

Mind Magic

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](http://archiveofourown.org/works/15994781) at <http://archiveofourown.org/works/15994781>.

Rating:	Teen And Up Audiences
Archive Warnings:	Graphic Depictions Of Violence , Underage
Category:	Multi
Fandom:	Harry Potter - J. K. Rowling
Relationships:	Harry Potter/Voldemort , Harry Potter/Tom Riddle , Remus Lupin/Nymphadora Tonks , Mostly One Sided Draco Malfoy/Harry Potter , Other Minor Romances
Characters:	Harry Potter , Ron Weasley , Hermione Granger , Severus Snape , Remus Lupin , Tom Riddle Voldemort , Albus Dumbledore , Nagini (Harry Potter) , Draco Malfoy , Luna Lovegood , Blaise Zabini , Nymphadora Tonks , basically everyone shows up at some point
Additional Tags:	Political!Harry , light!harry , Dark!Voldemort , Well-Meaning Dumbledore , Possessive Voldemort , Humor & Angst , Hogwarts Sixth Year , Book 6: Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince , Wizengamot , Soul Magic , very slow burn , No character bashing
Language:	English
Series:	Part 1 of Harry Potter and the Search for Ancient Magic
Collections:	HP Soul Bonds , TomarryFics , Top-Tier Complete Tomarry/Harrymort Fics , RWC Harry Potter , HP - Tomarry: solid reads 10/10, my favs :) , Cherry Lemonade will have spare time eventually! , Favorite HP Fics , Tomarry fics that are Good and I think you should read :) , HP Fics that are dear and special to me , Harry Potter, my heart is here , collection of fics over the years , Harry Potter, imma read later , tomarry couse i'm mentally ill
Stats:	Published: 2018-09-15 Completed: 2021-02-06 Words: 302,405 Chapters: 28/28

Mind Magic

by [Snickerdoodlepop](#)

Summary

Once Voldemort realizes that Harry Potter is his horcrux, his plans change drastically. So does Draco Malfoy's assignment for the school year.

Harry's sixth year starts going very differently. Snape is on a mission. Harry needs to learn pureblood politics. Draco Malfoy is trying to convince Harry to forgive him. Voldemort finds himself visiting Harry Potter in his dreams. Everyone is realizing that no one is quite what they thought.

And through it all, there's a mystery. What is Ancient Magic? Can Harry use it to save himself or will it pull him toward the dark side?

Notes

Disclaimer: I do not own Harry Potter, the World of JK Rowling, or any of these lovely (and not so lovely) characters.

This is purely for fun with no profit.

Warning: This is a very slow burn, with most of the story being a build up to an eventual romance. However, there will eventually be steamy scenes, and the ultimate pairing is Harry Potter/ Tom Riddle (Voldemort).

There is now a French Translation thanks to Sleepy_Ash_666

Check it out here:

[French Translation](#)

Body, Mind, and Soul

Prologue

It was a bright, clear day in early August, and Harry Potter was moving much slower than his eager body would prefer. The sun beat down on his head, making his brow glisten. Yet, that wasn't the reason he asked Ron and Hermione to pull back. He had important things to discuss. He'd been hoping to speak with them since his birthday a few days ago, but there always seemed to be something else to do or someone else around, in the overly crowded Burrow.

Now, as the trio walked along the wide, cobblestone streets of Diagon Alley, it was finally just the three of them. If you didn't count their Auror escort, but at least the brawny man was keeping his distance, so they could talk in private as long as they kept their voices low. Harry hadn't really expected to have this opportunity, but then Mrs. Weasley had fretted over the number of errands they needed to complete in one day, so Harry was quick to suggest they split up. Despite her obvious reluctance, it really was the only chance they had of getting through the entire supply list while still making it with time to see the Twins' new shop before sunset. No one wanted to be out after dark these days, not now that everyone knew who might be lurking in the shadows.

Ron and Hermione had to slow down considerably to match Harry's leisurely pace, as they strolled past the dim shops and boarded up buildings on their way to Madam Malkin's Robe Shop. The entire feeling of Diagon Alley could not have been more different from his first visit. What had once been bright, cheerful, and full of hope, was now melancholy, grey, and fearful.

Hermione seemed prepared to let Harry speak when he was ready, but Ron wasn't nearly as patient. He lowered his voice and leaned in, so they couldn't be overheard. "What's up mate? Did you want to talk to us?"

"I had another one of those dreams the other night. On my birthday. About him."

Ron paled immediately, but Hermione rallied. "About You-Know-Who? Like the one you had last week?"

Harry nodded. "This is the third one I've had in as many weeks."

The most recent dream had been a little different from the first two. For one thing, it had taken place in a dining room, formal, yet not overly large. The first two had been inside a

study. Voldemort had sat at the head of the long dining table, in a throne-like chair which looked exactly like the sort of thing the man would conjure for himself in real life.

Harry hadn't been sure where to go or what to do, so he had simply sat in the chair nearest to himself, at the opposite end of the table. The entire time, when Harry had walked in, looked around, and finally sat down, Voldemort had simply watched him, silently, with a neutral expression on his face. Yet, as soon as Harry had made himself comfortable, in the much less impressive seat, Voldemort seemed to decide that he wanted Harry's undivided attention. "Back again, Harry?"

Harry hadn't answered right away. He'd taken a moment to study Voldemort. The snake-faced wraith before him looked just like the man who had stepped out of the cauldron a little over a year ago, minus the murderous glint in his eye. "What is this? Are you real? Is this another dream or something else?"

Voldemort had narrowed his red eyes for a moment, but his face remained as impassive as always. "This is merely a dream, Harry. You are dreaming that you are speaking to me, obviously." Then he had tilted his head to the side and sneered. "Why? Did you wish to have dinner with me?"

It was Harry's turn to sneer. "What I wish is to never see your ugly face again."

Hermione looked thoughtful. "Are you sure these are really just dreams, Harry? Are you sure you're not seeing the real You-Know-Who?"

Harry kicked a pebble along the dark grey cobbles. The whole alley seemed like it had already accepted defeat, with so many closed up storefronts, and terrified shoppers scurrying to their next location.

"Yeah, I'm pretty sure it wasn't him. I was rather snarky. If it were the real Voldemort he would have lost it and just murdered me or tortured me or whatever. He's usually about as patient and understanding as a hungry werewolf."

Ron still looked pale. "Can we have this conversation without saying You-Know-Who's name?"

Hermione was not to be deterred. "What *did* he do if he wasn't trying to kill you?"

Harry shrugged. "The same thing as the other two dreams. Just talk."

"What did he say this time?" asked Ron.

"Tell me, Harry, I have heard a very interesting rumor and I wish to know if it is true."

Voldemort's impassive face had been the complete opposite of Harry's murderous glare. "I'm not telling you anything."

For only a second, Voldemort's expressionless mask had seemed to crack. His eyes had given the faintest of twitches and his mouth grimaced. But only for the briefest moment, and then everything had fallen back into place, smooth and languid as if nothing had happened. "Is it true that you are a Parselmouth, Harry? Is it true that you speak the language of the serpents?"

Harry had been surprised by the question, and it had probably been that surprise which caused him to answer without a pause. "Did you not know that? I'm surprised the whole wizarding world doesn't know about that by now, since half the school saw me speak Parseltongue in that Dueling Club. I guess maybe it sounds too unbelievable to be true."

Harry shrugged as they slowly shuffled down another lane, past an ancient witch trying to sell 'protection charms' from a hastily assembled cart. "He didn't really say much, he mostly just asked me questions."

Hermione seemed absolutely horrified by this revelation. "What!? I hope you didn't reveal any information about the Order or anything like that."

Ron was equally worried about this possibility, once Hermione had pointed out that it existed. "Yeah, mate, dream or otherwise, you shouldn't be answering You-Know-Who's questions."

"I'm not an idiot." Harry felt his indignance rise. Did they really feel they needed to lecture *him* about the dangers of Voldemort trying to trick him through their mental link? "He didn't want to know anything about that anyway. He just wanted to talk about me being a Parselmouth."

Voldemort had stared at Harry for quite a while as they sat in silence, while Harry had tried his best not to squirm under such scrutiny. "It is an interesting gift, the ability to speak to snakes. Many do not appreciate it, but I have always found it quite useful. Do you speak to snakes often, Harry?"

"No." Harry had felt no need to elaborate to Voldemort of all people.

Again, the twitch. That crack of composure had come and gone in the blink of an eye. "Really? Afraid of your own powers? Worried that the caress of that hiss on your tongue will tempt you toward the Dark Arts?"

Harry hadn't cared how much he irked dream-Voldemort. If the man could have killed him, surely he would have done so by now. So, he had folded his arms and rolled his eyes just like the annoyed teenager he was. "No, I just don't hang around a lot of snakes."

Voldemort did not take the bait. His composure remained. "Indeed? It is no matter; they very rarely make intriguing conversation."

Ron looked relieved that Voldemort hadn't asked about the Order, but Hermione just seemed confused. "So, he just wanted to chat... about the fact that you are both Parselmouths?"

Hermione's question seemed to spur Ron's curiosity, as well. "What? Like: 'hey, talk to any cool snakes lately?'"

Hermione rolled her eyes, but Harry just shrugged. It wasn't completely inaccurate. "Not exactly. But not too far off."

This made Ron laugh...loudly. It caused a few nearby shoppers to jump as if someone might attack them. Their Auror escort, still several meters away, gave an annoyed look. "Sorry," Ron announced to the street at large. Then he quieted his voice again. His playful smile returning. "Harry's right, Hermione. That's definitely not You-Know-Who. It's probably just some random weird dream. Nothing to worry about at all."

"Did you ever wonder, Harry, why you would be gifted with the language of the snakes? Such a unique ability, and typically an inherited one. I do not believe I have heard of any other Potters speaking Parseltongue. Strange that you would have the ability, when none of your forefathers did."

Harry had unfolded his arms and leaned forward on the table, propped on his elbows. "I didn't inherit it. I got it from you. Dumbledore already explained all of this to me."

Throughout their conversation, Voldemort had kept his spine parallel to the wing-backed throne, and his hands rested on the corresponding armrests. He had not moved an inch when Harry had spoken this statement, but for the first time, the indifferent expression left his face for more than just an instant. It had turned to fascination, and this time the expression stayed. "What did Dumbledore explain to you?"

Harry had paused again at this. Dumbledore had told Harry that Voldemort didn't realize he had given some of his powers to Harry. That it had been unintentional. Yet, Harry didn't really see that it would make any difference whether Voldemort knew about it now or not. After all, he had told the Diary Tom all about it, and it hadn't really changed his opinion of Harry at all.

Besides, in that moment, Harry had really wanted to rub it in Voldemort's face that Harry knew something that he didn't. "He told me that when you failed to kill me, you passed on some of your powers to me. That's the reason I can talk to snakes. Because of the power I took from you."

Harry had expected Voldemort to be outraged by this. After all, Harry had just admitted to essentially stealing something from Voldemort. However, very much to Harry's surprise, Voldemort's expression had changed from beguiled to completely enraptured. He had seemed to almost stare through Harry as he said, "What else did you take from me, I wonder?"

Ron seemed to believe the matter was settled, but Hermione wasn't entirely convinced. "I don't know Harry. Even if it was just a dream, perhaps you should still tell Professor Dumbledore."

Harry definitely didn't want to do that. The man seemed busy enough. What with the war, and the Order, and the school, and probably a thousand other things that Harry did even know about. Harry really didn't want to approach the professor just to say, 'sorry to bother you, sir, I know you're leading a war and all, but I just wanted to tell you about this funny dream I had.'

Besides, Harry *did* tell him, on the night Dumbledore had taken him to the Burrow. He was in no hurry for a repeat performance. "I already told Dumbledore about the first dream I had, Hermione. *He didn't care*. I'm not going to owl him about each and every dream I have where Voldemort shows up."

"Seriously, mate, you shouldn't say..." But Hermione interrupted him.

"I still think he would want to know what was..." Only to be interrupted by Ron, in turn.

"Hermione, drop it. Harry's just having weird dreams about You-Know-Who. He's probably just eating too much sugar or something. If you want, mate, I can finish off your dessert tonight."

Harry smiled, glad to have one of his friends on his side. "Just try to get near my pudding and see what happens to you."

They could see Madam Malkin's shop up ahead. It was, thankfully, still in business, and the lights were on in the large window, displaying several different robe designs. There was also a Hogwarts uniform on display, which both Ron and Hermione needed in a larger size. Harry was just following along for the company.

Even with their destination in view, the trio still walked along at almost a snail's crawl. They wouldn't be able to continue their conversation inside the shop, but their auror escort would almost certainly chastise them if they came to a standstill out on the street. Hermione, in particular, did not seem ready to let their discussion come to an end. "Well, I suppose if you're sure. But then, three dreams in just a few weeks seems like a lot."

Harry shrugged. "Not really, it's probably just stress, what with the war and all. It's surprising I'm not having more weird dreams. I only told you guys about it, because I think it's a warning or something. As if my subconscious is trying to tell me something."

Ron grinned. "If only one of us had signed up for NEWT level Divinations, we could *interpret* what they mean." He raised his hands and wiggled his fingers, mysteriously.

Hermione scoffed. "Dream interpretation is hardly something to take seriously, Ronald. You shouldn't even joke about that. With so many people gullible enough to buy these ridiculous 'warding bracelets' and 'good luck amulets,' you really ought to be setting a better example." As if on cue, they passed a particularly eerie-looking warlock selling what appeared to be pickled eyes in jars, with a sign that read 'Lucky Dragon Eyes.' Harry had looked a dragon in

the eye once, and he knew from experience that their eyes were much larger. Hermione wrinkled her nose at the putrid smell leaking through the jar; she waited till they passed before she continued. "It's not as though Divination is anything to be taken seriously."

Leave it to Hermione to go on an adventure trying to steal a prophecy, only to then scoff at the very notion that prophecies might be true, or that Divination could be taken at face value. Divination: the very same subject taught by the woman who had *delivered* that prophecy.

Hermione continued, undeterred. "Harry, please just promise me you'll take this seriously. Whether it's a subconscious warning, or a vision, or just a regular dream. Please promise me you'll be careful, okay?"

Harry offered her a warm smile, as they made their way to the front door of the shop. "Careful? Look who you're talking to, Hermione, caution is practically my middle name. My number one priority is avoiding danger at any cost."

Ron chuckled and joined in, as he opened the door to let the other two enter. "Yeah, Hermione, he's basically a turtle hiding in his shell."

Harry turned back to Ron as he made his way inside. "Exactly, I can't imagine where anyone would get the idea that I'm not careful. I avoid danger like –" Suddenly, Harry jolted as he walked right into someone. He immediately swung around to apologize, only to find himself face to face with Draco Malfoy.

Harry couldn't imagine anyone he wanted to see less. Based on the blonde's expression, Malfoy shared that sentiment. However, contrary to the way Malfoy usually looked when facing Harry, this time Malfoy didn't look hateful or contemptuous. He didn't even have his usual sneer. Malfoy looked completely and utterly shocked; possibly even scared. It was as if the Slytherin were staring at a ghost, instead of the young man he had spent five years tormenting.

"Draco, darling, I just need to..." Narcissa Malfoy and Madam Malkin walked around the counter, only to both halt at the sight of three Gryffindors entering the shop.

Madam Malkin stuttered something that sounded like, "Harry Potter."

Yet, it was Mrs. Malfoy who collected herself while everyone else was reeling. "As I was saying, Draco, I just need to pay for these things, and then we can move on."

Ron tugged on Harry's sleeve, sidling up next to his best friend. "Come on, Harry. We should just go somewhere else. We don't want to shop where Death Eaters buy their clothes."

Madam Malkin immediately paled, sure that a fight was about to break out. Hermione raised a hand to her mouth, probably nervous of the same thing. However, Malfoy said nothing. He continued to stare at Harry with his face as pale as a sheet. He looked about as anxious as the time Filch had announced that detention would be held in the Forbidden Forest. He was biting his lip as if he wasn't quite sure what to do. Still he said nothing.

Harry didn't like it. "What's your problem, Malfoy?"

The pale grey eyes met Harry's, and they suddenly seemed set with determination. "Potter, I need to speak with you."

Harry was not impressed. He really didn't want to hear anything that Draco Malfoy had to say. Yet, there was something about the nervous and shocked demeanor that stopped Harry from dismissing him completely out of hand. "Fine. Go ahead and speak. No one's stopping you."

Malfoy turned to his mother, who was watching him from the counter, where she was standing with the incredibly fidgety Madam Malkin. He gave her an almost desperate, questioning look. Harry watched as she responded with a slight nod. Malfoy immediately turned back and said, "I need to talk to you... in private."

"No bloody way." Harry was not falling for whatever this was.

Ron wasn't having it either. "Yeah, sod off, Malfoy. He's not going anywhere with you."

Malfoy offered Ron a brief glare, before turning back to Harry. "We don't have to go anywhere. We could just talk right there." Malfoy pointed to the large display window that took up the entire front of the shop. "We could just step right outside. Your friends will still be able to see you fine. There are plenty of people in the street. I just don't want to be overheard."

"You don't want to be overheard... so no one can hear you threaten me?"

Malfoy rolled his eyes, he seemed a little back to normal now that he was arguing with Harry like usual. "If I wanted to threaten you, Potter, I could just as easily do it with your little friends around."

Harry frowned. Malfoy had a point. The boy had once threatened all the muggleborns in school, right after Filch's cat was petrified, in full view of half the teaching staff. Malfoy had never really worried about being overheard when spewing hate. What was Malfoy up to? "Why is it so important that we talk in private?"

Malfoy gave Harry a unimpressed look, but instead of the snappy retort Harry would have expected, the boy sighed. "Please," he said. Harry's jaw dropped. "It's important. I need to talk to you. The sooner the better."

Harry couldn't remember ever hearing Malfoy say that word to anyone. He turned to Ron and Hermione, who looked equally shocked and confused. No help there. "How do I know you won't hex me as soon as I step outside the door?"

"Besides the fact that there's an auror standing, oh so conspicuously, across the street, who would haul me to Azkaban before I lowered my wand?" Malfoy asked. Harry said nothing, and the Slytherin sighed again. He pulled out his wand, and suddenly three other wands were drawn and aimed right at his pointy face. Harry, Ron, and Hermione were all prepared for a fight. However, Malfoy simply rolled his eyes at them. "Really?" He turned and walked over the counter, toward his mother, with his back to them. "Such dramatics," he called over his

shoulder. Then he handed his wand over to his mother. She took it and slipped it into her pocket, where it was quite clearly out of his reach.

What sort of trick was this?

Malfoy then strolled to the front of the shop and opened the entrance door, holding it open for Harry to walk through. “Are you coming or not?”

Harry still couldn’t see the trick here, and it bothered him. What was Malfoy going to do to him? What was Malfoy planning? Harry stepped forward, his wand still pointed toward Malfoy’s face. “How do you know I won’t hex you?”

Malfoy’s haughty smirk returned with a vengeance. “Oh please, Potter, you’re not going to attack someone who’s unarmed. You’re too *noble* for that.” The words ought to have been a compliment, but Malfoy spat them out like an insult. As if being noble and not attacking unarmed teenagers was something that one should be ashamed of.

Harry narrowed his eyes, but he strode through the door regardless. Whatever it was that Malfoy was planning, Harry would rather know what it was, and face it head on. Harry was not about to cower before Draco Malfoy, especially an unarmed and strangely anxious Draco Malfoy.

As soon as Harry was out on the street, in front of the shop window, he immediately turned to face the Slytherin, not about to let the boy out of his sight for a moment. He also checked out of his peripheral vision to make sure Ron and Hermione were still in sight, through the large glass pane they now stood in front of. Harry could see them watching him from the other side of a few dressed up mannequins. Looks of nervous anticipation showing strong through the clear glass.

Malfoy simply strode forward with his hands clasped behind his back and his expression cool and detached. A little color had returned to his pale cheeks, and he looked his usual pompous and arrogant self once again.

As much as Harry hated the sight of that pretentious face, it was an improvement to the shock and anxiety from before. “Alright, Malfoy, I’m here. Let’s get this over with. What did you want to say?”

Malfoy quirked a brow in annoyance, but managed to avoid rolling his eyes. Instead he offered his old rival what Harry could only assume was meant to be an unassuming smile, but looked almost like a pained grimace. “I want to offer you a truce.”

Harry froze, refusing to believe what he was hearing, yet Malfoy continued. “I don’t want to fight with you anymore. This...I don’t know...rivalry thing. Whatever this is. I’m done. In fact, the whole thing, all of it, I’m done.”

Chapter 1: Body, Mind, and Soul

One Month Earlier...

Severus Snape was having one of the worst summers of his life. He considered himself a patient man, an unselfish man, a long-suffering man. However, there was only so much he could take.

The situation with Dumbledore's cursed hand had been a serious blow. Dumbledore was going to die. There was nothing Severus could do but try to slow the inevitable. How had the headmaster been so careless? The man was usually at least three steps ahead of everyone else; overprepared for any eventuality, and yet he had not been able to foresee his own undoing.

Severus did not particularly like Dumbledore; he considered him more of an ally than a friend. Despite their many differences, Severus Snape and Albus Dumbledore wanted the same thing: to stop the Dark Lord. Their reasons may be different, but their goals could not have been more aligned. The Dark Lord must be destroyed. Lily's death must be avenged.

So, losing Dumbledore had been a terrible shock. Certainly, the man was still holding on for now, but it was just a matter of time. Another few months, perhaps a year at most, and Severus would lose his strongest ally in the fight against the Dark Lord. Perhaps the only man alive with the power to defeat such an unstoppable foe.

Of course, that had only been the beginning; his summer had simply gotten worse since then. There was also the incident with Draco Malfoy. The foolish boy had been more than eager to accept the Dark Mark and whatever assignment the Dark Lord decided to 'honor' him with. Dumbledore now wanted Severus to carry out young Draco's assignment. Apparently, Severus's soul was blackened enough already that it no longer mattered what other atrocities he committed to taint it further.

Not to mention the oath he'd been forced to take with Narcissa. For a man who had never had children, he seemed to be swearing his life to protect a growing number of them. First Potter and now young Draco. But then, that wasn't right, was it? He was no longer meant to save Potter, to keep him alive for Lily. That had been the most recent revelation in a summer full of shocking truths.

Potter was going to die. Had to die. Was always meant to die. Severus had always known Dumbledore was a sly manipulator, but this? This was more than Severus had thought the headmaster capable of; to train and prepare a boy from the time he was in diapers, so that he could sacrifice himself when the moment was right.

Severus had been appalled by Dumbledore's blasé attitude on the subject, but then, Dumbledore had actually had time to come to terms with this. As much as Severus hated the boy, and he truly despised the little Potter spawn, he had always been sure that they were working to keep him safe and alive, as Lily would have wanted. But it wasn't meant to be. Potter had to die, so that the Dark Lord could die. It seemed there was no other way around it. It was a sobering truth, but Severus had certainly accepted harder truths in his life.

"Severus?" The potion's master immediately turned at the voice. He had been lost in thought, simply sitting by the fireplace, musing over the cruel joke that his life had become. He looked

over at the entryway of his sitting room, to see a very unwelcome sight. It was another reason why this summer had been one of the worst he could remember, because he had to spend it with the very same rodent of a man who had betrayed Lily to her death.

Severus narrowed his eyes in distaste, but allowed no other show of emotion to cross his face. “Wormtail?”

The little rat scurried in and stood before Severus’s seat, near the other grey armchair by the fire. It was the only other seat in the sparsely furnished room, mostly filled with bookshelves, dust, and the overwhelming smell of must. “Mind if I sit with you?”

“Yes.” Severus spoke without a second’s hesitation. “However, you obviously have something on your mind, so we may as well get this over with.”

Wormtail ignored the obvious distaste in Severus’s voice, and simply settled himself into the armchair across from him. Severus noticed that Pettigrew seemed to have a mug of tea in his hand, obviously enjoying his morning cup. When Severus had first returned from Hogwarts for the summer, Wormtail would always wait until Severus made tea, and ask if he could also have some. Now, apparently, the man felt at home enough to make a pot on his own, without even alerting Severus to the activity. As much as Severus hated the idea of this pest bothering him for each and every little necessity, Severus also didn’t like the idea of rodents raiding his pantry.

Wormtail didn’t seem to notice the hateful look that Severus shot toward the chipped mug in his hand. “I only wanted to make a bit of conversation.” Wormtail wiggled his overly large behind, trying to make himself comfortable in Severus’s stiff armchair. “I was starting to go stir crazy, here all alone, with you off on missions for so long.” The little man offered Severus a filthy, toothy grin. “This place is a lot more bearable with a bit of company.”

“Funny,” Severus replied, his voice anything but humorous. “I was just thinking the exact opposite.”

Wormtail only shrugged at the insult, obviously accustomed to being disparaged and abused. “I don’t know how you can stand it. All this silence and murky darkness. Don’t you get bored all alone here? What do you do all day?”

Severus grimaced in horror as Wormtail took a noisy slurp of tea. The sound made his growing headache throb. How could any human being be this pathetic? This repugnant? Severus took a breath to steady his ire before he answered. “I spend much of my time thinking. I understand why such an activity would not appeal to you. I can’t imagine that your thoughts would be able to hold anyone’s interest for long.”

Wormtail, again, tried to inhale his drink, loudly sucking the liquid into his mouth, and then wiping a small amount of dribble with the sleeve of his stained robes. “You always treat me like I’m dirt beneath your feet,” he commented. Severus did not object. It was an accurate statement. “But we’re not so different, you and I.”

Before Wormtail could take another disgusting swivel of oversweet tea, Severus whipped his wand from his side and vanished the mug before it could reach the man’s eager lips.

Severus's magic whirled with righteous fury, but his voice came out slow and deadly calm. "You are nothing like me."

Wormtail paled, his face contorting in fear. However, he foolishly continued, perhaps trying to escape punishment by justifying his words. "We may be different in many ways, but we are, of course, on the same side. You and I; we serve the same master. Our loyalty is to the same Lord."

Severus continued to glare, with his wand pointed at Wormtail's rat-like face. He did not, could not, correct the man. It was necessary that Wormtail believe that they served the same master, that he could corroborate that Severus's loyalty was to the Dark Lord. Pettigrew's assumption that Severus was on the same side, was not what gave Severus pause, however. Severus was suddenly overcome with a question that he hadn't thought to answer before: who was he loyal to?

"Get out," Severus whispered, his voice barely carrying over the crackle of the fire. Pettigrew was quick to comply, practically tripping over himself in his hurry to escape Severus's obvious acrimony. Severus hardly noticed. He was barely paying attention to the world outside his own personal thoughts by this time.

Where did his loyalty lie? Certainly, he had promised the headmaster his loyalty, and the Order of the Phoenix. But then, he had also sworn undying loyalty to the Dark Lord and the Death Eaters, so his word was hardly anything to go by. He had promised to help, to protect, to look after so many people in his life: his mother, Lucius and Narcissa, their son, the Potter boy, and several members of the Order.

However, only one had ever seemed to really matter. Only one could be said to still hold his undying loyalty, and she had died almost fifteen years ago.

She was the reason for everything that he did, or at least everything good. Any decency, any kindness or mercy within him, was the part of him that was touched by Lily Evans. All the rest was merely his own cold and vindictive nature, his own ruthless cunning and unforgiving malignity. He had no misconceptions about being a good person. He knew he was not. Lily Evans was his goodness. Lily Evans was the reason he would give every ounce of himself to stop the Dark Lord, and probably die in the process. It's what she would have wanted.

Or was it? What would Lily Evans want? She had wanted the Dark Lord stopped, obviously, but would she want her only son to be sacrificed, in order to accomplish that goal? To bring an end to the war? To avenge her death? Severus couldn't imagine that she would ever want such an early and cruel end for her son. She hadn't died to bring an end to the Dark Lord, she had died to protect that boy, because she had loved him more than she had ever loved anyone or anything else.

What did it matter, though? It wasn't up to Lily whether the boy lived or died, and it wasn't even up to Severus. As soon as the boy realized what he was, what he carried, Dumbledore was right. Potter would sacrifice himself in an instant to save everyone else. Shouldn't the decision be up to the boy? Shouldn't he be allowed to decide if he lived or died? But then, was the boy really being given a fair choice? The headmaster had practically been grooming the boy to make a noble sacrifice for years now. Potter would do anything the old man ordered without hesitation; even die.

So, that was it, wasn't it? Potter would eventually find out that he carried the Dark Lord's soul. Even if Severus never told him, the boy would likely come to the realization through other means. He would face his foe, and the Dark Lord would most assuredly kill him, sealing both their fates. Dumbledore hadn't left much room for error. Severus couldn't really see any way around the obvious conclusion: Harry Potter was going to die. The Dark Lord would bring about his own destruction.

Severus watched as the logs slowly gave way with small pops, shooting tiny embers into the blaze. He leaned back into the unyielding firmness of the dusty antique, and he thought. What could be done? Potter clearly could not be swayed from marching naïvely to his own doom, but the boy was not the one who would be firing the spell. Could the Dark Lord be convinced not to kill the boy? Was such a thing even possible? If the Dark Lord came to understand that his very life was dependent on the boy, would that be enough to sway him against enacting his retribution on the nuisance that had thwarted him so many times before?

As it stood, the Dark Lord was almost obsessed with the thought of killing Potter. There was an almost manic craving to snuff out the life of his most obstinate challenger. Would the realization that the child actually held a piece of himself be enough to overcome that drive? There was only one way to find out.

Lord Voldemort tore through the door with a blast and made his way across the study in four quick strides. His magic was lashing violently, but it would not be pacified any time soon, not when his very existence was at stake. He began tearing books from the shelves, forcefully tugging them from their slots. His magic rippled around him, making the very shelves quake with his desperation and his fury, but he could do nothing to control it in this frenzy.

Severus had been right. Right about the ring, at least, which meant that his servant was probably also correct that Dumbledore's days were numbered. Lord Voldemort had been reluctant to believe it, at first; it sounded too good to be believed. Severus had told him that the headmaster had been cursed, the old man had barely clung to life with a healing potion, but he would be dead before the year was up. Surely, the most likely explanation was that Dumbledore had discovered the truth about Severus's true allegiance and had tried to trick Lord Voldemort's loyal servant into passing on a falsehood about the old man's health. But then, Severus had described the cursed object, a gold ring with the large black stone: the Gaunt family ring.

Lord Voldemort finally tore each and every book on horcruxes from the shelf and waved his wand to send them to his large, dark oak desk. The texts flew savagely across the room, some landing on the desk, but others slamming harshly into the wall beyond. The Dark Lord's face twisted in displeasure. His powerful magic had not been nearly as precise since his resurrection, and lately it had been flaring even more riotously, especially when his temper erupted, which was happening more and more often.

He stormed across the room and snatched up the first book he saw, *Soul Magic: The Darkest of the Ancient Magics*. Lord Voldemort needed answers. As soon as he had realized what had happened to his precious ring, he knew he needed to understand more.

He had been ready to tear that old hut apart in his need to discover the truth, but it wasn't necessary. The box which had held the ring had been left open on the floor. The entire shack reeked with the stench of Dumbledore's warm, glowing magic. There was no doubt about it. Dumbledore had been there. Dumbledore had taken the ring, and almost certainly been cursed by it. Dumbledore was dying. However, the old man also knew about the horcruxes. The good news hardly cancelled out the bad.

There were several questions that needed answering.

First: Severus had told his lord that the cursed ring had been destroyed with the Sword of Gryffindor; how was such a thing even possible? There were very few things that could destroy a horcrux, and surely a sword wasn't one of them. What magic was imbued within that sword to make it possible that it could destroy a horcrux?

Second: how was it possible that he had not noticed the destruction of his own soul? All the books had said that if a horcrux was destroyed, one would feel the damage occur. Of course, none of the books had accounted for a person making quite so many horcruxes. Did the feeling diminish with the number of horcruxes one created? Had he created so many, that what little soul was left inside of him could no longer tell if its brothers were gone?

Third: what was happening with his magic? Why was it pulsing and flaring against his control, and did that have anything to do with his unstable soul? He knew that as he made more and more horcruxes, his body had slowly changed, had become less human. His mind, as well, had become less focused and calm, and more easily angered, his thoughts sometimes running wild. Had his magic also been affected by this change?

Lately, all these symptoms seemed to only increase. He could barely control his temper on an average day; it was only because Severus had the foresight to apparate away that the Dark Lord had not murdered one of his most valued servants for delivering such unwelcome news. Lord Voldemort already slept and ate less than the average person, but in the last week, he had barely eaten a few light meals. Not to mention how violently erratic his magic could become when his mind was lost to fury. Was all of this increased volatility the result of the ring's destruction? Did his mind and body become less stable as his soul was destroyed piece by piece?

Fourth: what could possibly be done to prevent this damage to the rest of his self? He understood that the mind, body, soul, and magic of a wizard were all connected, so it made some sense that the destruction of one would affect the others. However, what could be done to prevent this? And could he reverse some of the damage that had already occurred? His mind and his magic were his greatest weapons, he needed them to be in peak condition. He could not have any part of himself outside of his control; he simply could not allow such a thing.

Of course, if Severus was to be believed, then a piece of himself was already outside of his control. A piece of his soul was very much outside of his control. However, he wouldn't think about that right now. The very idea of it was too revolting to even consider. No, he needed to focus on the ring; on the horcruxes he knew about for sure. Not the possible seventh one that Dumbledore had alluded to.

None of the books had any useful information. Was he really the only one who had dared stretch this power to its logical conclusion? The only wizard with enough nerve to see how far a soul could be stretched?

A couple of the books mentioned how the soul fragments could be returned to the host. A wizard had to feel remorse and repentance over the action that had caused the horcrux to form in the first place. That was completely useless. He didn't want to reabsorb his soul fragments, he still needed them separate from himself to ensure his immortality. Even if he did, he was sure there was no possible way he could bring himself to feel guilty over the loss of those pathetic lives. If anything, they should feel honored to have served such a grand purpose. Their otherwise meaningless lives were elevated by becoming sacrifices toward such a noble goal.

Clearly, he, Lord Voldemort, was the only person to ever test the bounds of soul magic quite so far, and therefore he was the only one who would be able to determine the solution to this problem. The books would be of no use. Now he simply needed to think.

Lord Voldemort called his dear snake to him. He was always able to think more clearly when she was near. Nagini seemed to help settle his mind and calm his volatile thoughts. Once she was rested on his shoulders, it all seemed to click into place. Yes, of course. He mood, his thoughts, his magic, all seemed more stable when she was in his presence. It was easier to eat and sleep when she was in his company. It couldn't be a coincidence, surely it wasn't just her soothing presence, but the vicinity of another piece of his soul.

If he could gather up the other pieces, the ones that hadn't been destroyed, he could keep them close to him. They could help stabilize his mind and his magic. He couldn't let any more pieces of himself get destroyed, he had already lost so much of himself. However, this left a large problem; the one thing he had tried to keep himself from dwelling on. According to Severus, or at least, according to Albus Dumbledore, Lord Voldemort had created one more horcrux. A piece of his soul existed within his own prophesized enemy, Harry Potter.

Severus hadn't understood that the boy was a horcrux, specifically, or that Lord Voldemort had created others. He only understood what the old man had told him; that the boy contained a piece of Lord Voldemort's precious soul, and therefore, the headmaster planned to sacrifice the boy. It was a plan worthy of the Dark Lord himself; trick your enemy into believing they are destroying their own bringer of death, when they are really destroying a piece of themselves. Lord Voldemort didn't doubt for a moment that Dumbledore was capable of such a cruelly practical plan. The Dark Lord had always seen the old fool for what he really was; a manipulator, a puppet master, a spider, scurrying around pulling strings and catching unsuspecting flies in his web of lies and half-truths.

That wasn't the part that he found hard to believe. What Lord Voldemort couldn't fathom, was how could the boy really contain a piece of his soul? Wouldn't the Dark Lord have recognized a piece of himself? Wouldn't the boy realize that he, himself, was a part of Lord Voldemort? It didn't matter either way. The boy still needed to be dealt with. Lord Voldemort could not allow any possible threat to continue. However, if the boy really did hold a piece of his soul, he knew he wouldn't be able to kill the boy outright, not without removing the soul

fragment first. Or perhaps, he could find some way to destroy the boy without destroying the soul fragment. He would need to do more research, find a solution to this problem.

Lord Voldemort stroked Nagini and closed his eyes. He needed to stay calm and find a solution. He pulled another book closer to him. It was going to be a long night.

Remus Lupin and Nymphadora Tonks made their way down the quiet street of Privet Drive as inconspicuously as possible, trying their best to look like muggles out for an evening stroll. The air was still quite warm, even as the sun was setting. To any outsider, they probably would just look as though they were enjoying the light summer breeze in this peaceful neighborhood. Unless, of course, one was to listen to their conversation.

“I mean, Arthur makes a few good points.” Tonks was flipping through a small notebook that had been passed off to her from the last guards who were on duty.

“No,” Remus corrected, “Arthur was wasting paper by making notes about muggles, when he should have been writing down any relevant details or strange occurrences he noticed.”

Tonks chuckled. “I’m sure to a couple of purebloods, a man walking around in a strange hat and putting letters into small boxes probably seemed like a strange occurrence.”

Remus rolled his eyes. “Arthur knew perfectly well that that man was just delivering the mail. Alastor probably threw a fit when Arthur started questioning that poor mailman. I mean, the whole point is that we all keep a low profile.”

Tonks was still reading through Arthur Weasley’s notes on the muggle letter delivery system. “Moody definitely didn’t seem particularly happy when we came to relieve them.”

“I don’t think I’ve ever seen Alastor in a mood that I would describe as ‘happy.’”

Tonks turned to show Remus a passage in the notebook. “Listen to this: ‘Muggle Mail Deliverer picks up letters from each letter box. Places letters in bag. Where does he take those letters? I asked him where he delivers letters to and he confirmed that he only delivers letters to the Little Whinging area. What happens if a letter needs to be sent outside Little Whinging? Does the Mail Deliverer know all the other Mail Deliverers? Does he know who to hand the letters over to?’ You know I never really thought about that.”

Remus shrugged. “They have centers, I believe. All the mail carriers bring their mail to a central location, and they have people who sort them and decide which mail carriers get which letters to deliver. They have a whole system, I believe.”

Tonks turned the page of her notebook, just as they turned the corner and started heading down a side street. Not that it made much difference to their view. Each street looked almost identical. “Huh, that seems so complicated. Just giving your letter to an owl is a lot simpler.”

Remus watched as a teenaged muggle came out of one of the nearly-identical houses and dropped a bag of trash into a large bin. He wondered if Arthur would start questioning the

trash collection system next. "From what I understand, owls aren't very good at delivering letters unless they've been magically bred and trained for the purpose. Besides, there are a lot more muggles, and they send a lot more letters, so it would get a bit messy if they started sending owls back and forth all day."

Tonks glanced over at her partner on guard duty. "You seem to know a lot about it. Your mother was a muggle, right? Did you grow up around muggles?"

Remus strolled along with his hands in his pockets, pondering the question. "Not so much. I was a wizard, after all, so I was closer with my father's family. Then, after I got bitten, I don't know. I just didn't really have anything in common with muggles." Tonks nodded. Remus knew that her father was muggleborn, but she grew up almost entirely in the wizarding world, much like him. "It wasn't until after the first war that I started living amongst muggles. After Lily and James died, and Sirius was in Azkaban, I didn't have a whole lot keeping me tied to that world, you know? Plus, wizard employers get really suspicious if you call in sick every month during the full moon. Muggles never really notice that sort of thing."

Tonks looked shocked. "You were living amongst muggles? But you're one of the most skilled duelists I've met. You're phenomenal at defense and transfiguration. You could probably be an Auror if you really wanted. I bet you rocked your NEWTs."

Remus blushed at the praise, but he had a sad sort of smile on his face. "I did very well in all my NEWTs, but I always knew that I was never going to be an Auror. They don't exactly accept dark creatures on the force."

Tonks shoved him lightly with her shoulder. "You're not a dark creature, and you know it."

"Not according to the ministry. You heard about that bill, right? It's still in committee right now, but Albus will make sure it goes before the entire Wizengamot, so he can try and stop it. They're trying to relabel werewolves from 'half-breeds' to full on 'dark creatures.' I'm sure it's a response to the attacks by Greyback and his lot. But if this thing passes, the Ministry can expect a full on werewolf riot. Any wolves still on the fence are almost certainly going to side with You-Know-Who, if only to try and regain their rights as citizens."

They turned another corner, and Tonks made note of a stray cat wondering through a nearby yard. You never knew who might be an unregistered animagus. Tonks always wrote down any living creatures she saw, and yet her notes still weren't a quarter as long as Arthur Weasley, who seemed to be able to write about each and every nuance of muggle life with absolute rapture.

"I had heard about that bill, but you don't need to worry about it. Moody says they don't have a leg to stand on. They won't get enough support. Now that Dumbledore's heading up the Wizengamot again, and he has full public support, he'll convince them what a bad idea this is."

"I hope you're right. Once Albus comes to pick up Harry, and we're not needed for guard duty, I need to start meeting with other werewolves right away. Convince them who's really got their best interests at heart. This bill certainly isn't making my job any easier."

Tonks gave Remus a sly smile. "I'll sort of miss these late night stakeout sessions. They're certainly a lot more enjoyable this year, now that we're partnering up."

Remus couldn't agree more. "Well, Albus certainly wasn't going to send us by ourselves to watch the neighborhood after what happened with Mundungus. One person could simply take off or get taken out, and no one would know. If you have two, then there's at least some back up."

Tonks fell into step just a little closer. "It certainly makes the job a lot more entertaining. This street is so bloody boring. Nothing interesting ever happens."

"I think there are a couple of dementors who visited last summer who might disagree with you."

"Fair point."

Remus looked up as they passed by Number Four. The house looked so ordered and normal and safe. It looked like the last place in the world anything interesting or dangerous or out-of-the-ordinary would happen. "Well, at least we know Harry's safe for now."

Harry Potter paced his room eagerly, unsure how he could possibly fall asleep with so much excitement. Professor Dumbledore had written to him, after barely any time spent with the Dursleys. Dumbledore was coming. He was coming to Privet Drive at the end of the week to pick up Harry and take him to the Burrow, where Harry would stay with the Weasley's for the rest of the summer. This was going to be the greatest summer of his life!

Dumbledore had even mentioned that he wanted Harry to accompany him on an errand. What could that possibly be? Something amazing, certainly, if the headmaster was involved.

It took hours for Harry's thoughts to settle enough for him to finally drift off to sleep. By the time exhaustion overtook him, he lay diagonally across his sheets, with one leg dangling over the side of his bed, and his day clothes and trainers still on. However, it didn't matter, he was too far gone to fight off sleep any longer, and he finally succumbed to the world of dreams.

Lord Voldemort stared at the boy across from him; the boy who was his prophesized enemy; the boy who could very well carry a piece of his own soul. "Harry Potter..." He savored the words on his tongue as he let them hiss from his mouth. He usually hated to say the name, calling him 'the boy' among his followers. Yet, he had always enjoyed watching the fear in the boy's eyes when the child heard his own name whispered from that serpentine face. Surely it was the face of his nightmares.

Lord Voldemort was not disappointed. No sooner had he called the boy by name, than that innocent face changed from curiosity to confusion to fear. "Y-you can see me?" The boy tripped over his words, clearly startled by this revelation. Although, Lord Voldemort couldn't

understand why. Surely the boy was old enough to have learned the cardinal rule: if you can see them, then they can see you.

“Of course I can see you. What other outcome did you expect when you looked into my eyes?”

The boy took a step back. “Usually in these dreams I can see you, but...” Suddenly the boy cut himself off, blushing. He realized too late that he had said too much.

Lord Voldemort smiled like a shark. He leaned forward into his desk, eyeing his prey. “Do you dream of me often, Harry Potter? Do you watch me while you sleep? Do I haunt your nightmares? What do you see, I wonder?”

The boy simply scowled. “I see what a monster you are.”

The reptilian nostrils flared. How dare the boy so cavalierly insult him? It was irksome enough to be mocked by an obstinate teenager. It was another thing entirely when the little rebel was a piece of his own soul; something that should belong to you entirely, loyal and devoted to its core. If the boy was his horcrux, he clearly didn't know it. Of course, Dumbledore wouldn't have been particularly forthcoming with that information, would he?

Strangely enough, Lord Voldemort felt himself becoming agitated by the young man's defiance, but the usual rage and violent hatred that seemed almost second nature to him, didn't come. Instead of spitting out curses and vitriol, he merely swept up from his seat, and began to glide from behind his desk, in a wide circle around young Harry, who stood his ground in the center of the room.

As the boy watched the Dark Lord circle him like a predator, he began to take in the details of the room they found themselves in. “Where are we, anyway?”

This caused Lord Voldemort to look around, as well. They were in his private study. A dark, wood-paneled room, lined with bookshelves and lit by a dreamy, glowing fire that gave off no heat in this incorporeal plane. Interesting. He must have fallen asleep at his desk while trying to find an answer to the problem of Harry Potter, and now he was dreaming about the very same boy, in the very same location where he had nodded off. Of course, he certainly wasn't going to give the boy any further information about their whereabouts. “We are dreaming, of course. We are in the Land of Morpheus.”

The boy gave him a look. “Obviously we're dreaming,” he spat at the man who continued to prowl the edges of the room, never taking his eyes off the boy. “If we were awake, you would have tried to kill me the second you saw me.”

“Perhaps,” was Lord Voldemort's only reply. He was annoyed at the boy's choice of words. Tried to kill him? As if to say the Dark Lord might not be capable of such a task. Although, it was difficult to deny, Harry Potter's words weren't entirely without backing. Lord Voldemort had tried, and failed, to kill the boy on more than a few occasions. But that was not any fault of his own, any error on his own part, the boy was not more powerful or cunning. He was simply unreasonably lucky, and so carefully protected by Dumbledore and his followers. That was all. Lord Voldemort paused. Or was it?

Lord Voldemort had walked a full circle around the Potter boy before he came to a stop, several feet before him, face to face. The Dark Lord looked down at the young man who had escaped death on so many occasions, who seemed to possess some sort of unnatural ability to cling to life. Harry Potter gave a challenging glare, but Lord Voldemort smiled venomously, hungrily. It all became so clear. The boy was not lucky; no one was that lucky. The boy was a vessel for his soul, his precious soul, and no piece of Lord Voldemort's soul would ever give into death so easily.

Young Harry hadn't avoided death due to any special magic of his own, it was the soul fragment inside of him, urging him to fight tooth and nail to stay alive, keep itself safe. Perhaps that also explained the boy's obstinate nature, his lack of fear. Some of the most powerful wizards and witches of the age would stutter and cower in the presence of the Dark Lord, but Harry Potter only looked on with either stubbornness or apprehension. Did the soul inside of him recognize its master? Did it see him as safety, as something that didn't need to be feared?

After his critical examination, Lord Voldemort took a step directly toward the boy. Slowly, cautiously, as if trying not to startle his prey. Harry Potter took a half step back but didn't run. There was nowhere to run to, anyway. Besides, this was a dream, the boy knew he could not be hurt here, or at least, he should sincerely hope so.

The boy narrowed his eyes. "What do you mean 'perhaps?' Are you trying to imply you wouldn't kill me in a second? Oh, but wait, I forgot. You like to play with your food before you eat it, don't you?" Harry Potter continued to shuffle slowly backward, as Lord Voldemort strode slowly, but purposefully, forward. The gap was narrowing bit by bit.

"Perhaps you don't need to die, Harry Potter. Perhaps you were made to serve a different purpose." Lord Voldemort stood directly before the boy, now.

Young Harry stammered to a halt at those words. His brows furrowed in obvious confusion. "You are such a liar," he declared, but then he paused, unsure. "What are you talking about, anyway?"

Lord Voldemort grabbed the boy's jaw in a motion so quick it was inhuman. Harry Potter tried to jerk backward, but it was too late, his face was already trapped firmly in the bruising grip of the Dark Lord. His eyes were wide with shock, probably both because his enemy had taken hold of him so easily, and also because there was no pain in his scar. Lord Voldemort knew the effect his touch had on the boy, how it made him scream in agony. Not here, though. Not in the dream.

Lord Voldemort leaned in, as if to share a secret. He stared into those bright green eyes, wide with concern and disorientation. This boy had fought him time and time again, but the boy was only fighting to live, was he not? Unknowingly keeping Lord Voldemort's precious soul safe from harm. Could this boy be useful? Could his determination and tenacity be put to use? Lord Voldemort tilting his head in fascination. "Perhaps you are worthy of Lord Voldemort after all, Harry Potter."

Harry shot up in his bed, gasping for breath. He was sweating and shivering at the same time, both too hot and too cold. Uncomfortable in every conceivable way. His mind was frantic. Had that been a nightmare, a vision of the future, or had he actually been speaking to Voldemort himself?

At the mere thought of the man, he unconsciously raised his hand to the lightning scar on his forehead. It wasn't hurting. There was the tiniest prickling sensation, but that happened often enough. Typically, when he saw Voldemort in his dreams, his scar was split open in agony. What did it mean that his scar didn't hurt? Was it just a regular nightmare then? One that just so happened to feature his greatest enemy, since he had seen the man only a few weeks ago at the Ministry?

Lately, most of Harry's nightmares featured Bellatrix Lestrange laughing and mocking him for Sirius's death. That, or a haunting veil that seemed to call him with whispering voices, luring him to a place beyond. Despite being caught in the middle of the duel between Voldemort and Dumbledore, despite being possessed by the man in question, Harry hadn't dreamed much of the Dark Lord himself.

It didn't surprise Harry that he was starting to dream about Voldemort now, though. After all, Dumbledore had shared the prophesy with him. Harry knew what awaited him at the end of this unavoidable path, and it wasn't Bellatrix Lestrange or some mystical veil. He would have to face Voldemort in the end. He would have to kill or be killed. Was that what the dream was trying to tell him? What had it meant?

A Change of Plans

Chapter Notes

Warning: Violence (not very graphic)

“Severus, I have done much deliberating since yesterday.” Severus Snape swept down the brick laid path in the back gardens of Malfoy Manor a half step behind the Dark Lord. It was a clear summer day, with hardly a cloud in the sky. It was strange to see the Dark Lord out in the light, among Narcissa’s prize winning rose bushes. His black cloak was up over his head, as if to protect his hairless head from the beauty of the sunlit afternoon. Yet his feet were bare as they padded silently along the red bricks. Severus didn’t offer any response to the Dark Lord’s comment, even when the wraith before him let his words hang with an unnaturally long pause.

Severus knew better than to try and fill the silence. That was a rookie mistake. The prolonged stillness probably made most of the Dark Lord’s followers uncomfortable, but Severus reveled in quietude, detested unnecessary chatter, and was not a man easily made uncomfortable. He simply strode at a relaxed pace by his master’s shoulder, while the man’s oversized pet slithered along nearby, a literal snake in the grass.

The Dark Lord turned a corner past a fountain with a carved marble mermaid lounging in the sun. She turned and almost gave them a friendly wave, until she saw who it was gliding by. She instantly froze and tried to pretend to be solid stone. Severus wasn’t sure where the Dark Lord was leading him, but he knew better than to ask. He simply waited for the man to speak again. “I have thought very carefully about each and every piece of news that you delivered. I have thought over what you told me of the ring, and its curse, and Dumbledore’s inevitable demise.”

They passed through a stone archway. The Dark Lord’s serpentine monster was still at their heels as the strange company headed out of the main formal garden area. They were in the informal gardens now. Instead of perfectly trimmed shrubbery and magical statuary, there were willow trees and fairy lights. Severus wondered if the Dark Lord was leading him to the large hedge maze ahead to their right. He wasn’t sure if that would be a good sign or not, so he simply followed along and let the Dark Lord’s words hang in the air. He still didn’t know whether the Dark Lord was planning to laud him, punish him, or kill him, and he had no intention of acting until he was given some indication as to which mood his master was in.

“I have thought over what you said about Harry Potter, his connection to me through a piece of my own soul, and Dumbledore’s clever little plan to eventually sacrifice the boy.” The Dark Lord eyed Severus critically for another moment, before finally ending the torment. “I believe you are speaking the truth, and that you are correct in your assessments.”

Severus couldn't help it. He closed his eyes in relief and let out a long breath he hadn't realized he had been holding. The potion's master hadn't been foolish enough to tell his lord about Lily, or changing sides, or about his genuine concern for the boy's life. He was sure he would have been struck down in an instant if he had. So he hadn't been sure how to convince the Dark Lord of the truth behind his words. Dumbledore was dying, and he had confessed that Severus needed to inform the boy of the trapped soul shard, in case the headmaster didn't get the chance. The potion's master was a little surprised that the Dark Lord had believed the story so readily, but knew better than to question any mercy he received.

They reached another fork and the Dark Lord led them left, away from the hedge maze. Now Severus was getting very curious about where they were going. However, he continued to say nothing, allowing the other man to take complete control of both their jaunt and their conversation. "The ring belonged to me. The curse placed on it was my own creation. I went to check the ring's whereabouts after our conversation, only to discover that it had, indeed, been stolen and the area around was rank with Dumbledore's magic." So that explained it. "I'm surprised the man was able to buy himself any time at all. The old man must know more about the Dark Arts than he likes to let on."

Severus kept his features perfectly passive and expressionless as they began making their way up a small slope. His mind was carefully blank. The potions master had also neglected to mention that he had been the one to heal the headmaster. It was best to let the Dark Lord believe Dumbledore had healed himself, and Severus had every intention of reinforcing this belief. "My Lord, Albus Dumbledore has always been particularly skilled in keeping secrets. For a man who claims to be a champion for the Light, he seems to operate almost entirely in shadow."

Severus could see the Dark Lord's lips quirk up at that, even in the shadow of his dark hood. Severus knew how much his supposed master delighted in taunts at the expense of the headmaster. "Indeed," the man agreed. As they reached the crest of the small hill, the Malfoy family quidditch pitch came into view. The professor furrowed his brow. That couldn't possibly be their destination, could it? The Dark Lord gave no elaboration about where they were headed, but simply continued with their previous topic. "As for the boy, I will admit, I am not yet entirely certain what I will do with him."

Severus nodded. At least that was an improvement compared to obsessively trying to kill Potter. "Yes, my Lord."

"However, until I decide what is to be done with him, the boy cannot be killed." Severus nodded again. They definitely seemed to be headed for the quidditch pitch now. The potion's master couldn't think of any reason why that would be their destination. He certainly couldn't imagine the Dark Lord wanting to go for a leisurely broom ride in the afternoon sun. However, the wraith-like man continued to offer no clarification about their destination and instead explained his plans for the Boy-Who-Lived. "It would be preferable if my soul fragment was within my reach. Somewhere close, where its safety can be guaranteed. The boy will need to be brought to the Manor, and kept under heavy protection until it can be determined whether my soul can be extracted or not."

Severus had not anticipated this outcome, and he felt like a fool for not even thinking of it. But then, if the Dark Lord wanted to hold the boy hostage, surely that was a better option than outright murdering him? Was this why they were fast approaching the quidditch pitch? Did the Dark Lord plan on bringing Potter to the Manor via broomstick? “My Lord, it will not be an easy task to remove the boy from his hiding place, the Order is already keeping him under their own protection.”

The Dark Lord did not look happy about Severus’s observation. As his magic lashed out, a nearby tree splintered to their right, and an enormous branch came crashing to the ground. The mammoth snake had to reroute around it in order to follow its master. “The Order can hardly be said to be ‘protecting’ him when they are merely keeping him alive long enough for him to be slaughtered along with my precious soul. I want Harry Potter brought here before Dumbledore can enact his little scheme and have the boy finished off.”

Severus nodded, but his master was hardly paying attention. “My Lord, of course. However, we are fortunate that time is on our side. From what he alluded to me, the headmaster has absolutely no intention of killing the boy himself. He wishes for you to do the honors. In fact, he was quite specific that you, my Lord, must be the only one to carry out that task.” They approached the broom shed, but the Dark Lord continued right past it without pause. They were going to the quidditch pitch without brooms? “Aside from that, my Lord, the headmaster has no reason to believe (as of yet) that you might not end boy’s life the first chance you get. He would have no reason to try and take out the boy himself. I believe your soul is not in any immediate danger.”

The Dark Lord’s mood soured further. The broom shed to their left shook with the force of his unrestrained magic. The brick path below them cracked and quivered. Did the man know how wild and unstable his magic behaved when his temper elevated? “I don’t care what was alluded. Dumbledore knows that Harry Potter carries a piece of me, and the old man will do anything to see me defeated. We already know that he is more than willing to have his little pet put down. I do not want to give him the opportunity. Where is the boy now?”

“My Lord, he is currently under the protection of the blood wards at the home of his muggle relatives in Surrey. We will have to wait until Potter is moved for us to strike.”

The Dark Lord nodded. “When is the Order going to remove him?”

“The Order is not going to remove him, my Lord. Albus Dumbledore is going himself to retrieve the boy. I do not know the exact date, but I know it is soon. I will confirm the exact date and time of his move, and inform you immediately, my Lord.”

The Dark Lord passed through another archway as they entered the quidditch pitch. The bricks below them continued to tremble, and Severus had to walk very carefully to maintain his footing. The Dark Lord led Severus and the snake out onto the well-trimmed, grassy field. “The time and date do not matter. If we try to take the boy out from Dumbledore’s personal grasp, he would just as soon kill the little Gryffindor than allow him to fall into my possession.” Severus did not personally believe that to be the case, but he withheld his opinion on the matter. “Where will Dumbledore take him?”

“I’m not entirely certain, my Lord, an Order safe house of some type. Dumbledore has been extremely tightlipped about where Harry Potter would be spending the summer, and I don’t believe the headmaster would tell me even if I asked. I know the boy has spent other summers with the Weasley family, so it could possibly be there. However, they may think that was too obvious, and send him somewhere else instead.”

The Dark Lord narrowed his red, cat-like eyes. He was obviously upset, and Severus could understand why. The Dark Lord had never liked the idea of anything being outside of his control. Severus could only imagine how he felt about a piece of his own soul being at the mercy of a reckless teenager and a scrupulously righteous old wizard who both shared a single-minded desire to destroy him.

The Dark Lord continued toward the center of the grassy pitch, and the professor realized for the first time that there was something there. “Perhaps you are right, Severus,” the Dark Lord relented. “Perhaps the summer will not be the best time to retrieve him.”

Severus nodded. “As you wish, my Lord. However, I’m sure I do not need to remind you that after the summer, the boy will be returning to Hogwarts, where Dumbledore has arranged for additional Auror protection around the castle and grounds.”

The two reached their destination, and Severus realized that the ‘something’ in the center of the field wasn’t a thing at all, but a person, bound and gagged, now lying helplessly at the Dark Lord’s feet. For one horrifying moment, Severus had thought it was Potter, but the hair wasn’t right. This man seemed to have chestnut brown hair, far too tidy to be the boy’s. Besides, this man was too old to be Potter; perhaps in his thirties or forties. He didn’t look at all familiar.

The Dark Lord looked down at his captive in excited anticipation, before he turned to his servant. “Give me your arm, Severus.” The man did so without question, stepping forward and pulling up his left sleeve to reveal the skull and snake on his forearm. The Dark Lord pulled out his wand and tapped the Dark Mark, without giving any word of explanation as to whom he was summoning to join them. The Mark burned for a moment just as the wand made contact, but Severus showed not one single outward sign of discomfort.

That anxiously excited expression returned, as the serpentine man looked back down at the figure on the ground as if he were a delicious rodent he was about to eat. Even the pet snake was circling in eager anticipation, probably hoping for scraps.

Severus waited for an explanation, but when none came, he finally took it upon himself. “My Lord, may I enquire whom this third party is? Who has the displeasure of inciting your wrath?”

The man in question seemed only half-conscious and was whimpering pathetically. The Dark Lord appeared highly amused. “Not a who, Severus, but a what. This is a muggle who simply wandered onto the Malfoy grounds, into the surrounding forest. Greyback informed me that one of his wolves found this thing lost in the woods, and I instructed them to bring it here.”

Severus quirked a brow. “I’m surprised a muggle was able to get past the muggle-repellant wards. Perhaps they are not working to their full strength.”

The Dark Lord let out a dark chuckle. It was difficult to say whether he was more terrifying when he was angry or when he was gleeful. “The wards are not working at all. I took them down three days ago.”

“You took down the wards, my Lord?”

“The muggle-repelling ones, yes, Severus.” The man pulled out his wand and aimed it at the helpless form barely struggling in the grass, but he only used a severing charm to cut the bindings...for now. “As you can see, it’s much easier to hunt when you simply let the prey come to you.”

Severus watched the man struggle blindly to pull the ropes off him. “Is that what you plan to do with Potter? Let him come to you?”

The Dark Lord looked very pleased with that enquiry. “The boy is out of my reach while he is in the school, as long as Dumbledore sits as headmaster. However, the boy has already shown that he is more than capable of sneaking away from the school, and more than eager to escape the careful protection of his keepers, should the safety or welfare of his friends come into question.” Severus nodded; the boy did have a knack for running headfirst into danger.

They watched the muggle for a few minutes as he wrestled out of the ropes and pulled the gag and blindfold from his face. He seemed rather out of sorts. Severus wondered what the werewolves did to him before they brought him here, even without the gag in his mouth, the man didn’t seem quite able to form words. He simply mumbled and cried. Severus found it difficult to muster sympathy for the man, not that he really wanted to. It wouldn’t really do either of them any good in the end.

Suddenly a voice called out from the edge of the pitch. “My Lord?” Both black-clad figures turned to see Draco Malfoy striding quickly across the grassy field. So, that was who the Dark Lord had summoned. Once he was close enough, the young man sank to his knees with his head bowed low. His expensive, tailored robes bunched up on the dry grass, and his platinum blond hair fell over his eyes.

“Draco,” the Dark Lord replied. “You arrived quite quickly. But then, I suppose it would be easy to come at a moment’s notice, when you live here as well.” It was a taunt, a power play. Of course the boy lived here; they were at Malfoy Manor. By rights, the Dark Lord should be considered a guest of Draco’s, but the Dark Lord was the lord of any place he deigned to stay, and everyone else was only there by his discretion.

Severus wondered if the young Malfoy heir picked up on the derisive nature of the comment. Almost certainly, if the boy had been trained by Lucius. Not that young Draco could do anything about it. “Yes, of course, my Lord.” It was then that the blonde seemed to notice the shaking and sniveling man trying desperately to get to his feet, on the other side of his master. At least the boy had the sense not to ask anything too direct. “How can I be of service, my Lord?”

“Come, rise Draco.” The Dark Lord was already striding away from the muggle, back toward the covered viewing area at the edge of the pitch. “We have things to discuss.”

The Malfoy family quidditch field was much smaller than the Hogwarts stadium, and the goal hoops were much closer to the ground. It wasn't really designed to vast quantities of spectators or full teams engaging in competitive play. It was designed with summer recreation in mind.

This meant that there weren't any vast raised stands with bleacher style seats. There were some luxurious benches dispersed around the edge, but most of the time when the Malfoys or their guests came out to watch a game, they sat in a large covered picnic area. It was this area that the Dark Lord led them now.

As soon as the Dark Lord was safely in the shade, he conjured a magnificent throne and sat facing the field. The poor muggle had only just managed to get to his feet and was staring around with vacant, confused eyes. Severus wasn't sure if the man could see them or not.

Neither Severus nor Draco took a seat. One did not sit in the presence of the Dark Lord, unless one was invited to. As the Dark Lord lifted his wand, and allowed his magic to flow out onto the pitch, he finally addressed the young blonde who he had summoned all the way out here. "Tell me Draco, how are things progressing with the mission I assigned you two weeks ago? I hope I am not overestimating your capabilities when I assume that you must have a plan or two in motion on how you will dispose of Albus Dumbledore."

Draco quickly diverted his attention away from the muggle when he was being addressed by his new master. "Not at all, my Lord. Your confidence is quite well placed. I already have a possible plan on how the headmaster could be dispensed with, and I have an idea of something that could allow other Death Eaters to enter the castle. My mother is taking me to Diagon and Knockturn Alley in a few weeks, once the school list comes out, and then I will put the pieces in motion."

The Dark Lord nodded in approval. "Ah, then I'm afraid that I have some bad news."

Draco paled immediately. Bad news from the Dark Lord was usually very, very bad news. "My Lord?" Severus was watching the Dark Lord's magic travel around the edge of the field. He seemed to be setting up some type of ward around the perimeter. Most likely a muggle-repellant ward, to trap his prey inside.

"The task I assigned you, Draco. It is no longer necessary. I no longer wish you to end the life of Albus Dumbledore. I hope you did not waste too much of your time." The cruel smirk on the Dark Lord's face showed that he couldn't care less what Draco had wasted.

The poor boy seemed torn between relief that he no longer had to face such a seemingly impossible task and fear that he was being punished for something. "H-have I done something wrong, my Lord?"

"Not at all, Draco. I simply wish for you to complete a different task. One which I believe will be more suited to your specific situation."

Draco was nervously rubbing his hands together behind his back. It was amazing how even the most well trained and composed purebloods seemed to fall apart under the heavy stare of those red eyes. "My specific situation?"

Once the ward was complete, the Dark Lord reveled at his own handiwork. Severus wondered what the game would be now, but didn't have to wait long for an answer. The Dark Lord opened his mouth and hissed some sort of command to his monstrous snake, who seemed only too happy to obey. She slinked through the shimmer of the wards and immediately made her way across the pitch toward the muggle who was now hobbling around, still trying to find his bearings.

The poor teenager beside Severus seemed paler than he had perhaps ever seen him. Severus wondered if he would look away, or if the memory of this day would mar his feelings about his beloved quidditch pitch for years to come. Severus remembered sitting under this exact canopy once, sipping tea with Narcissa while Lucius showed a young Draco how to ride his new training broom. It felt like a lifetime ago now. Slowly they watched the snake stalk closer and closer to her prey.

Severus didn't think anything would be able to pull his attention from the horrifying scene before him, but then the Dark Lord spoke and broke the tense silence. "The new task, Draco, which I would like you to devote your time and attention to, is to befriend Harry Potter."

That actually got Draco to look away from the man-eating snake which was about to live up to its title. "Harry Potter?"

"Yes, Draco. Your new task will be to gain the friendship and trust of Harry James Potter. I believe he is in your year at Hogwarts, is he not?"

"Er, I mean, he is, my Lord."

"Excellent, and you are familiar with the boy, are you not?"

Draco was clearly torn, looking between the terrible eyes of the Dark Lord, and the snake which was now seconds away from striking. "I do know him, obviously. I mean, he's in Gryffindor, though. Harry Potter...he...I mean, we don't exactly...get along, my Lord."

Suddenly the snake lunged, and it was some sort of miracle that the man happened to trip at just the right moment that the beast ended up in the grass beside him. Suddenly, the poor confused fellow seemed to realize that something was even more wrong than he previously thought (whatever it was that he had been thinking) and he suddenly pushed himself up and started half-hobbling, half-running back across to the other side of the pitch.

The Dark Lord had a particularly evil grin. "It seems the muggle is cleverer than I thought. This will be much more entertaining than originally presumed. I believe we have finally found something useful to do with this field. I would say this is a far more entertaining sport than watching wizards try to knock each other off brooms, wouldn't you agree?"

"Yes, my Lord," Snape responded immediately.

It took Draco another second or two to collect himself. His face was blank, and only his eyes revealed his inner terror. "Of course, my Lord."

They watched in silence for another minute and the fifteen foot snake uncoiled herself and slithered much more quickly after her fleeing prey. It was the Dark Lord who broke the spell. "I did not assume that you were currently close to Dumbledore's little pet, Draco. I do not specifically care what the nature of your current relationship is with the boy. The only thing I care about is that you complete this task. You will make Harry Potter believe that you are his friend. You will make him believe that you are someone that he can trust and confide in. And then you will lure him here to the manor. Is that understood?"

Draco looked utterly terrified, and Severus could understand why. Given the nature of the two boys' relationship, this task probably seemed significantly more difficult than killing Albus Dumbledore. The blonde was probably imagining what would happen to him if he failed to befriend Harry Potter, and his imagination probably included that snake. However, his voice was perfectly level when he answered his new master. "Yes, my Lord. Of course, my Lord." After a slight pause he seemed to remember himself. "Thank you for honoring me with this task."

There was a loud crunch sound, and all three of them turned back to look at the pitch. The snake had finally caught her lunch. She had latched onto the man's torso, and her body was wrapped around him as he fell to the ground. He would not get back up again. Even if the snake wasn't full of deadly venom, there was just so much blood spraying from his chest that no one would be able to survive for long.

The Dark Lord smiled like a proud parent. "Such a good girl. I will inform Greyback that if the werewolves catch any more muggles wondering around the grounds, they should bring them here. I was beginning to worry Nagini was not getting enough exercise inside the Manor."

Draco's expressionless face had turned a faint shade of green. Severus knew that Draco had been escaping to the quidditch pitch rather often this summer, to ride his broom in peace, and clear his mind from the thoughts of the war and his responsibilities. That was probably over now. There was nowhere for any of them to escape anymore.

Fortunately, the Dark Lord wasn't paying the least attention to his newest Death Eater. He was too focused on watching his pet play with her food. When he spoke, he didn't remove his eyes from the sight. "You may go now, Draco. You may wish to plan how you will win over the little Light wizard."

Draco nodded mutely and gave a final bow before he made his way toward the archway, while keeping as far away from the snake as possible. He moved like a walking corpse. He would be, if he wasn't able to win over Potter, and Severus couldn't imagine how the boy planned on doing that.

Severus watched the snake slowly swallow what was left of the man. He had seen worse things in his life, but that didn't mean that he wanted to see more. However, he hadn't been dismissed, so clearly the Dark Lord wasn't finished with him yet.

"Severus, you will keep an eye on young Draco. Make sure he is accomplishing my task."

"Yes, my Lord."

“You will also keep an eye on Harry Potter. Make sure that he is not putting my soul in any unnecessary risk. Make sure that the old man does not suspect anything has changed. Feed him some story about how I am planning to kill the boy.”

Severus nodded yet again. “Yes, my Lord. If you wish, I can tell the headmaster that it is your plan to arrange for his own assassination. Since that had been your previous plan, I’m sure he will find it believable.” It would be easy enough, since that was what Severus had already told Dumbledore.

The Dark Lord smiled at the idea. The snake was still devouring her meal. It was a horribly slow process. “Yes, tell him that. Tell him I am planning to send someone to kill him. He will have no idea that I have already figured out his little secret.”

“Yes, my Lord.” Dumbledore was already under the impression that Draco Malfoy would be trying to kill him. Severus had promised the headmaster that he would accomplish the task instead. He had even made an unbreakable vow to Narcissa.

Suddenly, Severus froze. The vow. He had made an unbreakable vow that he would help Draco accomplish his task. Even perform it himself, if Draco was incapable. He didn’t promise to kill Dumbledore, he promised to perform the task the Dark Lord assigned Draco. At the time, those two had been the same thing, but now Draco had a new task. Draco was tasked to gain Harry Potter’s trust and lure him back to Malfoy Manor, into the waiting arms of the Dark Lord. It seemed that now Severus was required to help him with that task, or else his life was over.

“That is all, Severus.” The Dark Lord’s words returned him to the present. He would have to think things through when he had time to consider everything, without another legilimens only a few feet away.

“Yes, my Lord.” He bowed reverentially and turned to follow Draco’s route back through the archway.

“Severus,” he was interrupted before he could make his escape. “Before you leave the manor, tell Bellatrix to meet me in my study. There is something I need her to return to me.”

Severus bowed his head, and then made his way out of the quidditch pitch as quickly as was possible without drawing undue attention.

Draco Malfoy did not appreciate the change of plans. He could not imagine a worse assignment. Was this some sort of punishment? Draco knew that the Dark Lord was angry with his father, he knew that the task of killing Dumbledore was a sort of test to prove the worth of the Malfoy family, but he had been more than up to the task. He was ready to prove himself.

How was befriending Potter a test? Anyone could do that. At least, anyone except for Draco. Potter hadn’t even been willing to shake his hand that first day on the Hogwarts Express. He

couldn't imagine that the Gryffindor would ever want to befriend him now, after everything that had happened between them since then.

Draco had been so proud to receive the assignment of killing Albus Dumbledore. It was clearly an important mission. The old man was one of the Death Eaters' greatest enemies. He was the leader of the Light wizards, and the cause of a great deal of legislation specifically targeted against pureblood families and Dark wizards. If the man were finally gone, it would make a lot of people's lives a lot easier.

True, the old man was probably only doing what he felt was right, but that was hardly an excuse. Besides, he was really, really old. Shouldn't he be dead by now anyway? Killing him would practically be a mercy.

Potter, on the other hand, was an attention-hogging git, with boorish manners, obnoxious friends, and an overwhelming bias against anything remotely Dark. Just the thought of Potter made Draco want to scowl. But did that mean his schoolmate deserved to die? Of course, Draco hadn't been tasked with killing Potter himself, but he held no illusions about what would happen to Scarhead should the Dark Lord get ahold of him. Probably something similar to what had happened to that muggle on the quidditch pitch.

Draco had always known that the Dark Lord wanted Potter dead, it simply had never been something he thought about in any serious way. It had always been more of a vague, abstract idea, 'The Dark Lord wants Potter dead.' Draco knew that for certain, but he had never really imagined the Dark Lord actually killing Potter. The boy seemed to have an almost unnatural ability to escape life threatening situations. It seemed like things would simply continue the way they always had. And if the Dark Lord ever did manage to eventually finish Potter off, which seemed like to only possibly conclusion to this tale, it would almost certainly be Potter's own fault, for sticking his nose where it didn't belong.

On the other hand, if Draco himself was the one to deliver Potter to the Dark Lord, then Potter's death wasn't really his own fault, it was Draco's. So what? Draco hated Potter. He hated Potter's arrogant attitude, and his overly flashy broom-handling, and his disheveled mess of black hair, and his ill-fitting clothing, and his ugly scar, and his hypnotizing green eyes. Everything. He hated everything. But Draco had never really wanted Potter to end up dead. Not really; not in any real way.

It didn't matter now, he supposed. Potter was going to die one way or another, and if Draco was the one to deliver the other boy to his master, he would surely be rewarded for his loyalty and cleverness. Draco's father would almost certainly be forgiven, and the status of the Malfoy family in the Dark Lord's eyes would be restored to its former glory.

Which left one very serious question: how in Merlin's name would he convince Harry Potter that he was a friend? Draco had been going over this seemingly impossible puzzle for weeks now. He knew, of course, that any relationship between them would have to start off with an apology, as distasteful as that idea was. Draco would probably also have to convince Potter that he was disavowing the Dark Arts since the Gryffindor Golden Boy seemed so obnoxiously opposed to them.

He had a vague idea of how he might approach Potter. First of all, he would need to get the other boy alone. Draco had no intention of making nice while Weasley and that nosey

mudblood butted in. Perhaps he would try and corner Potter on the Hogwarts Express, while his Prefect friends were making their rounds. However, the Chosen One would probably have other Gryffindors fawning over him. Maybe Draco could try to get him alone after class one day?

The question of when to approach Harry Potter was more or less answered for him the day he was shopping for new uniforms with his mother at Madam Malkin's and someone rudely walked into him. Draco spun around to give them a piece of his mind, only to come face to face with the very same young man he had been thinking about nonstop for weeks. The words seemed to die in his throat. He hadn't expected to see Potter until at least King's Cross Station. What was he possibly going to do now?

"Draco, darling, I just need to..." His mother was coming around the corner with Madam Malkin, carrying bags of his newest wares. They came to an abrupt halt at the sight of Draco's worst nightmare. The young man he was expected to deliver to death. The young man he was expected to earn the trust of.

Obviously, Draco had already informed his mother of his new assignment, which she hadn't seemed particularly happy about. So she immediately realized Draco's conundrum at having come face to face with Potter before he had really prepared himself for such a thing. At least she had the wherewithal to act naturally in such a bizarre situation. "As I was saying, Draco, I just need to pay for these things, and then we can move on."

Draco barely registered her words. He was frozen in place, staring into the bright green eyes he would be expected to help snuff out. Weasley was muttering something to his friend, but Draco neither listened nor cared. He only had eyes for Potter.

It wasn't until Draco's 'new friend' finally spoke up that the Slytherin finally snapped out of his trance. "What's your problem, Malfoy?"

Draco realized that he was being ridiculous, and probably suspicious. He had a task. He needed to befriend Potter and then deliver him to the Dark Lord, and that was what he was going to do. "Potter, I need to speak with you."

Potter was eyeing him critically. "Fine. Go ahead and speak. No one's stopping you."

Draco considered that for a moment. He supposed that he could simply try to explain here and now. But then he didn't think he would be able to bring himself to offer any sort of explanation with the bloody shopkeeper watching, least of all Potter's little minions.

Unsure how to proceed, Draco turned to his mother, his desperate expression offering a silent question. Her briefest nod was all the confirmation that he needed. If Draco didn't try to make amends now, it would look suspicious if he tried in a couple weeks, once school was under way. Whether he was ready or not, it was now or never. "I need to talk to you...in private."

"No bloody way." Potter didn't even give him a moment to explain.

Weasley suddenly stepped forward, like a dog trying to scare strangers away from its master. “Yeah, sod off, Malfoy. He’s not going anywhere with you.”

Draco didn’t have time for the ginger, and only spared him the briefest glare before returning his attention to his actual target. “We don’t have to go anywhere. We could just talk...” Draco’s eyes scanned around the shop as quickly as he could, searching for a suitable neutral location. “Right there.” He pointed to the front window on the other side of the display mannequins. The window was large and clear, offering the perfect view of the street outside, and the obvious Auror standing just across the way. “We could just step right outside. Your friends will still be able to see you fine. There are plenty of people in the street. I just don’t want to be overheard.”

Potter rolled his eyes. His little friends looked just as unimpressed. “You don’t want to be overheard...so no one can hear you threaten me?”

Did Potter really think that witnesses would be what stopped Draco from threatening him? They kept arguing until Draco finally burst out, “Please, it’s important. I need to talk to you. The sooner the better.”

Potter looked utterly shocked, his eyes were wide, and his mouth was gaping like a fish. What did Draco say to make him look so completely surprised? Potter seemed to catch himself quickly enough, though. “How do I know you won’t hex me as soon as I step outside the door?”

In the end, Draco had to pull out his wand and hand it over to his mother. All the while, with Potter and his little friends looking ready for a duel, as if they thought he was stupid enough to hex the Chosen One in the middle of Madam Malkin’s Robes for All Occasions.

When Draco held the front door open for Potter, the other boy seemed clearly torn. Potter must have been sure that Draco was up to something, however he didn’t seem to understand what exactly. Draco simply gave him an innocent look. “Are you coming or not?”

Potter finally made his way toward the exit. “How do you know I won’t hex you?”

Draco had to hold back a laugh. “Oh please, Potter, you’re not going to attack someone who’s unarmed. You’re too noble for that.” Despite Draco’s determination to make nice with Potter, he couldn’t help but spit out the words derisively. Pointing out Potter’s flaws was just too fun to pass up.

When the two were finally out in the alley, standing opposite each other in clear view of the shoppers inside, and the Auror across the way, Potter broke first. “All right, Malfoy, I’m here. Let’s get this over with. What did you want to say?”

Draco barely managed to avoid rolling his eyes. Potter was so bloody annoying. This was going to be a lot harder than he thought. “I want to offer you a truce.” When Potter simply gawked at him, Draco continued, undeterred. “I don’t want to fight with you anymore. This...I don’t know...rivalry thing. Whatever this is. I’m done. In fact, the whole thing, all of it, I’m done.”

Harry gaped at the little ferret. Where was Malfoy going with this? What could possibly be the angle here? This could not be believed. "What are you talking about?"

Malfoy took a deep breath, as if he were struggling to get the words out. "My father's in Azkaban, Potter. I don't know when or if he's getting out. I don't know when or if I will see him again. Oh, and of course, there's also the fact that he failed the Dark Lord. Azkaban is probably the safest place for him. If he's freed, I don't know what the Dark Lord will do." Harry didn't need to use much imagination to figure out that it wouldn't be good.

Malfoy continued his little tirade. "My mother is...well, she's an exceptionally strong woman. It would take more than that to break her. But, I just feel like my family is...You know what? None of this is really any of your business. It doesn't matter. The point is, I'm done. I'm out. I don't want anything more to do with any of this; I just want to pick up the pieces of my life and try to repair my family's standing, and the last thing I need in my life is some ridiculous competition with the Wizarding World's Savior."

Harry couldn't believe that Malfoy expected him to buy this nonsense. Malfoy hated him. Malfoy had always hated him, and there was no way that was going to change just because Lucius Malfoy was behind bars. "I thought it my fault your father was in prison? That's what you said last term, when you tried to attack me on the Hogwarts Express, isn't it? That it was all my fault that your family was falling apart. Why try to play nice now? What is this?"

Malfoy flinched, as if the words actually stung him. Harry turned toward the window again to make sure his friends were alright. Ron was watching him like a hawk, while Hermione was in the far corner with Madam Malkin fussing over her. Mrs. Malfoy had finished paying for her many bags of clothes, and was sitting down in a chintzy little seat by the front counter with a paperback book open in her lap. If this was some sort of trap, it was a very strange one.

Harry turned back to Malfoy only to see that the blond looked almost regretful. "Yes. I suppose I did say that." Malfoy looked like he might be in actual, physical pain. "I...may have jumped...a little too hastily...to the most convenient conclusion." Malfoy paused again, but Harry was in no hurry to help him out with whatever words he was tripping over. "I hated you. My father was there at the Department of Mysteries because of you...in a roundabout sort of way. I wanted to blame you. I realized after speaking with our solicitor that I, perhaps, misjudged your overall accountability in the events of that night."

Harry couldn't listen to this nonsense anymore. "I was one hundred percent accountable for what happened that night. If you want someone to blame, please, feel free to blame me. In fact, I'm much more comfortable with your hatred and scorn than whatever this is." Harry would much prefer Malfoy's cruel sarcasm to this strange, nervous stammering. "Besides, it was my fault. I led my friends into danger. I rushed in without thinking of the consequences...again. I'm not so cowardly as to let someone else take the blame for my mistakes."

Malfoy looked as coldly unimpressed as usual. "Wait, I can't tell. Do you actually think that whole fiasco was your fault, or are you just trying to seem noble?"

Harry hands curled into fists, and he had to hold himself back from launching at that smug Slytherin. “Fiasco? Is that what you call it? It was a nightmare. It was the single most painful experience of my life. It was a tragedy. Someone I loved died. My godfather died. He’s dead because of me. Screw you, Malfoy. You know what, thanks for the non-apology, or whatever this was. I think we’re done here.”

Harry started to walk around Malfoy to rejoin his friends inside the shop, but before he’d even gone two steps, Malfoys voice made him halt. “It’s not your fault.”

Harry gave him a disbelieving look. “Yes, it is.”

“It’s not your fault.”

“Shut up, you git!”

“It’s. Not. Your. Fault.”

Harry had had enough. “You don’t know anything!” He whipped out his wand, but he wasn’t sure why. He still had the trace after all, it’s not like he could actually hex Malfoy, but he really didn’t care at that moment.

The Auror across the way also pulled out his wand, and looked like he was starting to come over, but Harry couldn’t stand the idea of anyone listening to this rubbish. He didn’t want anyone to hear Malfoy talking about how that night was not his fault, when he knew it was. Harry waved the Auror back, but he kept his glare on Malfoy.

Suddenly Ron’s head appeared in the doorway. His wand was instantly trained on Malfoy’s back. “What the hell did you say, Malfoy?”

Malfoy didn’t respond at all. He just gave Harry a cold, appraising look. Harry couldn’t take his eyes off him. “It’s fine, Ron. Go back inside. We’re just talking.”

Ron wasn’t having it. “What did he say to make you draw your wand? What’s going on?”

“Nothing Ron. Malfoy’s just being obnoxious, and I lost my temper. It’s fine. Go back inside.”

Ron was not so easily swayed. “You don’t need to listen to whatever shite he’s spewing, Harry. Here, just come inside with me.” Ron turned his head to Malfoy, but the blond wouldn’t know that. He was still facing Harry, with his back toward the door, completely uncaring that Ron almost certainly had a wand trained on his back. “He’s done talking to you, Malfoy.”

Harry had expected his long-time rival to argue this, but to Harry’s enormous surprise, Malfoy simply nodded his head. “I honestly wasn’t trying to upset you. If you don’t want to hear what I have to say, I can’t exactly force you.”

What was happening to the world? Harry had no idea why he said it, but the words were tumbling out of his mouth before his brain had time to review their meaning. “Ron, it’s fine. We’re just chatting. I’ll be back in a minute. Just give us a sec, okay?”

Ron gave the back of Malfoy's head one more critical glance before he finally relented. "Alright Harry, if you're sure. Hermione's almost done, so I'm about to start my fitting. If you need anything at all, just wave."

"Thanks Ron." The door shut again with a little click. Harry could see Ron striding back to explain who-knows-what to Hermione. Malfoy also eyed the redhead through the large window glass, but didn't offer any comment. Harry still wasn't sure what to make of this whole situation, but he stowed his wand back in his pocket and gave Malfoy a critical look. "Why would you say that it wasn't my fault?"

At the question, the Slytherin turned his attention back to the young man across from him. "Because it's not?" Harry glared again, so Malfoy elaborated. "My father's solicitor told me what happened. He said that the Dark Lord set a trap for you, to steal something from the Department of Mysteries, that only you could retrieve." Malfoy paused here, and eyed Harry carefully, but Harry kept his face in the same annoyed scowl, so he continued. "Now, I'm not entirely certain of this part, but seeing as the Prophet won't shut up about some stupid prophecy about you being the Chosen One with the power to defeat the Dark Lord, I assume it has to do with that." Again, he paused, but Harry wasn't about to give any information on that topic to Draco Malfoy of all people.

Finally, Malfoy seemed to realize this, as well. "Regardless, the Dark Lord set a trap for you. He tricked you into going by making you think he had taken your godfather hostage. My father and the others went to capture you and your friends. Dumbledore and his cronies showed up and saved you, but Black was killed in the firefight." Harry thought he might be sick. It was painful enough to be reminded of that terrible evening, let alone have the details spewed so cavalierly from the mouth of this sniveling ferret.

When, once again, Harry refused to contribute to the conversation, Draco went on ahead. "Look, far be it from me to stop you if you want to wallow in your own self-misery. By all means, continue your little pity party as long as you like. I just feel like you should know it's not your fault. That night. Because it isn't."

Harry was done. "I can't deal with this right now, Malfoy. I don't want to talk about any of this with anyone. Least of all, you. I don't know what you're up to, but I can't imagine that you're possibly not up to something. The last time I saw you, you tried to attack me. Now, you're trying to console me? No. I don't know what you're selling, Malfoy, but whatever it is, I'm not buying it."

Again, before Harry had a chance to move toward the door, Malfoy's words brought him to a halt. "You're right, of course." Harry glared again. What was this? "You're right. Theo and I tried to attack you. We had just learned our fathers were in Azkaban. It seemed, at the time, like it was your fault. I acted rashly." Harry couldn't believe what he was hearing, until Malfoy just had to add one more little comment. "To be fair, though, your little minions cursed us behind our backs, so I feel like we're more than even."

Harry's wand was back in his hand. "Even? Even!? You have been nothing but a relentless bully to me and my friends since the first time we boarded the Hogwarts Express. You have taken every single opportunity to mock me, provoke me, and humiliate me. You have tried your absolute hardest to tear me down, to get me expelled, or to hurt me in any way you

could think of. We will never be even.” Harry tried to catch his breath. Malfoy’s face was pale as ash again. “If you want to suddenly stop being an arsehole; then fine. Great, even. I’m certainly not stopping you, but don’t you dare expect me to feel sorry for you just because your father is locked up. The only family I had left is now dead, and it’s your family’s fault; them and the monster they serve.”

“I thought you said it was your fault.”

Harry reeled. “I thought you said it wasn’t.”

Harry tried to calm himself down. He couldn’t hex Malfoy here in the street with pedestrians eyeing them curiously from across the way, no matter how tempting the prospect was. He could see Hermione looking concerned on the other side of the glass. He just gave her a dismissive wave to try and alleviate her fears. Ron was trapped on Madam Malkin’s pedestal, yelling something Harry couldn’t hear. He appeared to have a large pin sticking into his arm. He must have jumped when Harry pulled out his wand again, only to get poked with one of her many needles. Mrs. Malfoy simply sat primly with her attention entirely on her paperback, completely unconcerned about Hermione’s fretting, Ron’s screaming, or Harry threatening her son at wand point.

Malfoy sighed, as if he was losing patience with Harry. “You know what? Whatever. I don’t know what I expected. I wanted to extend you a peace-offering, but I should have known you’d never take it.”

Harry scowled. “I don’t know why you thought I would ever accept anything from you.”

Harry thought Malfoy would look down his nose with his usual pompous sneer, but he rolled his eyes instead, as if he were exasperated. “Oh, no! Merlin forbid the perfect, precious, Boy-Who-Lived, Chosen Scarhead debase himself by having a civil conversation with someone from a Dark Family.” His voice quivered on the last two words as if he were talking to a child about the Boogey Man. Then his sneer returned with a vengeance. “Well, screw you, you hypocrite, because your godfather was a Black. He was from the same family as me, on my mother’s side. We were related!”

Harry had no idea what that had to do with anything. “I know that.”

“What do you mean you know that?”

Harry shrugged. “He showed me the Black Family Tree. You were on it. I knew you two were related. How does that make me a hypocrite? I don’t like you because you’re a prat. I liked him because he was a great guy. I don’t care about your family. It’s you I don’t like.”

“Oh?” Malfoy looked completely disbelieving. “And yet when I first offered you an alliance you practically spat in my eye because you were from a precious Light Family, and you couldn’t stand to associate with anyone from a terrible Dark Family.”

Harry was lost again. “What do you mean Light Family and Dark Family?”

“What do you mean, what do I mean?” Malfoy was looking at him as if he didn’t quite believe what Harry was saying.

“I...well, I mean, I guess I have an idea what you’re talking about. It’s not hard to figure out. I’ve just never heard it phrased quite that way before.”

“Phrased what way? You can’t honestly tell me you’ve never heard anyone talk about Light Families and Dark Families.”

Harry tried not to blush. If he had a sickle for every time he found out something important about the wizarding world that apparently everyone else knew except him and no one had bothered to tell him about, he’d probably be richer than Malfoy. “Well, I’ve never really heard the Weasleys use those terms before. I don’t know. Sirius said his family was full of dark wizards, but...who knows? If anyone ever explained Light Families and Dark Families to me, I certainly don’t remember it.”

Malfoy looked increasingly perplexed. “You cannot honestly be that ignorant of pureblooded politics. You’re the Heir of one of the Noble Houses, aren’t you? When you turn seventeen, you’ll be able to claim your Lordship.”

This was news to him. “I have a Lordship? The Wizarding World has Lordships?”

It was Malfoy’s turn to gape like an idiot. He looked as if he simply couldn’t believe what he was hearing. Harry found it extremely annoying. People always seemed so surprised by how little he knew of the overall wizarding world and its ways, but it wasn’t like it was really his fault he had been shipped off to live with muggles.

He turned away from the blonde, back toward his friends. Ron was still struggling on the pedestal. He seemed to have acquired yet another pin, this one stuck in his other arm. Madam Malkin seemed beside herself, and Hermione looked like she was trying to calm him down, so they could free him from the fitted robes.

“You’re joking,” Malfoy sneered. Harry turned back to his conversation partner. He was about to agree that the entire situation inside did look like a joke, when he realized that Malfoy wasn’t talking about Ron’s flailing, he was talking about Harry’s last comment. “This is some sort of trick. You’re lying to me. There is no possible way that you don’t know that you’re Heir Potter. You must be. Who else would it be? There aren’t any other Potters, are there?”

“Er, I don’t know, actually.” Harry thought about it. If there was an heir to the Potter family, it would definitely be him. “I don’t think there are any other Potters. Professor Dumbledore said that my muggle aunt and cousin were my only blood relatives, so I can’t imagine there’s anyone left on the Potter side. I don’t really know who I would ask, though.”

Malfoy’s face suddenly scrunched with confusion. “Wait, if you’re this ignorant about Pureblood customs and politics and, apparently, your entire wizarding family, why did you so rudely snub my offer of friendly relations?”

This conversation was like some weird roller coaster of confusion. “What snub? What offer of friendly relations?”

“On the bloody train!” Malfoy’s voice almost squeaked with indignance. “I visited your compartment and I offered you an alliance. I offered you my help and my friendship. That was a very big deal. You could have politely refused, you could have been vague and kept things neutral, but no!” Malfoy took a step forward with a nasty scowl on his face. Harry, without even thinking, took a step back, stumbling on the uneven cobbles. “You didn’t even shake my hand. You wouldn’t even deign to touch me. You were just so much better than me. You were the precious Boy-Who-Lived and you didn’t need to show one ounce of respect to a Malfoy! How did you expect me to treat you after that?”

“That’s not what happened at all!” This time Harry took two steps forward, so they were only a few feet apart. “You waltzed into our compartment with your two goons, who were looming over us and practically cracking their knuckles. Then you insulted Hagrid. Then you insulted my friend, just because he was a Weasley.”

Malfoy cut him off mid-rant. “I was defending my family! He practically scoffed at me when I said I was a Malfoy.”

Harry tried to think back to that day. What had happened? Malfoy had said that his name was Draco Malfoy, and Ron had scoffed at him. At the time, Harry thought Ron was laughing at him because Draco was a silly name, and the boy seemed like a prat, so why not laugh at his silly name? However, now Harry knew more about Mr. Weasley’s relationship with Lucius Malfoy, and the clear antagonism between the Weasley and Malfoy families. It did make more sense that Ron would scoff at the Malfoy part, rather than the Draco part. What had Draco said? ‘My father told me all the Weasleys have red hair, freckles, and more children than they can afford.’ Yes. Ron scoffed at Malfoy’s name, and Malfoy had immediately insulted the entire Weasley family. Not that that was much better, since the Weasleys were basically his adopted family, as far as Harry was concerned. However, Harry could also see Malfoy’s point. He felt that Ron had insulted his family, so he insulted Ron’s.

“Yeah, ok, maybe he was scoffing at the Malfoy part and not the Draco part,” Harry relented.

Malfoy tilted his head in confusion. “Why would he scoff at the Draco part? What’s wrong with the name Draco?”

“It seemed like a silly name.”

“How is that in any way a silly name? That’s a fairly common Pureblood name. My great-uncle was named Draco. It’s a constellation.”

Harry shrugged again. He seemed to be doing that a lot since stepping out onto the street for this...whatever this was. “I had never met anyone named after a constellation before.”

“What are you talking about?” Malfoy kept looking at Harry as if he were speaking a different language. “Your godfather was named after a star. His father, Orion, was named after a constellation. Merlin, at least half the Black family are named after constellations.”

“Yes,” Harry agreed. “But again, I didn’t know that at the time.”

Malfoy scowled. “What did you know?”

“Not much.”

Harry could see that Ron and Hermione had finally finished their fittings and were paying at the counter. Hopefully that meant this conversation would be over soon. He was getting a little tired of discovering more and more things that he should have known, but didn’t. It was embarrassing enough when it happened around his friends, he really didn’t appreciate Malfoy figuring out just how ignorant he was.

Malfoy, however, seemed ready to stretch this out as long as possible. “Oh? You didn’t know much, but you knew that you didn’t want anything to do with me?”

Harry gave him an unimpressed look. “Well, yes. I met you at Madam Malkin’s, remember?” He waved at the very shop that stood only a couple feet from them. “You were acting like some arrogant prat.” Harry’s eyes glazed over, and his mind wondered back to that moment; the first time he had ever visited Diagon Alley, the first time he had ever met the troublesome Slytherin who would go on to do everything in his power to make Harry’s life a living hell.

“We were just standing there, awkwardly, getting fit for robes. I had never met you or seen you before in my life, and suddenly you started prattling on about what a great flyer you were.” Harry amended himself. “I’m sorry, I mean, what a great flyer your father said you were. And how your father bought you the latest broom. And how your father thought you should be on the House Team.” Malfoy rolled his eyes, but Harry continued. “You didn’t introduce yourself, or ask me my name, but you did make a point of asking me if my parents were both wizards, because Merlin forbid you accidentally make idle chit-chat with a muggleborn! Then, when my friend Hagrid came to get me, you were all too happy to share your thoughts about him. Or, I’m sorry, your father’s thoughts about him.”

Harry could finally see Ron and Hermione making their way toward the door, and this time he was more than ready for the conversation to be over. However, his hopes were dashed when Narcissa Malfoy suddenly chose this moment to acknowledge the two young Gryffindors who were in the shop with her. She appeared as if from nowhere, and immediately seemed to take up all of Hermione’s attention. What was she saying? What was happening?

Harry’s attention was drawn back to Malfoy by the boy’s indignant voice. “That’s why you wouldn’t even touch my hand on the Hogwarts Express? Because I made a comment about mudbl – muggleborns?” He paused. “What in Merlin’s name did I say about Hagrid that was so unforgivable?”

Harry was more than ready for this. He remembered exactly what Malfoy had said. “You accused him of being some kind of wild man who lived in a shabby little hut near the forest who would get drunk and accidentally set fire to his bed!” As soon as he said it, he regretted it. Yes, Malfoy had said those terrible things. However, they were all technically true. How could Harry explain that it was the way that he said it, and not the specific things he said, and had made Harry feel so indignant?

“Oh, I’m so sorry I made such an off-base assumption. Clearly, I didn’t really know him at all. Please do explain to me how each of those accusations was completely inaccurate!”

Harry didn’t have much of an argument there, and he knew it. Which was probably why he went with such an articulate retort. “Whatever!”

Harry actually had to stop himself from cringing at how pathetic he sounded. Malfoy’s victorious smirk certainly didn’t help. Harry could see Mrs. Malfoy showing Hermione some dresses on the other side of the glass, and he knew help was not on the way. “You know why I really hated you? Because of that stupid comment you made about people who didn’t know they were a wizard until they got their letter. You said they shouldn’t even be allowed to go to Hogwarts. That’s all I needed to know. I didn’t want anything to do with you after that.”

“Are you kidding me?” Malfoy rounded on him. “I made one comment about muggleborns and you got up on your high horse and decided that’s that? You’re done with me? You’re just so good and noble compared to everyone else, that if anyone ever says anything unkind about muggleborns, they’re just dirt beneath your feet? Not even worth a simple handshake?”

“What is with you and that bloody handshake?”

“I have never been so rudely insulted in my life!” Malfoy took another step forward, but Harry did not back down. They were almost nose to nose. “You wouldn’t even touch me. I was so below you, that I didn’t even deserve the simple human courtesy of a handshake.” Malfoy’s chest was heaving, and his pointy nose flared in righteous anger. “I detest Dumbledore. He is ruining the school. He is destabilizing the Hogwarts curriculum and turning it into an international embarrassment. He is obsessed with Light Magic and believes that anything that isn’t completely pure is just plain evil. He is ruining traditions and pureblood culture. But despite all of that, at the very least, you can say that the man has basic manners.” He lifted his finger and poked Harry hard in the chest. “Unlike you.”

Harry scoffed. “Oh yeah, Dumbledore’s just rotten to the core. I guess if you and your father had your way, people like me wouldn’t even be allowed at Hogwarts.”

“I never said you shouldn’t be allowed at Hogwarts.”

“Yes, you basically did.” Both their voices were practically screaming now.

“I never even implied that.”

“Yes, you did!” Harry had had enough. “You specifically said that people who don’t even know they’re a witch or wizard until they get their Hogwarts letter shouldn’t be allowed in. You were the first wizard my age I had ever met, and you basically told me I didn’t belong.”

Malfoy looked confused for just a moment, before his eyes suddenly widened in utter shock.

Suddenly, the shop door opened. Hermione came out with several bags. “Thank you again for the suggestions, Mrs. Malfoy, but I really think two dresses will be more than enough.”

Ron was right on her heels. "I'm not sure you needed any extra dresses. It's not like we're planning to go to a lot of fancy dress parties this year."

They both stopped when they saw Harry and Malfoy practically breathing down each other's throats. Apparently, Mrs. Malfoy had successfully distracted the two Gryffindors from what was going on outside.

Malfoy hardly spared the duo a second's glance. He was looking at Harry as if he'd never properly seen him before. "What did you say?"

Harry didn't bother to answer. "Hey guys, are you done?"

Hermione nodded. "Sorry we took so long. Ron was having some issues with the fitting, and then I ended up buying some extra formalwear."

Harry offered them a cheerful smile. "Sounds great. Let's go then?"

He started walking across the alley with his friends, when Malfoy's voice called after him. "I'm sorry."

Harry stopped, as did Ron and Hermione. The three of them slowly turned around to look at Malfoy's determined face, but he only had eyes for Harry. Harry had no idea what to say to that. Words seemed to completely fail him. He was lost in Malfoy's determined, grey stare. Malfoy had just apologized to him, and Harry wasn't even sure what he was apologizing for. Everything, supposedly. Finally, a word made it past his unyielding throat. "Okay."

He suddenly felt embarrassed. He turned as quickly as he could and started making his way down the alley, with Ron and Hermione practically running to keep up. Their determined departure was almost the opposite of their leisurely arrival.

Things Kept Hidden

Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes was like a phoenix among chickens. The garish colors and obnoxious signs would have stood out even in the Diagon Alley of Harry's memory. Compared to the somber little shops where they had spent the morning, the twins' new business was almost blindingly ostentatious.

The new joke store was loud in every sense of the word. The moment their small party entered the store, Harry could see it was packed wall to wall with customers. Whizzes and small explosions seemed to come from all around. People chattered away excitedly, as if there were no war at all. The whole place was thrumming with life and activity. It was such an incredible relief from the suffocating feel of the depressing street outside, Harry couldn't help but laugh at the sheer audacity of it all.

It took sixteen 'pardon me's, three tight squeezes, eight alternate paths, and one insistent shove before the three of them were able to find a quiet corner to talk.

"So, what the hell did Malfoy want?" Ron somehow seemed to have acquired an entire armload of products in the few minutes they'd been inside the shop.

Harry had been too busy trying to find an out-of-the-way nook, where he could relay what he'd discussed with Malfoy, to really get a good look at the products. Not that it really mattered; he felt that he was more than familiar with the items that Fred and George would stock. "I don't know for sure. Malfoy said he wanted a truce, that he didn't want to fight anymore."

"Bullocks." Ron was having the same reaction as Harry, but Hermione furrowed her brow, as if in deep thought.

Harry ignored Hermione's contemplative look and jumped in to agree with Ron. "That's what I said. He's up to something. I know it. I'm just not sure what he's getting at just yet."

Hermione sighed. "Please tell me you didn't antagonize him, Harry. I know Malfoy probably deserves it, but don't you feel like you have enough on your plate this year? Don't you think this whole rivalry thing is getting a bit silly?"

Harry scowled. "I didn't start this, Hermione, and he sure as hell isn't going to just let it go for nothing."

Ron seemed to wholeheartedly agree. "Yeah, Hermione, that little ferret can't be trusted. Harry's right, something doesn't smell right here."

"I'm not saying we should trust him." Hermione pulled them further into their little alcove as a group of third and fourth year girls ran by, their arms filled with glittery pink and purple products. "I'm just saying that, perhaps, Malfoy's sudden eagerness to make amends might *not* be a setup."

Ron just scoffed, but Harry wanted to hear where she was going with this. There had been something about Malfoy's shocked, almost scared, demeanor that just wasn't like his usual attitude. "Why else would Malfoy want to play nice, except to get me to lower my guard so he can strike?"

Ron nodded, in complete agreement. "That's what snakes do, Hermione."

Hermione gave them both a reproachful glare. "Slytherins also have a habit of looking after their own self-interest. I believe they're rather well known for it." When Harry and Ron gave her a blank look, she continued. "Oh, come on, you two. Think about the situation from a purely self-centered perspective."

"You mean, from Malfoy's perspective?" Harry interrupted.

Hermione gave him another scathing look but didn't voice her annoyance. "Sure. Think about it from Malfoy's purely selfish perspective. His father failed You-Know-Who and is now in Azkaban. His family has been disgraced; both in the eyes of the Death Eaters, and in the eyes of the ministry. His father has completely lost his standing in both circles, and by extension, so has Malfoy. Now, Malfoy is almost of age, and will be able to enter wizarding society soon. He was probably hoping to ride his father's coat tails into some powerful ministry position, but that's not really an option anymore, is it? There's a good chance that You-Know-Who is going to be seeking revenge for Malfoy Senior's failings, so Malfoy isn't going to have any help there. And he won't have any allies in the Ministry anymore, not now that everyone knows exactly who his father was working for. He's got enemies on all sides now."

Ron looked up from the nearby shelf he'd been looking at. Somehow, his already full arms seemed to contain even more merchandise than when they'd first slipped into their little corner. "So what? Bugger him."

Harry simply shrugged. He didn't completely believe that, but that was the same excuse Malfoy had provided. That he had enough to deal with, and he didn't want to continue his rivalry with Harry. "But if that's the case, why not just stay away? Why go out of his way to try and tell me he's going to leave me alone?"

Hermione gave him an exasperated sigh. "If he didn't tell you what he was doing, then you would spend all year wondering what he's planning. You two haven't stopped picking on each other for five years. It might be nice to go a single year without having to listen to you rant and rave about what Malfoy did to annoy you this time."

Ron was nodding, on Hermione's side, for once. Although, he seemed to have trouble moving his head much. His arms seemed to have almost reached critical mass, and were now sticking straight out in front of him, with boxes stacked all the way up to his chin. "I'm with Hermione, mate. It can get a little ridiculous how much you talk about him. Sometimes you just can't seem to shut up."

Suddenly their little corner became a lot more crowded, when Harry suddenly felt the presence of two very tall, very green, red-heads sidle up on either side of him.

“Let’s see here, people that Harry won’t shut up about?” Fred pretended to ponder as he looked over Harry’s head at his twin. “What’s your money on, George?”

“Well Fred, there are really only two options. You’ve got a certain pointy-faced Slytherin, or a certain snake-faced dark lord. Seeing as Ron isn’t pissing himself with jitters, I’m putting my money on blondie.”

Fred nodded. “That leaves snake-face for me. So, what’s the verdict? Who wins?”

Harry scowled at the twins. They were both wearing expensive-looking tailored suits that might have been the height of fashion, if they hadn’t been made in a garishly bright shade of lime green. “I talk about other things besides Malfoy and Voldemort.” Suddenly, a couple of second year Hufflepuffs dropped their shopping, and almost ran to the other side of the store.

George, standing to Harry’s right, gave him an unimpressed look. “Want to say that name a bit louder next time?”

Fred, on Harry’s left, agreed. “Yeah, maybe you’d be able to clear out the whole store.”

“Sorry,” he mumbled.

Hermione was the only one who didn’t seem ruffled by Voldemort’s name. But then, she hadn’t been raised to fear it. “George wins. We were talking about Draco Malfoy.”

Harry wasn’t willing to let the matter drop just yet. “I talk about other things besides Malfoy all the time. I talk about...quidditch.”

Fred nudged him. “Quidditch...in which you play against Draco Malfoy.”

“I talk about classes.”

George’s turn. “Classes...which you share with Draco Malfoy.”

“I talk about girls.”

Fred looked disbelieving. “When do you talk about girls?”

Ron came to his aid. “He talked about Cho Chang quite a bit last year.”

George smirked. “Oh, is that right, little Harrykins? How did that go?”

Harry shuddered at the memory of his horrendous date in Madam Puddifoot’s and their fight over Marietta Edgecombe’s betrayal. “Not well.” He had no intention of elaborating on that to these two terrors, however.

George gave him a consoling pat on the back. “Well, maybe she wasn’t really your type? More importantly, Fred you owe me a galleon.”

“A galleon? We agreed a knut.”

“Could’ve sworn it was at least a sickle.”

Hermione interrupted their argument. “I don’t think you two agreed anything.”

George looked mockingly offended. “Who asked you? I distinctly remember twenty galleons being mentioned.”

Fred scowled at the three young Gryffindors. “This is your fault, you three. What were you doing talking about Malfoy, when we’re in the middle of a bloody war with You-Know-Who? That’s who you *should* be talking about.”

Ron shrugged, almost upending his precarious pile and having to tilt to the side to adjust it back into place. “We talked about You-Know-Who all morning.”

Hermione ignored Ron’s obvious need for assistance. “We ran into Malfoy not fifteen minutes ago at Madam Malkin’s.”

The twins both looked down at Harry, concerned looks on their faces. “How did that go?” they asked in unison.

Hermione swooped in before Harry could get the chance to rant about the experience himself. “He offered Harry a truce. Apparently, he doesn’t want to fight anymore.”

Fred and George both laughed. “Oh, that doesn’t sound suspicious at all.”

“I completely agree, George. That seems really genuine. Nothing to be concerned about there.”

“Harry, you should probably start hanging around him all the time.”

“Definitely. Maybe you should start sitting with him at lunch, at the Slytherin table?”

“Yeah, and maybe he’ll take you to visit his dad in Azkaban.”

“Ooh, you could have a slumber party over at Malfoy Manor!”

“Watch out, Ron, I think Harry’s going to have a new best friend this year!” George warned while his younger brother rolled his eyes.

Fred picked up that train of thought with enthusiasm. “I can just envision you two, walking across the grounds on a moonlit night, hand in hand.”

George was really getting into the swing of things. “The kids would be adorable. Would they have black hair and grey eyes...”

“...or blonde hair and green eyes?”

“Ooh, I’m hoping the latter.”

“The perfect mix of dark and light.”

Instantly, their words sparked something in Harry, and he suddenly remembered something he'd been meaning to ask. "Dark and light! That reminds me. Have you guys ever heard the terms: Dark Family or Light Family?"

Hermione shrugged, for once not knowing what he was talking about. Ron looked surprised. "Talk about a change of topic."

Fred looked at him skeptically. "Who was talking to you about Dark Families and Light Families?"

Harry shrugged. "It was just something Malfoy mentioned. I'd never heard anyone talk about it like that before."

George nodded. "Makes sense."

"No worries." Fred agreed.

"That's just a pureblood thing," they explained in unison.

Harry was confused. "Aren't the Weasleys purebloods?"

Ron, Fred, and George all made similar scrunched up faces at that, as if they weren't quite sure how to answer. Fred rallied first. "Well, I mean, technically. We're blood traitors but we are still an old wizard family."

George continued. "We're not some Ancient and Noble house, though. Those terms are more for the political purebloods."

Harry took a wild guess. "The ones with a Lordship?"

Hermione tilted her head. "Are you curious about wizarding politics, Harry?"

He certainly hadn't been before, but now he was starting to wonder if he ought to be. "I don't think so, I'm just trying to understand. Malfoy said something about me being the Potter Heir; about me having a Lordship. I don't really know what that means."

"Well, milord, it means we are but your humble servants." Suddenly, Fred and George were on their knees in front of him.

"That's right, oh glorious, magnanimous Lord Potter! Your wish is our command."

Harry was distinctly uncomfortable with this. "Would you two get up? You're making a scene."

Fred and George continued prostrating while Hermione began darting out questions. "He said you have a Lordship? Did you know about this Harry? Has anyone ever mentioned a Lordship before? If you're Lord Potter, then why didn't anyone tell you? But, on the other hand, why would Malfoy make that up? Are you sure he said you have a Lordship? What were you two talking about exactly?"

Harry felt completely lost. “I don’t even remember. We were talking about politics, and he figured out that I don’t know a bloody thing, which was hard to miss, and then he was surprised because he figured I should know about this stuff since I’m Heir Potter or whatever.”

Fred and George were now taking turns bowing down with their arms stretched out in front like he was some sort of tribal idol. “Supreme Leader Potter!”

“Ultimate Emperor Potter!”

“Imperial Majesty Potter!”

Hermione ignored them in favor of more serious concerns. “Now that you mention it, Harry, the Potter family is an old pureblood family. It would make sense that they have a Lordship.”

Even if that were true, that just left Harry with even more unanswered questions. “So, what is a wizarding Lordship, exactly? Does that mean I have a vote on the Wizengamot?” He looked down at the two red heads who were now trying to kiss his worn-out trainers. “If you two don’t knock it off, I’m going to kick you.”

George pushed Fred out of the way. “Oh, kick me, your venerable Highness, it would be an honor!”

Fred shoved George aside. “No, kick me, I insist. I can’t imagine a more glorious gift than the underside of your boot!”

Fred and George were rolling on the ground with laughter and Harry was actually considering ‘gifting’ them the bottom of his shoe, when Ginny walked up, looking very confused. “Did I miss something?”

Fred pointed his finger like a weapon. “How dare you so callously address his Royal Excellency Potter?”

“That’s right, mere mortal, bow down before the Almighty Sovereign, the Glorious Lord Potter!”

Ginny was busy petting a tiny, furry creature that looked almost like a puffskein, except it was even smaller and bright pink. She gave Harry a confused look. “Is this another Chosen One thing?”

“I wish.” Harry rolled his eyes as Fred and George started discussing whether Ginny ought to bow or curtsy. “Apparently this is a new stupid thing I have to deal with. Because, you know, I didn’t have enough on my plate.”

Suddenly, Ron let out a loud scoff. Harry turned, realizing just then that Ron had been surprising quiet for the past while. Ron looked strangely red in the face; more so than usual. “Yeah, Harry’s right, it’s just a stupid thing. It doesn’t matter. Who cares about Lordships anyway? The only people who would care about something ridiculous like that are pureblood prats like Malfoy.”

Ginny shoved past Fred, who was competing with George to see who was better at curtsying. She clutched her little pygmy puff closely, as neither twin was particularly graceful at the skill. "Wait, do you have a Lordship, Harry?"

He shrugged. "According to Draco Malfoy I do, but I don't know why he would lie...about that."

"Does that mean you can vote on the Wizengamot?"

Harry looked at Hermione, expecting her to know the answer, since she always had the answer. However, Hermione looked just as lost. "To be honest, Harry, what little research I've done on the Wizengamot was more about how to prepare a case to go before them. The only times I really looked into it were for your trial and Buckbeak's hearing. I don't really know how membership or voting works. It would be pretty impressive, though, if you could vote on the Wizengamot."

Ron suddenly lost hold of his mound of merchandise. As he tried desperately to reach for the falling items, more and more seemed to slip through his grasp. "Shite! No! Come back here! Oh no, hey, don't fall, don't fall! No no no!" Box by box, it all seemed to slip from his grasp, as if in slow motion. "Dammit."

Fred and George had stopped their revelry and were glaring at him. "You know you're not leaving this store with any of that stuff unless you pay for it?"

Fred agreed. "Yeah, and if you broke anything, you're paying for that, too."

Ron scowled at them. "I'm your brother."

George gave an unimpressed look. "Yeah, so we know where you live."

"...and we'll know where to find you if you nick anything."

Ron was as red as a beat. "Like I wanted your stupid stuff anyway."

Ginny was more interested in Harry. "So, when did you find all this out, Harry?"

Ron didn't seem to want to hear the story again, however, because he suddenly shouted at the top of his voice. "Malfoy's a ponce! He cornered Harry at the robe store! He said he wants to be friends all of a sudden! He's a LYING GIT, and now he says Harry's a Lord, but WHO CARES!?"

Harry and the twins turned around to see how much of a disturbance this had caused. Fortunately, the store was so loud and overrun, that only a few people seemed to have heard Ron's outburst, and they just gave him a strange look, before returning to their shopping.

Harry could tell his friend was on edge and the last thing he wanted was to exacerbate the issue. "I'm with Ron." The twins and the girls looked rather surprised by this, but Ron gave a relieved smile. "Malfoy's a prat, he was probably just trying to stir up trouble by even mentioning it. I've got enough stupid responsibilities I have to deal with; the most important

of which is trying to defeat a dark lord. The last thing I need to worry about is some stupid club for pureblood prats like the Malfoys. So, let's just drop this subject, ok?"

Fred and George shrugged. "Ok, mate," they said in unison. Hermione nodded.

Ginny had turned to look in another direction, however. She didn't even seem to be paying attention. Harry tried to bring her back to the subject at hand. "Ginny?"

She still didn't turn. She seemed to be looking out of the shop window. "Did Ron say Malfoy cornered you and he's acting like a ponce? Do you think he's up to something?"

Harry was confused. "Obviously. Why?"

Ginny pointed out the window. "Because I can see him out there. And he certainly looks like he's up to something right now."

Harry, Ron, and Hermione all ran to the window. Sure enough, there was Draco Malfoy with his hands in his pockets, glaring around suspiciously, as if trying to make sure he wasn't being followed. "We should follow him."

Hermione's head fell in defeat. "Oh, Harry."

Ten minutes later, the trio was hunched over and crowded together underneath the invisibility cloak, as they shuffled awkwardly down the crooked side streets of Knockturn Alley. Unlike Diagon Alley, which looked so different now from Harry's first visit, Knockturn Alley looked just as unwelcome and creepy as the one other time Harry had stumbled this way.

When Malfoy entered Borgin and Burkes, Harry pulled his two friends to one of the front windows, where they crouched uncomfortably beneath the sill. They were still hidden beneath the cloak, but it was better to be out of the way, in case anyone might accidentally walk into them and cause all kinds of commotion.

Hermione was the last to peak over the sill to look inside. "For the record, I still don't think this is a good idea."

Ron raised his hand to try and squint through the murky window. "Noted."

Harry was busy trying to pull three extendable ears out of his pocket. "Malfoy's up to something. There's no way he's not up to something. I want to find out what it is." He slid the three ends under the bottom of the door, as stealthily as he could.

Ron turned to see what his friend was up to. "Where'd you get those extendable ears?"

"Fred and George gave them to me."

"They gave you extendable ears, but they wouldn't give me anything? I'm their brother!"

Hermione was still trying to peer through the glass, not bothering to look at Ron's indignant expression. "In Harry's defense, Ron, he did give your brothers the money to actually start that shop. You're their brother, Harry's their financier."

Harry finally got the ears set up and could hear noise starting to come through. "Both of you hush, I want to hear this." He turned again to look through the grime of the window, but that wasn't very helpful since Malfoy and Mr. Borgin were both standing behind a large cabinet. Slowly, the voices started coming through.

"Ah yes, young master, that item is exactly what a young lord needs when setting up a new home. That's perfect for getting back and forth from your manor to your summer home or to wherever you want to go."

"It's not a portkey, is it? It can't be tracked by the ministry?"

"Oh no, young master, it merely allows you to apparate through any wards that might otherwise get in the way."

"It will allow me to go through anti-apparition wards? Even particularly strong ones?"

"Any wards, young master, but with very specific limitations."

"What exactly are the limitations?"

"It's meant for purebloods who want to be able to apparate from one home to another. So, it will allow you to and from a location that has anti-apparition wards, but only if you are already keyed into the wards at both locations. You can't go anywhere that you're not already allowed. Also, the place you're going to has to be somewhere that you already consider home, either your primary home or a secondary home. So, it won't let you simply apparate into your neighbor's house."

"Anything else? Any other stipulations?"

"That's it, young master."

"Does it allow side-along apparition?"

"It does, but again, both people travelling have to be keyed into the wards. You can bring someone back to your home, but they have to already have been given permission to enter."

"Understood, I'll take it. Wrap up the other item too, the one we mentioned last time."

"Yes, young master, absolutely."

Harry turned to his friends. "Well if that's not bloody suspicious, I don't know what is."

Later that evening, Harry sat in the backyard with Ron, Hermione, and Ginny, as they watched Fleur Delacour pick a bouquet of 'wildflowers' for Mrs. Weasley, as some sort of

peace offering. “Zees are such lovely flowers just growing randomly all over ze yard. What a waste to ‘ave zem scattered about. I’m sure your mozzer will love ‘aving zem in a bouquet, Bill!”

Bill and Mr. Weasley were busy talking about Order business and were barely paying attention, but Ginny was watching intently and sniggering to herself. “I’m sure mum will have quite the reaction when she finds out Phlegm pulled out all the flowers that she spent hours planting in the yard.”

Harry looked up from the broom he was polishing. The four of them had spent the late afternoon playing two-a-side quidditch. Since Hermione was so abysmal, he had let her use his Firebolt, which was the smoothest ride with the best maneuverability. This did level the playing field slightly, but it always seemed to leave his broomstick feeling slightly stiff and uncooperative, as if it were annoyed at Harry for letting such an untalented flyer borrow it. So, Harry was giving it a long, gentle polish to try and apologize. “Maybe you ought to warn her that she’s destroying your mother’s garden?”

They watched as Fleur cut the stems off several Bluebells. Ginny just shrugged. “Oh, I’m sure she’ll figure it out eventually. So, did you guys ever figure out what Malfoy was up to?”

Ron finally managed to pull his attention from the part-veela when he heard the name Malfoy. “We’re sure that prat’s definitely up to something, we’re just not sure what. Maybe, since You-Know-Who abandoned the Malfoy family, he’s looking for a new dark lord to serve. Maybe he’s hoping to turn Harry over to some other evil dark wizard, or maybe the vampires or something.” Ron’s theories had become increasingly far-fetched throughout the day.

Harry pulled out his finishing polish to apply a final coat. “I mean, that’s...an idea.” He set the jar of polish aside in the grass and set to work. “But why would some other dark lord want me? Voldemort wants me because of the prophecy and all that; I don’t think some other dark lord would care.”

Ginny looked even more skeptical. “I don’t think any vampires would care either.”

Ron glared at his sister. “You never know.” They heard Fleur gasp as she found the primroses and started adding those to her armload of blooms.

Harry was starting to feel bad about all of Mrs. Weasley’s hard work. He had firsthand experience planting seeds in Aunt Petunia’s garden, and he would have been pretty disheartened if someone had come along and snipped all the stems off his flowers. “Are you sure we shouldn’t tell her to stop?”

Ginny shook her head fervently. “Don’t worry, mum has some spells that can put the flowers to right. I just have to see the look on her face when her future daughter-in-law tells her that her garden looks like a random smattering of wildflowers.”

Harry shuddered. “Girls fight dirty.”

“Anyway,” Ron seemed to shake himself from whatever trance he had been in when Fleur started smelling the roses. “Malfoy’s devious, but he’s not original enough to come up with some clever idea on his own. Someone could have sent him to do their dirty work.”

Harry nodded and thought about who might have sent Malfoy after him. “Maybe Snape sent him. I didn’t get the required O, so I won’t be able to take Potions with him this year. Maybe Snape’s trying to find a new way to torment me since he can’t torture me in class.”

A loud sigh came from the bench behind him, where Hermione was sitting. Harry turned from his place in the grass to see her curled up below the kitchen window, using the light to read her new book on Wizengamot protocol. Even as the other Gryffindors turned to look at her, she didn’t look up from her text. However, her expression clearly showed that she was exasperated.

Harry rolled his eyes. “Did you have something to add?”

She glanced up with an air of innocent confusion. “No, nothing,” she insisted. However, before Harry or Ron could get going on this new Snape theory, Hermione’s persistent voice cut them off. “I was just hoping that this year, finally, you might lay off your rivalry with Draco Malfoy, but it seems you’re determined to obsess over whether he might possibly have an ulterior motive.”

Harry was tired of listening to her say the same thing over and over. “*Possibly* have an ulterior motive?”

She continued as if she hadn’t been interrupted. “And now you’re dragging poor Professor Snape into your conspiracy theories...”

Harry almost dropped his broom at those words, but Ron came to his aid. “*Poor* Professor Snape?”

Hermione would not be deterred. “It just seems silly to me to spend so much time worrying about something that might not even be a problem. I mean, Malfoy certainly *could* be up to something, but we have no way of knowing what, and it’s just as likely that he’s not up to anything.”

Even Ginny seemed to find that doubtful. “Just as likely!?”

“What on Earth is going on here?” Mrs. Weasley must have finished the washing up from dinner. Her hazel eyes were darting between Fleur, her cut up garden, her husband and Bill, and finally the four teens sitting by the bench below the kitchen window. “What happened to my flowers?”

Fleur flounced forward, with an ethereal smile on her lips, and presented the admittedly lovely bouquet which represented the destruction of all Mrs. Weasley’s hard work. Harry had to admit, there was something breathtaking about the other-worldly young woman standing with the grace of some kind of celestial being and holding out the bundle of fresh flowers. “I found all zees random wildflowers just lying throughout ‘ze yard. It was such a waste of zeir potential beauty. I decided to gazzer zem into a pretty bouquet for you.”

Mrs. Weasley was gaping. Mr. Weasley and Bill both put their heads in the hands. Hermione covered her mouth. Ron seemed somehow hypnotized. Ginny was the only one moving, as she rolled onto her back in the grass behind Harry, so the others couldn't see her shaking shoulders as she tried to stifle her laughter.

Finally, Mrs. Weasley seemed to come out of her shock. "My garden! What have you done to my garden?"

Fleur looked around at the yard, confused. "I don't think zis could really be called a garden."

Ginny let out a gasp, as she started laughing even harder. Harry elbowed her to try and get her to calm down. He couldn't help but find her amusement infectious, but he didn't want Mrs. Weasley to notice them laughing and turn her ire on them. Of course, the Weasley matriarch seemed very distracted at the moment. "Of course it's a garden! Maybe it's not some fancy courtyard with fountains and plots and fenced off flowerbeds, but it's a proper English garden."

Fleur just smiled back. "Oh, of course. Zat was why I was confused. It's an English Garden. You see, in France, we plant gardens with order and beauty in mind."

Mrs. Weasley went bright red, and Harry had to try and hold Ginny down since she was shaking so much, she looked like she was having a fit.

Mrs. Weasley still only had eyes for the blonde young woman before her. "It's supposed to look natural!"

Fleur nodded. "Well, it certainly looked...natural."

Before Mrs. Weasley could completely erupt, Bill and Mr. Weasley finally rushed forward to intercede. Mr. Weasley grabbed his hysterical wife and tried to calm her, while Bill took Fleur's hand and tried to usher her inside, away from his mother. "Come on dear, let's go put your bouquet in your room. We'll leave mum alone for a bit, so she can put her flowers back in order."

Fleur stormed across the yard with Bill, muttering "Zat woman is determined to 'ate me no matter 'ow 'ard I try!" Ginny suddenly sat up as they passed by and tried to catch her breath. Her hair was now quite disheveled, and her cheeks were bright red.

Bill gave his younger sister an unimpressed look. "You know, you could have warned Fleur she was cutting up mum's flowers."

Ginny smiled and nodded. "We could've."

Bill scowled at her. "You're worse than the twins."

Harry was becoming increasingly embarrassed. "Sorry Bill, sorry Fleur. We didn't think it'd be quite so explosive."

However, Fleur just waved a hand at that. "It is not your fault, 'Arry. You cannot control zat woman's temper, but thank you for being so sweet. 'Ere you go, 'Arry" She handed him a

pale pink lily. “A pretty pink flower to match your cute little pink cheeks.” She gave said cheek a quick pinch before turning and bounding into the house, with Bill at her heels.

Ginny glared at Fleur’s back, and as soon as the part-Veela was out of sight, she turned her glare on Harry instead.

“What?” he asked.

“Enjoy your stupid flower, I’m going to bed.” Ginny straightened up before following her brother though the back door.

Harry stared after her, completely confused. “Girls are weird.” Ron nodded in complete agreement, and Hermione seemed determined to stare a hole in her book.

Of course, now that it was just the three of them, Harry wanted to take advantage of one of their few moments of privacy. “So anyway, the dangerous item Malfoy bought from Borgin and Burkes...what do you guys think he’s up to with that?”

Hermione let out another sigh, but instead of turning her focus on Harry, she looked up to watch Mrs. Weasley storm over to the shed, trying to find a book of gardening spells. “Harry, how many times do we have to go over this? He was probably buying it for its intended purpose; so he can apparate as he pleases from one house to another.” Harry turned to Ron, but the traitor just nodded along with what Hermione was saying.

Harry was frustrated that they still couldn’t see his side. This was one of the few things that Hermione and Ron both seemed to agree on. While Ron thought Malfoy’s overall behavior was suspicious, he agreed that the mysterious Borgin and Burke item couldn’t be used for anything nefarious, at least in and of itself. Hermione continued trying to make Harry see their point of view. “His father is probably still Lord of Malfoy Manor, even though he’s in prison, so Malfoy probably can’t change the wards. If he wants to apparate back and forth from one of his houses to the other, he’ll have to use that item.”

Harry glared. “Even if he *can* apparate, which he really shouldn’t even be able to yet, since he’s underage, but even if he could, why was he asking all those suspicious questions?”

Hermione and Ron shared a look as if to say ‘here we go again.’ Hermione took the bait, however. “What suspicious questions, Harry?”

“Like whether or not he could side-along apparate someone else.”

Hermione sighed, again. “That’s not an unreasonable question, Harry.”

He let out an annoyed huff. “That git was asking if it could be tracked by the Ministry!”

Hermione pinched the bridge of her nose. “Would you want to be tracked by the Ministry?”

“It was just bloody suspicious, ok!”

“What are you lot still doing out of bed?” Mrs. Weasley finally seemed to remember their presence when Harry raised his voice. While she wasn’t mad at them, specifically, she was

clearly not in the mood for any nonsense. “Get to your rooms, all of you. I want lights out in ten minutes.”

Harry and Ron quickly gathered their things and made for the door, but Hermione seemed to be holding back. Harry glanced over his shoulder when she didn't follow them to the door. “Are you coming, Hermione?”

She gave a stiff nod. “In a bit. I think I'll help Mrs. Weasley go through her books and try to find the spell she needs.”

Ron rolled his eyes. “Oh, of course. Any chance to look through a book. Suit yourself.”

Harry was ready for this bizarre day to end, but when the two boys reached the second story landing, a freckled face peeked her head out of the door. “Harry, before you go to bed, can I speak with you a minute?” Harry wasn't sure if he wanted to speak to Ginny alone, but he didn't want to be rude. Ron just rolled his eyes and offered to take Harry's firebolt up to the room, but he still left Harry alone to the mercy of his sister.

When Harry was tugged into the youngest Weasley's bedroom, he felt distinctly awkward. For as long as Harry had known Ginny, he had never actually been inside her room. At least it wasn't an affront to one's senses, like Ron's bright orange collage of everything Chudley Cannons. Her room was much more sensible, certainly cleaner, but not as feminine as he may have suspected. There were still several Quidditch posters, but the team featured was the Hollyhead Harpies, which Harry knew was the only all-female team in the league. Her new pink Pygmy Puff, which she had named Arnold, was lying on her pillow, apparently asleep.

Once the door was shut, he turned back to her. He wasn't sure what she wanted, and he was just standing there awkwardly in the middle of the room. Not to mention, he wasn't sure if she was still annoyed with him about whatever had happened earlier. “Er...sorry about the flower.” He held up the pink lily for her. “Here, you can have it.”

Ginny shrugged. “Oh, I don't really care about that,” she said, but she took the flower none the less, and set it in a small glass of water. “Don't worry Harry, I didn't ask you here to chastise you. I actually wanted to talk to you about your Lordship thing.”

Ginny walked past Harry and sat back casually on her pale blue bed. She motioned for him to sit beside her, which he did with great reluctance. Harry tried adjusting so he was touching as little of the bed as possible. He felt very out of his element. He had never been on a girl's bed before, and he wasn't sure he wanted his first time to be while discussing such an uncomfortable topic. “Look Ginny, I don't even want to think about that.”

Ginny just smirked at him. “Exactly, that's what I wanted to talk about.” She leaned over and grabbed her little pink puffball and set him on her lap. “Look, I know Ron was going off about how stupid the Wizengamot was, and how it's just for prats like Malfoy, but that's just because he's jealous. And I know Fred and George were teasing you, but that's just the twins being the twins; they can't help being ridiculous. You don't need to be all embarrassed about being an Heir. Bill's an Heir too, you know?”

Harry's head shot up at the mention of her eldest brother. "The Weasley Heir? But the others said that the Weasleys didn't have a Lordship or a seat on the Wizengamot or anything like that?"

As soon as he said it, he immediately regretted it. He realized it was pretty rude of him to point out that her family wasn't as prestigious as others, but Ginny just flashed a big smile and winked at him. In a lot of ways, she was more like the twins than she was like Ron. "Oh, we don't, but the Prewitts do...my mum's side of the family. Has Ron ever told you about Mum's Great Aunt Muriel? She's a piece of work, but she's Lady Prewitt. I think she even has a seat on the Wizengamot, but I don't think she votes all that often. Anyway, Bill's her favorite, and she named him her heir, so one day he'll be Lord Prewitt. You two might even end up working together, if you both get involved in that stuff."

This instantly cheered Harry up. Bill had an Heirship, too? Bill was a cool guy, not at all like Draco bloody Malfoy. "Bill's going to be on the Wizengamot? Really?" Then he got a wicked gleam in his eye and added, "Does that mean Fleur will be Lady Prewitt?"

"Ugh, don't get me started on Phlegm." Ginny shuddered. "But yeah, Bill's a Lord and he's great." She had a proud grin on her face. Bill was obviously her favorite brother. "And I'd bet anything Neville's going to have a seat, too. The Longbottoms are another one of those ancient and noble houses, and I know he's the Heir." Harry nodded, if Neville and Bill were also Heirs, then clearly it wasn't such a weird, outlandish thing. He still wondered why no one had ever mentioned it to him before. Whose job was it to tell him about this stuff, anyway? Ginny gave him a fond smile. "Plus, you know who the Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot is, right?"

Harry paused. That's right! He had read about that in the paper just this summer. Dumbledore had been ousted as Chief Warlock by Minister Fudge a year ago, but when the public finally came to terms with the fact that Voldemort was back, Dumbledore had been returned to his rightful place. "Dumbledore."

Ginny nodded. She seemed pretty excited by all this. "Exactly, if Dumbledore's in charge, then you know it can't be all bad. Plus, I think there are some other Order members who have seats, as well. I'm not entirely sure, but most of the old Pureblood families of esteem get to vote, I think."

Harry was significantly more relaxed now. So, this Lordship thing wasn't that big of a deal. "Hermione's doing research on the whole thing now, obviously. I'm sure she'll know more than the actual members by the end of the summer. I'll have to ask her if that book of hers lists who the actual members are. Maybe I should ask Dumbledore about this next time I see him."

Ginny looked excited by the prospect. "You should. You two are kind of close right?"

Harry shrugged. "I guess so. We're definitely closer than we were last year. Don't tell anyone, but he mentioned something about giving me private lessons this year."

Ginny's eyes went wide. "No! Seriously? That's brilliant. What kind of lessons?"

“No idea. He said to keep it private, but he did say I could tell my friends, so I guess it’s ok that you know. Just, you know, don’t tell anyone, right?”

Ginny nodded enthusiastically. “Right, of course not. You can trust me. I won’t even tell Dean.”

“Dean?”

Ginny smirked. “Dean Thomas. You know he and I are dating, right?”

Harry actually blushed. “Oh yeah, right. I guess I may have forgotten. Sorry.”

Just then, the door opened and Hermione walked in. “Oh, I’m sorry, I didn’t realize you two were chatting in here. I can go if you want some privacy.”

Ginny waved her off. “No, I think we’re done here. I was just telling Harry not to let Ron and the Twins get under his skin. There’s nothing inherently embarrassing about being a Lord or an Heir or whatever.”

Hermione bristled as she strode in and set down her thick tome. “Of course not. In fact, you could make a lot of positive change with a position like that, Harry.”

Harry just shrugged at that. After Hermione confirmed that Mrs. Weasley did, in fact, find a spell to restore her poor flowers, Harry wished the girls “good night,” and made his way back to Ron’s room at the top of the stairs. Maybe this Wizengamot thing could be a good thing. He was going to reserve judgement for now. In the meantime, he had asked the two girls not to mention his Lordship to anyone, and definitely never bring the subject up around Ron. Harry still wanted some more information about whether or not this was even real. He certainly wasn’t going to take Malfoy’s word for it.

Remus Lupin flicked his wand, and another shelf full of books shrunk themselves down and neatly made their way into his open trunk. Meanwhile, Nymphadora was helping to fold his clothes and tuck them into his small suitcase. He had given her the easy job; he hardly had much of a selection of clothes. He’d never had much money for a wardrobe, and what little he had, he preferred to spend on something to read. This was probably a good thing, since her idea of ‘folding’ seemed to be rather...creative.

Remus was content to work in silence, but of course, Dora wasn’t having it. “This is so unfair,” she voiced for just about the third time since they had started packing. At the moment, she was folding socks by sticking one holey sock entirely inside another. “There ought to be a law that prevents them from just tossing you out.”

“I doubt that would ever pass. Wizards don’t exactly want to rent out flats to werewolves. It’s alright, though, I’ve already got another place lined up.”

Dora scowled. “Yes, but how long before *they* throw you out on your ass?” She grabbed a scarf and tied it into a knot (for some reason) before shoving it into the suitcase.

Remus sighed with the patience of a man who had been dealing with this kind of prejudice for years. “Probably as long as it takes them to figure out that I’m always sick during the full moon. See, this is why I had been living amongst muggles.” He flicked his wand at the next shelf of books, and neatly packed those away, as well. “Of course, this time was an anomaly. It usually takes at least nine months to a year for my landlords to figure it out. Mrs. Orwell got it in just three full moons. I guess she’s a bit too nose-y for her own good. This time I picked a landlady who’s not nearly as friendly.”

Dora scoffed and rolled up an old shirt into some sort of ball before tossing it into the case. “Friendly? She figured out you had a condition and she threw you out without warning. She basically told you that you had till the end of the day or else.”

Remus simply shrugged as he packed up the last shelf of books with careful precision. He understood her frustration, but after so many years, it was hard to muster the energy to feel truly angry about it. “It’s nothing I’m not used to,” was all he said.

Dora slammed the suitcase shut. “You shouldn’t have to put up with this.”

Remus gave her an understanding smile. “I don’t really have any alternative.”

Dora blushed. She suddenly looked a little nervous, which was not an expression he was used to seeing on her face. “You *do* have options. You don’t have to just go from place to place, trying to hide your condition from your landlord.”

Remus looked at her skeptically. He wasn’t sure where she was going with this. “What other option do I have?”

Dora was fidgeting, which again, was very unlike her. She always seemed to move with unnerving confidence, despite her poor balance and coordination. “You could live with me. I have my own place, you know. So, you wouldn’t have to deal with any landlords or anything. We could...live together.”

Remus paled instantly. Suddenly much more nervous than the young woman across from him. “Dora, you know that’s not an option.”

She glared defiantly. “Why not?”

“It’s dangerous! I’m dangerous! This...what’s been going on here... I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have been encouraging this. I’ve just been enjoying my time with you so much, but we shouldn’t be getting attached to each other. This would never work. This was never going to work.”

Dora’s hair changed from pink to a violent shade of red. “Why not?”

“You know why not. My condition, Dora. I’m not safe to be around. Not only that, but I have to deal with this.” He waved his hand around the derelict apartment in a vague gesture. “All this prejudice and nonsense. If you were with me, you’d never be able to live your life to its fullest.”

Her hair turned a dark purple. “I don’t care about that. I like you, Remus. These last few months have been some of the best of my life. I want to try and make this work. Maybe you’re right. Maybe it’s impossible, but can’t we at least try?”

Remus looked so defeated. “We can’t. I’m so sorry. This is all my fault. I should have just kept my distance.”

Dora’s hair faded to a pale blue. “Why are you so scared? What do you have to lose? You can’t honestly tell me that you don’t have feelings for me.”

Remus looked up at her with grim determination. “That’s exactly what I’m saying. I don’t have feelings for you. I’m sorry. You should just move on. Find someone who cares about you in a way I never could. Please, go find happiness with someone who can actually make you happy. It can’t be me. I don’t love you.”

She paused as she looked at him. She didn’t shed a single tear, but her hair dulled to its natural mousy brown. “You are such a liar,” she said before apparating away, leaving Remus all alone.

Severus stood before his dark master as fire crackled in the hearth and the silence stretched out. The Dark Lord was seated comfortably in his high, wing-backed throne in his personal study, but Severus did not sit. The Dark Lord did not have a seat in front of his desk. Those who came to speak with him in his office were expected to stand or kneel. Severus waited for the Dark Lord to speak first. “Severus, did you do as instructed?”

“Yes, my Lord. I spoke to Albus Dumbledore just yesterday. I asked about the Black Heir, as well as the state of the Order’s Headquarters, but the man was annoyingly vague. He refused to say who Sirius Black had named as his Heir. He only said that the situation had been dealt with, and the Heir had already given their permission for the Order to continue using the Black ancestral home as their headquarters.”

The Dark Lord scowled, and his magic flared violently, causing the books that filled the shelves around them to shake subtly. “I need access to that house, Severus. I need to know who owns it.”

Severus braced himself. The Dark Lord never did like receiving bad news. “My Lord, I’m afraid that even if we were able to determine whom Black had named as his Heir, you would not be able to coerce them into granting you access to the house. Ever since the Order started using it as their headquarters, it has been under the Fidelius Charm, and Albus Dumbledore is the Secret Keeper. The only person who can tell you the house’s location, or allow you to enter, is the headmaster himself.”

The books shook even more violently. The fire in the hearth flared. The Dark Lord reached out and began to stroke a heavy, golden chalice that sat on the corner on his desk. Severus tried to inspect it without being too obvious. It was a beautiful cup, with some sort of inlaid detailing below the Dark Lord’s thin, pale fingers. Severus couldn’t recall ever seeing it before; he felt he would remember such a unique and beautiful antique. As the other man

slowly caressed the empty goblet, his temper seemed to quell. His turbulent emotions reigned in, if only just a little.

“Something was stolen from me, Severus. Something precious.”

Severus’s brows rose in surprise, not only surprise that something could be stolen from the Dark Lord, but also that the other would be willing to admit it. “Stolen, my Lord?”

“Stolen by Regulus Black.”

“Regulus, my Lord? Forgive me, I thought Regulus Black had been dead for some time...”

“Oh, he has.” This time, even the torchlight seemed to flicker, as the Dark Lord gave a truly evil smile. “He died quite violently and terribly. How I wish I could have seen it myself. The traitor deserved even worse for his betrayal.”

Severus thought over the Dark Lord’s sudden interest in the Black ancestral home. “You believe Regulus may have hidden this stolen item in the Black home?”

The Dark Lord’s red eyes, which had been gazing off toward some unknown horror, swiveled back to meet Severus’s own, pitch black orbs. “That is the most likely location, yes.”

Severus nodded. “If you would permit me, my Lord. I could try to locate this item for you. You could merely give me a brief description.”

The Dark Lord narrowed his eyes in obvious distrust. “I will not stoop to that unless absolutely necessary.” The man then seemed to consider his options, and he must have come to the obvious conclusion that he didn’t have many. “However, I need to know if Albus Dumbledore has already discovered this item. Has he mentioned finding any dark artefacts in the house?”

“Dark artefacts?” Severus actually had to stop himself from smirking at the ridiculous question. “That house is so full of dark artefacts, it is difficult to move without tripping over one.” The Dark Lord’s eyes flashed with annoyance. Knowing how much the man liked to think of himself as superior to everyone and everything, it probably irked him that his lost artefact might be mixed in with other, more ordinary objects. “I believe the Weasley brood spent an entire summer trying to clean out as many dark artefacts as they could. I do not believe they made much progress.”

This time the Dark Lord clenched onto the goblet as if it were a lifeline. “What do you mean they *cleaned out* the dark artefacts? What happened to the artefacts they found?”

Severus tried to remain stoic in the face of the Dark Lord’s oppressive wrath. “I’m afraid I don’t know, my Lord. I wasn’t involved with the ‘clean up duties.’ However, I regret to say that many dark items were simply vanished away in their onslaught.”

Severus had been sure that this would cause another eruption of malicious magic, however the Dark Lord actually seemed to calm at these words. “Vanish the items?” He laughed at the idea, although it was more of a cruel cackle than anything mirthful. “Vanish them? This

object is not something that could merely be vanished. It would take significantly more than that to dispose of this item.”

Severus considered those words. “My Lord, I do not wish to pry, but may I ask if this item was something of great value? Would it be something that was obviously worth money?”

The Dark Lord glared at Severus’s impudence. “Of course it was of great value. I told you it was precious. Its value is beyond mere money; beyond priceless.”

Severus nodded at that. “My Lord, if I may speculate...I remember many Order members complaining that many items of value were being pilfered from the Black home.”

The books began to shake again, even with the Dark Lord grasping the cup firmly with his spidery hand. “Pilfered?”

“Yes, my Lord. One Order member, Mundungus Fletcher, is little more than a common thief. It is an open secret that he has been secreting away several items of value from the home for the better part of a year. I know Black threw him out of the house on more than one occasion, after catching that pathetic excuse for a wizard squirrelling things away. I don’t doubt that since Black’s death, he has returned to his old habits in earnest. If the object that you are searching for was, in fact, in the Black home, and it was obviously of great value, there is a high chance that it ended up in the unfortunate possession of Mundungus Fletcher.”

Severus knew he was basically signing the man’s death warrant, but if the Dark Lord truly was desperate to find his stolen item, which he obviously was, it was better to give him all the possible information on how to retrieve it. Besides, Mundungus truly was a pathetic individual. If he really was stupid enough to try stealing ancient and dark family heirlooms, he deserved whatever comeuppance came from that.

The Dark Lord looked contemplative. “Mundungus Fletcher...”

Severus gave a curt nod. “Yes, my Lord. Would you like me to approach him?”

The Dark Lord once again narrowed his eyes suspiciously. “I will deal with that myself. You will not concern yourself with that man for now.”

Severus kept his expression neutral and gave no reaction at all to the Dark Lord’s obvious distrust. He certainly wasn’t insulted by it. The dark wizard didn’t trust anyone. “Yes, my Lord.”

“Before you leave, I have another task for you, Severus.” The potion’s master gave another curt nod. “What do you know about Harry Potter’s childhood?”

Severus’s impassive expression actually cracked for a moment, and his surprise showed briefly before he was able to school his features once again. “Harry Potter, my Lord?” The Dark Lord’s impatience was obvious, so he quickly went on to answer the question. “He was raised by his muggle relatives, as you know.” Still, the Dark Lord said nothing, waiting for Severus to elaborate. “I can only make an educated guess based on who the boy grew to be. I

know the boy is selfish, impertinent, and arrogant, which can only lead me to assume he was just as pampered and spoiled as his obnoxious father.”

The Dark Lord nodded, as if this was what he expected. “Yes, I’m sure the Light was quite eager to dote upon their precious Boy-Who-Lived. However, I believe you are more knowledgeable than you might believe. You knew the boy’s mother, yes? She and her family lived in Spinner’s End with you, yes? What do you know of the boy’s muggle relatives?”

Severus forced away any emotions associated with ‘the boy’s mother.’ He kept his face, and his mind, as clear as possible. “I only met the boy’s aunt, and that was years ago. I never met her husband, or any children. She was a pathetic and sniveling woman, not dissimilar to other muggles. As I recall, she was rather envious of her sister’s magic, as would be expected.”

The Dark Lord nodded. “You are probably wondering why I would ask you these questions.” Severus merely bowed his head in acknowledgement. “Young Draco came to see me yesterday. It seems he had a run in with his new target a little earlier than expected.”

Severus quirked a brow in curiosity. So, Draco ran into Potter? He couldn’t imagine that would have gone well. However, he waited for the Dark Lord to continue at his own time. “It seems Potter is still distrustful of young Draco. However, that is only to be expected.” Severus nodded. “What was unexpected, on the other hand, was that Harry Potter seemed to be much less informed about his past and his role in wizarding society than one would expect of ‘the Chosen One.’ It seems his family, and probably Dumbledore, have been keeping secrets.”

Severus couldn’t help it; his curiosity was too much. “Secrets, my Lord? What has been kept from the boy?”

The Dark Lord smirked at having caught Severus’s interest so completely. “That is what I wish for you to determine. Young Draco mentioned some things, but there is no way for me to know whether or not Harry Potter was merely lying.”

Severus nodded. “The boy is an almost pathological liar. I wouldn’t believe a word that comes from his mouth; least of all something he said to Draco Malfoy.”

“Indeed. I wish for you to do some further research and determine if anything was kept from the boy, anything that he ought to have been told that he may not be aware of. If we can prove that his caregivers have been keeping secrets from him, either in his early childhood, or since he was enrolled at Hogwarts, we may be able to crack his blind trust in them.”

Severus nodded. “Your wish is my command, my Lord.”

This time, Harry didn’t even flinch when he woke up in the eerie, wood-paneled study, with the flickering fireplace, and the walls lined with shelves of dusty tomes. He’d been dreaming about this place almost once a week for a couple months now. He was practically used to it. He probably would have been perfectly comfortable in the now familiar setting, if it weren’t for the unsettling company.

Once again, Voldemort sat in his throne-like seat behind his large, oak desk. Harry tried to ignore the other man for as long as possible, instead walking along the shelves and glancing at the volumes. He couldn't make out any of the titles, they were somehow fuzzy and distorted in the world of the dream, or whatever this was. It just gave him more verification that he was dreaming and not having a vision; everything had always been quite clear in his visions.

Harry tried not to look at the dark wizard sitting regally on the other side of the room, but it was almost impossible for his attention not to get drawn that way. Trying not to look at Voldemort was like trying not to look at a train collision. The man just seemed to draw your eye in some inevitable way, no matter how horrific the sight was.

As Harry, once again, glanced in that direction, he saw that Voldemort was smirking at him. The expression immediately had him on edge. He told himself not to let it bother him. He told himself to just keep his mouth shut and soon the dream would be over, but he had never been particularly good at listening to his own common sense. "What are you smirking about?"

The thin lips immediately stretched into an even wider grin, and Harry realized that Voldemort was trying to unsettle him, and was now feeling quite victorious that it had worked. "Are you interested in my book collection, Harry?" He hissed the name with an almost vindictive relish.

Harry forced himself not to shudder, but only with tremendous self-control. He merely glared, so Voldemort simply continued. "I suppose you will soon have access to a much wider selection, if not significantly more mundane. Are you looking forward to returning to Hogwarts, or are you lamenting the end of your little vacation?"

Harry shrugged; he loved Hogwarts, it wasn't much of a secret. "I always look forward to returning to Hogwarts."

Voldemort actually looked intrigued by that. "Really? I recall many of my classmates always complained that the summer holidays were too short, and they hated having to return to class. You do not strike me as the type to miss studying."

Harry ran his fingers along the spines of the books. They felt real, even if their titles were obscured. "It's not the studying I miss. I'm not much of a bookworm. It's the school I miss."

Voldemort gave him an assessing look. He still hadn't moved from his seat. "Is that so? I, too, used to find solace in the ancient castle. Do you find it interesting that you and I would share that in common?"

Harry shrugged as he continued to walk along the shelves, actually feeling the dust on the old spines. "I already knew we had that in common. I don't know why you're bringing it up. Weren't you the one who originally pointed it out?" When Voldemort furrowed his brow in confusion, Harry realized his mistake. "Oh, no, I guess that was the diary. I suppose you wouldn't really remember anything he said to me."

The expression on Voldemort's face looked surprised for only a moment, before it passed through curiosity, quickly over to fascination, and then all the way to hungry enthral. "You spoke to the diary? When did you speak with my diary?"

It was Harry's turn to look confused. "My second year. Wait, I thought you knew about that? Did no one tell you about the whole Chamber of Secrets thing?"

Voldemort was giving Harry his full attention, and it was rather unsettling. "I was told that you destroyed my diary, when it was being used to open the Chamber of Secrets. However, I was under the impression that the diary was in the possession of Weasley's youngest daughter, and that she was the only one who communicated with it."

Harry stopped running his fingers along the books when the shelves took him closer to the oak desk where Voldemort was still coiled as if readying to strike. Behind his wireframed glasses, Harry's eyes narrowed in annoyance. He really didn't like the idea of Voldemort talking about Ginny. "She had the diary most of the year. I only had it for a little while. We talked a bit, before I knew who he really was. And then, down in the Chamber, Tom wanted to have a nice, long chat about you and me. He said we were alike, but that didn't stop him from sending that stupid basilisk after me."

Those serpentine red eyes flashed in interest. "My diary told you that we were alike? Why would it say that?"

Harry shrugged. He really didn't want to talk about this with Voldemort, even if he was sure that this wasn't the real Voldemort. "I don't know. It doesn't really matter, though. We might have a few superficial things that are similar, but we're different in all the ways that matter. Besides, it's our choices that make us who we truly are, and every choice that I've made has shown me that I am nothing like you."

Harry was sure Voldemort would be annoyed at these words, but the man just watched him like a cat watches a mouse. The Gryffindor refused to squirm under the scrutiny. Voldemort tilted his head as if he were deep in thought. "Why would my diary think you were like me?"

In Enemy Territory

It didn't take Severus Snape long to track down the man he was looking for. Alastor had mentioned that Remus Lupin would be arriving at a popular half-breed and dark creature pub in Knockturn Alley that Saturday to meet with a possible werewolf ally. Severus knew werewolves were notorious for being disorganized, graceless, and generally unkept, which made him strongly suspect Lupin's associate would be inconsiderately late.

Lupin, by contrast, was always fastidiously prompt. Therefore, if Severus were to arrive shortly before their arranged meeting time, the potion's master suspected he would have at least a half hour of uninterrupted time to question the last Marauder about what he knew of Potter's childhood.

A thick fog was rolling into the twilight evening, as Severus made his way down the poorly lit back streets of Knockturn Alley. The lack of any proper illumination, and the perilously uneven cobbles might have made anyone else stumble or falter, but Severus swept forward with an unconcerned expression, which no one was there to appreciate. His long, black cloak billowed in the nonexistent wind, as he rounded the tight corners at an impatient pace.

Finally, Severus arrived at The Last Call, and threw the doors open in the same derisive gesture he used to impress (and intimidate) his students. The patrons, who sat quietly sipping their various concoctions, looked up to see a black hooded figure, trailing mist and shrouded in darkness. He swooped imperiously into the establishment giving off every indication that he was not someone to be trifled with. They all quickly looked back down at their drinks and each made the individual decision that they would mind their own damn business.

