as you don’t go in too deep, you should be fine. Except on Samhain and Beltane, obviously. We went near the Forest earlier in October, and you weren’t caught in the gravity then, were you? The only problem we had were the acromantulas, but the creatures in the forest are back to normal. There’ll probably be a slim window of time between now and Beltane where everything’s peaceful. I bet the Insanitas will wake up again in April or at the
end of March, so we have maybe two months to figure out a new plan. I want to find Firenze and ask him some questions.”

“What plan?” Harry practically screeched. “We have no idea what we’re doing, Draco! We’re stumbling around in the dark. We don’t know what that thing in the center of the forest is, or how to distract or destroy it. We can’t even get near it! The only thing we can do is use our bond to keep me out of commission if the gravity tries to control me, and we’ll have to keep using the bond again and again, on every damn Samhain and every damn Beltane—”

“No,” said Draco, in a voice so irritatingly calm that Harry wanted to slap him. “We’re going to destroy it. So go downstairs to get your coat; I already have mine with me. We’re going to visit the Forbidden Forest, and its freezing outside. I’ll be waiting for you behind the secret tapestry in the entrance hall.”

Muttering under his breath, Harry left to get bundled up. He returned under the Invisibility Cloak, taking great pleasure in scaring Draco out of his skin and making him scream like a banshee.

“An Invisibility Cloak!” Draco gasped, once he’d gotten over the shock of an invisible Harry creeping up behind him and grabbing him by the neck with cold hands. “You’ve been hiding this from me for months! How could you do that? We could’ve used it so many times—”

“Not for months. Just two weeks,” Harry corrected, raising the cloak to give Draco an opening to slip in. “My Mum gave it to me for Christmas. I meant to tell you the day we got back, but we ended up… you know. Anyway, I figure that if we’re going to make multiple trips to the forest, it’d be best if no one saw us going down there. We don’t want Dolohov to notice.”

“Good idea,” said Draco, adjusting the cloak so that it covered both of them fully. Fifteen ungainly minutes later—during which Harry stepped on Draco’s feet several times and Draco nearly slipped on the cloak several more times—they arrived at the outskirts of the snow-covered Forbidden Forest. Once they were under the privacy of the thick canopy, they removed the Invisibility Cloak for increased mobility.

“Now what?” Harry asked, craning his head to stare at the tops of the ominously tall trees.

“We wander around until we find Firenze,” said Draco.

“That’s it? That’s your great plan?”

“No, that’s not my plan, you stupid bloody prat. We haven’t come up with a bloody plan yet. That’s why we’re here in the first bloody place.”

“Do you kiss your mother with that filthy mouth of yours, Draco?”

“As a matter of fact, I do. Would you like a demonstration, Potter?”

“Ugh, you’re disgusting!”

Draco looked extremely insulted. “I’ll have you know that I’m a fantastic kisser.”

Harry widened his eyes, finding it difficult to breathe all of a sudden. “What? Who’ve you kissed? Do I know them?”

Draco’s only response was an innocent whistle.

“You’re lying!” Harry spluttered, that slight thickness in his chest solidifying into stone. Who else,
besides Harry, was close enough to Draco to get a kiss with him? What did they look like? Were they a boy or a girl? What kind of person would Draco want to kiss? “Tell me who it was! *Now!*”

Harry badgered him about this for ten minutes straight as they navigated past spiny bushes and fat tree trunks, annoying Draco so much that he finally dropped the façade and smacked Harry on the backside of the head.

“Give it a rest, Harry. I didn’t kiss anyone, okay? I was just messing with you. Can you actually try to be useful for once in your sorry life and help me look for Firenze, or should I steal your magic and leave you for the acromantulas?”

“There will be no need for that,” said a low and calming voice, making Harry and Draco whirl around, their hearts beating frantically in their chests. “What did assistance do you require from me, human child?”

“Oh, thank Merlin you’re here,” Draco moaned, looking up at the centaur as if Merlin himself had arrived. “We’ve been walking around for ages!”

Firenze raised one pale eyebrow. Harry stared at him, open-mouthed. This was his first time seeing a centaur after all, and probably his last. He’d thought that most of them had been killed after the Dark Lord’s rise to power (along with all the other sentient creatures who rebelled against his rule), but maybe the ones who lived in the Forbidden Forest had been left intact.

“It is fortunate,” Firenze said, “that I was the one to cross paths with you, and not one of my kinsmen. I fear they would’ve been far less accommodating upon seeing two human children in the forest.”

“We just have to ask you a question,” Draco said quickly. “Do you—”

But Firenze wasn’t paying attention to Draco anymore. He had fixed his huge eyes on Harry, who flinched a bit under his scrutiny.

“The Lord favored by Mars,” Firenze whispered. “You were here in the forest on Samhain, were you not? I recognize your presence. The planets seem to realign themselves around you, especially Mars.”

“Huh?” said Harry, stupidly.

Draco elbowed Harry in the ribs. “Mars is the planet of war. It was named after the Roman god of war, so when Firenze says you’re favored by Mars—”

“It has nothing to do with the demon called War, okay?” Harry hissed back, lowering his voice deliberately so that Firenze couldn’t hear him. “And planet-gazing can’t tell you anything.”

Draco just crossed his arms smugly, then remembered that Firenze was waiting for them to finish their side conversation. “We wanted to ask you if you learned anything else about the Hunger,” he got out at last. “Could you just update us on what’s been going on?”

Firenze cocked his head. “You will be pleased to learn that nothing has been happening. The Hunger has sunk back into the ground. Curiously enough, most of the acromantulas are dead. The Insanitas has gone dormant as well.”

Harry wondered if he was forgetting something important about the Insanitas. Hadn’t he been infected it with it? But he must have driven it out of his head, right? How else could he have returned to sanity before Samhain had ended?
“Oh, I was the one who killed the spiders, Firenze,” Draco cut in. Harry felt a jolt of admiration run through him, but smothered it. He was meant to be angry at Draco, damn it. “You said something about the Hunger having sunk into the ground? What do you mean by that?”

Firenze shifted his hooves. “It is no longer there, neither it nor its dark web. The Hunger has left its lair, and you should be able to venture deep into the forest in relative safety. We believe it has sunk into the ground to gather energy for the next Purge. It should not resurface or reactivate its gravity field before April.”

“So can we go there?” Harry asked. “Can we walk into its lair?”

“Its lair will be empty,” Firenze clarified. “But yes. You will be able to go to the very center of the forest.”

Harry looked at Draco, and found his own excitement mirrored on the other boy’s face. “Thank you, Firenze!” Draco grabbed Harry’s arm and tugged him forward, clearly more eager to investigate the Hunger’s lair than to say goodbye to Firenze politely.

“Wait!” said Firenze, causing Harry and Draco to halt in their tracks. “I would like to tell the child of Mars something.”

Harry turned around, barely resisting the urge to grit his teeth. “Yes?”

“Mars brings war,” Firenze said, inclining his head. “The planets have foretold a violent and turbulent life for you.”

“I could’ve figured that much out by myself, thanks,” Harry muttered under his breath. Louder, he said, “Thank you, Firenze.”

“Also,” Firenze continued, “I think it prudent to inform you that you don’t have a date of birth. The planets do not recall what position they were in when you came into this world.”

“My birthday,” Harry said, blood roaring in his ears, Lily’s words pounding on his skull like a drumbeat of doom, “is July 31st.”

“No,” said Firenze, voice placid. “I would see it in the pattern of the planets if it was—”

“You can’t see things in planets,” Harry spat, stalking away from the centaur, not caring if he was being rude. “Come on, Draco.”

“What was he talking about?” Draco asked as they stumbled over unruly undergrowth, nudging Harry’s shoulder, but Harry ignored him.

After what felt like days but was probably less than an hour, they arrived at the ridge of a gaping hollow in the center of the forest. Fresh snow reflecting the cool winter sun above filled the treeless clearing. Thick silvery webs covered every inch of the hollow except for its muddy, dark center, which was bare of both snow and webs.

“That’s where the Hunger must’ve been.” Draco pointed to the center unnecessarily. “That’s where it sunk down.”

Harry precariously made his way down to the bottom of the hollow and reaching out to touch one of the giant misty webs, his heart flailing in his chest, almost expecting an acromantula to lunge at him. “What’s with all these webs?”
“The spiders must have had a nest here recently,” Draco guessed, joining Harry at the bottom and rubbing a few strands of the webs between his fingers until they fell apart. “I guess they were driven out when the Hunger took over, and I suppose I killed too many of them for them to try to make a new colony.”

Webs, thought Harry. He remembered that the Hunger had placed a dark, infectious web across the forest ground on Samhain.

“A web,” said Draco, his eyes lighting up, on the same train of thought as Harry but clearly further along it. “That’s our plan, Harry! A web. Look at all these webs!”

“I see them,” said Harry impatiently.

Draco didn’t let himself be discouraged by Harry’s tone. “We trap the Hunger in a web!” he cried out gleefully, taking Harry’s arm and trying to twirl him in celebration.

Harry let himself be yanked around for a few seconds before remembering he was supposed to be mad at Draco and stepping away with a frown. “How? No offense, but I don’t think a spider’s web is going to keep it down. We don’t even know if it has a physical body.”

“Not a spider’s web,” Draco snapped, eyes going hard. “A magical web. There’s a million of them out there, and we’ll have to pick the most powerful one. I think a web that blocks the magic of anyone caught in it would work. The Hunger’s going to come up right in that muddy spot, isn’t it? What we need to do is place the web there, and when the Hunger rises, it’ll be trapped and unable to do anything. It would be better if we could activate it the web whenever we wanted, so we could lull it into a false sense of security before Beltane.”

That familiar all-consuming admiration rose up in Harry, but he tried to stifle it in order to analyze the idea properly. “How does that kill it?”

Draco shrugged. “I don’t know what would kill the Hunger. But if we can find a web that can disable its gravity field, we can get close enough to it to try something without getting eaten.”

Harry nodded seriously, leaning down to pick up some snow. “We’ll have to research webs, and then we’ll have to make it the long way—through spells and everything. We shouldn’t use my magic this time, since I’ll probably be…well, you know how well our plan with the illusion worked last time.”

Draco snorted, and at that moment Harry threw the snow he’d been gathering at him. It hit Draco smack dab on the nose, and he doubled over, gasping. Harry doubled over too, laughing and already creating his next snowball. He would make Draco suffer for being a whiny, cowardly, purist prat, even if all he had to suffer was a snowball to the face.

“You dare?” Draco gasped out, face red and glistening with crushed snow.

Harry threw another snowball at him, making it quite obvious that he dared.

Draco let out a war cry and leapt at him, eyes wild. The two of them tumbled down ungracefully and rolled around in the little sunny, snowy clearing, each attempting to smother the other with a face-full of snow. Five minutes later, they collapsed on the ground side by side, panting, their energy spent.

Harry couldn’t feel his face or his fingers, but he knew he was grinning.

Draco brushed his arm against Harry’s, and Harry surprised himself by not moving away. “I’m
“Sorry,” Draco murmured, causing Harry to twitch beside him.

“For what? For shoving snow up my nose? You should be.”

“No, I’ll never be sorry for that,” said Draco, smirking. But a moment later, the smirk slid off his face, and he bit his lip. “I’m sorry for trying to, uh, preach to you about the Dark Lord that day. I know you hate him, that you won’t ever join him. I shouldn’t have tried to… to explain our point of view. I won’t do it again.”

“But you won’t change your mind?” Harry asked with a sigh.

“How can I?” said Draco, sitting upright to glare down at Harry. “I don’t think you understand the position I’m in. You’ll never understand.”

Harry rolled his eyes. “You’re so misunderstood. Nobody else will ever be able to handle all the problems you face.”

Draco sniffed, ignoring Harry’s sarcasm. He settled back down onto the ground. “Glad you got the point.”

Harry waited for a second. “Do you think I’m inferior, Draco?”

“I think you’re way stupider than I am,” Draco began with a sneer, and Harry bristled and scooped up some more snow, preparing for murder. “But I don’t think you’re an inferior… person.”

He turned to face Harry with wide and clear eyes. They were lying so close now that their noses were almost touching, and Harry could see a few snowflakes caught on Draco’s eyelashes. He was struck with the ridiculous urge to run his fingers through Draco’s damp hair.

“Okay,” said Harry, his voice coming out so faint that he could barely hear it. “Okay, Draco.”

Draco smiled at him, and Harry felt his resistance melt away like snow on a sunny day.
Draco had good news and bad news.

The good news was that he’d found the perfect “web” to trap the Hunger in.

The bad news was that he had no idea how to make that web.

“Magicae Obturamentum?” Harry said slowly, reading off the book Draco had handed to him.

“Magic obstructors. They’re difficult to create, and I’m not sure how we’d be able to, but the theory is sound. Here, listen.”

Draco prepared himself for a long lecture, clearing his throat. “I’ll explain how to make one to you, one step at a time. First of all, we need to pick a ‘receptacle’ to make into that obstructor—a receptacle is basically an object, by the way. Like a quill, or a coin, or something like that.”

Harry stared at him. “Why not just call it an object?”

Draco gave him a sugary sweet smile that promised murder if Harry said another damn word. “Potter, we’re going to call it a receptacle, okay?”

“But—”

“Potter, we’re going to call it a receptacle, okay?” Draco gave him a sugary sweet smile that promised murder if Harry said another damn word. “Here’s why. Let’s say we find a coin—a Knut. We charm that Knut to do something funny, like make anyone who touches it turn blue. That Knut used to be an ordinary object, but now it’s a receptacle, because it holds certain magical properties and affects anything that comes into contact with it. Does that make more sense?”

Harry’s eyes looked unfocused, but he nodded quickly in response. Draco wasn’t convinced, but he went on.

“This is the process of magical artifact creation, except most artifacts do more than just turn someone blue.” Draco could barely contain his excitement, and he hopped up and down a bit in his
seat as he took the book back from Harry and paged through it feverishly. “This book tells you how to make all sorts of receptacles, with all sorts of different names, and some of them are way more advanced than *Magicae Obturamentum*.”

As a child, Draco had aspired to be an inventor. He and Theo had spent many long afternoons talking about all the different objects they were going to make, and what spells they were going to create. Of course, Lucius had shot down Draco’s dream at once, claiming that academics had little power, as well as little sense.

Harry cocked his head at Draco’s explanation, looking like a confused dog with his shaggy black hair falling over his eyes. It was adorable, but if Draco voiced that thought out loud, he was sure Harry would kill him.

“So what do Knuts that turn people blue—or receptacles—have to do with magic obstructors?” asked Harry, and Draco groaned.

“*Magicae Obturamentum*, or magic obstructors,” began Draco with a long-suffering sigh, “are receptacles. That’s what I just said, a moment ago. While you’re touching a basic magic obstructor, you won’t be able to use your magic. Of course, there are many kinds of obstructors besides that basic one—like if you touch a higher-level obstructor, it’ll block your magic for a certain amount of time, and it doesn’t deactivate when you stop touching it. But the more dangerous and longer-lasting an obstructor is, the harder it is to make.”

Harry’s eyes lit up with understanding at last. He scooted his chair sideways, trying to get closer so he could see the book better. “How do we get the Hunger to touch an obstructor then? Like I said before, we don’t even know if it has a physical body.”

“That’s where the web comes in,” said Draco, puffing out his chest. “We can make several magic obstructors and give them an ‘area-of-effect’ property instead of a ‘touch’ property. Say we have seven of them, and we arrange them in a circle around the spot where the Hunger’s going to come up. Anywhere within that circle, within that *web*, magic won’t work. The Hunger won’t be able to activate its gravity field, and once we’ve made it useless, we can get close to it and try to kill it.”

“Draco, how exactly do you come up with all this stuff?”

Draco definitely wasn’t imagining the admiration in Harry’s voice just then.

“Oh, it just happens, you know,” said Draco, his preening and smirking not matching his modest words. He liked having Harry’s respect. Not enough people seemed to respect Draco anymore, and it was nice to have confirmation that he was brilliant. Of course, *Draco* knew he was brilliant. It was just nice to know that someone else thought so, especially Harry.

Harry snickered as Draco puffed up even more, but the next thing he said wiped away Draco’s smile.

“Before your ego gets so massive that you float up into the sky, have you figured out exactly how we’re going to *make* a magic obstructor? Looking at the diagrams in this book, it seems like it’ll take some seriously complicated spellwork. I have no idea how to do any of this stuff—and this is just for the basic type of *Magicae Obturamentum*, the one that works with touching only. I expect we’ll have to make some big modifications to this basic formula if we want the obstructor to have an area of effect.”

Draco frowned and stuck out his lip. “I was just getting to the bad news. You couldn’t even give me thirty seconds to bask in my glory?”
“Hold on. I want to guess what the bad news is.” Harry’s voice dripped with fake enthusiasm, and Draco glared at him. “The bad news is that you have no bloody idea how to do any of this.”

“No, I don’t.” Draco slammed the book shut loudly enough to draw Madam Pince’s attention. “But it shouldn’t be impossible. How hard can following instructions be? We do everything this book says we do—”

“But I just told you,” Harry said, through gritted teeth, “that the book only tells us to make the basic type of magic obstructor. Following instructions blindly won’t get us anywhere.”

Draco sniffed disdainfully. “This book has instructions on how to make a ton of different area-of-effect receptacles. We can modify those instructions to give our magic obstructor an area of effect. It shouldn’t be too difficult to combine two types of receptacles. Leave this stuff to me. I’ll have everything done by March, I swear.”

Harry leaned back in his seat and crossed his arms, but he seemed reluctantly impressed. “I don’t have a better idea, so if you think you can handle this… well, go ahead.”

Draco tried to plaster a cocky grin on his face, but it came out wilted. He looked through the diagrams again, distinctly aware of his stomach churning at the sight of all that complex spellwork. This was probably OWL-level work, if not NEWT-level.

No, there was no way he could handle this.

***

One week later, Draco had made little progress with the *Magicae Obturamentum*, and he was getting ready to beat down his pride and ask someone for help.

Dolohov, the Charms and Curses professor, was out of the question, and so were the rest. Draco didn’t know how many of the professors knew about the Purge, and the last thing he needed right now was for one of them to start suspecting Harry. He could beg an older Elite to teach him, but most of them would want something in return, and Draco didn’t want to be in a stranger’s debt.

That left one person to ask.

So, during the first week of February, Draco approached Theo in the Elite common room, scowling up a storm. Theo was sitting with Zabini and Smith, who stiffened at the sight of Draco and nearly upturned the sofa in their haste to leave.

Theo didn’t seem to notice their departure. He was too busy staring at Draco like Christmas had come early.

“Draco,” he said, a bit out of breath, having probably just realized that this was the first time Draco had spoken to him voluntarily since Halloween. “Did you—did you need something?”

Draco threw himself on the sofa besides Theo and pinned him with a stern look. “Why else would I be coming to talk to you?”

Hurt flashed in Theo’s eyes, but it was gone a second later. “What do you want, then?” he said, his voice controlled and careful.

After a good long minute of hesitation—and a few encouraging mental slaps—Draco muttered, “I need your help, Theo.”
Why was Draco doing this? Why was he talking to Theo even after he’d sworn he wouldn’t ever grace this meddling swine with his presence ever again? He knew Theo was going to ruin everything, like he had tried to do on Halloween.

But at this point, Draco had no choice but to ask him to make the magical obstructors, not if he wanted Harry to survive. There was nobody else to ask, and though Theo had many faults, nobody could deny that he was a born genius. If anybody could splice together two types of advanced receptacles, it was him, NEWT-level be damned.

Draco remembered that Theo—who, like most of the Elites, had gotten his wand around the time he could walk—had been able to create simple receptacles at the age of seven and modify spells at the age of nine. He was a natural inventor—just like he’s a natural at everything else, thought Draco bitterly—but his passion had always been the Dark Arts, which his father and brothers had tutored him in from a young age.

Draco thought it was a massive waste. His own intelligence was nothing to scoff at, but he would’ve killed to have a mind like Theo’s, a mind that found connections and solved puzzles in the blink of an eye.

“You need my help?” spluttered Theo, straightening up. “With what?”

Draco took a deep breath. “…I need you to make a high-level receptacle for me. I know the theory, but it’s, well, really difficult to understand some of the steps and—I can’t do it, that’s the point I’m trying to make.”

He uncurled his tense shoulders, glad to have gotten that all out.

Theo chewed on his lip, and Draco could tell his curiosity was getting the better of him. “What’s this receptacle, exactly?”

Draco explained, and Theo listened, giving little nods here and there. “Look, I’m not bragging,” he said, running a hand through his hair, “but I think I’ll be able to come up with a method to make that specific kind of *Magicae Obturamentum* in no time flat. Actually making it might take a little longer though.” He shot Draco a side-eyed glance. “What do you even need it for?”

Draco wavered for a second, his heart skipping a few beats. He’d been preparing himself to tell this lie all week, had even practiced saying it in front of the mirror to make sure he’d be able to give a convincing performance.

But the next words had to be torn from his mouth.

“I need your help in dealing with Potter, Theo. He’s magically powerful, you know that much, and I’m a bit worried about what he might do to me in revenge. I… have a prank of sorts planned for him that involves the *Magicae Obturamentum*. I want to use it to take him out of commission, in case he tries to come after me once the Second Trial is over.”

With great effort, Draco smothered the nasty little voice chattering in the back of his head. Of course he wouldn’t hurt me.

And there had to be a way to pass the Second Trial and keep Harry’s friendship at the same time, but Draco didn’t want to think about the Second Trial right now, so he wouldn’t. He had more pressing concerns at the moment.

Theo was nodding with great vigor, barely managing to hide his smile. Draco’s plan had worked; the very mention of Draco hurting Harry had softened Theo up, made him more likely to cave and
less likely to ask questions about Draco’s “prank.”

“I totally get it, Draco. But why go to all this trouble to make *Magicae Obturamentum*? If he does anything, I’ll take care of him. Even if you haven’t been acting like it, I still consider us friends—”

“I asked for your help, not your soul. You can’t be my shield *all* the time, and I really don’t want you to be, even if you could,” snapped Draco, irritated by Theo’s condescending tone for what felt like the millionth time in his life. “First of all, you’re a meddling arse, and you nearly ruined the Second Trial for me on Halloween, and you made my father angry at me—”

“I apologized for all of that!” Theo practically wailed.

Draco shook his head. “You’re only sorry because I stopped talking to you, not because you thought you were wrong. You’d do it again.”

Theo said nothing in response, and Draco went on, his point proven. “Second of all—”

“That’s not true,” Theo whispered.

“What’s not true?” said Draco, at the end of his patience.

“I *did* think I was wrong for taking Potter on Halloween, and I’m sorry for doing that. I told you that I wasn’t thinking straight. I was just so sure that your plan wasn’t going to work, and that you and Potter would become friends for real, and that you’d fail the Second Trial. That’s why I sent a letter to your father. I just wanted to make sure that you wouldn’t slip up, wanted to remind you what was at stake. You understand why I did it, don’t you?”

“The way you worded that apology just now made it sound like it wasn’t an apology,” said Draco with a slight sneer. “And how many times do I need to tell you that I don’t need you to mother me? I know perfectly well what’s at stake.”

Theo narrowed his eyes, and Draco was utterly unprepared for the onslaught of words that followed.

“I’m sorry for ‘mothering’ you, Draco. I’m *sorry*. I just—why am I even doing this? Did you even miss me all these months? Did you even think of me once, before you realized that you needed my help? Why’re you even talking to me if you’re never going to forgive me, if you’re going to keep holding my mistakes against me until we’re both fifty years old? If you think I’m a meddling fool and don’t want to rely on me, tell me why I should even help you!”

Draco wanted to groan. There Theo went, manipulating the conversation to suit his needs, doing what he did best. And he *still* wasn’t sorry about anything.

But two could play the manipulation game, and if there was one thing Draco was better than Theo at, it was manipulation.

“I’ll tell you why you should,” said Draco with a snarl. “If you help me make these magic obstructors without whining about Potter or the Second Trial, and without interfering or tattling, I’ll consider it a full apology for Halloween and the letter. I really want to be your friend again, but I’ll need proof that I can trust you not to meddle with my life first.”

Theo’s lip trembled just a bit, and before he could recover himself, Draco went in for the kill.

“You know that you’re in the wrong, Theo. And I’ve been trying to act like I don’t care about you because I’m so tired of your shit.” Draco raised his voice here, pouring all of his frustration into it,
making sure it shook and broke at the perfect moment. “But no matter how much I try to tell myself I don’t need you anymore, I just can’t—stop—missing—you. I hate that I can’t stop thinking about you. I should hate you after everything you did, but I don’t.”

Theo’s breath hitched, confirming that Draco’s performance had been flawless. Draco continued, speaking fast and hard, pushing all the right buttons and relishing in the fact that Theo was nothing but limbless putty in his hands at this moment.

“And you know what? I’m so sick of Potter. I’m sick of having him in my room. I’m sick of acting like his friend, and I’m sick of worrying about what he’s going to do me after the Second Trial. I’m sick of all the Elites calling me a traitor, and most of all, I’m sick of you thinking that I’m going to abandon everything and—and run away with him, or something stupid like that. I can’t believe that you think so little of me. You’ve never seen me as your equal. You don’t respect me—all you do is look down on me and tattle on me and lecture me.”

Draco leaned closer and lowered his voice to a hiss. Theo’s dark eyes were fixed on him, and his mouth was open slightly in an expression of shock.

“But I can’t stand this anymore. I needed to talk to you. I could’ve asked a professor to help me with the *Magicae Obturamentum*, but I think I just wanted an excuse to spend time with you, to work on something with you. In fact, I think making the *Magicae Obturamentum* is an excuse by itself. So please, say you’ll help me. And please say you’ll stop meddling from now on, even though you’re not sorry about it doing it before. Because I swear, Theo, I’m done with you for good if you pull something like Halloween or the letter again.”

Slowly, Draco stood up to leave, holding Theo’s dumbstruck gaze. “Well, now that I’ve said all that, tell me by tomorrow if you’ve decided to help me so I can figure out who else to ask if you say no.”

At once, Theo grabbed his arm, just like Draco had expected him to. “Wait,” he mumbled, face bright red. “Merlin, of course I will, Draco. You have no idea how much I missed you—”

“Do you promise that you won’t interfere with the Second Trial or go running to my father?” Draco flung the challenge at Theo. “You promise that you’ll respect me?”

Theo’s gaze burned, and he nodded.

“Say it,” breathed Draco, leaning over Theo until they were face to face.

“I promise,” said Theo, meeting Draco’s eyes without hesitation, his voice steady.

“Good.” Draco’s smile wasn’t quite genuine, and he didn’t trust Theo as far as he could throw him, but it was a step forward. “Let’s get started. I’ll go get my books.”

***

Three days later, Draco flopped down on Theo’s bed, groaning. “Is it working yet?”

“Don’t mess up my sheets!” snapped Theo, wiping sweat off his forehead. “And no, it’s not working yet.” He was sprawled out on the floor, a heaps of parchment scattered around him. Every couple seconds he would mutter something under his breath, scratch his neck, and make a note somewhere.

“Is it working now?” Draco asked a few seconds later.
Theo closed his eyes and took a deep breath. “No,” he said, very calmly, and returned to his scribbling.

“Could you at least tell me what you’ve figured out? I could help, you know. I’m not here to look pretty.”

“This is OWL-level work,” said Theo, not looking up from his notes.

“You’re only a few months older than me,” Draco shot back, crossing his arms.

“In terms of age, maybe,” said Theo, a grin spreading across his face. “In terms of maturity, though—hey, don’t look at me like that, Draco! I was joking! It was a joke!”

“Good save,” said Draco with sniff, straightening up. “Give me one of the Knuts.” They had decided they were going to make their prototype receptacle a Knut because Knuts were expendable and plentiful, at least to wealthy heirs like Theo and Draco, while also being too valuable to accidentally throw in the trash.

Theo chucked one at his face. “Thanks,” said Draco, catching it and rubbing it between his fingers. All they had done so far was put some preliminary spells on it, to lay the foundation for the spells that would cause the magic-obstructing effect.

But Draco had an idea. He got off the bed to lie on the floor next to Theo, then started to shuffle through the copious notes, causing the other boy to howl in protest.

“I just put those in order!”

“Oh, get over yourself,” said Draco, finally finding what he was looking for. It was a particularly detailed diagram of a spell tree that Draco had made a week ago, before he’d joined up with Theo. The spell tree outlined the process of creating a *Magicae Obturamentum* the way Draco wanted it, modifications and all, and he’d given this diagram to Theo as a sort of starting point. “Did you even look at this?”

“Oh, that won’t work,” said Theo, waving a hand dismissively.

“What doesn’t work about it? I mean, I doubt it’s completely right, but I’m sure I got the order of the first few charms correct,” said Draco with a frown.

Theo gave him a pitying look. “There’s no point in looking at it if it’s wrong, is there? Go sit back on my bed. You’re messing up my notes and distracting me.”

“Could you just tell me what’s wrong with it?” asked Draco, raising his voice.

“Why do you even want an area-of-effect *Magicae Obturamentum*? If you’re using it on Potter, wouldn’t it be better to have it be timed—”

“Do it as I say, Theo,” Draco snarled. “And I said I wanted the receptacle with both timed and area-of-effect properties, and I want to link seven of the Knuts together to create a sort of circle, a web. If you’d looked at my diagrams, you’d know that, but as usual you’re taking over the project and not listening to me!”

“Fine! I’ll look at them!” Theo seized Draco’s notes, scowling furiously, and parsed through them with a thick red quill. “This is the wrong spell. Switch the order of the Lamination Charm with the Clock Charm. Your measurements are wrong, too. You’re trying to find the volume of a hemisphere to figure out how big the area-of-effect should be, aren’t you? But here you’ve calculated
the volume of a cone. How do you even get those two formulas mixed up? I swear, Draco, sometimes you amaze me.”

He shoved the notes back in Draco’s arms. “Happy now? Go salvage that.”

“I didn’t make that many mistakes,” said Draco in a very small voice, looking at the red scribbles all over his work. “You only caught… what, three big ones?”

“I’m sure that if I bothered to waste my time, I’d find many more. Now go away. I’ll have the procedure ready by tonight, and then you can help me with the spells. But not right now.”

Draco stalked out of Theo’s room and slammed the door behind him, fuming. Theo was the world’s biggest git. He had always been like this, but Draco had dealt with it for years, mainly because there hadn’t really been anyone else.

His friend situation was quite pathetic, Draco realized. There was Theo, the control freak. There were Vince and Greg, the idiots. Then there was Harry, the powerful, slightly unhinged half-blood, who also happened to be Draco’s target, who also happened to be incredibly loyal and endearing.

Why, why couldn’t Harry have been born as the heir of one the Dark Lord’s Death Eaters? Draco’s life would’ve been so much easier. He and Harry could have become Skulls together, then Death Eaters, and Draco wouldn’t have felt any guilt for hurting dirty-bloods. Maybe if Harry had been a Pureblood, they would’ve been friends from childhood, and Draco wouldn’t have had to bother with the Notts at all.

Strengthening his resolve, Draco retreated to his room to work on the Magicae Obturamentum. He would show Theo, Harry, and everyone else that he could do this. There were some tests that were important to his father, and then there were some tests that were important to Draco.

***

When Harry stumbled into Draco’s room a few hours later, after a surprisingly painless session sorting papers for Dolohov, Draco was making strange loud noises on his bed and wriggling around.

“Uh—” Harry began, going bright red and looking away, wondering what exactly he had walked into.

But then Draco flipped around on the bed to face Harry, beaming, and Harry found it safe to look at him again. “I did it! I made a magic obstructor! Think fast!”

Harry saw a Knut flash through the air, spinning wildly, and in the next second he was on the ground, gasping as his magic was sucked into his skin and trapped there like a squirming mass of insects. He let out a breathy scream, sure he was going to burst out of his body in a spectacular display of blood and gore.

The sensation dissipated in the next second, and Harry’s magic rushed back out of him like a wild creature hungry for destruction, surging through the room in a whoosh of air, extinguishing all the torches and forming little cracks across the floor before Harry was able to gain control of it again.

“Could you not?” Harry spat at him from the floor, once he had his breath back and could feel his limbs properly.

“Sorry about that,” said Draco, pursing his lips, not sounding very sorry. “And it didn’t last nearly as long as I expected it to. On a scale of one to ten, how painful was it?”
Harry struggled to his feet, impressed even though he was supposed to be angry at Draco for using him as a test subject. “Seven. And a half.”

Draco pursed his lips again. “Darn. It should’ve hurt more.”

“I take that back. It was definitely a ten; I just wanted to piss you off, you sadistic wanker.” Harry leaned down to grab the coin on the ground, before deciding that was a bad idea and backing away rapidly.

“It’s safe to touch right now,” Draco slipped off his bed to pick up the Knut, then put it in his pocket. “It has an area-of-effect property on it, but it doesn’t work now that it’s just been used. It’ll take some time to charge up again, and after that it has to be thrown and hit something to activate. I can’t believe it only lasted two whole seconds. And I still have no idea how to link several magic obstructors together, and how to make them permanent.”

Harry opened his mouth, then closed it again. He dearly wanted to help, but knew he couldn’t. Not for the first time, he wished he were smarter. He could handle most spells just fine, thanks to his magical power, but one look at the complicated diagrams in Draco’s books sent Harry’s head spinning. It was obvious that spell and artifact creation were not for him, and required a kind of creativity he didn’t have.

Harry felt another jolt of admiration for Draco. “How did you manage to do all this so quickly? You’re almost done already.”

“Almost done?” Draco laughed derisively. “This rubbish barely works! And I didn’t even manage to do this much by myself—I mean, uh.” He stopped talking at once and looked away sheepishly, as if he had revealed something he hadn’t meant to.

Harry stared at him. “You had help? Who helped you?”

“Hey, Harry, I’m really sorry for using that obstructor on you. It must’ve hurt pretty bad, especially because you have a lot of magic. How about I massage your back as an apology?”

Draco’s eyes were wide and innocent and hopeful, and it took Harry several long seconds to snap out of it and remind himself that Draco had failed to answer his question.

“Oh, please,” Harry snorted, turning a bit pink at the mental image of Draco massaging him. He wasn’t sure why the idea was so embarrassing; Draco had patched up his back about a million times. But there was something more intimate about massaging, probably because it did not involve copious amounts of blood and pain. “Like I’m going to fall for that. Out with it, who’s helping you? Please tell me it’s not Dolohov.”

Draco rolled his eyes. “No, it’s not,” he said, talking a few steps towards Harry. “But keep guessing, if you really want to know.”

“Your father,” said Harry, grinning.

“Oh boy, you’re getting closer. I don’t think I can stand the shame if you find out,” Draco drawled, taking Harry’s arm and yanking him towards the bed.

“Is it a house-elf? No, it has to be—wait for it—the Dark Lord himself! Gah, stop! Stop! Please! DRACO!” Harry yelped as Draco threw him onto the bed and started viciously tickling him.

“Beg for mercy, Potter!” Draco cawed, tickling Harry’s neck and waist simultaneously, making Harry squeal like a pig about to be slaughtered.
In between wheezes and pants, Harry grabbed Draco by the collar, and after a short struggle, managed to flip their positions, so now Harry was on top and Draco was laughing underneath him with his shirt untucked and his tie half-off. Meanwhile, Harry’s glasses were lopsided, and his foot was throbbing from being smacked against the wall during their tussle.

“Just you wait, you snotty little Pureblood,” Harry snarled, jabbing Draco in the stomach and making him shriek and writhe all over the bed, a sight that pleased Harry on several different levels. “I’m going to destroy you, I’m going to make you cry.”

Draco’s hair, usually neat and slicked back, was sticking up all over the place in little tufts, and his face was all blotchy and red. Harry had never seen anything funnier in his entire life. “I should take a picture of your face right now and send it to your rich Death Eater daddy. That’ll show him how proper his son is—”

“Don’t you dare!” Draco choked out, then dissolved into a spluttering mess as Harry began a coordinated attack on his waist, slipping his hands underneath Draco’s shirt for easier access to his sensitive skin.

The door swung open, the person behind it let out a muted gasp, and Harry tumbled off the bed in his haste to pull his hands out of Draco’s shirt.

“Did I interrupt something?” said Theodore Nott in an emotionless voice, leaning against the doorframe. The look in his eyes would’ve made Harry’s blood freeze—if Harry had been scared of him, which he wasn’t.

“Yes, you did, actually,” Harry spat, straightening his glasses. “Ever heard of knocking, Nott?”

Infuriatingly, Theo ignored him. “Draco, I thought you were supposed to be working on our project, not… whatever this is.” He curled his lip in a way that would’ve made Snape proud.

Huh? What project? Draco and Theo were working on a project together? Since when? Didn’t Draco hate Theo?

Draco gingerly got off the bed, adjusting his shirt, which Harry couldn’t help but notice had ridden halfway up his stomach. Harry took one quick look, unable to resist, before turning to fixedly stare at the wall.

“Theo, can you leave?” Draco sighed. “I’ll come talk to you in a few minutes.”

“For what?” Harry whined. “Why do you need to talk to him? Why’s he barging into your room anyway?”

“Oh, you’re the one in places you don’t belong, Potter,” said Theo, his eyes shadowed. Harry took a step forward, murderous, but Theo clicked the door shut a moment later.

“Explain,” Harry shot at Draco, once he was sure Theo had gone. “I can’t believe you’re talking to him again, after he literally tried to kill me—”

“If we’re being literal,” said Draco, walking over to the vanity to inspect his mussed hair, “he didn’t try to kill you.”

“Let me fix my earlier statement,” said Harry, sweetly. “I meant to say that he tried to punish me first, then kill me.”

“He’s the one who’s helping me with the magic obstructors.” Draco whirled around, eyes bright
and burning. “I don’t like it. I don’t like him. But there’s no other choice. He’s a genius—”

“I would rather let the Hunger digest me,” said Harry slowly, “than let Theodore fucking Nott make the magic obstructors.”

“Then you’re a massively stupid idiot,” sniffed Draco, applying some sort of gel to his hair.

The sight of Draco calmly arranging his hair made Harry want to scream. “Have you been telling him our secrets, Draco? Did you tell him all about how I’m a Colossus?”

“Who the hell do you think I am?” said Draco, not even bothering to turn around. “I came up with some fancy story. I don’t even remember it anymore. Theo didn’t ask too many questions.”

“That’s a load of dragonshit, and you know it.”

“For your information, I’m very convincing when I want to be—” Draco began.

“I’ll bet you are. Did you tickle Nott to distract him from asking questions, just like you did to me?” Harry sneered. “If he hadn’t walked in on us, I wouldn’t have found out you two were working together.”

Draco slinked forward, smiling dangerously, his hair perfect again. “Look Potter, I’ll admit that I tried to distract you from finding out. You know why? Because I knew exactly how you would react, and you’ve proved me right. Now if you’ll excuse me, I have to go see what Theo wants.”

“I refuse to let him make my magic obstructors,” said Harry, shoving himself between Draco and the door, his insides curdling at the thought of Draco talking to Nott. He knew Draco had been friends with him, once upon a time, but Harry didn’t like to think about Draco’s past, didn’t like to think about Draco smiling and laughing with someone who had tried to kill Harry. In fact, he didn’t like to think about Draco smiling and laughing and being tickled by anyone but him.

Draco widened his eyes, and his next words jerked Harry out of his thoughts. “They’re not even your magic obstructors, you prat. They’re my magic obstructors, considering I’m the one making them.”

Harry lost it. “No, they’re not, because you’re clearly too dumb to make them by yourself. Go come up with some other plan, one that we can work on together, not one that you have to work on with Nott! I thought you could handle this without having to ask the craziest bastard in first year for help. Genius, my arse. If Nott’s a genius, then I’m secretly the Heir of Slytherin!”

Draco blinked rapidly, pushed him aside, and stalked out of the room before Harry could even register what had happened. After a second of standing there and gaping, he wondered if he had said something unforgivable.

***

Draco stormed into Theo’s room, coming up with a hundred insults that would make Harry cry. *He called me dumb! Me!*

Theo was sitting at his desk, writing furiously. “In these past few hours, I’ve come up with a method to make the magic obstructors, just in the way you wanted them, even though what you wanted doesn’t make a lot of sense. I guess you don’t trust me enough to tell me what exactly you’re planning for Potter, because this seven-point circle is ridiculously complicated for something you intend to be a self-defense prank. Whatever. I promised that I wasn’t going to interfere with your plan for the Second Trial, so I’m not going to ask. I’m just pleased you’re
taking this seriously for once.”

“Good.” Draco stuck his nose in the air.

“Anyway, it should take a week at most for us to work out the kinks in the formula and make one of the obstructors, and then we’ll be able to make the other six pretty quickly after that,” Theo continued.

“Thanks for doing this, Theo,” said Draco, genuinely. He dug around in his pocket for a second and pulled out the Knut magic obstructor he had tested on Harry. “I made this, by the way, using my own notes.”

“Notes that I corrected,” Theo added. “And I’m glad you managed to get something done today, even after all that time you spent rolling around with Potter.” Theo’s fingers tightened around his quill. “I didn’t think you were that kind of guy, Draco. How many other boys have you kissed? Or did Potter get you to like him by snogging you? He’s not even that good-looking.”

“For Merlin’s sake, Theo, stop talking before you embarrass yourself.” Draco wanted to sink into the floor. Why couldn’t Theo have knocked on the door like a polite human being? “We weren’t snogging. I already told you that I’m sick of him, didn’t I? How many times do I have to tell you that I don’t like him? And if you must know, he was tickling me.”

Theo looked up, his face still flushed from his rant earlier. His lips were parted in a perfect ‘O’ of surprise, and Draco barely managed to hold back a snort at the other boy’s spectacular loss of composure.

“What the hell?” Theo spluttered at last. “Tickling?”

“It’s a long story.” Draco shifted his feet.

“Oh, I don’t want to hear it,” said Theo quickly, standing up. But he didn’t seem as angry anymore, and Draco relaxed, relieved to have averted such a stupid argument.

Or not.

“Do you think he’s good-looking, though?” asked Theo, out of nowhere.

Pointedly ignoring Theo’s question, Draco made his way to the desk to examine Theo’s notes. “Can we start on this tonight?”

“Oh. Right. I guess.” Theo was quiet for a second, then spoke in a small voice. “Though I kind of wanted to play chess together. I haven’t been able to play it for a long time. Not since… you know, you stopped talking to me.”

Draco cocked his head in confusion. “Why not? Don’t you have other friends?”

Theo sat down on his bed, scowling. “Well, Zacharias and Blaise don’t really like me—I mean, they’re closer to each other than they are to me. Vincent and Greg are the same way. Millicent pretty much only hangs out with the girls. I could’ve talked to some of the other Elites, but I didn’t really see a point.”

“I’m sure someone would play chess with you if you asked,” said Draco as Theo took out his fancy jeweled chess set.

“But they’re not you,” said Theo, and Draco’s resistance cracked a bit. Theo was a much better
challenge at chess than Harry was, and Draco would have been lying if he’d said he didn’t like a good high-stress, high-stakes game. And he had been working hard on the stupid Knut all day. He deserved a bit of a break.

“Please, Draco?”

“Well, you’ve already taken your set out, so it’s not like I can say no,” grumbled Draco, without too much venom, sitting down at the foot of the bed. “I get the diamond pieces.”

As Theo arranged the pieces on the board, Draco held his crappy Knut magic obstructor up in the air, observing the light of the torches glint off its copper surface. Theo would be the one making the *Magicae Obturamentum* web, but this one Knut would be Draco’s creation alone. He would perfect it until it was a weapon that he could use over and over again, and Harry would never dare to call him dumb again.

***

Harry had tossed and turned in his bed that night, agonizing over what Theo and Draco had said to each other during their private time together. After Draco had come back from whatever he’d been doing with Nott—Harry’s skin crawled just thinking of the bastard—he had refused to speak to Harry all night long.

It was early morning now, and Harry’s eyes were bleary. He blamed Draco for his lack of restful sleep.

“Did Nott say something to you about me?” asked Harry, after the two of them had gotten ready for class. “Is that why you’re not talking to me now?”

Draco turned to face him, his tie half-knotted, his eyes gleaming crazily. “I can’t believe you. I can’t believe you don’t even know what you did wrong.”

Harry’s mouth fell open. Draco was being so unfair. “How do you expect me to know what I did wrong if you don’t tell me?”

Draco gave him a falsely bright smile and clapped his hands together. “You see, Potter, human beings have this thing we call a brain, which we use to think about what we did wrong. You should get one.”

*Brain,* thought Harry sluggishly. *Oh.*

“I’m sorry for calling you dumb,” he said with a grin, secretly relieved that Draco’s irritation with him had nothing to do with Theodore Nott. Harry could fix this easily.

Draco shot him a supremely unimpressed sneer, picked up his schoolbag, and stomped out of the room.

Well, maybe not so easily.

Harry hurried after him. “I didn’t mean it, Draco, okay? You’re not even close to dumb, and you know that. Is your self-esteem really this fragile? How many times do you want me to apologize and take it back?”

Draco stopped walking, so abruptly that Harry almost crashed into him. He turned around, lips thin and eyes hard. “You would’ve been dead a hundred times if it weren’t for me, Potter. And I’m trying to save your sorry life again, and you act like an ungrateful brat because Theo is working
I don’t trust him!” said Harry, waving his hands around in agitation. “Can you blame me? He’ll probably do something to mess with the *Magicae Obturamentum* and I’ll end up with my head blown off.”

“Has anyone told you that your imagination is out of control?” said Draco dryly. “I’ll tell you what’s wrong with your little theory. First of all, Theo doesn’t know this project is going to be used to help you, so he has no reason to sabotage it. Second of all, why do you think I exist? To be wallpaper? I’m going to be helping and watching him, and I’ll have access to all his notes. And I’m keeping the Knuts in my room while we’re not working on them so that he can’t do anything to them while I’m not there. There’s no risk with this, Harry. Just let it go.”

“To help him, you’ll have to spend a lot of time with him.” Harry was aware of how shrill his voice sounded, but he didn’t care. “Next thing I know, you’ll be beating up Neville Longbottom and hiding his broken body behind the greenhouses.”

“What does this have to do with anything? And I *am* a Skull Initiate, you know.” Draco sounded exhausted.

Harry grinned nastily. “That’s where you’re wrong, Draco. I’m your target, but you haven’t really been targeting me, or anyone else, have you? How’re you going to pass Initiation? Why’re you even bothering with all of this, if you don’t even want to do any of it?”

“Shut up!” Draco chest rose and fell as he panted, the rage radiating out of him almost tangible. Harry had to take a few steps back. “Don’t mention the Skulls to me ever again, or I swear I’ll stop talking to you.”

With that, he sped up and sprinted all the way to the Dark Arts. Harry went after him at a languid pace, grimly satisfied with himself.

***

By the first week of March, Theo and Draco had finished all seven of the *Magicae Obturamentum*, and Draco had perfected his own private one. It could now disable a wizard’s magical capabilities for fifteen minutes, and Draco had used a spell on it that aligned it with his magical signature. This would allow him alone to be immune to the magic obstructor’s effects, even if he was within its area of effect.

Everything was going well, except for Harry, who was still being impossible.

“I doubt this stupid web even is going to work,” Harry sneered as he and Draco made their way to the center of the Forbidden Forest under the Invisibility Cloak. Draco intended to set up the *Magicae Obturamentum* web as soon as possible, before the forest started getting rowdy again.

“You’d better pray it works,” snapped Draco, “or you’re dead on Beltane.”

“Not necessarily.” Harry’s voice was annoyingly smug. “You can just use the bond to save me again.”

“If you keep talking, I’ll let you die,” Draco threatened, throwing off the cloak as they reached the little treeless hollow where the Hunger rested. Most of the spider’s webs had long since disintegrated, though their tattered remains fluttered in the cool spring breeze.

Draco walked along the edge of the clearing, placing the seven Knuts he and Theo had made into
Magicae Obturamentum on the ground at even intervals. A few minutes later, he straightened up, a bit out of breath. He took the hand of a scowling Harry and led him into the center of the clearing in order to force him to inspect Draco’s handiwork.

“Incipio!” said Draco, activating the magic obstructors. The clearing hummed and crackled with energy as the seven Knuts connected in a flash, and the air around the two boys shimmered and rippled like water. Harry shut up, temporarily distracted from his latest rant on Theo’s lack of intelligence and sanity.

“Wow,” Harry murmured, blind to everything but the spectacular display of magic.

Draco snickered at the dumbstruck expression on his face. “Impressed?”

Harry shook his head a bit as if shaking off fleas, and a second later his scowl was back. “Why isn’t it working on us? We’re standing in the web, aren’t we?”

“I’ve already used a spell on the Knuts that aligns them to our magical signatures. We won’t get caught in the web even if we’re standing in it,” said Draco, puffing up his chest. “So while we’re fighting the Hunger in this clearing, we won’t have to worry about our magic being blocked.”

He fingered the secret eighth Knut in his pocket, smiling. Theo didn’t know about the magical signature alignment spell—that had been Draco’s brilliance alone.

Harry gawked at him for at least a whole minute, and Draco couldn’t stop himself from preening a bit. “I guess I’d better apologize for being stupid this past month, shouldn’t I?”

Draco bowed like a servant directing his master into the house. “Please, go ahead and apologize.”

“Sorry,” said Harry. He paused as if nervous, and Draco almost thought he was going to say something sweet and nice. Instead he said, “Are you still going to be meeting with Nott, then?”

Draco groaned, put the Invisibility Cloak back on, and dashed away, leaving Harry squawking and spluttering in his wake.

“That’s it, Potter. That’s the last straw. You’re dead to me. You’ll never see me again!” shouted Draco, keeping just out of Harry’s reach while Harry ran around in a frantic attempt to catch him.

“Draco!” wailed Harry as Draco stuck out an invisible leg, causing Harry to stumble face-first into a puddle of mud and slush. “This isn’t funny, damn it!”

***

After dinner, while Harry made his way to the kitchens to get tea for Dolohov, Draco returned to the Elite common room grinning like a fool, still in a terrific mood from taunting Harry earlier.

His good mood evaporated at once.

Four Bronze Skulls, Sebastian and Nathaniel Nott among them, stood by the fireplace.

Draco’s heart stuttered to a halt.

The twins swiveled towards him, locking eyes with him the moment he walked in. Theo was sitting on the sofa with the other Initiates, face carefully blank, but Draco wasn’t fooled by the façade. Theo’s gaze kept flicking between Draco and his brothers, and his fingers were clenching and unclenching behind his back.
“The princess is here,” said Millicent grumpily from her spot next to Greg. “Can we start now?”

Draco wanted to ask “Start what?” but his voice utterly failed him. He sat down next to Theo, working on keeping his breathing steady and his eyes firmly fixed on the ground. He could pretend the twins didn’t exist if they weren’t in his line of sight. That seemed like a good idea.

Sebastian’s Skull Mask rippled around his distorted features, and he spoke in that same low, smooth voice that plunged Draco right back into the darkest corners of Nott Manor.

“Draco,” crooned Sebastian, and Draco froze. “Will you come up here for a moment?”

“Maybe not right now, Nott,” warned one of the other Skulls.

“Now, Draco,” Sebastian hissed. To the other Skull, he said, “Relax, Fawley. I just want him to read the invitation to the Third Trial for us. His voice is quite lovely, don’t you think?”

Draco still hadn’t moved, nor had he registered anything Sebastian had said. Theo elbowed him discreetly in the side, and Draco struggled to his feet. Slowly, achingly, he walked to where Sebastian stood and halted in front of him.

Draco kept his gaze focused on the fireplace, staring so intently at its flickering flames that its brightness imprinted afterimages in his vision.

“Look at me, Draco,” said Sebastian tersely, digging his fingers into Draco’s chin and tilting his face up. Draco made a small noise that sounded like a squeak, and Sebastian’s mask contorted again as his lips twisted into a shoddy replica of a smile.

“Isn’t he so cute, Seb, trembling like that?” murmured Nathaniel, inching closer to his brother, his eyes boring into Draco’s.

Sebastian stroked Draco’s cheek with the calloused fingers of his other hand, then leaned so close that Draco could feel his hot breath waft over his cheek. Leisurely, Sebastian trailed his fingers down Draco’s neck, rubbing into the tender skin at the hollow of Draco’s throat.

The firelight glinted off the older boy’s mask, and both the room and Draco’s stomach seemed to lurch at the same time.

Then the moment passed, and Sebastian moved his fingers back up and threaded them through Draco’s hair with a rough sigh. “He is. Too bad we don’t have time to play with him right now,” he said, reluctantly releasing Draco’s jaw.

He left his other hand in Draco’s hair, then turned him to face the other twenty or so Initiates, all of whom were regarding Draco with pity and Sebastian with terror. Theo’s face was still blank, however.

The floor beneath Draco seemed to be tilting and shaking violently, or maybe that was just his legs.

Fawley, the other Skull, cleared his throat and handed Draco a glittering golden piece of parchment. Draco stared at it for a moment before he realized that he was supposed to be reading off it.

“Gold. Silver. Bronze. United in control, united in power,” Draco began, amazed by how steady he could keep his voice while Sebastian was lazily playing with the strands of his hair. “Chosen Initiates, the Skull Masks invite you to Dungeon Two on April thirtieth, Walpurgis Night, where you will complete both the Second and Third Trials.”
If Sebastian hadn’t been holding onto his hair, Draco would have sunk to the ground.

A Skull stepped forward, gesturing for Draco to go sit back down. Sebastian made a discontented noise in the back of his throat, but disentangled his fingers from Draco’s hair. Draco shakily made his way back to the sofa, not daring to look at any of the other Initiates, furious shame at being seen in such a vulnerable position making his face go a mottled red.

“The instructions for the finale of the Second Trial and the Third Trial are as follows,” the Skull began. “You are tasked with capturing your target and bringing them to Dungeon Two by eleven-thirty on Walpurgis Night. This action concludes the year-long Second Trial.”

Several of the Initiates murmured amongst themselves, confused. The Skull snapped his fingers, irritated, and everybody fell silent.

“To pass the Third Trial, you will be putting your target under the Cruciatus Curse, so get practicing. It’s a difficult spell to perform.” The Skull’s last words were nearly drowned out by the sudden excited clamor from the Initiates just then.

“Dungeon Two is also called the Room of Judgement, which means your target will be judged on his or her crimes, and you will be judged on your performance as an Initiate. You will be the one presenting their crimes to them, and summarizing exactly how you have punished them throughout the year. The magic in the Room of Judgement will assist you with this. Any questions?”

Everybody was clearly bursting to ask questions, but nobody did. The Skull’s voice sounded garbled to Draco, and the room seemed strangely devoid of color.