Despite the location being rather far from the beaten path, The Last Call was quite crowded with hags, ogres, half-elves, and several other suspicious-looking characters. Severus looked past the seedy clientele and his eyes fell almost immediately upon Remus Lupin, sitting alone in a quiet corner of the pub. The ex-professor was easy to spot with his prim and polite posture, looking so very out of place in a forsaken location such as this. While the other dark creatures and half breeds all looked pointedly away as Severus passed, Lupin openly gaped when he caught sight of the cloaked figure. "Goodness gracious, Severus! What are you doing here?"

The potion's master merely lowered his hood and quirked his brow as he sat down opposite the werewolf. Severus looked around at the filthy surroundings in obvious distaste. If anything, this place was grimmer than the Hog's Head. Not that Severus was particularly sickened by dust or grime. He wasn't Lucius Malfoy, after all. However, he wasn't sure if he felt comfortable drinking anything prepared by the humpbacked bartender who was shuffling about.

Lupin, however, was not about to let Severus's sudden appearance simply go unaddressed. "You really shouldn't be here, Severus. This place is for half-breeds and dark creatures and such. They don't really like regular wizards hanging out here. Besides, I'm supposed to meet someone. He should be here any minute."

Severus simply gave Lupin a bored expression. “Let’s see, your meeting time was eleven o’clock, correct?” He flicked his wand and cast a wordless Tempus charm. The time appeared before them as 10:57. Severus gave a derisive smirk. “If that werewolf shows up in the next twenty minutes, I’ll give you three galleons.”

Lupin merely gave him a highly unimpressed look. “If Mr. Sykes shows up while you’re still here, you’re going to have to get up and leave. You can keep your money.” Lupin looked around for a moment, as if expecting the man to show up immediately. Several hags and vampires were giving them suspicious looks, but they seemed to be kept at bay by Severus’s intimidating scowl.

Lupin finally seemed to come to the conclusion that his meeting would not be starting at the scheduled time, and he turned his attention back to the hook-nosed man across from him. “Why are you here, anyway? Wait, did Albus send you? You’re not helping me make peace with the werewolves, are you?” The worried look on Lupin’s face showed that he very much did not want Severus’s help in that endeavor.

Severus couldn’t blame him. He had always made his feelings about those rabid killing machines as obvious as possible. The irony wasn’t lost on Severus that it had been this amiable and polite fellow, who had started his lifelong fear of those vicious monsters. “No, Albus knows better than to send a snake to do a wolf’s job.”

Lupin gave him a friendly smile, as if they had some sort of comradery between them. “Do you think of yourself as a snake, Severus?”

Severus glared, ready for the insult that Black or Potter would have surely thrown at him after a setup like that. “Why wouldn’t I? I am a Slytherin, after all.”

Lupin simply smiled fondly and gave an understanding nod. “For some reason, I always thought of you as a bat.”

“I can’t imagine why.”

Suddenly a shadow appeared over their small table. “Alright, that’s enough. I’m afraid you’re gonna ‘ave to shove off. We don’t serve your kind ‘ere.” The cantankerous bartender had finally shuffled all the way to their small corner.

Lupin offered him an apologetic smile. “I’m sorry, is there any way you can make an exception for my friend here? I can vouch for him. He won’t be any trouble, I assure you.” Severus’s eye twitched at the word friend, but he didn’t say anything to the contrary.

The wheezy man gave Lupin a confused look, which was strongly emphasized by his gnarled face and crooked teeth. “Not ‘im. We’re fine wiff vampires. Even keep blood on tap, just in case. It’s you that’s gotta go. Don’t take kindly to normals ‘round ‘ere.”

Lupin looked affronted. “I’m not really a normal wizard.”

“I am not a vampire.”

Lupin was calmly waving his hands over himself, in an amiable and gregarious gesture. Severus wondered if he had been this animated when he was a professor. No wonder the younger students had been so fond of him. “You see, I look normal right now, obviously, but I’m actually a werewolf. I understand that it doesn’t seem obvious at this specific moment, but just give it a couple weeks, and they’ll be no doubt.”

The bartender was giving him a dubious expression. “You don’t look like a werewolf.”

“Yes, that’s what I was just explaining.”

The bartender turned his attention back to Severus, and his expression become much politer. “Sorry, sir, what did you say?”

“I said I am not a vampire.”

The bartender just nodded. “Whatever you are, sir, don’t matter to me one drop. We take all kinds o’ dark creatures ‘ere. We don’t ask no questions, neither.”

Lupin sighed. “Really? Because you seem to be questioning me quite a bit.”

“How come you don’t look like a werewolf?”

Lupin’s expression was becoming more and more exasperated. Severus had to force himself not to smirk. “I look like a werewolf for exactly one night a month. The rest of the time, I just look like a regular wizard. I don’t look like a werewolf right at this moment, because it’s not the full moon.”

“You sure?”

“Yes! Believe me, I know very well when the full moon is.”

The bartender seemed to look him up and down for a few moments. Severus understood the confusion. Most werewolves were known to be shrewd, untrusting, and a bit wild. Lupin’s open, friendly, and polite demeanor was everything that one would *not* expect in a werewolf. “Well, alright. If you say so. I can’t imagine why anyone would claim to be a filthy werewolf ‘less they were one. It’s not really the sort o’ thing someone would lie ‘bout. So, what can I get you two gents?”

Lupin looked horribly offended but didn’t say any more on the subject. He merely ordered them two butterbeers and sent the man away as soon as possible.

Severus quirked a brow. “Butterbeer?”

Lupin shrugged. “If you want something stronger, you can order it yourself. I have a meeting which should have started ten minutes ago. I need my wits about me.”

“When that werewolf gets here, he is going to give you an even harder time than I am for ordering a child’s drink in an establishment such as this. I am more shocked to hear that they have butterbeer in this pub than to hear they have fresh blood.”

Lupin merely drummed his fingers on the table and didn't offer any comment. He seemed rather unconcerned about what anyone might think about him ordering butterbeer, but then, he had never really been one to pander to public opinion. Something they had in common. "Are you going to tell why you're here, or did you just come to keep me company?"

"No, actually, I came here to talk about Potter."

"James?"

"No –" Suddenly two heavy mugs full of golden, foamy liquid landed heavily on the table.

" 'Ere you are, gents." The bartender tried to smile at them, but it looked more like a grimace, a very painful grimace. Severus handed over some sickles before Lupin got the chance, and the bartender gave them one last skeptical look, before shuffling away. Severus noticed that a few of the nearby patrons were looking at their mugs in confusion, as if they didn't even recognize the drink inside.

Severus ignored them all and continued their conversation where they left off, although slightly calmer after the interruption. The mention of that man had been a little jarring. "No, not him. The boy."

"Harry?" Lupin picked up his glass and took a careful sip. "What did you want to talk about Harry for? Is everything ok?"

"As far as I know, the boy is in his usual state of annoyingly cheerful, terrifyingly confident, and absolutely healthy."

"I don't recall that being his usual state last year," Lupin interrupted. "Last time I saw Harry, he was more annoyingly sulking, terrifyingly uncertain, and absolutely devastated."

"Yes, I can only imagine it was difficult for him to be told to behave for once in his life and try to stay out of trouble for one whole year. That and he didn't even have his usual legions of doting fans." Severus rolled his eyes. "I'm sure the newspapers spouting on about him being 'The Chosen One' have put the spring back in his step."

Lupin looked like he was about to say something, but then he simply sighed and gave his head a slight shake. "I'm sorry, Severus, did you just come here to complain about Harry, or was there a point to this visit?"

"What do you know of Potter's childhood?"

Lupin lifted his mug again and took another thoughtful sip. "Why do you want to know about Harry's childhood?"

It was Severus's turn to try the Butterbeer. It tasted like it usually did, which was overly sweet and absolutely disgusting. He wasn't sure what he expected. "It has come to my attention that Potter may have been kept from knowing certain pertinent information as he grew up."

Lupin looked concerned by this, as Severus knew he would be. “What information was kept from Harry?”

While Lupin’s cadence of voice quickened, Severus’s became more deliberate and leaden. “That is what I am trying to determine.”

“Who was keeping things from Harry? His relatives? Those muggles?”

“His muggle relatives, perhaps. And, possibly...others.” Snape kept it purposely vague.

“What made you think this? What made you think this was a possibility?”

Severus was already prepared for this question and had readied a simple lie, not too far from the truth. “A conversation I overheard between two Death Eaters. It might all be lies, of course. However, I thought it best to investigate for myself, and determine if there was any truth to it.”

“Have you reported this to Albus?”

Severus didn’t want to admit to Lupin that Albus Dumbledore might be one of the people keeping things from Potter, if not the guiltiest party. He suspected, if push came to shove, that Lupin would choose Potter over the headmaster, much like he himself had. However, he didn’t want to start planting seeds of doubt just yet, especially if they might not be necessary at all.

“I will report to the headmaster if I determine there is something that needs to be reported.”

Lupin was not so easily misled, however. “You suspect Albus might be keeping things from Harry?”

“The headmaster is obviously keeping a great many things from Potter. The question is whether or not he is keeping information that Potter should have been informed of.”

Lupin sighed and looked off toward a group of banshees huddled in the far corner. Although, he didn’t seem to really be paying them any attention. “I suppose that would be a matter of opinion.”

“Certain things are a matter of opinion, and certain things are a matter of willful deception. Which brings me back to my original question. What do you know of Potter’s childhood?”

This time, Lupin was much more willing to comply. “Not too much, to be honest. I know he was raised by muggles; his aunt and uncle. I suppose everyone knows that. I know he doesn’t get along with them. I’ve never heard him say anything nice about them, but then, he almost never talks about them at all. I know he would have much rather lived with Sirius than them. He talked about that often enough.” Lupin paused to take another sip of his Butterbeer, while he thought. “Let’s see, when I was first teaching Harry, back when he first found out that I knew his parents, he asked me a million questions about them. He didn’t seem to know much of anything about their personalities, or likes and dislikes, or who they really were as people. I can only assume his aunt and uncle never talked about James or Lily.”

This didn't surprise Severus; Petunia had always seemed jealous and spiteful toward Lily. As far as he was aware, they weren't at all close toward the end of her life. So, it seemed unlikely Petunia would be overly sharing regarding stories about Lily, let alone her husband. "Do you know how they treat the boy?"

"As far as I'm aware, they're just as apathetic toward him and he is towards them. I remember Harry told me that he hated staying there because he always felt completely cut off from the magical world. I guess they don't like magic much, and he doesn't feel like he can really talk to them about his classes, or his personal problems, or really much of anything about his life." Lupin sighed. "I'm afraid I don't know much of anything useful. You might just have to ask him."

Severus really hoped it wouldn't come to that. "What about his friends?"

"Ron and Hermione?"

"No, his childhood friends. Anyone from the neighborhood. Any other children who might be able to shed light on his home life."

Lupin looked concerned at that. "You know, Harry once told me that Hedwig was his only friend at Privet Drive."

"Hedwig?"

"His owl." Lupin was looking more and more thoughtful, as if just realizing that something might be really wrong. "I don't think he had *any* friends in Little Whinging. He certainly never talked about any. He just said he was lonely at his Aunt and Uncle's place, and only had his owl to keep him company. I'm not sure if he *ever* had any friends before he came to Hogwarts."

Severus found that hard to believe. The little brat had been one of the most popular boys at school since he first arrived, excepting the times he was embroiled in scandal. He was James Potter's son, for Merlin's sake. Technically, he was Lily's son as well. They had both always been popular. The thought of their son, Harry Potter, being a lonely child was almost too absurd to imagine. As much as he hated to think about the boy, whenever his thoughts had strayed to imagining what Potter had been like as a younger child, Severus had always imagined Potter as an overly confident, spoilt troublemaker, with a gang of hooligans trailing in his wake, going from misadventure to mischief to mayhem, and generally causing a nuisance for as many people as possible.

However, that version of the boy (one with a gang of loyal miscreants) would have had people to go back to every summer. Merlin, even Lily had had muggle friends around the neighborhood and at her school. True, she grew further apart from them as she grew closer to the wizarding world and closer with Severus, and she barely corresponded with any of them by the time she finished Hogwarts, but she had certainly had friends when she was living in the muggle world. Why didn't her son? Could it possibly be true that Potter had a friendless childhood?

Lupin didn't have much else to add to help solve this mystery. He did recommend that Severus speak to Arthur and Molly, as Arthur had actually been to Potter's house and briefly met his uncle, and Molly usually took care of Potter once he returned from his relative's house. Severus conceded that that was probably a good idea, but he would wait until after the school year started. He didn't want to see Potter himself, unless he absolutely had to.

With their business concluded, Severus checked the time. It was almost half an hour till midnight. "It seems I was right about your appointment."

Lupin simply gave him that same understanding smile. "Yes, you were right. However, I will continue to arrive at meetings at the scheduled time. You'll have to forgive me if I continue to hope for the best from people."

Severus simply sneered at those words. His outlook on life was more or less the opposite of that.

As he stood to leave, Lupin stopped him. "Oh Severus, I almost forgot to say. Congratulations on the new Defense Against the Dark Arts post." Severus turned and scrutinized Lupin for a long time. The man couldn't possibly have been sincere in his congratulations. After all, Lupin had very much enjoyed that same position until Severus himself had revealed his little secret and caused his swift, early retirement. There was no possible way Lupin felt anything other than resentment. However, Lupin's easy-going smile did not seem the least bit forced, and his open and honest amber eyes held a quiet kindness in them. Apparently, Lupin was infinitely more forgiving than Severus could ever be. The new Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher didn't quite know what to say to that, so he simply nodded, and made his way to the exit as swiftly and silently as possible.

Harry hoisted his trunk up into the overhead bin and sat down next to Neville in their little compartment on the Hogwarts Express. The journey to platform Nine and Three Quarters had been much less stressful than usual, with the Ministry lending two spacious cars to drive Harry and his entire entourage to King's Cross Station. Harry couldn't help but remember how Sirius had snuck with him to the train station last year, disguised as the dog, Snuffles. He tried to put that thought out of his mind and distract himself by asking Neville and Luna about their summers, while he waited for Ron and Hermione to finish their Prefect duties.

Neville was excited to have a new wand, one of the last from Ollivander, before the man went missing. Luna already had her nose in the Quibbler, which apparently was doing quite well. Harry felt he would always have a soft spot for the magazine, after they printed his interview last year. Although, his fondness didn't extend quite so far as to actually buy a subscription. Their articles were just a little too colorful for him.

After the discussion of their various summer adventures, Harry had to shoo away a very rude fourth year girl named Romilda Vane, who tried to invite Harry to her compartment by insulting his friends. Finally, once things were settled down, and the train was making its way through the countryside, Harry steered the conversation over to something he'd been wondering about. "Hey Neville, can I ask you a slightly personal question?"

“Oh? Yeah, sure Harry. You can ask me anything.”

Harry wasn't quite sure how to even phrase it. “Are you the Heir of the Longbottom house?”

Neville gave him a confused look. “Er, yeah. I'm Heir Longbottom. I don't know if that's really a personal question, though. I just sort of figured that was common knowledge.”

Harry shrugged. “I suppose. I'm sure it's common knowledge for other purebloods. So, does that mean you'll be Lord Longbottom one day? Do you have a seat on the Wizengamot and all that?”

Neville's smile was a little awkward, but then, that was nothing new. “I mean, one day, I suppose. My grandmother is the Dowager Lady Longbottom right now. The Longbottom's have got a seat on the Wizengamot, and Gran's fairly involved in all that. I don't really know much about it, to be honest. I know some purebloods train their kids in all that stuff from a young age, but I think Gran always tried to involve me as little as possible. I don't think she'll pass on the Lordship to me till the day she dies.”

Harry was intrigued by that. “How does someone pass on a Lordship?”

Neville scratched his nose and looked thoughtful. “I think you just have to fill out the paperwork. You have to pass it on to a relative, obviously. You can't just give away your Lordship to whoever you like. So, if you're the Lord (or Lady) and you die, it goes to your next of kin automatically. But, if you want, you can name some other relative in their place as your Heir, and they'll get it instead. Also, if you want, you can pass it along while you're still alive. A lot of Lords do that as they get really old, or if they just don't want to bother anymore. I don't think Gran would be interested in that, though. But it's ok. I don't think I was really made for politics.” Neville gave a sheepish sort of shrug.

Harry could imagine Neville's grandmother holding onto that Lordship like a niffler holds onto a Galleon. It was no secret she felt Neville didn't quite live up to the standards that his Auror parents had set. Just listening to some of Neville's stories of his older relatives trying to ‘scare the magic out of him’ in the hopes that he wasn't a squib, reminded Harry vaguely of his own childhood, which was not a flattering comparison. Harry turned to Luna instead. “Do the Lovegoods have a Lordship, Luna?”

Luna didn't even look up from her magazine. “No, we're not a very old house. We're quite young by comparison, not like the Longbottoms or the Potters.”

“So, the Potters *do* have a Lordship?”

Neville looked extremely confused by this. Even Luna raised her head from the pages of the Quibbler to look at Harry, which was quite jarring since she was wearing her spectroscope glasses. However, it was Neville who asked what they were both thinking. “Wait, do you not know, Harry?”

Harry sighed and relayed the story of his little encounter at Madam Malkin's, in which Malfoy had mentioned a Lordship which Harry had never even heard of before. Neville seemed a little confused about what Harry was doing talking to Draco Malfoy, but Harry

didn't really want to explain the suspicious offer of a truce right at that moment, especially after arguing about it with Ron and Hermione for weeks.

In the end, Neville confirmed that the Potters definitely had a Lordship, and he could only assume Harry was the Heir. However, typically when the Heir wasn't of age, their guardian would vote in their stead, and should be the one to explain all these things to them. Harry figured that that explained why he had never heard anything about it. He doubted the Dursleys had any idea he was a Lord, and even if they did, they certainly wouldn't tell him about it.

After Ron and Hermione had returned from their Prefect duties, Harry and Neville were invited to the compartment of the new Professor Slughorn. There, they ate rolls and pheasant and were introduced to Blaise Zabini, a stuck up Slytherin from their year; Cormac McLaggen, an obnoxious Gryffindor from the year above; Marcus Belby, a poor Ravenclaw who didn't seem to hold Slughorn's attention for long; and Ginny, who seemed just as surprised to be there as Harry was to see her.

The strange little lunch date went on for hours, and Slughorn spent most of the time questioning Harry about the incident at the Department of Mysteries, and then praising him for his obvious skill. Harry could not have been more relieved when Slughorn finally dismissed them.

As soon as Harry was free, and he noticed the corridor was clear, he slipped under his invisibility cloak and followed Zabini back to the Slytherin sixth year compartment, in the hopes of gaining some type of clue as to what Malfoy was up to. Sure enough, Draco Malfoy, Vincent Crabbe, Greg Goyle, and Pansy Parkinson were all lounging around when Zabini returned, closely followed by Harry. Harry hoped against hope that no one saw his foot slip when he hoisted himself up into the luggage rack, but none of the Slytherins gave any comment, so he seemed to be in the clear.

From his vantage point in the overhead bin, Harry watched as the Slytherins discussed what had happened at the 'Slug Club' meeting, and Draco seemed rather miffed that he hadn't received an invitation. He practically seethed when Zabini told the blonde that Slughorn wasn't interested in Death Eaters. Eventually, the conversation steered to the subject of Harry himself.

Malfoy, who had been lying across the seat, with his head in Parkinson's lap, suddenly sat up with a scowl. "Of course famous Harry Potter got an invitation. I bet Slughorn was foaming at the mouth for the chance to get Potter in his stupid little club."

Zabini rolled his dark eyes. "So, because he got invited and you didn't, suddenly it's a stupid little club?"

Malfoy glared at Zabini for a moment, but then he simply sighed, shrugged, and laid his head back down in Parkinson's lap. "You know what, it doesn't matter. Who cares what Potter does this year, or ever again for that matter. I'm done with all that, anyway."

“What!?” Zabini and Parkinson yelled at the same time. Even Crabbe and Goyle looked more confused than usual, which was quite the achievement.

“You heard me, I’m done with all that. I don’t care what Potter does. I’m not going to be fighting with him this year, or ever again. I have more important things to do.”

Parkinson looked almost scandalized. “Like what?”

“Like try and improve my family’s standing. Get back in good graces with the Wizengamot. Maybe try to secure a job for when I graduate. My father’s not going to be able to get me one...not anymore.”

Zabini looked just as skeptical and Harry felt. “So, you’re *not* going to be spending the entire year complaining about Potter?”

Draco turned his head and glared up at Zabini, who was about as tall as Ron and had several inches on Malfoy. “I don’t complain about Potter that much.”

Zabini gave him a cheeky grin. “The only things you ever seem to talk about are how annoying Potter is and how terrible Dumbledore is. When you’re not complaining about one, you’re complaining about the other.” Harry was strangely reminded of a similar argument he had not too long ago with the Weasleys.

“Well, not anymore. I’m done fighting with Potter. This year, the rivalry ends.”

Parkinson and Zabini shared a look. “I’ll believe that when I see it.” Parkinson looked like she was trying to stifle her laughter.

“It’s true. In fact, I ran into Potter in Diagon Alley and I offered him a truce.”

Parkinson’s laughter turned into a coughing fit. “You what!?”

Crabbe looked scandalized. “Truce? Potter?”

Zabini seemed almost intrigued by the very idea. “He didn’t actually accept, did he?”

“Not yet, but I think he might with time. It’s not as though he doesn’t have enough on his plate to deal with.”

Parkinson was trying to scoot away from Malfoy, as though she didn’t want to touch anyone who was in a truce with Harry Potter, but Zabini was simply nodding his head thoughtfully. “That’s reasonable. I still can’t imagine you actually offering a truce to Potter. Didn’t he snub you when you first met?”

“Yes!” Malfoy sat up again, like a shot. Parkinson looked almost relieved to have distance between them. “The first day I met him, on the Hogwarts Express, he wouldn’t even shake my hand! Crabbe and Goyle were there; they saw it, too.” Crabbe and Goyle nodded their heads dutifully, and Harry rolled his invisible eyes.

Parkinson looked annoyed by this entire conversation. “So, why would you offer him a truce? Not only is he the Dark Lord’s number one target, he’s an arsehole. If you want to stay the hell away from him, fine, that makes sense. But why would you offer him a bleeding truce?”

Zabini didn’t seem as angry, just curious. “Why *would* you offer him a truce? Were you serious? Do you actually want to end your whole rivalry thing with Potter?”

“Yes, I actually want to end this stupid rivalry thing with Potter. I don’t know why that’s so hard to believe.” The other four Slytherins gave him a look that said they all found that very hard to believe, and Harry had to agree. “Besides, I don’t think he really meant to snub me that day on the train. I think I may have made a bad first impression without realizing it.”

Parkinson scoffed “Who cares?”

Malfoy looked thoughtful for a moment. “He said the strangest thing to me. When we were chatting in Diagon Alley. It didn’t make any sense, but I don’t think he was lying.”

Zabini was smirking. “I knew you wouldn’t be able to go a whole year without talking about Potter.”

Draco’s grey eyes, which had been staring off at nothing, narrowed in annoyance as they swiveled back to his dark-skinned friend. “Do you want to hear what he said or not?”

Zabini’s smirk never wavered. “Yes, obviously.”

“He said that he didn’t know he was a wizard until the day he got his Hogwarts letter. He said it so earnestly, too, like it was something he was really upset about. But that doesn’t make any sense. I mean, he was the baby who stopped the bloody Dark Lord, ‘the Boy-Who-Lived’ or whatever. How could he possibly be a squib? I mean, talk about accidental magic!”

The others seemed just as confused by this mystery. Apparently, it didn’t occur to any of them that Harry might possibly *not* have known that he was the Boy-Who-Lived, or that there was a Dark Lord, or that magic even existed, for that matter.

Harry waited while the train slowed down and the Slytherins slipped into their school robes. He tried to stifle his grunt when Goyle shoved his trunk right into his groin, but the others didn’t seem to notice, so Harry simply waited for them to leave the compartment when the train pulled into Hogsmeade station.

When Malfoy told the others to go ahead without him because he needed to check on something, Harry was excited that he might get some clue about the mystery item Malfoy bought at Borgin and Burke’s. However, that hope died in his throat when Malfoy shut the compartment door, turned to look up at the luggage rack, and said, “I know you’re there, Potter.”

Harry’s brain went into overdrive. He tried to reach for his wand from inside his pocket, but before he could pull it out, Malfoy started walking toward him saying, “I’m not holding a wand, so you better not curse me.” Harry finally got ahold of his wand and aimed it right at the blonde, whose head was now only a foot or two away, but before he could think of any

spell to use, Malfoy yanked on the cloak and pulled it off. “Hah!” he yelled, “I jolly well knew it.”

There Harry lay, crouched in a fetal position in the overhead luggage bin, with his wand pointed right at Malfoy’s face, and he didn’t really know what to do next. He had assumed that if he were caught, he would have to defend himself, but Malfoy was just giving him a very unimpressed look. Besides, as much as Harry hated the Slytherin git, Malfoy was right about one thing, Harry wasn’t about to attack someone who was unarmed and not attacking him. “What do you want, Malfoy?”

Malfoy sighed and held Harry’s precious cloak at his side. “I told you what I wanted back at the robe shop; I want out of this. I don’t want to fight with you anymore.”

“Well, excuse me if I find that a little difficult to believe.”

Draco rolled his eyes and tossed the cloak back at Harry. “You can believe whatever you like, I said my peace and I apologized, if you want to keep antagonizing me and *spying on me*, then that’s on you.”

Harry caught his cloak in his left hand and looked it over, trying to suppress his obnoxious guilt. Malfoy had extended him a peace offering twice now, and Harry was now the one who was forcing their rivalry to continue. Maybe Hermione was right, maybe if there was even a chance that peace could be brokered, he should at least try for it. However, he wasn’t about to let his guard down, just in case.

Harry scrambled down from the overhead, without taking his wand off Malfoy. The blonde simply waited patiently for him to regain his footing. Harry looked Malfoy up and down. He looked more or less the same as last year; the same pale, pointed face. Although, his features were perhaps a little sharper and more defined. He had the same silvery blonde hair; not slicked back the way he used to wear it, but still styled carefully. His eyes were just as steely and grey as they had always been, but they were missing their usual cruelty. Malfoy had only grown an inch or two; he was still taller than Harry, but at least he didn’t tower over him like Ron did.

Harry’s bright eyes met Malfoy’s pale ones. “I don’t want to fight anymore, either.”

“Really? Because that wand you have pointed at my face paints a slightly different picture.”

Harry sighed and carefully lowered his wand. “Were you really serious about that truce?”

Malfoy gave a look as if he didn’t understand where he would find the patience to deal with such idiocy. “Obviously I was serious. I actually have better things to do with my time than to go around offering fake-truces to people. I’m tired of fighting. I have more important things to do. If you can’t leave me alone, then that’s your problem.”

Harry rolled his eyes. “If I had offered you a truce, you would have spat in my face. Or more likely, you would have shaken my hand and then cursed me behind my back.”

“At least I would have shaken your hand!”

“Oh for the love of –” Suddenly, Harry shoved his wand back in his pocket and then held out his hand. “Here. You want to shake my hand so badly, here it is.”

Malfoy looked at it skeptically with his arms still folded in front of himself, defensively. The Slytherin gave him a long, assessing look. “Why did you say you didn’t know you were a wizard until the day you got your Hogwarts letter?”

“Are you kidding me right now?”

Malfoy just shrugged. “I want to know.”

“Fine,” Harry lowered his hand, not about to leave it hanging like an idiot. “I said that because...” Suddenly the compartment door slid open, interrupting their talk.

Tonks’s bright face poked through the door. “Watcher Harry. There you are. Thank Merlin! I was worried when you didn’t get off the train.” She looked skeptically between Harry and Malfoy. “Is everything alright in here?”

Harry put his hands in his pockets. “Yeah, everything’s fine. We were just talking.” He gave Tonks a sheepish grin. She looked paler than usual, almost sickly, and her spikey hair was a mousey brown instead of its usual bright pink or blue or purple.

She looked over at Draco Malfoy once again. “Are you sure?”

Harry nodded. “Yeah. We’re fine. Just talking.”

Malfoy gave her a cold sneer. “He said he’s fine. What’s it to you? Who are you, anyway? Potter’s bodyguard?”

Tonks gave the boy a piercing look, and then she smirked at him. “I’m the daughter of Andromeda Black and Ted Tonks. That’s who I am.”

Malfoy instantly went paler than usual. His mouth opening slightly in shock. It took Harry a moment to realize why. “Oh yeah, you two are cousins, right?”

Tonks looked quite pleased with the reaction she had caused in the young Malfoy heir. She nodded enthusiastically at Harry. “Oh yeah, I’m the estranged half-blood cousin who went on to become an Auror. They probably don’t talk about me much at family dinners. I’m pretty sure Mum was blasted off the family tree long before I came around.”

Malfoy still looked pale and small. “I...I didn’t realize...”

“Clearly.” Tonks simply gave him a playful wink. “Anyway, come on you two. You missed the carriages, so I’ll walk you to the gates.”

Harry fell into step beside Malfoy and looked over at the shocked aristocrat. Malfoy seemed almost as shaken as he had when he first saw Harry at the robe shop. Harry wondered what was going on with him, but he came to a decision. “I’ll tell you later.”

Malfoy looked up confused, so Harry elaborated. “Why I didn’t know I was a wizard. I’ll tell you later.”

Malfoy nodded. “Tomorrow?” he offered. “After class?”

Harry nodded back. “Sure. We’ll talk then.”

That evening, at the start of term feast, Harry told his friends what he had overheard in the Slytherin compartment, and his agreement to meet with Malfoy tomorrow. Hermione seemed apprehensive that Harry and Malfoy couldn’t be alone together without one of them starting a fight, and she warned him to try and be on his best behavior. Ron, on the other hand, was sure this was a trap, and warned Harry to bring the map and cloak with him, just in case. Harry didn’t really think he needed either of these warnings. Obviously it could be a trap and obviously he shouldn’t go picking a fight. However, he thanked his friends for their concern and their well-meaning advice.

After the last of the puddings were finished off, the students received some fascinating news. Apparently, Slughorn was not teaching Defense Against the Dark Arts after all. He was the new potions master, and Snape had finally gotten his wish of securing the coveted Defense post he’d been after for years. Harry wasn’t sure what this would mean exactly, but he figured that if it made Snape happy, it was probably bad news for him.

The Proxy

The next morning, Harry and Ron were thrilled to discover that their E grades were perfectly adequate to take NEWT Level Potions with Slughorn. Apparently, Harry's dream of becoming an Auror was not quite as shattered as he'd feared. He and Ron would be able to join Hermione in that morning's Potions lesson.

Slughorn could not have been a greater contrast to Snape. It was strange being taught Potions by someone who was encouraging, helpful, and capable of smiling. Harry left Double Potions with a huge grin on his face and a small vial of Felix Felicis in his pocket. He was feeling rather confident, until he walked past a tapestry of a young wizard facing off against a dragon. Suddenly, a hand shot out to yank him behind.

Without any warning, Harry found himself in darkness. "What the —" The only reason his didn't trip over himself was because a pair of firm hands were holding him in place.

There was a murmur of "Lumos" and then there was light. Green eyes stared into a pale, pointed face. Harry's holly wand was out in a second, but before he could think of an appropriate hex, Malfoy was already bending down to pick something up. "Here, I think you dropped this."

Harry looked down at the beaten and battered Potions text in Malfoy's hand. The same book he had just used to brew the best Draught of Living Death he would likely ever brew in his life. The same book which, apparently, was 'property of the Half-Blood Prince.' Harry snatched it back with a jerk. "Give me that."

Malfoy quirked a silvery yellow brow. "I'd be careful with it if I were you. That thing looks like it's been dropped a few times already. Likely from a substantial height."

"Who asked you?" Harry scowled, as he tucked the book safely into his bag. "Anyway, what in Merlin's name do you think you're doing dragging me into dark passageways? I thought you wanted a truce or whatever." Harry started walking down the narrow, hidden corridor. He knew the Marauder's Map almost by heart at this point, and he knew this passage eventually led back to the main floor of the castle; it was just a longer route.

Malfoy strode after him, just as quickly, but much more gracefully. "I do want a truce, but you said you'd tell me the mystery of why you didn't know you were a wizard, today after class."

Harry reached the end of the passage, pushed open the backside of a portrait, and jumped down into a torch-lit hallway. The young woman in the frame that seconded as a secret door, called out to him as he considered slamming her in Malfoy's face. "You'd better hurry or you'll be late for lunch."

"Oh, I know." Harry simply turned on his heel and strode from the hidden passage as quickly as he could. "You know, Malfoy," he called over his shoulder. "I meant after *all* the classes, not after the first bloody class of the day."

He was hoping to lose the blonde, but the boy was surprisingly agile, dropping down onto the flagstone floor with barely a moment's hesitation. "Yes, that's what I assumed, but I didn't want to give you the chance to change your mind." He darted along with annoyingly long legs until he quickly caught up to Harry. "So, tell me. What the hell did you mean when you said you didn't know you were a wizard? How does that even make sense?"

"It's the story of my life, it doesn't have to make sense." Harry began stomping up a set of stairs, with Malfoy barely two steps behind him. Suddenly the staircase beneath them began to jerk. It was changing directions midway. "Oh great, now we'll have to go down the east corridor and around the whole laundry area to make it back up to the main floor."

Malfoy gave him a skeptical look. "How do you know your way around the dungeons so well?"

Harry shrugged. "I know my way around the whole castle. I've explored it enough." Finally, the staircase settled on a new landing, and the two made their way along the new route. "If they run out of rolls before I get to the Great Hall, I'm going to be pissed, Malfoy."

Once again, Harry tried to march quickly enough to out-pace Malfoy, but the Slytherin was far more capable of making long strides, and he did it with far more poise. "If you simply told me what you promised you would, it would help pass the time."

They turned another corner and entered a long, windowless, gallery of portraits. The two were now only one floor below the ground level, but they still needed to get to the other side of the castle. "I never promised anything." Harry tried to intimidate Malfoy with an imposing glare, but Malfoy just glared right back. Harry noticed several of the portraits were glaring at him, as well, annoyed that Harry was interrupting their peaceful morning.

'Perhaps,' Harry thought, 'I should just get this over with?' He could tell Malfoy one small piece of his story and the git would finally leave him alone. Hopefully, for the rest of the year, if not the rest of his life. He sighed and began walking at a much more reasonable pace. "Fine." He strode past painting after painting of annoyed faces. "I'm sure you know I was raised by muggles. It's not exactly a secret." Malfoy nodded. "Well, the whole time I was growing up, they never told me I was a wizard. I didn't even know magic existed or any of that other stuff until I got my Hogwarts letter."

Harry had hoped it would be over quickly, like ripping off a bandage. However, he hadn't counted on having to explain it over and over again before it finally sunk into Malfoy's thick skull. By the time they were finally close to the Great Hall, Malfoy was still asking inane questions. "So, I don't understand, how did you think you defeated the Dark Lord if you didn't know about magic?"

"I didn't know about *any* of it! I didn't know about any dark lords."

They were making their way up to the steps toward the Entrance Hall, and Harry had just about reached his breaking point, but Malfoy kept going. "But then why else would you be so famous? Why would so many people care about you, if you hadn't defeated the Dark Lord?"

"I didn't know I was famous. I didn't think anyone cared about me."

They were finally at the entrance to the Great Hall. “Then how did you think that you got your scar?”

“In the car crash that killed my parents, now would you stop asking questions!?” Malfoy snapped his mouth shut when Harry rounded on him. Harry’s back was to the students now eating lunch, but he was sure he’d be drawing more and more attention the longer he stood there. “Look, you wanted an explanation and I bloody gave you one. Now, let’s get to ignoring each other for the rest of the year. That sounded lovely.”

He stormed off toward the Gryffindor table without a backward glance at Malfoy. It did not improve his mood when he discovered that Ron had already finished the last of the rolls.

Harry was hoping that his offer to share one small piece of information with Malfoy would convince the other boy to drop the issue. He was, therefore, rather unhappy that afternoon, when Malfoy tried to get his attention yet again in the middle of Defense Against the Dark Arts. “Potter...hey...Potter.”

Harry rolled his eyes and tried not to think about the Slytherin who had, ever so inconveniently, taken up the dueling position next to Ron and himself. He tried to concentrate on the task at hand, but it was rather difficult with Malfoy’s incessant goading.

“Hey Potter.”

“Shut it, Malfoy.” Harry didn’t even glance in the direction of the blonde. He kept his eyes on Ron, just in case the redhead managed to cast a hex while Harry wasn’t looking. “What part of non-verbal did you not understand?”

Snape had set them to the task of trying to cast wordless hexes and shield charms. Harry still hadn’t managed to get any shield to come out, but it wasn’t really a problem, since Ron wasn’t producing much of anything that he needed to shield himself from. Malfoy, meanwhile, was having the same issue with his partner, Blaise Zabini. However, Malfoy had clearly given up on waiting for Zabini to produce any wordless magic and had instead diverted all his attention to Harry.

“Potter, you said over the summer that you didn’t know you had a Lordship. So, I take it no one told you about that, either?” Malfoy was twirling his wand in his hand without a care. Harry really hoped that Zabini managed to produce a powerful hex, just to teach Malfoy a lesson about turning his back in the middle of a duel.

“Malfoy, shut it, you’re going to get us both in trouble.”

The Slytherin just shrugged. “Snape doesn’t care.” This did seem to be the case, since Malfoy’s whispers barely maintained the pretense of subtlety. Yet, Snape had hardly spared them a glance. “So, did you know that you had a vote on the Wizengamot?”

Malfoy had this suspiciously innocent look on his face, which only irked Harry more. It must have irked Ron as well, because Ron spoke up before anyone else got the chance. “Harry

doesn't care about your stupid little Pureblood club, Malfoy! He has more important things to worry about."

"Weasley!" Apparently, that had caught Snape's attention. "Wordless magic means: without words. Five points from Gryffindor." Ron clenched his fists and used his newfound fury to try and fuel his next hex, but once again, his wand didn't so much as spark.

Malfoy looked for a moment like he was trying not to laugh, but as soon as Harry turned to glare at him, his face quickly smoothed out into one of innocent curiosity, which immediately set Harry on edge. Once again, Malfoy lowered his voice to what probably sounded like a whisper to someone standing in the far corner of the room. "Well, Potter, I was just wondering if you knew who was using your vote before you came of age?"

Harry scowled. "Nobody's using my vote, obviously, since my guardians are muggles, and they're not exactly active in wizarding politics."

"Potter!" Snape's dreary voice was even lower in volume than Malfoy's whisper, and yet it seemed to carry infinitely more weight. "Again, I must remind the Gryffindors that nonverbal means that talking will not be necessary. That will cost you another ten points. This is my final warning."

Harry didn't even bother to point out how unfair this was. He just tightened his grip on his wand and tried with all his might to make a bloody shield come forth. 'Protego' he thought in his mind. 'Come on, let's show him what we can do. Protego! Protego! Protego!' Harry jabbed his wand, as if more force would somehow make the magic burst forth. It didn't. At least no one else was having any success either. Even Hermione seemed incapable of forming any sort of shield. Not that she really needed one against Neville's silent, desperate attempts.

Zabini seemed to be inspecting his wand to make sure it still worked. Malfoy wasn't even pretending to pay attention to the assignment; he was watching Harry carefully. "It's interesting that you think that no one is using your vote." Harry tried so hard to ignore him. Who cared what Malfoy had to say anyway? Whatever it was, it was just going to upset him. "I know my father always used to complain about the Potter vote. He'd say 'It's just not fair. Dumbledore has two votes, and he's only the head of one noble family. He gets the Dumbledore Family vote and the Potter Family vote.'"

Harry lowered his wand. He tried not to listen. He wanted not to hear these words, but Malfoy kept talking. "It's funny. You'd think Dumbledore would have mentioned to his *favorite* student that he has been using *your* vote to pass legislation. I wonder, does he tell you *anything*?"

Harry glared the most venomous glare he could manage, but didn't dare open his mouth, so Malfoy just kept going. "It seems odd that you and Dumbledore are supposedly so close, and yet he would keep such a big secret from you. I would be outraged if I were you. I mean, do you even know what sort of things he's been passing into law with your vote?"

He just couldn't take it anymore. "Probably something that I'd highly approve of, if it pissed off your father so badly!"

“Potter!” Of course. “Since you obviously seem to think that my class is the perfect time for socializing, perhaps Saturday evening will seem like the perfect time for getting actual work done. Detention. My office. 8 pm. Don’t be late.”

Harry was trying so hard to restrain his anger, he didn’t even notice the small sparks that erupted at the end of his wand. “Yes, sir.”

Snape swooped back over to the other side of the room to chastise Lavender and Parvati on their ‘poor wandwork.’ Harry was not remotely surprised to see that Malfoy was smirking. He should have known that the boy’s offer of a truce was just an excuse to get information out of Harry, so he could torment him further.

He was about to give the Slytherin prat a few choice words, but Ron beat him to it. “Bugger off, Malfoy. You’ve done enough damage.”

Harry couldn’t help but agree. “Yeah, we knew that your so-called truce was just a lie. You’re never going to change.”

That seemed to wipe the smirk right off Malfoy’s face. He looked startled, almost nervous. It was as if he had suddenly remembered that he should be trying to get along with Harry, instead of egging him on, as was his long-standing habit. Without any warning, words erupted from his mouth. “It’s my fault.”

The whole class froze. All attention was now on the young Malfoy heir. Harry and Ron shared a quick look as if to say: where is he going with this? “It’s my fault, Professor,” Malfoy continued.

Snape slowly stepped back toward them. Everyone was utterly silent. Harry wouldn’t have been surprised if the entire castle had gone quiet. “What are you talking about, Mr. Malfoy?”

“Potter was only talking because I was pestering him. If you’re going to punish anyone you should punish me.” You could have heard a unicorn sneeze. Harry was completely and utterly dumbfounded, and he certainly wasn’t the only one. Pansy Parkinson looked scandalized. Crabbe and Goyle seemed to have been hit with an overenthusiastic Confundus. Even Zabini seemed to be questioning what his eyes and ears were trying to relay to him.

Snape recovered first. “That may be, Mr. Malfoy. However, ‘being pestered’ is not a valid excuse for speaking in my class, especially in the middle of a serious assignment. On the other hand, it is also not acceptable to ‘pester’ other students in the middle of a duel, no matter how pathetic their attempts may be. You will join Mr. Potter in detention this Saturday.” With that, Snape turned with a swirl of his billowing black robes and stalked back to the front of the room. “Back to work.”

The sound of shuffling feet and swishing robes immediately started back up as everyone raised their wands and tried desperately to conjure even a small amount of magic without their voices. Harry pointedly kept his eyes fixed on Ron, but that didn’t stop Malfoy from whispering to him. At least this time he used an actual whisper, not one that the entire class could easily overhear. “Well, looks like we’re in this together now.”

Harry jerked his wand again, but a shield still stubbornly refused to form. “I don’t know what you’re playing at, Malfoy, but you’ve got another thing coming if you think this makes up for anything.”

“Well, now at least I’m in detentions with you. So, now we’re even for that at least.”

“No. Now I have to spend Saturday evening with Snape *and you*. That’s not exactly an improvement.” Ron sniggered, and Malfoy finally turned toward his partner and tried (and failed) to cast his own shield. The git seemed to finally realize that nothing he might say was going to improve the situation.

Harry was dreading his Saturday detention, and so when a note arrived at dinner, he was thrilled to discover that his Saturday evening would include neither Snape nor Malfoy.

Dear Harry,

I would like to start our private lessons this Saturday.

Kindly come along to my office at 8 p.m. I hope you are enjoying your first day back at school.

Yours sincerely,

Albus Dumbledore.

P.S. I enjoy Acid Pops

“Who’s it from?” Ron asked between mouthfuls of roast beef.

“Dumbledore. Our lessons begin this Saturday. I guess Snape will just have to wait.”

Hermione instantly perked up. “You should ask Professor Dumbledore about what Malfoy mentioned. Find out if he’s really been voting for you and on what legislation.”

“Oh, believe me,” Harry grabbed a roll and began to butter it. “I have every intention of bringing that up.”

By the time Saturday rolled around, Harry had amassed a small mountain of homework. He had thought that the OWL year had been tough, but apparently once you entered NEWT level classes, teachers no longer felt that students required sleep. He spent all day in the library with Ron and Hermione trying to make a dent in their workload. He wasn’t quite sure what he would do once Quidditch started in a couple weeks. Harry was Captain this year, so what was normally a recreational activity was going to be even more work than usual.

At a quarter to 8:00, he was more than happy to take a break from his Transfiguration essay. Especially since he would be spending the evening with Professor Dumbledore, and not his

two least favorite Slytherins. Although, he wasn't really sure what he would say to Dumbledore, in light of Malfoy's recent revelations.

When Harry arrived in the Headmaster's office, he found the man in question in his usual location, seated behind his large, wooden desk. The office looked just as it had last year. Some of the former headmasters and headmistresses were pretending to be asleep in their frames, but most were watching him avidly. They clearly all remembered the last time Harry was here, when he had thrown a fit over Sirius's death and smashed several of Dumbledore's silvery instruments. He was pretty embarrassed about the whole thing in retrospect.

Dumbledore was wearing bright turquoise robes with a shimmering gold trim. However, there was no sign of the large black and gold ring that Harry had seen over the summer, when Dumbledore took him to meet Slughorn.

The headmaster's right hand looked just as dead and decrepit as it had the last time Harry had seen it. Harry looked right at the hand when he spoke. "Sir, I know you said we'd talk about it another time, but may I ask..."

"Oh, this is nothing to worry about Harry. It seems my reflexes just aren't quite what they used to be. There's quite a fascinating story involved, but I'm afraid without the full context, I just won't be able to do it proper justice. I promise I'll tell you all about how it happened once the time is right."

Harry looked closely at the blackened hand. It definitely looked like the kind of thing you ought to worry about. "If you say so, Headmaster."

"Please take a seat, my boy. Lemon drop?" Harry took up Dumbledore's offer to sit down but declined the treat. It was then that Harry noticed the pensieve on the headmaster's desk, and the vial which obviously contained a memory. "So, Harry, how has your first week been treating you?"

"Fine, I suppose, sir. It's NEWT level now, so things are really stepping up."

Dumbledore nodded. "Yes, we do like to make sure our students are properly prepared for whatever may come their way." The headmaster then gave Harry a scrutinizing look, over the top of his half-moon spectacles. "I notice that you and Professor Snape have already begun your yearly back and forth."

"That's one way of putting it, sir." Harry tried not to look too sheepish. Dumbledore always had a way of making him feel guilty, even when he wasn't sure he necessarily deserved it. "Thanks for getting me out of detention, by the way."

"I didn't get you out of anything, I'm afraid. You will be serving your detention with Professor Snape next Saturday."

"Oh. Great."

"Perhaps next time you could try to avoid garnering a detention on the very first day of term." Dumbledore's words may have been reproachful, but there was a mischievous twinkle

in his eye, and a sly smile playing at the corners of his mouth.

Harry still couldn't resist defending himself. "It's not my fault, sir. Malfoy kept egging me on."

"Ah, so things have already picked up with you and Mr. Malfoy, as well?"

"He was talking about you, Professor."

"Really?" Dumbledore inquired. "I can only imagine what young Mr. Malfoy would want to say about me in the middle of a Defense Against the Dark Arts lecture."

"He said that you were using the Potter family seat on the Wizengamot to vote in a bunch of legislation."

"Ah. Well, I can see why that would upset you. The term 'bunch' is hardly appropriate to describe a quantity of bills."

"But it's true, though, sir?"

"It's certainly true that I have been using the Potter vote to help pad the numbers for us Light Wizards. Although, I usually only use it for particularly important legislation, or to break ties. I think in the last few years, I've only used it a few times. So, I'm not sure how accurate the term 'bunch' would be."

"So," Harry was trying very hard to understand why Dumbledore was being so cavalier about this. "You've only been voting for me for the last few years, sir?"

"I'm not sure if I would say I was voting for *you*, my boy, so much as for the Potter family estate. You see, I've been using the Potter family vote since before you were born."

"Before I was born!?"

"Yes, in fact, hold on just a moment." Dumbledore swept up from his seat and made his way across the office. He walked past Fawkes, who was sleeping quietly on his perch, and headed for a large cabinet behind his desk. "I was only planning on showing you one memory tonight, but I think we may have time for a few others. You don't have class in the morning, after all, and I think this will help answer quite a few questions you may have."

Dumbledore reached inside the cabinet and pulled out a few vials of swirling silvery mist and then made his way back to Harry. Without any further ado, he poured the contents of the vials into the pensieve and motioned for Harry to go ahead and take a look. Not needing any further prompting, Harry shot up from his seat, and leaned over until his face just touched the surface of the pearlescent liquid. Suddenly, he felt his feet leave the ground and he was falling as if through a dream.

Harry landed with a jolt in an enormous, unfamiliar room. It reminded him of the large courtroom where his trial had been held the summer before, but it wasn't quite as inhospitable. There were large stands full of benches around three sides of the room, just as there had been in the courtroom, but everything felt more lavish and grandiose. There was no

chair covered in chains in the center of the room, as there had been in the courtroom. Instead, several people were milling around the polished marble floor wearing the old-fashioned, purple robes that Harry recognized as the official robes of the Wizengamot.

After a moment of looking around, Professor Dumbledore floated easily to his side. They were the only two people not covered head to toe in purple, but the mingling witches and wizards didn't spare them a glance. Harry and Dumbledore weren't really here, after all, wherever 'here' was.

The headmaster seemed to anticipate Harry's next question. "This, my boy, is the main Chamber of the Wizengamot. I know you are already quite familiar with Courtroom Ten, where your hearing took place. That courtroom is where the Wizengamot meets to pass judgement on trials, especially important trials where the entire committee is in attendance. This room, which we now have the pleasure to visit, is the location where the Wizengamot meets to discuss legislation, and to attend to regular meetings and housekeeping."

"This is pretty amazing, but why are we here, Professor? What did you want to show me?"

As Harry spoke, a blonde man sitting at a large podium in the middle of the assembly seats started banging on a gavel. "The first meeting of the Wizengamot Summer Session will begin in five minutes. Please begin taking your seats, Lords and Ladies."

Professor Dumbledore placed his hand on Harry's shoulder and led him past the shuffling, purple-clad figures, over to the left side of the room. "This way, Harry. There are a couple wizards whom I believe you will recognize."

They squeezed past a pair of urgently whispering witches and Harry froze. There, in the front row, were two very, very familiar faces. They sat side by side, chatting casually together. On the right, was a younger version of Professor Dumbledore. His hair was just as silver as the man standing beside Harry, but there were a few less lines on his face, and no blackened hand.

The wizard on the left, Harry would have recognized anywhere, because it was almost like looking at his own reflection. The same soft cheekbones. The same nose. The same wire-rimmed glasses. The same mop of messy, black hair. The only difference was their eyes, because Harry had his mother's eyes. It was as if Harry and his professor were standing in front of a strange mirror, one looking at his past self and the other looking at his future.

James Potter looked to be a few years older than Harry was now, perhaps eighteen or nineteen. He was pulling at the collar of his official robes, as if they made him highly uncomfortable. "I don't know how you convinced me to come to this thing, Professor Dumbledore. Politics really isn't my style. Too much sitting around talking, nothing really getting done."

The younger version of Dumbledore gave an indulgent smile. "My dear boy, I think you'll find that there are many things in this world that can *only* be accomplished by people sitting in a room and talking. I think your father would have been very proud that you decided to be a part of such things. Either way, I do appreciate that you are doing me a personal favor by attending today." Harry's father blushed at the praise, just as Harry always did when

Professor Dumbledore gave him a compliment. Although, James also had a cocky smirk on his lips, which would have looked rather out of place on Harry's face. "Speaking of favors," Dumbledore continued. "You are not a student anymore James, I would welcome you to call me Albus."

"Albus, huh? That will take a little getting used to."

The noise of the gavel rang throughout the assembly, and Harry turned to see that same blonde wizard calling everyone to order. The Wizengamot seating seemed to be broken up into three sections. There were several wizards and witches sitting on the left side of the room, with the younger Dumbledore and James Potter. On the opposite, right hand side, was another group of members. Then, at the front of the room, between the two sides, was a third group. In the center of this group, at a raised dais, was the wizard who was calling for everyone to settle down. "Let the 436th Summer Session of the Wizengamot come to order in this year 1978."

Harry watched the blonde wizard bang his gavel one final time. Unlike the other Lords and Ladies assembled, who all had a silver 'W' on their robes, this man had the letter 'C.' Upon further inspection, Harry thought the gentleman looked vaguely familiar. There was just something about his pale, pointed face that set off alarms in the back of his mind. "Who's that, professor?"

The Dumbledore who was wearing turquoise robes seemed quite happy to answer questions. "That, my boy, is the current Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot, as of 1978. His name is Abraxas Malfoy. I believe you are quite familiar with his grandson, young Draco Malfoy."

"That's Malfoy's grandfather?" Harry examined the man even closer. He looked quite a bit like Lucius Malfoy, with the same long, blonde hair.

Dumbledore chuckled. "Well, not quite his grandfather yet, obviously. Draco has yet to be born as of this memory. I'm not sure if his parents were even married at this point."

Malfoy's grandfather finished reading through the announcements and moved on to more important matters. "Now, is there any new business that the members would like to bring to attention?"

"Chief Warlock." Everyone in the room, including Harry, turned to look at James Potter. He was standing to address the current Lord Malfoy, but he was also leaning casually against the front rail of the stands. He looked far more charismatic and cool than Harry was sure he would ever look in his entire life.

Abraxas Malfoy, however, did not appear impressed. "Heir Potter, or should I say, Lord Potter now? Such a shame to hear that both your parents fell to Dragon Pox, and with you barely out of Hogwarts, as well."

Harry's father narrowed his eyes, but didn't back down one inch. "Chief Warlock, I have a motion to bring to the floor."

Malfoy's grandfather didn't back down, either. "Do you now? I wasn't aware that you were even interested in politics."

James smirked at that. "I have absolutely no interest in politics. I have every interest in knocking you down a peg." Harry laughed, as did several of the wizards and witches on the left side of the room. Both Dumbledores were watching impassively, with matching cheerful smiles.

One of the witches near Abraxas Malfoy stood to whisper something to him, but he waved her down. "I know, I know," he muttered. "The floor recognizes Lord Potter."

James stood a little straighter at that; he'd clearly won their little interaction. "I move that we open the floor for a vote. I think it's time we had a new Chief Warlock."

Abraxas paled considerably at that. "You are nominating a new Chief Warlock? Who?"

James looked just as cocky as he had when Harry had watched him playing with the snitch in Snape's memory. "I nominate Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore."

Another wizard a couple rows behind them practically jumped from his seat. "I second that nomination."

The Dumbledore who was being nominated relaxed into his seat, giving off every indication that he was merely pleasantly amused by what was happening around him. Meanwhile, everyone began voting. Harry noticed that most of the wizards and witches on the right side of the room voted to keep Abraxas Malfoy, while all the wizards and witches of the left side of the room voted in Dumbledore's favor. The Wizengamot members in the front area, between them, seemed more evenly split in their votes.

Even without counting the individual votes, it was clear that Dumbledore had a slight advantage in numbers. Malfoy's grandfather seemed to have reached the same conclusion. He scowled darkly and announced, "It seems the motion has passed. The new Chief Warlock is Lord Albus Dumbledore."

Dumbledore stood gracefully and made his way over to the center podium as James whooped and clapped. Several Lords and Ladies gave the messy-haired young man scandalized looks over his uncouth behavior. James's clapping quickly died out. "Oh, I'm sorry. Do we not do that here?"

Malfoy's grandfather looked particularly disgusted. "This is not a quidditch match, Lord Potter. Please behave with some level of decorum."

Unlike the wizards in the right-hand stands, the younger Dumbledore looked quite amused by James's cheers, and winked over at him from behind his spectacles. He finally made his way up the narrow steps toward Malfoy's dais. "My dear Abraxas, I believe you are in my seat."

The blonde turned his attention to Dumbledore, and his face became even more disgusted. "We are not friends, Lord Dumbledore. You will address me by my proper title of Lord Malfoy."

Dumbledore simply smiled. "In that case, I must insist that you address me by my proper title of Chief Warlock." As Dumbledore said that, the silver 'W' on his robes transformed into a 'C' and Malfoy's robes went through the opposite transformation.

While Dumbledore took up his proper seat, Harry could see his father laughing over on the other side of the room. He was nudging one of his neighbors, as he draped over a couple seats to get into a more comfortable position. "That's all I wanted to do. Someone wake me up when it's over."

At that, the room seemed to fade into fog, and another memory began to form in the same Wizengamot Chamber. Harry was still trying to wrap his head around everything that he had seen. "My father was the one to nominate you as Chief Warlock?"

The current headmaster nodded. "Yes. Your father insisted that if he was going to have to sit through an entire meeting of the Wizengamot, he wanted to...how did he phrase it? Oh yes, he wanted to be the one to 'shove it in Malfoy's pompous face.'"

Harry laughed. "I take it my dad didn't like the Malfoys either?"

Dumbledore considered this. "He didn't really know any of them quite as well as you know young Draco. Lucius Malfoy was four or five years older than your father. He did know them by reputation, though."

Harry nodded at that. Perhaps there was some truth to what Malfoy had said. Perhaps some members of 'Light Families' really did discriminate against 'Dark Families.' It definitely seemed that Harry's father was against the Malfoy family by reputation alone. Sirius must have been an exception, but then he was the only Gryffindor in his family.

As the memory became clearer, Harry took the chance to look around. Several Lords and Ladies were once again milling around the main floor of the Chamber. Harry could see the younger Dumbledore seated at the raised dais in the center of the assembly seats. He looked around for his father again, but didn't see him right away. "My father didn't seem very interested in politics, sir."

The present Dumbledore chuckled lightly. "Oh no, not at all. I believe you, Harry, have become far more interested in politics than your father ever was. Although, that may have been more out of necessity than actual enthusiasm for the subject."

Harry had to agree. "I hate politics. I guess I am pretty interested in the outcome, though. Probably because it always seems to directly involve *me* in some way."

Student and headmaster watched as Chief Warlock Dumbledore called the meeting to order, this being the 438th Summer Session in the year 1980. That was the year Harry was born. When Dumbledore asked if anyone had business to bring to the floor, one of the witches on the left side of the room stood with practiced poise. "Chief Warlock," she intoned.

Dumbledore smiled when his eyes fell on the older woman. "The floor recognizes Dowager Lady Longbottom."

Harry's jaw dropped. He almost hadn't recognized Neville's grandmother from the one time they had met at St. Mungo's. Even sixteen years younger, the woman looked just as imposing in her purple robes as she did in her signature stuffed vulture hat. "I move that we open the floor for a vote on the Unforgiveable Bill. We've been debating the bill for weeks now, there are no more experts giving testimony. It is time to bring it to a vote."

The Dumbledore on the dais nodded primly and raised his wand. With a simple wave, and no words required, dozens of scrolls appeared in midair and made their way down to the assembled wizards and witches. "You will all find the full contents of the bill before you," he explained. "Just to remind everyone, the three curses which will be labeled as Unforgiveable and which will henceforth be completely illegal, even in the case of self-defense, are the Imperius Curse, the Cruciatius Curse, and the Avada Kedavra Curse, otherwise known as the Killing Curse. If there are no other questions, we will bring the matter to a vote."

Once again, the assembly on the right side of the room, where Harry could see Abraxas Malfoy sitting, all tended to vote against the bill. The members on the left side were almost exclusively in favor of the bill. While the wizards and witches in the middle, closest to the Chief Warlock, were a mixed bag. This time it was much harder to tell simply by a show of hands, whether or not the motion had passed.

Once Dumbledore finally finished counting he announced, "It seems the ayes have it. The bill has passed."

However, before he could bang the gavel, Abraxas Malfoy was on his feet. "Just one moment Dumbledore! I counted the hands, as well. The ayes have nothing. It was a tie, 48 to 48."

Dumbledore simply gave the current Malfoy Lord a pleasant expression, with that same mischievous twinkle in his eye which Harry knew from experience meant that the older man was quite pleased. "I'm sorry, I distinctly counted 49 to 48."

Abraxas Malfoy glared. "How is that even possible, when there are only 96 of us here?"

Several members of the assembly began murmuring to themselves, also confused as to where Dumbledore had gotten his numbers. However, the older man showed absolutely no sign of embarrassment. If anything, he looked highly amused. "Ah, I think I can understand your confusion, Lord Malfoy. You see, it is the Potter vote that puts us in the lead."

The murmuring grew even louder at that. The left hand side sounded curious, while the right hand side sounded furious, and Lord Malfoy was no exception. "The Potter vote? How is that even possible? Lord Potter is not here. He cannot vote if he cannot be bothered to show up."

As Abraxas Malfoy's anger rose, so did Dumbledore's obvious amusement. "Ah yes, I'm afraid James Potter and his wife are a bit indisposed at the moment." Harry knew that his parents would have been hiding in Godric's Hollow at that time, thinking themselves safe with the Fidelius Charm. "However, before they went into hiding, James filed the forms naming a Proxy."

Suddenly the whispers reached their highest level yet. "A Proxy!" "There hasn't been a Proxy in years..." "Who would James trust enough to hand over his vote to?"

Once again, Dumbledore flicked his wand and one more scroll appeared. This time, it flew straight for Abraxas Malfoy. The man yanked it from the air and scanned it quickly. “James Potter named *you* as his Proxy!?”

The Dumbledore on the podium smiled and nodded. “He did indeed. Which means that I will be voting for the Potter Family Seat until circumstances change.”

With that new information, the votes were recounted, and it was determined that the ayes did indeed have it. Thus, the Unforgiveable Curses were made unforgiveable. Meanwhile, Harry turned to his headmaster. “What did you mean ‘until circumstances change?’”

The Dumbledore who was standing next to Harry looked just as pleased with the proceedings as the one behind the podium. “Well, my boy, when a Lord assigns a Proxy, it means that another member of the Wizengamot is allowed to vote in their stead, in all matters, until the Proxy status is revoked, or a new Lord takes over that seat. Proxys aren’t very common, because you would need to trust a wizard a great deal in order to give them full access to your vote. Once you come of age, Harry, the Potter Family Seat will automatically pass on to you, and I will no longer be the Proxy.”

The scene around them faded to a foggy grey once again, and slowly a new memory began to form. Dumbledore seemed to be enjoying his trip down memory lane. The headmaster probably also took pleasure in ‘shoving it in Malfoy’s pompous face’ more than he would ever admit out loud.

Harry certainly enjoyed watching it. “What happens when I become Lord Potter, sir?”

“Well, that’s up to you, Harry. You can either leave your vote unused, you can sign over your vote to another Wizengamot member like your father did, or you can attend the Wizengamot sessions yourself and participate in the voting process. Although, that last option might not be feasible in the immediate future, what with school and the war and Voldemort.”

“Yeah,” Harry agreed. “That’s not happening any time soon.” He watched as the Wizengamot Chambers came back into focus. Once again, a purple-clad Dumbledore sat on the raised dais. Harry was still bursting with questions. “But sir, if I sign over my vote, would I be able to get it back later? How would that work?”

“It’s *your* vote, Harry. If you don’t like how your Proxy is voting, or if you decide you want to become more involved yourself, you can always reclaim your own vote. It’s a rather simple form, I believe. In fact, as the Potter Heir, if you believed that I was not doing an adequate job acting as a Proxy to the previous Lord, you could petition to have me removed. Although, if that is your intention, I would ask you to please give me fair warning first.”

“I really don’t think that would be necessary. I’m sure you’re doing a fine job.”

Harry’s Dumbledore smiled while the one behind the podium called the meeting to order. “Well, my boy, I’m glad I meet with your approval.” They listened to the opening announcements for the 444th Winter Session in the year 1986. Harry would have been living with the Dursleys.

As Harry looked around the room, he noticed that the three sections of members were not nearly as evenly dispersed as in the other memories. Now, the left side and the middle area had far more members than before, and the right side had less than half as many members as in the other memories. When Harry looked amongst the remaining wizards and witches on the right side of the assembly, he saw several recognizable faces.

Abraxas Malfoy was no longer there, but in his stead of the far more familiar face of a youthful Lucius Malfoy. Harry could also make out Crabbe Sr. and Goyle Sr. Harry had never before seen the man who was whispering in Mr. Malfoy's ear, but he had the same dark hair and pug nose as Pansy Parkinson, so Harry could easily guess which noble house he was representing.

Eventually, things settled down, and the first motion was brought to the floor. This time, it was the Ancient Magic Bill up for a vote. Harry wasn't familiar with that one, so he asked for clarification. "What's this bill about, Professor?"

Dumbledore explained, while his counterpart counted votes. "Well Harry, previously to this bill, there were several types of ancient magic which were available for anyone who wished to practice them, such as Blood Magic and Soul Magic. These types of magic were extremely difficult to perform, but they were also extraordinarily dangerous, and often hurt the caster just as much as any potential targets. This bill labeled these types of magic as 'Dark Arts' and made them illegal without ministry approval."

Harry nodded. That seemed pretty reasonable. He wasn't really sure what 'Blood Magic' was, but it certainly didn't sound pleasant. Once again, the votes came to a tie, but the bill passed because Dumbledore had an extra ace up his sleeve, or rather, an extra vote. Lucius Malfoy looked mutinous, but there wasn't really anything the man could do.

As the memory began to fade, Dumbledore spoke again. "I'm very sorry Harry, if you were left with the impression that I was taking advantage of your family's seat. That was certainly never my intension."

"No, it's my own fault for listening to anything that came out of Draco Malfoy's mouth."

"To be honest, Harry, I may have done you a disservice. I've always viewed the Potter vote as James's vote. I tried to vote the way he would have wanted. When you became Heir, you were just a little baby, and I certainly never considered what your opinion on legislation would be, for obvious reasons. As you got older, I continued casting the Potter vote in a way that James would approve."

The Wizengamot Chamber came into focus one more time, but Dumbledore kept going. "However, in the last year or two, you have blossomed into a fine young man. And you have become far more entrenched in Wizarding politics than your father ever was, whether you wanted to or not. You will be Lord Potter in less than a year now. I should have started consulting you on what *your* opinion would be before now. Or at the very least, explaining to you what votes were being cast in your family's name. I hope you can forgive me."

"There's not really anything to forgive, sir. I would have just taken your word for it, anyway. I don't really know anything about politics."

The Wizengamot was coming to order yet again, but the two visitors ignored them. Dumbledore looked rather troubled by Harry's words. "Yes, I suppose I never really got the opportunity to teach you about any of this. I had always been hoping to mentor you in politics once you were of age, if you were interested. I don't think I'll have the time to do that, now."

"Because we're both so busy with the war?"

"Yes, my boy, exactly. Because of the war." For a moment, Dumbledore looked significantly older than the version up on the dais.

Harry watched as the members voted another bill into law. This one would make it legal for ministry officials to search private homes to weed out Dark Artifacts if they had reasonable cause. Harry remembered Mr. Weasley searching the Malfoy family home during his second year.

This time when the memory faded, Harry found himself falling upwards and landing back in the headmaster's office. "I'm not sure I'll ever get used to that."

Dumbledore landed with practiced ease on the other side of the desk. "Well, I hope that cleared up any confusion regarding the Potter Family Lordship, Harry. Did you have any other questions?"

"I don't know, sir. I feel like I have a thousand questions, but I can't think of any right now. I wish I knew more about this Wizengamot stuff. I feel really unprepared for everything."

Once again, Dumbledore looked as though the weight of the world was on his shoulders. "I wish I could spend more time getting you prepared for your role in politics, my boy. However, I feel these lessons of ours would be far better spent by focusing exclusively on Voldemort." Suddenly, the man's eyes brightened. "You know, Harry, if you'd like, I can arrange for someone to come and tutor you in Wizarding culture and politics. That way, you'll be ready if you ever decide to take up the mantel as Lord Potter or Lord Black on the Wizengamot."

"Lord Black, sir?"

Dumbledore nodded. "Yes, Harry. I'm sure you remember that Sirius named you his heir. You didn't just inherit Grimmauld Place and a frustrated house elf. You inherited a second seat on the Wizengamot."

"So, I have *two* votes?"

"Yes, my boy, and quite an honor that is." Dumbledore began scooping the memories back into their proper vials. "You'll also get access to the Black family vault when you turn seventeen, along with the Potter vault, of course."

"I've already been to the Potter vault. It's pretty neat, I guess."

Dumbledore gave Harry a bemused look as he corked the vials. "You've been to the Potter family vault? How? You shouldn't be able to access that until you become of age."

“Hagrid took me when I was eleven.”

Dumbledore’s eyes seemed to sparkle at that. “No, Harry, Hagrid took you to the trust vault that your parents set up for you.” The man turned to make his way back to the cabinet, but he spoke over his shoulder. “I haven’t seen the Potter family vault myself, but I can assure you, that it is much more spectacular than your trust vault.”

“Seriously? Wait, what all did I inherit?”

Dumbledore was setting each vial back in its proper place. “I’m not entirely sure, myself. You know what you should do, Harry? You should go to Gringotts Bank some time before you turn seventeen, and have them do a Blood Inheritance Test.”

Harry was getting overwhelmed. This was a lot of information for one night. “A Blood Inheritance Test?”

“Yes, that will tell you about any Lordships you stand to inherit and any Noble Houses you might be second or third in line for. It will have all the information on both of your Wizengamot seats, and of course, any vaults and fortunes that will be yours.”

Harry had thought the money in his trust vault was a small fortune. He couldn’t imagine what treasures lay in wait in the Potter and Black vaults. “That sounds pretty amazing, Professor.”

“It’s always nice to receive good news in troubled times.” Dumbledore came back and sat in his usual seat behind the desk. “So, shall I arrange for you to start private tutoring in Wizarding politics? Please keep in mind, as you decide, that these Wizengamot lessons should be less of a priority than the private lessons you have with me, and of course, your schoolwork.”

Harry did keep that in mind. He was already swamped after just the first week of classes, and he would have quidditch soon, as well. He really didn’t need any more obligations weighing down on him. He was about to turn down Dumbledore’s offer, when he remembered how offended Malfoy had been at Harry’s lack of decorum on the Hogwarts Express all those years ago. How it had made him an enemy for life, or at least for the next five years. Perhaps he needed lessons after all? Besides, wasn’t he always complaining that no one ever taught him about perfectly normal aspects of Wizarding life? Wasn’t this his chance to finally not be so incredibly ignorant? And didn’t he always wish that he had more control over his own life; more responsibility in the decision-making process? Dumbledore was finally giving him a chance to make that decision.

“I would like to get those lessons, sir. Please make the arrangements if it’s not too much trouble.”

Dumbledore looked down his crooked nose at Harry and smiled like a proud parent. His blue eyes were twinkling like diamonds behind his half-moon spectacles. “Of course, my boy. It’s no trouble at all.” Before he said anything else, the headmaster grabbed the last silvery vial, the one which had been sitting on the desk since Harry had first arrived, and he poured the contents into the pensieve. “Now, Harry, let us return to the matter at hand. This is the

memory of Bob Ogden, a ministry official called out to settle a dispute at the house of the Gaunt family.”

“Who’s the Gaunt family, sir?”

Dumbledore winked. “You are about to find out.”

A Room Full of Secrets

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

That evening, Harry curled up in bed and thought about everything he had learned. Harry's father had given Dumbledore his Proxy vote, and Dumbledore had used it without consulting Harry's opinion. Of course, that was all perfectly reasonable. It wasn't as though Albus Dumbledore was going to seek the political advice of a small child. It seemed as though Dumbledore had done quite a bit of good with the Potter family vote, so Harry certainly wasn't going to complain.

In fact, Harry might just hand over the Proxy vote to Dumbledore again when he turned seventeen. It wasn't as though he had time for any of that stuff. However, he'd wait to decide on that until he had a few lessons with his new Wizarding Politics tutor. He was really looking forward to finally having someone teach him all the nuances of the Wizarding World that seemed second nature to people like Ron, who had grown up a part of it.

However, Harry was even more curious about where his lessons with Dumbledore were headed. He didn't feel like he had learned very much about Voldemort during their lesson, except that insanity clearly ran in his family.

He also doubted he'd ever felt sorrier for any human being than he felt for Merope Gaunt. Voldemort's mother had clearly drawn the short stick of life. He wondered what Voldemort had inherited from his mother, if anything. Tom Riddle had ended up with his uncle's bloodlust, his grandfather's prejudice, his father's handsome looks, but what had Merope given her son? Harry pondered this mystery as he slowly drifted off to sleep.

When Harry opened his eyes again, he was in a large room that he had visited many times in his nightmares. The dark, cavernous space seemed to glow with an eerie green light, and a quiet drip, drip could be heard in the distance. It was the Chamber of Secrets, and standing before him was the same young man whom Harry had met the one time he had found himself here in real life, Tom Riddle.

Much like Harry, young Tom Riddle was the spitting image of his father. Now that Harry had actually seen both of Riddle's parents, the resemblance was uncanny. He could not make out any of Merope's unfortunate face in Riddle's handsome visage.

The young man before him looked almost identical to the memory Harry had encountered in his second year. He had the same dark hair, styled in a perfect curl. The uniform matched the Slytherin robes that the other young man had worn. He even had the same Prefect badge, proudly displayed over his chest. The only difference was his eyes. The memory of Tom Riddle had had dark eyes, difficult to make out the exact color in the dim light of the Chamber. Harry had no trouble at all making out the color of the eyes before him now. They were red. Red as fresh blood, with a narrow slit instead of a human pupil. Voldemort's eyes.

Those formidable eyes looked quite jarring on an otherwise perfect face. Was Harry dreaming about Tom Riddle, because of the memory he'd just witnessed, and simply given him Voldemort's eyes? Or was he dreaming about Voldemort, but in the form of Tom Riddle? Or was this some amalgam of both?

Harry's question seemed to be answered for him when the young man spoke in Riddle's smooth baritone voice. "Hello Harry. Lovely to see you again, and in such a familiar setting, too." He sounded just as charming and unthreatening as he had the last time Harry had seen him, that is, until he was calling the Basilisk.

"What do you want? Was is this? Are you another memory?"

Riddle smirked. It was a smirk Harry had seen many times in his worst dreams. "Well, aren't you in an interrogating mood? This is just another dream, Harry, obviously. You are dreaming. I suppose you could say I was a memory...Perhaps a memory of a dream...or the dream of a memory. Either way, what I want is to ask you a few innocuous questions."

"You can ask whatever questions you like, but I'm not answering anything. There's nothing innocuous about you." Harry turned and started looking around the room. Maybe he could find an exit of some kind. Or maybe he should just keep Riddle talking so he doesn't call the basilisk? That's what he had done last time to try and buy time. Yes, that was the trick, keep talking and maybe help would come.

Lord Voldemort clasped his hands behind his back and casually glided in a slow circle around his prey. He was a little surprised that the boy's outburst didn't frustrate him more. As it had been for weeks, his thoughts and actions all seemed much calmer and more collected now that he was in the world of the dream. He wasn't sure if he was simply more at peace in his dreams, or if it had to do with his proximity to the soul fragment in the boy's mind. Either way, when the boy spat that he wouldn't be answering any questions, he simply smirked with the full confidence that he would get what he wanted before the end of this encounter, regardless of what Harry Potter seemed to think.

His words came out as smooth as acromantula silk. "Tell me, Harry, what happened the last time you were in these Chambers? What happened to the diary?"

The boy looked confused by the question. "Why would you ask that? Don't you already know?"

Again, Lord Voldemort found his temper surprisingly tamed. He didn't even feel the need to Crucio the boy for daring to question him. "The only part of me that would know what happened down in that chamber, died down there. Now, what happened exactly?"

Harry Potter glared, his eyes bursting with defiance. "I defeated the Heir of Slytherin and his monster with a song bird and an old hat."

The smirk widened on Lord Voldemort's, now quite youthful, face. He had the little Gryffindor now. Severus constantly bemoaned how arrogant and boastful the boy was. If the Dark Lord

were to simply pass him a few compliments, Harry Potter would surely be happy to regale his enemy with the story of what the boy probably considered a triumphant defeat. “Really, Harry? That sounds extraordinarily impressive. Why don’t you tell me how you accomplished such an astounding feat?”

The boy did not react at all as he had assumed. The defiant glare immediately vanished from his eye, and he looked, if anything, embarrassed. “It wasn’t really much of an astounding feat. I just sort of did what anyone would do. I don’t really want to talk about it, actually.”

Was the boy trying to be modest? Was he hoping to garner even further praise by showing humility? This didn’t exactly match the picture of Harry Potter that Severus had painted. Lord Voldemort pressed further. “You defeated an ancient and mighty creature whose scales should have been nigh impervious to magic. I am fascinated to hear what spells you might have cast that could incapacitate a basilisk.” Surely that would stroke his ego.

It did not. If anything, the boy looked even more miserable. “I really didn’t do anything. I didn’t even cast any magic. I dropped my wand when I found Ginny, and you took it – I mean, Riddle took it. So, I wouldn’t have been able to cast any spells, even if I had had any idea what to do.”

Suddenly, Lord Voldemort dropped his façade of false-flattery. He was genuinely shocked. “You defeated the basilisk...without a wand? What did you do!?”

To his surprise, the boy actually began to answer the question. However, Harry Potter certainly wasn’t trying to boast about some glorious victory. If anything, he sounded like he was trying to clear up some regrettable misconception.

The Dark Lord was having trouble merging the idea of the Chosen One Harry Potter that he had in his head, and the awkward young man who was stammering through his story as if he were embarrassed to admit it. Severus had always described the boy as conceited and over-confident, and Lord Voldemort had never had any trouble believing those claims. The boy was always so quick to run into danger and never seemed to cower before him like so many others.

The boy who now stood in the center of the chamber, did not seem over-confident at all. Many wizards had shivered in fear before Lord Voldemort, but that was not what Harry Potter was doing now. In fact, the boy seemed rather unconcerned about the Dark Lord at the moment, if anything he seemed quite flustered by the situation itself. It was as if he were being asked to explain some embarrassing misunderstanding.

On and on the boy rambled about the bird pecking out the basilisk’s eyes, and him running in fear, and him begging the hat for help, and then facing down the 60 foot snake with nothing but an antique sword. Throughout the entire explanation, Harry Potter sounded as if he were trying to clear the air. According to the boy, he wasn’t really a hero, he had simply done what anyone would do in similar circumstances.

Eventually, Harry Potter arrived at a place in the story where he waited until the basilisk opened its jaws to swallow him, and then lunged forward into the snake’s mouth, stabbing it in the gummy flesh, while the basilisk simultaneously bit down on him. Lord Voldemort

started to wonder if the boy was delusional, or if he simply had that much unfounded faith in humanity, that he actually believed 'anyone' would do the same.

The boy spoke as if anyone who thought of him as a hero must clearly be confusing him with someone else, and this was all a terrible mix-up, and he was incredibly sorry of any inconvenience. It was as if Harry Potter believed that he ought to have performed more admirably against a one-thousand-year-old, 60 foot basilisk when he was an unarmed 12-year-old.

"So, anyway, then I had the tooth stuck in my arm, and it hurt like hell, and you were laughing that I was going to die. I didn't really know what to do, but I knew I wanted to shut you up. So, I took the fang out and stabbed the diary with it. You were pretty pissed for about five seconds until you seemed to crumple up and vanish. That's it, I think. Oh, and Fawkes cried on my arm to heal it. He's the real hero, if you ask me. I just stabbed the snake. There wasn't really a lot else I could have done in the situation."

Lord Voldemort waited a moment, but it seemed the boy was finally finished speaking. "I can think of one or two things that the 'average' person may have done, that may differ from what you did." The Dark Lord stared down at the other young man, who now looked about the same age as himself. Harry Potter just shrugged and didn't really offer any other comment. He seemed a little relieved, as if he had gotten a weight off his chest; admitting some terrible secret.

Who was this young man? He was not anything like the boy that the Daily Prophet had written about almost endlessly during the Triwizard Tournament. Of course, Lord Voldemort would know firsthand how inaccurate their reporting tended to be. However, the boy was also not acting the way Severus and Lucius had described him. It seemed that the idea of a spoiled and overly-pampered Golden Boy did not line up with the reality he was being faced with.

However, there was an even more startling truth that this story had brought to light. Lord Voldemort was having trouble coming to terms with the fact that two of his horcruxes had faced off against each other and one had destroyed the other. He had certainly never seen that as a possible consequence of making so many. Besides, if two of his horcruxes had come to a head, wouldn't it make more sense that the older horcrux would win, the one with the larger fragment of his soul? How had Harry Potter come out victorious when he only contained a tiny fraction of Lord Voldemort's soul?

Perhaps there was more to the boy's uncanny luck than just the soul piece trying to keep itself alive. Lord Voldemort had been beside himself when he realized what the boy was, but now that he heard what had happened to another horcrux who tried to destroy the boy, perhaps having a human horcrux, capable of strategizing and casting his own magic, would be incredibly useful. It would make it that much more difficult for his enemies to destroy that fragment of soul.

However, it would still be easy for Dumbledore, who had almost unlimited access to the boy while he was at school. The Dark Lord needed to get Harry Potter away from Hogwarts and somewhere that he could keep a close eye on him. He needed to check on the Malfoy boy's progress.

Draco Malfoy clutched his left forearm in shock when he felt the mark burn. He had not even had a chance to go down to breakfast yet. He hadn't expected to be called so early into the term, or so early in the morning. The young man was even more nervous when he apparated to the entryway of his family's manor, only to discover that the Dark Mark was not guiding him to a location within the manor itself, but to the surrounding grounds. When he felt the skull symbol nudging him toward the quidditch pitch, his mood could not have been bleaker.

Not this again.

The Dark Lord was presiding in the covered area, in a self-summoned throne, with his man-eating snake nearby. No one else was around. It would just be the young Malfoy Heir and the Dark Lord.

"My Lord." Draco fell to one knee in a deferential bow and waited for the other man to acknowledge his arrival.

"Draco, how good of you to join us for breakfast. Rise."

Draco did as he was told, but snuck a few surreptitious glances around. He couldn't see any food, nor had he ever eaten any meal with the Dark Lord. Did the Dark Lord eat breakfast? Did the Dark Lord eat period? "I would be honored to join you for any meal, my Lord."

The Dark Lord's face twisted into a cruel smirk. "Indeed? And yet, you have not yet asked what is on the menu."

Draco swallowed but maintained his perfect composure. "Of course, my Lord. What will we be having?"

The man in the hooded black cloak simply cackled at the presumptuous question. "You misunderstand, Draco. It is not you and I who will be eating." He raised his bone white wand and pointed it toward the center of the quidditch pitch. Draco turned in time to see two young women jerk up and scream, as if they had been awoken with a sharp pain.

They were dressed as muggles, with heavy boots and cropped blue jeans. They must have been camping in the forest around the grounds when Greyback's pack had sniffed them out. So, this was happening again.

"Hello?"

"Where are we?"

"Who's there?"

"Please let us go. We won't tell anyone."

The Dark Lord silenced them with another sweep of his wand. The two girls already looked a little worse for wear. Draco wondered what the werewolves had done with them before bringing them to the Dark Lord to finish off, but then quickly squashed that line of thought.

The Malfoy Heir focused his attention on his master. He didn't want to look at the girls. They didn't look that much older than himself.

"I must congratulate your family, Draco, on the ideal location of their manor. Ever since I removed the muggle-repellant charms, the forest around your grounds has been providing my precious Nagini with a very impressive variety of meals."

Draco bowed his head. "Thank you, my Lord."

The Dark Lord whispered a command in the mysterious tongue that only he and his snake could understand, and the beast was off, slowly but purposefully. The Dark Lord smiled fondly at his pet, while giving Draco only the smallest fraction of his attention. "How is your mission going, Draco? Have you befriended Harry Potter yet?"

"Not quite befriended, my Lord. But I am making progress toward that end. I have gotten him to agree to a truce. We are no longer enemies, at least."

The girls on the pitch seemed to have noticed the giant snake slithering toward them and were slowly backing away. "Look, Draco. One of the muggles has a pronounced limp, while the other is much more mobile. I wonder if it will abandon its friend when my snake starts to attack? I wonder if it will try to help the other or try to save itself." Draco knew what *he* would do, and he was pretty sure the muggle would choose the same thing.

Sure enough, when the snake coiled back in preparation for its first strike, the girl with the limp stumbled to the left, while her 'friend' took off at a desperate pace toward the right. Draco wondered absently if the snake even had enough room in its belly for two people. Sure, the young women weren't that big, but they were still adult humans.

Lord Voldemort seemed quite amused with the proceedings. "As expected, the muggle happily betrays its friend for its own means." Draco tried not to watch the snake turn its attention to the slower girl, while the Dark Lord turned his attention to Draco. "So, you and Harry Potter have a truce? You are no longer enemies? That is not what I asked you to do, Draco. I asked you to befriend him. You have several more steps to go, it seems."

Draco nodded apologetically. "Yes, my Lord. I am working on it. We are becoming more familiar, my Lord. I...he...he told me about his childhood."

The slower girl let out a silent scream when the snake easily caught up. Draco really didn't want to watch her, as the snake struck her with bite after venomous bite. He turned his attention instead to her friend, but the heartbreaking expression on the other girl's face was possibly worse. The Dark Lord chuckled as if he found this to be the height of entertainment. "What did the boy say about his childhood?"

Draco almost startled, and his attention was suddenly diverted back to the matter at hand. "My Lord, he told me that the muggles who raised him never told him anything about his powers, his parents, or even about you, my Lord."

"What?" Suddenly, Draco seemed to have all of his master's attention. Not that the snake was particularly entertaining at the moment. It was taking its time engulfing the muggle. "Tell me

everything.”

Draco did. He tried to think of every single thing Potter had told him, which hadn’t been all that much. Potter had needed to repeat the same points over and over, since Draco simply could not comprehend the fact that Harry Potter, of all people, had never had any idea he was famous, or special, or the Boy Who Lived, or even a wizard. Draco had spent his entire childhood hearing stories about Harry Potter. If he was honest with himself, it was part of the reason he was so resentful when he had finally met him. The fact that Potter hadn’t known about any of it, just didn’t sit right with him.

“Then, my Lord, he said that he was told that he got his scar in the car crash that killed his parents. That was all, I believe.”

“Car crash!?” The Dark Lord did not seem happy with this development. Draco wasn’t sure if the dark wizard was upset because his handiwork was being blamed on a common muggle accident or because the boy he was devoted to destroying didn’t even know about him until recently, but he doubted that either realization was improving the man’s mood.

Suddenly, the Dark Lord flicked his wand, and Draco wasn’t proud of the fact that he flinched. Fortunately, the man’s spell went away from the Malfoy Heir and over toward the grassy pitch. A purple flash hit the enlarged snake, whose stomach suddenly shrunk as the contents were vanished. Another command was given, as the Dark Lord pointed toward the other young woman. Apparently, the first prey had been too easy for the dark wizard’s liking. The snake happily began its next pursuit.

The Dark Lord didn’t seem to be paying attention to the snake or Draco and he spoke. “Dumbledore is behind this. The man would want complete control. I should have suspected something like this. He cannot be trusted around my belongings.” Suddenly, he turned to the young Slytherin. “Draco?”

Draco had to force his eyes away from the snake stalking its new prey. He honestly didn’t want to watch it, but it was so hard not to. “My Lord?”

“I have another very important task for you. I need you to fetch something for me. Something of immeasurable value. Something that you will go to retrieve *immediately*, and return to me *immediately*. Do you understand?”

“Yes, my Lord. It would be an honor.” He kept his attention on his master and tried to ignore the panting and terrified young woman in his peripheral sight.

“Inside Hogwarts, there is a secret room. It only reveals itself to those who are truly worthy. I am not sure if even you will be able to access it, but hopefully if you go under my orders, it will allow you entry. It is one of Hogwarts’ best kept secrets.” Draco was practically salivating in anticipation. This truly did sound like an honor. A secret room that absolutely no one else had heard of? Was it the Chamber of Secrets?

“The room is located on the seventh floor, across the hall from a tapestry of Barnabas the Barmy.” For a moment Draco’s excitement faded into disappointment. It wasn’t the Chamber of Secrets. It was just the Room of Requirement. He already knew about that. However, then

he realized that he, Draco, was already in on what was clearly an important secret. The Dark Lord would be proud that he already knew it.

“Are you familiar with the tapestry, Draco?”

Draco practically preened. “My Lord, I am familiar with both the tapestry and the room. It is called the Room of Requirement, I believe, or the Come and Go Room.”

It happened without warning. Suddenly Draco was on the floor, screaming in pain, with the Dark Lord’s pale wand pointed on him. “What do you mean you know the room!? How do you know that room? Who else knows of the room?”

Draco couldn’t answer. He was too busy screaming. His whole world was reduced to just himself and the pain he felt. Nothing else registered or mattered. His skin was surely melting away. His bones were on fire. His veins pumped molten lead. His muscles were all being stabbed by dull knives. How could anything be this painful and not kill him? And then it ended.

Draco lay gasping and sputtering on the ground, his clothes and hair completely disheveled. His muscles were still throbbing, and his throat was raw. How long had it been? It had felt like an eternity.

“Stand, Draco. That was hardly a punishment. That was barely ten seconds.” Ten seconds? That couldn’t be right, could it? Of course, Draco had only felt the cruciatus curse once before. His Aunt Bellatrix had insisted he ‘toughen up.’ He hadn’t handled it well then, either. Neither had his mother when she found out.

He tried to get back onto his feet but was shaking too badly. He managed to push himself up onto his knees at least. “I told you to stand, Draco. Will you disobey a direct order?”

Draco wasn’t sure how he could possibly comply. He tried with every last ounce of energy he had to force his legs to hold his weight. It was not elegant. He looked like death warmed over, but at least he was on his feet.

“Now, tell me Draco, where did you hear of that room?”

“Potter.” His voice was so dry from the screams, it hurt to speak.

“Harry Potter? What do you mean? Harry Potter told you about the secret room?”

“Potter was teaching defensive magic to a bunch of students last year. They used that room.”

The Dark Lord scowled. “Do you mean Dumbledore’s Army? I thought Dumbledore was teaching defensive magic? That is why he was fired, was it not?” Suddenly the red eyes seemed to glow. “Does Dumbledore know of that room!?!?”

Draco took a deep breath. He was sure this would end with him back on the ground. “Potter was the one teaching. He was running Dumbledore’s Army. Dumbledore didn’t even know it was happening until they were all caught. I overheard the Ravenclaw Prefects talking about it; Anthony Goldstein and Padme Patil. They were in it. Potter found the room. I don’t know

how. He taught them defensive spells and advanced Light Magic like the Patronus Charm. They all know about the room now, and I'm sure they told others. Dumbledore has known since the club was discovered."

Draco was right. He did end up back on the ground, screaming in agony. Apparently, the Dark Lord did not subscribe to the philosophy: don't shoot the messenger. When the pain finally receded, his violent spasms continued for almost a minute. He wondered if his muscles would ever feel the same again.

When he looked up again, the Dark Lord was peering down at him with a disgusted expression, and his snake was at his side, looking very full and satisfied. Apparently, Draco had missed it catching the second girl. He had been a bit preoccupied.

"Listen to me, Draco. I am going to give you very specific instructions as to where this item is located and exactly what it looks like. You are going to go and fetch it. If you fail in this task for any reason, or if the item in question is no longer there, you will join me for breakfast again tomorrow, and you will play a much more active role in the proceedings."

Harry frowned when he felt the warm sun on his face, peeking through the crack in the curtains of his four poster. He squinted as the light fell into his eyes, and tried to turn over onto his other side. But it was too late. He was already awake now. He pulled the curtain aside just enough to grab his glasses and wand from the bedside table and then cast a quick Tempus charm. It was much later than he thought. He had already missed breakfast.

Harry wondered what had caused him to sleep in so much later than usual. He rarely slept in much, even on a Sunday, like today. He wondered why Ron never woke him up. A soft rumble from the bed beside him answered that question quickly enough. Harry yanked his curtains all the way open to see his best friend sound asleep in the crimson red bed next to his.

It shouldn't have surprised him that Ron was still out. Harry was almost always the one to wake his friend on the weekends, usually with the promise of food. Hermione had probably given up on waiting for them and gone about her day. Harry had no doubt he would find her in the library. However, he really didn't want to deal with either of his friends just yet.

His mind was still on the dream from the night before, the dream with Tom Riddle. Why did he keep dreaming about Voldemort? Sure, this one had been his younger self, but it had felt similar to the other dreams. Was he communicating with Voldemort? Did he need to start practicing occlumency again? Were they just regular nightmares? Why wasn't his scar hurting at all? Last year, it would flare up almost daily.

Harry really wanted to find answers, and he was half inclined to go to the library just to look up information on dreams. Unfortunately, he doubted he'd be able to find what he wanted without Hermione's help, and he really didn't want to ask her. She'd just tell him he needed to go to Dumbledore and tell the headmaster about the dreams, but Harry didn't want to waste anyone's time if he was just having weird nightmares. These dreams really didn't feel like the ones he had had the last two years.

If only there was a way he could just ask the library itself to give him all the books it had on dreams, or mental connections, or anything like that. Too bad it didn't work that way. Harry remembered how convenient the DA headquarters had been, simply filling itself with shelf upon shelf of different defensive magic.

Suddenly, a thought occurred to him. What if he went to the Room of Requirement instead of the library? Then, he could 'request' the room to fill itself with the specific books he needed. That would save a lot of time, without needing to resort to admitting to Hermione exactly why he was looking into this area of research. If he found anything at all to be concerned about, he could always go to his friends or the headmaster with the information he'd found. Surely, they couldn't scold him too badly for taking the initiative of looking into the matter on his own.

Harry flopped out of bed, showered as quickly possible, and practically ran to the seventh floor corridor. It wasn't far from Gryffindor Tower, and before he knew it, he was pacing three times in front of a blank stretch of wall he was very familiar with. When the door appeared, Harry wasn't entirely sure what he would find on the other side. As he walked inside and saw what the room had become, his jaw dropped.

It was enormous. Larger than he had ever seen the room before. Yet, there was barely room to walk. Stacked as far as the eye could see were...things. There was junk everywhere. The entire room seemed to consist of towering stacks of anything and everything a person could possibly imagine, with a few narrow pathways in between, barely wide enough for one person to slip between the detritus. How was this helpful? Where would he even begin to look for what he needed?

Harry crept into the cavernous space as if in a trance. There were trunks full of Merlin-knew-what. There were countless shelves of books, old junk, and magical objects. He passed a coat rack which held a frayed and half-visible invisibility cloak that looked rather the worse for wear. Nothing like his cloak.

He passed a table which held a silver tea set. One of the cups kept trying to chase the sugar dish around the tarnished tray, but the empty sugar dish kept dodging behind the tea pot, having already spent all of its contents.

He passed an old suit of armor which was missing an entire leg, and was only able to stand by desperately gripping onto its halberd with both gauntlets. There seemed to be no end to the strange, misplaced things Harry passed.

Again, Harry wondered why the Room would bring him here. How was he supposed to find the books he needed? Just as that thought occurred to him, he turned a corner, and there they were. There were three shelves full of books with titles like: 'Dream Interpretation: Seeing Into the Beyond,' 'The Theory of Mind Magic,' and 'Entering the Mind of Others Through Dreams.' This was exactly what he needed.

Some of the titles sounded very sketchy, even bordering on Dark Arts. There was one called 'Gaining Power Over Others by Influencing Their Dreams.' That certainly didn't sound good. Perhaps that was why the Room of Requirement had brought him here. The entire

space seemed filled with dodgy objects of a more questionable nature. Maybe this was where the Room kept its dark secrets.

Harry had already filled his bag with four books, when he heard a familiar voice around a corner. “This is ridiculous! How am I supposed to find anything in all this mess?”

Harry’s ears perked up. That was Draco Malfoy’s voice. What was Malfoy looking for? Surely it was something dark and dangerous. Harry wished he had his cloak, so he could stalk after the Slytherin unseen, but perhaps if Harry followed along at a distance, he wouldn’t be noticed.

Snatching up his bag, Harry tried to sprint as quietly as possible in the direction of the voice, only to run right into the speaker in question. “Oomph!” The air was knocked out of him, as Harry barely managed to stay on his feet. Malfoy wasn’t quite as lucky. The blonde crashed backward into a pile of moldy rubber boots. So much for going unnoticed.

“Potter!” Malfoy looked absolutely terrified to see his old rival. It reminded Harry of Draco’s shocked and confused manner when they ran into each other at Madam Malkin’s. What was Malfoy up to this time? What did he not want Harry to find? “What in Salazar’s name are you doing here?”

“I could ask you the same question.”

Malfoy looked so pale and small. “I’m...not doing anything. I simply...got lost.”

“Of course you did. Well, if that’s the case, then I’m sure you don’t mind leaving.”

“I can’t leave, I need to...” Malfoy looked so torn, like he was trapped between two insurmountable obstacles. “Why are you here, anyway? Why don’t *you* just leave?”

“I’m not leaving, I need to find something.”

Harry was shocked to see that Malfoy’s skin could get whiter. “You’re looking for something? Here? What...what are you looking for?”

“None of your bloody business.” Harry clutched his bag tightly. He didn’t even want Ron and Hermione to know he was looking into these strange dreams. He definitely wasn’t going to tell Malfoy about it.

Malfoy seemed to notice that Harry had glanced surreptitiously at the book shelf. When Malfoy’s eyes landed on the books, they instantly filled with relief. Whatever Malfoy was trying to hide from Harry, it wasn’t a book. When the grey eyes scanned the titles, a smirk appeared on his thin lips. “Mind Magic? Controlling dreams? Gaining mental influence over others? What are you up to, Potter?”

“Again, none of your bloody business.”

Malfoy strode forward, now much more confident that he had a better idea of why Harry was there, and he grabbed a text from one of the shelves. “I’m impressed Potter. I never would have guessed you’d show any interest in Mind Magic. It’s considered Dark, you know.”

“I didn’t know that, but it doesn’t matter. I’m not interested. I was just...curious.”

Malfoy set the book back on the shelf and grabbed another one. “Indeed? Well, I’d recommend this one.” He handed Harry a book titled ‘How the Mind Influences Magic and How Magic Influences the Mind.’

Harry gave the other boy a skeptical look and made no move to grab the book. “You don’t even know what I’m curious about. How would you have any idea what to recommend?”

Malfoy just shrugged. “It’s a useful book. If this is a topic you’re actually *curious* about, I’d recommend reading this one.” Harry hesitated for one more moment, before snatching the book from Malfoy’s grasp. If it really was a useful book, it couldn’t hurt, could it?

“Thanks,” he grumbled more out of habit than actual gratitude.

“How about we make a deal, Potter?” Harry’s mind went on high alert, ready for a trap. “I won’t tell anyone I saw you here, looking into...questionable content, and you don’t tell anyone you saw me here. Deal?”

“No way.” Harry shook his head in earnest. “How do I know you won’t break that deal and tell all your little friends behind my back?”

“Because if word got around to you that I had done that, you’d be able to tell everyone that you saw me here.”

“So what? Who cares? What are you doing here anyway?”

Malfoy had been looking much more like himself, but at the question, his nervousness started to peak through again. “The same thing as you. I’m looking for something.”

“Yeah, obviously. What are you looking for?”

“As you so eloquently put it, Potter, none of your bloody business.”

Harry narrowed his eyes. “Alright, Malfoy, I *will* make a deal with you. You saw what I was looking for, so now you’ve got dirt on me. You show me what you’re looking for, and we’ll both swear not reveal the other person’s secret. Otherwise, I’ll do everything in my power to figure out what the hell you were up to, and I’ll tell everyone anyway.” Harry wasn’t sure if he wanted to keep Malfoy’s secret, even if he did discover what the blonde was hiding, but he was really curious now. Did it have to do with the mysterious object he purchased at Borgin and Burkes?

Malfoy looked like he really didn’t want to take that deal, but he clearly didn’t have much of a choice. “Fine. I’m not telling you anything, but I suppose you can come with me while I look for it. Will that suffice?”

Harry nodded. “Yeah, ok.”

The two young men made their way silently through the stacks upon stacks of discarded objects. Harry was a little surprised that Malfoy was having so much difficulty finding

whatever it was he wanted. Harry merely had to think about what he wanted to find, and it had conveniently been right around the corner. Perhaps the item was charmed so that it wasn't so easily found.

The longer they walked without any sign of what Malfoy was looking for, the more nervous the little ferret seemed to become. Harry was quickly losing patience. "Are you sure that whatever you're looking for is even here?"

Malfoy looked startled at the very implication. "It has to be here. It just...it *has* to be." There was something almost desperate in Malfoy's tone that didn't sit well with Harry.

This was getting unnerving. To try to relieve some of the tension, Harry tried to change the subject. "So, how was detention without me?"

Malfoy looked a little relieved by the distraction. "It was postponed. Professor Snape said: 'Potter has decided that he has better things to do with his time than mere punishment, so he will not be able to attend his own detention this weekend. Despite Potter's best efforts to waste my time, I will not be spending two Saturday evenings watching over unruly children. You will sit your detention next week, when Potter's schedule frees up enough to allow for one evening of discipline.'" Malfoy shrugged. "Or, I don't know, it was something like that."

Harry snorted. Malfoy could do a hilariously accurate impersonation of the cranky dungeon bat. "That does sound like something he'd say."

Malfoy gave him a quizzical look. "What were you doing that got you out of a detention with Snape?"

Harry carefully considered how to answer that. They passed pile after pile of broken, dangerous, or hexed objects. There was a wizard chess set which was ganging up on its own king. There was a pile of broken and worn out wands. There was an eerie-looking doll that seemed to watch them as they passed by.

Finally, Harry settle on the truth, since he couldn't think of anything else. "I was with Dumbledore." He wasn't really supposed to tell anyone about his private lessons, so he just left it at that.

"Did you tell him to keep his crooked nose out of your business and stay the hell away from your vote?"

"Not really. More like...the exact opposite of that."

Malfoy scowled. "You know he stole your vote, right? He's been using it to pass all sorts of ridiculous legislation for years."

Harry rolled his eyes. "He didn't steal anything. My father made him a Proxy."

"Yes, but you're the Heir now. You could fight to oust him. I could even give you the exact forms you'd need to fill out."

“Don’t bother, Malfoy. I’ve seen some of the ‘ridiculous legislation’ Dumbledore’s been pushing through. I think he’s doing a great job as Proxy.”

The blonde simply scowled. “You would.”

They walked on, deeper into the expanse of hidden wonders. They passed a vase with a shriveled plant that smelled like rotten eggs. They passed a crystal ball that was entirely blacked out, with the occasional flash of what looked like lightning. They passed an overstuffed armchair that looked as though it might literally swallow up any person who tried to sit in it.

The longer they walked in silence, the more desperate Malfoy seemed to become that they might not find whatever it was he was looking for. Harry tried to lighten the mood again. “You know, Malfoy. I think I might owe you an apology, as well.”

Malfoy gave him a suspicious look. “What for? What did you do now?”

Harry tried not to let Malfoy’s suspicion get to him. “That’s not what I meant. Look, I just realized that you may have had a point.” Malfoy looked like he was about to interrupt, so Harry plowed on through. “When we met on the train. You thought I was being prejudiced against you because you were from a ‘Dark Family’ or whatever. I wasn’t, but now I guess I can see why you would think that. I guess I may have insulted you without realizing it. So, sorry for that, I suppose.”

Malfoy gave a stiff nod. “It was my own fault. I knew you were raised by muggles, so I should have just assumed that you wouldn’t have any manners at all. I should have been more understanding. I’m sorry.”

Harry gaped at the slimy Slytherin git. Of course Malfoy would insult someone while simultaneously trying to apologize to them. “Whatever.”

They rounded another corner, striding past more and more accumulated junk. Malfoy’s mood seemed to have lightened significantly. Apparently, Harry had thoroughly distracted him from the task at hand. “So, we’re even, then?”

Harry came to an abrupt halt. “What? No! You think that makes us even? Yes, I was a bit short with you when we met, but then you spent five bloody years making my life shite. We’re not even, not by a long shot.”

Malfoy’s mood instantly soured. “Well, I don’t know what you want me to do about that.”

“I don’t want you to do anything! Let’s just get your stupid whatever and leave and never talk to each other again. Sound good?”

The other boy didn’t answer. He simply stormed forward with even more determination to find his hidden treasure. Harry had to jog to catch up with him. As Harry rounded another corner, he almost ran into the blonde for the second time within an hour. Malfoy had skidded to a halt, his eyes on a large bureau about ten feet ahead of them.

“Oh Merlin! Oh, thank Salazar it’s still there!” Malfoy seemed to have completely forgotten Harry’s presence. He sounded so relieved, as if he had just been reprieved from the gallows. Harry followed Malfoy’s line of sight to try and figure out what would bring the other boy so much joy.

There, on top of the chest of drawers, in between an antique tiara and a large, burgundy hatbox, sat the ugliest bust Harry had ever seen. It didn’t look particularly remarkable, just a marble bust of some old wizard with a big nose and squinty eyes. “You made all that fuss over some stupid bust? What’s so special about that thing?”

Malfoy seemed to jump out of his skin, as if he had only just remembered Harry was next to him. “What? Oh, the bust. Yes, it’s a very important bust. You’d better not tell anyone I was looking for it.”

Harry was bemused. “I don’t get it. Why were you so worried about some bust of some old wizard? Who is he anyway?”

Malfoy strode forward and slowly lifted the bust, careful not to disturb the items next to it. He seemed deep in thought for a moment. “He’s...a relative of mine.”

“Oh yeah, I can see the resemblance.”

“Sod off.” Malfoy didn’t seem too annoyed, though. He just looked so relieved to have found what he was looking for. Not that it had been much of an insult anyway. The old man didn’t share a single feature of Malfoy’s aristocratic face. If they were related, it must have been very distant.

While Malfoy inspected his long lost relative, Harry looked around at the other objects in the little clearing. There was a pile of manacles that looked like they were just waiting for someone to ensnare. There was a frame with a painting that was slashed up. Clearly, whoever had previously sat in the portrait had long since run off. There was a large cabinet that stood slightly ajar. Harry thought he felt a breeze coming from within, but when he opened the door to check, there was nothing inside.

“I wouldn’t mess with that if I were you. That thing’s broken.” Harry turned back toward Malfoy who had already stowed his new bust in his backpack and was slinging it over his shoulder. Harry never noticed that the bureau was missing more than one item.

“Great. Well, a deal’s a deal. I won’t tell anyone about your ugly old relative; you don’t tell anyone about my extracurricular reading. Good bye, Malfoy.” Harry turned to put as much distance between himself and the blonde as possible.

Before he could make it three steps, however, Malfoy leapt beside him. “Wait. I still want to make it up to you.”

“Make what up to me?”

Malfoy sighed. “My poor treatment of you. You’re right, I acted quite rudely toward you. Let me make it up to you.” Harry wasn’t sure he liked where this was going. He tried to walk as

quickly as he could in the direction they came, but Malfoy easily kept pace. “If you’re interested in books on dark or ancient magic, there are some pretty amazing spells I could teach you. Things that could really wipe the floor with your opponent.”

Harry tried to keep his voice even. If Malfoy really was trying to play nice, he didn’t want to upset whatever peace they had going. “No thanks, Malfoy. I don’t want to learn the Dark Arts. Just forget it.”

They were already passing that creepy doll. The way back seemed much faster than how they got in. “Well, if not the Dark Arts, how about Potions? I’m one of the best at Potions, and it’s always been one of your worst subjects.”

Harry chuckled. That certainly had been true before, and maybe under different circumstances Harry would have actually taken Malfoy up on the offer. However, with Harry’s new potion’s text, he had a feeling that the class was going to go very differently this year. “No thanks, Malfoy. I think I have all the help I need in Potions.”

Malfoy narrowed his eyes. “Oh yes, you were doing much better this week than you usually do. How did you manage to win that Felix Felicis, anyway? Did you somehow switch cauldrons with Granger?”

“No, I’m just taking my classes more seriously this year. I want to be an auror, after all. I need a NEWT in Potions to do that.”

It was Malfoy who came to an affronted halt this time. “You want to be an auror? Why? I mean, obviously you *would* be just the type to want to catch dark wizards. But why waste everything else you have going for you?”

Harry wasn’t sure what Malfoy was talking about. “What do you mean? What else do I have going for me?”

Malfoy looked almost offended by that question. “Are you joking? You have everything going for you! You’re the Potter Heir. You’re rich, you’re famous. Everyone knows your name. You’re the ‘Chosen One,’ the Boy-Who-Lived, Champion of the Light side. You’re going to inherit a seat on the Wizengamot before you even graduate school. You could go into politics right out the gate. Any department in the Ministry would beg to take you. Just think what a difference you could make with that level of influence. A lot more than running around catching dark wizards one at a time.”

Harry considered that. He had never really liked the idea of getting involved in politics, but there was some truth to the words Professor Dumbledore had said in the memory. ‘There are many things in this world that can *only* be accomplished by people sitting in a room and talking.’

“Maybe I could get involved with that Wizengamot stuff later. I do have two votes, after all.”

“Two votes!? How do you possibly have two votes?”

“Sirius Black was my Godfather. He left me the Black seat when he passed. I’m the Black Heir and the Potter Heir.”

They did end up finding their way to the exit much quicker than it took them to find Malfoy’s stupid bust. The entire way back, Malfoy questioned Harry about how he could have ended up with the Black inheritance when Draco was the eldest Black male descendant (on his mother’s side).

Harry wasn’t really sure how he, himself, was related to the Blacks, since he didn’t know any of his family tree. As far as he knew, all his wizarding relatives were long gone. But then, his father had been a pureblood, so surely he was related to some other Pureblood families. The Weasleys had said all the purebloods were inter-married.

Malfoy was pondering a mystery of his own. “I wonder who would have become the next Lord or Lady Black if he didn’t pass it on to you? Aunt Bellatrix or me?”

Harry watched the door to the hidden room seal shut behind him and was only too happy to end this conversation. “Sirius probably would have passed it on to Tonks, or her mum. You know, the cousins you don’t like to talk about?”

“Oh yes, I’d forgotten about her.”

Harry scowled. “How did you forget about her? You just saw her a week ago.” Harry made sure his bag was secure and began striding away. “You know what Malfoy? You’re not going to change. Thanks for the apology and all that, but please don’t try to make it up to me or whatever. There’s nothing I want from you.” He had to yell to be heard as he reached the end of the hall, leaving Malfoy in his wake. “Let’s just move on and try not to speak to each other again for the next year, agreed?”

He didn’t wait for any response. He turned the corner and left the other boy standing all alone. With any luck, that would be the end of his interactions with Malfoy for a long, long time.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks everyone for all the really encouraging comments.

If you have any thoughts about how the story is going, what you think will happen, what you'd like to happen, or ideas for how to improve; please feel free to share!

The Rules of the Game

The next week of class continued much like the first. Homework was piling up like never before. It seemed that all the teachers now expected non-verbal magic for all practical classwork. Harry had eventually managed to produce a weak shield by the next Defense lesson, but it was nothing like his usual Protego. He felt that all of his spellwork had taken a deep dive once he was expected to perform magic without an actual incantation.

At least the rest of his year mates were all having the same problem. He was pretty sure Crabbe and Goyle hadn't managed a single spell once they were no longer able to grunt the words. Even Hermione had switched from theoretical texts to reading practical guides offering an introduction to non-verbal magic. It was one of the first times Harry and Ron had listened avidly while she read out loud during lunch. Neville, Parvati, and Lavender had also sat as close to them as possible, to try and glean as many useful hints as they could get.

By Wednesday, Harry was ready for a break from spell casting, and was looking forward to an afternoon on the Quidditch Pitch. He walked down to the stadium, Firebolt in hand, with Ron at his side. Ginny and Dean Thomas were behind them. The two of them would be practicing chasing the quaffle, while Ron practiced his keeping skills. Everyone wanted to hone their abilities before tryouts that weekend.

Hermione took up the rear, with her bag full of books. She was just coming along to show her support. Although, Harry suspected she probably wanted some fresh air, as well. It probably got pretty stuffy being in that library all the time.

As soon as they reached the field, however, Harry realized the girl may have had an ulterior motive for coming along. Harry had just released the quaffle for Ginny, Dean, and Ron, who were already soaring after it. He was about to release the snitch, when Hermione stopped him. "Just a moment, Harry. I was wondering if I could talk to you for a bit. Now that we're alone."

Harry gave her a skeptical look and his eyes went up to the three figures gliding over by the goal posts. "Are we alone?"

"Well, they're not exactly listening."

Harry watched Ginny and Dean pass the large red ball back and forth while Ron darted through the circular hoops ready to make a quick save. They all seemed rather distracted. "Fair point. So, what's up?"

Hermione set down her bag and pulled it open. Harry gaped at the books inside; there must have been at least ten thick textbooks. The young woman must have placed at least half a dozen featherlight charms on that thing just to be able to lift it. She pulled out a particularly large tome to show to Harry. It didn't surprise him that Hermione wanted to talk about a book, and he almost groaned until he saw the title across the cover. 'The History and Traditions of Britain's Wizengamot.' A large smile spread over Harry's face. "You finished it?"

Hermione handed the book over for Harry to peruse. “I finished it a week ago, but I never really got the chance to talk to you about it. I know you asked us not to bring up the subject when Ron was around, since he’s been so peculiar about the whole thing. I figured I could talk to you while they were distracted.”

Apparently, the three Quidditch players weren’t quite as distracted as they thought. Just then, Ginny swooped overhead and called down. “Harry, what’s up? Are you practicing or not?”

Harry held the book to his chest to hide the title, although it wasn’t really Ginny that he was worried about. “Yeah, Hermione’s just giving me some homework advice real quick. I’ll be up in a little bit. You guys go ahead and practice. You don’t need me anyway, I’d just be doing my own thing.”

Ginny shrugged. “Alright, but if you don’t want to practice, you should let someone else ride that racing broom of yours.” She flew down so she was almost eye level. “I wouldn’t mind having a go.”

Harry waved her off. “I’ll be up in a bit. You just focus on your own performance. This is practice for tryouts, after all.” The redhead finally flew off to the others, probably to relay why Harry wasn’t up in the air with them. Harry noticed that Hermione was blushing at him. “What?”

“Nothing,” she insisted. She gave herself a little shake and then moved next to Harry to show him something in the book. “Anyway, I found all sorts of interesting things in here. These pages list all the families that have a Lordship on the Wizengamot. Potter is here, and so is Black, like you said.”

Harry had mentioned the Black Lordship to his friends, but had tried to downplay the significance for Ron’s sake. Instead, Harry had made a show of complaining about having yet another responsibility, and having to take another class on weekends with some random tutor. Having extra work seemed to make Ron commiserate with him instead of getting jealous, but Harry still didn’t want to push his luck. The Wizengamot situation was clearly a sore subject for the youngest Weasley boy, who would probably inherit very little if anything from his own family.

Harry read through the list of names in the book. He could see Dumbledore, Longbottom, and Malfoy. He turned the page as the list continued. There was Potter and Prewitt. He even saw Shacklebolt, and he wondered if Kingsley had a vote, or if it was one of his relatives. “These are a lot of names. Are all these people on the Wizengamot?” This seemed like more people than Harry had seen in Dumbledore’s memories.

“There are about two hundred families that technically have a Lordship, however a lot of them are unclaimed. Either the relative who would be the Lord never claimed the title, or there are no more Heirs left to claim it and the family tree just died out.”

Harry turned the page again and saw another list, this one much shorter. At the bottom of this list was the name: Weasley. “What’s this?”

Hermione glanced over his shoulder to see what he was referring to. “Oh, that’s the list of families who used to have a Lordship, but it was revoked for one reason or another.”

Harry looked over the list more closely and saw another familiar name: Gaunt. “So, Voldemort’s family used to have a Lordship.” It didn’t really surprise him that they had lost it. He tried to imagine Morfin Gaunt attending a Wizengamot session while holding his bloody knife and a beheaded snake. The Gaunts didn’t exactly fit the ideal of pureblooded politicians.

“Hermione! Hey, Hermione!” She and Harry looked up to see Ron waving the quaffle over his head with a big grin on his face. Ginny was pouting nearby. “Did you see that save, Hermione? Harry, did you catch it? I’m definitely making the team this year.”

“Yeah, that was great, Ron!” Harry yelled back, having no idea what Ron had done to catch the quaffle, but assuming it must have been impressive for the boy to try that hard to get their attention.

“Yes, it was absolutely spectacular!” Hermione called in agreement. “You’re going to be fantastic this Saturday!”

Harry lowered his voice. “Did you actually see what he did?”

Hermione rolled her eyes. “Of course not. I barely pay attention to these things when there *isn’t* a book in front of me.”

Harry snorted and turned his looked back to the book in question. “So, did you figure out how they vote in new laws and things? Also, how do trials work? Do they run them any differently than regular meetings?”

Hermione flipped ahead several pages to a chapter titled ‘Special Committees.’ “So, this is really important.” She had switched to her ‘teacher’ tone of voice. “The Wizengamot has several Special Committees, such as the Committee for Magical Creatures, the Committee for Schools and Education, the Committee for Health and Healing Standards, etc. Once you join the Wizangamot, then you can petition to get on one of these Special Committees. You apply, and if they think you know enough about that subject or have enough invested in that cause, they can vote you onto the committee.”

She flipped another couple pages to show him the full list of committees. There were a lot. “Each committee is made up of members of the Wizengamot, but then it also has some experts in that field. So, the Committee for Health and Healing Standards would have several Wizengamot members, but also some officials from the Ministry Department for Health Regulations, and then probably several respected healers and health researchers, and even some members of the St. Mungo’s Board of Directors. The Special Committees are a pretty big deal. They make most of the laws.”

Harry looked up at that. “I thought the Wizengamot made all the laws.”

Hermione nodded. “The Full Wizengamot probably makes most of the big, important laws. But most laws, in general, only affect a small branch. So, let’s say there was a new bill about

broomstick manufacturing regulations. Most people probably wouldn't care about that. It would go before the Committee for Magical Transportation, and it would either pass or it wouldn't. No one else would care. Let's say there was a bill about which brooms could be ridden in official quidditch games. That would go before the Committee for Magical Games and Sports, and no one else would probably care.

"However, let's say someone wanted to push through a bill to make Firebolts illegal." Harry subconsciously reached down for the broom leaning against his leg, as Hermione continued her terrifying hypothetical. "Obviously, that would upset a lot of people. So, that bill would probably be pushed to go before the entire Wizengamot. Almost all bills begin in one of the Special Committees, but if they get enough attention, or if they upset someone, then they can be brought before the entire Wizengamot, and the full session can vote on it.

"That's what happens with trials, as well. Most smaller trials take place before a Special Committee. Buckbeaks's hearing was before the Committee for Magical Creatures. Your trial was supposed to be before the Committee for Child Welfare and Underage Magic. However, at the last minute, it was pushed before the entire Wizengamot. That's why it was so strange. I don't think there's ever been a case of underage magic going before the entire Wizengamot like that."

Harry nodded. "Yeah, I do tend to be the exception that proves the rule."

Suddenly, Ginny swooped down next to them again. "Are you sure you're practicing, Harry? Ron won't stop bragging every time he makes a semi-impressive save. It would be nice to have another pair of eyes on the situation."

Harry just waved her off again. "I swear, just one more minute. I'll be right there."

"Fine, but don't expect me to believe you again, you little liar....Just one minute my arse!"

She flew off again, and Harry turned his attention back to Hermione who had a devilish grin on her face. "I don't even want to know what you're smiling about this time." The bushy haired girl just shrugged. "So, if I became a Lord, would I have to join one of these Special Committee things?"

"Not necessarily. Some Wizengamot members seem to just have one area that they're really passionate about, so they just join the one Special Committee. Other Wizengamot members are very active and want to be involved in lots of areas of politics, so they join lots of Special Committees. I think Dumbledore is a member of several, and it wouldn't surprise me if someone like Lucius Malfoy had been on a lot of committees, as well." Harry nodded, that sounded in character for him. "However, some people don't join any committees. In fact, some Wizengamot members hardly even show up for the regular sessions. They only attend when there's something they really care about." Harry figured that his father would have fit in the latter category.

He wondered what type of member he would be when his Lordship fell into his lap next summer. Joining a committee and helping to draft policy sounded interesting. If he joined the Committee for Magical Games and Sports, he could make laws about Quidditch. If he joined the Committee for Magical Law Enforcement, he could pass laws that would help the aurors

do their jobs. Of course, he didn't even know how he would possibly have time to attend the regular sessions, let alone any Special Committee meetings.

Finally, Harry was literally pulled from the conversation, when Ginny returned to drag Harry into the air. "You're never going to be able to Captain the team if you're out of practice. I'll release the snitch, you see if you can catch it in under five minutes."

Harry rolled his eyes but allowed the smaller girl to shove him onto his broom before he pushed off into the air. He closed his eyes as the wind whipped past his face and he tried to forget about the war, and Voldemort, and the Wizengamot, and Malfoy, and the pile of homework waiting in his room, and everything else weighing on his mind.

For the next couple hours, it was just Harry, his broom, and the little golden snitch, and it was glorious.

As much as Harry enjoyed Quidditch itself, try-outs were a nightmare. It seemed that half of Gryffindor house showed up, even several first years, probably just so they could spend the afternoon with the 'Chosen One.'

It took almost four hours before Harry was able to weed them down to a decent team. Ginny and Katie Bell would be chasers again, but Dean Thomas didn't quite make the cut. Ron had once again secured his place as keeper, barely out-performing the obnoxious seventh-year, Cormac McLaggen. Harry suspected that Hermione had something to do with that, despite her claims that she 'barely paid attention' to the game.

By the time things finally wrapped up, Harry had missed dinner and he barely had time to race to Snape's office in the dungeons for his detention. As Harry skidded to a halt in front of the foreboding door, he cast a quick tempus to make sure he wasn't late. 8:01. Dammit. Well, there was nothing he could do about that now. He quickly rapped on the door, before he was another minute late.

The door swung open before Harry could even finish knocking, and the looming figure of Severus Snape filled the door frame. "Nice of you to fit this into your schedule, Mr. Potter. Is there a reason you're wearing Quidditch robes for detention, or did you actually believe that I would assign you laps around the field?"

"No, professor. I only just came from Quidditch try-outs." Harry squeezed past the shadowy figure and into the torch-lit office that always seemed to smell of noxious fumes, even though the man wasn't teaching potions anymore. Malfoy was already sitting in front of Snape's desk.

The bat-like figure of Severus Snape swooped past Harry and made his way to his own leatherback seat. His midnight black robes billowed behind him as they always did. He gestured for Harry to take the remaining seat. "If only your Quidditch captain had had the foresight and decency to schedule the try-outs at a time that wasn't directly before the star seeker had somewhere to be. Oh, but I apologize. You are the Quidditch captain, are you not? Tell me, Mr. Potter, is it basic foresight you lack, or common decency?"

Harry slumped into the seat, folded his arms, and kept his mouth shut. Just one evening of this and he would be free. He didn't want to say anything that would only land him back here next weekend.

Snape quirked a brow but didn't comment on Harry's silence. Instead he gestured behind him to the far corner of the room. "Now that the last of us has deigned to make an appearance, we can begin." He motioned the two boys over to the work bench in the darkest corner of the office, without leaving his seat himself. "Over there you will find a case full of flobberworms. Slughorn has informed me that he is almost out of flobberworm mucus for his potions stock, and I happily volunteered to refill his inventory. Mr. Malfoy, since you were actually on time this evening, you will be stunning the flobberworms and laying them out on the table. Mr. Potter, you will extract the mucus. Neither of you is to leave until your individual task is complete."

The two young men leaned over the large case to see hundreds of slimy, fat worms. The flobberworms were writhing around over each other, making slurping sounds as they oozed mucus onto each other to more easily slide around. Harry shut his eyes for a moment, with that many worms, he'd be here half the night trying to extract mucus, especially with Snape's exacting standards.

Harry could hear Malfoy give a resigned sigh beside him. "Sir?" he spoke up.

Snape didn't even look up from the papers he was grading. "No complaining, Mr. Malfoy. Get to work."

"I wasn't going to complain, sir." Malfoy was standing poised as he addressed the professor. Harry didn't want to wait for him to argue with Snape to get started, so he just grabbed a pair of gloves and got to work. "I was just thinking that if I stun all the flobberworms, that will take about 45 minutes. However, if only one person is squeezing the mucus out, they'll be here for hours."

Harry just focused on his work, slowly squeezing the first flobberworm until all the mucus fell with a disgusting gloop into a large vial. He set the, now much skinnier, worm into an empty crate and reached for another. He didn't even look up when he heard Snape speak. "I don't see why it would concern you how long Mr. Potter takes to complete his punishment. The sooner each of you gets started, the sooner you will complete the task."

Harry set aside the second flobberworm and went for a third. This really would take hours. Malfoy was not giving up, though. "I understand, sir. It's just that Potter is only here because of me, so I was wondering, would it be alright if I helped him extract the mucus once I'm done stunning them all?" Harry dropped his flobberworm. Who was this person and what had he done with Draco Malfoy? "If we're both extracting mucus then we'll both be out of your hair quicker."

Harry spun to see Snape's reaction. The professor's usual annoyed scowl was on clear display, but there was definitely an underlying sense of confusion and disgust. "Do whatever you like, Mr. Malfoy, just as long as the work gets done. Do refrain from holding hands and singing songs if you can possibly resist."

With that, Snape returned his attention to his paperwork and Harry and Malfoy focused on stunning and squeezing the flobberworms one at a time. For several minutes, Harry expected Malfoy to try and get his attention, or whisper something obnoxious, but nothing happened. The blonde simply grabbed the worms one at a time, stunning them, and then slowly extracting the mucus. In fact, he seemed even better at the task than Harry, but Malfoy always had been very precise when it came to preparing potions ingredients.

Finally, Harry whispered what he knew he ought to. "Thank you."

Malfoy simply shrugged. "This is disgusting, Potter. This had better make us at least a little more even."

Harry smiled. "Maybe a little." He wasn't sure what Malfoy was planning, or if he had some scheme up his sleeve. However, if it got Harry out of having to wrestle with flobberworms until past midnight, he certainly wasn't going to complain.

When Draco Malfoy finally finished extracting mucus alongside his unexpected partner, Professor Snape inspected their work and gave them a stiff nod of approval. Although, that was probably more for Draco's benefit. Potter was abysmal at squeezing flobberworms, but then the Chosen One had never really shown much care for his potion's ingredients.

As the two boys were grabbing their bags, Professor Snape called, "Stay behind, Mr. Malfoy. There is a topic which I would like to discuss with you." Draco nodded, while Potter gave them both a very suspicious look. As soon as the red-robed young man shut the door behind him, Professor Snape instantly put a finger to his lips to indicate silence and then raised his wand to set up a silencing charm and several privacy wards.

Draco was impressed by how thorough they were. "Was that really necessary? Would he even care what we say?"

Professor Snape scowled. "That boy is probably fumbling with his ridiculous 'extendable ears' as we speak. I have never met a person so incapable of keeping his nose out of other people's business." Snape turned and sat back down behind his desk, gesturing Draco into the empty seat opposite. "Besides, I very much would not want him to hear what I am about to say. How are you progressing in your little mission? I noticed that the two of you are, at the very least, not actively trying to hex each other."

Draco nodded. "It's not going as quickly as I might have hoped, but progress is being made. He opened up a bit about his childhood."

"And how would you possibly know whether or not he's just lying to placate you?"

"I don't think he was. I mean, the first time we met, when he was shopping for school supplies with Hagrid, I made this comment about students who didn't know they were magic, and he was so upset. I don't think he would or could just make that up."

Snape shot forward in his seat. "What did you just say?"

“So, I made this comment that students shouldn’t be allowed at Hogwarts if they don’t even know they’re magic...”

“Not that,” Snape interrupted. “About Hagrid. Why was he getting school supplies with Rubeus Hagrid?”

Draco thought about that. He had never really considered it before, but the groundskeeper did seem like an odd choice to take the Boy-Who-Lived on his first excursion into the magical world. The man couldn’t even legally perform magic. “I’m not sure. I didn’t ask. He was definitely there with Hagrid, though.”

Snape gave a curt nod. “Thank you, Draco. I’ll look into it. You just focus on your mission.”

Draco nodded and made his way into the corridor. As he opened the door, he could have sworn he heard the sound of cheap sneakers running like mad around the corner.

The next morning at breakfast, Harry was practically bouncing in his seat with excitement. The first meeting with his new tutor was today. He had received a note from Dumbledore earlier that week asking him to go to the empty classroom in the fourth-floor east corridor at 11am to meet with his new instructor.

Harry had no idea what to expect from the new tutor or from the lessons. Would it be some wise old wizard like Dumbledore, teaching him about the history of the Wizengamot and all the things they had accomplished? Would it be some middle-aged political expert, showing him the nuances of each of the Special Committees and how they interacted? Would it be some young book-minded individual like Hermione, explaining all the laws line by line? He really hoped it wasn’t the latter. He had always preferred practical advice to memorizing random facts.

At a quarter to eleven, Harry packed up his Charms essay and made his way out of the Common Room, promising Ron and Hermione he’d catch up with them at lunch. Harry was so excited that he was finally going to have answers to all his questions, he actually had to stop himself from running all the way down to the fourth-floor.

As he reached the solid wooden door, he hesitated for just a moment before knocking loudly and confidently. “Come in,” called a firm voice from inside. Harry quickly opened the door and slipped through into the airy classroom.

Instead of rows of desks with chairs, there was one medium size table in the middle of the room, with six chairs around it. Despite the setting, there was only one person seated at the head of the table. She was an elderly woman wearing an old-fashioned green dress with a fox-fur scarf. Atop her pinned-up grey hair, sat a large hat with a stuffed vulture. Harry had seen that exact outfit once before, and the memory definitely stood out in his mind. He had seen that precise dress and hat on the boggart-version of Professor Snape, when he had been wearing Neville’s grandmother’s clothes. “Mrs. Longbottom?”

As he spoke, she rose from her seat to greet him. "Please join me, young man. And shut your mouth. You are the heir of a noble house, not a guppy." Harry realized he was gaping at her, and snapped his mouth shut immediately. He quickly sat down in the chair to her right, which she had indicated.

No sooner had Harry sat down, then she reclaimed her seat and launched into introductions. "Now, let's get one thing straight young man. I, personally, think that you have more brains and guts than the entire Ministry of Magic put together. You have faced off against He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named more times than I can keep track, and you've done better than any wizard twice your age should half expect. That being said, while you are here in this room, you are my student, and if I am going to teach you about wizarding culture and etiquette, you will treat me with the proper respect as the authority in that subject. I will warn you now that I have very exacting standards. I will not allow any lollygagging or rowdy behavior, is that understood?"

Harry had only processed about half of what she said. "Er, yeah, I s'pose."

A look of almost pure horror passed across Neville's grandmother's face. She looked absolutely scandalized. "Albus warned me you were raised by muggles and were far behind in your training, but I had no idea how much work we had ahead of us. Not to worry, dear, this isn't your fault. We still have time to try and repair the damage."

Harry lowered his head into his hands. No wonder Neville was such a stammering pile of nerves. "I'm sorry, what damage?"

Mrs. Longbottom raised an imperious brow. "First of all, get your elbows off the table." Harry immediately removed his elbows, but he suddenly wasn't sure what to do with his hands. "Stop fidgeting. Clasp your hands and set them on the table in front of you. No, watch the elbows...good. Now sit up straight." Harry immediately leaned his body upright. "No, that's not straight, that's just straighter." Harry actually had to readjust how he was sitting so that his back was perfectly straight. "Excellent, now chin up. There. That is how you ought to sit at all times."

Harry was already getting uncomfortable after about ten seconds. "No offense, Mrs. Longbottom, but I've never seen Neville sit like this."

"Then you've never seen Neville sit down to dinner with me." Harry couldn't help but feel thankful for that. Mrs. Longbottom had her lips pursed in a stern expression that would have made Professor McGonagall proud. "Second lesson, you shall refer to me, and others, by their formal title while in these lessons. Outside of these lessons, while in a more informal social setting, I would encourage you to call me Augusta. However, during these lessons, you will practice the proper way to refer to your noble peers. You will refer to me as Lady Longbottom or madam. I suppose if you're feeling particularly loquacious, you can call me Dowager Lady Longbottom, but even I will admit that's a mouthful."

Harry felt completely out of his depth. "Yeah, I don't think I've ever felt loquacious in my entire life."

“Lesson three, no more using the word ‘yeah’ in my presence, or ‘s’pose’ for that matter. You will say ‘yes’ or ‘suppose’ or whichever word you chose. You will pronounce all the syllables and all the consonants in that word, unless it is an official contraction, and even then, you will use them sparingly. Is that understood?”

“Yes, madam. However, I think there may be some mistake.”

“I don’t see any mistake, except that your head keeps tilting to the side, young man. Here,” she pulled out a large book from her bright red handbag. The title read ‘Miss Marple’s Guide to Manners and Etiquette.’ “Just place this on your head and try not to disturb it. You can hang on to that book after this lesson and read it before we meet again. We’ll be meeting twice a month for these lessons.”

Harry picked up the book but didn’t put it anywhere near his head. “No, madam, that’s not what I meant. I think there’s been a misunderstanding in the subject of these lessons. I was under the impression that I’d be getting tutoring in Wizengamot policy, and the culture and politics of Wizarding Britain. This just seems more like...table manners.”

“Oh, my dear boy, you’re nowhere near ready for table manners. No, no, we’ll start with getting you to sit and stand properly, and move on to walking and making proper introductions. If you show a lot of promise today, then in a couple weeks, I’ll show you how to do a proper bow.”

“Lady Longbottom, no offense, but this isn’t what I signed on for. I thought I was going to be learning how to pass bills and address members of the Wizengamot and stuff like that.”

“Don’t use the word ‘stuff,’ and set that book on your head.” Harry found it difficult to resist such a commanding voice, and quickly put the book on top of his tangle of black hair. It immediately slid off. He tried again. By the third try it managed to stay for a moment before slipping backward onto his shoulders. Lady Longbottom nodded. “As I suspected. Keep practicing. Now, dear boy, I don’t see how you can possibly expect me to teach you how to address a Lord of the Wizengamot when you don’t even know how to properly introduce yourself. For that matter, how would I be able to teach you to perform a cultural wizarding ritual when you don’t even know the proper procedure for pouring tea?”

Harry tried to keep his neck perfectly straight as the book finally seemed to lie still for half a minute. His hands were up and ready to catch it the moment it started to slip. He couldn’t believe that he could balance on a tiny little broom, but he was having this much trouble getting a book to stay in one place. He listened to Lady Longbottom’s explanation of all the things he needed to learn with mounting terror. How could he possibly be that far behind? “You’re going to teach me how to pour tea?”

“I’m going to have to teach you a lot of things if you want to fit in with pure-blooded wizarding culture. And believe me, understanding pureblood society is the key to understanding the nuances of how the Wizengamot operates. It’s all connected. And if you don’t know how to bow properly, or pour tea correctly, or give the correct formal title, people will notice, and they will be offended.”

Harry readjusted the book again. He supposed that made sense. Malfoy had been furious because he didn't shake his hand. He just hadn't thought that these lessons would consist of so much etiquette and proper society stuff. He thought it would be more, well, interesting. This was going to be miserable.

"Now, my dear boy, let's take a break from that book for now. Stand up and I'll show you how to do a proper wizarding handshake." Harry had to suppress a groan. If he had to hear about bloody handshakes one more time he was going to lose it.

Harry sat on the swing in the old park off Magnolia Crescent. It was the same park he had once encountered Dudley and his gang, before they had been chased by a couple of dementors. The sky was cloudy and dim, very unlike that day, which had been one of the hottest on record.

"Where are we, Harry?" Harry turned and gaped at the figure sitting in the swing next to his. It was Tom Riddle, aged 16 like in the last dream, wearing fitted robes this time instead of a uniform, but still with the same piercing red eyes. Harry could not have imagined a setting where the young dark lord would look more out of place. It was surreal to see him in this quiet corner of Little Whinging.

"What are you doing here?"

Riddle simply let his legs dangle slowly back and forth. "I don't understand why you always ask me the same question every time you see me. The answer never changes. This is a dream. We're dreaming. Besides, I'm not even sure where 'here' is. This must be from your memories. It isn't from mine."

Harry simply nodded, unable to look away from the bizarre sight of a young Voldemort sitting on a child's swing. "Er, yeah, this is a park in Surrey. Near my Aunt and Uncle's house."

"I see." Tom Riddle looked around with an expression of polite interest. He looked so different when he wasn't in the snake-like form of an adult Voldemort. One might never suspect that there was a demon behind that angel face. "Did you come here often as a child?"

"No, not really. I didn't get out much."

Riddle simply nodded, his expression was deceptively benign. "No? Nor did I." Suddenly, Riddle started doing something that Harry absolutely couldn't believe. He began swinging his legs forward and backward. Not very quickly, but it was enough to cause momentum to the swing he was sitting on, which slowly began to sway to and fro.

"What are you doing? Are you seriously going to swing?"

Riddle shrugged. "I suppose. I don't see why not. I'm here, aren't I? What else am I going to do?"

Harry watched as he slowly climbed higher. He wasn't going very high or very fast, but just the fact that he was going at all seemed incomprehensible. "You don't strike me as the type to play around on a swing set."

Riddle smirked. "I can't remember the last time I was on a swing. It was probably around 1934."

Harry laughed. "Yeah, I guess it's been a while."

Riddle stopped swinging his legs, and simply let the momentum carry him for a while. "I always hated going to the playground. The swings were one of the few tolerable things there. I wasn't forced to interact with the other children."

"I take it you didn't like the other kids much?"

"They didn't like me." Riddle's swing slowly winded down so it was barely swinging at all. "I was always an outcast among the muggles. I believe you had a similar experience."

Harry's mind wandered to his own childhood. The other kids on the playground trying to avoid that weird Potter kid with the baggy clothes and the broken glasses. Dudley and his friends chasing him down. Hiding in the bushes so they didn't get the chance to beat him bloody.

Riddle was watching him intently. "You had a lonely childhood, didn't you Harry?"

Righteous anger coursed through Harry's veins. How dare Tom Riddle try to manipulate him like this. How dare he point out their similarities in such a blatant and callous way. How dare he point out Harry's terrible childhood when he was the very reason Harry had such a childhood. "At least I'm not lonely anymore. Not like you. You've surrounded yourself with people, Tom, and you're still just as lonely as you always were. You don't love anyone. You don't have anyone you really care about. You're all alone and you always will be."

Harry had expected Riddle to be angry, he had hoped to upset him, but the young man just smiled like he knew a secret that Harry didn't. He planted his feet firmly on the ground, causing his swing to come to a complete stop. "That's where you're wrong, Harry. I might be all alone, but so are you. You've surrounded yourself with little friends and concerned adults, but you're just as alone as I am. You might have people you love, but you have responsibilities they will never understand. And when the time comes for you to do what needs to be done, where will they be? Who will stand with you at the very end? No one. No one really understands you. No one can really connect with you. You're alone just like me, but at least I enjoy being alone. You're living your own greatest fear."

Harry tried not to let the pain of those words reach his face, but he was sure he wasn't successful. Riddle had touched a nerve so close to his heart he was surprised the muscle was still pumping like normal. Because deep down, beneath his Gryffindor courage and determined optimism, he really was scared that he would end up alone. That he would always be a freak who was unworthy of love. That his responsibilities were his and his alone, and no one else would ever really understand him.

“It’s alright, Harry.” He snapped out of his self-pity to see Tom Riddle once again pumping his legs back and forth and his swing oscillated slowly. “You won’t be alone forever.”

Harry tried to understand what the other young man could possibly be talking about now. “What?”

“Well, you have me, after all.” He flashed another pleasant smile.

Harry didn’t listen to any more. He stood up and made his way across the playground. “Fuck you.”

Unfortunate Relations

On Monday morning, Harry picked at his eggs and sausages without ever managing to bring them to his mouth. He was getting really sick of these nightmares. What little he had read from the books in the Room of Requirement, while interesting, hadn't been at all useful. Not even Malfoy's suggestion had really helped with his personal situation, and Harry had perused it more thoroughly than the other books. He was pretty sure they were just dreams, and not visions like the year before, but they were still getting to him, and he really didn't like the idea of Voldemort affecting him so badly, even if it wasn't really real.

"Hey Harry!" Ron interrupted his thoughts. "Check it out, do I look like a pureblood lord?" Ron was trying to balance his potions book on his head and was being about as clumsy as Harry had been over the weekend. Ron had been pulling stunts like this ever since yesterday, when Harry had confessed to him and Hermione what a waste of time his 'Wizarding Politics' tutoring had turned out to be.

"Ronald, put that down, you're going to make a mess." Hermione didn't even look up from her copy of the Daily Prophet as she spoke. She had been much more optimistic about the idea of wizarding etiquette lessons and seemed to think that it would be good for Harry. Although, Harry secretly thought she was just envious that he had a tutor who was assigning him additional required reading.

Ron chuckled as he let the book fall into his hands. "Oh, of course, Hermione. I wouldn't want to make a mess. Nice purebloods never make messes, right Harry?"

Harry just shrugged. "I'm not sure how much longer I'm going to be able to put up with those lessons. I mean, I agree that I need to learn all the basics before I'll ever understand Wizengamot protocol and all that, but at this rate it seems like it'll be all year before we even get to the political stuff. Maybe I'll just learn all this etiquette junk later, after the war, when I actually have time for this nonsense. I could just tell Dumbledore I changed my mind."

Harry glanced down the table to watch Neville finish off his porridge. Harry had been sneaking glances at the boy ever since his lesson. Harry had never noticed that Neville really did eat with his back perfectly straight and his chin level. And the Longbottom Heir wasn't the only one. Most of Slytherin table sat primly with their elbows off the table, carefully holding their knives and forks, and chewing with their mouths firmly shut. Most of the Gryffindors looked like a bunch of barbarians by comparison.

Hermione turned the page of her paper as she sipped her tea. "Perhaps the war will be over sooner than you think."

Harry perked up at that. "What do you mean?"

"According to the paper, they've already arrested a Death Eater and have brought him in for questioning."

“Who?” Harry yelled as he tore the paper right out of Hermione’s hands. “Is it Bellatrix Lestranger?”

Ron was trying to read over his shoulder. “Is it You-Know-Who?”

Hermione rolled her eyes. “I think that if they had You-Know-Who in custody it would be slightly bigger news, Ron.”

Harry scanned the paper until he saw the article Hermione was referring to. “Stan Shunpike? They arrested Stan Shunpike? There’s no way he could be a Death Eater.”

Ron grabbed a sausage with his hands and bit off an end. His interest had immediately dropped off once he realized it wasn’t anyone he knew. “Who’s Stan Shunpike?”

Harry flipped the paper over to show Ron the photo of the scrawny young man. “He’s the conductor of the Knight Bus. He picked me up once. There’s no way that pimply speck is a Death Eater.”

Hermione gave him a contemplative look. “I don’t know, Harry, the paper said he was bragging about being a Death Eater at some pub in London.”

“Tosh!” Harry threw the paper back onto the table. “He’s just got a big mouth and doesn’t know when to shut up. I bet he was just trying to get a free drink or something. I’d bet ten galleons he’s not a real Death Eater. I can’t believe they’re holding him because of something someone overheard at a pub!”

Hermione nodded. “I agree. If only you were involved in wizarding politics, Harry, you’d actually be able to do something about it.”

Harry scowled at her. “Fine, Hermione, I won’t quit my lessons...yet. We’ll see how it goes.”

Hermione smiled and took another sip of her tea. “That’s all I ask. Just give it another chance and see how it goes.”

Speaking of second chances, Harry still wasn’t sure how he felt about Draco Malfoy. The Slytherin had been trying to catch his attention since the beginning of Potions class, but Harry kept his eyes squarely focused on the worktable in front of him.

At this point, he didn’t even bother reading the actual instructions printed in the book. He was relying entirely on the Half Blood Prince’s scribbles to brew his Numbing Potion. Hermione gave an exasperated sigh when she saw what he was doing. “Harry, the instructions clearly say to cut the nettles.”

Harry shrugged and as he lowered his mallet instead of his knife. “Well, the Prince says to smash it, so that’s what I’m doing.”

Ron looked up from his own station. “The Prince said to smash it? Oh man, I already started cutting. Here let me see that mallet when you’re done.”

Hermione huffed. "I still don't trust this Prince fellow, whoever he is. The instructions are written that way for a reason. Besides, Ron, you already added your Columbine petals two steps too early, so I don't think it really matters how you prepare your nettlewort."

Ron looked down at his lumpy, dark blue potion. "Oh, so it's not supposed to look like this, then?"

"Speaking of petals," Harry said, passing Ron the mallet, "I need to go get some more."

Hermione tried passing him a handful from her own workstation. "That's alright Harry, I grabbed extra just in case."

"Not those, Hermione. I need a few pink ones to mix in with the blue ones."

Harry heard Hermione calling after him "But the instructions clearly state..." Harry never found out what the instructions had to say about the inclusion of pink petals, since he slipped into the ingredients cupboard before Hermione could finish.

He perused the shelves of flower petals looking for Columbine. Before he could find what he was looking for, he heard the door open and close behind him. "You do know that Slughorn puts all the ingredients we need in the cabinet out there, right?"

Harry didn't even bother to turn around at the familiar drawling voice of Draco Malfoy, he just rolled his eyes. It was interesting; a year ago, Harry would have panicked if he'd been trapped alone in a small room with Malfoy. Now, he just felt mildly annoyed. "I'm experimenting, trying to improve the recipe."

He could hear Malfoy's disbelieving scoff behind him as he trailed his finger along the shelves looking for Columbine. Malfoy clearly doubted his potions abilities. Probably based on experience. "Let me know how that goes." Harry just shrugged as he found the right flower. Now he just needed to find the right color. "By the way, how's your extracurricular reading going?"

Harry found the pink petals and pulled out a handful. "Fine. How is your distant relative doing?"

Harry turned to find Draco smirking, as if he knew something Harry didn't. He didn't seem at all perturbed that Harry had mentioned the bust that he had been so panicked to find. "You'd better not tell anyone about him," the blonde warned, but with a hint of amusement in his voice. Harry didn't bother to try and examine that.

"Whatever," Harry made to leave, but found his passage blocked. "Was there something else you wanted?"

"I have another book for you." As he spoke, Draco pulled a shrunken book from his pocket and used an Engorgio to restore it to proper size.

Harry didn't even bother to glance at the title. He was pretty sure that whatever it was wouldn't answer his questions about his weird Voldemort dreams. He was starting to think

that the situation was unique to him and Tom Riddle. “No thanks, Malfoy. Your other suggestion didn’t really have any of the answers I wanted. I don’t think even I know what I’m looking for.”

Malfoy just smirked. “This isn’t about Mind Magic, Potter. I think this will have answers to a very different question.” Curiosity piqued, Harry glanced down at the thick tome in Malfoy’s hands. ‘Nature’s Nobility: A Wizarding Genealogy.’ Harry reached out without thinking, and Malfoy’s smirk grew wider. “It’s a book of wizarding family trees. It’s got the Black Family Tree in there, and the Potter one as well. It’s from our library. I asked Mother to send it and it arrived this morning.”

Harry held the book in one hand and almost opened it with the other, until he realized his other hand was full of pink petals. His potion! It was still on the burner! “Look, Malfoy, this is nifty and all, but I don’t really have time to study my family tree right now.”

Malfoy tapped the book with his wand again and re-shrunk it so that it sat in Harry’s palm. “You can look at it later. It’s an older version; from the fifties. They update it every couple decades, and we already have the newer version, so you can keep that one.”

“Er...thanks.” Harry was surprised that he actually meant it. The book was a surprisingly thoughtful gift.

“Of course. I’ll also keep an eye out for any books on dream magic or whatever it was you were looking at. Even if you’re not sure what exactly you need. You never know.”

Harry pocketed the book on family trees and made his way out the door. “Alright. Thanks, I guess.”

When Harry returned to his station and started adding one pink petal for every four blue petals, he noticed that both Ron and Hermione were giving him a skeptical look. “What?”

Ron broke first. “Did Malfoy just follow you out of the cupboard? Was he in there with you? Did he hex you? Are you ok?”

Harry shrugged and stirred his concoction. It slowly took on a foamy consistency and turned a pale sky blue. “Malfoy said he’d keep an eye out for a book for me, but I don’t think it’ll really help with anything. We’re...not fighting at least.”

Hermione looked up from her potion, which was not quite as pale as Harry’s. “What book is he looking for? What do you need help with, Harry? Is something the matter?”

Harry took a deep breath as he added the next couple ingredients. He really didn’t want to bring up the subject of his dreams to Ron and Hermione again, at least until he had some sort of solution. He didn’t want to involve anyone in this mess. However, after Tom Riddle’s foreboding warning about how Harry was going to be alone without anyone to help him, he felt that terrifying possible outcome would be far worse than simply confiding in his friends about some awkward dreams. As much as he didn’t want to have to share his responsibilities, he’d rather that than be alone forever.

“Nothing’s the matter, Hermione. Malfoy just caught me looking at books on dream magic. I’m still having nightmares about Voldemort.” Ron, who had been trying to add a couple pink petals to try and balance out his own potion, almost choked at ‘the V word’ and dropped about seven petals into his brew at once. Harry kept going before Hermione could interrupt. “And before you say it, don’t you dare suggest that I tell Dumbledore. I’m not wasting his time with this.”

Hermione sighed. “Well if you don’t want to tell Dumbledore, perhaps we could look into it ourselves. I’ll keep an eye out for books on dream magic in the library. If you like, I could even look up tips about occlumency. I know you hated it when Snape taught it, but maybe some self-study would go a little better.”

Harry added the final sprigs of aloe and watched as the potion settled. It looked perfect. “Ok, Hermione. I suppose that’s not a bad idea. I mean, even if the occlumency doesn’t help with the dreams, it certainly wouldn’t hurt to be able to do occlumency. Both Snape and Voldemort can read minds after all.”

Slughorn, who had been frowning at Ron’s final product, coughed and spluttered when he heard Voldemort’s name. “Now, now, my boy, there’s no need for that type of language!” The professor moved along to the Slytherins after praising Harry and Hermione for their fantastic brewing skill, but he gave Harry a little extra praise.

Hermione tried to reign in her disapproving look, but was clearly having trouble. “Well, anyway, that’s settled. We’ll all try and learn some occlumency.”

Ron looked up at that. “All of us?”

“Yes, Ron. It will be good for us. Besides, if Harry can do it, then so can we.” Ron looked down at his dark, thick potion which was slurping instead of foaming. He was probably doubting that statement.

That evening, in the Common Room, Hermione perused the books on Mind Magic that Harry had borrowed from the Room of Requirement. He had told her about his little expedition there, but didn’t mention that that was where he ran into Malfoy, as per their deal. Not that it really mattered, since the blonde was just trying to hide an ugly family bust, but it was the principle of the thing. Harry didn’t renege on deals, even if they were with slimy Slytherins.

While Hermione tried to find any information she could on occlumency, Ron played exploding snap with Seamus Finnegan, and Harry perused his new book of family trees. Each family seemed to be in alphabetical order, so the Black Family Tree was near the beginning. Harry only looked at that long enough to find Orion Black at the bottom. If this version came out in the fifties, it wouldn’t have Sirius or his brother yet, but otherwise it looked very similar to the tree at Number 12 Grimmauld Place.

Harry quickly flipped through the pages until he found the Potter Family Tree. At the bottom was Charlus Potter and Doreah Potter nee Black. Based on the dates, they must have been his father’s parents. So, that was how he was related to the Blacks, his grandmother had been

one. Harry looked further up the tree to see women from several other prominent pureblood families had married into the Potter line. He recognized Abbott and McMillan. He even saw a Prewitt several branches up. "Hey, Ron, I think we might be related."

Ron glanced up from his game for only a moment, not wanting to distract himself long enough to singe his hands on the exploding cards. "Oh yeah? That's wicked, mate."

"What!?" came Ginny's horrified cry. She had been reclining on a couch with Dean Thomas, but she was suddenly sitting ramrod straight with an alarmed expression. "What do you mean we're related?"

Several other Gryffindors also looked over at this, clearly curious. "This book has a bunch of wizarding family trees, including the Potter family one. There's a Prewitt on here, which probably isn't a coincidence. Don't worry, though, it was about eight generations ago or something like that, so you don't need to feel bad about that singing Valentine."

Dean perked up at that. "Singing Valentine? It sounds like there's a story there."

Ginny quickly shook her head, noticing that more and more Gryffindors were listening in on their conversation. "No. There's no story. It wasn't a big deal. Nothing really happened."

Harry burst out laughing. "Oh yeah, sure, nothing happened except I got attacked by a bloody dwarf dressed up as a little cupid. The thing had a little diaper and wings and everything. I didn't want to hear his poetry, so he pounced on me. My bag got squished. There was ink everywhere. This was back in second year, when Lockhart thought it would be a good idea to push the whole Valentine's Day thing. I really don't miss that man." Ron, Dean, and Seamus were all snickering at Ginny's blushing face, and even Hermione looked like she was trying not to smile.

Harry felt it was all good fun, until he heard an obnoxious giggle from the other side of the room, and a small group of fourth year girls made their way forward, led by Romilda Vane. "I can't believe you sent Harry such an obnoxious 'gift,' Ginerva. How embarrassing for you! I don't think I'd be able to show my face in Gryffindor Tower again if I did anything half as humiliating."

Ginny scowled and was about to retort, when Harry beat her to it. "Shut it, Vane. Ginny sent a silly poem when she was eleven. She has nothing to be ashamed of. How was she supposed to know that stupid dwarf was set to attack mode? Besides, it's pretty funny in retrospect. It makes a good story."

"Yes, Romilda," Hermione agreed. "At least when Ginny had a crush on Harry, it was before he became the most popular boy in school. At least she actually liked *him*, and not just the *idea* of him." Several other students laughed at that, while Romilda Vane went bright red. Whether that was from anger or embarrassment, it was hard to tell.

Harry glanced at Ginny in time to see the grateful smile on her face. "Anyway," Harry tried to distract everyone. "Let's see who else I'm related to, shall we?" At this point, Harry seemed to have the attention of over half the Common Room. It seemed everyone wanted to find out whether or not they were related to the 'Chosen One.'