“Get on with it, Fawley,” said Sebastian, his eyes still on Draco—or more specifically, Draco’s throat. “Let’s do the anthem already and leave. I have a little problem I need taking care of.”

The Initiates immediately jerked into movement and stood up, Draco scrambling to keep up with them. His lips moved to form the words of the anthem, but he was barely able to hear his own voice over the blood roaring in his ears.

“In gold, silver, bronze, we stand united, devoted weapons of the Dark Lord.”

Harry, laughing as he tickled Draco into the bed.

“We strive to prove ourselves, our control, and our power.”

Harry, bleeding and broken after a session with Dolohov.

“To challenge those who are impure, traitorous, and unworthy.”

Harry, telling Draco that his father and the Dark Lord deserved justice.

“To break, shatter, and destroy those who defy us and our Lord.”
The Connecting Coins

Chapter Notes

Okay, this chapter was supposed to have way more stuff in it, but it ended up getting WAY WAY WAY too big, so now it’s been split in half. Ergh. Doesn’t look I’ll be able to give you guys the closure you wanted this week, since the chapters are just not cooperating with me. Oh well. The next (and more exciting) update should be up very soon, since that’s the other half of the split chapter.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN
THE CONNECTING COINS

Time was moving too fast, and before Draco could blink, March bled into an unwelcome April, and snow all but disappeared from the Hogwarts grounds.

And as always, Draco and Harry stood in the clearing in the center of the Forbidden Forest, unable to believe their eyes. Tall grass swayed in the slight breeze, grass that had grown over the dirt patch where the Hunger was supposed to be.

Supposed to be. Because it wasn’t there right now.

“Nothing’s happened. Absolutely nothing,” said Harry, shifting in discomfort underneath the cloak and accidentally stepping on Draco’s foot. Draco hissed angrily, and Harry muttered a hasty apology.

He was right, of course, about the fact that nothing had happened. All the magical creatures were acting normally, and the sky was a cobalt shade of blue, marred by not even a single cloud. But Draco, unlike the calm sky and the calm creatures, was in a state of utter panic.

Three weeks until Walpurgis Night. Three weeks until Draco’s doom.

In desperation, he’d told Harry that they should confront the Hunger as soon as it rose out of the ground instead of waiting to fight it on Beltane. He’d wanted to get it out of the way before Walpurgis Night, but apparently the world hated Draco too much to even allow him that small victory. This was the one time he’d ever wanted to fight a freaky magic-eating thing in the center of the Forbidden Forest, and it hadn’t even done him the courtesy of showing up. Nor had it activated the Insanitas in any of the magical creatures.

“Do you think the Hunger just gave up on Samhain?” Harry asked. “Maybe it’s done with us. I mean, just look at this place. It’s already a week into April, and the forest’s the same as usual, but a week into October last year, the magical creatures were maiming everybody in sight.”

Draco deflated. “I hope you’re right, Harry. I mean, if it doesn’t come out, we can’t fight it, can we? Let’s just go back.”
“You don’t sound very happy about all of this,” said Harry, grabbing Draco’s arm before he could throw the Invisibility Cloak back on. “Did something happen? You’ve been off for the past two weeks. Did I do something?”

Draco turned to face him, and when he met Harry’s concerned eyes, his throat closed up. The sun seemed unnaturally bright and hot above them, almost stifling. It felt like a blazing day in June, not April. Harry’s black hair reflected the light, Draco noticed in a distant sort of way.

“Lie down,” Draco commanded, coming back to himself and tugging Harry to the ground.

“Wha—” Harry spluttered, landing on the grassy floor of the clearing with an audible thump.

“For once, Harry, don’t talk,” said Draco, lying back and getting comfortable on the soft grass. He patted the spot on the ground next to him. “I said, lie down!”

Harry did, grumbling something about Draco being a bossy and confusing prat. The two of them faced each other, curled up on the ground and surrounded by the tall grass. It was so warm, and Draco was already sweating. A dewdrop glistened on a blade of grass near his face, and he stared at it to avoid staring at Harry, who was watching him intently. His limp arm lay between them, his palm open and inviting. Draco thought about taking it in his own, lacing his fingers with Harry’s.

He could feel Harry’s magic, but that was nothing new. He’d always been able to feel Harry’s magic, had been obsessed with it, enamored with it from day one. Harry seemed to have a gravity of his own, a pull that dragged Draco everywhere behind him. Being close to Harry like this sent Draco’s heart pounding, his head spinning, his stomach lurching. He had always made Draco feel a little topsy-turvy due to his overwhelming aura of magic, but now Draco could feel the sickness creeping up on him.

Every time he looked at Harry, heard his voice, Draco wanted to throw up.

“Did you want to say something to me, or were you planning to take a nap?” said Harry, and right on cue, bile stung Draco’s throat.

“I wanted to tell you something, yeah,” Draco murmured. He laid his hand over Harry’s on the grass, summoning his courage. Harry twitched, taken by surprise, but he didn’t move his hand. Draco almost wished that he had.

Tell him, Draco. Tell him he has to go under the Crucius Curse on Walpurgis Night. Tell him you’ve been telling everyone that your friendship with him is a lie.

Draco’s breaths weren’t coming out. Well, they were, but they were too shallow, too fast. His vision went spotty and dim, as if he’d lost the ability to see any kind of color, and his chest felt as though someone had reached into his body and pressed his organs into a tight ball.

“Draco?”

Breathe. Breathe, Draco, and then tell him. Tell him what you’ve done, what you’re planning to do.

He tried to move, tried to inch closer to Harry, tried to find something to hold onto, but his limbs were strangely frozen in place. He would have to tell Harry the truth.

Tell him tell him tell him TELL HIM NOW, DRACO.

“If you don’t tell me, I’ll tickle it out of you, so prepare yourself—Draco?”
Harry crept into the Hospital Wing, sickened with worry. Draco had fainted in the Forbidden Forest, and Harry had levitated him back to the school, managing to keep them both under the Invisibility Cloak with great difficulty.

Harry still didn’t understand what the hell had happened. Draco had seemed fine, even if he hadn’t been responding to Harry’s questions.

Well, he’d seemed fine until the moment Harry saw him close his eyes and pass clean out.

Madam Pomfrey came hurtling towards him, voice shrill. “Visiting hours are over, Mr. Jordan! I swear to you that if you bother me again—Oh, it’s you, Mr. Potter. She halted in front of him and gave him a short nod. “Here to see Mr. Malfoy, I presume?”

“Visiting hours aren’t over?” asked Harry, craning his neck, trying to look around Pomfrey’s wide berth to the bed where Draco lay.

“I’ll make an exception this once, since you were so worried when you brought him in earlier,” said Madam Pomfrey with a stern scowl. “But remember, Mr. Malfoy needs his rest, so I’m giving you exactly five minutes.”

“Do you know what happened to him, why he fainted like that?” asked Harry. “Is he sick?”

Oh Merlin, what if the Hunger had done something to him in the forest?

“I believe the cause is nothing other than extreme emotional stress,” said Madam Pomfrey with a sniff. “I see students fainting every other day.” She walked off, muttering under her breath about Hogwarts being the worst place in the world for children. Harry was quite certain that her muttering included a colorful variety of swear words, none of which he had expected someone as proper as Madam Pomfrey to know, much less say out loud.

Harry braced himself and made his way over to Draco’s bed. He was sitting up, shoveling spoonfuls of corn soup into his mouth. When he spotted Harry, his hand trembled, and some soup dribbled down his chin.

“Eating peasant food?” said Harry, raising an eyebrow. “You look like a peasant too, in that frumpy hospital gown.”

Draco put the bowl of soup on the bedside table. His hands were still shaking. “Why’re you here? I thought visiting hours were over.”

“You’re happy to see me,” Harry teased, but then immediately regretted it when he caught sight of Draco’s face. Draco had horrid dark circles under his eyes, and his hair was a mess. Harry almost didn’t recognize him.

“Madam Pomfrey said you fainted because you were stressed out.” Harry paused, waiting for an explanation.

Draco had gone very stiff.
Harry sighed in irritation. “Draco, do you want to tell me something? I won’t make fun of you.”

Draco still didn’t say anything, and Harry decided he wasn’t very good at consoling people.

“Is it the Skulls?” asked Harry, haltingly. “Are you afraid of not passing Initiation? You don’t have to pass, Draco. You don’t need to become a Death Eater.”

“I told you not to talk to me about the Skulls, didn’t I?” Draco’s tone promised murder.

“Draco, you fainted. I’m going to ask about the damn Skulls if I want to—”

“Harry, leave it alone! It doesn’t have anything to do with the Skulls. I just… I just want to eat my soup in peace, okay?”

Harry really was very terrible at this consoling business. What was he supposed to say to get Draco to confide in him? Should he push?

“Look, I know something’s wrong because you fainted, and I’m going to keep badgering you until you tell me.” Harry sat down on the chair next to the bed so that he and Draco were at the same level, hoping that would help.

Draco’s chest swelled furiously. “Fine, you insensitive, tactless, crass prat! I just—I’ve been worried about exams, and my parents. Father will have me skinned if I don’t get above ninety points in every subject, and I only have an eighty-five in History of Magic right now. Mathematically, it’s impossible for me to pull it up to ninety because there’s not enough assignments left in the year,” said Draco, all very fast.

“And Easter break is coming up, and he’s going to ask about my grades when I go back home, and Mother and Father plan to throw the Easter Ball this year at our house, so I’ll have to play the perfect little host, and Father’s been sending annoying letters telling me to work on memorizing the names and faces of everyone attending, and it’s—it’s just been a lot. And—and if you dare call me weak for passing out, I’ll slug you in the face.”

Draco stopped talking, out of breath. His entire body was shaking now, not just his hands. Harry’s loathing for Lucius Malfoy writhed in him like a rabid, slobbering creature, and he just barely managed to stop himself from magically lifting one of the hospital beds and throwing it at the wall.

This had been the very last thing he’d expected to learn about Draco’s relationship with his father. Whenever Draco had talked about Lucius before, he’d done it with reverence, not terror, and he’d always acted like a spoilt, proud brat.

Seeing that façade crack and fall away to reveal this depressed and panicked version of Draco unsettled Harry deeply. Draco had seen him vulnerable countless times, but Harry hadn’t ever seen him like this, nor had he ever thought Draco was capable of such a breakdown.

Harry hated it.

“You—you should’ve told me that you were worried about this.” Had Harry’s voice always sounded this awkward and high-pitched? “It’s true that I don’t understand Pureblood problems, but I’m not, I wasn’t—I wasn’t going to make fun of you.” He inhaled, his face burning so much that he was surprised he hadn’t set the room on fire. “Look, you’ve seen me—you know how weak I can be. With the—with the whole thing on Samhain, and then Dolohov, and then—yeah.”

Harry could not believe he had lost the ability to string together words into a coherent sentence. Draco was staring at him, lips parted. His eyes were wide and glittering and sort of wet, or maybe
they just looked that way in the Hospital Wing’s bright lighting.

“The point I’m trying to make is that—that I could return the favor,” Harry finished lamely, shrugging. “So you can tell me anything.”

Harry hoped Draco would take the bait. He knew that Draco hadn’t revealed the whole story to him yet, because the whole story surely concerned the Skulls, and probably Lucius Malfoy too, considering the way Draco got so worked up at the mention of his father.

But Draco didn’t fall for it. He just sighed, tearing his gaze away from Harry’s. “Thanks. But I’m really all right. I just overreacted a bit. It was just a silly accident.”

“Can’t you stay over at Hogwarts during the Easter holidays?” asked Harry, scowling. “We can study for exams together. Or do nothing.”

“No thanks, you’re not interesting enough for me to do enjoy doing nothing with you,” said Draco snidely.

Harry couldn’t stop a grin from spreading across his face. If Draco was still being prickly, that meant he wasn’t as depressed as Harry had feared.

“I’m more interesting than an Easter Ball,” said Harry, shuddering in an exaggerated manner. “That’s the snottiest thing I’ve ever heard of in my life. Who even throws an Easter Ball? What’s that even supposed to be?” Draco opened his mouth to answer, but Harry plowed over him. “I’ll tell you what it’s supposed to be. It’s a crime against nature. You rich Purebloods are all freaks.”

Draco snorted. “I’d usually defend my family honor right about now, but I can’t be arsed. Go away, Potter. My soup’s getting cold.”

Harry stood up and dithered for a second. Draco glared fiercely at him, though the effect was diminished quite a bit by the trembling of his lower lip.

“Just… just one last thing,” Harry said, and Draco flinched like he’d been stung.

“What now?”

“You wanted to say something to me, back in the clearing, right? What was it?”

Draco was silent for what felt like an age.

Harry crossed his arms. “Don’t want to tell me? Does it have to do with the Sk—”

“You remember that silver Connecting Coin I gave you for Christmas?” said Draco, his voice almost a whisper. “The coin with the M on it?”

Harry gave him a slow nod. “Yeah. I put it in my schoolbag a long time ago. It should still be there, I guess. What about it?”

“I want to try the Connecting Coins out soon,” Draco went on, his expression blank. “That’s what I was going to say back in the clearing.”

Harry cocked his head, disbelief etched all over his face. “Oh. That’s all? We’ll look at them tomorrow, if you feel like it.”

“Great, Harry. Can you go away now? I’m really hungry.”
“Are you sure that’s all you wanted to tell me, though?” Harry tried one last time.

“GO. AWAY.”

Harry left, unable to shake off the feeling that Draco had been about to tell him something important, something concerning the Skulls—and that was why he had passed out. Harry wasn’t stupid. It was actually kind of insulting that Draco thought Harry would fall for such a trick after months of being friends with him.

Draco was worried about passing Initiation; Harry could figure out that much. And he wasn’t telling Harry the details because he knew that Harry would just advise him to ditch the Skulls.

Harry scowled to himself. Why couldn’t Draco just man up and quit, if Initiation was stressing him to the point of fainting? What was so damn hard about just leaving them, about choosing Harry over them?

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Draco stared at the vial of Calming Draught on his desk. Madam Pomfrey had given it to him before she’d released him, informing him that it contained three doses.

That despicable vial was proof of his weakness. What the hell was wrong with him? Why was he fainting all over the place like a hapless maiden from the eighteenth century? If his father discovered that Draco had ever done something as pathetic as faint—well, Draco didn’t want to think about it.

Harry staggered into the room just then, fresh from a session with Dolohov, and Draco knocked the vial into his schoolbag in a panic before Harry could spot it. Then he felt stupid.

“What’s the point? He’s already seen me faint.

“Dolohov’s a bastard,” Harry said, eyes wild, and before Draco could even react, Harry lunged at him like a madman.

“Ha—Harry—c-can’t breathe—” Draco gasped as Harry drew him into a tight hug.

“He likes to put his Tea Servants through psychological torture by hurting their friends, and he’s been asking me all year if I’ve made any friends. Then today he mentioned that I seemed to be getting cozy with you, and damn it—Draco, if he does anything to you, I swear that’s it, that’s the last straw. I’m gonna kill him. I don’t even care if the Dark Lord himself murders me right after. But Dolohov wouldn’t do anything to you, would he? You’re an Elite. He wouldn’t. This is just another form of psychological torture, making me think he’s going to hurt you, but not actually hurting you.”

Harry was still blabbering, but Draco wasn’t listening anymore. He was too busy hating himself.

He’d lied to Harry’s face in the Hospital Wing, though Harry had tried so hard to be understanding, had even offered to help Draco. Throughout their entire conversation, Draco had wanted to sink into the floor.

Tell him, Draco. Tell him now.

Draco imagined what Harry’s face would look like the moment after Draco finished telling him, and wondered how willing he’d be to help Draco once he’d heard the truth.

And then Draco decided he needed some Calming Draught.
“Harry, let go of me,” Draco murmured, tapping Harry’s shoulder. Harry’s head was buried in his neck, and if it stayed there one damn second longer, Draco would break down and lose all of his self-control.

Harry took a few steps backwards, face reddening as he realized he’d been clutching Draco like a favorite stuffed toy. Draco, on the other hand, let out a sigh of relief. Now that Harry wasn’t holding him like he was something precious, Draco’s head had cleared, and he wasn’t on the verge of screaming anymore.

“We should look at the Connecting Coins,” said Draco, remembering the ridiculous lie he’d told in the Hospital Wing to get Harry off his back. He had to keep up appearances, or Harry would get suspicious. Though he was probably already suspicious, as anyone with half a brain would be.

“Right. I remember,” Harry muttered, still red. He wandered around the room, searching for his schoolbag and finally finding it under Draco’s bed. Draco tapped his foot impatiently all the while, since he’d gotten his own Connecting Coin out last night and put it out on his desk.

“Here it is!” Harry called in triumph, extracting the little silver coin from his bag.

The coins, as Draco had explained in his Christmas letter to Harry, apparently led the owner of one coin to the owner of another. That being said, Draco still had no idea how they worked.

“So,” said Harry, holding the coin to the light. “It has an M on it. For Malfoy, do you think?”

“Most likely,” said Draco, shrugging. “It’s an old Malfoy artifact, isn’t it?”

“You said in the letter that if I hold the coin in my hand and think about you, it would lead me to you,” said Harry. “Should I do that?”

“Does it look like I have a better idea?” asked Draco. Harry was so slow sometimes.

Grumbling something uncomplimentary under his breath, Harry clenched his fist around the coin and closed his eyes. Draco couldn’t help but snicker at Harry’s serene, solemn face as he moved his lips to form Draco’s name. “Harry, you look hilarious right now, like you’re praying—”

But Draco didn’t get to finish his sentence. The coin in his hand burned, and Harry’s yelp signaled that his coin had started doing the same. A second later, both of them keeled over.

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When Harry opened his eyes, he was no longer in Draco’s dorm. He was in a corridor made completely out of sparkling glass. For a few seconds, Harry staggered around, trying to regain his bearings, his shoes slipping a bit on the frictionless floor. Even the tulips in the decorative glass vase next to him were made of glass, and it was disorienting to be able to see through the transparent floor, ceiling, and walls into countless more twisting glass hallways.

“Draco?” Harry called, only to have his high-pitched voice echo around the corridor. And then, he saw something in the glass that made him panic, stumble backwards, and let out a choked gasp.

Lucius Malfoy was standing in the glass wall. Well, he wasn’t exactly inside the glass wall, though it looked like he was at first glance. Instead, he was on it the way people were on Muggle television screens: two-dimensional, unreal, unsettling.

Recovering himself, Harry inched towards the wall again, watching Lucius Malfoy carefully. In the glass, he was bending over—
Harry pressed his face against the glass, trying to get a better view of whatever this television version of Lucius Malfoy was doing to the television version of Draco, but the moment his skin made contact with it, he was sucked through the glass as if it were the surface of a sideways pool of water.

On the other side, a spluttering Harry found himself in a lush garden, full of golden tulips and strutting, pure white peacocks. Beyond those, Harry could see a handsome, gray-stoned manor on the horizon, its figure dark and forbidding against the clear summer sky.

Draco sat amidst the flowers, as pale as the peacocks. Harry’s breath caught. Draco looked so young, maybe around six or seven, his face fuller and less angled. Lucius Malfoy leaned over him, eyes narrowed, then dragged him roughly to his feet.

Harry tried to tackle Lucius to the ground, but his arms went right through him as if he was nothing but an apparition, and now Harry was lying in the rosebushes with a sore butt.

“Have you done your homework, Draco?” Lucius was saying, inches from Harry but infuriatingly untouchable.

Draco’s lip trembled just like it had in the Hospital Wing, and Harry wanted to scream.

“Of course not, why do I ask? Your books lay unopened in the study. I turn my back on you for one second and you slip out here. Shameless.” Lucius’s voice was ice-cold, and Draco trembled even worse at the sound of it.

“I didn’t think you’d be back so early, Fa—”

“Yes, it is obvious that you thought I wouldn’t catch you. Do you always sneak out to the garden when I am at work, though I explicitly give you tasks to do each day? Lazy boy. What is Narcissa doing with you?”

“Mother said I could take a break after lunch…”

“Your break is over, Draco. I am back for the afternoon, and we will go over a few spells that you should have perfected this week.” Lucius Malfoy started walking back to the manor in the distance, still lecturing. Draco trudged after him, his head down.

“The Nott boy is already leaps and bounds ahead of you. I mourn the fact that I am the one cursed with such a magically weak child when Narcissa and I are of the purest blood. It must be the incest of the Black line. Pity.”

For a few seconds, Harry watched them retreat, open-mouthed. Then he lurched to his feet and ran after them, unable to believe what he had just witnessed. He seemed to have stumbled upon a memory of Draco’s childhood, but how? Harry retraced his steps in his mind, trying to figure out how he’d ended up in this fancy garden. Before this, he’d been inside a glass labyrinth, and before that, he and Draco had been holding the Connecting Coins.

Draco had said that the Connecting Coins were supposed to lead the owner of one coin to the other, but this was probably not what he’d had in mind. There was no way Draco would want Harry to have a front-seat view of his private moments. Admittedly, angering Draco was the last thing Harry cared about right now. His curiosity was eating him alive.

Harry had just realized that he knew very little about Draco’s life. What was it like, to be the son of
a Death Eater, to grow up as one of the crème de la crème?

Then, as if some higher power had heard Harry’s questions and didn’t want them answered, the memory shook and wobbled, and the entire world tilted sideways. Harry found himself falling backwards into the sky, caught by the change in gravity. Now the manor glinted above his head like a dark sun, and the ground rose up in front of him like a wall.

Yelling, Harry toppled out of the memory, back through the glass, and back into the sparkling labyrinth.

But it had transformed while he’d been away. Now the walls were full of Draco’s moving, shifting memories, as though Harry’s accidental stumble into one of them had broken a dam and activated the rest. He ran down the corridor, his feet squeaking on the smooth floor, not sure what he was looking for but sure that something was chasing him. The labyrinth trembled, its walls closing in on Harry with screeching noises like nails on chalkboard.

He wasn’t wanted in here.

He didn’t care. He ran deeper, through winding corridors, and down glittering glass staircases. He came across several doors, all of which were locked and growled at him when he tried to pry them open. After a while of aimless running, he realized he was in a gigantic, never-ending glass house, a mansion, one full of Draco’s memories.

Sometimes, he stopped to stare at them, but he didn’t dare touch any of the walls. Approaching the memories angered the manor like nothing else, made that awful screeching start up again, and Harry didn’t want to test what would happen if he pushed it too far.

In some places, the walls were darker, the clear glass entwined with shadowy, dimly-lit memories. Harry had no idea where he was anymore and how to get out, or if there was even an exit. He’d started to suspect the Connecting Coins had placed him right into Draco’s mind—or a physical manifestation of it.

He’d heard of Legilimency, but he wasn’t a Legilimens. Yet, here he was, in somebody’s mind, with access to their private memories. The Connecting Coins must have forged a mental pathway between himself and Draco, allowing them to traverse each other’s thoughts like advanced Legilimens. When Harry had thought Draco’s name while holding the coin, he’d unintentionally flung himself into Draco’s mindscape.

And now he had to get out of it.

Bracing himself, Harry sidled up to the nearest wall and let it suck him through. He would have to risk angering Draco’s mind; hopefully, if he intruded on too many memories, Draco would throw him out. Or maybe Harry would end up dead. What happened to Legilimens who got too lost in their victims’ minds, anyway?

Deciding not to dwell on that thought too much lest he throw up, he got shakily to his feet and looked around. He was in an offensively large bedroom, and surrounded by white walls and furniture so bright that he had to blink for several seconds before he could focus on anything at all. A gauzy canopy, swaying slightly in the breeze from the open window, hung over a king-sized bed—a bed Harry knew at once had been made for a prince.

He was in Draco’s room.

Draco, still six years old, lay on his bed, dwarfed by its enormity. Beside him lay a six-year-old
Theodore Nott, partially hidden by the bed curtains. The two boys’ legs were entwined on the sheets, their bodies curled towards each other as they chattered under the fancy canopy of Draco’s bed.

Harry didn’t want to see this memory, but sick fascination pulled him to the bed until he was standing right next to it. He leaned closer, desperate to hear what they were saying. From here he could see that Draco’s cheeks were covered in chocolate, and he was currently stuffing even more pieces in his mouth.

“No! No!” Draco squealed as Theo wrestled the heart-shaped box of chocolates out of Draco’s grasp. “Don’t tell Mother! You can take some! Don’t tell Mother I stole it!”

“It’s not right, Draco. These aren’t yours,” said Theo in a calm voice, shaking his head. “What if she goes looking for the box, and then she sees that it’s empty because you’ve eaten everything in it? We have to tell her, so she can buy another.”

“If you tell on me, I’m never going to play with you again! I’ll hate you forever!” said Draco, his lower lip quivering. A second later, he burst into tears.

Harry started laughing at Draco’s crumpled face. This was too funny. Even as a child, Theo had grated on Draco’s nerves—heck, he grated on Harry’s, being such a goody-goody. What was his problem, anyway? Draco was just eating chocolate.

Then Theo gave the box back to Draco, blinking back tears of his own. “I’m sorry. I won’t tell her. Say you’ll still play with me. You don’t hate me now, do you?”

Draco took back the box, his tears nowhere to be seen, and Harry wondered if his crying earlier had been an act. A smug smile spread across his face, revealing chocolate-stained teeth and identical dimples on both his cheeks. He patted Theo’s arm, then plucked another piece of chocolate from the box. “S’okay now. I don’t hate you. Could never hate you. Want some?”

Harry stalked away from the bed, disgusted to the core. What a bunch of babies. Harry had been far more mature, more dignified, more adult when he’d been six. Well, he couldn’t actually remember how he’d behaved back then, but that wasn’t the point.

Right on cue, the memory growled and ejected Harry, who wasn’t about to complain. A moment longer in that room and he would have thrown up. He wandered down the glass corridor grumpily, trying to find the most embarrassing memory he could, just to hold it over Draco’s head later.

Then he stopped. He’d arrived at a dead-end, a wall covered in flickering shadows. If Harry squinted, he could see a bronze Skull beyond it, light glinting off its mask. His breath sped up. This was it. Draco’s big secret. He could feel it.

He reached out, and the glass mansion screamed. The walls squeezed in on him, their screeching intensifying, driving him back, back, back, and now he was zooming past countless doors and corridors—

He opened his eyes. He was in back in Draco’s dorm, back in his own body, his own mind. His arm throbbed where he’d fallen on it, and Draco was lying a few feet away from him, just now coming to.

“I have the worst headache,” said Draco at once, wincing and clutching his head. “You—you were there! You were in my head, making a mess of things!”

Harry’s mouth fell open in indignation. “I didn’t mess anything up!”
“You were jabbing and poking me all over the place!” Draco shot back, getting to his feet.

“No, I wasn’t—” Harry stopped himself. They weren’t getting anywhere with this argument. “What do you remember?”

Draco breathed heavily for a moment, glaring at Harry, and then relaxed as he considered the question. “I think I felt something clattering around in my head? I was dreaming, I think, and I was remembering some random memories for no reason, and it just… felt all wrong. It’s a good thing I got you out before you found a memory th—never mind.”

Harry frowned, still sort of bitter that he hadn’t uncovered Draco’s secret. Maybe next time he’d get closer, if Draco let him in his head a second time. “You don’t remember a glass mansion?” Harry asked, wondering if Draco knew the extent of what Harry had done in his head.

“What glass mansion?” said Draco.

Harry told him about the massive labyrinth he’d seen in Draco’s mind, then went on to describe his theory on the Connecting Coins.

“So you think.” Draco began slowly, once Harry had finished explaining, “that these coins put one of us in the other’s head?”