Harry ran his fingers further up the family tree, looking for any familiar names. “There’s a Longbottom on here, Neville. Oh, and there’s a McMillan. I bet Ernie wouldn’t have been so quick to accuse me of being the Heir of Slytherin if he had known we were related.”

Cormac McLaggen, from the quidditch try-outs, strode forward. “Are there any McLaggens on your tree, Potter? You know my family is entirely pureblooded for at least twelve generations back.” Harry shuddered and was relieved to see that there were no McLaggens. At least his ancestors had good taste.

Harry did see a few names that worried him, though. There was a Smith on there, and he really hoped it was just a generic Smith and he wasn’t related to that obnoxious Hufflepuff, Zacharias Smith, from the DA. There was also a Nott way up on the tree. “Oh man, there’s a Nott. Do you think that’s the same as Theodore Nott from Slytherin?”

Ron made a face. “I hope not, Harry. His dad’s a Death Eater. You don’t want to be related to a Death Eater.”

Hermione looked up from her book once again and gave them both an exasperated look. “Harry can’t help who he’s related to. Besides, you know for a fact that you’re related to the Blacks, Harry. Which means that you know for a fact that you’re related to Bellatrix Lestrange. It can’t get much worse than that.”

“Fair point,” Harry agreed.

At this point, Ron and Seamus had completely forgotten about their game, and were pretty focused on Harry's new book. “I’m tired of hearing about Potters,” Ron complained. “What other families are in that book? Does it have the Weasleys?”

Harry shrugged. “I’m not sure.”

Before Harry had a chance to flip that far ahead, Ron jumped up and grabbed the text from his hands. He instantly opened it to the back. “Oh yeah, here we go. This is my family tree, but it only has up till Septimus Weasley, he’s my granddad.”

Instead of reading through his family tree to see who all he was related to, Ron seemed more interested in finding out which families were listed in the book. “They’ve got the Longbottom Family Tree, as well. You’re not on it though, yet, Neville. The last one is... Algie Longbottom.”

The boy blushed at the attention. Yet, Harry noticed, his back was still straight. “That’s my great uncle, Algie. He’s the one who bought me Trevor.” They all looked over at the large toad which had, once again, escaped the dorm room and was sitting over in a quiet corner.

Ron rolled his eyes. “And aren’t we all grateful for that.” The redhead started spouting off more families which had been included in the list of ancient wizarding families.

Seamus tried to peak over his shoulder. “Check if McClivert is in there. That was my mum’s maiden name before she married a muggle.”

Ron was still frantically flipping through the pages. Harry hoped he didn't rip them. Sure, Malfoy had said he didn't need to give the book back, but he still didn't want any damage to be done. "Hold on, Seamus," Ron chided the Irishman, "I want to look up Granger first."

Harry tried to subtly shake his head at Ron, but it was too late. Hermione looked beyond uncomfortable when she spoke up. "Er, Ron, Granger won't be in that book. My parents are both muggles, remember? None of my relatives would be in there."

Ron simply moved on to McClivert as if nothing had happened. "Oh yeah," was all he said. Ron acted as if this wasn't a big deal at all, and Harry supposed it technically wasn't. It didn't matter that Hermione was a muggleborn, she was still the most brilliant witch in their class. But Harry suddenly realized that Hermione probably felt really left out of this conversation. The same with Dean Thomas, he supposed, looking over at the tall, dark-skinned young man next to Ginny. They didn't have any wizarding heritage to look up.

Before Harry had a chance to try and say something to smooth things over, Ron spoke up again, and what he said left Harry shocked. "I s'pose Hermione wouldn't be in this book yet. But she will be as soon as she marries into a wizard family."

Harry immediately turned to look at Hermione. She was blushing so much she looked almost burgundy, and she was looking anywhere but at Ron. There was a small, shy smile tugging at the corners of her mouth. Harry wondered if Ron even noticed what effect he had on her. Harry also noticed that Dean was trying to catch Ginny's eye at those words, but she was looking anywhere but at him.

For the first time, Harry was really grateful that he was a half-blood. It wasn't that he cared so much about ancient bloodlines or any of that pure-blooded nonsense. But it was really fun to look at his wizarding genealogy and see all the other witches and wizards he was related to. He felt bad that he had spent the first ten years of his life not even knowing about this world he was so connected to.

At the thought of half-bloods, Harry was reminded of the Half-Blood Prince. He wondered if the Prince was in the book, or at least his family. Supposedly, if he were a half-blood, then half of his family would be in this book somewhere. Harry wondered if he himself was related to the Prince. There had been several names on his family tree that he hadn't recognized, like: Fleamont, Peverell, and Stinchcombe. Perhaps the Half-Blood Prince was from one of those families. It would be pretty amazing if he turned out that he and the Prince had some connection, and he didn't even realize it.

Severus Snape rasped on the thick wooden door with three clear, precise taps. He didn't want to be here. He hated the outdoors, he hated nature, he hated loud noises, he hated animals, and he really hated the idea of climbing into a small, dilapidated hut that seemed to act as a sort of conduit, attracting all the things he most detested.

As soon as he finished knocking on the door, an obnoxiously loud barking could be heard inside. It certainly did not improve his mood. "Calm down there, Fang. Hang on a sec! Be right there." Severus waited with quickly evaporating patience until the door finally opened

and the entire frame was filled with the overly large form of Rubeus Hagrid. “Oh, ‘ello Professor Snape. I wasn’t expectin’ you.”

“Indeed. I can’t imagine why you would, since I have never visited you before, and I made no indication that that would change. However, I’m afraid I have a few questions which I would like to ask you.”

Hagrid did not seem remotely put off by Severus’s comment. He simply gave a jovial smile, nodded his head, and stepped out of the way (as much as his enormous figure would allow). “Why don’t yer come on in.”

Severus had to duck his head slightly as he passed through the threshold. He could only imagine how Hagrid made his way through this door regularly, but then Hagrid was probably used to not fitting places.

The man in question had already traipsed back to the corner that acted as the kitchen of his one-room hut. He seemed to be boiling a pot for tea. “I was actually expectin’ ‘Arry and ‘is friends. They usually stop by to ask questions about some bloody mystery abou’ this time a’ year. I even ‘ad cakes prepared for the occasion. I ‘spose you can ‘elp yerself.” Hagrid lifted a large plate full of grey lumpy blobs. “Rock cake?”

Severus sneered down at the foul-looking objects but decided to take one in the hopes that Hagrid would be more amenable to answering his questions. Of course, if Potter was able to easily get answers from the boisterous man, how hard could it be? “Thank you.” Severus sat in the overstuffed armchair that Hagrid indicated. When an unusually large boarhound tried to place its slobbery head in Severus’s lap, the potion’s master gave it such a sour look, that it seemed to change its mind and go lay down in a quiet corner.

While Hagrid waited for the pot to heat up the Muggle way, Severus inspected his ‘cake.’ It seemed to be the same density, feel, and weight as an actual rock. For a moment, Severus contemplated the possibility that Hagrid would try to trick him into eating a rock as some sort of mean spirited prank. That was until the huge man turned around and gave him such a genuinely earnest look, that the thought was wiped from his mind. “I ‘ope you like the rock cakes. ‘Arry and ‘is friends can’t seem to get enough of ‘em. They even take extra in their pockets when they leave.”

Severus had to suppress the urge to roll his eyes. There was no way Potter and his little cronies were eating these things on a regular basis and still had all their teeth. They were probably just stocking up on ammunition to throw at unsuspecting first year Slytherins. Severus set the ‘cake’ aside as inconspicuously as he could. “Speaking of Potter, that was actually who I was hoping to speak to you about.”

Hagrid poured them both a surprisingly normal cup of tea and settled down on the large bed across from Severus. “Oh yeah? How is ‘Arry doin’? Like I said, ‘ee usually comes to visit me by abou’ this time a’ year. I figured he must be busy wiff this and that. Lot of responsibility that boy.”

Severus took a sip of his tea. Hagrid had added sugar, which he usually didn’t like, but at least it was still drinkable. “Yes, you’ve known Potter since his first year. How did you two

first meet?”

Hagrid seemed to beam with pride at the question. “Well, a’ course, I was the one ter drop him off wiff his muggle family after tha’ Halloween night. But then, that were years ago. When ‘Arry turned eleven, I was the one ‘oo gave ‘im his Hogwarts letter.”

Severus furrowed his brow at that. “Don’t they usually just mail the letters? Was Potter really so special that someone had to hand deliver one?”

Hagrid took a slurp of his tea as he explained. “They tried to mail ‘em! Galloping gargoyles did they try. Must’ve sent ‘undreds a’ letters. They made it to the ‘ouse a’right. Never seemed to make it into ‘Arry’s hands. It weren’t ‘till I showed up that we figured out why they weren’t gettin’ to ‘im.”

Severus had a very bad feeling about this. “Why weren’t they getting to him?”

Hagrid told him. He told Severus all about his trip to a little cabin on a storm-ravaged island, and exactly what he had found there. Hagrid seemed to have a lot to say on the subject. On and on he went about Harry’s cruel Uncle Vernon, and the shrewd Aunt Petunia, and the boy’s fat and spoiled cousin. Slowly but surely, Severus’s entire perception of the world and how it worked was fundamentally changed.

The Dark Lord had been right, important information was being kept from Potter. Draco was right, Potter hadn’t known he was magical until just before he started school. Lupin was right, the boy had experienced a sad and lonely childhood. It seemed that everyone had been right about the boy, except for Severus, and there was something fundamentally wrong with that. Unfortunately, Hagrid’s story only raised more questions within Severus than it answered, and he was determined to learn more about Potter’s childhood with Petunia and her family.

On and on Hagrid complained about the Dursleys, their lack of care for Potter, and their obvious fear and loathing of all things magical. Although, Hagrid didn’t seem to think of it in those terms. “And then tha’ trumped up uncle of his ‘ad the nerve to insult Albus Dumbledore, and I caught that bully of a cousin trying to finish off ‘Arry’s birthday cake, so I couldna take it no more, and I gave that boy a pig’s tail to match ‘is pig face.” Hagrid gave a proud smile before he suddenly looked horrified. “Oh, I probably shouldna said tha’. Forget I mentioned it.”

Severus honestly couldn’t have cared less. If anything, hearing about a bully getting their comeuppance was always good news, even if the bully was tormenting Potter. “Don’t worry, I’m quite good at keeping secrets.”

Hagrid stood and took Severus’s empty cup. “How would you like another cuppa? Or maybe somethin’ a bit stronger?” The bristly face winked one of his gleaming, beetle black eyes.

Severus considered that. Hagrid was known to get quite talkative when he’d been drinking. Besides, the half giant was immune to legillimency, so a little liquid incentive certainly couldn’t hurt. “What do you have?”

Hagrid pulled out a bottle a firewhiskey and poured them each a more-than-generous portion. Severus took a small sip, while he watched Hagrid take in a huge swig of the burning liquid. “So, I’m curious, how did you convince Albus that you should be the one to take the boy school shopping? I would have thought McGonagall would have been the obvious choice. Her or one of the other Head of Houses.”

“Oh, I didna need to do anythin’. It were all Dumbledore’s idea. I were already goin’ to Diagon Alley on an important errand, so ‘ee suggested I jus’ stop by an’ pick up ‘Arry on the way. So, it all worked out perfect.”

Severus watched Hagrid gulp down another couple swigs of firewhiskey and get a little more comfortable on his bed. Severus took another tiny sip to keep up appearances. “What errand did you have?”

“Oh, tha’ were the year Flamel was keepin’ the Philosopher’s Stone at the school, you remember. I ‘ad to go to Gringotts to pick it up, so I just took ‘Arry along wiff me. But don’ you worry, I told ‘im it were very important secret Hogwarts business and to just forget all about the package I got from Vault 713. How was I supposed to know ee’d get curious about it? Especially after Dumbledore accidentally left that Prophet at me hut wiff the article about the break-in and ‘Arry found it.”

This time, Severus actually swished back a fair amount of the whiskey and let it burn down his throat. “Tell me, the day that Albus *accidentally* left the Daily Prophet article lying around your hut, did you happen to mention to him that Potter would be stopping by later?”

Hagrid poured himself another large glass and offered to top off Severus’s, as well. He allowed it. Severus rarely indulged but he had a feeling he didn’t want to sober for where this conversation was inevitably headed. Hagrid took another large swig before he continued, pleasantly nostalgic. “Oh yeah, tha’ was when ‘Arry had just started school. Wha’ a little nipper ‘ee was, too. Looked jus’ like a young James ‘ee did.” Severus resisted the urge to scowl. “So, Dumbledore came by me hut to ask abou’ how things ‘ad gone wiff ‘Arry.”

Hagrid’s accent seemed to get stronger the more he imbibed. It was getting harder to make out his words. “Anyway, I tole ‘im tha’ things were goin’ great wiff ‘Arry, and tha’ I were already planning to have tea wiff ‘im later tha’ afternoon. The ‘eadmaster tole me all abou’ the break-in and ‘ow grateful ‘ee was that I were there to get the stone in time, but then ‘ee mus’ve forgotten abou’ ‘Arry, ‘cause ‘ee left the Prophet righ’ on the table when ‘ee left. I didna even notice it were there, ‘till ‘Arry pointed it out. You’d think Dumbledore would know better.”

Severus took another generous sip; the burn didn’t hit quite as hard now. Instead his throat seemed to tingle. “Yes, you’d think Albus would know better. Apparently not.”

“Well, this is nice, innit?” Hagrid hiccupped.

“What are you referring to?” Severus finally finished off his tumbler, the warmth of the firewhiskey feeling more like a comfort than a burn by the time he reached the bottom of the glass.

Hagrid was already pouring himself a fourth helping as he explained. “This. You an’ me. Two colleagues havin’ a social visit an’ chattin’ abou’ our mutual friends.”

Severus allowed Hagrid to pour him another serving. “I don’t have any friends,” he spoke without a thought. Then something Hagrid had said seemed to make it past the haze of alcohol. “I’m sorry, did you just claim us to be colleagues?”

Hagrid gave a loud burp. “A’ course. We’re both members a’ the Order, after all. An’ we’re both respect’ed Hogwarts professors.”

Severus stared at the wild-looking man before him as he started on his next glass of firewhiskey. “Yes, I suppose we are both...professors. How are your classes going, by the way?”

Hagrid frowned at that. “I don’ understan’ it. Not a single student signed up for the NEWT level class. Don’ make no sense. Everyone loved the class the las’ coupla years. An’ ‘ardly any third years signed up for the entry level. Apparently, there’s some ridiculous rumor that the class is dangerous. Canna imagine ‘ow tha’ got started.”

Severus took another sip and nodded. “Unfathomable.”

“Tha’s alrigh’ though. It gives me more time to take care of Aragog.”

Severus looked up from his glass at that. “Aragog?”

“Oh yeah, ‘ee’s an Acromantula ‘oo lives out inna Forest, over pass’ the Centaur’s village.”

Severus was alarmed by the news that there was an Acromantula in the forest where any student might wonder across. “You know, if there are dangerous creatures encroaching on school grounds, I’m sure the rest of the faculty would be happy for help you fight them back.”

Hagrid just chuckled at that. “Oh, tha’s not a problem. In all the years I’ve been ‘ere, I’ve never once seen a dangerous creature in tha’ forest. Anyway, poor Aragog’s been gettin’ real sick lately. I’m worried ‘ee migh’ not last much longer. I’ve been visitin’ ‘im every day, bringing’ ‘im mashed flobberworms, and blankets an’ things. I even brough’ ‘im a teddy bear, even though I know ‘ee’s a little old for one. I jus’ thought it mighta be a comfort.”

Severus finished off the rest of his firewhiskey in one go. “I’m sorry, when you said you were trying to take care of an Acromantula on school grounds, I didn’t realize you meant that you were actually *taking care* of an Acromantula.”

“Well, ‘is family is there for ‘im as well. Bu’ I figured ‘ee could use a little extra suppor’ at this time.”

If Severus would have had any firewhiskey in his mouth, he would have spat it out at those words. “There are more of those things out there!?! Are they breeding?”

Hagrid simply shrugged and finished off what may have been his ninth serving. He probably would have poured another if the bottle hadn’t already been empty by then. “There may be a

couple out there. An' I don' see 'ow I could tell 'em not to breed. It's not as though they make rubbers for giant spiders. Anyway, where was I?" Hagrid looked down at his empty glass and frowned. "Oh yeah, so Dumbledore tole me I could take some extra time off me Gamekeepin' duties to spend some more time wiff Aragog, so I've been..."

Severus couldn't help but interrupt. "Let me stop you there. The headmaster knows about..." He paused, finally accepting defeat. "You know what? Nevermind. I don't think anything could surprise me anymore. At this point I would believe it if you said Albus literally sent a student into a den of giant man-eating spiders."

"Oh, they'd never eat a person, nah. Aragog wouldna hurt a fly."

Severus nodded. "No, I'm sure a fly wouldn't make a very satisfying meal."

Hagrid tried to take another swig of his glass, only to be reminded, once again, that it was still empty. "Yeah, well, I know better'n to send some random student off ter deal wiff a nest of Acromantulas. The only student I've ever sent out there were 'Arry. An' even then, it were only for a very good reason."

Severus picked up his rock cake, only to set it back down when he remembered that it still looked and felt like an actual rock. "Excuse me? You sent Potter into a nest of Acromantulas? And that seemed like a reasonable thing to do?" Hagrid nodded happily. "I hesitate to ask this, because I have a terrible feeling I already know the answer, but did the headmaster know that you were planning to send Potter into a den of giant, man-eating spiders?"

Hagrid fervently shook his head. "Nah, a' course not. 'Ee 'ad no idear." Hagrid seemed to pause and consider that possibility. "I mean, 'ee were there in the hut when I tole 'Arry to go, but I don' think 'ee knew wha' we were talkin' 'bout."

Severus closed his eyes and let out a long-suffering sigh. "No, I'm sure it went right over his head." He picked up the 'cake' as he stood up to leave and handed it back to the amiable giant. "Stop serving these things to people. They are inedible." He pulled his cloak around himself and made for the door. "Thank you for the whiskey and the conversation. It was... horrifyingly informative. I can see why Potter spends so much time here."

With that, he made his way back to the castle. He only stumbled a few times on the steep slope, but there was no one around to see.

Before Harry could sneak off to bed, he was cornered by a very familiar redhead. "Hey Harry, can I talk to you for just a sec?"

Harry looked down at Ginny and gave her a kind smile. "Sure." Harry could see several lowerclassmen giving them curious looks. "Let's just step into the corridor for a minute." Once they passed through the portrait of the Fat Lady and wondered down the hall about thirty feet, Harry turned to her again. "So, what's up?"

Ginny blushed, which was something she hadn't done much of since her first year. "I just wanted to apologize again for that stupid Valentine. Thanks for standing up for me, by the way."

Harry just shrugged. "It was no trouble. Again, the whole thing just seems kind of funny now, anyway."

Ginny offered him a smile in return. "Still, it was a pretty terrible poem. 'Your eyes are as green as fresh pickled toad.' The diary came up with that one. I thought it was creative at the time. Now, I think he was trying to be bad on purpose."

Harry couldn't help but laugh at that. "Oh, he was definitely trying to be bad on purpose. There's no way Tom Riddle thought that was a good poem. He probably thought it was hilarious that you were going to have a dwarf read that thing out loud to me."

Ginny actually looked surprised by Harry's assessment. "I didn't realize he had a sense of humor."

"Oh, Tom Riddle definitely had a sense of humor. It was just the kind of humor that was at everyone else's expense. Anyway, don't worry about the poem. Just don't do it again, right?"

Ginny nodded. "Oh, you have my word."

When Lord Voldemort opened his eyes, the first thing he saw was a door. It was hard to miss, since it was only a couple feet in front of him and took up the majority of the wall before him. Upon further inspection, he realized he was in a very small, dim enclosure. His only company was a small person, huddled in the corner.

The Dark Lord's attention was instantly drawn to the other person in the small space. They sat on the other side of a small cot which took up almost the entire closet area, which Lord Voldemort also found himself sitting on. The figure's head was down, and they seemed to be crying. The Dark Lord had no idea how to react to this development. He looked around some more to try and gain some bearings.

Looking up, he could see the underside of some stairs. So, he was in some sort of cupboard under a set of stairs. There was only one muggle lightbulb providing any illumination, and that light was extremely dim and barely adequate. The entire place was so small he wouldn't be able to stand if he tried, and that was with his current schoolboy form. If he had his present-day snake-like body, he would hardly have been able to crouch inside the cramped space.

The other figure let out a small whimper, and his attention was immediately drawn back to the cupboard's only other occupant. The lithe form and messy black hair indicated that it must be Harry Potter. Besides, who else would he possibly be sharing a dream with? However, the boy looked smaller than he had ever seen him in real life (barring their very first meeting) and his small size was only accentuated by the extremely baggy t-shirt and jeans he was swallowed up in.

Lord Voldemort waited for the boy to realize he was there, but as the seconds ticked by, he grew impatient waiting for the other's attention. Finally, he let out an exasperated sigh, his voice sounding just as youthful as his body. "Why are you crying?" He had always hated when the young children at the orphanage had cried. They were so weak and pathetic. He had never cried unless he had a physical injury, and even then, he would never let anyone else see him shed tears.

No sooner had this thought crossed his mind, then little Harry Potter immediately wiped his face diligently and then turned to see who had spoken. The boy was delicately cradling his wrist, which was obviously injured.

The first thing Lord Voldemort noticed was how utterly vulnerable Harry looked. He couldn't have been more than six, and almost everything about him was pitiable. His cheap glasses were broken and held together with sellotape. He had a small cut on his lip and a deep purple bruise under his eye. His cheeks were sallow, and he looked far too small and skinny for his age, giving him a frail and sickly look. Yet his eyes were anything but weak. Although they were red and puffy from crying, they were hard and determined. Those bright green eyes looked like they had seen far too much for a boy his age.

Next, Lord Voldemort looked down at the wrist, carefully held in Harry's other hand. It looked swollen and bruised, like someone had grabbed him far too harshly and tugged. "What happened to your wrist? Who did this?" The Dark Lord was surprised how angry he was at seeing Harry Potter so obviously abused and battered. For years, Lord Voldemort had wanted nothing more than to hurt this boy, and yet the thought that someone else had hurt him, that Harry's childhood must have been very much like his own, did not sit well with him at all.

The young boy simply looked at him with a mixture of confusion and apprehension. The Dark Lord wasn't sure if Harry recognized him or not. If Malfoy was correct, Harry didn't even know who Lord Voldemort was at this age, so it was possible Harry didn't recognize him in this dream. He might simply be wondering why a strange young man had suddenly appeared in the cupboard with him. However, dreams didn't necessarily follow the rules of time or physics, so anything was possible.

The longer Harry went without speaking, the more annoyed Lord Voldemort became. The boy's wrist looked terrible. It might have been sprained, or even broken. "I said: who did this to you?" The boy simply narrowed his eyes in suspicion, clearly unwilling to admit that he had been attacked. "Tell me!" he cried.

Suddenly a loud pounding came from the other side of the door. "Keep it down in there, you freak!" a thunderous voice roared from just outside the cupboard. He could easily envision the spittle flying from whatever mouth produced that enraged voice. "So help me, boy, if I have to come in there to shut you up, you're going to regret it!"

Lord Voldemort could only imagine what horrible figure could produce such a hateful and booming voice. He turned back to the little figure of Harry Potter, expecting to see the child cowering in the corner of the cupboard, but that was not what he saw at all. The young boy was sitting up straight, poised and ready, like a serpent preparing to strike. Like a cat cornered, but ready to hiss and bite and scratch until its last breath if necessary. His face was

set in a defiant glare. Lord Voldemort had seen that exact expression many times, yet he had never seen it directed at someone else. Those green eyes were alight with a brazen temerity.

Lord Voldemort had once been surprised by the sheer audacity of this boy. Shocked even, that such a young child could look without fear at an enemy who was so clearly more powerful than himself. However, it all seemed to make sense now. Harry Potter had been practicing that spiteful glower for years. He had spent his entire childhood with an enemy nowhere near as dangerous as the Dark Lord, but who had probably seemed just as inescapable to a young child.

Both the boy and the young dark lord held their breaths and waited for the angry figure behind the door to move away. Lord Voldemort knew that he could easily kill the man in real life. In fact, he would probably enjoy it. However, this was Harry's dream (or nightmare) and if Harry dreamed that the man was a threat, then he would be a threat, until the two of them awoke.

Finally, they could hear the heavy figure stomping away from the door of the cupboard. His footsteps marched up the stairs. As Lord Voldemort looked up at the sound above him, some dust fell down around them from the underside of the stairs and several spiders were dislodged from their webs. One even fell on Lord Voldemort's shoulder. What a miserable little place this was.

Once the coast was clear, Lord Voldemort spoke again, much quieter this time. "Who was that?"

This time, Harry actually answered. Apparently, now that the threat of being overheard was gone, he was more willing to speak. However, his voice was still barely above a whisper. "Uncle Vernon." Although the Dark Lord knew, from the context of this nightmare, that the boy must have feared that man, his voice gave away no shred of cowardice or weakness. Instead his voice oozed bitterness and contempt. Lord Voldemort could easily relate to those feelings.

"Does he always call you a freak?"

"They all do. They don't like me." The glare was still present in his eyes, and again, it was directed at the door to the cupboard instead of at Lord Voldemort. The Dark Lord simply assumed 'they' must be Harry's muggle family. "But they don't like anyone who isn't like them, and I'll never be like them." If anything, Harry sounded proud that he wasn't anything like his awful relatives, and the dark wizard couldn't help but agree.

"Did he do that to your wrist?" The boy simply nodded, his attention still focused on the door. "Here, let me see it."

At this, the boy turned back toward him. "It's alright." He simply shrugged and held up the wrist that already looked improved. "It's already healing." The boy was right; the swelling had gone down considerably. Although it still looked bruised, the brown and purple smudges seemed to be the only evidence that anything had happened at all. Lord Voldemort then looked at the cut on the boy's lower lip. Although it still had dried blood, the cut itself had

already sealed shut without so much as a scar. The boy had healed himself without even realizing that he was doing magic.

Despite the surprisingly powerful company, Lord Voldemort was quite sick of feeling trapped in a tiny, little cupboard. He crawled forward, barely a foot or two, and fiddled with the door handle, trying to get out.

"It won't open," Harry warned him. "They always keep it locked."

Lord Voldemort felt his indignation skyrocket. Always? The boy was kept in this cupboard... locked in this cupboard...often enough that he would use the word always? The Dark Lord looked around the miserable setting more carefully. He took in the tiny cot that the boy was sitting on, with nothing but a thin blanket and a torn pillow. He looked at the shelf of dirty old clothes that seemed almost humorously large for the tiny boy. He saw the little shelf of small, broken toys and the stubs of old crayons. This was not just some cupboard where Harry was locked when he misbehaved. This was his bedroom. And he was kept locked in here...always.

The Dark Lord jerked on the handle with all his might. He reached for his wand, but it wasn't there. He tried a wandless Alohamora, but nothing happened. Again, he had to remind himself that this was Harry Potter's nightmare. If Harry believed the door was locked with no way to open it, then there was no way to open it. If Harry believed they were powerless to escape, then they were powerless to escape. "I am not spending all night locked in a cupboard," the Dark Lord muttered to himself.

"You get used to it." Lord Voldemort turned his attention back to tiny form of the young Harry Potter. The boy did not seem remotely happy with the circumstances, but he did seem resigned to his surroundings.

The Dark Lord wondered if the boy's relatives still kept him locked in this cupboard every summer. He doubted they would be able to, even if they wanted. The Harry Potter he was familiar with would hardly be able to fit in here. Besides, he couldn't imagine Harry Potter getting shoved into a cupboard without some serious kicking and scraping. Based on the bruised wrist and cut lip, the six-year-old version had probably put up quite a bit of fuss for his size. Lord Voldemort could only imagine what the sixteen year old version might try.

It didn't matter either way. Harry Potter may spend his nightmares reliving his nights locked in a small cupboard, but the Dark Lord Voldemort did not get locked into broom closets by pathetic muggles, even in the fantasy of a dream. "Harry, open this door. Now."

"Yeah sure, I'll get right on that." Apparently, the boy had not only been defiant at a young age, but sarcastic as well. "Oh wait, I just remembered what 'locked' means."

"You can open it Harry. You have magic. You're special. You can get it open if you really want to. Focus on how much you want the door to open and it will listen."

Despite Malfoy's insistence that the boy had no idea magic even existed until he was eleven, this version of Harry didn't seem remotely surprised by Lord Voldemort's words. Again, the Dark Lord wondered what Harry did or didn't remember in this dream. If the boy did know who the Dark Lord was, then he seemed more concerned about his ill-tempered uncle than

the young Tom Riddle beside him. In fact, the boy had a small smirk slowly spreading across his scrawny face. "What's the matter?" he asked. "Don't like being locked in a cupboard?"

The Dark Lord scowled. "You can't honestly tell me you do? I can see your resentment. You hate it in here just as much as I do."

The little Harry nodded at that. "I probably hate it more than you do. But like I said, you get used to it."

"Open this door!"

Harry instantly looked up at the underside of the stairs. "Keep your voice down, or they'll hear you."

The Dark Lord wasn't sure if the nightmare version of Harry's uncle would be able to harm him, but since the nightmare version of the door was presenting such an obstacle he didn't really want to risk it. He lowered his voice before he spoke again. "Harry, you will open this door!" He used the most commanding voice he had, which even as a teenager had been almost impossible for others to resist.

Of course, Harry had always been the exception to everything. The frail little six-year-old actually rolled his eyes at the forceful command. "I don't take orders from you. Besides, I don't need to get out of here. I can just lay on this stupid little cot, close my eyes, and pretend I'm somewhere else. I did it for ten years. I can do it again."

Despite his usual calm demeanor within these dreams, Lord Voldemort was quickly losing his patience. He was about to start shouting, until he heard a loud grumble coming from the boy's stomach. Perhaps he had a way to persuade him, after all. "It sounds like you're hungry. If you want to eat, you'll need to find a way to unlock this door."

Again, Harry simply smirked at him. "No, I don't." He crawled off the cot, pushing the teenaged dark lord out of his way, and reached under the lowest shelf in the other corner of the cupboard. He pulled up a loose floorboard to reveal a few apples, a banana, and a handful of crackers. "I've been hoarding food in here since I was four. The Dursley's sometimes forget to feed me when I've been locked in here for a day or two."

"They forget to feed you?"

Harry simply shrugged. "Sometimes. But Aunt Petunia always tries to get Dudley to eat an apple or a banana with his afternoon snack and he always throws it away when she's not looking. So, I just dig them out before Petunia can find them." The boy was smiling, clearly proud of his ingenuity.

However, the Dark Lord could not have felt less like smiling. "You eat food out of the rubbish bin?"

Suddenly, the smile on the young boy's face vanished, to be replaced by a very different expression. If Lord Voldemort didn't know better, he would guess it was shame, but what

would the boy possibly be ashamed about? But then he knew. He understood Harry Potter as easily as he understood himself.

The boy was embarrassed and ashamed. He was ashamed that he spent his childhood at the mercy of his pathetic and hateful muggle relatives. He was embarrassed that he spent so many nights locked in a small, dusty cupboard with no means of escape. He was humiliated that he had only survived by eating food stolen from the garbage. He was mortified by his own life, and Lord Voldemort understood those feelings perfectly, because they were his own.

Lord Voldemort was ashamed that he had spent his childhood as the mercy of the hateful muggles who ran that pathetic orphanage. He was embarrassed that he spent so many nights in a decrepit building that wreaked of poverty and was always drowned in the sounds of children screaming and crying. He was humiliated that he had only survived on war time food rations and huddling overnight in concrete bomb shelters as the Blitz ravaged London.

The Dark Lord looked down at Harry, who was staring at his apple as if he were too embarrassed to eat it, and yet too hungry not to. "It's ok," the dark wizard felt himself saying. "I won't tell anyone." Harry simply looked at him, his eyes full of suspicion. Lord Voldemort simply smiled, and he was amazed that the smile was actually genuine. He couldn't remember the last time he had a genuine smile for anything that wasn't another person suffering. "I understand why you don't want anyone else to know about...all of this. Your uncle, the cupboard, the food. Your secret is safe with me."

Harry watched him for a long moment, probably trying to assess his motives. However, in the end, Harry seemed to accept what he was saying, and gave a slight nod, as if he, too, understood. Then he turned his attention back to the smudged apple and took a large bite.

Potential Allies

Chapter Notes

I'd like to take a moment to thank my betas, Michele and Natalie. You guys are the greatest!

Remus Lupin sat in the far corner of The Last Call, as he waited for his contact to arrive. This was now the third time that he would meet with his werewolf contact, Erwin Sykes, and the man had yet to show up to a single meeting even remotely on time. *Ten* minutes after the man was supposed to arrive, the barman finally limped over. "Oh, it's you again."

Remus attempted a friendly smile. "Yes, me again. I'll take the usual: a butterbeer, please."

The humpbacked barman scowled at him. "Ain't got no butterbeers left."

Remus furrowed his brow. "You don't have any left?"

The barman shook his gnarled head and explained. "I only ever 'ad the three bottles. You drank 'em all the last few visits. Ain't got none left."

"And you didn't think to restock them?"

The barman just shrugged. "To be honest, I was sort of 'oping you wouldn't come back. You sort of bring down the whole feel of the place jus' by sittin' 'ere."

"How do I..." But before he could finish, he was interrupted by a playful and familiar voice.

"He'll take a firewhiskey and soda, and I'll have the same." The bartender turned around to see Nymphadora Tonks sidling up to the table. She was dressed in her usual chunky boots, with ripped stockings and an overlong purple coat. Despite the fact that her clothes matched her usual look, and her face was the same as always, the rest of her appeared completely different. Her hair was long and blonde, her eyes were a vibrant purple, and her ears were long and pointed, like elf ears.

Despite her short frame, she lifted her chin and gave the bartender such a challenging look that he merely nodded his head and said, "Yes, miss. Right away, miss."

Dora sat down in the empty seat opposite Remus as the wizened old proprietor shuffled away. Remus sighed. "Am I the only one who he questions?"

Dora glanced around the pub at the other patrons, taking in the hags, the half-elves, the vampires, and someone who looked about three-quarter troll, before she turned her attention back to Remus. "It's all in the attitude."

“Well, whatever it is, I clearly lack it.” Once again, the bartender gave Remus a suspicious look as he set down the drinks, but nodded respectfully at Dora when she handed over her sickles. Once the barman was out of earshot, Remus gave her an exasperated look. “You shouldn’t have done that.”

Tonks just gave a playful wink. “It’s 1996, Remus. It’s alright if a girl pays for drinks.”

“That’s not what I meant, and you know it. I shouldn’t be drinking alcohol before an important meeting.” Remus eyed the glass but didn’t take a sip. “And speaking of meetings, you shouldn’t be here to begin with, even if you are in disguise.”

Nymphadora just smirked as she pushed Remus’s glass closer to him. “I came to help. I wasn’t going to, but then I ran into my cousin the other day.”

“What are you...” but Dora didn’t let him finish.

“Narcissa’s son, the Malfoy boy. He was chatting with Harry.”

Remus’s eyes widened. “You saw Harry?”

Dora just continued as if she hadn’t been interrupted. “They were getting along. Or at least they weren’t fighting.” Again, Remus tried to ask about Harry, but Dora just cut him off. “I figured if those two can stand to be around each other, I can at least try putting up with your nonsense. At least for an important mission that you *obviously* need help with. Even if I am still annoyed with you.”

“Look, Dora, you know I’ll always care about...”

“Don’t,” she sighed. “I get it. You don’t want anything serious. You don’t want to let yourself be happy. You don’t want to drop your guard. You don’t want to hurt anyone. Let’s not talk about it right now.” Remus turned away, feeling guilty, but then his eyes fell on the other patrons and he saw them shrewdly eying him up, so he turned back toward her. He was surprised to see Dora was smiling, even if the smile seemed sad. “In the meantime,” she pushed the glass even further toward Remus, “It’s already paid for, you might as well drink it.”

Remus smiled back at her and lifted the glass. “I’m still not sure how responsible it is to imbibe right before a meeting with an important contact.”

Dora gave him a bemused look. “If you don’t want to drink, why do you keep meeting him at a pub?”

Remus gave in and finally took a small sip. The fizzy soda did help soften the bite of the firewhiskey. “I didn’t pick this place, obviously, Erwin Sykes did.”

Dora took a large swig of her drink before leaning on her elbow with her chin propped to the side. “So, who this infamous alpha werewolf I keep hearing about? Do I ever get to meet this Erwin Sykes fellow?”

“I’m Erwin Sykes.” Both Remus and Dora jumped and turned at the voice. Dora’s jaw dropped, and Remus couldn’t help but chuckle at her shocked expression. It took a lot to shock Dora, but this person was clearly the last thing she expected when she had heard about an important ally in the war against Voldemort.

In a word, Erwin Sykes was burly. He seemed more bear-like than wolf-like. Even though he wasn’t particularly tall, he still managed to seem larger than life, but maybe that was more due to his long, wild beard, or his heavily muscled arms, or his overlarge, faded leather coat. His coat wasn’t the only thing faded about him. His walnut brown beard had several streaks of grey, the lunar tattoo on his neck had gone pale with age, his clothes had several holes and patches, and his hair had a large bald spot on top.

Despite being past his prime, Erwin Sykes oozed the brashness of a man who had always been the biggest fish in his small pond. He was using his sharp nails to pick at his teeth with hardly a care, barely sparing Remus or Dora a glance. “Remus,” he gave half a nod. “You look terrible as always.” Remus pursed his lips but didn’t say anything. It wasn’t untrue. The younger werewolf hadn’t been sleeping well lately and he probably looked ill. “I see you brought a friend this time.”

Remus stood to make introductions. “Oh, yes, Erwin, it’s good to see you again. This is…” He wasn’t sure if he should give her real name. If Erwin pieced together that Nymphadora was an Auror working for the Ministry, he’d be out of there before she could even open her mouth. “…another member of the Order. She goes by Dora.”

Dora usually preferred people to call her Tonks. There were very few people that she allowed to call her Dora, but she seemed to understand his apprehension, so she just offered a “Nice to meet you,” and stood to shake his hand.

Before Erwin could return the gesture, however, the three of them heard a loud “Sykes!” called over from the bar. They turned to see two extremely predatory young men shoving their way past a few drunken satyrs. The two men elbowing their way to their table had matted hair and filthy teeth, which made them look even wilder than Erwin. The ruffian on the right, with dark, almost black hair, spoke again. “Funny seein’ you here, Sykes, and in such pathetic company.”

The troublemaker on the left, a slightly shorter young man with sandy hair, glared at them all and squared his shoulders, ready for a fight. “Yeah, Sykes, what’s a wolf like you doin’ with Dumbledore’s lapdog and some purple fairy?”

“Fairy?” Dora muttered beside Remus. “I don’t even have wings. If anything, I’m a nymph.”

Erwin Sykes didn’t look at all affected by the arrival of other two werewolves. “Well, if it isn’t Howler and Grady?” Despite the fact that they were both taller than him, Erwin somehow managed to appear as though he were looking down on them. “Not that it’s any business of a couple pups barely out of puberty, but I’m here at this pub to enjoy a pint. Imagine that? Who I choose to keep company with is my own matter and you two can very well bugger off back to Fanghorn.”

The two young men, Howler and Grady, stalked closer, slowly and carefully, chuckling as they went. "Oh, Sykes, we're not part of Fanghorn's pack anymore," the dark-haired man, Howler, explained.

"Yeah, we moved up in the world," oozed the sandy-haired man, Grady.

Howler's chuckling grew in volume and became even more ominous. The other patrons around the pub, who had been giving them sneaking glances, were all staring openly now. "We're in Greyback's pack now. So be careful who you call a 'pup' old man."

"Yeah, now answer the question," Grady demanded. "Greyback's struck a deal with the Dark Lord. He's gonna make things right for all us wolves. So, what's a pack leader like you doin' with this house-trained mutt?"

Remus slowly and discretely slid his hand into his pocket and curled his fingers around his wand. He could see Dora, beside him, already angling her body into a dueling position. Erwin, on the other hand, simply grabbed Remus's firewhiskey and soda from the table and finished it off with one long swig, before slamming the empty glass down. "At least Remus here knows how to show proper respect for his elders. Besides, Greyback can strike all the deals he likes, he doesn't speak for me. I run my own pack, and if I don't want to fight some wizard's war, he's sure as hell not going to volunteer me."

Howler suddenly lunged forward and grabbed Erwin by the scruff of his collar. "You might still be an alpha, *for now*, but even the other alphas ain't no match for Greyback. So, if you and your pitiful pack wanna tuck your tails between your legs like a bunch a' bloody cowards, that's your right. But don't you dare waltz around with Dumbledore's trained pet like it's not a betrayal to your own kind."

Grady, who looked more like a weasel than a wolf, slinked up beside Howler to try and intimidate Erwin even more, but Erwin didn't even seem to notice him. Remus was more than ready for a fight, but Erwin was still smirking at the taller werewolves, as if he was exactly where he wanted to be. "You pups have no idea what it means to betray your own kind."

Howler snarled. "I warned you not to call me a pup!" He raised his hand, with his nails out, looking much more like claws than human nails. The moment he bared his claws, Dora couldn't take any more. Before anyone else could react, she raised her wand and sent a blast, knocking both the younger werewolves backward, into a table filled with drinks.

The three hooded figures that had been sitting around the table, all jumped up when two werewolves suddenly slammed into the flimsy piece of furniture. The wood snapped in two as the foamy drinks spilled everywhere. The hooded figures all hissed and one even looked like they were about to curse the two werewolves. That is, until Grady lifted his hand toward the candle on a nearby table.

Suddenly the small candle flame burst into a ball of fire, bigger than a crystal ball. The three cloaked figures instantly stepped back out of the way of the growing fireball. Grady smirked at the engorged candle flame, watching it grow and twist around on itself while in his control.

Once the fire seemed to settle into a relative sphere, Grady swiped his paw and the ball of flame went hurling toward Dora.

Dora was so shocked at what she was seeing, she managed to trip over a chair in her attempt to dodge the spell. Remus's arm shot out to steady her. He pushed her head down as the fireball flew over them, hitting the far wall and catching the drapes aflame.

"Over here!" Erwin shouted. Remus dragged Dora toward the relative safety of that voice. Erwin had already knocked a large, square table over onto its side and was hiding behind it. Remus ducked behind as well, pulling Dora with him. Another fireball flew over their heads. Remus pointed his wand at the wooden table and transfigured it into stone, just in case their aim got better.

As soon as they had cover, Remus lifted his wand over the top of their makeshift barricade and sent a hex toward the two younger wolves. They were already running toward the bar as the hex flew over their heads. They dove over the ledge and behind the counter.

The poor humpbacked barman was scurrying to the backroom as fast as he could hobble. Most of the rest of the clientele seemed to realize that this wasn't going to be resolved quickly or quietly, and were making for the exits. The smell of stale beer and other questionable fluids was quickly getting covered with the scent of burning wood and smoke.

Dora still seemed in a state of shock over what had just happened. "He threw fire at me... without a wand! How is that even possible?"

Erwin didn't seem to understand her confusion, so Remus explained. "A lot of werewolves can do some simple element manipulation without a wand. They call it 'wolf magic,' but it's really just very basic Elemental Magic. Nothing fancy, of course, but it's effective."

Another small fireball came shooting their way, and Remus used his wand to divert it toward a window, where it smashed the glass. He frowned. There had to be a less destructive way to deal with those.

Dora was still wrapping her head around the concept of 'wolf magic.' "They're doing Elemental Magic? But that's a type of Ancient Magic! That's illegal."

Erwin, who was casually leaning against the underside of the table and picking at his teeth yet again, just scoffed at Dora's confusion. "Illegal? Maybe with the Wizard Ministry, but if you're living out in the woodlands, just you and the wild, there's no one who's going to tell you not to call on the elements if you need to."

As another fireball came flying toward them, Remus cast his strongest shield spell. The flaming ball bounced off the shield. It hurled into a far corner where a couple of vampires were lurking, probably hoping to feed off whoever was left standing. They ducked out of the way just in the nick of time. The bloodsuckers seemed to realize that there were easier ways to get a free meal. Without further ado, they slithered toward the exit, leaving the bar bereft of potential witnesses.

Before Remus could reinforce his shield, Howler sent another fireball, larger than Grady's. Dora jumped up and cast a shield of her own. The fireball deflected toward a table, which blasted into burnt wood chips.

Remus tried hitting the wolves with another hex, but they managed to dodge it just in time. When Grady prepared another fireball, Remus prepared a modified shield charm. "Aguamenti Protego!" The fireball slammed into a shield of water, but suddenly a blast of hot steam was coming straight for Remus. He raised his wand again to divert it, but Dora was already blowing it away with a powerful gust of wind.

Erwin had scooted back, almost to the next table, in order to get a better view of the fight. "You two are pretty good at this."

Dora raised another water shield and glared back at Erwin. "A little help might be nice."

Erwin just shrugged, as unaffected as always. "This isn't my fight, I already told Remus I'm not picking sides in some wizard war."

This time, Remus was the one who deflected the steam from the doused fireball. "Erwin, be reasonable, these two are shooting fireballs at you, as well."

Erwin scowled at him. "Only because you two pulled out wands like a couple of bloody wizards."

This time Remus tried capturing the fireball in an 'Immobulus,' but that simply caused it to burst with pent-up energy and shatter several chairs. Dora, meanwhile, was gaping at Erwin again, completely baffled by his words. "Wait," she asked, "You don't have a wand?"

Remus just rolled his eyes as he tried again to hex the two obnoxious werewolves. He missed, yet again. "Don't listen to him, Dora. He's got a wand; I've seen it." Remus glanced over his shoulder at Erwin for just a moment, before returning his full attention to the two fireballs that were coming at the same time. "I don't know what your problem is with wands, Erwin. Lots of werewolves have them. I know Greyback's got one, as well."

Erwin frowned as he watched Remus shield one blast and divert the other. "Sure, I've got a wand, I even passed my OWLs. Not many werewolves can say that. But I'd never pull out a bloody wand to settle a score between wolves. When I have a problem with another wolf, I fight him like a wolf, not with this wand nonsense. You two should've stayed out of it. I could've wiped the floor with those two upstarts. But no, you two had to pull out wands and start a whole magic duel. Well, you two started this mess, you can finish it."

This time, Howler and Grady took the time to grow a fireball together, building up a blast the size of a large cauldron and hurling it at Remus and Dora. Dora reacted first. "Glacius!" she called. The fireball instead became a ball of ice, still hurtling toward them.

"Reducto!" Remus yelled, shattering the ball and sending chunks of ice scattering across the pub.

Remus and Dora ducked behind the stone table just in time to dodge the flying ice. Erwin was giving them a nod of approval. “Although, I’ll admit, your method is pretty effective.”

While Remus tried to throw a few hexes, Dora kept her attention on Erwin. “Look, Mr. Sykes, I get why you don’t want to involve yourself in a wizard’s war, but this war isn’t exactly just for wizards. Greyback has already joined with You-Know-Who, and I think a lot of other creatures have already picked one side or the other. Aren’t you kind of involved already?”

Erwin leaned over to the nearest table and picked up a half-full pint that a couple of hags had left behind. He took a slow, deep swig. “I get what you’re saying, miss. I don’t like the sound of this Dark Lord fellow, and I don’t trust him further than I can throw him.” He took another sip while Dora diverted another fireball. “But I’m also not looking to make any powerful enemies. Least of all Greyback, who may be a bastard, but his name still has a lot of weight among the werewolf packs.”

This time, Dora shot a preemptive freezing spell, to block the next fireball that came their way. It worked to block a couple of the balls, but once again left huge chunks of shattered ice around the establishment. Dora huffed in exasperation when another fireball appeared over the counter. “They’re not very creative, are they?”

Remus nodded in agreement, as they turned yet another fireball into steam. “I think they only really know a couple elemental spells, and they just keep sending their most destructive one over and over again.” Remus tried to hit the young men with another ‘Stupefy.’ Yet again, their wolf-like reflexes helped them dodge the spell.

Dora seemed to be growing impatient with the entire scenario, so she turned back to Erwin, who was finishing another pint glass. “I thought you were some big, respected werewolf. Can’t you stand up to Greyback and his pack?”

Erwin shrugged. “I’ve got some respect, but no wolf in Britain can match Greyback. I’m an alpha, sure, and my pack is the largest in England in terms of numbers. But lots of the members of my pack are families. A lot of women and children, old folks, general peaceful sort. People respect me because I’m learned and patient, at least compared to some of these whippersnappers you see rising in the ranks these days.”

Erwin paused to give Dora time to cast another ‘Aguamenti Protego.’ “But all the wolves cower before Greyback. He’s strong, and he’s ruthless, and he’s bloody determined to forge a new path for all werewolves. Not to mention, he’s turned almost half of them himself. He’s got a whole pack full of some of the toughest werewolves you’ve ever met, a lot meaner than these two hot heads. Most of his pack could have been alphas in their own right.” Erwin set down his empty pint glass and started looking around, probably for more free drinks. “Plus, when Greyback talks about his big plans for how werewolves will be free of Ministry control and able to hunt all they want, a lot of wolves like what they hear.”

Dora gave him a skeptical look. “A lot of werewolves who aren’t you?”

Erwin managed to find another unfinished pint glass and savored another slow swig before answering. “I’ll admit I like the sound of change.”

Remus was also losing patience with the two young werewolves who simply would not let up in their barrage of fireballs. “Dora, can you just deflect all these stupid blasts while I try to get a straight shot?” He glanced over his shoulder. “And Erwin, I already told you, the Order is trying to change things, too. Dumbledore wants equal rights for werewolves. Maybe not to hunt muggles all they want, but to be equal citizens under the Ministry.”

Erwin spat up his drink with an affronted laugh. “Oh goody, more Ministry regulations! The Ministry’s already got ideas for us, or did you forget, Remus? They’re trying to pass that law that would make us all Dark Creatures. We’ll be hunted down like bloody animals this time next year.”

Remus was quickly losing his temper with the entire situation. “That’s not going to happen! Dumbledore isn’t going to let that happen!”

“Says you.”

Remus stood up straight. “That’s it, I’m sick of this.” Dora diverted two more fireballs, while Remus levelled his wand at the bar. “Bombarda Maxima!”

A wave of explosive energy shot from the tip of Remus’s wand and tore through the pub, knocking away any furniture or glassware that happened to be in its way, on its swift journey to the bar. When the spell collided with the counter of the bar, the shockwave caused all the glass on the shelf beyond to shatter. The counter itself exploded with an ear-splitting bang.

Remus and Dora were both knocked off their feet. Erwin was left gaping as the force of the explosion cracked his pint glass and spilled what little ale was left.

As soon as the smoke cleared, and the dust settled, the three of them peered over the stone table that the destruction. They could clearly see the unconscious forms of Howler and Grady, very successfully knocked out. The steady rise and fall of their chests was the only sign that they would wake again. It was Erwin who broke the silence. “What the hell was that?” Remus just shrugged but Erwin looked beyond impressed. “I never knew you had it in you!”

Dora couldn’t help the proud smile she stretched over her face. “He’s full of surprises.”

Erwin looked Remus up and down as if seeing him for the first time. “Alright kid, you’ve impressed me. I’ll tell you what, if your pal Dumbledore really gets this werewolf bill knocked down, then I’ll arrange something.”

Remus gave him an unimpressed look. “You’re going to have to be more specific than that.”

Erwin just smirked, completely unphased by Remus’s skepticism. “There are some wolves, in my pack and others, who are pretty skeptical of this Dark Lord bloke, and Greyback as well. I’ll arrange it so you can talk to them. I’m not making any promises. It’s you that’ll have to convince them, but at least you’ll have your foot in the door.”

Remus nodded. “That’s all I need.”

Erwin glanced over at Dora, still looking quite unusual with her purple eyes and elf ears. “Bring your girlfriend, too. I like her; she’s a little spitfire.”

“She’s not my…” but Dora interrupted him.

“We’re just friends.”

Erwin didn’t seem to care. “Whatever.”

Remus tried to be the voice of reason. “You know she’s not a werewolf, right?”

Erwin looked back over at Dora with clear amusement in his eyes. “That’s ok, look at her. She gets it.”

Dora smirked, and nudged her ‘friend.’ “Do you hear that, Remus? I get it.”

“Uh huh.”

Erwin gave one last glance around at the smoldering and dilapidated pub. The whole place now reeked of fire and death, but to be fair, it was an improvement to what it had smelled like. “You two sure know how to leave your mark. Anyway, I’ll contact you if the bill fails, otherwise, don’t bother.” With that, the burly old man turned and made his way out the door without so much as a ‘goodbye.’

As soon as Erwin had left, Remus and Dora slowly looked around at the destruction they had caused. Erwin wasn’t kidding, they really had left a mark; almost no corner had been spared. There were only a couple chairs that hadn’t been shattered, and the tables were all lying in fragments. There didn’t seem to be a single piece of useable glassware left in the entire establishment. All across the floor and ceiling, there were scorch marks, intermixed with clinging chunks of ice. It was quite a sight.

Dora turned her attention to the two unconscious werewolves. “Should we arrest them? Or take them in for questioning?”

Remus shook his head. “I doubt those two idiots would know anything useful. And we can’t arrest them, either. The Ministry can’t know we were here meeting with werewolves, and if word gets out that the Order of the Phoenix is turning over werewolves to the Ministry, we’ll never get another meeting again. I suppose we’ll just leave them to wake up on their own, although I can’t imagine how sore they’ll feel when they finally come to.”

Dora nodded, looking around some more. “Well, should we, I don’t know, clean up?”

Just then, the two of them heard a shuffling noise, and turned to see the humpbacked bartender hobbling back into the main floor of the pub. “What the ‘ell happened ‘ere?”

Remus blushed. “Oh, er, well sir, you see…”

Dora interrupted. “They started it.” She pointed to the two very still forms of Howler and Grady. At least the two were clearly breathing, slow and steady.

The bartender lifted his eyebrows, causing his face to look even more gnarled and wrinkled. “Well, you two sure as ‘ell finished it. Look what you did to my bar!”

Remus tried stalling, he wasn’t quite sure how to make this right, but he was determined to try and help. “Look, I understand you’re upset...”

“Upset?” the wizened man spat out. “I’ve never seen this much destruction in me life! You two are welcome back ‘ere any time you like!”

“Huh?” Dora gaped.

Remus wasn’t much better. “I’m sorry, what?”

The old man was looking all around now, all the while nodding happily. “I’ve seen a lot of pub fights in my time, but never one like this. You two did a real number. You scared off all the usuals, even the vampires, and that takes some doin’. At this rate, I’ll ‘ave *the* most disreputable alehouse in all of Knockturn Alley!”

“Yeah!” Dora cheered. “Good on you!”

Remus sighed. “Don’t encourage this.”

However, Dora had already gotten into the swing of things. “If you want, we can smash a couple more windows on our way out?”

The bartender actually seemed to consider that. “Aw, better not. Don’t want to look like I’m trying too hard, you know?”

Dora nodded. “Makes sense.”

Remus did not agree. “No. No part of this makes sense.”

The bartender was already taking note of what would need to be repaired and replaced. “You two ‘ad better move along before the Aurors show up. But remember, you’re welcome back ‘ere any time.”

Dora tried not to chuckle, as Remus was wrapping his head around the ridiculousness of the situation. “Really? *Now* he likes me?”

Dora grabbed his wrist and pulled him toward the front door. “Come on, Remus, let’s go before he changes his mind.”

A couple weeks had passed since Harry’s discussion with Ron and Hermione where the three of them had agreed to study occlumency together. Nothing had really come from that discussion, except Hermione had begun scouring the library for any books she could find on occlumency, shielding the mind, or simply Mind Magic in general.

She was at it again that Saturday afternoon. Meanwhile, Harry and Ron tried to make as much progress as they could on the Charms essay that Hermione had already finished while the two of them were at Quidditch practice. Harry was already so tired from practice that he could barely keep his eyes open. He'd reread the same passage from his Charms book about six times without taking in the meaning, and was about to start his seventh attempt when he heard a voice call, "Harry."

Harry looked over at Ron to see if his friend had been the one to speak, but suddenly realized that Ron was no longer next to him. Harry looked around their small back corner of the library and could see no one else around. "Harry..." The voice was definitely coming from behind the bookshelves. Harry stood up and started looking through the stacks of books to see if he could find Hermione anywhere. She was always in the library, but not today apparently.

"Harry." There was that voice again. Harry followed it to the very back of the library, never encountering another person. Finally, he stopped at the gates of the Restricted Section. Madam Pince normally always kept it locked and would only let students through after suspiciously examining whatever signed note they handed over. Yet for some reason, the gates were hanging wide open today.

"Hello?" Harry glanced through the shelves of Dark books, filled with forbidden secrets. Harry hadn't actually been in this section since his fourth year when he was researching ways to breath under water. "Is anyone there?"

"Harry..." Again, that enticing voice called to him, and Harry couldn't help but follow his curiosity. He passed the threshold and no irate librarian came to scold him. He walked on and on past the shelves and Harry noticed something very different about the Restricted Section. For some reason, it suddenly had a lot more books in it. The shelves which had always been half-stocked at best, were now filled to the brim. Where had all these books come from?

"Harry." He followed the voice all the way to the deepest, darkest corner of the restricted section and came to an abrupt halt when he saw none other than Tom Riddle. The handsome young man was leaning casually with his back to the nearest bookshelf. In his hand was a tattered old book. Despite the previous dreams, where Harry could never make out the titles of the books he saw, he could clearly read the words on the cover of the text in Riddle's arms: 'Secrets of the Darkest Arts.'

"What?" Harry wasn't sure how to properly formulate a question, but Riddle didn't seem in a sharing mood anyway. The taller young man simply gave him a wicked smirk and winked at him. Then he turned and set the book back on the shelf in between 'Fifteenth Century Fiends' and 'Magick Most Foul.'

THUMP. Harry's eyes flew open when Hermione slammed a stack of books on the table. Ron knocked over his inkwell in his surprise. "What the –."

Hermione was already interrupting him, her hand on the stack of books. “I have now combed through the library four times trying find anything related to the subject of occlumency. I have found a total of *one* book that even *mentions* it, and these are all the books I could find that talk about Mind Magic at all.”

Harry gaped. “That’s *all* the books? There’s only five. Are you sure you didn’t miss any?”

Ron was busy trying to ‘Tergeo’ his spilled ink before it reached his half-finished essay, but he still had the wherewithal to act indignant of Hermione’s behalf. “Harry, first off, never question Hermione’s ability to find books in the Hogwarts Library. I mean, that’s kind of her whole thing.”

Hermione looked almost too proud of that. “Aw, thank you, Ron.”

“Second, mate, what’s wrong with you?” Ron stoppered his, now clean, inkwell. “Less books means less reading. Why would you complain about not *enough* books?”

Hermione’s expression turned into a disapproving frown. “Well, I happen to agree with Harry.”

“That you’d like more books?” Ron laughed. “There’s a surprise.”

Hermione pulled up a chair and frowned at her stack. “Well, I mean, that there should be more books on the mind arts in general. This is *all* I found.” She gave them an almost apologetic look. “Not only that, but I’ve skimmed through these five and it seems they mostly just cover the general theory. There’s almost nothing about any practical application.”

Harry turned back to his Charms essay. If the books were just theoretical, they would be useless for them. Ron, on the other hand, was already reading over the titles one at a time. Of course, Ron would cling to any excuse to put off doing homework. “So, there’s nothing on how to actually *do* occlumency at all?”

Hermione suddenly stood up again. “I mean, I haven’t read them all word for word yet, but I think all these books only talk about Mind Magic in really vague and broad terms.” Despite her words about how unhelpful the books would be, she still began packing them in her bag. “That’s why I want to go to that room of hidden things that Harry talked about. I have a feeling the books there will be more useful.”

Harry was a little shocked that Hermione would be so willing to search for books that were probably against school rules. But then, she had never been one to turn down useful sources of information. So, he and Ron dutifully began packing their things as well.

Harry still wasn’t convinced that the Occlumency books in the Room of Requirement would be any more useful. The books on dream magic hadn’t helped anything. “Are you sure those books will be any better?”

Hermione finished packing all her texts away and began applying several charms to lighten the load. “I mean, I suppose it’s possible that all books on Mind Magic are just vague and obtuse. However, I have a different theory. I believe the practical books aren’t available to

students. The mind arts are quite complex, and if they're not attempted correctly, they can have disastrous consequences. Not to mention, a dark wizard could use them to drive someone insane, or tear apart their mind, or even torture someone mentally." She slung her bag over her shoulder. "Occlumency itself is one of the simpler Mind Magics, and you can really only hurt yourself if you mess it up too badly, but there are far scarier things in that branch of magic."

Harry suddenly remembered that Malfoy had mentioned that Mind Magic could be considered part of the Dark Arts, and now he could see why.

Ron paled as he grabbed his bag, obviously a lot more apprehensive about this than his other two friends. "Merlin, Hermione, maybe we shouldn't be messing with this stuff, then?"

"I can see your point, Weasley." All three Gryffindors turned at that snide voice. As if the thought of him had simply made him materialize, Draco Malfoy sidled up behind Harry and Ron. He had a derisive smirk on his face. "Your brain isn't exactly working at full efficiency as it is, you probably don't want to risk any further damage."

Ron scowled. "The hell are you doing here, Malfoy?"

The young man in question had a look of mock confusion on his face. "In the school library? Obviously, I'm here to torture first year Hufflepuffs with dark curses. Maybe, if I have time, I'll raise the dead. What else could I possibly be doing in the *school library*? Since, apparently, no Slytherin would *ever* do homework...or study."

Harry tried not to smirk at Malfoy's cheek, but he wasn't sure how successful he was. "If you're so busy doing homework and studying, why aren't you sitting in a chair with a book in your hand? Why are you here? At this table? Bothering us?"

At Harry's words, Malfoy's attention immediately diverted to him, and his expression became much less guarded. He could probably see the ghost of a smile on Harry's face. "I have another book for you. I wasn't going to mention it in front of your...friends, but since you're obviously ok with discussing Mind Magic with them in the middle of the student library, I figured subtlety doesn't really matter to you."

Harry frowned at the Slytherin. He, Ron, and Hermione weren't exactly in the middle of a bunch of students, gossiping carelessly about mind arts. They were in a quiet corner without anyone else around. The only way Malfoy would have heard them was if he had been eavesdropping. However, Harry didn't really feel the need to point this out, especially since he had so obviously spied on Malfoy barely a month ago on the Hogwarts Express. "Fine," Harry shrugged. "Let's see your book."

Hermione looked extremely nervous and Ron looked like his bottom jaw might fall off, but Malfoy didn't seem at all surprised by Harry's response. "Not here," he countered. "You never know who might be watching."

"Ok then," Harry pulled his bag over his shoulder. "Thanks for wasting our time. Now, if you don't mind, we were just leaving." Harry turned to make his way toward the exit, and Ron and Hermione immediately followed after him.

Harry was not particularly surprised to see that Malfoy was trailing after them as well. What did surprise him was how much it didn't bother him.

Ron, however, did not seem as though he was going to tolerate having his back exposed to the son of a Death Eater. "Get out of here, you wanker, before I hex you all the way to the hospital wing."

"Ronald!" Hermione scolded, glancing around to see if Madam Pince had heard him.

Malfoy just laughed at that. "Oh, by all means Weasley, do go ahead and attack a Prefect in front of all these convenient witnesses." He gestured to the tables of students they passed on their way out of the library. "I'm not threatening you. I'm not breaking any rules. The library is a public space and I can walk around if I want."

Harry held the library door for Ron and Hermione, but Malfoy caught it before Harry could shut it in his face. "What *do* you want, Malfoy?" Harry asked when he found himself, yet again, face to face with the blonde. "I thought you wanted a truce. I thought you didn't want to get involved. Why are you following me around and being weirdly nice and offering to lend me your stupid books?"

Malfoy looked deeply annoyed by the question, but calmly shut the library door behind him. "If you think my books are so stupid, you're welcome to give them back. How foolish of me to try and apologize for my past misdeeds by lending you books from my personal library."

Before Harry could retort, Ron practically choked. "You? Apologize? You are so full of..."

Hermione shoved Ron aside before he could finish that thought. "Books? What books?" She was looking at Malfoy like she had never looked at him before. She had the same expression on her face as when she had secured her first ever permission slip to get into the Restricted Section. The same expression as when Dobby had shown them the Room of Requirement and all the defensive books in the DA's headquarters. Hermione Granger had just found a new well of knowledge, and she wasn't going to let up until it was drained dry.

Malfoy, for his part, did not seem to appreciate the hungry gleam in her eye. However, after assessing the bushy brunette for a moment, his expression slowly morphed into a calculated grin. "What books are you looking for?"

Harry really didn't trust that silky tone, but Hermione pounced on the question. "Do you have any books on occlumency?"

Malfoy's eyes widened as he tried to keep the shock off his face. Clearly that had not been the answer he expected. "You want to learn occlumency?"

Harry wasn't sure how this had become a conversation between Hermione Granger and Draco Malfoy, but Ron seemed equally unsure of what to say. Hermione's demeanor suddenly changed. As soon as Malfoy asked the question, she instantly tried to look aloof and disinterested. She gave an uncaring shrug. "Perhaps." It was as if she were haggling and had just realized she shouldn't seem too eager. "Is that something you would know anything about?"

Malfoy's smug sneer was downright predatory. He had the upper hand and he knew it. "I know occlumency. I'm quite good at it."

"Liar!" Ron finally couldn't hold back any longer. "Prove it!"

Malfoy's lips turned back downward when he turned toward Ron. "And how do expect me to prove to you that I can defend against a mind attack, when (and I'm wildly speculating here) none of you knows how to *properly do legilimency*?"

Just then, the library door opened behind them, and the pug-like face of Pansy Parkinson appeared at Malfoy's side. Her first instinct was to glare at Harry. "What's the matter, Chosen Boy? Don't get enough attention from the other Gryffindors so you have to bother the other houses as well?" Harry didn't bother with a comeback to such a ridiculous taunt, so she just turned to Malfoy. "Come on, Draco, you said you'd help me with my Transfiguration essay."

"Not now, Pansy, I'm busy."

Her face wrinkled in confusion at his words, causing it to look even more like a pug dog. "Busy?" She sneered at each Gryffindor in turn. "With what?"

"Nothing," Ron answered before Malfoy could explain. "He's not doing anything. We were just leaving." Ron immediately turned and began walking away. Harry went ahead and followed him. He figured whatever Malfoy was up to, he wouldn't want Parkinson to think he was playing nice with the Boy-Who-Lived. So, their conversation was basically over anyway.

Hermione, however, hesitated before she followed the other two. She gave Malfoy a slightly hopeful look. "If you were really serious, then we're going to *that* room to look for books on *that* subject. You're welcome to join us."

"He's what!?"

Harry would never have guessed there would ever come a time when Ron Weasley and Pansy Parkinson shouted the exact same thing at the exact same time, but this year was proving to be full of unexpected surprises. Hermione, for her part, just gave one final nod and then followed Harry and Ron to the end of the corridor.

As soon as the two members of the snake house were out of sight, Harry could still hear them talking.

"Draco? What in Salazar's name was that about?"

"I'll explain later Pansy, I have to go."

"Go? But Draco..."

Just as they were turning another corner, they heard the clipped sounds of expensive shoes hitting the flagstone. Harry could see the blonde walking very quickly, but still very gracefully, to try and catch up with them. Apparently, a Malfoy never runs, regardless of the circumstances.

Harry could hardly believe that Draco Malfoy, of all people, was going to blow off Parkinson to try and help his trio of friends track down books on occlumency. Sure, Malfoy had been acting strange since the summer, but this was just too much. He and Ron stood with their mouths gaping open as the young man made his way to their group.

“Well, let’s get you those books, shall we?”

Once again, Hermione seemed to accept this turn of events much quicker than the boys. She was already walking ahead with Malfoy, while Harry and Ron were left behind, their brains still trying to process this impossible situation. Harry recovered next. With a final shrug, he took off after his friend and his former enemy. It wasn’t until the three of them turned another corner that they heard Ron shout after them. “Hey, wait for me!”

Ron, who took up the rear, kept his wand trained on Malfoy the entire walk to the seventh floor. Hermione, however, was busy attacking the Slytherin with questions. “Alright, Malfoy, if you really know occlumency, then you understand the theory behind it. I want to hear what you understand about the theory, and if it matches what I’ve read in my books, then I’ll know that you actually know what you’re talking about.”

“Alright, Granger, let’s see if this matches your little books.” Malfoy turned his head so they could see his face lit up by the low torches. He had a grim look on his face, like he was about to tell a ghost story over the campfire. “Listen up, Potter, because you might actually learn something. Everyone’s mind, magic, body, and soul are linked in a connection that is both lose and seemingly variable, while also being tightly interwoven. I’m not sure if anyone fully understands the depths of those connections.”

This sounded reasonable, but Harry and Ron glanced at Hermione to verify that Malfoy was on the right track. She didn’t say anything to the contrary, so the blonde continued his explanation. “That’s why Mind Magic, Soul Magic, and Blood Magic are so dangerous and can be so unpredictable. They tap into the connection between your mind and your magic, or your soul and your magic, or whatever.”

They made their way to the end of the passage and moved on to a wider corridor filled with tapestries. Malfoy tilted his head at just the right angle so the firelight accentuated his sharp features. “The best way to really (correctly) perform Mind Magic is to first tap into your own mind. Understand it fully. Feel every corner of your own mind. Understand your emotions, your memories, your drives, your desires, your hidden secrets, your thoughts, every single thing about your own mind, even the parts you’d rather not think about. Then you need to understand your magic. Explore it, feel it, immerse yourself in it.”

Hermione was listening with rapt attention, nodding along like she did during particularly interesting lectures. Even Ron seemed to get swept up in Malfoy’s little speech. “So, how do you do that then? Explore your mind and magic and all that?”

“There are techniques for that. I can teach you.” Malfoy looked like he was quite enjoying being the center of attention, having the Gryffindors hang on his every word, like the Slytherins so often did. “Anyway, once you’ve gotten control over your mind and your magic, and you understand them both fully, you can start to find the ways that they link together, or even create new links. As you start to control your mind, your magic will respond

with it. For occlumency, you simply need to try and clear your mind, and your magic will respond and create a magical shield to block your inner thoughts from others. If you get particularly good at it, you can even create new, false, memories and magically send them to others when they try to see your mind.”

Hermione looked rather impressed. “Well, it does seem like he knows what he’s talking about.”

“Yeah,” Ron conceded, but he still didn’t lower his wand. “We might not know much about magic theory, Hermione, but we did actually catch that.”

Both Ron and Hermione seemed somewhat spellbound, but Harry had very personal experience with this subject. “That’s all well and good, Malfoy, but clearing your mind when someone’s trying to rip out your memories isn’t really as simple as all that.”

This time it was Malfoy’s turn to quirk his brow at Harry. “I doubt you’d have any trouble with it. It seems like clearing the mind would come easily to you, Potter.”

Ron’s wand had gone a little slack during Malfoy’s explanation, but it suddenly shot back up to point right at Malfoy’s head. “Don’t listen to him, Harry. He’s just trying to rile you up.”

Malfoy rolled his eyes. “I didn’t mean it as an insult. I’m serious.” He turned back to Harry. “Fourth year: you were the only one in our defense class who was able to fight off the Imperius Curse on the first attempt. And you were the only one able to fully resist it by the end of class. If you can do that, you should be able to control your own mind easily.”

Harry didn’t really understand how those two things had anything to do with each other, but Hermione seemed to agree. “That does make sense, Harry. If you have enough control of your mind to drive away the influence of the Imperius Curse, you should have enough control to drive off any unwanted thoughts.”

Harry couldn’t help but disagree. “I don’t know. I don’t feel very in control of my thoughts or emotions. And I certainly never felt like I just willed the Imperius Curse away. It was more like...there was a voice in my head and I forced myself not to listen to it. The voice never really went away until the person just cancelled the spell.”

Malfoy seemed genuinely confused by this. “You can’t just force yourself not to listen to the voice. How would you even do that?”

Harry shrugged. “Sheer stubbornness.”

“Hah! That sounds about right,” Ron laughed.

Hermione didn’t seem to agree. “No, Harry, Malfoy’s right. If it were even possible to just muscle through the Imperius Curse and stubbornly deny the voice, it would be extremely painful.”

“Yeah, fighting off the Imperius curse hurts.” Harry had never really thought about his technique for fighting off the curse, he had always just assumed his method was the only

way. “Now that you mention it, it’s always pretty damn uncomfortable. But so what? It’s just pain. You can live through pain.”

The other three were all looking a little horrified. They had finally reached the seventh floor corridor, but the others seemed too distracted by Harry’s confession to focus on pacing the hallway three times with any sort of request.

“Let me get this straight.” Malfoy kept his voice very deliberate and controlled. “When Professor Moody...”

“Fake Moody,” Ron interrupted.

“Fine.” Malfoy continued. “When fake Professor Moody cast the Imperius curse on you in fourth year, fourteen-year-old you heard a soothing and calm voice in your head saying ‘Hop on one foot’ or whatever it was. You are telling us that you did *not* gain control over your mind and cast the voice aside. Instead, you felt the euphoric pull to do as you were told and thought ‘No, I’m Harry bloody Potter, I never do as I’m told’ and you just...didn’t listen? You experienced a tremendous amount of mental and physical pain, just so you wouldn’t have to hop on one foot in front of the class? Is that what you’re saying?”

Harry considered that. “Well, actually he wanted me to jump on the desk. But yeah, I guess the other stuff isn’t too far off.”

“Bloody hell, mate. I don’t know if you’re mad or a genius.”

“He’s an idiot.” Malfoy corrected Ron. “You know there’s a much easier way to do that, right?”

“Well, now I do.” Harry was done with this line of questioning, and he started pacing the corridor thinking about what kind of books he needed. “Besides, it doesn’t matter how much better your method is if I can’t find a way to clear my mind.”

On his third turn down the passage, the blank wall filled with a nondescript door. Harry held it open as Hermione and Ron got to take their first glance at the cavernous chamber which held all of Hogwarts’ hidden treasures and dirty secrets. Ron was grinning from ear to ear.

“Woah, mate, this is great!”

Hermione looked equally impressed. “Harry, this is absolutely incredible.”

Malfoy seemed annoyed that Harry was getting all the credit. “Hey, I...” he paused, and Harry quirked a brow at him. Would he admit that he’d found it also, if it meant that he would have to tell the other two why he was there? “...think it’s interesting also. Good find, Potter.”

Before Harry could comment on Malfoy’s obvious annoyance, Hermione spoke up with a question that surprised no one. “So, where are the books?”

Harry led them in a direction that just felt right, past a couple animated swords that were dueling each other. On they strolled beneath a large tapestry that was half unraveled. They

even saw a small silvery instrument that looked like the kind of thing Dumbledore would keep in his office, except this one was emitting small pink and green bubbles. Meanwhile, Harry could hear Malfoy muttering under his breath, "I still can't believe you're trying to learn Occlumency from a book."

Much like before, Harry was able to find the texts he was looking for quickly enough. This time there were only two shelves, and many of the books looked quite old, but at least they had to do with occlumency. Hermione immediately grabbed the fattest book on the shelf, while Ron went straight for the smallest. Harry grabbed one called 'Defensive Mind Magic,' since that sounded useful.

While Ron and Hermione were distracted, Malfoy sidled up next to Harry. He pretended to read over his shoulder while whispering in his ear. "Is this really what you were looking for in the Room of Requirement last time? Books on occlumency? I thought you were curious about dream magic? You do know those are two different things, right?"

Harry kept his voice just as low. "I know. I'm just...I'm interested in both. For different reasons."

Malfoy shrugged and slipped him a shrunken book, probably the one he had been referring to back when they were in the library. "It's on dream magic. I told my mother I wanted books on the subject, but didn't mention why. She found it in our library. Maybe it will be useful."

Ron looked up from his flimsy book to see Malfoy a lot closer to Harry than he was comfortable with. "Get away from him, Malfoy. Harry doesn't need you breathing down his neck."

The Slytherin just rolled his eyes but didn't move. He diverted his attention back to Harry, clearly deciding that Ron wasn't worth the effort. "If you're really interested in learning Occlumency, Potter, you shouldn't be trying to learn it from books. It takes practical effort and guidance." Malfoy looked like he'd won something, and Harry wasn't sure whether to be annoyed or amused. "I could teach you, you know. I did say I wanted to do something to make up for by past behavior, and this could be it."

Despite the question being addressed to Harry, it was Ron who answered, brandishing his flimsy occlumency book as if it were a weapon. "What the hell are you up to, Malfoy? And don't say 'trying to make peace' or 'forming a truce' or whatever. Because we all know that's complete rubbish! You hate Harry, and you hate us, and there's no bloody way you want to teach us *anything* out of the goodness of your slimy heart."

Hermione looked scandalized by Ron's tirade, but Malfoy himself kept his eyes on Harry. It was clear that he would accept an answer from no one but the Chosen One himself. Harry sighed. "Look, thanks for the offer, Malfoy, but I think I know what you're getting at now. And there's no way I'm getting occlumency lessons from some Slytherin git who's just going to use it as an excuse to attack my mind and rip out whatever embarrassing memories he wants to peruse."

Harry bent down to pick up his bag. This time, he was done with this nonsense. "Come on guys, grab whatever books you want and let's go. Malfoy, do whatever you like, but I'm not

letting you inside my mind.”

“Why would I attack your mind?” Malfoy seemed genuinely confused by Harry’s accusations. “I don’t even know legilimancy.” But Harry was only half listening. He gestured for Ron and Hermione to hurry up, so he wouldn’t have to listen to any more of Malfoy’s excuses. “Besides, you wouldn’t even be ready to defend against mind attacks for some time. The first step would be teaching you how to clear your mind.”

That did it. That stopped Harry right in his tracks. He hadn’t even gotten a couple steps from their small clearing, when he turned around and walked right back. “What do you mean, teaching me how to clear my mind?”

“That’s the first step in occlumency, you need to learn how to clear your mind. Then, after that...”

Harry took another step closer. “You can learn how to clear your mind? Like, there are actual specific steps and techniques to learn *how* to clear your mind?” Harry was slowly making his way back to the blonde’s side.

Malfoy simply looked confused. “Yes, obviously. What? Did you think people just started learning occlumency by someone attacking their pupil with legilimancy and the poor bastard trying to blindly fight them off?” Harry shared a look with Ron and Hermione, but refused to comment on this. However, his temper was quickly mounting.

Hermione came to the rescue, since Harry was quickly becoming too angry to speak. “How *do* you clear you mind?”

Malfoy seemed quite pleased to have all attention on him, yet again. “Well, the first step is meditation and breathing techniques. Allowing yourself to get into a calm frame of mind.”

Harry was getting less and less calm by the second. That ruddy bastard! Meditation? Snape never once mentioned any breathing techniques. He certainly never helped Harry get into a calm frame of mind. Like always, he had simply angered and intimidated Harry, and then used his power to try and torture him as much as he could get away with.

Malfoy noticed that Harry was starting to physically shake with righteous anger. “What’s wrong with him?”

Ron covered for him. “He’s not good at getting into a calm frame of mind.” So far, Harry hadn’t specifically mentioned his lessons with Snape, and his friends rightly assumed he didn’t want Malfoy to hear about it.

Hermione was still trying to salvage the situation. “Would you be able to teach us these meditation and breathing techniques?”

“Not bloody likely.” Ron still did not trust this situation. “I can’t exactly picture myself getting into a calm frame of mind with a ponce like Malfoy hovering over me.”

“Well, if you prefer I can just lend you my book on the subject.” Hermione’s eyes seemed to sparkle at the suggestion, and Malfoy once again spoke directly to her. “I was practicing Occlumency all summer, so I grabbed tons of books on the subject from our family library. I’ve got one specifically on breathing and meditation techniques. I’ll let you borrow it, if you like.”

“Why would you do that?” Ron still did not seem capable of grasping that Malfoy would possibly want to help them for any reason.

Harry chimed in as well, before Malfoy could weasel an excuse. “Yeah, what is all this Malfoy? I get that you want to make amends or whatever, but there’s got to be some other motive here, right? Why would you possibly want to be so helpful?”

Malfoy huffed in annoyance. “Oh, you know, Potter. It’s all a part of my new evil plan. I’m going to keep being nice and helpful toward all of you until it drives you utterly mad with suspicion. Perfect. Things are progressing right on track.” He turned back to Hermione with an all too innocent smile. “If you don’t want the book, I don’t have to lend it to you. I just thought it would be useful.”

Hermione jumped in before Harry or Ron got the chance to insult Malfoy again. “It is useful.” She shot Harry and Ron a warning look as if to say ‘don’t ruin this for me,’ before she turned back to the blonde. “Thank you, Malfoy. If it’s not too much trouble, we would like to borrow your book, please.”

Both Harry and Ron gaped at her. Clearly, she was a lot more forgiving than either of them. However, Malfoy seemed more than satisfied with how things had progressed. “It’s no trouble at all. I’m happy to help. I’ll just ask Mother to send me the book and I’ll bring it with me to Potions on Monday.” Malfoy turned on his heel and was about to leave, but he just couldn’t resist one final comment. “Oh, and by the way, Weasley, that book in your hands is called ‘An Idiot’s Guide to Mind Magic.’ Maybe try not to make yourself such an easy target in the future.” And with that, he made himself scarce.

As soon as it was just the three of them, Ron looked down at the thin book that he had been waving about. He scowled when he saw the words printed across the cover. “I really hate him.”

Later that evening, after Harry and Ron had finally completed their Charms essays, Harry sat up in his bed with the drapes shut and pulled out the book on dream magic that Malfoy had lent him. It didn’t look like anything special, but the title: ‘The Connection Between Magic and Dreams’ did strike a chord with him.

Even if Harry’s recent dreams were just that: dreams, he still felt like they were trying to tell him something. Just last week, his dream had taken place in a small bedroom with nothing but a child size bed, a desk, and a wardrobe. Tom Riddle had claimed it was his bedroom at the orphanage, but Harry had no idea how he would remember a bedroom he had never seen before. He was starting to suspect that these dreams were more than just a warning. This had to have something to do with his connection with Voldemort, but since Harry didn’t really

understand that connection, he had no idea if these dreams were memories, or visions, or what.

Harry glanced through the Table of Contents first. None of the Chapters really caught his attention, until he saw one that was circled. Someone had gone through this book and circled one of the chapters with a green quill. It was Chapter Eight: Sharing Magic and Sharing Dreams. Harry wasn't sure who would mark up this old book. It must have been some former Malfoy, because who else would have access to the Malfoy Family Library? Either way, it did seem to be exactly what he needed, so Harry flipped ahead to Chapter Eight.

As soon as Harry skipped to the page he was looking for, he realized that the person with the green quill had not hesitated to mark up this entire section of the book. Several passages were underlined, certain phrases or words were circled, and the person had even scribbled notes in the margins. Although scribble probably wasn't the right word, since whoever it was, had impeccable handwriting. Harry couldn't help but notice that the handwriting was eerily familiar, although he couldn't think where he had seen it before.

Before this year, Harry probably would have been annoyed that someone had marked up the book he wanted to read. But after his experience with the Half-Blood Prince, he'd begun to think that added notes could be even more useful than the original text, so this time he started by reading the notes that his green-penned friend had added.

The first page of the chapter seemed to be just an overview, explaining how dream magic (a very specific branch of Mind Magic) could be influenced by other types of magic, most commonly Blood Magic, but also Soul Magic. The term Soul Magic was circled.

Harry remembered Dumbledore talking about Soul Magic and Blood Magic. The headmaster had said they were dangerous; that they could hurt the person casting them even more than the person they were targeted at. Dumbledore had described them as being different types of Ancient Magic. Was Mind Magic another form of Ancient Magic? Why would Dumbledore go out of his way to make Mind Magic illegal? Was that why there were no books on the subject in the school library? Harry would have to ask the headmaster during their next lesson.

Harry turned a few more pages, and the notes from Green Quill (as Harry was now referring to him) seemed to increase quite a bit. The book passages, along with the additional notes, explained how sharing blood can cause two people to form a link with their magic, a Blood Magic link. This Blood Magic link could theoretically become strong enough, that other types of magical links were formed, as well.

If a Mind Magic link were formed, then the two people could share dreams, or even feel if the other person were extremely scared, upset, or in danger. There were a few instances of relatives (usually siblings or even twins) sharing dreams with each other. The book claimed that, theoretically, if the link were strong enough, two wizards would even be able to communicate over the link or feel each other's emotions. Again, several phrases were circled, including 'Blood Magic link' and 'feel each other's emotions.' There was even a note written to the side: 'Sharing blood enhanced the link.'

Harry couldn't help but be reminded of his connection with Voldemort. After all, Harry had had many dreams from Voldemort's perspective over the years. He had certainly felt Voldemort's emotions on more than one occasion. Could they have a Mind Magic link like this book was describing? But how could that have formed? Then Harry remembered that they did have a Blood Magic link. They weren't related, but Voldemort had used Harry's blood in his resurrection, in order to bypass the protective magic of his mother's love.

Was that enough to explain it, though? Harry had been having visions of Voldemort even before the man's resurrection. But Dumbledore had told Harry that Tom Riddle had inadvertently given Harry some of his magic, during his attempt to kill him as a baby. If Harry and Voldemort shared magic, would they have formed a Mind Magic link from that? Harry couldn't really think of any better explanation.

The link that this book was describing did seem to describe the connection Harry had with Voldemort, but to a far lesser degree. The book had people describe what they had felt over their Mind Magic link. The 'shared dreams' seemed to usually just be vague impressions or feelings. Harry's had always been crystal clear. And the few people who had actually felt another person's distress had described it as a faint tingle, something you would hardly notice unless you were really looking for it. Harry had passed out on more than one occasion when Voldemort had been particularly upset. It was about as faint as a mallet to the brain.

Harry went ahead and kept reading, though. Toward the end of the chapter, Harry saw a large section that Green Quill had boxed in and underlined, as if it were particularly important. Harry read that section.

The rarest type of magical link is a Soul Magic link. It only occurs when two magical beings have their souls bonded together. There are currently no verified instances of a Soul Magic link occurring in modern times. However, should one occur and were able to grow in strength, it could cause a Mind Magic link to grow as well. However, this is purely speculative, and no evidence of such an instance occurring as ever been documented.

Harry didn't bother reading any more of that section. It was just theoretical nonsense, and obviously didn't apply to him.

Lord Voldemort stormed out of the library with his magic flaring violently. He couldn't find his book on Dream Magic anywhere, and his only conclusion was that the house elves must have misplaced it when they were cleaning the library. After all, it wasn't as though any of the other occupants of the manor had any interest in dream magic. It felt good to take out his frustrations on the small, terrified creatures. The Dark Lord found their screams wonderfully soothing.

Different Expectations

Severus Snape scowled at the lovely, suburban home. He wasn't sure what he imagined when he pictured the house that Harry Potter grew up in, but this certainly wouldn't have been it. The simple, single-family dwelling just looked too normal for a boy who seemed to attract the bizarre and dangerous at every turn. On the other hand, it looked exactly like the sort of house he would envision for Petunia Evans, who had always espoused the dogma of fitting in and being normal.

The house before him looked almost exactly like the residences on either side, but this house was different. He could feel it. It was drenched in powerful magic; Blood Magic. The sheer power of it licked at his heels as he walked down the sidewalk, along the wards. The magic reminded him of Lily.

But this was not his destination. Not today. He still had too many questions that needed answers. He wanted to get a better idea of the situation before he questioned Potter's relatives. *If* he questioned Potter's relatives. He was still holding out hope that Hagrid had misunderstood the situation and Potter was just as much of a spoilt nuisance as he had always presumed him to be. But that was beginning to seem less and less likely.

Severus stood before a door that looked very similar to the one at the front of Number 4. The only difference was that this one had a note taped to the front which read "Please knock loudly. Doorbell broken." The note was written on pale blue stationery that had little green and pink cats along the perimeter. Severus detested the idea of following instructions written on such an unsophisticated letterhead, but didn't see much other choice when he was trying to keep a low profile. He knocked loudly.

The door opened only the barest of cracks. All Severus could see was one watery eye peaking out from beneath some grizzled grey hair. "Hello? Oh yes, you're Mr. Snape, right? Come in quickly, before Mr. Tibbles can make an escape." Sure enough, the elderly woman only opened the door long enough for Severus to slip inside, and then she immediately shut it in the face of a large, ginger cat, before the hopeful thing could dart outside.

"He's always trying to slip out," she explained. Severus paused at the threshold, taking in the appearance of the house and Mrs. Figg herself. Arabella Figg was a small woman with flyaway grey hair barely held down with a tied hairnet. She was shuffling around the cozy house in an old dress and tartan carpet slippers as she led him into the drawing room, where he could see even more cats waiting.

Mrs. Figg led him to an overstuffed armchair. "Make yourself at home. I assume Dumbledore sent you."

"I came...on business that concerns him, yes." The whole house smelled intensely of cabbage. Why did it smell so strongly of cabbage? Was she cooking cabbage?

A fluffy white cat approached and tried to drag its furry body along Severus's leg. The potion's master gave it his most imposing glare, but clearly the small thing wasn't nearly as

easily intimidated as Hagrid's boarhound. It kept rubbing itself along his leg, leaving small white hairs in its wake.

"That's Snowy, he's the friendly one." Mrs. Figg smiled approvingly. She then pointed at a fat black cat with white paws, who was hiding under the coffee table. "And that's Mr. Paws, he's a bit on the shy side, but he'll warm up to you with time."

"What...creative names." Severus had to hold back a scowl as he tried to nudge the white cat away from him with his foot. He was tempted to just kick it, but didn't want to do that while Mrs. Figg was watching. He doubted that would go over well.

She seemed to suddenly have an idea. "Oh here!" She pulled out a small jar that was full of some dried herb. "This is catnip, if we put a little of this in your lap, all the little dears will come right to you."

Severus jumped and grabbed her arm in the nick of time before she could pour that vile plant onto his clothes. "No." He tried to keep his voice as calm and polite as he could. "That will not be necessary." Severus tried to think of a convincing lie to explain his revulsion for the little flea bags without being rude. "I'm actually highly allergic to cats. In fact, is there a way to get them to leave me alone?"

"Oh," she frowned down at the cat, 'Snowy' that still seemed insistent on getting as much white hair onto Severus's black clothes as possible. "Well, they sort of just go where they want and do as they please."

Severus sighed. "What a useful trait in a pet."

"I'll get you some tea," the woman announced as she made her way to the kitchen. "That should help with your allergies. You are looking rather pale and your voice sounds awfully nasally."

"It always...nevermind. Tea would be nice, thank you." As soon as the elderly woman was out of sight, Snape grabbed the jar she left on the table and poured a large handful of catnip onto the chair opposite him. "Go." He muttered. "Go over there. Smell the chair. Doesn't it smell nice? Go away you filthy little..."

"Here we are then!" Severus immediately shut his mouth when he heard Mrs. Figg reenter the drawing room. "I made Earl Grey. I hope that suits you." She poured out the steaming liquid into two dainty teacups, while offering Severus an overly friendly smile. "Oh would you look at that. You made a new friend." Severus looked down to see the fat black and white cat was now at his feet, beside the fluffy white one.

Mrs. Figg could not have looked prouder. "That's Tufty. He's a very good judge of character. If he likes you, you must have a good soul."

Severus frowned. "I thought you said his name was Mr. Paws."

"No, no. *That's* Mr. Paws." She pointed to a space behind Severus, and he turned to see two large yellow eyes staring back at him from mere inches away. He jumped to the side, and

took in the whole cat, which was sitting quite comfortably on the back of the chair, next to his head.

“So, did you come here to ask about Harry?”

Severus turned back to the owner of the cats. She was sitting in the pile of catnip, joyfully sipping her tea, and yet all the cats still seemed drawn to him. Perhaps they couldn't smell the catnip over the staggeringly strong stench of cabbage. “How did you know I wanted to talk about the boy?”

“Dumbledore always asks about him. I sort of suspect he's the only reason that man ever floos. Sure, Dumbledore always inquires after my cats, and asks how they are and if there are any kittens on the way. I breed them, you know? Part kneazle-part cats; that's my specialty.”

“You don't say?”

“But then the conversation always ends up back with young Harry.” Mrs. Figg sipped at her tea as another cat made its way to the armchair and tried to crawl into Severus's lap. He tried gently pushing it away, but that seemed to just encourage the thing as it started swiping at his hand with its paw.

“What did Dumbledore ask about specifically?” The sooner he could get this over with, the sooner he could leave and burn his clothes. The white cat by his feet had covered one entire leg with white fur and had moved on to the other leg.

Mrs. Figg seemed perfectly happy to answer questions, as unsuspecting as Hagrid had been. “Oh, you know, the usual. I've been keeping an eye on that boy for years, you know. When he was just a little nipper, Dumbledore would usually just ask how he was doing, and if he seemed safe and happy, and if his relatives were treating him alright.”

Severus, once again, forcefully prevented Mr. Tibbles from making a bed out of his lap, but while he was distracted, Mr. Paws began climbing onto his shoulder. “And what did you tell Dumbledore?”

“Oh, well, I never much liked those Dursley people. They keep their house just a bit too clean, if you know what I mean. Besides, that Petunia woman, the aunt, told me once that she didn't like cats. What kind of monster doesn't like little kitties?”

Severus's eye twitched, as he held back Mr. Paws with one hand while trying to prevent Mr. Tibbles from kneading his lap with its claws. Meanwhile, he had no hands left to stop Tufty from rubbing its ears against his hip. “Yes, who could possibly not like these...things?”

“Exactly.” Mrs. Figg sipped her tea happily, completely oblivious to Severus's plight. “So, as I was saying, those Dursley people always seemed no good to me. And I warned Dumbledore that they didn't care for cats much. Also, they hardly seemed to pay any attention to the boy. They never took him on vacations or holidays; they always left him with me. But then, he was a rather strange child, I always got the impression he didn't really want to spend his time with them, either.”

Severus had moved on to the strategy of lifting the cats up and setting them on the ground. However, that only lasted a moment, before they jumped back up into his lap, so he seemed to be fighting a losing battle. “In what way was the boy strange?”

“Oh, lots of ways. He was so quiet for one, barely spoke a word. Very polite, but sad in a way.”

Severus tipped his elbow, knocking Mr. Tibbles to the floor, but subtly enough that it looked like an accident. “Polite?” he scowled. “Quiet? We are still talking about Harry Potter, correct?”

“Yes, of course. Very polite and quiet. He never seemed have any friends, though. At least I never saw him with any. Except maybe his cousin, those boys were always playing chase with each other.”

“And who was chasing whom, I wonder.” Severus again tried to knock one of the cats from his shoulder, but then Mr. Paws leaned up onto Severus’s chest and started licking his chin. “Madam, are you sure there’s no off-switch for these things?”

“You know I’ve never seen them quite so taken with someone, before. Except maybe Harry; they always seemed to just love that boy. You two must have kindred souls.”

“That cannot possibly be accurate. I believe your kneazles must simply be attracted to feelings of disgust and annoyance.” At those words Mr. Tibbles started purring in Severus’s ear, and the white cat, Snowy, decided that Severus’s trousers were sufficiently ruined and jumped up to start defiling his shirt. Severus sighed and tried to reign in his temper. “Was there anything else that was odd about the boy?”

“Well he always wore the strangest clothes. Huge, baggy, ugly things that barely seemed to fit him. But then, who understand kids styles these days? And of course, there was the cupboard, but I suppose that wasn’t too strange compared to everything else.”

Severus sat up at that, dislodging Tufty from its perch on his shoulder. “What cupboard?”

Mrs. Figg just shrugged and poured some more tea into her china teacup. “He slept in a cupboard. Couldn’t tell you why. Some children just like hiding out in their own little space, I suppose. He seemed a bit embarrassed about it, actually. Almost never brought it up, but he let it slip a couple times when he was little. Talked about his cupboard instead of his room. I tried asking him about it once, but he just changed the subject. I think he just liked having his own little hideaway.”

“And why would he feel the need to hide?”

Mrs. Figg just shrugged again. “Oh, that’s perfectly normal, my cats do it all the time.”

“Right, well, I believe that’s all the useful information I am going to get here.” He stood up, knocking off at least three cats in the process. “Thank you for –.” He paused for a long moment. “I actually can’t think of anything to be thankful of regarding this experience.”

“Sorry I couldn’t be more useful. I don’t know if this would help at all, but I do have lots of photos.”

Severus nudged two more cats away with his foot. “You have photos of Potter? As a child?”

“Oh? You want photos of Harry? I meant photos of the cats, but I do actually have some photos of the boy, as well. Here, I’ll throw in a few of Harry.”

“I don’t need any photos of your cats. Just photos of the boy will be sufficient.” As soon as Mrs. Figg turned her back toward a shelf of old albums, Severus tried kicking the cats away as quietly as possible. Unfortunately, their cat-like reflexes helped them dodge the kicks, and they seemed to just regard it as a game, trying to all gang up on him at once.

“Here we are.” Mrs. Figg turned back with a large stack of muggle photos. “All the pictures you could possibly need.”

“Mrs. Figg, I could not possibly need photos of your cats. Just the boy will be fine.”

“Well, you never know. And if anyone asks you where they could find part-kneazles, part-cats, you let them know where to find me.”

Severus took the thick stack, knowing he would have to sort out the photos of the boy on his own. “If anyone asks me about kneazle kittens, I know exactly what my response will be.” He left through the floo, not able to stomach the idea of anyone seeing him in the fur-covered clothes, even random muggles.

He used his soiled garments to practice his control with Fiendfyre.

Harry stood with this back straight, as still as possible, not wanting to dislodge the thick book from its precarious position on his head. So far it hadn’t fallen for a full minute, which was his record, but he was going to need to breath at some point, and he was pretty sure as soon as he did, it would come tumbling down again.

“All right, young man. Let’s see how well you remember our lesson on proper titles. If you and I were to meet on the streets of Diagon Alley, how would you address me?”

Harry furrowed his brow, and the book fell into his arms without further ado. He finally let out the breath he’d been holding. “Merlin, this is impossible!” Mrs. Longbottom pursed her lips in annoyance, but held her tongue. “I mean, I would call you...Mrs. Longbottom?”

“Correct.” She nodded her head at the etiquette book in his hands, which caused the entire vulture stuffed hat to nod along with her. “Try again. You don’t strike me as the type to give up so easily.” Harry once again placed the text on his head. “Now, what if we were to meet at a dinner party?”

“Dinner party...” He bit his lip in thought but was very careful not to adjust his forehead in any way. “I’d call you Augusta?”

“Correct again.” Her skirts swooped behind her and she marched around him appraisingly. “That’s because you and I are social acquaintances. But what if you were to meet someone like Lady Malfoy at a dinner party? Someone you weren’t well acquainted with? How would you address her?”

Harry tried to think back about what Miss Marple’s Guide to Etiquette had said about that. When his head unconsciously tilted in thought, said book came tumbling down again, and he barely managed to catch it in time. “Would I just call her by her last name? Malfoy?”

“If she is the only Malfoy present, then you can call her Malfoy, after you have already greeted her once with her correct title of Lady Malfoy for a formal affair, or Mrs. Malfoy for a casual affair. If there is more than one Malfoy, then how would you address her?”

Harry could hardly believe that the rules were this specific. “Would I keep calling her Lady Malfoy?”

“Yes, young man, very good. See, I said you would catch on quickly enough.” She gave him a proud smile even though he probably looked like a complete moron with his baffled expression and that fat book barely maintaining its position on his tangled mass of black hair. “One last question. How should someone refer to *you* at a formal affair, such as a Wizengamot session?”

“Oh, I remember that one! They’re supposed to call me Heir Potter for now, or Lord Potter once I turn seventeen. If they call me anything else, like Mr. Potter, or something informal like that, then they’re actually mocking me, and I’m supposed to take it as an insult.”

“Spot on.”

Harry smiled, and the book fell yet again. At least he had managed to keep it for almost two minutes. He was improving.

“Now, I think it’s time you try walking with that book.” His smile immediately dissipated as Mrs. Longbottom stared down her pinched nose at him. “Come now, place Miss Marple back on your head and take a step forward.”

Harry did as he was told. Once the book was in place, he stood as still as possible to keep it from immediately plummeting to the floor. He then slowly placed one foot forward, as carefully as he could.

“Come now, young man.” Her tone was clipped and demanding as ever. “A respectable young heir does not edge forward like a terrified puppy. He takes long and graceful steps, with the confidence that he knows exactly where he is and where he’s going.”

Harry caught the book again as it fell. “Madam, I can walk with confidence, or I can balance the book on my head. I can’t do both.”

“Your father could.” Mrs. Longbottom moved behind him and jabbed her wand into his lower back until he straightened it out to her liking. “I’ve hardly met a wizard with more confidence and natural poise as your father. If he could do it, so can you. Try again.”

Harry tried about thirty more times. Each more frustrating than the last. He wasn't sure how he felt about her expectation that he strive for the example set by his father. On the one hand, Harry had wanted for many years to live up to his father's legacy, and it felt like a dirty tactic for her to so blatantly compare him to the man he never knew. On the other hand, what little Harry had learned about his father in the last couple years had taught him that his father was overconfident to the point of being an arrogant bully, at least when he was still in school. Harry didn't want to turn into some pompous prat like Malfoy. He doubted Ron would ever forgive him.

"Keep walking," Mrs. Longbottom instructed. At least Harry was able to take one or two steps before the book fell, but he had to use his Seeker reflexes to catch it. "In the meanwhile, we'll practice your small talk."

"Oh good," Harry just couldn't help himself. "I was just thinking that doing two things at once wasn't nearly difficult enough. I really need at least three."

"You're almost seventeen, young man." Mrs. Longbottom tutted as she used her wand again to prod at him. This time it was his chin she moved until it was facing perfectly forward. "I believe you can manage to walk and talk at the same time."

"It's not the walking or talking I have issue with, madam." This time the book fell behind him, and he had to spin around in time to catch it. "It's the balancing act that goes along with it."

"Try again, if your father could do it, then it should be no problem for you." Harry's eye twitched at the second reference to his father. Did Neville have to put up with this? Probably. "Now, let's go over the specific topics that are appropriate to discuss at formal functions. The weather is always safe, but extremely boring. Holiday travels are fine to ask about, as is asking about family or mutual friends, but only if the specific people aren't embroiled in a recent scandal, otherwise it's quite crass. Current events, the news, and politics are acceptable as long as it's not something that could be considered controversial, then save that discussion for the floor of the Wizengamot, or behind closed doors."

"Can I talk about Quidditch?" Harry's balancing skills took an immediate dive when he tried to process the information Mrs. Longbottom was giving him.

"Only at informal functions. Plebian sports aren't a very appropriate topic for a high society affair." Harry nodded, remembering the book too late. How was he so bad at this? It was like the occlumency lessons all over again. Mrs. Longbottom waited for him to readjust the book before she continued. "Good lad. Chin up. Keep trying. Now, let's go over the proper way to make political small talk. Let's say we were going to discuss a current bill, I would start by saying: 'So, Heir Potter, what do you think of the current Werewolf Dark Creature Bill?' Then you would say –."

"What Werewolf Dark Creature Bill?" Harry dropped the book again, but this time he let it fall to the floor.

"No, young man. First of all, you never want to allow yourself to seem ignorant about any political subject. Second, if you wanted to know more about a particular bill, you would say:

‘I haven’t yet formed an opinion one way or the other. I’m curious what you think of the bill?’”

“Ok,” Harry picked up the book before he received that stern look again. “What *do* you think of the bill? Is that a real bill that’s being debated right now? What’s it about exactly? Why is it called the Werewolf Dark Creature Bill?”

Mrs. Longbottom just waved her non-wand hand dismissively. “Oh, it’s just some bill going before the Wizengamot in a few weeks about labeling werewolves as Dark Creatures instead of Half Breeds. However, the specific bill we are discussing doesn’t really matter. The point is, when you ask someone about the bill...”

Harry couldn’t help but interrupt again. “There’s a bill in the Wizengamot about labelling werewolves as Dark Creatures? It’s not going to pass, is it? There’s no way something like that could pass, right? Are you voting on it? Who could possibly vote yes to something like that?”

Mrs. Longbottom had the same expression that McGonagall always had right before she took a lot of points from Gryffindor. Her voice seemed to get low and terrible. “Do not dare interrupt me again, young man. I understand that you have never been taught appropriate manners, but you should still know better than to so rudely interrupt an elderly lady. Especially one who is taking time out of her busy schedule to help you.”

Harry paled. “I’m really sorry, Lady Longbottom. I didn’t mean to interrupt or anything. I do appreciate your help and everything. I just...is that really a bill? That werewolf thing? Can you please tell me more about that?”

Mrs. Longbottom’s expression softened a bit at his desperate tone. “Is that something you’re actually concerned about?”

“Of course!” Harry cried, and then he remembered himself and immediately put the book back on his head and kept his posture upright. “I mean...I care a lot about werewolf rights, Lady Longbottom. I have a friend who’s a werewolf.” Her eyebrows shot up at that. “They get a bad rap...I mean, they have a bad reputation, and I understand some werewolves are pretty terrible people, but not all of them are. Some are really amazing wizards, who are just trying to get by. Do you think this bill could possibly pass?”

“It could.” She gave Harry a sympathetic look. “I’ll be honest, Heir Potter, I was planning to abstain from voting on that bill. I know Albus has told all the Light Wizards that it’s important for half-breed diplomacy for that bill to fail, but there are just so many werewolves like Greyback out there, attacking innocent people; even children. I don’t usually agree with that Umbridge woman, but in this situation, it seems to make sense to me that werewolves get labelled as Dark Creatures. The only reason I was abstaining was because Dumbledore kept insisting that we couldn’t let the bill pass.”

“He’s right!” Harry could feel his blood boiling, and he began pacing back and forth across the room, trying to keep his temper in check. The idea that Lupin could lose what little rights he had left had spiked Harry’s indignation, but the mention of ‘that Umbridge woman’ had sent Harry’s ire through the roof. “There are tons of wizards who go around killing innocent

people; even children. Yet no one talks about labelling all wizards as 'Dark' and rounding them all up. Just because there are some bad werewolves out there, doesn't mean we should start tracking them all down or locking them up. Umbridge is just prejudiced against all magical creatures! She'd use *any* excuse to label *any* magical creature as Dark or Evil or Illegal. She can't get away with this! This isn't just about half-breed diplomacy. It's basic decency! Good people, innocent people, shouldn't be punished just because of a few bad eggs. This is wrong!"

Mrs. Longbottom was giving him a highly impressed look. "I knew there was some of your father's spark in you, Heir Potter." At her words, Harry tilted his head in confusion, and suddenly the book came crashing to the floor again. Had that been on his head the whole time he was pacing the room? He'd completely forgotten about it. "I didn't realize you were so passionate about this subject. I must say, I hadn't considered it in quite those terms. Perhaps I'll vote after all."

Harry gave a half smile. "I think that would be a really good thing, madam. Sorry if I got a little carried away. I didn't mean to start ranting like that."

Mrs. Longbottom pointed her wand at the book on the floor and wordlessly levitated it into Harry's hands. "Do not apologize for passion, young man. Now, I knew there was a Pureblood Lord in there waiting to burst forth. Let's see you do that again."

Dear Professor Dumbledore,

Mrs. Longbottom told me about the Werewolf Dark Creature bill. She said you were trying to prevent it from passing, and I want to help.

I know you said you were more interested in hearing about my political views now that I'm getting closer to seventeen. Well, here's my opinion. I completely agree with you. This bill cannot be allowed to pass. Please use the Potter family seat to vote down this bill.

In fact, if you need extra votes, please feel free to use the Black family seat as well. Just send me whatever paperwork I need to fill out and I'll assign you to be the Black Proxy if I can. I don't want Lupin to lose any more rights. I want to do everything I can to help.

Thank you for fighting for this cause.

Sincerely,

Heir Harry James Potter

P.S. I also don't think Stan Shunpike is a Death Eater. I'm not sure if there's anything you can do about that, but I'd like to help him if at all possible.

Harry fed Hedwig some leftover bacon he saved from breakfast before he tied the letter to her leg. There were plenty of school owls in the owlery that could make the journey, but there

was really only one bird he would trust with something this important. “Dumbledore wasn’t at breakfast again this morning, girl. I haven’t seen him in days. I have no idea where he is. Do you think you can find him and get this to him?”

Hedwig ruffled her snowy white feathers in indignation. She seemed offended by the mere suggestion that she might not be able to complete this task. Harry knew most owls would need an address to deliver a letter, but he also knew his owl was special. Besides, if Dumbledore was off on some important, secret mission, Harry suspected the man would still make himself available to incoming mail. Especially if that mail was from Harry.

Harry waited at the owlery window until Hedwig disappeared into the cloudy afternoon sky. Before he turned away, he could already hear someone trudging up the steep steps, trying to catch their breath as they climbed. Harry turned in time to see Neville’s dirty blonde hair and round, friendly face come into view as he clambered up the final set of stairs.

“Oh, hey there Harry. Sorry if I interrupted something. I can come back later.” Considering that Neville sat so primly during meals, he seemed to shrink in on himself when standing. Like he was trying to take up as little space as possible. Harry hadn’t noticed before that Neville had really shot up in the last couple years, and the boy was probably half a foot taller than Harry now. Had Neville always been so tall? Had he just seemed short before?

Harry waved off the boy’s suggestion. “You don’t need to apologize for anything, Neville. This is the school owlery...for everyone. Besides, I just sent off my letter, so the place is all yours now.”

“It’s ok, I’m just sending a letter to Gran.” Neville nervously tried to reach out for one of the school owls, but it pecked at his fingers in protest. “I just always seem to have trouble finding one that’s willing to go on a delivery.”

Harry watched for a couple minutes as Neville tried desperately to tie his letter to any owl that would sit still long enough. Some of the owls seemed to sense his nervousness and nip at him whenever he got his hands close enough. Others just flew away before he got the chance to even try. Harry watched with horrified fascination. “Er, that’s...” The only thing that came to mind was ‘pathetic and sad,’ so Harry quickly changed the subject. “So, what are you writing to your grandmother about?”

Neville tried lunging at an unsuspecting owl, but it flapped away just in time. “Oh, you know. Just letting her know how the term is going. By the way, Harry, Gran mentioned that she was giving you lessons. I hope you don’t mind that she told me. She didn’t say what they were about, but she said she’d met with you and thought you had potential.”

“Oh, that’s nice of her, I suppose.” Harry watched as Neville scared away another bird. “Hey, Neville, do you want to just give me that letter and I can mail it off?”

“No, I’ve got this. Besides, Gran says I need to spend more time around animals, so I can learn to be better at handling them, like my dad was.” One such animal took the time to leave a large, wet dropping on Neville’s cheek before flying away.

Harry lifted his wand almost absentmindedly. “Scourgify.”

“Thanks.” Neville frowned as he looked around the owlery. Almost all the owls had moved over to the opposite side of the tower from him. The rest were hiding out in the upper rafters. “You’re a good friend, Harry. I know you have a lot going on right now. Ron mentioned you were meeting with Professor Dumbledore, too. And you’ve got Quidditch and all that, and now Gran. I just...well, if you ever need help with anything...not that there’s much I could help you with. But if you ever need help with Herbology, or anything like that, I’d be happy to help lighten the load or whatever.”

“Thanks for the offer, Neville.” Harry gave a little whistle and three barn owls swooped down to him, one even landing on his shoulder. Neville’s jaw dropped and the letter slipped from his loose grip. Harry leaned forward and caught it before it hit the floor. If nothing else, Mrs. Longbottom’s lessons were helping with his Seeker reflexes. “It might be nice to get some extra help with Herbology, but you really don’t need to worry about me. I’ll figure it out. Plus, I’ve got Hermione, after all.” Harry tied the letter to the owl on his shoulder and sent him along out the window.

Before Neville could reply, the two of them heard more footsteps coming up the stairs, along with a drawling voice. “Would you just drop it, Pansy? I’ll help you with your essay this afternoon if it’s bothering you so much.”

“That’s not the point, Draco, and you know it. What were you doing with Potter and his two girlfriends?”

Harry heard Malfoy huff in annoyance as Neville’s eyes bulged and he whispered, “You have two girlfriends?” He looked embarrassed but also slightly impressed.

“Of course not. I can barely deal with girls one at a time. I have no idea what I’d do with two of them.” Harry did not want to deal with Draco Malfoy either, but there was only one exit from the owlery, which would lead him right down the narrow staircase Malfoy was currently climbing up. So, Harry grabbed Neville by the forearm and steered him to the back closet where Mr. Filch kept the spare owl pellets and cleaning supplies.

As soon as the two Gryffindors were safely out of sight, Harry kept the door open just a crack, but cast ‘Muffliato’ on himself and Neville; a handy new spell he had learned from the Half Blood Prince.

“What was that?” the other asked.

“It’s a spell that muffles our voices, so they shouldn’t hear us. But keep it down just in case.”

Harry peaked through the crack in time to see Malfoy sauntering up the stairs, followed by several other Slytherins. There was Pansy Parkinson, and Crabbe and Goyle of course. There was also the tall, dark-skinned young man from the Slug Club, Blaise Zabini. Taking up the rear was Theodore Nott, another son of a Death Eater who had attacked the Department of Mysteries. Harry was suddenly very glad he had chosen to avoid a confrontation, even if he was awkwardly stuffed in the shadows of a closet with Neville.

Malfoy was already making his way over to his large pet eagle owl, but Parkinson stomped forward and blocked his way. “Don’t you dare ignore me, Draco! I’ve known you since we

were in diapers, now answer my question. What were you doing with Potter, Weasel, and the Mudblood?"

Harry's blood boiled when he heard Parkinson use that word on his friend, but Neville didn't seem like he was willing to sit idly by. Harry felt the other boy try the move past him for the door, and Harry had to wrestle him back to keep him from blowing their cover. Harry was sure Neville would not be able to take on six Slytherins, even with himself as backup, but Neville didn't seem concerned about the odds.

While Harry shoved Neville back into a large sack of owl pellets, and gave him a warning look not to attempt that again, the conversation continued outside. "For Salazar's sake, Pansy, I don't know why I keep having to repeat myself." Harry made his way back to the crack in the door in time to see Malfoy roll his eyes. The blonde tried to sidestep Parkinson again, but she wouldn't have it. "I thought I made my intentions perfectly clear on the train. I don't want to fight with Potter this year, I offered him a truce."

"Truce?" Nott looked horrified. "But Potter is the enemy. That whole lot are our enemies and Potter's top of the list."

"Yeah," Crabbe agreed. "Potter's no good."

Goyle grunted in agreement.

Zabini was the only one who didn't have a horrified expression. "Look, Draco, I get it. You have enough enemies to deal with right now. Your life would be easier if you crossed Potter off that list. But why have you been following him around like a sad puppy? Do you like him or something?"

"Ew!" Parkinson looked queasy by the very prospect.

"I have *not* been following him around." Harry would have to disagree. "And I most certainly have not been acting like a sad puppy."

"You offered to help Granger find books!" Parkinson was back to pointing her finger viciously at her old friend. "I heard her talking about looking for books in some room, and you ran off to help them. I know it! What kind of books was Potter looking for? What the bleeding hell are you helping him with?"

Draco looked like he was finally acquiescing. "Well, if you must know..." Harry held his breath. "Potter didn't know hardly anything about his lineage. I was helping him research his genealogy." Harry let out the air from his lungs. Malfoy had kept their secret. "I already told you a long time ago that he didn't know he was a wizard until Hogwarts started. I'm helping him catch up."

"Potter? Not know he was a wizard? That can't possibly be true." Nott scoffed. He had missed the conversation on the Hogwarts Express.

"Can't you see he was just lying to you Draco?" Parkinson pleaded.

Meanwhile, Neville once again scooted close to Harry, but this time he didn't try to push the door open, so Harry allowed it. "Is that true Harry? You didn't know you were a wizard? Is that how you ended up with that genealogy book? Malfoy gave it to you?"

"Yeah," Harry whispered. "My, er, muggle relatives didn't like to talk about my Wizarding family. So, I missed out on some stuff. That's why I'm taking lessons with your grandmother, actually. She's teaching me wizarding etiquette and political stuff."

Neville's face went white as a ghost. "Gran is teaching you etiquette? Oh, Harry, I'm so sorry."

Harry just shrugged. "She's...intense. But I can handle it. She's not so bad." At least Mrs. Longbottom would just jab him with her wand instead of smacking him upside the head like Uncle Vernon used to do to try and teach him to 'behave.'

"Would you all just drop it!?" Harry was pulled from his thoughts by Malfoy's shouts. "I know what I'm doing, ok?"

Pansy put her hands on her hips. "Fine, but *we* don't know what you're doing. Who's that letter for? Are you and Potter pen pals now?"

Malfoy immediately hid the letter behind his back. "The letter's for my mother."

"Oh yeah?" Nott sneered. "Why are you hiding it then?"

"That's none of your concern."

With a nod from Theodore Nott, Crabbe and Goyle bounded forward and grabbed Malfoy. Harry was half inclined to go to his rescue, but he had to admit he, too, was curious about Malfoy's letter.

"Should we help him?" Neville whispered.

A few weeks ago, Harry would have easily answered 'No way. He dug his grave and he can rot in it.' Now, Harry said, "Maybe. Just wait a tick. If it looks like he's really in trouble, we'll help."

While Malfoy was thrashing and cursing his so-called friends, Nott plucked the letter from his grasp, only to have it snatched by Pansy Parkinson. She tore the envelope open with mad vigor. "It *is* addressed to his mum," she announced.

Nott tried to read over his shoulder. "What's it about?"

While Nott and Parkinson skimmed the letter, Zabini sneered at Malfoy's mutinous, former body guards. "Theo got his stupid letter. You can let him go now."

"He's asking her to send a book!" Parkinson announced as Crabbe and Goyle stepped away from a very irate Draco Malfoy, whose hand went straight into his pocket and returned with a wand.

“What book did you want that you couldn’t tell us about?” Zabini was asking Malfoy directly, but Nott was already answering.

“He’s asking for ‘The First Step to Guarding Your Mind: Meditation and Breathing Techniques for Clearing Your Mind.’ He’s even asking her to disguise it as something else, since there’s no way it will pass school rules.”

Harry let out a small gasp. Malfoy was asking for that book for him and his friends. If anything happened to Malfoy because of that book, it would be Harry’s fault. “Neville, we might need to help Malfoy after all. Be ready just in case.”

“Ok, Harry.” Neville nodded. He looked nervous, yet completely prepared to follow Harry to hell and back again if necessary. “Whatever you say.”

Malfoy, meanwhile, swiped his wand toward his friends and shouted “Accio letter!” The letter in question flew through the air, back to its rightful owner. “Look what you did Pansy! Now I have to go all the way back to my room to grab another envelope.”

She just shrugged. “They keep spare envelopes in the closet over there. Just grab one of those.”

Harry shoved Neville behind the large sack of owl pellets and looked around for another hiding spot. If only he’d thought to bring his invisibility cloak!

Harry could hear Malfoy slowly getting closer. He could hear Nott complaining. “Why are you studying Mind Magic anyway? If you’re trying so hard to stay under the radar, is it really worth the risk?”

Pansy agreed. “If your new buddy Potter finds out you’re reading books on Mind Magic, that little beacon of Light is going to go straight to the Ministry and report you.”

Even Zabini seemed concerned. “Or more likely he’ll run to the old man. Everyone knows the headmaster’s got Potter wrapped around his finger. I bet Dumbledore’s little whipping boy would be only too happy to run along to his master if he even suspected you might be interested in any form of Ancient Magic.”

Harry frowned as he tried desperately to fit under the bottom shelf of mail supplies. So, Mind Magic *was* a form of Ancient Magic, and Dumbledore had made it illegal. Why? And if Dumbledore was so against it, why had he been so insistent that Harry learn Occlumency last year?

“I told you, I know what I’m doing.” Harry froze when he heard Malfoy’s voice just on the other side of the door. “Besides, none of you really knows anything about Potter. He’s... well...he’s not quite what I thought at first. I just assumed he was some Golden Boy who was obsessed with Light Magic, but there’s more to him than just that.”

“Fine,” Blaise conceded. “Maybe Potter is a complex, multi-faceted person full of depth and nuance. You know you still can’t trust him, though, right?”

“Blaise, I would have thought you of all people would trust my judgement.” When Harry heard Draco place his hand on the doorknob, he finally had to accept that he just wasn’t going to fit under the shelf. He was small, but he wasn’t quite that small. He stood up to face the music. “I know exactly how to handle Harry Potter.”

The door swung open and Harry lifted his head to meet Malfoy’s eyes. He was standing to the side of the closet so the other Slytherins couldn’t see him, but Malfoy definitely could, and he did not look remotely happy about it. Fortunately, Neville was still well hidden behind the owl pellets, but it definitely looked like Harry was, once again, spying on the Slytherins. Which he supposed he was, in a way.

After the initial shock wore off, Malfoy’s eyes immediately narrowed into slits. Harry wasn’t sure what to say, and then he realized he couldn’t really say anything without giving away to the other Slytherins that he was there. Malfoy probably wasn’t going to attack him, but his friends almost certainly would. Without knowing what else to do, Harry reached over and grabbed an envelope from the nearby shelf. He held it up for Malfoy.

The boy let out a long-suffering sigh, snatched the envelope, and then slammed the door shut on his way out. Harry heard a faint click. Malfoy had locked him in.

Neville peaked his head out from behind the sack of pellets. “Did he see you?”

Harry looked around at the small pantry. He was definitely standing in the middle of it. He wasn’t sure how Neville might possibly suspect that Malfoy had *missed* him. “Yeah, Neville, he definitely saw me.”

“Why didn’t he say anything?”

“I’m not sure. Maybe it’s part of the truce?”

Since the door was now shut, Harry had to press his ear to the thick wood to try and hear what was happening in the owlery. The voices were all rather muffled until Parkinson’s shrill voice cried out “Draco, what you’re talking about isn’t a truce. If I didn’t know better, it sounds like you’re trying to befriend him!”

“Well, would that be so bad!?”

Harry heard Neville gasp beside him as the other Slytherins erupted.

Parkinson’s voice was filled with betrayal. “Potter’s never given two shites about a single Slytherin in this school!”

Nott’s voice was filled with contempt. “Potter’s the Dark Lord’s number one target. You’re going to get yourself killed!”

Blaise’s voice was filled with worry. “You can’t trust him, Draco. Potter’s just going to hurt you, and then whose shoulder are you going to cry on?”

“Harry?” Neville tugged on Harry’s t-shirt, as the Slytherins went on about how terrible and untrustworthy Harry was. “What’s going on with you and Malfoy? He’s not really your

friend, is he?"

"No." Harry paused. "Well...not really. We're...I don't know. I think maybe he's trying to make amends. But I don't know why. I think he's probably got *some sort* of ulterior motive, but I don't know what."

"Hmm," Neville looked thoughtful. "It would be weird if you and Malfoy were suddenly friends after everything that's happened between you two."

"I whole-heartedly agree."

"I could see why he'd want to be friends with you, though."

"Really? Because I'm at a loss." Harry pressed his ear to the door again, but the Slytherins were still spewing nonsense.

"You're a really good friend, Harry. You're patient, and loyal, and brave, and everything I wish I was. Who wouldn't want to be your friend?" Neville blushed as he looked down at his toes. "Sometimes Gran talks about what my dad was like at Hogwarts. How he was so good at Defense Against the Dark Arts, and what a great leader he was, and how much people respected him. I think you're a lot more like my dad than I'll ever be."

Harry turned away from the door and looked at the pitiful young man before him. "Look Neville, there's something you should know. I never told anyone else. It's just that, your Gran kept trying to compare me to my dad, too. She was talking just this morning about how great and confident and strong my dad was."

Neville was giving him a watery smile, and Harry found he couldn't meet it. He stared at the ceiling as he continued to speak. "A lot of people always talked about how I was like my dad. How my dad was this amazing guy. He was so brave and good-hearted and fun. People kept telling me I was like him."

"I bet your dad would be really, really proud of you, Harry." Neville certainly looked proud.

"Maybe," Harry conceded. "But I'm not sure how proud I would be of him." Harry glanced at Neville again, to see the boy's face look almost horror-stuck.

"Don't get me wrong," Harry continued. "I love my dad, and he was a good guy...overall. But this is the part no one knows, so please don't tell anyone." Neville nodded solemnly. "One time, I found this pensieve full of memories from this guy who went to school with my dad. Don't ask me how. I wasn't supposed to look, but I couldn't help myself. The first chance I got, I went straight through, and I saw my dad when he was my age. Maybe fifteen."

"That must have been amazing!" Neville was trying to encourage him, but it was having the opposite effect.

"No. It was one of the worst moments of my life. Everyone had always talked about what a great guy my dad was. But he wasn't. He was a bully. He was some pompous prat strutting

around the school like he owned it. I saw him ask out my mum and she told him she's rather date the giant squid."

"How is that possible?" Neville asked. "Why'd they get married?"

"I guess he got more mature as he got older." Harry shrugged. "I asked some of his old friends later. They said he and my mum didn't start dating until their last year at Hogwarts, after he had done some growing up. I mean, don't get me wrong, he definitely wasn't all bad or anything. He was a good guy overall. Very charming. Maybe a bit like the Weasley twins if they had Malfoy's arrogance."

Neville nodded. "Ok. But why are you telling me all this?"

"It's just...people always talked about how great he was. No one ever said a single bad thing about him, and I don't think they were lying, or at least, I don't think they meant to. I think people just liked him and missed him and he'd been gone for so long, everyone just remembered his best qualities."

Understanding dawned in Neville's eyes. "You think Gran just remembers my dad's good traits, and not the bad ones?"

"Look, Neville, I'm not saying your dad was a prat or anything like that. I don't know anything about him. But, I do know you shouldn't try to compare yourself to your grandmother's memory of your dad. Because you're never going to live up, right? She's spent years thinking about all the things that were great about him, and it's fine if you want to think of him as this perfect guy. But just remember that no one's perfect, right?"

"Yeah, ok Harry." Neville looked lost in thought. "Thanks."

While Neville processed the implications of Harry's story, Harry leaned on the door again to try and hear what the Slytherins were up to. He couldn't hear anything at all. The only sound coming from the owlery was the occasional soft hoot. Had Malfoy just left them locked in the closet?

Harry tapped his wand against door knob and thought 'Alohamora.' To his delight, the spell actually worked wordlessly. As he tried to push the door open, he immediately encountered an obstacle, though. Harry could hear an annoyed "Ow!" as the door pushed against something hard.

Harry peaked around the side of the door. "Malfoy! How long were you eavesdropping?"

"How long were you?" the blonde countered.

"At least we only did it on accident. It's not our fault a big gang of Slytherins came up to the owlery while we were here, and we were trying to avoid a fight."

"Well, it's not my fault I went to let you out and I couldn't help but overhear you saying the words 'There's something you should know. I never told anyone else.' What did you expect me to do after that?"

“Piss off!” Harry wasn’t sure if he was answering Malfoy’s question or just responding to it. Either way, as soon as Malfoy stepped out of the path of the door, Harry shoved it open the rest of the way and stormed toward the exit.

Harry wanted to be angry that Malfoy had overheard one of his most personal stories, and in a way, he was. But another, traitorous part of him, was glad that Malfoy had heard. Some small part of him felt relieved, even, that Malfoy understood where he was coming from. Besides, for some unfathomable reason, Harry really didn’t think Malfoy would tell the other students.

Severus threw photo after photo straight into the fireplace, burning away the faded images of cats swatting at the camera, litters of kittens, and angry eyes glaring out from underneath a couch. The woman had claimed there were some photos in this ridiculous pile that actually featured the boy, and Severus was determined to find them. By the time he reached the end of the stack, he had only found two.

The first photo was of a young Potter, perhaps six or seven, sitting on the same armchair that Severus had occupied earlier. He was small, scrawny, and covered with five different cats. He seemed about as pleased with this development as Severus had been.

The second photo also included a cat. In fact, it appeared to simply be a photo taken of her cat sitting on the railing of her front porch. In the background, though, was Potter, running up the street as though his life depended on it. Lumbering after Potter, was what appeared to be a pig in a wig. The child was quite possibly the largest boy Severus had ever seen, with a round, mean face, and a splash of blonde hair.

Severus set the photos aside for now. They didn’t move like wizarding photos would, but he could easily imagine the scene they set. In both photos, Potter had looked almost unhealthy; so frail and skinny and pale. His comically baggy clothes only seemed to draw more attention to this fact. It seemed the puzzle pieces were all fitting together, but Severus did not like the picture they were revealing. He would need to dig up more clues.

Harry opened his eyes to a room he was extremely familiar with. The large, circular space was lined with portraits of snoozing headmasters and headmistresses. Fawkes’s perch stood empty in the far corner. There was even the ornate cabinet where Dumbledore kept the pensieve when not in use. The only difference between this office and his memories, was that sitting behind the large oak desk was not Albus Dumbledore, but Tom Marvolo Riddle.

“How dare you sit there!” Harry marched up to the front of the desk, glaring at the other young man all the while. “That’s the headmaster’s seat. You haven’t earned the right to sit in that chair.”

Riddle was reclining in the ornate piece of furniture, looking quite comfortable while examining one of Dumbledore’s spindly objects. “Neither have at least half the headmasters

and headmistresses who have occupied this seat.” He didn’t even bother to spare Harry a glance as he spoke.

“Dumbledore did!” Harry could barely keep his voice even. He had gotten pretty used to these strange dreams with Tom Riddle and had barely batted an eye when he saw those angelic brunette locks or those snake-like red eyes. But there was just something about Riddle occupying Dumbledore’s rightful seat that didn’t sit well with Harry. “Dumbledore earned that seat.”

Riddle gave an exasperated sigh and narrowed his slitted eyes at Harry, finally making contact. “That’s an interesting perspective.” He turned back to fiddle with the silver object, although he barely seemed to be paying attention. “I suppose an argument could be made that Dumbledore earned his position. It’s certainly true that of all the many terrible things the man has done, he certainly worked his way to his position of power through his own cunning and ingenuity, as opposed to favors, bribery, or nepotism, as so many other headmasters and headmistresses have done.”

Harry scowled at the implications of that comment. “Dumbledore isn’t some cunning mastermind.”

“Even you know that’s not true.”

Harry scowled, but didn’t have much else to say. He knew Dumbledore wasn’t some evil mastermind, but the man did have a cunning mind, and he did always seem to have some master plan that he was working toward that he was very tight-lipped about. At least Riddle had consented that Dumbledore did earn the right to sit in that seat. That was probably the closest thing to a compromise they would reach on the subject of Albus Dumbledore.

Without anywhere else to go, Harry pulled up one of the chintzy seats in front of Dumbledore’s desk. It was, in fact, the same antique chair he had sat in many times before, with the same old-fashioned floral print. Instead of going for the spindly objects, Harry reached for the bowl of lemon drops and plopped one into his mouth. It tasted like the memory of lemon drops, like the echo of a flavor. It was faint, and he could barely feel it on his tongue unless he concentrated.

“You seem rather familiar with this office,” Riddle noted, as he reached for a different spindly object. “As I recall from my days at Hogwarts, most students never even saw the headmaster’s office, since you need a password to even enter.”

Harry just shrugged and tried to hold onto the memory of what Dumbledore’s lemon drops usually tasted like. “Usually, if something is the case for most people, I tend to be the glaring exception.”

Riddle smirked. “So, does Dumbledore call you into his office whenever he’s bored so he can shower you with praise and encouragement, the way Dippet used to do with me?”

Harry forgot all about the lemon drop. “Dippet did that with you?”

Riddle set down the silvery instrument and reached for yet another. "I, too, have always been a glaring exception to the norm."

Riddle's gaze was heated with excitement, and it made Harry slightly uncomfortable. He slid the chair back out and started pacing around the room. It felt a little strange to wonder around the headmaster's office without Dumbledore present, almost like an invasion of his privacy. But it wasn't half as perverse as sitting in his usual seat while Tom Riddle, of all people, claimed Dumbledore's rightful place.

"I don't think Dumbledore ever called me to his office just to compliment me or whatever. And he's not really the type to shower anyone with praise. He's appreciative and all, but not much of a gusher." Harry strolled past the cabinet that held the pensieve and tapped it as he passed. It felt real enough. "I think most of the times that I've been sent to this office were because I was in trouble, or at least because something bad had happened."

Riddle set down the spindly object he was holding and gave Harry his full, undivided attention. "You were in trouble? With Dumbledore? Why?"

"I don't know, this and that." Harry walked past Fawkes's perch and tried not to meet Riddle's hungry gaze. "The first time I was sent here, I was sure I was going to be expelled. It was second year, and everyone seemed to think I was the Heir of Slytherin." At Riddle's disbelieving sneer, Harry clarified. "Well, most of the Hufflepuffs seemed to think I was the Heir of Slytherin, since it had gotten out that I was a parselmouth. I think a lot of the Slytherins and Gryffindors were still pretty skeptical. But then I found the petrified body of this one Hufflepuff boy, Justin, and everyone thought I'd tried to murder him to shut him up. So, I was sent straight to Dumbledore."

"And what happened?"

"I killed his bloody bird...or at least, I thought I did." Harry placed his hand on the empty perch. "I walked in and the poor thing didn't look so good, but when I tried to pet him, he burst into flames right before my eyes." Harry was a little surprised to hear soft laughter coming from the headmaster's usual seat. "I didn't know what to do! I thought I'd killed Dumbledore's bird, and I didn't even know how I'd done it. I thought for sure he was going to expel me after that. I mean, his pet bird was just a pile of ashes."

Harry paused when he heard Riddle's laughter escalate. "You thought you had murdered Dumbledore's prized phoenix! That's brilliant!" Riddle stood up from the headmaster's seat, and sauntered closer to Harry, his eyes alight with mischief. "I want to see a pensieve memory of you telling the old man that you accidentally snuffed out his favorite pet. Oh, please tell me he thought it might be true for just a moment. Please tell me he was worried!"

Harry stepped back from Fawkes's perch as Riddle slowly crept toward it from the opposite side. Harry was a little shocked to see so much amusement on Riddle's face. It didn't seem like it belonged. "He was worried for a moment when he walked into his office and I was practically having a panic attack. But then I told him his bird burst into flames and he just laughed it off."

Riddle now had an arm draped over the perch quite casually. "Of course he laughed. I would have also." Despite being in his enemy's lair, Riddle gave off every impression that he was perfectly comfortable with his environment. Riddle would probably be able to balance a book on his head with no issue. Hell, he could probably curse a little old lady and strangle a puppy without even making it wobble.

Harry scowled at his effortless grace. "It's not that funny, you know."

Riddle kept his hand on the perch, but the rest of his body circled around the post, closer to Harry. "Your ignorance is rather humorous. After all, it's common knowledge that Dumbledore owns a phoenix. Was it really so surprising that the large, red and gold bird burst into flames?"

"Yes! It was!" Harry argued as he tried to walk around Riddle, back toward the front of the room. "Normal people don't keep pets that randomly burst into flames. It's not my fault I assumed that burning into ash was unusual behavior for the bird."

Riddle continued to smirk as he strolled around the room like he owned it. He appeared to be walking in no particular direction, but Harry found that no matter which direction he went, Riddle seemed to keep getting closer. "Very well, Harry. I suppose I'll have to concur. People really oughtn't keep pets that burst into flame." Harry rolled his eyes. Riddle was the last person who should be criticizing other people's pets. "But tell me, Harry. Why was that your first visit to the headmaster's office? What about your previous year at Hogwarts?"

Harry moved closer to the snoozing portraits. The previous headmasters and headmistresses had shown no sign of life since Harry had arrived in the dream office. "I never had a reason to come here my first year."

"Really?" Riddle appeared to be sauntering toward one the shelves, but again, his path took him closer still to Harry. "Even when you thought someone was trying to steal the Philosopher's Stone?"

"Well, in the end, when we were sure Snape was going to go after it soon, we did try to tell Dumbledore, but he'd already been called to the ministry. That's why we took matters into our own hands."

Riddle quirked a curious brow at him. "You didn't think to warn Dumbledore until the very night the Stone was about to be stolen? I know you saw Lord Voldemort in the forest long before that night, or at least what was left of him. It didn't occur to you to run to the headmaster about that?"

Harry paused. It hadn't, actually. Why hadn't it occurred to him to warn Dumbledore that Voldemort was in the forest drinking unicorn blood? "I don't know. I guess I figured no one would believe me. Adults never listen, and they never really do anything to help. I guess, at the time, I didn't have any reason to think Dumbledore would be different."

Riddle was looking quite intently at Harry now. He ceased his pretense of a casual stroll, and began to stalk in a direct path toward Harry. "You didn't trust Dumbledore?"

Harry quickly darted out of Riddle's path and tried to get the desk in between them. "I didn't really trust anyone. I never had a reason to. And I didn't really know Dumbledore back then; we'd barely spoken. I really only knew him by reputation." Harry edged around the desk until he was on Dumbledore's usual side, while Riddle still edged closer to the front of the desk. "But I know better now. Now I know that Dumbledore will believe what I say. Now I know I can trust him, and he'll always try to do what's best for me."

Riddle leaned across the desk, bringing his sculpted face as close to Harry as he could get with the oak desk between them. "Like he did what was best for Sirius Black?"

Harry shot forward and grabbed Riddle by the collar of his starched white uniform. "How dare you! How dare you even say that name!" Harry shook Riddle by his lapels, but the other young man made absolutely no attempt to dislodge himself. "You don't know anything about Sirius. And there wasn't anything Dumbledore could have done. It's Bellatrix's fault. Bellatrix and Voldemort. How dare you blame Dumbledore!"

Harry was a little surprised at how many feelings rushed to the surface when Riddle had spoken that name. After all, it was only a few months ago that Harry was in this same office arguing the exact opposite of what he was now screaming at Tom Riddle. But back then, his anger and pain had been so fresh, and he had been looking for anyone he could blame but himself. Now, even though the memory of Sirius was still painful, it was even more painful to hear Tom bloody Riddle of all people blame Dumbledore for that pain.

Riddle, however, seemed almost completely unaffected by Harry's screaming and shaking. He didn't even have a hair out of place as he leaned forward so that he and Harry were almost nose to nose. "Bellatrix is just a tool, Harry. A weapon. Of course Lord Voldemort was going to send his best tools to carry out his task. But would you have even been there that night, would Sirius Black have been there, if Dumbledore had been honest with you from the start?"

"He just made a mistake." Harry heard the desperation in his voice. He wanted so badly for those words to be true. His hands fell to his sides and he barely noticed that Riddle's fingers were clasping around his own shirt collar. "He didn't want me to get hurt. He was trying to protect me. Dumbledore's the only one I can count on."

"Oh, you can count on Dumbledore all right!" Riddle suddenly shoved Harry back, so he landed roughly in the chair behind him. Dumbledore's chair. "You can count on him to do whatever he feels is necessary to create the vision of the future that he wants to ensure." Riddle lifted his knee so that it was on the desk, and began crawling forward, his eyes never leaving Harry's. "You can count on Dumbledore that if anyone has to be tossed aside in order to ensure his vision of the future, he will sacrifice any number of pawns to see that his victory over Dark Magic is assured."

Harry couldn't take his eyes off Riddle's livid face, a face that was slowly getting closer and closer. "No." His voice was barely above a whisper. "Dumbledore's not like that. That's what Voldemort is like. It's Voldemort that sacrifices people, even his own followers, not Dumbledore."

When Riddle finished crawling over the desk, like a prowling cat, he swung his legs over the edge so that he was sitting right where the desk ended, mere inches from his prey. Harry had no idea how Riddle managed to do this with any amount of dignity, let alone, almost perfect poise. Harry suspected that if Riddle had been balancing Miss Marple's Guide to Etiquette, it would have stayed on his head throughout the entire maneuver.

"Why Harry," his voice was like a purr. "Dumbledore and Lord Voldemort are not so different. Merely two sides of a war. And each side is willing to do whatever it takes to win."

Harry shook his head again, but did not break contact with those deep red eyes. "No. There are things Dumbledore wouldn't be willing to do. Things he would never stoop to. Things that no decent person..."

Harry's voice cut out when Riddle leapt off the edge of the desk and surged forward, grabbing Harry by the chin. "Oh Harry!" Riddle simpered. Then he leaned in so close to Harry's ear that he could feel those soft lips brush against his earlobe. "What makes you think Dumbledore is a decent person?"

Harry gulped as he sat up in his four-poster bed, panting and sweating. It was just a dream, he reminded himself. Just a dream. That was all. Or was it?

Slughorn and Mundungus

The next day in Potions, Slughorn asked them to get into pairs so that they could work together to brew the very complicated Skele-Gro potion. Harry had very painful memories of that potion from second year Quidditch, but he knew he would rather have it than not have any bones.

When Harry turned to Ron, naturally assuming that the two would be partners, Harry was a little surprised to see that Ron had already placed his cauldron next to Hermione's. The young man was even volunteering to grab the ingredients for her. "I might not be that great at potions, but I'm sure I'll do ok with your help, Hermione."

Harry couldn't help but wonder why Ron would choose the help of Hermione over the Half-Blood Prince. Ron had been strangely clingy with Hermione ever since Saturday, when Hermione had shown interest in Malfoy's book collection. The redhead now insisted on sitting next to her at every meal, and even followed her to the library on Sunday for extra study hours. It was as though he were afraid she would wonder over and join the Slytherins if he let her out of his sight.

Ron set down the ingredients while Harry was still looking around for a partner of his own. "Here you go, Hermione. See, I can be helpful, too. I may not have some big fancy library, but I'm a way better partner than Draco Malfoy would ever be."

"Ron, what are you talking about?" Hermione didn't even look up from her task as she verified that he had brought the right ingredients. "Why would I partner with Draco Malfoy? Now you're just being silly. He always partners with Zabini anyways."

At her words, Harry looked over at Blaise Zabini, but he didn't see the tall young man next to Malfoy. Instead, the other Slytherin had decided to partner with Terry Boot from Ravenclaw. Harry looked around for Malfoy, and found him alone in the corner, sorting through his ingredients on his own. How did Malfoy not have a partner? Why weren't any of the other Slytherins working with him? Were they really that upset that Malfoy was acting decent towards Harry?

Harry wondered if he should offer to partner up with Malfoy, since this was sort of his fault. However, before he could gather the courage, he heard a soft "Harry?" from behind him. He turned around to see Ernie MacMillan of Hufflepuff dragging his cauldron over. "Would you like to partner up? I already grabbed all the ingredients we'll need."

Before Harry answered, he glanced back over at Malfoy one last time. Some Ravenclaw girl was grudgingly approaching the only person left without a partner. Harry's guilt was slightly abated. "Yeah alright, Ernie, but let's use your textbook. Mine's got scribbles all over it." Harry didn't want it to become common knowledge that he was getting secret help from the Prince, so he let Ernie take the lead for today.

This time, when Harry left Potions class, he wasn't remotely surprised when a pale hand reached out and yanked him behind the tapestry. Once Malfoy lit the tip of his wand, Harry offered him a half smile. "You know, we've got to stop meeting like this."

"Shut it, Potter." The blonde pulled out a thick text from his bag with the title: Meditation and Breathing Techniques for Clearing your Mind. "Here's your book. I hope you're a little more appreciative about this one, since it's caused me a good deal of trouble."

"Yeah." Harry lifted the book carefully, trying not to upset Malfoy any more. "Sorry about all that. Who knew a truce would upset so many people?"

"I knew they wouldn't be happy." Malfoy began striding down the narrow passageway, taking the long route to the Great Hall, and Harry followed along willingly. "Especially Theo. I knew he would use it as an excuse to try and steal my position in the hierarchy. I expect that from him." Harry really did not understand Slytherin dynamics at all. "But Blaise! He doesn't even want to work with me in class now. I thought...I just thought we were better friends than that."

Harry pushed open the back of the portrait and held it open for Malfoy to follow. The taller young man jumped down easily onto the flagstones beside Harry. "Look, Malfoy, I'm sorry things are weird with you and your friends and your girlfriend."

Malfoy's steps faltered. "Girlfriend? What girlfriend? What are you talking about?"

Harry stopped when he realized Malfoy wasn't following. "Pansy? She's your girlfriend, right?"

"What? No. We're just friends. She's not...my type," he tripped over his words.

"Oh." Harry shrugged and started walking down the corridor again. "Sorry. Anyway, I do appreciate the books you've been giving me. That Dream Magic one was a lot more useful than the ones in the Room of Requirement. Plus, that genealogy thing was actually pretty neat. At least now I know how I'm related to the Blacks. My grandma was one."

"My mother is a Black. That's her maiden name." Malfoy started up the stairs first, and Harry followed.

"That's neat. You and I are probably like third cousins or something. Gosh, I really need to do that Blood Inheritance Test thing and figure out who all I'm related to."

"You haven't done a Blood Inheritance Test!?" Suddenly, the steps lurched beneath them and the entire staircase swiveled toward a new landing.

Harry barely grasped the railing before he tumbled backward. "How does this keep happening to us?"

"Because we keep taking the same route at the same time." Malfoy didn't seem remotely phased by the changing stairs. "Now tell me, Potter, you haven't done a Blood Inheritance Test? Why? When are you taking one? You're taking one soon, right?"

“Bloody hell, Malfoy, why do you care so much?” The stairs reached their new destination, and Harry cut past the Slytherin to get off before the staircase could change its mind again.

“I care, Potter, because you’re from a noble family and you don’t even really know who you are. How can you possibly live your whole life not even knowing who you are or where you came from? What if something happened to you? What if...you died...and you never even knew who you really were?”

“Er, I don’t know. Would a blood test tell me who I *really am*? What does that even mean?” Harry walked down the gallery of disgruntled portraits, with Malfoy right beside him. “Would a blood test tell *you* who *you* are?”

“I did take a Blood Inheritance Test, when I was thirteen, like every other pureblood. And do you know what it told me? That I am a Malfoy. The Heir of Malfoy, to be precise. And I come from generations of Malfoys and other distinguished pureblood families.” The blonde lifted his chin and gave Harry a defiant look, as if he were just waiting for the other boy to hit him with some snarky comeback to that obnoxious answer.

Harry did have to hold his tongue for a moment to stop himself from teasing Malfoy; the Slytherin was so proud of something that seemed so ridiculous to Harry. In the end, he managed to give an earnest smile. “Well, I’ll be honest. That does sound a bit silly, but it is neat that you know so much about where you come from. It would be nice to have something like that.”

At least Harry knew why he never had an Inheritance Test before. That had been the summer Sirius Black had escaped from Azkaban. So, all the adults in his life had probably been pretty distracted.

“You should take an Inheritance Test during the next Hogsmeade trip, the first one’s coming up soon.” Malfoy followed along in step with Harry as they left the glaring portraits behind and entered another gallery full of suits of armor. “You just need to get to Gringotts. If you tell them you’re the Potter Heir and pay a convenience fee, they’ll let you take it right on the spot.”

“Really?” Harry slid down another secret passage that would get them closer to the Great Hall, Malfoy at his side. “That would be great, but there’s no way I can even get to Diagon Alley, let alone Gringotts.”

Malfoy waved that off. “Just take the floo. The ones at Hogwarts are on serious lockdown, but there’s one in the Three Broomsticks. It will take you straight to the Leaky Cauldron, and you can walk from there.”

“Oh sure, I’ll just waltz down the street, no problem.” Harry pulled aside a curtain, and the two of them popped out of the secret passageway and into one of the main corridors on the ground floor. “I think you’re forgetting, Malfoy, that I’m just a tad recognizable.”

Malfoy suddenly looked just as devious as when he had first held out Neville’s Remembrall and dared Harry to chase him. It really should have set off all sorts of alarms in Harry’s mind, but for some reason, it excited him rather than worried him.

“Oh, you’re quite recognizable with this ridiculous hair.” Malfoy swatted a few stray wisps. “And hideous spectacles.” He flicked the hinge of Harry’s glasses. “And scratched up forehead.” He bopped his finger right on Harry’s scar. “But no one’s going to recognize you if you take a Polyjuice potion.”

Harry’s jaw dropped. “You have Polyjuice potion?”

That cocky smirk. “I have Polyjuice potion.”

“From where? You didn’t brew it yourself, did you?”

“I could have. Believe it or not, I’m actually quite good at potions.” Malfoy opened a heavy door, so they were now in the front Entrance Hall. “But no, I stole it from Slughorn, if you must know. The very first day of class when he was showing us those sample potions.”

Harry furrowed his brow. “So, you have Polyjuice potion? And you would let *me* use it?”

Malfoy nodded, but he said, “On one condition.”

Harry hesitated for a moment. They were standing at the large open doors leading to the Great Hall. Neither one of them had crossed the threshold, since they would immediately have to part ways. After all, the Gryffindor Table and the Slytherin Table were on opposite sides of the room. Harry ignored the students who were halfway through lunch and kept his attention entirely on Malfoy. “Alright, I’ll bite. What do you want?”

“I want to go with you. To Diagon Alley and Gringotts.”

Harry quirked a brow. “I thought you were trying to stay out of trouble? You know we could get a month’s worth of detentions if we’re caught. Maybe even suspended.”

“I know.” Malfoy ran his fingers through his soft, blonde hair. “But I still want to do it. It’s worth the risk.”

“Why?”

Malfoy looked so pale and unsure again, but he spoke with confidence. “I just feel like I owe you that much at least. After everything. If something happens to you...later. If you’re killed in the war or whatever, at least you’ll have gotten the answers you were looking for...before the end.” Malfoy let out a sigh. “I just...I never realized that you didn’t know anything about yourself. And you should. You should know who you are and where you come from. I feel like helping you figure that out is probably the least I can do. Just let me assuage *some* of my guilt, ok?”

Despite the fact that Malfoy had barely made eye contact during his little confession, Harry couldn’t help but feel that his old rival was telling the truth. It was a strange feeling, trusting Draco Malfoy. “Yeah, alright Malfoy. If you let me use your potion, you can tag along. At least I know you’re not going to snitch on me, if it means you’ll get in trouble as well.”

They parted ways agreeing that they would sort out the details later.

The amount of homework being thrust at them hadn't subsided in the least by mid-October. Harry and Ron had more or less developed a system for getting all their homework done, while still attending twice-a-week Quidditch practices. It took a lot of help from Hermione, and they usually worked with Neville as well, for Defense and Herbology. Fortunately, their first essays and assignments for the year had been returned with grades just adequate enough that they could still be accepted into the Auror program.

The continuing lessons with Augusta Longbottom were boring but bearable. Harry was definitely improving in his ability to catch books that fell off his head, at least. During their last meeting, she had indicated that Harry was ready to practice a Formal Tea, which meant that they were moving along quicker than she had first anticipated. Thank Merlin.

Harry was also quite proud that he had managed to avoid every single Slug Club meeting so far that year. This despite Professor Slughorn's continued attempts to plan all the meeting times around Harry's schedule. It took a bit of creative lying, but Ginny was happy to always pass on the message to Slughorn that quidditch practice was definitely on Thursday, only for it to suddenly 'change' to Friday at the last minute, or vice versa. Obviously, Hermione didn't particularly approve. But she also knew that Harry was stretched enough as it was, so she restrained herself to the occasional exasperated sigh.

Of course, all of this meant that Harry, Ron, and Hermione had almost no free time to practice their breathing or meditation techniques. They had all read through the first few chapters of Malfoy's book (Hermione had practically memorized the thing). So, they knew what it was they were supposed to be doing. However, there was a big difference between reading about a state of perfect calm and actually achieving a state of perfect calm.

Every time Harry tried to slow his breathing and clear all his thoughts, he found himself getting too upset about what he'd read in the news, or what was going on with the Werewolf Dark Creature bill, or what excuse Snape had come up with to take points from Gryffindor in their latest class. He could clear his thoughts ok, but he just couldn't clear his feelings. For some reason, Harry's emotions seemed to spike every time he tried to relax.

Hermione was having the opposite issue. Clearing her feelings seemed to increase her thoughts. She said that every time she tried to clear her mind, she kept remembering something that she ought to be doing, or something she should have mentioned in her most recent essay. So far, her foray into Mind Magic had led to several bouts of inspiration for ways she could improve her assignments. However, she hadn't really made any progress toward occlumency.

Finally, Ron was having a different issue altogether. It seemed that he had no problem slowing his breathing or clearing his mind at all. However, the last few times he had attempted this, Harry and Hermione had found him snoring in an armchair about ten minutes later. While falling asleep was definitely one way to keep someone from reading your mind, they were pretty sure that mastering occlumency required you to be awake.

So, by the time the first Hogsmeade trip finally rolled around, Harry was pretty excited to visit Gringotts and learn about his family history, but a little embarrassed that he'd have to

admit to Malfoy that none of their trio were ready for any new books on Mind Magic. They were all still trying to master step one.

On Saturday morning, the students finally had their first chance of the year to leave the school grounds and visit Hogsmeade village. Harry and his two best friends were pleased to be rid of Filch's latest security measure, his obnoxious Sneak-O-Scope. At least, until they made it into the fresh air and realized how unseasonably cold it was for October. The entire walk to Hogsmeade, they huddled close together, shivering and trying to hide from the chilly winds. However, Harry still took the opportunity to go over their plans.

"Ok," he began explaining through chattering teeth. "McGonagall told me there's going to be extra security in Hogsmeade today. Apparently, the whole village is crawling with Aurors. That means we need to head straight for the Three Broomsticks, find the first two adults we can, and get a couple hairs without anyone noticing. Malfoy should be there shortly after us, and I'm sure he'll complain if we make him wait alone in the bathroom for too long."

They had decided not to take the Polyjuice potion until they arrived in Hogsmeade, since the effects only lasted an hour and it took about twenty minutes to walk to the village even at a quick pace. Besides, if they used the hairs of some patrons at the pub, it would look less suspicious than a couple random students, who might appear too young to be wondering around Diagon Alley alone.

"Are you sure you want to do this, mate?" Ron prodded. "I mean, maybe you and I can just pinch Malfoy's Polyjuice potion, leave him at the pub, and go just the two of us? It'll be a regular adventure like old times!"