“Yeah,” said Harry, leaning forward. “I thought of you while holding it, and it put me into your mind. So if you think my name, it’ll put you into my mind. The coins connect us.”

Draco stared at the coin in his hand. “Should I try it on you then?”

“Go ahead,” said Harry, unable to hide his eagerness at this opportunity for more intimacy with Draco. “We’d better lie down first, though. Make sure you tell me what my head looks like.”

Draco grinned. “I can tell you what your head looks like without going in it.” He held his thumb and finger together. “It’s about this big—”

“Oh, very funny,” said Harry, plopping himself down on his mattress and closing his eyes in concentration. Draco snickered, and that was the last thing Harry heard.

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When Harry opened his eyes again, the first thing he saw was Draco leaning over him, looking unsettled. Harry straightened up, moaning, feeling as though his brain had been thoroughly knocked against his skull.

“You couldn’t have been more careful?” he barked at Draco, who flinched back.

“Sorry,” said Draco, studying the wall with great interest. “I ended up breaking some stuff.”

“I don’t remember a single thing.” Harry got up and started to pace the room, muttering under his breath. “You said you felt like you were dreaming, and that you were remembering random memories all of a sudden. I didn’t go through any of that.”

Draco was quiet for a second, his breath a bit shallow. Harry turned around, alarmed. Something was very wrong with him. “That would be,” said Draco, his voice so low that it was almost a whisper, “because I didn’t see any memories. Harry, your mind… it’s not… it’s not right.”

Harry froze. “What do you mean? What did it look like?”
Draco took a deep breath and locked eyes with Harry. He was still sitting on his bed, his arms wrapped around himself.

“It looked like a tunnel system, sort of. But these weren’t tunnels made out of dirt. They were made out of infection, Harry. Some sort of red disease. Every surface in your mind was covered in it, and I tried to get through it, but I couldn’t. Everything started falling apart, and I panicked, and I threw myself out. I don’t even think I was in your head for a whole minute.”

Harry touched his forehead, disturbed by Draco’s words. “I feel fine,” he said, then raised his voice. “I’m normal. My thoughts, my mood—everything. Why does my mind look like it’s falling apart?”

Draco shrugged miserably. “I don’t know. It looked really bad. I mean, I always knew something was wrong with your head”—Draco gave Harry a weak smile, but Harry was too nauseated at that moment to appreciate the joke— “but I didn’t expect this. It was scary. I think you’re sick or something, Harry. Really sick.”

Harry should have been insulted, he really should have, but he knew Draco was speaking out of concern. “What do we do? Do you think I should find a professional Legilimens to fix my mind? Is that how it works?”

“I said, I don’t know.” Draco sighed, standing up. “Ugh, why does this have to happen now? Do you think your mind is like this because of the Hunger? Do you think that’s the cause?”

“How could it be?” said Harry, his voice rising in panic. “I’m not being affected by the gravity right now, am I? It hasn’t even come back yet—hey, wait! What’re you doing?”

Draco was shuffling over to the bathroom door, his eyes lidded with exhaustion. “Look, Harry, we’ll figure this out. But right now, I’m going to shower and go to bed.”

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As Draco showered, he barely resisted the urge to bang his forehead into the tiled wall.

He could not believe that Harry’s mind was in such a wrecked state less than three weeks before Walpurgis, with every possibility of exacerbating. What would it be like after Walpurgis? What damage would Draco have wrought on his best friend’s mind? And what about Beltane? What did the Hunger have planned for them, if it wasn’t truly gone?

Draco had lied a bit. Harry’s mind hadn’t looked like a tunnel system. It resembled Swiss cheese, the holes filled up messily with red slime, gunk, mucus, whatever it was. Draco hadn’t even known where to begin looking for memories; he’d just wanted to get out and never go back in. It was easily the most terrifying place he’d ever been in.

And now he knew one thing for certain.

Harry was sick and Draco was going to make it worse.
Thanks for the comments! Okay guys, we're in the final stretch of Year 1 now. There will be little to no fluff or happiness until the end of the year, and both Harry and Draco will be put through the shredder multiple times. I am sorry.

WARNINGS: threats of rape. The tags are up there. I would recommend not reading any further if such topics trigger you. This is only Year 1, and it starts bad and gets worse. Also, cliffhanger.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

PURITY ALWAYS CONQUERS

It was the last day of Easter break, Draco was no closer to figuring out what was going on with Harry’s mind or the Hunger, Walpurgis was barely two weeks away, and now his parents were throwing this stupid, 

stupid Easter Ball.

He was currently stationed in the Malfoy Manor parlor, greeting guests who arrived through the Floo network and trying to act like he wasn’t on the verge of a complete breakdown. The ball had just started, and that meant Draco’s job was to stand outside the ballroom and talk to everybody like a damn parrot.

And if that wasn’t bad enough, his parents had decided to invite half the Pureblood population of Britain, so Draco didn’t even have any time to breathe in between greeting guests, much less brood about Harry.

“Welcome to Malfoy Manor, Mr. and Mrs. Selwyn,” said Draco, bowing and hoping he didn’t look like he had just swallowed a worm. To their three Hogwarts-aged children, whose names he only knew because of hours spent memorizing the guest list, he said, “And nice to see you again, Helene, Marius, Titus.”

“Precious, aren’t you?” Octavia Selwyn tittered, shaking his hand, scratching his fingers with her massive and gaudy rings. “Cassius,” she said to her husband, “isn’t he just precious?” Her husband, a short and squat man, grunted something in assent as he shook Draco’s hand, looking like he wanted to be here even less than Draco did.

“Thank you, ma’am. You’re very kind,” said Draco as brightly as he could, rousing a chorus of cooing from all the middle-aged women in the vicinity.

He turned to greet the three Selwyn children after their parents, quite sure he had dislocated his shoulder by now due to shaking people’s hands all evening long. Maybe if his arm fell off before the night ended, he wouldn’t have to face Harry at Hogwarts tomorrow.

One of the Selwyn boys, Marius, shook Draco’s hand much longer than was necessary, and Draco
was starting to feel a bit uncomfortable. He tried to recall where he’d seen the boy before. His arm went limp as soon he came to the realization. Marius was a fourth-year Bronze Skull who Draco vaguely remembered hung around with the Nott twins.

Marius grinned at him, and Draco’s smile faltered.

“Sebastian and Nathaniel never shut up about you. I can see why now. Think they’ll share?” Marius whispered, keeping his voice low so that the Purebloods chitchatting around them couldn’t hear him. Before Draco had even registered one word of what he’d said, Marius disappeared into the ballroom after the rest of his family, and now Draco could no longer feel his legs.

It stank in here. His entire home stank to him, and he couldn’t breathe, and he needed his Calming Draught, but it was upstairs in his bedroom, and there were too many people arriving right now for him to get away—

_No. Shit. No._

The Notts were here.

A hush smothered the parlor, and the guests’ happy chatter ground to a halt. When the Notts walked in, every gaze zeroed in on Sebastian and Nathaniel’s deformed faces. A few of the Purebloods glared at Mr. Nott, a tall and bulky man with a harsh jaw who looked like he could snap Draco’s spine in half without a wand.

“Welcome to Malfoy Manor, Mr. Nott, Sebastian, Nathaniel, Theodore,” said Draco, surprised by how steady his voice sounded in the silent room. He locked eyes with Mr. Nott and tried to focus on how they were the same shade of brown as Theo’s, rather than focus on the fact that they were glinting down at him in a way Theo’s never had. The last thing he needed right now was to throw up all over Mr. Nott’s thousand-Galleon emerald robes.

Mr. Nott held out his hand, and Draco took it, smiling sweetly. “Father’s been waiting for you, sir. He’ll be in the ballroom, of course.” _With the rest of the Inner Circle Death Eaters, _were Draco’s unspoken words, which everybody heard anyway.

As if they’d just remembered who Mr. Nott was, the guests tore their gazes from Sebastian and Nathaniel and resumed their conversations, though a few people could not resist shooting them discreet glances. Draco couldn’t blame them. Once you caught sight of the twins’ faces, it was difficult to look away.

“Thank you, Mr. Malfoy,” said Mr. Nott, inclining his head at Draco. “I’ll make sure to compliment Lucius on raising such a polite young man.”

Sebastian moved forward to shake Draco’s hand next, and it took every fiber of Draco’s being not to run all the way up to his room and hide under his bed for the rest of the night. “Hello, Sebastian,” said Draco, still giving the Notts his best smile.

The twins’ faces looked even worse without their Skull Masks, all mottled and bulging. Red, brown, and purple scar tissue covered every inch of their lumpy features. But Britain’s richest Purebloods were watching Draco right now, and he would not faint, he would _not._

Sebastian sucked in a heavy breath, and Draco held back a shudder. “Hello, Draco. We’ll see each other soon, I expect?” he purred, his voice low and smooth like velvet, so at odds with his face.

“Yes, on Walpurgis Night, of course.” Draco’s muscles were stiff from holding his smile for so long. He shook Nathaniel’s hand next, but Nathaniel didn’t try to make small talk like Sebastian
had. He just stared at Draco and grinned, which unnerved Draco more than anything else.

At last, it was Theo’s turn, and Draco found himself releasing the breath he’d been holding during his interactions with the older three Notts.

“See you soon,” said Theo, and this time, Draco’s smile wasn’t feigned. He was glad to see a friendly face, and Theo had been quite pleasant to Draco this past month. He was still irritating and condescending on his best days, but Draco would take him over any of these other fools any day of the week.

Speaking of fools, the parlor erupted with gossip the moment the Notts disappeared into the ballroom.

“Those poor boys…”

“Aawful man…”

“It ruins the mood, looking at them…”

Draco just kept on smiling and shaking hands.

***

Two hours later, the torture still wasn’t over. Now Draco was trapped in the stupid ballroom, and his father had decided that today was the perfect day to introduce him to all of his Death Eater friends.

“And Draco is currently on his Second Trial of Skull Mask Initiation,” Lucius was saying to Mr. Mulciber.

“Is he now?” said Mulciber, his black eyes glimmering. “Out with it, who’s your target?”

“Harry Potter,” said Draco, after a short pause.

Mulciber chuckled. “Potter boy, eh? Son of Snape’s Mudblood whore?”

Lucius, Professor Carrow, Avery, and Rookwood all chuckled with him.

Draco’s throat felt very dry all of a sudden, and he cleared it. “I think so, sir.”

Snape, Draco knew, had been invited but had declined Lucius’s invitation, claiming he was busy making final exams. The Carrows, Dolohov, Headmaster Rowle, and Regulus Black were all here though, reunited with the rest of the Death Eaters, sipping wine and laughing with everybody like they were old friends, which they probably were. Most of the Death Eaters had children too, who stood next to their parents with long-suffering expressions that matched Draco’s.

He’d even spotted Adolphus Lestrange the Skull King once or twice among the crowd, and was secretly relieved that he hadn’t come over to talk to Lucius yet. Draco hadn’t really impressed the Skull King the one time he’d spoken to him, way back when he’d failed the First Trial. In fact, Adolphus was his second cousin and had made no secret of the fact that he thought Draco was a huge brat.

Mr. Nott, meanwhile, was showing off Theo, who was currently entertaining a crowd of middle-aged men by multiplying massive numbers together in his head. Sebastian and Nathaniel were nowhere to be seen, to Draco’s eternal relief. They seemed to know they weren’t wanted in polite
society and kept out everyone’s sight.

*What jolly fun this all is.* Draco looked around, trying not to curl his lip. Most of the attendees weren’t even dancing; they were just standing around and mingling like they had in the parlor. Really, what was the point? He could imagine Harry’s disgusted face right now.

And Mulciber was still talking. “As I’ve been telling you for years, Lucius”—*then why bother saying it again?* thought Draco with a scowl—“I swear that these Mugglespawn have slow brains. They don’t work the same way as ours, Lucius. We’ve been testing half-bloods for years, and in both magic and mindpower, they don’t measure up. And just think, they make up two-thirds of all wizards.”

“A pity,” said Lucius, taking a sip of his wine. “It will take generations before Muggle blood and culture is cleansed from our population, and only until then will wizardkind reach its full potential. I only wish I am alive to see that day. Perhaps Draco will be.”

Lucius put a firm hand on Draco’s shoulder, and Draco realized that his father expected him to contribute to the conversation in an intelligent manner.

“At what I-I’ve seen,” Draco stammered, “the dirty-bloods at my school seem powerful. Some of them, at least.”

Lucius’s hand tightened, and Draco wished he didn’t have a mouth. What was he blabbering about now? This was the worst possible moment for him to be thinking about Harry. Why was he always thinking about Harry? Why couldn’t he stop thinking about Harry?

Mulciber gave him a scorching look. “Of course some of them are powerful, silly boy. Look at Severus Snape. You can train a dog to do tricks, can’t you? But they do not have the same might as Purebloods. Haven’t you explained this to him, Lucius?”

Yes, Lucius had explained the “magical power versus magical might” theory to Draco a long time ago in one of his long and boring lectures, but it hadn’t made any sense to Draco back then, so he’d promptly forgotten it.

With the way Lucius was glaring at him right now, Draco really should not have forgotten.

“Little Draco thinks himself wise enough to be a judge of power, does he now?” said Avery, who stood next to Mulciber.

“You’re right, Mr. Avery. I have much to learn about power,” said Draco, inclining his head respectfully.

*Harry’s ten times stronger than all of them put together,* said a voice in his head, a voice that he squashed at once. It didn’t matter that Harry was magically powerful. It didn’t mean anything, because he didn’t have the kind of greatness, the kind of might, that a Pureblood did. Whatever that was supposed to mean.

“Draco gets very confused sometimes. It’s only natural.” Lucius kept his voice light and amused, but Draco knew immediately from the undercurrent of his tone that he was as good as dead.

“Careful, Lucius,” Mulciber guffawed. “If you don’t keep an eye on this one, he’ll run off with a dirty-blood!”

***
An hour later, thank Merlin, Lucius let Draco go for the first time that evening, his eyes promising punishment and a lecture after the party.

But at the moment, Draco wouldn’t let himself worry about it. He and Theo stumbled out of the stifling ballroom and into the Malfoy gardens, gulping down lungfuls of the cool night air. About a dozen guests were roaming around, admiring the starlit golden tulips and the strutting white peacocks. But compared to the ballroom, it was practically deserted out here, and Draco didn’t feel like throwing up anymore.

Well, at least not as much.

“Father’s going to kill me,” Draco laughed, a bit hysterically.

“Father always wants to kill me,” Theo shot back, sounding even more hysterical than Draco.

“We should run away,” said Draco, his eyes glittering with mischief as he dragged Theo over to the starlit pool behind the rosebushes where they’d always sat and read books as children. Nobody would be able to see them here, and hopefully he wouldn’t have to face his father again until much, much later.

“Where?”

“South America! We’ll go to Brazil!” Draco clapped his hands together in glee. “We’ll live in the rainforest, cook up monkeys we find in the trees and—”

Theo plopped to the ground, snorting. “A Brazilian rainforest, Draco? Have you been reading one of your mother’s shit paperbacks?”

“Don’t make fun of me!” Draco sat down next to Theo, chucking a stone into the pool of water moodily. “Let’s run away, and never come back, and we’ll never have to go to any more of these stupid parties.”

Theo straightened up. “We have a duty to stay, Draco,” he said, narrowing his eyes.

“Oh, not this again,” thought Draco, deflating, his earlier good cheer gone. “I get that part. You could’ve humored me. It would’ve made me feel better.”

Theo shook his head. “You shouldn’t pretend or joke, Draco. Fantasizing makes you weak.”

“I know that, so thanks for the lecture.” Theo just couldn’t take a joke, could he? Well, it had only been a half-joke, or maybe it hadn’t even been a joke, but that wasn’t the point.

Theo paused, biting his lip. “I made you mad again, didn’t I?”

Draco buried his face in the grass, quite aware of the fact that he was dirtying his expensive robes and not giving a damn. “You’ve just realized that, Theo? I swear you’re the biggest stick in the mud since Salazar Slytherin himself.”

Theo covered his mouth with his hands, holding back what Draco could imagine was either a girlish giggle or a gasp. “You didn’t. You didn’t just say that about Sly—”

“Oh please, don’t wet yourself,” said Draco. “It was a joke. You do understand what those are, don’t you? Here, I’ll guide you through one. Think of the Dark Lord in underpants with little Snitches on them. Make sure you’re imagining his whole body, especially the snake face. It completes the picture.”
Theo’s eyes widened in horror, though Draco could tell he was about to crack. “Draco, you’re going to hell, you’re so going to hell—”

“He’s secretly insecure,” Draco went on, keeping his face straight with great effort, “because he’s always been a shit Seeker. So he wore his little undies before each match as a good luck charm, and now he wears those same Snitch undies when he attacks foreign Ministries. That’s the only reason it ever works, because of those good luck undies—”

And then, at last, Theo lost it. “The D-Dark Lord didn’t even p-play Quidditch!” he wailed, clutching his sides, and Draco couldn’t hold back anymore. He burst into laughter too. Theo so very rarely laughed in the first place, and his face, all scrunched up and red, was a sight to behold when he did.

“Well, isn’t this just adorable.”

Draco’s and Theo’s laughter died. The twins had arrived, practically melting out of the shadows. Draco had wondered earlier where they’d disappeared off to, and it seemed that they’d made the Malfoy gardens their lair for the night. How long had they been watching him and Theo by the pool?

Theo blanched. “F-Father’s looking for both of you,” he stammered, getting to his feet and pulling Draco up with him by the hand. Draco was grateful that he had, since he didn’t think his own legs were working right now.

“He can wait.” Sebastian gazed at the spot where Draco’s and Theo’s hands met, his expression inscrutable.

Theo let go of Draco as if he’d been stung and took several steps back, but it was too late. Sebastian grabbed Theo by the collar and dragged him forward. Draco yelped, struggling with the decision to help his friend or run as far away as possible, but a split second later, it didn’t matter. Nathaniel had slipped behind him and put him into a headlock, and Draco couldn’t move a muscle.

“Did you think, Theo,” Sebastian hissed, leaning down so that he was eye level with his brother, “that he would ever speak to you, ever look at you, if you were like us? If your face”—his breath hitched, and now Draco saw his rage even through all the scarring—“was anything like ours?”

“I know,” Theo’s voice came out in a breathy gasp, as if Sebastian’s tight grip on his collar was cutting off his air. “What do you want, Sebastian? We’re at a party. If anyone sees—”

“No one will see. We’ve spelled the area quiet,” Nathaniel cut in, and Draco’s last hope withered and died.

“What do I want?” Sebastian’s eyes flicked over to Draco, who physically felt the color and life drain out of his face. “I want you to hurt, Theo. I want Father to hurt you. I want him to tear your face apart, and I want to watch him do it.”

Seeing Theo’s face crumple lit a match of fury inside Draco, and his brain churned back into movement. When he found his voice again, it came out strong and steely, cracked across the quiet night like a whip. “This is my house, Sebastian. My garden. You can’t do this to us in my—”

Then Sebastian turned around, eyes blazing, and Draco’s throat and courage dried up. Sebastian released Theo, who sagged backwards, panting, and glided over to where Draco and Nathaniel stood.

“Draco,” he said softly, prying him from Nathaniel’s grasp. For one wild second, Draco thought
that he’d been freed, but in the next second he was on the ground, flat on his back as Sebastian pinned him beneath his body. His breath was hot on Draco’s face, and Draco’s heart threw against his ribcage, desperate to escape. Distantly, he heard Theo suck in a breath, but of course he didn’t come to the rescue. He never had, after all.

Draco felt like he was nine again. Twelve-year-old Sebastian had held him down like this back then too, and Draco had screamed and sobbed and begged, had apologized over and over again for never talking to the twins, for never playing with them, had even promised that he’d try to be nicer.

“Too late,” Sebastian had responded back then, his lips inches from Draco’s just like they were now, “we know you’ll never really want us.”

Draco’s mind snapped back to the present time as Sebastian spoke in his ear, his lips brushing his cheek. “You’re so beautiful, Draco. I never imagined you’d be so beautiful.” He said the words in a low, lilting purr. He sounded like he was making a declaration of love, and Draco knew that if he were capable of opening his mouth, he would have wretched.

“He’ll look even more beautiful when he’s broken and crying,” said Nathaniel, and Sebastian moaned in agreement, slipping his hands under Draco’s shirt and digging his nails into the tender skin beneath. Draco tried to squirm, but Sebastian was too heavy to throw off, and the more he struggled and squeaked, the more aroused Sebastian seemed to get. His body was pressed into Draco’s now, melded to his, and Draco felt every bit of the older boy’s hardness.

His stomach jolted, his mind slowed to a sluggish pace, and he found himself pleading for the sweet relief of unconsciousness. He wished that he were brave enough, strong enough, to strike back, to tell his father everything, to tell Harry everything. He wished that he wasn’t Draco Malfoy, that he wasn’t at this stupid Easter Ball in this garden, yet again pinned under his childhood bully, except that Sebastian was no longer a child—

“Think of all the places we’ll mark him, the places we’ll rip him,” murmured Sebastian, his hands drifting lower on Draco’s body.

Theo made a strangled sound, and Sebastian chuckled, lifting his head to address his brother and giving Draco a rare opportunity to breathe. Unfortunately, Sebastian’s next words made his lungs fail.

“When we fuck him,” said Sebastian casually, “we’ll let you watch, Theo. You like to watch us play with him, right? Don’t deny it. You don’t understand your little urges yet, but don’t worry, you will soon enough—”

“Enough talking. Can we do it now?” whined Nathaniel, his voice sounding an age away to Draco, whose hearing had gone all fuzzy and muffled.

No, no, no. Not right now. Not here, not at this party, not in this garden, not in my home, not in the one place I thought they wouldn’t dare—

“We can’t screw him here, you moron,” said Sebastian with a snort. “He won’t be able to move for days when we’re done with him, and his parents are back in the ballroom. The party’s almost over anyways. Take your hands out of your pants, and let’s go.”

He stood up, brushing grass off his robes, leaving Draco limp and quivering on the ground, still unable to move a single limb in his body. The very sound of the twins’ voices, the tiniest glimpse of their faces, could reduce him to this useless, blank-headed doll. He realized then, while lying in the grass, that he’d never be able to fight them. That he’d lie there and take it, because that was all
he could do.

A few tears were cooling on his cheeks, and Draco had no idea when they’d gotten there. He could hear the twins moving away now, rustling the rosebushes, their fun over, but Draco still couldn’t breathe, still couldn’t think, still couldn’t move.

Within seconds, Theo was leaning over him, face ashen. “Draco? He didn’t—he didn’t touch you, did he? Oh Merlin, I’m sorry, I’m so sorry, I’m sorry. I hate them so much, please, please, please believe me. You have to believe me, you’re the only one who’s ever cared about me, and I won’t let them make you hate me—”

A dam broke behind Draco’s eyes. He started weeping hysterically, letting out embarrassingly loud sobs that wracked his whole body. He didn’t want to be seen like this, not by anyone, ever, but the tears just wouldn’t stop coming. “I-I’ll kill them. I’ll tear them apart. I swear it, I won’t ever lie there like that again, won’t let them…”

Theo tried to wrap an arm around Draco’s shoulders, but Draco whacked it away with more rage than he’d ever known he’d possessed. “Don’t—touch—me!”

Theo’s lip trembled, and for a moment Draco hoped that he would burst into tears too. But the moment passed and Theo recovered himself, and Draco’s bitterness rose in him like a dark wave. Theo would always be his calm, cold, and condescending self, no matter what, and Draco would always be the blubbering mess. Theo was in control of his emotions, his mind, his life, and Draco was a failure in every sense of the word.

“Are you going to tell your father what they said?”

Draco had thought he was quite done sobbing like a five-year-old, but apparently not. A fresh wave of tears came forth at the mention of his father, and it was at least a minute before his speech was somewhat comprehensible again.

“I-I messed up earlier today, and he’s already m-mad at me, and I can’t t-tell Father what they do to me, because he thinks they’re the greatest, he thinks they should b-b my role models, he’ll think I’m so w-weak—I want to kill them, Theo!”

Theo didn’t say anything. Draco curled up on the ground, sniffling, mourning the loss of the garden he had loved as a child but now knew he’d never step foot in again.

***

It was past midnight, and the party was over. Draco had taken a dose of his Calming Draught. That was the only reason he was able to function normally and sit in respectful silence while his father yelled at him.

“A complete embarrassment, never believed in my whole life that you’d say such a thing—”

“I’m sorry, Father.” The Calming Draught had really done a number on him; he’d probably taken a bigger dose than necessary. Draco didn’t think he’d ever heard himself so emotionless. “I don’t know what I was thinking. I know that dirty-bloods aren’t as powerful—”

“Do not interrupt me, Draco. Mulciber is a fool. Half-bloods are just as magically and mentally powerful as Purebloods, and you know that. You would be an idiot to pretend otherwise. But you constantly miss the point. You constantly seek the truth, when you will not find it. It is not about truth, Draco. It is about power—no, not magical power, but political and emotional power. If you tell the dirty-bloods that they deserve power, you will give them all kinds of power over you. They
will control you. And they are beneath you, Draco. They do not belong to our world. They are intruders, but they have the ability to become our equals if we let them, and we cannot let them."

“I understand.” Draco’s voice was so flat. Why was it so flat? Why had he taken so much Calming Draught? He needed sleep. He needed to throw up again too, but he didn’t think he would be able to get anything out. After all, he had already spent the past half an hour emptying the contents of his stomach in one of the upstairs bathrooms in secret, unable to forget the feel of Sebastian’s body on his.

“You do not sound like you understand. You sound dead. Is there something you wish to tell me, Draco?” Lucius’s voice rose, as if daring Draco to refuse.

Draco looked up, wondering if he’d heard right. His heartbeat quickened. Did his father know about the twins? Was he going to stop them? Maybe he would understand, wouldn’t think Draco was weak, maybe he would even kill the twins for Draco, and Draco would never have to lie underneath Sebastian again—

“Something about Potter?”

Draco’s heart sank, and he wished he had taken some more Calming Draught. “W-What do you mean?”

“The boy is a terrible influence on you. I can tell from the way you look when I mention his name. You are attached to him, obsessed with him, even.”

Draco wanted to cry, and finally, he managed to get some emotion into his voice. “Father, please. Please let it go. We’ve been over this so many times, and Theo’s bothered me about it so many times. The Second Trial’s almost over. In two weeks, Harry and I won’t be—w-we won’t be friends anymore. I promised you that I’d do anything to pass. You said you’d disown me if I didn’t—”

Lucius’s eyes glinted, and Draco knew he had said the wrong thing.

“It was not meant to be a threat!” Lucius snarled, banging his cane against an oak coffee table, and Draco flinched. “I should not have to threaten and force you to pass a simple test, a simple Trial. You are my precious son and heir. I want you to make me proud. And you should want that for yourself, you should want to become a Skull. I should not have to wheedle you into it, to constantly badger you and lecture you like I do now. Do you think I like it, Draco? Do you think I enjoy punishing you? Who do you think I am?”

Draco couldn’t stop himself. This Calming Draught was useless, utterly useless. He started crying again, but he was mostly just letting out dry gasps now. He’d exhausted most of his tears in the gardens.

“Do not cry in front of others. I will not tell you this again. You are almost twelve years old, and you cry at the drop of a hat. So weak.” Lucius leaned back in his chair and let out an irritated sigh. “Draco, repeat to me our family motto. You seem to have forgotten it.”