Despite Hermione's general disapproval of anything against the rules, it had been Ron who was most outspoken against Harry's plan to sneak to Gringotts. However, his strong aversion to the whole idea seemed to center entirely around the fact that Malfoy was involved. Despite Harry's reassurances, Ron was convinced that Malfoy was going to use the situation as an excuse to do *something* against Harry. The problem was, none of them could come up with any reasonable theories about what that *something* could be.

Harry was getting a little tired of arguing about it. Even Hermione had conceded that it was probably safer to bring Malfoy along, since they would have a form of insurance in case Malfoy decided to snitch on Harry.

Harry tried explaining the situation one more time. "Look, Ron, if we steal his potion, he's just going to run straight to a teacher to let them know we snuck out of Hogsmeade. Even if he gets in trouble for having the potion to begin with, he'll know that we're going to get in a lot more trouble. Besides, while I'm off with him, I need you to act as my decoy, remember? There's no way I want Malfoy pretending to be me for an hour. Merlin knows what he'd get up to."

"I really hope this is worth it, Harry," Hermione said. "This is an awful lot of risk. I just hope the reward compares."

They had barely passed into the main shopping area of the small village when Harry heard a boisterous voice. "Harry, m'boy! What a coincidence!"

"Oh no," Harry muttered as the trio was intercepted by the rotund form of Horace Slughorn. The man was just making his way out of Honeydukes, his arms laden with bags of sweets. Harry really was in no mood to make small talk with the overenthusiastic Potions professor. Not only did they need to hurry and get to the Three Broomsticks so they could steal some hair from some strangers, he was also eager to get out of the biting Autumn winds. "Er, hello sir. We were just heading to the pub, actually. Going to warm up. We'll see you later."

"Oh, what a wonderful idea! I'll join you."

Harry sighed inwardly as Slughorn squeezed between him and Hermione, completely ignoring Ron's existence. "So, Harry, m'boy. You've been quite busy with all those Quidditch practices. But I think I've got your schedule figured out now. This next week we're going to have a Slug Club meeting on Monday. I know for a fact you don't have Quidditch that day. So, you should be able to make it, correct?"

Harry almost laughed at the coincidence. "Actually, no sir. I have a meeting with Dumbledore that night."

It was true. After several days of silence, Hedwig had finally returned with Dumbledore's response about a week ago.

Dear Harry,

I'm very pleased to hear that you are making progress with Augusta. She has written to me, as well, and speaks highly of you.

I'm also delighted to hear that you have taken an enthusiastic interest in the Werewolf Dark Creature Bill. This is actually a very important bill for our side, and I'm glad to know I have your support. Fortunately, the situation is not imminent, and we will have time to discuss the matter in person before any voting takes place.

I'm sorry I've been away for so long. Please believe that the work I am doing is important. I will return to the school next weekend, and I would like to hold our next lesson on Monday the 14th of October.

In the meantime, please make sure you are still focusing on your studies and do keep safe.

Sincerely,

Headmaster Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore

P.S. I have already begun work on Mr. Shunpike's Defense. I will certainly let you know if there is anything you can do that will help his case.

Harry tried not to look too pleased at Slughorn's disappointed expression. "Sorry sir, but I made plans with the headmaster over a week ago, and I'm afraid it can't be changed now."

"Well, that is understandable, but you really must come to a meeting soon. Miss Granger here just loves them! Why don't you tell him, m'girl?"

Hermione blushed. "Oh, er, yes. They're actually quite..." She caught a glimpse at Ron's sour expression. "...boring?" she half-mumbled as if hoping Slughorn wouldn't hear her.

Fortunately, the Potions professor, at this point, wasn't paying the least attention. As they came upon the cheerful pub, the man had spotted two familiar faces. "Why, if it isn't Abe! And Mr. Fletcher! What are you two up to this fine morning?"

Harry followed Slughorn's line of sight toward two people he had seen before. The shorter figure was the bandy-legged, poorly shaven form of Mundungus Fletcher. He was looking as shifty as always. Harry also recognized the taller figure as the surly old man who ran the Hog's Head. Apparently, his name was Abe.

The silvery haired bartender barely spared Harry and his friends a glance before he mumbled "Just leaving," and headed off down the street.

While Harry and the others were distracted, he heard Slughorn shout "Ow!"

Harry immediately turned to see the professor giving Hermione a suspicious look. "Sorry, professor," she apologized, looking perfectly contrite. Harry watched her quickly stow her hands back in her pocket. "You had a bug in your hair, but I think I got it." When Harry met Hermione's eyes, she gave him a significant look, and he knew they had one hair taken care of. They just needed one more.

"Oh. Well, thank you, I suppose." Slughorn turned back to Mundungus, who seemed to be trying to draw as little attention to himself as possible. "Anyway, Mr. Fletcher, it is quite fortuitous running into you. I heard through the grapevine that you have recently come into possession of some inexpensive, second-hand cauldrons and perhaps some other potion supplies. I'd love to discuss prices."

"Er, could be." Mundungus looked exceptionally nervous and he kept glancing between Slughorn and Harry. The latter had no doubt that Mundungus was trying to pawn off stolen goods, but he wasn't quite sure why the cagey man was looking so apprehensive at seeing Harry. After all, Harry had met Mundungus several times before. It wasn't as though they had a contentious relationship. Yet, the ginger-haired man seemed to be holding his battered suitcase to his chest like a shield.

"Now now, Mr. Fletcher. Don't be so shy. As long as your prices are reasonable, you know I'm good for it." Slughorn watched as Mundungus's eyes once again darted toward Harry. "Oh, don't you worry about young Harry here. He's quite the potions expert as well. In fact, he might be interested in some potion's ingredients for himself."

Mundungus seemed anything but reassured at Slughorn's words. "Yeah, right. Maybe we could discuss this later Mr. Slughorn. We could chat another time...in private."

"Of course. If you're busy, I understand. I just wanted Harry here to know what an excellent source of ingredients you are." He elbowed Harry encouragingly, but couldn't put his arm on Harry's shoulder like usual, since they were still filled with Honeydukes bags. "Harry, m'boy, you remember Mr. Fletcher here. His prices are half what they charge at the apothecary. And he can usually get things that aren't as widely...approved of. Perhaps you two could exchange contact information."

Mundungus looked almost green at this point. "Er...maybe another time."

"It's ok," Harry really wasn't sure what was going on with the old thief, but he tried to put the man out of his misery. "I already know how to get ahold of him if I need to." The man was in the Order after all.

"You do!?" Instead of looking relieved, Mundungus seemed horrified by this revelation.

"Oh wonderful!" Slughorn boasted, completely misreading the situation, or perhaps just not caring. "You know, Miss Granger, you should get into contact with Mr. Fletcher as well."

"I should?" Both Hermione and Ron seemed completely baffled by what was going on.

"Yes, of course. You have a head for books, as I recall, and Mr. Fletcher here seems to have access to quite a library that he's been selling at a very reasonable rate. Why just this last summer he sold me a particularly ancient Grimoire that was filled with some very impressive secret magic. No idea where he found the thing. Very impressive contacts he must have. Why, I thought there was only one copy left in Britain, which belonged to the Black Family, but then he..."

Slughorn's voice petered out as Harry grabbed Mundungus by his collar and slammed him into the side of the Three Broomsticks. "It belonged to the Black Family?!" The wiry little man tried to scramble out from beneath the Gryffindor, but Harry held tight. "You've been stealing his stuff? How long have you been casing the place?"

"What is the meaning of this young man?" Slughorn stammered, as Mundugus dropped his suitcase in his attempt to shove Harry off him. The battered old case fell to the ground with a thump and a pile of stolen silverware and candlesticks spilled out into the chilly air.

"Did you know Sirius named me his heir?" Harry shouted at Mundugus. The ginger-haired man shook like a leaf in the wind. "Did you know it was *my stuff* you were selling off? What price would have given me for those bloody ingredients? Do I get half off if they're already mine?"

"Harry," Hermione whispered. "People are watching."

"Harry, mate, come on. We're late already. He's not worth it." Ron reminded him.

Harry was too mad to think rationally. He didn't actually care that Mundungus would have tried to sell him his own belongings. He already knew Dung was a conman and a trickster. What bothered him was that the bastard was stealing *Sirius's* things. Sure, Sirius hadn't really cared about that stuff, but his godfather had still taken the time to pass them on to Harry. And Harry would be damned if he let Sirius's final gifts to him be sold off by Mundungus Fletcher.

On the other hand, they really were running late. Malfoy was probably fuming, waiting around in the loo. "If I ever catch you with Black family heirlooms again, you'll find out exactly why they're considered a Dark Family." Harry wasn't exactly sure what he was threatening, but it seemed to do the trick. As soon as he let go of the shorter man's robes, Dung crumpled away and went running down the street. He didn't even bother to grab the suitcase.

Slughorn mumbled something about giving Mr. Fletcher a stern talking to and rushed after him.

"I'd bet five galleons that 'stern talk' involves the price of cauldrons," Ron muttered.

"Whatever," Harry sighed, as he scooped the silver back into the battered old case. "I guess I'll just hold on to this stuff for now. I'm certainly not going to trust Mundungus to put it back. If I ever see that bastard again it will be too soon."

"I don't know, Harry." Hermione leaned forward and plucked a wiry ginger hair from his shoulder. "I think you might be seeing him again quite soon."

"Oh no," Harry shook his head. "No way. Not him."

"Come on, mate," Ron implored. "We were supposed to meet Malfoy ten minutes ago. We don't have time to try and steal another hair."

"Fine," Harry conceded. After all, what other choice did they have? "But I'm going as Slughorn. There is absolutely no way I'm going to be Mundungus for an hour."

"There is absolutely no way you're going to be Slughorn for an hour." Malfoy held up the white hair and the orange hair with a thoughtful expression. He handed Harry the wiry ginger one. "Here, you can be the other fellow."

"What? No." Harry refused to take the hair. "I already called dibs on Slughorn."

He, Ron, and Malfoy were crowded in the small men's restroom at the back of the Three Broomsticks. Hermione gave a soft tap from the other side of the door. "Hurry up in there, the Aurors are getting suspicious."

As soon as Harry and Ron had entered the busy pub, they immediately noticed the two Aurors sitting in the corner, keeping an eye on things. There was no doubt the two of them

had noticed Harry, as well. They had watched fervently as Harry walked through the pub, past the other students, and entered the loo.

The three of them were banking on the fact that everyone would notice Harry Potter entering and leaving the bathroom, but no one would really notice that Ron had entered as well, or that Slughorn and another fellow exited.

Malfoy quickly transfigured three bars of soap into goblets and poured out three portions of the thick potion. He turned and plucked a hair from Harry's head, none too gently. "You can't be Slughorn, he's way too recognizable. Lots of people know him and any one of them might approach him. I can't imagine what you were thinking when you took his hair instead of just some random nobody."

"We were in a bit of a hurry," Harry defended. "Besides, I'm used to people approaching me. I can deal with it."

Malfoy scowled at Harry as he dropped a single hair into the three different potions. "You're used to being rude and awkward to people who approach you," Malfoy corrected. "Slughorn is the quintessential Slytherin. He knows pureblood politics better than almost anyone. There's no conceivable way anyone would believe you are Horace Slughorn. Not if they know the man."

They watched as the potions slowly changed colors, picking up the characteristics of the person who provided the final ingredient. Mundungus's looked like watery porridge. Slughorn's looked overly sweet and syrupy. Harry's seemed to shine as it turned a brilliant gold. "Ugh, of course," Malfoy rolled his eyes. "Even your damned Polyjuice potion is gold, bloody Chosen Boy."

Ron reached for the golden goblet with relief. It certainly looked a lot more appetizing than the other two options. Malfoy shoved the lumpy potion at Harry while he held the syrupy one close. "Bottom's up, Potter." Harry stared at Mundungus's potion with disgust.

"Seriously, you three," Hermione called again from the other side of the door. "The Aurors look like they're about to come check on you."

Harry scowled and finally took the potion from Malfoy's hand. "Fine, it's just one hour, anyway." He glanced at his watch one final time before he brought the potion to his lips. "Wait just one minute. It'll be exactly 11:45." The other two nodded, neither seemed particularly eager to drink their respective potions. "Remember Ron, we'll try to be back well before 12:45, but if we're running late, make sure you get to the bathroom before you change back. We might be able to buy a few extra minutes just in case. I've got my invisibility cloak with me, so we might be able to sneak back in." The redhead nodded.

"Ok, one...two...three." They downed the three potions at the same time.

A couple minutes later, the Aurors were getting quite antsy that the Boy-Who-Lived had been in the bathroom for quite some time. They slowly stood and made their way to the door at the

back of the pub. A small girl with bushy brown hair was standing next to the door while holding a battered old suitcase. It was as if she were keeping guard for something. “Is Harry Potter still in there?” one of them asked her.

“Er...yes?”

It wasn't a very reassuring response, so one of them pounded on the door. “Mr. Potter? Are you still in there? Is everything alright?”

There was no answer. The two men shared a look and then pushed the door open.

Inside were three figures staring at themselves in the mirror. One was definitely Harry Potter. He looked quite the same as he had when he first walked into the bathroom, except that now, suddenly, his Hogwarts robes seemed much too long for him.

Another figure, who they recognized as the acclaimed potions master, Horace Slughorn, was casting a spell on the robes in question. “How is it possible you two don't know how to transfigure fabrics?” he was grumbling. He cast a spell to shorten the length of Mr. Potter's robes, so that they fit once again.

A third figure, a bandy-legged ginger-haired man, was still examining himself in the mirror with a frown. “Excuse us if we don't wear clothes tailored to fit like a glove,” he countered. When he caught sight of the two Aurors in the mirror, he turned to face them. “Er, can we help you?”

The two Aurors frowned at the three men adjusting each other's outfits in the loo. It was highly suspicious, but they couldn't really see anything technically wrong happening. “Are you alright Mr. Potter?”

“Yeah.” It was the short, ginger-haired man who answered. “I mean, Harry, I think they asked you a question...” He turned and gave Harry Potter a meaningful look.

“Oh, right.” The dark-haired young man instantly blushed. He set the wire-rimmed glasses back on his face and blinked at the two towering figures. The Aurors wondered why the boy had taken his glasses off to begin with. “I mean, yeah, I'm ok. Everything's fine here.”

The young woman waiting outside the loo peaked around the corner. “Harry?” she asked.

The figure who was clearly Harry Potter strode forward confidently. “Yep, that's me,” he said. He swaggered over to the girl with his head held high. “Come on Hermione, let's go see if I can get a free butterbeer. After all, I'm the Boy-Who-Lived.”

She sighed but followed after him. The two Aurors gave a final suspicious look toward the other two men who were watching Harry Potter with obvious annoyance. “What were you two doing?” one of the Aurors asked.

The potions master gave them an incredibly haughty expression. “We were just leaving,” he announced. And without further ado, the two of them hurried out of the restroom, across the pub, and through the fireplace floo to who-knew-where.

Severus Snape frowned when he saw Molly approaching along with Arthur. He had asked the head of the Weasley clan to join him for lunch, hoping to get some information out of him. However, it hadn't occurred to the professor that the anxious man would drag his wife along. Or more likely, that she would demand to join.

Apparently, the woman didn't want to be left home alone with her future daughter-in-law and had insisted on tagging along. Although, Molly Weasley gave Severus a look that implied that his company had only barely won out over a spoilt part-veela.

The three of them were the only customers in the entire Leaky Cauldron. Ever since the newspapers started warning everyone that the Dark Lord and his followers were at large once again, Severus had hardly seen anyone actually sitting down in the rather exposed pub. Severus himself was probably one of very few people who didn't fear the Death Eaters, the Ministry, or the Order of the Phoenix, but he still chose a quiet corner of pub away from any through traffic. He didn't want to be disturbed after all.

Arthur Weasley was blushing as he sat across from the sallow-faced man. "Sorry Severus. I wasn't exactly sure what it was you wanted to talk about. I wouldn't have brought Molly along without an invitation, but you know how wives can be." He paused when he caught sight of Severus's livid expression. "Or perhaps not..."

"Don't apologize to him, Arthur dear." The woman was pulling out some knitting as she settled into the bench seat. "When you invite a married man out for a meal, it's implied that his wife can join too, if she wants."

Severus highly disagreed with that statement, but he chose not to argue over something so trivial at a time like this. "It hardly matters either way. In fact, it may be beneficial that you chose to insinuate yourself in this matter, madam. I asked you to join me today to discuss Harry Potter."

Arthur Weasley looked startled. "Why would *you* want to talk about *Harry*?"

Molly Weasley almost dropped her knitting. "Is Harry alright? Oh, that poor dear! He just can't seem to catch a break. What's the matter with him? What happened?"

Severus suppressed a sigh. Of course they would instantly jump to the conclusion that the boy was in some sort of distress. Potter did have a knack for getting into such situations. "Believe it or not, I was actually going to ask *you* that question, madam."

Without going too detailed with his specific concerns, Severus mentioned that he was having some worries about the suitability of Potter's current guardians. The moment the potions master brought up the subject of Potter's muggle relatives, the two purebloods instantly took on dour expressions. Much like Hagrid and Mrs. Figg, the Weasleys seemed to have nothing nice to say about the Dursleys. However, they were much more hesitant to outright erupt with accusations. It seemed that neither of them really wanted to complain too much about Potter's biological family, but their opinion also seemed highly tainted by the typical pureblood belief that all muggles were harmless and silly.

Molly began almost every sentence with “Now, you know I don’t like to speak ill of people who are less fortunate than ourselves, but those people...” Arthur, meanwhile, spoke as though he was simultaneously jealous that Harry Potter had the privilege of growing up around muggles and seeing them in their ‘natural environment’ while also pitying the boy for having such unpleasant guardians.

As the conversation continued, Severus barely touched the soup he had ordered. Far more concerned with his interrogation than his actual meal. “What do you mean unpleasant? Can you be more specific?”

Arthur sighed. He, too, had barely touched his steak and kidney pie. “Well, I didn’t mean unpleasant. That wasn’t a very nice word, was it? I mean, they’re Harry’s family, after all, and I’m sure they love him a great deal deep down. It’s just, I found his uncle to be rather... disagreeable. In his defense, I had just blown up half his living room, but then, who doesn’t have a floo-size fireplace anywhere in their home? Of course, I haven’t met many other muggles. I’m not entirely sure how they usually act amongst themselves. But I did meet the Grangers - Hermione’s parents - on more than one occasion. And I must say, I found them utterly fascinating.”

Molly focused on her knitting as her husband rambled on about muggles. However, she was incapable of holding back her own opinion. “What Arthur is trying to say is that their care for Harry could certainly be better, but it’s not really their fault, obviously. You can’t really blame a couple muggles for not being able to properly care for a wizard child. And, I mean, it’s obviously quite a burden for them to care for another child in addition to their own.”

Severus couldn’t really see why it would be such a daunting obligation when Potter was gone at boarding school nine months out of the year. Besides, the Dursley’s house had seemed quite nice, so they clearly weren’t lacking for money. But then, Potter had always had a knack for trouble. Severus could barely stand to be in the same room with the boy for their Defense classes twice a week. But Severus detested the boy. It wasn’t as though Harry Potter’s family detested him. But then, Severus was beginning to suspect they might.

“You said that their care could certainly be better. In what ways are they not properly caring for the boy?”

Molly immediately set her knitting in her lap. Arthur set down his fork. They turned to look at each other and shared one of those looks that conveyed a language only spoken by long married couples. And then the dams burst and they both began speaking at once.

“...skinny as a rake. Barely any meat on his bones. Can’t even afford to feed him a decent meal...”

“...never has any of his summer homework done by the time he comes to stay. They can’t even help him with his homework...”

“...I have to owl him baked goods, and sweet breads, and meat pies every summer. If I didn’t send him care packages every week, Merlin knows how he’d get any proper nutrition...”

“...didn’t know anything about Sirius escaping Azkaban when that happened. And then he didn’t know anything about the Quidditch World Cup or the minister’s falling out with Dumbledore. Never gets any proper news out there...”

“...wasn’t expecting any presents for Christmas. Apparently, his aunt and uncle never get him anything. I mean, even if you can’t afford to buy a gift, at least send him *something*...”

“...I know most of our boys have to wear second-hand clothes as well, but at least they fit! He looks like he’s being swallowed by some of those outfits they make him wear...”

“...he was wondering around the train station all alone. No one was with him. He had no idea how to get onto the platform. And his glasses were broken clear in half and held together with tape. Tape!”

“...it was right after Ron’s first year at Hogwarts. He didn’t respond to any of his mail. Not one letter. Apparently, someone was keeping his mail from him. Harry claimed some house elf was involved, but I think his relatives were holding his mail...”

“...Fred and George wouldn’t stop yammering about those muggles for days after they picked Harry up in the Ford Anglia. They were talking like the poor dear was some sort of prisoner. Of course, they were exaggerating quite a bit to try and get out of trouble, but it didn’t paint a very nice picture. It sounded like Harry was having a terrible summer, but I’m sure his uncle didn’t actually put bars on his window...”

Severus couldn’t help but interrupt. “Bars on his window?”

Arthur nodded. “According to the twins. But they’re not exactly a reliable source. Besides, if his uncle had ever done anything half that atrocious, I’m sure Harry would come and tell us right away.”

Severus narrowed his eyes in thought. “Perhaps.”

Suddenly, the fireplace across the pub erupted in green flames and two figures stepped out of the floo. It was Horace Slughorn and Mundungus Fletcher. The two of them barely spared a glance around the tavern they had just entered. Instead, the men marched straight for the back entrance that led to the alley. However, Severus was not about to let them get away that easily.

“Horace?” he called after his fellow professor. It seemed to have no effect. “Horace?” he tried again, even louder. The walrus of a man made no indication that he was even aware of Severus calling out his name. The two newcomers had almost made it to the back door when Severus whipped out his wand and cast a powerful shield in their path.

Horace looked completely flustered when he ran head first into a shield set directly in his path. Mundungus, however, recovered surprisingly quickly. The ginger-haired man spun around fast, with his wand instantly in his hand, as he scanned around for the source of the shield. When his eyes met Severus’s, they widened almost comically.

Severus stood from his seat, allowing his imposing height to speak for itself. “Horace, I didn’t mean to so rudely impede you. However, I called your name twice to no avail.”

Horace also didn’t seem particularly happy to see the other potions master. However, he didn’t seem quite as horrified as Mundungus, who was gaping from Severus to Arthur to Molly as though he couldn’t wrap his head around what his eyes were seeing. Despite the fact that Severus had addressed Horace directly, it was the professor’s wiry little companion who answered. “So what? Maybe he just didn’t want to talk to you, Snape. What are you doing here anyway?”

Horace elbowed him quite sharply. “Please ignore my friend here. He has absolutely no manners whatsoever. I didn’t mean to brush you off Severus. It’s always wonderful to see you, of course. However, the two of us are in a bit of a hurry, so if you’ll excuse us...”

“Yes, I imagine you would be in a hurry,” Severus interrupted. “You must be in quite a hurry to return to Hogsmeade. Since, I recall, you volunteered to act as chaperone this weekend and should be there, at the village, watching the students. Now. As we speak.”

“Yes, of course.” Horace recovered quickly. “I’ve been at Hogsmeade all morning, as you can imagine. I just had to run out and take care of the quickest of errands. So, I asked one of those handy Aurors to cover for me while I was away. So, no need to fret about that, my dear Severus. I’ll just pop along to take care of a quick matter with my friend Mr. Fletcher here, and then I’ll be back to supervising young minds before you can say ‘Half-Off Cauldrons.’” Horace gave a cheerful wink at that.

Severus scowled at the sheer audacity of the man, but it didn’t particularly surprise him. Instead, Severus focused his attention on Mundungus Fletcher. The man had been trying to give Molly Weasley a cheerful wave, and then he began pouting when she gave him a disapproving scowl.

“Mundungus, before you wander around the streets on some...errand.” The bandy-legged man turned his attention to Severus when he heard his name, and his demeanor instantly became more guarded. “I have actually been meaning to speak with you. Or at least, warn you.”

“What would you possibly want to warn me about?” The man looked even more skeptical of Severus than he usually was. He scowled at Severus like he would very much like to punch him in the face.

The professor did not particularly appreciate that look, but he still felt obligated to warn Mundungus. After all, the man was in danger because of what Severus himself had revealed. “The Dark Lord seems to be under the impression that you stole something of great value from him. Do not ask me what. I have no idea. However, you may want to lie low for the time being, as I’ve no doubt he will have agents on the move hoping to recover this item from you.”

Severus thought he was more than prepared for Mundungus’s reaction. The man was nothing if not a consummate coward, after all. Severus had been prepared for the man to panic, to cry, to beg Severus to protect or hide him. He was prepared to watch Mundungus fall into a pitiful

heap on the floor or run for the hills without even a 'good-bye.' However, Severus was not at all prepared for what actually happened.

Mundungus Fletcher, the sniveling sneak of a man, actually rolled his eyes at the news that the Dark Lord was hunting him. And his reaction only got stranger from there. "Ugh... you've got to be kidding me!" If anything, Mundungus seemed annoyed by this revelation. He certainly wasn't showing any signs of fear.

"Er, Dung?" Arthur interrupted. "I'm not sure if you heard Severus correctly. He just said that You-Know-Who was trying to find you...personally."

"Oh, I heard him!" Mundungus huffed. "And it doesn't surprise me at all. Of course I would steal some super secret valuable doodad from Voldemort himself. Of course I would be that stupid. I don't know what you all expected." He pinched the bridge of his nose. "Merlin, why does this always happen to me?"

Horace seemed equally horrified by Mundugus's reaction. Or perhaps he was just aghast at hearing the Dark Lord's name. "Er, Mr. Fletcher? Mundungus?"

The little thief startled at the name, as though he had only just remembered Horace was there. "Oh yes, of course. Er, thanks for the warning, Snape, but we really must be going. Got that errand after all."

Without any further ado, the two of them slipped out the backdoor just as they had tried to do earlier.

Molly picked up her knitting once again. "Well, that was...odd."

"Hmm, yes," her husband agreed. "Do you think one of us should follow them? I mean, they seemed like they might be up to something."

"They are obviously up to something." Severus took another spoonful of his soup, not letting the interruption spoil his appetite. "However, it certainly doesn't affect any of us, so I could hardly care less. After all, it's not as though either of those two idiots are my concern or responsibility."

A Quick Trip to the Bank

Chapter Notes

****This Chapter was edited on April 6, 2020.**

As soon as Harry and Malfoy (still disguised as Mundungus Fletcher and Professor Slughorn) passed through the brick archway into Diagon Alley, they immediately breathed a collective sigh of relief. “Phew,” Harry panted in Mundungus’s wheezy voice. “That was a close one. I thought for sure Snape was going to catch us.”

“Well, certainly with your abysmal acting skills, Potter. Merlin, have you ever lied in your life?” Malfoy’s sharp tone sounded strange when combined with Slughorn’s jovial voice.

Harry brushed the dust off his transfigured robes and began the trek down the cobbled lane. “Er, I’ve actually never been great at keeping things bottled up. I have a bit of a habit of speaking before thinking, so lying’s not really my thing.”

“You don’t say?” Malfoy rolled his now watery blue eyes. Even with Slughorn’s usual guffaw, Harry could almost taste the sarcasm. “I never would have noticed!”

Just then, a tall man with yellow blonde hair waltzed up to them, all smiles. “Why Horace, dear fellow, what a coincidence? What brings you to Diagon Alley on such a chilly and unpleasant day?”

As soon as the stranger called Professor Slughorn by his first name, Harry had begun to panic. However, Malfoy seemed to beam with joy and spoke without missing a beat. “Why Lord Greengrass! I don’t see how it could be considered an unpleasant day if I’m running into you. It really is just corking to see an upstanding public figure such as yourself.”

Harry had to stifle his laughter at the word ‘corking.’ Who said that? Slughorn’s pale eyes gave him a warning look before he continued. “Mr. Fletcher and I were just on a quick errand to the bank.”

The blonde man, called Lord Greengrass, gave Slughorn’s companion a scathing look. Harry tried not to take it personally. After all, Mundungus Fletcher probably deserved a scathing look. “Oh, I see. But what is this Lord Greengrass nonsense, Horace? We are friends, of course. Please, call me Peneus.”

“Why of course, Peneus, if you insist.”

“So, Horace, I heard you came out of retirement? How are things at Hogwarts? I certainly hope you’re still able to get your hands on that elven mead you’ve always preferred? I’ll have to send you a bottle. You were always such an inspiring teacher. A man such as you doesn’t

deserve to drink common firewhiskey. Both my daughters insist you're their new favorite teacher. I certainly hope they're performing well in your Potions class? They're living up to the family name I presume?"

Harry tried to keep the look of disgust off his face at the man's obvious pandering and bribery, but Malfoy could not have looked more pleased. It was hard to tell if the young man was actually that excited about the prospect of Slughorn getting free mead, or if he was just a really good actor. "Oh, yes, Peneus, you should be quite proud of those two girls. Daphne's not exactly a natural, as you know. But the private lessons must have really helped, because she's getting on just fine. And, of course, I'm sure you've noticed Astoria has quite the penchant for potions."

"Excellent, I'll let you get along with your errand, then. Always good to see you, old friend. And I'll be sure to send along the finest of elf-made mead."

As soon as the blonde man had wondered off, Harry barely had a moment to wrap his head around what had just happened when Malfoy began speaking again. "So anyway, Potter, as I was saying, you really need to work on your ability to lie convincingly. Otherwise, people will walk all over you."

Harry hurried after Malfoy, who was surprisingly quick despite Slughorn's girth. "Woah, hold up. How did you know that man's daughters? For all you know they're failing potions and he's going to figure out you're not the real Slughorn."

Malfoy rolled Slughorn's eyes again. "Daphne is most certainly not failing potions. She's in our bloody Potions class, Potter. She partnered with Theo during the last lesson. Or do you simply not notice things that don't directly revolve around you?"

"She's in our class? Really? Wait, is she that blonde girl that hangs around Parkinson?"

Harry wasn't sure he had ever seen such an annoyed look on Slughorn's face, but before Malfoy could berate him for his lack of knowledge of their Slytherin classmates, they were interrupted yet again.

"Well if it isn't Professor Slughorn himself!" Suddenly, a slender woman with long legs and even longer ash brown hair zeroed in on Malfoy with a single-minded focus. "I heard a rumor you were back at Hogwarts and back in the public eye. Good to see that sometimes the gossipers are right. I certainly hope this means you're going to start up your annual Yuletide parties again. I think I got my first big break at the one my sixth year."

"Why Cynthia, so good to see you again." Harry once again had to hold back his shock that Malfoy was able to come up with these names. "Yes, the rumors are true for once, I'm back where I belong, and you can bet your bottom knut that this year's Yuletide party will be one for the books. You simply must attend, dear girl." Harry wasn't sure if this woman could be considered a girl. Although she was rather pretty, with sleek and professional robes, she looked to be at least in her mid-thirties.

Cynthia didn't seem to mind though, as she let Malfoy continue to gush as the real Slughorn likely would have. "I read your most recent exposé on the Goblin Liaison Office and all the

commotion happening there. Looks like Mr. Creswell has his hands full with those devious little creatures. Although, to be honest, it seemed like it was your astounding writing that made his work seem more interesting than the man himself is. Hopefully, you'll meet someone at my party worthier of your remarkable investigative skills."

With the promise that she had secured an invite at what was, apparently, a very exclusive party, the woman bid them 'good day' and the two of them were once again able to hurry down the street.

"Anyways, Potter," Malfoy continued as though they hadn't been interrupted again. "You really need to start opening your eyes to what's going on in the wizarding world around you. I mean, it's one thing to be ignorant when you first got here, because you were raised by muggles. But you've been a part of this world for over five years now. Your ignorance is becoming rather willful."

Another person passed by and gave a friendly wave toward the unmistakable form of Slughorn. "Hello Horace!"

"Hello Julius, how are you, old boy?" Harry didn't even bother to be surprised at this point. Apparently, Malfoy just knew every single person in the wizarding world. Or at least, every person who would be worth catching the interest of Professor Slughorn.

After a brief greeting, Malfoy told Julius to give his best to Silvia, and wished him on his way. Again, Malfoy barely waited for the newcomer to take their leave, before he picked up his conversation with Harry as though there had been no interruption at all. "Speaking of things you don't know, how are you doing with that book I lent you? Have you managed to clear your mind yet, or are you still having trouble learning to breathe through your nose?"

Harry scowled, but it probably looked pretty pathetic with Mundungus's scraggly face. "You spend your time with Crabbe and Goyle and you're calling *me* a mouth-breather? I'm constantly amazed they manage to remember that the air goes in then out then in again." Malfoy quirked one of Slughorn's thick eyebrows but didn't comment, so Harry continued. "Not that it matters how well I can breathe, when it doesn't help me clear my mind in the least. I don't think that book is really helping anything. No matter how much I try to relax and just breathe, I can't seem to get my emotions to calm down."

"Hmm," Malfoy pondered as they turned the final corner and could see Gringotts at the end of the lane. "I suppose you did always carry your heart on your sleeve. Maybe Mind Magic just doesn't come naturally for you. It's alright. There are lots of forms of ancient magic: Mind Magic, Blood Magic, Soul Magic, Elemental Magic. People are usually only predisposed to one or two types, and the others can be very difficult for them. Maybe you'd do better at a different branch of ancient magic."

So, Mind Magic *was* a type of ancient magic! Which meant it was illegal, and Dumbledore had used the Potter vote to help make it that way. But why? Harry was about to ask Malfoy what else the boy knew about the different types of ancient magic, when they were interrupted once more.

“Horace, you old so and so! I didn’t realize you were in Diagon Alley today. Have you had lunch yet? We could grab a bite at Gold’s. You’re still a member, aren’t you?”

“Why Bertie!” Malfoy exclaimed. “You know anyone worth their salt luncheons at Gold’s.” Harry hid his exasperation at yet another interruption. However, he couldn’t hide his look of horror and confusion when Malfoy clapped the man’s hands twice, spun around, linked pinky fingers, and then pulled out his wand and tapped it to the man’s shoulder in synchronism with the other fellow. Was that some sort of secret handshake? How did Draco Malfoy know Slughorn’s secret handshakes?

As soon as the man, Bertie, was out of earshot, Harry wasted no time raising this question, not about to let Malfoy dominate the conversation again. “Ok, no, stop. What the bloody hell is going on Malfoy? How do you know all these people? How do you know their significant others, and their big exposés, and their secret handshakes? I get that your family probably knows a bunch of people, but there are limits!”

“Seriously, Potter? You don’t know Cynthia Roscoe? She’s one of the most well-known reporters for the Daily Prophet.” Harry just shrugged at that. “She’s sort of like Rita Skeeter, but instead of doing gossip columns and human interest fluff pieces, she always focuses on political topics. She’s probably the most influential political writer they have. Some people say that the scathing article she wrote about Cornelius Fudge after the debacle at the Department of Mysteries was the final nail in the coffin for him. Plus, it paved the way for Scrimgeour to take over as the new Minister. I’m familiar with her most recent exposé because, unlike you, I actually read the newspaper.”

Harry shrugged. “Fair enough, but how about the other ones?”

“Julius Macmillan is on the Board of St. Mungo’s. It always pays to know the members of the Board in case you need to call in a favor. Besides, he’s a Macmillan. His nephew is also in our Potions class. His nephew was *your partner* during our last class. And his wife, Sylvia, used to be in the same book club as my mother.”

“That was Ernie’s uncle?”

“Yes. This is what I meant when I said you really need to try and be less ignorant. You should know some of these people. They’ll certainly know you. As for Bertie Higgs, he’s a complete prat, actually. And that means a lot coming from me. But he’s very well connected, and he’s a member of Gold’s. It’s basically *the* most elite Gentleman’s Club in Wizarding Britain. All the most well-connected and high-born wizards are members. All the Malfoy men have been members of the club since its founding, but now I’m practically going to have to beg for an invite after I graduate, since Father had his membership stricken.”

“Oh man, I’ve never even heard of them.” Harry wasn’t too surprised at that, though. He doubted any of the people he socialized with were the type to sit around smoking expensive cigars in a private club while chortling about their investments.

Malfoy skewed Slughorn’s lips into a look of revulsion. “Of course you’ve never heard of the most elite and exclusive private club in London. Of course you couldn’t care less about them.

And I'd bet my last galleon they'd trip over themselves to have you join the second you leave Hogwarts. Bloody Chosen One. Nothing in my life fair."

Harry could hardly bring himself to feel bad about that. It wasn't exactly his fault that he was so annoyingly well-known. "Merlin, you should probably have been invited to join the Slug Club instead of me. I think you'd actually appreciate it."

"You know what, Potter? I've been thinking the exact same thing!"

As they made their way up the great marble stairs that led to the main doors of Gringotts, another well-dressed wizard greeted Slughorn like old friends, and Malfoy immediately responded in kind. Harry still had to stifle his impatience, but this time he knew better than to ask for an explanation. Of course, he also couldn't help but be grateful that Malfoy had come along with him on this little mission. The Slytherin had been right, Harry would have made a terrible Horace Slughorn.

From the shadows of a small café across the street, two curious faces looked up when they heard the boisterous shout of "Horace!" echo through the small plaza. They turned their attention toward a few figures on the steps of Gringotts Bank. When the two shadowy figures saw the friendly Professor Horace Slughorn standing with the bandy-legged and clearly irritated form of Mundungus Fletcher, their expressions changed from curiosity to mad glee. They left their teas behind half finished, without even clearing the bill.

By the time the two Polyjuiced students finally made it inside Gringotts, Harry cast a quick Tempus charm. The numbers 12:10 appeared in the air before him. "Oh man, we've already wasted 25 minutes. That's almost half our time gone. You were right about Slughorn being a bad idea." Harry supposed they could have hidden under his invisibility cloak, which was hidden in his pocket, but then they probably would have taken even longer. It was always difficult for two people to try walking while huddling under the one cloak. "Let's try to get this done as fast as possible."

Malfoy nodded in agreement and they made their way to the first free goblin they could find. The hook-nosed little creature was carefully weighing some silver nuggets when Malfoy interrupted. "You there, goblin, we need someone who can administer a Blood Inheritance Test. Go on, get going, we're in a hurry."

Harry was startled by Malfoy's rudeness. Although, he wasn't sure why. Malfoy had always been quite rude to Harry and his friends, until *very* recently. But on the other hand, Harry had now had three etiquette lessons with Augusta Longbottom. The woman had covered introductions quite extensively, and Harry now knew that this was not at all how you were supposed to begin a business transaction. He wondered why Malfoy didn't know that.

The goblin also seemed all too aware of how unnecessarily pushy Malfoy's behavior was, as the creature seemed in absolutely no hurry to obey any demands. The little thing simply

narrowed its beady black eyes and curled back its lips in displeasure. Harry could see yellow teeth. They looked very sharp.

Without much other choice, Harry thought back to his lessons with Augusta. How were you supposed to greet new business associates? Harry stepped forward. "Excuse me, sir. Please forgive my colleague, he doesn't have much in the way of manners. My name is Harry Potter. You'll have to excuse my appearance, you see, I took Polyjuice potion in order to get here without much ado. I hope the Inheritance Test thing will still work. However, I would greatly appreciate your assistance in this matter. It will be a pleasure to work with you." Harry held out his hand for the goblin to shake, just as Madam Longbottom had instructed him.

However, the goblin looked even more wary of Harry's introduction than it had of Malfoy's. Behind him, Harry could hear Malfoy muttering. "Seriously, Potter? You wouldn't shake *my* hand, but you'll greet a money-grubbing goblin like it's the bloody Minister of Magic."

The goblin's eyes seemed to shift between Harry and Malfoy, but it still didn't move. Harry was becoming even more awkward. "To be honest, I only learned a couple different introductions so far. That was the one for business associates. If there's a special introduction for goblins, then I don't know that one yet. I'm sorry."

Harry shifted from foot to foot as the goblin seemed to study him carefully. Finally, the creature spoke. "Very well. Whoever you are, you clearly know nothing of the ways of wizards or goblins. However, we will see if you are who you say you are. A Blood Inheritance Test will show. Follow me."

Harry and Malfoy both followed the shifty little creature behind the counter as it made its way toward an imposing door. Before the goblin reached for the handle, however, it halted and turned to the two of them. "Not you," it sneered toward the rotund form that Malfoy was currently exhibiting. "You wait there." It pointed a long finger toward the front lobby where there were several lounge chairs, clearly laid out for the purpose. The face of Slughorn scowled back at the creature, clearly not pleased to take orders from a goblin. "Go on, get going." The goblin's pointy-toothed smile looked almost evil. "Aren't you in a hurry?"

Without much other choice, Malfoy slunk away, and Harry followed the devious little banker into a well decorated corridor. As they walked down the winding hallway, passing several unmarked doors, Harry decided to try and fix whatever social faux-pas he had made before. "So, er, I'm not really sure what I did wrong back there. I certainly didn't mean to offend you or anything. How did you figure out that I didn't know anything about wizards or goblins?"

The goblin hardly spared him a glance, and it spoke as if it barely had the patience to deal with such a simpleton. "Wizards and goblins have different customs; different etiquette. Wizards do not waste their niceties on goblins, and we are happy to return the favor. I thought you were mocking me with your polite words. But you are not impudent. No, you are simply alarmingly ignorant."

"Oh," Harry couldn't really argue that. "Yeah, that's becoming increasingly obvious. So, how do goblins greet each other? What is the proper etiquette?"

The goblin paused and gave Harry another skeptical look before he responded. “Grog’nar gringkaff devkenn. Grog’nar progkaff ettboll’nar.”

Harry blanched. “I’m sorry, what?”

“It is Gobbledegook. It translates to: ‘May your gold flow. May your enemies cower before you.’ It is a traditional goblin greeting.”

Harry remembered Hagrid telling him to never mess with goblins, and Harry was beginning to think the man had a point. “Ok, let’s see. Groggnar gring-calf devkan. Groggnar preg-calf ettbollner.”

The goblin’s smirk immediately wiped from its pointy face, and it gave Harry a long and hard stare. Harry panicked that he may have accidentally said something highly offensive, until suddenly the creature’s mouth opened, and it let out a vicious laugh that was all teeth.

The goblin’s entire body shook with laughter. Harry waited while the small thing tried to catch its breath, although it took a moment. It kept looking back at Harry and bursting into laughter again.

Harry sighed. “I’m sorry. I obviously don’t speak Gobbledegook. Did I say something funny? What did I say?”

The goblin finally settled down slightly. “Your words were...technically correct. Barely. They are understandable as the proper greeting. But you speak with no growl. No proper goblin snarl. You sound like an infant child, still in a gobliness’s arms, just learning to speak his first words. Helpless and weak. To hear an adult wizard speak like a helpless and pathetic goblin child, brings such joy you cannot understand!”

Harry frowned. That certainly wasn’t the impression he was trying to make, but on the other hand, the goblin now seemed very happy to work with him. He was quickly led to a small room with nothing but a long table surrounded by some chairs. “You wait here. Bogrod will come to administer the test. It will cost 15 galleons. You will pay us whether you are Harry Potter or not.”

“Er, ok.” As the goblin began to shut the door behind him, Harry called out. “Wait, I didn’t catch your name?”

The goblin smirked at him. “My name is Nagnok. I would very much enjoy hearing you say Nagnok.”

Harry frowned but complied. “Nagnok?”

The goblin burst into laughter again. “I do hope you are Harry Potter. I would like to tell the others that the wizard’s Chosen One sounds like a mewling babe that has barely grown his fangs in.” With that, Harry was left alone.

He quickly cast a tempus charm again. 12:17. They’d used up over half their time, and Harry had no idea how long this stupid test was going to take. Apparently, it was a blood test.

Would they take a sample of his blood and test it with some potions or spells? Was the goblin going to come in with a big syringe? How much blood did they need? How long would it take them to test it?

Before he could work himself into a panic over the time, the door opened again, and a suavely dressed goblin entered with a piece of parchment and a small knife. Harry hardly found that comforting.

The goblin, whom Harry assumed was Bogrod gave him a devious smirk. "I heard that you learned a new greeting. Where are your manners?"

Harry sighed and tried to remember the phrase from earlier. He really didn't want to waste time with this, but also didn't want to annoy the goblins who could probably take as long as they pleased administering the test. Once again, Harry stumbled over the words, and once again the goblin watching him broke into uncontrollable laughter.

"Very good, human. Very amusing indeed. Now, let us see if you are who you claim to be." The goblin set the sheet of parchment on the table and handed Harry the knife. The young man hesitated for only a moment before taking it. "Do not worry, weak little human, not much blood is needed. Merely three drops of blood will suffice. Let them fall onto the parchment."

Harry frowned. "That's it? You don't need a vial or anything? No spells or potions or whatever?"

The creature scowled. "Goblins do not use spells like wizards. We are not permitted wands. Goblins use old magic, Blood Magic. The parchment is enchanted with such magic. Your blood will activate it. Three drops."

Harry gave the knife a suspicious look. Dumbledore had made it seem like Blood Magic was really bad. Not to mention, this whole thing felt eerily similar to the blood ritual Pettigrew had used to resurrect Voldemort, which had also required some drops of his blood. However, Dumbledore had also been the one to recommend Harry take this test. Malfoy had talked like this was a fairly common thing for teenagers to do. Maybe it was different when goblins used Blood Magic as opposed to wizards using it? Maybe it wasn't always bad?

Harry placed his pointer finger on the sharp tip of the knife and let it prick him. He held it over the paper and allowed three drops to fall. The moment the final drop hit the parchment, words began to form across the sheet, as red as Harry's blood.

Harry James Potter

~ Father ~

James Potter, Son of Charlus Potter and Doreah Potter nee Black

~ Mother ~

Lily Potter nee Evans, Daughter of Franklin Evans and Rose Evans nee Bailey

~ **Date of Birth** ~

July 31, 1980

~ **Lordships and Heirships** ~

Lord of the Daring and Noble House of Potter
(Not eligible to inherit until Seventeenth Birthday)
[Proxy: Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore]

Lord of the Pure and Noble House of Black
(Not eligible to inherit until Seventeenth Birthday)

Lord of the Valorous and Noble House of Gryffindor
(Eligible as of Twelfth Birthday, per ancient family Rites)

Heir of the Wise and Noble House of Peverell
(First in Line, Eligible for Lordship only with the passing of the current Lord)

Heir of the Diligent and Noble House of Longbottom
(Eighth in Line, Eligible for Lordship only with the passing of the current Lord and ranking Heirs)

***Other possible Heirships are too distant to appear on this list.

~ **Gringotts Vaults and Inheritances** ~

Vault 687: Trust Vault for Harry Potter established by James Potter
(Eligible to access as of Eleventh Birthday)

Vault 462: Potter Family Vault
(Not Eligible to access until Seventeenth Birthday)

Vault 397: Black Family Vault
(Not Eligible to access until Seventeenth Birthday)

Vault 31: Gryffindor Family Vault
(Eligible to access as of Twelfth Birthday)

Harry set down the parchment. A lot of it had simply been a reiteration of things he had known or suspected, yet one piece of information definitely stood out. “Gryffindor? I’m related to *the* Gryffindor?”

Bogrod took the parchment and glanced it over. “Distantly. I believe the Gryffindor Lordship was previously held by the Urquart family, but the last member of their line passed in 1985,

so it must have passed on to the Potter line at that point. Some of the older families that pre-date wizard law allow their heirs to inherit at an earlier age of majority.”

Harry looked the parchment again, reading off the vaults. The Urquart name sounded vaguely familiar. Maybe they were in that book Malfoy had lent him. He’d have to check it over again. “So, the Urquarts were cousins of the Potters or something, and now that they’re all gone, I’m the only Gryffindor left?”

“You’re the only Potter left. If you pass, those lordships will pass on to another line...if there are any who qualify. Sometimes lines die out, and there is no one left to inherit a Lordship. This test will not give you those answers.”

“Why didn’t I ever get a notification that I inherited the Gryffindor Lordship? Why wasn’t I ever told that I could access a new vault?”

The little goblin narrowed its eyes. “We keep treasure for wizard families. Treasure that is usually created by goblins. It is *your* responsibility to keep track of your own possessions, your own Lordships, your own properties. It is not the responsibility of goblins to inform you of all your treasures and which ones you have access to. We only keep them safe. If you didn’t know you were a Gryffindor, that is your fault.”

“Right, ok.” Yeah, Hagrid was right. Do not mess with goblins. “So, I take it you can’t tell me what is actually in those vaults?”

“You may visit the vaults that you have access to. Most ancient wizard vaults have gold, books, magical artifacts, spell scrolls, and the titles to properties. You will have to visit your own vaults in person to see what is in yours.”

Harry sighed. He was incredibly curious about what could be in the Gryffindor family vault, but he definitely didn’t have time to actually go visit it right now. “I really need to get back. I’ll have to return some other time to actually visit the vaults. Er, can you take the 15 galleons out of my trust vault?” Harry had some money in his pouch, but he was hoping to use that later for Christmas shopping.

The goblin agreed, and Harry was about to leave when he was stopped once more. “Mr. Harry Potter, you speak and act so much like an ignorant young child. You have amused Nagnok and I greatly. We will tell the other Gringotts goblins about this wonderful revelation. To thank you for this joy, let me offer you a piece of advice. Someone as infantile and oblivious as you will probably need it.”

Harry tried not to look too offended by the goblin’s words. He probably *could* use all the advice he could get. “Er...ok?”

“The Gryffindor Lordship carries a heavy weight; a great amount of power. Old power, power others would be only too happy to get their hands on. I do not believe that Urquarts ever let it be known that they carried the Lordship. It is not common knowledge who the Heir of Gryffindor is. Until you plan to use that power, or until you know *how* to use that power, it would serve you well to keep that power to yourself. Until you learn how to use your power, others will learn to use you.”

“Oh. I see. Well, thank you.”

The goblin’s grin turned up a notch. “In Gobbledegook, the word for ‘thank you’ is Bel’jokk.”

Harry let out a sigh, but gave the creature what it clearly wanted. “Bel-jalk.”

The goblin’s laughter could be heard down the hall.

Harry’s time limit was quickly approaching, so he marched back toward Malfoy as briskly as he could without drawing too much attention.

The figure of Slughorn instantly stood when he saw the figure of Mundungus practically jogging his way. “How did it go? Did you take the test? What were your results?”

Harry grabbed Malfoy’s shoulder without pausing to catch his breath. “Later,” he muttered as inconspicuously as possible. “We don’t have time to chat now. We’ll talk when the potion wears off.”

Harry was so focused on steering Malfoy toward the exit, he didn’t realize they were being targeted until a wand found itself digging into his back. Harry froze and the figure behind him leaned in to whisper in his ear. “Any sudden movements, and we’ll kill you where you stand.” The voice was wheezy, and Harry had to hold his breath to prevent from choking on their fowl-smelling breath. “You’re coming with us, Mundungus Fletcher. Our master has some questions for you.”

Mundungus? They thought he was Mundungus? Oh no, maybe Harry should have listened when Snape had warned him that Voldemort was looking for the thief. He really had picked the worst two possible people to try and sneak around Diagon Alley unnoticed.

Harry turned his head just a fraction, so as not to upset whoever had their wand subtly jabbing into his back. Malfoy, still disguised as Slughorn, stood frozen to the spot with a dark-haired, stocky witch directly behind him. She must have also had a wand to his back. “Don’t worry,” she whispered. “We remember you, Professor Slughorn. You just keep your mouth shut and don’t get involved in this, and we’ll leave you right as rain.”

Harry was sure he recognized her from some old Wanted posters; the Death Eater Alecto Carrow. Which meant her brother, Amycus Carrow, was likely the wizard who held Harry at wand point.

Harry tried to catch the eye of some of the goblin guards around the perimeter while the Death Eater began nudging him forward. The security didn’t seem remotely concerned about him. Harry guessed that even if the goblins figured out what was happening, their concern was guarding the gold, not necessarily the customers. Certainly not Mundungus Fletcher, who was fairly well-known as an unscrupulous character.

Harry took a deep breath and tried to decide on a plan of action. If he attacked the Carrows, they could easily kill or hurt Malfoy, or even some of the other patrons of the bank. On the other hand, he absolutely could not possibly allow them to take him to 'their master.' That was certain death. The Polyjuice potion was going to wear off in about fifteen minutes and he was pretty sure Voldemort's questions would take longer than that. Besides, if Voldemort thought Mundungus was stealing from him, it was unlikely the 'questions' would end amicably even if Harry didn't turn back into himself.

On the other hand, if Harry could lure the Carrows out of the bank and into the street, he would have more room to duel them, and he wouldn't have to worry about so many customers that could be hurt in the crossfire. However, the Death Eater behind him was clearly pushing him toward a hall full of large fireplaces where he would almost certainly be floo'ed to his death.

What could he do? If only being the Heir of Gryffindor came with cool powers. At least the Heir of Slytherin got Parseltongue. Why couldn't Gryffindors get anything like that? Suddenly, Harry got an idea. He quickly glanced around Gringotts looking for anything snake-like. Some of the large columns had floral designs going up the sides, with vines wrapping around. That would have to do.

Harry ignored the leaves and focused all his attention on the vines themselves, trying to picture them as snakes creeping up the sides of the columns. It took a moment to really wrap his head around the idea that the vines were snakes. They were snakes slithering along the column. The whole while, he and Malfoy tried to walk as slowly as possible toward the end of the lobby, without aggravating the Carrows too much.

Finally, Harry felt he was as immersed in the illusion of the snakes as he was ever going to be, and he let out the word "wait" just to test what happened. The reaction was immediate. The two Carrows and Malfoy himself all froze and stared at him in disbelief. "I think there's been a terrible misunderstanding; I'm not who you think I am."

To his great relief, Harry felt the prodding in his back immediately disappear right before he heard a wand clang to the marble floor. Amycus must have dropped his wand in shock. Before Alecko could react, Harry pulled his own wand from his pocket and called out "Accio wand!"

Before Harry could cast another spell, Alecko shoved Malfoy's large, Polyjuiced form out the way and aimed a curse right at Harry. Fortunately, even in Mundungus's body, Harry's reflexes were just as quick as ever. "Protego!"

Harry didn't recognize the dark purple hex that came from the witch's wand, but when it rebounded off the shield back toward Alecko, she was knocked clear across the room with an ear-piercing screech. That seemed to have caught the attention of the goblins, who were suddenly running his way and shouting threats in Gobbledegook. Amycus pulled on Harry's left hand, trying to wrench his wand from Harry's grasp. Before he could dislodge it, Harry swung his other arm around and punched Amycus square in the nose.

The entire lobby broke into chaos. Not wanting to stick around another moment, Harry threw the extra wand as far as he could and used his empty hand to drag Malfoy's shocked form

toward the exit. He pulled the heavy man through the door before the goblins could try to detain them further. Sure, Harry and Malfoy might be able to explain their actions, but not before the potion wore off. Harry didn't want to imagine how many detentions McGonagall would give him if she found out what he had gotten up to during his Hogsmeade trip.

After only a few seconds of sprinting, Harry saw sunlight, and felt the chilly October air fill his lungs. They had made it outside, but they still had to get back to the Leaky Cauldron. Harry practically flew down the stairs and into the street with Malfoy at his heels.

"Crucio!" Harry ducked as an automatic response and looked back to see where the red light came from. Alecko must have found her bearings. She was standing on the marble steps of the bank and was aiming curses right at Harry.

Harry looked around for Malfoy, who was no longer beside him. Slughorn's rotund form was hiding behind a small cart of 'protective amulets.' Perhaps those things actually could be used for protection after all. "Malfoy, we have to go! Come on!" Several shopkeepers were peeking out the doors, and Harry was sure it wouldn't be long before the Aurors came by to arrest whoever was causing this ruckus.

Malfoy was shaking his head. "Potter, I can apparate!"

"What?" Harry didn't understand what that had to do with anything.

"Just give me your hand you nitwit! You'll die if you stay here." Malfoy was still ducking behind the cart, but his hand was held out for Harry to take.

Curses were flying past his head so closely that his hair got singed, and Harry didn't have to think. He didn't hesitate. He didn't second guess anything. He simply jumped forward and grabbed Malfoy's hand. As soon as they made contact, Harry felt the familiar squeeze of side-along apparition that he had only felt once before with Dumbledore. The next dark curse hit squarely where Harry Potter no longer was.

Harry felt like he might be sick the moment his feet hit the ground. This was only his second time apparating, and he had to take several deep breaths to try and settle his stomach, so it didn't spill its contents. Once he was sure he wasn't going to embarrass himself by retching everywhere, Harry looked around and took in his surroundings.

Green.

He was surrounded by green draperies, green beds, even the windows seemed to shine with an ethereal greenish glow. "What the... Where are we?"

"My dorm room," Malfoy explained.

Harry took in the details more carefully. The room did look quite a bit like his own dorm room. There were five four-poster beds with school trunks at each end. The main difference was that instead of red linens and curtains, they were all Slytherin green. Instead of a bright

view of the school grounds from the tower, the windows showed the underwater world of the Black Lake.

“How did we apparate into Hogwarts? How is that possible? Isn’t that impossible?”

Malfoy held up his wrist to show a dainty silver bracelet. “Not with this. I bought it at Borgin and Burkes over the summer. It allows you to apparate into any place you consider your home. I consider this dorm room to be like a home. I was able to apparate you with me because you’re also allowed into Hogwarts as a student.”

The mysterious item Malfoy bought over the summer! Harry had been so suspicious about what Malfoy might do with it. It looked so harmless now. “Well, I suppose it’s better than apparating into Malfoy Manor,” Harry reasoned.

The face of Slughorn seemed to pale at those words. “Yes, I suppose. I could have apparated there, of course. I just... I wasn’t really thinking about it. They were shooting curses and I could only think about getting us to safety as soon as possible.”

“Speaking of ‘as soon as possible...’” Harry cast another Tempus charm. The time read 12:34. “Oh man, we have eleven minutes. There’s no way we can walk down to the pub in eleven minutes. Can you apparate us?”

Malfoy shook Slughorn’s head. “Not from Hogwarts grounds. The bracelet lets me circumvent the wards to allow me to apparate *to* someplace I consider home, but not *from*. The only place I can disappear to, from Hogwarts, would be Malfoy Manor. But we can’t go there. We have...guests visiting.”

Harry was pacing now. “But even if we run, we can’t make it to the Three Broomsticks in eleven minutes. Oh bloody hell, we were so close!”

“Perhaps if we can get to the edge of Hogwarts’ wards, I can apparate us the rest of the way.”

Harry shook his head. It still wouldn’t be enough. Even if they ran through the school under his invisibility cloak, it would take too long.

Malfoy was looking around his room, trying to think of something. “I’m sorry Potter. I should have just apparated us straight to Hogsmeade. I wasn’t thinking. I just panicked.”

“It’s ok. I just don’t know how we’ll get back fast enough.” Harry was reminded of the time he and Ron had missed the Hogwarts Express and were panicking trying to think of a way they could still get to the school. Of course, at the time they had access to a flying car. Harry and Draco couldn’t exactly fly Mr. Weasley’s Ford Anglia.

Harry snapped Mundungus’s head back toward the other boy. “Malfoy, where do you keep your broom?”

“My broom? It’s under the bed, but I don’t see...” Slughorn’s watery eyes went wide. “Ok, but I’m steering.”

It was quite fortunate that Harry had thought to bring his invisibility cloak. He couldn't imagine what the students would think if they saw Professor Slughorn flying awkwardly down the halls of Hogwarts with a wiry ginger-haired man clutching on behind him.

The Nimbus 2001 really was a smooth ride, even more maneuverable than Harry's first broom, the 2000 model. Of course, neither broom could hold a candle to Harry's Firebolt, but now didn't seem like a good time to point that out. It was uncomfortable enough with Malfoy trying to balance and steer a broom with Slughorn's much larger body, and Harry trying desperately to hold the cloak over both of them as they flew down halls and up stairs at the fastest speed that was still relatively safe.

Harry didn't bother trying to cast a Tempus charm as they flew. He doubted he'd be able to reach his wand from this angle anyway. Besides, they were going as fast as they possibly could. They'd either make it or they wouldn't.

When they made it to the Entrance Hall, the doors were thankfully still open. Filch was standing guard, prodding some poor third year students and looking through their Honeydukes bags, sure he would find contraband. Harry and Malfoy could not have been more relieved to fly smoothly over his head, through the enormous threshold.

Once they were in open air, they increased to full speed. The air stung, and Harry's lungs burned, but they couldn't slow down now. As soon as they passed the main gates marking the end of the school grounds, Malfoy didn't even bother to dismount the broom before grabbing Harry's wrist. Harry felt the now familiar squeeze and everything went black.

When Horace Slughorn and Mundungus Fletcher stormed into the Three Broomsticks at 12:43 in the afternoon, they were half-frozen, mostly disheveled, and fully out of breath. However, none of the patrons seemed to be paying Harry or Malfoy much attention. Most of customers appeared to be watching some sort of performance toward the front of the bar.

Harry ignored this and darted for a corner where he saw Hermione and Ginny whispering to each other while finishing off their butterbeers. "Hermione?" Harry called in relief. However, he didn't see Ron with her. Maybe the boy had already run off to the restroom?

Hermione eyed him nervously. "Mr. Fletcher?"

"No, it's me." Harry didn't want to say too much more with Ginny sitting right there as well. He didn't mind if she knew what they were up to, but there wasn't really time to explain right now.

Hermione quickly put his concerns to rest. "Oh Harry, thank Merlin it's you! I was getting so nervous. Don't worry, I already told Ginny everything. I felt it was only fair that she didn't hex you over something Ron did."

Harry didn't like the sound of that. "Why? What did Ron do?"

Hermione pointed to the bar at the front where all the customers were watching something avidly. "See for yourself."

Harry passed Malfoy on his way across the pub. The Slytherin was nervously looking down at a pocket watch. "Where's your little friend? This stuff is going to wear off any minute."

"I have a bad feeling he's in the middle of that mess."

It took a bit of shoving to get past the other patrons, but by the time they made it to the center of the crowd, Harry could see what had caught everyone's attention. The center of the group was mostly made up of girls. Harry could see Romilda Vane and her little clique of fourth year Gryffindors. Lavender Brown and the Patil twins were there as well, along with some of the Hufflepuff girls from the DA, and several others. Although it wasn't just girls; Harry noticed Colin and Dennis Creevey, as well.

In the center of it all was Harry Potter. Or, more accurately, Ron Weasley who looked exactly like Harry Potter. One hand held up a half-finished butterbeer, while the other was gesticulating wildly. "So, then I held up the sword, and I charged right at the basilisk..."

Harry didn't need to hear much else. Not that he had the time, since Ron's eyes looked like they were already starting to turn blue. Harry latched onto his arm. "Fascinating story, Mr. Potter. If I could just see you in the loo for a moment..."

Some of the audience seemed quite put off that they were losing their form of entertainment, especially since he had just got to the good part. However, Ron quickly quelled their frustrations. "Don't worry, folks, I'll be right back to tell you about when I visited the mermaid kingdom. I believe you still owe me a few rounds of drinks."

By the time all three of them disappeared into the men's room, Malfoy had already lost his walrus moustache and Harry's poor eyesight was making coordination difficult. "Bloody hell, that was close! Ron, what were you thinking? We told you to run to the loo if time was almost up."

"Sorry mate," Ron's freckles quickly returned along with a blush of embarrassment. "But get this, you can eat and drink for free for the rest of the day! A bunch of people were asking me about that Chosen One business, and don't worry I didn't say a word, but then I told them I had some other stories. I told them about Quirrell and the stone, and then the Hungarian Horntail during the Tri-Wizard Tournament, and I was just telling them about the Basilisk in the Chamber of Secrets. They were eating it up, mate. They bloody love you!" Ron gave Harry a punch in the arm for enthusiasm. "So, you can have all the shephard's pie you can eat and all the butterbeer you can drink on me! No need to thank me."

"Thank you?" Harry gaped.

Malfoy quirked a brow at that and started transfiguring all their robes back to normal. "Actually Potter, that's not a bad deal. You should try that more often."

"See Ron?" Harry was completely flustered with anger and confusion. He snatched his glasses back from his best friend none too gently. "Malfoy thinks it's a good idea, so you

know you did something wrong.”

“Excuse me?” Malfoy sneered.

Ron paled instantly. “What? Oh mate, I’m sorry. Everyone was just so excited, and they all wanted to talk to me, and hear what I had to say. And I figured you’d be happy to get the free drinks and stuff.” Ron put his hands in his pockets and scuffed his shoes on the floor, thoroughly abashed. “So, how was the bank? Did it go alright?”

“I mean, it certainly could have gone better.” Harry wasn’t sure how to explain quite everything that had happened. But he knew one thing for sure. He would wait to tell anyone about the Gryffindor thing until he understood what exactly it entailed. “But then, it could have gone a lot worse...”

Malfoy snorted at that, quite out of character for him. “Could have gone worse? I’m shocked that the two of us aren’t being tortured to death as we speak. Merlin Potter, it’s as though your blood was replaced with Felix Felicis when you were a child. Are you always this unreasonably lucky?”

Harry nodded. “Oh yeah, this was just a typical day in the life of Harry Potter. You wanted to tag along. Now you know what I have to deal with.”

That evening, after Harry had relayed the story of his little adventure to Ron and Hermione and had hidden away the suitcase full of Mundungus’s stolen goods, Harry sat up in bed trying to calm his mind. He was hoping Malfoy’s breathing exercises would help lull him to sleep the way they did for Ron. However, it was almost impossible with so many conflicting thoughts running through his head. Maybe Malfoy was right; maybe he had no natural talent for Mind Magic. But then, was he predisposed to another type of ancient magic? What if it was Blood Magic? Or Soul Magic?

Dumbledore had made it seem like those things were really bad. But then, the goblins obviously used Blood Magic and it didn’t seem like it was a very big deal at all. Maybe Harry just didn’t understand? Well, that was certainly true. Apparently, there were a lot of things Harry didn’t understand. Lots of people he didn’t know, but should have. Lots of ideas he’d never heard of, but ought to have. And it was his fault, because he had never taken the time to learn. He had never really cared before.

Hermione was so book smart; she knew the theory behind almost everything. Malfoy knew all about this political stuff and the right etiquette for everything. Even Ron had such a way with people and an easy sense of humor. He’d been Harry for one hour and he charmed a whole crowd in a way Harry never could. Of course, Harry always felt awkward with that amount of attention.

Maybe it was time Harry tried to get over that? After all, he was going to have attention on him whether he liked it or not. Harry had power whether he wanted it or not. People certainly knew who he was, whether he knew them or not. Perhaps it was time he took up the mantle

that had been dropped in his lap. He always wanted to help people, after all. It was probably time he started taking this political stuff more seriously.

When Harry opened his eyes in Grimmauld Place, he had to bite back a sob. The last time the young Gryffindor had been here, it had been Christmas with the Weasleys and Sirius. His godfather had been alive and happy. Well, maybe not happy, but alive at any rate.

“Where is it? It must be here somewhere...”

Harry could hear a distant voice coming through the crack under his door. Harry knew that voice, and it definitely wasn't Sirius's. The young man left his usual bedroom that he shared with Ron, and he wandered down the stairs toward the highly annoyed mutterings of Tom Riddle. The young dark lord was scouring the study, pulling out drawers, sifting through paperwork, opening any cabinet or container he could get his hands on.

Harry watched him for a moment before he finally decided to comment. “What are you doing? Are you looking for something?”

Riddle, who had been completely focused on the task at hand, shot his head toward Harry with an expression that almost looked like panic. “Potter?” It took only a moment for him to school his features back into a calm mask, but Harry did not forget what he had seen. “Of course. I should have realized this was your dream, Harry. Your memory. I was merely investigating my surroundings. It's not every day I have such unfettered access to the Headquarters of the Order of the Phoenix.”

Harry narrowed his eyes. He wasn't sure how much he believed Riddle's excuse. “You're not going to find anything useful. It's my memory, and I don't know anything about the Order, so you're not going to be able to figure out anything from me.”

“I'll be the judge of that.” Riddle shoved past Harry out the door and made his way to the library.

Harry hesitated for a moment, before accepting that he didn't really have anywhere else to go. So, he followed after the other young man. It felt odd to be ignored by Riddle. Especially after the last couple dreams, where he had felt such singular focus from those snake-like eyes. “What's got you in an even more unpleasant mood than usual?”

Riddle was rifling through the ancient bookshelves, tossing the books aside. None of the covers showed any titles. Harry couldn't think of a single book that was kept in the old library, so that probably translated to blank books in the dream. Riddle shoved several scrolls out of his way, as if they had personally offended him. “I'm completely surrounded by incompetents.”

“Hey!”

Riddle didn't even spare him a glance. “Not you.”

"I'm the only one here." Harry pointed out.

Voldemort's childhood memory, or whatever it is that Riddle was, seemed to have given up on the library. He began marching up the stairs toward the upper floors with the bedrooms and his first stop was the room Hermione usually shared with Ginny. Harry followed along, now a bit curious to see if Riddle would actually find anything. However, Riddle seemed thoroughly indignant when the drawers revealed to be full of lady's blouses, instead of Dumbledore's most important secret documents, or whatever else he was hoping to find.

"I can't believe I've been reduced to such an inane waste of time. I have to do everything myself! Apparently not a single person who works for me can take care of even the simplest of tasks."

Riddle finally gave up on the girls' room and moved on to the bedroom that Harry thought of as his own. Harry wasn't really sure how he felt about Riddle looking through his own drawers, but decided to keep his mouth shut, otherwise he was sure Riddle would give this room his special attention.

"So, who exactly worked for you at this age? Were your school friends anything like Voldemort's Death Eaters?"

Riddle scowled, but it was hard to decide if he was scowling at Harry's comment, or the obnoxiously red Weasley sweater in his hands. "I never had friends. I had followers."

"I'll take that as a yes."

Riddle, once again, grew tired of riffling through nothing but old clothes, and made his way up to the next landing. Harry followed at a much more sedate pace. "You know, I think I know why all your followers are so bloody useless."

"They're useless because everyone is useless. People are all so sentimental and undisciplined and spineless and moronic. No one can be counted on." Riddle made his way to the master bedroom. As soon as he opened the door, he paused at the threshold. The room contained several small piles of hippogriff feathers, the bedsheets were completely torn up, and the wallpaper was slashed with claw marks. The Slytherin gave Harry a disapproving look, as if this was somehow his fault. It wasn't Harry's idea to keep Buckbeak in Sirius's mum's old room. That was all his godfather.

Riddle simply shut the door and moved on to the next bedroom without bothering with that one. "I think this demonstrates my argument quite well. Other people are merely a disappointment. They should be grateful I don't simply wipe them all out."

"Well, that's one theory." Harry followed Riddle into the bedroom that Mr. and Mrs. Weasley usually shared. "I suppose it could be that all people are just terrible and useless and incompetent. I have another idea though."

"Of course you do." Riddle shoved Mrs. Weasley's knitting supplies out of his way and then opened a drawer that was completely full of rubber ducks. Riddle's face, which was usually quite blank, looked like it couldn't make up its mind whether to be angry, disgusted, or

confused. He shot Harry another glare, as if the rubber ducks were also his fault. Of course, they might have been. Harry wasn't entirely sure what Mr. Weasley kept in his drawers, but he could easily believe they were full of rubber ducks, so the dream had probably complied.

"Hey, don't give me that look. You're the one who wanted to discover Order secrets. There you go, now you know!" Riddle shoved the drawer shut with much more force than necessary and moved on to the wardrobe. "Anyway, as I was saying, I think I know why all your followers are so bloody useless. Maybe it's because every time anyone disagrees with you, you Crucio them until their ears bleed. Maybe, just maybe, that doesn't exactly inspire creative thought. Maybe, and I know I'm going out on a limb here, but just maybe your methods make people servile and thoughtless."

Riddle slammed the wardrobe shut and marched onto the landing. "People are already servile and thoughtless. My behavior is hardly going to change that." He headed up the last set of stairs, toward the top landing where Harry knew Sirius's room was. "I Crucio my followers so they understand how disappointed I am in their uselessness. I no longer have the patience to deal the idiocy of the average witch or wizard."

Harry ran after the petulant young dark lord, hoping to block him from entering his godfather's room, if that was even possible. "No longer have patience? Did you ever have patience?"

Riddle was reading the sign on Sirius's door when Harry ran forward and tried to block the other's path. "No, you're not going in there." It was one thing to watch the boy riffle through the Weasley's belongings, but he wouldn't sit idly by and let Sirius's memory be violated in such a way.

The much taller young man simply narrowed his blood red eyes at Harry, who was so defiantly blocking his path. "I am exercising patience right now." He clenched his fists but didn't make any move to touch Harry. "I seem to have far more reserves of leniency in these dreams than I have felt in some time." His head tilted carefully to the side, and he let out a long suffering sigh. "I used to be exceedingly restrained and stoic. I long ago lost those qualities. I long ago lost...many things. Now stand aside before my patience reaches its end."

"No, I own this house now and if you tell you you're not going in this room, then you're not going in."

The reaction was immediate. Riddle's eyes opened and stepped even closer so that their chests were practically touching. "You own this house? You are the Black family heir? Why Harry Potter, what other fascinating little secrets are you hiding?"

"I...nothing." Harry tried to step back but his back was already against the door. "I'm not fascinating."

"Allow me to disagree." Riddle was looking around the landing in a whole new light. "So, this is your house now?" As his eyes swiveled to the door across the hall, he seemed to freeze in place. Riddle's entire body turned on the spot, and he began stalking toward the bedroom across from Sirius's.

“What are you doing?” Harry was pretty sure that room once belonged to Sirius’s brother, but he couldn’t read the sign on the door with Riddle in the way.

“Oh don’t worry, Harry.” Riddle didn’t bother turning back toward him as he crept closer and closer to the door. “If you want me to stay out of that room, I can show you patience.” The taller young man paused with his hand on the door handle. “All the things I’ve lost in the pursuit of my goals, it hardly matters now. I will shortly be getting everything back.” He turned to stare right into Harry’s eyes. “Soon I will have everything that belongs to me.”

As Riddle pulled at the handle of the door, Harry felt himself slipping awake. After all, Harry had never been in that room. He had no memory of what was inside. There was nothing left to dream.

Lord Voldemort awoke with a start. He had been so close to discovering his precious locket, he was sure of it. Yet it had once again slipped through his grasp.

The Dark Lord was now in an even fouler mood than he had been when he closed his eyes. Someone was going to pay.

Forbidden Magic

Chapter Notes

Sorry this took so long to post. Life started happening all at once, as it is so prone to do. I have an extremely thorough outline, though, and I can't wait to get to the end. So don't worry about this story not reaching it's goal. It just might take a while to get there.

After Harry's startling dream, it took some time to fall back asleep. By the time Harry awoke the next morning, his dorm room was empty, and he realized Sunday breakfast was already half finished.

The Great Hall was full of excited chatter when Harry burst in wearing some ill-fitting jeans and a frayed jumper. He was hoping no one would notice him, but he seemed to be drawing even more attention than usual. About seven different girls stopped him on his way to the Gryffindor table, asking to hear more about 'the man with two faces' or 'the basilisk and the magic sword.'

Harry managed to keep his temper in check until the Patil twins started badgering him. That was the final straw. "You two were there during the Tri-Wizard Tournament! You saw me get the dragon egg. Why would you want *me* to tell *you* what happened with that bloody dragon? Check a pensieve if you can't remember."

Hermione was down at the far end of the table, whispering something with Ginny. But before he could get anywhere close to them, he was stopped yet again, this time by Colin Creevey. "Hey Harry! I just wanted you to know that I'm developing the photos now. I'll be sure to show you when they're done."

Harry stopped in his tracks. "Photos? What photos?"

"Yesterday, at the pub, you asked me to take some pictures of you. You said if anyone asked, it would be great if you had some photos of yourself that you could show people."

"To prove I was at the pub on Saturday?" Harry raised his eyebrows at that. That was actually pretty clever of Ron. "Er, thanks Colin. Let me know how those photos turn out."

By the time Harry reached Hermione and Ginny, the two girls had their heads hunched together and were whispering so heatedly, he was pretty sure they didn't even notice him.

"Did you see him chatting up Lavender Brown?" Hermione was stabbing her fork into her sausage with such ferocity, Harry wondered if she realized the poor thing was already dead. "And those jokes? '*Did you hear the one about the wizard with the crooked staff?*' Where in Merlin's name did he pick those up? A Knockturn Alley brothel?"

“That one was actually pretty funny,” Ginny relented. “But how dare he take advantage of Harry like that! The only reason all those girls were fawning over him is because they thought he was the *Chosen One*. I had to put a silencing spell around my bed last night, because the girls in my dorm spent half the evening talking about how they never realized Harry Potter was so funny and outgoing and carefree.”

Harry frowned. He liked to think he was a little funny, but he definitely wasn’t outgoing or carefree.

Hermione moved on to stabbing her eggs as if they had personally offended her. “Did you hear Lavender Brown’s laugh? She sounded like a six-year-old giggling. Besides, I’ve seen that girl drawing little hearts and flowers around the edges of her notes. She *defiles* her school notes with little doodles. Who does that?”

“Ugh, and that Parvati Patil!” Ginny fumed. “Since when is she so interested in Harry? She barely spared him a glance ever since he ignored her at the Yule Ball fourth year. And then Ron just had to stroll in with his stupid anecdotes, and suddenly Parvati’s like ‘Oh Harry, tell me the one about the Hungarian Horntail!’ It’s pathetic.”

Harry was now completely lost. “I thought you two liked Lavender and Parvati?”

The two girls practically jumped off the wooden bench. They looked like they had been caught in the middle of a crime. “Harry!” Hermione scolded, as if he was the one doing something wrong by approaching them. “What on Earth are you doing here?”

“At breakfast?”

Ginny was trying to catch her breath. Her face looked even redder than her hair. “We thought you were off with Ron.”

“I don’t even know where he is. Where is he, by the way?”

“Who knows?” Ginny shrugged. “He ran out of here in a bit of a fit.”

“Well,” Hermione explained. “To be fair, Ginny did hit him with one of her Bat-Bogey hexes.”

“I’m not sorry.” Ginny’s smirk looked downright scary. “If you can’t hex your own brother, who can you hex?”

Harry slowly edged away from the girls. He wasn’t sure what had gotten into them, but he definitely didn’t want bats coming out of his nose. “Ok, well, I’ll let you two get back to whatever you were doing...”

“Where are you off to?” Hermione asked, but she didn’t even let him answer before going on. “You should go start on your Defense essay. Neville told me that his grandmother is planning a Formal Tea with you this afternoon, so your lesson could take twice as long as usual.”

“Twice as long?” Harry was about to complain, but then he stopped himself. He had promised himself just last night that he was going to take this political stuff more seriously.

“Fine. I have a lot to get done before that, then.”

“Here.” Ginny passed him a napkin full of sausages and a couple slices of toast. “I don’t know much about Formal Teas, but I doubt they’re very filling.”

“Er, thanks.” Harry was only too happy to accept food, but before he could make his way toward the exit, Hermione stopped him one last time.

“Oh my goodness! Harry, I almost forgot.” She tossed over her copy of the Daily Prophet. “Your little field trip yesterday made the front page. Despite all probability, you actually managed to draw more attention to yourself than Ron.”

Harry looked down at the cover of the newspaper. The front page read, ‘Trouble at Gringotts: Death Eaters Attack Wizarding Bank.’ Harry offered her thankful smile, tucked the paper under his arm, and made a beeline for the library as quickly as he could.

Harry almost couldn’t believe it when he found Ron in the school library instead of Hermione. “What are you doing here?”

“Avoiding Hermione,” said Ron.

“In the library?” Harry asked.

“She doesn’t bloody own it. I can come here too, if I want.”

Harry conceded that and threw his bag down into the seat next to his friend. “I notice you don’t have bats shooting out of your nose, so you must have removed Ginny’s hex.”

Ron turned the page of his book with a shrug. “That stupid spell was Ginny’s go-to move back in the DA. I had better know how to remove it by now. Not that I bloody deserved it.” He looked up from his book, giving his best friend a very serious look. “Harry, the girls have gone mental.”

“There must be something in the air,” Harry agreed. “Ginny and Hermione aren’t the only ones acting weird. Padme and Parvarti stopped me this morning, asking to hear the story of the Hungarian Horntail. Apparently, they didn’t get quite enough yesterday.”

Ron’s blush wasn’t quite as flaming as Ginny’s, but it was a close second. “Sorry, mate. I didn’t realize people would be so interested in what I had to say. I’m not used to people hanging on my every word like that. I didn’t mean to get so carried away. I really was trying to make you look good.”

“I believe you,” Harry relented, pulling out the newspaper Hermione had given him. “The problem is, I think you may have made me look a little too good.”

The front page article was rather hit or miss in regards to the truth of what happened at the bank. It seemed that the Carrows had disappeared shortly after Harry and Malfoy had made their exit from the scene. So, the Aurors and investigators had to rely on second-hand witness

testimony, which seemed a little all over the place. Plus, the goblins were being even less helpful for the ministry than they had been for Harry. It seemed they were refusing to divulge who had been at the bank at that time, or what business had been conducted. Based on the bank's official statement, Harry got the impression that the goblins really enjoyed being as difficult as possible toward the Ministry of Magic.

The other witnesses, the wizards and witches who happened to be in the Gringotts lobby at the time, were almost less helpful than the goblins. Some claimed that they had seen anywhere from five to ten Death Eaters, while others were saying there was just one. A few people claimed they had seen Horace Slughorn, but others said it could have been someone else, and since the real Slughorn was insisting he was in Hogsmeade at the time (and had witnesses) that theory quickly died.

One of the few things people could agree on, was that they had heard one of the Death Eaters (probably Amycus) screaming "Grab Mundungus! Just get Mundungus!" So, most people assumed that the man with the Slughorn look-alike was Mundungus Fletcher.

"I see you made the front page." Ron peeked over his book with a teasing smile on his face. "Oh man, Harry, we can't take you anywhere."

"It's not my fault." Harry tossed the paper over for Ron to peruse. "Well, maybe a little. But how was I supposed to know the Death Eaters were on the hunt for Mundungus? At least Dung knows now. Even if he doesn't read this article himself, someone's bound to pass on the word to him. He's probably hiding in the deepest, darkest hole in the wall he can find."

"Bit of a weird coincidence, though," Ron thought out loud, as he skimmed through the article. "You don't think Malfoy set you up, do you?"

"No. Malfoy didn't even know what hairs we were going to take for the Polyjuice. And if he had arranged something with the Death Eaters, then they would have been expecting Harry Potter, and the Carrows definitely didn't know it was me. They were bloody shocked when they heard me speaking Parseltongue, and possibly even more surprised when I started fighting back. I doubt Mundungus would have put up much of a fight."

"Yeah, I s'pose." Ron conceded, also setting the paper aside and returning to his text. "I still think Malfoy's up to something, though. There's no way a person goes from being that big of a prat one day to becoming some sort of bleeding heart the next. Not happening."

"He's definitely not a bleeding heart." Harry agreed. "But even his mates are getting mad at him for spending time with me. So, if it's all an act, then it's a bloody good one. Besides he... he saved my life, Ron. He could have apparated away without me; saved himself. He... he held out his hand to me. He didn't have to, but I think he saved my life."

Ron looked just as baffled as Harry felt. Before they could try to discuss what that might mean, Harry's morning was interrupted yet again. "Hello Harry!" This time by Lavender Brown. "Hey Ron, I didn't see you at Hogsmeade yesterday."

"Oh," Ron quickly shuffled his book aside. "I was around." He and Harry had snuck back to the school as quickly as they could yesterday, after the fiasco in the Three Broomsticks.

“You missed it.” Lavender gave a little giggle. It did sound slightly like a six-year-old.
“Harry was telling everyone the story of when you and he followed Ginny into the Chamber of Secrets.”

“Er, yeah, I heard about that.” Ron’s face was getting redder and redder.

“Harry said he killed the basilisk with a magical sword. Did you help?” Lavender was now entirely focused on Ron, as if Harry wasn’t even there. “I bet he didn’t do it all on his own. You were there too, right? Did you help slay the basilisk?”

Ron was staring staunchly at the table in front of him. “Er...no. I was sort of...”

Harry cut him off before Ron could put his foot in his mouth. “Ron was busy preventing the entire chamber from caving in!”

“What?” asked Lavender.

“What?” asked Ron.

“Don’t be so modest, Ron.” Harry insisted. “Oh yeah, Gilderoy Lockhart panicked in the chamber and almost sent the whole thing crashing down. If Ron hadn’t prevented it, we’d probably still be trapped down there.”

Lavender looked aghast. “Is that true, Ron? *The* Gilderoy Lockhart was so scared that he panicked, but you kept a level head? You helped keep the chamber from collapsing while Harry fought a basilisk?”

Ron seemed to be mentally sifting through the question for any inaccuracies. Ron *had* been sorting through the rubble to unblock the collapsed passageway. And that *did* happen at the same time that Harry was fighting the basilisk, just in two very different parts of the chamber. “That is...technically true, yes.”

“Oh Morgana! That’s amazing! What other adventures have you two had together?”

Harry was more than happy to share credit with someone other than himself, but as Lavender’s voice began to rise, so did the interest levels of the other students around. Harry could hear a soft murmuring of “Is Potter going to tell more stories?”

Harry panicked at the thought. Fortunately, Ron caught the dread in his eyes, and immediately packed his book away. “Anyway, Lavender, glad we had this chat. Harry and I should probably get going though.”

“But wait! Ron, could you at least tell me some more stories of all the amazing things you’ve done with Harry?” Several students were creeping up, clearly trying to gather some more information on Harry and Ron’s various misadventures.

“Maybe another time, Lavender.” Ron slung his bag over his shoulder and started edging toward Harry. “I just remembered, Harry and I need to go...away. Work on some essay or something.”

“Yeah, we’ve got lots of homework.” Harry could see Romilda Vane and her gaggle were blocking the front entrance of the library, so he started dragging Ron toward the back shelves instead. “In fact, we need to pick up some books on...” he glanced at whatever direction was the opposite the fourth year Gryffindors. “Herbology.”

Harry darted down a narrow aisle and Ron tore off after him. “See you ‘round, Lavender.”

They darted down one row of books and then another, turning several corners, to try and prevent any of the younger years from following them. It only took a few minutes to find a deserted corner, near the section for breeding magical animals.

Harry leaned against the bookshelf and tried to catch his breath. “The students of this school really need to get some hobbies or something. My life cannot possibly be that interesting.”

“Harry?” Ron looked rather shaken, as well. “What was that about? Why’d you have to go bragging about me to Lavender Brown? Now she’s going to think I’m some amazing hero or something. How am I supposed to talk to her after that?”

“Are you kidding me?” Harry pulled out a flimsy pamphlet on different Hippogriff breeds and threw it at Ron’s thick head. “You did the same thing to me! According to Ginny, half the girls in Gryffindor now think I’m some sort of charming and carefree funny-guy. Boy are they going to be disappointed!”

“You’re pretty charming and all that.” Ron countered, but he yielded quickly. “Sort of.” Harry’s frown didn’t diminish in the least, and soon Ron broke. “Look I’m sorry, mate. I didn’t mean to. It’s just, I’m not used to all that attention, you know? And it’s not just the Boy-Who-Lived thing, either. It was kind of fun to not be me for a bit. I know people think I’m just a goofball. So, to be someone else, anyone else, for an hour... To be able to say things and not have to worry about people thinking I’m just some big joke, it was like a shock to the system. I don’t know how to describe it, I just never felt more confident before. So unafraid to just...be. You know?”

“What are you on about?” Harry thought it over. It hadn’t felt very freeing to be Mundungus Fletcher, but Mundugus Fletcher was a thief and a scoundrel, so that was hardly a comparison. On the other hand, it was always nice to talk to people before they realized who he was and started gawking at his forehead. “It is sort of nice to not have to deal with people’s preconceived notions, I guess.”

Ron had swung his bag around and was digging inside. “Look, I’m sorry if I attracted a bunch of unwanted attention, but I know how to make it up to you.”

“How?”

Ron pulled a thick book out of his bag, and Harry realized it was the one the boy had been reading before. It wasn’t one of their schoolbooks. Ron handed it over and Harry read the cover. ‘The Magic of Money Management: Turn those Knuts into Galleons with these Invigorating Investment Initiatives.’

“What is this?” Harry asked.

Ron flipped the book open and showed him the first few pages. There were lots of colorful charts and graphs. “I ordered it a couple weeks ago. I’m not like you, Harry, I don’t have a bloody vault waiting for me when I graduate Hogwarts. And Malfoy’s got that whole stupid manor and more money than he knows what to do with and a big fancy library... Well, I’m going to have a library too!”

“Do you want a library?”

“People like libraries, Harry.”

“I suppose *some* people do.” Harry could think of one person in particular who really liked libraries, and suddenly this whole thing made a lot more sense.

“Well, anyway,” Ron explained, “Maybe I won’t have a library as big and fancy as Malfoy’s, but I could still have enough books that people would enjoy it.” Harry didn’t bother asking which people Ron was talking about. “I know I don’t have much money now, but according to this book, all I have to do is be really careful with how I manage the money that I do have. I even sent ten galleons to Fred and George yesterday. I told them I want to be an investor like you. It was most of my savings, but the book said the more you invest the more you can earn.”

Harry felt that now would be a poor time to point out that he had given the twins one thousand galleons, and that ten galleons probably wasn’t worth their time. He wondered if Fred and George would even take Ron seriously. They didn’t usually. In fact, they seemed to derive great pleasure in poking fun at their youngest brother. Harry would have to send them a letter asking them to please accept Ron’s offer, as a favor to him. They’d probably do it for Harry. After all, they’d gifted Ron new dress robes under Harry’s direction.

Harry swallowed his misgivings and gave Ron the kindest smile he could muster. “That’s great Ron, but what does this have to do with me?”

“This is how I can make it up to you, Harry.” He pointed to a fancy pie chart in his book. “I can teach you how to diversify your portfolio.”

“Diversify my what?”

“Your portfolio!” Ron pointed to the chart again. It did have lots of different colors. “You’ve got to diversify it. That’s very important. That’s basically rule number one.”

“Ok,” said Harry. “But what does that mean exactly?”

“Er, not quite sure yet,” Ron admitted. “Honestly, I’m only on chapter two. But, I’ll let you know as soon as I figure it out.”

“Alright, be sure to keep me posted. I’d hate for my portfolio to go without the right amount of diversity.” Honestly, Harry had no idea what was in his vaults, or what to do with any of it. So, whatever ideas Ron could scrape together would probably be better than nothing.

“Will do!” Ron promised. With that settled, the two of them stood in silence for a moment. “So, what do you want to do now? Do you want to risk it and try to sneak out of here?”

Harry shook his head and sunk down to the floor, getting himself comfortable. “Nah, I should probably start my essay for Snape.”

Ron nodded and sat down beside him. “We could do that, or we could read through the Half Blood Prince’s notes some more and see what other spells he has written.”

Harry couldn’t hold back his excitement as he pulled out his battered Potions textbook instead of his Defense one. “Brilliant. Yes! Let’s do that while Hermione’s not around. I thought I saw one called ‘Levicorpus’ the other day and I want to find out what that one does. We can do the essay later. It’s not as though Snape ever teaches us anything useful anyway.”

Down several corridors, in the bowels of the castle, Draco Malfoy checked that his bracelet was in place before apparating to his family’s lavish manor. Or at least, what had been a lavish manor. The place had become increasingly lifeless and cold as of late.

According to Professor Snape, the family Quidditch pitch was now completely fenced in and the grass had long since died. The Dark Lord didn’t want to worry about the muggles escaping while he watched from his throne as his snake hunted them down. Apparently, this had become a fairly regular activity. Draco shuddered at the thought. The Quidditch pitch had been one of his favorite places in the whole world; full of so many happy memories. Now it was a graveyard.

Fortunately, the Dark Mark wasn’t tugging him toward the grounds this time, but further into the house itself. Draco left the foyer behind and started down the dimly lit hallways. Had his house always been this dark and oppressive?

As Draco got closer to his destination, he tried to keep his mind clear. Although that was easier said than done. Right now, the only hope that he would leave this house alive again, was that the Dark Lord had no idea that the two individuals who escaped the Carrows yesterday were actually Potter and himself. But then, why would the Dark Lord suspect that? The Carrows certainly had no idea.

Draco’s emotions spiraled as the pull from his Dark Mark led him to the formal dining room. The Dark Lord had never summoned him there before. What fresh horror awaited him this time?

Before he opened the heavy double doors, Draco made sure his face was schooled into a blank mask and his mind was free from any aberrant thoughts. He could not think about Harry Potter right now, or what had happened yesterday, or what could or should have happened. He most definitely could not think about the fact that he could have easily apparated Potter straight to his master, but instead he had panicked and brought them both back to the safety of Hogwarts.

It was a mistake. It wouldn't happen again. In fact, it hadn't happened at all. He needed to forget about it. Draco's goal was to capture Harry Potter and deliver him to his lord. That hadn't changed, and one momentary lapse of judgement wasn't going to matter in the long run. Harry Potter was not his ally and he most certainly was not his friend. The other young man was simply a means to an end. And with that thought firmly planted in the forefront of his mind, Draco decided he couldn't keep his lord waiting any longer.

The Dark Lord typically only used the formal dining room of the manor for Inner Circle Meetings, so Draco was quite shocked when he saw the glassware and table settings laid out on the magnificent table. Draco was even more surprised when he realized that the Dark Lord was not the only one seated at the table. His mother and aunt Bellatrix had taken up seats across from each other, a few chairs down from the head of the table.

"My Lord?" Draco wasn't entirely sure what the Dark Lord wanted, but he knelt on one knee regardless and waited for instructions.

"Draco," the hissing voice sounded highly amused. "You seemed so disappointed last time I mentioned breakfast and then fed Nagini instead of you. Today I thought you and your family would be honored to join me for a meal."

Draco was mildly surprised that the figure before him ate food at all. Breakfast almost seemed too human for him. The Malfoy heir had certainly never seen such an occurrence, but then the suite of rooms the Dark Lord stayed in did have a dining room of its own, so perhaps he just ate in private.

"My Lord, I would be honored to break bread with you." Draco quickly took up the seat next to his mother, still not entirely sure what was going to happen.

The room went silent once they were all seated, and Draco stared nervously at the empty plate in front of him. A terrifying thought ran through his mind. *What were they going to be eating?*

As if the Dark Lord had read his thoughts without even needing to make eye contact, the man spoke up. "Ah yes, of course, we still need to be served." A deathly pale hand raised a bone white wand, and Draco tried his hardest not to flinch when a loud ring resounded through the hall.

Not a moment later, the door to the kitchens opened, and two shaking and cowering figures shuffled through. Draco recognized them at once; Amycus and Alecto Carrow. However, they looked quite different than they had the day before. For one thing, they appeared haunted, pale, and exhausted. Draco was sure they must not have slept a wink last night, and probably hadn't eaten since yesterday either. The Dark Lord would not have allowed them any rest or comfort after such a disastrous failure at the bank yesterday. The siblings were also visibly twitching, a common after-effect of the Cruciatus curse.

Of course, the thing that stuck out the most was their clothes. Or rather, lack of clothes. The brother, Amycus, seemed to be wrapped in some sort of table cloth. While the sister, Alecto, had fashioned some sort of toga out of the second floor curtains. Draco could perhaps

understand why the Dark Lord might take away their clothes to humiliate them, but why would the man allow them to fashion new coverings from household linens?

“I’m sure the three of you read in the paper this morning just how utterly these two failed me yesterday.” The Dark Lord’s voice was torn between amusement at the Carrow’s degradation and fury at discussing their ineptitude. “Two of my highest ranking Death Eaters failed to capture the miserable, second-rate thief, Mundungus Fletcher. It is an insult to myself and our entire effort in this war.”

“My Lord,” Alecko scrambled on her knees, tears pouring from her eyes. “Please forgive us. Please, it was an anomaly only. He took us by surprise.”

“He turned and started hissing, my Lord.” Amycus joined his sister on his knees. Both their voices were hoarse; probably from screaming. “I know I’ve only heard Parseltongue a few times, but it sounded so similar. He must have been making those noises on purpose to try and shock us.”

“Crucio!” The Dark Lord let the curse linger as Aunt Bellatrix laughed in delight. “How dare you compare Fletcher’s pitiful sputters of fear to the ancient language of my forebears! That worthless excuse for a wizard has never shown one ounce of bravado or ingenuity.” Draco kept his thoughts carefully blank, and his face as smooth as a mask.

Finally, the man at the head of the table allowed the spell to end so that the siblings would be able to hear what he was saying. It would have been difficult over so much screaming. “Mundungus Fletcher is barely one step above a squib. And the two of you combined could not subdue him even with the element of surprise.”

Suddenly, the Dark Lord’s furious expression turned into a feral smile. It was far more terrifying than his anger. “This is why the two of you will be serving us this morning. Both of you have proven yourselves worthless as wizards. Perhaps you will prove to be better house elves.”

So that explained why the two of them were covered in table clothes and curtains instead of regular clothing. The Dark Lord wanted to both hurt them and humiliate them, and Draco and his family were there to provide an audience for that humiliation. It was certainly an effective punishment; Draco could not think of a lower being than a house elf. It was an insult of the highest degree.

As the Carrows brought in the first platters of breakfast foods, Aunt Bellatrix wasted no time in making their job more difficult. She started with a couple subtle tripping hexes. The two siblings stumbled and faltered a bit, but valiantly carried the platters to the table without spilling anything. It was difficult to imagine what punishment that would have entailed.

When the siblings returned to bring in the next round of food, Bellatrix stepped up her efforts. Draco watched silently as Bellatrix’s Engorgio caused a bowl of black pudding to grow so large that Amycus was forced to drop it. Still, the Dark Lord did absolutely nothing to discourage her.

The entire thing was difficult to watch. Draco turned to his mother and realized that she too, was looking anywhere but at the Carrows.

“Draco.” He turned at his name, toward the red eyes of the Dark Lord.

“Yes, my Lord?”

“I believe you also have an important assignment. One that was far easier than the Carrows’. How is that progressing? Have you befriended Harry Potter yet?”

Out of the corner of his eye, Draco could see Alecko falling to the ground after a well-placed jinx from his aunt. It seemed the battered woman wasn’t able to get up again, or maybe she decided it wasn’t worth it. Instead, she simply crawled with the platter of sausages over to the table.

Draco carefully cleared his throat. “Things are progressing quite well, my Lord. Potter is already beginning to trust me and confide in me. I’m sure I will be able to deliver him to you soon.”

There was a crash. Bellatrix had shot a blasting curse at the steaming pot of coffee in Amicus’s hands. It seemed the man had managed to jump out of the way surprisingly quickly, but his hands still took quite a splash. They were already turning bright red and blistering from the heat of the liquid.

The Dark Lord seemed completely oblivious to the plight of his followers. “Harry Potter has begun to trust you? Would he be willing to leave the school with you? With that bracelet of yours, all you need to do is tell the boy you are apparating him one place, and then take him straight to the Manor.”

Draco made sure his occlumency shields were firmly in place and forced himself to look directly at the Dark Lord. It was even more unsettling than looking at Amicus writhing on the floor. “I’m not entirely sure, My Lord. Potter certainly trusts me enough to meet me at Hogsmeade under teacher supervision. And he trusts me enough to borrow books from me, but allowing me to apparate him somewhere may take slightly more time.”

Another loud shatter made Draco turn again. It seemed Aunt Bellatrix had grabbed her crystal glass and smashed it onto the floor by her feet. Broken glass scattered everywhere. “My glass broke,” she announced. “Alecko, bring me another one.”

Draco watched as the battered woman crawled back to the kitchen. She still seemed unable to stand, from whatever punishment she’d been subjected to since yesterday now compounded with Bellatrix’s torments.

The Dark Lord spared no attention for anything but Draco. “Harry Potter has been borrowing books from you? What books?”

“Oh,” Draco had to try very hard not to get distracted by Alecko, as she crawled back with a fresh glass. “He borrowed a book on Wizarding Genealogy, one on breathing and meditation techniques, and there was one on dr —“

“I can’t reach it from there!” Bellatrix shouted, interrupting Draco’s list. Alecto was trying to pass the other woman her replacement stemware without stepping into the pile of broken glass that littered the floor. With the ‘house elf’ outfit, she wasn’t wearing any shoes. Not that it mattered since she didn’t seem to be able to stand. “Come closer,” Bellatrix purred. “Set it right here, next to my plate.”

Alecto spared one brief pleading look toward her master, but there was no help to be found. The man seemed to delight in her torment almost as much as Bellatrix. Finally, with no other option available, the broken woman crawled across the broken glass to deliver Bellatrix her fresh cup. Draco’s aunt cackled like mad over the sound of the crunching glass.

“Why is Harry Potter reading books on meditation techniques?” The Dark Lord once again pulled Draco’s attention back away from the horror with the Carrows.

“Potter is always losing his temper and speaking without thinking.” Draco once again kept his features completely expressionless. He had to force himself not to think of any recent examples of Potter’s impulsiveness. “I can only assume he wants to learn to calm himself and curb these instincts.”

“Bella!” Draco’s attention was once again diverted when his mother chose that moment to lunge from her seat and wrap her hand around a large glass carafe that Bellatrix was moments away from tossing. He could only imagine how much broken glass she’d be able to spread if she smashed that thing. “Sister dear,” his mother tried to calm the situation. “That carafe was a wedding gift from the Greengrasses. It was hand-made in Paris.” Bellatrix frowned but allowed Narcissa to pry the vessel from her fingers. Alecto almost sighed with relief.

Narcissa carefully placed the container back on the table without spilling any of the pumpkin juice inside. “I, of course, want you to enjoy your breakfast, Bella,” Draco’s mother continued. “However, if you insist of breaking my glassware, I will have to ask the servers to bring you a child’s cup. The crystal has been in the Malfoy family for generations.”

Bellatrix’s smile was almost as terrifying as the Dark Lord’s. “Don’t worry, little sister. I can enjoy myself just fine without breaking your precious heirlooms.” Without a word, she shot another tripping jinx at Amycus, and the man fell into the pile of broken glass beside his sister.

“Are you enjoying your breakfast, Draco?” The young man felt quite off kilter as his head swiveled back toward the Dark Lord. The snake-like figure was still watching the proceedings with perverted glee. Draco noticed that the man hadn’t touched any food. Maybe he didn’t eat after all.

“Of course, my Lord.” Draco quickly plopped a few bites of sausage into his mouth to emphasize this.

“You seem quite distracted by the Carrows. Are you perhaps taking note of exactly what happens to my followers when they fail to perform the task I assigned to them?”

“Yes, my Lord. I have certainly learned a valuable lesson today.”

Harry dropped his bag in the corner of the spare classroom and made his way to the table with Madam Longbottom. “So, what are we learning today? I heard we were going to have a formal tea.”

“Perhaps we shall have tea,” the woman pursed her ancient lips. “Or perhaps I should spend the next three hours reminding you of proper greetings.”

Harry flinched and internally reprimanded himself. “I’m sorry. I meant to say: Good afternoon Madam Longbottom. It’s wonderful to see you again, as always. Will I have the pleasure of joining you for tea today?”

“Yes, dear boy,” she nodded approvingly. “However, you will have even more company today than usual.”

Before Harry could ask what that meant, the door he had just walked through opened again and Neville walked in, closely followed by Hermione.

“Hermione? What are you doing here?” When Harry heard a determined cough to his right, he tried again. “I mean, hello Hermione. To what do I owe the pleasure?”

As it turned out, Madam Longbottom had asked Neville to come along with a friend. That way, Harry to get more practice socializing with other witches and wizards in a ‘formal’ setting. Apparently, Hermione had been quite enthusiastic to volunteer so that she, too, could get lessons in wizarding etiquette.

“My parents weren’t very strict about table manners unless we had guests over,” Hermione explained. “But it’s amazing how many new rules you have to consider once magic is involved. I’ve already read up through chapter seven of Miss Marple’s etiquette guide, and the differences between muggle and wizarding etiquette are quite fascinating. I never realized there were specific spells that were considered rude to perform at the table, while other spells are encouraged.”

Madam Longbottom nodded in agreement. “Anything too showy is considered quite ostentatious.” Harry remembered the Weasley twins trying to levitate all the food onto the dinner table and their mother yelling at them to knock it off. “Today we’ll practice a tea in a more intimate setting, when you are serving yourself. Next time, we’ll practice a tea when there are servers to wait upon you.”

Augusta began by explaining the proper table setting and the proper order for who serves first, while Hermione asked endless questions about little things she had picked up in her reading. Harry was starting to wish his classmate hadn’t come after all. At first, he’d been happy to have an extra muggle-raised friend to learn with, but it was quickly becoming clear that Harry was the only person in the room who had no idea what he was supposed to be doing.

“I was ever so surprised to learn that ‘Wingardium Leviosa’ should never be used to pass things along the table,” Hermione rattled on. “Apparently there’s a special spell for that.”

“Quite right, dear girl.” Madam Longbottom’s head swiveled back toward Harry and the vulture swung with it. “Heir Potter, I don’t particularly mind if you raise or curl your pinky, but there is absolutely no reason for it to be wrapped around your cup. There is a handle. Use it.” The vulture swung back around. “As I was saying dear, a regular levitation spell is far too unstable. Unless the caster is quite skilled, they’re more likely to spill whatever it is they’re trying to pass.”

In the meantime, Harry tried to figure out how exactly he was supposed to pick up the stupid little china teacup without spilling it. He was used to drinking tea from a nice sturdy mug; Aunt Petunia would never have let him near her fine china. And the cup in front of him had a handle so small, he could barely fit a single finger through.

“Psst,” came a whisper from across the table. Harry looked up to see Neville giving him a sympathetic smile. “One finger through the loop, and then your thumb goes on top of the handle for balance.” He carefully lifted his cup to show his friend how it was done. Harry was strangely reminded of last year, when he had spent countless hours showing Neville over and over again the proper wand movements for different defensive spells. He supposed this was repayment.

In the meantime, Hermione was hounding Madam Longbottom with question after question with an enthusiasm she usually reserved for homework. “Are there this many little rules and expectations for other types of wizarding get-togethers? Besides meals and teatime? Do holiday celebrations and big festivities have the same type of guidelines?”

“You can’t imagine,” Neville mumbled, and Harry had to try and cover up his snort by taking a swig of tea.

The vulture hat swiveled back over to them again. It almost seemed like it was looking for prey. “Neville don’t mumble, it makes you look weak. And as for you, Heir Potter, tea is intended to go in one’s mouth, not out one’s nose. If you cannot handle that basic concept I’m sure we can accommodate you by serving something that is intended to go in one’s nose.” Neville had gone pale, and Harry wasn’t entirely sure if she was joking or not. He decided it was best not to risk it.

“No thank you, Madam. I think I’ve got the hang of it now.”

Augusta gave a curt nod, which caused the vulture to bob with her, and swung her head back toward Hermione. “The more formal the event, the more expectations come with it, of course. A Wizengamot Session has all sorts of rules about who can speak and when. And of course, holidays and weddings have their own traditions.”

“Oh yes, I was meaning to ask about that,” Hermione carefully poured herself some more tea while Harry tried not to slurp his own. He didn’t know what she would threaten to serve him over a slurping mishap. “Miss Marple referenced another book that I was interested in called ‘Celebrating the Seasons: Traditional Wizarding Ceremonies and Rituals.’ I looked for it in the library, but I couldn’t find it anywhere. Do you know if Flourish and Blotts would have a copy?”

Before Augusta answered, her arm snapped out and caught Harry's when he tried to reach for a biscuit. "As pushy as your father, I see." Harry frowned, as his wrist was held in a surprisingly strong grip. "If you have to reach across the table to grab something, then use the spell I showed you to bring it to yourself. Unless you're as clumsy as Neville, and then for all our sakes, simply ask someone to pass it to you."

Harry massaged his sore wrist as he glanced over at the poor boy in question. Neville's ears were bright red with embarrassment, but he simply sipped his teacup with a grace Harry had certainly never seen him use for wandwork. Harry was about to speak up in his friend's defense when Hermione beat him to it. "Excuse me, Madam Longbottom..."

"Of course, dear girl, forgive me. You were talking about MacDougal's book of rituals." Madam Longbottom smiled primly, as her vulture swung back around. "You won't find it in any mainstream establishment these days. All those ceremonies are illegal now."

"Illegal?" Hermione cried. Harry glanced up as well, slightly distracted from his new goal of using 'Locomotor' to encourage the tray of biscuits in his direction. Hermione had completely forgotten about tea; her face was aghast with horror. "Merlin, what did those rituals entail? Did they have...sacrifices or something?"

"Oh heavens no," Augusta looked offended by the very notion. "Nothing like that at all. No, most of them were quite harmless. I think one of the options for the Samhain Ritual included a few drops of the caster's blood, but nothing more sordid than that. Besides, I think most people performed the herbal ritual, anyway. It was much simpler to set up."

Harry was still carefully guiding the cookies across the table as Hermione tried to get to the bottom of this new mystery. "But if the ceremonies were so harmless, why are they outlawed?"

"Well," Augusta explained. "Most of them involved Elemental Magic, and a few even used Blood Magic, which are both..."

Harry lost all his concentration and scattered the biscuits across the table. "They're Ancient Magic," he breathed.

"Heir Potter!" Madam Longbottom literally clutched her pearls.

Just as Harry was about to apologize, Neville immediately raised his wand and cleared up the mess with one quick spell. Before Harry could express his surprise at Neville's seamless spell-casting, the boy muttered, "Don't worry, you're not the first person to lose concentration halfway through a Locomotor spell."

"Harry are you alright?" Hermione asked, but Harry had already turned toward Augusta.

"Elemental Magic and Blood Magic are both forms of Ancient Magic, and so now they're illegal." Harry said it like a statement, but the elderly woman nodded anyway. Her vulture bobbed along with her.

Hermione frowned, obviously missing something. “Ancient Magic? But I thought Mind Magic was a form of Ancient Magic?” The woman at the head of the table nodded again. Hermione blanched. “Mind Magic is illegal!? Since when? I knew it was considered inappropriate for school, but I didn’t realize it was actually against the law. Why is it illegal?”

Harry also turned toward Augusta at that question, eager to get some idea as to why. However, when he looked at the elderly woman, he found her staring right back at him, as if it were somehow his fault that Ancient Magic was illegal. But then, Dumbledore had used Harry’s proxy vote to break the tie and declare it illegal, so perhaps it sort of was his fault.

“If you want to know why Ancient Magic is illegal,” the woman looked right at the young man as she spoke. “Perhaps you should ask your headmaster.”

Harry could see Hermione out of the corner of his eye turning toward him, but he focused his attention on his tutor as he spoke. “Don’t worry, I will.”

Harry was about twenty minutes early when he arrived at the Headmaster’s office Monday evening. Yet the man was already seated serenely behind his desk with the pensieve already in place. “Why Harry, my dear boy, you have taken me entirely by surprise,” he said, despite all evidence to the contrary. “I’m not sure if I’ve ever known you to be quite so prompt.”

“Yeah, sorry if I’m a bit early, but I really wanted to talk to you about something.”

“Wonderful!” the headmaster exclaimed, while gesturing Harry to one of his flowery little chairs. Harry blushed when he remembered the dream where he had sat in that same chair, but he didn’t do anything else to show his mixed emotions. “I was actually hoping to speak with you as well, Harry. I always find it far more satisfying when the person you wish to speak with, also wishes to speak with you. It makes conversations infinitely more engaging. Care for a lemon drop?”

Harry looked up at the bowl of sweets and his eyes instantly landed on the newspaper sitting, ever so innocuously, on the desk beside the candies. It was the Sunday morning post with the headline: ‘Trouble at Gringotts: Death Eaters Attack Wizarding Bank.’

“Sir, why is that sitting there?”

“Oh that?” Dumbledore shrugged, his expression far too innocent for Harry’s liking. “No reason in particular. So, how was your weekend, Harry?”

“Er, it was...ok I s’pose.”

“I’m so glad to see you are all in one piece and in good health, my dear boy. But then, why wouldn’t you be? Since you didn’t engage in any needlessly reckless activities this weekend.”

“Actually, sir, I think I will take a lemon drop.” Harry shoved the candy in his mouth and stared down at the desk.

“Hmm.” The headmaster was studying him carefully, but Harry refused to meet his eyes. “Well, I suppose I should put this newspaper away.” The man gracefully stood and levitated the newspaper toward himself, but he specifically maneuvered it so that it passed right under Harry’s nose. As soon as it landed in the headmaster’s non-blackened hand, the man paused. “That is, unless you’d like to read it? Did you hear about the incident at Gringotts Bank?”

“I’m fairly aware of it, yeah.” Harry spoke around the hard candy in his mouth. He tried his best to focus on the sweet flavor and nothing else.

“Of course,” the headmaster smiled knowingly. “News does tend to spread quickly. But then, you would have been quite distracted at the time of this incident. Apparently, you were *very* busy at the time, telling several animated stories about your various adventures to a legion of fans.” Dumbledore also plopped a lemon drop into his mouth before adding, “As you are so prone to do.”

“I mean...I did stop by the Three Broomsticks, sir.”

“I’ve no doubt,” the headmaster continued, with that same encouraging smile. “Professor Slughorn agrees that he saw you heading that way. Although, I’m not sure how much I can trust his account of things. You see, your potion’s professor assures me that he spent the entire day in Hogsmeade, but Professor Snape insists that he saw the man at the Leaky Cauldron, along with Mundungus Fletcher, both acting quite suspiciously.”

“Well, I definitely wouldn’t trust anything Snape said.”

“Professor Snape, Harry,” Dumbledore kindly reminded him, as he retook his seat. “And Arthur and Molly both saw them as well.”

“Oh. Right. Well, in that case...” Harry wasn’t sure what else to say, and he was feeling quite defensive. Perhaps that’s why he suddenly switched tactics. “Why did you make Ancient Magic illegal?”

Dumbledore opened his mouth, and then shut it. He opened it again, but all he managed to say was, “Harry, what are you talking about?”

“You heard me.” Harry was relieved to finally be on the offensive in this conversation. “You used my family’s proxy vote to make Ancient Magic illegal. I saw you do it in that pensieve. It was one of the memories you showed me. So, why did you do it?”

The young Gryffindor wasn’t sure if he’d ever seen Professor Dumbledore look quite so blind-sided. Under other circumstances, it might be funny. “Harry, we went over this while we were still in the pensieve. Ancient Magic can be very dangerous for both the person who uses it and the person whom it is used against.”

“Yeah,” Harry agreed. “That’s what you said, sir, but then you told me to take an Inheritance Test that uses Blood Magic, which is Ancient Magic. And you wanted me to learn Occlumency last year, and apparently that counts as Ancient Magic as well. And then Hermione wanted to look at some book on traditional wizarding ceremonies, but Augusta

said those are illegal now, because they use Elemental Magic which, again, is Ancient Magic. So how dangerous can it honestly be and why did you really make it illegal?"

Dumbledore's expression slowly changed to a sad smile. "I can see that this is something that's been weighing on your mind for some time. I take it that this is what you came early to discuss?" Harry nodded, and Dumbledore's smile grew a little more indulging. "I must say, I knew you were becoming more interested in politics, but I had no idea your interest had become quite so passionate."

"I don't even really understand what's going on, sir. I just want to understand." It certainly wasn't the first time Harry had felt this way, and he was pretty sick of it. "Can you please just explain to me why you passed that law?"

Instead of speaking, Dumbledore pulled out a pocket watch. Harry glanced at the little golden trinket to try and figure out what Dumbledore was looking at, but he didn't see any numbers, just stars and moons. It certainly didn't make any sense to Harry, but Dumbledore must have been able to read it because he said, "If I had known we had so much material to cover, I would have asked you to stop by earlier. I certainly don't want you to lose any sleep on a school night."

"I have free period tomorrow afternoon," Harry was quick to chime in. "I can take a nap if I need to, sir."

"Oh?" Dumbledore stowed the pocket watch away. "Now Harry, my dear boy, there is a simple answer to your question, but it is not the full answer. The full answer is a bit more complicated and may take some time to explain. However, I am inclined to believe that you are not interested in any partial truths. You are looking for the full story."

"Yeah, if there's a story behind why you pushed that bill through, then I'd like to hear it, sir."

Harry sat uncertainly while Dumbledore, once again, swept up from his seat. The man pulled out his wand and materialized a bright green wizard's hat which almost, but didn't quite, match his lime green and gold robes. "Well, in that case," Dumbledore explained. "I suppose it would be better to show you rather than tell you."

As the old man strode purposefully toward the door, Harry bolted after him. "Where are we going, sir?"

Dumbledore turned and winked at him over his half-moon spectacles. "To a magical place where one can find the answer to many of life's mysteries and unlock both terrible and wondrous secrets."

"Really?" Harry could barely contain his excitement. "Where's that?"

"The library."

Harry tried to hold back his disappointment. "Oh."

Harry had never walked the halls of Hogwarts with Albus Dumbledore at his side. If he thought people tended to stare at him on a regular day, it was nothing compared to how they gawked when Harry and Dumbledore marched past side by side. Even though it was getting close to curfew, there were still a fair number of students milling around, especially near the library. Many of them were quick to turn and point out the two famous wizards, who simply *must* be up to something secret and important. Professor Flitwick even dropped his paperwork in excitement when he saw the two of them striding past. It was as though people thought Harry and Dumbledore were on their way to go defeat Voldemort right that very moment.

When they entered the library, Dumbledore wasted no time in steering Harry to the Restricted Section. Harry was once again reminded of one of his recent dreams with Tom Riddle. Riddle had been looking at some book on dark magic. What was it called again? He supposed it didn't matter.

Harry walked into the segregated little area in the back which smelled of ancient books. He couldn't help but notice that there were definitely fewer books in the Restricted Section now, than there had been in the dream. Perhaps they had been removed because they contained Ancient Magic, which was now illegal? Perhaps they had been removed for other reasons?

"I think we'll start with...these." Dumbledore began levitating books off the shelves and sending them to a small reading desk in the corner. "Hmm, this one also has some good examples."

Harry grabbed one of the books at the top of the stack, while Dumbledore rounded up more and more, sending the books dancing through the dusty air toward his student. Harry certainly hoped he wouldn't be expected to read all these books cover to cover. They looked very old and very thick.

While Dumbledore walked down the aisles, occasionally sending yet another book flying back to the desk, Harry looked down at the title in his hands; 'Fifteenth Century Fiends.' He went ahead and flipped it open. "The Fifteenth Century? Sir, I know you said the answer to my question was long and convoluted, but does it really begin in the Fifteenth Century?"

"It began even before that, my dear boy." Dumbledore called from somewhere in the shadows. "But we'll have to start somewhere."

"You there!" Harry suddenly looked up at the stern face of Madam Pince, the librarian. "No students in the Restricted Section without a note."

"It's quite alright, Irma," explained Dumbledore as he came around the corner. "He's with me."

Madam Pince didn't take her shrewd eyes off Harry. "Does he have a note?"

Harry tried to subtly move himself behind Dumbledore as the librarian continued to glare down at him. Dumbledore seemed almost as flummoxed as Harry. "No, Irma, there's no note because he is physically here with me. I am standing here, next to him, giving him permission to be here."

Madam Pince didn't back down. "The rule states that no students are allowed in the Restricted Section without a note."

Dumbledore sighed and with a wave of his wand a note appeared in the woman's hands. "There you are. A note."

To Harry's bemusement, the librarian then proceeded to inspect the note as if she thought it might be a forgery. Finally, she relented and was about to leave, when she turned back to Harry and told him. "No levitating the books. It's against the rules. You might drop them."

"I can assure you, Irma, that Harry is quite capable of..." Dumbledore paused as it seemed to occur to him that this was an argument that wasn't worth fighting for. "On second thought, never mind. Thank you, my dear woman, for your unyielding adherence to executing the rules of this administration."

When they were finally alone again, Dumbledore moved so he could look over Harry's shoulder at the book in his hands. "Which one do you have there?" he asked. "Ah yes, lots of fiends in the Fifteenth Century, I'm afraid. I believe this book has a chapter on Morgana the Black. Why don't you skip ahead to that?"

Harry did as he was told and flipped through the pages until he reached a black and white drawing of a beautifully terrifying woman with dark hair and gaunt eyes, who reminded him slightly of Bellatrix Lestrange. "She's almost as scary as Madam Pince," Harry commented.

Dumbledore chuckled at that. "Almost, but not quite," he agreed. Then he pointed to a particular passage in the text. "But back to the matter at hand, I think this is what we're looking for."

Harry began to read out loud. "*While Morgana was highly skilled in many branches of the Dark Arts, it was her skill at Blood Magic that made her particularly unstoppable. Many wizards and witches tried to defeat her with duels, but could not even get close enough to raise a wand to her. According to legend, her skill at Blood Magic became so strong in her prime, that she could rip the bones from a person's body with the merest flick of her wrist.*"

Harry balked at the horrible words. "Is that even possible?"

Dumbledore merely shrugged. "Blood Magic gives the caster power over their own body or the body of another person. In theory, if a person were skilled enough and powerful enough, such a thing is not outside the realm of possibility. I have never heard of such a thing actually occurring, however."

Without a word, Dumbledore slipped another book into Harry's hands, and pointed to another passage. Again, Harry read aloud. "*Herpo the Foul is considered one of the first wizards to take on the title of Dark Lord. His ruthlessness was matched only by his power at Soul Magic, which he used to create Inferi, corrupt the souls of others, and even prolong his life unnaturally.*"

Without pause, Dumbledore handed him another book and pointed out another passage to read. "*Ekrizdis was one of the most ruthless wizards of the Fifteenth Century. For years he*

inhabited the Fortress of Azkhaban, which was later converted into a prison. However, during his life, Ekrizdis ruled the island of Dementers, using his powerful Soul Magic to bend them to his will. Rumor suggests that the creatures even taught him their darkest Soul Magic ability; to suck out the souls of living beings, a skill Ekrizdis used on many unsuspecting muggle sailors."

Again and again, Dumbledore handed Harry examples of terrible dark witches and wizards who were able to become almost completely unstoppable, because they were skilled at Ancient Magic. The examples were mostly of Soul Magic experts, but occasionally they were highly skilled in Blood Magic or Mind Magic instead, and one even used Elemental Fire Magic.

"Ok," Harry was pretty sure he was starting to get the picture. "So, you were worried that if Ancient Magic were legal, then another Dark Lord might rise up like Voldemort?"

"Exactly," Dumbledore smiled. "Except I was not worried that it *might* happen. You see, it was most assuredly already happening. Harry, are you at all familiar with Gellert Grindelwald?"

"Wasn't he a dark lord a long time ago, sir? Way back before Voldemort?"

To Harry's surprise, Dumbledore chuckled. "Well, I'm not sure if I would use the phrase 'a long time ago.' But I suppose young people tend to think of anything that happened before they were born as 'a long time ago.' Of course, you are correct, he was a skillful Dark Wizard trying to gain power *a long time ago* in the 1930s and 40s." Dumbledore let out a sad sigh. "Of course, to me, it sometimes it feels like only yesterday."

"You defeated him, right sir?" Harry asked. "Your chocolate frog card said that you dueled with him and you won. Did he use Ancient Magic?"

Dumbledore's eyes twinkled with mirth. "Well, I'm glad to see your Hogwarts education has served you well if you learned about an important historical event from a chocolate frog card." Despite his reprimanding words, Dumbledore seemed highly amused by Harry's source of information.

The man slowly began levitating the books back to their original locations as he continued, flagrantly ignoring Madam Pince's rules. "Yes, Grindelwald was skilled in a few branches of Ancient Magic. He had enough knowledge of Mind Magic and Elemental Magic that he could perform some basic occlumency and legillimancy and some elemental spells. However, his true skill lay in Blood Magic. The man had a natural talent for it, and by the time he was finally stopped, he was capable of drawing vast amounts of power from within him. It made him capable of some incredibly strong wandless magic."

"Wandless magic?" Harry gaped. "Like the goblins? They said that they do magic without wands."

"Oh, did they now?" Dumbledore asked. "And when did they say this?"

Before Harry could fumble for an answer, Irma Pince was back with a vengeance. “My alarm went off!” she shouted. “Someone’s been levitating books. It’s against the rules.”

“Goodness gracious!” Dumbledore looked scandalized. “Levitating books? In violation of the rules? Hmm, I’m afraid I didn’t see any students levitating books here. How about you, Harry, did you see any students levitating books?”

Harry looked down at the stack of books Dumbledore had been levitating only seconds ago. “Er...no?”

“Well there you go, Irma. Harry says he didn’t see any students committing this heinous crime. So, I suppose that leaves us with something of a mystery. I can assure you, though, that I will certainly keep our eyes peeled for anyone who may breaking this rule. If I *see* anyone doing this, I shall let you know immediately.”

The librarian gave Harry a suspicious glare, but didn’t have any proof that he was up to trouble, so she stomped away with one last calculating look.

A minute or two passed in silence before Dumbledore spoke again. “Is she gone?”

Harry peaked out of the gated entrance to the Restricted Section. It was now past curfew for the younger students, so there were only a few sixth- and seventh-years left, trying to make last minute revisions to their assignments. Most of them kept sneaking suspicious looks toward the Restricted Section, as if they were trying to figure out what Harry and Dumbledore were doing in there. Madam Pince had returned to her desk near the front entrance. She seemed to be running some diagnostic charms, probably on her ‘levitating book’ alarm to see if it was working.

“I think the coast is clear,” Harry said. He was starting to feel a little like a co-conspirator, especially when Dumbledore immediately started levitating the rest of the books back to their original places on the shelves. “Why don’t you just carry them back by hand, sir?” Harry asked, clutching the one remaining book in his arms.

The other books were spiraling and dancing through the musty air in an almost synchronized fashion. It was rather amazing to watch. “I’m an old man, Harry. I can’t be bothered to carry around heavy stacks of books. Besides, you’ll have to forgive my pride, but my skill level is ever so slightly higher than your average student, and I think I can be trusted not to drop items I’m trying to levitate.” As if to drive home this point, Dumbledore flicked his wand and the last few flying books dove into a spectacular spiral before souring to their final resting place.

“What in Merlin’s name is going on?” Harry could hear Madam Pince grouching from the other end of the library. He quickly turned to peak out the gate again.

“She’s coming back,” he warned.

Dumbledore had already tucked his wand away. Harry noticed that the man seemed to wince a little when his blackened hand brushed against his robe and he thought Harry wasn’t looking. Was it bothering him more than he let on? Harry wondered if Dumbledore’s

resistance to carry the books had less to do with his old age, and more to do with his withered hand.

Before Madam Pince stormed in, the headmaster sidled up next to Harry and whispered with his voice full of mischief. "I'll keep your secret if you keep mine."

Harry didn't bother asking what 'secret' Dumbledore was referring to. The man had obviously figured out what Harry had been up to that weekend. He wasn't really sure why he ever thought he might be able to hide it from his seemingly omniscient headmaster.

When Pince asked if they were sure they hadn't seen any students levitating books, Harry clutched the one remaining tome like a lifeline. Dumbledore insisted that he hadn't even seen other students besides Harry, and that he could assure her that he was making sure Harry wasn't levitating any books. Harry chose to keep his mouth shut. Recent experiences had confirmed that he was terrible at this sort of thing.

Harry didn't open his mouth until he and Dumbledore were alone again. "You know, I'm beginning to think you're a terrible role-model, sir," Harry teased. "It's no wonder I have such a disregard for the rules."

"Every rule has exceptions, my dear boy," Dumbledore explained. "I would like to think that in a reasonable society, we should be able to make reasonable judgements about what we can and should reasonably do. It is terribly unfortunate that neither society, nor the people living in it, can be counted on to be reasonable."

"Is that why you made Ancient Magic illegal?"

"I made Ancient Magic illegal because I watched two nearly unstoppable Dark Lords rise to power in my lifetime and I didn't want to see a third." Dumbledore hopped up onto the desk where the books had been and sat quite primly. Despite being an 'old man,' he was quite spry. "I made exceptions to that law because I am a reasonable person. Most Aurors are allowed to learn some Ancient Magic for defense, whether it be occlumency or some basic wandless magic. Many healers learn some basic Blood Magic for healing. Obviously, creature magic is exempt, since most magical creatures use some form of Ancient Magic."

"Why didn't you make an exception for holiday rituals and things like that, sir?" Harry was almost bursting with questions.

"As it happens, I did try to." Dumbledore's legs were swinging in a carefree manner. "Oh goodness, yes. There was a bill about it in the Wizengamot several years ago. I can't quite remember who brought it up, but I did vote in favor of it. I'm afraid it was still voted down by some of the other Light Wizards. They didn't seem to think that old-fashioned rituals were worth making an exception over."

Dumbledore leaned in conspiratorially. "I'll let you in on a little secret, though, Harry. I know for a fact that many of the old families still perform those rituals in secret."

"Light families or Dark families?"

“Both, I would assume. I want you to understand, Harry, that I was certainly never trying to ruin anyone’s holiday plans. I have seen many terrible tragedies in my lifetime. My goal was only the lessen the number that the next generation would have to endure.” After a moment of silence, Dumbledore asked. “Did you have any other questions, my dear boy?”

Harry looked down at the book in his hands. He had ended up back with ‘Fifteenth Century Fiends’ again. Dumbledore did have a point that almost all the fiends had been involved in Ancient Magic in some way. “Did Voldemort use Ancient Magic?”

“Yes,” Dumbledore confirmed without hesitation. “He obviously has some impressive skill with Lellimancy and wandless magic. However, his specialty was always Soul Magic. I know he created many inferi, and I have strong reason to suspect that he engaged in some of the darkest and most corrupting Soul Magic there is.”

Harry allowed the book in his hands to fall open. It landed on an etching of Ekrizdis, the man who had lived with dementors and even sucked out people’s souls. The picture of him just showed a shadowy figure in a black cloak. “I understand why you would want to pass that law, sir. But why make *every* type of Ancient Magic illegal? Why not just make Soul Magic illegal? Or Blood Magic? Or just the really powerful kind?”

“That’s an excellent question, Harry.” Dumbledore looked quite proud, despite the fact that Harry continued to question him. “You see, most people have a certain inclination to be better at one type of Ancient Magic, and that type will come more easily to them.” Harry nodded, that was basically what Malfoy had said. “So, let’s say that a young student decides to study Elemental Magic. However, they realize in their studies, that they have a natural inclination toward Blood Magic. Because they already began studying Ancient Magic, in one form, Blood Magic will come to them much more naturally. However, if they had never studied Ancient Magic at all, those skills would never have become unlocked, and they would never risk hurting themselves or others.”

Harry was just about to speak when Madam Pince appeared in the gateway again. “The library’s closing. It’s almost curfew.” She glanced at the book in Harry’s hand. “Are you checking out that book? You’ll need a note with the title of the book if you are.”

“We’re not taking any books tonight, Irma,” Dumbledore assured her. “Don’t worry, my good woman, we’ll be out of your hair in just a moment. How about you begin shutting things down while Harry and I pack up here?”

Once again, Dumbledore waited until the librarian was out of view before he began to levitate the book in Harry’s arms back toward the shelf. “You’re shameless,” Harry tried not to laugh. “Anyway, I guess I’m still not sure why *all* Ancient Magic had to be illegal. I mean, I know you made a few exceptions, but it still seems really limiting. Maybe I just don’t understand.”

“Or far more likely,” Dumbledore countered, “You understand perfectly. You simply don’t agree.” Dumbledore led him back through the library as Madam Pince was turning down the lights. It seemed they were the only ones left.

“So, you think I’m wrong?”

“Not at all, my dear boy. You see, not every situation has a right and a wrong answer.”
Dumbledore opened the library door for him. “It’s entirely possible that we’re both wrong. Or, and this is a wondrous thing indeed, we could both be right! It’s all a matter of perspective.”

“If you say so, sir.” Harry was still reeling when they left the library side by side. The halls were silent. All the students must have returned to their rooms. “I do understand why you did what you did. I’m just not sure if I would have done the same thing.”

“Well, Harry,” Dumbledore placed a hand on his shoulder as they walked together. “One day, you will be able to join the Wizengamot yourself. And you will be able to make the changes you feel are right. I must say, I’m very excited that you’re taking this responsibility seriously. And I dearly hope, for your sake, that the laws you pass will inspire the changes that you wish to see.”

Harry nodded silently, as they made their way past the gargoyle and up the stairs to the headmaster’s office.

“In the meantime, Harry, I promise you that I will not use your proxy vote to push through any other legislation about Ancient Magic. It was always my intention to use that vote in a way the Potter family would approve of. If you don’t agree with me on this issue, then I will not use your vote for this issue. It’s as simple as that.”

“Really?”

Dumbledore nodded and pushed open the doorway to the familiar space. “In return, however, I would like you to promise me that you will not go wandering outside of school grounds again, without any supervision. There are a lot of witches and wizards who are trying very hard to keep you safe here, my boy. Sneaking off with your friend, without alerting anyone, was not a good way to repay them.”

“Yes, sir. I understand. I promise I won’t go sneaking off again.”

“Wonderful!” Dumbledore clapped his hands and returned to his place behind his desk. “Now, I’m afraid that little field trip took up most of our evening. And yet, alas, we still have much to discuss. I believe you wanted to know about the Werewolf Dark Creature Bill? And perhaps even sign over another vote to help our cause?”

“The bill!” Harry cried. “I almost forgot about that.”

“Indeed. And, of course, we still have a memory to peruse.”

“Whose memory are we looking at tonight, sir?”

“Why, my own memory, Harry. The memory of the day I met a young man at a poor orphanage.”

Making Enemies

When Remus Lupin arrived at the Ministry of Magic on Tuesday evening, he was not at all impressed with his treatment by the security wizard.

“You say your name is Remus Lupin?” The Watchwizard asked as he placed Remus’s wand into his wand-weighing device.

“Yes, that’s what the nametag says.” Remus checked his pocket watch again. The voting may have already started, and he desperately needed to know the results. If werewolves were relabeled as Dark creatures, it wouldn’t just affect him, it would affect the entire landscape of the war.

“Well, I’m afraid that name has a ‘security risk’ warning attached to it.” The man explained, purposely holding Remus’s wand out of his reach.

“Security risk? How am I a security risk?”

“It says here that there’s a werewolf registered under that name. Is that you?” The wizard looked fairly skeptical as he gave Remus a second prod with his probity probe.

Remus resisted the urge to sigh, and simply gave the security wizard an affable smile. “Yes, that’s me.”

“Are you sure?” He looked Remus up and down. “You don’t really look like a Dark creature.”

Before Remus could answer, an affronted voice came from his right. “Werewolves aren’t Dark creatures.” He turned to see Nymphadora Tonks in all her bubblegum pink glory. “At least not yet. I suppose tonight’s the night we get a final confirmation.” She winked at Remus before turning to the Watchwizard. “Give him his wand back, Eric. I’ll escort him where he wants to go, so you don’t need to worry about any ‘security risk.’”

“Well, I suppose if he’s with an Auror...”

Before the man could change his mind, Remus swiped his wand back and quickly followed Dora out of the Atrium. “Thanks for getting me out of that nonsense.”

She flashed him a playful smile. “Hopefully, after this ridiculous bill is shot down, you won’t have to deal with quite as much nonsense.”

“We can only hope.”

They took the elevator down to the bottom floor, and she led him down several corridors until they reached the outside of the main Chambers of the Wizengamot. He could hear arguing coming from inside, but outside the heavy doors, a familiar face was waiting for them. “Oh good, you’re both here, they’re about to vote any minute now.”

The woman had dark hair and eyes, but her severe features were offset by her kind expression. Dora gave her a quick hug. “Remus, you remember my mum, Andromeda?”

“Of course, Mrs. Tonks, always a pleasure. But I must say, I wasn’t expecting to see you tonight.”

Andromeda Tonks motioned them toward a small door to the right on the main Chamber entryway. “Nymphadora asked me to stop by to help explain the voting. I think her experience with the Ministry is more limited to the Department of Magical Law Enforcement. I’ll admit, I’m quite out of practice when it comes to pureblood politics, but it’s not for nothing that I was raised as a Black.” Once they were through the door, she motioned them up a narrow, winding staircase. “At the very least, I remember how to get to the viewing balcony. From up here we’ll be able to see and hear everything that happens down on the Chamber floor. And it’s enchanted so they can’t hear us.”

When they arrived in the viewing section, they realized it was already mostly full. There were several reporters taking diligent notes. There were people who looked like assistants and secretaries. However, the main reason it felt so overly full, was because the figure of Rubeus Hagrid seemed to fill up any space he occupied. Remus was surprised the man had managed to squeeze up the stairs. “Hagrid, I didn’t know you would be here.”

“Wouldna missed it fer nothing.” Hagrid motioned them toward a seat near him. Some of the reporters shot him dirty looks, since it was probably hard for them to hear the current speaker over Hagrid’s gruff voice. “It’s a bloody outrage they’re even debatin’ somethin’ like this. Firs’ it’s werewolves, then who knows? Are they gonna start callin’ giants Dark creatures? Or goblins? It’s bad enough they gave that label to perfectly harmless animals, like acramantula, or manticores, or mountain trolls.”

“Are there manticores that are harmless?” asked Dora.

“Since when are mountain trolls harmless?” asked her mother.

“My goodness, Hagrid,” Remus interrupted. “Your NEWT-level Care of Magical Creatures class must be very...exciting.”

“Well it woulda been, if anyone had bothered ter sign up,” Hagrid frowned. Remus let out a sign of relief for all the lucky students who wouldn’t be exposed to ‘perfectly harmless animals.’

“Excuse me,” interrupted a woman with ashy brown hair. “Please keep it down. Some of us actually came up to the observation balcony to *observe*.” She looked like a reporter, and Remus quickly apologized on behalf of his party.

When the werewolf finally turned his attention to the main floor and the sea of purple robes, he instantly regretted it. The woman speaking had the most irritatingly saccharine voice, that it was almost like listening to the squeaky wheel of a broken trolley cart. “Gallopig gargoyles, who on earth is that?” he whispered with care.

Andromeda frowned as she also listened to the short woman drone on about half-breeds and dangerous creatures. “She doesn’t look familiar to me. She must not be from any of the old families.”

“Tha’s Umbridge,” Hagrid practically growled. The ashy haired woman quickly shushed him again. “Sorry,” his voice dropped to a conspiratorial whisper. He could still probably be heard by everyone on the balcony, but at least he didn’t completely drown out the woman below. “As I said, tha’s Umbridge. She worked for Fudge. She’s the one who gave ‘Arry such a hard time las’ year. Tried to get Dumbledore sacked, too. Wouldna be able to think of one nice thing ter say abou’ her if me life depended on it.”

“So that’s the High Inquisitor,” breathed Remus, as he looked at the nasty piece of work who had spent a year *not teaching* Defense Against the Dark Arts. “What else did we miss?”

“Well,” explained Hagrid. “Apparently they’ve been at this fer weeks now. So tonight they’re all jus’ summin’ up their points before the final vote.”

“That’s typical for important measures,” Andromeda chimed in.

“Only a coupla people really went on and on like this toad, though,” Hagrid continued. “That one –” He pointed to a prim, blonde man on the right side of the room, “Kept talking about keepin’ magical bloodlines separate and preservin’ a traditional way o’ life. Don’t like ‘im at all.”

“That’s Lord Peneus Greengrass,” Andromeda explained. “With Lucius Malfoy and the Lestrangle brothers in prison, and the Black family all but gone, the Greengrasses are probably the most prominent Dark family left in the Wizengamot. He’s trouble, but at least he’s not a Death Eater.”

“And tha’ one –” This time Hagrid pointed at a suave brunette over on the left side of the room, “Kept talkin’ about how dangerous Greyback was. He kept mentionin’ different attacks the werewolves ‘ave made on You-Know-Who’s orders. He kept callin’ werewolves ‘the tools of evil.’ That can’t be good, neither.”

“That’s Tiberius McLaggen,” Andromeda continued her helpful commentary. “He’s a Light wizard, but he’s always had the personality of a fermented flubberworm. I think he holds a lot of sway with the other Light wizards, though, I’m afraid.”

“Not as much as Dumbledore,” Dora insisted, determined to be hopeful.

When the Umbridge woman finally ended her sickening little speech, Albus Dumbledore banged his gavel from his prominent position in the center of the assembly. “Thank you, Dolores, that was illuminating as always.” From the older man’s gentle expression, one might never guess that he held Umbridge in anything but the highest regard. Dumbledore would probably be polite and patient with a boggart he found in his closet. “Now that everyone has had a chance to speak up, I think it’s time we move on to the most important part. Everyone in favor of reclassifying werewolves as Dark creatures, with all the legal restrictions thereof, please raise your hand now.”

A lot of people raised their hands, including the majority of the right side of the room where Lord Greengrass sat. The middle section, around Dumbledore, was more of a mixed bag. However, most of the wizards and witches on the left, kept their hands down. The main exception being Lord McLaggen and a group of wizards and witches sitting near him, who all raised their hands with an angry determination.

“Thank you,” Dumbledore smiled. “And now, everyone against this bill, who would like to keep werewolves classified as they are, please raise your hands.” Dumbledore himself raised his good hand while he counted the others who joined him. Most of the left hand side of the room voted with him, much to McLaggen’s obvious annoyance. Remus recognized Frank Longbottom’s mother voting with Dumbledore, along with Kingsley Shacklebolt and Elphias Doge, but he didn’t know many other faces.

“Wonderful!” Dumbledore gave his gavel one more loud tap for good measure. “It seems the ‘nays’ have it, so as of now, werewolves will remain as they...”

“Hold your hippogriffs, Chief Warlock!” It was Lord McLaggen who spoke up. “You’re not the only one who can count. It was a tie, and a tie means that it goes back to the Special Committee for Magical Creatures.”

“Ah, of course,” Dumbledore’s smile didn’t falter for a moment. “You’re quite right, Tiberius. The bill would return to the Special Committee...if the vote had been a tie. But I’m afraid you may have miscounted.”

“Hem hem.” Remus took a moment to figure out where that awful little cough had come from, but then he realized that Umbridge was speaking again. “I believe Lord McLaggen if correct, Dumbledore. Even with that ridiculous Proxy vote you coerced out of Potter, the votes are even. 45 to 45.”

“Ah, yes, I think I see the confusion, Dolores.” Dumbledore’s eyes were twinkling in that way they did when he knew something that someone else didn’t, which was the vast majority of the time. “You see, I no longer have one Proxy vote that I can use as I see fit. I now have two.”

The uproar that followed this announcement was only slightly drowned out when the Chief Warlock flicked his wand and sent several documents toward several outraged politicians. Lord Greengrass, Lord McLaggen, and Secretary Umbridge were all among the assembled parties who received a copy of whatever paperwork Dumbledore had produced. A couple bundles of parchment also floated their way up to the balcony. Remus noticed that the woman with the ashy brown hair managed to snag a copy.

“The Black vote!” shouted Lord Greengrass. “The Blacks are one of the most distinguished Dark families in Britain. How dare you use the Black vote to push through your infernal Light agenda!”

Remus wondered how Dumbledore had managed to secure Sirius’s old vote, but that question was quickly answered.

“Potter!” Umbridge looked almost apoplectic. “How is Potter the Black family heir? That shouldn’t even be possible.”

“My goodness, Chief Warlock,” Lord McLaggen was much calmer, but he certainly didn’t look pleased. “What exactly goes on at that school of yours? Do you provide lessons, or do you simply ask the students to hand over their wands to you upon entry? Merlin knows there’s no reason to teach them anything, when you’re obviously more comfortable doing their thinking for them.”

The reporters and assistants were scribbling like mad. This was probably more excitement than they had expected.

Dumbledore didn’t show one ounce of offence. “I can assure you, Tiberius, that Harry offered his other Proxy vote completely of his own volition. In fact, he was the one who suggested it to me. And now, with all that cleared up, I officially announce the bill failed.” He banged his gavel one last time. “Werewolves will remain as half-breeds. They are *not* Dark creatures. At least, not today.”

Once again, the assembly burst into chaos.

On Wednesday morning, Harry was thrilled to read about the Wizengamot verdict in Hermione’s copy of the Daily Prophet. He almost snorted his pumpkin juice when he got to Dumbledore’s dramatic reveal that he had yet another Proxy vote. Harry wished he could have seen the look on Umbridge’s face when Dumbledore told her that she had lost, all thanks to Harry Potter. Perhaps he’d ask Professor Dumbledore to show him that memory in the pensieve the next time they had a lesson.

Harry was feeling quite confident that nothing would be able to dampen his day, until he arrived at Potions just in time to have a copy of the Daily Prophet shoved in his face. As the little black and white photo of the Wizengamot passed about an inch from his nose, an indignant voice followed. “You gave him another vote!?”

“What?” Harry tried to take a step back from the violently shaking newspaper.

Suddenly, the issue was snatched away, and instead, Harry’s vision was filled with a very irate Draco Malfoy. “You gave him another Proxy vote? Are you insane? You finally take an Inheritance Test and you finally learn about your family and legacy and all the things that have been kept from you....and what’s the first thing you do? You give away even more power to the man who’s trying to make Inheritance Tests illegal.”

“He’s not trying to make Inheritance Tests illegal.”

“He made Ancient Magic illegal!” Malfoy was almost shaking, and Harry was surprised the Slytherin had even come over to talk to him. The last couple days, it seemed as though Malfoy was avoiding him like the plague. It was as if the dam had burst.

Before Harry had a chance to defend his decision, Slughorn called them all to get into pairs again. Harry didn't even think about what he was doing, he just pulled Malfoy over to his cauldron so they could continue their argument in peace. "Look, I don't really agree with him on the whole Ancient Magic thing, but I really didn't want werewolves to be labeled as Dark creatures. I'd do anything to prevent that."

"Are you kidding me?" Malfoy lowered his voice while Slughorn wrote their assignment on the board. "You handed over the Black family vote to Albus Dumbledore, because you were trying to promote the rights of werewolves? Werewolves!?"

"Yeah." It all seemed so reasonable to Harry.

"Why would you possibly do that? Who cares about werewolves?"

"Boys," Professor Slughorn interrupted them. "I'm sure whatever you're discussing must seem awfully important, but you only have a couple hours left to brew the Strengthening Solution, and believe me, you're going to need all the time you can get."

"Yes, sir." Harry blushed when he realized everyone was staring at them.

"Of course, sir." Malfoy just sneered at the onlookers.

Harry then remembered that Slughorn had asked them to get into pairs and Harry had been so focused on arguing with Malfoy, he'd completely forgotten to grab a partner. He turned to see Ron standing by Hermione. She was giving Harry a very confused look, and Ron looked fraught with worry, as though he thought Harry might be ill. He then turned toward Ernie, who had partnered with him last week, only to find Ernie standing with the Ravenclaw girl who had partnered with Malfoy.

That's when it hit him. There was only one person left to partner with, a person that Harry had dragged over to his cauldron right as Slughorn was asking them to pair up. What had he done?

"I'll get the water boiling." Malfoy interrupted his panicking thoughts. "You go get the ingredients."

"Oh, er, ok, I guess." Apparently this was happening. Harry supposed he would just have to make the best of it. Malfoy was quite good at potions, and the two of them had been getting on alright, even if this whole situation felt surreal. After all, they had run off to Gringotts together, surely, they could brew a potion together. It just felt different with the rest of the class watching them, giving them confused and angry looks.

On his way to the ingredient's cupboard, Blaise Zabini made a point of almost knocking Harry over, as he came from the other direction. "Stay out of my way, Potter," he snarled.

"Oi, you're the one who ran into me!"

Without another word, Zabini gave him a glare that would have made Aunt Petunia proud, and then swept away. Harry wasn't sure what was going on, apparently by ending his rivalry

with one Slytherin he had made enemies with another.

While he tried to scoop up all the necessary ingredients, he was interrupted again. This time by the professor himself. “Harry, my boy! Have a fine weekend, did you? Get some fresh air, I take it?”

Harry instantly paled. Did he know? Dumbledore said he had spoken with Slughorn on Monday; asked him about his whereabouts during the Gringotts attack. Apparently, Snape had insisted that he’d seen Slughorn at the Leaky Cauldron. Despite Slughorn’s ridiculous personality, the man was supposed to be rather clever. He could probably put two and two together.

“Why Harry, do you know I received the nicest gift this morning? Elven-made mead from one Peneus Greengrass. He sends his regards and wants me to know that it was lovely catching up on Saturday.” Harry kept his mouth shut, because what could he really say? Slughorn then leaned in and winked conspiratorially. “Twenty points to Gryffindor, Mr. Potter, for having such fine taste. Perhaps I’ll share a glass with you if I actually manage to get you to come to one of my dinners.”

“Er, I should really get back to brewing this potion, sir.”

“Of course, my boy, of course. Oh, and Randall,” he called towards Ron. The redhead looked up from his work station, confused and a little nervous. Slughorn almost never addressed his directly, and that was probably the closest he’d gotten to Ron’s actual name. “Good job chopping those lacewings. Five points to Gryffindor for you, as well.”

Ron’s mouth fell open. “Oh, thanks sir!” He then proceeded to smash one the wings while he wasn’t paying attention. “Bloody hell,” he mumbled and quickly tried to salvage the situation before Hermione noticed.

Harry wasn’t sure what Slughorn had done that for. He could see why the Potion’s professor would give Harry points, since Slughorn had scored free wine because of him. But why Ron? Why not Malfoy? But the answer was obvious, wasn’t it? The whole time Harry was in Diagon Alley on Saturday, Ron had been ‘missing’ as well. And everyone knew Ron was Harry’s very best friend. Slughorn probably assumed that Harry had gone with him. Hell, Dumbledore probably made the same assumption. He hadn’t said a single word about Harry traipsing off with Malfoy, he had given Harry a hard time for leaving the school grounds with his ‘friend.’ Who would possibly assume that Harry Potter would willingly go anywhere with Draco Malfoy?

“Took you long enough,” Malfoy complained when Harry returned.

Harry spent most of the class distracted, but Malfoy fortunately seemed more focused and determined than ever.

The next day, they had Defense with Snape. Harry hadn’t spoken to the dour man since Monday when Dumbledore had returned to the school; the day he supposedly questioned the

professor about the events of the weekend. If there was any doubt at all as to whether or not Snape had also figured out what Harry had been up to, it was cleared up during that class.

On the board were the incantations for a fire shield and a water shield, along with the relevant theory behind each one.

“The fire shield will protect you from powerful ice charms,” Snape lectured. “Because fire is a natural deterrent to ice, a fire shield will be much more effective than a typical *Protego* shield spell. The water shield will obviously protect you from fire.”

As soon as they’d finished their notes, Snape set them into pairs to start practicing the two shields. Harry was excited, these sounded like some of the coolest spells they’d learned so far that year. “Not so fast, Mr. Potter, Mr. Weasley.” Snape had sidled up beside him and Ron. His expression was deadly. “You two will be spending the next hour making progress on your bonus assignment.”

“What bonus assignment?” Ron asked, because apparently, he had a death wish.

“You two are each going to write me a 4 foot long essay on why the best method for defense is: to stay in a warded location where your safety is almost guaranteed. Be sure your essays include why it is profoundly stupid to go wondering off on your own, without telling anyone where you’re going, and with absolutely no plan as to how to defend yourself should you be found out.”

“Why do have to write a stupid essay when no one else does?” Ron couldn’t be stopped, no matter how fervently Harry shook his head.

“Twenty-five points from Gryffindor for asking a question you already know the answer to.” Well there went all the points Slughorn had given them. “If you ask me one more inane question, I swear I will give the both of you detention every Saturday from now until the end of the year. The *only* reason I haven’t done so already is that I have better things to do with my own time. Of course, even if I were condemned to your insufferable presence every weekend, *at least I would know where you two dunderheads are.*”

Then he swept away leaving Harry and Ron to work on the world’s most boring essay, while everyone else in the class dashed around the room, shooting off fire spells and dousing each other with water.

With so much activity, it was easy to talk without Snape swooping down on them. “He knows I was the one who went to Gringotts this weekend,” Harry whispered, by way of explanation. “He thinks you were the one who went with me.”

“And now we’re stuck here while everyone else gets to mess around.” Ron pulled out his parchment and quill. On the other side of the room, Seamus Finnegan managed to cause a small explosion of fire, while Dean Thomas sprayed him down with a stream of water. “This is so unfair!” Ron complained. “I really hope that Inheritance Test was worth it, mate.”

“I certainly learned a lot this weekend.”

Harry tried to concentrate on the blank parchment in front of him, but it was so hard when Lavender and Parvati were running around the perimeter of the room shooting off sparklers and sizzling them out with messy water shields. Their shields were so flimsy they splashed water everywhere, even onto Harry's parchment. "Hey, watch where you're splashing!"

"Sorry Harry," Parvati called, and to Harry's surprise, she winked at him.

Meanwhile, Lavender was apologizing to Ron, even though his parchment was perfectly dry. That was until Hermione doused her with a blast of water like the spray of an elephant. "Oh, whoops! So sorry, Lavender, didn't see you there."

"Why you –" And she was off, trying to light the hem of Hermione's robes on fire, but Hermione was much more adept at water shields than Lavender was.

"Look at him," Ron grumbled, referring to Snape. The professor was standing to the side with a bored expression, doing nothing to quell the excitement that had erupted around the room. "He's doing this on purpose. That bastard has never allowed one smidgeon of fun in any class he's ever taught. Now, suddenly it's a bloody free for all."

Harry looked up from his essay. He had only written a few lines so far. He was still distracted thinking about the things he had learned that weekend, particularly from Malfoy pretending to be Slughorn. "Hey Ron, I think I'm going to go to Slughorn's dinner tomorrow night."

"What? But we have Quidditch practice tomorrow night."

"We only have Quidditch practice because I specifically scheduled it that day, to get out of dinner." Harry tried not to laugh when Crabbe lit his own sleeve on fire, and Goyle tried to put it out by tackling him. "I can just move practice to Saturday. That would probably work better for everyone anyway."

"Why would you even want to go to Slughorn's dinner?" Ron hadn't even written a single sentence, he was thoroughly distracted by the commotion around them. "I mean I get why Hermione would go, she's the type of nutter who would actually enjoy socializing with a teacher. But Slughorn's just going to spend the whole meal trying to get you to talk about the Prophecy and the Department of Mysteries. It sounds like your worst nightmare."

"Maybe," Harry conceded. "But I realized this weekend that Malfoy knows just about every wizard and witch working in politics. If I want to get more involved in this political stuff, I need to meet more people. Or at least learn who these bloody people are. It's like you and your money management thing. You weren't born with a vault waiting for you, so you have to learn how to make your own money. Well, I wasn't born into the wizarding world, so I need to try and find a way to learn who these people are."

"If you say so," Ron shrugged.

They lapsed into silence, while they pretended to work on their essays, but really just watched the duels around them.

From the sideline, Harry could see Zabini trying very hard to set Malfoy's hair on fire, while Malfoy screamed at him and cast water shield after water shield. However, when Nott tried to blast a fireball at Malfoy while his back was turned, Zabini immediately cast a water shield of his own, to protect his ex-friend. Apparently Zabini was angry enough to ruin Malfoy's hair, but not angry enough to let Nott seriously burn him.

Meanwhile, Pansy Parkinson was dueling the blonde girl Harry recognized as Daphne Greengrass. They were both trying very hard to make it look like they were giving the assignment their full effort, while also being careful not to muss up their hair or their uniforms.

"You know what, Harry," Ron spoke up again all of a sudden. "I think you might actually have a point. You should go to that dinner. Most of the people involved in all that pureblood political stuff are bloody bastards. They need more people like you." Ron was ignoring the drama around them and giving Harry a conspiratorial look. "Besides, if you and Hermione are off, that will give me more time to read my book. I've already finished Chapter Three. Now I know the best strategies for getting out of debt."

"Are you in debt?" Harry asked.

"No, but if I ever do get into debt, I'll know how to get out."

"Huh. Have you gotten to the part of the book where it talks about how to not get into debt to begin with?"

"Not yet, but I'll definitely keep an eye out."

They spent the rest of the lesson trying to finish their essays while being far too distracted with the chaos around them. About halfway through the period, the 'defense practice' devolved into a full on water/fire fight between the different houses. Gryffindor had a serious handicap with both Harry and Ron out of commission, but Hermione and Neville really held their own.

Before they left, Snape took ten more points from Gryffindor because Harry and Ron barely made any progress. Plus, Harry's essay was soggy, while Ron's was singed. Overall, Harry felt they got off easy.

The rest of the week was fairly uneventful. On Friday morning, while Hermione was in Arithmancy, Ron proudly announced to Harry that the twins had written back. Ron was now a co-investor in Weasley's Wizard Wheezes. Harry was glad that the letter he had secretly sent to Fred and George was taken seriously. It wasn't as though they really needed Ron's ten galleons.

At one point, Malfoy did finally lose patience and demand to know what Harry had learned during his Inheritance Test. Harry admitted that he was distantly related to the Longbottoms, and Malfoy immediately lost interest. "I just assumed you'd be related to Merlin or someone like that, with your luck," Malfoy admitted.

Harry just shrugged. After the goblin's sobering warning, he wasn't going to tell anyone he was related to Godric Gryffindor until he at least had some idea what that meant.

By the time Slughorn's dinner arrived, Harry was almost excited. However, the dinner itself wasn't nearly as informative as he thought it might be. There weren't any famous witches or wizards, just the students Slughorn thought were 'interesting.' Although, Slughorn told them that his Yuletide party would be a Who's Who of influential people in Wizarding Britain, and they were all invited.

While the food was higher quality than the usual Hogwarts fare, the conversation left something to be desired. Hermione made a point to discuss Potions Theory, something Harry knew nothing about. It was very awkward because Slughorn seemed to expect that Harry knew all about it, thanks to his help from the Half-Blood Prince. Fortunately, the professor brushed it off as Harry not wanting to 'talk shop' during a social dinner.

Cormac McLaggen, the seventh year Gryffindor who had vied for the Keeper position against Ron, was even more insufferable. He kept chatting with Harry as though they ought to be best mates, just because they were both Slughorn's favorites. The only thing that helped Harry get through the meal was Ginny making ridiculous faces behind McLaggen's back every time he talked about "my uncle on the Wizengamot" or "my luncheon with Minister Scrimgeour."

At one point, McLaggen prattled on about how Harry really ought to meet the new minister. "He's such a decisive figure, really knows how to lead the Ministry. I'm sure my uncle could introduce the two of you, if you'd like." Ginny finally lost patience and Harry noticed her slip a candy into McLaggen's chocolate parfait. A couple minutes later, his nose started bleeding so profusely he had to excuse himself to run to Madam Pomfrey. Harry was not sad to see the back of him, and he sent Ginny a grateful smile.

Harry thought the night couldn't get any worse, until he slipped away to use the loo, and suddenly found himself cornered by Blaise Zabini, who must have slipped away after him. "Potter." The Slytherin said Harry's name like a curse word.

"Zabini." Harry looked around the empty restroom and realized no help was coming. "What do you want?"

"I noticed you're spending an awful lot of time with Draco. Even though, in theory, you two don't have anything in common."

The dark-skinned young man was at least a head taller than Harry, but he was never one to back down from a challenge. "I can spend my time with whoever I like, Zabini. It's really none of your business."

The Slytherin narrowed his eyes. "Is this the part where you insist that you and Draco are just friends?"

"We're not friends," Harry replied automatically. "We're..." but he paused. Were they friends? They weren't enemies, but 'friends' sounded too weird.

“I thought so!” Zabini snapped, as if he’d just gotten Harry to confess to something. “I never understood why he was so obsessed with you. What do you have that I don’t have? I mean, you’re short, your hair’s a mess, and you dress like a blind house elf.”

“What does that have to do with anything?” Harry felt this conversation was getting away from him. Zabini was obviously upset that Malfoy was spending so much time with Harry, but why did it matter how Harry dressed?

“Well fine, if he wants to play with fire and get himself burnt, I can’t exactly stop him.” Zabini was ranting now. “But I swear on the grave of Salazar Slytherin, if you hurt him, Potter, I will kill you myself.”

“I don’t just go around hurting people!” Who did Zabini think he was? Harry wasn’t the bad guy in this situation. “Besides, what do you care about Malfoy getting hurt? I thought you were mad at him? I thought you two weren’t speaking anymore?”

“You don’t understand anything, Potter!” Zabini may have had a point there. “You know what, I don’t know why I even bothered trying to talk to you. You’re a waste of my time.” Then Zabini turned up his nose and gave such a condescending look, it reminded Harry quite a bit of Malfoy himself. “Besides, I know I’m better than you, and if Draco can’t see that, then that’s his loss.”

Without another word, Zabini glided from the room with a grace that would have made Madam Longbottom proud. The whole thing left Harry feeling empty and unsure.

Harry couldn’t figure out why Zabini was suddenly so against him. Harry had always had issues with Malfoy, Crabbe, Goyle, even Nott. Zabini was really the only sixth year Slytherin boy who hadn’t hated him on principal. Yet now, Zabini was treating Harry like he was an insect he’d very much like to squash.

“Bloody hell, I really don’t understand Slytherin dynamics.”

When Lord Voldemort opened his eyes, he found himself looking up at a starry night sky. It took only a moment to realize that it was not the sky itself, but in fact, the ceiling of the Great Hall of Hogwarts, reflecting the stars beyond. It had been a long time since he had stood beneath the magical ceiling or the floating candlelight. He wasn’t sure why his dreams kept returning him to Hogwarts. Probably because it was the one place he and Harry had in common; the most convenient place for them to meet in their shared dreamscape.

He had only been in this dream a few minutes, but already his mind felt more at ease. There was a sense of calm in his dreams with Harry; a peace he never felt while awake. Perhaps when all his horcruxes were finally returned to him again, he would feel this way all the time. His magic and his mood had already stabilized somewhat from having the cup and the diadem close by, along with his precious snake.

As for his current situation, the Dark Lord decided to make himself comfortable. He strolled over to the Slytherin table and sat down in the seat that had once been his. He wasn’t sure

why he gravitated there; probably out of habit. But he really could have sat anywhere since he was entirely alone.

That was, until Harry arrived. Harry also took a moment to marvel at the brilliant stars before his attention was quickly drawn to the only other figure in the room. And then Harry Potter looked right at him. Lord Voldemort didn't say anything from his seat at the far right. He simply gave a smile that he knew from years of experience came across to others as charming and endearing. Not to Harry, apparently.

The young men narrowed his eyes in suspicion, and immediately walked over to the opposite side of the room to sit at the Gryffindor table. Lord Voldemort sighed. The boy was being difficult for no reason. On the other hand, the Dark Lord had to admit it had been years since he'd played mind games with a worthy opponent.

Without further ado, the Heir of Slytherin stood up from his rightful place and sauntered over to the table for the brave and chivalrous. Harry watched without a word as the teenaged version of the Dark Lord walked all the way across the room, having to divert around the Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff tables. Lord Voldemort gave not one indication that he was annoyed, but then, he wasn't really. In fact, this was almost fun.

The moment Lord Voldemort sat himself down across from Harry Potter, the boy finally spoke up. "I'm sorry, but this table is reserved for Gryffindors."

Lord Voldemort merely blinked at him. He turned his head one way, toward the empty professor's table, and all the empty space around the front of the hall. He turned his head the other way, toward the open main door leading to darkness, and the empty dining tables. He turned back to Harry. "I can assure that if any Gryffindors show up and would like to sit here, I will make room for them."

Harry lips twitched at that. He was clearly trying very hard not to smile. "I'm surprised you even deigned to sit here. I figured you'd go sit in Dumbledore's chair again."

"Dumbledore's chairs are ostentatious even by my standards. And believe me, that's saying something. I've always had a flare for theatrics."

"Oh, I know." Again, Harry's lips quirked just a bit. "I bet you were a magnet for trouble even as a kid." Then, almost instantly, the Gryffindor's face became haunted and sad, as though he had just remembered something. "Sorry, that was crass. It must have been hard growing up in that orphanage, where you didn't have anything of your own. I can't imagine how intimidating it must have been to come to Hogwarts after that."

"Hogwarts was never intimidating," Lord Voldemort quickly waved that notion away. "And I think you can imagine exactly what it felt like to finally be here."

Harry inhaled sharply. "Like coming home."

Lord Voldemort nodded, because Harry did understand. He was probably the only one who ever could. Maybe it was because he was Lord Voldemort's horcrux. Maybe it was because... some other reason.

"It was still intimidating, though," Harry continued. "I was so nervous about the sorting. I thought maybe the hat would say there had been a mistake and send me back to the Dursleys. I felt like a complete fraud."

Lord Voldemort frowned at that. "I don't understand, what were you lying about?"

"I wasn't lying about anything. I just felt like this couldn't really be real."

"Why would you feel like a fraud unless you were actively lying about something?"

"I – " Harry gaped at him. "Never mind, you obviously wouldn't understand. You've probably never felt insecure in your life. I bet your sorting was just like Malfoy's. Let me guess, the Sorting Hat barely even touched your head before it shouted 'Slytherin'?"

The Dark Lord actually did laugh at that. He loved laughing at the expense of others. "The Sorting Hat didn't even fully touch his head before it sent him straight to Slytherin? Of course it did! What else would it have done? That boy doesn't have one drop of intelligence or loyalty or courage."

Harry looked uncomfortable laughing at young Malfoy's expense. "I don't know, he's been slightly less of a prat lately."

"Indeed?" Lord Voldemort quirked a brow, but Harry only shrugged and kept his mouth shut. "Well, let me assure you, Harry, the hat took much more time considering me. Even at a young age, I had many impressive traits that would have been valued by any house. In fact, I recall that the Sorting Hat told me that I would also do well in Ravenclaw."

Harry was gaping like he couldn't quite believe the words he was hearing. "The Sorting Hat told you that you would do well in Ravenclaw? It said that to you? Even though you're obviously a Slytherin? I mean, you're basically the quintessential Slytherin, but it said you would do well in Ravenclaw?"

Lord Voldemort was getting annoyed. Was Harry trying to tease him over such an inconsequential thing? "Well, obviously I belong in Slytherin, since it put me there. But I also have a brilliant mind and a thirst for knowledge, so it considered Ravenclaw. But in the end, it put me in Slytherin."

Harry was staring down at the table, lost in thought, but he looked hopeful. "The hat put me in Gryffindor. So that must be where I belong, no matter what other houses it considered."

Lord Voldemort was instantly intrigued. "What house did the hat suggest for you? No, let me guess. With your sycophantic loyalty to Dumbledore, it must have been Hufflepuff, right?"

Harry was only half listening. "I must be a Gryffindor. A real Gryffindor. If you're a Slytherin, which you obviously are, then I'm just as much a Gryffindor."

The Dark Lord only shrugged. "Well, to be fair, I did help the hat along."

Harry's looked back up at him. "What do you mean?"

Lord Voldemort smiled. He liked having Harry's attention fully on him. "In the end, I did tell the hat that I would prefer to be in Slytherin. I knew it was where I belonged. The hat finally sent me to Slytherin because I asked it to."

For the first time, Harry smiled. And he wasn't simply smiling, he was grinning from ear to ear. He looked so happy it was almost beyond words, full of joy and hope. Lord Voldemort almost couldn't believe how much he liked seeing that expression on the boy's face. "Thank you, Tom."

Without warning, Lord Voldemort awoke in his dark bedroom, alone and confused.

"Why would he thank me?"

"The Werewolf Dark Creature Bill has failed. It failed thanks to Albus Dumbledore and Harry Potter. And do you know who voted in favor of that ridiculous bill? Dark Wizards. Dark Wizards who want to maintain the status quo of having wizards at the top and half breeds at the bottom. Dark Wizards who are loyal to Voldemort. So, I implore you to see reason, see who really has your best interests at heart."

Remus was standing in a large glade deep in the northern woods, with dozens of werewolves, young and old, listening to his speech. Erwin Sykes had kept his end of the bargain and spread the word to his pack and others. He told them there was a wolf willing to stand up to Fenrir Greyback. There could be another way, besides following the will of an evil dark lord.

Some of the assembled werewolves looked apprehensive, even downright skeptical. Others looked hopeful. Remus tried to reassure them all.

Before he could continue his speech, one man with dark skin, a leather trench coat, and long dreadlocks waved a copy of the Daily Prophet for all to see. "You think we can't read, Lupin? You're not the only one who knows things. A lot of Dark Wizards voted for that bill, sure, but so did a lot of Light Wizards. It says here that it was mostly ministry officials pushing for it. The witch who proposed it works for Scrimgeour. Why should we trust Dumbledore if he's working with the same ministry that wants to hunt us down like dogs? None of us trusts this You-Know-Who fellow, but at least he's promising change."

There were a few nods of agreement. The werewolves were skeptical of Voldemort, but they all knew for certain that they didn't like the Ministry. "You're right," said Dora, stepping out from behind Remus. She was maintaining her nymph-like disguise with purple eyes and pointed ears. "The ministry officials are trying to take away whatever rights you have left. Some of them would round you up and put you in a bloody kennel if they had it their way, maybe even put you down for good. But they haven't. They can't. They've been trying to do that for decades, and they've never been able to. Because despite what the Ministry would like to think, wizards aren't all powerful, and they don't have complete control over all the other magical creatures."

Some of the werewolves puffed up their chests, looking proud that they had thwarted the Ministry officials for years. Others looked terrified at the reminder of what was at stake.

Remus continued where Dora left off. “Right now, the Ministry of Magic is like a zoo that’s trying to round up and tag all the magical creatures and half breeds, but it’s a zoo that’s being run by pixies with their heads cut off. They’re all just flying around making a lot of noise and not doing anything. Right now, all of you are relatively safe to live quiet and peaceful lives in the forests and on the outskirts of muggle villages.” There were some nods of agreement.

Remus took a deep breath. “But Voldemort and his followers are not pixies. They are dragons, and they will burn down everything in their path. Voldemort wants complete control over all creatures in Britain. If he is allowed power, there will be no place safe from him. There will be no peace. There will be no quiet. And if he decides he doesn’t need you anymore, he’ll do a lot worse than lock you up.”

The few people who had brought children, clutched them closer and shuddered. Another man stepped forward, this time one with white hair and shrewd eyes. “How do you know that? What makes you so sure the Dark Lord would definitely turn on us? Greyback’s insisting that the Dark Lord has promised all werewolves more freedom. More rights than the Ministry ever did.”

This time, Erwin spoke up, finally having lost his patience. “I heard what Greyback said, same as did you, Thorne. That Dark Lord is promising us werewolves the right to fight a damned war for him. The freedom to hunt down muggles without care.” Erwin spat at Thorne’s feet. “If you really want the freedom to fight someone else’s war and kill someone else’s enemies, then you can take it and shove it.”

Someone else spoke up then, this time a middle-aged woman with three children sitting beside her. “What if we don’t want to fight anyone? What if we just want to be left alone? Are we going to be punished for staying out of this? Lupin, you said Albus Dumbledore wants our support, but what does that mean? Does he want us to fight for him instead?”

Remus could feel his heart breaking for her, and the other mothers there who reminded him so much of Molly Weasley. “I mean, if you’d like to fight for our cause, we could certainly use more support. But no, of course he’s not expecting everyone to pick up arms for him, especially if they are just looking to protect their families. His concern, my concern, is that you *don’t join Voldemort and Greyback*. We don’t want you to be misled into thinking they’re fighting for your rights. They *do not* have your best interests at heart.”

“Oh, is that so?” A deep, rumbling voice spoke out over the whole clearing. It was almost more growl than speech, and it carried easily over the now silent crowd. When Fenrir Greyback stepped out from the treeline, all but a few werewolves slunk back in fear and submission. “Dumbledore’s little pet is claiming that I’m not fighting for the best interests of werewolves? That’s rich coming from someone who’s more lapdog than wolf.”

Remus stood his ground, and Dora stood beside him. It was Erwin who spoke first, though. “What are you doing here, Greyback?”

“Shut your mouth, Sykes, before you piss me off even more than you already ‘ave.” Greyback snarled in Erwin’s direction, but the gruff man did not avert his eyes, he only squared his shoulders and glared back. Erwin Sykes was an Alpha of his own pack, after all.

Greyback looked unimpressed by the bravado. "I knew you'd gone soft, Sykes, but I figured you was at least a wolf where it counted. Maybe not. I'd rip out your throat for this betrayal, but then I'd be stuck with your pathetic pack. And I don't 'ave time for a bunch of little whelps, and useless old geezers, and females who spend more time pregnant and nursing than doing anything bloody useful."

The woman who reminded him of Molly Weasley, bristled at that. She looked like she wanted to say something, but wisely thought better of it.

Erwin Sykes spoke instead. "Everyone who's here only came because I asked them to. If you're going to teach anyone a lesson, it's going to be me."

"Oh, you're all gonna to learn a lesson today." Greyback curled his lips back into a fierce smile. Lupin could see the teeth had been filed into sharp points. "But I ain't fightin' some old wolf who's past his prime. I'm gonna show you all what the other side has to offer. I'm gonna show you just how weak they really are." He turned and faced Remus head on. "Hey boy, you remember me?"

It was the face of his nightmares, but Remus wasn't a six-year-old boy anymore. His wand was out in an instant, and without a thought he took up a dueling stance. Out of the corner of his eye, he could see that Dora had taken a step back and was in a support position of her own.

Greyback simply glared at the wand, making no move to reach for his own. "Wolves don't fight with wands, boy. You'd know that if you 'ad stuck with your own kind, instead of hiding out in that wizard school."

The alpha was trying to goad him, but it wasn't going to work. "If you don't want to fight with a wand, Greyback, that's your prerogative. However, I choose to use every weapon in my arsenal."

The alpha narrowed his eyes, but again made no move to attack. "Did Dumbledore teach you those big words at that fancy school of his? What else did he teach you I wonder. How to sit? Heel? Roll over?" He gave another snarling laugh. "Do ya see this?" he called to the crowd at large. "He doesn't even know how to fight like a wolf! He's a damned wizard just like the rest of 'em. Is that who you want to throw your lot in with? A trained pet who doesn't run with a pack? Doesn't hunt? Doesn't know wolf magic?"

Remus gripped his wand like a lifeline. At first he had thought Greyback was trying to trick him into fighting hand-to-hand, so he could rip him in two. Now he realized that he had played right into Greyback's hand. Remus had unconsciously demonstrated to the other werewolves that his first inclination was to fight like a wizard, not a wolf. That wasn't going to make him lower his wand though. It was too late to change their opinion now, and he wasn't stupid enough to think he stood a chance against Greyback without his wand.

"I'm here because I care about these people." Remus kept his voice level and calm, the opposite of Greyback's feral bark. "I'm here because I'm not afraid to take a stand against Voldemort. You're right that I don't hunt, and I don't know wolf magic, but I have magic of my own. I'd be more than happy to demonstrate it, if you like. And I absolutely have a pack.

Dora here is part of it, and so is Albus Dumbledore. So, if you want to keep yammering on about how weak I am, by all means continue. But if you actually want to prove a point, I'm right here. Let's see who's really stronger, you and your fangs or me and my wand."

Greyback let out a ferocious growl. The other wolves sunk down lower, some even turned their heads to expose their necks. "I told you I ain't fightin' you with a wand. It'd be over too quick. I want to enjoy it when I tear you apart." Greyback's words were fierce, but Remus saw the way his eyes flickered nervously to the wand once again.

Greyback was the strongest werewolf in Britain; he could easily tear Remus apart limb from limb. But the alpha probably never attended any proper school, and even if he knew the basics of how to use a wand, he certainly would never have had any formal training. Greyback probably wasn't as good at dueling as Remus, and he knew it.

Before Remus could take advantage of the situation, Greyback turned on his heel and started marching back toward the treeline. Remus wasn't about to hex someone behind their back, at least not with so many witnesses watching him and judging him. "You all saw it," Greyback called over his shoulder. "He only wants to fight if he can use that little twig of his. He's not a real wolf. He doesn't know our ways and he's not one of us."

Before he was completely out of sight, the imposing figure gave one last dire warning. "Now if you're too weak or scared to fight with me, then at least stay the hell out of my way. But if you throw in your lot with this mongrel and his little pixie friend there, you'll be makin' more than one powerful enemy." With that, he snatched his wand from his pocket and disappeared away.

"Who's the weak one?" Dora shouted at thin air. "The one who stands his ground with his friend and his weapon, or the one who scampers off because we didn't immediately cow to his demands?" Some of the wolves looked impressed by her words. Others were clearly looking at Remus like he was a traitor to their cause.

"We'd better get out of here before Greyback comes back with friends," Remus whispered.

On the one hand, he felt they had made a fairly good impression. He'd given the werewolves something to think about. On the other hand, he couldn't help but think Greyback had a point. Remus was more of a wizard than a werewolf. He didn't really understand their culture or their way of life. Maybe he'd have to work on that if he was ever going to change any minds.

Not a Good Pairing

Chapter Notes

Another shout out to my wonderful Betas: Michele and Natalie!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

The Gryffindor Quidditch team met up on Saturday for their rescheduled practice. Unfortunately, Harry realized they were in trouble the moment he and Ron arrived at the quidditch pitch. A small group of Slytherins had slithered their way into the stands to watch, like snakes waiting to strike. Neither Malfoy nor Zabini were among them, but Harry easily spotted the hulking bodies of Crabbe and Goyle.

Harry started practice with some laps and basic drills. However, Ron didn't even make it to the goalposts before Theo Nott and Pansy Parkinson stood up. They raised their hands and began leading the other Slytherins in a rousing chorus of 'Weasley is our King.'

It was even worse than fifth year. As the song continued, it became progressively more crude. They had even added a few lines that questioned Ron's manhood.

The team was doing their best to ignore the spectators, but it was hard to hear each other over the screaming chorus. On the other side of the stands, Hermione had her wand out and looked furious. But she couldn't just hex all the Slytherins, no matter how obnoxious their song was.

After a couple hours of this, Ron must have dropped the ball almost two dozen times. His face was beet red and his hands were shaking. Finally, Harry had to admit this practice was probably making their Keeper worse instead of better. They gave up and left before their reserved timeslot was even halfway up.

On their way back to the castle, Hermione seemed even angrier about the whole situation than Ron. "How dare they? And that disgusting line about Ron wanting to 'take it' from the Slytherins, that's not even school appropriate! Someone should really go tell a professor. I bet none of them would have been singing something like that if there had been a teacher around."

"Hermione, just drop it," Ron muttered. The poor boy was drenched in sweat, and Harry was getting nervous about their Quidditch prospects for the year.

Hermione suggested they get some homework done, and the two boys couldn't think of any excuse to avoid it. So, the trio spent the afternoon sitting at one of the study tables in the back corner of the library.

This was where Draco Malfoy found them.

The blonde made a beeline for Harry specifically, but the seat next to him was already taken by Ron. So, the young man gestured to the seat across the table. "Hello Potter, mind if I sit here?"

Ron didn't give Harry the chance to answer. "Sod off, Malfoy."

He was clearly in no mood to deal with another Slytherin after the morning they'd had. Harry tried to explain. "Er, sorry Malfoy, now's not a good time."

Malfoy quirked brow. He didn't leave, but he didn't sit down either. "What crawled up your arse, Weasley?"

Ron pulled out his wand, but Harry grabbed his wrist before he did something that would land him a month's worth of detentions. "Seriously Malfoy," Harry hissed. "Not a good time."

Before Malfoy could make another snide comment, Hermione spoke up. "What are you doing here, Malfoy? Do you have another book to lend us, or do you actually want to sit down and study with us?"

Malfoy glanced from her to Harry and back again. "I don't know, I just figured since Potter and I are partners on this stupid Strengthening Solution, we may as well work on the essay together. I mean, it only makes sense. But I don't want to be where I'm not wanted."

"Good, then leave," Ron ground out.

"Maybe we can work on the essay another time, Malfoy," Harry offered. "It's been a long day."

"You're quite good at Potions," Hermione blurted, seemingly out of nowhere. Malfoy just gave a curt nod. Harry wasn't sure where she was going with this, until she gestured to the seat across from Harry. "You can sit and work with us if you'd like."

"What?" Ron choked.

Hermione continued, with her hand hovering protectively over the seat. "But first you have to apologize to Ron."

"What?" This time it was Malfoy who choked. "What in Salazar's name did I do to Weasley?"

"Besides tormenting him and his two friends for five years straight?" She kept her hand firmly on the seat, not giving Malfoy access until he met her demands. "Harry and Ron had to cancel Quidditch practice early this morning, because the stands were filled with Slytherins singing 'Weasley is our King.' Whose fault is that, I wonder?"

"Not mine," Malfoy bristled. "I didn't even know they were doing that." He tried to pull out the seat to join them, but Hermione pulled it back away from him.

“Perhaps,” she conceded. “But you’re the one who came up with that awful song to begin with. You’re the one who got that whole thing started.”

“Pansy’s the one who wrote the lyrics, not me.”

Harry and Ron were both staring open mouthed as Malfoy and Hermione pulled the chair back and forth between them while arguing over the world’s worst song.

“Draco Malfoy!” Hermione sounded so much like McGonagall when angry, the boy let go of the chair on instinct and Harry dropped his quill. “If you’re going to insist that you had nothing to do with that disgusting song, then you can go and sit with someone stupid enough to buy that ridiculous lie. If you want to sit with Harry, then you can apologize to his best friend for being rude and un-sportsmanlike.”

Harry gaped. Ron gaped. Malfoy gaped.

After a moment of silence, Malfoy muttered, “I’m sorry I started that song. I only did it because I wanted Slytherin to win. I didn’t realize you’d be such a...” He paused and seemed to realize that his chosen sentence couldn’t possibly end well. He changed tracks. “I realize now it was rude of me. I mean, it was rather clever actually, but still rude. Sorry.”

Malfoy pulled out the chair and sat down as though it was a victory. Maybe it was. But Harry wasn’t sure what Malfoy had won, except perhaps some of his respect. Was that really a prize Malfoy would willingly humble himself for?

Ron didn’t say anything else on the matter except a quiet, “Thanks, Hermione.”

“Seriously!?” Malfoy sneered.

Harry partnered with Malfoy again the next Monday. On Wednesday, they were all supposed to work on their potions individually. Yet Malfoy still set up his cauldron next to the Gryffindor. He started joining them in the library, as well. It was as if he was just a part of their group now.

Harry noticed that Zabini always made a point to glare at both Harry and Malfoy. However, the other Slytherin hadn’t said anything since the encounter in the loo, so Harry never mentioned it to Malfoy. He figured Malfoy was having enough problems with the other Slytherins. Harry didn’t want to add to his worries.

It was strange being around Malfoy so much. Once Harry started spending more time with the blonde, he realized Malfoy had a very wry sense of humor. The young man almost always had a funny and clever little comment ready. On the other hand, his comments were usually quite rude, so Harry didn’t always appreciate them.

“Harry,” Hermione commented one afternoon. “I have exciting news! Neville invited me to another tea party with his grandmother, so I’ll be there next weekend.”

“Ooh, a tea party with Longbottom and his grandmother!” Malfoy crooned. “The very definition of excitement. You Gryffindors sure know how to party!”

Harry kicked him in the shins, but not very hard.

The other downside of working with Malfoy, was that Harry had to be very careful to hide his Potion’s textbook from prying eyes. Malfoy was already suspicious about how Harry knew which substitute ingredients would work, so Harry had to be discreet. Besides, the idea of sharing the Half-Blood Prince just bothered him for some reason. He felt like he really understood the boy, and he felt that Malfoy wouldn’t.

On the other hand, Malfoy’s constant presence did help the group’s progress with Occlumency. Almost every other day, the four of them would sneak into an empty classroom to practice together. Both Harry and Ron were finally getting a little better at clearing their minds. Harry had gotten to a point where he could meditate and clear his thoughts for a few minutes. Ron’s progress wasn’t far behind. Of course, neither of them were anywhere close to controlling their thoughts or blocking their minds.

Hermione, on the other hand, was now several steps ahead. She had successfully learned to clear her mind and could even move specific thoughts around and start to build defensive shields.

One afternoon, Malfoy brought her yet another book on the subject from his private library. “Thank you, Malfoy.” She took the book in greedy hands. She had now burrowed something like two dozen books on the subject.

“You know, Malfoy,” she continued. “It’s getting a bit hard to progress with so many distractions during our lessons.” She gave Harry a Ron a pointed look. In her defense, Ron had started snoring during their last practice, which caused Harry to burst into laughter. “I was wondering if you’d be willing to give me a private lesson some time?”

Ron looked like he had just been Crucio’d. “I can study with you, Hermione,” he almost shouted. His voice even cracked halfway through.

Hermione frowned at him. “Well, I appreciate that Ron, but you don’t actually *know* Occlumency. So, it would be more useful for me to study it with Malfoy. Since he *does*. You understand that, right?”

Ron flushed. “Yeah, er, I just realized I need to feed Pigwidgeon. He’s probably hungry. I need to go now.”

As soon as Ron was out of sight, Malfoy wasted no time with his comments. “Does he think the House Elves suddenly forgot to leave food in the Owlery? Or is Weasley’s owl so stupid it won’t swallow food unless it’s placed in its mouth? I don’t know why you spend so much time with him, Potter. He’s a moron.”

“Say another word about him and I won’t bother spending any more time with *you*. He’s not a moron, he’s just going through something. Drop it, you wanker.”

Malfoy was quick to change the subject after Harry's warning. "Anyways, Granger, if you want to have a private lesson, that's fine. I'm here to help after all. In fact, Potter, you're making a fair amount a progress as well. I'd be happy to give you private lessons some time."

"What?" Harry was entirely caught off guard. "I'm nowhere near as far along as Hermione."

Malfoy was undeterred. "Well, then private lessons will help you catch up. You do want to learn Occlumency, don't you?"

"Er, I suppose."

"If you're worried about people seeing you working alone with me, we can always go somewhere more secluded. Maybe we could sneak into the woods, right outside the school grounds. Just the two of us. No one has to know."

"No way, I promised Dumbledore I'm not leaving Hogwarts without letting him know first. I'm not taking any risks after what happened with the Carrows."

Malfoy looked disappointed, but he simply nodded and said nothing more on the subject. Hermione was looking back and forth between the two of them with a thoughtful expression which Harry didn't think to question.

After Hermione asked Draco Malfoy for private lessons, everything started to change, and not for the better. For one thing, the odds of Gryffindor winning the Quidditch Cup took a distinct downward turn.

Ron no longer seemed capable of making even the easiest saves. His flying was listless. He constantly got distracted and flew off in the wrong direction. Not only that, he was getting angrier and more frustrated by the smallest things. It didn't matter whether the Slytherins were in the stands or not; some part of Ron was simply broken.

Harry tried everything he could think of to buck up his friend.

First, he tried helping Ron to clear his mind, just the two of them. That way, maybe Ron wouldn't be dwelling on so many negative thoughts. Unfortunately, Ron spent their entire session complaining about Hermione's upcoming lesson with Malfoy. After getting himself worked up, Ron started panicking that Malfoy might try to take advantage of the girl as soon as they were alone. Harry had to help calm his breathing and assure him that Hermione was more than capable of taking on Malfoy.

Next, Harry tried to distract Ron by asking him for financial advice. Unfortunately, this just opened up another cage of pixies. "I've only earned three Sickles so far! How am I supposed to start a library with three bloody Sickles?" Ron was flipping desperately through his money management book as if it might contain a chapter called: 'How to Immediately Gain Access to a Library full of Rare Books to Impress the Girl you Fancy.'

Harry tried to reassure him. “You know, I’m sure people are impressed by other things besides books. I know some people are really impressed by kindness and bravery and things like that.”

“Well I’m not very good at those either,” Ron spat. “I’m not good at Quidditch or Mind Magic or Potions or anything!” He tossed the book down on the table. “Merlin’s bullocks! How is it even possible that Malfoy owns so many sodding books? Why can’t anything in my life be fair?”

Harry didn’t know what to say to that. He had never been very good at that sort of thing.

“Er, I know. Let’s read through the Half-Blood Prince some more. I bet we can find some more cool spells.”

This did distract Ron for a while, until the conversation inevitably led back to Malfoy. Ron didn’t understand why Harry was partnering with the Slytherin in Potions class. Harry didn’t understand it either, so he certainly couldn’t explain it.

Ron did perk up when he noticed a particular spell ‘For Your Enemies’ called *Sectumsempra*. “That sounds promising. I wouldn’t mind having a private lesson with Malfoy to practice whatever that is.”

“No Ron, he’s not our enemy any more. Maybe we’ll try it on Nott and Parkinson the next time they lead that stupid song.”

Harry did manage to cheer up Ron a bit, but all his progress was lost that evening. As Harry and Ron headed back toward the Common Room, they caught Ginny snogging with Dean Thomas in a hidden corridor. Ron burst into a rant about how his sister might get a ‘reputation.’ Ginny lost her temper and teased him that he was just jealous, because no one wanted to snog him. After that, Ron and Ginny refused to speak to each other.

The situation with Ginny was also making Harry feel distinctly uncomfortable, for entirely different reasons. Ginny had always been Ron’s little sister. That’s how he’d always thought of her. She was *Ron’s little sister*. So, seeing her in Dean’s lap, kissing him with such enthusiasm, while his hand snaked up her shirt, was...startling. He supposed she wasn’t just Ron’s little sister anymore. Now she was a young woman in her own right.

That thought made him feel strange, in a way that reminded him of the dream in Dumbledore’s office, where Tom Riddle had crowded him and whispered into his ear. Although, he wasn’t really sure why he would compare the two.

Harry was getting desperate that he might be the worst Quidditch Captain in Gryffindor history, when the most obvious solution occurred to him. He should just talk to Hermione! He would simply ask her not to do the private lessons with Malfoy.

He didn’t want to ruin her progress in Mind Magic, or betray Ron’s trust, but things had definitely gotten out of hand. His plan was to simply tell her that now wasn’t a good time. He

could say that both he and Ron were worried about her getting too overwhelmed with Mind Magic, and that it was distracting their Quidditch abilities. He would politely ask her to perhaps postpone her private lessons for later. Perhaps until after things had calmed down between Ron and Malfoy. Or at the very least, until after the Quidditch match.

The next Formal Tea with her and the Longbottoms was on Sunday afternoon, so his plan was to pull her aside afterwards. As soon as he arrived, however, he realized things weren't going to go according to plan.

"Today, we'll be practicing with servers to pour your tea for you," Madam Longbottom explained. "It's a bit more formal, but you need practice being waited upon." Of course, by servers, she meant house elves. Two little house elves were scurrying around, setting the table and trying very hard to be helpful.

When Hermione arrived, a few minutes later, the temperature of the room seemed to drop by several degrees. She didn't say anything to Neville's grandmother specifically, but she couldn't help making her views on the matter known in other ways.

"Are you being paid for this?" Hermione asked the elf as it tried to pour her tea. The poor little thing bristled with indignation, but Hermione was a girl on a mission. "Have you ever thought about how wonderful it would be to get money in exchange for the work you do? Just imagine all the things you could buy with money of your own!"

Later, she casually mentioned her friend, Dobby. "He's been ever so happy since he was freed. He belongs to himself now, and he's been earning his own wages." The two elves looked at her with wide, scared eyes. It was as if she were telling some sort of horrifying cautionary tale.

Toward the end of the affair, Hermione mentioned to one of the elves that she had some extra socks if it wanted one. The pitiful thing started crying full force. Harry and Neville had to apologize to both Augusta and the elf, explaining that she simply didn't understand how to talk to house elves.

Hermione was fuming by the time they left to meet with Ron, and Harry didn't really want to broach the subject of her private lessons quite yet. He hoped she would calm down by the end of the evening, and maybe everything could go back to normal. But then Hermione spent the next hour and half complaining about house elves.

Even Harry, who agreed with the overall sentiment, was started to lose patience with her. Ron, however, had been in a sour mood all day. "Oh for Merlin's sake, Hermione! Give it a rest. I don't see why it bothers you so much when *they're happy*."

When she stormed off, Harry decided not to go after her. There was no way she would want to do any favors for Ron any time soon.

The first Quidditch match of the season was one week away, and their team practice was getting worse each time they met. It was becoming clear to Harry that if he didn't do

something drastic, they were going to lose so many points that it wouldn't matter if he caught the snitch or not.

The Slytherin captain, Urquhart, had come down with Mumblemumps, so their first match would be with Hufflepuff. The badger house was probably the easiest team to beat. However, that just made Harry even more apprehensive that they would embarrass themselves losing to Hufflepuff.

Harry thought about the Felix Felicis in his school trunk, but Professor Slughorn had specifically said that it wasn't allowed for sporting events. Besides, Ron didn't need luck, what he needed was confidence. He just needed to feel like he was someone else, if only for an hour or two.

With a sudden burst of inspiration, Harry ran to the empty classroom to interrupt Malfoy and Hermione's very first private lesson.

When he barged in, unannounced, he found Hermione sitting on the floor mediating. Meanwhile, Malfoy sat over in the far corner, examining his nails and looking bored. Whatever horrible scenarios Ron was surely imagining, they probably didn't include anything this uneventful.

"Hey, Malfoy, I need to talk to you for a sec."

Malfoy instantly perked up. "Sure, let's talk in the corridor."

Harry glanced back down at Hermione. She seemed to be in some sort of trance. "Is she going to be alright?"

"She's fine, she's just exploring her mindscape. She won't notice if we're here or not."

As soon as they were alone, Harry got right down to business. "Do you have any more Polyjuice Potion?"

Malfoy quirked a brow. "Why?"

"I need to borrow some. Two doses. Do you have it or not?"

"I do have some, but why do you need it? I thought you weren't leaving school grounds again?"

"I'm not leaving school grounds," Harry insisted. "I need it for use on school grounds, but I can't tell you why."

"Oh? What's in it for me, then?"

Harry hadn't thought about that. His friends were always willing to do favors for him when he asked. But Malfoy wasn't exactly his friend. Besides, Malfoy was a Slytherin. He wouldn't go around giving out valuable potions for nothing. "What do you want?"

Malfoy's lips curled into a devious smile. "I want to go to Slughorn's Yuletide Party. Everyone who's anyone will be there. I can't miss that party."

"How the hell am I supposed to get you an invitation to Slughorn's party?"

"I didn't say you needed to get me an invitation. I said I wanted to go. You're invited, correct? You can bring an additional guest, correct? Bring me."

"Fine, whatever. You let me have two doses of Polyjuice Potion, and I'll get you into that stupid party. Deal?"

"Deal."

The next thing to do was check the official Quidditch rules. There was a rule that no student could use any spell or potion that would enhance their ability, but Polyjuice Potion had no effect on skill. So, it technically wasn't against the rules. Next, he checked to see if there was any rule about players switching positions last minute. It seemed there was nothing to prevent Harry from playing Keeper, or Ron from playing Seeker.

On the other hand, Polyjuice was technically a regulated potion. People weren't supposed to buy, sell, or brew it without Ministry approval. But he hadn't bought it. He was just burrowing it. Either way, he had never let Ministry regulations stand in his way before.

Once Harry was sure they wouldn't get in any serious trouble, he ran his idea past Ron himself. The other boy was immediately skeptical that they would need to borrow the potion from Malfoy. On the other hand, he did seem quite excited by the idea of pretending to be Harry again.

Harry didn't want anyone else to know what he was planning. For one thing, he didn't want to spoil the effect the potion would have on Ron. For another thing, he wasn't sure if this was illegal or not, so it was best not to include too many people.

He simply told the rest of the team that Ron would be playing Seeker while Harry played Keeper.

"He can't even catch a big red ball when it's flying at his face!" yelled Ginny. "How is he supposed to catch a little snitch? Besides, you're the best Seeker in a century. Why would you play Keeper? How is that going to help us?"

Ron glared at her but didn't say a word. Harry tried to give her a reassuring smile. "Ginny, you just have to trust me. I have a plan. I promise it will work out. I know it all sounds a bit dodgy, but I have a secret plan, and it's going to be great."

The rest of the team was still unsure about the whole thing, but they relented.

The night before the match, Harry opened his eyes to another eerie dream. This time he was in the Defense Against the Dark Arts classroom. Tom Riddle, the memory, the dream, whatever he was, sat at the teacher's desk as though he were a Hogwarts professor. Harry took his usual seat in the second row. "You know this is Defense Against the Dark Arts," Harry explained. "I don't know if you're qualified to teach that."

Riddle narrowed his red eyes. "My qualifications are so above and beyond the limitations of this position, that the mere notion that it was denied to me is maddening to a degree I cannot express."

Harry chuckled at Riddle's indignant tone. "Are you planning to apply?"

"I did apply."

"What!? When?" Riddle applying for a teaching job seemed so out of character for him. Why would he want to teach? Did Voldemort used to dream of enriching young minds?

"It doesn't matter, it was a long time ago." Riddle didn't seem to want to talk about it. Maybe Dumbledore would explain more during their lessons, when they got to that part of Tom Riddle's life. "And despite what you might think, I would have been a superlative teacher."

"Well," Harry mused, "you're a narcissistic, power hungry, murdering, psychopath. So, that's not great. But on the other hand, you clearly understand the Dark Arts, the theory on how to defend against it, and you certainly know how to duel. So, you wouldn't be the worst professor we've had."

Riddle gave him a disbelieving look, but then then his expression cleared. "Oh yes, you had Quirrell. I suppose he would have been the worst Defense professor imaginable."

"Quirrell?" Harry laughed. "I actually forgot about Quirrell. Yeah, he was pretty bad. Not as bad as Lockhart though."

"Quirrell had a dark lord on the back of his head." Riddle stood from his seat and walked around the desk with a contemplative expression. "He tried to steal the Philosopher's Stone from the headmaster. He almost murdered you. Twice."

"Yeah, but at least he taught Defense Against the Dark Arts. Lockhart taught...I don't know...himself. He literally made us memorize all his favorite foods and hobbies. And when I found out he was a fraud, he tried to turn me into a mindless vegetable. If Ron's wand hadn't backfired, I'd probably be drooling into a pan at St. Mungo's. Frankly, I'd rather be dead."

"I wouldn't." Riddle leaned back into the teacher's desk and made Harry nervous with how he seemed to latch onto Harry's every word.

"Well, you're not me." Harry knew that there were things worse than death. "So, anyway, Lockhart was definitely worse than Quirrell. Not the worst we've ever had though."

"Not the worst?" Riddle moved forward again. This time he sat in one of the front row seats, one row ahead of Harry. He looked like he was enjoying this conversation. "Ah yes, you also

had Barty Crouch Jr. I suppose it wasn't the most sensible plan to have a half-mad Death Eater teaching impressionable young minds."

"Oh no, fake-Moody was great actually. One of the best teachers we've ever had."

Riddle quirked a brow at him. "I assume that's if you ignore the fact that he spent the entire school year trying to engineer your capture and death."

"Oh yeah," Harry conceded. "If you take that into account, he's...no wait. He's still one of the best."

Riddle pushed his chair forward, so there was only a table between them. "How?"

"Well, I think all my Defense professors have tried to either kill or maim me at some point. I mean, Snape hasn't yet, but I think it's just a matter of time. And Lupin only tried to attack me during the full moon, so he gets a pass. But otherwise, we've had some pretty homicidal teachers."

Riddle leaned forward out of his seat, his elbows resting on the table. He was almost nose to nose with Harry now. "Who was the worst?"

"Umbridge." Harry didn't hesitate. "Umbridge was the worst."

"Did she hurt you?" Riddle's voice was barely above a whisper.

"Yes."

Riddle's eyes flared. He looked furious. "What did she do?"

Harry didn't have time to explain all the horrible little things she had done over the year. And even though he knew she was the one who sent the dementors after him in Little Whinging, he had no way to prove it. Instead, he simply showed his forearm, the one which still showed 'I must not tell lies.'

When Riddle reached out his hand to touch the white scars, Harry let him. The young man's touch was gentle, almost reverential. "I see." Then his eyes swiveled from the scar back up to Harry's face. "Do you want revenge?"

Harry faltered. "What? I don't know. Why would you ask me that?"

"Because you and I could be allies, Harry." His hand wrapped itself around Harry's wrist, holding him in place. Riddle leaned in even closer, so he was once again whispering in Harry's ear. His breath tickled the side of Harry's face. "There's no reason for us to be enemies anymore. I could give you everything you want."

Harry's first thought was that Tom Riddle had no idea what Harry wanted, and wouldn't be able to comprehend it. But he was even more confused as to why this shade of Voldemort would even offer. "What are you? What is this exactly?"

"I'm your friend, Harry." He raised a single finger to gently stroke Harry's cheek. "I'm a part of you."

Remus frowned as he looked around the encampment. Most of the 'shelters' were just canvas tents, but there were a few hastily assembled wooden structures, and some converted muggle caravans.

"Home sweet home. Don't worry, you'll fit right in." Erwin Sykes was giving him a brief tour and showing him where he could pitch his own tent. Remus didn't own a tent of his own, so Dora's parents had lent him theirs, which was quite spacious on the inside.

"Everything seems a bit impermanent." Remus was feeling rather out of place.

"Well, we've got to be ready to leave at a moment's notice. Can't stay any place too long." There was a large fire going in the center of the clearing. Some older men were skinning a deer. Some women were watching a group of rowdy children. "If the ministry gets wind of where we are, we've got to move fast. Plus, sometimes muggles run us off, thinking we're random vagrants."

"I see. Well, thanks for letting me stay for a bit."

Dumbledore had wanted him to get closer with the wolf packs, and this was his chance. Besides, Remus wanted to prove to the werewolves that he could fit in with them. He needed to show that he could learn to be a wolf as well as a wizard. More than anything, though, he felt he had something to prove to himself.

Erwin introduced him to a few other wolves, including the middle-aged woman who had reminded him of Molly Weasley. "I'm Frida Lovett dear. And don't you worry, we'll get you nice and settled." She shook his hand eagerly before she screamed across the clearing, "Dolphus!"

"Yes, love?" A skinny, flustered man scurried over from the campfire.

"This is Remus dear. Remus, this is my husband, Dolphus. He leads a lot of the scavenging parties to help get food and supplies. Dolphus, perhaps Remus could help you with one of your runs."

"Oh yes," Dolphus looked quite excited by the idea. "I'm sure someone trained by Dumbledore would come in pretty handy in a pinch."

"Er," Remus wasn't sure how he felt about that. "I'll certainly try to be helpful if I can."

"I'm sure you'll be fine, Remus," Erwin reassured him, before he pulled him along to introduce him to some other members of the scavenging party. "You're tougher than you look, I've seen that first hand."

As soon as they were out of earshot, Erwin dropped his voice and gave him a serious look. "You sure you won't get lonely out here, though?" he asked. "You sure you won't miss those

wizards or that little purple girlfriend of yours?”

“She’s not my girlfriend. We’re just friends.”

“If you say so,” Erwin conceded. “Probably for the best, anyway. It usually doesn’t work out between wolves and the un-bit.” He looked Remus up and down. Even with the ex-professor’s scruffy clothes, his wardrobe still looked much more respectable than the rest of the people in the glade. “Not that you were ever much of a wolf to begin with. But don’t you worry, pup. We’ll teach you what it means to be a real werewolf.”

Severus sneered at the lime green paint, the flashing lights, and the display windows filled with disgustingly garish merchandise. The charmed accordion that played the same obnoxious tune over and over was particularly annoying. However, it was the sign advertising ‘U-No-Poo’ that soured his mood from cantankerous to downright livid.

Professor Snape was not impervious to rumors. He probably picked up more tidbits than the average teacher. He knew that his Slytherins were planning some sort of disruption for the Quidditch match that afternoon. He knew that Hufflepuff was said to have the worst team they’d managed to scrape together in years. And he also heard that Gryffindor’s Keeper, Ronald Weasley, had been unable to stop a single goal in the last three weeks of practice. Whatever fiasco was going to occur on the Quidditch pitch this afternoon, he was quite looking forward to being anywhere else.

On the other hand, his alternate assignment was looking to be even more unbearable. He knew he needed more answers to the mystery that was Harry Potter’s childhood, and he knew that the two individuals inside that stained-glass door had some of those answers. However, that didn’t make it any easier to gather his resolve and march into the cacophony of mess and noise.

The shop was even worse on the inside than it was on the outside. Even without any customers yet that morning, the products themselves made more noise than a hungry owl, sputtering and whirring on their shelves. The same irritating music continued inside, and for some reason he kept catching whiffs of bubblegum scent. By the time he found the Weasley twins at the back counter, he already had a pounding headache.

“Ah, Professor Snape,” said the one on the left. He had no idea which one it was.

“We thought you might have got lost,” continued the other.

Severus took a deep breath and tried not to show just how irked he was feeling. “I suppose I should thank you for agreeing to meet with me before your usual business hours. However, perhaps we could continue this conversation in a more private location? Or *any location* where there isn’t accordion music playing quite so loudly?”

“Did you hear that Fred?”

“Why yes, George. It sounds like Snapey here wants a tour of our backroom.”

“That’s where we keep our more intimate stock.” The twin on the right (George presumably) winked.

“No.” Severus did not feel the need to hear any more on that subject. “That is not what I insinuated.”

“Are you sure?” asked Fred.

“We could get you an aphrodisiac,” offered his brother. He pulled out a large box from behind the counter.

“Aw George, I don’t think even the most powerful aphrodisiac would help this case.” The other twin started pulling out a different box. “Why professor, perhaps what you need is a magically scintillating lubricant? *For those hard to reach places.*” There was another wink.

Severus took a deep breath and kept his voice level and cold. “I swear by any gods that may be listening. If either of you mention one of my ‘hard to reach places’ ever again, I will curse off so many ‘places’ of your own, you will not have one full body between the two of you.”

The two Weasleys shared a look. After a moment’s silence (or as close to silence as the shop would ever be, with that infernal accordion still blaring in the background) the twins both burst into laughter.

“Alright, Professor, fair enough.”

“Sorry, just couldn’t help ourselves.”

Still chuckling lightly, they each pulled out a large box from under the counter. Thankfully, there were no aphrodisiacs or lubricants. It looked like a bunch of joke products and junk.

“So, let’s get down to serious business, then.” Fred began pulling items out of one box and setting them on the counter.

George was pulling other products down from the shelves. “What was it you actually came all this way for?”

“We’ve got some Skiving Snackboxes if you want to get out of teaching for a day.” Fred flashed some brightly colored candies under his nose. “But we figure you can poison yourself just fine if that’s what you’re interested in.”

“If you’re lonely, we’ve got these adorable little Pygmy Puffs that make great company.” George dropped a couple pink and purple furballs on the counter in front of him. “I’m afraid they don’t come in black, but maybe just being in your presence for long enough will turn them automatically.”

“And of course, we’ve got a whole series of defensive products if you wanted to use that to supplement your classes. Shield hats, shield cloaks, shield gloves, the whole lot.” Fred waved around several items of clothing, most of which were bright red or purple.

Snape leaned back to avoid being swatted by a swinging scarf. “Any student who is so incapable of a simple shield charm, that they need to resort to wearing these atrocities, is more than welcome to spend my class period practicing their sewing skills.”

Fred wiggled an eyebrow. “We’ll give you a discount since you’re in the Order.”

“All members of the Order of the Phoenix get 10 percent off,” George continued.

“So, let’s see. We’ll sell you a Snackbox for 10 Galleons.”

Severus looked back down at the box of candies. The price on the lid said: 8 Galleons. “I’m sorry, how is that a discount?”

“Well,” explained Fred. “You’ve got to remember, the price on the label is the price for regular customers.

“Yeah,” agreed George. “So for you, there’s the regular price, plus an extra Galleon for ‘Slytherin Tax.’”

“Exactly,” Fred continued. “And then there’s the ‘You Gave Us At Least Six Detentions Every Year We Were At Hogwarts Tax.’ That’s another Galleon.”

“And lastly, you can’t forget about the ‘Arsehole Tax.’ That’s an important one. Another Galleon for that.”

“But then you get 10% off for being in the Order. So, that brings us back down to 10 Galleons.” The twin held the box higher. “Interested?”

“I’m not interested in purchasing anything.” Severus was quickly losing what little patience he started with. “I need to talk to you about something serious. Is there anything that can be done about the volume of this ridiculous music?”

“Of course!” George tapped his wand. Immediately, the music got louder.

Severus practically had to shout to be heard. “I need to talk to you about Harry Potter.”

George tapped his wand again, and the music was almost ear-splitting.

“As if we’d tell you anything about Harry!” Fred screamed over the noise. “Get the hell out of our shop if that’s what you’re here for.”

Severus had to use a *Sonorous* spell to ensure they’d actually hear him. “Don’t tell me anything about Potter if you don’t want to, but at least tell me about the home with the muggles. Tell me about the Dursleys.”

George tapped his wand again and there was silence. Actual silence this time. Severus never realized how much he appreciated the lack of accordion music in his everyday life.

The twins were giving him a shrewd look. “What do you want to know about the Dursleys?”

Severus took the opportunity to explain, as quickly as he could while he had their attention, that he had already spoken with Lupin, Hagrid, and their parents. He was growing increasingly concerned that the Dursleys may not be suitable caretakers for the Potter boy.

“We could have told you four years ago that they weren’t suitable *anything*.”

“We did tell. We told Mum.”

“And Dad.”

“And Sirius.”

“No one ever listens to us.”

“Well, Sirius did.” Fred pointed out.

“Yeah, but he just ranted that he should have got custody of Harry,” complained George.

“Didn’t do any good.”

Severus took yet another steadying breath. “I don’t have time for this. I am putting together a case that Potter should be removed from their custody. Do you have anything to add or not?”

The two of them shared a look before either of them spoke. “Have you actually talked to the Dursleys yet?”

“In person? At their house?”

Severus shook his head. “Not yet, but I intend to.”

An evil grin crept across both their faces. “Well then, Professor Snape,” Fred reached under the counter and pulled out an entirely different box. This one was even larger. “Allow us to draw your attention to the Mega Box. It contains a sample of every prank product and tricky toy we sell. I’m sure it will come in handy when you stop by Privet Drive.”

“Yes quite,” agreed George. “And it can be yours for the label price if you want to test anything on any porky cousins or monstrous uncles.”

“What’s this label price nonsense, my dear brother?” Fred interrupted. “The distinguished professor should get 50% off if he really wants to help our main investor.”

Snape was once again thrown by this new information. “Wait, stop there. Investor? Potter is the financial backing of this...establishment?”

“Yep,” they cried in unison.

Snape stored that aside for later. He wasn’t sure if he could take points from Gryffindors for investing in horribly obnoxious businesses, but he could at least make Potter’s afternoon as inconvenient as Severus’s morning had become.

He shoved the large colorful box back toward the twins. "I don't want to buy any ridiculous pranks."

"You will once you see that room he calls a bedroom."

"And the bars on his window."

"And the little flap in the door."

Severus narrowed his eyes. He was becoming angry for an entirely different reason. "Were there really bars on his window?"

This time George reached under the counter and pulled out a large box of fireworks. "You go to the Dursley house, Professor. And you make sure you take a look at the cupboard under the stairs. It's just off the main entry."

"We had to run down there to grab his trunk when we freed him from that hellhole a few summers back," Fred explained.

George pushed the box across the counter. "You take this. No charge. So long as you promise to go have a look in that cupboard."

"Believe us, you're going to want it after you see what's in there."

Severus looked down at the box of fireworks and contemplated his options. In the end, he left a fair bit heavier than he arrived.

Right before the big match with Hufflepuff, after Harry had given his team a final pep talk, he pulled Ron aside. They each took a deep breath, and then chugged back a full dose of Polyjuice Potion. They couldn't risk sneaking more onto the pitch, so Harry would have to catch the snitch in less than an hour. Otherwise they'd be found out. But the weather was clear, and the Hufflepuff Seeker wasn't nearly as skilled as Cedric Diggory had been, so Harry felt their chances were good.

It was weird walking onto the field in Ron's body. Ron however, practically swaggered in Harry's body. He waved at the crowds with a beaming smile on his face.

At Madam Hooch's whistle, Harry took off with the other players, but flying felt different in Ron's body. He was used to his own smaller form, and it was strange to suddenly be taller with longer limbs. He hoped the difference in body types wouldn't throw off Ron's Keeper abilities too much. However, his concerns were quickly dispelled when Ron (as Harry) started making save after save, all while waving and smiling at his cheering fans.

Everything seemed to be going splendidly. Blaise Zabini was taking over commentary since Lee Jordan had graduated, but his snide comments about Harry's tussled hair and scruffy uniform seemed to bounce right off Ron. The boy was flying with more confidence and flare than Harry had ever seen from his friend. Before they knew it, Gryffindor was 60 points ahead.

Meanwhile, the Slytherins tried to jeer and boo and sing at Harry while thinking that he was actually Ron. They'd even reworked their song lyrics to accommodate Ron's new position as Seeker. But Harry just laughed them off. They had no idea who he really was. Harry couldn't care less what they thought of his manhood.

When Harry caught the snitch only a half hour into game, the crowd started cheering "Ron! Ron! Ron!" Harry thought that everything might just turn out well after all. How very wrong he was.

The troubles began in the locker room, while Harry and Ron were waiting to change back into themselves before they made a public appearance. Ginny tracked them down first. "Don't think I don't know what you did, you little cheaters. If it didn't work so damn well, I'd be pissed. Next time, warn me you're going to switch places."

Ron was slightly annoyed at being called a cheater, but he was still over-the-moon about his victory. So, he simply shrugged it off. He did not shrug off Hermione, however, when she stormed in and threatened to tell a teacher on them. "The only reason I don't turn you both over, is that I know it was Malfoy's potion you took. He doesn't deserve to get into trouble just because you two can't play by the rules." That was the final straw.

Before Harry knew it, Ron and Lavender were snogging in the Gryffindor Common Room. Then, Hermione was conjuring an enormous flock of birds that turned as vicious as her mood. Finally, Harry found himself with a crying girl in his arms. If he had known the evening would end up like this, he might have tried using the Felix Felicis after all.

The next morning at breakfast, Ron wasted little time before he and Lavender Brown were adjoined at the lips again. Harry turned to check on Hermione, only to realize she had already snuck off to the library. He followed shortly after. Lavender's friend, Parvati, kept trying to catch Harry's eye, and he had no intention of sticking around to find out what she wanted.

Harry didn't say anything when he joined Hermione at her usual table. He didn't know what to say. After working in complete silence for about fifteen minutes, Draco Malfoy found them in the back corner.

"Mind if I join you?" he asked, but he was already pulling out his usual chair.

"Of course we don't mind, Malfoy." Hermione smiled sweetly. "In fact, why don't you go ahead and take that seat by Harry? No one's sitting there, after all."

Malfoy frowned and looked over at the empty chair as though it might be a trap. "Where's Weasley?"

"Who?" asked Hermione, as though she'd never heard of Ron before in her life. "Oh, you mean Lavender's new boyfriend? I'm sure he's far too distracted choking on her tongue to bother with studying."

Malfoy gave Harry a questioning look, but Harry wasn't sure how to explain what was happening. "He's busy." He gestured at the empty chair. "I guess you can sit here if you want to." Malfoy did.

Ten minutes later, Ron sauntered into the library with Lavender draping off him like a lumpy curtain. It was painful to look at. Before Ron got too close, however, he must have noticed that Draco Malfoy was sitting right next to Harry, in his usual place. He froze.

"Come on Wun Wun," they could hear Lavender crooning. "I don't want to study right now. I want to practice my wandwork."

"Yeah," Ron agreed, not taking his eyes off Malfoy. "Let's get the hell out of here."

"Please do," Malfoy called. The cruel grin on his face made Harry nervous. "You're not wanted here anyways."

Ron opened his mouth, as though he were about to say something, but then he just shut it again. He grabbed Lavender's wrist and practically frog marched her back toward the exit.

"Was that really necessary, Malfoy?" Harry muttered.

"It was beyond necessary," he countered. "That was the most disgusting thing I've ever seen. I think my eyes may be permanently scarred."

"Agreed," said Hermione, who was already packing up her things. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I need to go...check on Crookshanks. He shouldn't be alone right now." She was gone before Harry could even ask her if she wanted company. Suddenly it was just him and Draco Malfoy. How did that keep happening?

Malfoy was looking through his school books. "So, what do you want to work on first?"

"I don't want to work on anything, you prat! My two best friends have lost their damned minds and now they're driving me around the bend."

Malfoy hummed in agreement. "They are more annoying than usual. I'm surprised Weasley's snogging that Brown girl, to be honest. I figured he and Granger were fixing to be an item."

"Even you noticed?" Harry asked.

"A blind troll would have noticed."

Harry wonder how things could have gone so wrong so fast? "Oh Merlin!" He suddenly realized he was once again going to have to choose between his two good friends. "Now there's no way they're going to work together in Potions class. They're both going to want to partner with me. What am I going to do?"

"You don't need to do anything. You already have a partner for Potions class. You can just keep working with me."

“Well, I’m obviously not going to do that.” Harry didn’t even consider that an option. Malfoy’s expression turned stone cold, and he turned back to his books without a word. “I know!” Harry offered. “We’ll just split up. One of us will work with Ron, and one of us will work with Hermione.”

Malfoy sighed. “Fine, if we have to.”

“So, do you want to work with Ron or Hermione?” Harry already knew the answer, but he figured he’d ask to be polite.

“Well obviously I’ll work with...” Malfoy choked and stopped himself mid-sentence. His face had gone paler than usual and his eyes grew wide. Harry almost asked if he was ok, before he realized the boy’s dilemma. Malfoy had been taught his entire life that purebloods were superior to muggleborns in every way. So, to suddenly realize that he would much rather work with a muggleborn over a pureblood probably came as a shock to the boy. “I mean...I’ll work with...” He didn’t seem capable of saying it.

Finally he turned the question back on Harry. “Well who do you want to work with?” There was an almost desperate look in his eye.

Harry was growing annoyed that Malfoy’s prejudice and rudeness was rearing its head again. But in the end, he decided to take pity on the boy. After all, he had come a long way in just a few months. “I’ll work with Ron. You can work with Hermione. If you don’t mind?”

Malfoy nodded. “Fine,” he agreed. “If you really want to work with Weasley, I suppose that’s alright. I’ll do *you* a favor and work with Granger.” Harry allowed Malfoy to rationalize it however he needed to, as long as neither of his friends was stuck without a partner.

“Oh, and Potter?”

“Yeah?”

“I hope you learned your lesson about using that Polyjuice Potion. Because you can’t even imagine what I’ll do to you, if you try that little stunt during a Slytherin match.”

“Yeah, no, I think I’ve learned my lesson.”

On Monday morning, Slughorn asked them to pair up for another complicated potion. This time, Ron rushed for Harry as if it were a race. He probably thought it was. “Let’s partner up, mate!” The words came out in one quick burst of air.

“Er, sure Ron, sounds good.”

Hermione looked utterly betrayed, until there was a tap on her shoulder. She turned to see Draco Malfoy giving her a polite expression. The whole class hushed to hear what the Malfoy heir was going to say to her. “Excuse me, Hermione, would you like to partner with me today?” There was silence. Even Slughorn looked gob-smacked.

Hermine blushed bright red, while Ron turned green. Her eyes glanced at Ron for only a moment, before she turned back to the blond and gave him a brilliant smile. “Of course, Draco, I’d love to.”

From then on, he was no longer Malfoy. He was Draco.

Chapter End Notes

Again, thank you for your continued support and enthusiasm. All the comments have been incredibly encouraging and helpful!

Nothing Makes Sense Anymore

Chapter Notes

Again, another shout-out to my wonderful Betas, Michele and Natalie! Thanks a lot you guys!

And thanks so much to everyone reading this. I really appreciate all the feedback!

November was shaping up to be a very weird month for Harry. For one thing, he never would have expected he'd be spending so much time with Draco Malfoy, and so little time with Ron Weasley.

It wasn't that Harry didn't want to spend time with Ron, specifically. It was more an issue that wherever Ron went, Lavender followed, and wherever Lavender went, Parvati followed. And then, whenever Lavender and Ron started snogging, which was basically all they ever did, Parvati would start giving Harry meaningful looks. So, he would just leave the room instead of dealing with that.

Harry wasn't entirely sure why he was so turned off by Parvati's obvious flirting. However, he was starting to worry that he was only interested in girls who showed no interest in him. He had pined for Cho Chang for almost a year when she was dating Cedric Diggory, but then it had all fallen apart spectacularly when she started returning his affections. He had never been remotely interested in Ginny when she had been making googly eyes at him. But now that she was snogging Dean Thomas, his feelings toward her had become rather confused. Was he only interested in girls that were unavailable to him? That couldn't possibly bode well for his future romantic prospects.

In the meantime, Harry still tried to partner with Ron in class if he could, but he didn't see much of the boy outside of that.

While things were strained with Ron, Hermione was becoming more and more entrenched in her studies. It was like third year all over again. She didn't want to talk about anything other than homework. However, this time she had Draco Malfoy to discuss assignments with, which was possibly worse.

Harry never would have guessed that conversations between Hermione and Draco could be so...*boring*. They talked about Mind Magic a lot, which Harry didn't understand. They talked about Arithmancy and Ancient Runes, which Harry really didn't understand. Worst of all, they talked about NEWT level History of Magic, which they were both taking for some unfathomable reason.

One particularly dull evening, Hermione and Draco spent an entire hour discussing which of the Goblin Rebellions had the most lasting influence of modern Goblin diplomacy. When Hermione pulled out a fifth textbook and started quoting it word for word, Harry wondered if watching Ron and Lavender snog might be preferable to this.

“How can either of you possibly care about this rot?” Harry finally lost patience.

“It’s not rot,” argued Hermione. “Studying history is an important part of understanding modern diplomacy and politics. Take the Goblin Rebellions for instance. They have a huge influence on how wizards and goblins interact to this day.”

“Exactly,” Draco agreed. “If we don’t study how our ancestors dealt with those troublemakers, how will we know what to do the next time those little bleeders get ideas above their station?”

“Well, I wouldn’t phrase it like that.” Hermione gave Draco a skeptical look. “But it’s important to know what happened between wizards and goblins so we can try to make better compromises and avoid the same mistakes. A lot of people think that the 1752 Rebellion had the biggest impact.”

“It did,” Draco argued. “The goblins teamed up with the bloody werewolves! Besides, two different Ministers had to resign in shame in the span of a couple months.”

“Well, I personally think the 1793 Rebellion was even more influential,” Hermione countered. “It really changed how goblins viewed wizards, which has a much more lasting impact on our relationship. There was a very serious miscommunication error between the current minister and Urg the Unclean. The goblins became convinced that the wizards were trying to steal all the goblin treasures. It was a bloodbath.”

“Maybe the minister didn’t have enough growl in his voice?” Harry suggested, based on his own very limited experience speaking Gobbledygook.

“Oh please,” Draco sneered. “Those little money-grubbers would use any excuse to attack respectable wizards. They’re just jealous because we have wands and they don’t.”

“Well actually,” Hermione interrupted. “The issue is a lot more complicated than that. If you look back at the Rebellion of 1752…”

Harry just scooped up his stuff and snuck off toward the exit. Hermione had grabbed yet another textbook, and it was clear this would not be resolved soon. Anything would be better than this. He couldn’t imagine what would happen if Hermione and Draco ever discussed house elves. It would probably make the Rebellion of 1793 look like a mild disagreement.

Thirty minutes later, he found himself walking the frigid grounds, trying to clear his head. Or maybe just numb his thoughts with the cold. Even with his thick cloak, hat, and scarf, he shivered slightly as his feet crunched on the frosted grass. Harry wasn’t sure what to do about Ron and Lavender or Hermione and Draco. He couldn’t really be mad at them, since none of

them had really done anything wrong, per se. However, he couldn't help that he was feeling incredibly lonely, even when they wouldn't leave him alone.

He remembered Tom Riddle's dire warning, that Harry would slowly lose his friends and loved ones and be stuck with no one but his mortal enemy. But then, Riddle had also claimed that he and Harry didn't have to be enemies. That didn't make much sense to Harry. There was an entire prophecy that claimed otherwise. 'Neither can live while the other survives...'

"Hello Harry."

He was startled from his thoughts by a sing-song voice right behind him, a voice he would recognize anywhere. "Luna!" He spun around to see the peculiar girl staring at a point right next to his head.

"Oh Harry!" she lamented. "I thought your nargles had gone away over the summer. How did you attract so many in such a short time?"

Harry frowned. "Nargles? Wait, are those the things that make your brain go fuzzy?" She nodded. "I don't know, Luna. I think I'm just a magnet for trouble."

She gave him a sad smile. "I was going to walk through the forest, if you'd like to join me. That way, if any trouble comes, at least we can face it together."

He was glad to have some company that didn't make snide remarks or complain about political issues. They walked in silence for a while. The only sound being Luna offering a few random comments on some of the flora and fauna they passed. "You see that weed over there?" Harry nodded. "It's very unlucky, but only on Tuesdays. Otherwise, it's just fine."

The path beneath them slowly grew less cared for, and the underbrush began sneaking up along the sides. "And did you notice how large the moon was last night, Harry? I wonder if that will affect my menstrual flow this month."

Harry coughed and spluttered. "I...can't imagine." He tried to think of anything else to talk about, desperate to change the subject. "Hey Luna, you know all about different types of strange magic, right?"

"Oh, no, sorry. I can't think of any type of magic that would be strange." She looked at the side of his head again, shooing away some invisible entity.

"Er, right. But do you know anything about Dream Magic?"

"Oh, Dream Magic. Yes. I'm quite fascinated by Dream Magic. I wouldn't call it strange, though. Dreams are perfectly normal. Affecting dreams with magic...I suppose that is quite a rare skill."

"I know it's a branch of Mind Magic, which is technically illegal."

"Oh, is that what you believe?" She gave him a piercing look, which was quite disconcerting. She almost appeared to be looking through him.

“Er, yeah.” He paused. “Is that wrong?”

“Some people believe that Dream Magic is a type of Mind Magic. They think that dreams can be affected with the mind. And to a certain extent they’re right. But I’ve always thought of dreams as a way to see into your soul. I think Soul Magic would be better at affecting someone’s dreams than Mind Magic would.”

“Soul Magic?” Well, that was worse. Dumbledore had implied that Soul Magic was basically the darkest and most dangerous type of Ancient Magic.

Luna had stopped to pick up some pinecones and place them in her pocket. He couldn’t imagine why. “Why are you so curious about Dream Magic, Harry? Or Soul Magic, for that matter?”

“I’ve been having some odd dreams. I’m not sure what they mean, but they’re always about the same person. I think we’re connected. I thought we were connected with Mind Magic, but now I’m not so sure.”

“Maybe you’re soul mates.”

“No.” Harry blurted it out without even having to stop to consider. “No, we’re definitely *not* soulmates. I guess our fates are intertwined. But we’re definitely destined to be enemies...not friends. And definitely not...that.”

Harry was once again reminded of his most recent dream. *I’m your friend Harry. I’m a part of you.* The Tom Riddle from his dreams did seem completely different from the Lord Voldemort of his nightmares. Was it possible that there was some small part of Voldemort that was still good? Some memory or dream that would actually help Harry instead of hurting him?

He was startled from his thoughts when Luna leaned forward to swat at something near his ear. “They can’t seem to get enough of you,” she muttered. When she finally made eye contact with him, she gave him a heartwarming smile. “Don’t worry so much about destiny, Harry. The future isn’t written in stone. Just because your fate is connected with another, doesn’t mean it has to end one way or another.”

Then, she placed one hand on each cheek. When she looked at him, it was almost as if she was staring at some point just beyond him. “Remember Harry, you always have a choice.”

Harry frowned at the chalkboard. It simply said to brew a Draught of Living Death. Snape had always written out the instructions on the board, but Slughorn always told them to simply follow the instructions in the book. Unfortunately, Harry didn’t seem to have his book with him. For some reason he must have forgotten it. And he was completely alone, so he couldn’t ask Hermione or Draco for help.

Where was everyone?

“Start with an infusion of wormwood. Then add the powdered root of Asphadel.”

Harry turned to see Tom Riddle leaning casually against a prep table behind him. He frowned at the taller young man. “I’m sorry, did you actually want to help me?”

Riddle shrugged. “You looked like you could use some.”

Harry did remember this potion. It was the one he brewed the very first day of class, which had won him the Felix Felicis. However, he was quite sure he couldn’t brew it from memory alone.

“Fine. I suppose you’ve probably brewed this enough times.” He added the wormwood and the Asphadel.

Riddle smirked and slithered closer. “I don’t think I’ve brewed a Draught of Living Death since Hogwarts, actually. I do have a good memory for these sorts of things, though. Or...I used to. I used to be able to remember almost anything I read with almost perfect clarity. Although, my memory has been a bit fragmented as of late.” He looked down at the potion. “Stir it clockwise twice,” he added.

Harry followed the instruction without question. “What do you mean ‘as of late?’ Do you mean since you became a memory? That’s what you are, right? A memory like the one in the diary?”

Riddle simply shrugged, neither confirming nor denying Harry’s theory. “You’ll add the sloth brain next.”

“I remember these dreams when I’m awake,” Harry admitted as he let the brains ooze into the cauldron. “Where do you go when you’re not in the dream with me? Do you have your own little world like the diary did? Are you connected to Voldemort? Does he know that you’re talking to me?”

Riddle simply raised an eyebrow. “Of course I have a connection with Voldemort, Harry. But then so do you.” He gestured down at the potion again. “Now pay attention, because the next part’s tricky. You’ll want to cut those Sopophorous beans as finely as possible to get more juice. It’s a very delicate process. I’d recommend using a sticking charm to get them to hold still. Otherwise they’re quite tricky to work with.”

Harry looked down at the beans. He remembered this part. “What if I just use the side of my knife to crush them? Then I don’t have to be careful at all, and I’ll get even more juice.”

Riddle looked scandalized. “No. Don’t do that. That’s completely imprecise. You might get too much juice.”

“I think I’m going to try it.” Harry started crushing the beans while Riddle looked on in disgust. It reminded him a bit of Hermione’s disapproval. Once all the beans were thoroughly squashed, he scraped the juicy remnants in with the rest of the ingredients. The potion turned a pale lilac, just as it had in class.

Riddle's eyes seemed to almost glow with intrigue. "How did you know that would work?"

"I didn't know," Harry lied. "Just a hunch."

"Just a hunch? Tell me, Harry, have you read Dmitri Moonvale's book: The Perfect Properties of Potions?" Harry shook his head. "I see. And what about Madam Carmen's: The Theory on Modern Potioneering?"

"I've never even heard of it," Harry admitted.

"You've never..." Riddle let out a frustrated sigh. "I see. And yet you simply 'had a hunch' that your little trick would work?"

"I guess so." Harry was starting to feel embarrassed. He didn't really understand potions, and he was very aware of it. "Sometimes I just do things because I have a gut feeling about it. It drives my professors crazy."

"Really? I would have loved having you as a pupil. Most students are so dreadfully dull. You are anything but."

Harry tried not to blush at the compliment. He wasn't sure if he should be proud or offended that Riddle would find him so interesting. "Er, what happens next? With the potion, I mean."

"Stir it counter-clockwise until it turns clear as water. Try to speed up and slow down as you stir to create a bit more turbulence."

"What if I just stir clockwise every seventh stir? That would create plenty of turbulence."

This time Riddle's eyes began to sparkle with something like mirth. "Hmm, how full of ideas you are!" He slid forward so that he was practically leaning over Harry's shoulder. "Try it."

Harry did. After the first clockwise stir, the potion turned a very pale pink. After a few more rounds, it turned perfectly clear, just as he knew it would.

"Perfect," Riddle whispered. "Why Harry, you and I make a good team. We really ought to work together more often."

The month only got stranger from there. Not only were things strained between his close friends, things had started to get even more bizarre with the rest of Gryffindor House.

Both Parvati Patil and Romilda Vane seemed to materialize at his side any time he returned to the Gryffindor Common Room. They wasted no time glaring at each other, while batting their lashes at Harry.

Parvati was the less annoying of the two. At least she knew Harry's interests. She constantly asked Harry if he wanted to practice dueling, telling him how much she missed the DA. She'd also offered to lend him her charms notes, since she was rather good in the class. But

Harry was also quite skilled at charms, so it wasn't much of a lure. If only she knew a lot of about Wizarding Politics or Occlumency, he might have been tempted.

Romilda Vane, however, was insufferable. She giggled at almost anything Harry said, whether it was remotely funny or not. She made nasty little comments about any other girl who tried to talk to Harry, even Hermione and Ginny. Worst of all, she started a rumor that Harry had agreed to go to Slughorn's Yuletide Party with her.

Ginny was beside herself when she confronted him about it. "Why would you go to Slughorn's party with that floozy?"

Harry had no idea what she was talking about. "Since when is Draco a floozy?" Pompous arse maybe. Prejudiced git certainly. But floozy?

Ginny spluttered. "What? Draco *Malfoy*? You're going to Slughorn's party with Draco Malfoy?"

"Er, apparently. I sort of agreed to get him into the party one way or another, and that seems to be the easiest way."

Ginny smirked. "So, you're definitely *not* going with Romilda Vane?"

"I can honestly say that I'd rather spend an evening with Draco Malfoy. Merlin, I'd rather spend an evening with Moaning Myrtle than Romilda Vane."

Ginny's lips curled into a devious smirk. "Oh, well then, I'll go let her know. She seems rather misinformed on the subject. She's been telling anyone who will listen that you're definitely going to go with her." She winked at him before darting out of the room. "Don't worry, I'll be gentle."

Harry doubted that, but he didn't really care either way. Served the girl right for spreading such an obvious lie.

He assumed that was the end of it, until the next day when he returned to the Common Room after a particularly grueling Quidditch Practice.

Romilda was waiting for him with a tall glass of Pumpkin Juice. "How was practice, Harry? Are you thirsty? I've got some fresh squeezed juice to help you relax."

Hermione practically dove between them. "I'm quite thirsty, actually. I'll take that."

Romilda snatched back the glass before Hermione could swipe it. "It's not for you, it's for Harry."

"I'm sure he won't mind," Hermione insisted. "Will you, Harry? You were just saying that you weren't very thirsty, and I know I'm parched."

Harry had no idea what was going on, so he just nodded along. That was usually the best strategy when Hermione was spouting nonsense. "Er, yeah. Help yourself, Hermione."

Hermione tried yet again to snag the cup. Without warning, Romilda threw it into the fireplace to keep it from the Prefect's grasp. "Well now look what you made me do!" Romilda screamed, as if throwing it into the fireplace was an accident. "Sorry about that, Harry," she went on. "Maybe you and I can sit down and have a glass some other time."

The moment Romilda left the Common Room, Hermione grabbed him by the shoulder and marched him to a quiet corner. "Don't drink anything she gives you. Or anyone else for that matter. I overheard some girls talking in the loo. They've been ordering Love Potions and they were talking about how they could trick *you* into drinking them. They snuck off before I could see who it was. It doesn't take a genius though."

"Oh great," Harry rolled his eyes. "Now I have to deal with this nonsense."

"Just ask someone to Slughorn's party," Hermione suggested. "If you're already going someone else, the other girls will back off."

"I *am* going with someone else." Maybe Harry should have told people already, but it felt weird to talk about. "I'm going with Draco."

"Wait, so you already have a date?"

"No. I just told you, I'm *not* bringing a date. I'm bringing Draco." As far as Harry was concerned that was the opposite of bringing a date.

Hermione gave him another contemplative look, similar to the expression she had when Draco was trying to convince Harry to practice alone in the forest. "You and Draco have been spending a lot of time together this year. It's interesting that he suddenly developed such an interest in you."

"Er, I don't know. He doesn't want to be rivals anymore. You were the one who said we shouldn't assume the worst."

Hermione blushed. "Well, I did. I just...you and Draco... I'm curious, did you ask him to the party, or did he ask you?"

"He more or less insisted. Well, the agreement was that I'd get him into the party. I guess that means I'll be taking him myself."

"So, you're just going as friends?" she asked.

"No," he snapped. Hermione's jaw dropped. "We're *not* friends!" She closed her mouth. "I mean we're not rivals anymore, but 'friend' is kind of a strong word, don't you think? He and I are...I don't know."

"Oh, I see. Harry, have you and Draco actually sat down and talked about what's going on between you two? Have you defined your relationship? Maybe talked about what feelings you have for the other?"

Harry narrowed his eyes at her. "Does that sound like something I would do? With anyone? Ever?"

“Well no,” she admitted. “But maybe you should. I’d hate for there to be any misunderstandings between the two of you.”

“Oh yeah,” Harry rolled his eyes. “Because a misunderstanding between me and Malfoy would be the end of the bloody world!”

Harry didn’t worry about Hermione’s warning. He definitely wasn’t going to sit down and have a talk about his feelings with Draco Malfoy of all people. Besides, there was nothing to misunderstand.

If Harry thought the other Gryffindors were acting odd, it was nothing to how Snape was behaving. It started shortly after Gryffindor’s quidditch victory against Hufflepuff. The very next class, Snape had walked right up to Harry while the students were supposed to be practicing nonverbal water shields.

“Twenty points from Gryffindor, Mr. Potter.”

“For what?”

“For supporting and encouraging the sale of contraband goods inside the walls of Hogwarts.”

Harry didn’t know what that was supposed to mean, but Snape didn’t seem to be in the mood to explain. So that was that.

Next, Harry noticed that Snape seemed to appear in a lot of places that Harry just happened to be. Harry would be working in the library, and the man would just happen to be talking with Madam Pince. Harry would head down to the Quidditch stadium, and Snape just happened to be heading out to the greenhouses to gather supplies. Harry would head to another Slugclub dinner, and Snape would just be leaving Slughorn’s office.

It was fairly obvious that Snape was trying to keep an eye on him, even if the man was trying to be subtle about it. The question was: why? Harry couldn’t imagine it was possibly for a good reason.

Before long, Snape’s behavior became even more bewildering. The professor had moved on from teaching them spells. Now, he was teaching them basic dueling and survival tips. Harry thought that some of the tips were even more useful than basic spells. For example, one day he had them practice simply dodging spells. Not using shields or anything, just ducking to get out of the way. According to Snape, sometimes they wouldn’t have time for a countercurse. So, they needed to learn to just get out of the way if necessary. Harry knew from experience that this could definitely save your life.

The overall survival tips weren’t that strange. The peculiar thing was that Snape had started asking Harry several random questions every lesson. At first Harry didn’t think much of this. He figured Snape was just trying to stump him. Snape loved pointing out Harry’s ignorance. However, as this continued, it became clear that Harry knew all the answers. Yet Snape kept on asking. Why would Snape keep asking Harry questions *that he knew the answer to?*

“Potter, what would you do if you didn’t have a wand and a larger attacker was strangling you?”

Harry thought back to the time Uncle Vernon had tried to strangle him. “Go for their eyes,” he said. Snape frowned.

“Potter, how do you fight off a group of attackers who are all more experienced fighters than yourself?”

“You wouldn’t,” Harry answered without hesitation. “You run. You run like your life depends on it.” Snape let out a disappointed sigh.

“Potter, let’s assume that you dislocate your shoulder in the middle of a duel. What would you do?”

“Well, I’d finish the duel first, and then I’d fix my shoulder.”

“And how would you fix your shoulder?”

Harry had no idea what spell would fix a dislocated shoulder. However, he did once have to pop his shoulder into place when he was younger and fell out of a tree while hiding from Dudley. Harry described how you could use a solid surface to pop the joint back into place, even if you didn’t have a wand. Half the class looked horrified. Snape looked furious.

In fact, with each lesson, Snape would ask Harry more and more questions like this. And every time Harry answered, Snape looked more and more upset. However, he wasn’t taking any points from Gryffindor, so Harry figured he’d just keep answering as best he could.

One day, Snape presented a question to the entire class. “Let’s say that you’re in hiding. You don’t want to be found. You’re living off the land. What would you do for food?”

Ron raised his hand. “I’d transfigure some food.”

“And break Grawp’s Elemental Law of Transfiguration? I think not, Mr. Weasley. Anyone have an actual idea?”

Draco tried next. “If I was hungry, I’d just go eat at a restaurant.”

“You’re in hiding, Mr. Malfoy, not on holiday. You don’t have money. You certainly don’t want to be seen eating at any restaurants.”

Hermione raised her hand. “I would try foraging for berries in the woods,” she explained.

“I see,” Snape rolled his eyes. “And I presume you know which berries are edible, which are poisonous, and where you can find either.”

“Oh...I...”

“There’s free food everywhere,” Harry grumbled.

“Is that so, Mr. Potter?”

“Yeah, lots of people throw away food. You can always find free food in rubbish bins.”

Half the class laughed while the other half wrinkled their nose at the disgusting notion. Snape just gave him a long, hard stare. He looked very angry.

After class that day, he asked Harry to stay behind. Harry waited to be reprimanded.

“Potter, I have to ask you, what was...” He took a deep breath, as if this was difficult for him. “How is it that you...” He looked at Harry again. He seemed torn. “Nevermind. Just leave.” Harry didn’t need telling twice.

Severus scowled as he watched Potter leave his classroom. So far, his questions had revealed far more about the boy than he wanted to know. Absolutely none of it was good. He would need to stop by the Dursleys before the holiday break, in case the boy was planning to see them at all.

Severus was only alone for a few minutes before there was a knock on his door. It was Draco Malfoy, the other boy who was making his life difficult.

“I have an invitation for you, Professor. Mother wanted me to deliver it in person.” He handed Severus a silver embossed invitation printed on fine linen parchment. The top read: *The Malfoy Family Yuletide Soiree*.

The Malfoys had been hosting a Christmas Eve party for years now. It seemed the tradition would continue even with the Dark Lord residing in their home. Severus cast several wards and silencing charms before he asked any further questions.

“Who else are you inviting to this little party?”

Draco shrugged. “The usual. Most of the old crowd, of course. All the Lords and Ladies with any real sway on the right side of the aisle.”

“Are you inviting Potter?” Severus interrupted.

“What? Harry? No, of course not. Why would he even want to come?”

Since when did Draco refer to Potter as *Harry*? “Please help me understand your thought process, Mr. Malfoy. You have been tasked with befriending Harry Potter and luring him back to your home. You have now successfully befriended Harry Potter, a monumental task to say the least. You are now hosting a party in your very home; a party which you are inviting people to attend. And yet, you now tell me that you do not intend on inviting Potter. I cannot fathom any reason why you would not.”

“Well, I mean...” Draco was floundering. “Of course, I *could* invite him. But I’m sure he wouldn’t come.”

“And why are you so sure?”

“Plus, it’s right before Christmas! I’m obviously going to deliver him to the Dark Lord. I mean, that’s basically my only option. So, it’s *going* to happen. But does it really need to happen the day before Christmas? That’s just... I can’t even... Harry should at least enjoy one last Christmas before...”

Severus was quickly losing patience. “Your life depends on you completing this task, Mr. Malfoy. *My* life depends on you completing this task. I swore an Unbreakable Vow to your mother that I would help you do this. If you do not send him an invitation, I will.”

“Fine, I’ll invite him. What does it matter when he dies anyway? Just let me do it on my own time, alright?”

“You are not doing this on your own time, Mr. Malfoy. You need to complete this task within the time that the Dark Lord had permitted you. Believe me, young man, you do not want your time to run out.”

Draco seemed more distracted than usual during their Occlumency lesson. “Are you still upset that Hermione didn’t agree with you on that stupid goblin thing?”

“What? No. I mean yes. Yes, that’s what’s been bothering me. You figured it out.” Draco lapsed into silence again. Harry was starting to get tired of everyone around him either being agitated or melancholy. He wasn’t very good at cheering people up.

“Look, I’m sure the Rebellion of 1845 was really serious. You probably both made good points.”

“The Rebellion of 1845?” Draco sneered at him. “Was there a rebellion hence unknown to wizards? Is this some mysterious rebellion that only you know about? Or are you trying to refer to the Rebellion of 1752, almost a hundred years before?”

“Sure, whatever. 1752 and 1676 right?”

“No. Not even close. 1752 and 1793. Seriously, Potter, how did you even pass your History of Magic OWL?”

Harry shrugged. “I didn’t pass it. I failed.”

Draco gaped in horror. “You failed!? You failed one of your OWL exams? What did your aunt and uncle do? Were they furious?”

“Er, no. I don’t think they know. Even if they did, they certainly wouldn’t care.”

“Why wouldn’t they care? I know you said they didn’t like magic much, but they certainly would care about their nephew’s grades.”

Harry blinked at him a couple times. “No, no they wouldn’t.” His voice left no room for doubt. “They don’t care about me. They certainly don’t care about my grades. I could fail every class and they’d probably be happy to be proven right about me. They think I’m a good-for-nothing just like my parents.”

Draco looked horrified. Draco’s own childhood probably had its own problems. But there was no doubt that Draco’s parents cared about his success or failure.

They sat in silence for a while after that. The Slytherin seemed to be staring off out the window while Harry tried to practice his breathing some more. No matter how calm and relaxed his body got, he was never able to clear his mind.

Finally, Draco spoke up again. “Harry?”

“Yeah?”

“Why did you agree to take me to Slughorn’s Party?”

Harry shrugged. He hoped this wouldn’t lead to a talk about feelings. “You wanted to go. I’m not going with anyone else. It’s not a big deal.”

“We’re having a Yuletide party on Christmas Eve.” Draco’s voice was quiet, almost sad. “The Malfoy Family Annual Soiree. Lots of people are coming. It’s mostly politicians, though; members of the Wizengamot. Dark wizards.” Once Draco started talking, his voice got faster and faster as he rambled on. “I’m sure you’d hate it. I mean, you *could* come. I could invite you, but I’m sure you wouldn’t want to attend. You would have an absolutely terrible time. In fact, you really shouldn’t come. You probably already have plans anyways. But just so you know, there’s a party, and you could attend, but you definitely shouldn’t. You wouldn’t like a single person there. I’ll let my mother know you won’t be attending.”

Harry stared at Draco as the boy finally paused to catch his breath. “Er ok. Thanks for the... invite? I guess I won’t be attending.”

Draco looked so relieved. “Oh ok. So sorry you can’t make it. Maybe another time.”

After that, Draco returned to the task at hand. “What are you doing by the way? Are you even trying to clear your mind?”

“Obviously.” It was just like Snape’s Occlumency classes, except at least Draco wasn’t trying to force his way into Harry’s mind. Maybe Snape wasn’t that bad of a teacher after all. Maybe Harry was just completely unsuited for Mind Magic.

“Come on, Harry. This is basically step zero. It really shouldn’t be this hard. Let go of your emotions and let your thoughts guide you to your mindscape.”

Harry scowled. He really wished people would stop telling him to ignore his emotions. It was like telling him to stop breathing. Maybe he could block them out for a moment, but then they’d just rush right back in. Whatever the key was to Mind Magic, Harry clearly lacked it.

“How did you learn Mind Magic?” Harry asked without preamble.

They were dreaming of the Charms classroom this time, but clearly Harry had another subject he’d rather discuss. Lord Voldemort raised a perfect eyebrow. Lately, Harry had been catching his interest more than anyone else ever had. His horcrux was endlessly fascinating.

“Since when are you curious about Mind Magic, Harry?”

Harry slouched in his desk and stared off in the distance. “I don’t know. I tried to learn Occlumency last year, but that turned out to be a disaster. Now I guess I’m trying to figure out why these dreams keep happening.”

“Does Dumbledore know you were studying Ancient Magic?”

“He’s the one who told me I should learn Occlumency.”

Lord Voldemort scowled. “Sweet Salazar, that man is a hypocrite.”

He assumed that Harry would immediately object, but the boy simply frowned. “Maybe a little,” he mumbled. “But I think he views different types of Ancient Magic differently. I don’t think he views Occlumency as being as bad as other things.”

“If that’s true, then why did he make all Ancient Magic illegal?”

Harry turned back to the Dark Lord and narrowed his eyes. “You never answered my question. How did you learn Mind Magic?”

Lord Voldemort shrugged. “It always came naturally to me. My mind was always so well organized. It was easy to sift through my thoughts, to manipulate the minds of others as I saw fit. I simply had to clear my emotions and focus exclusively on the logical processes of my mind.”

Harry was listening avidly. There was something thrilling about holding Harry’s attention so fully. “Ok, but how did you clear your emotions?”

“What do you mean: how? I simply set aside my emotions. It’s quite simple.”

“Not for me!” Harry quickly lost patience. “I don’t know if I’m just incompetent, or if Mind Magic is just impossible for me, or what! But I just can’t suppress my emotions, or ignore them, or set them aside. Every time I try to clear my head, my emotions feel like they’re getting stronger, not weaker.”

Lord Voldemort considered that. He had never had that issue, and he couldn’t imagine what that could mean. Perhaps it was the Horcrux interfering with Harry’s progress. Perhaps it was just some fundamental aspect of Harry’s personality that made him more in tune with his emotions.

“Whenever you try to clear your mind, your emotions rise to the surface instead of shifting to the side?”

“Yeah,” Harry looked hopeful again. “Is that a common problem? How do people work past that?”

“I don’t know if that’s something you need to ‘work past’ Harry. If your magic is trying to push you in a different direction than the one you are trying to go, it seems foolish to ignore such an obvious hint. Your magic knows more than you do.”

“I don’t know what that means,” Harry admitted.

“You’re a clever boy. Surely, you can figure it out.”

Harry leaned forward and reached for his glass without disturbing the thick book on his head. When another little projectile came flying toward his shoulder, he leaned to the side while carefully keeping his head level. So far, he hadn’t dropped the book once for the entire meal, which was definitely a record for him.

Madam Longbottom had moved on from Formal Teas to Formal Dinners. Harry never knew there were so many different types of forks in the entire world. Wizards really liked to go all out.

Since they would be served by house elves again, Neville had invited Ginny to join them instead of Hermione. The youngest Weasley did know more about wizarding culture, but very little about formal etiquette. While she didn’t ask nearly as many probing questions as Hermione, she did distract Harry in other ways. Namely, she had grown bored after the very first course, and had begun shooting her peas and carrots at Harry whenever Augusta wasn’t looking.

It had turned into a very serious game. Ginny kept her wand hidden under the table, and only fired off the little vegetables when she was sure she had a clear shot. Harry, meanwhile, had been instructed to keep the book on his head for as long as possible. Trying to duck out of the way of flying food was not helping this effort. Or, at least, it shouldn’t have been. For some reason, Harry was having an easier time keeping the book still than he ever had before. It was as if turning it into a sport made him even more determined to win.

Meanwhile, Neville was looking between his two friends and his grandmother with growing apprehension. Augusta was still caught up in a story about her uncle Algernon, but eventually she was bound to notice their mischief. Perhaps it was Neville’s desperation to prevent a catastrophe. Perhaps he was simply curious about the subject. Either way, it was the first time Harry heard the boy interrupt his grandmother since they’d started these lessons.

“So Harry, did you ever ask Professor Dumbledore about Ancient Magic?”

The heavy book fell onto Harry’s plate with a clatter. Mashed potatoes flew everywhere. Madam Longbottom’s livid expression swiveled to Harry. However, it wasn’t nearly as intimidating with a glob of stuffing hanging from the beak of her vulture hat. Ginny didn’t even try to hide her vicious laughter.

“Nice one, Harry,” she managed to gasp in between her snickers.

“Oops,” was all he managed before the house elves immediately started cleaning up and preparing him another plate.

“Heir Potter,” Augusta bristled. “Please try to refrain from showering your fellow dinner guests with your food every time you are asked an unexpected question.”

“Good advice,” Harry agreed. “I’ll keep that in mind.”

In the end, Harry simply explained that he had talked to Dumbledore a bit about Ancient Magic. That the headmaster had explained his reasoning. While Harry didn’t entirely agree, he could understand the man’s point of view.

Madam Longbottom looked intrigued. “Don’t entirely agree? So you agree that not all forms of Ancient Magic are entirely Dark? I know that the Longbottom family has been practicing Elemental Magic for generations.”

“Gran!” Neville interrupted. He looked as nervous as ever. “They don’t want to hear about that.”

“I don’t see what not,” Augusta continued. “Of course, we only study it for purely theoretical purposes now. We wouldn’t do anything illegal.”

While Madam Longbottom looked perfectly earnest in her assertion, Neville had turned bright red. He was practically itching with nerves. Did Neville know Elemental Magic? Harry had trouble wrapping his head around that idea. It made sense that Draco Malfoy would study illegal Ancient Magic in the safety of his own home, but Neville? Neville Longbottom!?

As soon as they were released from dinner, Neville tried to bolt for the greenhouses. “I really need to go check on my plants.”

Harry wasn’t about to let him get away that easily. “Neville!” He practically had to manhandle the other Gryffindor to keep him from scurrying off. “Neville, I need to talk to you.” It really shouldn’t have been so easy to overcome Neville, considering he was at least a head taller than Harry, and much thicker set. Neville probably didn’t know his own strength.

“Look Harry, you don’t need to worry. I don’t do that stuff. I just learned the theory, I swear!”

“No, Neville, you don’t understand. *I’m* trying to learn that stuff. Draco Malfoy offered to teach me, but I don’t know, I just can’t do it for some reason. I don’t think I’m relaxing properly or something. Maybe you can help me.”

“Bwah ha ha ha ha!” An evil cackle echoed through the narrow corridor. Harry turned to see Peeves materialize in the air before them. “Ooh Potty, what a naughty little boy you are!”

“Shove off Peeves, this is a private conversation.”

“Oh, I can see that. Very personal indeed! By all means, carry on. Just pretend I’m not here.” Peeves could clearly tell they were discussing something nefarious, but there was no way he

knew they were talking about Ancient Magic specifically.

Neville was hardly paying attention to Peeves, he was still shocked by Harry's words. "Wait, *you're* trying to learn...that stuff? You? I never would have guessed, you of all people... Does Professor Dumbledore know you're trying to learn about...those things?"

"Yeah, of course." Technically Dumbledore did not know Harry was taking lessons with Draco. But he had tried to get Harry to learn Occlumency last year. "He's completely on board with it. In fact, he thinks I might *need* to know those things if I'm going to be able to fight off Voldemort."

Peeves howled with laughter. He was zipping through the air, barely able to contain his glee. "That's how the great Potty Head will defeat the Big Bad Meanie!? With...that stuff?" He gave a lecherous wink. "Oh Potty Pants, I had no idea you had such a dirty mind!"

"Shut up Peeves," Harry scowled. "You don't even know what we're talking about."

Peeves didn't seem to care, though. He was giggling like someone had placed a ticking jinx on him.

Harry tried to ignore him. "Look Neville, I really need to learn that stuff. I keep trying to calm my mind and relax, and it just never works. My emotions just keep getting in the way. Draco says it should be easy, but it's not for me. Did you have the same problem? How were you able to get in touch with your mind?"

"Oh Potty!" Peeves wheezed. "It's not your *mind* you need to be touching."

"I said shut up, Peeves!"

"Actually, he's right Harry," Neville mumbled. "I mean, if you're doing mind stuff, then yeah, you need to focus on your thoughts. But different people are good and different types of...things." Harry nodded, Draco had mentioned something about that. "I'm good at stuff that involves earth and plants, so when I clear my head, I try to focus on the elements around me. I know that people who do blood...stuff will try to clear everything else and just focus on their bodies."

"Big Bottom!" Peeves interrupted. "Who knew you were so kinky?"

"Shut up Peeves!" they cried in unison.

"So," Harry tried to work through his thoughts. "Maybe I should just try to figure out what kind of stuff I'm good at. Maybe I should just forget about mind stuff, since that's clearly not my strong suit."

"I could have told you that!" Peeves jeered.

Neville ignored the poltergeist and focused on Harry. "Yeah, if you really want to learn that stuff, I'd suggest figuring out what kind of stuff you're best at and learning that stuff first. Don't try to force yourself to learn mind stuff. Maybe that is easy for Malfoy, but it doesn't mean it will be easy for you."

Harry nodded. He left Neville to attend to his plants and Peeves to try and calm down his raucous laughter. Harry had a lot to think about.

That evening, Harry sat up in bed and tried to allow his mind to calm. The first part was simple enough now. He sat back and relaxed and just breathed in and out slowly for about five or ten minutes. His thoughts drifted, his body calmed, everything seemed to slow down and become still. And just like every time before, his emotions seemed to come alive. He ought to be helping his friends. He was sure someone needed him. Voldemort was still out there hurting people and Harry should be doing something about that, not sitting in a room breathing quietly.

Normally, Harry tried desperately to ignore those impulses. He would try to fight back those thoughts and clear his mind fully. This time, he didn't even bother to try.

Instead, he latched onto those thoughts, those emotions. He felt consumed with a feeling of right and wrong, of a heavy responsibility, and a staunch morality. It was easy to do once he tried, although it wasn't remotely comfortable. A lot of those feelings were painful. There was guilt for the bad things he'd done. There was regret for his missed opportunities and poor decisions. And there was remorse, terrible remorse for the people he had loved and lost.

But whatever pain he felt was more than worth it, because of the other feelings that began to erupt as he followed them down whatever path he was on. He felt the same elation he got from helping others. There was the pure joy from being around his friends. And he felt love. Overwhelming, heart-stopping, mind-blowing love. The love he felt for his friends, for the Weasleys, for the members of the Order, for Dumbledore, for his parents and Sirius, and everyone. Everyone he had ever loved. It was all here, wherever here was.

He was hungry for more once he started to feel it. He wasn't sure if he was exploring his mindscape or if this was something else. But whatever it was, it was more wonderful than anything he could have imagined. He felt surrounded by care and affection and kindness.

And then he reached his destination, although he hadn't realized he'd been going anywhere in particular. But once he arrived, there was no doubt that he was now in a place where he wanted to be.

It was a place, and yet it was nowhere. It was inside of him and yet far away from him. It was a part of him, and yet it was something entirely its own. He could sense it, but he doubted he'd ever be able to describe it. No words in English seemed adequate to do it justice.

It was bright. Bright in a way that would make the sun seem pale, and yet it did not hurt to look at. In fact, looking at it seemed to soothe Harry in a way nothing else ever could.

It was white. It was the purest, softest white he could possibly imagine.

It sounded like a mother's lullaby, but also a powerful orchestral composition. It smelled like a summer storm, but also a sweet perfume. It tasted like Hogwarts' treacle tarts and Mrs.

Weasley's homemade stew and Mr. Fortesque's very best icecream.

It felt like warmth and tenderness and comfort. It felt like a shared joke between friends. It was as comfortable as a Weasley Sweater yet as thrilling as the first time he rode a broom. It felt like coming home.

And Harry knew that this thing, whatever this was, it was good. These feelings, whatever he was allowing himself to experience, it was good and right and Light. And so, he continued.

There was a lot to explore. Whatever that place was, it seemed to go on and on. For some reason, all of his loved ones were there. Well, not personally there, but imprints of them. It was as if they had all left a mark on that place. Was it his mind? It didn't feel like a mind. There were no coherent thoughts or memories, only an overwhelming sense of rightness and goodness.

Hermione was there, but it wasn't Hermione exactly. It felt like a friendly kind of love, a strong sense of needing to do what was right, and a moral responsibility for those less fortunate, while being willing to forgive those who had messed up. It wasn't the memory of Hermione, but it was a certain kind of imprint that she had left of him.

He could sense the imprint of Ron, too. Another friendly sort of love, a deep sense of loyalty to his friends and family, a need to jump into action when someone he cares about is in danger, and a desire to protect others from getting hurt.

Harry explored some more, trying to find other imprints of the people he cared about. It was wonderful feeling the very best of all of them and how they made him feel.

There was a sense of wonderment, a childlike curiosity, and a pure, joyful, innocent love that could only be Luna.

There was a deep sense of right and wrong. A powerful need to do what was morally right. And a willingness to sacrifice it all for the greater good that must have come from Professor Dumbledore.

As he moved along he felt more imprints. So many people who had touched his life in little, inexplicable ways. People who had filled him to beyond capacity with love. He didn't know why or how, but he was sure that these imprints on this place had made a profound impact on him. That they had all changed him in some way. They had made him better.

That was when Harry saw it. It was different from everything else in this place. It startled him at first and he wondered how he possibly could have missed it. Perhaps it was because the thing seemed to be tucked away in a distant corner, shameful and neglected.

While everything in this place seemed to shine with a blinding whiteness, this thing was black. Black and dark as the deepest caves and the void of nothingness. It sounded like a cry for help and the screech of nails on a blackboard. It smelt like sickness and ashes. It tasted like rot and bile and blood.

It felt like pain and bitter cold and loneliness. It felt like the loss of a friend. It felt like being locked alone in his cupboard. It felt like learning that no one would ever really care about you. It felt like the complete and utter absence of ever feeling kindness or tenderness or love.

It was profoundly terrifying. It was the worst thing Harry had ever seen, or felt, or experienced. It was so lonely, so sad, so overwhelmingly miserable and desolate. Harry had to get away. He could never experience that again. That was truly hell.

With a jerk, Harry pulled away from whatever place this was. He wasn't sure if he was the one slipping away, or if this place was slipping away from him, but either way, it was working. The darkness, pain, and loneliness was falling away. So was the bright, light, warmth and love. He felt like he was leaving something, but also returning.

When Harry opened his eyes, Ron was there. Neville, Seamus, and Dean were all crowded around behind the redhead, looking confused and scared.

"You alright, Harry?" asked Seamus.

"You started screaming something awful," explained Dean.

"Was it... You-Know-Who?" asked Neville.

"No." Harry tried to sit up. "No, I'm fine. It was just... a bad dream. Really, I'm fine."

"Yeah, he's fine." Ron shooed the other three out of way. "Give him some space, go back to bed. Nothing to see here."

As soon as the other three Gryffindors crawled back into their respective beds, Ron immediately threw himself onto Harry's mattress and pulled the curtains closed. "So what really happened, Harry?" he asked. "Did you have another vision? Is anyone hurt? Oh Merlin, is my dad okay?"

"Yes, yes, everything's fine. I mean, as far as I know." Harry grabbed his wand from his nightstand and cast a quick *Muffliato* so they wouldn't be overheard. "I didn't have a dream," Ron immediately opened his mouth, but Harry continued, "...or a vision. I was trying to practice Occlumency."

"*That* was Occlumency?" Ron looked doubtful. "There's no way that was right. I don't know what Malfoy's been teaching you, mate, but Occlumency is not supposed to cause blood-curdling screams."

"Yes, I know," Harry agreed. "I don't think I was even doing Mind Magic. I'm not entirely sure what I did."

"I'm starting to think Mind Magic is bloody impossible." At least Ron was having as much of a struggle as Harry. "I don't think those stupid breathing exercises are working at all."

"I'm surprised you even have time to breathe these days," Harry teased him.

Ron turned a violent shade of red, but he looked more embarrassed than upset. He gave a soft smile. "Yeah, I guess I deserved that," he relented. "Sorry if I've been distracted lately. Lavender's just a lot of fun. And she's really easy to talk to...when we actually talk. And she thinks I'm really smart and really interesting."

"Well that's good," Harry said. "Your girlfriend probably should think you're smart and interesting."

"No, you don't understand. No one ever thought I was the smart one or the interesting one. Not compared to you and Hermione."

Harry let out a sad sigh. "I think you're being a bit hard on yourself. I mean, Hermione's crazy smart. She could be the smartest witch in Britain. And as for me, I *wish* I could have just one boring day. Interesting things just keep happening to me...with terrifying consequences."

Ron smiled. "You're like a Summoning Charm for trouble." He let out a sad sigh. "And now you've got Malfoy following you around. That's more trouble than anyone should have to deal with. You two aren't really friends, are you? I mean, do you like spending time with him more than me?"

"No, of course not, don't be silly. You have got to make up with Hermione, because ever since you left, all they do is talk about homework. It's been so boring without you."

"Really?" Ron's face burned with hope. "You guys miss me?"

"Of course. Don't worry so much about Draco. I think Hermione sees him more like a project, like with the House Elves. She thinks she can save him."

A huge grin erupted on Ron's face. "Maybe she'll start knitting him little hats?"

"I can only imagine his reaction if she ever asked him to wear one!" Harry chuckled. "He'd probably be more horrified than the house elves!"

After a brief laugh, they lapsed into silence again. Ron seemed deep in thought before he spoke again. "I'm sorry if I was acting like a prat about that Wizengamot thing. I've seen firsthand what it's like to be you. I don't know why I ever feel jealous of you. I mean, no offense or anything, but you've had a lot of shite happen to you. I can't imagine how hard it is to actually *be* you."

"Eh," said Harry, waving it off. "You get used to it."

"Just...I don't know. You're a good person, Harry. Sometimes it's easy to forget that everything's always harder for you."

Harry sat quiet and awkward. He was never good at taking compliments. He never felt like he deserved them.

"Anyway, that was all," Ron mumbled. "I should really be getting back to bed."

“Wait!” Harry wasn’t sure what he wanted to say, but he wanted to return something that Ron had given him. He was feeling especially sentimental after his foray into the wonderful place filled with imprints of his friends. “Ron, I want to tell you something.”

“Er, alright.”

“It’s a secret, though. You absolutely cannot tell anyone else. No one knows. No one but me, anyway.”

Ron immediately looked interested. “Does Malfoy know?”

“No, Ron, I just said no one knows. Draco doesn’t know. Hermione doesn’t know. Dumbledore doesn’t know. I haven’t told a single person. So, promise me you won’t tell anyone.”

“Yeah of course, I promise. What is it?”

“Last month, when I took that Inheritance Test. I found out I was the Heir of Potter and the Heir of Black. But I also found out I was the Heir of Gryffindor. I’m the last descendant of Godric Gryffindor.”

Ron’s face was blank, but he gave a small nod. “Well Harry, I think that is both the most and least surprising thing I have ever heard.”

Holiday Shopping

Chapter Notes

**This Chapter was edited on April 6, 2020.

As November came to an end and the snow piled up in the castle's eaves and ramparts, life for Harry began to return to normal. Or as normal as could be expected.

Ron was finally taking some breaks from sucking on Lavender's face. So, Harry was now willing to spend time with the two of them. Hanging out with Ron and his girlfriend was still awkward, because Lavender kept trying to drop little hints to Harry about how great Parvati was. However, it was significantly better than watching them try to breathe life into each other.

One afternoon, the four of them were walking back to the Common Room together. Suddenly, Ron grabbed Harry's arm and tugged him behind a tapestry that led to one of Fred and George's favorite secret passageways. His friend put a hand over Harry's mouth to keep him from spluttering, and the two of them listened to Lavender and Parvati panic.

"Won-won? Where'd he go?"

"I don't know, they were just here. Harry? Harry, can you hear me?"

"Did they run ahead without us?"

After a couple minutes, the girls decided to continue to the Common Room and see if they could find the boys there. Harry and Ron both relaxed on the other side of the hidden entrance.

"Man, it is almost impossible to lose them," Ron complained.

"You know, it's probably not a good sign if you're trying that hard to hide from your girlfriend."

"Sometimes I just need some air so I can think." Ron continued down the secret passage and Harry followed, casting a *Muffliato* just in case. "Besides, you and I haven't gotten a chance to talk since that night. Are you really related to Godric Gryffindor?"

"Yeah. According to the test, at least."

Ron looked beyond impressed. "Then why don't you want anyone to know? Merlin, if I was related to Gryffindor, I'd tell everyone!"

“Well, I get enough attention already. Plus, the goblins told me not to tell anyone. They said that the Gryffindor Lordship was powerful or something, and that people might try to take advantage of me. I don’t really know what power I have, so I probably shouldn’t go announcing it until I figure that out.”

They came out at the other end of the passage, near the Transfiguration classroom. Ron swung the portrait shut behind them. “Did you inherit anything? Was there a vault or anything like that?”

“There’s a vault,” Harry confirmed. “But I have no idea what’s in it. I was thinking of checking it out over the holiday break. Maybe you could come with me and help me sort through whatever’s there.”

“Hermione would probably be better at that sort of thing,” Ron admitted.

“But aren’t you studying that money management stuff?”

Ron gave him a disbelieving look. “Well yeah, but I doubt there’s much money in that vault. This is some ancient vault from the Gryffindor family line. It’s going to be filled with powerful magical artifacts. And books. Lot and lots of books. And scrolls with old magic. Those ancient lines, they kept a lot of magical secrets within the family.”

“So, you think there might be some ancient magical secrets in the vault?”

“Definitely. Maybe some type of magic that only Gryffindors can do, like how only Slytherins can speak Parseltongue...except you of course. Oh, this is so cool, Harry! I wonder what you inherited.”

Harry was started to really wonder that himself.

After his chat with Ron, Harry decided he ought to tell Hermione about the Gryffindor thing, as well. Especially if he was going to ask her to go through the vault with him. He waited until Draco wasn’t around though, since he wasn’t ready to tell the Slytherin.

“You’re sure you’re related to Gryffindor himself?” Hermione actually put her books aside when he told her, she was so enthralled. “That’s so exciting Harry!”

“Yeah, but Ron’s the only other one who knows. So, make sure you don’t go around telling anyone.”

Hermione frowned. “Ron knows? When did you tell Ron?”

“A few nights ago. I had a sort of Ancient Magic breakthrough and I woke him up.” Suddenly, Harry felt silly he hadn’t told Hermione about this earlier. “Actually, maybe you know what happened to me. I was trying to practice my Occlumency, but instead of blocking out my emotions, I sort of followed them. And then...” He continued his tale of exploring that bright, light place full of imprints of his friends and loved ones. He told her about the black spot and his concerns over what that could possibly be.

“Hmm,” Hermione frowned at him. “That doesn’t sound anything like Mind Magic, Harry. If I had to guess, I’d say you were probably doing an entirely different branch of Ancient Magic.”

“But what? And how could I do it without even trying?”

“Well, different people are more adept at different types of Ancient Magic. I’m not entirely sure what this was, but it certainly doesn’t sound like Elemental Magic or Blood Magic. If I had to guess, it sounds like maybe you were doing Soul Magic.”

“No, that can’t be right,” Harry panicked. “Soul Magic is evil. It’s the darkest form of Ancient Magic there is. But this didn’t feel evil, it felt good and Light, except maybe that black splotch.” Suddenly, a terrible thought occurred to him. “Oh no, do you think I did that to myself by doing Soul Magic? Did I darken my soul?”

“That seems unlikely, but I have no idea why you would have a black spot on your soul. Maybe it’s perfectly common. I really don’t know anything about Soul Magic. I’ll try to research it and I’ll let you know if I find anything.”

Over the next couple weeks, Harry had no idea whether Hermione got the chance to research Soul Magic or not. This was because everywhere they went, Draco Malfoy immediately followed. Harry didn’t particularly mind Draco now that he’d got used to him, but it was making it impossible to share secrets with his actual friend. Plus, there was the added annoyance that Draco and Hermione talked almost exclusively about homework.

One afternoon, Harry tried to meet Hermione in an empty classroom, but as he approached he could hear Draco’s voice from inside. “I’m so glad I ran into you Hermione,” the voice drawled from the other side of the door. “We should really practice your concentration some more. You said Harry’s coming? When is he getting here? I’d love to talk to him more about other ways he could clear his mind. In fact, he and I should probably double our private lessons if he’s going to make any progress.”

Harry didn’t want to deal with any of that, so he just snuck off without a word.

He didn’t want to do Ancient Magic anymore in case he accidentally did Soul Magic again. At least, not until he knew what he was doing and what the hell that scary black mark was.

He also felt weird spending so much time alone with Draco. Ron had been worried that Harry was friends with Draco now instead of him. At first, the idea seemed ludicrous, but the more Harry thought about it, the more he could see Ron’s point. After all, Harry had been spending more time with Draco than his own best friend. Were he and Draco becoming friends? Why would Draco even want to be friends with him? What was in it for him? Was this still just an attempt to improve his family’s standing in the eyes of the public, or was Draco actually starting to enjoy hanging out with Harry and Hermione? Harry wasn’t even sure how he could figure that out.

The second Hogsmeade weekend of the year was the first weekend of December, so most of the students were planning to do their holiday shopping while they had the chance. Ron and Hermione still weren't speaking to each other, so Harry had to work out a sort of schedule for the day. He was spending his morning with Ron, so he could pick out a present for Hermione. He would then spend his afternoon with Hermione, so he could pick out a present for Ron.

It worked out even better, because Lavender was off somewhere with the Patil twins all morning, shopping for the boys. Harry was finally able to spend some alone time with his best friend again. Ron seemed to agree that this was preferable.

"Merlin, it feels good not having the girls breathing down our necks, right mate?"

Harry gave him an incredulous look. "I mean yeah, but if you feel that way, why don't you just break up with Lavender?"

"Don't be silly, she's great, and she thinks I'm great too. I just, you know...sometimes she can be a bit much."

"Yeah, I noticed."

They found their way into a bookshop and Harry skimmed over the titles of the academic books looking for something Hermione would like. "What do you think?" he asked. "The Theory of Advanced Transfiguration or The History of Goblin Diplomacy? I mean, they both sound horrendously dull, so I'm sure she'd love either of them."

Ron just shrugged. "I got her a book on the magical abilities of different creatures. There's a whole chapter on House Elf magic. I thought she'd like that, but now I don't know if I should even give it to her."

"You should. You two are being ridiculous. You should really make up."

"She started it! She attacked me with birds, Harry."

Harry didn't respond to that, since he didn't want to get involved. He just kept looking through the shelves to see if there was anything better, although he could just give her two books if he didn't find one that was good enough.

He stopped when he saw several copies of a single book on a large display toward the front. The book was a deep green with crimson and silver filigree. The title read, "The Modern Yuletide Gathering: Tips and Tricks for Hosting a Traditional Pureblood Celebration with a Contemporary Twist!" It looked like exactly the sort of thing Draco would like, especially since he had that silly Malfoy Family Yuletide Party coming up.

Then Harry frowned. Was he getting Draco a Christmas present? Did their relationship, whatever it was, warrant a Christmas present? Even if he was going to get Draco a present, wouldn't it make more sense to just send him Honeydukes candy, like he was for Neville, Ginny, and Luna? The book was obviously something Draco would enjoy, but would it be weird if such a nice present came from Harry? After all, the book didn't look cheap.

“Hey Harry! Check this one out!” Ron was waving a book on constructing complex Rituals using Ancient Runes and Arithmancy. “This one practically makes my eyes bleed. She’ll love it.”

Harry nodded, and slipped the holiday book into his bag as well. He figured if he didn’t end up giving it to Draco, he could just return it later.

“So, what are you getting for Lavender?” Harry asked as they were checking out.

“Oh,” Ron stammered. “I hadn’t even thought about that. I guess I should probably get her something though, right?”

They spent the next hour looking for something Lavender might like, while Harry teased his friend that he hadn’t even considered buying a present for his girlfriend. He then poked fun of all of Ron’s ideas for things Lavender might like. “No, I don’t think she’d want a book. Books are more Hermione’s thing.” They tried Honeydukes next. “I mean, yeah you can get her chocolate, but you’ll have to get her more than just one chocolate frog.” They finally ended up at a clothing store for witches. “I mean, it’s entirely possible that she might like a nice hat, but I have no idea what kind of hat she would like, do you?”

Finally, Ron gave up. “Well, I don’t know mate, what would *you* buy for a girlfriend?”

“I don’t know, that’s part of the reason I don’t date.” That and he had no idea who he’d even want to date. He tried to squash down the memory of Ginny straddling Dean’s lap, and suddenly an even more horrifying image came to mind; Tom Riddle leaning over with his breath tickling Harry’s ear. “Plus, there’s no one I’m very interested in,” he spluttered.

“Huh. Well who are you going to Slughorn’s Party with? I know you’re not going with Romilda Vane. Ginny practically drove that girl to tears when she called her out in the middle of the Common Room.”

“Er, not sure yet.” Harry hadn’t told Ron that he was going with Draco. He hated the idea of lying to his friend, but he also didn’t want to start another fight when things were finally a little more normal between the two.

“Do you know who Hermione’s going with?” Ron burst out, as if he’d been hoping to ask it all day and had just been waiting for the right moment. “She’s not going with Malfoy, is she?”

“Er, I’m pretty sure she’s not going with Malfoy. But I’m not sure who she is going with.”

“Well, tell her that she shouldn’t go with Malfoy. She can do a lot better than him. She won’t listen to me, but maybe she’ll listen to you.”

This conversation was getting into dangerous territory, so Harry suggested they go to a flower shop to arrange a holiday bouquet for Lavender. After all, most girls liked flowers, and they were a lot cheaper than textbooks.

The young witch at the shop seemed quite enthusiastic to show Ron all the different magical blooms that could be added to enhance the bouquet. "These little bluebells actually chime and will play a little holiday tune. And these lilacs release a wonderful scent which will make the young lady think of you. And these roses can change color depending on the time of day. They start out fresh and white in the morning and turn deep red by the evening."

When Ron told her, "I want whichever one's cheapest," she lost a lot of her enthusiasm.

Harry was looking over the different varieties of lilies when he ran into another friend. "Neville? What are you doing here?"

"Oh, I was going to get the girls some lily bouquets for Christmas. They represent friendship. Don't tell them, though, I want it to be a surprise."

"Yeah sure, Ron's just picking out a bouquet for his girlfriend."

Neville perked up. "Oh? I could help. I know a lot about the meaning of different flowers. He should add some Amaranth, it represents eternal love."

"Yeah, I'm not sure if that's quite the message he's going for."

Harry tried to change the subject away from plants and asked about Neville's holiday plans. The boy seemed less than enthusiastic that he would have several elderly aunts and uncles staying for the entire holiday. "How about you, Harry? Are you staying at school again?"

"Not this time, Ron's parents invited me to stay at their place."

"Oh wow, that should be fun."

"Yeah, don't get your hopes up too much, Harry." Ron strode up behind them. He had a receipt for whatever bouquet would eventually end up with Lavender on Christmas morning. "Usually the most exciting thing that happens at my house for the holidays is my mum has a few too many egg-nogs and starts singing along with Celestina Warbeck on the wireless."

Neville nodded in understanding. "My gran always goes for the Christmas sherry. Then she starts telling stories of when she met my Grandfather, or when my dad was my age...she gets real talkative."

"Oh man," Ron rolled his eyes. "Sherry is worse than veritaserum. One time my mum drank four glasses of that stuff and started telling me the story of the 'wonderful date' she had with my dad before I was conceived. I wish I knew how to Oblivate myself."

Harry's interest peaked. "Wait, really?"

Ron blanched at him. "Please don't tell me you want to hear that story."

"No, not about that," Harry went on. "About sherry being like veritaserum. Is that true?"

"Sure," said Neville. "I mean, it's not exactly like veritaserum, but my Gran always starts spilling intimate secrets when she's had a glass too many. Some people just can't handle their

liquor. Why do you ask?”

“There’s just someone I was hoping to have a candid conversation with.” Perhaps this was how Harry could figure out if Draco had any ulterior motives. He could get Draco really drunk under the guise of celebrating the end of term, and then ask him if they were really friends or if Draco was just using him for some political purpose. He didn’t really see how this could possibly backfire.

Severus surveyed the house again, trying to stall the inevitable. It looked exactly the same as the last time he had walked by, on his way to Figg’s house. There was a large, expensive-looking car in the driveway. The shrubs were cut into perfect, boring squares. Not one single blade of grass was out of place.

It certainly didn’t look like the kind of place where someone would be mistreated or abused. It looked like the kind of place where everything was perfectly maintained to the highest standards. Of course, it also didn’t look like the sort of place where scruffy little Harry Potter would fit in at all. And this was certainly where he had come from.

He let out a long sigh and stepped onto the front walkway. As he passed the threshold into the yard, he felt the blood wards give a slight tug at his left arm, as if the wards almost wanted to prevent his Dark Mark from entering. However, they quickly abated as he was determined to not be a threat, and he was able to pass inside the wards.

So, the wards on the house were keeping the boy safe from threats outside. But was it worth it if the boy had to face other threats from the inside?

Snape strode to the door with his cloak billowing behind him. He hadn’t bothered to try blending in with muggle clothes, not for the sake of these people. He did at least give them the courtesy of knocking on the door. When the face of Petunia appeared, it would have been difficult to say which one of them was more displeased to see the other.

“You!?” she practically shouted. “I mean, I’m sorry, I think you have the wrong house.” She tried to slam the door in his face, but Severus had been ready for that. One quick flick of his wand prevented the door from moving an inch.

“Hello, Petunia. It’s been a long time. I can honestly say that I was quite looking forward to never seeing you again. However, circumstances have forced my hand, and you and I need to talk.”

“I don’t have anything to say to you.” She continued trying to force the door shut, although it wouldn’t move one way or the other, stuck just a few inches open. “My husband and I have both made it very clear we don’t want anything to do with your kind. Lily’s dead and that boy of hers isn’t even here right now, so there’s nothing you could possibly want here. Please leave.”

“I know Potter isn’t here. I do teach at that school, of course.”

Petunia looked shocked by that information. “What? You’re one of his teachers?”

Had she not known that? “Yes, I’m sure Potter must have mentioned that at some point.”

“Of course not! I would never allow filthy talk about your kind or that school for freaks in my lovely home.”

The door slammed open. Severus hadn’t even consciously thought about it, he just flicked his wand and the door slammed wide, knocking Petunia back in the process. She barely managed to catch herself from falling off her feet. “Vernon!” she screamed. “Vernon, we’re under attack. One of those freaks is here doing you-know-what.”

“Not in my house!” An angry voice could be heard from the living room.

In just a few seconds, two of the thickest, stupidest looking people that Severus could possibly imagine rushed into the entryway. First was a man whose neck was almost thicker than his large head. He was waving a golf club like a troll club, and the comparison certainly didn’t end there. His face was purple with rage, but he at least had enough sense not to rush at Severus. Instead he maintained a sentinel position in front of the living room, as if he were trying to prevent Severus from stealing the family TV.

The other person appeared at the top of the stairs. He was so large and thick, he reminded Severus of what Crabbe and Goyle would look like if they had Malfoy’s blonde hair. “Mum, what’s going on?”

“Go back to your room, Duddykins. He’s a you-know-what!”

The boy yelped and placed his hands over his butt to protect it, while he ran back to what was presumably his bedroom. Severus didn’t bother wondering about that. He did wonder about being called a you-know-what. Were they really so afraid of magic that they wouldn’t even speak openly about it in their own home?

Severus felt the Weasley products begin to weigh heavily in his pockets. He had only brought them on a whim, sure he’d never actually use them. Now he was starting to feel glad he had them...just in case.

“Now see here, you filthy freak!” The purple-faced man was spitting everywhere as he pointed a stubby finger at Severus. “We don’t want your kind here. That conniving old man promised we’d be left in peace if we agreed to take the boy and we kept up our end of the bargain. Now you’ve got ten seconds to leave or I’m calling the police.”

Severus decided to take that risk. He was pretty sure he knew which buttons he could push. “By all means, Dursley, bring the police here at once. I’m sure they’d be very interested to know how you’ve been neglecting and abusing the young orphan boy left in your care.”

The man went from purple to white. “I beg your pardon? That boy’s lucky I didn’t leave him on the streets. A freak like that shouldn’t even be allowed in the company of good people like my family! I fed and clothed that boy for practically his whole life, and do I hear one word of gratitude for my kind generosity?”

Severus flicked his wand yet again and silenced the man, he had heard more than enough. Just in case, he cast a full body bind. He didn't want to get hit with a golf club while he was trying to investigate the house itself.

Petunia was staring in shock at her silent, frozen husband. "Vernon? Vernon?" She rounded on Severus. "What did you do, Snape? Did you turn him to stone? Did you kill him? How could you do this to me? I never threw stones at you like some of those other children, I left you alone!"

"The only reason you didn't throw stones at me was because you were quite aware of what I could do in return. However, I assure you Petunia, that I have merely improved your husband's disposition. You're welcome." He moved past her and made a beeline for the small door under the stairs. There was something there he was supposed to see. "I'm sorry to say that he'll be back to his usual demeanor by this evening. Although I suppose you both seem...well matched."

He noticed a small mail slot into the door of the cupboard. That was odd. When he placed a hand on the handle, Petunia practically flung herself forward. "No! There's nothing in there. Please, if you want money, we can give you money."

Severus shoved her away from him. "I don't want your money. Keep your hands off me or you will also be spending your day as a silent statue." She paled and stepped back to huddle silently in the corner. With her out of the way, Severus once again reached for the handle. He swung open the door and looked inside.

He was left feeling...disappointed. There was nothing there except some boxes and an old cot and some spare linens. Based on the warning of the Weasley Twins and Petunia's sudden outburst, he had been expecting something much more damning. Perhaps what he was looking for was inside one of these boxes?

He crouched down and began pulling out boxes. However, he didn't really find anything except old photo albums, holiday decorations, and formal dinnerware. He was about to reach for yet another unassuming box when he saw two words scrawled onto the inside wall. It looked like someone had written it in marker years ago and it had never been washed off. The words read, 'Harry's Room.'

Severus waved his wand and immediately shoved the rest of the boxes out the door. He crouched inside, barely fitting in the small space, and he examined the cupboard in a new light. The small cot, barely big enough for a child, was shoved into the corner. He pulled out his wand and started searching for any hidden compartments. When he found the loose floorboard hiding some long rotted crackers and an apple he was sure his suspicions were correct.

Next, he examined the mail slot. He realized there was a lock on the other side, so that the flap could be locked shut. There were also three locks of different varieties that would prevent the door from being opened from the inside.

He turned to Petunia, who was practically shaking with fear. "How often did you lock him in there?" he asked.

“We only locked him in there if he was misbehaving,” she pleaded.

“I did not ask you why you locked him in there. I asked you how often it happened.” Severus gave her a long, cold stare but she seemed beyond words this point. He did not let that deter him, and he simply strode forward and looked deep into her eyes. He saw the memories rush past. Keeping the boy locked in there as often as possible so they wouldn’t have to look at him and be reminded of this blot on their perfect life. The fear when the letters started arriving addressed to the cupboard. The decision to finally move him into a proper room when the boy was almost eleven.

Severus dropped her gaze and made his way up the stairs without pause. The boy’s room was easy to find. There were about fifteen locks on the door and a catflap at the bottom. Severus didn’t think he wanted to know why there was a catflap. He realized his hands were shaking when he reached for the door handle.

Five minutes later, he found himself marching back down the hall with his mind in turmoil. The room barely had furniture. There weren’t bars on the window anymore, but there were still the bolts holes from where they had been ripped out. There was more food hidden away in another loose floorboard.

Severus almost made it to the stairs, when a round, worried face stuck out from behind a door. The potions master scowled at the boy and he yelped and ducked back inside his room. Severus was about to ignore the young man, but then he realized he should probably check to make sure the Dursley’s other ward wasn’t also being neglected and abused.

He approached the door and decided not to bother knocking this time. He opened the door to find a much larger room, filled to the brim with every single toy or electronic that a young man could possibly want. The Dursley’s had kept their nephew locked in a cupboard while they had indulged their son with every possible luxury a boy could ask for.

Perhaps it was Severus’s own resentment at never getting anything he wanted. Perhaps it was the mean glare on the boy’s face that reminded him of every young man who had ever thrown rocks at him. Perhaps it was because this was exactly the sort of room he had originally expected Harry Potter to have, the sort of room James Potter and Sirius Black had probably grown up in, filled with everything money could buy. Severus wasn’t entirely sure what made him do it, but he wasn’t particularly proud of what he did next.

Severus reached into his pocket and pulled out the entire box of Weasley products.

“Don’t hurt me. I didn’t do anything!” the boy yelled, although Severus could hear the lie in his voice.

“Don’t worry, I won’t hurt you. In fact, I have a present for you.” He set the shrunken box on the ground, and then tapped it to enlarge it to the proper size. “This is for having to put up with Potter all those years.” He opened the lid. “It’s full of toys. Magical toys.”

The young man looked deeply suspicious of this. “How do I know they’re safe?”

“Oh, they’re not safe,” Severus explained. “In fact, they’re quite dangerous. If you’re not careful, you could burn the house down or blow something up.” Severus pulled out a couple Wizzbangs. “You see, these are magical fireworks. Very dangerous indeed.” The boy’s pudgy eyes went from fearful to greedy. “Be very careful. In fact, it’s probably best if you don’t play with these at all. Just tell your parents you have them and I’m sure they’ll lock them away somewhere safe where they can’t cause any damage.”

“Er, yeah sure, I’ll make sure they put them somewhere safe,” the boy lied as if it were second nature to him.

“Good.” Severus turned and left the room without another word. Well, at least he’d warned him. If the boy blew up half the house, it was his own fault.

He found Petunia still cowering at the bottom of the stairs. “We took him in. We did what the old man wanted. We gave him food and clothes and a roof and all that. Even though we didn’t want him. There’s a lot of people out there that wouldn’t even do that. We’re good, decent people.” Severus wasn’t sure if she was trying to justify her behavior to him or to herself.

“You know exactly what you are,” he said. “But why? Why treat him like that? Why would you refuse to even say the word ‘wizard’ in your home? Surely you cannot be so afraid of magic?”

She was shaking like a leaf. It was clear she wasn’t going to give him any answer with her words. He peered into her eyes again. Instead of some sort of memory of Harry, she was stuck on memories of Lily. Her parents talking about how proud they were of Lily. Lily showing her sister an impressive spell to show off what she could do. Lily and James sitting down to a very awkward double date with Petunia and Dursley, where Potter had made a point of teasing the man about his job selling drills. Severus pulled out, vibrating with rage.

“You treated a child like he was dirt beneath your feet because you were mad at his parents?” He kept his voice quiet, as his vicious ire poured out of him. “You resented his parents, so you thought it was ok to take it out on...” Suddenly, Severus paused. His eyes seemed to almost glaze over as certain thoughts forced their way to the forefront of his mind. Things he didn’t want to acknowledge, but it seemed he had no other choice.

“I have to go.”

Harry let out a long sigh when he stepped into the bookstore for the second time that day. “I hope you’re not looking for a present for me,” he told Hermione, who was scanning the titles carefully. “I really don’t need any more books.”

“I already got your present, and don’t worry it’s not a book.” She crouched down to read the books on the lowest shelf, tugging him down beside her. “I’m trying to find books about Soul Magic,” she whispered.

“Why not just look in the library?” he asked.

“I tried, and just as I suspected, there’s nothing there.” She gave up on the current book shelf and moved to another, dragging him along with her and casting a *Muffliato* around them. “There wasn’t anything in the Room of Hidden Things either. So, it’s not just that Dumbledore removed them or anything like that. The only book I could find that mentioned Soul Magic, was a book on different types of Ancient Magic.”

Harry perked up at that. “What did it say?”

“Well, apparently different people are more likely to have an affinity for one or two types of Ancient Magic over the other types.” Harry nodded. He knew this already. “Most people have an affinity for some type of Elemental Magic, either Fire, Water, Air, or Earth. Those are the most common. Having an affinity for Blood Magic or Mind Magic isn’t quite as common. But the book said it’s really rare for anyone to have an affinity for Soul Magic. Only about one percent of people can do that naturally. That’s probably why we can’t find any books on the subject.”

“Huh, so maybe I wasn’t doing Soul Magic.”

“I don’t know, Harry. From what little the book described, it did seem like Soul Magic draws power from your feelings and your sense of right and wrong. I think that you really were doing Soul Magic.”

Harry huffed. “Well this is ridiculous.” He stood up and kicked a small stool over in his frustration. “Why does everything always have to happen to me?”

“What’s wrong this time, Harry? Win another tournament? Defeat another Dark Lord?” Harry looked up to see Draco Malfoy a few shelves away. He must have overheard Harry’s whining.

“No, I’m just...not sure what to get Ron for Christmas.”

“Well, I can’t imagine you’re going to find anything in a bookstore.”

“Sometimes he reads for fun,” Harry tried to defend his friend. “Right now he’s trying to learn money management.”

Draco went silent at that, blinked a couple times, and then burst into laughter. He was practically doubled over he was laughing so hard.

“It’s not that funny.” Harry glared at the blonde.

“Weasley...” Draco gasped out his words in between his uncontrollable guffawing. “Is trying...to learn...money management...from a book!”

Harry and Hermione finally managed to quiet him down enough to make their purchases. Hermione hadn’t found anything on Soul Magic, but she did find about seven other books that caught her eye. When they made it to the check stand, she handed one to Harry with a wink. “You should give this one to Ron. It’s not as gimmicky, and there are no pictures or anything, but it has some very sound investment advice.”

“Oh, er, thanks.” Maybe Harry would be able to get his friends to make up before the holidays after all.

Draco rolled his eyes at their exchange, but didn’t say anything more on the subject.

After that, Draco managed to convince them to go to some fancy clothing store. Hermione started reading one of her books in the corner and Harry picked at some lint on his shirt while Draco admired the fine fabrics and trims.

“When are you ever going to wear this stuff?” Harry was starting to lose patience. “Merlin, one outfit here probably costs more than my Firebolt.”

“More than your old Nimbus maybe, but not more than a Firebolt,” Draco countered. “And while I already have my outfit picked out for Slughorn’s party, you never know. Maybe there’s something better.” He peered over at Harry. “What are you wearing, by the way?”

Harry shrugged. “I don’t know. I don’t think I fit my old robes from the Yule Ball. I guess I should wear something nice, right? I suppose I’ll have to order something.”

Draco looked like he was in physical pain. “No, you’re not ordering some stupid rags to wear next to me. We’re getting you proper formal robes. Here. Today. Now.”

Before Harry knew what was happening, he was being shoved onto a pedestal while Draco and the saleswoman scurried around trying to find something that Draco considered suitable. The woman was draping fabric after fabric on him while Draco watched with a shrewd expression. Hermione looked like she was trying to stifle her laughter at how uncomfortable and awkward Harry probably looked standing on a pedestal.

“Are there any colors you prefer?” the stern-looking dressmaker asked him.

“Er, I don’t know, I like red and gold.”

Draco scoffed at that. “This is a formal party, you idiot, not a quidditch match. You don’t actually have to wear your team colors.” Harry sighed as the seamstress followed Draco’s instructions instead of Harry’s and put away the crimson fabrics. “I was thinking emerald.”

“Hey!” Harry protested as the saleswoman began draping different green fabrics across his shoulders and chest. “You said no team colors.”

“You wore green at the Yule Ball and didn’t have a problem with it.”

This time Harry gaped for an entirely different reason. “You remember what *color* I wore at the Yule Ball? That was two years ago! How could you possibly even remember that?” Harry barely remembered that. There was no way he’d be able to remember what Draco wore.

“Of course I remember that.” Draco looked incredulous. “How could I possibly forget when they matched your eyes so perfectly?” Hermione started coughing. “I mean, all Malfoys have a keen eye for detail. It’s not a big deal. Forget about it.”

They ended up buying Harry green robes again. They were even nicer than the ones he wore for the Yule Ball, made of the finest silk. Draco tried to suggest Harry get a silver trim, but Harry put his foot down with that one, and insisted on the gold instead. Draco also offered to buy the robes, since they were his idea, but Harry didn't want Draco spending that much money on him. He sighed as he emptied out the last of his money from his pouch. At least he'd already bought everyone else's presents. He'd definitely have to stop by Gringotts during the break, though.

As the seamstress wrapped up Harry's purchase, Draco was still sulking. "My robes are silver," he huffed. "We won't match at all."

"If I wanted to worry about matching, I'd be bringing a date," Harry pointed out.

"I beg your pardon?"

Hermione tried to interject. "Harry, maybe now's not the..."

"I was just saying I don't want to have to match with someone, or worry about finding a date, or doing any of that ridiculous stuff. That's why I'm going with Draco."

Harry smiled at the blonde in appreciation, but for some reason Draco just stared back at him with a completely blank expression. It was a little disconcerting. It was sort of like looking at Tom Riddle.

Hermione quickly tried to change the subject. "Well, I still don't have a date. Ron and I were going to go as friends, but obviously that's not happening. I was thinking of asking..."

"I'll go with you, Hermione." Suddenly, Draco was oozing with Slytherin charm.

"What?" Harry spluttered.

"But I thought you were going with Harry?" Hermione looked confused.

"The agreement was that Harry would get me into the party. If I go with you, I'm still getting into the party. Besides, this way Harry can take *an actual date* to the party and not have to spend his whole evening with someone who he can't even be bothered to match with."

Harry couldn't believe this was happening. "Seriously? You're going to dump me just because I didn't get the silver trim?"

"Are you sure?" Hermione asked. "I mean I do have that blue dress with the silver trim your mother picked out at Madam Malkin's."

"I'm sure that would be perfect." Draco could look very enticing when it suited him.

"You can't go with Hermione," Harry protested. "I already promised Ron you two weren't going together."

"You did what?!" Hermione rounded on him.

“I mean,” Harry tried to backtrack. “He was just curious who you were going with...”

“I don’t see how it could possibly be any of his business.” Hermione looked like Mrs. Weasley after the twins had flown Harry to the Burrow in their father’s car. And just like Mrs. Weasley, her expression changed from furious to delightful without warning. “Draco, I’d absolutely love to go with you. I’m sure we’ll have a wonderful time.”

Harry wasn’t sure how the situation had gone so wrong so quickly.

Draco had seemed annoyed with Harry for the rest of their trip at Hogsmeade. Therefore, Harry figured he should enact his ‘get Draco drunk’ plan as soon as possible. Step one was to procure some actual alcohol. Since he still wasn’t legally an adult, he’d have to get someone to buy it for him. And he had the perfect someone in mind.

“Kreacher!” Harry called out, when he was alone in his dorm room.

The elf did not look at all happy to see him when it appeared. “Master called?” The words felt like they had to be dragged out of him.

“Kreacher, I need you to do me a favor.”

“Kreacher lives to serve his master.”

“I’m sure. I need you to go get me a bottle of firewhiskey.” Kreacher nodded, and was about to leave when Harry quickly added, “I’m going to be celebrating with Draco Malfoy later. You know Draco Malfoy, right? The son of Narcissa Black. I want to make sure I have some very good firewhiskey to serve him.”

Kreacher’s eyes suddenly lit up with pride. “Kreacher will find the finest firewhiskey to serve to noble Master Draco...I mean Master Harry.” And with that he was gone.

“Well, at least he won’t bring me poison.” He could only hope.

While the house elf was gone, Harry ran down to the library to find Draco. He waited for Hermione to walk off looking for another book before he broached the subject. “Hey Draco, I didn’t mean to imply that I didn’t want to go to the party with you. I’d rather go with you than some date.”

“Whatever Potter. I’m going with Hermione now, so you can have fun trying to track down a last-minute date.” So, he was Potter again?

“Maybe you and I can have a little party of our own?”

“What in Salazar’s name are you talking about?” Draco slammed his book shut, looking annoyed.

“Keep your voice down! I have a bottle of firewhiskey, and I need someone to share it with. Maybe you and I can hang out tonight and drink it.”

“Why don’t you share it with your very best friend, Weasley? Or, I don’t know, get a date?”

“Er, I’d rather drink it with you.” That was technically true at this specific moment.

Draco narrowed his eyes. “Why?”

Harry sighed. He had never been good at lying or conniving. Maybe it would be better if he stuck with a partial truth. “Well, if you must know, I kind of want to see what it would be like to get you drunk.” To Harry’s surprise, Draco actually blushed at that. Before the Slytherin could answer, Harry saw Hermione heading back to their table. He lowered his voice. “Don’t tell Hermione, though. She’d probably confiscate the bottle.”

Just then, Hermione plopped down a huge stack of books. “What are you two talking about?” she asked.

“Harry and I were just making arrangements for our next Occlumency lesson.” Draco lied like he was born to it. “I’ll see you tonight at 9 in the Room of Requirement?”

“Sounds good.” Harry smiled and immediately left before Hermione could lecture them on staying out so close to curfew.

When Kreacher returned, he appeared to be in a much better mood than usual. However, he also brought company.

“Dobby?” Harry spluttered. Unlike usual, it was Kreacher who looked pleased as a pixie, while Dobby looked thoroughly miserable. “Dobby what’s wrong?”

“Harry Potter should not be drinking with Malfoy boy!” Dobby cried out. “The Malfoys is bad people! The Malfoys try to hurt Harry Potter.” Dobby was practically in tears as he tugged at Harry’s robes, begging for him not to go have a drink with Draco.

“How did you even find out about that?” Harry asked.

Kreacher smiled. “Kreacher is proud to bring Ogden’s Best Firewhiskey for the proud Malfoy Heir. Kreacher telling all the house elves in Hogwarts Kitchen that Kreacher is bringing fine Firewhiskey for Master Draco!” He paused, “...and Master Harry.”

“Man, you guys gossip worse than goblins. Well, Dobby, you don’t need to worry about Draco. He’s not so bad anymore.”

“How could bad Malfoy be not bad anymore?” Dobby sniffled.

“Well, I’m working on him and...”

Suddenly, the little elf wrapped his arms around Harry's legs and rubbed his ear against him like a cat. "Oh, Harry Potter is so good and so Light he is making even Malfoy boy good. If anyone can make the bad Malfoy into good boy, it is the great Harry Potter!"

"Er, yeah sure, can I have that Firewhiskey now?"

Before the house elves took off again, Harry remembered something. "Oh wait, Kreacher, I actually have some stuff that Mandungus took from Grimmauld Place. Maybe you could put it back." He pulled the suitcase out from under his bed and opened it up. "Looks like he took some silverware, and some candlesticks, and...hey, where have I seen this locket before?"

Kreacher dove forward and grabbed the little golden locket before Harry could get a good look. "Locket belonged to Regulus!" he cried. "Is not special. Not important. Kreacher will put locket back. Kreacher will return all Black heirlooms to them's proper place. Kreacher will not allow sneaky thief to take precious locket again."

"Er, fine," Harry checked the time. "I have to go meet Draco now, so just make sure everything's back where it belongs, I guess."

"Thank you Master!" Kreacher seemed pretty happy to get that stuff back. "Kreacher will keep Regulus's locket safe."

Harry still couldn't help but wonder where he had seen that locket before, but he figured it must have been at Grimmauld Place if it used to belong to Sirius's brother.

Draco was already waiting in a room laid out with two comfortable lounges with a table in between. There were several snacks laid out on the table. "I figured you we shouldn't drink on an empty stomach. I've got nuts, sliced fruit, chocolate, and cheese. Smoked cheese goes best with whiskey, especially if it's well-aged."

Harry plopped down onto the couch across from Draco. He was fairly impressed by the other's forethought. "Does chocolate go well?"

"It does if it's dark chocolate. This is specialty chocolate from South America. It's almost ninety percent pure cocoa. Very dark."

Harry excitedly took a bite, but then almost spit it out. "Blech! This isn't even sweet! It's almost bitter."

"It's not supposed to be very sweet, I told you it's almost pure cocoa. If you think that's bitter, wait till you try the firewhiskey." He grabbed the bottle Harry had set on the table. "Ogden's? I'm impressed; you have better taste than I would have thought."

"You'll have to thank the house elf, Kreacher, for that." Harry waved his wand and two fancy glasses appeared before Draco. "If it's poisoned, that's his fault. I'm sure it's fine though. He seemed pretty happy with me after I gave him some old Black family jewelry to keep safe."

Hey, Malfoy, you're related to the Blacks. Do you know about any Black family heirloom which is a locket that refuses to open?"

"No idea, the Blacks have countless heirlooms. A locket that refuses to open sounds exactly like the sort of thing they'd hang onto." He frowned as he looked at the two gleaming glasses Harry had summoned for him. "Harry, these are wine glasses."

"I thought that made them extra fancy."

"I'm sure they're perfectly fine...if you're drinking wine. What sort of low-class plebian drinks Ogden's Best Firewhiskey from a *wine glass*?"

"Whatever. Summon your own glasses then." Harry completely forgot what they were talking about as he snatched his pretty wine glasses away from Draco's judgmental grasp.

As Draco waved his wand, two crystal whiskey glasses appeared on the table before him. "Much better. So, what's the plan?"

"Er, I don't know, I figured we would drink the stuff." Harry wasn't very experienced with this sort of thing, but didn't people usually *drink* alcohol?

"I meant, did you have a game in mind or anything like that?"

"Oh, well, we could play Exploding Snap, I guess."

Draco let out a delighted chuckle. "Not a card game, you ponce, a drinking game. Haven't you ever played a drinking game?" Harry just shrugged. Draco leaned in, curious. "Have you ever drank at all?"

"Fred and George gave me a pint of ale once, but then Hermione came back to the common room and they vanished it right quick. Hermione has a lot of positive qualities, but you don't get invited to a lot of sordid activities when she's one of your best friends."

"Fair enough." Draco lifted the bottle and filled the glasses only about a third of the way with the thick amber liquid. "We used to have parties in the Slytherin Common Room all the time. Especially back when we were in the Inquisitorial Squad. There was always plenty to drink. No Slytherin would dare snitch on the rest of their house." He pushed one of the glasses toward Harry. "Cheers."

"Cheers," Harry repeated and took a large swig of whiskey. He immediately regretted it the moment the burning liquid touched his tongue. He regretted it even more when it got to his throat. Draco laughed at his coughing and spluttering. "What the hell is wrong with it? Why does it taste like that?"

"That's what firewhiskey tastes like," the other boy sniggered. "You're supposed to sip it, Harry, not guzzle it. Don't worry, it will get better after a few more sips. Have some chocolate, it will help."

Harry grabbed a handful of the bitter chocolate and swallowed it down. It did soothe his burning throat a little, but didn't taste any better than before. "Why does anyone even drink

this stuff?”

“Oh, you’ll see. Let’s play ‘Never Have I Ever.’ Heard of it before?” Harry shook his head as Draco topped off their glasses. He wasn’t sure if he wanted to keep going if it was going to taste this bad, but he had already gotten this far. “Every round, we’ll each say something that we’ve never done. If the other person *has* done it, they have to take a drink. And don’t be cheap and say something obvious like ‘I was never sorted into Slytherin.’ That’s no way to play. And be honest, it’s no fun if you’re just lying. The whole point is to learn someone’s secrets.”

Harry grinned, this was exactly what he wanted, to learn Draco’s secrets. “Yeah, sounds good.” He’d start with simple things and work his way up to the more serious questions. Again, he couldn’t really see how this could possibly backfire. “You go first.”

Draco smirked and let the whiskey twirl in his glass. “I have never been to the muggle cinema.”

Harry smirked right back and set his glass on the table without taking a drink. Draco frowned. “But you were raised by muggles?”

“Yeah, but they never took me to the movies. They always left me at home.”

Draco scowled. “Fine, your turn.”

“I have never...learned another language.” Draco smirked and took a drink as if he were proud to. “What language do you speak?”

“Well, I’m learning ancient runes, but I’m not sure if that counts since it’s just a written language. Je parle français.” He winked.

It continued like that for some time, each one saying something they hadn’t done before, that they suspected the other one had.

“I have never washed my own clothes,” Malfoy smirked.

“I have never used magic to do my chores,” Harry countered.

“I have never been grounded.”

“I have never been allowed to say the words ‘wizard’ or ‘magic’ in my own home.” Draco looked appalled at that one, but he took a drink anyway.

Draco had been right about the taste, after the second time the Slytherin topped off their glasses, it didn’t burn nearly as much. In fact, Harry’s whole body was beginning to feel warm and light. It felt quite good.

After a while, their questions got a little more personal. “I’ve never messed up my hair on purpose,” Draco tried.

“Neither have I!”

“Seriously, it just looks like that?” Draco stumbled up off his own couch, shuffled awkwardly past the little table, and dropped down next to Harry, giving him an intense stare. “Prove it! Let me feel it,” he insisted. Suddenly Draco’s long fingers were combing through Harry’s thick, black hair.

“Hey! What are you doing?”

“It’s softer than I thought it’d be. I guess it really is just messy.” Draco sat back then, still on the same couch as Harry, but at least with some space between them.

“Fine, my turn. I have never used product in my hair.”

Malfoy rolled his eyes, but reached over to the table and grabbed his drink to take another swish. “To be fair, I only really did that when I was younger. I don’t have any Sleakeasy in it right now.”

“Really?” Harry was impressed. Draco’s hair looked very smooth and light, the opposite of his own.

The boy in question just smirked. “Touch it if you don’t believe me.” Harry hesitated, but then Draco was grabbing his hand and moving toward his hair. “Just touch it!”

It was very soft and feathery. Not as thick as Harry’s, but light like loose down. “Oh wow, I guess it does feel nice.”

Draco had a devious look on his face, like he had won something, but didn’t say anything more on the subject of hair. After that, the game got even more intense.

“I have never cast a Patronus.”