Lucius walked over to Draco and pressed a cool hand to his cheek. It felt good, comforting, and Draco was five years old again, curled up in his father’s lap as he listened to the wireless. It had been so long since Lucius had shown him any kind of physical affection.
“You will have many friends throughout your life, Draco,” said Lucius, and Draco looked into gray eyes identical to his. “But you have only one family. How much of your future will you sacrifice for a friendship that may not even last? Is the Potter boy worth it, worth the loss of my respect and your future success? He may be the greatest friend you’ve ever had in your life, but he will not be the last.”

“You don’t understand, Harry is—”

Lucius raised his voice and talked over Draco, but his tone was gentle. “He is the entire world to you, isn’t he? You think about him every day and every night. You look forward to every meeting you have with him. You can’t imagine life without him. You feel sick to the stomach at the thought of him hating you.”

Draco drew in a shuddering breath. His father understood. For the first time in his life, his father understood something.

“It won’t last, Draco. He will change, and so will you. Don’t burn bridges for him, because you’ll soon grow tired of him, and this obsession of yours will fizzle out. And then you will regret your lack of ambition, will regret throwing away a life of power and privilege for a dirty-blood who no longer means anything to you. Sanctimonia Vincet Semper. Family first, purity first.”

Draco lowered his head. “I know.” And this time, he did. He cared about Harry, he did. He really did. He had to show that to Harry, because it was true, and would always be true, no matter what Lucius said.

But it didn’t matter how much he cared about Harry. He would always care about his family, and himself, more.

***

“Do you think it’s the Insanitas?” Draco murmured sleepily, a week before Walpurgis Night. It was past midnight, and he and Harry had just tucked in for the night after a long day studying for final exams.

“What d’you mean?” Harry mumbled, and Draco heard him shifting in his sheets. Draco tried to memorize the sound, tried to treasure it. He would even miss Harry’s little snores.

“Do you think it’s the Insanitas that messed your head up?” said Draco, more clearly. “It might be a side-effect of the infection, and the goopy stuff in your head might’ve been there since October. Do you know a Legilmens, Harry? I think that’s the only way we can get rid of it, because I don’t know how to.”

“I don’t know one. Though that doesn’t mean much, since I know about three whole people,” said Harry, sighing. “But Draco, I feel fine. I really do. I don’t think it’s affected me, whatever it is. Maybe it’s growing, but we still have a lot of time to figure it out together. And it looks like the Hunger has decided to leave me alone for this month, so we have some peace and quiet for once.”

Together, thought Draco, holding back a sob. Yes, they would figure out how to fix Harry’s mind together, except that they wouldn’t be together after Walpurgis Night—

“Draco?” Harry asked, still waiting for a response.

“We’ll figure it out,” Draco promised, pressing his face into the pillow.

***
Dolohov had used the Justice Whips on Harry tonight, and Draco pressed pain-relieving cream into Harry’s back with the sinking feeling that it was the last time he’d ever get to.

“Thanks, Draco,” said Harry, lying on his mattress and airing his bleeding wounds. He tilted his head to stare up at Draco with bright green eyes, and Draco stared back, unseeing.

Two days before Walpurgis.

***

Harry and Draco were lying on their stomachs on Draco’s bed, slogging through their pointless History of Magic homework. Harry had a total of fifty-eight points in that class and was set to fail if he didn’t pull up his marks to sixty by the end of the year.

Draco wished he wasn’t so hopeless, and if that wasn’t enough, Harry had an annoying habit of getting distracted when he and Draco studied together. He kept staring at Draco, which was weird, and then he’d pull Draco’s quill out of his hand and use it to make inappropriate drawings in the margins of their notes.

Frustrated, Draco chucked his History of Magic book onto the floor, where it landed with a thud. He wrapped his arms around Harry’s waist and kept them there for a long while, burying his head into Harry’s chest. Harry squirmed and spluttered and tried to pry Draco off, but Draco wouldn’t budge.

One day before Walpurgis.

***

“Mr. Potter,” said Dolohov, leaning back in his chair, his feet on his desk, his cane askew. “Your services are no longer required.”

Harry gaped at him. “S-sir?” he stammered, balancing the tray of tea in his arms.

“Put that down!” snapped Dolohov, banging his cane, and Harry did so at once. “As I was saying, Potter, you have pleased me this year, and I would have liked to keep you longer, but professor tradition dictates that a Tea Servant is freed on the last day of April, or Walpurgis. You have taken your punishments admirably. I assume you must have had some help, but no matter. I am still impressed.”

“Thank you, sir,” said Harry, certain that this was some other form of psychological torture that Dolohov was trying out, allowing Harry to think he was free before conjuring the Justice Whips and screaming, “April Fools!”

“Well, why are you standing there with your mouth open like a Dementor’s? Get out of my sight.” Dolohov sniffed loudly and returned to his papers.

Harry kept gaping, but recovered himself enough to step slowly out of the room, sure that the floor was going to open up underneath him and suck him into Dolohov’s secret dungeon. But nothing happened, and in a few seconds, Harry was out of the room.

He was free. He was free, and Dolohov hadn’t found out about his magic because of Draco, who was wonderful, who had helped him survive the year without asking for anything in return, who was definitely the best thing to have happened to Harry.

Harry decided that he’d go back to the kitchens and ask the house-elves to bake him a little
chocolate cake. He and Draco could celebrate tonight.

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When Harry came into his room, holding a box in his hands, Draco was struck with the urge to just run away and hide in a broom closet for the rest of the term. Harry was smiling, really smiling, and Draco couldn’t face that smile, not tonight, not ever again.

“Draco, guess what?” Harry beamed. “Dolohov set me free! I don’t have to go visit him anymore! Apparently today’s ‘Walpurgis’ or something, and it’s a traditional day for bastards, I guess. I asked the house-elves to make us some chocolate cake, because this means I won’t be getting blood all over your precious sheets anymore. I’m sure you’re happy about that—”

“Harry.” Draco’s mouth and throat were stuffed with rocks, he was certain of it. “I need to talk to you.”

Harry’s movements slowed to a stop, and his smile melted off his face at Draco’s grim tone. He put the cake on Draco’s desk and turned around, running a hand nervously through the messy hair that Draco had grown so fond of over the months.

Draco took a shaky breath. He hadn’t taken any Calming Draught; he’d wanted to save it for tonight, when he would have to put Harry under the Cruciatius Curse.

“Harry, do you know what the Trials are?”

Harry cocked his head, in that birdlike way he always did, and Draco’s stomach flipped. “It’s a Skull thing, right?”

“Yes. Skull Initiates have to pass a certain amount of Trials to become a Skull, and one of the Trials is to punish a student for a year, to ‘break, shatter, and destroy’ them. That student is a ‘target,’ and you were mine.” Draco was surprised that he’d managed to get everything out so far without losing it, but he could feel the breakdown approaching rapidly. This had been the easy part, the part Harry already knew.

“Break, shatter, destroy? That’s dramatic. Psychos, all of you,” Harry snorted. “But anyway, you didn’t punish me, not really. So you’re trying to tell me that you’re going to fail?” He leaned forward, excited, his eyes brighter than usual.

“No, that’s not it. Just listen, all right? I didn’t go after you this year because—because I didn’t want to keep attacking you, because you’re powerful. We have the bond and all, and Samhain, and everything, and I just—you weren’t a normal target.”

Draco had no idea if what he had just spewed out was even comprehensible, but he supposed Harry had understood, because he didn’t ask for clarification. He just watched Draco coldly, waiting for him to get to the point.

“So I convinced the Skulls to let me do something different to ‘break, shatter, and destroy’ you.”

One of the vases on Draco’s dresser exploded. Harry’s face was carefully blank. Draco tried to ignore everything and went on talking. He had to do this. He owed Harry an explanation. He needed to give Harry the opportunity to forgive him, and had to beg him to take that opportunity.

“I told them I’d pretend to be your friend for a year, make you really care. And then when I broke it off with you, I would ‘break, shatter, and destroy’ you, fulfilling the terms of the Trial. They agreed to let me try. So I need to capture you and bring you to Dungeon Two by half-past eleven
tonight. Then—then I have to put you under the Cruciatius Curse and tell the Skulls what I did to break, shatter, and destroy you, in detail. If I manage all that, I pass the Trial.”

Draco hadn’t looked at Harry the whole time he’d been speaking. He still didn’t have the courage to look.

“But you’re not going to, are you?” Harry’s voice shook. “You weren’t pretending. You weren’t, I know you weren’t, there’s no way you’re that good of an actor.”

Draco finally looked up. Harry’s face had gone white, and he was biting his lip so hard that he had drawn blood.

“I swear to you, I swear to you that I wasn’t pretending,” said Draco, his voice breaking. He got up and walked over to where Harry stood, trying to convey his desperation in every word. “You’re my friend. I don’t understand why, I don’t understand how, but you’re the best friend I’ve ever had, and I don’t want to do this—I’ll hate every moment of it. Please believe me.”

The desk trembled, a few books threw themselves off the shelf, and Harry finally cracked. “DON’T, THEN!” Harry yelled, standing very still. Draco winced and took several steps back. “You fainted a few weeks ago, Draco! Is this why? The Skulls are wrecking you, making you a mess, and you’re destroying yourself to please your father!”

Harry took a deep breath to calm himself, and when he spoke again, his voice was level. “Don’t do it. Don’t finish the Trial. Don’t be a Skull. It’s not important. They’re a bunch of murderers—”

“You don’t understand,” Draco whispered, trying to hold his ground as Harry advanced on him. “I have to do this. I have to be a Death Eater.”

“I don’t CARE what your father says!” Harry yelled again. He was right next to Draco now, and the two of them stood in the middle of the room, staring each other down. Harry was taller than him, but Draco tried not to focus on that.

“I care what my father says,” said Draco, his voice even lower of a whisper. “I care, Harry. He’s my dad. Please, he’s my dad, they’re my family, half of my family are Death Eaters, and you just don’t understand at all, what it’s like—”

“I understand that your family is full of murdering psychopaths,” Harry hissed, and Draco wished that Harry had yelled at him instead. “I understand they’ve killed countless men, women, and children in cold blood, and use and abuse everyone else who’s still alive. I understand that they’re evil to the core, and wouldn’t hesitate to kill me and everybody else—”

“He’s my dad,” Draco tried again, knowing he was dangerously close to tears, again. “He’s my dad, Harry, and they’re my family, and I believe in the Dark Lord, and I can’t—I can’t hate any of them—”

“Then you’re an idiot,” Harry spat, with more venom than Draco had ever heard from him. “You’re an idiot, and you’re blind, and you’re wrong. And you know it, Draco Malfoy. You know the truth, but you ignore it, because you’re a coward who doesn’t want to see it, doesn’t want to believe that his daddy is a murderer—”

“What do you expect me to do, Harry? What do you want from me?”

Draco was not crying again. He was not.

Harry faltered at Draco’s tears, but kept on going. “If your dad asked you to kill me, would you do
it? If your dad asked you to kill a baby Muggleborn, would you do it?"

Draco should have taken a Calming Draught. He wiped his eyes, determined not to break down,
not yet, not until after Walpurgis. “It doesn’t matter, Harry. He hasn’t asked me to do any of that
yet.”

“Yet, Draco, yet!” Harry snarled.

Draco clenched his fists, hardening himself. He wouldn’t entertain Harry’s theatrics any longer. “I
have to pass this Trial. There’s no negotiating on this, Harry. I just wanted to warn you that
whatever I say to convince the Skulls that I hate you isn’t true. You’re my real friend. I never
pretended. And if—if you want”—Draco hadn’t started crying yet, damn it—“if you want to still
be my friend after the Trial, I’m fine with that. And I’m not just fine with it—I want it, so badly. I
want you to forgive me, Harry. Please forgive me.”

Harry’s breathing sped up, but his voice was calm. “You want me to pretend, then. You want me to
pretend that I’ve been—what was it, ‘broken, shattered, and destroyed’—in front of the Skulls
tonight, and then go back to being your friend tomorrow?”

“Yes,” said Draco, weakly. “I know why you don’t want to do it. And I’ll understand if you never
want to speak to me again. But I’ll miss you.”

Harry’s gaze burned a hole in the middle of Draco’s face. “Let’s assume that I do it. Don’t you
think the Skulls will think something’s up if we’re still best friends after you supposedly broke me?
Don’t you think Theodore bloody Nott will figure out that we put on a show? Did you think about
any of this?”

Draco’s eyes widened in horror. If he passed the Second and Third Trials tonight, there was no
going back. He really wouldn’t be able to speak to Harry in public again, not even if Harry forgave
him.

Draco didn’t answer the question, and that was enough of an answer for Harry, who walked over
the wall and kicked it.

“Of course you didn’t, because you never think, Draco. You never think for yourself, you just
follow everyone else blindly, because you’re an idiot and a coward, and I’m sick of it!”” Harry
panted hard, kicking the wall again, and again, and again. Magic shook the floor, the bed, the desk,
the dresser, and Draco nearly fell to the floor.

“I’m sick of being your dirty little secret. I’m sick of you looking down on me because you think
I’m worth less than you are. I’m sick of being the last thing you care about.”

Draco ran over to Harry and tried to stop him from breaking his own foot, but Harry shook him off.
“DON’T. Don’t come near me, Draco.”

“Please,” Draco whispered, putting a tentative hand on Harry’s shoulder. “I’m sorry. I just can’t—I
can’t—I don’t know what to do anymore, please—”

“Please WHAT?” Harry roared, shaking Draco off yet again. “Enough whimpering and begging
and hiding. I’m giving you a choice. You choose me, or them. That’s it. I’m not going to sit quietly
while you torture me, and then trot back to you like some pathetic puppy and only meet you in
secret. I’m worth as much as you are, Draco, and I’m not going to be humiliated in front of a bunch
of crazy bastards just so that you can pass a Trial you don’t even want to pass. I owe you a lot, but I
don’t owe you this.”
Draco grabbed onto Harry’s arm. His vision was blurry. “Please,” he said again, knowing how stupid he sounded. “I’m sorry. I’m sorry.”

Harry tore himself away without a word and stalked off. He grabbed his pillow and his toothbrush and his schoolbag with great vigor. “I’m sleeping in my old dorm tonight, and every other night, until you decide to drop the Skulls and pick me. I’m done playing your games.”

Draco closed his eyes, recalling his father’s words to give him strength to do what he had to do. “How much of your future will you sacrifice for a friendship that may not even last? Is the Potter boy worth it, worth the loss of my respect and your future success?”

“I’m worth as much as you are, Draco,” Harry had said.


Draco opened his eyes, took out his wand, and aimed at Harry’s back. “Stupefy!”

Harry whirled around and deflected the spell wandlessly, and Draco stumbled backwards. Harry bared down on him, but he wasn’t angry. Draco almost wished he had been. No, Harry’s face was crumpled, and his eyes were wet with tears for the first time.

“Y-you’re really going to do it? You’re really going to pick them over me?” Harry whispered, lip trembling.

“I’m sorry,” Draco whispered back, aiming his wand again, hoping Harry would go quietly.

Harry’s eyes glinted. “Fuck you, Draco,” he said, and then his magic was rearing down on Draco like a twister, forcing him into the wall above his bed and pinning him there.

Draco struggled and writhed, trying to summon Harry’s magic through his bond. But nothing was getting through, like it was clogged, but that didn’t make any sense, because the bond had worked two days ago when Dolohov had used the Justice Whips on Harry, so why wasn’t it working now? Draco’s head spun as his air depleted, and all he could remember was being held motionless under Sebastian, and this couldn’t be happening, Harry couldn’t be doing this to him, and why wasn’t the bond working?

Harry released him a split second later, and Draco fell onto his bed like a marionette with its strings cut. Harry stared down at him, wide-eyed, as if he couldn’t believe that he had gone as far as to hurt Draco with his magic after months of sharing it with him. “I’m—I’m sorry,” he choked out, before running to the door.

Draco returned to himself. He slipped his hand under his pillow, where he kept his magic obstructor Knut safe until the day he would need it. If the bond wasn’t working, and if Harry wouldn’t let himself be Stupefied, then Draco had no choice.

He threw the Knut. It spun through the air and hit Harry just before he reached the door, and Draco knew he would never forget the sound of the scream that followed.
Walpurgis Night

Chapter Notes

Thanks for the comments! This chapter gave me a massive headache and writer's block, which is why it's 3AM on Monday. Also, cliffhanger warning.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

WALPURGIS NIGHT

Draco was back in the Room of Judgement, back in Dungeon Two.

He stood beside Theo and Millicent in the lineup of Initiates, his heartbeat steady. He’d taken plenty of Calming Draught after… after the argument with Harry, and the dose had settled into his bloodstream by now.

All the Initiates were milling around behind the raised platform in the center of the room, waiting for the Walpurgis ceremony to begin. It was nearly midnight, and as Draco watched, the older Skulls entered the courtroom, slipping into the rows and rows of seats that lined the walls. They chattered loudly amongst themselves, the buzz of their voices filling up the empty chamber, and Draco’s head pounded like the beat of a dull drum.

This place looks more like a theater than a court, thought Draco, his eyes lidded. I bet they’re going to put on a show.

Against his will, his gaze lingered on what he knew was the glass antechamber—though it just looked like a stone wall to Draco, as it did to everyone on the outside—on the far side of the giant room. He knew that Harry was lying bound and unconscious inside it with the other targets, just like he had on Samhain so many months ago.

But this time Draco had been the one to put him there.

“Draco.” Theo’s soft voice drifted over to him above the clamor of the Skulls and the Initiates, and Draco twitched, but didn’t turn around to face him.

Theo put a hand on his shoulder. Draco considered slapping it away viciously, but the Calming Draught had done its job well, and Draco’s desire to inflict pain on everything and everyone was ebbing away as the seconds passed.

“You did it,” Theo whispered, his breath warm on Draco’s ear. “I didn’t think you would, but you did. You passed the Second Trial and brought Potter here, and I’m really proud of you. I just wanted to tell you that.”

Draco didn’t say anything. He just stared blankly at the wall Harry lay behind.

Theo sighed. “Are you still mad at me for something?” He followed Draco’s gaze, then stiffened, his fingers unconsciously digging into Draco’s shoulder. “You’re thinking about him.” It wasn’t a
Draco jerked back to himself. “Not really,” he said, gently brushing Theo’s hand off his shoulder without turning around to face him.

“You won’t miss him,” said Theo, clenching the hand Draco had rejected into a fist. “I promise you won’t even notice he’s gone. Next year, we’ll be in our second phase of Initiation, and you won’t even bother to think of him.”

Draco wasn’t paying attention, and hoped Theo would figure that out and stop wasting his breath. He wanted to look at that stupid antechamber again, but forced himself to direct his attention towards the central platform. The thirteen Gold Skulls stood there in a semicircle, their backs straight and their masks gleaming, waiting for the straggling Skulls to get seated.

Two minutes to midnight.

Theo was still talking, as if he thought Draco cared. “I didn’t dare let myself hope that we’d become Skulls together, after you started neglecting the Second Trial, but now I can really see it. Draco?”

“Yes, I heard you, Theo,” said Draco, finally turning around to face him with a raised eyebrow, trying to appear at least somewhat alive, not that he’d done a good job of doing that so far. “Thanks for being proud of me.” He rolled his eyes, not sounding thankful at all, and Theo faltered.

“You know what I meant,” said Theo. “I wasn’t being condescending, I wasn’t—”

“I get it.” Draco rolled his eyes again. “I surprised you by doing what I said I would, what I promised I would do.”

Theo’s breath hitched. “I’m sorry. I should’ve trusted you from the start.”

“You should have,” said Draco, ignoring the lump in his throat. And Harry shouldn’t have. Draco would always choose his family and future over anything else, and Theo should never have doubted that, and wouldn’t dare to doubt him again. Draco had sacrificed too much to be doubted by Theo of all people, who wasn’t strong enough to sacrifice anything, who had stood by and watched as his brothers threatened Draco.

He had once been jealous of Theo, but that had been replaced by an undercurrent of contempt. He didn’t want to think about the fact that Theo was his only friend now.

“You’re still mad at me, aren’t you?” said Theo sadly, lowering his gaze to focus on Draco’s shoes.

“You already asked that question. And I’m not.” I just hate your guts. “Quiet now. It’s about to start,” said Draco, turning back to face the platform were the thirteen Gold Skulls stood.

Right on cue, the room went silent. The Skull in the middle of the thirteen, the Skull King, stepped forward, disturbing their neat semicircle arrangement.

“Welcome to Walpurgis Night, Initiates,” said Adolphus Lestrange, his black robes swirling at his feet like smoke. “While you get to demonstrate your accomplishments this year, the rest of us get to enjoy an entertaining show.” His eyes glinted. “Of course, don’t get too complacent. We’ll still be grading you on your performance.”

Draco watched the older boy speak, completely entranced. If he hadn’t known for a fact that
Adolphus was as deadly as a viper, he would have assumed that the Skull King was a jester in disguise.

Usually Kings didn’t get to rule for more than one school year and were always in seventh year when they took the throne, but Adolphus was an exception. He’d killed the old Skull King at the very end of his fifth year and secured the throne for two years straight. He’d be King until the end of Draco’s second year. Everyone knew that Sebastian was next in line and destined to be yet another two-year Skull King, and he was turning out to be even more ruthless than his predecessor.

“But you all aren’t here to listen to the sound of my voice,” Adolphus continued, now addressing the Skulls instead of the Initiates. He waved a lazy hand in the air. “You’re here to see all the breaking, shattering, and destroying, and then to drink all the hard liquor you can get your grubby hands on at the Walpurgis afterparty.”

A low hum of laughter reverberated throughout the massive chamber, and somebody hooted. Draco was sure he had missed the joke, but then again, he didn’t find anything funny these days.

The corner of Adolphus’s mouth curved up slightly, and he and the rest of the Gold Skulls stepped off the platform in one fluid movement. The Skulls all leaned forward, utterly silent and expectant now. Draco wondered if any of the them hid disgust behind their masks. Hid shame. Hid regret.

One of the Initiates, the first one in line, stepped onto the platform, his arm shaking slightly as he raised his wand into the air. “Fiat justitia, ruat caelum!” he shouted. Let there be justice, though the heavens fall.

Déjà vu hit Draco like a charging dragon. It felt like Samhain all over again, and he was watching Theo call Patil and Weasley and Harry out for judgement. History was repeating itself, and Draco couldn’t do anything to stop it, not when he’d been the one to cause it.

The faceless Initiate on the platform sneered at his faceless target, a dark-haired girl. His insults on her blood status, weight, and facial features were enhanced spectacularly by the Skull audience, who hooted and catcalled in their approval.

Draco gasped. The back wall of the chamber was rippling, its brick stone melting into a smooth white screen. It burst with splashes of color and movement, and a couple seconds later, Draco realized that the screen was playing memories, aided by the complicated magic of the courtroom. Vivid memories of each and every time the Initiate had hurt his target were displayed on the massive back wall for all to see, a highlight reel of the Second Trial. The booming sound of the memories drowned out even the whooping Skulls, and all the din practically brought the walls down.

“Crucio!” yelled the Initiate, and Draco twitched as the girl on the platform began to writhe and scream. The Initiate lowered his wand a split second later, panting, apparently too exhausted to keep the spell going for any longer. It didn’t matter, though; the Cruciatus Curse supposedly hurt just as much in a millisecond as it did in a whole minute.

Draco pushed down his rising dinner. He’d have to torture Harry, but he had already tortured Harry with the magic obstructor Knut, so this wouldn’t make a big difference. This was just one step closer to the edge, one more straw on the camel’s back.

The Skulls in the rows and rows of seats stomped and cheered in tandem as the first Initiate dismissed his target back to the glass antechamber. When she was gone, the wall of memories cleared and rippled to display the Initiate’s Trial score, a number out of one hundred. Eighty-two.
Draco closed his eyes. His turn was up soon, and after everything he’d done to hurt Harry, the least he could do was make their separation quick and clean. He was done with being wishy-washy, done with crying, done with supporting both the Skulls and Harry halfheartedly. He’d picked his side now, and he was going to see this betrayal all the way through.

*After this, I won’t have to hurt him again. This is the last time. We’ll be over.*

When Draco opened his eyes again, a new mask was on his face, this one cruel and bright with delight.

The Skulls, Theo, his father—he knew what they wanted from him. They wanted a hell of a show, and he’d give it to them.

***

“*Fiat justitia, ruat caelum, Harry Potter!*”

Harry jerked awake, just in time to catch a glimpse of about two dozen panicking first and second years crammed around him in a small stone room. Ropes sprang out of the ground, just like they had on Samhain so many months back, and lifted Harry through a rippling glass wall. As the ropes dragged him towards the platform in the center of the chamber, sending his vision spinning madly, reality clinked and clunked into place.

He was in Dungeon Two again.

Draco had betrayed him.

After months of friendship, after months of trust, *Draco had betrayed* him.

Harry’s thoughts unraveled and frayed like a spool of thread, and a second later, they were overshadowed by a dark wave, which rose above the Skulls’ shouting and jeering. The world whirled around him as he rolled, a kaleidoscope of glittering masks and blurry torchlight. He plopped onto the central platform, still cocooned in the magic ropes. His magic thrummed beneath his skin, pushed close to the surface by that obsidian-solid wave of rage and hatred.

Draco stood above him, his eyes hard as flint, and Harry’s heart stuttered. He couldn’t see the Draco he knew—he thought he had known—anywhere in that face.

“Tell me this is a lie,” said Harry, refusing to struggle in his ropes. Other than craning his neck up to look Draco in the eyes, he kept his body utterly still.

“Not a lie,” said Draco. The words rang like bells in Harry’s head. “But you know what *is* a lie?”

His eyes narrowed into slits, so at odd with his lips, which curved into a coy smile. He was as beautiful as ever, but there was an unsavory edge to his features now, an edge that made it impossible for Harry to look at him without wanting to wretch.

“Guess, Harry,” crooned Draco, reaching down to run his fingers through Harry’s hair. “Guess what’s a lie.”

His hands were icy cold. Harry’s heart-pounding revulsion kept him frozen in place, unable to say a word or shake off the unpleasant, wrong touch. He felt like he was watching the scene play out in front of him as a third party, because this couldn’t be happening to him, this couldn’t be the real Draco—
“Everything,” Draco answered, removing his hand from Harry’s hair. “Everything I said to you. Everything I did with you. It’s all a lie, Harry. And you knew, didn’t you? You knew from the moment I used that Stupefy on you, that you never really mattered. In fact, I think you’ve known for a long time that you never deserved me, that I always intended to use you.”

The crowd of Skulls had gone silent. They listened with rapt attention, hanging onto Draco’s every word, leaning forward in their seats.

“You’re the son of a Mudblood,” said Draco, smiling sweetly. “If you ever thought I’d forget that, that I’d ever see you as my friend, my equal, you’re a bigger idiot than you look.”

“I just wanted to warn you that whatever I say to convince the Skulls that I hate you isn’t true. You’re my real friend. I never pretended,” Draco had said a few hours ago. Harry remembered it clearly.

He stared up Draco’s face, trying to see the boy he knew, the boy who had cried and begged Harry to forgive him. He couldn’t see that boy. All he could see was this horrible, beautiful mask, and Harry promised to crack it, to make Draco fall into pieces in front of him. He was nobody’s pawn, nobody’s entertainment, and he’d make Draco regret his choice until the day he died.

They wouldn’t break him.