Harry scowled at the unfair statement, after all, most people knew about his Patronus. But he took his due anyway. Then he thought carefully. “I have never cast the Imperius Curse.”

Draco eyes grew wide. He looked down at his tumbler, now filled with their fourth or fifth round, who could remember? He eyed Harry warily. “This remains between us, yeah? You’re not going to run off to your precious headmaster or anything?”

“Everything stays in the Room,” Harry agreed. “You have my word.”

Draco nodded and took a deep gulp of his drink. “My father made me learn,” he spoke as soon as he’d swallowed. “It’s not like I’m going around casting it on random students every other day. I learned it because I had to.”

“You don’t have to justify anything to me, I’ve cast Unforgivables before.” Suddenly Draco was gaping at him and Harry wasn’t entirely sure why he had admitted to that. When Draco asked which ones, Harry answered. “Just Crucio. Just once. I tried to use it on Bellatrix after she killed Sirius, but it didn’t really work the way it’s supposed to.”

“You have to want to hurt someone,” Draco whispered.

“So I’ve heard.”

Draco gave him a sly glance. “My turn again. I have never had a Prophecy made about me.” Harry scowled again, but took another drink. “I bloody knew it!” the Slytherin shrieked in victory.

Harry was quite confused as to why Draco would be so excited, but then he remembered that he wasn’t really supposed to let anyone know about the Prophecy. Why had he admitted to it so easily? And then it finally occurred to him. Alcohol could work like Veritaserum, and Harry had quite a few secrets that he’d like to keep from Draco Malfoy, and this probably hadn’t been the best idea. Although, at the moment, the whole thing seemed really, really funny.

“I wasn’t supposed to tell you that,” he laughed. How funny that he would be sharing his deepest secrets with Draco Malfoy of all people. “Oh well, it’s not like you know what the Prophecy’s about!”

“What is it about?” Draco asked immediately.

“I can’t tell you, it’s a secret.” Harry pressed a finger to Malfoy’s lips and whispered, “Shh. Secret!” Then he tried to remember what they had been talking about. “Oh yeah, it’s my turn now.” He thought for a moment about what he’d been hoping to ask. “I have never pretended to be friends with someone I didn’t really like that much.” Draco immediately took a swig of his drink. “Are you kidding me?” Harry shouted.

Draco gave him a confused look. “What are you...” then he eyes popped open in realization. “Oh, not you. I was thinking of Crabbe and Goyle. They’re so bloody thick, talking to them is like talking to a brick wall. I only hang out with them because they’re family friends and I’m expected to.” He gave Harry a little pat on the head. “You’re actually pretty tolerable, now that you’re not being so difficult.”

“I was the one being difficult!?”

“My turn!” Draco leaned forward to pour them yet more firewhiskey. The bottle was about two-thirds empty at this point. Draco clearly had to concentrate to pour the bottle into the tumblers instead of onto the table. His whole face was flushed red and his hair was now quite disheveled. When he leaned back, he gave Harry another devious smile. “I have never kissed a girl.”

Harry frowned, but took a drink.

Draco eyes lit up instantly. “Was it Granger?”

“No, not Hermione. She’s like a sister.”

“The Weaslette?”

“You mean Ginny? No, she’s like a...well, I’ve never kissed her. She’s too busy kissing Dean.”

“Please tell me it wasn’t that annoying fourth year who’s always following you around?”

“Romilda Vane? Merlin’s pants no! It was Cho Chang.”

“Chang? The Ravenclaw Seeker? Actually, that’s not bad, Potter. She’s quite pretty, if you prefer the sporty type.”

“Well, at least I’ve kissed somebody, unlike you!”

“I’ve kissed before,” said Draco.

“Your parents don’t count!”

“I never said I haven’t kissed anyone, I said I never kissed *a girl*. Blaise and I used to kiss all the time back when we were dating. Hell, we used to do a lot more than kissing!”

Harry’s mind was foggy and slow and definitely not in any way prepared for that statement. It took him a couple tries before he could fully work his way up to grasping the full meaning. “You kissed Blaise?” He paused to think some more. “But didn’t you notice he’s a boy?” Draco gave him a little more time to think. “Wait, you *dated* him? You dated a guy, who was like your boyfriend? So...are you bent?”

Draco was obviously losing patience. “Yes, Potter, you figured it out! You solved the big mystery! I’m bent. I’m a poofster, a queen, a fairy, a bufty. Do you finally get it now? I’m gay!”

Harry frowned. He was still slowly trying to understand this whole thing. “Does Blaise know?”

Draco froze for a moment, and then his annoyed expression disappeared as he started laughing. “Yes, Harry, you complete moron. I think Blaise probably noticed about the time I started shagging him!” Finally, his laughter calmed down a little. “Most of my year-mates in Slytherin know. It’s not that big a deal, as long as I end up marrying whoever my parents pick out. The Malfoys need an Heir, after all. Hermione knows too, by the way. I didn’t tell her, but she’s made some...comments. She’s definitely figured it out.”

“Yeah, she’s a lot cleverer than I am.” Harry’s head was spinning. There was something here that was definitely important. Something that he should be noticing and picking up on, but he couldn’t quite reach it. Something to do with Draco and Blaise and Hermione. Something someone had said at some point, but he could barely remember the beginning of this conversation. There was no way he could sift through comments from days and weeks before. But there had been something. “Blaise...talked to me one day...”

“Oh really?” At this point, Draco was just helping himself to the firewhiskey without any need for the game. “What a fascinating story. You do know that most humans communicate through talking, right? It’s not particularly special.”

“He...said things.” Harry barely noticed how slurred his words were.

“Yes, that’s what usually happens when people talk.”

Harry was only half listening to Draco. He was starting to feel incredibly tired. What time was it? It was definitely way past curfew.

“He said...I don’t remember. He wasn’t happy.” Since when did his eyelids get so heavy?

“Well, he hasn’t been too happy with me, either. Whatever. He’s just jealous that I’m making new friends.”

“Jealous?” Maybe he should just close his eyes for a minute? After all, the couch was so comfortable. The room felt warm and cozy. All his problems and responsibilities felt so far away.

“Harry? Are you still awake?” Draco’s voice felt far away now. Harry thought about answering, but it seemed like far too much effort. “Harry? Harry?”

“Harry?” he tried. “Harry?”

When Lord Voldemort had arrived in this dream, he had discovered an entirely new location. He was in a dim yet cozy room with two couches and a small table stocked with snacks. Harry appeared to be fast asleep on one of the couches, which was unusual. When Harry entered the dreams with him, he was usually conscious.

“Harry, where are we? Is this a room in Hogwarts or somewhere else?” He finally lost patience and gave the boy a none-too-gentle shake. “Harry!”

The boy finally stammered and opened his eyes. He gave the great Lord Voldemort a very confused look and said the strangest thing. “You’re not blonde.”

“I...” Lord Voldemort wasn’t sure what to say to that. He knew he looked different in these dreams. He looked as handsome and composed as his younger self. But he had always had dark hair, certainly never blonde. “Should I be?”

Harry blinked a few times, and began to sit up, albeit very slowly. “Tom? Is that you?” Lord Voldemort let the name slide. He did look like his younger self, after all.

But then, Harry started giggling. It was very strange. Lord Voldemort was sure he’d never heard Harry Potter giggle before. “Blonde Tom Riddle!” he laughed. “Oh no, that would be way too weird. Can you imagine?” Harry’s face was bright red, and his words were slurred.

“Are you ill? What’s wrong with you? Do you have a fever?”

Harry seemed to think about that for an unusually long time. He even reached up to feel his forehead. “Huh, I don’t think so. I do feel really warm though.” He started laughing again. There was something very wrong here and the Dark Lord was determined to get to the bottom of it.

“Did you drink a potion? Did someone give you something?”

“Nope.” Harry yawned and stretched out on the couch as Lord Voldemort glared down at him. Most people cowered when the Dark Lord gave them such a look, but Harry didn’t even seem to notice. “The only thing I drank was like...half a bottle of firewhiskey.”

Ah. So Harry was drunk. Very drunk by the looks of it. Lord Voldemort had had many experiences with drunk people over the years, and he had never enjoyed any of them. People were insufferably stupid and obnoxious on the best of days, they were significantly worse while intoxicated. “Well, if that’s the case, I’ll just let you sleep this off.”

“Now I can’t stop thinking about what you’d look like blonde.” Harry didn’t seem to be paying any attention. “At least you still have your hair. Voldemort doesn’t have any. Can I touch it?”

“Touch what?”

“Your hair. I wanna touch it.”

Lord Voldemort was lost for words, so he settled for, “Why?”

Harry hiccuped, but continued, no less determined. “Your hair always looks so perfect. I wonder what it feels like.”

Lord Voldemort felt completely out of his depths. Normally, the Dark Lord would never expose himself to such a vulnerability as to let another person touch him. However, this was just a dream, and neither of them could hurt the other. There was also the fact that Harry was his horcrux, and he did very much want to sway Harry to his side. He just never expected that Harry would possibly want to...pet his hair.

Meanwhile, the boy himself was smiling up at him with a stupid grin, while patting the seat cushion next to him hopefully.

“Fine, I will allow this one indulgence.” He primly sat on the lounge next to the Gryffindor, and Harry wasted no time in running his fingers through his hair.

“It feels so soft! But not feathery, it’s nice and thick.” Harry was practically leaning over him as his fingers ran up and down Lord Voldemort’s scalp. He was carefully tucking some strands behind the Dark Lord’s perfect ear. The boy even twirled his finger through the little curl that always used to fall on his forehead. “I like this,” Harry mused, as he wrapped his finger in the dark brown curl.

The Dark Lord would be hard-pressed to admit that it did feel...nice. Lord Voldemort had always cared for himself. He had taken care of himself, and had never needed anyone, for anything. But this, whatever this was, it felt like the sort of thing people did when they cared for each other. Like some sort of expression of affection.

Lord Voldemort had never wanted affection from anyone. He was better than everyone else, after all. But there was just something about Harry’s feather-light touches that made him feel like he wanted more of this...whatever this was. Perhaps it was because Harry was his horcrux. Yes, that had to be it, it was the only reasonable explanation. The Dark Lord relaxed

and allowed Harry to continue his ministrations. The boy certainly seemed to enjoy combing his fingers through the dark curls.

“So,” The Dark Lord ventured after a minute. “Did you want me to touch your hair as well?”

The messy-haired boy simply shrugged. He seemed like he was lost in his own little world. “You can if you want.”

Lord Voldemort did. He pulled Harry a little closer and started petting his hair as well. Despite how tousled and unkempt it looked, Harry’s hair didn’t feel knotted or tangled. It wasn’t quite as soft as Lord Voldemort’s had been in his youth, but it wasn’t wiry or bristly either. It felt nice.

Lord Voldemort wasn’t sure how long they sat there, gently petting each other’s hair, but the Dark Lord couldn’t think of any reason to stop. New ideas were sparking in his mind. He had been planning to kidnap Harry for some time now, but if he was honest, he hadn’t been entirely sure what he would do with Harry when he finally captured him. Now he could see it quite clearly. He would keep Harry close to him, pet him when he was good, like he did with Nagini. Harry seemed to enjoy his touch. It was probably something that all horcruxes had in common.

The Dark Lord was pulled from his pleasant thoughts when he realized Harry was snoring. “Harry! Wake up!”

“What? Oh, sorry.”

Lord Voldemort was getting annoyed again. This was why he didn’t like dealing with drunks, they were too easily distracted and too slow to follow along with his sophisticated thought processes. “Why did you even drink so much?”

“Oh, er, I don’t know. I was trying to get Draco drunk, but I think it ended up backfiring.”

Lord Voldemort quirked a brow. Perhaps he would get some useful information out of this after all. “Why were you trying to get Draco Malfoy inebriated?”

“I wanted to learn his secrets, of course!”

“And did you?”

“Oh yeah, I learned something really important.”

“Which is?”

“Draco Malfoy can handle his liquor way better than I can.” Harry started snickering again, and Lord Voldemort was quickly losing patience. He considered just leaving, but then Harry spoke again. “Draco’s funny when he’s drunk. I bet his parties are fun, too. Now I kinda wish I was going.”

“Going to his party? Do you mean the Malfoy Family Yuletide Soiree?” Harry screwed up his face in thought, but then nodded. “You were invited, I presume?” Harry hiccupped and nodded again. “I’m sure it will be a delightful party. Why on earth would you possibly miss it?”

Harry frowned. “I...don’t remember. It all happened so fast. There was definitely a reason I wasn’t supposed to go, though.”

“Who told you not to go?” Lord Voldemort pressed. “Was it Dumbledore? Did he forbid from attending?”

“Dumbledore?” Harry looked very confused, but then, he had looked confused throughout their entire conversation. “What did Dumbledore do now? Is he here?”

“No, Harry, listen to me.” He tilted the boy’s chin so he was facing the Dark Lord directly. He wasn’t sure if the boy would even remember this dream, he was so out of it, but Lord Voldemort leaned in close and tried to speak as directly as possible. “You should go to the Malfoy family’s holiday party. You’ll have so much fun. Just think of the important people you could meet! You should go, Harry. You want to go. Forget about Dumbledore. Ignore what anyone else says. Go tell Malfoy that you want to attend his party.”

“I want to attend the party,” Harry mumbled.

“Yes!” It was working. “It will be such a fun party. You want to go very badly.”

“I want to go. I want to...I want to touch you again.”

“What?”

Harry raised a finger, and carefully pressed it to the tip of the Dark Lord’s nose. “Boop,” he said.

Lord Voldemort swatted his hand away. “Stop that. I need you to listen.”

“But you’re so boring! You talk too much. I want to touch your nose. You know Voldemort doesn’t have a nose? You still have yours though!”

Harry raised his finger again, but Lord Voldemort intercepted it in time. He held the hand carefully away from his face. “Harry, this is serious. This is not a time for infantile games. You will go to that party and you will...”

“Shh.” Harry’s other hand came out of nowhere and this time the finger pressed itself to his lips. “Shh, I’ll tell Draco I want to go to his stupid party, just stop talking about it!”

Lord Voldemort was getting very irritated, but he also very much wanted Harry Potter to walk right into Malfoy Manor. The boy would not be walking out again. Before he could respond, however, he realized that Harry wasn’t shushing him anymore. Instead, his finger was gently stroking his lips, back and forth.

Harry looked deep in thought, as he sat perched up on his knees, very close to the Dark Lord. "Your lips are soft. Voldemort doesn't even have lips. I don't know what he did to himself, but you shouldn't do it."

"Perhaps it can be reversed." The Dark Lord spoke carefully, allowing Harry to continue brushing his finger lightly across his lips. "Once I have everything that belongs to me."

"Like what?"

"Well Harry..." He surged forward so that he could whisper into the boy's ear again. However, he must have startled Harry, because the boy tried to jump back. Instead, his knobbly knees just tangled together, and he fell sideways. Harry flopped off the couch as ungracefully as a chicken trying to fly, with about as much flailing and squawking. When Lord Voldemort leaned over to check on him, the boy was gone.

It was very late into the night when Harry collapsed onto the floor. It was only a couple minutes later that he grabbed the bowl of nuts from the table and retched into it. He fell back to sleep shortly after, without bothering to climb back onto the couch.

The Madness of Professor Snape

Chapter Notes

Happy Halloween!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

When Harry awoke the next morning, everything hurt. Everything. His back was sore, his legs were bruised, his head was throbbing, his throat was burning, and his stomach was roiling. His forehead and belly, in particular, seemed to be competing for which was more displeased with him and trying to get their revenge.

It took him almost twenty minutes to drag himself off the floor and onto his feet. Draco was still sound asleep on the couch. He didn't feel any need to force the poor boy into consciousness, not when this was what it felt like. He checked the time and realized breakfast was already over and lunch would begin in about an hour. Fortunately, it was Sunday and they didn't have classes today.

Suddenly, regrettably, Harry remembered that he had a lesson with Augusta today. A lesson that was supposed to begin five minutes ago. With an audible groan, Harry told himself that he had to go meet with her, even if he felt like death warmed over. But before that, he needed to find the loo. More importantly, he swore he would never drink that much ever again. In fact, maybe he should just swear off alcohol forever.

Two hours later, Harry gave Draco a gentle nudge. "Draco, lunch is almost over. If you don't wake up now, you're going to miss it."

"Shove. Off." He tried to turn away, but Harry was insistent. When the Slytherin finally sat up, he looked like he'd barely escaped a tussle with the Whomping Willow. But then, Harry was sure he didn't look any better. The whole room was still a bit of a mess, in fact. The couches and table were pushed at awkward angles. At least the Room of Requirement had taken the liberty of removing Harry's sick from last night, so the only smells were whiskey and sweat.

It took Draco a fair amount of time to get his bearings, but when he did, he reached into his pocket and pulled out two small potion vials. He took a swig of one and offered the other to Harry.

"What is it?"

"Hangover potion," he explained, after he swallowed his own vial with a grimace. But then he let out a sigh of relief and relaxed into the back of cushions of the sofa. "Go on, take it, it

will make you feel better.”

“I don’t think I need it,” Harry admitted. “I feel pretty great already.”

“You what?” Draco looked offended at the very idea. “How is that even possible?”

“Well I felt like I’d wrestled a troll when I first woke up. I mean, it wasn’t quite as bad as a *Crucio*, but it was definitely up there in terms of general unpleasantness. But then, I went to go meet with Neville’s gran, and she wanted to teach me how wizards celebrate Yule. She had this Yule log and all these magical herbs and things. We burned them in the fireplace and sang some songs, and I don’t know what happened, but now I feel bloody fantastic!”

“Oh,” Draco muttered. “That makes sense. I lot of those herbs have healing and rejuvenation properties. I wouldn’t go around telling people you did that, though. I mean, it’s sort of a grey area, but some people might consider that bordering on Elemental Magic.”

“Yeah, she warned me about that, too. So, are you guys planning to do something like that at your holiday party? Is that why you didn’t want me to come?”

“What?” Draco spluttered. “No. Just forget about the party. Why would you even bring that up?”

“I don’t know,” Harry frowned. “I guess I was just thinking...the party does sound like it would be fun.”

“No, it doesn’t,” Draco stood up and started gathering his things. “I specifically described it as a not-fun party. I don’t know what I could have said that made it sound fun to you. So just forget it.” He adjusted his tie, which didn’t do much to improve his rumpled look, and then he headed for the door. “I have to go, if lunch is ending soon, I need to get to the Great Hall.”

“Wait, I’ll go with you.”

Draco looked less than enthused by that, but didn’t really have any reason to stop him.

Harry still wasn’t sure why Draco was so determined to convince him not to go to the party. Was Draco embarrassed by him? Did he think Harry would make a fool of himself? Was he trying to keep Harry from seeing his house for some reason?

“So, what exactly is so ‘not-fun’ about the party again?”

Draco sighed dramatically as they made their way through the corridors. “There will just be a lot of people you don’t know. People you won’t like.”

Harry skipped the missing stair on instinct as they descended the winding staircase. “I’m trying to meet new people actually.”

“And it will be very formal. Very stuffy. Lots of pureblood etiquette and old-fashioned traditions and so forth.”

“I’m learning that stuff! I guess I didn’t tell you, but I’m actually taking formal lessons with Neville’s gran. That’s why I’ve been having tea with her.”

Despite Harry’s reassurances, Draco looked like he was getting more and more anxious. “Look, Harry, it’s just...”

Before Draco could finish his thought, they made it to the Entrance Hall and almost ran into Blaise Zabini on his way out of the Great Hall. Blaise looked like he had just walked in on something indecent when he saw the two of them heading for lunch together. “Draco.” His voice was terse and strained. “I noticed you never came back to the dorms last night.”

His dark eyes moved from Draco to Harry, and he glared at Harry’s disheveled state. Despite the herbs revitalizing his insides, Harry was sure he still *looked* like he’d been wrestling with a troll. Blaise clearly didn’t approve. “I can see now that you were...busy.”

“We were hanging out,” Harry admitted. “And we fell asleep.”

Blaise snorted. “Must not have been that good then.” He turned to Draco. “At least I kept you awake.” Then he shoved past them and made his way down the steps toward the dungeons.

Harry’s mind was working much faster than it had been last night. Blaise’s comment struck a chord, and he remembered his last encounter with the dark-skinned Slytherin. Finally, everything clicked together with horrifying clarity. “Dear sweet Merlin! He thinks we’re dating!”

A couple of second year Ravenclaws practically jumped when they heard Harry’s outburst. Draco quickly dragged him to a quiet corridor off to the side. “Keep your voice down, Potter. It’s not a big deal.”

“How could he think we were dating? I dated Cho Chang last year. He should know I like girls.”

“Maybe he thinks you like both?”

“Like both? What? Is that even a thing?”

It was Draco’s turn to look shocked. “Yes, that’s a thing. Sweet Salazar, do you know anything about sexual preferences?”

“No. Not really. No.”

Draco rolled his eyes. “Well, some people like girls, and some people like boys, and some people like both. There, now you know.”

“Oh.” Harry tried to wrap his head around that. He supposed it didn’t really matter what Blaise thought. Besides, the boy would figure out that they were just friends when Harry and Draco went to Slughorn’s party with different people. Harry supposed it was probably better that he wasn’t going with Draco after all. Blaise probably would have assumed it was a real date.

“Blaise is coming to my Yuletide party.” Draco interrupted his thoughts.

“What?”

“I didn’t mean to be rude earlier. I’m sure you can handle yourself perfectly well at a formal party. It’s just that Blaise will be there, since he’s a family friend, and I’d hate for there to be any awkward situations. I don’t want him to get the wrong impression, you understand.”

“Oh, er, yeah. That makes sense. It’s probably best if I skip the party then. Thanks for looking out for me.”

As Harry turned to go back to the Entrance Hall to try and catch the very end of lunch, he barely heard Draco mutter, “You have no idea.”

If Harry thought his weekend was strange, it was nothing compared to his Defense Against the Dark Arts class on Monday. It started out as most Mondays did, with everyone dropping off their essays on Snape’s desk. Then the dour man proceeded to quiz them to make sure they had finished the reading assignment.

Harry always finished his reading assignments for Snape. For one thing, Defense had always been his favorite subject. For another thing, if he missed one single thing discussed in the reading, Snape would somehow ask him about that one thing, and then happily take ten points from Gryffindor. So, Harry had read through the entire Chapter 12 from the textbook last week, and then reviewed it again Sunday night.

“Now, I know all of you were wasting your Saturdays running around Hogsmeade, but I trust you still managed to finish the reading I assigned?”

“Yes, professor,” they muttered.

“Potter.” It didn’t surprise him that Snape called on him first. “In Chapter 12, Jigger describes several practical dueling techniques.” Harry waited for it, Snape’s questions were always convoluted and meant to trick him into giving the wrong answer. “What technique does Jigger recommend when you are dueling one other opponent who is evenly matched with you?”

Harry froze. The question seemed too straight-forward. Jigger had described the Standard Dueling Technique for basic one-on-one duels, but he had just called it the Standard Technique. Was that the answer? That would be way too easy, but Harry couldn’t find any catch. In the end, it was the only answer he could think of, and Snape looked like he was getting impatient. “The Standard Technique?”

“Correct, three points to Gryffindor.”

The room was already perfectly quiet, but somehow it felt as though all the air had been sucked out. Had Harry heard that correctly? Did Snape just *give him points*? Surely he had

meant to *take them away*, but Harry didn't want to point that out for fear that the man might correct his mistake.

"Potter," Snape didn't waste time asking him another question. Harry held his breath, waiting for the other buckled boot to drop. "Which technique does he recommend when you are dueling an opponent who is clearly a higher skill level than yourself?"

It was too easy. There had been three bloody pages explaining the technique. Did Snape seriously think he would skip three full pages? "The Defensive Technique?"

"Correct, three more points to Gryffindor."

Harry turned to Ron to see if his friend was also hearing what Harry was hearing. The ginger looked as white as a ghost and was gaping with his mouth wide open. So, it wasn't just Harry.

"And now, Potter, what technique does he recommend when you are dueling two opponents at once?"

"The Split Technique."

"Correct, five points to Gryffindor."

What was happening? Who was this man and what had he done with Professor Snape? Did Voldemort send another Death Eater to replace their Defense professor? He turned to Hermione next. He doubted that she had ever looked so confused during a class before. To be fair, Hermione had probably answered hundreds of questions for Snape over the years, and he was pretty sure the man had never given her a single point.

"Potter," Snape pulled his attention again. Was he just going to keep doing this? "What is the proper technique when you are faced with your worst nightmare?"

Harry almost sighed with relief. He was pretty sure he understood the catch, finally. Snape was trying to lower Harry's guard with some really easy questions, only to throw in a trick question. After all, Jigger didn't cover any dueling techniques for your 'worst nightmare.' So, Snape probably expected Harry to just blurt out whatever technique was closest. Harry wasn't going to fall for it. "If you're facing your worst nightmare, sir, the proper 'technique' would be to use the *Riddikulus* spell and laugh at it, because you're obviously facing a Boggart."

Snape tilted his head, and the whole class held a collective breath. "That is actually...correct. 15 points to Gryffindor."

At that point the Slytherins couldn't seem to take it anymore. Nott's hand shot into the air, but Pansy Parkinson didn't even bother raising her hand. "Sir, you know you're *giving* him points, right? Not taking points?"

"I'm very aware what I am doing, Miss Parkinson, thank you."

Nott took that as his cue. "Sir, why don't you ask someone else these questions? We all did the reading, professor. I'm sure any one of the Slytherins could get these right."

Blaise rolled his eyes. "I'm surprised Potter even had time to read with what a *busy* weekend he had." Harry wasn't sure if Snape heard that or not.

It didn't seem to matter, because Snape launched right back into asking Harry questions. Questions Harry knew the answers to. It continued for another ten minutes with Snape ignoring every single other student who tried to answer, and giving points to Harry instead.

Finally, after a brief lecture, Snape asked them to pair up and practice the different dueling techniques. As soon as they were free, the whole class burst into hushed whispers. "Is he *confunded*?" "Has he ever given Gryffindor points before?" "Did he lose a bet?" "Do you think it's another imposter like Moody?"

Ron grabbed Harry as a partner right away. "Do you know what's going on? Did you do something?"

"I have no idea. I'm as confused as everyone else!"

He became even more confused during the practical lesson, when Snape gave him *even more points* when Harry demonstrated the proper dueling techniques. Sure, he had done it perfectly, but Harry always did the Defense practicals perfectly, and he usually *lost points* on some stupid technicality. What the hell was going on?

Apparently, everyone else was wondering the same thing. As soon as they were dismissed at the end of the period, Harry barely made it out the classroom door, before he was slammed against the wall by an irate Theodore Nott. "What did you do, Potter? Was it a *Confundus* charm? An *Imperius* curse?"

Harry felt Nott's wand press against his neck, but he refused to show fear to another Slytherin bully. "I didn't do anything, Nott. Let me go." He slipped his own wand out of his pocket and pointed at his attacker's abdomen.

"We know you did something," Parkinson wheezed from behind Nott. Her friend, Daphne Greengrass, was also looking furious. Crabbe and Goyle were there too, cracking their knuckles, because apparently, they didn't know how to use their wands.

"There's no way he just decided to give you all those points out of the goodness of his heart." Nott pressed the wand tip further into his neck. "Now tell us what you did."

"If he said he didn't do anything, he didn't do anything!" Ron had appeared, with his wand raised at Nott's back. Hermione, Neville, Lavender, and Parvati were all there as well, with their wands raised.

If someone didn't do something soon, they were all going to demonstrate the 'Mixed Group Technique.'

"Drop him, Theo." It was Draco Malfoy. "Snape's not stupid enough to fall for a simple *Confundus* and I think we all know Potter would never perform an Unforgivable."

“Get out of here, Draco,” Nott scoffed. “We all know whose side you’re on now. Maybe you’re the one who taught him how to do the *Imperius*?”

Parkinson turned her wand on Draco. So Hermione turned her wand on Parkinson. So Greengrass turned her wand on Hermione. So Ron turned his wand on Greengrass. And then, suddenly, just as everyone was about to curse each other, Blaise Zabini stepped out the classroom door. “What the hell?”

“Potter did something to Snape!” Nott yelled.

“Potter didn’t do anything to Snape. Snape could duel Potter in his sleep. And there’s no way anyone could slip Snape a potion. Potter’s just completely irresistible, didn’t you know? Losing your bloody mind over Potter is all the rage these days.” And then he walked away without another word.

Harry wasn’t sure whether to be offended or not. It sounded vaguely like Blaise had defended him, while also insulting him. Either way, Nott slowly lowered his wand. “Fine, but when I find out what happened, I’m going to crush you, Potter.”

Nott would have a hard time solving the madness of Professor Snape, however. It seemed that absolutely no one knew what had happened.

By the next day, word had spread through the whole school. Everyone was talking about how Professor Snape had given an almost unreasonable amount of points to Harry Potter, 68 points by Hermione’s count. The students couldn’t seem to talk about anything else, but no one had any reasonable ideas as to why it would happen.

Every single Slytherin was now glaring at him wherever he went, except maybe Draco. Although, he was pretty sure Blaise was glaring at him for an entirely different reason. Harry still wasn’t sure what to do about the Blaise situation. He thought about setting the record straight, but he was sure the boy wouldn’t listen to him.

Besides, Harry had no idea how he would even explain what was going on. He could tell Blaise that he liked girls, but apparently, even if he liked girls, he could also like boys. He frowned. He could probably prove he liked girls, but how could he prove that he *didn’t* like boys? Well, he had shared a dorm room with Ron, Neville, Seamus, and Dean for several years, and he had never been attracted to any one of them. If he liked guys, he probably would have noticed a while ago. It wasn’t as though he found any guys fit. Well, Charlie Weasley was pretty fit, but that was just because he was really fit, that didn’t prove anything.

Now that Harry thought about it, Oliver Wood had been pretty fit as well. But again, just because Harry noticed that someone was fit, didn’t mean he wanted to do anything more. Oliver was his friend, they were just friends.

Cedric Diggory had been insanely handsome, and Harry had never been attracted to him. Sure, Harry thought about Cedric a lot, but that’s because he had died so tragically. And when Cedric had been alive Harry only noticed he was handsome, because he was dating Cho. And

before he was dating Cho, Harry only noticed Cedric was handsome because how could you possibly not notice?

Harry turned and went to go find Draco.

“Hey Draco,” Harry found the Slytherin in the library as per usual. He was starting to understand why he and Hermione got along so well. “Can we talk for a minute, er, in private?”

“I’m busy, Potter. I have to finish this Runes translation by tomorrow. Just ask me whatever you’re going to ask.”

“Ok, if you insist.” He looked around, but no one appeared to be listening to them. “So you like guys, right? And you don’t like girls? But some people can like both. So, how do you know for sure that you don’t like girls?”

Draco grabbed his arm and started dragging him to the back shelves, casting a silencing charm around them. “What the hell is wrong with you?”

“You said to just ask!”

“Does it seriously bother you that much that I don’t like girls?”

Harry was taken aback. “What? I don’t care about that. I want to know how you know that you don’t like girls. I mean, I like girls, but what if I liked boys, too? How would I know?”

Draco paused. Then a small smile appeared at the corner of his mouth. “You like boys?”

“I don’t know. That’s what I’m asking, how would I know?”

“Well, you could kiss a boy,” Draco leaned in slightly. “Then, if you liked it, you’d know for sure.”

“That seems rather extreme. Besides, I kissed Cho, and I’m not sure how much I liked that. It was kind of weird.”

“Maybe you don’t like girls?” said Draco.

“I thought I did! Now I’m confused. I didn’t realize you could like both. Is it possible to like one more than the other?”

“Yes.”

“Well, now that’s just silly!” Harry felt overwhelmed. “How am I supposed to know what I am when there are so many options?”

“You don’t have to decide right this second.”

Harry huffed. He wanted to know exactly what he was, but he supposed Draco was right. It wasn't exactly an urgent situation, especially compared to all the other crazy things happening in his life. "What would happen if I was...you know? I know muggles have pretty mixed feelings about people who are *that way*. My aunt and uncle thought that being bent was almost as bad as being magical. How do wizards feel about it?"

Draco shrugged. "I supposed it's mixed, as well. It used to be that purebloods who were *that way* would just have affairs on the side. No one really talked about it. Then, in the 60s, Blood Adoptions became really popular. That's when you perform a magical ritual to adopt a child and they become yours by blood. So their blood, their physical attributes, even their magic, is as if they were your own child. Once two wizards could just perform a ritual to adopt a child and make it their own, purebloods could bond with someone of their own gender. It wasn't as big of a deal since they could still have an heir."

"You said 'was.'" Harry pointed out. "What happened?"

"Blood adoptions, Harry. It was a blood ritual. Blood Magic."

"That's why you're so upset that Dumbledore made Ancient Magic illegal?"

"That's part of it."

"Well, I'm the Heir of Potter and the Heir of Black and when I can vote on the Wizengamot I'll push for Ancient Magic to be legal again. And then anyone can perform a Blood Adoption ritual if they want, and you can bond with whoever you like."

Draco just gave him a sad smile. "Yeah, alright Harry, we'll see."

Remus frowned when he took in their next target. It was a small petrol station, far from town, which was closed for the night. When Remus had agreed to join the 'scavenging party' he hadn't realized that it was basically a raiding party, breaking and entering to steal food and supplies from random stores and houses.

This was his second mission with Dolphus's team. The first one had been a disaster. He had almost backed out when he had realized they were breaking into a butcher's shop. It wasn't exactly the type of 'scavenging' he'd been expecting. But then, he had gotten into all sorts of trouble with the Marauders back in the day; stealing some meat for hungry families could hardly be worse.

That was his thought, until he saw one of the young wolves named Marrock trying to steal the money from the till. When Remus told the young man to leave the money, they only needed food, the young buck took it as a challenge and demanded Remus fight him. Remus had no time to fight a puffed up boy who looked about the same age as Charlie Weasley. But when he said as much, Marrock seemed to interpret that as Remus backing from a fight because he was afraid he'd lose.

Remus didn't worry too much about the opinion of some silly young man, until Erwin came to warn him a few days later. Apparently, Marrock had started a rumor that Lupin couldn't really fight. That it was all just show, because he had gone to that fancy wizard school. Everyone had assumed he must be really powerful, but since Lupin had backed out of a fight with a boy barely out of his teens, maybe he couldn't really do anything after all.

Erwin recommended that Remus participate in a couple of the 'practice fights' that some of the young wolves did each night, where they worked on honing their wolf magic. However, Remus knew he wouldn't be able to do proper wolf magic, and he didn't really want to call attention to his wizard magic, so he declined every time.

Apparently, that was just confirmation to the rest of the pack that Remus was a complete pushover who couldn't hurt a fly. So, he really needed to prove his usefulness tonight during their raid. Perhaps he could cast some spells to quickly move all the supplies into their bags. He would have cast disillusionment charms on the whole group, but he knew they didn't really trust his type of magic.

Tonight it was a small group, just the four of them, creeping slowly toward the station. As they got closer, they could make out a couple security cameras on the outside of the building. Marrock shot a spark of lightning at them to fry the circuits. They crept closer.

They peered inside, and Lupin raised his wand to deactivate the other cameras. Muggle electronics usually hated magic, and it was easy to overload their systems with the simplest of spells. He was just about to deactivate the alarm system as well, when Marrock lost patience and threw a rock through the glass door.

A loud screeching siren whirled through the little store. All four of them immediately covered their sensitive wolf ears. "Turn it off!" someone screamed.

Remus shorted out the alarm with another wave of his wand, but whoever owned this place would surely know that there was a break-in. "You idiot, I was just about to turn it off! Now they'll know we're here."

"Who cares?" sneered the boy. "We already turned off all the cameras, and we'll be gone before anyone can get here."

Remus was about to argue, but their team leader, Dolphus, tried to calm the situation. "Let's just get as much as we can, as quick as we can. We don't have time to argue now." He gave Marrock a stern look, though. "We'll talk about your impatience later."

They were halfway through filling their sacks with food when they heard the first siren driving up. It was almost immediately followed by two more. Lupin peered over one of the shelves to see outside, where several officers were stepping out of three police cars. More seemed to be arriving.

"We need to go now!" he shouted.

Dolphus appeared at his side. "How the hell are we going to get out of here now?" he asked. "We could maybe take on three or four, but there must be at least ten bobbies out there."

“We can take them!” shouted Marrock. He allowed his wolf magic to spark through his fingers, it looked like a tiny lightning storm. “I can fry them if they try to touch us.”

“You’re not frying anyone,” Remus scolded. He wasn’t about to let innocent muggles get hurt just because one hothead couldn’t wait for the alarm to be deactivated. “We’re leaving and not one’s attacking anyone.”

“Come out with your hands up!” The loud voice was magnified almost like a sonorous charm. “We have the place surrounded. Come out with your hand up!”

“And how do you propose we leave?” Dolphus asked. “I don’t really see any other option besides fighting or getting caught.”

“I do,” said Remus. He grabbed Dolphus, Marrock, and the other young man and then he turned on the spot.

Remus had passed his Apparition test years ago, before the Ministry knew he was a werewolf. He’d never had any issue with side-along apparition, even though it was a little trickier. Apparating two people was hard, though. It took a lot of concentration to make sure no one got splinched. Apparating three additional people, however, was a fool’s errand. He would never have tried it, if there had been any other choice.

As soon as they landed back in the forest clearing, he immediately checked over his three companions to make sure he hadn’t accidentally killed anyone. However, all three of them appeared to be fine. He had actually done it. He had gotten them all back to their base safe and sound. He certainly wouldn’t try that again though.

Marrock was pale as he looked around. “Where are we? What happened?”

“It’s called Apparition.” Remus explained as he tried to track down Erwin. He didn’t appreciate almost being arrested by muggle policemen, and he wanted to make a formal complaint about Marrock’s outburst. “It transports you from one place to another. It’s wizard magic.”

“I know what apparition is.” Dolphus was also following behind Remus. He was looking at Remus with a lot more respect than he had before. “I’ve known a couple wolves that could do it. They couldn’t apparate with other people though.”

“Well, if you’re skilled at it, you can apparate with more people.” Remus saw Erwin across the clearing, and made a beeline for the man.

“Hey Remus!” Erwin gave him a wry grin. “You’re back early. I hope you didn’t back out.”

Dolphus spoke up before Remus could get a word in. “Marrock lost patience and set off some kind of muggle warning system. A bunch of muggle bobbies came before we could even fill our sacks. We’d have been caught except Remus here can apparate. He can apparate, and he can bring three bloody people with him!”

Everyone in the clearing must have been listening because they all went quiet at those words. Even Erwin looked surprised. “You can apparate three other people? I thought no one could apparate more than one or two.”

Remus sighed. “Well, legally you’re not supposed to. But it is technically possible.”

Erwin was looking at Remus like he’d never really seen him before. “What else can you do with wizard magic?”

“Oh, well, I don’t know, lots of things.”

“He turned off the muggle alarm system,” Dolphus interjected again. “One wave of his wand and it was off. He filled his bag with magic, too, way faster than we could.”

All the wolves around the clearing were crowding in closer. Dolphus’s wife, Frida, who reminded him of Molly Weasley, stepped in front. “Can you teach us?” she asked.

“I’m sorry, what?”

“Wizard magic,” said Dolphus. “Can you teach us wizard magic like you can do? A lot of us have wands, but we can’t do spells half as fancy as you can.”

Remus spluttered. “Erm, Erwin maybe you can explain to them why that’s a bad idea.”

Erwin just gave a wolfish grin. “I don’t see why that’s a bad idea at all. We’ll teach you wolf magic if you teach us wizard magic. And believe me, boy, you’re going to need to know some wolf magic the next time Greyback calls you out.”

Remus gave that same thought. That was why he was there after all. “Well, I suppose we could give it a try. I did always enjoy teaching.”

The next time Harry dreamt of Tom Riddle, they were in the oversized classroom that McGonagall had used for dancing lessons. There was a large gramophone playing tinny music in the background.

“I hope you don’t mind,” Riddle appeared behind him. “I took the liberty of playing something fun. I’m not entirely sure what the young people are listening to these days.”

Harry smiled as he listened to several trumpets blast through a fast-paced swing tune. “Well, they’re definitely not listening to brassy big band music. Although, I’ll admit, this is kind of fun.” He tapped his foot along to the crackly music. It sounded a little familiar, like something he had heard in a commercial once. “So, what’s the occasion?”

“I thought you could use a dancing lesson. If you’re going to be attending the Malfoy Family Soiree, you don’t want to make a fool of yourself.”

“As long as I don’t dance, I can’t make a fool of myself,” Harry pointed out. However, he quickly found himself getting swept up as Riddle placed one of Harry’s hands on the taller

boy's shoulder and then held the other one to the side. "Hey, this is the girl's position!" Harry protested. "I'm definitely not going to learn anything if you make me dance the girl's position."

"Well, you're obviously not ready to lead, so just watch what I do."

Harry felt strange being this close to Tom Riddle. The boy was only inches away as he guided him through some fairly simple dance moves. For some reason, this felt strangely familiar. Had Harry dreamt of being this close to Tom before? For some reason he had foggy memories of petting the other boy's hair, even giving him a little bop on the nose, but that couldn't possibly be right. He decided not to dwell on it.

Riddle led them along with the upbeat music, as Harry tried not to step on the other boy's toes. "I'm going to show you how to do a spin, so pay attention."

"I don't need to learn a stupid spin."

"Spins are incredibly easy, just follow my lead." Harry definitely wasn't ready though, and he tripped over his own feet before the spin even started. Riddle scowled at him. "You can hear the music, correct? You do know that you're supposed to move your feet in time with that music, yes? You're not actually supposed to stomp around like a three-legged hippogriff."

"Yes, I know, sorry. I'm not much of a dancer. It doesn't matter, though, because I'm not going to the Malfoy Soiree, so no one's going to see me dance anyway." The song reached its end just as Harry finished his outburst and left them in silence.

Tom Riddle stood frozen for a moment, his grip on Harry's hand and lower back tightening slightly. Then the next song started, and he pulled Harry into another dance, this time with a bit more force in his movements. "What do you mean you're not attending, Harry? I thought we agreed that it was in your best interests to attend?"

"When did we decide that? And what do you care anyway?"

Harry felt the hand at his back pull him in even closer, so he was almost flush with the other solid body. Riddle was looking right into his eyes, making him squirm. "I'm trying to help you, Harry. The party is an excellent opportunity for you to meet new people, to make good connections. Don't you want to increase your sphere of influence?"

"No, I don't really care about that. It would be nice to meet people, I guess. But Blaise is going to be there, so it's not really worth it."

Riddle waved his hand and stopped the music. Harry tried to take a step back, but he realized he was still trapped in a very firm grip. When Riddle spoke, his voice was quiet and deliberate. "What exactly is a Blaise?"

Harry tried to backtrack. "Oh, he's just a guy in my class. He's a Slytherin. We don't get along that well."

“Did he threaten you? Did he warn you not to go to the party?”

“No, nothing like that. He didn’t do anything. I just found out he was going to be there, and well, we don’t get along. So, I figured I’d just skip the party. It’s fine.” Harry really didn’t want to explain why exactly they didn’t get along, but he figured he had to say something. “It’s just...he’s really competitive when it comes to Quidditch. And with the Gryffindor rivalry...it would just be awkward.”

“You shouldn’t let one person prevent you from a wonderful opportunity, Harry. This party could be very important for you. You should do everything in your power to attend.”

“Why would you possibly care? Aren’t you just a dream? A memory? How could it possibly affect you whether or not I go to some stupid party?”

“I’m your friend, Harry. I’m trying to help you. I want you to be great.” He lifted his hands to cup Harry’s face. “Don’t you want to achieve greatness, Harry?”

“I think your definition of greatness and my definition of greatness are very different, Tom.”

On Thursday, when the Sixth Years had Defense again, everyone held their breaths to see what Snape would do this time. There had been no reading assignment, so they all had to wait until the practical portion to see if he would give out any more points.

As soon as Snape set them to practice some more advanced dueling techniques, Harry immediately got into the Split Technique with Seamus and Dean. The Split Technique was one of the hardest, since you had to duel two opponents at once, but Harry figured it would probably get him even more points.

Seamus and Dean certainly weren’t pushovers, having trained in the DA with him, but Harry was still out-maneuvering them both. About five minutes into the duel, Harry was still going strong, shooting more and more complex hexes to trip them up. Half the class wasn’t even trying to duel anymore, they were just watching him dance around the room, evading spells and tossing them back without hesitation.

After a few more minutes, Harry managed to disarm Seamus, and then it was just a couple rounds before he had Dean tied up in an *Incarcerous*. He was completely winded and covered in sweat, but he felt exhilarated. Somehow, everything felt thrilling and right when he was dueling.

“Now, class, can anyone tell me why Potter was able to defeat Finnigan and Thomas combined?” Snape had been watching, but his grim expression didn’t give anything away.

“Because he’s Harry Potter?” asked the Hufflepuff, Justin.

“Mr. Finch-Fletchley, allow me to amend your misconception. For the past five years I acted as Mr. Potter’s potions master, and I can assure you that ‘being Harry Potter’ does not equate to talent. Does anyone else have an idea?”

Parvati Patil raised her hand. "Because he's a better duelist?"

Snape rolled his eyes. "I don't suppose you want to elaborate on how or why he is a 'better duelist'?"

Parvati blushed. "He's just...really fast."

"I suppose that is technically in the same vicinity as a correct answer. I suppose you could say that Potter was able to win the duel because he was...fast. I suppose you could also say that the Hogwarts wards protect the students because...they're magic. The reasonable answer is that Potter won because he is quick on his feet and moves erratically to avoid spells and makes himself a difficult target. He also uses a wide variety of spells offensively, so his opponents aren't sure what to expect, and he sends them quickly without wasting time thinking about what he ought to do next."

The whole class waited, without a word. This was the moment of truth. How many points would he give?

"Well?" Snape sneered at them. "Get back to practice!"

Harry frowned, but he didn't want to give up that easily. While everyone else started pairing up again to practice some more duels, Harry followed his professor to the corner of the room. "Er, thanks sir, I appreciate the good advice."

"I didn't give you any advice, Potter. That advice was for your classmates. You obviously already know everything I just said."

"Oh, well, did you have anything for me then?"

"What do you want, a biscuit?" he scowled. "If you want advice, here it is. You use a variety of spells, but they're all incredibly basic and predictable. If you want to catch an experienced duelist off-guard, try using some advanced, lesser-known spells. The type of spells you find in books. And don't wave your wand around so much. It's easy to tell what spell you're going to do, even when you cast non-verbally. Anyone with adequate reflexes could block you easily."

Harry tried not to scowl in return. Apparently, Snape was still as impossible to please as ever. The man was looking at him expectantly. "Now's the part where you can thank me for the good advice."

Harry almost reeled. Snape wanted him to say 'thank you' for getting berated? He was about to tell Snape where he could shove that 'thank you,' but then he stopped himself. Snape hadn't been any less critical than Augusta usually was when she was correcting him, and Augusta always had his best interests at heart. Even if she was rude, she was genuinely trying to make Harry better. If his lessons had taught him anything useful, it was that sometimes he should just shut his mouth and be polite. Besides, even if Snape was being a complete prat, his advice was technically useful.

"Of course, sir. Thank you. That really is good advice."

Snape looked surprised for a moment, but the moment passed quickly. “Well, get to it, Potter. You obviously need practice, and Finnigan and Thomas hardly count.”

Harry nodded. It seemed that Snape would no longer be giving out points. So maybe things were back to normal. However, Harry couldn't help but feel that something was different, if only just a little.

“Checkmate.”

Draco frowned as he stared down at the board. “That's not checkmate, Daphne, it's just check.” His little bishop was nodding along in fervent agreement, as it waited for its chance to move. “Queen's bishop to D5.”

“Oh Morgana, I forgot about him.” The young woman pursed her lips and studied the board some more.

They were sitting in the Slytherin Common Room, enjoying a calm weekend afternoon. Draco had been avoiding his common room, ever since he had started befriending Harry, but he still liked to make an occasional appearance. He was still a Malfoy, after all, and that name carried a heavy weight among the Slytherins.

Even if the others weren't actively antagonizing him, it was still difficult being around his former friends when they were mostly ignoring him. At least the Greengrass sisters were still speaking to him. Their family was Dark, but they weren't Death Eaters. The Greengrass Family was slightly more open minded toward muggleborns and half-breeds. Very slightly.

“Ok, how about queen to F6? I think that's checkmate,” Daphne tried. She was a pretty, blonde witch with pale green eyes. Although, not his type, obviously.

“Wrong again. Now you're forgetting about the other bishop. King's bishop to F6.” They watched his bishop smash his scepter into the queen and then drag her from the board.

“Draco!” He turned to see Blaise Zabini storm into the Common Room and march up to their little corner. “Have you no sense of decorum or have you just completely lost your mind?”

“I beg your pardon?”

Everyone was openly staring at them as Blaise slammed a letter down onto the chessboard, knocking their pieces away. “Hey!” Daphne protested, “I was winning!”

“No, you weren't,” Blaise sneered at her. “You just lost your queen. It was a trap and you fell for it.” Then he turned his attention to Draco. “The Malfoys often lay little traps just to disappoint others.”

“What are you on about?” asked Draco.

Blaise shoved the parchment forward, knocking aside even more pieces, while others tried to jump out of his way. “This just came from my mother. Apparently, she just got a letter from

your mother saying that she's so sorry, but Walter Benson is attending the Malfoy Family Soiree, and so Narcissa is rescinding our invitation."

"What?" That didn't make any sense. Walter Benson was the younger brother of one of Cassandra Zabini's former husbands; one of several husbands who had died under mysterious circumstances. It was well known that the remaining Benson brother held an enormous grudge against Blaise's mother. However, the Bensons were a fairly minor house, and the last of their fortune had gone to Cassandra after the death of her husband. "My mother's always been close with your mother. There must be some mistake. There's no way she would invite Walter Benson at the expense of you and your mother."

"She would if you told her to!" Blaise scowled. "You know what? I have been a fairly good sport about this ridiculous thing you have going with Potter, but now you've gone too far. I can't believe you would uninvite me from the Annual Soiree. I can't believe you would uninvite *my mother!*"

"I didn't uninvite anyone. There must be some mistake."

"The only mistake was that I ever dated you in the first place!"

"Would you calm down?" Draco stood and tried to hush the other boy. The entire Common Room was silent as half of Slytherin House watched their lover's quarrel. "Potter and I are just friends. He's not even going to the stupid party. I have no idea what's going on, but I'm going to find out."

Draco stepped outside for some air. How did this even happen? Why would his mother uninvite the Zabini family? Draco certainly never asked her to. Besides, he was counting on Blaise to attend; that was his excuse for why Harry couldn't go.

Suddenly, a horrifying thought occurred to him, and he went to go find the oblivious Gryffindor.

Harry stood gaping at the pushy Slytherin, not quite believing what he'd just heard. "What did you just say?"

"I said, did you write to my mother?"

Had Draco really interrupted him in the middle of Quidditch practice for this nonsense? Had he seriously dragged him up to the icy stands to argue about something this ridiculous in the biting cold? "No, Draco, I have never in my life written to your mother."

"Are you sure?"

Harry didn't understand why he even needed to explain this. "Draco, I can assure you, if I had written to your mother, I would definitely remember it."

"Did you write to anyone else? Did you complain to someone about Blaise? Did you tell anyone that you weren't going to the party because of Blaise?"

“No, Draco, I didn’t tell anybody anything.” No one but a memory, and that obviously didn’t count. “What is this about?” He stomped his feet to try and keep them from going numb.

“My mother uninvited Cassandra Zabini from the holiday soiree. It’s an enormous slight. She says it’s because one of her ex-lover’s family members will be there, but that’s an obvious lie.”

“Maybe your mother uninvited Mrs. Zabini because her last four husbands all died in extremely questionable circumstances.”

“Don’t be ridiculous, my mother would never commit such an obvious social faux pas for such a silly reason.” Snowflakes were clinging to Draco’s eyelashes, but he didn’t seem to notice. “Something strange is going on here. Are you sure you didn’t tell anyone about Blaise?”

“Yeah, I’m sure.” Harry had only told Tom Riddle, but Riddle was just a memory in his dreams. He couldn’t actually do anything...could he?

That was when the doubt started to creep in. What if he could? What if Tom had some way to contact the real Voldemort? But so what? Why would Voldemort care whether or not Harry went to some stupid party? Unless the man planned to capture or kill him at the party? But that was outrageous.

Or was it? Draco had said there would be lots of powerful Dark wizards and witches in attendance. Maybe some of them were secretly Death Eaters? A lot of Dark wizards supported Voldemort, either directly or indirectly. Harry probably should have known that he could never go to that party. It was too dangerous, too exposed.

Draco looked completely lost in his own thoughts when Harry spoke again, or maybe he had just frozen solid. “Look, Draco, if anyone asks, I’ll say that Dumbledore refused to let me go to your party. So, don’t worry about it, even if Blaise isn’t going, it doesn’t matter. I don’t really want to go. I’ll just say that Dumbledore put his foot down and refused to let me go.”

Draco nodded but still looked worried.

The next Monday marked the last week before the holidays. Instead of a practical lesson, Snape sat them down for a grueling mid-term exam. Harry usually preferred practical exams over paper exams, but he thought he did alright.

Potions was much easier. They had to brew a Shrinking Potion, and the Half-Blood Prince guided him to the perfect concoction. At least Harry had one teacher he could actually learn from.

By the end of the day, Harry was more than happy to relax by the fireplace in the Common Room. Hermione was off studying in the library, but he really didn’t want to think about exams. He was still concerned about his talk with Draco over the weekend.

What if Tom Riddle had some way of influencing the real world? Harry had been talking to Tom Riddle for months. He hadn't really thought much of it. The boy was a distant memory, and it wasn't as though Harry had told him anything serious. But still, Voldemort was constantly looking for his enemies' weaknesses. If Tom Riddle had a way to contact the real Voldemort, then anything Harry said could and would be used against him.

"Oh, hey Harry!"

Harry was pulled from his thoughts by the increasingly infuriating voice of Romilda Vane. She was standing right in front of him with a little pink gift box. "I got you an early Christmas present. You look like you could use some cheering up. They're chocolate cauldrons. I made them myself. They're infused with a hint of butterbeer." She winked at him.

Harry repressed a shudder. "That's...nice."

She practically shoved the box into his hands. "So, Slughorn's party is this Friday. I know you weren't originally planning to go with me, but it's only a few days away and rumor has it you still don't have a date."

"Oh yeah, I still need to do that."

"Well, I'm free this Friday, and I already have this really pretty dress so..."

"Hey Harry!" Harry had never been so happy to hear Colin Creevey's voice. The little fifth year looked rather embarrassed to be interrupting Harry's personal conversation, but Harry gave him a very grateful smile.

"Colin! Yes, what is it?"

"Er, Professor Dumbledore wanted to see you. He gave me this note to pass to you. He said it's really urgent."

"Urgent? I need to see Professor Dumbledore? Oh well, Romilda, I guess I have to go." He stood to leave immediately, but then remembered he still had the chocolates in his hands. He didn't want to bring those dangerous things to Dumbledore's office. "Oh, Colin, could you leave these by my bed?" Romilda was still watching him with feverish hope. "I'll, er, eat them later."

Colin went up to the dorms after promising he'd save the chocolates for their intended recipient. Harry would just have to destroy the box later, when he got back. In the meantime, he was very curious to see what memories Professor Dumbledore would show him tonight.

When Harry arrived at Dumbledore's office, however, the man didn't have the pensieve out. Instead, his desk was covered in files and old parchments and letters. All the portraits on the walls were either asleep or pretending to be. Harry doubted that could be a good thing.

"Sir? What exactly is the lesson for today?"

“I’m afraid there is no lesson today, Harry. I’m sorry to say we have something much more serious to discuss.”

Harry internally panicked. What was this about? Did Dumbledore know about the Malfoy party that he considered attending? Did he know about the dreams Harry had been having with Tom Riddle? Did he know Harry had done Soul Magic, even if it was on accident? Was he in trouble?

Dumbledore didn’t look angry, but he did look very sad and disappointed. Somehow, that just made Harry feel worse. “What’s wrong, professor?”

“A great many things, I’m afraid. But certainly nothing that is your fault. I’m afraid the blame lies entirely with me. I’ve been reading these old letters and notes all day. The signs were all there; I was just too blind and too optimistic to realize what they meant.”

Harry’s heart was beating faster and faster. Whatever this was, it was really bad. “Sir? I don’t know what that means.”

Dumbledore gave him a sad smile, and then passed him an aged letter. Harry looked down and read it.

Dear Albus,

Mr. Tibbles has an ear infection again. I’ve been using that new potion you recommended, and it really is much more effective. I’m thinking about sending a letter to Kneazle Fancy Magazine to let them know what a great product this is. Other breeders will want to know.

Spicy is also doing well. She’s only been pregnant a month now, but I’ve already got several buyers interested in her upcoming litter of kittens. This new batch is only one-quarter kneazle, but a lot of buyers prefer more cat than kneazle, since the magical genes make the kittens so temperamental.

Harry’s doing just fine, by the way. He’s such a dear little boy, so quiet and polite. He said the cutest thing the other day. I told him that the cats liked to sleep in confined spaces to feel safe, and he said that he slept in the cupboard under the stairs. Isn’t that just adorable! He made himself a little fort. Sometimes he reminds me of Pouncey.

Anyway, I’ll be sure to keep you updated on everything going on in Little Whinging.

Sincerely,

Arabella Figg

Harry wasn’t even sure what to feel. She knew he slept in the cupboard, but she thought it was a cute little fort. He couldn’t really bring himself to be upset; it felt like so long ago. What worried him was that Dumbledore was asking him about it now.

“Harry, my dear boy, I’m afraid I have some questions I need to ask you.” Harry looked up and realized the headmaster had an official-looking form in front of him, with his quill at the ready. “There are no wrong answers. I just need you to try and be as honest as possible.”

“No.” Harry wasn’t sure exactly what this was, but he knew he couldn’t do this. “No, I don’t want to talk about this. I don’t want you writing anything down. I can’t...I’m not doing this.”

Harry was sure that Dumbledore was going to scold him, or at least insist that they needed to fill out whatever forms those were. Instead, the man gave him an easy-going smile, and set the forms and quill aside. “That’s fine, Harry. You certainly don’t have to answer any questions that you don’t want to. In fact, I’ve always thought that conversations are much more pleasant when they go both ways.”

Harry looked down at all the official-looking documents. He wasn’t really sure where Dumbledore was going with this. “Did you want *me* to ask *you* questions, Professor?”

“You’re certainly welcome to if you like. In fact, did you ever notice, my boy, that I have a particularly crooked nose?” Harry was bemused, but he nodded. Dumbledore’s crooked nose was impossible not to notice, it was bent in about three places. “That is because I broke it, many, many years ago. Although I remember it like it was yesterday.”

“How did you break your nose, sir?”

“My brother. He punched me right in the nose. Broke it in three places.”

“Why?”

“I’m afraid that’s a bit of a long story. In fact, I may have deserved it. Suffice it to say, my brother and I have never gotten along particularly well. I believe you and your cousin have had a similar antagonistic relationship?”

“Yeah, we don’t get along at all.”

“Indeed? And have you ever come to blows like my brother and I?”

Harry sighed, he still didn’t really want to talk about this, but it felt a little easier after hearing Dumbledore’s own family drama. “He and his gang used to chase me around the neighborhood. They called it ‘Harry Hunting.’ They’d beat the snot out of me if they caught me, but they usually couldn’t catch me. I’m pretty quick on my feet.”

“Ah, that you are.” Dumbledore smiled encouragingly. “However, that couldn’t have been a pleasant experience at all. Even if you could usually avoid them, why not tell your aunt and uncle that this was happening?”

Harry snorted. “Tell Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon that their precious Duddykins was a schoolyard bully? They’d never believe a word of it. Besides, even if they did, they probably still wouldn’t have cared. They never liked me anyway.”

After that, the conversation went much easier. They just talked about this and that. Dumbledore told him a few other stories about bullies from his childhood. It felt weird to know that other kids had once picked on a young Albus Dumbledore. Apparently, the headmaster had once had something a rivalry with Phineas Nigellus Black’s older brother, the original Sirius Black. That was almost too weird to comprehend.

In exchange, Harry told the headmaster about the Dursleys always picking on him. Aunt Marge encouraging her dog to attack him. Vernon complaining that Harry's father was a lazy drunk who got what was coming to him. It was kind of funny in retrospect, in a sad sort of way.

Somehow the conversation ended up back with his cupboard. He wasn't sure quite how that had happened, but he did admit to the headmaster that he hadn't chosen to sleep in the cupboard; his aunt and uncle had just kept him there. Dumbledore told him about how much he hated being grounded when he was a child, not being allowed to go as he pleased. Harry told him how much he hated being locked in the cupboard, sometimes for days. How lonely it got in there.

That was when Dumbledore's composure finally slipped. His usual calm and pleasant demeanor gave way to a dark and angry expression that Harry had only ever seen a couple times before. "This is my fault. I should never have left you at that house. This is my responsibility."

"What?" Harry started to worry again. He didn't want Dumbledore blaming himself for Harry's abhorrent relatives. It wasn't the headmaster's fault that the Dursleys were so unpleasant. "I'm sorry, sir. I shouldn't have said anything. It's fine, they're obnoxious yes, but I can handle it. It's better now, I've got my own room, and they usually just stay out of my way."

"That is hardly a solution, Harry. Don't worry, there is still time to fix this." The man had started collecting all the forms on his desk. Harry was horrified to see that they had somehow filled themselves out while they were talking. "I will do my best to make amends for leaving you with abusive relatives. However, this should never have happened at all."

"They weren't abusive!" Harry's hands were shaking. "It's not like they were beating me or anything. At worst they'd give me a smack upside the head if I was too snarky. It's not like Vernon ever took his belt to me or anything. I'm fine, sir. Really, I can handle it."

"Just because you *can* handle something, doesn't mean you should ever have had to. Harry, my dear boy, absolutely none of this is your fault. You haven't done anything wrong. You understand that, right?" But Harry didn't understand. He felt like he had seriously messed up.

"Professor, I have to go back, right? I have to stay with the Dursleys because of the blood wards. There's nothing we can do about that, so it seems silly to complain. It's not a big deal, sir, I've put up with them for fifteen years, I can put up with them for one more summer."

Dumbledore was giving him a very sympathetic expression. With a flick of the man's wand, the paperwork vanished and was replaced with a small replica of a house. It looked a bit like the Dursley's house, but small enough to fit on Dumbledore's desk. "Did I ever fully explain the blood wards to you, Harry?"

"Er, I don't know." Dumbledore had explained that they were powerful and important, but if there was more to it, he had never heard it.

When Dumbledore flicked his wand again, a bubble of light appeared around the house, encapsulating almost the entire desktop. “As you can see, the blood wards protect the house and property itself, but they also protect much more.” Dumbledore gestured behind Harry with his good hand, and Harry turned on the spot. The entire office was now filled with little red and white lights, bobbing through the air.

“What’s all that, sir?”

“The protection follows you, Harry, as you discovered down in the third-floor corridor your first year. A protection like that is far more powerful than any Fidelius Charm. As you grew up in Little Whinging, those blood wards spread to protect you where you went, while you were at school, at the park, at your neighbor’s house. If anyone wishing to harm you had cast any spells or rituals to try and find your location (as I’m sure must have happened on at least one occasion) they would not have succeeded. The blood wards protected you, no matter where you went. Even if they knew your exact address, they would have to attack you in person, and the wards would prevent them from stepping onto the property.”

“It didn’t really stop Dudley from chasing me around the neighborhood,” Harry couldn’t help but point out.

“No, I’m afraid it wasn’t designed for such a purpose.” They watched the little red and white stars bob around him. They felt very comforting. “The blood wards were meant to protect you from those wishing to kill or permanently maim you. Had your cousin ever attempted such a thing, I assure you the wards would have activated.”

Harry remembered the time his uncle had caught him listening to the news under the living room window in the summer before his fifth year. Vernon had been so mad, he’d started strangling Harry, until suddenly the man’s hands had burned and he let go. “I understand how important the wards are, sir. I can put up with the Dursleys if it means my mum’s protection will keep me safe.”

“Harry, my dear brave boy, I don’t think you understand why I called you here today. This meeting is not so I could convince you to stay with the Dursleys even longer. This meeting is to...” Suddenly, several of the little silvery instruments around the room began to whirl. The sound became louder and louder until all at once they screamed at the same time as the bubble of light on Dumbledore’s desk popped, and the little stars floating around the room all flickered out.

“What was that?”

“That was the paperwork being certified. The Dursleys are no longer your guardians, Harry, nor should they have ever been. I’ve been filing documents all week to try and get this taken care of before the Christmas holidays. Your testimony was the very last thing required. It is done.”

Harry’s head was spinning. “You started this a week ago? Why?”

Dumbledore sighed. “I always knew the Dursleys weren’t particularly pleasant people, Harry. But then I thought the safety of the blood wards made up for any inconveniences. However,

when Professor Snape pointed out what was really happening in the Dursley home, I took action at once to make amends for my mistake.”

“Wait, what? What does Snape have to do with this?”

“Professor Snape, Harry. He went to check on the Dursley’s home while you and the other students were in Hogsmeade. He was quite displeased with what he found there.”

“Professor Snape...visited the Dursleys?” He wasn’t quite sure which one he felt sorrier for. “Wait, he went the weekend of the Hogsmeade trip? So, he had just gotten back that Monday? Is that why he gave me all those points? For putting up with the Dursleys?”

Dumbledore chuckled. “Ah yes, I heard about Professor Snape’s sudden generosity. It seems that every year there is some big event that the whole school can’t stop talking about. Your first year it was Quirrell and the Stone. Then it was the snake fiasco at the Dueling Club, Professor Lupin transforming into a werewolf, your name coming out of the Goblet of Fire. This year it was Severus Snape giving points to Gryffindor.” Dumbledore paused. “For some reason you always seem to be involved.”

“Look, sir, I really appreciate everything you’re trying to do. But it’s really not necessary. I can put up with the Dursleys, it’s fine.”

Dumbledore sighed again and stood up from his seat. He walked around the desk until he was right next to Harry, and then he squatted down until his crooked nose was level with Harry’s own. He was looking Harry right in the eye, and it was rather disconcerting. “Harry,” he said, “I’m so sorry I left you with those people.”

Harry immediately tried to interrupt, but Dumbledore lifted his hand to silence him. “No, Harry, none of this was your fault. It was my fault, and the Dursleys’ fault, and maybe a dozen other people who didn’t realize what was going on and should have. But absolutely none of the blame lies with you. You have nothing to apologize for.” Dumbledore gave him a stern look, as if to say that this was not something he was willing to argue, so Harry just nodded. He wasn’t sure if he believed the headmaster, but it did feel nice to hear.

“Regardless,” Dumbledore continued. “It is over now. The wards are broken and they are not going to be mended. You will not see the Dursleys again, unless perchance, you choose to visit them at some point in the future.” He stood back up and swept over to his desk again. “In the meantime, I will make arrangements with Remus Lupin for the formal adoption.”

“Adoption?” Harry was completely out of his depths again. “I’m getting adopted? By Remus?”

This time, Dumbledore pulled out a key and unlocked one of the drawers of his desk before handing a small stack of parchment to Harry. “You must understand, my dear boy, that you are still not of age. You cannot continue without a legal guardian.”

Harry looked down at the paperwork Dumbledore had just handed him. He gasped when he read the first line: *The Last Will and Testament of James and Lily Potter*. “My parents’ will? Why do you have this?”

“I’ve been reading through it to see who your parents listed as acceptable guardians for you.” Harry skipped ahead to find just that. The overall document seemed straightforward enough. They had left almost everything to Harry. He noticed that it mentioned his trust vault along with the Potter family vault Dumbledore had told him about. He skipped ahead until he got to a list of names that were all familiar.

“Sirius has passed, of course,” Dumbledore continued to explain. “Peter Pettigrew is obviously not an option. Unfortunately, Frank and Alice Longbottom are not acceptable alternatives, either. Which leaves us with Remus Lupin.”

“Well, that’s fine,” Harry was starting to feel excited about all of this. He would never have to go back to the Dursleys and instead he got to stay with Remus Lupin! “I really like Remus, and he’s responsible and all that. But, wait, have you talked to him yet? Do you think he would even want me?”

“I’m sure he would be more than happy to look after you, Harry. The problem is not his willingness, the problem is that it is technically illegal for any half-breeds, such as werewolves, to adopt wizarding children. Even if your parents listed him as a suitable option, now that Remus has officially been outed as a werewolf, he will not be able to take custody of you.”

“Oh.” Harry deflated. “Well that’s ok, couldn’t someone else adopt me? Someone my parents didn’t put in their will? I’m not really sure who would want to, but...”

“I have already spoken with Arthur and Molly Weasley. They would be more than willing to adopt you as their own son.” The Weasleys? Ron would be Harry’s brother? That would be great! And Ginny would be his sister? That would be...weird. “Unfortunately,” Dumbledore continued. “Arranging a full adoption with anyone who wasn’t already approved by your parents, would create another obstacle. Or, rather, three obstacles.”

Just then, there was a loud pounding on the door. Whatever portraits were still pretending to be asleep, finally gave up the pretense and peered at the entrance curiously. “Headmaster!” Professor McGonagall’s voice came from the other side. “I’m sorry to interrupt, but it’s really quite urgent.”

“It’s alright, Minerva. Please come in.”

She did, and she brought Ron, Seamus, and Dean with her. All three boys had their arms tied up with magical ropes as she marched them in, and they all seemed incredibly angry about it.

“Let me go! I have to see her!” Ron bellowed.

“If you so much as look at her, I’ll carve your eyes out!” Seamus threatened.

“She’s mine!” Dean interrupted. “Both of you need to back off.”

Harry had a very bad feeling about this.

Dumbledore looked thoroughly baffled. “What seems to be the problem here, Minerva?”

“Never, in all my years, have I seen three boys cause such a ridiculous fracas. They practically destroyed the Common Room dueling over some poor, innocent young woman.” The three of them looked like they very much wanted to go on dueling. They were each struggling with the ropes that tied them up, and muttering threats to one another.

“This poor, innocent young woman?” asked Harry. “Was her name Romilda Vane by any chance?”

The name had an immediate effect on the three captives. Each of them looked over at Harry and started threatening him instead, insisting that she was theirs and Harry couldn’t have her. The former headmasters and headmistresses all looked scandalized, and one woman even gasped, “My word!”

McGonagall raised her wand at the boys threateningly, but Dumbledore merely sat back and smiled as if this were an interesting television program. “Why Harry, can I assume that you have some idea what’s going on here?”

Harry explained what Hermione overheard in the girl’s loo. And Romilda Vane’s constant insistence that Harry have some pumpkin juice with him. And the chocolates that he’d left in his dorm room just a couple hours ago. “I wouldn’t have just left something like that lying around if I’d realized *all three of them* would try to eat my candy.”

“I see,” said Dumbledore, when Harry had finished. “Well, let’s see what the damage is shall we?”

The three love-struck boys were still standing near the door. They didn’t seem to be paying much attention to the other occupants of the room. Instead, they were focused on kicking each other and insisting that they loved Romilda Vane the most.

“Ron, my boy,” said Dumbledore. The redhead immediately looked up. “You say that you are in love with Miss Vane?” There was a very enthusiastic nod. “And how would you like to express that love?”

“Well, I’m going to yell it from every mountaintop! I’m going to announce it to the world! Everyone will know how I feel!”

“I see, and do you want to hold her in your arms?”

“That’s quite forward,” Ron blushed. “I think I want to write poetry about her arms. How nice they are. They’re beautiful!”

“You want to write poetry?” Harry blanched. He couldn’t imagine a potion so powerful it would make Ron want to write poetry.

“Harry, please.” Dumbledore turned to the boy next to Ron. “How about you, Seamus? Would you like to kiss Romilda Vane?”

“Why would I waste my lips on something like that?” asked the Irishman. “When I could be using them to express my love by telling her exactly how I feel? I want everyone to know of

my love!”

Dumbledore nodded. “Just as I suspected.”

“Is it Amortentia?” Harry asked.

“It is most assuredly *not* Amortentia. I’m not sure how a fourth year girl would even get her hands on such a thing. What we have here appears to be a potion designed to mimic a love potion. In that, it makes the recipient act like they are in love, but only in the most public and embarrassing ways possible.”

“Why would someone want something like that?” asked McGonagall.

“I doubt Miss Vane realized that the potion would have such an effect. She probably assumed it was a regular love potion.”

“But who would make or sell something like that?” asked one of the former headmasters.

“Fred and George Weasley,” said Harry. Now that he thought about it, that sounded exactly like the sort of thing the twins would do. They would absolutely sell a love potion that made the recipient act like a complete idiot, screaming loud proclamations of love, but didn’t even make them want to kiss their intended.

In the end, Dumbledore instructed McGonagall to fetch Horace Slughorn to bring an antidote. Romilda Vane would be getting a month’s worth of detentions. The head of Gryffindor also made it clear that she would be giving Romilda a very stern talking to, and the fourth year girl would be required to clean up the entire mess in the Common Room, without magic.

Once McGonagall was gone, Harry watched Ron, Seamus, and Dean hop around trying to trip each other. He supposed they would just keep at it until Slughorn arrived with the antidote. Dumbledore didn’t seem particularly concerned. He was grabbing another form from his desk.

“Harry, do you, by chance, know anything about the Wizengamot’s Special Committees?”

Harry turned away from his friends to gape at his headmaster. “What does that have to do with anything?”

“It doesn’t have anything to do with love potions, at least that I know of. However, it has everything to do with your adoption, and the obstacles involved.”

“Oh yeah.” Harry had completely forgotten what they were even talking about before. “You said there were three obstacles?”

Dumbledore smiled. “Exactly.” He handed Harry yet another form. This one was titled: *The Special Committee for Child Welfare and Underage Magic*. Under the title, there was a monthly date and time that the committee apparently met. Then it listed the members in alphabetical order.

“Hermione told me special committees were like sub-sections of the Wizengamot.” Harry glanced through the list of names. “They specialize in different topics and can pass laws and rulings on those topics. So, is this one of the obstacles?”

“This is all three, I’m afraid. Every adoption of an underage witch or wizard must be approved by this committee, unless the child is being adopted by a direct blood relative or someone already listed as a potential guardian by their parents.”

Harry nodded in understanding. “So, when I was adopted by the Dursleys, this committee didn’t have to approve it. And if I were adopted by Remus, since he’s listed in my parents’ will, this committee wouldn’t have to approve it. But if I were to be adopted by the Weasleys, or someone else, it would have to go through this committee?” Dumbledore nodded again. “But that still just seems like one obstacle. How is that three obstacles?”

Instead of answering Harry’s question, Dumbledore turned to the three other boys in the room. Ron had resorted to trying to chew through his ropes. Dean and Seamus were now lying on the ground and trying to kick each other. “Boys,” he cried. “Which one of you wants Romilda Vane the most?”

“Me!”

“No, me!”

“I do, she’s mine!”

Harry frowned as they ranted on and on about which one was most deserving, while the portraits laughed at their antics. Dumbledore merely sighed. “You see, Harry, the issue with your adoption is not that no one would want to adopt you. The issue is that everyone will want to adopt you, and many of them for nefarious or selfish reasons.”

“Why would anyone want me?” Harry asked.

Dumbledore gestured to the sheet in Harry’s hands and pointed out one specific name on the list of members. “Cassius Parkinson would want you. I’m not entirely sure if he’s officially a Death Eater, but he is certainly loyal to Voldemort. I can only imagine what he would do if he was able to vote on your permanent living situation.”

“Yeah, ok, that’s definitely an obstacle.” In the background, Ron, Seamus, and Dean had started a poetry competition to see who could write the most loving sonnet about Romilda Vane. It would have been funny if it weren’t so horrifying. “So, are there just a bunch of Death Eaters who would want to send me straight to Voldemort?”

“Not all Death Eaters, Harry.” Dumbledore pointed to the list of names again. “There is also Bertie Higgs.” Harry remembered him from Diagon Alley. Draco had said he was a ponce. “He is a Light Wizard and a close friend of Tiberius McLaggen.”

“If he’s a Light Wizard doesn’t that mean he’s on our side?”

“If only it were so simple.” Just then, Ron got particularly upset by Dean creatively rhyming Vane with champagne, and he tried to headbutt the other boy right in the stomach.

Dumbledore waved his wand and Ron instead plowed into a pile of pillows. “You see, Harry, we often hurt the things we covet. You are quite an icon for Light Wizards everywhere. Many politically influential Light Wizards will want to take advantage of that. If Bertie Higgs adopted you himself, or one of his close allies, they could use that to gain political favors from other Light wizards. Worse still, it would appear as though they automatically had your endorsement, simply because they had custody over you.”

“Yeah, that’s not good either. So, what’s obstacle number three?”

Dumbledore reached for the forms and turned to the second page, where the list of members continued. He pointed to the very last name. *Umbridge, Dolores*.

Harry stared at the name for several seconds, and then looked up at his headmaster. “We absolutely cannot go through this committee.”

“My thoughts exactly.”

“So, where does that leave us?”

“With Remus Lupin,” Dumbledore explained. “I’m on the Special Committee for the Regulation of Half-Breeds and Magical Creatures. I’m going to try to slip in an amendment that would make it legal for half-breeds to adopt magical children if their parents allow it. Hopefully, no one notices and everything goes through.”

“And if it doesn’t?”

“We’ll just have to cross that bridge when we get to it.”

Just then, there was another knock at the door. They looked up to see Professor Slughorn peering in. “I heard that there were some young men who needed a *calming draught*.” He winked.

Dumbledore motioned him toward the three other Gryffindors. They had used up a lot of energy and were now just lying around muttering about how much they wanted to tell everyone about Romilda.

While Slughorn was ministering to them, Dumbledore whispered to Harry. “I’m going to have the boys sleep in the Hospital Wing tonight, just in case. You can take off now if you’d like, Harry. Unless there was anything else you wanted to ask?”

“Nah, I think I’m alright. Oh wait, until this thing is sorted out with Remus, do I just not have any guardian?”

“Oh no, Harry, you are legally required to have a guardian of some kind until you are seventeen. Right now, I am acting as your legal guardian. As the Potter Family Proxy, I was able to take custody of you without Special Committee approval.”

“What the bloody hell!?” It was Ron. Slughorn had untied him and he was sitting up, cradling his head. “Why would anyone do that to chocolates? Chocolate is supposed to be safe!”

Seamus looked almost as green as his sweater. “Blimey, I feel like I just had a run-in with a banshee.”

“You think you had a run-in?” Dean grimaced. “I’m going to have to go back there and face Ginny. Oh Merlin, I told her that Romilda was twice as pretty as her. I think I’d rather take on a banshee.”

Harry felt bad for them, but at the moment he had more pressing matters. “Sir, did you just say that you adopted me? Why didn’t you mention that before?”

“Oh, it’s just a temporary remedy until we can sort out your adoption with Remus. I’m afraid I will be very...busy this summer. So, you will need a more permanent arrangement. However, I promise you that I will make sure you have a place to call home before I have to leave.” Dumbledore looked sad for a moment, but then he perked up quickly. “In the meantime, you’re welcome to move any things from Privet Drive into my house. That way, you at least have somewhere to hang your hat, so to speak.”

The other boys were still complaining to Slughorn, but Harry completely ignored them. “You have a house?”

“Yes, my boy. As much as I enjoy my rooms here, there is not nearly enough room to store all my belongings. You wouldn’t believe how many awards and trophies I’ve accumulated over the years. So, once Christmas holidays begin, I’ll take you with me to get you settled.”

Harry tried not to get too excited, but this sounded too good to be true. “You’re going to take me to go stay at your house...with you?”

“If you’re interested. I’m afraid I have a lot of business I need to finish, so I may not be the most engaging company. I’ll also be gone for Christmas, so I was planning to drop you off with the Weasleys on Christmas Eve. After all, no one should be alone for the holidays, and I know they were already making arrangements to include you in their festivities.”

“Yes,” said Harry. He didn’t even need to think about it. “Yes, I’m interested. Yes, I can definitely leave some stuff and your place, and visit your house for the holidays, and hang out with you. Yeah, the Weasleys, Christmas, all of that sounds great. Yeah, I would definitely be interested in that.”

“Wonderful, it’s a plan! I think it’s time you head to bed now, Harry. I’ll make sure these boys are taken care of. And I still need to have a talk with Severus about why the students would be so very surprised that he gave points to Gryffindor. It’s going to be a long night.”

“Er, yeah, thanks.” On his way out the door, Harry checked on Ron and the others. Slughorn had given them some actual calming draughts and they were looking better. “Hey Professor Slughorn?”

“Yes, Harry?”

“I’m still figuring out a date for your party, but if I show up with Romilda Vane, please promise me that you will immediately give me that antidote, because I’m definitely under a potion.”

“You have my word,” Slughorn promised.

With that, Harry was more than ready to put the whole crazy night behind him.

Chapter End Notes

Oh man, this was my longest chapter so far, so let me know what you thought!

I'd love to hear all your reactions to when Harry FINALLY figured out that Blaise thinks Harry/Draco is happening. And of course, Harry slowly figuring out his sexuality. Or at least figuring out that it's something he still needs to figure out. Also, let me know your thoughts about Snape's sudden desire to give Harry lots of points, Remus finally earning some werewolf respect, and Voldemort's continued attempts to lure Harry to that party.

And of course...the final scene. Dumbledore. Love potions. Politics. It looks like Harry will be having a busy holiday break. I can't wait to hear what you guys think might happen next...

Increased Awareness for House Elf Rights

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Harry could hardly believe his luck. Everything was finally going his way. He never had to stay with the Dursleys again. He was going to be adopted by Remus Lupin (if Dumbledore's plan worked out). He was spending Christmas at the Burrow with the Weasleys. And best of all, he was going to be spending the time before Christmas with Albus Dumbledore...at the man's house!

Who could imagine what the headmaster's house would be like? Would it be full of weird spindly objects like his office? Would there be portraits of ancient generations of Dumbledores? Was there a huge birdhouse for Fawkes? When Harry tried to picture what the building might look like, he conjured visions of a smaller version of Hogwarts, or maybe a big wizards tower, or something equally mysterious.

That evening, Harry rested his head on the pillow with a peaceful smile. He was just about to close his eyes, when he jerked back up again. In all the excitement, he'd almost forgotten his most pressing concern.

Tom Riddle.

The Riddle from Harry's dreams was supposedly a memory. He looked indistinguishable from the Tom Riddle that had stepped out of the diary years ago, except the eyes. He had Voldemort's eyes. It seemed that, like the diary, the dream-Tom was able to influence the real world. Although, Harry had no idea how. Come to think of it, how could Harry be sure Riddle was only a dream? Sure, Riddle constantly reminded him that their meetings were just dreams, but counting on Tom Riddle to tell the truth was like counting on a dementor to cheer you up.

Harry should have tried harder to stop the dreams earlier. Perhaps he should have warned Dumbledore. Several months ago, he'd been studying Draco's book on dream magic to try and find a solution, but at some point during the term, he had just gotten used to seeing Tom Riddle. They mostly talked about inconsequential things, so it had never seemed urgent. Besides, there was something cathartic about talking with Riddle, a young man whose childhood was not so different from his own. Another boy who felt at home at Hogwarts, who had been desperate to prove himself. Although, the evidence that Tom Riddle presented for his own self-worth, was not anything that Harry found compelling.

That night, Harry tried clearing his mind for the first time in ages. It hadn't worked before; not once. And it wasn't as though he had gotten any better. He'd been putting off his lessons with Draco since he'd accidentally stumbled upon Soul Magic. However, if he could do Soul Magic as easily as riding a broom, then Mind Magic should be a walk in the park.

The next morning, Harry desperately flipped through the book to chapter eight, not lifting his eyes from the pages as he reached out his other hand to pour a second cup of tea. He was going to need help staying awake through his midterms. He'd been up well before his morning alarm, and he hadn't fallen asleep until after midnight. But there was no way he could force himself to close his eyes again after yet another dream of Tom Riddle.

The two of them had spent another evening dancing and arguing about the Malfoy Soiree. At least this time Harry knew not to blame anyone else on his refusal to attend, although Riddle seemed desperate to find some specific reason behind Harry's disinterest. From what Harry knew about Tom Riddle, and he felt he knew the boy pretty well at this point, Riddle viewed the whole world as a series of obstacles that were really only problems for other people. Tom Riddle had always accomplished anything he set his mind to, and if something didn't work out, he blamed someone else. Neither Tom Riddle nor Voldemort had ever been good at taking no for an answer.

"What do you mean you still aren't attending, Harry? Has Blaise Zabini done something? Has he threatened you?"

"What? No, this has nothing to do with him. I haven't talked to him in ages. In fact, I heard he isn't even going to the party." Tom Riddle's knowing smirk had been all the confirmation he needed. Harry was sure the memory had done something to arrange for the Zabinis to be uninvited.

"Then why don't you want to go to the party? Surely Draco Malfoy has made his event sound appealing? What did he say exactly?"

Harry wasn't sure if Tom Riddle had the power to uninvite Draco from his own party, but he didn't want to test it. "Oh, yeah, Draco made it sound really fun. After he talked about what a great party it would be, I really wanted to go at first. But then you made it clear that there would be a lot of dancing, and I never liked dancing. So, I changed my mind. I'm not going."

Riddle's eyes had flashed with fire, and he pulled Harry so tight to his body that if it hadn't been a dream, Harry was sure it would have bruised. "You just need more practice. What you need, Harry, is to trust me and let me lead you."

Harry couldn't believe how real it had all felt. No dream should feel that real. Riddle's breath had been warm against his ear, the scent of aftershave had wafted from the taller young man's collar, the fabric of Harry's robes had scrunched up where Riddle rubbed soothing circles into his lower back. "Just relax. I've got you. I'll guide you through the steps." As another song began, Harry felt himself get swept away. "I'm sure you'll find that dancing can be quite stimulating if you simply allow yourself to enjoy it."

Harry almost tore the pages of the ancient tome in his haste to find the section he was looking for. Without looking up from the words, he poured some sugar into his fresh cup of tea.

The moment Harry had woken up sweat-soaked and shaking, he'd thrown open the curtains of his four-poster and started rifling through his school trunk. By the time Harry finally found Draco's dream magic book, breakfast was about to start, and Harry had bolted down to the Great Hall to start reading before the rest of Gryffindor Tower woke up.

Over the course of the year, he had almost completely forgotten about ‘The Connection Between Magic and Dreams.’ He hadn’t bothered with the book after his initial perusal months ago. Once Harry started studying occlumency with Draco, he had assumed that the lessons would eventually teach him how to block out the dreams. Clearly, that wasn’t going to happen. So, he needed to find some other solution.

After scouring the Table of Contents and then riffling through the delicate pages, Harry finally arrived at the section with the green ink scribbled throughout the margins. He began scanning the pages in earnest. He wasn’t sure what exactly he was looking for, but he hoped he’d know it when he found it.

He took a sip of his tea as he skimmed through the emerald notes, but then he immediately spat it back into his cup. “Ugh!” he cried, trying to get all the syrupy mess out of his mouth. Maybe next time he should pay attention to how much sugar he was adding.

“Er, Harry,” Neville mumbled from across the table. “You’re welcome to drink your tea any way you like, of course. But I wouldn’t recommend doing it like that in front of Gran.”

Harry shuddered at the very idea. “Yeah, I do usually swallow my tea.”

Hermione didn’t even look up from her transfiguration book, she was so engrossed in last minute studying. She and Neville were the only other Gryffindors sitting at their end of the table this early in the morning, but other students were shuffling in as breakfast appeared on the four great tables.

Harry turned back to his book, trying to keep the cover hidden so everyone would assume he was studying for mid-terms. He skimmed through the section on Blood Magic links strengthening Mind Magic links. There were lots of examples of how people with close blood relations and magical bonds could sometimes sense each other’s feelings and thoughts. Unfortunately, the book didn’t seem to have anything to say on how this could be stopped.

Harry skipped ahead, trying to find something about breaking the link, but the book just gave several examples of things that could strengthen Mind Magic bonds, many of which were underlined in green ink. The terrifying thing was that the more Harry read, the more he realized he and Voldemort met most of these criteria.

“If two individuals share a close blood relation...” Check, thought Harry. They even shared the exact same blood, since the resurrection. “If they have a similar magical signature, or similar magical abilities...” They had the exact same abilities, since Voldemort accidentally gave Harry *some of his magic*. “If two wizards or witches have a shared personal history...” Definitely. “If the individuals have experienced significant life events together, particularly if they were traumatic or life-altering...” Harry’s head was reeling. Voldemort had been present for all of Harry’s most traumatizing and life-altering moments. The man been *the cause* of most of them.

He skimmed ahead to the very last example. It was circled. It talked about how souls could theoretically form a bond, and that bond would create a link stronger than a mere Mind Magic bond or Blood Magic bond. The book said that a Soul Magic bond was the strongest connection two wizards could share. The person with the green quill had even written a note

to the side: "As long as the souls are linked, no other bond is necessary. A Mind Magic link and Blood Magic link will form naturally from the connection of the souls."

Harry had dismissed the idea of Soul Magic links the first time he'd read about them months ago, but now he wasn't so sure. Dumbledore had warned him that lots of dark wizards used Soul Magic to hurt their targets. He'd even said that Voldemort used the darkest Soul Magic of all.

The description of a Mind Magic link in this book seemed to pale in comparison to what Harry felt through his link with Voldemort. What if their connection was even stronger than Mind Magic or Blood Magic? What if Voldemort had used Soul Magic on Harry? Maybe that would explain why Harry had a big black splotch on his soul. What if Voldemort had damaged Harry's soul somehow, when he tried to kill him all those years ago?

Then Harry remembered what Luna had said about Dream Magic. She had said it was a form of Soul Magic more than Mind Magic. But if that was true, then Harry's case was hopeless. Mind Magic could be blocked with Occlumency, but what could block Soul Magic? Could it even be blocked? Was there some form of Soul Magic that was used to prevent others from using Soul Magic against you? Even if there was, Harry wouldn't be able to learn it since he had no hope of learning Soul Magic.

Or did he? Apparently, Harry was a natural at Soul Magic. While he had completely failed at Mind Magic, he had performed Soul Magic without even trying. If he could only find some book that taught Soul Magic, not some evil dark book about tearing out people's souls or anything like that, but something that taught the basics, maybe he could find a way to block out these dreams.

"I heard Romilda is so embarrassed, she won't even come down to breakfast." Harry was pulled from his thoughts by some fifth-year girls talking about Romilda Vane. He hadn't even noticed the table filling up around him, he was so focused on the book in front of him. He wondered if this was what Hermione felt like all the time.

"Seriously, Ginny, you know how much I like you. It was the potion, I swear!" A few seats away, Dean Thomas was trying to win back Ginny's goodwill.

The redhead didn't even glance up from her meal. "I know. I already told you I'm not upset."

"You keep *saying* you're not upset. But then you keep *acting* like you're upset. You won't even look at me!"

Ginny continued to stare at her plate as she shrugged. "Well I wouldn't want you to have to look at someone who's only half as pretty as Romilda Vane."

"I knew it! Ginny, come on, you've got to listen, it was the potion!" The dark-skinned Gryffindor leaned in with a sly smile. "Romilda Vane has a face like a horse. You're a hundred times prettier than her."

When Ginny smiled back at him, Harry realized that he didn't want to hear any more of their make-up session. Instead, he turned his attention to Ron and Lavender who were only a

couple seats down from him. It seemed that Lavender was reacting to the whole situation very differently than Ginny.

“Oh my poor Won-Won! I can’t believe that nasty witch would dare try and steal you from me. How are you feeling? Does your head still hurt?”

Ron tried to look pitiful. “I don’t know, Lavender. Maybe if you kiss it you can make it better.”

Hermione kept her nose in her book, but the green tinge on her cheeks made it clear she was trying not to spit up her own tea.

Meanwhile, now that Harry’s face wasn’t locked on his book, Parvati tried to get his attention. “I can’t believe that little tramp tried to bewitch you into going to Slughorn’s party with her. You poor thing! It’s so good that you realized she was bad news. I’m so glad you’re ok, Harry.”

“Hey,” interrupted Seamus. “I’m the one who actually got bewitched. Why don’t you ask if I’m ok?”

“Maybe if you didn’t eat other people’s chocolates you wouldn’t get dosed with love potions!” Parvati snapped back. “Anyway, Harry, I just want you to know that if you ever need someone to talk to, or someone to just listen, or to go to a party with you; I’m here for you.”

“Er thanks, but I actually have a date, so it doesn’t matter anymore.” He didn’t have a date. He wasn’t sure if he was even going to get a date at this point, but he was sick of everyone vying for his attention. He figured he would just start telling everyone that he was already going with someone else.

“You have a date!?” Parvati’s expression immediately dropped, before clearing up almost instantly. “Oh, right, of course. You’re probably going with Hermione...just as friends.” She looked back and forth between the two of them hopefully. “Since you two are like brother and sister. Right?”

“No, he’s not going with me,” Hermione finally spoke. She still hadn’t looked up from her textbook, but the green tinge on her face was gone now, replaced with a devilish grin. “I’m going with Draco Malfoy.”

Ron choked on Lavender’s tongue. Neville dropped his spoon. Dean and Ginny completely forgot about their argument. Even Parvati looked like she couldn’t quite believe what she’d heard. “Draco Malfoy from Slytherin? Lucius Malfoy’s son? The same blonde ferret we’re all familiar with?”

“That’s the only Draco Malfoy I know of.” Hermione’s smile could have cut glass.

Ron glared at Harry like this was his fault. Well, he had promised Ron that she and Draco weren’t going together. “They’re just going as friends,” Harry couldn’t help but blurt out. “It’s not a big deal.”

Suddenly, Hermione was also glaring at him. “We are *not* going as friends. We’re going as a *date*. In fact, it will probably be incredibly romantic.”

All the Gryffindors were gaping like plimpies, except for Ron, who looked like he might puke slugs at any moment. “So,” Parvati ventured. “Are you and Malfoy like boyfriend and girlfriend?”

“Yes,” Hermione insisted before Harry could say anything to the contrary. “Harry probably didn’t know, since our relationship is quite new, but Draco is my boyfriend now. In fact, it’s quite serious.” She threw a challenging look at Harry as if daring him to correct her.

He didn’t even know what to say. Harry knew that Draco was gay. Hermione knew that Draco was gay. Apparently, half of Slytherin house knew that Draco was gay. But Ron didn’t. And Harry was pretty sure Draco wouldn’t want his new friend announcing it at the Gryffindor table over breakfast.

It was clear that none of the other sixth year Gryffindors knew about Draco’s preferences. They all started whispering amongst themselves about this new development. Harry didn’t want anything to do with any of this, so he packed his dream magic book, along with the rest of his belongings, and headed to the Transfiguration classroom early. Their next mid-term would be starting in half an hour, so he decided to review his class notes and worry about Soul Magic later.

Hermione caught up with him just as he was settling in. “Please don’t tell Draco!” she cried.

Harry carefully set his parchment back down. “What?”

“Please don’t tell Draco what I said. I don’t want to embarrass him or anything.”

“Don’t you think he deserves to know that you two are *quite serious*?”

“You and I both know that if Draco was serious with anyone, it wouldn’t be me.” She gave him a knowing smirk. “He told me that he already talked to you about Blaise. So you know that he’s...*you know*.”

“Bent? Yeah, I know. What I don’t know is where you think you’re going with this nonsense. Ron’s eventually going to find out that you lied to him. What do you think is going to happen then?”

“Look, I know I can’t keep this up forever, but I couldn’t just sit there while he whined at Lavender to kiss him and make it better. I’ll figure it out, and I’ll explain everything to Ron and Draco later. But in the meantime, please promise me you’ll keep this a secret for me? Please?”

“Ugh, fine. Just don’t involve me in any more of this stuff. Whatever’s going on with you and Ron and Draco and whoever...I don’t want to be involved.”

She agreed immediately, but Harry couldn’t help but worry that this was all going to go spectacularly wrong. There was no doubt this would end badly, and despite her assurances, he

was pretty sure he was going to have to deal with the fallout.

He was so glad he didn't have a date.

Then Friday came. The party was that evening, and Harry still didn't have anyone to go with. As much as he didn't want to worry about relationship drama, it would look very strange if he showed up alone. He was trying to make a good impression, make some political connections and so forth. It wouldn't make him look very responsible or likeable if he couldn't even get a date to a school event.

There wasn't anyone he wanted to go with, though. The only girls he would want to spend an evening with were Hermione or Ginny, and they had both made it very clear that they already had dates. Ron would probably be mad if he took Lavender, even as a friend, and Parvati was out of the question. That really only left one option.

When Harry arrived at the Entrance Hall that evening as they had arranged, he found Luna Lovegood wearing a vibrant pink and silvery dress that didn't come close to matching his formal robes. He knew then that he had made the right choice. "Why Luna, you look quite eye-catching."

"Thank you! This is my first time going to a party with a friend. So, I decided to dress my best." She had forgone her usual radish earrings in favor of some purple beaded ones that clashed terribly with her dress. Instead of the butterbeer cork necklace she so frequently wore, she was wearing one made of braided multi-colored strings. Harry thought she looked absolutely perfect.

"I'd much rather go to a party with a friend than an actual date," Harry said without thinking. Then he winced. The last time he'd said something like that, Draco had dumped him for Hermione. However, Luna just beamed with platonic affection.

"I couldn't agree more, Harry."

Slughorn had converted his office into an enormous winter wonderland with glistening icicles and garlands of holly. There were dozens of people milling around, a string quartet playing near a crowded dance floor, and a long buffet table full of finger food. Harry barely had time to get his bearings before the professor descended on him like a walrus who had found a particularly juicy fish.

"Harry, m'boy, so glad to see you here. And I see that you did find someone other than Miss Vane to escort you, wonderful! Come along, there are lots of people I wanted to introduce you to!"

First on their list of introductions was a writer named Eldred Worpel. He had just published a book on vampires, and had even brought a vampire as his guest. As interested as Harry was in making new connections, he really didn't like how excited Worpel was about the idea of writing a Harry Potter biography. Three times he had to tell the man that he definitely wasn't interested.

Meanwhile, Luna seemed quite excited to chat with the vampire, Sanguini. "So, do you know the new Minister of Magic, Rufus Scrimgeour?"

"No, I have never met the man." The vampire's raspy voice came out in a thick Eastern European accent. He kept glancing down at Luna's neck as he spoke to her.

"Are you sure you've never met? I thought you'd know him, since he's also a vampire."

Harry, who had bent down to grab a couple drinks from a passing house elf, immediately swiveled around empty-handed. "Wait what? Is that true?"

"No," Sanguini asserted. His posture became even more rigid. "Wizards despise Dark Creatures. They have been quite aggressive in their interactions with us. They would not have chosen a vampire to be their leader."

Luna wasn't convinced though. "Oh, it's all a big coverup," she explained. Only Luna could talk about dangerous conspiracies as if she were commenting on the weather. "The Wizengamot doesn't want us to know. But it must be true, because otherwise the ministry wouldn't be denying it so much."

"Are they denying it?" asked Harry.

"I haven't heard a single thing about this," said Worpel.

"Exactly!" Luna looked as though she had just proven her case, so Harry led her away quickly. Sanguini was beginning to look as though he wanted to drain her dry.

Harry could see Hermione and Draco chatting with a couple wizards over by the buffet table. The two of them did look like a handsome couple in matching silver and pale blue. Harry tried to reach the familiar faces through the crowd of guests, but before he made it halfway to the buffet, Slughorn pounced again. "Harry, m'boy, there you are. Have you met Amelia Bones? She's head of the Department for Magical Law Enforcement."

Harry turned to see a middle-aged woman whose blonde hair had begun to grey, but who gave off the same no-nonsense aura as Professor McGonagall and Augusta Longbottom. "We've actually met," he explained. Madam Bones had been one of the few people who had spoken up in his defense at his trial for underage magic. "But I'm not sure if you would remember me."

"Oh, you are quite memorable, Mr. Potter. It's wonderful to see you again, and in much more pleasant circumstances." She reached out her hand, and Harry kissed the back of it as Augusta had shown him. She gave him an encouraging smile, and then gestured to the

woman that she'd been talking to. "Harry, have you met Cynthia Roscoe from the Daily Prophet?"

Harry recognized the woman with long legs and ashy brown hair from his quick trip to Diagon Alley with Draco Malfoy. "We haven't met in person," Harry said, as he reached out to shake her hand. "However, I certainly enjoyed your exposé on the Goblin Liaison Office." It was a risk, since he hadn't actually read that piece, but Harry really wanted to make a good impression. Especially if the woman was as influential as Draco had hinted at.

"You read my exposé?" Her pale brown eyes flashed with pride, and her dark lips cocked into a smirk. "I didn't realize you were so interested in the inner workings of the ministry, Mr. Potter."

"Well," Harry explained. "Since I'm going to be involved anyway, I figured I should make as much of an effort as I could to educate myself on how things are run."

They looked impressed, until Luna opened her mouth. "Harry, if you want to know how the ministry is run, you should really hear about the Rotfang conspiracy. It's quite terrible what the Aurors are doing to spread gum disease to unsuspecting victims."

"Er..." Suddenly Harry was wondering if it had been a good idea to invite Luna. She was a lot of fun, and her crazy ideas were usually quite humorous, but he hadn't really thought about what sort of impression she would make on the political people at Slughorn's party. Both Cynthia Roscoe and Madam Bones looked distinctly ruffled, until Harry heard a friendly chuckle behind him.

Draco Malfoy had strolled up behind them, holding two glasses of wine and wearing an amused smile. "Why Miss Lovegood, you have such a droll sense of humor. I'm not sure if Miss Roscoe and Madam Bones understand your jokes, however."

"My jokes?" She tilted her head.

The Slytherin smiled so casually, it was easy to feel comfortable in his presence. "You know who would appreciate some of your irreverent humor? Hermione over there has gotten herself quite entangled in a conversation with Professor Trelawney. I'm sure they could both use some cheering up." Harry glanced over toward the buffet table to see that Hermione did look exasperated with her ex-professor.

"Oh?" Luna perked up. "I haven't spoken with Professor Trelawney in such a long time. I should tell her about my latest dream about raining frogs. I think it means something fortuitous is going to happen."

"It probably means I'm going to die horribly," Harry mumbled under his breath.

"It probably means it's going snow," Draco dead-panned, glancing out the window at the heavy snow already falling.

Either way, Luna skipped off toward Hermione and Professor Trelawney. Harry could only imagine how much more awkward their conversation could get.

Before Harry had a chance to thank Draco for saving him from his own date, there was a glass of wine being proffered to him. It was a deep red and it smelled like plums. "Don't worry," Draco reassured him, as he nudged the glass toward Harry's hand, so close their fingers brushed. "It's not bitter. It's port. I remembered you prefer sweeter drinks."

"Thank you." He hoped Draco understood that Harry was thanking him for more than just the wine.

He must have, because he gave Harry a sly wink before he turned his full attention to their rest of the little group. "You'll have to excuse Harry's date," he explained. "Such a charming girl, but sometimes she doesn't realize that not everyone shares her sense of humor. Rotfang conspiracy! Such a silly joke!"

Cynthia Roscoe and Professor Slughorn let out a light chuckle, but Madam Bones narrowed her eyes at Draco's platinum blonde hair and pointed features. "Aren't you Lucius Malfoy's son? I must admit, I'm rather surprised that any Malfoy would be on speaking terms with Harry Potter. Let alone, friendly enough to grab drinks for each other." She looked down at the glass in Harry's hand suspiciously.

"Harry and I have become good friends, actually. Isn't that right, Harry?"

Despite Draco's unaffected expression, Harry could pick up the hint of desperation in his voice. Draco wanted to be accepted by these important people, but even more than that, he wanted to be accepted by Harry. And after everything that had happened between them this year, Harry was more than willing to give him what he wanted. "Oh yes, definitely," Harry agreed. As if to prove the point, he took a deep sip of wine without bothering to glance at it. Of course, if Draco was going to poison him, he wouldn't have waited till now. Besides, the port really was sweet and delicious. "Draco and I are...we're friends."

His new friend looked relieved, but Madam Bones still looked skeptical. "I see. Well, Mr. Malfoy, how fortunate for you that you would become good friends with Harry Potter now. Especially since his popularity and potential influence have soared this past year. What a coincidence that you would seek him out, just after your own father was disgraced and imprisoned. I wonder, is that how you managed to secure an invitation to a party such as this?"

Draco scowled, but before he could defend himself, Cynthia Roscoe spoke up. Unlike Madam Bones, she looked more intrigued than suspicious. "Yes, Professor Slughorn, I must admit that I too am surprised that you're still on good terms with the Malfoy family." At least Harry's trip to Diagon Alley had been good for something. He knew that Cynthia Roscoe was the political correspondent for the Daily Prophet. She was trying to determine just how much political influence the Malfoy Heir had managed to hang on to.

Slughorn seemed oblivious to all of this; he was too busy downing another glass of elven mead. "Now that I think of it, I can't recall inviting Mr. Malfoy here." The man's red face was screwed up in effort. "Oh well, must have slipped my mind."

"Actually, Professor, I wasn't invited." Draco gave Madam Bones a defiant smirk. "I came as a plus-one. I'm here with my date, Hermione Granger."

While Slughorn looked confused, both witches immediately ran that name through their minds. “Granger?” asked Madam Bones. “I can’t recall a Granger family in England. Are they German perhaps?”

“Any relation to Hector Dagworth-Granger?” Roscoe ventured.

“I doubt it.” Draco had the same expression that Hermione wore when she announced her date at the Gryffindor table. “You see, she’s muggle-born.”

Roscoe gaped while Madam Bones actually dropped her glass in shock. “You? Muggle-born? What?”

Draco took a slow sip of his wine and then an all-too-pleased grin spread across his face. “Oh yes, I’m here with a muggle-born. In fact, Harry introduced us, and now things are getting *quite serious*.” Harry resisted the urge to roll his eyes. “You seem surprised Madam Bones. Did you, perhaps, make some unwarranted assumptions about me?”

The older woman took a moment to compose herself. She didn’t even notice that a house elf had swooped in to clean her spilt drink and was trying to offer her a new one. However, both Cynthia Roscoe and Professor Slughorn were looking at Draco as if they had just found buried treasure. “Why, Heir Malfoy,” Roscoe crooned. “I didn’t realize you had taken a stance so different from your family’s.”

“I wouldn’t say that my stance was quite so different.” Draco swirled his wineglass with practiced poise. “In fact, I would say that I’m embracing new ideas along with the old. I feel it’s best to respect well-established traditions, while also remaining open to new ideas that could strengthen society. In fact, I think Harry would agree with me on this.”

“Er,” Harry examined those words trying to find a trap, but it seemed innocent enough. “Yes, I guess I can agree with that overall sentiment.”

“So do you two discuss politics often?” asked Roscoe.

“Oh yes,” Draco was quick to answer first. “In fact, just the other day Harry and I discussed your recent interview with Rufus Scrimgeour. Harry was impressed with Scrimgeour’s overall distinguished career as Head of the Aurors. However, he had mixed feelings about the current administration’s handling of the upcoming war.”

“Mixed feelings?” she pried.

“Yes, Harry was just telling me that he felt it was quite an overreach for the Ministry to force all Dark Families to allow Aurors to search their homes looking for any possible connections to the Dark Lord.”

“Really?” Madam Bones challenged. “*Harry* thought it was an overreach? Are you sure you’re not putting words in his mouth? Are you sure you’re not just upset that *your home* was searched over the summer?”

“No one’s home should be searched without cause!” Harry practically shook with indignation. “That absolutely is an abuse of power!” Sure, Harry had never read Roscoe’s interview with the new minister. He and Draco had never once discussed it, or Harry’s opinion on any of this. Harry didn’t even know there had been searches of Dark family’s homes. Draco *was* putting words in Harry’s mouth. But now that Harry knew what had been going on, it seemed that Draco had expressed Harry’s feelings quite succinctly. “This administration is making the same mistakes that the last administration made.”

“Really?” asked Roscoe. “And what other mistakes do you think they’re making?”

Draco, Madam Bones, and Professor Slughorn all looked very curious to see what he would say. Harry took a deep breath, held up his chin, and forced his voice to sound calm and confident. “It seems to me that the ministry is just trying to make it look like progress is being made, even when there isn’t any. If they can say they are doing *something*, even if it isn’t anything useful, then perhaps the public will be appeased. Crouch made countless arrests during the last war, and some of those people never even got a trial. Sirius Black didn’t, and he was held in Azkaban for over ten years before he finally escaped, and it turned out he was innocent!”

Roscoe looked almost hungry with excitement, but Madam Bones looked distinctly embarrassed. “Yes, well, things were different back then.”

“Were they?” asked Harry. “Are you sure the ministry isn’t doing the same thing all over again? You arrested Stan Shunpike a few months ago, right? On second-hand testimony? He’s still being held in Azkaban, correct? Has he received a trial yet?”

Madam Bones’s jaw dropped. Cynthia Roscoe immediately jumped in. “Do you really think Mr. Shunpike could possibly be innocent?”

“Regardless of what I think, the man still deserves a trial. But yes, I’m sure he’s innocent. I’ve met Stan Shunpike on more than one occasion, and he strikes me as a braggart and a gossip, but certainly not dangerous. I once heard him chatting up a young lady by telling her that he was the youngest Minister of Magic in history.” Harry neglected to mention that the young woman had been a veela at the Quidditch World Cup, and there may have been some magic encouraging Stan to exaggerate.

Madam Bones now looked stern instead of shocked. “Harry, I can promise you that I will look into Mr. Shunpike’s case personally. From what little I had heard on the matter, I was under the impression that this was an open and shut case. However, if what you say is true, we will get to the bottom of it. Innocent people should not be sitting in prison no matter how much Minister Scrimgeour wants to appear ‘tough on Death Eaters.’”

Harry blinked, almost unbelieving. Had that actually worked? Did he just make a difference?

As the music swelled along with Harry’s head, Madam Bones and Miss Roscoe continued to question the Gryffindor about his other political opinions. Harry was only too happy to tell them about his disgust at the Werewolf Dark Creature Bill that had almost passed several weeks ago. He went on to talk about his concern for all magical creatures and half-breeds, explaining that one of his good friends was a werewolf, while another was a half-giant.

When Roscoe asked him about her piece on the Goblin Liaison Office, Draco immediately came to the rescue again. “Oh yes, Harry greatly enjoyed that article. He was telling me how impressed he was with Dirk Creswell’s diplomacy with those little buggers,” he lied with ease.

“I mean, I didn’t call them *little buggers*,” Harry clarified. “Goblins are certainly worth more respect than that. But yes, I was impressed with Dirk Creswell’s diplomacy.”

“Really?” The voice came from a man who had been standing behind them. When Harry turned to see who had spoken, he saw a shorter fellow with mousy hair and thick glasses. He was smiling as brightly as the sun.

“Mr. Creswell!” cried Draco, before Harry could make a fool of himself. “What a coincidence! Why, look Harry, it’s Mr. Creswell himself, who you obviously recognize from the in-depth interview you read.”

“Oh yes,” said Harry. ‘Oh no,’ he thought.

Unlike the majority of party guests, Mr. Creswell was wearing a formal muggle suit instead of dress robes. However, just like the other guests, his eyes drifted to Harry’s forehead, where they widened at the sight of the lightening scar. But then, just as quickly, his eyes swiveled back to meet Harry’s own, where they stopped and crinkled with genuine kindness.

Harry immediately felt guilty for lying about having read the article. He was just about to admit that he’d never even heard of Mr. Creswell, when the man spoke up again. “Mr. Potter, allow me to introduce my good friend, Lady Cordelia Macmillan.” He gestured to a taller and older woman next to him. “She and I are both on the Special Committee for the Regulation of Half-Breeds and Magical Creatures. In fact, Lady Macmillan here is head of the committee.”

Harry froze. Now what was he supposed to do? This was the exact committee that he’d been hoping to make a good impression with. This was the committee that would be voting on whether or not werewolves could adopt wizarding children.

Still trying to think what he could possibly say next, Harry stalled by bending down to kiss the back of Lady Macmillan’s hand. Fortunately, she spoke first. “I suppose I should be thanking you, Heir Potter.” She had very dark grey hair and her eyes matched her midnight blue robes almost perfectly. “After all, it was your vote that helped Albus and I defeat the Werewolf Dark Creature Bill. Both your votes, in fact.”

Harry was about to ask what she meant, when she and Mr. Creswell happily explained. Apparently, Lady Macmillan had agreed that werewolves should not be relabeled as Dark Creatures, and she had been trying to limit Umbridge’s power within the committee. She told Harry that she was one of the members who had been working with Dumbledore to get the bill voted down.

When she smiled at him, her face looked vaguely familiar. “Lady Macmillan?” Harry inquired. “Are you by any chance related to Ernie Macmillan?” She looked a bit like the Hufflepuff in Harry’s potions class.

“Oh yes, he’s my nephew’s son. I’m so glad he’s making respectable friends.”

Before Harry could ask about Ernie, however, a cold voice cut through their pleasant conversation. “Oh yes, Potter, what a wonderful, respectable friend you are.” Blaise Zabini had appeared from the other side of Creswell. Harry hadn’t even noticed him approach; he was so busy with Lady Macmillan.

“I hate to change the subject, Potter, but I’m just so curious.” Zabini’s expression was far too innocent for Harry’s liking. He was clearly out for blood. “We never got to hear about your opinion on that article. The article on the Goblin Liaison Office, that you just told everyone you read and enjoyed. I must admit, I never realized you were so interested in Goblin Diplomacy. Why don’t you tell us all, what exactly was your favorite part of Miss Roscoe’s piece?”

“Well, since you asked so nicely,” Harry took a deep breath. “As Draco said, I was most interested in reading about Mr. Creswell here, and his impressive diplomatic skills.”

Mr. Creswell beamed, but Zabini was not so easily sated. “How interesting.” His voice sounded anything but interested. “And did you enjoy reading about the Goblins? Which specific Goblins do you think would be the easiest to work with?”

Draco looked furious with his friend, but Harry didn’t let his nerves show. He could do this. Augusta had taught him how to deflect subjects, so he never admitted ignorance. “Well, Zabini, I don’t usually let articles in the Daily Prophet impact my opinions on people or creatures that I know personally. As it happens, I know from my own real-life experience, that the goblins I find easiest to work with are Griphook, Nagnok, and Bogrod. No interview is going to change my opinion about them.”

Draco’s mouth opened and closed several times. Blaise looked even more baffled. Clearly, neither of them thought that Harry would be able to name a single goblin. True, Harry couldn’t remember any of the goblins he had read about in history class, but he certainly remembered the goblins he had met in person.

Dirk Creswell’s smile grew even brighter, if that was even possible. “Why, you know Bogrod? That’s wonderful! I’ve worked with him on many occasions.”

Zabini had no intention of allowing Harry to receive any more praise. He swooped in for the kill. “Well, Potter, if you are so very interested in Goblin diplomacy, surely you have many opinions on the subject. Which Goblin Rebellion would you say had the most lasting influence on modern Goblin diplomacy?”

Harry slowly swirled his wineglass with the same casual ease Draco had done earlier. “Why, Zabini, what a wonderful question!” The taller young man narrowed his eyes, correctly assuming that Harry was stalling. “After all, it’s important to know what happened between wizards and goblins in the past, so we can try to make better compromises and avoid the same mistakes.” All the adults leaned in, all eyes on Harry. Which meant no one noticed when Draco subtly scratched his chin with two fingers. “A lot of people think that the Rebellion of 1752 had the biggest impact. But...” Everyone held their breath, except Draco

who brushed an invisible piece of lint from his robes with three fingers. “I personally think the Rebellion of 1793 was even more influential.”

“And why is that exactly?” Zabini wasn’t letting him get away with it that easily.

Harry tried to remember what Hermione had said. “Well, it really changed the way goblins viewed wizards. After that disastrous miscommunication error, the goblins thought that wizards were all trying to steal their gold. It was a bloodbath! And it’s had a huge impact on our dealings with the goblins ever since.”

“Why Mr. Potter, I couldn’t agree more!” Mr. Creswell was almost jumping with excitement. “As you know from the article, I speak fluent Gobbledegook, and I’ve always thought that the minister must have had too much growl in his voice when he was trying to speak to them. The goblin language is very particular regarding the exact amount of snarl one should use. If you use too much, it is a highly offensive insult.”

“Really?” Harry was quite interested now. “I have to opposite problem. I’m learning Gobbledegook, but apparently, I don’t have nearly enough snarl.”

“You’re learning Gobbledegook!?” Zabini had lost all composure now.

“Oh yes!” Harry turned to Mr. Creswell, trying to remember the phrase Nagnok had taught him. “Groggnor gring-calf devkan. Groggnor preg-calf ettbollner.”

Dirk Creswell chuckled lightly. “Oh yes, I see your problem. Your pronunciation is technically correct, but there’s almost no snarl at all. Of course, it’s probably better to have too little snarl than too much. At least you won’t offend anyone.”

“Bel-jalk!” said Harry, hoping that he was remembering the word for ‘thank you’ correctly. He must have, because Mr. Creswell was looking at Harry like he wanted to pack him up and show him off to all his friends. Harry could only hope that was a good thing.

At the very least, it seemed to be the final straw for Zabini. He stormed off in a hurry, muttering just loud enough for them to hear, “If he can’t even snarl, he’s probably terrible with his tongue.”

Cordelia Macmillan and Cynthia Roscoe both stepped closer to fill in the gap. “Why Heir Potter,” Roscoe’s voice was soft like silk. “I never realized you were so interested in creature rights.”

“Yes,” Lady Macmillan agreed. “What other magical creatures are you interested in?”

“Oh well...” and suddenly Harry was struck by the situation he was in. He was completely surrounded by adults; important, powerful, influential adults. And they were all looking at him, and listening to him, and asking about his opinion on important matters. The Head of the Goblin Liaison Office had just been impressed by his knowledge of goblins. The Head of the Department for Magical Law Enforcement was going to personally look into a case that Harry was upset about. The leading Political expert for the Daily Prophet wanted to hear

more about Harry's political opinions. And now the Head of the Special Committee for Half-Breeds and Magical Creatures wanted to know what other creatures Harry wanted to help.

Well, if he was already in this deep, he may as well go all the way. "House elves," he said.

The palpable anticipation that clung to all the adults seemed to melt into confusion. "House elves?" Lady Macmillan enquired. "I'm sorry, I don't really understand."

"I'm interested in improving the rights of house elves. I have a friend who's a house elf, and he's lived a really hard life. In fact, I've known a few house elves who have all lived really hard lives. I know it seems weird, but if I could, I'd like to make things easier for those little guys. I'm actually a member for the Society for the Protection of Elvish Welfare."

"The Society for what?" asked Roscoe.

"The Protection of Elvish Welfare," said Harry. "Or S.P.E.W. for short."

"Spew?" asked Draco.

Harry sighed, but didn't let it deter him. He was committed now. "Yes. S.P.E.W. Spew. The Society for the Protection of Elvish Welfare. The goal is to promote the welfare of house elves."

"By doing what?" asked Lady Macmillan.

"Getting them nicer uniforms?" asked Draco.

"No, by helping them gain more rights and freedoms," Harry explained.

Lady Macmillan looked sympathetic but confused. "Do they want more rights?"

"They certainly don't want freedom," Slughorn sniggered.

"They don't want to be set free," Harry had to admit, although he was sure Hermione would disagree. "But they do want to be treated with kindness. It makes a big difference to them whether or not they are treated well by their masters. I've talked to enough house elves to know that."

The wizards and witches pondered that for a moment. "Alright, Mr. Potter," Cynthia Roscoe began. "I can see you've thought about this. So, this organization you are a part of, does it have many members?"

"I'm afraid that there isn't a terrible amount of interest in house elf rights, so people aren't exactly lining up to join a society such as this." He did not mention that you could probably count the members on one hand, especially now that Ron and Hermione weren't speaking.

"But are any of the members house elves?" Roscoe asked.

"Actually, yes. My dear friend Dobby is a member." At the mention of Dobby, Draco started choking on his wine, but Harry ignored him. "He's a house elf employed by the school, but

he used to belong to a very cruel family who treated him terribly. He's very interested in promoting rights for other house elves." Draco's cheeks had turned bright red, but the others probably assumed it was from all the coughing.

"Can anyone become a member?" ask Lady Macmillan.

"Oh, well I suppose so, if they really wanted to. I did have to pay five sickles, but then I got a cute little badge that said S.P.E.W."

Draco narrowed his eyes. "I'm pretty sure if you were going around wearing a badge that said 'Spew,' I would have noticed it."

"Are you sure you weren't just distracted?" asked Harry. "I know things are getting *quite serious* between you and Hermione."

Draco broke into a wide smile. "Now I remember! Oh yes, of course, that badge that says 'Spew' that you wear all the time! How could I forget? Yes, Harry's always wearing that thing when he's spending time with me and my very serious girlfriend."

"Oh yeah," Harry agreed. "I was thinking of getting an extra one. I know Dobby loves them."

"Are you two talking about Dobby?" Harry turned toward the singsong voice behind him. It was Luna. She had just snuck up behind them with Hermione. "I love Dobby. He's such a sweetheart, even if he did hang Mistletoe in our headquarters last year."

"Do you have a problem with mistletoe?" asked Slughorn.

"Don't ask," Harry warned.

Hermione was clearly in no mood to hear Luna's opinions on what mistletoe may or may not be infested with. "So, here's where you two have been hiding!" She glared at Draco with the same ferocity she usually reserved for Ron. "I can't believe you abandoned me with Professor Trelawney. I only just now got away."

"Oh, sorry." Draco didn't look remotely contrite as he grabbed another couple wine glasses from a passing house elf. Instead of handing the second glass to his own date, he passed it to Harry with a coy smile. "Still thirsty?"

Harry took the glass right as Hermione shouted, "Draco!" The blonde spun around; the featherlight touch of his fingers, gone in a second. "Could you please hand me a glass as well?" She was wearing a pained smile, and she kept glancing between Draco and the group of witches and wizards who were all watching them.

Draco's eyes followed hers, and he shifted from cool to flustered in about a second. "Oh right, yes, of course." He looked down at the selection of wines on the elf's tray. "Er, what kinds of things do you usually drink?" Hermione rolled her eyes and just grabbed a glass herself.

Cynthia Roscoe was watching the exchange with interest. "Wait, don't I know you?" she asked Hermione. "You're Mr. Malfoy's date? What was your name again?"

“My name’s Hermione Granger, but I doubt you would know me from anywhere.”

“Didn’t you date Viktor Krum during the Triwizard Tournament?”

“Oh.” Hermione frowned. “Yes, that was me.”

“Yes, I thought you looked familiar. You dated Krum and then you dated Potter, right?”

“No,” Harry swallowed his wine too quickly and then started spluttering. “We were just friends. Only friends. She’s like a sister.”

“Ah,” Slughorn nodded knowingly. “Like you and Miss Weasley, yes?”

“No. What? She’s not my sister. I mean, like a sister. I mean...what was I saying?” His eyes were watering, he was still half-choking on his wine, and suddenly all the confidence and charisma from the last hour left him in one fell swoop. “Hermione’s a friend, who’s like a sister. And Ginny’s also a friend, who’s like a friend. But she’s Ron’s sister, not my sister. And Hermione is Ron’s friend. Er...yeah.”

Harry took another sip of wine to clear his throat, or maybe just to force himself to stop talking. Every single adult was giving him a knowing smirk, as if they understood something he didn’t. Even Hermione had the same expression, but then, she was practically an adult herself. Luna was off in her own world, but Draco was giving Harry such a disgusted glare that he almost took a step back.

“Anyway, Miss Granger,” Cynthia Roscoe quickly changed the subject. “You were dating Krum, but now you’re dating Mr. Malfoy?”

“Yes, we’re dating!” Both Hermione and Draco shouted the words as quickly as they could, as if they were trying to beat the other to the punch. Then they paused and stared at each other. Harry knew why Hermione wanted to pretend they were dating, and he knew why Draco wanted to pretend they were dating, but apparently, the two of them had never discussed it with each other.

Hermione cleared her throat. “I mean, yes. We are dating. Right Draco?”

“Yes, that’s right. In fact, I would say that things are quite serious, right Hermione?”

“Oh yes, very serious indeed.”

Harry set down the rest of his glass on the tray and slunk off just as the two of them started explaining how they met. He could only take so much utter tosh in one evening. His lies about reading the Daily Prophet, followed by his exaggerations about S.P.E.W. had already pushed his limit.

He trudged away from the little group, but only made it a few steps toward the buffet table before he almost ran over Ginny Weasley. Apparently, she had been standing only a few feet away from him. “Oh, Harry, I...bathroom.” She took off without another word.

“That’s not good.” Had she heard him make a complete ninny of himself in front of some of the most influential wizards and witches in politics? What had she thought? She couldn’t possibly know that he had incredibly confusing feelings about her, could she? Even Harry didn’t know what he was feeling about...anything.

Either way, he didn’t want to deal with any more people that night. With a final farewell to Luna, who wanted to stay and question to Sanguini some more, he made his way back to Gryffindor Tower. It hadn’t ended quite as well as he’d hoped, but he thought he still made a reasonably good impression on a few people who mattered.

The next day was Saturday, and everyone who was leaving school for the winter holidays would be taking the Hogwarts Express back to London around eleven. Everyone except Harry. Dumbledore had already sent him a note, explaining that the headmaster needed to stick around to see off the last of the students, and then he would personally escort Harry to his house.

The day had finally come. Harry was going to Dumbledore’s house! It was actually happening, and even the nerves and awkwardness of last night’s party could hardly distract him. He was so preoccupied by his thoughts that he hardly noticed when more owls arrived than usual to deliver the morning mail. He did, however, notice when a second wave of owls arrived.

“That’s odd,” he mumbled as he watched them fly toward the Gryffindor table. He almost panicked, thinking they might be coming for him, but then they flew off to the other end of the table, and he breathed out a sigh of relief. He turned his head to see dozens of owls all landing at the far end of the table. “Huh, what do you think that’s about?”

While several Gryffindors had paused their conversations to try and see what was going on with the morning mail, Ron didn’t seem to notice. In fact, the redhead was kissing Lavender with such enthusiasm, Harry doubted he would notice if the entire hall filled with owls. Clearly, Ron had something to prove. He hadn’t removed his hands or lips from Lavender all morning, not since Hermione and Draco’s supposedly romantic evening.

Neville, at least, was aware of his surroundings. “That’s a lot of owls. I don’t know, Harry. I think something’s up.” They watched as yet another wave of owls flew through the windows and, once again, heading toward the far end of the Gryffindor table.

“I’m going to go check it out.” Harry was unable to help himself. At this point, almost everyone in the Great Hall was staring at the back corner of the Gryffindor table where over fifty owls were hooting and swooping. It was impossible not to notice.

As Harry got closer to the swarm of the owls, the noise grew almost deafening. The little things seemed lost and confused. Most of them weren’t carrying their letters anymore, having already dropped them on the table. He didn’t understand why they wouldn’t leave, if they had already delivered their mail. Instead, they flew around in a huff, crying out in indignation, stealing bacon and sausages from nearby students, and dropping feathers everywhere.

At the center of all this confusion, Harry found Hermione. She had an owl on each shoulder, one of which was nipping at her ear. Another owl sat on the top of her head, ruffling her bushy hair into a tangled nest. In front of the poor girl, lay an enormous pile of letters which kept getting larger. The mound had grown so large that nearby plates and goblets were getting knocked off the table. Harry wrinkled his nose as the smell of owl droppings began to permeate the area. Any students who had been seated nearby had already run for cover. By this point, the whole of the Great Hall was staring, trying to get a better look at what was going on in the center of the hoard of owls.

It reminded Harry a little of when Hogwarts kept trying to send letters to him, back before he knew he was a wizard. He asked Hermione the same question that his cousin had asked years ago. "Hermione, who on earth wants to get ahold of you so badly?"

"I have no idea!" She had to scream to be heard above the screech of the owls. She dug her hand into the pile of letters and waved them about. "I've checked all the return addresses, but they're all from different people. I don't understand why so many people would want to write to me."

"Well, have you opened any of them yet?"

"I've opened a couple." Even more owls swooped through the windows toward them and half of them dropped letters right in Hermione's lap, causing them to spill over onto the floor. "The letters don't even say anything useful!" she cried. "This one just has a note saying 'I'm very interested,' which can't possibly be good. And this one here doesn't say anything at all! It just has five sickles in it."

"Five sickles?" Something clicked. "I'll be right back."

Harry practically had to crawl out of the circle of swooping owls. He darted past Professor McGonagall who had come to see what all the commotion was about. Another wave of owls was already coming through the windows. Harry ran past Ron, who had finally given up trying to suck out Lavender's tongue. "Harry, what the hell?" he asked, but Harry ignored him and scooped up the Daily Prophet from next to Neville's plate.

Sure enough, the front cover had a large picture of Harry himself. It was an older picture, from the Tri-Wizard Tournament, but then, that was probably the most recent photo the Daily Prophet had. The title read: 'Harry Potter Questions the Ministry's War Efforts but Supports Magical Creatures.' Harry wasn't surprised to see that the article was written by Cynthia Roscoe, and he skimmed it as fast as he could, trying to pick up anything useful.

"...had the pleasure of meeting Heir Harry Potter...very impressed...bursting with potential...already making influential connections with prominent Light and Dark families...well-read in political writings, including several of my previous articles...highly critical of Rufus Scrimgeour's unorthodox push for home searches...interested in Goblin Diplomacy...spoke Gobbledegook with Dirk Creswell...outraged at Stan Shunpike's lack of trial...discussed the Werewolf Dark Creature Bill with Lady Cordelia Macmillan...member of the Society for the Protection of Elvish Welfare (Harry slowed down at that point)...S.P.E.W...anyone can join...five sickles...free badge..."

Harry eyes were wide with panic. “What have I done?”

By the time he ran back over to Hermione, there were hundreds of owls. They were now taking up half of Gryffindor table and the entire back corner of the Great Hall. No one was even trying to finish breakfast. Half the students were standing on benches and craning their necks, trying to get a better look at the army of birds that had descended on the castle.

Hermione had completely given up on checking the letters. She was working with McGonagall, Flitwick, and Sprout to try and regain order. Flitwick had finally silenced the birds, so at least there was no longer such a din. Sprout had erected a barrier, so the birds wouldn't fly over to the other tables and disrupt the rest of the hall. McGonagall had transfigured several hawks and even a small dragon to try and scare the owls back out of the hall, but they refused to go.

“What is the meaning of this!” the woman cried. “Why won't they leave?”

“I don't know!” Hermione had practically sobbing. “They've delivered their letters. They should go away, right?”

Harry ran past them, ducked underneath three new swooping owls, and dove his hand into an enormous pile of letters. He needed to confirm his suspicion. Sure enough, the letters were not addressed to Hermione herself, but instead they had been sent to S.P.E.W. or the President of S.P.E.W. or the Headquarters for S.P.E.W. or some other variation. “I need to learn to keep my big mouth shut,” he muttered.

Hermione and the professors were still battling off owls when Harry ran to join them. “Hermione, I'm so sorry. I think all the owls have been instructed not to leave until they get their badges.”

“Badges?” Her hair was so bushy if it was practically standing up, she was covered in feathers, and she smelled like something Crookshanks had dragged in. “What badges? Who wants badges?”

Harry didn't even know how to explain, so he just handed over the newspaper for her to read. As her eyes darted over the article, her expression morphed. It started with a raised eyebrow, then there was kind smile, then there was a look a mild surprise, and then suddenly her jaw dropped. She looked back up at him. “You told that reporter about S.P.E.W.?”

“Hermione, I'm so sorry. I had no idea this would happen.”

“You told the Daily Prophet that the magical creatures you were most interested in helping were house elves and that you were a member of S.P.E.W. to try and help your house elf friends?”

“I mean, yeah I did, but it never occurred to me that they would put it on the front page.”

“You told them that anyone could join S.P.E.W.? It just costs five sickles and they get a free badge?”

“Hermione, seriously, if you hate me for this I’d completely understand. But I never meant...”

“Hate you?” Hermione gawked at him like he was crazy. “Harry this is the greatest Christmas present I’ve ever received!” She leaped forward and squeezed him tight. He felt his ribs creaking as bushy brown hair filled his vision and a feather stuck itself up his nose. “Oh Harry this is so wonderful! I was starting to lose hope that S.P.E.W. would ever gain any support...and then...the front page of the Daily Prophet! I don’t know how to ever thank you!”

“You could let me breathe,” he barely managed to croak out.

“Whoops, sorry.” She let him go, but she was still beaming from ear to ear as more and more owls flew all around them. When another owl landed on her shoulder and pecked at her cheek, she seemed to snap out of whatever happy stupor she had been in. Suddenly, she was all business.

She let out a loud whistle. “Alright owls,” she shouted. “Whoever’s waiting to deliver their letter, drop it in this bag.” She waved her wand and an enormous sack appeared at her feet. The owls began dropping their letters there, rather than on top of whatever was left of breakfast. “Whoever is waiting for a badge, head up to the owlery. I’ll meet you up there in just a moment.”

Finally, the flood of owls began to dissipate. They flew up into the air and out the high windows, presumably heading for the owlery. Hermione waved her wand again, and all the letters that lined the Gryffindor table began soaring through the air toward her large sack. “There’s so much to do,” Hermione was muttering, hardly paying attention to the owls or letters now that she understood the reason for them. “There’s badges to make, letters to write, forms to file, and the train leaves at eleven. I’m so glad I’m already packed.”

Without further ado, she swished her wand one last time, and the very full sack of letters lifted into the air and followed after her as she ran down the hall and out the doors.

Professor McGonagall watched Hermione’s retreating back with pursed lips. “Well, she seems to have gotten things under control. Mr. Potter, please inform Miss Granger that such a disruption during breakfast should be avoided in the future.”

“Oh, I’m sure she knows, but I’ll remind her.”

With that, the teachers cast a few final spells to clean up the spilt food and discarded feathers, and then returned to the head table. Meanwhile, the burst of whispers that spread through the Great Hall was almost as loud as the owls had been. Everyone was wondering what the hubbub could possibly have been about. Several of the students had seen the morning’s edition of the Daily Prophet, but none of them knew about Hermione’s connection to S.P.E.W.

Ron was about halfway to Harry, almost certainly about to ask what was going on, when Draco Malfoy beat him to the punch. As soon as Ron spotted Draco, Hermione’s supposed boyfriend, he turned red and almost ran out of the Great Hall. Harry would have to calm him

down later, but in the meantime, Draco was glaring at him and pulling the feather from Harry's nose.

"Since when is Hermione the most popular girl in Wizarding Britain?" he asked.

"Did you see the Daily Prophet this morning?"

"Obviously, but that article was about you, not her."

"Well, until about ten minutes ago, there were only two members of Spew. Hermione was the president and then there was me. Ron was in it too, but I'm not sure if he counts as an active member. Anyway, there has been a significant uptake in interest."

Harry thought Draco would be angry or annoyed. Instead, he looked highly impressed.

"Potter, seriously? I never realized you were so Slytherin!"

"What are you talking about?"

"That is a brilliant scam!" Draco winked at him.

"It's not a scam. How is that a scam?"

"You just convinced half of Wizarding Britain to send five sickles to you and your friend. How is that not a scam?"

"I didn't convince anyone anything!" Harry spluttered. "I had no idea they were going to do that. And besides, that money is to help house elves."

"Help house elves how?" Draco was still smirking. "What are you going to do, buy them better cleaning supplies?"

"No, we're going to help them get away from terrible families like yours." That wiped the smirk off Draco's face. "Don't think I don't know who Dobby used to belong to. And don't you dare mention this scam nonsense to Hermione. Now if you'll excuse me, I have to go stop one friend from working herself to death, and then stop another one from plotting yours. I'll see you after the holidays."

On his way through the Entrance Hall, Harry was accosted by a Ron, who was almost shaking with nerves. "Harry, what's going on with Hermione? Is she ok? What did Malfoy do?"

"He didn't do anything," Harry tried to calm his best friend. "They didn't even kiss!" Even if Hermione had made him promise to keep up the pretense that she and Draco were dating, he didn't need to go out of his way to upset Ron.

"Didn't kiss? I'm not worried about that!" Ron blushed. "Well, I mean, maybe a little. But did he say anything rude about her? Did he call her a you-know-what? Was it a prank? Did he

brag to all his friends that he tricked her?” Ron grabbed Harry’s shoulders and started shaking him. “Did he hurt her Harry?”

“No no, none of that happened!” If Harry wasn’t already bruised from Hermione’s hug, Ron’s shaking was going to do the trick. “It was fine. It was all fine. We all went, we ate appetizers, we chatted with some people, and we left. It was fine.”

“How could it be fine?” Ron looked so lost and confused. “He hates muggle-borns. He always has. You remember what he used to call Hermione? He called her *that word*, Harry. He called her that word all the time!” Ron started pacing. “And I’ve seen the way he looks at her. He looks at her like he thinks she’s boring! He doesn’t look at her like he fancies her. I know what it looks like when a guy fancies a girl. He makes googly eyes at her. Malfoy never makes googly eyes at Hermione.” Ron stopped his pacing and stared right at his friend. “I think he’s using her, Harry.”

Harry didn’t think he could possibly feel more guilty. Draco *was* using Hermione, but Hermione knew it. She was fine with it. It was all part of her plan to make Ron jealous. But instead of making Ron jealous, she had made the poor boy insanely worried that she was going to get seriously hurt. And the worst part was, Harry knew everything, but he couldn’t tell Ron anything. “Ron, I don’t know how to explain this, and I wish I could elaborate more. But you just have to trust me, that Hermione knows what she’s doing, and she’s going to be okay. I don’t think she’s going to get hurt.”

“But what about all those owls? Who were they even from? I just assumed it was some trick Malfoy had played. I tried running after her, but she was already gone.”

“It wasn’t a prank. That was my fault, actually. I need to go help her. Look, I promise I’ll explain things as best I can when we hang out over Christmas, but right now I really need to find her.”

Ron called after him, but Harry was already bounding up the stairs two at a time, heading for the owlery.

Harry and Hermione spent the next two hours working diligently. By the time Harry had found the harried girl up in the owlery, she had already made several hundred copies of her original S.P.E.W. badges. She was in the process of magically transcribing several hundred copies of the same generic ‘Thank you for your support’ letter.

They worked in tandem. Hermione wrote out the names of the original senders on an increasingly long list and recorded how much they had donated (usually it was five sickles, but sometimes they had sent enough for extra badges to give to friends and family). Meanwhile, Harry placed the ‘thank you’ letters and badges in an envelope and mailed them off with their respective owls. Fortunately, all the owls seemed to respond to their owner’s name when he called it.

By the time they finished it was already half past ten. “Oh dear, I really need to get going or I’ll miss the train.” Hermione fussed. She was running around the tower, gathering up all her

belongings. She still had several feathers stuck in her hair. “Thanks for all your help, Harry. I still have a million things I need to do once I get home. I’ll need to file as an official non-profit through the ministry, and I’ll see about hiring a part-time staff to help me with all of this.”

“If you really need help, I’m sure Dobby would be more than happy to lend a hand.” It wasn’t the first time Harry had mentioned it, nor would it be the last if they had to do this again.

“For the last time, Harry, we are not using house elf slave labor to help us end house elf slave labor.”

“But you’re ok with using me as slave labor?” he couldn’t help but point out.

“Anyways, I’ll see you later.” She grabbed some items from her bag before she zipped it up. “Let me know when you want to meet to go to Gringotts and visit your vault. I think I might need to open a vault myself, actually.” They both looked down at the huge sack full of sickles that Hermione had collected. Harry was starting to worry that Draco may not have been too far off. “Oh, and if you get the chance, you can use these.” She shoved the items from her bag into his arms. They were woolen and looked a bit like little pouches.

“Er, thanks? What am I supposed to do with these?”

“Free house elves of course!”

Harry took a closer look of the strange hand-knitted items in hands. “Oh, are they clothes?”

“Yes, of course. Those large ones are hats, and those little ones are socks. I’m sorry, I haven’t been practicing my knitting as much lately, so these are from last year. They’ll just have to suffice for now. I just hate the thought of those poor little creatures being trapped and enslaved any longer than necessary.”

“Right, I’ll just...hold on to these...in case I meet any house elves that want to be freed immediately.”

Hermione nodded in satisfaction and ran off to grab her trunk before she had to catch the train. Harry shoved the socks and hats into his pockets. He figured he could just throw them out later.

While Harry was still up in the tower, he went to feed Hedwig a couple owl treats. “Hey girl, I’m leaving this afternoon. Do you know where Dumbledore’s house is?” She gave him a couple slow blinks. “Well, if you do, can you fly out and meet me there? He and I are going to leave in about an hour, and I have no idea which mode of transportation he’s planning to use.” Without further ado, she flew off into the cold, grey sky.

It was just past eleven when Harry dragged his trunk up the spiral stairs to Dumbledore’s office. He had placed a featherlight charm on it, but it was still awkward to maneuver around

the tight, winding staircase. By the time he made it to the top, he was really hoping that he wouldn't have to drag it back down.

The headmaster himself was sitting behind his desk, reading the morning's Daily Prophet. Harry was greeted to a large photo of himself waving back at him. When he pulled up his usual seat, Dumbledore lowered the newspaper slightly to peer over his half-moon spectacles. "Good morning Harry. How was your evening?"

"Well, I learned a valuable lesson about talking to reporters at parties. Anything I say can and will be used against me. So, I suppose my evening could have gone better."

"Could have gone better?" Dumbledore lowered the paper even more to give Harry his full attention. "Hmm." The man was eyeing him critically, and Harry tried not to fidget under his twinkling gaze. When Dumbledore let out a sad sigh, Harry's stomach churned. "Harry, my boy, I have to admit that I'm very worried about you."

"Worried about me? Why? What's wrong?" He could hear the former headmasters and headmistresses murmuring amongst themselves.

The current headmaster gestured to the newspaper in his hands. "Did you read this article, Harry?"

"Well, not word for word..." Harry trailed off. "To be honest I sort of just skimmed it."

"I see. Well, I have now read through it three times." The man glanced down at the article in question. "It says here, Harry, that you are familiar with several of Miss Roscoe's other pieces. Tell me, which articles have you read?"

"Oh, er, that may have been a slight exaggeration. I've actually read...none."

A couple of the portraits chuckled at Harry's admission, and Dumbledore himself looked like he was trying to hide his amusement. "Indeed? Well, Miss Cynthia Roscoe was always a formidable young woman. She was that way even when she was a young Ravenclaw. I believe I have read every single one of her articles over the years. This one is, without a doubt, one of the most complimentary pieces she has ever written on an individual." Harry could hear a few gasps behind him. "Even some of her kindest pieces about me (and I assure you, not all of them have been kind) never reached this level of veneration."

"Oh, well that's not too bad, right?"

"That is not bad *at all*," Dumbledore amended. The portraits seemed to agree, because they were shouting out congratulations. They had been so quiet during the talk about Harry's childhood, but now it seemed they all wanted to give their opinion. Dumbledore quieted them and then opened the Prophet again, smiling down at something else. "And then there is the article on page two."

"There's another article about me?"

“Not about you Harry, but it certainly mentions you.” Dumbledore handed the paper over so Harry could see. The next page had a large picture of a familiar pimply face with the headline ‘Stan Shunpike: Dangerous Death Eater or Sympathetic Scapegoat?’ As Harry scanned the article, Dumbledore elaborated. “I received a late-night floo call from Amelia Bones asking for my opinion in this matter. After I told her that I agreed with you regarding Mr. Shunpike’s innocence, we were able to have the young man moved to a holding cell at the ministry early this morning. It seems Mr. Shunpike will get his day in court after all.”

“That’s...I can’t believe it. That’s fantastic!” The portraits were cheering now.

“I couldn’t agree more, Harry. And that’s not the only good thing to come from all this. I received an owl from Cordelia Macmillan at breakfast. One of the few owls that did not come to harass Miss Granger. Lady Macmillan was quite intrigued by your concern for house elf rights, and she wants a representative from S.P.E.W. to join our Special Committee.”

“Seriously?” Harry squirmed. “Sir, the thing about Spew...”

“Yes, Harry, I did actually notice when the owl containing my anonymous donation arrived for Miss Granger, along with a few hundred others. I’ve already written back to Lady Macmillan letting her know that it would probably be best to have the representative wait until the summer session to join us. After all, I’m sure Miss Granger will be far too busy next term with classes and trying to run a very popular creature rights foundation. Not to mention her new boyfriend.”

“Her boyfriend?” How did Dumbledore know about that?

The headmaster gestured to the newspaper sitting on the desk. “Turn to page 12.”

Harry did, and was greeted with the ‘Society Pages.’ Sure enough, the very first article was about Heir Draco Malfoy and his new girlfriend, the muggle-born Hermione Granger. There was even a little picture of the couple from last night’s party. Apparently, the two of them had stuck around to talk to another reporter after Harry went to bed, and even got their photo taken. Harry was mentioned in this article, as well. It said that he and Draco were close friends, and that Harry arrived at the party with ‘a blonde witch’ but spent most of the evening with his ‘new friend.’

Harry frowned. “Is that why you’re worried about me, sir? Because I’m making friends with Draco Malfoy?”

Dumbledore let out an amused laugh. “Oh no, my dear boy. You have known Mr. Malfoy for years now, and I’m sure you are perfectly aware of both his good and bad qualities. I doubt there is anything I could say, either in his defense or as a warning, that you didn’t already know. The same goes for Miss Granger.”

There was a beat of silence as the headmaster’s expression turned sad. “No, Harry, I am worried because you just had an outstanding article written about you in the paper, your words with Madam Bones may spare an innocent man from a terrible fate, and your new campaign for house elf rights is getting the attention it deserves. However, the only thing you

have to say about all of this, is that it could have gone better. Frankly, young man, I cannot imagine a more fortuitous outcome.”

Dumbledore stood with a sweeping motion and walked around the desk. He bent down to Harry’s level, just as he had done a week ago, during their last serious talk. “Harry, I’m worried that you have lost the ability to recognize your own accomplishments. Sometimes one needs to step back and realize when one has done a profoundly good job.”

“I...” Harry could hardly process everything that was happening. He shoved his hands in his pockets to hide the fact that they were shaking. “I mean...I know I did okay.”

“The way that you must have spoken and conducted yourself last night, Harry, far exceeded what could be considered merely okay. I must say, when Augusta told me you were doing well in your lessons, I never imagined you had made such profound progress. I am so incredibly proud of you, Harry. But more importantly, my dear boy, *you* should be proud of *yourself*.”

The former headmaster and headmistresses were all shouting their praises as well, but Harry blocked them out. He was sure his face was red with embarrassment. His breath was coming out in short bursts. Dumbledore gave him one last encouraging smile, and then stood back up and turned away before Harry could die from awkwardness. “And now Harry, I think it’s time we got you settled in at Godric’s Hollow.”

“Godric’s Hollow? Is that where you live?” Harry asked. Dumbledore nodded as he grabbed a magenta hat with sparkling stars sewn around the edges. “How are we getting there, sir? We can’t apparate out of Hogwarts, can we?”

“You’re quite right, we can’t apparate. However, the wards do nothing to prevent travelling by phoenix tail feather.” The headmaster let out a little whistle, and Fawkes flew over to the desk with a little coo. “Now hold on tight, Harry,” Dumbledore warned. “I’m afraid this feels a little strange.”

Harry gripped his trunk handle in one hand and Fawkes’s tail in the other, while Dumbledore took hold as well. A moment later the three of them were encased in brilliant red and gold flames. Then, the office stood empty.

Chapter End Notes

I'll try to update again around the New Year. In the meantime, thank you all so much for your kind words!

Welcome Home

Chapter Notes

This chapter gets very dark. I apologize in advance. Mentions of torture and scenes with a very dark tone.

**This Chapter was edited on April 6, 2020.

One moment, there was a peaceful little playground. It was empty, save for the chilly winter breeze that passed through the gates. The swing set was frosted with icicles and the see-saw was weighted down with mounds of snow. Everything was quiet.

The next moment, a roar of red and gold fire erupted in the middle of the clearing. A scrawny teenager, a brightly dressed old man, and a stunning songbird all appeared out of nowhere. The vibrant flames shot out a final burst of light, the songbird let out a loud warble, and then the creature disappeared, taking the fire and the suitcase with it. The two figures were left in silence.

“Well, that was better than apparition,” Harry conceded. His fingers and toes still felt tingly from the odd sensation of being engulfed in magical warmth, but at least he didn’t feel like retching. Once he checked that flames hadn’t left any marks or burns, Harry looked around at their new surroundings. They appeared to be in a bland muggle suburb. “Wait, do you live here, sir?”

It didn’t look at all like what Harry had imagined. As they made their way down the snowy path out of the park, Dumbledore chuckled. “I certainly don’t live here, Harry, no.” He opened a small gate that led out of the park and onto the plain suburban street. “Are you not familiar with this place?”

As Harry stepped out onto the icy street, the neighborhood was instantly recognizable. In fact, the only reason he hadn’t immediately known where he was, was probably because it had been years since he had seen these houses covered in snow. “Privet Drive? Why are we here, sir? I thought you said I never had to go back?”

“I promised you that you did not ever have to return to the Dursleys, and I still stand by that promise. You see, your relatives are out of town at the moment, so I thought now would be a good time for you to come and collect anything that you may have left at the house. That way, you need not return later. Besides, you might be interested to see how much things have changed since you left.”

“Nothing ever changes at the Dursley’s.” Harry scuffed his shoes through the snow, in no hurry to return to Number 4. “It’s always exactly...” But then Harry saw the house, or at

least, what was left of it. The roof was missing half its shingles. All the windows were boarded up. An enormous hole in the side of the living room was covered with blue tarpaulin. “What happened? Did the Death Eaters...”

“Oh no, not to worry, Harry.” Dumbledore was quick to reassure him, but Harry was already running down the street toward the wrecked building. “This had nothing to do with Voldemort or his followers.” Harry could barely hear the headmaster over the rushing wind, the pounding in his heart, the crunching of his feet in the snow. “Your relatives are all perfectly safe!”

Harry stopped when he reached the front yard. Upon closer inspection, it was clear that all the windows had been blown out by something. The front door was missing, as well. A thick piece of plywood had been nailed up to cover the threshold. Harry could make out dark scorch marks around the door. “Was there a fire, sir?” Harry called back, as the older man caught up at a leisurely pace. “Are you sure they’re ok?”

“All three of them are in perfectly good health, although they were rather flustered when I saw them.”

“You saw them?” Harry was still craning his neck, trying to see inside the house through the boarded windows. There were no lights on inside and everything looked still and dark. “Sir, what happened? When did you see them?”

“Well, that is quite a story.” Dumbledore waved his wand, and the tarp protecting the living room wall was pulled aside so that Harry could look in. “As you know, I have quite a few protective spells and alarms set up around this area. Most of them were deactivated when the Blood Wards fell last week, but I did keep a few going, just in case the Death Eaters decided to target your former guardians. So, as you can imagine, I was quite concerned when all the remaining alarms went off a few days ago, just after dinner.”

Harry stepped inside what was left of the living room. His shoes were caked in snow and mud, and he was vaguely aware that his aunt would be furious with him for bringing it into the house. Aunt Petunia had always screamed at him for not wiping off his shoes properly, even when it had been Dudley who tracked mud inside the house. However, it probably didn’t matter now, considering the state of everything. Even with the meager light shining through the hole in the wall, it was clear that some mud and snow wasn’t going to make things any worse.

The pristine carpet, that Harry must have vacuumed a hundred times over the years, was singed and covered in soot. The walls were completely blackened and cracked. The many pictures of Dudley that had once lined the mantelpiece, were completely shattered. Half of them lay discarded on the floor. Uncle Vernon’s prized television, twice the size the neighbor’s, which Harry had never been allowed to watch, lay in a heap of melted plastic. Finally, the fancy designer couch that Petunia had been so proud of, which Harry had never been allowed to sit on because his aunt was sure he’d get it dirty, was smashed and lying in a pile of splintered wood and half-charred fabric.

Harry could barely wrap his head about what he was seeing. “But I thought you said it wasn’t the Death Eaters?”

“Oh no, it turned out to be something much more destructive.” Despite the words, Harry noticed a pleasant smile on Dumbledore’s face. “I arrived on the street just moments later with Minerva and Severus. I even called Kingsley and Alastor to meet us here, just in case. However, you can imagine my surprise when I did not find any wizards around, Death Eaters or otherwise. Instead, I found your very frustrated relatives trying to put out several small fires, while an entire case of Weasley Wizzbangs continued to set themselves off around the house.”

“Fred and George’s fireworks?” Harry looked around at the wreckage in a whole new light. He took note of the scorch marks and the exploded end tables. “But who set them off?”

“Ah, I wondered that myself.” Dumbledore led Harry out of the living room and through the threshold into the kitchen. With the flick of a wand, a few lights appeared and followed them as they went, allowing Harry to assess the damage. The kitchen was possibly worse than the living room. All of the Dursley’s top-of-the-line appliances were completely destroyed. The pantry full of food, that Harry had never been allowed to take, was now full of splintered wood, broken shelves, and spilt crumbs. “It seems that your cousin managed to get ahold of a box of Weasley merchandise. However, when I asked where he found such a thing, he claimed he could not remember.”

Harry frowned. He certainly wouldn’t have left something like that at the Dursley’s house. Had Fred and George mailed it to his relatives?

The two of them made their way into the formal dining room, where the Dursleys had once hosted the Masons to try and get an important drill contract. The room was almost unrecognizable, with the table, chairs, and light fixture in pieces. “I still don’t quite understand, sir.”

“Ah yes, I also wasn’t sure how so much destruction could happen in such a short time. When I questioned your cousin on what exactly he did with the products, he admitted that he knew that they were fireworks and other magical products.” Dumbledore led him back around to the entryway, which was also blackened with soot. “Young Dudley admitted, after some prodding, that he did know that the products had the potential to be dangerous. So, according to his logic, he had decided to mitigate this risk by setting off every single thing in the entire box, all at once. Apparently, in his mind, that would mean that if the products turned out to be particularly dangerous, the danger would be over more quickly.”