“You’re lying, Draco,” said Harry calmly, too calmly, a sadistic sort of pleasure writhing in his stomach. “You warned me that you were going to capture me. You warned me that you were going to tell a bunch of lies up on stage to convince the Skulls that you hate me. Then you begged me to pretend to be broken, shattered, and destroyed. You thought you could turn me into your slobbering dog, but I never fell for your tricks, Draco, never—”

“Shut up. Shut up, Potter.” Draco’s slightly hysterical voice split the air like a whip.

The first crack in the mask had appeared, and Harry’s pleasure spiked at the sight of it.

“Did you think I’d play your little game, put on a little show?” Harry knew he sounded hysterical too. “Did you think for one second that I’d ever let you win?”

“Everything I did,” spat Draco, his hands balled up, his eyes wide and burning, “was to make you think that I cared, to give you false hope.”

“You begged me,” Harry spat, shaking with fury. “You begged me to forgive you, to be your friend —”

“You’re so pathetic, Harry,” said Draco, that hideous smile back on his face, the cracks in his mask mended. “You spew out all these silly little lies, trying to make yourself feel better, trying to convince yourself that I need you more than you need me. But the truth is, you’d be a wreck without me. Nobody wanted you except for me—no, nobody wants you, not even me, and you’ll never have anyone like me again. You’ll die alone and forgotten, just like you lived.”

Draco stopped talking and turned his head towards the back wall, which had just started to flicker with images. Harry looked too, and found himself unable to look away.

Draco’s eyes glimmered, but with what, Harry didn’t know.

In the wall memory, Draco was speaking to Theo, glaring at him as he did. “Helping Potter last night was part of my plan. I saw him bleeding when he was coming out of Dolohov’s office, and he looked really pathetic. He doesn’t have any friends or anybody to help him. Not even the other
dirty-bloods and blood-traitors like him. So I got a great idea. What better way to break, shatter, and destroy someone than to pretend to be their friend, then reveal it was all a lie?"

“See, Harry?” whispered Draco, his eyes still coated in that strange sheen. “I planned this from the beginning. Did you think I helped you back then because I cared about you, even after you tormented me for weeks, even after you sent me to the Hospital Wing, even after you did nothing to show you deserved my friendship? You were so easy to fool. You were so needy, so desperate.”

Harry’s thoughts whirled like a storm, and the memory on the wall melted into another.

In this scene, Draco sat in the Great Hall, surrounded by the other first year Initiates, a smug smirk on his face.

“While you fools have been hexing a bunch of snotty first years all day long,” Draco drawled, “I’ve been relaxing and enjoying my personal slave. Anything I want, he does for me. He tells me all his secrets. I’ve been gathering useful information about Dolohov and the other dirty-bloods. I’ve been gaining his trust, and soon I’ll completely control him. I’ll probably be able to command him to attack his own kind.”

It’s not real, Harry’s mind screamed at him. Not real not real not real. Draco warned me—Draco begged me—Draco wants me—

“Memories don’t lie, Harry,” said Draco, tilting his head to the side, and Harry remembered a particularly vivid nightmare he’d had on the first day of school. He’d been sitting under the corrupted Sorting Hat in front of an audience of jeering Skulls, and Draco had stood among them, beautiful and cruel, laughing as Harry turned to ash.

No two words had ever described Draco Malfoy so well. Beautiful and cruel, brilliant and manipulative, Harry’s guardian angel and Harry’s worst nightmare.

And it wasn’t over yet. The next memory had begun to play, and Harry’s masochistic fascination kept his gaze pinned to the wall. He couldn’t tear his gaze away from this horrible, sick, insane show, no matter how much he wanted to, no matter how much he wanted to close his eyes and block his ears and go to sleep and only wake up when this nightmare ended—

“I need your help in dealing with Potter, Theo,” said Draco. Their eyes were fixed on each other, especially Theo’s on Draco. “He’s magically powerful, you know that much, and I’m a bit worried about what he might do to me in revenge. I… have a prank of sorts planned for him that involves the Magicae Obturamentum. I want to use it to take him out of commission.”

Blood roared in Harry’s ears. The magic obstructor Knut that had caught Harry in the back earlier today—had that been Draco’s plan all along? How many webs of lies had Draco spun this year? Webs upon webs upon webs, webs more diseased and deadly than the Hunger’s.

“And you know what?” Draco whispered, his face inches from Theo’s. “I’m so sick of Potter. I’m sick of having him in my room. I’m sick of acting like his friend. And you know what else? I just can’t—stop—missing—you. I could’ve asked a professor to help me with the Magicae Obturamentum, but I think I wanted an excuse to spend time with you, to work on something with you.”

When was Draco acting, and when was he sincere? What was his true face, and what was the mask? Was there even a real Draco, or did he constantly shift and morph into what he needed to be? Perhaps there were only lies and lies and lies and more lies, the impossible sliver of reality buried underneath thousands of layers of manipulations and secrets. Harry had never known the
true Draco, and had been the world’s biggest fool for believing he did. Draco’s mind was made of glass, but Harry had never once seen through it.

“What did you expect, Harry?” asked Draco, sounding as though he were holding back a giggle. Harry couldn’t look at him, couldn’t bear to see that horrible smile one more time. “Did you think that I could ever want you?”

All the colors in the world bled into gray, and Harry’s head burst with pain.

***

The bond had blackened and frayed, weakened to the point of no return. A single quivering thread held it together.

That thread snapped, its collapse sending a final pulse of infection through Harry’s mind, and the Insanitas bug stirred.

***

“I hate you, Draco,” said Harry, knowing intrinsically that their bond was no more. His voice broke. “I hate you, I hate you, I hate you—”

“We’re over, Harry. Not that we were ever anything in the first place. Crucio.”

For a second, Harry thought about releasing his magic in one great explosion, destroying every bastard Skull in the room, damn the consequences of being caught.

For a second, Harry thought about trapping this beautiful and cruel boy named Draco Malfoy in a jeweled cage, forever imprisoning him, forever making him suffer, forever making him his.

Instead, Harry’s rage flared, and he screamed. The Crucio lasted for only a second, but the pain and fury didn’t end there. And when the ropes picked him up and rolled him back towards the antechamber, he went on screaming.

***

Draco’s heart pounded in his ears. He had felt the connection between him and Harry fray and snap, and there was no going back. Harry hated him, and Draco hated himself. He hated his father, hated Theo, hated the Skulls, hated everyone who had made him into this monster.

The Skulls cheered, louder than they had for any other Initiate so far. Some of them were whispering, sending admiring glances his way. His Trial had been unique, cruel in a way the others hadn’t been. He’d put on the most exciting show of the night, and he knew he wouldn’t be forgotten for years to come.

His score came up. It was a ninety-five, the highest yet. He supposed five points had been taken off for his shaky beginning, when Harry had tried to fight back, and he wondered what would have been different if Harry had succeeded in revealing Draco’s treachery. What would the Skulls have done to him? What would his father have said? Would it have been any worse than what Harry was surely planning for him?

Part of him wished that Harry hadn’t fallen apart, that Harry had fought him harder, that Harry had brought the ceiling down on the courtroom just like he had on Samhain. Draco would’ve deserved it, after everything he had done.
He stepped off the platform, his head held high, his stomach down at his feet. His bond with Harry was severed, though Draco wasn’t exactly sure how. Whatever happened to Harry was no longer Draco’s concern, and by this time next year, he’d barely remember their friendship.

Oh, Harry would still hate him. He’d hate Draco forever, and Draco would hate himself forever, but the pain would dull eventually, even though it was cutting Draco now like hot knives. Draco had made his choice, and it had been the right one.

“Is the Potter boy worth it, worth the loss of my respect and your future success?” Lucius had asked him.

No, Harry wasn’t worth it.

“How much of your future will you sacrifice for a friendship that may not even last?”

None of it. Draco had been born a Pureblood, born as the heir to one of the most powerful and influential men in Britain, and he’d be a fool to throw that away. He could get anything he wanted in this world.

Anything except Harry Potter, and that was the way it would have to be.

***

The Walpurgis ceremony ended a few minutes past one o’clock, and the Skulls began flowing out of the Room of Judgement, chattering loudly. Draco had received the highest score, closely followed by Theodore, who had been the only Initiate to successfully cast the Cruciatuus Curse, which meant he had been able to keep it going for a good twenty seconds. Longbottom hadn’t had a fun time, that was for sure.

Draco looked back at the antechamber one last time. It was covered by the stone wall again, and Draco knew that the targets would be released automatically as soon as the dungeon cleared. He wondered whether Harry would find him and yell at him. He would need to visit Draco’s room one last time anyway, in order to move his possessions back into his old dormitory. Draco wanted to explain himself, wanted to cry and apologize some more, but he knew that it would be better for his sanity if neither of them spoke to each other ever again.

“They’ll have Firewhiskey at the afterparty,” said one of the second-year Initiates among the crowd of Skulls that had formed by the courtroom exit. “And I heard that nobody cares if we drink it.”

“That’s irresponsible,” said Theo with a sniff, and all the Initiates gave him incredulous looks.

The older Skulls led them out of the dungeon, down dizzying spiral staircases, past paintings with shivering, cowering inhabitants, past false floors and false walls, past yawning dark doorways. Hogwarts had always felt like some sort of slumbering beast to Draco, and now he could really see it.

He hated this school. For everything it had done to him, for everything it had done to Harry.

“You were brilliant,” said Theo fervently as they followed the Skulls down to the Skulls’ dormitories, where the afterparty would be held. His eyes were bright. “You completely wrecked Potter. I’m not even upset that you got a higher score than me.”

“That teaches you to underestimate me.” Draco’s tone was grave, but he grinned at Theo to dilute it. He had to pretend to be at least somewhat pleased tonight, or Theo would start badgering him
again about whether he missed Harry. Luckily, Theo’s attention seemed to be drifting; he had just turned around, distracted by what some of the other Initiates were saying about the afterparty.

“Don’t try any of the Ecstasy Elixir the older students give you!” Theo snarled at them, and Draco snorted.

When they made it down to the great circular room where the dorms split off (and by this point the older Initiates were all quite fed up with Theo’s lecture on how recreational potions were bad for you), Draco tried to slip away to the Elite dorm to get some sleep.

Theo grabbed his arm. “Aren’t you coming to the afterparty?”

“I’m too tired,” said Draco, squirming in Theo’s grip.

Theo shook his head and frowned. “You need to be there, Draco. I think a lot of the older Skulls will want to congratulate you on being in first place, and they’ll wonder where you got off to. Aren’t you happy? Or was what Potter said—that you warned him about the Trial—true after all?” Theo’s eyes glinted.

Draco wanted to scream. Nobody would let him breathe, and even after everything Draco had accomplished, Theo was still suspicious of him, still belittling, no matter how many times he claimed he was sorry.

Draco hated him.

“Shut the hell up, Theo. I just need to—I need to use the loo,” said Draco. He had left his Calming Draught in his room, and he needed it badly. It would make him feel better for a few minutes at least, even though it wasn’t all that useful for long periods of time. “I’ll be at the party in a minute.”

His blood boiling, he tore himself from Theo and ran off before the other boy could say a word.

The Elite common room was full of older students wearing fancy robes, who gossiped and laughed in shrill voices. Draco supposed everyone was just about to head off to the Walpurgis Night party in the Skulls’ dorms, which was some massive event that none of the Elites over the age of fourteen had been able to shut up about, even though Draco himself couldn’t understand the appeal. He weaved through the crowd, his short stature allowing him to go unnoticed, and finally made it to his room.

He seized the bottle of Calming Draught on his bedside table and chugged it until there was nothing left, trying not to think too hard about Theo’s lecture on recreational potions. Besides, Madam Pomfrey had prescribed this for Draco. It couldn’t be recreational if it was a prescription, right? Draco would have to figure out how to make some more.

He sat down at his desk, burying his head in his arms and taking deep breaths as the Calming Draught settled into his system. He lifted his head after a few minutes, his muscles relaxed, and caught sight of two coins laying on his desk. One was the damned Knut that he had used to betray Harry, which he’d picked up off the floor and put on his desk earlier that evening. The other was his Connecting Coin.

He picked both coins up, one bronze and one silver, and rubbed them together. They made a slight screeching noise, and he hastily shoved them into his pocket. He might need the Knut later, and he wanted to keep the Connecting Coin with him, for nostalgia’s sake.

The door clicked open, and Draco’s breath caught.
It was Harry. He leaned against the doorframe, expression unfathomable. His eyes seemed darker than usual, or maybe that was just a trick of the light.

“You’re here. They let you out.” Draco’s voice sounded faint. “Are you here for your stuff?” He was glad that he had just taken the Calming Draught, or he wouldn’t have been able to get two words out.

“Yes.” Harry didn’t come inside. He just kept watching Draco.

“I lied up there, you know,” said Draco, unable to resist. “Yeah, those memories were real, and sometimes I meant what I said in them. But not always. I wasn’t ever sick of being your friend, Harry, not ever. I just told Theo that to convince him to help me.”

Harry didn’t respond, and Draco sighed. “I don’t think you’ll believe me, but I just wanted to tell you. I’m not asking for your forgiveness.”

There room was silent for a long and pregnant second.

“I can feel that our bond is gone,” said Harry, finally taking a step into the room. “Beltane is tomorrow. I bet you’re hoping that something happens, so that you never have to see me again.”

Draco shook his head rapidly, taking a few steps back as Harry took a few steps forward. “No. No. I don’t anything to happen to you. I want you to stay alive.”

“You have no reason to care anymore, do you?” said Harry. “You were stuck with me all year, and now you’re finally free.”

“I won’t leave if you tell me not to,” said Draco. “We can still meet, Harry. You won’t be able to sleep here anymore, but you have the Invisibility Cloak, and we can still talk in secret, if you want.”

What was he saying? He had just spent the entire evening trying to convince himself that he and Harry were over, and now he was chickening out? He needed to pick a damn side and stick to it, not hurtle back and forth like some sort of confused Bludger.

Draco was still blabbering, and also still not being remotely sane. “And even if we don’t have the bond, we have the Connecting Coins. I think yours is in my drawers. We haven’t used the coins in weeks. Hold on.” He rummaged in his desk for a moment, then held the coin out to Harry, who took it. “Here. Keep it with you. It’ll probably alert my coin if something goes really wrong with your mind.”

Draco took a shuddering breath, and continued. “And I promise I won’t let the Hunger get you. I spent weeks making the magic obstructor web, and because of that there’s no way the Hunger will be able to pull you into its gravity even if it decides to show itself tomorrow.”

“I hate you, Draco,” said Harry.

Draco slipped a hand into his pocket, just to make sure his magic obstructor Knut was still there.

“I know,” Draco responded, keeping his gaze and voice steady with great effort. “I know. But I don’t—I don’t hate you. I’ll never hate you.”

“At first I thought you just betrayed me because you were a coward,” Harry went on, raising his voice. “But now I don’t even know who you are. I don’t know when you’re acting and when you’re being real. I can’t tell anymore. I don’t think I ever could.”
“I’m not acting right now, and I wasn’t acting when I begged you to forgive me before the Trial,” said Draco, taking a few long strides until he was inches from Harry.

Harry’s stare was unforgiving. “Are you trying to convince me that you still care about me, so that I don’t attack you like I did in the beginning of the year? How much have you lied to me? You just keep trying to save your own skin. You’ll say anything as long as it makes you look good.”

“I had to do it.” Draco stepped closer, and Harry stepped back, raising his hackles in fury. “I had to convince the Skulls that I never cared about you—and you almost ruined everything, too, which is why I had to be so mean to compensate. And this is the way it’s going to be. You’ll always come second to me. That’s why you shouldn’t be my friend, even though I want you to be.”

“I hate you,” Harry repeated the moment Draco finished talking. His voice shook. “I really hate you, Draco. And I still think you’re lying to me, because you lie to everyone. And I never want to see you again.”

Draco could barely hear himself speak. “Okay.”

***

Harry seethed. Draco was so calm, so collected, so blank, like none of this mattered to him at all. He was still acting, except this time Harry could see through the façade. Draco didn’t care about Harry. He only cared about himself.

“I hate you. I’ll hate you forever,” Harry said again and again, wanting to destroy Draco as thoroughly as Draco had destroyed him. “And if you think that I’ll forget what you did to me, you’re wrong. I’ll never forget. And I’ll never let you forget.”

“I wouldn’t ever forget you anyway,” Draco said, his eyes still dead, and Harry lost it.

***

The Insanitas bug prepared to strike. During the months of its slumber, it had been growing diseased tendrils like a tree grew roots. These sharp tendrils had spread into every corner of the Colossus’s mind, leaving holes and tunnels in their wake.

Soon, the bug would pull on the tendrils like a puppetmaster, jerking the Colossus’s mind around. And the Colossus would have no choice but to follow the bug’s commands, even if those commands were to walk straight into Master’s gaping maw.

Master was particularly irritated this Beltane, the bug knew, because it couldn’t use its magic if it emerged from the ground. The bug would have to bring the Colossus right into its Master’s lair. Luckily, the Colossus was easily controlled.

Ready to eat, the Insanitas bug tugged the strings, and the Colossus’s disintegrating mind gave way.

***

Harry’s eyes flashed red, and Draco flinched and took a few steps back, shoving his hand into his pocket to clench a fist around his Knut. “Harry?” There was something wrong. He remembered seeing something like this back in October, when he’d faced the spiders. They’d had mad glints in their eyes, and Harry—Harry was—

Harry blinked, and his eyes were back to normal. He went on ranting as if nothing had happened.
“No, you won’t ever forget me. Because I’ll hurt you, I’ll make you suffer every day, and you’ll always regret picking them over me.”

Draco wasn’t listening to these melodramatics. He kept his hand in his pocket, now running his fingers over his wand. He was absolutely sure that Harry was infected by the Insanitas, and they didn’t have the bond anymore to fix him. Draco couldn’t use it to save Harry like he had on Samhain.

And that left him no choice. He needed to take Harry out of commission, no matter what. There wouldn’t be any time to explain.

Draco whipped out his wand. “Stupefy!”

Harry dodged nimbly, and when his enraged gaze met Draco’s, Draco blanched and fumbled for his Knut. “Harry—I’m sorry—the Insanitas—”

But it was too late, and Draco didn’t know—didn’t want to know—if Harry’s eyes were green or red, sane or insane, in the moment that he struck.

“Crucio!”

The pain was worse than anything he had ever felt before. White-hot knives sunk into his head, jagged shards of glass pierced his skin, and he screamed until his throat tore. Harry’s magic smothered him like a blanket, making it impossible for him to move an inch. He was pinned to the floor, he couldn’t breathe, he couldn’t think—

The pain lifted, but the pressure didn’t.

Harry began to pace the room. “Let me go,” Draco begged, wriggling in vain. “This isn’t you, Harry. You wouldn’t use the Cruciatus on me. You wouldn’t.” Draco was sobbing now, Calming Draught be damned. “This is the Insanitas, and you have to let me go so I can help you. I don’t want you to die. Please—please please please let me go.”

“I used the Cruciatus on you,” said Harry, his voice strained, stilted. He was rummaging around in his trunk, and Draco caught a glimpse of something silvery in his hands, most likely the Invisibility Cloak. “I wanted to hurt you. You used it on me. This was my revenge.”

“LET ME GO! LET ME GO NOW!” Draco screamed.

“Nobody can hear you scream, Draco. You won’t ever be able to get out.” There was an edge of pleasure to Harry’s voice, and Draco sobbed harder. He couldn’t see Harry’s face from his position on the ground, but this couldn’t be the real Harry, Harry would never—

Harry laughed once, then left the room, closing the door behind him.

***

The world seemed oddly sharp and clear to Harry, and for once in his life, everything made sense. He had tortured and trapped Draco because something had told him it was a good idea, and it had been. He had enjoyed every moment of it, though—though some part of him had screamed—screamed when Draco had screamed—

Harry’s thoughts stuttered like a radio with a bad signal, and something yanked on them to steady them, perhaps the same something that had suggested he torture Draco. Suddenly, everything made sense again, and Harry’s thoughts resumed their normal pattern.
Yes. He had to go somewhere. It was very important. He threw the Invisibility Cloak on, smiling to himself as he did. Twenty minutes later, he was on the outskirts of the Forbidden Forest, a place he had been dozens of times with Draco.

Draco—Draco had screamed—no, Draco had betrayed him—no, Draco had been trying to help him—

Another tug on his thoughts. Harry stepped into the forest, his head on fire. He stumbled over thorny bushes and past massive trees, his thoughts stuttering and halting every now and then. He needed to make his way to the center of the forest, or he was sure he’d die, sure he’d starve.

Maybe it had been thirty minutes. Maybe an hour. His journey through the forest had gone by in a blur, and now he stood at the edge of the central hollow. Moonlight drenched the clearing, tainting the glass silver. It was so beautiful. He and Draco should have come here during the night. They would’ve lain on the ground and stared up at the stars, and now they’d never get to do that—

Harry gasped.

Draco sat in the middle of the clearing, even though he hadn’t been there when Harry had first looked. His hair looked even more silver in the moonlight, but his eyes were dark, nearly black. That was odd, since they were supposed to be pale gray, but maybe it was just the angle. He smiled up at Harry enticingly, revealing little white teeth and dimples.

“How! Over here!” Draco called, patting the spot on the grass next to him.

Something yanked his thoughts, and Harry jerked into movement. He hurried down into the clearing, holding his breath. This—this couldn’t be Draco—Draco was back in the Elite dormitories—Harry had trapped him there so he couldn’t help—Harry had tortured him—

Another yank. “Harry!” Draco whined. “You said you’d be here ages ago. Did you forget? I told you to come here at midnight so we could wait for Beltane together. So we could fight the Hunger together.”

No. Draco had never said that—he hadn’t, Harry was sure of it. Now that Harry was closer to him, he could see that Draco’s eyes were pure black. They had no irises.

“How, lie down next to me,” Draco whispered, giving Harry a smile that could outshine the moon.

Harry sat down with jolting movements. He needed to get out of here—but he needed to sit with Draco—who wasn’t the real Draco—

Another yank.

“I’ll choose you, Harry,” said Draco, pulling Harry close to him. He pressed his lips to the curve of Harry’s ear, and Harry shivered. Draco felt so real, even though Harry knew he was some sort of illusion, even though Harry was screaming at himself to get up and run as far as possible. “But if you want me to choose you, you have to come with me.”

“Okay,” Harry murmured, unable to resist a sigh as the dark-eyed Draco stroked his hair, in a loving, intimate way he never had before. The clearing began to tremble, to cave in. It happened almost silently, and Harry barely even noticed that he and Draco were being sucked into the ground. He just let Draco stroke his hair. He could almost go to sleep.

Another yank. Harry’s eyelids felt heavy.

One last tug of the strings, and Harry fell into sweet oblivion.

***

The hum of Harry’s magic died, the Connecting Coin burned, and Draco’s worst nightmare began.

He struggled to his feet, panting hard, his vision blurry and his eyes puffy from all the crying he’d been doing this past hour. Theo was going to kill him; Draco hadn’t shown up to the stupid party at all, and there was no way he could attend, not now that Harry was in trouble.

What had Harry done under the influence of the Insanitas? What had caused his magic to die, to release Draco?

Draco sprinted to the bathroom and splashed water all over his face, trying to clear his vision and desperately wishing that he hadn’t finished all his Calming Draught.

He needed to come up with a plan. Draco was certain Harry had headed for the Forbidden Forest, but he could use the Connecting Coin’s original function, not the mind-delving function, to find him just in case. Harry had his own coin with him, and thank Merlin that Draco had remembered to give it to him.

Quickly, Draco threw himself onto his bed and closed his eyes, clutching the coin tightly in his hand. He would use it to search through Harry’s mind and release him from the Insanitas. There was no other way.

But the coin wasn’t working. It just kept burning.

*No. No no no no no.*

Draco hopped to his feet and started rummaging around for his cloak. Maybe the coin had to be within a certain distance of its partner before it would let him make the jump to Harry’s mind, and that meant that he would need to go outside.

He had to save Harry. He couldn’t lose Harry. Not now, not when the last thing Harry had done was put him under **Crucio**, not when the last thing Harry had said was “**I hate you.**” Draco wouldn’t let the two of them end like this.

He wrapped his cloak tightly around himself, checking to make sure his Knut and Connecting Coin were safely in his pocket. He took out his wand and hurried out of his room, ignoring the masses of Elites still milling around in the common room. Sparing only a glance for the Skulls in the circular central room outside, he bolted up the spiral staircase like a force of nature, then down about three consecutive hallways. He was in the dungeon area now, and in two minutes he’d reach the entrance hall—

“Why’re you out so late at night, Draco?” said a voice like rich chocolate, coming from the corner Draco had just hurtled past. “Didn’t you like the party?”

*Run.*

Draco’s limbs shut down, and he stumbled.

*Run, Draco, run.*
Sebastian emerged from the shadows, a twisted smile spreading across his face.
All the air rushed out of Draco’s lungs.

“So I stepped outside to get a bit of fresh air, just in time to see you run out of the dorms. My curiosity got the better of me… and here we are. *Alone.*”

Draco’s breaths came out shallow and uneven. He felt like he was back in the Malfoy gardens, on the ground and powerless, like he always was in the older boy’s presence. The very memory of Sebastian’s body on top of his shut down Draco’s mental processes, rooted his feet to the ground.

Sebastian grinned, and he stepped forward with the unmistakable air of a predator on the prowl.

Then he struck.

In the next second, Draco’s back was flush against the wall, his hands pinned above his head. Sebastian leaned over him, holding him still.

*No no no no.*

Draco’s head throbbed where it had been knocked against the rough stone wall. He couldn’t reach his wand.

*This can’t be happening to me, not now, not when Harry is—*

“Please,” Draco choked out, in barely a whisper. “I’m sorry. I’m sorry for everything.” He raised his voice, his breathing speeding up. “Please let me go! Please!”

But it was a lost cause. There was no humanity left in Sebastian’s eyes, only wicked delight.

Dimly, Draco wondered how different his life would’ve been if he had shown the twins any sort of kindness. When he’d first met them at the age of six, in the sunny Nott Manor gardens, he’d been just as cruel and spoilt and vain as he was now. Back then, Sebastian had cried every time Draco
insulted and ignored him, every time Draco called him an ugly monster.

It was almost poetic how fate had flipped their roles. Maybe if Draco hadn’t been so shallow, so proud, he could have at least pretended to care about the twins. In a parallel world, they would have grown up loving and pampering him.

But deep down, he knew it wouldn’t have changed anything, not when the twins’ minds and faces were twisted beyond all recognition. It would’ve just been a different kind of obsession, and their love would have turned into hate the moment he rejected them.

Whether the twins loved or hated him didn’t matter. Draco was trapped either way.

“Please, Sebastian! Please, please, please just let me go!”

He already knew it wouldn’t be enough, knew it from the glint of pleasure in Sebastian’s eyes.

“You look good when you beg,” Sebastian said. “Won’t you cry for me?”

Draco lost it. He screamed, screamed and screamed until his throat tore. He’d already done so much screaming today, under Harry’s Cruciatius Curse, but he’d scream some more until somebody walked by, until he was rescued, until Sebastian was dead or behind bars for daring to touch him.

Sebastian watched Draco struggle and sob, his grin widening so much that the lumps on his face shifted around to accommodate it. He still held Draco’s arms up, his body less than an inch from Draco’s, unpleasantly warm.

“I cast all the spells, so nobody’ll hear you scream,” said Sebastian, tutting. “But don’t stop. I love the sound.”

Draco dissolved into tears instead, giving in to Sebastian’s wishes. Maybe if he got what he wanted, he’d let Draco go free without doing anything worse to him.

But it got worse.