Harry was about to comment on this tremendous lack of good judgement, when suddenly he was struck dumb by what he saw in front of him. His cupboard under the stairs. Or at least, a space where there had once been a cupboard under the stairs. The door, which had once kept him locked away for days, was completely ripped off its hinges and lay several feet away. The entire side of the staircase was nothing but a big, gaping hole. The stairs themselves sagged down on one side, supported by nothing. Whatever had been left inside that horrible space, was nothing but dust and charcoal. Apparently, as if by some divine retribution, a particularly powerful firework must have entered the cupboard and exploded in a blaze of glory.

The corners of Harry’s lips began to pull upward. “Sir, you’re sure the Dursleys are ok? They weren’t hurt?”

“Several other products did hit them,” Dumbledore admitted. “A couple tickling jinxes, a tap-dancing hex, and so forth. By the time we managed to get things calmed down, your relatives were several shades of purple and orange, their clothes were full of itching powder, your aunt had duck feet, your cousin had an extra set of arms, and your uncle could only speak Gnomish. However, we managed to sort them out good as new, except for their hair. It seems that something in that box vanished all their hair away, so they’ll just have to grow their hair back the old-fashioned way.”

Harry tried to imagine what Dudley would look like without the spot of blonde on top of his head, or what Vernon would look like without his moustache and thick eyebrows, or Aunt Petunia without her tight curls. It would be quite a sight.

He had a pretty good view of the whole downstairs from here. He could see the demolished living room, the annihilated dining room, and of course, the gutted staircase. “So, Dudley blew up the house?” Harry let out a long sigh. He smiled. He felt free and relaxed in a way it hadn’t felt in ages.

“Yes, that seems to be the case.” Dumbledore was also smiling.

Suddenly, Harry realized that his feet had lifted up from the ground. Dumbledore was levitating both of them over the mangled stairs. Harry watched them drift slowly through the air. “So, how angry were they? I bet Uncle Vernon went spare.”

“Ah yes, your uncle had quite a lot to say once his language was restored.” Dumbledore barely swiped his wand and they both touched softly onto the upper landing. “He seemed quite determined to explain to me how this was entirely your fault, and my fault, and the fault of all of wizard-kind. He was also quite adamant that any costs to repair the damage would be covered by me personally, or by Hogwarts school, for some reason. Had he known about your vaults at Gringotts, Harry, I’m sure he would have demanded they be emptied.”

They walked down the upper hallway past his aunt and uncle’s bedroom. Harry was not surprised to see that it was also completely ruined. “You don’t really have to pay for all this do you? Am I supposed to pay for it?”

“I informed your uncle that the Order would be happy to assist in removing the fireworks and putting out any remaining fires. However, seeing as it was his own son who set off everything, he would have to pay for the repairs himself.”

Dudley’s room was the worst. His state-of-the-art electronics, his fancy new computer, his shelves upon shelves of toys were all gone forever.

Dumbledore continued his explanations while they explored. “Since then, your aunt and uncle have sent me several amusing letters about my responsibility to them. It has been quite fascinating to read what they think I owe them. Although, I do appreciate that your uncle felt the need to send me a copy of the full estimate from the contractor on what it will cost to repair all these damages. I sent him back a note thanking him for keeping me informed, and wished him well coming up with the money to cover such an expense. I suspect your cousin will not be getting nearly as many Christmas gifts as usual this year.”

When they reached the end of the hall, Harry noticed that the door to his bedroom was still locked shut. Uncle Vernon must have kept it locked even while Harry was away, just in case Harry's freakishness were to leak out. With another wave of Dumbledore's wand, the locks undid themselves.

"Where are the Dursleys now, sir?" Harry asked, grasping the door handle.

"I believe they are staying with your uncle's sister. I'm not entirely unfeeling. I did offer to arrange for them to stay with an Order member if they needed shelter, but they seemed very uninterested in such an opportunity."

Harry took a steadying breath before he peered inside his old bedroom. As soon as he saw what was inside, his jaw dropped. The bed was still there. The sparse furniture was all in one piece. The floorboards were undisturbed. Even the glass in the small window stood unbroken. "There was no damage in here?"

"Hmm." Dumbledore looked around with the same, pleasant smile. "It seems not. All those thick locks must have kept the fireworks out."

Harry laughed out loud at the irony of it all. The Dursleys had always refused to leave Harry alone at the house. Uncle Vernon was convinced that if they left him by himself, there would be no home for them to return to. Yet, this is what happened as soon as Harry was gone for good.

"Yes, it's funny how life works out sometimes." Dumbledore probably didn't need to use Legilimency to know what Harry was thinking. "I would have told you about all of this sooner, but I didn't want you to worry, especially with your mid-terms. Now that things have sorted themselves out, I felt you should see what has been going on while you were away."

"Yeah." Harry took a moment to calm down his laughter. "You were right, sir. It is nice to see what's changed."

"Was there anything you wanted to pack up before we leave, Harry?"

He looked around at the almost empty room. There was nothing here but Dudley's hand-me-down clothes, his secondhand toys, and other broken things. "No sir, there's nothing here I want to take with me. I'm done with this place now."

Dumbledore nodded, and reached out his arm for Harry to take. "Very good, my dear boy. Let us leave then." Harry was more than ready to leave.

When Draco stepped off the Hogwarts Express, his mother was there to greet him like always. She had lost weight, and her complexion was paler than usual, but he knew better than to express his concern while they were still in such a public place.

It wasn't until they apparated into the Manor's grounds that he was able to speak candidly. "Mother, are you alright? What's happened?"

“I’m perfectly fine, little dragon. I don’t want you worrying about me. You must protect yourself now.”

Draco frowned at those words. It was only then that he realized they had apparated to the very edge of the Manor grounds, instead of the front garden like usual. “Why are we here?” he asked. They were barely outside of the dense forest that marked the edge of the property, the same forest where Fenrir Greyback and his pack were lying low. “You know I can apparate us directly inside with this bracelet?”

“If I had wanted us to enter the Manor directly, we would have taken the floo.” She led him down the snowy path, away from the close-knit trees. He could see the Manor in the distance, but it was going to be quite a trek if they were walking all the way there. “The Dark Lord wants to see you as soon as you return,” his mother explained. “So, I am taking you to him directly.”

“I see.” They walked past an oyster shell fountain, clammed up for the winter. The landscaping was quite sparse this far from the main gardens. Draco could see the Quidditch Pitch in the distance, but he looked away almost immediately. He didn’t want to be reminded of that place. Apparently, the Dark Lord was still using it to watch his snake hunt down muggles. “So, we’re taking the long route, it seems.”

“Nonsense.” Despite the fact that his mother was taking him on a direct path to their master, she was sauntering along as slowly as a typical funeral march. “I just thought it would be nice to stroll through the gardens on the way, since the weather has been so nice lately.”

Draco let out an indignant huff. He could see his breath in the air. It had been drizzling most of the week, and the cloudy sky could let loose again at any moment. “Oh yes,” he rolled his eyes. “Who wouldn’t want to enjoy this biting, frigid weather? Or these dried up, frozen plants?”

“Indeed.” They walked without a word as the path changed from snow-covered dirt to dry red brick. No matter how slowly they walked, however, they would eventually arrive at the Manor. It was his mother who finally interrupted the unbearable silence. “Did you happen to see the paper this morning?”

“Are you referring to the article about Harry or the one about me?”

“Oh, are we calling him Harry now? How interesting. However, I was referring to the article about you of course. The Dark Lord has read it as well, I believe.”

Draco cringed. He knew his mother would always read the Society Pages, but he had hoped the Dark Lord didn’t read those columns. He should be able to justify his date with Granger. He could explain that he had only taken her because she was Harry’s friend. After all, Draco had been instructed to make friends with Harry by whatever means necessary. However, he really didn’t like the idea of having to stand before the Dark Lord and explain his dating choices.

“Is he angry?”

“Hard to say.”

“Did he mention it at all?”

“Not to me.”

“Then, how do you know he read it?”

“He always reads the paper. I believe he reads every word. After he read this morning’s copy, he said that he wanted to see you the moment you arrive.” His mother gave him a meaningful look. “Which is why I’m taking you straight to the Manor.”

They drifted back into silence. It was technically possible that the Dark Lord hadn’t seen that particular article, or perhaps he wanted to discuss something else. However, it did not bode well that he wanted to see Draco immediately after reading the paper. Their pace had slowed to almost a crawl, and yet they both knew they couldn’t stop walking entirely. They had to continue toward the Manor; the place that used to be home.

“Mother, in case I don’t get the chance later, I suppose I should tell you something.”

“You know you can tell me anything, little dragon.”

“I only took the Granger girl because she was Harry’s friend. I don’t have any romantic feelings toward her. You see, I’m not interested...I don’t like...Well the thing is...”

“It’s alright Draco,” she interrupted. “I am your mother, and you are my son. That means that I’ll always love you, no matter who you love. Oh, and don’t worry about Blaise. I smoothed things over with his mother, so you two should be able to work things out. Although, I’m afraid he still can’t come to the party.”

“Blaise and I aren’t even...never mind. Thank you, Mother.”

He didn’t say anything more after that. In fact, neither of them said anything for the rest of their walk, which seemed to go on forever, and yet ended far too soon. When they finally reached the front porch, Draco’s cheeks were almost burning with the biting cold and his nose had gone numb. He was almost relieved to reach for the front door handle, but his mother stopped him at the last moment. “Wait, dear. Before you go in, you should probably take that thing off.” She pointed to his chest.

Draco looked down to see the shiny new badge that Granger had given him on the train. It read: S.P.E.W. “Oh, yes, I almost forgot about that. A lot of things have changed since the summer.”

Harry gasped when they landed once again on solid ground. At least he was becoming more adjusted to apparition. This time it only took him about a minute before his stomach felt settled enough for him to assess his surroundings.

Before him was a low garden wall, made with dark grey stone. The wrought iron gate was fashioned with intricate griffons, lions, and phoenixes. Leading up to the gate was a wide cobblestone path, which was where Harry and Dumbledore had landed. Beyond the garden wall, Harry couldn't see anything but dense trees. "Where's the house, sir?"

Dumbledore chuckled. "Turn around, Harry."

As Harry began to turn, his eyes caught on the path itself, on the random colors and grooves. While the little walkway may have once been cobblestone, someone had since replaced over half the original stones with decorative bricks and plaques and carved pieces. One brick had a child-like drawings of a chicken painted on it. Another had the words "Thank you for all your support" carved in golden lettering. There were several steppingstones with phrases like "Bless This Home" and "Greetings from the Hopkins Family." There were hundreds of little colored pebbles set into the path, as well, which was what originally caught his attention.

The brickwork had a very crowded feel to it. It seemed Dumbledore had been given so many carved stones with "Thank-you" notes and hand-painted bricks and commemorative stonework plaques that his front path could hardly contain them all.

It took Harry a moment to finally pull his eyes away from the stonework, and then his attention was drawn almost immediately to the yard itself.

The front garden, surrounding the path, gave off a similar feeling of being overly full. There were almost too many things to draw the eye. Harry wasn't sure if the large frog topiaries were simply swaying in the wind, or if they were actually dancing. The enormous jade statue of a dragon was blinking slowly at Harry and huffing out puffs of smoke. Several pixies where crowded around a small ring of standing stones. A large wooden trellis had thick vines slithering up the side, motioning for him to come closer. Finally, Harry's eyes landed on a scarecrow with a huge smile stitched into its face. There were six crows sitting on it.

"What's wrong with your scarecrow, sir? It doesn't seem to be doing its job."

"It's not actually a scarecrow, Harry. It is a soothe-crow. It is meant to attract crows."

"Why?"

"I didn't think to ask. It was a gift from a Raven Queen I met many decades ago in Estonia. I suppose I could have put it away, but it's attached to many pleasant memories. Besides, the local birds seem quite taken with it, and I hate to disappoint."

After another few moments glancing at a statue of a House Elf playing a panflute, a birdbath filled with bubbling purple slime, and croquet set that seemed to be playing itself; Harry finally tore his eyes away from the garden. Before he could get distracted by any other peculiarities, he forced his attention to the house at the end of the path.

It wasn't a particularly large home; certainly not a castle or manor. But it wasn't small either, more like a fine Tudor cottage. There must have been at least three stories, but it was hard to tell exactly, because the roof was so steep, and it was gabled at different heights and angles.

If the front lawn was full of so many wondrous things, Harry couldn't wait to see what the building itself contained. "Can we go inside?"

"This is your home as well now, Harry. Why don't you lead the way?"

Harry practically flew to the stone entryway and tugged at the creaking, wooden door. As soon as he was through the threshold, Harry jerked to a standstill. He wasn't quite sure what to look at first. His school trunk was waiting for him in the entrance room. However, the room also held...everything and anything he could possibly imagine.

Dumbledore had told Harry that he mostly used to house to store his things; that he didn't spend much time actually living here. As soon as Harry saw the inside for himself, he could certainly believe it.

Every available wall space that Harry could see was full of shelves, and every shelf was stacked almost beyond capacity. Books seemed to be the main thing occupying the shelves. There were dozens of bookcases and cabinets and display cases, none of which seemed to be a part of any matching set, or even the same color or style. The main theme of Dumbledore's interior design was to provide as much shelf space as possible for the absurd number of books. Harry wondered if this is what Hermione would see if she ever looked into the Mirror of Erised.

As he stepped inside to get a closer look, Harry was able to get a better idea of what else occupied the shelves, besides the old tomes. Several strange objects and doodads had been set between the leather covers. To Harry's right, there were more shelves mounted to the wall, leading up the stairs. Harry could make out a peacock feather quill, a necklace made of dragon teeth, and a wind-up golden erumpent. When Harry tried to run his finger along the intricate detail of the figurine, the miniature erumpent pricked him with its tiny golden horn.

"Hey!" Harry glared at the little toy, which was now stomping its metallic feet. Yet Harry's attention was quickly pulled away by even more wondrous things. "What is all this stuff, sir?"

"Careful," Dumbledore warned as he led him toward the sitting room. "I'm afraid some of these things have a mind of their own." The next room had a few overstuffed seats and a fireplace, but otherwise it was just as crammed with ledges and cabinets to store more books. Harry wondered if there were more books here, in Dumbledore's house, than in the Hogwarts library. "You see Harry, I've travelled to so many places, and read so many books, and been given so many gifts; I've ended up with a lot of...things."

"You've ended up with everything!" Harry was overwhelmed but also deeply impressed. Some of the items on display looked very luxurious and expensive. Others appeared extremely old and probably full of historical significance. Other things seemed to be from some distant, exotic lands. Harry also counted at least five cases full of nothing but trophies.

"It has gotten a bit overwhelming," Dumbledore conceded. "I've lived a long life, Harry. And I have to admit, it's been an interesting ride. This house is full of trophies and commemorations, parting gifts and thank you gifts, souvenirs and memorabilia, memories

and nostalgia. I probably should have sorted through all these things long ago, but I never seem to have the time. I certainly don't have the time now."

Harry stopped to examine another shelf, this one near the front windows. There was a heavy stack of books and then a small stone tablet chiseled with ancient writing. Beyond that, there was an intricate silver clock with thirteen hands, all moving in different directions, which pointed toward beautifully painted pictures of different fish. Harry couldn't imagine the purpose of the fish clock, but he quickly moved along. At the end of the shelf was a fancy case with three different perfumes on display. "Why do you have perfume?"

"They were a gift from Fifi Flammel, Nicolas's distant niece, and a very famous robe designer. She has made some custom robes for me over the years, and I've always encouraged her to be a bit more experimental than her usual clientele. She also makes lady's perfume. These are a set of custom scents that she thought I would particularly enjoy."

Harry picked up the first bottle. "May I?" At Dumbledore's nod, he sprayed the first one on the curtains and then took a whiff. The first one smelled like sherbet lemon. The second one smelled like fresh rain. The final one smelled like a mix of acid and sulfur. "Ugh! What was that?" Harry coughed and quickly sprayed the lemon one a few more times to cover it up. "Why does it smell like that?"

"That, Harry, is the smell of dragon's blood. Did you know, my dear boy, that there are twelve different uses for dragon's blood? I've worked with it extensively."

"And do you actually like that smell?"

"Not even a little. I do believe the gift was Fifi's idea of a joke. I keep it around in case anyone, like yourself, decides they want to get a whiff of Fifi Flammel's custom scents. I also enjoy a good joke."

Harry gave him the stink eye, but he wasn't actually upset. If anything, he was feeling a bit overwhelmed. Just one shelf contained such a variety of fascinating and amazing things. And this was just one shelf out of dozens, hundreds, maybe even thousands. Who knew how many more rooms were full of treasures?

"Your house is incredible, sir. I hope, some day, I have a house like this." He hoped he lived a life half as interesting.

"You do, Harry. This is also your home now, remember? Come along upstairs. I'll show you to your room."

They made their way up the stairs, past Dumbledore's bedroom, and further down the hall. Harry tried to catch sight of as many strange objects as possible. There was a black and white harlequin mask which Dumbledore must have worn to some long-forgotten masquerade ball. There was a comb carved out of blue coral, which Harry suspected had once belonged to a mermaid. Just a few shelves down, there was a huge, shimmering diamond, nestled on a velvet pillow. "Sir, is that a real diamond?" It was about the size of Harry's eye.

"Oh that thing?" Dumbledore chuckled. "Well, what do you think, Harry?"

Harry paused. Of course it was fake. How would Dumbledore even afford such a large diamond? On the other hand, it could have been a gift. Once Harry thought about it for a moment, he realized it must be real. After all, why would Dumbledore put a fake diamond on display in such a prominent way? But then Harry remembered that Dumbledore was exactly the sort of person who would decorate his house with huge, gawdy, fake jewels.

“Actually, sir, it wouldn’t really surprise me either way.”

Dumbledore seemed to enjoy his response. “Well, to be perfectly honest Harry, I also have no idea if it’s real. It was a gift from an old goblin some years back. He was certainly the type who would happily swindle me with a fake jewel, but on the other hand, he may have wanted to make a point by giving me a real one. At the time, it seemed rude to check the authenticity. But at this point, I sort of like the mystery. If you do manage to figure it out, please don’t spoil it for me.”

Harry nodded and they continued their journey through the second level. Dumbledore trotted along at his usual brisk pace, and Harry tried not to trip over himself as he kept getting distracted by everything around him.

It wasn’t long before Dumbledore came to an abrupt stop. Harry almost barreled into him, with his eyes darting every which way, but he managed to catch himself in the nick of time. After he apologized, Harry peered through the threshold. He was trying to get a peek inside, naturally assuming that this was the bedroom Dumbledore had mentioned. However, this room didn’t look anything like a bedroom. There were more bookshelves, of course, but also several pedestals displaying ancient artifacts. There was also an enormous desk cluttered with paperwork and curios.

“Now, my dear boy, this is my personal study,” Dumbledore explained. Harry leaned in even closer to try and get a better look. “While you are here, Harry, you are welcome to any room in the house.” Harry took a step forward, but Dumbledore tugged at his sleeve, urging him back out of the room.

“However,” the man continued, “I’m afraid there are some incredibly dangerous trinkets in this room. There are Dark artefacts and cursed objects and other very deadly items that I have been studying. If you do enter here, you must be extraordinarily careful not to touch or disturb anything. In fact, it’s probably best if you just stay out of this room unless there’s a pressing need.”

Harry nodded enthusiastically and took another step away from the entrance. The idea of cursed and deadly objects did not sound welcoming. “Yeah, I’ll probably just stay out of there altogether.” It wouldn’t be hard with so many other things to see and do.

Dumbledore smiled and nodded before continuing to the last door in the cluttered hallway. At the man’s behest, Harry opened the door and finally got a look at his new bedroom.

Just like the rest of the house, the walls were lined with crowded shelves. Also following the general theme, none of the furniture seemed to match, but it all looked well-made and upholstered with a wide range of fabrics and colors. As Harry crept in to get a better look at

some of the items inside, he noticed that there was one large bookshelf that was completely empty.

“Sir, your shelf is empty. What used to be there?”

“There didn’t used to be anything there, Harry. It’s a brand new bookcase. I asked the elves to add another one in here.”

Harry frowned as he ran his finger over the empty ledges. “Why? What are you planning on putting here?”

Dumbledore gave him an indulgent smile. “I’m not planning to put anything there. That bookcase is for you to fill. This is your room now, remember.”

Harry bit his lip. “But I don’t have anything. I certainly don’t have anything that would deserve a place on a shelf.” He didn’t have any rare or exotic gifts from famous or powerful people. He didn’t have any memorabilia or souvenirs from ages past.

“Are you so sure about that, Harry? I seem to recall Hagrid telling me that he once gave you an album of family photos. I’m sure that is more than worthy of a place of honor. And I’m sure you’ve been given any number of well-intentioned gifts over the years. But it’s no matter. Feel free to display whatever you like.” Dumbledore gestured out toward the hallway. “If you’d prefer, you’re welcome to borrow items from another room to display in here. As I said, I never got the chance to sort anything, so I certainly wouldn’t mind if some things move from one room to another.” The man gave the empty bookcase a doubtful look, as if he suddenly wasn’t so sure of his decision. “I wanted you to feel comfortable here. But if it bothers you...”

“It’s perfect,” Harry was quick to reassure him. “This whole house is more amazing than anything I could have imagined.”

“Thank you, Harry. I’m afraid I must leave you now.”

“What?” Harry could hardly believe the abrupt turn. “But we’ve only just arrived.”

Dumbledore pulled out his wand and Harry’s trunk, which had been downstairs, appeared at the foot of his new bed. “I’m so sorry I can’t stay to give you the full tour, but I have a tremendous amount of work that needs to be seen to. I’ll try to return for dinner, but if not, I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“I might not see you until tomorrow!?” Harry tried to keep the shock and disappointment out of his voice, but he didn’t think he managed. He had really been looking forward to spending time with the headmaster. “What should I do in the meantime?”

“If you get bored, I did set aside some books that I thought you’d enjoy. They’re in the library.”

Harry gaped at him. “You have a library? Why?”

“Of course I have a library, Harry, where do you think I keep my...” Dumbledore’s voice trailed off, as he turned to look back at the hallway. They could see shelves stacked with books all the way around the corner and out of sight. “Hmm. Come to think of it, you may have a point. I should probably rename that room. Anyway, the house elves will point it out to you if you ask. Their names are Mipsy and Tupper. Sometimes they go off to visit with their friends in the Hogwarts kitchens, but if you call for them, they’ll come right away.”

“Ok, but what if something happens while you’re away? Who should I get ahold of? Actually, how do I get ahold of anyone while I’m here?”

“Ah yes, all excellent questions, Harry. The wards here are strong enough that you should be able to do magic without attracting the attention of the ministry. So, if you need to send a message, you can simply send me your patronus.”

“I saw Tonks do that once, sir, but I don’t really know how that works,” Harry admitted.

“Oh, it’s quite simple. First you cast a patronus. Which means, of course, that you’ll need a happy memory.”

Harry lifted his wand with a tremendous smile. It was easy to cast *Expecto Patronum* with the thought of spending his weekend at Dumbledore’s house, surrounded by reminders of the man’s extraordinary life. The silvery stag erupted from his wand and jaunted around the bedroom.

“Perfect,” Dumbledore beamed. “Then you simply whisper your message to your patronus, and then tell him who to pass the message along to.”

Harry approached his stag and leaned in to whisper a message to it. Then he stood back up. “Go tell Professor Dumbledore.” The stag cantered over to the headmaster and then Harry’s voice emitted from the apparition. “Thanks again for letting me stay, sir. I think I’ll be alright while you’re gone.”

As soon as the headmaster left, Harry immediately began unpacking his things. He may not have as many books or trinkets as Dumbledore, but he was determined to find a few precious items that could fill the shelves. Today was going to be a good day.

Draco tried to keep his mind perfectly clear. He tried to keep his attention on the snake-like man before him. Most importantly, he tried not to look at the young woman who was tied up and gagged in the corner of the room. “You wanted to see me, my Lord?”

“Indeed Draco, I’m not sure if you noticed that you made it into the newspaper.” The man was pacing before Draco, completely ignoring the captive, still whimpering over by the desk. The Dark Lord looked almost hungry, eager.

“Of course, my Lord. Even the Daily Prophet could hardly believe that a Malfoy Heir would be in the company of a filthy mudblood.” Draco heard a pitiful whine come from the young woman over by the bookcase. He tried not to notice her brown hair and tear-stained cheeks.

He tried not to notice that she had a passing resemblance for Granger. “Of course, I would be willing to stoop to any level to accomplish the task you set for me, my Lord. I have worked hard to gain the trust of Harry Potter, at your behest, even if it means cavorting with his disgusting mudblood associate.”

Draco hoped that would be enough. Maybe, if he was lucky, he wouldn’t be subjected to whatever punishment was clearly awaiting the young woman.

“Of course, Draco.” The Dark Lord strode back and forth before his enormous fireplace, barely sparing a glance to his follower, as Draco knelt before him. The man’s red eyes almost glowed in the lowlight. Whatever this was, the Dark Lord was enjoying it. “I admit, when I saw your photo next to that disgusting mudblood, I was...impressed.”

Draco almost choked. “Impressed?”

“Oh yes, Draco. To think that you would degrade yourself to such a low level, simply to carry out the task I assigned you. That shows a tremendous amount of loyalty.”

“Of course, my Lord.” Draco desperately clung to that excuse. Maybe he could get out of this situation without any punishment at all? “I am completely loyal to you. That is the only reason I would ever associate with such filth...out of my devotion to you and this task.”

“I have no doubt.” The Dark Lord ceased his pacing, but still did not turn his full attention to Draco, who was still on his knees in the middle of the floor. Instead, the man tilted his head toward the corner, as if he had only just noticed the pitiful young woman. “It seems to me, Heir Malfoy, that such impressive loyalty...should be rewarded.”

A tremendous sense of dread settled in Draco’s stomach. “My Lord, my service to you is its own reward. I do not require anything else.”

“Nonsense, Draco. What sort of ruler would I be, if I did not bestow my favor after such an obvious show of fealty?” Draco’s master finally turned to face him fully, and there was a sharp, cruel smile on that serpentine face. However, Draco knew better than to answer a rhetorical question. He simply waited for whatever horror was sure to come. “I find it only fair, Draco, that the reward befits the specific show of devotion.”

The Dark Lord stalked forward, eyes alight with sadistic glee. “Since you were so willing to publicly disgrace yourself, simply to gain Potter’s trust, I decided I would allow you the pleasure of venting your frustrations. After all, since you obviously detest mudbloods, and you only spent an evening in their filthy company as part of this task, you must be quite eager to take revenge on their kind.”

“My Lord,” Draco kept his voice and his breathing as calm and steady as possible. “I am more than capable of reigning in my emotions. I would gladly spend an evening in the company of any person if it would serve your cause.”

The Dark Lord was now only a couple feet from him. The man had to lean over to maintain eye contact. Draco was so careful to keep his mind perfectly blank. “That is why you are being rewarded, Draco. That is why I am going to give you this gift. I am going to allow you

to do to this filthy mudblood [the Dark Lord nodded toward the woman in the corner] all the things I'm sure you wish you could have done to that Granger girl." Then the man leaned in and dropped his voice to a whisper, as if the words were intimate and seductive. "Besides, my dear boy, Bellatrix tells me you need more practice with the *Cruciatus* curse."

Before Draco could form words, before he could form thoughts, the Dark Lord grabbed him by the shoulder and forcefully yanked him toward the young woman. Now that Draco was looking down on her, he realized she looked vaguely familiar. He couldn't remember her name, but he was pretty sure she had been a Hufflepuff a few years ahead of him. Had she been one of Cedric Diggory's friends? Her eyes held such fear, such desperation. Draco was sure she was hoping that he might take pity on her. That he would spare her, maybe try to save her. But there was no hope for her. There was no hope for either of them.

"Come now, Draco. You know the spell." The Dark Lord was right behind him, urging him to lift his wand. "Remember, it takes focus and intent. You will need to call forth your desire to hurt. Draw on your hatred."

At first Draco wondered if he would even be able to muster the right emotions. However, with his wand trained on the girl, with the Dark Lord whispering in his ear, he realized that he had never felt so much hatred and disgust in his entire life.

"Crucio."

"Ow!" Harry nicked his finger trying to sort through all the detritus that lined the bottom of his trunk. He had already taken out his cloak, the Marauder's Map, and the photo album of his parents, and placed them on one of the upper shelves. Since Dumbledore's shelves were full of such precious items, Harry figured he would put his most prized possessions on display.

Behind him, Harry heard a soft coo, and he turned to see Fawkes blinking at him with concern. Fawkes and Hedwig had shown up, tapping on his window, about an hour earlier. As soon as Harry let them in, Hedwig had dropped a dead mouse on the dresser, which she proceeded to eat. Fawkes, on the other hand, had gone straight for a bowl of yellow candies in the other corner of the room. They had been watching him unpack ever since.

Both birds flapped their wings in agitation when they saw the drop of blood roll down his finger. "Don't worry," Harry told them. "It's just a scratch." He turned his attention back to the trunk to figure out what he had cut himself on. When he found the shard of mirror that had once been a gift from Sirius, he considered throwing it away. But he knew he wouldn't be able to do that, not when this mirror had cost him so much. So, he placed it on the shelf with the other things.

It took another hour, but he managed to fill most of the bookcase. There was the miniature Firebolt Tonks had given him for Christmas last year. There was the broken Sneak-o-Scope Ron had gifted to him in their third year, which had tried to warn them about Scabbers so many times that it had worn itself out. There were several books from Hermione over the years. He even found a badge that displayed: "Potter Stinks." Harry almost laughed when he

found it, but he placed it in a spot of reverence next to the wooden flute he had used on Fluffy their first year. He considered some of Hermione's hand-knitted hats and socks, but he was worried Dumbledore's elves would find them and get offended, so he kept them safely in his trunk.

When he was done, Harry had to admit he did feel a bit more at home. However, there was still a lot of empty space on the lower shelves. Harry sighed. Perhaps he would take Dumbledore up on his offer to loot the rest of the house for things to put in his own room.

Since Harry had already seen the first two floors, he decided to explore the top floor. He and Dumbledore had passed a small, steep staircase on their way down the hall, and Harry was excited to find what was up there. Besides, the man had told Harry that he was welcome to explore any room of the house, and Harry was determined to see them all.

As he carefully crept up the narrow, creaking staircase, the air gradually grew thick with dust. By the time he reached the top, it was so dim he could hardly see, and he had to pull out his wand and cast Lumos. Harry didn't know how to make the glowing baubles of light that Dumbledore had made, and he didn't see any oil lamps or candles like on the floors below, and he was very sure he wasn't going to find a light switch anywhere, so he just had to hold his wand out in front of him to navigate the way forward.

It did not surprise Harry in the least that there were more books up here. It did surprise him a bit that there were dozens of ancient portraits hanging along the walls, collecting cobwebs. Harry didn't recall seeing any portraits in the rest of the house. Perhaps Dumbledore got enough commentary from portraits while he was at school, and didn't particularly want to have to deal with it on a constant basis in his home. After all, the ancient ladies and gentlemen, who had a certain familial resemblance to the headmaster, kept muttering that he should "comb your hair," "fix your collar," and "get that light out of my eyes!"

Harry hurried down the cramped hallway, past the bristling portraits, until he saw a small door that was barely open a crack. With his wand still held aloft, his heart beating with nervousness and excitement, Harry carefully pushed the door open and peered inside.

Harry almost huffed with annoyance when he found more books. Of course it was books. For a moment there, he had expected to find something remarkable. He was disappointed there was no portal to a magical kingdom with talking animals, or magical sword waiting to be pulled from a stone. Those were the sorts of things one would expect to find in Dumbledore's attic.

Instead, there were shelves and shelves of books. Harry pointed his wand tip toward the spines to try and see if there were any interesting titles. Instead of normal book titles, Harry quickly realized that all these books had very strange-sounding labels; things like "Autumn 1934," "Christmas Vacation 1897," and "The Wedding of Patrick and Druella Creswell."

Not sure what to expect, Harry pulled out a random book from the shelf, only to realize why they were labelled the way they were. These were old photo albums. Harry had stumbled across Albus Dumbledore's personal collection of old photos.

Harry quickly set the random album back on the shelf. He was torn. On the one hand, he really didn't want to pry through Dumbledore's personal affects. It felt like an enormous intrusion. On the other hand, he was so, so curious about what he might find. However, his curiosity had gotten him into trouble before, and it really was a huge breach of trust for him to rifle through Dumbledore's things while the man was away.

Harry had just decided to leave the photo albums alone, when one particular title caught his attention. "Summer 1978." That was the summer Harry's parents got married. What if there was a photo of his parents in that album? What if Dumbledore had attended the wedding? Surely, Dumbledore wouldn't begrudge Harry searching for some photos of his parents. Perhaps Harry would just look at that one album, just to check.

There it was on page seven. There was a photo of a beautiful bride with a smile as bright as the sun. She wore a crown of lilies in her long, red hair. Next to her was a handsome groom, looking like he must have downed a bottle of Felix Felicis to ever get so lucky. They both waved at Harry when they saw him, and his mother even blew him a kiss. There were a couple other photos of guests, including a photo of Dumbledore and a few other old men toasting and laughing, but everything else seemed to pale in comparison to how happy and hopeful his parents had looked on their wedding day. If only they'd known what was to come.

Harry pulled the photo from the album, along with the invitation that had been placed on the opposite page. "*You are cordially invited to the wedding of Lily Evans and James Potter.*" He would put these on his shelf.

Harry had just placed the album back where he found it, when another one caught his eye. "Hogwarts 1890 to 1895." What had Hogwarts been like back in the 1800s? Harry figured it couldn't do any harm to take a peek, and so he did.

There were several pictures of students, mostly with Gryffindor crests, although it was a little difficult to tell because these photos were all in black and white. All the photos looked a tad awkward, with the subjects giving Harry a curt nod or a polite curtsy, as he flipped through the pages. Of course, candid photos weren't really a thing back then.

There was one particular young man that appeared in almost every photo. He was taller than his peers, slim and poised, with eyes that twinkled. Even though the eyes looked grey in the colorless photos, Harry knew they were light blue. When Harry waved at the young Albus Dumbledore, the other young man winked back at him.

Another young man appeared in most of the pictures. Eventually, Harry got curious and flipped one of the photographs over to see if there were any names or descriptions on the back. He was in luck. "Albus and Elphias, 1894." It was actually a lot of fun to see a young Albus Dumbledore hanging out with his own friends in Gryffindor Tower over a hundred year ago.

Before Harry even thought about it, he reached for yet another book from that time period. He was eager to see more photos of Hogwarts, but as soon as Harry flipped through a couple pages, it became clear that these were not photos of students. Instead, there was a stern-looking woman, a humble-looking man, and two young boys, one of which was holding a

baby. Harry blushed, suddenly realizing that these must be Dumbledore's family photos. Harry quickly slammed the album closed. He had never meant to invade Dumbledore's privacy in such an inappropriate way.

Although, Harry did wonder about the three children. Professor Dumbledore had once told Harry that he had a brother who embarrassed him. Did Albus Dumbledore have another sibling? If he did, he had never mentioned it.

Harry was about to leave, when he caught sight of an album titled: "Hogwarts Graduation." Surely that wouldn't have any photos that Professor Dumbledore would feel embarrassed about. That would certainly have photos of old students.

Harry smiled when he saw all the eager young teenagers in their graduation gowns, looking happy and excited for the future. There were several photos of young Dumbledore shaking hands with different professors and researchers, and several more of him holding up all kinds of awards and plaques. Toward the end of the album, the students were wearing formal dress robes, all celebrating their big day.

The last few pages had photos of Dumbledore and his friends during the summer. This must have been how Dumbledore spent his first few months after graduation. There were a few pictures at a beach, with everyone wearing funny-looking swimsuits. There were some photos of Dumbledore and his friend, Elphias, laughing and drinking beers. Finally, there was one photo of Dumbledore and a blonde young man, with their arms slung over each other's shoulders.

Harry didn't remember seeing the blonde boy in any of the other photos, so he flipped that one over to see if it was labelled. It wasn't. Harry turned it back over and looked a bit more carefully. Young Albus Dumbledore looked so incredibly happy. He was carefree and untroubled in a way Harry had never known him. The other young man looked about as pale as Draco, but more filled-out; his body that of a beater rather than a seeker. He was definitely taller than Draco, since the photo showed him as standing neck and neck with Albus Dumbledore. And his smile reminded Harry a bit of Sirius Black, both cocky and mischievous, as if he were looking for trouble.

Harry decided to take this photo, as well. After all, he didn't have any photos of Professor Dumbledore, and he kind of liked the photo of him looking so young and full of joy. Besides, it was just a photo of Dumbledore and a random boy. If it was someone Dumbledore was close with, he would have had more photos of the young man, and this was the only one Harry could find. He was pretty sure Dumbledore wouldn't mind.

Once that was settled, Harry decided he ought to get out of the attic before anything else caught his fancy. He figured he would go find the library Dumbledore had mentioned. He was curious what books Dumbledore was kind enough to leave for him.

"Are you enjoying your gift, Draco?"

"Yes, my Lord. Thank you."

The woman was shaking on the floor, beyond words, beyond cries, beyond anything. Draco wasn't sure whether she was completely insane yet. Probably not; Aunt Bella had said that it takes a while to get your victim to that point. However, Draco wasn't sure if he had it in him to continue. He used the guise of catching his breath to give both himself and the girl a much-needed break.

"If you are finished playing with your gift, Draco, you should put an end to her. I believe you know that spell, as well."

Draco stopped breathing. He had never wanted to kill anyone; certainly not some Hufflepuff girl only a few years out of school. But perhaps it would be more merciful than letting this continue any longer?

Before he was forced to decide, the door burst open and Amycus and Alecko Carrow rushed inside. Draco hadn't seen them since that horrible breakfast. They both looked much better than they had that morning, although perhaps not fully recovered.

"My Lord!" cried Alecko. "We found him!"

"We found Mundungus," Amycus elaborated. "Or at least, we found where he's going to be."

"We've been tipping off a smuggler to get news on when that little thief will show his face again. We were clever enough to find a smuggler who had worked with Mundungus before." They were both almost radiating excitement, completely unconcerned about what they might have interrupted.

The Dark Lord, by contrast, was growing visibly annoyed. "Did you two come in here to inform me of Mundungus Fletcher's whereabouts, or did you come here to brag about your cleverness?" As he spoke, he grabbed Draco's arm, almost absentmindedly, and pressed his wand to the Dark Mark, sending out a summons.

Amycus flustered under the Dark's Lord's ire, but quickly recovered. "According to our source, Mundungus is planning to meet him in a muggle pub in East London tomorrow. We plan to go there and bring him to you."

The Dark Lord narrowed his serpentine eyes. "You two have already proven to me that you are incapable of capturing the thief. Last time he escaped by hissing at you."

Just then, Severus strode into the room, clearly answering the summons. "My Lord?"

"Severus, the Carrows are going to obtain Mundungus Fletcher for me tomorrow. Go with them and make sure they do not bungle this matter as they did before. Remember, I want him alive and in a condition where he can answer my questions. Perhaps we will finally get an answer to where my belongings have gone is that blasted Black house."

Draco blinked. "The house elf is probably holding onto all the valuables."

"I don't care about some filthy house elf," the Dark Lord scowled.

“Of course, my lord. I only know that Potter gave the creature a locket and some other valuables to watch over. I’m sure anything that belongs to you...”

Before Draco could finish his sentence, he felt his feet lift up from the ground as the Dark Lord hoisted him to eye level by the scruff of his collar. Apparently the man was too angry to even use magic. His eyes were bright with vengeance, but his voice was quiet venom. “What did you just say?”

“Potter. He told me that he gave the elf some Black family heirlooms to watch over, like a locket that refused to open.”

The Dark Lord raised his wand. “Avada Kedavra.”

Harry jerked up when he heard a loud thud. He realized he must have dozed off while reading in the comfortable chair by the fire, but the sound of the heavy book hitting the floor must have woken him up.

Dumbledore had left him a book on mischievous and creative defensive spells, a biography of Godric Gryffindor, a book of humorous tales about quidditch mishaps, and a beginner’s guide to Gobbledygook. The man had even left a few newspaper clippings, containing the articles by Cynthia Roscoe, the ones Harry had claimed he’d read.

Harry had spent the afternoon catching up on the articles he should have read ages ago, before rewarding himself with: “Eyes off the Snitch: Hilarious Stories of Some of the Worst Seekers in Quidditch History.” It was a fun book, but it must not have been fun enough to keep him awake.

Harry yawned and stretched, only to realize he wasn’t alone in the room. He almost fell out of the chair when he noticed two large pairs of eyes staring up at him. However, he calmed down immediately when his brain finally caught up with the fact that the eyes belonged to two house elves.

“Master Harry be awake?” asked one of the elves. They were both dressed in clean uniforms made of tea towels, similar to the Hogwarts elves. “Master Harry be wanting dinner now? It getting late and Master Albus probably not be coming back tonight.”

“Oh, you must be Mipsy and Tupper. Er, dinner would be nice, thank you.” There was no way he was going to offer to make dinner for himself. He knew enough about house elves to know that wouldn’t go over well.

After they fed him a hearty stew, Harry went up to his room and carefully set the pictures and the wedding invitation on his bookcase. The photos looked a little silly just lying on the shelf. He would need to remember to buy picture frames for them later. For now, Harry congratulated himself on a job well done. It had been a very successful day, and he fell asleep with a huge smile on his face.

The girl's eyes didn't even shut when the green light hit her. At least her body finally stopped shaking. It took Draco a moment to remember to breathe once the Dark Lord dropped him to the ground. For just a moment there, he thought the curse might be aimed at him.

"Play time's over," the Dark Lord scowled. "Time to get to work. Amycus, Alecko; bring me Mundungus or it will be your head. I need to know if that locket is the same one I know of. Severus, contact everyone in the Order willing to talk to you. I want to know where the boy is being kept during the holidays. Draco, you will come with me. You have a letter to write."

"A letter, my Lord?" Draco was almost afraid to ask.

"For your new friend. I have made several arrangements to get Harry Potter to the Malfoy Family Soiree. You are going to send him one final invitation, and this time, I am going to make sure that the message is so enticing he will hardly be able to refuse."

When Lord Voldemort fell asleep that night, he did not recognize the room he dreamed of. It was strange, usually in his shared dreams with Harry, they met at Hogwarts. But if this was a room at the school, the Dark Lord did not remember it. The walls were overly full, with shelves and cabinets of every variety, stuffed to the brim with books, trinkets, antiques, and trophies. The color scheme was a combination of royal blue, pastel pink, and mustard yellow. It was almost physically painful to look at.

Lord Voldemort was already in a foul mood. He was furious that his followers were so extraordinarily incompetent. He was furious that the Malfoy boy was so pathetic, that the only way he was able to garner Harry's trust was to seduce the boy's filthy mudblood friend. He was furious that even when his followers managed to acquire useful information, they didn't have the wherewithal to share it with him. But most of all, he was furious that Harry Potter was still not within his grasp.

It had been months of faffing about. Months of excuses. Months of Severus and Draco insisting they would be able to deliver the boy...soon. Soon, but not quite yet. Always insisting they were...close. Close, but not quite ready.

He was ready to burn Malfoy Manor to rubble with his fury, and yet when he saw the boy that night in his dreams, his fury faded to nothing. All emotions and reasoning seemed to dissipate, and he was left with one pervading thought: soon. Soon the boy would be his. Soon he would have everything.

Harry seemed rivetted by the shelves of rubbish, but Lord Voldemort sneered at the disorder around him. "What is this place?"

Harry startled at the sound, but immediately relaxed when he recognized the Dark Lord's teenage form. "Oh, it's you again." He turned back to a display case featuring some magical encyclopedias. "Don't let all the books fool you. Apparently, this room is not the library. I think it's the parlor, or maybe the drawing room? I didn't exactly get a formal tour."

Lord Voldemort frowned and picked up a hideous silver filigree pillow from a turquoise chaise lounge. With the countless ancient tomes and displays full of priceless magical artifacts, combined with abominable colors and tacky little souvenirs; the room looked like a cross between a distinguished museum and a brothel for circus clowns. "What decent person would have a drawing room that looks like...this?"

"Professor Dumbledore."

The Dark Lord dropped the pillow and wiped his hands on his robes. Dumbledore could have sat on that. Even if it was a dream, he still felt contaminated. "Why would you possibly dream about Dumbledore's house? Why would you even know what it looks like?"

Harry simply smirked at his reaction. "It's the holidays, and he brought me here to stay with him."

All joy at seeing the boy vanished in an instant. "Dumbledore kidnapped you? He's keeping you at his house?"

Harry looked just as confused and horrified as the Dark Lord himself probably appeared. "Kidnapped? What are you talking about? He invited me to stay. Actually, I believe he adopted me. So, I'm not exactly visiting, so much as living here as his ward."

"He what!?" Before he realized what he was doing, Lord Voldemort had Harry by the elbow and was marching him out the room. "You have to leave. You have to leave immediately."

"Where do you think we're going to go?" Harry didn't put up a fight, as he was dragged into the next room full of Russian nesting dolls, musical instruments, tea sets, and yet more books. "You know this is a dream, right? We can't actually go anywhere."

Lord Voldemort faltered, but of course, the boy was right. He had panicked and foolishly tried to frog march the boy out a dream. The Dark Lord took a deep breath. He needed to stay calm and think rationally. Like always, he felt much calmer in his dreams with Harry than he had felt in years.

"Harry, you need to listen to me." He placed one hand on each of the boy's shoulders and looked him right in the eye. Their faces were so close he could hear Harry's breath hitch. "You are not safe here. Albus Dumbledore cannot be trusted. The moment you wake up, you need to get out of that house. That man will use you as he sees fit, and then he will kill you."

Harry's mouth opened wider and wider the more he listened. By the time the Dark Lord got to the end of his warning, Harry burst out in laughter. "I'm sorry," he choked and spluttered. "I think you may have gotten Dumbledore and Voldemort confused. It's Voldemort who wants to kill me."

"No!" He shook the boy's shoulders until the young man settled down and stopped laughing. "Listen to me, Harry, Voldemort will not kill you. Things have changed. You may have some political disagreements with the Dark Lord, but he will keep you safe. He will make sure Dumbledore can't hurt you."

Harry's expression grew more incredulous with each word. "No, you've definitely got Dumbledore and Voldemort mixed up. It's Voldemort who wants to kidnap me, and Dumbledore who's protecting me."

"No, Harry, you cannot trust Dumbledore! He's deceiving you. He is the reason you were forced to live with that filthy muggle family. But the merciful Lord Voldemort sent Snape to investigate your living situation. You have Lord Voldemort to thank for never having to return to the Dursleys."

"No," Harry stepped back and shook his shoulders to dislodge Lord Voldemort's grip. "I had to live with the Dursleys because Voldemort killed my parents. Dumbledore was the one who..." He broke off with a sigh. "You know what? I feel like we're talking in circles. Either way, you're insane if you think for one moment that I would ever trust Voldemort over Dumbledore. That's just...never going to happen."

Lord Voldemort curled his perfect lips into a fierce smile. "Never say never, Harry. Soon, my precious little soul, soon you will see who really has your best interests at heart."

Harry took another step back. "What do you mean, soon?"

A Tempting Invitation

Chapter Notes

I hope everyone is keeping safe and healthy. Best wishes to everyone in these crazy times!

****IMPORTANT UPDATE**** (From April 6, 2020)

It has been pointed out to be by a very loyal reader that there is a prominent inconsistency in the story. She pointed out that it wouldn't make sense for Draco Malfoy to tell a surprised Voldemort that Harry is the Black Heir in Chapter 20, when Dumbledore made quite a point that he was the Black Proxy (thanks to Harry Potter) back in Chapter 14.

Therefore, I have updated the following Chapters:

Chapter 12: During the final scene, in the dream sequence in Grimmauld Place, Harry lets it slip that the house actually belongs to him, thus informing Voldemort that he is the Black Heir before it is announced publicly.

Chapter 17: While drinking in the Room of Requirement, Harry tells Draco that they can thank his house elf, Kreacher, for the high quality firewhiskey. He mentions that the elf was happy to help him after he gave the elf some Black family heirlooms to watch over. Harry even asks Draco if the other boy is familiar with any Black artifact that is a locket that refuses to open, but Draco simply shrugs it off, saying that the Blacks had tons of mysterious artifacts.

Chapter 20: Instead of blurting out that Harry is the Black Heir, Draco mentions that if Voldemort is looking for something in the Black estate, he should check with the house elf, since Harry gave the elf several heirlooms to watch over, including a locket. At the Dark Lord's insistence, the boy admits that he doesn't know anything, only that Harry gave a locket to his elf to keep an eye on.

Chapter 21: Instead of being surprised by Mudungus's confession that Harry has Slytherin's Locket, it merely confirms Voldemort's suspicion that the locket in Harry's possession is, in fact, his horcrux.

When Harry opened his eyes, sunlight was streaming through the windows. A gentle tapping could be heard from the bedroom door. "Master Harry, sir. Breakfast be's ready soon. Master Albus be waiting in the dining room, sir. He's be asking if you wants to join him."

"I'll be right down."

Harry dressed in a flash and tried vaguely to smooth down his hair before he followed Mipsy to the room in question. As Harry suspected, the ‘dining room’ looked just like another library, except there was a long table with intricate carvings of satyrs and fairies around the edge and legs. When Harry asked, Dumbledore explained that the table was yet another gift, this one from a Canadian wood nymph.

As soon as he took a seat, the house elves bounded in carrying trays of bangers and mash, bubble and squeak, and eggs and beans. Harry was more than happy to help himself to food which tasted almost indistinguishable from the breakfasts he was used to in the Great Hall.

“So, professor, were you able to finish up whatever kept you so busy yesterday?”

“I certainly made progress.” Dumbledore was sprinkling cinnamon and sugar on some apple slices. Of course, the man was well known for his sweet tooth. “I’ve got a lot going on these days. There’s the war effort, of course. I’ve also been making some subtle inquiries with the members of the Committee for Magical Creatures. Hopefully, when I introduce the bill to allow magical creatures to adopt wizarding children, it will pass without notice. I’m sorry I wasn’t able to get you properly settled in yesterday. Did you manage to find anything to fill your shelves?”

“Oh yeah,” Harry was excited to tell Dumbledore about the photos he found. “I hope you don’t mind. I found a photo of my parents’ wedding, and an old invitation.”

“Did you really?” Dumbledore chuckled as he sprinkled cinnamon and sugar on his porridge. “Oh yes, I almost forgot I had those. Well, I’m glad they found their way into your hands.”

Harry took another bite of sausage as he remembered what else he had found. “And there was a photo of you. I don’t have any other photos with you in them, so I hope you don’t mind. You just looked really happy, and you were laughing and smiling.”

“Ah yes, your parents wedding was quite a happy day for all of us.”

Harry grimaced as he watched Dumbledore sprinkle cinnamon and sugar onto his boiled egg. Apples were one thing, but *eggs*? “Actually sir, it wasn’t a wedding photo. It was an older photo, from when you were young. I think you had just graduated from Hogwarts, and there was this cocky-looking blonde fellow with you.”

Dumbledore froze with the egg halfway to his mouth. Perhaps the man had finally realized he’d sprinkled sugar on it instead of salt? He wasn’t looking at the egg, though. He seemed to be staring off at nothing. Harry wasn’t sure what to do as he watched Dumbledore blink a few times before, suddenly, bursting into laughter.

The man was laughing so hard, he dropped his egg onto his plate with a clatter. It definitely wasn’t the reaction Harry had expected. In between his chuckles, Harry could hear him breathing, “Cocky-looking indeed...”

“I’m sorry, sir. I didn’t mean to do anything wrong.”

“You haven’t done anything wrong Harry,” the man assured him once he had calmed down a bit. “I have once again underestimated you. In this case, I completely forgot your unbelievable propensity for *finding trouble*. Not that I’m upset of course. It’s just...that young man...well I suppose you could say he was something of a trouble-maker.”

“I didn’t mean to take your private things, sir. I can go put the photo back right now.”

“Nonsense Harry, if the photo caught your attention, then you are welcome to keep it. I suppose I really was a much more care-free person back then. I can’t remember the last time I felt truly care-free.” Dumbledore gave Harry a heartwarming smile, and then took a bite of his sugary egg. “Now that I think of it, I’m very glad that you found that picture. If the time ever comes when you want to look back and remember me; that’s how I would want to be remembered...smiling and happy and carefree.” He paused as a small, worried furrow appeared on his forehead. “I will ask you not to share that photo with anyone, though. It’s...rather personal.”

“Of course, sir. Thank you. I won’t show it to anyone else.”

They quickly changed the subject to safer topics. Harry told him how he enjoyed the books Dumbledore had left, before explaining how he’d spent his evening.

“And the furniture in your room is comfortable enough?” Dumbledore inquired. “I certainly hope you slept alright.”

“Oh yeah, I slept...” but then Harry paused. That dark guilt was creeping in again. The same guilt that cropped up every time he kept something important from Dumbledore. Harry still hadn’t told the headmaster about his dreams with Tom Riddle.

For months Harry had rationalized that he didn’t need to tell Dumbledore; that the dreams were just simple dreams. But he couldn’t really make that excuse any more. If Harry were completely honest, he had known for awhile now that his nighttime conversations with the teenaged Dark Lord were more than meets the eye. He should have told Dumbledore what was going on a long time ago.

“Actually, sir, now that you mention it, I did have a strange dream last night. To be honest, I’ve been having quite a few strange dreams...”

Harry wasn’t sure where to start, so he started at the beginning. He told Dumbledore about the dreams in the Chamber of Secrets and the park in Privet Drive. He didn’t want to elaborate too much, but he did mention most of the dreams without going into too much detail. While he told Dumbledore about the dream in the Great Hall and the Potion’s Lab, he left out the one in his cupboard and in the Room of Requirement, they just felt a little too personal. He didn’t even want to think about the dream in Dumbledore’s office, when Riddle had crawled across the headmaster’s desk. Harry still had very confusing feelings about that dream.

Dumbledore listened politely as Harry explained the encounters he’d dreamed of all over Hogwarts. While the headmaster was keeping his expression as kind and understanding as always, Harry could tell the man was concerned. For one thing, kept glancing up at Harry’s

scar. For another thing, his questions were a lot more prying and determined than they were curious.

“How often do you have these dreams, Harry?”

“I don’t know, it’s been once or twice a week lately.”

Another glance up at the scar. “And he told you that he was a memory, like the diary?”

“Yeah, but that doesn’t really make sense. Why would a memory be talking to me in my dreams?”

Again, Dumbledore glanced at Harry’s forehead. The questions went on for some time. If it weren’t for the cordial atmosphere and the comforting scents of fried sausage and breakfast tea, Harry would almost feel like he was being interrogated. Dumbledore seemed to want to verify that Harry hadn’t mentioned their private lessons to dream-Tom. Harry tried to reassure the man that he and Tom had only ever discussed inconsequential things.

It felt strangely like a breach of trust to tell Dumbledore about the intimate discussions with Tom Riddle, so Harry kept things vague and pretended that he couldn’t quite remember the details. What else could Harry do, though? It wasn’t as though Harry could fully explain his talks with Tom, their shared feelings of loneliness, Tom’s promise that he would never tell anyone about Harry’s cupboard, Harry teasing him about being too hard on his followers, Tom waltzing with Harry while he whispered in his ear, Harry running his fingers through Tom’s soft hair.

The more Harry talked, the more he regretted ever bringing up the subject to begin with. How had things gotten so out of hand? The headmaster didn’t seem particularly reassured, and all the while, his eyes kept drifting up to Harry’s scar, as if that were the key to this mystery.

Finally, the man seemed to accept that Harry wasn’t going to be able to give him any specifics. “Very well Harry, thank you for telling me everything that you can.” Harry tried not to blush under that inscrutable gaze. “However, there is one more thing I don’t understand. You say that you didn’t mention these dreams before, because you didn’t think they were anything serious. And yet you felt the need to tell me now. What has changed that made you think that these were more than simple dreams?”

Harry hadn’t told Dumbledore about the Malfoy Soiree or Blaise’s disinvitation. There was a part of him that was worried that Draco or Blaise might get in trouble. However, if he were honest with himself, he just felt way too awkward telling Professor Dumbledore about the strange dynamic that now existed between Draco, Blaise, and Harry. It was too embarrassing to even think about, let alone tell a man that Harry thought of as a grandfather.

Instead, Harry settled for a simpler explanation. “I dreamt about him again last night. When he found out I was staying with you, he warned me that I needed to leave your house right away. He told me I should go to Voldemort. He actually tried to convince me that I should trust Voldemort over you. Obviously, I told him where he could stuff it.”

Instead of looking relieved, Dumbledore looked more and more troubled with every word he heard. After another long pause, he spoke with a voice that was heavy with the weight of the world.

“Harry, I do have a theory or two on why this may be happening. However, until I can confirm one way or another, I’d rather wait to discuss my hypothesis for another time. I’m not entirely sure how... concerned... we should be, and I don’t wish to distress you unnecessarily. In the meantime, I think it might be best for you to pick up your Occlumency lessons with Professor Snape once again.”

“No!” Harry was never going through that again. Especially after Draco explained that Snape’s assault on his mind was totally unnecessary. “Those lessons never did any good anyway. Besides, Draco’s been giving me Occlumency lessons, and he’s a way better teacher than Snape.”

“Draco Malfoy is giving you Occlumency lessons?” When Dumbledore said it aloud like that, Harry realized how strange it sounded.

“Er, yeah. He’s actually pretty good at Mind Magic. So, don’t worry, I have a plan to stop the dreams. I think I’ll be able to put an end to them soon.” Harry did not mention that his plan involved giving up on Mind Magic and trying to use Soul Magic to block out the dreams. After all, Harry was clearly more suited to Soul Magic than Mind Magic; he just needed to find a book that would teach him the basics.

Suddenly, Harry paused with his cup of tea halfway to his face. He looked to the left, at the shelves upon shelves of books, and then to the right, at even more books on *every conceivable topic*. Would Dumbledore have any books on Soul Magic? Surely, somewhere in this vast collection...

“Well, if you’re sure you have a plan to put a stop to this, Harry. Just promise me you’ll try to clear your mind every night before bed.”

Harry nodded and tried to seem nonchalant. “Yeah, of course, sir. I promise.”

As they finished their food, a flurry of owls arrived carrying the morning mail. Dumbledore received several official-looking letters, as well as four different newspapers. Harry was more interested in pouring another cup of tea, until he realized that one owl had placed a thick envelope next to his empty plate. Harry frowned; he had just seen his friends yesterday morning, and he hadn’t expected any of them to write so soon.

When he picked up the heavy envelope and saw a fancy silver crest with ‘The Noble House of Malfoy’ written across the bottom, his curiosity was piqued even more. Harry carefully pried the seal open with his butter knife, but before he could even look inside, a fancy little teaspoon fell onto the table with a plunk. Harry peered at the little silver spoon, but it just sat there, innocuous as anything. Why would Draco send him cutlery?

Harry peered back inside the envelope, but there were no more spoons inside, or forks or knives for that matter. Instead, there were two pieces of parchment. Harry pulled them out to see if he could find some sort of explanation.

The first was smaller; written on extremely high-quality parchment. Across the top, were silvery embossed words which read: “You are Cordially Invited to the Malfoy Family Yuletide Soiree.” There was some other information about the date and so forth written across the bottom. Harry frowned at the formal invitation. Why would Draco send this now, after Harry had already turned down the offer?

Harry turned to the last item in the envelope, an extremely long letter written in Draco’s handwriting. The letter started simply enough, with the other boy hoping that Harry was having an enjoyable holiday. However, it quickly diverted to the topic of the Malfoy Soiree. Unlike every single time Harry and Draco had discussed the party in person, suddenly Draco seemed quite enthusiastic that Harry should definitely attend.

The entire letter, which had been folded up to make room in the envelope, was almost three feet long. Draco used most of that space to describe the immensely fun things that would happen at the party, which he didn’t want Harry to miss out on.

Draco described the entertainment for the evening, which would include several card tables with games like exploding snap. There would be two different popular bands, and although there would be some dancing, Draco insisted that Harry did not have to do any dancing if he didn’t want to. Apparently, there would even be a proper Yuletide Ritual at midnight. The same ritual Harry had been curious about.

The letter went on to describe some of the amazing guests Harry could meet. There would be several famous quidditch players, some important political figures, and celebrated magical researchers. There would even be some members of the Committee for Magical Creatures, in case Harry wanted to discuss Goblin diplomacy further.

Draco didn’t stop there. He went on to discuss the vast banquet that had been arranged, with delicacies from several different magical cultures. Apparently, the Malfoys had even arranged a baking competition between several prominent pastry chefs to see who could make the most delicious treacle tart. Harry was practically salivating over the idea of five different treacle tarts waiting to be judged.

Toward the end of the letter, Draco described the lighting of the trees and the enormous fireworks display they had planned. By that point, Harry was starting to wonder if maybe he could just stop by the party for a little bit, despite all his previous reservations. After all, it really did sound like the most spectacular event he could possibly imagine. Almost as if the entire event had been catered specifically for his tastes.

And yet...there was definitely something off about the letter. “That’s weird,” he mumbled.

“Is something wrong, Harry?” Dumbledore looked up from the newspaper he was reading, which appeared to be in French. The headmaster gave the silvery invitation a curious glance, and then frowned at the little spoon sitting near Harry’s saucer.

“Actually, sir, I could use a second opinion. Draco sent me an invitation to his Christmas Eve party. He even sent me a letter which goes on and on about all the fun activities they’ve got planned.”

Dumbledore slowly set down his newspaper. "I see. And were you hoping to attend this event?"

"Well, not originally, but this letter does make it sound really fun. I would almost be tempted, but there's something very weird about this letter. I mean, it's in Draco's handwriting, and it's got his family's seal and everything, but it just doesn't sound like Draco."

"Really? In what way?"

"Well, he keeps making references to things that never happened. The letter goes on and on about how Draco has been trying for weeks to convince me to go to the party. He even says: 'I know you keep refusing, despite my constant pleading...' But that never happened! It was the opposite. I asked Draco about the party, and every time I mentioned it, Draco would always insist that he didn't think I should go."

"Is that so?" Dumbledore's eyes twinkled with mischief. "Draco Malfoy has been trying to convince you *not* to attend his party?"

"Yeah, until just now. But if he changed his mind, why not say that? Why not just write: I've changed my mind and now I think you should come?" Harry furrowed his brow. "I don't think he did change his mind. I think he only sent me this letter to be polite. Maybe his mother asked him to invite me... Maybe he thought someone was reading his mail... Either way, I think this letter might be some kind of pretense."

Dumbledore was nodding along enthusiastically. "That certainly seems logical, Harry. I am inclined to agree." The man then gestured to the spoon that had landed on the table. "And what of that?"

"Oh," Harry glanced back at the letter. "Draco says it's a Portkey that is set to bring me to Malfoy Manor the evening of Christmas Eve." Harry used his fork to scoot it further away, just in case. "I don't think I want to risk it. I know it's spelled to take me to Malfoy Manor, but I haven't had the best luck with Portkeys. For all I know, it could take me straight to Voldemort himself."

Dumbledore shrugged his shoulders. "That is...a possibility." With a wave of the headmaster's wand, the little spoon soared through the air and out of the room. The man was acting as though he was highly amused about something, but he didn't seem inclined to let Harry in on the joke. "So, shall I assume you will *not* be attending that party?"

"Yeah," Harry placed the letter and the invitation back in the envelope. "I guess I didn't really need a second opinion. Now that I think about it, that party just seems like a bad idea all around."

Dumbledore simply chuckled and turned back to his newspaper. "Yes, I'm certain you'll have a much better time at the Burrow than you would have had at Malfoy Manor, despite all the... activities... I'm sure they had planned for you."

They spent the rest of breakfast in amiable silence. Dumbledore read the paper and sipped his tea, while Harry wrote up a letter of response for Draco. After some internal debate, Harry

figured that he would follow Draco's lead. So, he wrote a long apology about how he knew Draco really wanted him to attend, but Harry had to regretfully disappoint him.

It was nice spending a quiet morning with the headmaster. Harry had never had a grandparent, or any elderly relative, but he liked to imagine that it would be like this.

Draco let out a sigh of relief when he saw Harry's response. "Dear Draco, I truly hate to disappoint you yet again, but..." Maybe the Gryffindor wasn't quite as dense as he seemed? Maybe he had figured out how dangerous the party would be for him? Or maybe he had simply written whatever response the Order of the Phoenix had instructed him to write? Either way, it seemed that Harry would not be walking to his death the day before Christmas.

Unfortunately, Draco was the one who had to give the Dark Lord the bad news. The letter itself did not blame Draco in any way for the refusal, but would Draco still be held accountable? The leader of the Death Eaters was not known for taking disappointment well.

Draco had just lifted his hand to knock on his master's door, when he was pushed aside by Amycus and Alecko Carrow. It seemed they had already returned from East London, and they were quite eager to get to the Dark Lord before anyone else.

"My Lord," Amycus cried. "My Lord, we have wonderful news!"

"We caught him, my Lord!" Alecko rushed up behind her brother. "We caught the thief!"

After breakfast, Dumbledore made his apologies once again. "I'm afraid I'll be gone for much of the day again, Harry. I'll do my best to be back in time for dinner. Please feel free to explore at your leisure."

"Oh yeah," Harry replied vaguely. "I was actually planning to take a look at your book collection."

"Oh good, I'm glad you enjoyed the books I left out for you." Dumbledore seemed to think Harry was talking about the collection of books the man had left in the library. "If I'm not back before nightfall, I'll send you a note." With that, he departed.

Harry hesitated for a moment, just in case. Even though Dumbledore had said Harry could 'explore at his leisure,' he was pretty sure Dumbledore wouldn't want him scouring the bookshelves for mentions of Soul Magic. But Harry hadn't found anything at the bookstore or the school library or the Room of Requirement. If he didn't find anything on Soul Magic at Dumbledore's house, he wasn't sure where else he could look.

With that in mind, Harry turned his attention to the shelves around him. Where should he even start? From what Harry had seen, every room of the house was filled with books, and Harry hadn't noticed any system or method of sorting. So, he figured he'd just have to go

through the rooms one at a time and check each book individually for any title related to Soul Magic.

He started with the library, since that seemed like a reasonable place to start. However, the more he ran his fingers over the spines of the various books, the more this seemed like a completely insurmountable task. It wasn't just bookshelves and display cases, there were also chests, wardrobes, and bureaus all filled with texts. Harry crawled along the floor to read the spines on the lowest shelves. He climbed up a rickety ladder to look through a stack of books being used as a mount for an ancient bust. Harry opened drawers to more books, and unlocked chests of treasured tomes. He even levitated down three small volumes that had been jammed in the center of an iron chandelier.

Just as Harry feared, there didn't seem to be any rhyme or reason to the sorting system. Fiction was mixed in with textbooks, poetry books were placed with cookbooks. Dumbledore clearly didn't discriminate. If it was a book that had been printed, the man owned it. No topic seemed too esoteric or pointless. There were books on magical herbs and gardening, dragon training, proper crystal ball maintenance, fashion trends for the modern witch, the magic of music, a Runic dictionary, wizarding fairy tales, healing balms and potions, and even a magazine of muggle knitting patterns. Harry found almost everything, except any mention of Soul Magic.

By the afternoon, Harry was exhausted and more than happy to accept the shepherd's pie that Dumbledore's house elves offered him. They asked him if he was looking for something in particular, but Harry insisted he was just having a glance around. He wasn't sure if they would report him to Dumbledore, but he didn't want to risk it. Even if Harry was planning to use Soul Magic to block out the dreams, and possibly heal his soul, the headmaster had been dead set against Soul Magic. Harry was sure the man wouldn't approve, no matter what Harry's intentions.

Harry was just finishing his lunch, when he was startled by a large, silvery phoenix that appeared before him. Harry realized it was Dumbledore's Patronus when it spoke in the headmaster's voice.

"My dear boy, I am so sorry to inform you that I will not be able to return tonight. The Order has just discovered that Mundungus Fletcher has gone missing, and we believe he may have been taken hostage by Death Eaters. We are handling the situation. I'm afraid there is nothing you can do at this time, so please remain where you are. I will return in the morning, and I promise I will give you all the information I have. Stay safe. Do not leave the house. Remember to clear your mind before bed."

When the phoenix disappeared, Harry was left feeling more frustrated and useless than he had felt in a long time. Voldemort had captured Mundungus? For a moment, Harry worried that this might somehow be his fault. After all, the Carrows had almost captured Harry when they thought he was the thief. However, if anything, Harry had probably bought Mundungus more time. The man had gotten some warning that Voldemort was hunting him. However, if Voldemort really thought that Dung had stolen something from him, it had only ever been a matter of time.

Harry felt so impotent, trapped at Dumbledore's house. He wanted to be doing something. He wanted to help. He couldn't just sit around the house reading 'Godric Gryffindor: Man versus Myth' while everyone in the Order was off trying to find and save their lost recruit.

On the other hand, what could Harry do? If he left the house, he would just create even more problems for the Order. He would just make himself a target for Voldemort...again. Harry had already learned his lesson when he rushed off to try and save Sirius. He certainly wasn't going to risk everything for Mundungus Fletcher.

But he couldn't do nothing, either. If only he had found some books on Soul Magic, he could at least be studying that and learning some powerful magic. But Dumbledore wouldn't just leave books like that lying around. After all, the man thought Soul Magic was incredibly dangerous.

Suddenly, Harry realized where Dumbledore would keep those types of books. He felt silly that it hadn't occurred to him before. Slowly and carefully, Harry crept up the stairs and down the hall, until he was facing Dumbledore's private study. The one and only place in the entire house Dumbledore had asked him not to go.

Technically, Dumbledore had never forbidden Harry from entering. He had simply warned Harry that it was dangerous and should be avoided. However, Harry still felt as though he was doing something taboo as he inched his foot across the threshold. No alarms went off. No traps were activated. Harry edged forward a little more, until he was completely inside the study.

Harry hadn't glanced this way since Dumbledore had first pointed it out, but from what he could tell, everything looked the same. There were several pedestals with various objects (probably cursed). The large desk was cluttered with papers and trinkets, and the entire back wall was lined with bookshelves.

Harry took a deep breath, and carefully made his way to the books, careful not to touch anything else. It felt a bit like the first time he snuck into the Restricted Section, even though he wasn't technically breaking any rules. He had just leaned down to read the first spines along the bookshelves, when he heard a loud squawk behind him.

Harry whipped around with a jolt, only to find Fawkes staring back at him. The phoenix was perched on a large globe of the constellations, sitting just outside the study. Harry wasn't sure how it was possible for a bird to give a disapproving look, but Fawkes managed it somehow.

"Squawk!"

"I wasn't going to touch anything!" Harry wasn't sure why he felt the need to defend himself to an oversized songbird, and yet he continued. "I was only looking."

Fawkes tilted his head and squawked again. Did the bird know that he was lying? Did the bird even know what Harry was saying? Was he imagining the disappointed look in its eyes?

"I suppose...I should probably just leave this room now." Harry inched away from the bookshelf. Fawkes let at a happy trill and perked up.

Harry sighed. He wasn't sure how close Fawkes and Dumbledore were, but it seemed clear that if he tried rummaging through the books with Fawkes watching, Dumbledore would almost certainly find out about it. "I was just curious about what might be in here. But I can see now that there's nothing here I should be messing with. So I'll just... go downstairs... and read about Godric Gryffindor."

The phoenix cooed in delight, dismounting from its place on the globe. It flew across the room to land on Harry's shoulder. It was rather awkward, since the bird was almost the size of a chicken. However, Fawkes seemed perfectly content to monopolize Harry's shoulder as he made his way out of the room. The songbird trilled and preened as soon as they were back on the landing.

"Yes, I get it, you don't want me in there. Now please stop fidgeting."

With Fawkes's careful eyes still on him, Harry climbed down the stairs, curled up in the cozy seat by the fireplace, and read about 'Godric Gryffindor: Man versus Myth.'

"Harry!" Fletcher screamed. "Harry Potter took me suitcase. He 'as yer locket."

Lord Voldemort stared down at the pitiful excuse for a man, in a combination of disgust, disbelief, and angry acceptance. So, the locket in the boy's possession was his horcrux after all. Of course this game of hide and seek would eventually lead back to Harry Potter.

Mundungus Fletcher had not taken much convincing to spill his secrets. He babbled everything he knew about the Order's headquarters (which was hardly useful, since it was still under the Fidelius Charm). He had listed any other members he knew of (which had all been people the Death Eaters already knew about). And he had told the Dark Lord everything he knew of Dumbledore's plans (which was basically nothing).

The only remotely useful piece of information Lord Voldemort had gained, was that Mundugus Fletcher had indeed stolen Slytherin's Locket from the Black family house. However, the locket had apparently fallen into the hands of Harry Potter since then. A locket, which according to the Malfoy boy, was now in the possession of a house elf.

Voldemort sighed, at least today wouldn't be a complete waste. With a flick of his wrist, the whimpering little fellow was flung away from the Dark Lord's feet, and out onto the frigid quidditch pitch. "Nagini, time for dinner."

Soul Magic. How was it possible that Harry had been searching for any books on the subject for months, and yet as soon as he gave up, he found the phrase in a book about Godric Gryffindor?

Harry had been debating whether he would give up and try a different book, or just take a nap. It wasn't that the biography was boring, per se. It was that it was so ridiculously sycophantic.

The author was clearly a fan of Gryffindor, which made sense seeing as he was writing a book on the man. But the way it was written, it was as though Godric Gryffindor didn't so much as sneeze without being noble and chivalrous about the whole affair. Even Harry, who was very proud to be sorted into Gryffindor, and was even the Heir of Godric Gryffindor, felt that there was such a thing as too much idol worship. This book had surpassed that in Chapter One.

Then, at the opposite end of the spectrum, the author seemed to think Salazar Slytherin was basically the vilest piece of slime to ever crawl the Earth. According to the author, Slytherin was a lowly, pathetic and talentless hack, who never had a single clever thought without Gryffindor's help. This, while simultaneously being an evil genius who had masterfully fooled the other three founders into believing his clever and cunning lies.

Harry had never had a very high opinion of Salazar Slytherin. In fact, he'd once killed the man's prized pet with Gryffindor's personal sword. And even he found himself thinking: come on, he couldn't have been *that bad*.

And so, Harry had been drifting off, barely paying attention, when he suddenly found himself staring down at those two words: 'Soul Magic.' He quickly backtracked and tried to make sense of why they were there at all.

Each of the Four Founders specialized in one type of Ancient Magic: Gryffindor used Blood Magic, Ravenclaw used Mind Magic, and Hufflepuff used Elemental Magic. However, Slytherin, the darkest of the four, devoted his time to the most evil branch of Ancient Magic; Soul Magic. At the time, it was not yet known how foul and Dark this type of magic truly was, and so the other three founders did not realize they should be wary. Just as they did not realize that Slytherin's Parseltongue was another sign that he should never be trusted.

Harry slammed the book shut. He had had enough of that. It did give him some interesting information, though. Apparently, the four founders had used Ancient Magic. It wasn't a big surprise. Augusta had said that Ancient Magic used to be a lot more prominent. According to her and Neville, certain skills even ran in families, which was why Neville was so good with plants.

Harry frowned and looked back down at the book. None of this made much sense for Harry, though. The book had said that Gryffindor used Blood Magic. Harry hadn't actually tried using Blood Magic, so it was possible that he might be really good at it. He definitely had no skill at Mind Magic. But it didn't really explain why Harry was so adept at Soul Magic. If anything, the Heir of Slytherin...

Parseltongue...

Dumbledore's words ran through his head. *"It seems he transferred some of his powers to you..."*

Voldemort could do Soul Magic. Dumbledore had told him that Voldemort had performed some of the darkest Soul Magic of all, whatever that was. Harry could do Soul Magic because Voldemort could. On the one hand, that was probably a very good reason why Harry should just leave it alone and forget about Soul Magic altogether. On the other hand, speaking

Parseltongue had come in handy more than once. He'd been able to stop the snake in the dueling club from attacking Justin Flinch-Fletcher. He'd even used Parseltongue to get into the Chamber of Secrets to save Ginny.

There had to be some way that Soul Magic could be used for good. Even if it was just to block the dreams, or to try and remove that dark stain on his soul. *He shall have power the Dark Lord knows not...* Voldemort definitely wouldn't be expecting Harry to know Soul Magic.

Harry spent the rest of the evening lying in bed and skimming through Gryffindor's biography. He looked for any references he could find to Soul Magic or Blood Magic. However, it seemed that the author was very careful not to mention Ancient Magic if it could possibly be avoided.

As Harry drifted off to sleep, he remembered that Dumbledore had asked him to clear his mind, but he wasn't sure he'd be able to muster the effort. As his eyes drifted shut, he could hear Fawkes in the corner, singing a light melody. On and on the bird sang his beautiful phoenix song, and in just a few moments, without even really meaning to, Harry entered that deep, calm, meditative state. It was the same state he was supposed to be in for Occlumency, or Soul Magic, the same state that usually took him about half an hour to reach. Apparently, there was something about the phoenix song that settled his mind almost immediately, and led him off to a peaceful, dreamless sleep.

Severus carefully measured the nettles and added almost twice what was usually called for. The Dark Lord had requested that this batch be particularly strong, and the Potion Master aimed to please. Next, he raised his vial so that he could slowly, carefully add one single drop of acromantula venom.

"Professor, I need your help!" Draco Malfoy burst into the manor's potion lab without a hint of warning.

Severus watched helplessly as a huge dollop of poison fell into the cauldron.

"What is wrong with you?" he spat. He barely managed to vanish the entire brew before it could blow up an entire wing of the house. "Do you have any idea how long I've been working on that potion? Two days. And now I have to start from scratch. There's no way it will be ready in time for Christmas Eve."

Draco frowned at the now empty cauldron. "Why does it need to be ready in time for Christmas Eve?"

"The Dark Lord is confident that Potter will find a way to attend the party. The potion needs to be ready before the boy arrives."

"I wouldn't worry too much about that." Draco held up a small piece of parchment. "This is what I came to show you. It's Harry's reply. He's not coming."

Severus snatched the parchment from the young man's shaking hands. "*Dear Draco, I truly hate to disappoint you yet again, but...*"

"What did the Dark Lord say when you told him?"

Draco's pale face whitened a few more shades. "That's sort of what I needed your help with."

"You didn't tell him?"

"I was about to! But then the Carrows showed up with Mundungus, and the Dark Lord was busy most of the day. I didn't want to interrupt him. Now I'm not sure what to do. He's going to be angry when he sees the reply."

"He's going to be even angrier when he finds out you kept it from him." Severus tried to think what they could do now. Perhaps they could pretend the response only just arrived.

"We could just pretend Harry never responded at all," Draco suggested, his voice slow and hesitant. "We don't need to be the ones to deliver the bad news. Besides, I don't want to be the one to tell the Dark Lord that Harry is staying with Albus Dumbledore."

"What did you just say?" As Draco tripped over his words, Severus quickly skimmed through the letter. The Malfoy Heir was right; Harry wrote that he couldn't attend because he was spending his holiday *with Headmaster Dumbledore*. Severus read that section three times just to be sure he wasn't delirious from potion fumes.

Why was Potter staying with the headmaster? It didn't make any sense. Was this Severus's own fault? He had gone to Dumbledore with the evidence of the Dursley's neglect and abuse, but he had assumed the boy would be placed with the Weasleys or one of James Potter's old friends. It had never occurred to him that Dumbledore would keep the boy at his own house. The man had already admitted that he was planning to sacrifice Harry. Why would he keep the boy at his house? What was he planning?

"We will say nothing to the Dark Lord," Severus decided. "But in the meantime, you must write to Potter and warn him that he cannot trust the headmaster."

"He won't believe me." Draco frowned down at the letter himself. "I already tried warning him that the headmaster is a meddling old coot. But it doesn't really matter, it's not as if the old man would ever hurt Harry."

"No, he wouldn't harm the boy himself," he agreed. *Not unless he decided the boy was more dangerous alive...*

Harry awoke to a different phoenix swooping in front of him; another silvery patronus.

"Harry, I'm so sorry to stand you up again, but I have unfortunately been called to another urgent matter. I'll do my best to be back by tonight. However, if not, I will certainly be there tomorrow to drop you off at the Burrow as agreed. Again, I'm terribly sorry."

Harry sighed, tomorrow was Christmas Eve and he'd have to leave Dumbledore's house. As much as Harry enjoyed Christmas with the Weasleys, he'd been even more excited to spend part of his holidays with the headmaster. Yet Harry had hardly seen the man since he'd arrived.

There was also the matter of the possible Soul Magic books. He'd been hoping he might find something in Dumbledore's vast collection, but with Fawkes watching him so carefully, he wasn't sure if he'd ever get the chance.

Just then, Harry heard a soft trill coming from the far corner. He looked over to see Fawkes on the same perch he sat last night. The Phoenix was letting out a soft warble with every breath. Was this cute little trill the sound of a phoenix snoring? Harry carefully inched out of bed and crept closer. Sure enough, the phoenix had its eyes closed and its head curled into the crook of his neck, warbling softly and steadily.

Harry's heart skipped a beat. With Dumbledore gone for the day, Fawkes asleep, and the House Elves busy cooking breakfast, now might be his one and only chance. Without even changing out of his pajamas, Harry darted silently out the door and down the hall. He had no idea when the bird would wake or the elves would come to offer him food, so he decided he should do this as quickly as possible.

With just a moment's hesitation, he slipped back into Dumbledore's forbidden study. Well, not technically forbidden, but definitely frowned upon. He carefully tiptoed past a blackened skull, a ruby necklace, and a golden music box. While they did pique his curiosity, he knew better than to give them too much attention, let alone touch anything. He had no doubt the items held Dark Magic.

When Harry saw the little silver teaspoon on Dumbledore's desk, he paused in his quest. Why would Dumbledore move the portkey all the way to his study? If Harry had already said that he wasn't going to use the thing, why bother moving it so far out of reach?

It probably didn't matter. Dumbledore was probably just trying to get it out of the way. It wasn't as if Harry would use it anyway. However, now that Harry saw it sitting there, he wondered if he should hold on to it...just in case. He definitely wasn't going to go to Draco's party. But what if he changed his mind? Perhaps he shouldn't discard the spoon so quickly. Perhaps he should wait and see how he felt tomorrow?

Harry carefully picked the spoon up with hem of his sweater, still not wanting to touch it. He carefully tucked it into his pocket. It probably didn't matter. He was sure he wouldn't use it. But he decided he'd hold onto it, just in case.

With that sorted, he turned his attention to the wall full of bookshelves. So far, no one had come looking for him, and Fawkes was nowhere to be seen. He let out a sigh of relief and bent down to read the spines of the books.

He had learned from the Restricted Section that books could be dangerous, so he was careful not to touch any of them, unless he found a title that specifically referenced Soul Magic. He started on the left and made his way right, slowly but surely, reading each and every title.

For a man so famous for being against Dark Magic, Dumbledore certainly had a lot of books on the subject. Of course, while there were many tomes related to the Dark Arts, there were also many books specifically about breaking curses or countering Dark spells. There were almost a dozen books on Dark resurrection rituals and ways to restore a body using necromancy and Blood Magic. Harry was sure Dumbledore had been reading them to figure out how Voldemort had returned. It wasn't as though Dumbledore needed to return to corporeal form.

Harry was about halfway through the shelves, when he saw something that grabbed his attention. "*The Darkest Soul: Horcruxes, Soul Devouring, Soul Splits, and other Infernal Soul Magic.*" Harry grimaced at the image those words created in his mind. On the one hand, this was definitely a book about Soul Magic, but on the other, this wasn't any type of Soul Magic Harry was interested in. He had been hoping for something along the lines of "*An Introduction to Soul Magic*" or "*Soul Magic for Complete Novices.*" Really, he would settle for anything that explained the weird black mark on his soul.

Harry was torn. He could settle for this awful book, or he could keep looking and risk Fawkes waking up to find him in such a compromising situation. He sighed and kept searching for another ten minutes without finding anything promising.

While he did manage to find a couple more books with the words like 'soul-splitting' or 'horcrux' in their titles, whatever that nonsense was, he didn't find any kind of introduction to Soul Magic. With a sigh of frustration, he walked back to *The Darkest Soul*. At the very least, the book sounded like it covered different types of Soul Magic, so maybe the first chapter would explain the broad theory before it started the dark, creepy stuff. Maybe it would reference some other books that could be used as an introductory guide.

He carefully reached out his hand and lightly touched the spine. It didn't burn him or suck out his soul or anything. He carefully pulled the book off the shelf without disturbing the books on either side. The text felt surprisingly heavy, even for its thick size, as if it were weighted down with knowledge. Harry glanced at the title one last time, and then carefully peeked under the cover. When it didn't immediately start screaming or shooting off curses, Harry slowly opened it the rest of the way.

He turned a couple pages, hoping to find a Table of Contents. He was sure there wouldn't be a chapter called: "So you found a weird black splotch on your soul and you want to learn what it might be..." or something about: "So, you have a weird connection with your mortal enemy and you want to figure out what is causing it." However, he just might be able to find a chapter about the basic theory, or at least some non-evil Soul Magic. When he realized there was no table or glossary or anything, he just moved along to Chapter One. That would probably be his best bet anyway.

Harry was so absorbed in the book, he didn't notice the footsteps behind him. He simply flipped through the pages, not realizing that he was no longer alone, not until he heard a familiar voice.

"Oh, hello Harry." Albus Dumbledore had returned, and he was standing right in the doorway. "I didn't mean to startle you, I just had to pop in to grab some paperwork."

The man frowned when he took in Harry's guilty expression, and the headmaster's gaze lowered to the book in his hands. "What have you got there, my boy?"

How was he possibly going to explain this?

It's the Thought that Counts

Chapter Notes

I hope everyone is still doing well in these crazy times.

I wanted to give another shout-out to my wonderful Betas; Michele and Natalie. You guys are the best!

The small clock on the wall of Dumbledore's private study ticked away the seconds. The Dark and cursed objects sat on their respective plinths, just waiting to be touched. The book on Dark Soul Magic still lay open in Harry's arms. Dumbledore himself stood with his hands clasped together, a slight frown on his face. He didn't comment on the fact that Harry was frozen and speechless. The headmaster was patient as any experienced teacher to let someone else incriminate themselves.

It took a long time for Harry to find his voice. And when he finally did speak, he simply said the first thing that came to mind. "I'm sorry, sir. I know you warned me not to come in here."

"Yes, you are very lucky that you were not cursed or attacked by anything in here, my boy." Dumbledore's concerned expression remained in place as he took a couple steps forward, his buckled boots clicking on the hard wood floor. "Perhaps I didn't make myself clear when I expressed the dangers present in this room." He let out a soft sigh, and a small smile appeared. "However, you do appear to be entirely safe and unhurt. And that is really the only thing that matters." Then his eyes dropped to the book in Harry's hands. "I am rather curious what caused you to overlook my warning, however."

"I—" Harry had no words. How would he possibly explain this? He couldn't believe that he had been found with such incriminating evidence. "It's not what it looks like."

"Oh?" Dumbledore took another step forward. The heels gave another click clack in the otherwise quiet room. "What do you think it looks like? Harry, are you alright?" He looked down at the book again. "What were you reading?"

"I...I didn't mean to."

Dumbledore's face was growing more concerned with every moment Harry hesitated. "May I see that book, Harry?" Without waiting for confirmation one way or the other, Dumbledore's wand was in his hand and the book was soaring across the room into his waiting grasp.

Dumbledore's reaction was far more intense than Harry expected. The man took in a sharp breath, and his face turned as pale as the crescent moons on his oversized hat. Harry thought Dumbledore would be disappointed and sad, but instead the man looked white with fear.

“Harry?” His voice was little more than a whisper. “Did you have another dream last night?”

“Huh?” What did that have to do with anything? “No, I didn’t dream about anything. Actually, Fawkes slept in my room last night, and he sang some phoenix song, and my mind felt clear, and I didn’t really dream about anything.”

“I see.” Dumbledore took another couple steps forward. This time, he moved much more cautiously, with a noticeable pause between the click and the clack. It was as if he didn’t want to startle a cornered animal. “Yet, you still felt some sort of draw to this book in particular. Why is that?”

“Well, I mean, not *that one* in particular.” In fact, Harry had been quite resistant to take that book. “I actually tried to skip that one because it sounded so awful, but it was the only book I could find with...” Harry cut himself off. He didn’t want Dumbledore to know he was looking into Soul Magic, but perhaps that would be better than Dumbledore thinking he was suddenly interested in evil Dark Magic. “It’s a bit of a long story.”

“Well I did tell Amelia I would be right back with some paperwork. However, this seems rather more pressing.” Dumbledore paused at his desk and set the dark tome on the cluttered surface. Harry wasn’t sure if the man’s fear had abated or if he was just hiding it better. “Yes, a talk sounds like a wonderful idea.” He gestured for Harry to sit in a floral, spindly seat on one side of the desk while he took the larger, velvet pink chair on the other side. “I would love to hear this story of yours. Did Tom Riddle tell you in one of your dreams that you should look into Soul Magic?”

“No, he never mentioned it.” Harry had no idea why Dumbledore thought his interest in Soul Magic could only have come from Tom Riddle. However, at least this felt a bit more natural; sitting with Professor Dumbledore looking down his crooked nose at him, with an ornate desk between them. Harry was used to this situation, even if he was very aware that he was still wearing his pajamas. “I know you said Soul Magic could be dangerous, but it didn’t seem like it could be all bad. Luna’s the one who told me about it.”

“Miss Lovegood? Well, this is going to be quite the story.”

“I don’t want to get her in trouble. I just asked her about Dream Magic, and she thought dreams were more Soul Magic than Mind Magic. Anyway, I wasn’t making any progress with Mind Magic, and I don’t think it was Draco’s fault because Hermione got the same lessons and she’s about sixteen steps ahead of me. Then Neville told me that some people were better at certain types of Ancient Magic, and I realized that I must not have any aptitude for Mind Magic. And Draco lent me this book on Dream Magic from his house, and it had all these useful notes about Mind Connections and Soul Connections.”

Dumbledore perked up at that. “A book on Dream Magic from Malfoy Manor? I would be very curious to see that.”

“Oh? Well, it’s in my trunk. I could go grab it.”

When Dumbledore nodded, Harry jumped up and ran back to his room to retrieve the book in question. As soon as he returned, he handed it over to the headmaster with a slight

explanation. “Someone wrote a bunch of notes in the margins in green ink. It wasn’t me. But I found them to be really useful.”

Dumbledore nodded as he began flipping through the Dream Magic book. “It looks as though whoever it is circled Chapter Eight in the Table of Contents. *Sharing Magic and Sharing Dreams*.”

“Yeah, that’s the only chapter I read, actually. It talks about how magical links caused from Blood Magic or Soul Magic can affect Dream Magic.”

“Indeed?” Dumbledore skipped ahead to that section. “Oh my, this person certainly left quite a few notes.” The pages were covered in green markings. “And the handwriting...” Dumbledore’s voice trailed off.

“I know, it’s insanely neat,” Harry agreed. “I mean who writes like that? But anyway, the notes were actually quite useful. They were surprisingly applicable to my situation with Voldemort.”

“You don’t say?” Dumbledore chuckled as if he found that funny for some reason.

Harry continued his story as Dumbledore thumbed through the pages. “So anyway, I figured that since Mind Magic wasn’t working, I could try learning Soul Magic to block out the dreams. But then I couldn’t find any books that taught how to actually do Soul Magic. Not in the library or the bookstore or anywhere. And I figured since you had almost every book in existence, you must have something.”

Harry pointed to the creepy book that Dumbledore had caught him with, now sitting between them on the desk. “That was the only thing I found.”

Dumbledore set the Dream Magic book aside for a moment and glanced at the book on the table. “Well, I don’t have many books on Soul Magic.”

“Sir, I promise you, I wasn’t trying to learn Dark Magic.” Harry needed Dumbledore to believe him, so he looked the man right in the eye as he spoke. After all, he never did learn Occlumency, so the man would be able to pick up his every emotion. “I don’t even know what that Soul Split or Horcrux stuff is, but it sounds awful and I don’t want anything to do with it. I just wanted to learn some bloody basics so that maybe I could stop the dreams like you wanted me to. That was all I was trying to do.”

“Harry,” Dumbledore pulled a small candy from his pocket. “Have a peppermint.”

“What?”

“You seem upset. Here, have a peppermint. I find them quite calming.” Dumbledore handed Harry the small, hard candy which Harry plopped in his mouth. “Now, my dear boy, I’m sorry if I overreacted when I saw that book.” He let out an amused chuckle as he looked down at the two books now sitting on the desk.

“What a fascinating life you must lead, Harry. You grow a passing curiosity for Dream Magic, and this surprisingly useful book winds up in your possession. You then become curious about Soul Magic, and somehow you run across the most powerful and dangerous book on Dark Soul Magic Rituals that has possibly ever been put to print. You seem to make a habit of randomly finding uniquely rare or dangerous items. I can’t imagine this is pleasant for you.”

“It’s exhausting,” Harry admitted.

Dumbledore was smiling like a proud parent. “Now, don’t worry, you’re not in any trouble. I really must insist that you do not return to this room, however. Your ability to find dangerous ancient artifacts is beyond even my skill to prevent. Perhaps it will come in handy later, but probably not today.”

Harry simply nodded and sucked on the minty sweet. He didn’t know what to say.

“In the meantime, would you mind if I borrowed this curious book?” He gestured to the text from Malfoy Manor.

“It’s technically Draco’s, but I doubt he’d mind if you had a look. As long as you give it back when you’re done.”

“Oh, don’t worry. I will be exceedingly cautious with it, my dear boy.” Dumbledore winked at him over his half-moon spectacles. “And now it seems I owe you some answers. I’m sorry that you didn’t feel like you could come to me with your questions earlier.”

“Answers? About what, sir?”

Just as Harry asked, Dumbledore waved his non-blackened hand, and suddenly the entire office was filled with soft light. Almost every surface was lit up with a soft glow, even Dumbledore himself. When Harry looked down, he realized that he was lit up, as well. A soft light was emanating from his very skin.

“Do you know what this is, Harry?”

Harry watched the soft glow shimmering and flickering just beneath his skin. “Some sort of spell?”

Dumbledore chuckled again. “I did perform a spell, yes. To reveal magic. All the light you see is magic. It’s everywhere, Harry. For magical beings, like yourself, magic flows through your blood, it runs through your mind, it exists in your very soul, and it permeates the world around you. Ancient Magic is what we call the ability to tap into that existing magic.”

Harry studied the magic flowing through the veins on his wrist. It glistened in a rainbow of different colors, like light flowing through a prism. “How could that possibly be bad?”

“It shouldn’t be.” Dumbledore’s voice was soft and wistful. “It certainly didn’t used to be. There was a time when Ancient Magic was the only type that wizards performed. All magical creatures use some sort of Ancient Magic. Goblins and house elves tap into Blood Magic.

Vampires and veelas lure people in with Mind Magic. Mermaids and werewolves have Elemental Magic. Dementors, as you've experienced firsthand, use Soul Magic."

"But then why don't we use Ancient Magic anymore?"

"Because we have these." Dumbledore lifted something from beneath his desk, and suddenly the entire room was full of blinding light.

Harry looked away as quickly as he could, but it still seared his eyes and made his head dizzy with overwhelming power. "What in Merlin's name was that?"

"It's alright, I cancelled the spell. You may open your eyes again, Harry."

When he did, there was no longer any soft light emanating from every surface. Harry looked back to see what it was that Dumbledore had lifted, which had been so full of blinding magic. It was his wand.

"Wands are conduits for magic, Harry. Once wizards developed wandlore, they were able to perform far more powerful magic than had ever been possible before. If a wizard is trained in both wand magic and Ancient Magic, their abilities with Ancient Magic will be far more potent, since their magic is used to being funneled through a conduit. Their abilities will be far more powerful, but also far more volatile. Hence, they can be a danger to themselves and others."

"Ok, I understand why you don't want wizards doing Ancient Magic, I guess." Although he still didn't agree. "But you said some types are worse than others. Why? What's so bad about Soul Magic?"

"Well, other types of Ancient Magic can certainly be used to perform very Dark Magic, but they can also be used to do good." Dumbledore lifted his good hand, and it lit up red. "Blood Magic is the ability to control the magic within your body. One of the first things you learn is how to channel your own magic to perform small spells without a wand. That's obviously useful. And more powerful Blood Magic can be used to heal yourself or others."

Slowly the red color faded away, and Dumbledore waved his arm in small circles, making the air around him shimmer with green. "Elemental Magic can encourage plant growth, improve river flows, keep you warm; there are many little uses."

As the green lights faded away, Dumbledore sat forward and his eyes shimmered with a blue far more vibrant than his usual pale color. "One of the first things you learn in Mind Magic is Occlumency, which is the ability to shield your mind. You can also learn to organize your thoughts, and more powerful Mind Magic users can heal the minds of others who have been Obliviated or affected with a mind-altering curse."

Dumbledore blinked few times, until his eyes faded to their usual shade. He let out a sad sigh, and no new colors appeared. "I'm afraid there is no useful or positive magic that can be performed with Soul Magic."

Dumbledore's certainty left little room for argument, but Harry was never one to give up without a fight. "But if Blood Magic can heal someone's body, and Mind Magic can heal someone's mind, why can't Soul Magic be used to heal someone's soul?" Harry thought about the black spot within his own soul.

"I'm afraid it's not as simple as that, Harry."

"Why not, sir?"

"First of all, when you are performing such advanced magic, it is not a matter of waving your wand and saying words. There is a deeper power needed. Usually something else must be given up, in exchange for such power. Damaging a soul involves something much more profound than a cut or a curse, Harry. Which means that healing it requires an even more powerful sacrifice. There is simply no ritual or Soul Magic practitioner powerful enough to perform such a feat."

"I see." Harry tried to take all this in. Perhaps he should just give up on Soul Magic, or at least set it aside for now. After all, he might be skilled in another type of Ancient Magic besides Soul Magic or Mind Magic. "Sir, I have another question. Neville said that his family had always been skilled with Elemental Magic. Apparently, some types of Ancient Magic run in families. Do you know if my parents were able to do any type of Ancient Magic?"

"I don't believe either of them ever attempted it," said Dumbledore. "However, your grandfather Charlus had some skill with healing Blood Magic. I have no idea if that was a family trait."

"Thank you, sir. I'll let you get back to Madam Bones. I promise to stay out of here, and I'll leave the idea of Soul Magic alone for now." After all, if Soul Magic couldn't heal his soul, then there wasn't much point. Besides, if Dumbledore didn't have any books that taught the subject, he had no idea where he'd find anything useful. On the other hand, maybe he should give Blood Magic a try, if that was really a Gryffindor family trait.

Harry sat on his bed and closed his eyes. He tried breathing slowly, in and out, in and out. He knew very little about Blood Magic, but Neville had mentioned that it involved getting in touch with your body in a similar manner to how Mind Magic involved getting in touch with your mind. So, he figured he would have to start by getting into that calm, meditative state.

This part was always tricky, but this time he had a shortcut. He imagined the song that Fawkes had sung for him last night; that calm, sweet phoenix song. It lulled him to a peaceful state in only about ten minutes.

The next step was to get in touch with his blood, his bones, his skin.

He started by flexing his different muscles, stretching his fingers, letting his shoulder rise and fall. He tried to hold still while taking some time to notice each part of his body, how his head rested on his neck, how his chest slowly went out and in, how his legs crossed each other. He had no idea how long he sat there, letting himself concentrate of each ligament and limb, but

the longer it went on, the more relaxed he felt, and the more he noticed the soft trickle of magic that flowed through every inch of him.

It started out as a slight tingle in the background, but the longer Harry focused and kept breathing slowly, the more noticeable it became. Harry was simply filled with magic. It climbed up his legs and his spine, it swirled around in his gut, and danced along his arms and his fingers. Had it always been there? Had he just never noticed it before?

He must have been sitting there for over an hour by the time he decided to try something new. Slowly and carefully, he raised his hand, while keeping the rest of his body perfectly still and his breathing calm. He opened his palm upward. Dumbledore had said that if you were in touch with your magic, you could perform spells without a wand, so Harry wanted to test that.

He let in a deep breath and whispered, “Lumos.” He took another calming breath, before he opened one of his eyes to peak at his hand. He felt it before he saw it; the magic dancing along his arm all began to converge on his palm. And then there was light. It sat in the palm of his hand, just like the light of a Lumos spell. Harry felt his heart speed up. He had done it. He had performed a spell without a wand. More magic was diverting to his hand. The light grew even brighter. Harry smiled at the ball of light that had started about as luminous as a small light bulb, but was growing stronger and stronger as more magic danced down his arm.

Harry laughed, he was so excited, and suddenly he felt more and more magic thrumming through him. The light was now so bright it hurt his eyes, and Harry had to look away. He tried to calm down, and cancel the spell, but apparently it wasn’t that simple. His palm felt warm. The light was now so bright it hurt his retinas even with his eyes closed and turned away. He tried to shield his face in the crook of his elbow. He kicked out his legs. He shoved his illuminated hand into the covers of the bed, and yet he still felt the magic flowing down his arm.

How did you stop this? Why wasn’t there an off switch? Harry started to feel dizzy, his legs went numb, his palm felt so hot it was almost painful. Then, suddenly, everything went black.

Harry didn’t open his eyes again until he heard a soft tapping sound. “Harry, my dear boy, are you still awake?”

Was he? What happened? Harry sat up and looked around him. The memory of what had caused him to pass out all rushed back, and he immediately checked over his hand, his body, and his bed to see if there was any damage. Everything seemed more or less in order. His hand was red and felt sensitive, almost as if it had been sunburned, but otherwise it was fine. His entire body felt sore, but was otherwise unhurt. Thank goodness he had simply tried a Lumos spell. It was almost scary to imagine what could have happened if he’d tried Incendio, or something even more powerful.

“Harry?” Dumbledore’s voice was coming through the door.

“Yeah, I’m awake. What time is it?” Harry looked around his bedroom. Everything looked the same as when he had knocked himself out, except now the windows were dark. Had he really been passed out for most of the day?

“It’s almost midnight, Harry,” came Dumbledore’s voice. “I’m sorry to bother you so late, but I only just got back from all my errands. I thought I would have a nice cup of cocoa before bed, and I wondered if you would like to join me if you were still up.”

“Yeah, er, cocoa sounds good. Sorry, I’m just...packing up for tomorrow. I’ll meet you downstairs.”

Harry was still wearing his pajamas from that morning, but he exchanged one Weasley sweater for another so at least it looked like he had changed. He glanced over at his shelf of valuables. He still needed to pack before they left tomorrow, but he could do that later. Finally, he clambered down the stairs, toward the sounds of crackling fire and the smell of warm chocolate.

Dumbledore was relaxing in his front sitting room; the same room Harry had spritzed himself with dragon blood perfume just a few days before. There were already two mugs full of steaming brown liquid when Harry sat down.

“I hope you don’t mind Harry, but I prefer my hot chocolate with a hint of cinnamon.” The man tapped his wand and a small shower of brown dust sprinkled on both the mugs.

“That sounds good, sir.”

“And I think I’ll add a smidge of brandy as well, since it is the holidays.” Dumbledore pulled a small bottle out from a globe bar next to the fireplace.

“That sounds great!”

Dumbledore chuckled at him, as he added a dash of amber liquid to only one mug. “But of course, you’re not quite seventeen yet, are you Harry?”

“Er. Well no, not technically, but I did try firewhiskey once.”

“Oh, did you?” Dumbledore’s eyes twinkled with mirth, and he hovered the bottle temptingly over the second mug.

“I mean just once. I think I was pretty responsible about it. And besides, Slughorn was serving wine at his Christmas party.”

“Yes, that does sound like him,” Dumbledore sighed. “Well, I suppose a thimble’s worth of brandy won’t do any harm. It’ll be our little secret.”

Harry watched Dumbledore serve the mugs with a growing sense of excitement. He wasn’t overly interested in the alcohol, especially since Dumbledore really wasn’t kidding about the thimble amount. It was more that Dumbledore was treating him like an adult. They were sharing a secret, and sipping drinks with brandy, and sitting up late by the fire like adults did.

Harry had wanted Dumbledore to treat him more like an adult for a long time, and it was finally starting to feel like it.

“So Harry, how are you enjoying your holidays so far? I’m sorry I haven’t been able to entertain you much.”

“That’s alright, sir. I know you’re busy. Your house was really amazing; all the stuff you have was really cool to see. I’m glad I got the chance to explore.”

“Thank you, Harry. I hope that you got to see everything you wanted to, since I’ll be taking you to the Weasleys first thing in the morning.”

Harry nodded and sipped his cocoa. The chocolate with a hint of cinnamon was delicious. He couldn’t taste any of the brandy, probably because there were only about six drops in the huge mug. Based on his experience with firewhiskey, he wasn’t sure whether he was relieved or disappointed about that.

Meanwhile, Dumbledore was humming happily as he gave himself a chocolate moustache. “So, my boy, did you have any other plans for your holidays before you return to school?”

Harry almost shook his head, before he remembered the plans he’d made with Hermione to finally check out the Gryffindor vault. “Actually sir, Hermione and I were planning to meet at Gringotts at some point over the break. I have some business I need to take care of with one of my vaults.”

“Oh? Well, in that case, make sure you let Molly and Arthur know when you want to go, and we’ll arrange some security for you. I’m sure that will be much easier than sneaking there with stolen Polyjuice Potion.” Dumbledore didn’t ask which vault Harry was referring to, and Harry wasn’t sure if he should tell him. He knew that he could trust Dumbledore to keep his secret, but the goblin Bogrod had been very insistent that Harry shouldn’t tell anyone about his Gryffindor inheritance.

They took a few more quiet sips of their drinks before the headmaster spoke again. “Speaking of Miss Granger, young Mr. Malfoy was quite enthusiastic to invite you to his party. You don’t think he would invite her as well, do you?”

“Oh no, he never invited her to his party. They’re not really…” Harry sighed. He supposed it didn’t matter if Dumbledore knew. “To be honest, they’re not actually dating. I think Hermione’s just trying to make Ron jealous because Ron’s dating Lavender, and Draco’s just trying to prove a point, or make Blaise jealous or something. Either way, they’re definitely not really boyfriend and girlfriend.”

“Is that so?” Dumbledore looked off into the fire for a moment, an amused smile on his chocolate-stained lips. “You know, Harry, sometimes I look back on the early years of my life, and I miss the excitement and the energy of youth. And other times, I hear stories like this, and I remember that I’m very, very grateful that phase of my life is over.” He gave Harry a wink. “Teenage hormones aren’t easy for anyone.”

“They’re a nightmare!” Harry fervently agreed.

Dumbledore chuckled and then changed the subject again. "I'm not sure how far along you are in your packing, but feel free to take the books that I left out for you. I don't really need *Hilarious Seeker Fumbles in History*. In fact, since we'll be busy in the morning, I may as well give you your Christmas present now."

"What?" Harry blanched. "You got me a Christmas present? You didn't have to do that." Harry didn't get anything for Dumbledore. He hadn't even thought about it.

"Well, to be honest," said Dumbledore. "I cheated. Much like your first year, I didn't so much get you a present, as I facilitated the process whereby something that should rightfully belong to you, ended up in your possession."

"What does that mean?"

"Come out front and see!"

Harry downed the rest of his chocolate and rushed to follow the headmaster through the entryway into the frigid evening air. The front yard looked very different under the moonlight, with soft snowflakes drifting lazily around them. He couldn't see nearly as many fascinating details, but he did still see the little fairy lights dancing in the distance. The colorful glass stones in the front cobbled path were emanating soft colored lights.

Harry could barely make out a large, dark mass in the center of the path, but he had no idea what it was. As he tried to squint at the huge object, Dumbledore waved his wand beside him. Suddenly, the night air was filled with the large, floating lights that the man had spawned at Privet Drive. The shimmering balls of light tumbled through the air, waltzed between the snowflakes, and hovered along the cobblestone path. Finally, they made their way to the center of the path, where they illuminated an enormous motorbike. The bike looked fixed up and shiny as new.

"Sirius's motorbike?" Harry shivered from more than just the cold.

"It's yours now. I know Sirius told Hagrid that he could hold onto it, but we both agreed that your Godfather would want you to have it. Hagrid was the one who fixed it up for you, but he mentioned that he added improvements, so you might want to watch out for that."

Dumbledore reached into his pocket and pulled out a set of keys. "Happy Christmas, Harry."

"I can't believe you're giving me Sirius's bike." He held the keys in his hand. This was the last thing he would ever get from Sirius. "Sir, I'm so sorry. I didn't get you anything." Harry was kicking himself for not picking up some small present for Dumbledore. Of course, when he'd gone holiday shopping, it was before he'd known he was spending the holidays with his headmaster.

"Oh, that's quite alright Harry. I really don't need anything."

Dumbledore wasn't kidding. Harry had no idea what he could have even bought for the headmaster. It wasn't as though the man needed any more books. Suddenly, a thought struck him. "Actually sir, now that I think about it, I do have something for you."

“Oh, that’s really not necessary, Harry.”

“No, trust me, you’re going to like it. Just wait a second.” Harry ran inside, up the stairs and made a beeline for his trunk. It only took him a moment to find what he was looking for and then he rushed back down to find Dumbledore in the warmth of the foyer. Without further ado, Harry shoved his unwrapped present into his professor’s hands. “Happy Christmas, sir.”

“Oh, why thank you so much, Harry.” Dumbledore smiled at the two little mismatched objects in his hand. “They’re wonderful. What are they?”

“They’re socks. Sorry professor, Hermione’s not nearly as good at needlework as she is at spellwork.”

Dumbledore looked down at the lopsided little socks that would barely cover his fingers. “And who were these socks knitted for?”

“Well, originally they were intended for house elves, but I figured you might prefer them.” Harry felt a little awkward giving Dumbledore the world’s ugliest baby-sized socks, which Hermione had inexpertly knitted herself, and had apparently run out of yarn half-way through the second one, and switched to an entirely different color part-way through. And yet, somehow all that made the gift feel even more endearing.

Dumbledore was running his finger over the soft texture. “You got me hand-knitted socks?”

“Er, well, I figured you could never have too many socks.”

When Dumbledore looked up from his gift, Harry felt a thousand times more awkward when he realized the man had tears in his eyes. “Thank you, Harry. This was a very thoughtful gift.” Without another word, the man reached forward and enveloped Harry in tight hug. Harry felt the headmaster’s whispered words. “No matter what happens, Harry, please remember that I always wanted the best for you.”

Harry nodded, but didn’t say anything.

This time, when Lord Voldemort opened his eyes into Dumbledore’s chaotic hodgepodge of academic marvels and glittering rubbish, he did not let the setting distract him. He was also careful not to touch anything. Instead, he prowled through room after room of tasteless decor, searching for his Harry.

Lord Voldemort couldn’t remember the last time he felt such excitement; such potent anticipation. Soon. The Malfoy Soiree was tomorrow night and the boy would finally be within his grasp. Plans had changed significantly since the summer. He could hardly believe now that he had wanted to kill the boy. Harry who had carelessly brewed a perfect Drought of Living Death, Harry who delicately run his fingers through the Dark Lord’s hair, Harry who had shared the secret of his lonely and neglected childhood, so much like his own.

He found the young man in a sitting room, inspecting a bottle of brandy. "You're not drunk again, are you?" asked Lord Voldemort. He wasn't sure how he felt about the idea of an inebriated Harry Potter. As annoying as the boy had been that evening, there had also been a certain intimacy which had been far more enjoyable than he'd ever expected.

"No, I'm not drunk, not even close." Harry set the bottle aside and moved on toward a shelf by the window. "I'm surprised you came back, now that you know where we are. But since you're here, how would you like to sample some perfumes? They're custom scents by Fifi Flammel."

"Maybe another time." Lord Voldemort moved closer to inspect his horcrux. "How are you? Are you still safe?"

"Of course I'm safe, I'm at Dumbledore's house." As if to prove the point, he spritzed a small bottle that reeked of sherbet lemon. "Are you still trying to insist that he's out to kill me?"

"It hardly matters what I say, you're not going to listen. Besides, you will be gone from this place soon."

Harry set down the perfume bottle and quirked a brow. "How did you know that?"

"I know many things."

Harry narrowed his eyes, his posture growing rigid. "Yes, you know a lot of things. You're in contact with Voldemort, aren't you? Do you tell him about all the things we talk about in these dreams, or are you more selective than that? Do you know what he's planning?"

The Dark Lord smiled at the boy. Harry still hadn't worked out who he'd been talking to all these months. "Lord Voldemort and I...share many things. One thing that I know for certain is that he would not harm you."

Harry scowled and turned around, breaking eye contact. "Then you're either woefully misinformed or you're a liar. Either way, I have nothing more to say to you."

"We can speak of other things." Lord Voldemort moved forward so that his chest brushed up against Harry's back. "Why don't you show me these perfumes you are so interested in."

"Oh?" Harry perked up, and let his hands run across the decorative bottles. "I didn't realize you liked the smell of sherbet lemon so much."

"I don't. There must be other perfumes here, anything besides sherbet lemon."

"Oh, there are definitely some other scents. Why don't you try this one?" Harry handed him a small red vial.

It was almost worth the insidious smell of sulfur and chemicals just to see Harry's wide smile and listen to his joyful laughter. Almost.

The next morning, Dumbledore apparated Harry to the Burrow before the sun had a chance to rise. Harry parked his new motorbike in Mr. Weasley's shed, said his farewells to the headmaster, and then headed up toward the house. He trudged past the chicken coops and a half-finished snow man, only to find the front door locked. Harry couldn't use magic outside the wards of Dumbledore's house, so he tried knocking.

"Who's there?" The voice of Remus Lupin was slightly muffled through the door. "Harry is that you?"

"Of course it's Harry," Mrs. Weasley interrupted before Harry could answer for himself. "Let the poor boy in."

"Calm down Molly," said Remus. "We're supposed to be taking these security measures seriously. Harry is that you?"

"Yeah, it's me," he called through the door.

"You heard him!" Mrs. Weasley fussed. "It's Harry, now let him in."

"Harry, remember when Professor Snape caught you sneaking back into the school from Hogsmeade? He found a piece of parchment on your person, and he thought it was a Dark artifact of some kind. What did the piece of parchment say?"

Harry chuckled at the memory. "The parchment was telling Snape to keep his abnormally large nose out of other people's business." The lock clicked and the door slid open.

"Hello kiddo, good to see you again." Remus was there with open arms, but Mrs. Weasley swooped in for a hug before Harry could reach him.

"Oh Harry," Mrs. Weasley fussed. "I've been worried sick about you! I just, I'm just so sorry... I never knew." Before Harry knew what was going on, soft tears were trickling down the older woman's cheeks.

"Didn't know what?" Harry grabbed a napkin from the kitchen table and handed it to her as quickly as he could. "What going on? What are you talking about?"

"We know about the Dursleys," Remus clarified. He handed Mrs. Weasley a glass of water to calm her down. "Dumbledore explained the situation, and why you're in need of a new guardian."

"Oh Harry," Mrs. Weasley tried to calm her breathing as she wiped the tears from her face. "I'm just so..."

"He also explained," Remus cut her off, "That you might not want to talk about it. And we shouldn't ambush you about it. Besides, I doubt you want to spend Christmas Eve dredging up bad memories. So just know, Harry, that we're both here to talk about anything you want, but we don't have to talk about it if you don't want to."

"I don't want to talk about it." Harry was very firm on that. He didn't even feel comfortable with them knowing about it, but he supposed that Dumbledore would have needed to explain

the situation. Especially if he had approached each of them as possible legal guardians for Harry.

“In that case dear,” Mrs. Weasley gave him an encouraging smile as she finally got ahold of herself. “How about breakfast?”

“I’m definitely in the mood for some of your breakfast, Mrs. Weasley.”

The motherly woman shuffled back to the stove to finish her fried eggs, while Remus called for the rest of the family. Apparently, the werewolf wasn’t the only one visiting for the holidays. Bill and Fleur were still in town, and the twins had flown in from London the night before, so the dining table was going to be a tight fit for everyone.

“You go ahead and sit in Arthur’s spot, dear.” Mrs. Weasley placed two enormous trays of bacon and sausages on the table, while Harry set out silverware for everyone. “He was called into the Ministry late last night, and he’s still not back yet.”

Ron found his way to the kitchen first, eager to see his best friend. Bill and Fleur came downstairs shortly after.

“Why ‘ello ‘Arry.” Fleur pinched his cheek, but then stopped short when she saw the food on the table. “Mrs. Weasley,” Fleur smiled like ice at her future mother-in-law. “You already made breakfast. Even though I told you zat I wanted to make crepes suzette zis morning for when ‘Arry arrived.”

“Oh, well I just made a few things to tide people over in case they get hungry while you’re making your French food.” Mrs. Weasley set down another tray of sausages, followed by a large pot of beans. “I’m sure Harry is starving for a nice home-cooked meal.”

“I zink ‘Arry would prefer something a bit more flavorful and delicate. Right ‘Arry?”

Both women looked down at him expectantly. “Er, I’m sure I could have some of both.”

“I’d like to try that crepe suzie thing,” Ron offered with a hopeful grin.

“Hah, of course you would,” Ginny teased, as she sat down and began loading her plate with her mother’s food. Harry tried to look in any direction other than Ginny. The last time he’d seen Ron’s sister was at Slughorn’s party, where he’d made a complete fool of himself. He still wasn’t sure if she had overheard him, or what she might have thought.

Meanwhile, Ron was eyeing the bacon carefully, clearly trying to decide how much he could eat and still have room for Fleur’s breakfast. He had just moved to take a couple slices when his jaw dropped open. “What in Merlin’s name are you wearing?”

Harry turned to see what the boy was referring to. Ginny was wearing perfectly normal jeans and a jumper. However, right on her chest, shiny and prominent, was a badge that read: SPEW.

“What does it look like I’m wearing?” She lifted her chin in defiance.

“It looks like you’re wearing one of Hermione’s badges,” said Ron. Suddenly, Harry remembered that Ron had missed Slughorn’s party, and the front-page article of the Daily Prophet. So, he had no idea that Hermione’s little club was suddenly very popular. “Why are wearing a spew badge? Is Hermione starting that back up again?”

“Maybe,” Ginny winked.

“You’ve got to admit,” Fred sauntered down the stairs with George at his heels. “Those badges are a lot of fun.”

“If they’re so fun, why aren’t you wearing one?” asked Ron.

“Because I’m wearing two.” Fred turned around and presented his rear end to Ron. Right there, pinned to his trousers, were two SPEW badges. One for each cheek. “What do you think?”

“I think you should get your arse out of my face.” Ron shoved him away.

“Ronald! Language!” Mrs. Weasley snapped as she buttered an enormous platter of toast.

“I went for a more refined look, as you can see.” George had several badges across his shirt in the shape of a smiley face. “These things are great.”

“We’re definitely getting in on this,” Fred agreed. “George and I already have an idea for a line of our own badges.”

“In case anyone wants any that light up,” said George.

“Or make noises,” said Fred.

“Or emit smells.”

“Or squirt water at your enemies.”

“All proceeds go to the original SPEW of course,” George explained.

“Why would anyone want something like zat?” asked Fleur as she quickly poured her batter into an empty pan before Mrs. Weasley could utilize it for even more sausages.

“Is Hermione trying to make money off this spew thing?” asked Ron. Harry wasn’t sure how to explain. “Did Malfoy trick her into something?”

“What does Malfoy have to do with Hermione?” asked Fred.

“Oh yeah,” said Harry. “You guys wouldn’t have heard.” It wasn’t as though Fred and George read the society columns. “Hermione’s dating Draco Malfoy.”

The twins dropped their silverware. Remus choked on his drink. Even Mrs. Weasley let go of the toast platter a bit too soon and it hit the table with a bang. The only one not frozen in place was Fleur, who waltzed over to the table and gently set down her plate of crepes

suzette. “Ok, the first ones are ready. Bon appétit!” She looked from Harry’s embarrassed expression, to Ron’s red face, to the twins’s matching gawks, to Remus’s complete bafflement. “Oo is Draco Malfoy?”

“I don’t know,” said George.

“No idea,” agreed Fred.

“I mean, I *thought* I knew who Draco Malfoy was,” George continued.

“Blonde ferret, talks like a ponce, got Harry and us kicked off the Quidditch team last year, uses the M-word like it’s going out of style...” Fred began listing things on his fingers.

“Yeah, but there’s no bloody way that the Draco Malfoy I’m thinking of would be dating the Hermione Granger I’m thinking of.”

Remus set down his glass of pumpkin juice. “Harry, are you talking about the same Draco Malfoy who dressed up like a dementor and ran out on the Quidditch field to try to scare you off your broom in third year?”

“Yeah, that’s the one.”

“Why would Lucius Malfoy’s son date Hermione Granger?” asked Bill.

“Why would Hermione date that awful boy who’s always picking on you?” asked Mrs. Weasley.

“It’s a long story,” Harry admitted. “I think he’s trying to change. He doesn’t want to be like his dad, I guess. We’re sort of friends now.”

“Four months ago, you were whining that he was *definitely up to something*,” said Fred.

“You three go off to Hogwarts for the very first year without us,” George lamented. “And you can’t even make it four months without replacing us with *Draco Malfoy*.”

“Yeah!” Fred waved his toast for emphasis. “What the hell happened in *four months*?”

Harry shrugged. “A lot.”

“They’re actually a really cute couple.” Ginny shoved Fleur’s crepes away from her and grabbed some more fried eggs and toast. “They went to Slughorn’s party together and they made quite the splash. A lot of exciting things happened at that party, actually. It was a pretty good night, even though Dean and I broke up.”

“You and Dean broke up?” Ron paused on his way to reach for the crepes.

“You were dating?” asked Fred.

“Who’s Dean?” asked George.

“Doesn’t matter. We’re not together anymore. I realized he wasn’t the right guy for me. So just drop it.”

While the others loaded up their plates, Harry stared down at his own plate with crepes suzette on one side and sausages and beans on the other. He sighed. He wished he was hungrier than he felt. He hated having to make choices. Especially when people’s feelings could get hurt.

No more was said about Hermione and Draco until Mr. Weasley arrived at the house two hours later. The twins spared no time wanting to be the first ones to let their father know that Lucius Malfoy’s only son and heir was dating a muggleborn. Not just any muggleborn; Hermione Granger.

Arthur Weasley closed his eyes and let the news wash over him like a cool breeze on a hot day. He took in a deep breath and let a slow smile creep onto his face. It was as if he had just learned that there really was some justice in the world. “Does Lucius Malfoy know about this yet?” he asked the boys.

“No idea,” they admitted.

Mr. Weasley nodded. “Well perhaps someone should tell him. Just in case he hasn’t heard yet. I wonder if he can receive letters in Azkaban.” He wandered off to his room with a pleased as punch expression on his face.

Harry spent the rest of the morning with Ron, Ginny, and the twins. They all ran out to the shed so that Harry could show off Sirius’s motorbike. The siblings were all very impressed, even though Mrs. Weasley didn’t let any of them fly it. “Not when you don’t even know what all those buttons do!” she had insisted.

Next, Harry showed them the books Dumbledore had lent him, and told them all about Dumbledore’s house full of wondrous curiosities.

“That diamond was definitely real,” Fred insisted.

“No way. It was obviously a joke,” George countered.

“I wish I could see the soothe-crow,” said Ginny. “If we had one of those in our yard, Mum would go mental! Although, at this point, she might prefer it to *some other people* staying at the house.”

“You’re lucky Hermione didn’t go with you, Harry.” Ron was flipping through Harry’s new Quidditch book. “If she’d seen that many books in one place, I don’t know if she’d ever leave. We’d never see Hermione again!” Then suddenly, his expression grew sad, and he didn’t say anything else about her.

Remus slowed his breathing as he tried to remain calm and clear-headed. He had been practicing almost every day for weeks now, but his power was still difficult to control. He reached out with his magic and felt the air around him. He felt the cold tingle along his fingers. He felt the soft breeze brush past his face. He let out his magic and took control of the air.

He concentrated on the air around the pebble, which he had set on the old tree stump in front of him. He felt the air around the pebble, cold but calm. He swirled it into discontentment. He felt the air begin to rush this way and that across the surface of the stump. The pebble stirred.

He focused on the air as close to the pebble as he could, swirling it into a small cyclone. The pebble began to spin. Remus increased the speed and the force of the air, until it whirled like a miniature tornado. Finally, the pebble began to lift off the stump.

Remus held both hands above the swirling storm, trying to keep the pebble in place as it spun wildly in the torrent of air. Unfortunately, the power of the wind was too much, and the pebble swirled out of his control and shot off over his shoulder with a violent force.

“Ow!”

Remus was jolted from his meditative state when he heard someone cry out behind him. The air quickly slowed to its normal state and he wheeled around to see what sort of damage he’d done. Harry was standing only a few meters behind him, rubbing his forehead with one hand while holding the offending pebble with the other.

“Gallop gargoyles, Harry I’m so sorry!” He rushed forward to check the boy’s head where a small lump was already forming. “Oh dear, this is why I was trying to practice far away from everyone.”

“You were doing magic without a wand, weren’t you?” Harry didn’t look annoyed at all. In fact, he looked mesmerized by whatever he’d seen.

“Sort of,” Remus admitted. “I don’t know if you’ve heard, but Dumbledore sent me to stay with the werewolves for a time. I’ve been learning a lot about them, and I’ve picked up a bit of werewolf magic.”

“Werewolf magic?” Harry winced when Remus tapped his wand to the boy’s forehead to heal the bruise. “Do you mean Elemental Magic?”

“Yes, actually.” Remus was impressed. He hadn’t expected Harry to know anything about werewolves, especially since he had skipped that section when he was teaching Defense Against the Dark Arts. “I’m learning Elemental Magic. My specialty is the air element, but as you can see, I’m having some difficulty mastering it.”

Harry looked down at the pebble thoughtfully. “Do you have trouble controlling the power? Because it’s too strong?” he asked.

“Yes, how did you know that?” According to Erwin Sykes and the other werewolves, the experience had been the opposite for all of them. They had trouble concentrating their power

enough to manipulate the elements. However, Remus's power seemed to concentrate too much, too quickly, and the air around him would quickly swirl out of control.

Harry didn't answer, he simply turned his attention to the stump that was now lying perfectly still. "You were able to cancel the magic, though, before it went too crazy or made you pass out or anything."

"I wasn't able to the first few times I tried," Remus admitted. "But now I can. It took a bit of practice. Why are you asking me about all of this, Harry?"

"How did you manage to stop it?" Harry asked next. "How did you prevent the magic from pouring out until you lost control?"

Remus had no idea why Harry was so curious about this or what exactly he was thinking. "Like I said, it took practice. Now Harry, would you please tell me why you know so much about this? How do you know about Elemental Magic?"

Finally, Harry paused his questions, and his expression turned slightly embarrassed. "Dumbledore had wanted me to learn Occlumency and Mind Magic. But I don't think I'm good at those. I was curious about Ancient Magic in general, though. What was it the werewolves were teaching you exactly?"

"I suppose if this might help with your Occlumency, then some general advice couldn't hurt." Remus explained how the other werewolves had taught him to relax his thoughts and calm his breathing. How he focused on the magic in the air around him and reached out to the magic in the air in order to manipulate it as he wanted. He explained how he cancelled the Elemental Magic, not by trying to gain control over it, but by relaxing and letting it go, which took some practice. During the entire talk, Harry watched, enthralled.

Harry was thrilled to get some practical advice about Ancient Magic. But more than that, he was excited to be spending time with someone who felt like family. If everything went well, Remus would be family in the legal sense. After all, if Dumbledore's bill went through, then the man would be able to adopt Harry permanently.

The two of them spent the chilly afternoon wandering the snowy backyard and chatting about all sorts of things. The former professor told Harry about his day to day life with the other werewolves, although Harry noticed that the man seemed to be skimming over certain details. Harry told the story about his school year so far, and about Draco turning a new leaf and becoming friendly. He even asked Lupin if he had ever heard of someone called the Half-Blood Prince, but Remus had never heard the name, much to Harry's disappointment.

It wasn't until almost dinnertime that the conversation finally turned toward Harry's adoption.

"Albus told me that he's doing everything in his power to make it so I can adopt you," said Remus. "And you know that I would always do anything I could to protect you and make

sure you're happy and healthy. But are you sure you would want to live with someone like me?"

"What do you mean, someone like you?" Harry was tired of hearing his favorite teacher think less of himself because of something he couldn't help. "You mean someone who's always been kind to me? Someone who stood up for me? Someone who takes the time to help me?"

Remus let out a sad sigh, accentuating the many haggard lines on his face. "Harry, I know you don't care that I'm a werewolf, but a lot of other people do. There are lots of people would think less of you if they heard you were living with a werewolf."

"I don't care about what other people think," Harry insisted.

Remus let out a soft smile. "You got that trait from Sirius." He ruffled Harry's messy hair affectionately. "Look, pup, I just don't want you to feel like you're boxed in. If you want to stay with me, I'll welcome you with open arms. But if there's someone else you want to stay with, like the Weasleys or anyone else, you just say the word and I'll do everything I can to make that happen. It doesn't matter what your parents' Will says. You're old enough to decide where you want to live."

"Yeah, I am," Harry agreed. "And I want to live with you."

Remus nodded as they trudged through the frozen vegetable patch, past a snowman with two SPEW badges for eyes. It seemed that the man had finally accepted Harry's decision.

"Alright, then we'll have to do what we can to get Dumbledore's bill passed with the Magical Creatures Committee. I've been staying with lots of werewolves, trying to make a good impression with them. Maybe I could talk to someone on that committee, make them see we're not the monsters that some people make us out to be."

"If only I was going to that party tonight," Harry mused. "Apparently, a bunch of people from that committee will be there. I could have talked you up."

"What party?" asked Remus.

"The Malfoys are hosting some big thing, but I already decided not to go. I don't think it would be too safe for me, considering Voldemort's out for my head, and there will probably be Dark wizards there and whatnot."

"Oh yes, best not to risk it. You can never be too careful."

"But you could go!" Harry suddenly realized. After all, why not? "Yeah, Voldemort's not looking for you. Even if there were Death Eaters at the party, they wouldn't really care if they saw you. If you went to the party, you could talk to the committee members and schmooze all those Pureblood ponces. You're one of the smartest people I know, and you're polite and can talk policy and all that. You're sure to change their minds about werewolves."

Remus looked unconvinced. "Harry, I would stick out like a cursed thumb at a party like that. All my clothes are..."

“You’re not that much taller than me,” Harry interrupted. Remus only had a few inches on Harry, and he was about as skinny. “I’ve got some really fancy dress robes that Malfoy picked out himself. You could borrow them!”

“I don’t know, Harry. I mean, talking to some committee members would be great. But there’s no guarantee the Malfoys would even let me in. I mean, it’s not like I was invited.”

“No, but I was!” Harry was getting more and more excited about this idea as everything seemed to be falling into place. “And it doesn’t matter if they would let you in or not, because I have a Portkey that’s timed to take someone to Malfoy Manor tonight. You can use the Portkey and it will let you straight through. Plus, I have a formal invitation, so if anyone questions you, you can show them that you have an official invite and everything. I don’t see how this could possibly go wrong.”

The idea seemed like the perfect compromise. Harry couldn’t go to the party due to the security risk, but Remus should be perfectly safe. Besides, anyone who talked to Remus Lupin would have to admit that the man was nothing like the awful stereotypes about werewolves. Remus was as polite and mild-mannered as it was possible to be.

“Actually Harry, that just might work...”

It was the night before Christmas.

Everyone had eaten their fill of holiday pudding. Mrs. Weasley was on her third glass of sherry and was singing along with Celestina Warbeck on the wireless. If one listened carefully enough, they could hear Fleur’s colorful comments in the background. The twins were showing off a few of their latest products to their father and older brother. Ron’s bishop was dragging away the remains of Ginny’s pawn.

It was in the middle of this quiet, pleasant evening, that Harry pulled Remus upstairs to prepare him for his big debut. According to Draco’s letter, the Portkey would activate at exactly one hour to midnight.

By the time Remus was wearing the formal robes and had carefully combed his hair, Harry was almost bouncing with excitement, while Remus was fidgety with nerves.

“You’re going to be great,” Harry assured him one more time for good measure. “Just be yourself. You’re going to knock everyone’s socks off.”

Remus nodded, as he tucked the invitation into his pocket. “Where’s the Portkey? How much time do I have?”

“You’ve still got five minutes to go. The Portkey is the little spoon on the dresser. It’s not supposed to activate until the designated time, but I’ve been trying not to touch it just in case. I’ve never had good luck with Portkeys.”

“Oh, you should be fine, Harry,” said Remus, as he walked over to retrieve the spoon.
“Unless they’ve been hijacked for some reason, Portkeys will only transport you when...”

Harry never heard the end of the sentence, because Remus Lupin disappeared the moment he touched the silver spoon.

“Remus?” There was no response. Harry was left alone. “Well, I guess he’s at the party.” He couldn’t help but wonder if something had gone wrong.

“He’s coming.”

Draco could hardly believe it, but the Dark Lord was right. They had been waiting around in a dark, oppressive room for three hours. Draco had missed the beginning of his own party, just to wait for someone that he was sure wasn’t coming. And yet, only a couple minutes left until the agreed time, a spinning figure began to whirl into the room.

Professor Snape stood taller and brought his wand to the ready, while the Dark Lord continued to stalk in the shadows like an impatient cat. Draco barely had time to wonder: *What is wrong with him? I told him not to come!* When his thoughts diverted wildly to: *That doesn’t look like Harry. Who the hell is that?*

“Stupefy,” Snape cried before the man who was not Harry Potter could react to his new surroundings.

The man crumpled to the floor and Draco, Snape, and the Dark Lord all crept forward curiously.

“Is it him?” asked the Dark Lord. His voice sounded different than usual; manic and excited instead of calm and cold. Draco tried not to shudder at how eager the man was to kill his classmate. The Dark Lord looked ready to pounce. “Is it Harry Potter? Is he Polyjuiced?”

“He’s used Polyjuice before,” Draco admitted. It did seem in character for the Gryffindor. “And those are the robes Potter wore to Slughorn’s party.” But why would Harry come to the soiree after Draco practically begged him not to?

Snape was ready with a more practical solution, pulling a small vial from his pocket. “If he’s Polyjuiced, then this will reveal his true self.” He carefully poured the contents down the unconscious man’s throat. A moment later, when nothing happened, Snape began running a few spells to see if the man was wearing a glamour or any other concealment charms. However, it was becoming quite clear that this was not Harry Potter, just a middle-aged man wearing Harry Potter’s clothes.

“Who is it?” The Dark Lord’s voice held no more excitement or fervor, only the promise of pain.

Now that Draco wasn’t looking to see if the man would turn into Harry, he realized the person sprawled out on the floor looked familiar. “He looks like my old Defense Against the

Dark Arts teacher.”

“That’s because he is,” said Snape. “This is Remus Lupin, a friend of the Potters and a member of the Order of the Phoenix.”

The Dark Lord’s fury seemed to rise with every word he heard. “The boy didn’t come.” Draco could feel the weight of his master’s oppressive Dark Magic filling the small room. In the marble fireplace, the smoldering embers of the dying fire roared with a desire to burn everything they could reach. The books on the distant shelves quaked with anticipation. “He was supposed to come to me. He was supposed to come willingly.” Cracks formed on the frosted windows. The hearth turned into a blazing inferno that rose so high it caught a nearby tapestry on fire. Then the Dark Lord turned his eyes on Draco. “You said he would come.”

“I...I tried...”

“You have failed.”

“My Lord, if I may.” Like a Patronus in the dark, Professor Snape was there, standing between Draco and the Dark Lord. “As long as we have this Remus Lupin character, Harry Potter should not be hard to entice. Lupin is a close family friend, just as Sirius Black had been. If Potter was willing to escape his would-be protectors to save Black, I see no reason he wouldn’t do the same for Lupin.”

“You can still bring me Harry Potter?” The raging fire calmed slightly. The books stopped shaking.

“Of course my Lord,” Snape assured him. “Draco and I will bring you Harry Potter as promised. The arrival of Lupin is not a failure. It is a benefit, which will allow us to more easily lure the boy in.” Snape paused to look at the unconscious man, the light from the blazing tapestry creeping closer. “Potter will come if he knows Remus Lupin *is still alive*.”

The Dark Lord kept his eyes narrowed. The fire continued to spread on the far side of the room until it caught the carpet on fire; the same carpet Lupin was lying on. It burned hotter and faster until, just as suddenly as the fire had started, it was completely snuffed out. The carpet, the tapestry, and the fireplace went from vivid red and orange to charred black in a moment.

“Very well,” the Dark Lord’s voice was not much more than a hiss. “I will give you one last chance. Use the spy as you see fit, but you will get me the boy by the end of the year.”

“Yes, my Lord.” Draco stepped up next to his professor, bowing his head in thanks. “I already have a plan in mind to convince Potter to come. By springtime at the latest...” Before he could finish his sentence, the Dark Lord surged forward and wrapped his long fingers around his fragile neck.

“Not the end of the *school year*, you insolent child. The end of *this year*. You have until midnight on New Year’s Eve to bring me Harry Potter or you will have disappointed me for the last time.”

Draco coughed and spluttered, but he still couldn't help the shocked words that came from his abused throat. "That's only one week away!"

The Dark Lord squeezed harder, until no air could slip through. "I didn't ask you for a countdown, I asked you to bring me that boy." Draco started to see spots in the corners of his vision. "I will not be so merciful if you fail me again."

Without another word, the Dark Lord shoved Draco aside and swept from the room, leaving the ashes of his own destruction in his wake. Snape didn't move a muscle, while Draco rubbed his neck and tried to slow his racing heart.

One week. They only had one week to convince Harry Potter to escape from wherever he was and come to Malfoy Manor. Otherwise, they'd be lucky if the Dark Lord gave them a quick death. One week.

One Week

Chapter Notes

This chapter is very long. Sorry, it's almost too long for a single chapter, but I didn't want to end it until we got to a good stopping point.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Harry was shocked beyond words. Both he and Ron stared down at the opened package in abject horror. It was almost painful to look at, and yet he couldn't turn his eyes away.

"That isn't what I think it is, is it?" Ron finally found his voice.

"I don't know." Harry cocked his head to the side to try and look at it from a different angle. "What do *you* think it is?"

"I mean, obviously it's a necklace," Ron admitted. They both cocked their heads the other way, staring at the little golden trinket. "But what do you think she meant by sending that?"

"I think she meant that you're her sweetheart." After all, that was what the little gold chain said. 'My Sweetheart' was written in curly letters right where it would land on Ron's chest if he were wearing it. Harry couldn't imagine why Lavender Brown would send this, of all things, as her Christmas gift to Ron. But there it was, sitting in the gold and silver box, in all its frilly glory. "Did you by any chance tell her that you wanted..."

"No way."

"Did you ever imply that you'd..."

"Definitely not."

They stared at the Sweetheart necklace for another couple minutes, while Ron fretted, and Harry tried not to laugh.

"You're going to have to wear it, you know. She'll expect to see you wearing it."

"She can't possibly expect me to wear that in public!" Ron lifted it carefully out of the box, trying to touch as little as possible, as if it were dipped in poison. The little piece of jewelry somehow looked even more garish with the morning sunlight dancing across the words.

"You should wear it to breakfast," Harry suggested. "Show it off to the twins."

"Don't you dare tell them I have this." Ron shoved his gift into his dresser drawer, away from prying eyes. "If I do wear it...later where none of my siblings can see it...you'd better not

laugh at me.”

“I cannot be held responsible for what I might do if I see the words: ‘My Sweetheart’ staring at me from around your neck.”

“I’m not showing you any more of my presents.” Ron began shoving the rest of the brightly colored boxes underneath his orange pillows. “You’ve got your own pile of stuff, what did you get?”

Harry had quite a haul this year for Christmas. There was the usual sweater and homemade fudge from Mrs. Weasley, Honeydukes candy from Hermione, joke products from the twins, a book of defense spells from Remus, and broomstick polish from Ginny. Draco had sent him some fancy French chocolates, and Harry wondered if Hermione had received something similar. He hoped Draco enjoyed the book on hosting formal events that Harry had decided to send him.

He paused when he found a gift from Kreacher. Before, he would have expected Kreacher to send him a pile of dragon dung or a bunch of maggots. However, since Harry had returned all the Black family heirlooms, the house elf seemed much more tolerant of him. Sure enough, when Harry unwrapped the package, he found another bottle of Ogden’s best firewhiskey.

“Bloody hell,” Ron put away his own Honeydukes candy when he saw the fancy label. “What a way to celebrate Christmas!”

“Yeah, but we’re not touching that bottle right now.” Harry handed over the little note that Kreacher had sent with the bottle. “Kreacher says it’s for me to share with the Malfoy Heir. He makes quite a point that the whiskey is *only* for sharing with Draco.”

Ron frowned at the whiskey now lying on the bed. “You don’t think he would curse it, do you? So that it poisons us if we drink it while Malfoy’s not around?”

“I don’t really want to test it.” Harry picked it up and placed it carefully in the trunk. “We’ll drink it later when we’re all hanging out together.”

“When we’re hanging out with Draco Malfoy? Oh goodie!” Ron rolled his eyes.

“Quit whining, or I’ll invite Lavender too. And then you’ll have to hang out with him while wearing your new necklace.”

“You wouldn’t!”

“There’s only one way to find out,” Harry teased. “Now come on. I’m done opening presents. Let’s go see what’s for breakfast.”

As soon as the potion was stable, Severus lowered the fire so it would simmer quietly. He and Draco had one week. One week to capture Harry Potter. One week to come up with a plan and implement it. Not to mention, he only had one week to finish the very precise potion that the Dark Lord requested, and he couldn’t afford any mistakes. He waited until everything was

stable before he finally turned his attention to the unconscious figure lying in the corner of the room.

Remus Lupin hadn't been awoken since he was stunned the night before. First, Severus checked over Lupin's vitals to make sure everything was alright. Then, he placed a few charms for safety. Only then did he spell the body into a sitting position and whisper, "Enervate."

The haggard-looking man blinked a few times before he realized where he was and who was looking down on him. Lupin mouthed a word that looked like 'Severus,' but no sound came out. As soon as he realized he couldn't speak, his arm jerked, as if to grab at his throat, but it was impeded by the thick ropes that wrapped around him. It was at this point the man realized he was tied up, silenced, and completely at the mercy of his former tormentor.

Any reasonable person would panic in such a situation. However, Lupin simply let out a silent sigh and met Severus eye to eye. He looked more resigned than scared. As if he was completely confident that Severus wouldn't hurt him. He shrugged his shoulders as if to ask: 'Well, what now?'

"You have been captured by the Dark Lord," Severus explained. That brought a spark of fear to the werewolf's eyes. "I am going to remove the silencing spell and untie you so that you can eat some food. You may ask me questions, but I need you to be as quiet as possible. I've told the others not to disturb me while I'm brewing, but they will gladly interrupt if they hear voices. Do you understand?"

Lupin nodded, so Severus removed the silencing spell first and then the ropes.

"Where are we?" Lupin jumped straight to the questions, but at least he kept his voice down.

"The Dark Lord's hideout. That is all I can reveal." Severus stood to grab the bowl of food he had left by the ingredient's cupboard.

"Why am I alive?" asked Lupin.

"The Dark Lord wishes to use you as bait to lure in Harry Potter."

"I'd rather die."

"I don't believe that will be necessary. Potter is many things, but he does have at least some sense. Sirius Black died less than a year ago because that boy tried to play hero. I doubt he would be stupid enough to try it again, even if he knew for certain that your life was in danger."

Severus laid down the bowl along with a glass of water. "Here. It's stew. It's cold but it's safe to eat."

"I'm not hungry."

"I recommend you eat when the opportunity presents itself. There is no guarantee when your next meal will come."

Lupin looked up again with a slight frown. “Shall I assume from that comment that you have no intention of helping me escape?”

“How stupid do you think I am? If I let you out of this room, you would be dead before you ever left the building, and I would be punished for allowing you to get that far. Probably, with my own death.”

Lupin nodded and lifted the bowl of stew to sniff at it. “Then why untie me at all? What if I overpowered you and made a run for it?”

Severus rolled his eyes and turned back to his cupboards, barely giving Lupin a fraction of his attention. He needed to prepare the mixture of herbs that would be added to the simmering potion later. “You are a skilled duelist, Lupin. However, I doubt your skill *without a wand* is much of a match for me *with a wand*.”

“I’ve started practicing wolf magic,” Lupin admitted after he tasted the stew. “I’m learning to do magic without a wand.”

“Oh? And is your skill so profound that you can now defeat a fully trained wizard without attracting the attention of a dozen other Death Eaters and the Dark Lord himself? Or perhaps you can defeat all of them single-handedly now that you’ve learned *a little wolf magic*?” Severus turned to scowl at the man who was now sitting cross-legged on the floor, sipping his breakfast.

“Yes, fine, I see your point.” Lupin tried the water next. “I’m surprised I’m not being tortured for information. He knows I’m a member of the Order, right? You would think he’d want to question me.”

“He also knows you’re a werewolf.” Severus set out several small jars of dried herbs. He opened the chamomile first to carefully measure the precise amount needed. “You’re lucky his own prejudices are working in your favor. The Dark Lord has been using Greyback as a tool to spread terror to the masses. But he would never trust Greyback with any valuable information, or even give him the Dark Mark. He likely assumes that Dumbledore is using you for a similar purpose; as a blunt instrument to terrorize and threaten his enemies.” Severus couldn’t help but roll his eyes at the last statement.

“I take it from your snarky tone that you don’t find me very threatening?”

“Albus Dumbledore has Moody to intimidate his enemies. Not to mention half a dozen Aurors.” He placed the required chamomile into a separate bowl and turned his attention to chopping trifid stalks. “You are less threatening than Molly Weasley.”

“Well, that woman did raise Fred and George. I wouldn’t want to cross her.” Lupin finished his stew and then blinked a few times, slowly. “What’s simmering in that cauldron over there? I think the potion fumes are starting to get to me.” He took another sip of his water.

“The fumes shouldn’t affect you,” said Severus. “The active ingredients are fully distilled by now.” He finished with the stalks, and then turned to give Lupin his full attention. “The potion in your stew is probably starting to kick in.”

“I...what?” Lupin set down the glass of water.

“I laced your stew with a powerful forgetfulness potion.”

“Why would you do that? You said it was safe.” Lupin looked around the room for something that might help him. “What are you playing at?”

Lupin started to stand up, or at least he tried to. He didn’t seem to be able to coordinate well enough to get to his feet.

“I also added a powerful dizziness potion for good measure,” Severus explained, almost as an afterthought. “I wouldn’t try standing or moving around if I were you. You wouldn’t want to make yourself sick; not when the potion has already spread through your system.”

Lupin was breathing deeply in and out, trying to stay calm as Severus slowly approached him. All the werewolf managed to say was, “Why?”

Severus leaned down to meet the other man’s eyes. “Potter isn’t the only one I’m trying to save.”

It took less than a minute for Lupin to fully give in to the potion; slumped over, eyes closed, and mouth hanging open. Only then did Severus speak again. “Don’t worry, Lupin, you won’t even remember this conversation.”

Just then, Severus heard a quiet noise outside the door. It sounded like someone trying to hide a sneeze. Within two seconds, he was standing in the threshold with his wand raised, only to find young Draco Malfoy looking apologetic.

“I didn’t want to interrupt your brewing again,” said the boy.

“Get inside.” Severus stepped out of the way of the door. “Now.”

As soon as Draco was in the potion’s lab, his attention immediately fell on the unconscious Remus Lupin. The man’s hair was disheveled, and the elegant formal robes were crumpled and filthy. However, he was otherwise no worse for wear.

“Has he woken up at all?” asked Draco.

“He was awake long enough to eat a meal laced with forgetfulness potion.”

“Forgetfulness potion? Why bother?”

Severus wasn’t sure what to say to that. There was a lot Draco didn’t know; a lot he couldn’t know. As far as Draco was concerned, the Dark Lord was still hunting Harry Potter in the hopes to finally kill him. As far as Draco was concerned, Severus was loyal to the Dark Lord only, and was committed to helping in the task of capturing and murdering the Boy-Who-Lived.

Draco didn’t know that Severus had tried to save Potter’s life, by revealing that he carried a piece of the Dark Lord’s soul. Draco didn’t know that Severus had spent the last few months

trying to find a way to capture Harry Potter in order to fulfill the Unbreakable Vow, while also trying to ensure that the boy's quality of life would be worth living. Severus had hoped that he could postpone the inevitable kidnapping. He had hoped the Potter boy could find a home where he would be safe until the fateful day came, but that was not to be.

Severus had no idea what the Dark Lord was planning to do with Harry Potter once he was captured. The potion's master had originally assumed that the boy would simply be thrown in a dungeon and forgotten, but that was seeming less and less likely. For one thing, the potions that the Dark Lord insisted Snape brew were expected to be done by the time the boy arrived, and they did not bode well.

Severus fully expected that he would have to kidnap Harry Potter in order to save Draco Malfoy, and then turn around and have to save Harry Potter from the Dark Lord. However, how and when he saved Potter was still completely unknown. If the Dark Lord simply placed Potter in an enchanted sleep and left him alone, then there wouldn't be much need to rescue the boy in a timely manner. However, if the Dark Lord was committed to torturing Potter as punishment for his continued meddling, then the boy would need to be spirited away as soon as possible.

That was where Remus Lupin came in. Not only could Lupin be used as a backup plan to capture Potter, if his first plan didn't work out. More importantly, Lupin could later be used to help rescue Potter from Malfoy Manor, without the Dark Lord blaming Severus. However, if Lupin made it back to the Order with the boy, Severus needed to be doubly sure that the man had no idea that his capture had anything to do with him or Draco Malfoy. And if Albus Dumbledore was going to be questioning Lupin about his capture, then a simple Obliviate wouldn't be enough.

"The forgetfulness potion is to ensure that his memories match what I want him to think," was all Severus told Draco. "On the off chance he escapes, I don't want Dumbledore to know we were involved in his capture."

"How would he ever escape?" asked Draco. "Won't the Dark Lord kill him as soon as he finishes off Harry?"

Severus didn't answer. Instead he turned back to his ingredients and started counting out griffon talons. "Speaking of Mr. Potter, we only have one week to capture him, and we cannot afford any more mistakes. Go grab a piece of parchment and a quill from the desk over there. You're going to send him a letter."

"Another letter? He probably already assumes my mail is being monitored, since I sent that ridiculous invitation. Why would he trust me if I tried to bargain for Lupin's life?"

Severus dropped the talons aside. "Listen to me very carefully, Draco. Under no circumstances will you tell him that you have Remus Lupin. If he suspects that you are behind the disappearance of his beloved werewolf, he is not going to be stupid enough to run off alone. Not again. He will rush to tell some member of the Order, possibly Dumbledore himself. They will not allow him to get within cursing distance of you or this house."

"Well then, what the blooming hell am I supposed to write?" Draco sneered.

“Exactly what I tell you to.”

When Harry and Ron ran downstairs, the kitchen smelled of cinnamon and cloves. There was holly strung up along the fireplace and they could hear Fred and George singing inappropriate versions of Christmas carols while they tore into their stockings. Harry was especially excited to find that Tonks would be joining them for the holiday, but disappointed that Professor Lupin had not returned. Apparently, Tonks felt the same way.

“Molly, where’s Remus?” asked the young woman, as her hair slowly changed from pink to mousey brown. “Didn’t he say he would be here for breakfast?”

“That’s what I thought, too.” Mrs. Weasley was setting out so many dishes, the table practically buckled under the weight. “But you know how he can be. Sometimes he gets a tad overwhelmed, and he just wants to be away from people for a bit. He must be in one of his moods again.”

“Can anyone get ahold of him?” Harry asked. “I got invited to some fancy party at the Malfoy house yesterday, but I told Remus he could go instead of me. I figured he could show the political people that werewolves weren’t so bad. Has anyone heard from him since last night? You don’t think something could have happened to him?”

Mr. Weasley shook his head. “Harry, you know I trust the Malfoys less than I trust The Quibbler, but they wouldn’t be stupid enough to try anything in the middle of a party. There would be far too many witnesses.”

Mrs. Weasley seemed to agree. “Don’t worry dear, we’ll try and send him a message after breakfast. But if it doesn’t work, I don’t want you to fret too much. If Remus really did go to a pureblood party, it’s likely someone may have said something that upset him. He’s very sensitive about his condition, you know.”

“I suppose that’s possible,” Harry conceded. But he still wanted to hear from Remus himself to make sure the man was alright. Tonks simply gave Harry a sad smile and a shrug. They would just have to wait and see.

When they all sat down to eat, there was hardly room to move. Not only was the table itself creaking from the weight of sausages, baked beans, and hearty potatoes; there was barely enough room for all of them to squeeze together, even with Remus absent. Ron, Harry, and Ginny crowded onto one small bench, while Bill, Fleur, and Tonks crowded together on another.

Harry wondered if Mrs. Weasley was trying to play matchmaker when she insisted that Tonks stay for the meal and sit with Bill. However, Harry couldn’t help but think she was fighting a losing battle when he saw Fleur feed Bill a toasted walnut in the most suggestive way possible. She even took her time brushing her finger across his bottom lip.

Before Mrs. Weasley could explode, Fred chimed in. “Oh, is that how they eat walnuts in France? I want to try!” Without missing a beat, he picked up a few walnuts and shoved them

into George's mouth, pausing to pet his twin across the mouth a couple times for good measure.

As soon as he was free, George turned his attention on Ron. Instead of a few walnuts, he held up an entire handful. "Open up Ron!"

"Get off me!" the poor boy shouted, while George tried to stuff all the walnuts into his mouth at once.

While Harry was distracted, Ginny took the opportunity to flick a walnut at his forehead.

"Hey," he cried. "What was that for?"

She flicked two more at him. "Come on, Harry!" Then she threw several at his head, while he tried to swat them away. "You're supposed to eat them." She barely managed to get the words out through her laughter. "It's how the French do it."