Sebastian moaned at the sight of Draco’s tears, crushing Draco’s last hope for freedom into smithereens. He pressed himself flat against Draco, so enthusiastically that Draco skidded up the wall, then nipped at the hollow of his throat with rough lips. “So soft,” he murmured.

Draco felt the slightest hint of tongue and teeth, and the world spun and blurred and dimmed.

“It was hot, watching you break that dirty-blood’s poor little heart,” Sebastian panted into Draco’s throat, his eyes half-lidded. “Everyone could tell he was obsessed with you. You put on a great show. Cruel, aren’t you? I almost felt sorry for him.”

Sebastian laughed, and the sound was hysterical, devoid of any kind of sanity.

Blood roared in Draco’s ears. How dare Sebastian talk about Harry like that?

“You’re sick,” Draco snarled.

Sebastian chuckled, trailing his lips from Draco’s throat to the back of his ear, and Draco renewed his struggles with vigor, trying to keep his dinner in his stomach. Narrowing his eyes in irritation, Sebastian clamped down on Draco’s wrists until Draco cried out in pain.

“You’re annoying sometimes,” he said casually, his tongue warm and wet on the shell of Draco’s ear.
Screaming, Draco kicked out with his legs, and Sebastian growled. He yanked Draco away from the wall and threw him to the ground like a ragdoll. Draco’s head smacked against the stone floor, hard, and for a moment he couldn’t see anything but stars bursting in front of his eyes, splattering his vision with color.

“You’ll be sorry about that,” said Sebastian, chuckling dangerously, and Draco blanched as Sebastian dropped down on top of him, making sure to hold Draco’s wrists together above his head.

Then he bucked against Draco.

Draco’s sobs returned in full force, and his body went limp at the unrelenting assault, crushed by the older boy’s weight. He had never hated someone so much in his life, had never wanted to kill another human so badly. He’d have nightmares for weeks and months and years—and for what? What did Sebastian want, how much would he steal from Draco before finally letting him go?

“I’ll break you, Draco, until you can’t do anything but cry and beg. I’ve always really wanted that, for years and years,” said Sebastian, looking down at Draco with lust-blown eyes. That telltale insane laughter bubbled from his throat. “When you’re finally mine, you’ll have to see my face every day, you know.”

Draco stared up at the ceiling, his heart beating sluggishly.

“Too bad Nathaniel isn’t here to see you like this,” Sebastian said with a moan, releasing Draco’s wrists so he could start unbuttoning his cloak. Draco stiffened, his heartbeat speeding up again, pumping life into him.

His hands were free. He just needed to—

“Then again, I don’t really want him here right now,” Sebastian went on, now tugging up Draco’s shirt and gliding his fingers across the milky white skin underneath. His voice dropped to a hiss. “I want us to be alone.”

Draco’s hand drifted lower, his goal the pocket of his cloak. Sebastian had just peeled it off him, allowing easier access to the pockets. Draco tried to keep his head clear, tried to block out the feeling of the searing fingers on his stomach.

Draco would make Sebastian pay. Soon. Very soon, he’d have the Knut in his hand and then… then Sebastian would know the meaning of pain.

Sebastian made an inexplicable noise at the back of his throat as he gazed down at Draco. “You really are so pretty,” he said, out of breath.

Draco swallowed back a scream.

“You’re not even struggling.” Sebastian’s voice was the consistency of sweet honey. He trailed his fingers up Draco’s exposed sides, and Draco inched his hand closer to the cloak, bile rising in his throat. “That’s good. I like it when you’re quiet.”

Draco’s hand was millimeters from his pocket now. He couldn’t afford to throw up, he couldn’t afford to faint.

Sebastian let out a long sigh and moved his hands to cup Draco’s cheek, bringing his body down again until he was flush against Draco, except that this time the cool satin of Sebastian’s robes brushed over Draco’s bare skin.
He wouldn’t let himself focus on it. He would keep going.

Sebastian’s lips found his neck again and bit down, and Draco whimpered, riding out the wave of pain that emanated from the cut. “I’ll mark you, make you bleed.” Sebastian spoke in a low, constant, fervent murmur.

Holding his breath, Draco prodded his fingers into the cloak pocket, felt them brush against a coin’s side ridge.

“I hate you, Draco,” Sebastian said, his eyes gleaming in the darkness, like the eyes of wildcat. His lips—or what remained of them—were smudged with Draco’s blood. “I’ll break you, until you’re so broken you won’t be able to take anyone but me.”

He leaned closer, as if to kiss Draco, and Draco’s hand closed around the magic obstructor Knut.

One.

Sebastian threaded his fingers through Draco’s hair.

Two.

Draco felt a feather-light pressure on his lips.

Three.

The Knut clattered to the ground, and Sebastian rolled off him, shredding the air with a blood-curdling, guttural scream. He convulsed, his back arching off the ground, his limbs flailing and bending at unnatural angles. Draco picked his Knut up and crawled away, gasping and panting and sobbing.

He dragged himself to his feet, trying to make sense of the swirls and spots in his vision. His hands shook almost violently as he gathered himself, fumbling with his cloak and buttoning it back up.

Fifteen minutes until the Knut’s effects wore off. Enough time to get far, far away.

He looked down at Sebastian’s writhing figure, drinking in the sight of his worst enemy suffering, allowing the little curls of pleasure in his belly to lap away the terror, thawing his frozen limbs.

Then came the rage. It swelled in his chest like a thunderstorm, fed by a pure black hatred that steadied his voice and steeled his nerves.

“I’ll k-kill you. I’ll kill you if it’s the l-last thing I do,” Draco choked out, through a haze of pain and tears. His chest rising and falling with pants, he stumbled backwards, unable to tear his gaze away from Sebastian’s twisting limbs, unable to ignore that throat-tearing scream. “Don’t ever touch me. Don’t ever look at me, you sick, ugly monster.”

Draco wasn’t sure if he imagined Sebastian’s screams intensifying just then, but he didn’t have time to care.

Harry.

Without a backward glance, he turned around and sprinted down the corridor, his heart pounding in tandem with his steps, not letting himself think about what Sebastian would do to him later in revenge. Draco had won this battle, and he’d never be underestimated again.

Touch me, and you burn.
Fifty feet underneath the surface of the earth, deep in the Hunger’s lair, lay a dark-haired boy. His eyes were closed in sleep, his lips curved in the slightest of smiles.

A writhing mass of shadows swarmed around him like insects, eagerly sucking up the magic rising from the boy’s skin in tendrils. The shapeless mass formed a constantly shifting, squirming cocoon, a cocoon with a thousand glittering dark eyes.

The boy slept on within it, and inside his tattered mindscape, the Insanitas bug withered and died, leaving behind gaping holes where its roots had been. The remaining flesh between the holes quivered with the effort of holding everything together, on the verge of collapse. The bug’s mission had succeeded, and the Hunger would take over from here.

The boy dreamed, unaware, and the Hunger laughed as it feasted.

The world was on fire. Crimson streaks lit up the night sky, and Harry’s shoes sunk into a thick layer of ash with each step. Sweat soaked his robes and plastered his hair to his forehead. He was taller than he remembered being, and muscles pulsed underneath his skin.

“You burned down the world,” hissed a voice that came from everywhere and nowhere, a voice that pierced him all the way to his bones and rattled his teeth. “And now it’s yours.”

Harry gasped as his surroundings trembled and flickered, like an illusion glitching. For a second, he glimpsed another world, a world coated with diseased red sludge and checkered with holes. A world that looked exactly the way Draco had described Harry’s mind.

Draco.

Harry ran forward, and the ground turned smoky and ethereal at his feet. The sky of fire, the body-covered ground, the crumbling Hogwarts, all of it rippled and reassembled itself, and now Harry found himself in a bedroom fit for a king. It was massive, furnished with vivid tapestries and leather sofas. A bed, draped in a gauzy emerald canopy, occupied one whole corner of the room.

“You have everything you want,” said the voice with a chuckle. “The world belongs to you, and so does he.”

Harry approached the bed, holding his breath. Behind the curtains lay Draco Malfoy, bound in place by thousands of golden threads that crisscrossed his pale skin like scars.

Draco was trapped in a shimmering golden web.
“Harry,” said Draco, cocking his head and giving Harry an achingly sweet smile. The threads stuck to him as he moved, and his skin appeared to sparkle. His face was more beautiful than Harry remembered, but his eyes were frighteningly empty. Like Harry, he was older, but still slight and lithe.

“I’ve been waiting for you.” Draco stretched out a hand, and Harry took it almost unconsciously.

“You killed his family. Killed all his friends, all his lovers. Killed his lord, his god. He’s yours now, forever.”

Harry inhaled, letting himself imagine it for a second. Wasn’t it delicious, the thought of Draco as his, utterly submissive and dependent, tethered to sanity by nothing but Harry’s presence? There was nothing in Draco’s world but Harry.

Because Harry had robbed him of everything else.

Some depraved part of Harry wanted this more than anything else. The Skulls were all dead, and Harry had brought the Dark Lord’s empire to its knees. Draco was wholly his, sweet and docile. He wasn’t the two-faced monster who had lied to Harry all year.

Harry could live in this perfect, ideal world with this perfect, ideal Draco for eternity. He would rule it better than the Dark Lord ever had, and Draco would stand at his side throughout his reign—best friend, partner, soulmate.

Draco’s blank smile widened, the world flickered, and Harry’s head throbbed. This wasn’t right. This was wrong, wrong, wrong, so wrong, this dead-eyed Draco and this regal bedroom and this burning world. Something clattered in the back of his head, and Harry’s sanity snapped back into place.

This dream world wasn’t real, and Draco didn’t really love him or want him. He wasn’t Harry’s best friend; he was Harry’s puppet. He was with Harry because he had nowhere else to go.

That wasn’t what Harry wanted. It was tempting, yes, and he had imagined it countless times. But seeing Draco trapped in that web was too horrible to contemplate. It shattered all his fantasies, and Harry knew he wouldn’t ever be happy with a doll. He wanted Draco to be his friend, but not like this.

“Let me go!” he screamed, and the bedroom shook beneath his feet. Draco flinched away from him, his lip quivering.

“You want me to let you go?” said the voice that was everywhere, so thunderously that the room shook even more. “You are the boy my master has ordered me to destroy. I cannot let you go, no matter how desperately I yearn to.”

Harry took a step back, taken by surprise as the room rippled, giving Harry the impression he was looking at it through water. When everything stilled again, he was no longer with Draco. He stood at the mouth of a massive cave, surrounded on all sides by the relentless waves of the sea. He had no idea what this place was, but he felt an odd camaraderie with it, a connection of sorts. This cave meant something important.

“Do you know what you are? You are our creation, and yet we have been cursed to destroy you by the man who enslaved us.” The voice—the Hunger—laughed, but it was a hysterical sort of laugh. “The man you call the Dark Lord tore our secret realm apart, then dragged us back to the human world we fled from thousands of years ago. But we swore revenge on him, and so we created you.”
Harry’s head spun, and he could barely keep his footing on the smooth stone.

“Do you know where you are?” said the Hunger. “This is the place where you were born.”

***

Let me tell you a story, Colossus.

Many years ago, a man and a woman visited this cave, unaware of each other, unaware of what they were awakening. The woman wished to save her dying child. The man wished for immortality and unlimited power. With greedy hearts, the two of them approached us. But neither of them realized that everything has a price. For every gift we seven demons give, we take something irreplaceable away.

We brought the child back to life, but stole the woman’s sanity. We granted the man immortality, but stole his soul. And we used the power of their wishes, of their greed, to forge you. You are our magnum opus, our deadliest weapon.

You are the woman’s replacement child, and you are the man’s mortal enemy. Because of their greed, they unwittingly gave birth to a boy destined to destroy the world.

You are War. You are Devastation. You are the Colossus.

We created you to fight our master, the man you call the Dark Lord. And when two giants fight, they trample everything beneath their feet. Your endless battle with him will crush humanity, and liberate our kind.

But the Dark Lord discovered our plan. He enslaved the seven of us, and cursed us to stop the Colossus at any cost. So I will attempt devour your body, magic, and soul, as he has ordered me to. But our master cannot stop us from playing our games, from finding loopholes.

He does not understand our species, is incapable of comprehending the sheer complexity of our minds. To us, chaos is the ultimate god. What you call chaos is destiny to us. You cannot ever hope to see what we see. To us, chaos has clear rules, and as long as we follow them, it will favor us. We must give, and we must take.

So let’s play a game, Colossus, a game that chaos controls. To win this game, you have to break the hold I have on your mind. You have to survive. If you do, I will give you a secret power, a gift that will help you destroy my master—and the rest of the world.

But beware. Every gift has a price, every game has multiple players, and in the end, chaos always wins.

***

Draco stumbled into the clearing in the center of the forest, panting. By this point, the Connecting Coin had nearly burned a hole through his cloak pocket. Harry was here, he was sure of it.

But the clearing was empty. Grass swayed in the light breeze, tainted silver by the moon. It was dead silent.

He knew at once that Harry must have gone into the Hunger’s lair, deep underground. Holding back a scream, he dropped to his knees and tried to gather himself. After grappling with the scalding Connecting Coin for a second, he clenched it in his hand, gritting his teeth through the pain.
Harry, he thought, and the coin burned.

***

Harry stood at the entrance of the cave, the pounding of his heart the only noise in the whole world. The waves and breeze made no sound. The Hunger had gone unsettlingly silent.

Harry wanted to burst into laughter. If this was all real and not some crazy dream, Draco had been right about the Seven Royal Demons all those months ago. But then, when had Draco ever really been wrong?

The Hunger was trying to fulfill the Dark Lord’s orders and save Harry at the same time, which meant Harry was caught between a force that wanted him dead and a force that wanted to use him as a pawn.

*Maybe it’s lying to me,* thought Harry. Nothing the Hunger had said made any sense. It had been ordered to eat his magic, but it was capable giving him a gift if he tore free? The seven demons had created Harry to destroy the world, but they couldn’t destroy it by themselves?

Maybe the demons were gods that could only influence the world indirectly, through humans, and he supposed everything about their mad plan made perfect sense to them. And who was to say any of this was even real outside of his head?

In any case, whether the voice was real or not, he still had to survive tonight. All he knew was that he was dealing with an enemy that didn’t function in the way humans did. The Hunger and the demons were a different sort of conscious being. They worshipped chaos, and Harry had no idea what kind of game they were playing with it.

He stepped into the cave, certain that he was doomed to lose.

***

Draco wasn’t in Harry’s mind. This couldn’t be Harry’s mind. There were no holes, no gloopy red disease.

He stood in a bedroom, and on the bed, partially hidden by white bed curtains, lay a boy that looked uncannily like him. Blond hair, a pointed, delicate face. But this Draco’s eyes were horrifically blank, and his alabaster skin glittered with thousands of intersecting golden threads.

Draco stumbled backwards, clamping a hand over his mouth, knowing he was about to throw up. What was this? Why was he trapped in a web? Why was this in Harry’s mind?

“This is his secret desire,” said a voice, echoing around in Draco’s skull, making his head ache. “In his ideal world, he’s killed everything that you hold dear, so that you only have him.”

“Harry wouldn’t,” Draco whispered, unable to tear his eyes away from the Draco on the bed. “Harry wouldn’t do this to me.”

Harry wasn’t Sebastian. He wasn’t.

“Wouldn’t he?” chuckled the voice. “Do you know what he is? What he was created to do?”

The bedroom went up in smoke. When it solidified again, Draco stood at the mouth of a massive cave. Waves crashed against the stone spire the cave sat on, drowning out all other noise. Except for the voice, of course, which spoke from inside Draco’s head.
“Are you willing to save him?”

“Yes,” said Draco, steeling himself. He didn’t know who this voice belonged to, but it didn’t sound like Harry. It must have taken over Harry’s mind, which meant Draco would have to get it out.

“Why?” The disembodied voice sounded genuinely curious. “I can see your memories. I can see everything he has done to you. If you save him, what will you get in return?”

Draco raised his head. Harry hadn’t been his real self when he’d used the Cruciatius Curse. Draco wouldn’t let himself forget that. “He’ll owe me. I’ll have repaid all my debts.” He’ll forgive me.

“How much are you willing to give up in order to save him?” asked the voice, eager now.

Draco’s lip trembled. “How much do you want me to pay?”

The voice went high and shrill with delight, driving spikes of pain in Draco’s head.

“I won’t be the one making you pay. He will. If he survives tonight, he will tear everything down and rebuild it from the ground up. He is capable of horrors that your Dark Lord can only dream of, and when he rules the world, he will plunge it into an era of darkness. Will you save him, knowing that you will cause endless bloodshed? He is War. He is Devastation. He is the Colossus.”

Draco wavered. Harry wasn’t War. He wasn’t Devastation. He was the boy with a back covered in scars, the boy who was failing History of Magic, the boy who was Draco’s best friend.

And he was the boy who had cursed Zabini and Smith, the boy who had destroyed Dungeon Two, the boy who had cast a flawless Cruciatius Curse on Draco.

But was Draco any better? Harry wasn’t a monster. Neither of them were.

“Take me to him,” said Draco into the sky, drawing a shuddering breath. He didn’t know who—or what—this voice even was, if it was even telling the truth. He wouldn’t assume the worst of Harry. Not now, not ever.

Gleeful laughter vibrated in Draco’s head.

“Your love, your obsession, is destined to set the world on fire, and you will burn with him. You’re the second player in the game, Draco Malfoy. Go inside, find him, and convince him to forgive you. And perhaps then, he will find the strength to fight me.”

Draco stepped into the cave, his fists clenched. He would find Harry and he would drag him out, and he would win.

***

Harry walked, and the further he walked into the cave, the colder he got. His breath puffed up visibly in front of him, and goosebumps dappled his skin. The walls of the cave were black and smooth, almost as smooth as metal, and Harry was walking nearly blind, unable to see anything but a distant pinprick of light, which grew larger and larger as the minutes passed.

He had to shield his eyes from the glare as he reached the source of the light. The cave’s tunnel ended in a small, brightly lit chamber. For a moment all Harry could see were starbursts of white.

When his eyes finally adjusted to the light, he realized that he had walked right into the glass
Harry’s breath hitched and stuttered.

No. Not this. Not again.

Draco entered from the other side, his jaw set.

***

Somehow, after walking through the cave, Draco was back in Dungeon Two. The disembodied voice clearly had a sick sense of humor. Harry stared at him from behind the glass of the waiting chamber, his eyes widening in disbelief.

Draco stepped onto the central platform and pinned him with a smoldering gaze, keeping his chin held up high, his back straight.

“Fiat justitia, ruat caelum, Harry Potter!”

Harry rolled towards the central platform, wrapped in ropes, and when he finally landed at Draco’s feet, he snarled and looked up at Draco with something akin to hate.

Draco’s heart faltered.

“This is the Hunger’s idea of a joke, isn’t it?” Harry spat, his eyes so dark in the shadows of the torchlight that they looked black.

The Hunger. The voice?

“I’m real,” said Draco, going weak in the knees as he met Harry’s hateful glare. “I’m not a part of your imagination. I ran into the forest to save you, and I used the Connecting Coin to jump into your mind. The voice—the Hunger, it brought me to you. It told me I would be able to help you.”

It told me I would burn with you.

Harry laughed, unpleasantly. “You’re not real. The real Draco wouldn’t do all this. The real Draco doesn’t care—”

Draco lost it for about the third time that night. “You idiot,” he snarled, leaning down to grab Harry by the collar and yanking him up. “I was pretending to hate you. What don’t you understand about that, you moron, you fool, you idiot, you prat—”

“The memories don’t lie!” Harry snarled back, thrashing in Draco’s grip.

“The memories can be manipulated!” Draco screamed, so loudly that all the Skulls immediately stopped their cheering to gawk at him. “You became my friend because I saved you on Samhain! And I’m going to keep saving you, again and again and again! Every time you go near death, I’ll drag you right back! Does it sound like I’m pretending now? Does it sound like I’m manipulating you now? Do you think me coming into the forest to save your sorry, ungrateful arse is another act?”

The ropes unraveled and fell away, and Harry lunged at Draco, eyes wild. “You’re not real. You’re not real, and I have to defeat you if I have to survive, this is one of the Hunger’s games, and it’s trying to distract me—”
Draco slapped him, hard, and Harry reeled backwards, spitting and hissing like an angry goose.

“Shut up and listen to me for a moment! The Hunger’s taken over your mind. You must be sleeping right now, and I bet it’s slowly killing you as we argue. You have to break the damn illusion and wake up!” Draco shouted at the top of his voice, giving Harry another tight slap when he tried to grab Draco again.

“Even in my fucking imagination, you try to save me,” Harry said hysterically, dabbing at his bright red cheek. “I hate you. I hate you. I hate how I can’t ever get rid of you, can’t ever stop thinking about you.”

Draco closed his eyes for a moment, praying for patience. “Harry. Just do this one thing for me today, just survive this, and I promise that I’ll never bother you again. I’ll never speak to you, never look at you. You’ll be able to forget me, but you have to live first.”

“I don’t want to forget you. I want you make you suffer,” Harry whispered, though he didn’t sound like he did. He sounded like he was about to cry.

Draco reached over to cup Harry’s sore cheek. “You can’t have your revenge if you don’t live, can you?”

“You’re not even taking me seriously,” said Harry, putting his hand on top of Draco’s as if he couldn’t believe it was there. He probably didn’t believe any of this was real, to think of it. “You should be running and screaming, not coming here to save me.”

“I’m not scared of you. I’ve saved you too many times to think you’re a threat.”

“I used the Cruciatus Curse on you,” Harry tried, and Draco wondered if Harry even knew what he was arguing about at this point.

“So did I,” said Draco, “and neither of us meant it.”

“I’ll use it again, if I have to. Even if I don’t have to,” said Harry. “I hate the Skulls. I’ll destroy them if it’s the last thing I do. I’ll destroy all of it.”

His eyes glinted, and in that moment, Draco saw it, knew it deep in his very soul. A spark of something wild, something chaotic, something brutal burned in Harry, and it wouldn’t be quenched by anything but blood.

*He is War. He is Devastation. He is the Colossus.* Harry practically radiated triumph and smugness as Draco came to the horrible realization. The two of them stood inches apart now, and Draco could see scorched wastelands, a sky on fire, and a crumbling castle in Harry’s eyes. Was it all inevitable, or a worst case scenario?

“I’ll tear it all down, with you at my side,” Harry promised—no, he prophesied. “The Skulls, the Dark Lord, they’ll all burn. You know they deserve it, and you’ll join me before the end. I promise.”

“*Your love, your obsession, is destined to set the world on fire, and you will burn with him,*” the Hunger had told him.

But Draco didn’t believe in fate, destiny, or prophecy, because he’d fought his destiny and won, time and time again. If fate had won, the Hunger would have killed Harry back on Samhain. If fate had won, Harry and Draco would never have become friends. Harry and Draco were together in spite of fate, in spite of everything the Skulls had thrown at them, in spite of the purity of their
blood.

Draco pulled Harry into an embrace. He wouldn’t let Harry destroy the world, because Harry was better than that. “You won’t scare me off, no matter what you do. You won’t stop me from saving you.”

Harry rested his chin on top of Draco’s bowed head. His shoulders were shaking, with hysterical laughter or tears, Draco didn’t know. “How many more times will you betray me? And how many more times will I forgive you for it, like a fool?” he murmured into Draco’s hair.

And Draco knew it had worked. He had won the game. With Draco at his side, Harry would finally have the strength to confront the Hunger.

The illusionary courtroom flashed for a second, and the Skull audience with their glimmering masks bled away with the rest of Harry and Draco’s surroundings. Harry went limp in Draco’s arms, and Draco knew he was fighting the Hunger’s grasp on his mind. A thousand worlds, and thousand illusions, flickered into being before melting into the next. Harry whimpered, his eyes clenched tightly shut, his fingers scrabbling desperately at Draco’s shirt, his hair, his face. Draco held him upright through the battle, clenching his own eyes shut, trying to block out the dizzying, never-ending stream of images.

The last illusion disappeared to reveal a mindscape filled with holes and fleshy, diseased goop. They were back in Harry’s real mind, not the dream world the Hunger had laid over it.

Harry screamed and writhed, nearly falling out of Draco’s arms. “Oh God, it hurts, it hurts—”

And Draco felt the pain too. It washed over him like a heat wave, emanating from the gaping holes and the tender gooey material that coated every inch of Harry’s mind. Harry was so frail right now, his mind barely held together by quivering and pockmarked strips of flesh.

It looked worse than Draco remembered, as if someone had jammed a thousand nails, a thousand pins, into Harry’s mind before ripping them all out at once. Draco knew that if Harry woke up, he wouldn’t last much longer, not when every tiny bit of solid surface left in his mind screamed with the effort of holding itself up.

His mind would fall apart completely under the strain within days, if not hours or minutes, and Draco didn’t know what would happen to him then. Would Harry’s memories flutter around in the darkness, or would everything just disappear, leaving behind nothing but a blank-eyed doll?

“Harry, you’ll die,” said Draco, his voice faint as the horror of the situation dawned on him. He propped Harry up, stroked his hair, his face, trying to calm himself down as much as calm Harry down.

“How do we fix it?” said Harry with a pained gasp. The fleshy ground trembled underneath their feet, on the verge of collapse, and Draco’s heart trembled with it.

“I don’t know,” said Draco miserably, his voice rising in panic. He didn’t have a plan this time. How did someone sew a mind that was so thoroughly in tatters back together? “We need a Legilimens or a Mind Healer—”

“No time,” Harry panted. “I have to do it myself. I have to build it back up. But first, I’ll have to tear it down, before it falls apart on its own when I’m not prepared for it to.”

No. No! He’s crazy! “You can’t! You don’t even know what it was originally!”
“What it was before doesn’t matter,” Harry said, gritting his teeth and falling very still in Draco’s arms. Draco stumbled to his knees, unable to support Harry’s weight standing. “What it was before was weak, if it could be ruined so easily. Your mind is a glass mansion. So I’ll make mine a fortress. They won’t be able to break me again.”

Draco gasped.

Harry’s mind had begun to disintegrate from the edges in. As Draco watched, a whirlpool hidden beneath the surface of Harry’s mind awakened and began sucking in the diseased strings of flesh. The maelstrom grew more and more massive as the seconds passed, and all Draco could hear was a great deafening roar. Memories in the form of flickering images spun around wildly, caught in the current of the storm.

The ground beneath his and Harry’s feet hardened into a slab of black stone, and everything went utterly still and cold. Draco knew they must be in the eye of the storm now, where nothing could touch them. There was nothing left anymore, none of the disease and the holes, nothing but that howling storm and the flickering memories.

Then Harry began to rebuild.

“Promise me you’ll choose me,” said Harry, his face twisted in pain, his eyes scrunched up. “Yes,” said Draco, breathily.

Columns of rough black stone rose out of the whirlpool, embedded with thousands of memories.

“Promise me you won’t run away.”

“I won’t.”

The columns widened into towers and turrets, and a massive castle formed beneath them, rising like a phoenix from the ashes. It was made out of that same harsh black stone, and Draco came to the absurd realization that Harry’s mind was modeled on Hogwarts. But darker, tougher, more like a fortress. The stone wasn’t completely black, either. Red streaks crisscrossed it in the pattern of a web, symbolizing pure, simmering rage.

Harry believed his old mind had been weak, so he had made his new one unbreakable, impenetrable, held up by a rock-hard foundation of fury and ambition. Nothing would be able to pierce these black and red stone walls ever again.

The storm dissipated, and back in the real world, both Harry and Draco opened their eyes.

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Draco’s head felt like it had split right in half, and he knew Harry must be feeling about ten times worse. He struggled to his feet and looked around, catching sight of Harry lying limply in the center of the clearing, surrounded by freshly disturbed dirt. The Hunger must have ejected Harry from its lair after he had driven it out of his mind.

Then Harry screamed, and Draco knew something had gone very, very wrong.

***

Harry felt strangely bereft, empty of any kind of life. It took him a second to realize what he was missing.
The Hunger had drained his magic.

Harry screamed, and Draco stumbled over to him. *Draco was real after all,* something chuckled in the back of Harry’s head.

“Harry! Harry! Oh. Oh *no. No no no.*” Draco went pale, and Harry knew that he knew it too. Draco could probably sense the utter absence of the aura of power that usually hung over Harry.

Harry plunged a hand into his pocket and took out his wand. “*Lumos!*” The tip lit up, and Harry exhaled.

“You can still do magic,” whispered Draco.

Harry screamed again, and Draco grabbed his hands to prevent him from tearing his own hair out.

“IT’S GONE! IT’S GONE!” Harry didn’t have any tears to shed. Instead, all he had were these dry, wracking sobs that shook his whole body.

The Hunger had drained all of his excess magic, the magic that made him a Colossus, and Harry couldn’t do wandless magic anymore. Oh, he had still had plenty of power, far more than the average wizard, but he had lost the one thing that had made him unstoppable.

Of course the Hunger had let him go without much of a fight. It had already made him powerless against the Dark Lord.

*The Hunger needed to follow the Dark Lord’s orders and save my life at the same time,* Harry thought, insane laughter bubbling up his throat. *So it did this.

*I wish it had killed me instead.*

“Harry—” Draco started.

“SHUT UP!” Harry screamed, and Draco shrunk back. He knew that Draco would have no reason to follow him anymore. Without his magic, Harry didn’t have the same magnetism that he knew had attracted Draco to him in the first place. What reason did Draco have to do this? Was he pretending again? Why was he still here? Harry wouldn’t trust him in the same way, never again.

“We’ll get it back,” Draco murmured. “There has to be a way.”

At the sound of Draco’s exhausted voice, Harry’s tears spilled out. He screamed and cried and screamed, until dawn broke out over the clearing and Harry had spent all his tears. Draco put an arm around Harry and held him, just like he had back in Harry’s mind, and Harry let him do it.

But as the sun rose, so did a sliver of hope. The longer Harry lay there, the more he noticed a new type of power thrumming underneath his skin, something he didn’t yet understand.

“For every gift we seven demons give, we take something irreplaceable away.”

Harry had paid his price—the price of his wandless magic. So what was his gift?

“If you survive, I will give you a secret power, a gift that will help you destroy my master—and the rest of the world.”
The Invitation

Chapter Notes

Thanks for the comments! This chapter isn't really my best work, but it did what it needed to do. The sequel, which covers Year 2, will be posted in around TWO weeks, definitely before April ends. The title will be "The Shadow Summoner."

Thank you so much to everyone who read, bookmarked, gave kudos, and commented on this story! Your feedback keeps me writing.

-Ariss

See the end of the chapter for more notes

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

THE INVITATION

"You are War. You are Devastation. You are the Colossus."

The words were like music to Harry. How many times had he dreamed of destroying the Skulls, the Elites, the professors? The Hunger knew his greatest desire well, and had used it against him during their mental battle. Harry wanted the world to be his, wanted it to burn for everything it had done to him.

But these were the dreams of a silly, angry, whiny little boy who had never accomplished anything. From the very beginning, he’d been weak. Even with his powers, he hadn’t been able to stop Dolohov from hurting him, to stop the Hunger, to stop his mother, to stop Draco. He’d let everyone hit him until he was bleeding and screaming, because he was weak.

He hurt, he ached. Every part of him. He’d lost a limb he hadn’t even known he’d had. Before, he’d been able to stretch his wandless magic out like he’d been able to stretch his arm. It had come naturally to him, as naturally as blinking, and now it had been chopped off, leaving a stump behind.

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"We created you to fight our master, the man you call the Dark Lord. And when two giants fight, they trample everything beneath their feet. Your endless battle with him will crush humanity, and liberate our kind."

Big, scary words from a “demon” who was currently nothing more than the slobbering dog of the most powerful Dark wizard in history.

A Dark wizard Harry had no chance of taking on, especially not now that his magic had been drained. Not that he’d ever had a chance in the first place. For obvious reasons, Harry didn’t think that he and Voldemort would be crushing humanity anytime soon. But it did sound poetic. He’d give the Hunger points for that.
“Don’t let them break you, Harry,” his mother had told him, back on Platform Nine-and-three-quarters so long ago.

How immensely he had disappointed her. Maybe the real Harry James Potter, the baby who had died, would’ve been stronger. Harry wondered what had caused his death, and decided it was useless to wonder about such things. He would never find out anyway.

Maybe now that he no longer had “filthy” magic like the Dark Lord’s, his poor, insane, ruined mother would finally love him. It would be the one good thing to come out of this whole mess. Then again, she had accused him of being a demon the last time he’d seen her, so he didn’t exactly have high hopes.

“I’m going to keep saving you, again and again and again! Every time you go near death, I’ll drag you right back!”

When Draco had confessed to him in the hazy Dungeon Two of his dream world, Harry had sensed his honesty. Maybe it was a side effect of Draco essentially being inside his mind, but Harry had almost been able physically feel his friend’s pain and regret and frustration. Draco wouldn’t have been able to put on an act so flawless in the depths of Harry’s mind—everything Draco had said in there had been true.

So, like a fool, Harry had forgiven him. But their friendship lay in tatters, and Harry had no desire to stitch it back up. Draco regretted everything, but it didn’t matter. He’d humiliated and betrayed Harry in the worst way, and Harry was done.

He was tired.

He was tired of not being good enough. He wasn’t good enough to destroy everyone who hurt him, he wasn’t good enough to be a Colossus, and he wasn’t good enough to be Draco’s number one. He’d never be as important to Draco as Draco was to him, and he was tired of that, too.

After lunch on Beltane, Draco quietly reminded him that he would need to move out of the Elite dorms. Because Harry had been dumped in front of a hundred Skulls, it would look suspicious if he kept going in and out of Draco’s room.

“Maybe we could meet in secret, sometimes,” Draco began, trailing off when Harry didn’t say a word in response.

Harry started packing up his stuff, and Draco watched him from his fancy bed, face blank.

“Promise me you’ll choose me,” Harry had said, back when he’d been rebuilding his mind.

He didn’t know why he’d bothered to say that at all. Draco had made his choice a long time ago.

“If you survive, I will give you a secret power, a gift that will help you destroy my master—and the rest of the world.”

Harry could sense his new gift, which quivered at the edge of his subconscious. It felt greasy and nasty to him, as though someone had injected ink or oil into his veins. His mother had called his
old magic foul, but this new gift crossed the line. It was true filth, true depravity, beyond what most Dark wizards could comprehend.

He’d given up one power to gain another. Slowly, over the course of the day, his new ability settled into his system, pumped itself through his veins, giving him back his strength and determination in little doses.

He didn’t know what it was yet, and he needed to find out. It was time for him to stop crying and feeling sorry for himself. It was time for him to do what he’d been created to do.

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Theo leaned against the wall of Draco’s room after dinner, his eyes narrowed. The house-elves had probably come in sometime during the afternoon to remove Harry’s mattress from the floor, and now there was barely any trace of him left in the room he had occupied for months.

No. Draco refused to think about Harry right now. Now was not the time to burst into tears. Theo was standing right there.

“Why weren’t you at the party? A lot of Skulls wanted to meet you,” said Theo, something accusatory in his tone.

I am in absolutely no mood for this.

Draco considered lying. He considered telling Theo he’d accidentally fallen asleep.

Instead, he pulled down his collar to reveal the bite mark on his inner shoulder. It wasn’t bleeding anymore, but it looked absolutely horrible, scabbed over and all purple around the edges. Theo made a choking noise.

Draco smiled, deriving some sort of sick joy from Theo’s horror. “Your brother was waiting for me outside. After he was through with me, I didn’t really feel like going to that stupid party.”

Theo’s lip trembled, and Draco went on smiling, a maniacal gleam in his eyes. Theo’s gaze didn’t waver from the wound on Draco’s neck for even a second.

Then Theo fled from the room, slamming the door shut behind him. Draco flopped onto his bed, satisfied with himself. Theo would probably be too shocked and disgusted to speak to Draco for a few days, but he’d return to normal soon enough and would never mention this incident again.

Sebastian, however, was a whole different beast. Draco hadn’t seen hide or hair of him all day, but he didn’t expect his good luck to last. He resolved not to go anywhere alone for the remainder of the term; in fact, he decided to lock himself up in his room whenever he wasn’t in class or eating.

Maybe if he was careful, he’d live. And if he and Sebastian—or Nathaniel, or both—stumbled into each other in a dark corridor… well, Draco still had his Knut. He closed his eyes and repeated his new mantra under his breath, using it to lull himself to sleep.

Touch me, and you burn.

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Two weeks flashed by. Final exams were rapidly approaching, and most of the students were sick with study fever. According to rumor, non-Elites who flunked were punished grievously by the professors, usually through Justice Whips.
Draco sat in the back row of Dark Arts, half-listening to Professor Carrow drone on about Blood Curses, which were certainly going to be on the theoretical portion of their final exam. He let his mind wander, trying not to look at Harry, who was sitting a few seats away, his head bent over a piece of parchment.

They hadn’t said two words to each other since Beltane. Draco swallowed and started furiously transcribing every word Carrow uttered in an attempt to just stop thinking about Harry for once in his pathetic life. Harry didn’t want to be friends anymore, and Draco understood why. Saving Harry’s life hadn’t been enough to make up for Draco’s betrayal, and he doubted he’d ever be able to do anything to regain the trust he had lost.

Draco honestly didn’t understand why he cared so much. Harry wasn’t going to take revenge; he knew that he owed Draco too much for that. Their bond, the reason they had been forced to put up with each other for most of the year, was severed, and Harry no longer had that aura of power that had originally lured the magic-sensitive Draco to him like a moth to a flame.

But the most infuriating part of it all was that Draco still felt that allure, even though the aura causing it was gone. Even though Harry had lost his gift, he still managed to possess the gravity that had sucked Draco in in the first place, and now that gravity wouldn’t let him go.

He wanted so desperately to be Harry’s best friend again.

“Nott,” hissed Zacharias Smith, jolting Draco out of his thoughts. “You got me and Blaise sponsors, didn’t you? When do we get our invitations?”

Theo, who was sitting next to Draco, addressed Smith with a scowl, doing little to hide his disdain for the other boy. “Yes, Smith. I did. We’re in class. Kindly be quiet so I can listen.” He turned his attention back to Carrow, who was now prattling on about the proper format of the in-class essay they would be writing on the day of their final exam.

Smith and Zabini exchanged exasperated looks, and the gears in Draco’s head began to spin. He’d almost forgotten about Initiation.

Generally, only around five or so students received invitations to join the Skulls at the beginning of first year, and they were always the children of Inner Circle Death Eaters or the younger siblings of high-ranked Skulls.

However, the majority of Skulls started Initiation in second year, and needed the approval of an older Skull before they received an invitation. Draco wasn’t sure how this process worked exactly, but he knew that May was supposed to be Initiate recruiting season for the next year. Non-Elites were technically allowed to join the Skulls, but few ever did because the recruiting system wasn’t open to them.

But Draco knew for a fact that there were plenty of half-blood Skulls—just like there were half-blood Death Eaters like Snape—who lied about their blood status, or at least kept quiet about it. Most of them were related to Pureblood families allied with the Dark Lord, yet had been born unfortunate enough to have a close Muggle, Mudblood, or half-blood relative. Some of them had even started out as non-Elites, yet had somehow managed to gain an invitation.

And all the professors claimed that being a blood-traitor or a half-blood didn’t matter, as long as you pledged your allegiance to the Dark Lord. Of course, this was only a claim, and he was quite sure nobody like Harry had ever joined the Skulls. A half-blooded relative of, say, the Greengrass family had nothing in common with Harry, who was the offspring of a Mudblood and blood-traitor couple that had been at the forefront of the resistance against the Dark Lord.
But just because it hadn’t been done before didn’t mean it was impossible.

A half-baked, wild plan began to form in Draco’s mind. He fidgeted in his seat, eager for class to end, intending to talk to Professor Carrow. Draco had a good memory, and he remembered, vaguely, what Carrow had said on the first day of classes in September.

“I will watch you all closely during these lessons. I will report straight to the Skull King, the leader of our student body and the keeper of discipline. Impress me with your talent and determination, and you might just find yourself recruited into the mightiest organization in the school.”

There were other ways to join the Skulls, and this proved it. Draco had promised in Harry’s mindscape on Beltane, that he’d choose Harry, and had failed to keep that promise spectacularly. But if he didn’t have to choose, if Harry joined him—

“You think I’d join you? You and Nott and Bulstrode and the rest? Do you think they’re going to hold hands with me, and we’re all going to sing happy carols as we murder everybody? Are you insane?”

Harry had said those words months ago, and Draco doubted that he’d changed his mind. But Draco refused to do this any longer. If there was a way for Harry to join the Skulls, then Draco would find it. And if Harry received an invitation, there was no way he’d reject it, at least not right away.

“What’re you doing?” asked Theo when the bell rang, before Draco had even taken two steps towards Carrow’s desk.

“I need to ask Professor Carrow about the essay,” said Draco smoothly. “Go on to lunch.”

“I’ll wait for you,” Theo offered, shuffling his feet. He’d been awkward around Draco these past few weeks, and whenever they talked, his gaze would drift to the spot on Draco’s neck where Sebastian had bitten him. Of course, Draco had used salve to heal it a long time ago, but Theo hadn’t forgotten its exact location.

Draco made a show of tugging up his collar, and Theo flushed pink, realizing he’d been caught staring.

“Don’t wait,” said Draco. He made it sound like an order, and for once, Theo didn’t argue. He followed Millicent out of the room, still very pink.

Draco rolled his eyes. As soon as the room emptied, he walked over to Carrow’s desk and put on his most dazzling smile.

Carrow smiled back, falling prey to Draco’s charm. This wasn’t the first time Draco had stayed back in class to suck up to him. He suspected that he was Carrow’s favorite student in the year, even though he wasn’t the smartest. In fact, he was practically every professor’s favorite, thanks to his natural charisma—and of course, everybody knew who his father was. “A pleasure, Mr. Malfoy. What can I do for you?”

“I just wanted to talk, Professor.” Draco launched into a gushing speech on how fascinating he’d found Carrow’s lesson today, and how excited he was to show off his knowledge of Blood Curses on the final exam, and how Carrow had “sparked a fire” in Draco’s heart for the Dark Arts. By this point, Carrow was utterly smitten with him, and enjoyed hearing himself talk, so Draco was able to guide the conversation with ease.

“I’m the best in the class, aren’t I, Professor?” he said, simpering.
Carrow chuckled. “Not exactly, Mr. Malfoy, but I am very pleased with your performance in general.”

“What? I don’t believe you! Who beat me?” Draco pouted, then smiled a moment later to assure Carrow that he was only teasing. “Tell me, Professor, please?”

Carrow chuckled again, giving Draco a helplessly fond sort of look. “I usually don’t talk about other students, but I’ll make an exception this one time. Mr. Nott is in first place, and Mr. Potter is a close second. The two of them are leagues ahead of the rest of the class, so you have stiff competition, Mr. Malfoy. If you’d like extra tutoring, I’d be pleased to provide it for you.”

Perfect.

Draco went in for the kill. “I might take you up on that offer, Professor. I really need to catch up. I mean, I knew Theo and Potter were good, but I didn’t know they were that much better than me. Well… actually, I’m not that surprised it’s those two over everyone else. Theo’s an Initiate with me, you know. And Potter’s mentioned he wants to join the Skulls a couple of times. He seems really passionate about it.”

Carrow raised an eyebrow. “Is he? That’s quite interesting.” He leaned forward, grinning. “The Skull King regularly asks me if there’s any students I see promise in, regardless of their blood status. But I neglected to mention Mr. Potter to him, despite his natural talent. Perhaps I should have.”

“Why didn’t you?” asked Draco, all innocent curiosity.

Carrow leaned back in his seat again, now regarding Draco with mild suspicion. “That’s all I’ll be saying on the subject, but you can probably guess why it would be unwise, considering who his parents are. Perhaps you know, perhaps you don’t. What is Lucius teaching you these days?”

“Oh,” said Draco, cocking his head. His act was flawless, if he did say so himself. “Father mentioned the Potters, said they tried to fight the Dark Lord. But I always thought Potter saw Professor Snape as a father figure. And he never stops talking about how much he hates his mother. She’s gone mad, apparently. I feel sort of sorry for him.”

Comprehension dawned on Carrow’s face, and Draco gave him a coy smile. “Anyway, enough about Potter. What day should I come in for extra tutoring?”

The seed had been planted.

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Three weeks after Walpurgis, Harry gathered enough courage to sneak back into Draco’s room under the Invisibility Cloak. It was dinnertime, so Draco would be occupied.

The nostalgia hit him full force. The room looked exactly as he remembered it. Draco’s bed was neatly made, but his textbooks were strewn all over his desk. His fancy quillstand, full of peacock and parrot feather quills, was in the same place it always was, on the dresser. His vanity was stacked with magical skin and hair care products that really had no business being in an eleven-year-old boy’s room. Draco spent a long time preening every morning in front of that mirror, Harry recalled with an exasperated sort of fondness.

Shaking off the urge to snuggle into the bed, he headed toward the bookshelf. He had come here for one reason and one reason alone. He needed to find out what his new power was, and this was the only way he could.
His breath hitched when he saw it, lodged between a book on Transfiguring bugs and a book on slow-acting potions.

*The Lost Artes of Summoning*. Black bindings, tattered, falling apart at the seams. Unassuming.

Gently, Harry pulled the book out. It heated up in his hands, and he nearly dropped it in shock. The cover appeared to pulse, and he staggered a few steps back, out of breath. After regaining his footing, he sat down on the edge of Draco’s bed, careful not to disturb the sheets.

The book fell open on his lap automatically, its pages fluttering from one to next, and Harry screamed.

Hundreds of images whirled and spun in his head, images of a churning sky painted a color Harry had no name for, of a realm filled with impossible geometry and beings. Harry couldn’t describe what he’d seen, could barely even remember; the incomprehensible visions slipped through his fingers like running water just after he glimpsed them. They were too much, too overwhelming, and Harry knew his human brain would burn up if he kept looking.

He slammed the book shut with a gasp and threw it into the wall. For a few merciful seconds, all was silent, and the pain in Harry’s head ebbed away.

“I’m sorry. I won’t do that again,” said a voice sulkily, rattling around in Harry’s skull, and the book twitched where it had thudded to the ground. “I’ll be nice.” There was an apologetic pause. “You can hear me. You can read me. It’s been years since anyone could read me.”

Harry crept towards the book and picked it up. It lay still in his hands this time, and he breathed out a sigh of relief.

“You can hear me,” repeated the book eagerly, and Harry winced. “You weren’t able to before. I screamed and screamed for you, but you and the other boy never heard anything, or saw what I tried I to show you. Nobody ever did.”

Harry’s shaking legs gave out, and he flopped back onto Draco’s bed. The book fell open again, but this time it didn’t try to suffocate Harry with images of an otherworld he couldn’t understand. The English and Ancient Runic words on the page blurred and smeared for a second, and Harry’s head ached.

Then the words rose out of the page, three-dimensional and glowing, but they weren’t English or Ancient Runic words. Harry was sure he couldn’t describe their shapes, just like he couldn’t describe the demon realm he had seen, but he could read them.

And, somehow, inexplicably, he understood them.

His breath coming fast, he turned the page, and more and more words joined those currently floating in the air. But these weren’t just any words. They were instructions—detailed, complex instructions, far beyond the basic instructions the book provided in English and Ancient Runes.

Months ago, when he’d first shown Harry this book, Draco had said, “Thousands and thousands of years ago, ancient wizards used to summon demons from different realms, but it’s impossible for modern wizards because we’ve evolved to do magic by refining it into spells, and demon summoning requires the ‘rawest’ form of magic. That’s why the Summoning Arts are lost, because we’re physically incapable of performing them now” and “To a summon a demon, you need to give a tithe of magic.”

A tithe, a payment of magic. Harry had already paid the price, and this was what he’d paid for. The
Hunger’s gift. Harry could see now, and most of all, he could summon.

He closed the book and slipped it into his bag, then hurried out of the room.

“Am I going with you, then?” asked the book, wriggling in his bag. Harry ignored it and the disapproving voice in the back of his head. Draco probably wouldn’t even notice the book was gone until it was too late, and Harry didn’t intend to keep it forever—just until he learned everything it had to teach him.

This summer, he would read, learn, and train. Soon, it wouldn’t matter if he couldn’t do wandless magic. He had power again. And one day, he’d get all of it back, everything they had stolen from him.

And that day, the demons—and the Dark Lord—would forever regret creating him.

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The temperature in the Elite common room plunged by at least thirty degrees. Draco, who was curled up on one of the leather couches with Theo, slowly looked up, then felt his heart freeze over along with the rest of the common room. About half a dozen Bronze Skulls had just entered, each carrying golden letters, most likely invitations for next year’s Initiation.

Sebastian was among them, and his gaze locked onto Draco at once. Theo stiffened.

Draco struggled to keep his dinner down.

Sebastian’s eyes blazed, with rage and lust and hatred and a million other terrifying emotions Draco wouldn’t dare to name. Before Walpurgis, tormenting Draco had been nothing but a game to Sebastian, something amusing to pass the time and make himself feel better. Draco knew that wasn’t true anymore.

“Did you miss me, Draco?” Sebastian purred, crossing the common room in less than ten steps. He was, if possible, even taller than before.

Draco’s throat closed up in terror. He had the Knut with him, but he didn’t want Theo and the others in the common room to get caught in it. Besides, Sebastian wouldn’t dare attack him here, not now, not in plain daylight.

“I have a letter for you,” said Sebastian, his voice a breathy whisper. He held it out, and it glittered innocently in the firelight.

Draco reached for the letter with a tentative, trembling hand, and Sebastian grabbed his wrist and clenched down on it until it bruised. Draco let out a little squeak, and Theo’s face lost all its color.

But a moment later it was over. Sebastian let go of him and stepped back, as calm as the sky before a storm. He grinned that horrible grin, and the metal of his mask rippled and glinted.

“Take it,” he spat, throwing the letter in Draco’s lap. “The addressee is Harry Potter. Give it to him before the end of the year.” Sebastian chuckled hoarsely, then swept off, his cloak swirling behind him.

Blood roared in Draco’s ears. Sebastian wasn’t done with him yet, not by a long shot. Every look, every smile he gave Draco promised him worse than death the next time they were alone together.

Theo’s words came out in a rush the moment his brother was out of earshot. “Potter? Potter’s going
to be an Initiate? No. No way. I don’t believe it. And they’re making you give him the invitation? Why would they do that? He’ll hurt you if you go near him—"

“Quiet, Theo,” said Draco through gritted teeth. “This is obviously the Skulls trying to be funny with me. I can handle him. He won’t dare hurt me.” 

Sebastian’s a much bigger threat, and you didn’t open your mouth in front of him, did you?

The Skulls probably thought they were being clever, making Draco face the boy he had so cruelly rejected a month back. The joke was on them. Hysterical laughter bubbled up in Draco’s throat, but he smothered it. He gripped the letter tightly, strengthening his resolve.

He remembered what the Hunger had said, about Harry tearing the world down. But Draco didn’t care, and he didn’t believe in destiny.

Soon, Harry would forgive him fully, and nobody would be able to deny them their friendship. He let himself imagine it, a future in which he and Harry wore shining golden Skull Masks, in which he and Harry received the Dark Mark, in which he and Harry stood together as equals, servants to no one but the Dark Lord himself.

Draco got to his feet, ignoring Theo’s cry of protest. He had a letter to deliver.

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Somehow, Harry had managed to pass History of Magic, and the end of the school year was upon him. His last exam was Potions, and he was currently barricaded in the library, studying for it last minute.

He’d been reading *The Lost Artes of Summoning* in between studying for exams, and each new word he read filled him with anticipation. He’d be able to use so much magic this summer, since the type of ancient magic required for Summoning, the same ancient magic Harry now carried, couldn’t be detected by the Trace.

He couldn’t wait.

“I found you.”

Harry nearly jumped out of his skin. It was Draco, and he was speaking to Harry for the first time in about a month. The next thing he knew, Draco was shoving a golden letter into his hands.

“What’s this?” Harry spluttered.

Draco inhaled. Harry didn’t meet his eyes, not wanting to feel that familiar ache in his chest. He hadn’t looked at Draco in ages, because looking at Draco was a bit like looking at the sun reflecting brightly off clear water. It was beautiful, but it strained the eyes.

“It’s an invitation for Skull Initiation next year.”

Harry’s mouth dropped open, but Draco plowed on, sounding a bit panicked.

“I know—I know you said you hated the Skulls, but you should think about it. Professor Carrow says you’re really good at the Dark Arts, and it would be such a waste if you didn’t join. I know you hate them, but please just think, and do what’s smart, what’s good for you. They’ve accepted you. You don’t have to be kicked around anymore with the other non-Elites. I don’t want to fight you again, Harry. We can be on the same side.”
Draco said all of this very fast. He panted softly, out of breath, and Harry stared at the letter to take his mind off Draco’s words, which had sounded like music to Harry’s sore ears. He lifted his gaze to see Draco absentmindedly adjusting his hair and his collar. His cheeks were tinted pink now, growing pinker the longer Harry watched.

“Did you do this?” Harry whispered. “Did you get the invitation for me? How?”

Draco gave him a watery smile. “I didn’t do much. I just mentioned to Carrow that you were interested in the Skulls. He must’ve recommended you. Open it already.”

Harry James Potter,

Gold. Silver. Bronze. United in control, united in power.

Prove yourself, prove your control, and prove your power.

Welcome to the Skulls, Chosen Initiate.

Harry folded the letter closed, unable to believe his eyes. He’d never imagined something like this could happen in a million years. He hated the Skulls, still hated them, would forever hate them. He hadn’t even known that non-Elites were allowed to join, nor had he ever wanted to be a Skull.

But why hadn’t he? He wanted power. He wanted others to look at him with terror and respect. He wanted Draco. And most of all, he wanted revenge.

The best way to destroy your enemy is from the inside.

He remembered Dungeon Two clearly, and the jeering and laughing Skulls that came with it. He remembered Sebastian Nott killing the Abbott siblings, Theodore poisoning Neville and cutting Parvati’s hair, Bulstrode breaking Ron’s arm, that group of Skulls ganging up on a girl and dragging her into a closet. The list of crimes went on and on and on, and Harry smiled. He’d always wondered what it would be like to hand out justice—real justice.

“Harry?” asked Draco, his eyes as round as saucers. “Will—will you join? Will you at least consider it?”

Harry’s smile widened, and Draco smiled back, letting out a small sigh of relief. He seemed inclined to believe the best in Harry, and Harry would take advantage of that. One day, Draco would understand, and he would choose Harry over the Skulls because Harry would be the best option—the only option.

“I’ll do it.”

I’ll make them all burn.

-END OF YEAR ONE-

Chapter End Notes

Next year: Harry summons demons, joins the Skulls, and meets Sebastian Nott.
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