"It eez not!" Fleur looked appalled, as the younger Weasleys all started assaulting each other with walnuts. "We 'ave manners where I come from."

The twins had cast a multiplying spell at some point, and there were now more than enough nuts to go around. Even Tonks seemed to cheer up a bit. She valiantly defended Ron by shooting several walnuts at the twins. Mr. Weasley and Bill looked like they were trying not to laugh. Mrs. Weasley was shouting that they should all be enjoying the meal as a family, but her voice was drowned out by the general clamor. Ginny kept shoving walnuts down Harry's shirt, so Harry retaliated by smearing them into her bright red hair, getting crumbs everywhere.

In the middle of all this hubbub, the Weasley's pitiful owl, Errol, flew through the window and crash-landed onto the table, showering everyone with nuts, beans, and pudding.

A moment of silence followed, before Fleur shrieked and ran from the room, the younger Weasleys erupted into even more laughter, and Mrs. Weasley valiantly tried to cast cleaning spells on everyone. Shortly after Errol's arrival, with a holiday greeting from Charlie, another owl arrived carrying the morning paper. Finally, a third owl flew into the kitchen; a fine eagle owl with dark feathers. It circled the table looking for a clean place to land, but then gave up and touched down onto Harry's lap. Harry recognized the bird from having seen it fly to the Slytherin table so many times over the year.

"Is that Malfoy's owl?" asked Ron.

"I think so." Harry reached forward to grab the letter tied to its leg. He handed the bird a sausage that was lying on the floor, but Draco's owl didn't seem in any hurry to leave. "It must be expecting a reply," Harry muttered. He opened the envelope and unfolded the letter.

The Weasleys were all polite enough not to say anything while Harry read the letter, but it was clear they were all terribly curious what the Malfoy Heir would be writing to Harry Potter about on Christmas morning. "He's just wishing me a Happy Christmas," Harry explained to his diligent audience. "And he says he missed me at the party, but that it's

probably for the best I didn't go, just to be on the safe side." Harry read a little further. "Apparently Remus did attend, and Draco says that Remus got into a bit of an argument with one of the Wizengamot members. According to Draco, the man shouted that werewolves should have been labelled Dark Creatures and that they should never be allowed to attend functions with civilized people."

Harry's heart raced with fury that anyone could ever say such a thing to the infinitely patient and kind-hearted Remus. But he also felt worried about how Remus would have reacted to such comments. Maybe Mrs. Weasley was right that he wanted to be alone for a while.

He read on. "Draco says that Remus ended up leaving early. He's asking me if Remus made it back alright. He says that Remus looked really upset when he left."

"We should send Remus a Patronus," Tonks insisted.

"If he didn't show up to breakfast, then he probably doesn't want to talk to anyone," Mrs. Weasley warned her.

"Bugger that." Without any further hesitation, Tonks lifted her wand and shouted, "*Expecto Patronum!*" Once again, Harry got to see her new Patronus, which looked a bit like a large dog. Once again, he wondered if it was supposed to be Sirius. "Remus, where are you? Are you alright? Please respond just to let me know you're safe. We're all worried about you." With that message, the large dog bounded off to find Remus.

"How long does it usually take for a reply?" Harry asked.

"It only takes a few minutes for the Patronus to find their target," Mr. Weasley explained. "But Remus might not respond right away. Did your *new friend* [Mr. Weasley stumbled over the words, but recovered quickly] say anything else, Harry?"

"Oh yeah," Harry looked back down at the letter and read the last bit. "He says he really needs to meet with me to discuss something urgent, but he doesn't want to talk about it in a letter. I've no idea what that could be." Harry looked up pleadingly at the Weasleys. "Is it ok if I go? Is there somewhere he and I can meet in private?"

"Er," Mr. Weasley looked uncomfortable. "I don't know, Harry. Albus asked us to make arrangements so that you could meet Hermione at Gringotts. We're getting that all set up now. I don't know if we'll have time before the next term to set something up so you can also meet with young Mr. Malfoy. Why don't you ask him if it can wait until the Holidays are over?"

"Okay, I'll ask." Harry shooed the owl off his lap so he could send his response after breakfast. "And I'll write to Hermione to figure out when I'm supposed to meet with her. I'm sure she has something planned out."

"*Expecto Patronum!*" Once again, Tonks cast the powerful charm which filled the kitchen with silvery light. "Dammit Remus," she cried at the silvery creature. "If you have gotten my message, then respond. I just need to know if you're alright." Once again, the giant dog-like animal bounded off through the wall.

“What if someone attacked him as he was leaving the party?” Harry asked. “What if he’s dead and it’s all my fault?”

“Don’t worry, Harry dear,” Mrs. Weasley tried to reassure him. “This isn’t the first time that Remus has refused to answer a Patronus. Sometimes, he gets it in his head that he’s a danger to those around him, and he just needs some time to himself. He’s been under a lot of stress lately, living with those werewolves, and now with this adoption business...”

“You think he’s upset because of me?” asked Harry. Did he push Remus too far? Yesterday, Remus had tried to insist that someone else might make a better guardian for Harry. Had Harry been pushing something that Remus didn’t actually want? Was Remus trying to avoid him now?

“No Harry. This has nothing to do with you,” Tonks insisted. “If Remus is in a state, then that’s his own business, and it’s no fault of yours. We’ll contact Dumbledore and see if he can reach Remus. I know he’s tried to cut himself off in the past, but I thought he had moved beyond all that.” She looked distant and unsure. “I thought he was finally willing to accept...”

Before Tonks could finish, there was a sharp knock on the door.

“Is that him?” Harry cried.

There was a scuffle as Mrs. Weasley ran for the front door, with Harry and Tonks hot on her heels. Meanwhile Ron, Ginny, and the twins bolted for the window.

“Bloody hell,” said Ron.

“That’s definitely not Remus,” said Fred.

“I wish,” said George.

“I wouldn’t bother with that door, Mum,” said Ginny.

It was too late, though. By the time Ginny commented, Mrs. Weasley was already pulling open the handle, while Mr. Weasley shouted a belated warning about security measures. Suddenly, they were face to face with someone Harry had not seen in a long time.

The bespectacled form of Percy Weasley was standing on the front stoop. Not far behind Percy, was a man Harry recognized from the Daily Prophet, the new Minister of Magic Rufus Scrimgeour.

“Er, hello Mother,” said Percy.

In less than a minute, Mrs. Weasley had Percy seated at the table, filling him a plate of breakfast. Rufus Scrimgeour had filed in after them, and Mrs. Weasley tried to offer him some tea.

“No thank you, Mrs. Weasley. Although I think I may try one of these roasted walnuts, since you seem to have so many.” The minister grabbed a couple walnuts from the table, walnuts

that Harry was pretty sure had been shoved up Ron's nose at one point. He ate them with a grateful smile. No one said anything, but Ginny looked like it was quite a struggle.

Before Harry knew quite what was going on, the minister insisted that the Weasleys should have some time to catch up, and suddenly Harry was alone in the garden with Minister Scrimgeour. It didn't take a genius to figure out that this had been the man's plan all along, but at least he didn't try to deny it.

"I've been hoping to talk with you for some time," Scrimgeour admitted. "I've actually tried to arrange a meeting with you on several occasions, but Dumbledore is rather protective of you. Understandable, of course." He added quickly. Then he gave Harry a piercing gaze. "Did you know about that?"

"That you wanted to meet with me or that Dumbledore is protective?" Harry wasn't sure where this conversation was headed, but he was already annoyed that Scrimgeour would use Percy as a pretense to gain one-on-one access to the Boy-Who-Lived. He didn't know much about Rufus Scrimgeour, except that he used to be head of the Auror Office. According to the Prophet, the man had been slightly reluctant to take the position as Minister of Magic, and he had only accepted at the behest of several other ministry officials. Rufus Scrimgeour was supposed to represent strength and stability in these dark times.

Harry could see why the public found him reassuring, especially after Cornelius Fudge. Scrimgeour exuded a calm patience, far different from the previous minister's excitability and paranoia. He walked with a slight limp, and his mane of brown hair was mixed with bits of grey, giving the impression of an old lion. As Harry assessed the man, he noticed something that he could hardly believe. Something bright stood out from the grey of his robes.

"Wait!" Harry cried, stopping in his tracks. "What are you wearing?"

"Oh this?" The man gestured to the shiny badge pinned to the front of his robes. "This is my SPEW badge, of course. I, like everyone else in Wizarding Britain, read your interview in the Prophet, and I found your words quite endearing. Obviously we all want House Elves to have their fair say. I'm sure with your help, Mr. Potter, we could find a way to give the little creatures more rights, within reason."

Harry narrowed his eyes. He wasn't sure what Minister Scrimgeour considered 'within reason,' but he was damn sure the man had never once concerned himself with the plight of house elves until it seemed beneficial to him.

"You see, Mr. Potter," Scrimgeour continued. "You and I are on the same side. Perhaps you should consider that the next time you decide to spout your criticisms of the Ministry in front of Cynthia Roscoe in the middle of a cocktail party."

"The same side?" asked Harry. "What side is that exactly?"

"The side that is trying to defeat He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named. The side that is trying to give the public something to hope for. The side that is trying to maintain some semblance of order and steady governance even with a madman on the loose." The minister eyed Harry

carefully, but the young man kept his face as blank as possible. He doubted that Rufus Scrimgeour could or would perform legilimency, but he looked off toward the snowy garden just in case.

“There are many rumors about you, Mr. Potter,” the minister continued. “Such gossip. There are many people who believe you are the ‘Chosen One.’ The only person capable of defeating He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named.”

Harry said nothing and focused on the last walnut stuck under his sweater. He wondered if there was any way to pull it out and flick it at Scrimgeour’s head without the man noticing.

“Since you and I are *on the same side*,” Minister Scrimgeour took care to emphasize those words. “It only makes sense that we would help each other. Decrying one another’s efforts to the press is hardly going to help the fight against our mutual enemy.” The minister paused again, but Harry had no intention of helping him get wherever he was going. “I would be happy to make arrangements for you to come by the ministry from time to time to discuss creature rights with the appropriate parties. And of course, I could give you some insight into the steps we’re taking to protect the public from He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named. Perhaps we could set up another interview for you. This time you would be much more informed of all the positive things the Ministry is doing. Things, I’m sure, you’ll approve of.”

So, this was the man’s game? “You want me to give another interview, telling everyone that the Ministry is doing a bang-up job? And in exchange, you’re offering to get me in contact with some of the people who can promote creature rights?”

The minister made a sound that was probably meant to be an embarrassed chuckle, but came out more like a cough. The man clearly hadn’t mastered his own expressions and mannerisms as well as young Tom Riddle had. “Well, young man, I’m not sure if I would phrase it quite so bluntly. But yes, I do believe that you and I can be mutually beneficial for each other.”

“Really?” Harry asked, finally turning his full attention toward Scrimgeour. “Because I don’t see how you can be beneficial to me, at all. You see, I’m rather well-known. If I want to contact someone at the Ministry, I bet Dumbledore could set something up, or Slughorn, or one of several other people I know who have contacts at the Ministry. I don’t see why I need to do you any favors, just so you set me up with one of the Ministry officials that *you* think is appropriate for me to talk to. I know Umbridge is still working for you. Is she one of the people you want to get me an appointment with?”

Scrimgeour narrowed his eyes, but didn’t say anything, which was really all the answer Harry needed.

“Anyway Minister, if you really want me to give an interview where I tell everyone you’re doing a great job. Then instead of spending your valuable time harassing teenagers, why don’t you actually *do your job*?”

Rufus Scrimgeour was much tougher than Fudge if that didn’t rile him up. The man let out a soft breath, before he spoke with deadly, quiet calm. “I don’t expect a sixteen-year-old to understand the intricacies of fighting a war that’s half in shadows against a hidden enemy. However, I would have guessed that you had learned your lesson, that you do not want to

make enemies of the entire Ministry of Magic. For one thing, someone might look into your living situation.”

“My living situation?” Maybe the minister was angrier than Harry realized.

“Did you not think it would look odd that Harry Potter would be removed from his beloved family’s home, only to be placed in the care of Albus Dumbledore? Dumbledore has never adopted any children before. Why now? Why you? How very suspicious.”

“My family is hardly beloved!” Harry cried, now quite riled up himself. “Dumbledore got me out of a terrible situation. He adopted me temporarily until we get a permanent guardian lined up.” Harry had no intention of hinting who they planned as a permanent guardian. “But he had to do something in the meantime, because I couldn’t stay with the Dursleys anymore.”

Scrimgeour broke into a smirk. “You couldn’t stay with the Dursleys because they were ‘unfit guardians’ according to several witnesses who all, coincidentally, are known associates of Albus Dumbledore.”

“If you think the Dursleys are so great, go send one of your own people there to talk to them!” Harry realized he was screaming, but he didn’t care. “I bet your official can’t make it more than five minutes before they realize that the Dursleys should never have custody of any wizarding child!”

“Five minutes?” said Scrimgeour. “And yet your precious Dumbledore left you there for fifteen years?”

Before Harry could answer, the front door of the Burrow burst open and Percy Weasley came storming out. “That’s it, I can’t take it anymore!” he cried. The junior undersecretary had beans on his starched shirt, gravy in his well-combed hair, and there were walnuts pouring out of his carefully ironed trouser legs.

As the young man stormed off down the path, Minister Scrimgeour seemed to realize his time was up, and he probably wasn’t going to get anywhere with Harry anyway. With a final nod, he made his leave as well. Harry was more than happy to see the back of them.

As Harry watched the pair apparate away, Ron sidled up next to him, looking nervous.

“You alright mate?” asked Ron. “What did Scrimgeour want?”

“He was just trying to manipulate me, but I told him where he could shove it. I’m done being manipulated.” Harry finally felt his body relax. He hadn’t realized he had been so on edge.

“What about you? Did you do that to Percy or was that the twins?”

“The gravy was Fred. The beans were George. And the walnuts...the walnuts were all Ginny.” Ron paused for a moment while Harry chuckled, before he changed topics. “Hey Harry, was the Minister of Magic wearing a spew badge?”

“Yeah,” Harry admitted. “Yeah, he was.”

“Right. And *why* was the minister of magic wearing a spew badge?”

“Er, I guess it’s time I tell you about Slughorn’s party. Come on, let’s get inside. It’s a long story.”

That evening Harry tried to clear his mind again. They still hadn’t gotten ahold of Remus, but Harry was ready to take the man’s advice on Ancient Magic. If he could find a way to simply let the magic go, maybe it wouldn’t completely overwhelm him. Just in case he did pass out again, he didn’t practice until he was already lying on his cot, ready for sleep.

Ron quietly snored in his bed on the other side of the room. The youngest Weasley brother had taken the news about SPEW surprisingly well. In fact, he seemed genuinely happy for Hermione that the cause that mattered so much to her was finally getting attention. Although, he had made a few worried comments about how he hoped Malfoy wouldn’t take advantage of Hermione’s new cause.

Harry had heard from Hermione as well. They were going to meet each other at Gringotts on New Year’s Eve, and then have a little SPEW meeting afterward. The date was far enough away that the Order had time to prepare their security. But it was also a few days before they had to return to school, so if they decided they needed to return to Gringotts, they would have time.

Harry pushed all those thoughts away as he sat up in the cot and focused on his body. He relaxed and tried to feel the way the magic flowed through his veins. It didn’t take quite as long this time for him to feel the powerful magic creeping up his arm and causing the light to flare in his hand. He enjoyed the brilliant Lumos for a moment, before he let out a breath and tried to let the magic drift away. Before he could even take a second breath, the magic flared even stronger, and he felt himself growing dizzy. He tried again to let it go gently, but it was too overwhelming. He fell into blackness yet again.

There were five days left until the end of the year. Five days left to capture Harry.

Draco spent yet another day hiding out in the musty potion’s lab with Professor Snape. The man had been obsessively working on the same potion for the last few days, but refused to tell Draco what it was. Draco recognized a few ingredients as similar to a calming draught, a few others that were used for the Draught of Living Death, and a few ingredients that were almost never used for potions unless you were planning to poison someone. He could only assume Snape knew what he was doing.

When another wolf-like patronus burst into the room, Draco knocked over his inkwell in shock and Professor Snape dropped his soporiferous beans onto the floor.

“Remus please! We’ve been looking for you for...”

The professor swiped his wand and threw up a silencing shield. Even if they couldn’t dismiss the patronus, at least they didn’t have to listen to it.

“Curse these constant interruptions.” Snape vanished the beans that had landed on the dusty floor and walked to his cupboard to grab an uncontaminated sample.

Meanwhile, Draco siphoned up the ink that was dripping down the small writing desk. He turned his attention back to the letter he’d been working on. “If the patronuses bother you so much, why not just move Lupin to a different room?” He glanced over at the man still asleep in the corner. “They’ll go wherever he is.”

“And leave the man to the mercy of your aunt? Or whatever Death Eater happens to come upon him? I need him alive in case your letters to Potter don’t work. How is that going, by the way?”

“He’s not bloody listening!” Draco waved Harry’s latest reply. “He keeps asking if there’s any way it can wait until next term. When I told him there was no way, he asked if I could simply meet him at the Weasley home. How am I supposed to apparate him away from their filthy hovel?”

“Make it clear that this is urgent.” Severus turned his attention back to his secretive potion. “Try to convince him that you might be in danger. Tell him that if you two don’t meet in a private location, there will be dire consequences. Tell him whatever lie you think will work.”

“I don’t need to lie!” Draco shouted. His hands were shaking. “I *am* in danger and there *will* be dire consequences.” He frowned down at the parchment. He had only gotten two words down on paper. ‘Dear Harry...’

“Maybe it would easier if I just tell him everything,” he wondered aloud. “He’s so ridiculously noble. He might show up just to try and save me from the Dark Lord.”

“No!” Severus was crushing his sopophorous beans with the side of his blade, but he pointed the knife menacingly at Draco when he heard the suggestion. “Even if Potter would be that stupidly reckless, you have no way of knowing whether or not any Order members are reading those letters. You are going to keep everything as vague as possible, or all this effort will have been for nothing.”

Just as the man was scooping up his beans, another patronus burst through the wall.

Professor Snape muttered, “What have I done to deserve this?” As he watched yet another batch of sopophorous beans cascade to the floor.

This time, the patronus wasn’t a wolfish creature like the others. This time it was a silvery phoenix. “Severus,” cried the voice of the headmaster. “I must speak with you the moment you are free. It is urgent.”

“What’s that about?” asked Draco.

“Probably Lupin. He knows I was at your party that night. He probably wants to know if I saw anything.” Severus vanished the dusty beans on the floor and turned to cast a stasis charm on the potion. “Do not touch anything until I return. Do not send your letter until I have read it. Do not leave the werewolf unattended.”

“You’re leaving? Now?” Draco turned once again to look at the unconscious figure in the corner. “What are you going to tell Dumbledore?”

“The same thing you told Potter. The same thing as the memory I implanted in Lupin. It is important our stories match.”

Harry had been practicing the wandless Lumos spell each night for three days in a row. And each night he had knocked himself out.

The first night he had passed out before he could reign in his breaths. The second night, he had at least managed to dim the light slightly before he passed out. It was the third night that he finally managed to dispel the light completely. However, the whole process had been so exhausting, he fell back into another dreamless sleep just a moment later.

Ron couldn’t help but bring up his concern the next day. “I’m all for you learning new magic Harry, but I really don’t think it’s supposed to knock you on your arse.”

“Sorry mate. I thought you were asleep.”

“Well, I *was* asleep until some bloke started flashing a crazy bright light in their hand and then passed out.” Before Harry could apologize, Ron continued. “Look, I don’t mind. It’s good you’re getting the hang of that Ancient Magic stuff. But I don’t want you hurting yourself. If Blood Magic really is a Gryffindor trait like you say, you should look for books about it when you go to visit the vault. You’ll be there in four days. Hermione can help you look. Just please promise me you’ll do something to learn about Blood Magic, because I don’t think it’s supposed to knock you out every time you try.”

“I promise.”

Harry read through the letter that was blotted with wet stains, almost as if Draco had been crying when he wrote it. The handwriting was much worse than usual. He couldn’t even read some of the sentences. Yet phrases like, ‘*can’t fully explain*,’ ‘*extraordinarily urgent*,’ ‘*can’t wait any longer*,’ and ‘*matter of life and death*,’ still stood out strong. Draco was his friend now, and his friend needed him. Harry couldn’t postpone this anymore, he needed to help.

He marched down to the living room as if preparing for battle. He was a man on a mission. “Draco needs me!” he practically shouted at Mr. Weasley. The man looked up from his morning paper, confused.

“I’m sorry?”

“Draco needs help. It can’t wait until school starts again, and he can’t come here. He needs to meet with me in private, just the two of us, as soon as possible. If you and the Order cannot possibly make arrangements for that, then I’m going to march out that door and go find him right now. It’s a matter of life and death!”

Mr. Weasley gaped for a moment before he set down his tea and newspaper. “Well, hold on just a moment, Harry. What’s going on then? What’s a matter of life and death?”

“Draco needs to meet with me in person!” He showed Mr. Weasley the tear-stained letter in his hand. “See? Don’t you see how urgent that it?”

Mr. Weasley frowned down at the letter. “It does appear to be urgent. Perhaps we should write to Dumbledore...”

“There isn’t time for that! He needs to meet with me right away. I have to go.” Harry turned, ready to march out the front door without another thought. Only to run right into Tonks.

“Watcher Harry!” she cried. Her hair was still brown, and she had deep circles under her eyes. “Where are you off to in such a hurry?”

“I’m going...” but then Harry paused. He had no idea where Draco was. They had never agreed on any time or place to meet. “Mr. Weasley, you don’t happen to know where the Malfoy’s live, do you?”

“Believe it or not, Lucius Malfoy has never given me his personal address.” Mr. Weasley was on his feet now, but he didn’t look angry. If anything, he looked exhausted and bewildered. “Harry, please think for a moment before you do something you’re going to regret. Even if you knew where the Malfoys lived, how are you planning to get there? Walk? Grab your broom and fly off to who-knows-where? Please, Harry, rushing into danger isn’t going to help either of you.”

Harry let out a long breath and tried to calm his racing heart. Mr. Weasley had a point. Draco’s letter had been so upsetting to read that he felt like he needed to do something immediately. But rushing off with no plan had gotten him into trouble more times than he could count.

“Why would you even want to go to Malfoy Manor?” asked Tonks. “Remus went and he’s been missing ever since.”

“That’s not Draco’s fault!” Harry snapped. “I thought Dumbledore said that Remus was probably with those werewolves.”

“He *might* be with those werewolves!” Tonks corrected. “We have no idea, because they’ve moved to a new location, and we can’t find them anywhere. But if Remus was just sitting around with his new friends, why won’t he respond to my messages? Why won’t he at least let us know he’s safe?”

Harry turned back to Mr. Weasley. “What if Draco’s letter has something to do with Remus? He says it’s a matter of life and death!”

Mr. Weasley sighed. “Either way, you can’t just run off alone. You’re going to have to write to him if you want to arrange a time and place to meet. We’ve already worked out security for you to go to Gringotts on New Year’s Eve. That’s only three days away. Can you ask him if this meeting can wait three days? Gringotts Bank has private meeting rooms that can be

booked for a small fee. They're completely private and safe. Ask him if that will work. Just please don't do anything drastic Harry."

Harry nodded. "Ok. I'll write him back."

Draco crumpled up the letter and threw it into the fireplace with all the force he could muster.

Professor Snape didn't even look up at him. He was focused on his task of pouring revitalizing potions down Remus Lupin's throat.

"Why not just wake him up and have him eat some real food?" asked Draco. "If you're modifying his memory anyway."

"I'm only modifying the memories that need to be modified. The more I infiltrate his mind, the more obvious it becomes that tampering has been done. Besides, the potions will suffice until we are able to secure Potter." Professor Snape finished the nutrition potion and moved on to the hydration potion. "Shall I assume from your little tantrum that the boy still refuses to meet with you?"

"Oh no, he wants to meet in person...in a private room in Gringotts!" Draco scowled and threw himself into the annoyingly uncomfortable desk chair. "How are we supposed to kidnap him from Gringotts? Those private rooms are almost as secure as Hogwarts. Not even Portkeys will work."

"Then you will have to convince him to leave with you." Professor Snape finished pouring the last vial, and lowered Lupin's head back to the floor. "If he thinks you're in immediate danger, then he's sure to do something stupid to help save you."

"There's no guarantee I'll be able to convince him to sneak off with me. It seems an awful big risk." Draco tried to distract himself by looking through the rest of the mail he had tossed onto the desk. There was a Quidditch magazine, a letter from Daphne Greengrass, and another from Hermione Granger. He read that one first.

Meanwhile, Professor Snape was casting some cleaning spells on Lupin to keep him from smelling. He even re-cast the cushioning charm on the stone floor to keep the man from bruising.

"Well Draco," the professor sneered. "If you want to live to see your seventeenth birthday, I suggest you make capturing Potter a priority. There are two days left. What other option do we have?"

"Spew!" Draco shouted, as he looked down at Granger's letter.

Professor Snape turned to him with a look of utter revulsion. "What did you just say to me?"

"Spew. S.P.E.W. It's an acronym. It's the Society for the Welfare of House Elf something." He waved the letter by way of explanation. "I'm invited to their next meeting."

Professor Snape narrowed his eyes. “Why? Did they want to berate you for your treatment of house elves? Did you do something illegal?”

“What? No. I’m a member.”

“*You* are a member of a society dedicated to house elf welfare?” Professor Snape paused, but then continued. “*You* are in a...”

“Yes! It’s Harry Potter’s stupid club with Granger. She’s the one running it, and he talked about it in the Prophet, and they dragged me into it as well.”

Professor Snape seemed surprised for an entirely different reason. “That ridiculous club that Potter ranted about in the Prophet is run by Granger?”

“Yes.”

“So, it’s a scam?”

“That’s what I said!” Draco cried. “I don’t think the Gryffindors see it that way, though. I think they’re planning to use the money to...I don’t know...buy dustbins? Anyway, they’re having a meeting this Friday, on New Year’s Eve, and Granger and Potter will be there. Granger just sent me an invite.”

“Is the meeting in Gringotts?”

“No, they’re having it at an accounting firm. It’s the Selwyn Accounting Firm. Well, it’s got to be run by purebloods if it’s got a name like Selwyn.”

Professor Snape nodded, and strode back to his potion’s cupboard. “Tell Granger you won’t be able to make it. We’re going to find another way to attend.”

“We?” asked Draco.

“You’re not going alone.” Severus opened the doors to his cupboard to look for something specific.

“But you can’t come with me, can you? I thought you still had to act as a spy.”

“Neither of us are going as ourselves,” Professor Snape explained, as he pulled out a vial filled with a very familiar-looking potion. “You’re lucky that I like to keep useful potions in stock.”

Harry raised his arm out toward the snowball he’d set out in front of him. He took a deep breath as he felt the tingles of his magic licking through him. “*Wingardium Leviosa*,” he muttered.

Nothing happened.

It was Thursday. Harry was supposed to meet Hermione at Gringotts the very next day, and he wanted to make some progress with Blood Magic before he visited the Gryffindor Vault. Hell, he wanted to make some progress with *something*. There was still no word from Remus, and no one had any idea where he was. As for Draco, he had responded to Harry's letter by telling him that '*Nevermind, everything's fine.*' Harry hadn't heard anything else from the boy since then, and he wasn't sure whether he was more worried about the Slytherin or the werewolf.

He huffed and tried yet again to calm his mind and body. He took several slow breaths and tried to focus on that feeling of the phoenix song lulling him toward peaceful calm. Before he could raise his arm again, he heard Ginny call over. "Hey Harry, if you're not going to use your Firebolt, can I use it?"

He sighed and cracked his eyes open toward the two redheads flying in the air above him. "I suppose."

"No way!" cried Ron.

He and Ginny had been playing a one-on-one practice round of Keeper versus Chaser all afternoon. It hadn't been much of an even match. At one point, Ginny had gotten tired of lobbing the Quaffle at the sheet they'd strung up in the tree, and had instead started aiming at Ron's head. Later, she threw a pocket full of walnuts at the poor boy to distract him, before quickly scoring three goals in a row.

Ron was growing less and less amused. "If anyone gets to use the Firebolt, it should be me. You don't need another advantage."

"But you need all the practice you can get," Ginny teased. "If you train against someone who's on a Firebolt, just think how much better it will make you!"

"It doesn't matter to me either way," Harry cut in. He gestured toward his broom that was sitting on the frozen garden bench. "Either of you can use it for now. Just try to keep it down for a minute."

"What are you doing?" asked Ginny, swerving closer. "I thought you came out here to play with us."

"I will in a minute." Harry took another breath and prepared to clear his mind again. "I just want to practice this a bit before tomorrow."

"He's learning wandless magic," Ron called out. He was flying over toward the bench to claim the Firebolt for himself. "He can make a Lumos appear in his hand, but then he always passes out."

"I didn't last time!" Harry protested. "Last time I was just really tired afterward, so I fell asleep right after. But I didn't pass out."

"Oh, my mistake," Ron laughed. As soon as he had his hands of the Firebolt, he took off at a ridiculous speed; much too fast for the tiny garden. He almost bucked himself off the broom,

trying to make an incredibly tight turn back from the vegetable patch.

Harry ignored them and closed his eyes, focusing on the task at hand. He could do this, he just had to tune everything else out. He took several slow breaths and concentrated on his body and his blood and his magic. However, before he could even feel the first tinges of magic, Ron's voice distracted him again.

"Last night he tried to make his pillow levitate," Ron called out to his sister. "Every bloody pillow in the room shot up at the ceiling. He's lucky it was just pillows and not... Merlin's Bullocks! Ginny that doesn't count, I wasn't ready!"

"You snooze you lose!"

"I wasn't even anywhere near the goal!" Ron cried.

"Then you're a terrible Keeper!"

Harry huffed. "I'm going to go practice inside where it's quiet!" he called out. He wasn't sure why he had even bothered trying to do Blood Magic in the yard while Quidditch was happening. He just didn't want to cause any accidental damage to the house, in case something shot through the ceiling.

Ginny swooped down so they were almost eye level. "Why would you want to practice inside where it's quiet and there are no distractions?" she asked.

"I think you just answered your own question," he said.

Ginny smirked at him. She lifted her arm to show the Quaffle in her hand, before turning to lob it as hard as she could toward the sheet that was acting as the goal.

"Dammit Ginny!" Ron hadn't been ready at all, hovering several meters from the tree. But he had been dealing with Ginny's dirty tricks all day, and he moved with incredible speed, making a spectacular save at the last second.

Ginny turned her dazzling smile on Harry. "See? When you practice in less-than-ideal circumstances, it makes you even better when you have to do it for real."

Harry gave that some thought. "Alright, I'll keep practicing out here. But if I get hit with the Quaffle while I'm trying to meditate, I'm going to visit your room and levitate your whole bloody bed through the window."

It took Harry another two hours to finally succeed, with Ginny whizzing by every few minutes. Her floral perfume filled his nose while he tried to focus on his own magical core. When he finally did levitate the snowball, it shot up off the ground and struck Ginny right in the face. The last thing he heard was her enthusiastic laughter. Then he passed out.

Finally, the day had come. It was New Year's Eve and Harry floo'ed to the Leaky Cauldron first thing in the morning to meet with Hermione, as well as their security for the day.

Harry was nervous and excited. He'd talked with his financial advisor (Ron) the night before. Ron asked Harry to make note of any deeds or property titles he found inside. That way they could determine if Harry owned anything that could be rented out or sold. He also reminded Harry once again to look for books on Blood Magic, and Harry fervently agreed.

The moment Harry stumbled out of the fireplace, he tripped right into the steadying grasp of Kingsley Shacklebolt.

"Kingsley!" Harry cried, as he tried to get his bearings and dust some of the ashes from his winter coat.

"Hello, Harry. It's wonderful to see you again. We're all happy you're well."

Harry looked around at those words to see who Kingsley meant by 'we.' Tonks had come as well, along with Mad-Eye Moody, and several other Aurors Harry didn't recognize. Finally, there was Dedulus Diggle, the man who always bowed whenever he saw Harry.

As if on cue, the man swept into an excited bow. "Mr. Potter! Always a pleasure."

"Hello Mr. Diggle," said Harry.

"He remembers me!" Diggle practically squeaked. Harry noticed that the man was wearing six SPEW badges. "Did you hear that everyone? Harry Potter remembers me!"

"Yeah, I can't imagine why," Moody growled.

Just then, Harry was knocked into Kingsley's grasp again, when a heavy weight came tumbling into him.

"Ooph," Hermione cried, not faring much better with the magical floo than Harry had. "Wizards really need to learn about high speed rail," she muttered, as she dusted herself off.

"Nice of you to join us, Hermione," said Harry.

Hermione blinked up at those words, only to realize she had an audience. "Oh, I see we have a full entourage today."

"Dumbledore wants to make sure you are both safe on this little outing," Kingsley explained. "Speaking of which, do you have," Kingsley dropped his voice to barely a whisper, "Your cloak?"

"Yeah," said Harry, patting his pocket. "I've got it here just in case."

"Don't put it in yer bloody pocket, boy!" Moody snarled. "You want the first pickpocket who wanders by to nick it off you? Stuff it in that thick shirt. Dark wizards won't think to look there."

Harry highly doubted that any pickpockets were going to try their luck with someone surrounded by a dozen aurors, but he moved the cloak anyways, to make Moody happy.

As the group slowly made their way out of the pub, Harry noticed that Tom the barman was also wearing a SPEW badge. “Hey Hermione,” Harry sidled up to his friend. “Did any more people send you money for those badges? How many members do you have now?”

“Oh my goodness, the interest had been astounding!” she admitted. “I thought things might calm down after that first day, but the owls have been coming steadily the entire holiday. I think that a lot of people sent money for badges the first couple days, and then other people saw those people wearing badges, and it just sort of caught on. I never realized so many people would be so enthusiastic to show their support for house elves!”

Kingsley chuckled, but still kept his keen eyes focused on the few passersby wandering the streets. “I am glad you’re enthusiastic about your cause, Hermione. But I think it’s far more likely that people want to show their support for the Chosen One, than for house elves. However, since they do not sell ‘I support Harry Potter’ badges, the public has settled for the next best thing.”

“Well, either way,” said Hermione. “It’s a good thing we’re going to Gringotts today, because I’ll need to open a vault to keep the proceeds for SPEW. I’ve had to enchant my bag with an extendable bottom just to fit all the sickles. And I hired an accountant, Mr. Selwyn, to help keep track of everything. It’s his firm where we’re having our meeting later. If it weren’t for him and Penelope, I don’t know how I’d get it all done.”

“Penelope?” asked Harry. He could see Gringotts in the distance, but it was slow travelling with such a large group.

“Penelope Clearwater, from Ravenclaw.” At Harry’s blank expression, Hermione continued. “Honestly, don’t you remember anyone? She was Head Girl in our third year. She dated Percy, although she assures me that she’s not speaking with him right now, since she’s rather upset with his behavior. In our second year, she got petrified by the basilisk at the same time as me, when we were leaving the library together.”

“Oh yeah, that girl,” said Harry, although he didn’t really know much else about her.

“She was quite thankful that I told her about the mirror trick,” Hermione explained. “She works for the Ministry now, and she knows more about paperwork filing and the bureaucratic system than anyone else I’ve ever met. Seriously Harry, if it wasn’t for her, I would have filed a form 962A instead of a form 983C. Can you imagine the chaos that would have caused?”

“No, not really,” Harry admitted.

“Well, it would have been disastrous,” Hermione assured him. “You can’t imagine how difficult it is to form a new nonprofit organization per the Ministry’s rules. You need two signatures from Wizengomat members who are also in a subcommittee that relates to your nonprofit. I got one from Cordelia Macmillan from Slughorn’s party, and another from a nice fellow who remembered me from Buckbeak’s trial. Then you need three more general Wizengamot signatures. I got Kingsley here, as well as Madam Longbottom and Professor Dumbledore. Then there were about nine different forms that all had to be filled out in a very particular way and filed in a very specific order. If it weren’t for Penelope, I doubt SPEW

would be a legally recognized organization. And I wanted to make sure everything was on the up-and-up, with how much attention we were getting.”

Harry furrowed his brow as he climbed the marble steps of Gringotts. “Why is it so hard to start a nonprofit?”

“Well, it’s not hard if you’re a member of the Wizengamot, or a relative or spouse of a Wizengamot member. Then it’s just a simple one-page form. But if you’re not...” Hermione’s voice trailed off, but Harry understood the meaning. If you were a pureblood, the process was easy, if you had no wizarding relatives, things were different.

When they finally made it inside the bank, Kingsley and Mad-Eye flanked the entrance doors with a view of the whole lobby, while the rest of their security team waited outside. Hermione told the two men that their SPEW meeting was in about six hours, so they’d have to leave by that time, whether they had finished sorting through the vault or not. Harry certainly hoped they were done after six hours, but he had to admit he had no idea what to expect from the vault.

It didn’t take long to get the attention of one of the goblins. Unfortunately, the creature had already heard all about Harry Potter, and insisted that it wanted to hear Harry’s proper goblin greeting before it called for additional assistance.

Before Harry realized what was going on, he and Hermione had been ushered into a private room. Harry was asked to go through the same embarrassing greeting three times, as more and more goblins assembled to hear the famous Harry Potter speak terrible Gobbledygook.

While Harry grew increasingly impatient, Hermione seemed to find the situation delightful. She outright giggled at his fourth attempt. “You’re not getting any better,” she laughed.

“You try it then, if you think it’s so easy.” As soon as he said it, he regretted it. He was sure she’d say it perfectly and make him feel even more like a fool.

“Grogganar grenkave devkin. Grogganar prugkave ettbollanar.” She enunciated every syllable very carefully. However, she didn’t sound anything like a goblin, and the other goblins seemed to agree. Most of them had put their hands over their pointy ears.

“Ah! It burns!” one of them cried.

“It is like some terrible death rattle,” wailed another.

Hermione blushed. “It wasn’t that bad, was it?” She had never been good at accepting that she wasn’t skilled at something. “Let me try again.”

“No!” One of the goblins screamed. “Never speak those words again. We will take you to your vault as you wish. Just please do not make those sounds again.”

“I have a key for the Gryffindor vault,” Harry explained. “I think that’s the only one I have access to until I turn seventeen.”

“And before I join Harry, I actually need to open a vault of my own,” Hermione explained. “Not for personal use, though. It’s for my organization: The Society for the Promotion of Elvish Welfare.”

Some of the goblins looked confused at those words; others disgusted. Most of them, however, were grinning and snickering.

“You are starting a society to promote the welfare of house elves?” one of the goblins asked.

“Yes,” said Hermione.

There was a bit more sniggering.

“And you believe such a society would collect enough charity, that you would require a vault at Gringotts?” asked another.

“Yes,” said Hermione.

Some of the goblins had cover their mouths to choke back their laughter.

“And what would you do with *all this money*” the goblin waved his hands to indicate the absurdity of the idea, “that you believe you will collect for the welfare of house elves?”

“Well, I will help to end the enslavement of house elves, of course.” At these words, all the goblins burst out into even more raucous laughter than when they heard Harry butcher their language. However, Hermione was nothing if not persistent, and she continued as if nothing was amiss. “Not just house elves, either. I intend to improve the rights of all magical creatures.” The goblin’s laughter grew louder still. “I’ll even help to improve goblin rights!” Hermione had to shout to be heard.

Suddenly all the laughter died, and the room went completely silent.

“How dare you!” one of the goblins cried, with his finger pointing accusingly at Hermione.

“Wizards do not *give* goblins their rights,” another cried. “Goblins take what rights we are owed.”

“Goblins do not need silly little witch girl fighting for our rights. When goblins fight, we fight with blood and steel!”

“Oh dear,” Hermione muttered as the goblins began closing in on them.

“Hermione,” Harry whispered. “Where’s your bag? The one with the sickles?”

“In my pocket, why?”

The goblins looked furious, as they slowly crept closer and closer hurling out insults and threats. “How dare some filthy human witch try to fight for the rights of Goblins!”

Before things could get any worse, Harry yanked the little beaded bag from Hermione's pocket and opened it wide so that all the goblins could see inside. "She's already collected money!" Harry cried in desperation. "She's got lots of money and she wants to open a vault with you!"

The goblins immediately silenced as they gawked at what they saw inside the bag. Harry couldn't help but lean forward and peer inside himself. Even though he had been expecting it, he still couldn't help but gape in astonishment. For one thing, the inside of the bag was enormous, Hermione's extendable charm appeared almost limitless. However, it was the small mountain of silver coins, laced in with bronze and gold, that really left him speechless. No wonder he'd been seeing so many SPEW badges lately.

"What did you say your name was, human girl?" one of the goblins enquired. It sounded far more polite than any of the goblins had been so far.

"Er, it's Hermione Granger."

"Would you like some tea, Miss Granger?" asked another goblin, who smiled up at her with its sharp, pointy teeth.

"Oh, actually that sounds lovely, thank you."

"Come along, little witch." A few goblins started ushering Hermione out of the room, along with her coveted beaded bag. "We will take you to a private room where we can discuss many options for your new vault. There are many add-ons we think you will appreciate. We can discuss all the possibilities."

"Oh, alright, but I do have to join Harry when I'm done." Those were the last words Harry heard before Hermione was whisked away to discuss 'add-ons.' It was then Harry realized that, since she didn't bank at Gringotts, Hermione had very little experience with goblins. Well, she was about to learn they were very different from house elves.

Finally, the goblin Bogrod led Harry to the Gryffindor vault. The journey in the little cart was even longer than the ride to Vault 794, which held the Philosopher's Stone in his first year. The ride seemed to go on and on, past waterfalls, over a deep chasm of darkness, and through a tight tunnel. Finally, their trip ended at an enormous set of doors, with the number 31 set in gold letters above an intricate locking mechanism.

At the goblin's behest, Harry stepped forward and placed his key in the lock. It clicked perfectly, and the huge double doors slowly swung inward together. Harry held his breath as the darkness inside was quickly illuminated with magical light. He could finally see what was inside.

"Harry?"

He could barely make out Hermione's voice from where he crouched in the back corner of the cavernous vault. "Hold on, I'm coming!" he shouted in return.

"Harry! What on Earth?" Even though her voice was distant, he could still hear the shock and awe. He couldn't blame her. The space was enormous and there was so much inside it.

"Wait there," he called out. "Don't try to come through, you'll just get lost." He carefully maneuvered his way back toward the doors of the vault.

"I'm sorry I'm late!" He could hear her voice more clearly now. Just a little further. "I didn't realize it would take so long to sign all the paperwork and everything."

"It's fine," he said, as he rounded another corner and finally came in full view of her bushy hair and overwhelmed expression.

"Harry, this is just so much..." She swept her gaze over the rows of starch white coverings, overwhelmed and a little confused. "So much furniture!"

"Yeah, it's a big bloody cavern full of furniture," he agreed. "It's not quite what I expected either." He followed her line of sight past the enormous gallery of tables, divans, and dressers all carefully covered with pale sheets, enchanted with preservation charms. "Part of me expected a huge mound of treasure with gold and gems, like a big dragon's hoard. I definitely did not expect several centuries worth of antique furniture."

"There's no gold at all?" Hermione asked.

"There's a fair amount of gold jewelry in the back," said Harry. "And I found some gold-plated silverware. No galleons though. I guess the families who passed this place along kept their gold in other vaults."

When he had first walked into the cavern-like space, he had almost thought he was seeing ghosts. But as he began carefully peeking under all the white sheets, he found a writing desk with carved griffon legs, a chair upholstered with real dragon scales, and a hand-painted bureau with knobs like glittering sapphires. There were priceless, hand-crafted pieces for as far as the eye could see.

Hermione peeked under one of the covers to reveal an ancient harpsichord painted with satyrs and unicorns. "Well, you know the old saying, new-money shops for their furniture, but a real gentleman goes to the attic."

"Well, then I must be the most gentleman of gentlemen, because I've counted at least six dining room tables. Six! What in Merlin's name am I going to do with six dining tables?"

"You could always sell some of them if you like." She checked under another cover to reveal a baroque vanity with a gold filigree mirror. The Hermione in the mirror looked far more attractive than the one gaping at her reflection. "I'm sure someone would pay good money for some of this stuff." She paused for a moment to admire the way the mirror-Hermione's hair flowed smoothly past her shoulders, but when the reflection started blowing kisses at Harry, she yanked the cover back down without hesitation.

Harry led her through the narrow path he'd made between the dust-covered artifacts. "I'd feel weird selling someone else's household goods," he said. "I mean, I know it's technically mine now, but it doesn't feel right to sell off pieces that obviously meant a lot to someone."

"Well, it's up to you of course." They made their way between two large settees and ducked past a glittering chandelier. "What else did you find besides furniture?"

"Oh, there's plenty of other stuff." They walked past a huge pile of embroidered cushions and pillows. "I'll give you the full tour. The furniture takes up the most space, so it's hard not to notice. But over here, there's this whole section full of artwork."

"Artwork?" asked Hermione. "What kind of artwork?"

"Every kind."

It wasn't much of an exaggeration. There were paintings from almost every era. There were tapestries, mosaics, and frescos. Display cases were filled to the brim with vases, porcelain, etchings, carvings, and ceramics. There were enough busts to form a small village. One particular bust of a young woman with a large bosom kept winking at Harry and made him very uncomfortable.

After the art section, Harry showed his friend what else he'd discovered. There were several dressers full of old jewelry. There was an apothecary cabinet with rare potions ingredients, kept in stasis. There were chests full of magical artifacts and family hand-me downs ranging from deadly weapons to dainty tea sets. There were wardrobes filled with ancient wizarding robes that made Ron's Yule Ball dress robes look stylish.

Harry was especially interested in the drawers full of paperwork, but he could hardly make heads or tails of it. "I think this stuff over here are the deeds and the titles that Ron was asking me about, but it's a bit hard to tell." Harry dusted off a few yellowed sheets and passed a few files to Hermione.

She glanced through the years of paperwork with increasing trepidation. "It looks like a big mess of old contracts, land holdings, business deals, inheritance information, marriage arrangements, and who knows what else." She shut the file in her hands and frowned at the stack of several dozen others. "This would take a lot more than six hours to go through," she admitted.

"Let's not bother with this stuff now," Harry flopped a few more heavy files onto the floor. "Let's just put them in your bag. We can sort through them later. There's one more thing I have to show you, and I think you're going to like it."

They stuffed the files into Hermione's beaded bag, and then made their way further into the vault. He had saved the best for last. Behind the artwork and furniture, in a secluded alcove slightly obscured by a few large shelves, was the most valuable thing he had inherited.

"Oh Harry!" Hermione gasped at the sight. "That's a lot of books!"

It really was. There were ten enormous shelves stacked with leather-bound tomes, peeling grimoires, and ancient spell scrolls. It wasn't anywhere close to the selection of books in the Hogwarts library, but it would still take them hours to sort through it all.

"Please don't try to read them all right now," he warned her.

"Now's not the time for reading." Hermione fumbled in her little beaded bag until she pulled out a couple of notebooks. "Now's the time for writing."

The girl's plan was for both of them to go through the shelves systematically. They would use the notebooks to write down the name, the author, and the subject of each book. That way, they would at least get a sense of what was there. Harry thought it was a good idea in theory, but punishingly boring in practice. Writing the title and author was easy enough. However, only so many books gave away their subjects from the title alone, which meant they had to flip through the books to try and gauge what they were about.

After only four books, the subject line of Harry's notebook read: 'Some foreign war between France and Spain; One of the Goblin Rebellions I think; A history of wizarding expansion into the Pacific Islands maybe; Something about Russian wizards.'

"Hermione, I think I'm in the history section." He sighed when yet another book went on about a war he'd never heard of. "I have no idea what any of these bloody books are about. Maybe we should switch places."

She looked up from a few shelves away. He could see that her notebook was far more filled out than his was. "I don't know, I think I'm in the potions section. You probably won't fare much better over here. Just try another shelf for now."

Harry stood and stretched. Then he walked along the shelves trying to find something about Ancient Magic, or at least something that wasn't as boring as magical history. "So, how did things go with the goblins?" Harry tried to fill the silence. "I hope they didn't talk you into too many add-ons."

"They did manage to talk me into a few extra security locks before I figured out what they were up to." Hermione was like a book-ingesting beast. She had already worked her way through three stacks of texts, and her subject lines looked much more filled in than Harry's pathetic attempts. "Enough about me, though. How was your holiday? How did it go with Dumbledore?"

Harry explained all about Dumbledore's house while he skimmed the titles along a couple more bookcases. As he had suspected, Hermione sounded most enthusiastic about the man's book collection. Although, she did interrupt him when he got to the part of the story with Draco's invitation.

"I heard that you sent Remus to go instead of you." Hermione had already moved to a second page of her notebook and Harry still hadn't settled on which section of the shelves he wanted to sort through. "Tonks contacted me a few days ago to see if I knew anything, but I hadn't heard a thing."

“I take it you weren’t invited to the party then?” Harry forced himself to stop pacing the shelves back and forth and just pick a spot.

“Why would I be invited to a Malfoy party?”

“Well, you and Draco are dating,” he grumbled, as he pulled a couple books off the bottom shelf to start writing down their information.

“What do you mean we’re...” Hermione’s voice trailed off as her face went pale. “Oh right. Oh dear.”

“You forgot!?” Harry dropped the book in his hands. “You forgot you were dating Draco Malfoy! How do you even forget something like that?”

“Well the last couple weeks have been quite busy.” She huffed in frustration and shoved several books back in their places. Although, Harry noticed that she had placed several into her beaded bag to peruse later.

“Fine, it’s none of my business anyway.” Harry finally turned his attention back to the book in his hands. “Oh, you’ve got to be kidding me.” All the writing was in ancient runes. He glanced at a few nearby books, only to see that they were all in one foreign language or another. “These ones aren’t even in English! How am I supposed to write down the subjects if I can’t even read the bloody titles?”

“I’m done with the potions section,” Hermione crept over. “I can do the foreign language ones. I even know a few translation spells. You go find another section.”

Harry sighed and tried yet again to find a section of books he could sort through. He paused when he saw a book on Transfiguration. It wasn’t his favorite subject, but at least he had a basic understanding.

“Speaking of Draco,” Hermione continued, as she moved through her pile of books much faster than Harry, even though she had to translate them. “I invited him to the SPEW meeting today, but he said he couldn’t make it.”

“I invited him to meet me at Gringotts,” Harry admitted. He filled in ‘Transforming precious metals’ into the next subject line. “He’s been writing me all week about how he wanted to meet in person. Then, as soon as I write back saying that I can meet him at Gringotts, he sent me a final note saying that he had worked it out, and not to worry about it. It was a bit weird actually.”

“Wait, Draco wrote to you several times in the past week?” Hermione looked up from her translation.

“Yeah, he’s been writing a lot.” Harry frowned down at the book in his hands. It appeared to be all about transfiguring objects into slightly smaller versions of the same object. Why would anyone even want to do that?

“Did he, by any chance, send you something as a Christmas gift?”

“Yeah, he sent me some fancy French chocolates. They were pretty good.” The next book was about transfiguring them to be slightly bigger again. He scribbled a quick summary in his notebook.

“Draco sent you fancy chocolates as a Christmas gift? Really?” Hermione sounded excited.

Harry set down his book. “Yeah, why? So what? You sent me chocolate frogs.”

“Yes, but there’s a difference between some chocolate frogs and a box of fancy truffles.” Hermione has staring down at her book, but Harry wasn’t fooled. He knew that she was trying to imply that the fancy chocolates were somehow significant, but he doubted they were. Draco was just a posh bloke, and he gave posh presents. When Hermione spoke again, her voice still was suspiciously innocent. “So, what did Ginny get you?”

“Huh?” Her change of topic caught him off guard. “Oh, er, broomstick polish. It’s pretty nice stuff, too. Supposed to smell like cherry blossoms. It sort of reminds me of her perfume.”

“Oh? Well, now you can think of Ginny every time you polish your broomstick.” Before Harry could fully wrap his head around that sentiment, Hermione tugged on her hair frustration. “Oh for Merlin’s sake!” She looked like she wanted to shake the book in her hands, but was too afraid she’d damage it. “I’ve tried three different translating spells on this thing and I still can’t read a single word.”

“Maybe it’s spelled so that it can’t be translated,” Harry suggested. “Or maybe it’s in code or something.” He walked over to take a look.

The small leather-bound book in Hermione’s hand looked to be as old as paper itself. The brown cover was flecked with age, the pages were yellowed, and the corners looked frayed.

“*Finite Incantatem!*” Hermione tried more counter spells on the book. “*Revelio!*”

Harry looked more carefully at the browned cover. Someone had scrolled a title in heavy black ink. “**Myne Perfonal Jurnal.**”

“What part are you trying to translate?” he asked.

“Well, the cover to start.” She tried a few more spells. “The inside is the same thing. Just a bunch of squiggles and curly lines.”

“What squiggles?” Harry looked closer at the title. The handwriting was quite loopy and old-fashioned, but it definitely couldn’t be mistaken for squiggles.

However, Hermione pointed right at the words when she said, “Here, these squiggles.”

“It says Mine Personal Journal,” Harry read. “Although both mine and journal are misspelled, and they used an ‘F’ instead of an ‘S.’ But I think that’s just because it’s ye olde English.”

Hermione gaped at him. “You can read this?”

“You can’t?”

She immediately opened the journal to the first entry. "Can you read this as well?"

He leaned in and groaned at the obnoxious sentence that was shoved in front of him. "Ugh, please don't make me read that." The words were handwritten, and the letters were very flowery with lots of swoops and curls. However, Hermione insisted, so Harry tried to stumble over the words. "*Me thinketh it acorduant to resoun, to telle myne tale of magick awakenyng. And so bifel up-on a day, wan I be wonne and ten yeer of age...*"

"Harry wait, you're speaking parseltongue," Hermione interrupted him. "Did you think that you were speaking English?"

"I think calling this English is a bit of a stretch."

"Well I suppose you're right. Technically, I think it's parselscript. The written version of parseltongue. That's why it looks like English to you and squiggles to me."

Harry gaped at her. "Why would there be a book written in Parselscript in the Gryffindor vault? Gryffindors can't speak Parseltongue. And it's not like any of Slytherin's descendants would have gifted a journal to some future Gryffindor. The families have been at odds ever since Salazar Slytherin himself..." Harry's words trailed off and he cast his eyes back down at the ancient words.

He skipped to the second paragraph. "*Myne father, sovereyn lorde was he, giveth me myne namen Salazar Slytherin.*" Harry looked up at his friend. "You're not going to believe this."

By the time they finished sorting through the books, their six hour window had been completely used up. In that time, they managed to find several books on Gryffindor Blood Magic, which Hermione had carefully stowed in her magical bag. However, they didn't find anything nearly as interesting as Salazar Slytherin's personal journal.

Hermione seemed particularly reverent about the journal, simply for its historical significance. However, Harry wasn't quite sure how he felt about it. He'd never had a high opinion of Slytherin. Even if the man had been friends with Gryffindor and had helped to found Hogwarts, he's also kept a giant snake in the basement which he trained to eat muggleborns. Even if it would be slightly interesting to read the man's point of view, Harry had no interest in trying to slog through the old-fashioned words.

"Seriously Hermione, I'm done reading that shite." Harry put his foot down when Hermione tried to get him to read a few more pages. "There are Y's where there should be I's and F's where there should be S's and I keep finding some stupid little letter that looks like an A and an E got stuck together, and I have no idea how that's supposed to be pronounced. It's like Shakespeare or something."

"Well, Hogwarts was founded in the year 990," Hermione explained. "So that would have been almost six hundred years before Shakespeare."

"That's not better!"

When they finally left the vault and began their careful walk toward the accounting office for the SPEW meeting, Harry was glad to put all thoughts of Gryffindor and Slytherin behind him. He was interested in meeting Hermione's new friends. Most of all, he was excited to finally make some concrete plans to help house elves.

The Selwyn Accounting Firm was slightly off the main street, in a building that looked very sober and serious. When they passed through the tasteful front door, a small bell gave a single, respectable chime. Once again, Kingsley and Mad-Eye followed Harry and Hermione inside, while the rest of their security team tried to look inconspicuous out in the alleyway.

An extremely old woman sat behind a polished desk. Her glasses were so thick, Harry wasn't sure how she could even see through them.

"Oh, I'm sorry dears," she told them in a frail voice. "I'm afraid Mr. Selwyn isn't seeing any more clients today. He has a very important meeting beginning in just a couple minutes."

"That's Mr. Selwyn's aunt," Hermione whispered to Harry. "Her eyesight isn't the best." When Hermione addressed the woman at the desk, she spoke much louder and clearer. "No, Miss Selwyn. It's me Hermione Granger with SPEW. We've spoken before. I'm actually here for that meeting."

"Yes," the woman nodded and offered a kind smile. "There's a meeting that's just about to start. So, I'm afraid you'll have to leave."

"No, Miss Selwyn, you don't understand." Hermione spoke even louder and slower. "I'm here for that meeting. I'm Hermione Granger."

"Yes." Again, the woman simply nodded and smiled. "He has a meeting with Hermione Granger, so I'm afraid you'll have to wait..."

"No, I am Hermione Granger!"

"Miss Granger, is that you?" They could hear a voice call from a distant office.

"Oh, thank Merlin," Hermione muttered. "Yes, it's me Mr. Selwyn!" she shouted. "I'm afraid your aunt doesn't recognize me."

The woman in question was still nodding and smiling. "Well, I suppose since Miss Granger is running late, you can slip in and talk to him for a bit until she gets here."

Just then, a short, bald man burst into the lobby. He was wearing a tweed vest with the chain of a pocket watch peaking out. While he was also wearing glasses, they weren't nearly as thick as his aunt's. "So sorry for the holdup, Miss Granger. I'm afraid I had a bit of an emergency with a couple of important clients this morning. It's almost sorted, though. Please feel free to settle into the conference room on your left. Miss Clearwater is already waiting inside."

"No need to postpone your meeting, Mr. Selwyn," a voice drawled from the back room.

Two well-dressed figures emerged from the office where Mr. Selwyn had just come from. Neither of them looked at all familiar. There was a shorter man with brown hair, who looked pale and nervous, almost as if he were ill. The other was slightly taller, with sandy hair. He looked impatient and annoyed to be there. It was the impatient one who spoke again.

“I think our business is concluded. We’ll leave you to your other affairs. Although,” his eyes suddenly swept over toward Hermione and Harry, where they still stood by the front desk. “I am rather curious to meet your other business associates. I believe an introduction is in order.”

“Ah, of course, how rude of me.” Mr. Selwyn stepped forward toward the desk and gestured for the two men to follow. “Miss Granger, this is Mister William Travers, and his cousin, Duncan Travers. Gentleman, this is Miss Hermione Granger.” When the taller fellow gave Hermione and handshake, his expression looked completely blank. When the shorter, sickly-looking fellow shook her hand, he kept his expression down, never meeting her eyes. Harry noticed that the shorter man was shaking slightly, and again wondered if he was ill.

Despite the strange greeting, Hermione kept her tone and manner polite. “Nice to meet you both. Mr. Selwyn, let me introduce my good friend, Harry Potter.”

Harry shook Mr. Selwyn’s hand, and then turned to the two clients. The taller man was looking down on him with a sneer that felt oddly familiar. His shivering cousin was practically shaking out of his boots when he reached out his hand to take Harry’s.

Just before their hands could meet, the young man was knocked aside by a slender young woman with her hair in a tight ponytail. “Oh my goodness, you’re Harry Potter!” she cried. Harry had no idea where she had come from, he’d been so focused on the two strange men. “I’m Penelope Clearwater by the way. I was waiting in the conference room, but when I heard Hermione say your name, I simply had to come out and meet you right away.”

Her words tumbled out, each one almost tripping over the next, and they just kept going. “I’m a tremendous fan of yours, of course. Especially after you saved all of us muggleborns in my sixth year. But then, obviously, I knew about you long before that. I read all about you in *Modern Magical History* and *Great Wizarding Events of the Twentieth Century*, and there’s one more I believe...”

“The Rise and Fall of the Dark Arts?” Hermione supplied happily.

“Yes! That’s it, thank you Hermione.”

Harry looked back and forth between the two girls with his jaw gaping open. How could there possibly be another one? Mr. Selwyn and his aunt didn’t seem to have noticed that anything was amiss, but then Aunt Selwyn didn’t seem to realize they were still standing in front of her. The two gentlemen clients were both aghast. Even the sickly-looking bloke had paused in his nervous shaking to give Penelope a look of unpleasant surprise. As if he couldn’t believe that anyone could be quite so...much.

“As you know, Hermione is the one who warned me to use a mirror when turning around corners with a basilisk on the loose. So, I was already more than eager to help her with

anything she needed when the dear girl owed me a couple weeks ago. When I realized she wanted to help poor enslaved House Elves, I simply had to..."

"Yes yes, that's very nice," the older man with the sandy hair interrupted. "I'm afraid my cousin and I do not have time for this entire saga. We must be going. Duncan," he gave his jittery cousin a scorching look. "Make your goodbyes, and we will be off."

The young man with the brown hair and sallow skin stepped forward. Even as he approached Harry, he refused to meet his eyes.

Harry didn't know what was going on with the young man, but he found himself feeling sorry for him. "Er, it was nice to meet you Mr. Travers," he said. He held out his hand for the younger cousin, Duncan.

The man took his hand.

What followed was the strangest handshake Harry had ever experienced. Duncan didn't even move his hand up or down, he simply stared down at Harry's hand as if he'd never seen anything quite like it. He didn't move, or let him go, or say anything. He simply stared at Harry's hand.

Nothing happened for a minute until Harry realized that Duncan had started trembling again. He had no idea what to do. "Er, Mr. Travers? Are you alright?"

"I'm fine," he spoke up immediately, but he still didn't let go of Harry's hand and the trembling only got worse. "I'm fine." Finally, the pale young man looked up to meet Harry's eyes for the first time. Harry realized with a start that the dark brown eyes were wet with unshed tears. There was something painfully broken about the man before him. "It's nice to finally shake your hand," he said.

"Oh, for Salazar's sake!" The older cousin lost patience and shoved the nervous young man aside.

"Hey!" Harry tried to check on the shivering young man, but before he could turn away, the older Travers had gripped Harry's wrist with firm insistence. Barely a moment later, Harry felt the familiar tug of apparition. "No!" He tried to break away, but the other man's grip was too strong.

He heard Hermione scream. He saw Kingsley move out of the corner of his eye. Moody had shot some spell toward the man holding him, but before it ever landed, they were already being swallowed into the void.

Harry landed in a dark room at the same time as the two other gentlemen. It took every ounce of strength in him to swallow down the nausea and fear and reach for his wand. But before he could even let out a single spell, his vision was filled with the warm red glow of a stunning spell. He was out.

Chapter End Notes

I'm sorry there was no Voldemort in this chapter, but I promise there will be a LOT of him in the next chapter.

The Calm Before the Storm

Chapter Notes

Sorry this took so long to post. The world is crazy right now. I hope everyone is staying safe and healthy. Best wishes to you all!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Consciousness returned to Harry as quickly as it left. He had been fumbling for his wand in a dark room. He had been hit with a red spell. He had tumbled into oblivion. And then, it felt like only a moment later that the darkness was lifting.

His eyes fluttered open.

The first thing he saw were two vivid red eyes looking down on him. He'd seen those eyes so many times in his dreams, that he said the first thing that came to mind.

"Tom?"

Suddenly, the figure before him reeled back. It wasn't Tom Riddle. This wasn't a dream. Voldemort glared down at him. His pupils narrowed into thin slits. His snake-like nose flared in anger. He looked furious.

"You dare?" the man cried.

Harry didn't register anything else after that. He reacted purely on instinct and dived out of the way. He practically summersaulted off the couch he'd woken up on. He scrambled to his feet and ducked behind Voldemort's black robes. The irate dark wizard had his wand in hand already, and Harry dug through his pockets in vain. His wand wasn't there. He didn't have a wand.

"Get back here!" He heard Voldemort's shrill cry.

A flash of purple light flew passed Harry's ear, and he threw himself to the side. They were in a small study lined with bookshelves. There wasn't much room to run and there weren't many things he could hide behind. But there was a door. He dashed for freedom. He ran like his life depended on it, but it still wasn't enough.

"Incarcerous!"

Ropes shot out from behind him and wrapped themselves around Harry's whole body, binding his arms and legs. He didn't even make it another step before he fell forward. He tried to brace himself for impact, but right before his face smashed into the hardwood floor, his whole body lifted from the ground. He was being levitated into the air.

“Let me go!” Harry cried, more out of habit than hope.

He could see the floor moving below him as he was guided back to the settee he’d just escaped. “Always so difficult,” Voldemort commented, as he plopped Harry onto the seat cushion. Harry’s body was more or less sitting up. However, with the thick ropes winding all the way from his legs to his shoulders, it was a rather awkward angle.

“No matter,” the serpentine man continued. “This will fix that.” And then Voldemort pulled a vial of shockingly blue potion from his black robes.

Harry tried to edge away as the terrifying man slithered into the seat beside him. Voldemort’s movements were careful and deliberate, like a prowling tiger that had finally cornered its prey. So close now to his ultimate goal. Savoring the moment.

The scar on Harry’s forehead was itching like mad, not unbearable yet, but irksome. Voldemort’s excitement danced through the link. Even if Harry couldn’t feel it in the back of his mind, there was no doubt what the expression on Voldemort’s grinning face suggested. The man was downright rapturous to finally have Harry Potter within his grasp.

Harry knew he wouldn’t be able to fight his way out of this. But just maybe he could still talk his way out. “Is that really how you’re going to kill me?” He eyed the electric blue potion nervously but tried to keep his voice calm. “With poison? While I’m tied up without a wand? And no witnesses to see your mighty victory?”

Harry had been hoping to wound the man’s fragile ego, but to his surprise, Voldemort didn’t seem at all perturbed. A shiver ran down Harry’s spine when the man let out a sinister chuckle.

“Oh Harry, my Harry.” The man crept even closer. His elated expression filling Harry’s vision. The young man tried to worm away, but he could barely move with the ropes digging into his limbs. Without anywhere to go, he leaned his head away as far as he could. He could feel Voldemort’s breath ghost his ear when the man spoke almost tenderly. “My victory over you was secure the moment I gave you that scar. Besides, my dear Harry, if I wanted to kill you, I wouldn’t use poison.” Harry saw the blue potion vial in his peripheral vision, edging toward his lips. “Now, open your mouth.”

Harry locked his lips as tight as he could, not even risking a snide remark. Suddenly, Voldemort’s fist was grabbing the back of his hair. Harry’s scar seared with pain, both from the touch and the bitter anger dancing across the link. His mouth wanted to scream, but he bit down on his lips to prevent it. He could taste blood.

“Open your mouth now, or I will give you a reason to scream.”

Harry could feel the man’s temper erupt with ire. It didn’t take much to piss him off. Even with his scar searing and Voldemort’s fingers tugging at his hair and the pain from biting down on his lips, Harry kept his mouth sealed.

“This is the last time I’m going to ask nicely, Harry.” The brave little Gryffindor could barely make out the words, he was becoming deliriously dizzy from the pain in his scar. “Crucio!”

The pain increased tenfold. White hot agony seared through Harry's entire body. His mouth ripped open in a terrible scream. But the moment his mouth was open, the tip of the vial went past his sore lips and the spell ended. The searing pain had only lasted a second, but Harry's muscles were still shaken and he felt dizzy. Even with the aftereffects of the torture, Harry still tried to spit out the potion. It was useless. He was too weak, and Voldemort was still gripping the back of his hair, keeping him dizzy with the pain in his scar.

The moment the slick, minty liquid went down his throat, however, all the soreness and pain seemed to evaporate like a bad memory. The agony screaming through his scar, settled down to barely a whisper. His muscles felt completely relaxed. In fact, everything felt completely relaxed. It was like he was floating on a cloud.

Harry leaned back into the soft and inviting couch with a relieved sigh. He didn't even care that Voldemort's hand was still gripped into his hair. It didn't seem to matter. His fear, his anger, even his heart-pounding adrenaline all seemed to drift away. "Wah?" he mumbled.

Once again, Voldemort was leaning in close; his eyes only inches away. "How do you feel?"

Harry wasn't sure how to answer that. He didn't feel much of anything at the moment. "How'm I suppose'd to feel?" He was vaguely aware that his words were slurred, but that didn't bother him. Nothing bothered him at the moment.

Voldemort frowned and glanced down at the empty potion's vial in his hands. "Perhaps I gave you too much. I asked Severus to brew a calming draught, but not just any calming draught. I needed one strong enough that you wouldn't panic and do something irreversibly stupid the moment I told you that you will remain here for the rest of your days."

"I do feel...calm." Harry wasn't sure why Voldemort would want him calm for the announcement that Harry was about to be tortured till the end of his days, but it had worked. Harry tried to summon up some righteous anger, which usually came so naturally to him, but it just faded away along with any sense of fear or fight. All he felt was blissful peace, and a bit sleepy. "I'm actually kinda tired, so if you could kill me before your monologue, that'd be great."

"I don't think you understand, Harry. You belong to me now. In fact, today is my birthday, and you are a very special birthday present to me."

"So, you're gonna kill me...after cake?"

Voldemort smashed the potion vial. "This was supposed to make you more agreeable, not more obnoxious." Annoyance flicked through the link, but it was so distant that it barely registered through the haze of peace Harry was swimming in.

Then, just as quickly, the barely-there annoyance was replaced with hints of hopeful expectation. "Ah," Voldemort's lipless mouth quirked up into a predatory smile. "But of course, you don't know about *your* gift yet. You see, Harry, you belong to me now, and I take good care of my belongings. I have a gift for you. One I know you will like."

"I haven't liked any o' the other things you've given me."

“But you are quite fond of the Dumbledore’s flee-bitten werewolf, aren’t you?”

It was a sign of how strong that potion was that it took him at least ten long seconds to understand the meaning behind those words. “Remus?”

“I have him.”

Voldemort’s expression was triumphant. Harry was sure he ought to feel desperate fear and hate, but all he could muster was mild concern. “We captured him almost a week ago,” Voldemort continued. “He is my gift to you.” As the man spoke, he leaned in closer and closer, until he was practically hovering over Harry’s prone form. That serpentine face was getting closer and closer, and the sharp teeth were smiling like a shark. “You see? Lord Voldemort is infinitely merciful and giving. I will allow the wolf to continue to live.”

Harry tried to think carefully, but it was impossible with the potion slowing his movements, his feelings, his very thoughts. “Where’s he?”

Once again, annoyance flickered. But thankfully, Voldemort leaned back a bit, if only just to look down on Harry from further up. “You do not sound very grateful. I assumed that you would be more pleased to know that I had spared your pet wolf. More *appreciative*.” He turned to glance down at his bone white wand, as if considering what he ought to do with it. “Perhaps he was not an appropriate gift after all.”

“No!” Harry had no idea what was going on, but he did somehow understand that Remus’s life was in his hands. “He’s a great gift! Bes’ gift ever. Happy birffday!”

“Oh?” Voldemort perked up, and leaned in close again. “Show me.” He was closer than ever, and his voice was barely a whispered breath against Harry’s cheek. “Show me how grateful you are.”

“Er...” What did that even mean? “Thank you?” Harry tried. “Thanks... a lot.” Once he got into it, it wasn’t hard to just tell Voldemort what the man wanted to hear, especially with the potion dulling his pride. Plus, it was Remus’s life in the balance. “So much! Thanks! A thousand times. Is the best present ever! I’m very, very grateful. I mean grateful.”

Harry thought he had really sold it, all things considered, but Voldemort was looking more irritated with every word. Harry realized the man wanted him to actually *do* something. But what could he do with his arms and legs tied up and Voldemort practically smothering him? Was he supposed to bow down? Grovel?

Well, if that’s what the man wanted...

Harry was pretty sure he would never have groveled before Voldemort under normal circumstances. But these were far from normal circumstances, and the potion was preventing him from caring about much of anything.

With his arms and legs still tied tight, he wriggled down off the couch like a sick flobberworm, until he was sprawled out near Voldemort’s feet.

The dark wizard stood up at once, before Harry could even start groveling. "What are you doing? Get back here."

"I was bein' grateful!" Harry tried to explain. It was hard to maneuver while on the hardwood floor, with the ropes still wrapped the entire length of his body. He was angled on his stomach, with his cheek against the polished veneer. He could make out Voldemort's bare feet storming up and down in front of him in a huff.

Once he was lying down and in a fairly comfortable position, Harry sort of forgot what he'd been intending to do. His muscles were so relaxed, his eyelids felt heavy, and he was drifting in a wonderful mist of calm, pleasant, blankness. In his peripheral, he was aware that Voldemort was still pacing along the study, muttering about something. But the man didn't seem to expect any response from Harry, so Harry ignored him.

This continued for some amount of time that Harry had no way to gauge. Until, suddenly, he was pulled from his bliss by a heavy knock at the same door he had tried to escape through only a few minutes before. When Voldemort called for the person to enter, Harry barely mustered enough interest to turn his head to see who was entering. It was Snape.

Over the years, Harry had seen Snape look at him with disgust, distaste, and dismissal. He had thought it was impossible for Snape to look any more unimpressed with him than he had before. And yet, the look on Snape's face when he saw Harry tied up and lying at Voldemort's feet, showed quite well that he would rather polish Filch's boots with his tongue than deal with whatever was going on with Harry at this moment.

"You called for me, my Lord?"

"What is wrong with him!?" Voldemort's fury was palpable, and it caused the muted throb in Harry's scar to spike painfully. He flinched, but fortunately, the pain didn't last long.

"You will have to be more specific." Snape didn't flinch. His tone was as dry as ever, and his expression stayed just as contemptuous. "The things wrong with Potter could fill a book."

"I gave him the potion that you brewed, and now he's rolling on the floor and drooling."

"I'm not droo-" But then Harry noticed that his chin was wet. "Oh, I guess I am."

"I apologize, my Lord, but you gave me very specific instructions."

"The only instruction I gave you," Voldemort hissed with deadly restraint. "Was to mix a potion strong enough so that he would remain calm when I explain that he will live here and belong to me for the rest of his days."

"Yes, my Lord," Snape agreed. "But the important thing to remember is that placidity does not come naturally to the boy. Besides, have to tested to see if it works?" Snape made eye contact with Harry for the first time. "Potter?"

"You're the worst. Why're you here?" Harry mumbled.

“Potter, you are a prisoner of the Dark Lord. He is not going to kill you. He is keeping you here, alive, indefinitely. You belong to him now and are subject to his whims. How do you feel?”

“I dunno.” His voice was a bit muffled because half his face was now resting, smooshed against the floor. “A bit peckish.”

“Leave now.” Voldemort’s voice didn’t raise but the threat was no less clear. “And move that wolf outside with the other mongrels. We will deal with him once your ridiculous potion wears off.” Harry felt himself being hoisted back into the couch just as Snape’s billowing black robes disappeared behind the door. Voldemort was looking down at him again, but at least he wasn’t leaning inches away. “You are useless in this condition.”

“S’rry I’m not good at bein’ tortured.”

The man’s hairless head quirked to the side. “Were you under the impression I was trying to torture you? You must be quite unimaginative if you think I torture my prisoners by casting a single Cruciatus curse for two seconds, before dousing them with calming draught.”

“You said you had Reems. I mean Remus. You were gonna bring ‘im here, till you realized I was loopy.”

“I told you he was alive.”

“For now.”

Voldemort quirked a hairless brow. “Ah. I see. I did not explain fully.” The hairs on Harry’s arms stood on end, as Voldemort inched closer and closer. Why did he keep moving so close?

This time, the dark wizard did not merely loom over Harry’s leaned-back body. He positioned himself so that his black-robed figure was next to Harry’s, with their legs almost touching. Then he lifted his arm, reaching it across the back cushions of the couch, until it was draped around Harry’s shoulders. The Dark Lord himself was wrapping an arm around Harry’s back. This had to be a dream. A really weird dream. Or was the potion making him imagine things?

“My dear Harry, I did not decide to keep you for torture and torment. I have plenty of victims for that if I desire. You shall remain here as my...” But then the man’s voice trailed off, as if he wasn’t sure what was going on either. “You will be...” Again, he couldn’t quite seem to decide what Harry was. “You will keep me company.” He finally settled for.

Harry was dreaming. That was the only explanation. He tried to pinch himself, but couldn’t reach through the ropes. Yeah, definitely a dream.

In the meantime, he figured he would deal with things as they came. “You want me...to keep you company...so you don’t get lonely? Bored? Wha? Why? How? Wha!?”

Voldemort raised his wand to Harry’s face, but with Harry’s reactions so delayed, he didn’t even duck in time for Voldemort to hit him with an unknown spell. As soon as it landed,

Harry realized it was just a siphoning charm. Voldemort was removing the spittle from Harry's face. He must have started drooling again.

“Oh...er...thanks?”

“You are intolerable in this condition. You will stay in your chambers until morning. By then, the potion shall have worn off.”

Without further ado, the arm around Harry's shoulders shifted until a hand was gripping the back of his neck. The sickening tug of apparition didn't bother him nearly as much as usual. He wasn't sure if that was because he was getting used to it, or if the potion was muting that as well. Either way, Harry only felt relaxed and tired when they appeared in a beautifully decorated bedroom.

“Whose room's this?”

“Yours.” Voldemort had both hands of Harry's shoulders, preventing him from tipping over since Harry had started to sway precariously.

The ropes around Harry's body disappeared into nothing, without Voldemort even drawing his wand. Even with the ability to move his arms and legs, Harry was still having trouble holding himself upright. The firm grip on his shoulders guided him as he stumbled over to the bed, where he collapsed into a carefree heap.

“Do not attempt to escape.” Voldemort's voice was getting further away, but Harry couldn't even be bothered to keep his eyes open. “All the exits are magically locked. Your wand is in my safe keeping, your pockets were emptied, and I summoned any magical items from your person. I suggest you get some rest.”

Harry heard a door open and close before he peaked to make sure he was alone. He seemed to be.

He ought to escape. He ought to make a run for it. But how? The doors and windows would be locked. He didn't think he could do wandless magic in this state. There was no way he could focus on his magic carefully enough to draw upon it. Besides, the bed was very comfortable. There was a fireplace with a crackling fire, and the room was nice and warm. Perhaps he could take a quick nap and he could plan his escape when he woke up. The sun was still bright in the sky. It was probably around midafternoon.

A nap was so very tempting. Voldemort had said something about dealing with Remus when the potion wore off in the morning. So, the last Marauder ought to be safe until then. Harry kicked his shoes off and shuffled forward until his head hit the downy pillows. He tossed his glasses over to the nightstand, where they thankfully landed without breaking.

It would be nice to curl up under the covers and enjoy this brief moment of calm. Harry couldn't remember the last time he felt this tranquil. He reached for the hem of his jumper, about to tug it off, when he felt a subtle lump. Was there something tucked into his sweater?
The invisibility cloak!

How did he still have the cloak? Moody had mentioned that dark wizards wouldn't check the inside of his sweater, and he was right. Thank Merlin for the man's paranoia. But Voldemort had said he'd summoned all the magical items off Harry's person. Was the cloak immune to summoning charms?

Not that it mattered either way. Harry had his cloak, and Voldemort didn't know it. It needed to be hidden somewhere safe. He was lucky it hadn't fallen out already. Harry crawled under the thick covers and buried his face into the blissfully soft pillows. As subtly as he could, in his ungraceful condition, he slipped the cloak from out of his jumper and into the pillowcase. He wasn't sure if Voldemort was spying on him, but he wouldn't put it past the man.

Fortunately, Hermione had been holding onto the beaded bag with all the spoils from the Gryffindor Vault. So, that was still safe, even if it was well out of Harry's reach. Unfortunately, Voldemort had Harry's wand, and Harry had no idea how he would get that back. But that was a problem for another time. After a nice, relaxing nap.

With his precious cloak safe and sound, and Harry already curled up under the blankets, he quickly drifted off to the soft sound of crackling fire.

"Wake up, pretty boy."

Remus Lupin's nose was assaulted with fetid stench before he even opened his eyes. There was campfire smoke, cooked meat, sweat, unwashed clothes, and blood. Most of all, there was the overwhelming scent of werewolves.

He opened his eyes reluctantly, already knowing what to expect. Sure enough, he was in a small wooded clearing, surrounded by rough and angry werewolves. They were in human form, but there was no mistaking that scent.

Some rabbits had been laid out to cook over a large fire pit. A half-stripped deer hung from a nearby tree. Some canvases and animal hides had been strung up here and there to offer the barest of shelter from the snowy weather. Off in the distance, through the dense trees, Remus could just make out a beautiful manor house on a hill. He tried to peak closer to see if he could make out any other landmarks.

Before he could see anything useful, a gruff voice caught his attention. "Over here, little lapdog."

Remus looked.

Fenrir Greyback was on the other side of the clearing. He was holding a snow-white rabbit by its ears. The little creature's back foot was bleeding, as if it had been caught in a trap, but seemed otherwise unhurt. It desperately kicked at the air in a vain attempt to escape, but Greyback barely seemed to notice. His attention was entirely on the man he had bitten all those years ago.

Remus tried to stand a little straighter, but realized he couldn't move. He was tied to a thick tree, with his back up against the wet bark. The thick ropes were digging into his arms. He hadn't even noticed, he'd been so distracted by the putrid smells and horrible sights.

"What happened?" Remus kept his voice as level as he could. The last thing he remembered, he had been with Harry preparing for the party at Malfoy Manor. Had something gone wrong with the Portkey? Had the Burrow been attacked? Had anyone else been taken? Why couldn't he remember anything? "Where's Harry?"

Greyback finally lifted the twitching rabbit in his hands. For a moment, Remus thought he would snap its neck. But what actually happened was much worse. Greyback brought his prey's neck toward him before biting down with his sharp, yellow teeth on full display. Remus had not known before that moment, what sounds a rabbit makes when it is being eaten alive, but he would never forget now. Deep into the rabbit's flesh, Greyback sunk his teeth, before pulling away with a terrible rip, taking half the flesh of the neck with him.

There was so much blood. On Greyback's face, hands, mouth, and shirt. All over the very dead rabbit. Dripping onto the muddy ground below.

Greyback chewed for a moment before swallowing the raw, bloody, fur-ridden rabbit meat. Only then did he respond to Remus. "You don't speak unless you're spoken to."

Remus gawked but didn't say anything. He wasn't sure if he was capable of speech right at the moment. If Greyback had been trying to make a point, it had worked.

The alpha took another bite of limp rabbit, this time from the upper chest. Remus wasn't sure what was worse, the sound of crunching or the smell of the fresh blood. After he chewed and swallowed, Greyback strode forward, as if he were having a casual stroll through the park.

"You're not much of a fighter without your wand," the older werewolf taunted.

Remus was too stunned to think through a proper response, so he spoke the first words that came to his mouth. "You'd be amazed how much of a handicap it is to fight with both hands tied behind your back."

Smack. With lightning speed, Greyback had swung his free hand forward to backhand Remus across the cheek. The blow was hard enough to make him see stars.

"That Death Eater said the Dark Lord wanted 'im unhurt for now." Remus could hear one of the other werewolves calling out.

Only then did Remus spare any attention for the other men in the clearing. He recognized the two young hotheads, Howler and Grady, from his firefight with Dora and Erwin in The Last Call pub. None of the others looked familiar, just two dozen men reeking of testosterone and violence. The one who had spoken looked just slightly older and less stupid than the others; an entirely bald man with dark skin and a large gold earring in one ear.

"I ain't gonna break 'im, Wolfram," Greyback snarled. "I'm just teachin' 'im respect."

Remus was still shaking off his dizziness when Greyback leaned in close. Remus could barely breathe as the scent of blood filled every orifice and clung to his skin. "I know you, Lupin." Greyback's voice was soft but deadly. "You don't even fight when you got your hands free. You let that little girl fight for you."

"If by little girl, you mean Nymphadora Tonks," Remus spoke calmly. "Then I can assure you, she would make quick work of you, or any of your mates. I would be more than proud to have her fight for me."

Remus could hear the other wolves sneering in indignation and throwing out taunts. The sandy-haired Grady spat on the ground, clearly remembering that she and Remus *had* made quick work of him and his friend.

Greyback merely curled his lip into an amused snarl. "Is that right?" Remus could see chunks of rabbit still clinging to his sharpened teeth. "I ain't met a bitch yet who could hold my attention long. Sure as hell never met one I'd choose over *my pack*. Maybe I'll take yours for a ride. See what all the fuss's about. She's a bit old for my tastes, but you make her sound tasty."

Greyback wanted to rile him up. He wanted Remus to demand a challenge. But Remus wasn't a headstrong teenager. He had learned long ago that the best way to deal with spiteful venom was with polite patience. "Oh by all means, you're welcome to give it a try. I'd quite enjoy seeing whatever's left of you once Dora's unleashed every dirty trick Moody taught her."

A couple wolves flinched at the mention of Moody's name.

"Or did you not realize she was Mad-Eye Moody's protégé?"

A couple werewolves even took a step back at that. Greyback didn't though. He hadn't moved a muscle. It would take a lot more than a name to make Fenrir Greyback show weakness.

"What the hell's wrong with you?" His deep voice was barely above a low rumble. "Where's your killer instinct? Do you have any wolf in you at all? I just threatened your mate."

"She's not exactly my mate..."

"Oh? Not your type, eh? I always wondered if you was a poof. Too bad that Black fellow fell through the veil, or I could see what it felt like to ride his ass."

"Don't you dare say his name." It was getting harder to stay calm, but he needed to focus.

"Oh? There's a bit of a spark there, after all."

The other wolves had started chuckling. Some shouted out random taunts, asking Remus what Black had tasted like. Howler asked whether Remus liked to be on top or bottom. They all seemed to agree that Remus would be on bottom.

“Say whatever you like about Sirius Black,” Remus conceded. “He’s past the point where you could ever hurt him. Besides, he always liked a good joke.”

“Yeah, he’s long dead,” Greyback chuckled. “But Harry Potter isn’t.”

Remus stiffened.

“What was that you said when you woke up? Where’s Harry?”

The bald man laughed. “Maybe you’re not the only one that like’s ‘em young, Alpha,” he called out.

“Yeah, I think you’re right, Wolfram.” Greyback’s smile was all bite. “Is that it, Lupin? Why’re you so worried about some kid? Worried you lost your piece of ass?”

“Shut your filthy mouth!” He tried to rip his way to Greyback’s neck, but it was no use with the ropes so tight. He could feel the wind around him swirl with his anger. The other werewolves felt it too, and they knew what it was. Remus Lupin had called on his wolf magic.

The tree branches swayed, knocking snow to the ground. The flaps of the canvas shelters blew wildly. The fire spluttered, but was too strong to go out from one big gust.

A couple of the younger wolves looked nervous, but most just looked amused. It wasn’t much of a demonstration for anyone who had been raised around wolf magic, and it was barely within Remus’s control with his temper so fried.

“So, you’re a wolf after all,” Greyback finally stepped back and Remus felt like he could breathe again. “I was startin’ to wonder.”

The wind had already settled back down, and Remus was exhausted after just a small pull of wandless magic. “What do you want?”

“I heard you was teachin’ Sykes’s pack wizard magic. I heard you could do all sorts of tricks with that wand of yours. Maybe you could learn to be a proper pack wolf after all, if you learn to bend over for someone other than Dumbledore.”

“Everyone works for someone.”

“I don’t work for no one!” Greyback roared.

“Oh yeah?” Remus gestured toward the decadent manor through the trees. “Who lives there?”

To Remus’s surprise, Greyback curled his mouth into an amused smile. “You want to know who’s there? I’ll tell yeh. That there is where Harry Potter is. The Dark Lord’s playin’ with ‘im now. But maybe he’ll let me have whatever’s left when he’s done.”

“Voldemort has Harry Potter?”

This time, several of the werewolves flinched; even more at Voldemort's name than they did for Moody's. Greyback seemed quite unconcerned by the name, however. "Yeah, he's got 'im now." Greyback paused when Remus didn't say anything, lost in thought. "Where'd that fightin' spirit go?"

Remus knew when to fight and when to talk. Tied to a tree and surrounded by deadly enemies was not the time to fight.

"You said you weren't working for Voldemort? So, you struck some sort of deal with him then?"

"You were right Alpha," called the one named Wolfram. "This one is smart."

"Book-smart maybe," Greyback conceded. "Ain't got a lick o' real sense, though." He lifted the limp rabbit carcass to take another bite. This close, Remus could hear an awful slurping sound mixed in with the loud crunch, and did his best not to squirm. Greyback seemed more amused by Remus's reaction than anything. "You hungry?"

"I lost my appetite."

Greyback barked out a laugh. "Alright Lupin, yeah, I got a deal with the Dark Lord. So what?"

"You're a clever wolf," Remus continued. "So you would know that you can't really trust a wizard. Especially not one as duplicitous as Voldemort."

"He even talks like a nob!" shouted Grady. "Wha's that supposed to mean anyway?"

"Duplicitous? It means he's a tricky bastard," Remus translated.

Greyback laughter was deeper and more sincere this time. "Yeah, ain't a wizard or creature in Britain that don't know that, little pup. What's your point?"

"The only way you will be able to guarantee that he will give you whatever it is he promised you, is with a magically binding contract."

"Contract?" Greyback's disgusted look probably matched the one Remus had worn when he watched the werewolf bite into the still-squirming rabbit. "I don't want no Ministry paperwork, and I sure as hell don't need no legal nonsense to make someone keep their word."

"It's not just legal," Remus continued. "It's magical. It's bound by the magic of both parties. So if either one betrays the other, they'll be harmed with the magic of the contract. Possibly even lose their magic."

"I could lose my magic!?" Greyback snarled.

"Or he could lose his. If he went back on his word. That's why he would have to keep his promise to you." Remus spoke as quickly as he could. He didn't think he had much time. "I know how to write and bind such a contract. I could help you make a deal that he couldn't

back out of, if you take me to the manor right now. Take me to see him *right now* and I'll help you."

"I'm not stupid." Greyback tossed the rest of his rabbit onto the rack with the other half-cooked hares. He had already lost interest in what Remus was saying. "You just want to save your little cub. But it don't matter. You'll see the Dark Lord and your little pet tomorrow morning. The Dark Lord has plans for you." He turned back to Remus one final time, with an evil glint in his eye. "We'll see how much fight you got in you when you're staring into them red eyes."

Remus took a deep breath. It was going to be a long, cold night.

Severus frowned as he stepped onto the small balcony. "You're certain it was magical?" he asked the woman beside him.

"I may not know all the theory you love to stick your nose in, Sevvie," cooed Bellatrix Lestranger, "But I know what magical wind feels like."

"Do not call me that ridiculous name." Severus pulled out his wand to cast a few diagnostic spells. He didn't sense any spellwork around. "I felt the wind as well, Bellatrix, but it appeared natural. If it were a wizard's spell, it would have been focused on a single location. The wind picked up across the entire property, even into the forest. No spell could do that. It must have simply been a force of nature."

"I'm telling you what I felt," she cried, pulling out her own Walnut wand. Severus had no idea what she could be checking for, or what spells she would think to try. "I sensed magic. It was magic!"

"Indeed? Well, if it was, it's over now." Severus had also thought it was odd that the wind had suddenly picked up so dramatically only to die down a minute later. But a wizard could only make the wind pick up in a specific location, not all across the entire Malfoy grounds. Perhaps the Dark Lord could, if he was determined, but why would he bother?

"Severus," came a soft voice from just inside. It was Narcissa.

"Yes?" Severus highly preferred her company to that of her obnoxious sister. But he became uncertain when he noticed how troubled she looked. "Is something the matter?"

"I need your help."

The knock was so quiet, it was practically apologetic.

"Draco darling?" The fluttering voice was muted through the door.

"Go away, mother."

“You never came down for lunch or supper,” she persisted. “And the house elves told me you didn’t touch the food I sent up.”

He was lying on his bed, staring straight up at the ceiling. He had been staring at the ceiling for hours, and he had no intention of stopping any time soon. “I’m not hungry.”

“I brought Severus with me.”

“I don’t want to see him.”

“I thought perhaps he could speak with you.”

“Just leave me alone.”

His words fell on deaf ears, however. In his peripheral vision, he could make out his bedroom door getting yanked open and Professor Snape getting shoved through at his mother’s behest. “I don’t know what you expect me...” but before the professor could finish his protests, Draco’s mother snapped the door shut, leaving the two of them alone together.

Draco finally sat up at the arrival of an intruder. He couldn’t even remember the last time he’d moved a muscle.

“Leave.”

“You look dreadful,” Professor Snape commented without emotion. Draco didn’t deny it. He was sure he did. “Have long have been crying?”

“I wasn’t crying!” Draco wiped his face just in case. There were no fresh tears, but his eyes were red and sore and drained. “If I tell my mother you consoled me, will you leave?”

Professor Snape was quiet for a long time before he spoke. He was staring off in the distance. He looked torn, as if he were unsure what to say or do. When he finally did speak, his voice was barely a whisper.

“I know that look.”

Draco sneered. The man wasn’t even looking in his direction. He was looking as far away from Draco as he could.

“What look?” asked Draco.

“You look as though you are responsible for the death of someone you care for dearly.”

“What would you know about that?” Draco spat out with as much venom as he could muster.

“Enough.” Professor Snape returned no venom. His voice was quiet and laced with profound regret. He still refused to meet Draco’s eyes. Draco waited for the man to explain, but he seemed to have no intention of elaborating.

The room lay silent for several minutes until, without warning, Professor Snape let out a much put-upon sigh. “Why do I always have to be the one to put things to right?” he muttered. Then he pulled out his wand and waved it toward Draco’s door, casting dozens of silencing spells.

“What are doing?” asked Draco.

“I’m not supposed to tell you this.” Only when all the spells were in place did Draco’s godfather finally give him his full attention. “Do not dare tell anyone what I am about say, especially your aunt. The Dark Lord wants to limit the number of people who are aware of... the situation.”

“What situation?”

The words crawled from Professor Snape’s mouth as if they were reluctant to leave. “Harry Potter is alive.”

Draco’s mind stopped. His heart stopped. His entire world stopped.

“Did you hear me, Draco?” asked the professor. “Harry Potter is still alive, and he will remain so for the time being. The Dark Lord needs him in one piece for now.”

“Where is he? How is he? What’s happened to him? Is he hurt? Is he mad at me?”

Professor Snape sneered down at him. “None of those things is any of your concern.” With the flick of Professor Snape’s dark wand, the chair by the vanity pulled itself out and flew across the carpet until it landed across from Draco. When the dour man finally sat down, they were eye to eye. “I told you this information so that you could move on and focus on what is important, not so you could rush off and get yourself killed. You need to forget about Potter and focus on your own well-being. You and your mother. The Dark Lord will almost certainly come up with more insidious tasks for you to complete, now that you have proved yourself.”

Professor Snape reached into his pocket and set a small bottle of violently blue potion on Draco’s nightstand. “In the meantime, drink this. It will calm your mind and help you sleep. You look like death warmed over.”

“Nothing will calm me down now.”

“I have compelling evidence that this calming draught is particularly effective.” With that, the man stood and strode toward the exit. He paused just as his hand touched the door handle. He stared down at it as he spoke. “I know what you’re going through, Draco. More than you can possibly imagine. But there is no reason for you to torture yourself with such guilt. You didn’t apparate Potter here. I did.”

“I was about to! I was going to!”

Severus sighed, and turned back to meet Draco’s eyes. “I have met many killers in my life, Draco. Some who kill because they want to. Some who kill because they have to. I can assure

you, young man, you are neither.”

The moment that Draco was alone again, he snatched the potion vial that Professor Snape had set by his bed. He ran to his ensuite, uncorked the bottle, and poured it down the toilet. He didn't need calm. He didn't need sleep. He needed to find Harry.

After a glorious yawn and a big stretch, Harry slowly blinked his eyes open. He felt wonderful after that nap. The potion must have worn off a little as he slept, since he felt more clear-headed than before. But its calming waves were definitely still spreading through his mind, otherwise Harry was sure he'd be feeling fear and panic. He did feel a bit concerned about the overall situation, but nothing like the blind terror and hysterics he probably would normally feel at the idea of being kidnapped by Lord Voldemort.

He retrieved his glasses from the bedside table, and decided that now was probably a good time to inspect his surroundings. The room that Voldemort had dropped him off in was even bigger than the one he'd stayed in at Dumbledore's house. Also unlike Dumbledore's house, all the furniture matched. Everything was in the same austere and pretentious style, with dark tones and heavy fabrics.

Harry figured he would inspect the exits first. The first door looked like the main entrance. He was pretty sure it was the door Voldemort had left through, although he hadn't been paying much attention by that point. Harry couldn't even reach for the handle. Some sort of invisible barrier prevented him from getting within a few inches of the door. That was definitely the exit, and it was most assuredly off-limits at the moment.

A second door, beside a large wardrobe, led to an ensuite bathroom with a huge marble tub. Harry gave the bathtub a wistful look before turning back to inspect the bedroom windows. There were a couple large, paneled windows with a view of the sprawling grounds of whatever enormous building he was in. The sun was no longer in the sky, but it was still light enough to see, so it must have only just set. The windows had no invisible barrier, but they were locked. Not that it mattered, since Harry's room was at least three stories above a snowy courtyard, which would not do much to soften his fall. Past the courtyard, he could just make out some beautiful, snow-covered gardens. And beyond that, were dense, dark woods.

“Are you attempting to escape?” a soft hissing voice came from behind him.

Harry twirled around in a flash, and then had to grip the window ledge to prevent himself from falling over. He could now walk around on his own, but his balance still wasn't as good as usual.

He'd been half expecting to find Voldemort, but it wasn't much of a relief to find the man's enormous, green snake instead. She was lying beside the fireplace, soaking in its warmth. She'd probably been watching the painting above the mantel, which featured several large purple peacocks strutting around a cherry blossom tree. Harry doubted Voldemort would have chosen such a wall hanging, which made him wonder who had.

“You're his snake, aren't you? Nagini, right? Are you here to eat me?”

“Nagini belongs to our master, yes. But you are not for eating. Not anymore. Not now that you belong to our master.”

Harry took a step back. “Don’t call him that. He might be your master, but he’s not mine.” Harry looked around to see where she might have come from. “How did you get in here?” Perhaps there was an entrance he hadn’t found.

“Nagini has been here since the human hatchling first arrived. Master asked me to watch you and make sure you didn’t come to harm. I am also supposed to warn him if you try to escape. Is that what you are doing?”

“No, I was just...looking around.” Harry figured he might as well keep looking around, since she wasn’t an immediate threat. He inspected the fireplace next, which was also warded so he couldn’t get close to the flames. After that, he checked out the sitting area facing the fireplace. There were no knick-knacks or anything that could be used as a weapon or tool to escape. There wasn’t really anything besides the fancy furniture. The place felt more like it was for looking at than living in. It was the opposite of the Weasley’s homey and welcoming Burrow.

Nagini followed him closely as he walked around. Harry sighed. “Are you really supposed to watch me the whole time I’m in here?”

“Yes, that is what Master asked of me.” She curled up around the leg of a mahogany coffee table as he inspected the firm cushions of the nearby velvet chairs. Nothing useful had fallen into the cracks. “You are much more interesting now that you are awake,” she noted. “What are you looking for?”

“Mice,” he lied. “I’ll let you know if I find any.” She perked up at that. Suddenly, he thought of something worrying. “What if I have to go to the loo?” he asked. “Would you follow me into the toilet as well?”

“I will follow you wherever you go. Master made sure I would be able to travel through the door if necessary, so you will not be able to shut me out.”

“You’d watch me use the loo!?” Harry shuddered at the thought and moved on to the wardrobe. When he opened the doors, he found a large selection of fine wizarding robes. “Whose clothes are these?”

“Master made sure you would have everything you needed. He assumed you would want to clothe yourself like other humans do.”

“Well, yeah, I definitely want to...wear clothes.” Harry rifled through the hangars, finding crisp shirts, tailored trousers, and outer robes in a selection of colors. Mostly greens. “This stuff all looks like it cost a lot of money, though. Did he buy me all new clothes? Are they just for me?”

“Everything in the room was put here for you. If you wish to wear the human clothes, you may.”

Harry looked down to eye the snake suspiciously. “What happens when I do change? What about my privacy? Would you at least close your eyes?”

“Nagini is to watch you as long as our master wishes me to. I will not close my eyes when I am watching.” She paused for a moment. “What is privacy?”

“Nevermind, I guess it doesn’t matter since you’re a snake anyway. Who are you going to tell?” He left the wardrobe and sauntered over to the bed, where he could see some books lying on the nightstand.

“I will tell master about all that you do, especially if it is suspicious. If you attempt to harm me or yourself or leave this place, I am to signal him right away.”

“How do you signal him?” He pretended to fluff his pillows, while checking to make sure his invisibility cloak was still hidden in the pillowcase. It was. *Good.*

“Nagini is connected to our master, just as you are also connected.”

“Seriously, you can just call him your master, you don’t need to include me in that nonsense.” He turned his attention to the books on the bedside table. “Did he leave these here for me?”

“As I told you,” she hissed. “Everything was left deliberately for you”

“Why in the hell would he think I wanted to read Secrets of the Darkest Arts!? Whatever rot that is.” Harry glanced at the book underneath. “Unfogging the Unforgivable Curses?” Harry glanced at the first couple pages to make sure it was what it appeared to be. As he suspected, it was a book which taught how to cast the unforgivable curses. “Why? Why would I ever read these?”

Dumbledore had left him books on goblins, quidditch, and defense spells. Even that annoying book on Godric Gryffindor had at least seemed like the sort of thing Harry would like. Why would Voldemort ever think that Harry would read these horrible books? Harry sorted through the rest of the heavy stack to see if there was anything that wasn’t dark and dangerous. Finally, at the bottom he found Advanced Theories in Potioneering. “Oh goody! If there’s anything I love more than advanced theoretical magic, it’s potions!”

“If there is a specific book that you desire, you may tell Master tomorrow.” Nagini had slithered onto the bed and was making herself comfortable. “I’m sure he would be able to find whatever you need.”

“Oh, I’m sure that would go over well,” Harry rolled his eyes. “Hey Voldemort,” he said with mock politeness. “You know all those books you left out for your prisoner? Well, next time, how about a different genre? Oh, and maybe a nice bottle of sparkling water while you’re at it!”

Nagini ignored his sarcasm, or possibly didn’t understand it. “You are not a prisoner.”

“Oh? Well, what am I then?” Even Voldemort had seemed uncertain about how to answer that.

“You are his most prized possession. Master will take good care of you now, just as he takes care of me.”

Harry shuddered at the thought. Phrased like that, it sounded even more foreboding than if she said Voldemort was planning to kill him. Thankfully, the potion kept him from getting too creeped out.

Of course, with the potion still coursing through his system, he was sure he wouldn't be able to attempt Blood Magic. And he had already scoped out the room as much as he could. And there was no point attempting escape with Nagini hounding him. Harry remembered the large bathtub in the other room. It had been a very long time since he'd had a bubble bath. He might as well be clean for when he did escape.

When he told Nagini that he planned to take a bath, she slid off the bed to follow him as he searched for some towels. “May I join you in the tub?” she asked. “I like the feeling of warm water on my scales.”

“What? No!” He turned all the taps and watched fizzy water quickly fill the tub. “You can't be in the bath with me.”

“Why not?” She was watching the bathtub longingly.

“Because it's weird,” Harry turned his attention to a small linen cupboard where he found a couple fuzzy towels and a plush bathrobe. “Bathing with Voldemort's pet snake! I can't even imagine.”

“Master lets me bathe with him,” she protested.

“Well that's...” suddenly Harry was struck with a ridiculous image. He couldn't help but burst into laughter.

“Why are you doing that? What is funny?”

“That's...” He tried to catch his breath. “That's just really funny. I can just imagine the big bad Dark Lord...taking a bubble bath...with his pet snake. Please tell me he uses a loofah!”

“What is a loofah?”

“You know what, Nagini?” Harry called over as he slipped into the bathrobe, hardly caring at all in his peaceful state that she might get a flash of his bits. “I just realized that you can be funny. I didn't expect that.”

“Do you consider funny to be a good thing?” she asked, as she kept edging closer and closer to the warm, bubbly water.

“Yeah, funny's a pretty good thing to be.” He found some fancy shampoo and body wash in a drawer.

“So, you are complimenting me?”

“Er...well yeah, I suppose I kind of am.”

“Thank you, hatchling,” she preened. “Does this mean that you will let me into the bath with you?”

“No! That’s still weird. Especially now that I know you bathe with Voldemort.” He shooed her away from the edge of the marble tub and she slithered back to the floor reluctantly.

“Are you sure, little hatchling?”

Harry was resolute as he turned off the taps and climbed into the bubbly water. It was hot and soothing. He still kept one eye on Nagini though. She was trying to look pitiful and doing a suspiciously good job for a deadly snake.

“You won’t even notice me,” she hissed.

“How would I possibly not notice that I’m sharing a bath with a four-meter long, man-crushing snake?”

“I will be quiet.”

“My concern is not about you making *too much noise*! It’s...oh, you know what? Fine. How about this, you can stick the tip of your tail in the water. How does that sound?”

“It is better than simply lying on the cold tile floor.”

“If you want, I can put a towel down for you to lie on,” Harry offered.

“That would be considerate of you.”

Harry ended up laying out three towels and getting everything very wet in the process.

Lord Voldemort was alone in his study, reading through his books on horcruxes. He no longer had any desire to remove the horcrux from Harry. No, he was quite sure he was keeping Harry. But for what purpose? What was the boy’s place here? He finally had Harry where he wanted him, so what would he do with him?

His other living horcrux, Nagini, made a wonderful pet. He supposed that Harry could be a pet as well, but that didn’t feel quite right. He finished flipping through another book and set it aside. His temper had already begun to calm with Harry so close by. His plan to collect all his horcruxes was going perfectly. He just needed the locket, which Harry would be able to get for him now that Harry was within his control.

Their meeting this afternoon could have gone better, but it also could have gone much worse. It was regrettable that he had to Crucio the boy to get him to comply. Soon the boy would comply without threats.

In the meantime, he wanted to determine why the boy felt such pain whenever Lord Voldemort touched him. He had assumed that effect would go away now that he had accepted Harry for what he was. Nagini had always said that her master's touch felt soothing. The books didn't offer any useful information, but then Lord Voldemort had probably been the first to make horcruxes from living beings instead of inanimate objects.

He had noticed that the boy seemed to flinch any time the Dark Lord's anger spiked. Perhaps that was the clue. Perhaps the pain was because he only ever seemed to touch Harry Potter when he was furious with him. Tomorrow he would try touching the boy when he was feeling pleased with him.

In the meantime, he needed to figure out what it was that he wanted.

Draco waited until the manor was silent and asleep before slipping through the corridors and down the stairs, towards the dungeons. That was the most likely place he would find Harry.

There were only a few cells in the Malfoy dungeons. He checked each one that had been unoccupied the previous day, but there were no new occupants. Finally, out of desperation, he knocked quietly on the only occupied cell. It felt strange to knock, since the man was technically his prisoner, but it also felt rude to barge in unannounced.

"Yes?" came a wizened voice through the thick doorway.

Draco unlocked the door and creaked it open to peer in on Mr. Ollivander. The old wandmaker was sitting by a small desk, examining some different unicorn hairs by candlelight. Draco was a bit surprised that the man would be working on wands this late at night, but there was a strangely timeless quality to Garrick Ollivander, as if he had spent all of eternity sitting in a quiet room making wands.

"Aw, young Master Malfoy." Mr. Ollivander gave him a cheerful smile when he finally looked up from the hair samples. "Ten inches, hawthorne wood, unicorn hair. A particularly supple and rich wand." Then, his attention was drawn back to his work. He opened a drawer to pull out several small blocks of wood. He didn't bother to look back at Draco as he spoke. "To what do I owe this unexpected visit?"

"Have you seen Harry Potter?"

"Ah, young Master Potter," he mumbled as he tossed a block of wood over his shoulder and picked up a quill to scratch something out on an aged piece of parchment. "I have had the pleasure of his company on exactly two occasions. The first was when he came into my shop to buy his first wand. The second was when I inspected that same wand for the Triwizard Tournament."

Draco waited to see if Ollivander would say anything else, but the man kept grabbing more blocks of wood and tossing them left and right.

"So, you haven't seen Harry since then?"

“As I said, I saw him and his wand, on exactly two occasions. Eleven and a half inches, holly, phoenix feather. An extraordinarily unusual combination.”

“Of course,” Draco grumbled. “Everything about Harry is extraordinary and unusual and completely irreplaceable.”

“Ah!” Mr. Ollivander called out in triumph. “This is it! Chestnut.”

“How do you know?”

The man frowned as if he wasn’t sure how to explain. “I’m not sure,” he admitted. “It just smells right.”

“Well, I’ll just let you get to it then.”

That had been a complete waste of time. Where else could Harry be? Where would the Dark Lord keep him?

Harry grabbed the soft towel from the gilded ring and stepped out onto the wet tile floor. “Remind me to never trust anything you say ever again,” he grumbled to the giant snake. “Give them an inch, and they walk all over you!”

“Nagini does not walk. Nor do I know what you are speaking about.” The long green snake was almost as wet as Harry and covered in scented bubbles, but she seemed quite pleased with herself.

“I said you could put the tip of your tail in the bath, not half your bloody body!” He towed his hair dry, and then grabbed an extra towel to try and wipe off Nagini before she could drag bubbles all over the bedroom.

“I did as you said,” she protested.

“There were almost two meters of tail in that tub by the time I got out!” To demonstrate, he pointed to where the bubbles ended, which was quite far.

“It was just the tip!”

Harry snorted in spite of himself. “If you say so.” By the time he had finished drying her off, he could barely keep his eyes open. The nap hadn’t done much to stave off the soothing effects of the potion, and the bath had made him feel even more peaceful than before. There was a part of him that wanted to stay up planning his escape, but it was just no good in this condition.

“You’re going to have to get off,” he warned Nagini, who had begun winding up his leg. “I’m going back to bed now.”

“Good.” She slithered into the other room, headed straight for the enormous bed. “The blankets will be even more comfortable than the tub with a warm-blooded human to heat

them.”

“Er, maybe, but you’re not going to find out. You’re sleeping on the floor.”

“But Master lets me...”

“Ugh, fine,” he was too tired to argue. “You can sleep at the foot of the bed. But if you start coiling up next to me, I’m kicking you out, I swear!” His head barely touched the pillow before he closed his eyes.

Lord Voldemort was mildly surprised to see the grey walls of Hogwarts when he entered his dream. He had half expected to wake up in the guest room he had designated to Harry. Instead, he was pleased to find himself in a familiar fifth floor corridor of a place that felt much more like home.

He didn’t see Harry anywhere, but he could hear a familiar splashing sound coming from behind the statue of Boris the Bewildered. He had no idea what the current password would be, so he simply whispered, “Winter Green,” which was the last one he remembered. It worked.

It had been a long time since Lord Voldemort had been in the Prefect’s bathroom, but it was appropriate that he was in his teenaged form and wearing his old school uniform. He even had his old Prefect badge pinned to his chest. He stepped past the wall of porcelain sinks and made his way toward the enormous swimming pool sized tub built into the floor.

Harry was floating in the center of an enormous mound of multi-colored bubbles. He looked blissful and untroubled in a way that could only be caused by a powerful potion. His eyes were closed behind his round spectacles, as he floated with his arms and legs spread wide along the top of the water, wearing nothing but his underpants.

“Comfortable?”

Harry opened his eyes to see who was there. “Tom?” Then he closed his eyes again with a shrug. “Could be worse I suppose,” he mumbled.

Lord Voldemort ignored the name. He did look like his younger self. “You must still be under the effects of the potion if you don’t care about me walking in on you doing...whatever this is.”

“I’m relaxing,” Harry called with a dopey smile on his face. “Can’t remember the last time I did that. Once I get back to Hogwarts, I’ll have to ask Snape how he brewed that potion. It’d probably be pretty fun under normal circumstances.”

“You look like you’re having fun under these circumstances.” The Dark Lord bent over and began untying his shoes. It seemed silly to stand around just watching Harry swim through the water.

“How did you know about the potion anyway?” Harry called back. “I’d already figured out that you were communicating with Voldemort, but I still don’t know how. Do you two talk, or can you read his mind or what?”

Lord Voldemort shrugged his broad shoulders and made a noncommittal noise, before he began unbuttoning his shirt. If Harry still hadn’t worked out who he really was, he wasn’t going to help him along.

“What are you doing!?” Harry had moved to the edge of the enormous tub and was watching him fold his shirt with his mouth gaping open.

“I’m setting my clothes on this chair, so they don’t accidentally get wet,” he explained.

“But why are you taking them off?”

“I just told you. I don’t want them to get wet.”

“You can’t use the tub; I’m already using it.” Harry splashed his arms about to demonstrate. “I’m not getting out for your sake!”

“And of course, it would be impossible for us to both fit in such a small space.” The Dark Lord rolled his eyes but then he caught himself. The great and powerful Lord Voldemort did not roll his eyes! At least, not since he had been much younger. What was Harry doing to him? Why did he feel so different in these dreams?

“Fine, I guess I can share. You’re not nearly as big as Nagini anyway. But swim over there.” Harry pointed toward the other side of the pool. “And keep your knickers on. I don’t want to see more than I need to know.”

Lord Voldemort folded his trousers carefully and made his way to the edge of the pool where Harry had indicated. He was about to bend down to lower himself carefully into the water, but then a thought struck him. He hadn’t been in a young and healthy body for a very long time. It had been decades since he felt water rush across soft skin. He couldn’t even remember what it had felt like to have wet hair.

He looked across the enormous tub to see Harry wafting on his back again. The boy seemed rather unconcerned about him. Lord Voldemort would much prefer to have Harry’s full attention. He took a few steps away from the edge of the tub, and then ran forward and leapt into the air. The water was too shallow for a proper dive, but he could still make an enormous splash.

He heard Harry yelp just as his own head went under the water. When he came back up, the other young man had bubbles in his ears, his glasses were fogged up, and his wet hair was sticking in all directions. He looked like he was trying to feign annoyance, but was having trouble hiding his amusement. “Oh, very funny,” he said. “You’re lucky that potion is keeping me calm, or I’d be furious.”

Lord Voldemort couldn’t help the self-satisfied smirk that crept across his face. “Oh please, you’re barely holding back a smile. You thought it was funny.”

"It's funny that any version of Voldemort would attempt a belly flop!" Harry jeered.

"It was not remotely a belly flop. I merely jumped in. The water was too shallow to attempt anything with flair."

"I didn't realize you were capable of doing anything without flair," Harry laughed.

"I could tackle you under the water without flair. Want to see?" He crept close to Harry, but the other young man immediately splashed as much water as he could before flailing away.

The chase went on for almost an hour before they both settled down. By then, they had both been dunked, had their feet tugged under, and had been splashed in the face several times over. Lord Voldemort had kept score, because he always kept score, and he felt he was winning, but it was a close game.

Once things had calmed down, they both leaned with their folded elbows on the edge of the tub. Their breaths coming back under control. They were quiet for a while, before Harry broke the silence.

"Hey Tom?" When he hummed an acknowledgement, Harry continued. "You're connected to Voldemort, right? You seem to know things that he knows. So, do you know what he wants?"

Lord Voldemort had been completely relaxed, with his head resting on his folded arms. He shifted to look at Harry, suddenly faced with the same question he had been pondering mere hours ago. "What do you mean?" he stalled.

"Voldemort kidnapped me, but he said he didn't want to kill me. He's keeping for...something. I don't know." Harry edged closer. His wide, trusting eyes fixed on the young dark lord. Harry shifted along the edge of the pool until their elbows were touching. It felt strangely intimate for both of them to be so close together in such an enormous tub. "What does he want from me?"

"This," Lord Voldemort whispered before he even had the chance to think.

Harry furrowed his brow and looked up at the space around them. "What, Hogwarts?"

"No, not Hogwarts. Well, yes, he would like the school as well. But he wants this." He nudged Harry as if to demonstrate and moved even closer until their hips were touching. His words were barely louder than a breath, only for Harry to hear. "This thing that exists between you and I. Lord Voldemort wants to feel something like this in his waking life. I've never before felt anything so...companionable." It was hard to find the right words.

"Voldemort wants a friend?" Harry looked doubtful.

"Not a friend." He had never needed nor wanted a friend. Friends were for common people. He reached out the tilt Harry's chin toward him. He needed Harry's full, undivided attention. "Can't you see that what we share is so much more profound than friendship, my dear Harry?" Harry's skin was soft beneath his fingers. He stroked his thumb across the boy's wet cheek.

“Are you talking about yourself or Voldemort?” Harry’s voice was quivering.

“It doesn’t matter. Both.” He pulled Harry away from the edge of the pool, turning the young man’s shoulders toward him, until they were practically chest to chest. “You are mine, and I have every intention of keeping you forever. You will stay by my side. You will give me...this. Your companionship. Your fire. Your ridiculous comments. And I shall take care of you in return.”

Harry blinked a few times, before a coy smile appeared at the corner of his mouth. “You want me?” he asked, leaning in just a little closer.

“Yes.”

The smile spread until those plump lips were fully upturned. “You sure?”

“Completely.”

“Well, if you’re sure.” Without warning, Harry wrapped his arms around the Dark Lord and dunked him under the water. Well, perhaps there had been a warning, but he’d been too focused to see it for what it was. Harry even took the time to ruffle his perfect hair while they were both under the suds.

When they came up for air, Harry was laughing hysterically. He had never looked more joyous, at least not in the Dark Lord’s presence.

It was wondrous to see, and Lord Voldemort couldn’t help but point it out. “I like you like this.”

“What? Completely drenched?” Harry shook some of the bubbles from his hair. “Or do you mean loopy on calming draught?”

“Happy,” he said. Harry paused in his ministrations to stare at him. “I like seeing you happy.” He wondered if he would be able to evoke such a reaction outside of their shared dreams.

Chapter End Notes

Now it is time that I feel I need to state my intentions with this story.

From the very beginning, I intended for this story to take place over four parts. I wasn't sure how much drive I had, or if I would actually have the time or energy to continue to multiple parts. Now that we are getting close to the end of Part 1, I will say for certain that I am definitely continuing this to Part 2. The story is rapidly approaching the end of Part 1, but it will definitely continue right where we left off with Part 2 (which will be

titled Blood Magic). I will post the first chapter of Blood Magic simultaneously with the last chapter of Mind Magic when we get to that point (only a few chapters to go now).

I'm sorry I didn't give more warning that this would be a multi-book story, but I honestly wasn't sure if I would have it in me to write something so long. Now that we are at that point, I am confident that I will at least write a second part.

My ultimate goal is to write all four parts. But if I realize that such a task is too daunting, I will find a way to wrap up the story in Part 2. No matter what, I won't leave you all hanging with a non-ending. This will reach a final satisfying conclusion.

The Locket, the Tiara, and the Cup

Chapter Notes

Since I made you guys wait so long last time, this time we have a much faster update.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Lord Voldemort was in an exceptionally good mood when he awoke the next morning. He finally had his precious Harry safe within his grasp. He would track down his last horcrux, the locket, later today. Everything was going according to plan.

His dream with Harry, splashing around in the Prefect's bath, had been invigorating. He couldn't remember ever enjoying himself so much. He wondered if the boy would be amenable to doing something similar while they were both awake. Perhaps when the weather turned warm again, they could visit the beach together. Teenagers liked visiting the beach, right? Lord Voldemort had always enjoyed his trips to the beach when he was younger.

Once he was properly dressed, he strode down the halls of his private wing until he reached Harry's room. It didn't take long. He had purposely placed the boy in the bedroom closest to his own. He opened the door without hesitation, excited to see Harry again so soon.

The potion should have worn off by now. It had been much more muted during the dream. Harry hadn't been drooling or flopping around at least.

The young man was still asleep in bed. Lord Voldemort crept closer, not wanting to wake him too soon. He had been sharing dreams with Harry since the summer, and he was now curious what the boy looked like asleep. However, Lord Voldemort had not been prepared for how inviting the sight would be.

For one thing, Nagini had slithered up to wrap herself entirely around Harry's body. They were coiled together like a single being. Voldemort always enjoyed sleeping with his precious snake nearby. He wondered what it would be like to share a bed with a second horcrux. Perhaps once Harry was settled into his new role, Lord Voldemort would move him into his own bedroom, once he was sure Harry wouldn't try to strangle him in his sleep.

The boy's hair was even more ruffled than usual, and his lips were just barely parted. Lord Voldemort wanted to touch them, just as Harry had touched his own lips during the dream in the Room of Requirement. He frowned and raised his fingers to his own face. Lord Voldemort did not have lips anymore. He didn't have a lot of things. Perhaps once he collected his remaining horcrux, he could find a way to restore his former handsome features.

In the meantime, he wanted to test another theory. He concentrated on his feelings of joy and delight as he reached his finger out to stroke Harry's scar, just barely visible through his bangs. He held his breath, concentrating all of his thoughts on how pleased he had felt in the

dream the night before, how excited he was to further his closeness with Harry. He brushed his finger up and down the little lightning scar.

Harry stayed asleep, and Lord Voldemort watched carefully to see if he looked uncomfortable. Quite the contrary, Harry seemed to relax even further into his pillow as he let out a blissful sigh. It had worked. His touch could do more than cause pain. It could feel good. Lord Voldemort moved closer and tried to think where else he could touch to illicit more happy sighs. Perhaps he would run his long fingers through Harry's hair, or touch Harry's cheek just as he had in the dream last night.

But before he made up his mind, Harry began to blink his eyes open. The young man turned his bright green eyes upon the Dark Lord. Then he screamed.

"Oi!" Remus felt a swift kick to his thigh. "You awake?"

"I was, yes," he groaned.

It would have been next to impossible to sleep any longer with the warming charm wearing off. Greyback had been decent enough to adjust Lupin's ropes last night, so he was at least tied to the tree in a sitting position, with his legs sprawled out on the frigid dirt. Then the alpha draped a thick hide over him and cast a rudimentary warming charm. Remus wasn't sure if it was because Greyback was trying to win over his loyalty or if he was just didn't want Remus to die of hypothermia during the cold winter's night. Either way, it had taken hours for Remus to finally drift off, fraught with worry for Harry and the other Order members. Then, he was woken up by the early morning chill, when Greyback's unpracticed charm started to wear off.

It had been a long, cold, restless night for Remus Lupin.

"Hey!" Another kick brought Remus's attention back to the present. The young and impetuous werewolf, Grady, was looking down at him. He was biting into a piece of deer jerky. "You hungry?"

"Weren't you under orders not to harm me?" He gritted out. What little patience he had been clinging to had been worn thin by lack of sleep. His teeth were chattering from the cold, and his muscles were aching something terrible.

"Grady!" Greyback called from the campfire. Remus could see a few werewolves prowling around in the predawn light, heating up tins of water for coffee and sneaking into the trees to relieve themselves. Greyback was in the center of the action, watching his pack member with a shrewd eye. "I said to feed 'im, not tenderize 'im." He made his way over to the tree where Lupin was still tied.

When he reached the two of them, he smacked Grady upside the head, snatched the jerky from his hand, and shoved him away. "I have to do everything myself." He held the jerky right in front of Remus's mouth, so it brushed against his lips. "Eat. You're gonna need your strength."

Remus considered arguing. He considered being difficult. Then he thought better. He bit into the jerky and ate it as quickly as he could, not enjoying the experience of eating from Greyback's unwashed hands. Remus had seen where those hands had been. When the food disappeared, Greyback brought a flask to his lips instead. "It's water," he assured.

Remus drank the entire flask. He had no idea how long it had been since he'd been taken captive, but his throat was painfully dry. "Thank you," he muttered, because one person in this clearing ought to have manners.

"You look like shite," Greyback commented, once Remus was properly fed and watered. "Not used to sleeping out in the fresh air? Little house-trained Lupin can only sleep in a fluffy little bed?"

"I can sleep outside just fine." Remus felt a little more like himself now that he has some food in his system and the early morning light was coming in. "I'm just used to sleeping with better quality warming charms."

He half expected to be smacked again, but to his surprise, Greyback chuckled. "You got moxie. I'll give you that." He pulled out his wand and recast the warming charm. Like the night before, Remus noticed that his wand movement wasn't quite right. Greyback must have caught Remus's assessing gaze. "What you looking at? You wanna give notes?"

Remus shrugged, or at least attempted to with his shoulders brushing against the dewy tree bark. "I just thought that if you made your movements a bit more fluid, less jerky, and you pulled the downstroke to the left a bit more, your charm would have a bit more strength to it."

Greyback blinked at him a couple times. He turned to the other pack members to see if they were watching. They were. About two dozen men had stopped whatever they were doing to gape at Remus Lupin, wearing worn-out formal wizard robes, while sitting on the frigid ground, tied to a tree, and offering pointers to Fenrir Greyback about proper wand movements.

Greyback scowled at his men. "Get back to your jobs," he snarled.

"Does that work?" called out the dark-skinned Wolfram. "That thing about the wand needing to go a bit left? My warming charms never last more than a couple hours."

Greyback huffed. He looked back down at Remus, who was finally heating up a bit, even with the poorly cast charm. He raised his wand again, but this time, his movements were a bit more fluid, and he swished his wand a bit to the left on the downstroke. A pleasant stream of balmy air flowed toward Remus, warming him to the bones.

Greyback looked mildly surprised, as if he hadn't realized the spell could be that effective. The other werewolves were gaping again.

"Hey!" shouted Howler. "I can never get the levitation charm to work, can you show me what I'm doin' wrong?"

“The levitation charm’s easy,” Grady teased him. “The disarming spell is hard. I wanna learn that one for fightin’ wizards. Can you teach that one?”

“I could never get the hang of the fire-lightin’ spell,” shouted out another werewolf.

“What’s the spell for summoning things?”

Suddenly, all the werewolves in the clearing wanted a formal lesson from a Hogwarts-trained professor while they had the chance.

Harry Potter did not wake up nearly as relaxed as he had fallen asleep. The fancy silk pajamas felt itchy and weird, there was a giant snake wrapped around him, and most notably, Voldemort was looming over him like a waking nightmare. As soon as a desperate scream escaped him, he tried scrambling to sit up, but it was next to impossible with Nagini’s thick body coiled around his chest.

Harry still didn’t have his wand, and he didn’t dare reach for his cloak to give away its hidden location in the pillowcase. So he shoved Nagini as hard as he could, and sat up against the headboard, as far from the snake’s master as he could get.

Voldemort’s serpentine face didn’t look at all pleased with Harry’s reception.

“If you do not get ahold of yourself,” the hissing voice warned. “I will give you more of Severus’s potion, regardless of how obnoxious it makes you.”

Harry tried to calm his mind. There was too much to process all at once. He’d been kidnapped by Voldemort. He was in some unknown location. He’d spent half of yesterday doped with extra-strength calming draught. The Death Eaters had taken Remus. His thoughts stalled there. Nothing else mattered once he remembered his former professor.

“Where’s Remus Lupin? Is he ok?”

The looming dark lord looked even more annoyed once Harry opened his mouth. He did at least answer the question though. “I do not keep wild animals in the house. He is outside with the other beasts. He will remain unharmed as long as you behave yourself. This attitude of yours,” Voldemort glared down at Harry, who was clutching the blankets to his chest and still trying to calm his breath. “Is hardly conducive to his good health.”

“My attitude!?” Harry gaped. What the hell did Voldemort expect? What did he want? And suddenly, Harry remembered his dream from last night.

“What does he want from me?”

“This.”

Tom Riddle creeping closer until their bodies were flush.

“I’ve never before felt anything so...companionable.”

Tom Riddle's dark eyes staring into his soul.

"I like you like this."

"I like seeing you happy."

Could that even be possible? If the real-life Voldemort was influencing Tom in the dream, then perhaps it would make sense that Tom could influence Voldemort in some way. It was the only thing that could explain all of Voldemort's bizarre behaviors since Harry had been kidnapped. 'Gifting' him Remus and expecting him to be appreciative. Dosing him with an extra strong calming potion. Locking him away in a big fancy room, instead of a dreary cell.

"Perhaps I was too hasty in giving you a gift on your first day here." Voldemort's hushed voice was practically murderous. "You have hardly done anything to earn such kindness, and you are clearly incapable of showing proper gratitude."

Harry tried to think as quickly as he could. Voldemort might still murder Remus if Harry didn't fix this somehow. Voldemort wanted him to be happy? To be companionable? He took a deep breath and tried to make his voice as calm as possible.

"I'm sorry," he said.

Voldemort's head quirked to the side.

Apparently, neither of them ever expected Harry to offer an apology to the Dark Lord. But Harry had spent the last four months studying proper etiquette. Augusta Longbottom had covered this in their private lessons. Sort of. She had taught him how to talk to a political rival. You sometimes had to be courteous to people you didn't like. You sometimes had to apologize for things you didn't feel bad about.

"I'm sorry if I was rude." He kept his voice light and sat up a little straighter, as if he had Miss Marple's book on his head. "And I'm sorry I screamed just a moment ago. You startled me is all."

"You are still afraid of me?" Voldemort's voice was just as quiet as before, but it had lost the inherent threat.

"I'm just not used to people watching me sleep," Harry admitted. He considered saying something about how creepy it was to have a deranged murderer stare down at you as if you were their next meal, but thought better of it. Instead he settled for; "You surprised me."

"That is understandable," Voldemort conceded. "I too am not fond of surprises." He seemed much more relaxed now that Harry was trying to make pleasant conversation with him. He took a step forward and his mouth curled into a rabid smile. "I have plans for you today."

"Oh?" Harry tried his best to keep the sheer dread out of his voice. He hoped he sounded curious, as opposed to horrified, but wasn't sure how well he succeeded. "What plans?"

"You will see." Voldemort's smile grew even wider. He was clearly excited about something. "Your pet wolf will be there. Would you like to see him?"

Voldemort had been practically leaning over the blankets, but in his excitement, he turned his body to sit on the edge of the bed. Harry tried not to choke on his own tongue. You-Know-Who was sitting on his bed. The same bed that Harry was still in, with nothing to protect him but a duvet and some silk green pajamas.

Nagini, who had slunk down to the foot of the bed, slithered over to her master. She climbed up his body until she was draped across his shoulders.

Harry had to take another deep breath to keep his voice and his breathing calm. "I would be very happy to see that Remus is safe and healthy." When Voldemort narrowed his eyes slightly, Harry continued. "It was so incredibly thoughtful of you to allow me to, er, keep a pet werewolf. Especially since he's someone who means a lot to me. Thank you again for such a wonderful gift. It makes me really happy to know he's ok."

Voldemort leaned closer. "You are happy?" The man's red eyes stared into Harry's green ones. He would know if Harry lied.

"I'm happy about my gift." He tried to tell the man what he wanted to hear without saying anything that was technically untrue. "I'm happy that you kept Remus alive and unhurt."

Voldemort stared for a moment longer. Perhaps he was waiting to see if Harry would say anything else, or perhaps he was still trying to catch some possible lie. Fortunately, even with Voldemort's powerful legillimency skills, he only seemed interested in glancing at Harry's surface thoughts. He hadn't yet scoured Harry's mind to view his memories. Which was good, because Harry knew he wouldn't be able to do anything to stop it. He would have to make sure Voldemort never felt the need to search through his memories.

Finally, Voldemort seemed satisfied enough that he stood up from the bed, with Nagini still wrapped on his shoulders. "Very well. We have much to do today, my precious Harry. Get dressed and we will begin."

Harry also climbed out of bed, grabbed his glasses from the nightstand, and glanced over at the wardrobe. "You want me to get changed? Into a new outfit? Right now?" He edged closer to where the clothes were kept. Voldemort showed no signs of leaving. He watched Harry expectantly.

"Of course. The sooner you get yourself ready, the sooner you can see your pet werewolf."

"Er, ok." Harry grabbed the first set of clothes he saw in the wardrobe, hardly caring what the items looked like or if they went well together. He glanced around at the spacious room, looking for something that was large enough to change behind, until his eyes landed on the bathroom door. "I'm just going to pop into the loo," he announced. "And I'll get dressed too, while I'm in there. Shouldn't be long."

"Nagini," Voldemort hissed, supposedly in Parseltongue. "Follow him and make sure he doesn't dawdle."

Harry chose not to object. He didn't really want Voldemort's pet snake watching him change, but it was a hell of a lot better than the man himself. He didn't dawdle.

After an hour of wand movement critiques, and one very poor cup of tea with no cream or sugar, Remus was being marched up to the manor that overlooked the forest. His hands were tied behind his back, and Greyback had a firm grip on both shoulders, but neither of those things mattered. Remus would have never tried to escape when he was being led straight to Harry.

Apparently, Voldemort had some plan for Harry that required Remus's presence, and Greyback had been instructed to bring him to the manor by mid-morning. As they got closer to the imposing building, Remus could make out a very unwelcome sight.

The full figure of Bellatrix Lestrange was marching up and down the front drive. She was laying out a number of stones in the front pathway. Her husband, Rodolphus, was standing to the side, inspecting his nails, and looking like he'd much rather be inside by the fire.

"I'm telling you, Bella," he grumbled without looking up. "It was just regular wind. If it had been a spell, it would have tripped the wards."

"That's why I'm checking the wards!" she shouted back. "I just want to make sure they'll detect a spell of that strength."

Remus didn't know what they were talking about, but he hoped the wards were malfunctioning. It would mean an easier escape for Harry.

"What are you wizards barking about?" Greyback grumbled as they passed by.

"None of your business, wolf," snapped Rodolphus.

"There was a terrible magical wind yesterday!" Bellatrix Lestrange shouted, unable to help herself. "Did you mutts feel it?"

Greyback paused. He eyed Remus for a moment, before turning his attention to the two Death Eaters. "Magical wind? What time?"

"Early afternoon. It tore through the entire grounds. No one believes me, but it was magic!"

Greyback gave his captive a shrewd look, and it took Remus a moment to realize why. Early afternoon? That had been about the time he'd woken up in Greyback's encampment. When he'd lost his temper and unleashed his Elemental Magic in his desperation. But surely the wind had only spread through their small clearing. There was no way Remus would have been able to unleash wind on the entire small valley. Could he?

"I felt something," Greyback admitted. "Like your mate said, it were just regular wind." But his claws dug just a bit deeper into Remus's flesh.

Greyback didn't say any more on the subject. He continued marching Remus up the front path. By the time they approached the front entrance, however, they were stopped again.

“Where do you think you’re going?” Bellatrix called at their back. In a flash, she ran forward and placed herself between them and the front door. “No animals in the house.”

“The Dark Lord wanted to see Lupin here,” Greyback insisted. “I was told to bring ‘im, so that’s what I’m doing.”

Bellatrix scowled at Greyback’s tone, but then her eyes turned to Remus and they lit up in horrific delight. “Ooh, lookie here! I know you!” She bounced forward, so her heaving bosom was practically bumping into him. “You’re not just any little flea-ridden mutt are you? You’re Dumbledore’s little lapdog, aren’t you?” It took everything in Remus not to growl at the woman who had killed his best mate.

“Look at him, dressed up like a wizard!” Rodolphus laughed from somewhere behind them. Remus was still wearing the filthy remains of Harry’s formal robes. “Apparently, that’s what happens when you dress up a dog like a human!”

“You’re off to see the Dark Lord, huh?” asked Bellatrix, leaning forward and licking her lips. “I wonder if he’ll let me play with you when he’s done.”

Suddenly, Greyback shoved Remus out of the way and strutted forward with his chest puffed up, glaring down at Bellatrix’s much shorter form. “He’s mine,” the alpha growled. “He’s a wolf. I’m the one that bit ‘im, so the Dark Lord gave ‘im to me. You wanta touch ‘im, you go through me, bitch.”

Remus never thought he’d see the day where Fenrir Greyback defended him to anyone, least of all a Death Eater. Normally, he would have had no problem watching his two least favorite people tear each other apart. However, with Bellatrix’s wand at the ready, and her husband flanking them from behind, now seemed like a terrible time to start a fight. Not to mention, his hands were still tied behind his back, and Harry was waiting somewhere inside that house.

“You filthy animal! You dare...”

Remus had to speak up before this got out of hand. “My dear madam,” his voice was perfectly calm and polite. That, more than anything else, seemed to get her attention. She gaped at him, probably surprised that a werewolf was even capable of speaking in such a way. “Your master, the Dark Lord, gave very specific orders. He wished for me to be brought forthwith into that building. At this present moment, you are impeding those orders. Is it your desire to displease the Dark Lord?”

Her mouth snapped shut.

Greyback chuckled. “You heard ‘im. Are you tryin’ to piss off your boss?”

Bellatrix offered Greyback one final scathing look, before she stepped out of their way. Her wand was still in hand, but it wasn’t pointed directly at either of them. “What an adorable little trick,” she shouted after Remus, as the two of them stepped into the house. “Who knew that an animal could be taught to dress and talk like a real human?”

“Yeah,” Greyback muttered, so that only Remus could hear. “I know I’m curious what other tricks you can do, Lupin.”

Remus ignored him, as well as Bellatrix’s distant cackle. He was on his way to see Harry. He needed to make sure Harry was ok, and nothing else mattered.

The moment Harry saw Remus Lupin stumble through the door, he tried to leap forward. “Remus!”

“Harry!” the man called back.

Unfortunately, Harry was held back by two firm hands gripping his shoulders. Remus seemed to have the same problem. A nasty-looking man with matted grey hair shoved Moony into the study without relaxing his grip in the slightest.

They were in the same study Harry had woken up in the day before. There was the same obnoxiously large desk, the same crowded bookshelves, the same ostentatious fireplace. At least this time Harry was standing on his own two feet, instead of tied up and sprawled out on the lounge seat.

“Sweet Merlin, Harry, I’m so glad to see you!” Remus was still wearing the robes Harry had lent him, now filthy and frayed. The man himself didn’t seem to have fared much better than the robes, but at least he was alive. Remus was still alive. “Are you alright, Harry? You look...” Remus paused, and a small frown appeared. “Actually, you look really good.”

“I...what?” Harry looked down at himself. He’d thrown on the first items he could find in the wardrobe, which happened to be a set of dark green robes. At the moment, the robes were open to reveal a pair of black trousers and a silvery green button down. The clothes fit shockingly well, almost as if they had been made just for him. They did look nice, in a fancy pureblood sort of way. Hell, they were the kind of clothes even Draco Malfoy would be caught dead in.

Aside from the posh outfit, Harry knew his hair was slightly tamer after the fancy shampooing the night before. In fact, he probably looked quite well-rested after a day of lounging about and napping and taking bubble baths. If it weren’t for the fact that his hands were tied together in front of him (so as not to get any ideas, Voldemort had said) and he had a nightmarish dark lord hovering behind him, he probably would have looked much better than usual.

Remus was a different matter.

“Well, you look bloody awful!” Harry cried in outrage. “What happened to you? Why do you have blood on your face?” He turned to address Voldemort without taking his eyes off Remus. “You said he wasn’t hurt!”

The grip on Harry’s shoulders tightened even more, and Voldemort pulled him back until Harry could feel the man’s chest at his back. Thank Merlin he was being held through the

robes and there was no skin to skin contact, but Harry's scar still prickled.

"I said he was a gift," a hissing voice whispered in Harry's ear. It sounded like it might be Parseltongue. "I made no promises." When Voldemort turned to address the others, his voice sounded even more sinister. "Greyback, were my orders unclear? I wanted the man unhurt."

"I never hurt 'im, your Lordship. We was only playing around." He gave Remus a quick shake. "Tell them you're fine."

"I...er..."

"Is that why his cheeks are stained with blood?" Voldemort words were like quiet thunder.

"Oh that!" The man removed a hand from one shoulder to tear off a piece of Remus's soggy robes. The poor ex-professor sputtered and squirmed as Greyback rubbed the scrap of fabric all over his face. "See, it's comin' right off now. It were just some rabbit blood is all." He held up both of his own hands for inspection. They were both stained reddish brown with aged blood. "Gets everywhere that stuff!"

"Remus, is that true?" Harry hoped it was. Rabbit blood was better than almost any other option he'd been imagining.

"Yes Harry, I'm fine. Please don't worry about me. You're the one I'm –" Remus's words suddenly cut out when a bone-white wand slashed through the air near Harry's ear.

"Your little wolf is in fine health, as I said he would be." Voldemort's serpentine voice came out as a hiss in his ear yet again. "And now, my precious soul, you will call forth your other pet to me."

Harry blinked in surprise. "What? Hedwig?" He finally turned his eyes away from Remus to gape at the black-clad figure behind him. "What do you want with Hedwig?"

"What is a Hedwig?" Voldemort seemed just as confused as Harry.

"She's my pet. My owl. I don't even know how I'd..."

"No, not your owl!" The man's annoyance was increasing steadily, and Harry's head was beginning to pound. "You have a house elf. Call it here now."

"You mean Dobby? Why?" Harry was terrified and confused and his head was throbbing more and more. "He doesn't even really belong to me. What's he done now?"

"It does belong to you!" Voldemort raised his wand again, this time pointing it right at Remus. "Your little gift was for being so well behaved, Harry. If you do not behave, you don't get to keep your gift." Harry's breathing stopped. "Now, Black left you that house elf in his will. It belongs to you. Call it here."

Suddenly, Harry understood. He had completely forgotten that he did own a house elf.

"Kreacher!" he shouted, hoping that his command would work all the way out here, wherever they were.

It did. With an ear-splitting crack, the little elf appeared in the center of the study, directly between where Harry and Voldemort stood by the desk and where Remus and Greyback stood by the entrance.

“Master called?” Kreacher turned to give Harry the same annoyed glare as usual, until the poor little thing saw what was lurking behind Harry. With a gasp of terror, he threw himself onto the floor in a bow so low that his nose smashed against the hardwood.

“You! Elf! What is around your neck?” Voldemort cried at the poor, trembling creature. But the wrinkled old elf kept his body as low as possible, shaking visibly. “Look up at me, you pathetic little worm!”

“Er, Kreacher,” Harry knew Voldemort was liable to start throwing around curses if he didn’t get his way. “It’s ok. As your master, I order you to stand up straight.” Harry’s voice was shaking almost as much as Kreacher. But an order was still an order; the house elf stood up.

Suddenly, Harry could see what Voldemort had been referring to. Kreacher was still wearing the green and gold locket that Harry had pulled from Mundungus’s suitcase.

“Accio Locket!” Voldemort cried. When that didn’t work, Harry felt his scar erupt with fury. He sank to his knees with a cry. Then, just as suddenly, the pain was gone. “Harry!” Voldemort was whispering into his ear again, grabbing him around the waist, and urging him to stand back up. This time, Harry was sure the voice was Parseltongue. “It’s ok, my little soul. I am calm. I won’t hurt you.”

Harry blinked as his senses returned to him. He could see Remus with his head cocked to the side, looking confused and a little disturbed. Greyback had his eyebrows raised and a little smirk on his lips, as if the man-eating werewolf was the only person in the room that actually knew what the hell was going on.

Kreacher hadn’t moved at all during the interaction, except to continue shaking like a Whomping Willow leaf.

“Give him the bloody locket, Kreacher,” Harry spat out, as soon as he had a voice to speak. Remus was shaking his head ‘no,’ but Harry ignored him. If Voldemort had threatened Harry himself, he would have been only too happy to spit in the man’s red eyes. But when it was another person’s life of the line, that changed everything.

With one last despondent cry, as if all hope had been lost, Kreacher pulled the locket from around his neck and levitated it to the Dark Lord who snatched it with victorious triumph. Voldemort held the locket aloft, basking in his own supremacy, while the tiny, shaking house elf cried in defeat. It was difficult to watch.

“It’s ok, Kreacher,” Harry tried to comfort the old elf, feeling entirely responsible for the little guy’s tears. He wasn’t even sure why Kreacher was so grief-stricken. “Please don’t cry. It’s ok. You did really well. You kept the locket safe for a long time.”

“Kreacher was supposed to be destroying locket!” the elf cried. “Not keep it safe! Not give to Dark Lord. Destroy!”

“Who ordered you to do that?” asked Harry.

“Yes, who indeed?” When Voldemort spoke again, it was with a deadly calm that promised pain. “Tell me elf, how did you come to be in possession of such an exquisite artifact to begin with?”

“Master Harry found locket on nasty little thief.” The elf’s voice was so quiet it was hard to hear him over the crackling of the fire. “Master Harry gave locket to Kreacher.”

“CRUCIO!”

Kreacher fell the short distance to the floor with a gut-wrenching cry. Harry didn’t care that his hands were tied in front of him, or that he didn’t have a wand. He darted forward to try and knock the wand from Voldemort’s hand. He had to help Kreacher, the consequences be damned. Just as he was a moment away from snatching the phoenix-feather wand, the little piece of white yew turned to blast a powerful shield right in Harry’s face.

“Ah!” he cried as he was knocked back, right off his feet and onto his rear. At least Kreacher’s screams had stopped.

Voldemort glared down at Harry with his wand raised in warning. The deadly piece of wood wasn’t turned toward Harry; it was pointed at Remus. “You stay there,” he whispered. “Until you can learn to control your little outbursts.”

Harry glared right back, but he didn’t say anything. He turned to glance at Remus, who gave a single nod, as if agreeing that Harry should stay put. Harry kept his arse planted on the floor.

“Kreacher, just tell him whatever the hell he wants to know,” he grumbled. “Maybe we can all get through this bollocks day in one piece.”

So Kreacher talked. And talked. And talked.

It was quite a story. If it hadn’t been so unbelievable, Harry might have thought the elf had made it up. It started with Regulus Black proud to do a favor for the Dark Lord. Then there was a horrifying cave, which Kreacher had described in nightmarish detail. Voldemort asked several questions, especially when Kreacher explained how he got away from the fiendish undead creatures in the cave.

“How did you escape?”

“Master Regulus summoned for Kreacher.”

“Yes, but *how* were you able to obey that summons?”

“Master Regulus summoned for Kreacher.”

“There were wards! How did you get through the wards?”

“Master Regulus summoned for Kreacher.”

Harry's head started to pound after a few more back and forths. He needed to intercede before someone else got Crucio'd, but he had no idea what to say. Fortunately, Voldemort got distracted when Greyback started chuckling.

"What part of this is so funny to you?"

"Sorry, your Lordship," Greyback gave a brief nod, which conveyed the minutest amount of respect. "But I got to wonder if those powerful wards of yours were designed to prevent house elf magic, or any other creature magic, for that matter. 'Cause most of the wizards I know, they only ever worry about other wizard magic."

Voldemort glared back for a moment, before his eyes widened in horror. The man had made a mistake. He hadn't accounted for something vital, and he just realized it. Harry shot up to his feet when he felt his scar erupt in vindictive fury. He knew what was going to happen before Voldemort even lifted his wand. This time, he dove in front of Voldemort's spell just as he aimed it at Kreacher.

"CRUCIO!"

It was Harry who screamed and fell to the floor. The spell lifted almost immediately, but the agony had still been mind-numbing. Harry didn't have time to dwell on it, though. He knew he had to act fast. Dizzy with pain, muscles screaming, limbs shaking, Harry scrambled back to his feet. He lifted his chin to Voldemort who stared back, red eyes boring into green.

Voldemort's wand was trained on Remus again. "Get away from that elf," he whispered.

His eyes were wide, his stance defensive, and Harry couldn't believe the emotion trickling through the link. Fear. Voldemort was afraid.

What did he have to be scared of? He was the most powerful dark wizard in Britain, and Harry couldn't do anything to defend himself. All Harry could do was stand in front of the poor elf and try to block the man's curses. Besides, Kreacher couldn't do anything either... unless Harry ordered him to.

Suddenly, Harry realized why Voldemort was worried. The wards on the manor were probably the same as the ones on the cave. Harry could reach back and grab Kreacher's hand, and the elf could apparate them both away on Harry's order. Harry could escape. He could leave right now.

He stared at Voldemort's wand, still trained on Remus. Harry could escape, and Remus would be dead before the crack of apparition finished ringing in their ears.

"I said, step away now," the man warned. His wand held the promise of death, but it didn't move. Voldemort seemed worried that if he threw any curses, it would only spur Harry's desperation.

Harry didn't move. He kept his aching body between Kreacher and the waiting threat of that bone-white wand. If Harry stepped backward, toward the elf, Voldemort might panic and kill Remus. If he stepped away from the elf, giving Voldemort a clear shot, the man would

immediately kill the creature to eliminate the threat. Harry took a deep breath. Now was not the time to act rashly, or do something brave and stupid, or say something he'd surely regret. Now was the time to remember those ridiculous lessons Augusta had been pounding in his head.

Be courteous, be respectful, but don't let them walk all over you.

Harry took the slightest step forward, toward Voldemort. He was careful to keep his body between the man and the elf.

"I'm here," he said. "I'm not going anywhere." Harry kept his voice as calm and steady as he could with the pain lancing through his scar. "But you need to listen to me."

The man was watching Harry like he was the only thing that existed in the world. He was definitely listening.

"You gave me the werewolf." Harry gestured toward Remus. "He is my possession now. My gift." He nodded his head toward the terrified house elf behind him, who was muttering about '*Master Harry taking Crucio for worthless Kreacher.*' "The house elf is also mine. He belongs to me."

Harry took another cautious step forward, his body still between the Dark Lord and the house elf. Voldemort gazed at him intently. The man's wand was still at the ready, but it no longer seemed seconds away from a deadly curse.

"I am so happy and so grateful that you allowed me to keep my possessions," Harry continued, taking another step away from the elf. "I know it was an act of mercy on your part." With another step, Harry was close enough that Voldemort would be able to reach out and grab him. Yet the man waited, unsure what Harry was about to do.

Finally, Harry lifted his chin, and tried to hold himself up like the pureblood heir that he technically was. "You told me that you took good care your belongings. Well, so do I. And I cannot stand idly by while you hurt them."

The two of them stood in silence for a long time. Harry had no idea what Remus or Kreacher thought of his words, because he only had eyes for Voldemort. No one else made a sound.

Finally, time unfroze, and Voldemort lowered his wand. A coy smile was tugging at his lips. "My little Harry," he whispered in that hissing tone which Harry had come to understand signaled Parseltongue. "You are so like myself. How could I have ever doubted that you were made to be mine?" He waved his free hand at the two werewolves. "Greyback, take Lupin away. He is to remain unharmed."

"Yeah, we'll give you two some alone time." Greyback kept looking between Harry and Voldemort with a strange little smirk tugging at his lips. "But first I wanna know what your little pet meant." Harry ruffled at being referred to as Voldemort's pet, but Greyback continued immediately. "Lupin's a wolf, so he belongs to me, right? Obviously, you want the boy behaving an' all that." He winked at Voldemort, like he was in on some sort of inside joke. "I mean, I get what's goin' on here."

Did he? Harry didn't even know what was going on, but he'd love to find out.

"Your simple lupine mind cannot even begin to comprehend what is happening before you!" Voldemort cried.

"Yeah, sure, whatever you say. I bet it feels really profound and all that," Greyback shrugged. Harry looked over at Remus to see if his former professor could offer some clue as to what Greyback was alluding to. Remus looked just as confused as Harry. "But if I'm watching Lupin, I wanna make sure he's my responsibility. It don't make sense for some prisoners to belong to other prisoners."

"Harry is not a prisoner, he is my guest." Harry's could see Remus's jaw drop at Voldemort's words, but Greyback didn't look particularly surprised.

"Whatever you want to call him," he said with another shrug.

"I told Harry he could keep the werewolf if he behaved." Voldemort took a step forward, until he was practically hovering over Harry. "However, I have no use for a werewolf, except for the work that your pack is doing for me. So, feel free to incorporate him into your pack, just so long as he is alive and safe."

"Oh, I ain't gonna hurt 'im," Greyback assured. "In fact, he's startin' to grow on me. I think all of us are gonna be good friends." With those foreboding words, Greyback tugged Remus back out the door while the man desperately tried the mouth out words that Harry couldn't understand.

Harry watched the door close behind them. "What was Greyback talking about?"

"I cannot begin to imagine." The voice behind him was very close. "Greyback is a werewolf and they hardly understand human nature, let alone something as exceptional as a connection like ours."

Aside from Kreacher, who was crying quietly on the ground, it was just Harry and Voldemort left in the room. As soon as that thought crossed his mind, the man's arms were around him, pulling Harry back into his grasp. It was disquieting how much Harry had gotten used to Voldemort's long fingers digging into the fine robes.

"If you want your little house elf to live, you are going to give him this order in these exact words..."

The man was extremely thorough. Harry had to order Kreacher to return to the Hogwarts kitchens where he had come from. The elf couldn't contact the Order or alert anyone that he'd been gone. He couldn't indicate that he'd seen Harry or even that he knew where Harry was. He couldn't contact Harry, or return to Voldemort's hideout, even if Harry were to call him. He was simply to go back to his job as if nothing had happened, and never tell a soul about the locket.

To be doubly sure, Voldemort warned both Harry and Kreacher that he was going to update the wards around the manor to include house elves. Therefore, no elves would be able to

apparate in or out, no matter how many times Harry called.

Finally, when he was satisfied that there was absolutely no loophole that could be exploited, Voldemort released his grip on Harry and had him send the trembling little house elf away. With Kreacher gone and Remus off with the other werewolves, Harry was once again alone with the strangely possessive dark lord.

Even though it was still morning, he already felt exhausted. The Crucio had taken a lot out of him, as well as bartering for Remus's and Kreacher's lives. His hands were still tied together, and his knees were weak, so he went to sit down on the lounge seat in the corner. The same one he'd been quite eager to get away from the day before.

Voldemort wasn't paying him much attention. Now that things had calmed down, the dark wizard had pulled out the locket once more to admire it. He seemed rivetted by the little golden trinket, petting the green letter S with a thin, pale finger. Suddenly, Harry realized that he had seen that locket before, and not just at Grimmauld Place. He had seen it in Dumbledore's pensieve, in the memory of the Gaunts. That was Voldemort's mother's necklace. No wonder the man was pissed that it had been stolen.

Harry tried to keep his expression clear. So far, Voldemort didn't know that Harry had been learning about his past in Dumbledore's private lessons. The dark lord had no idea that Harry had seen the little Gaunt shack or Wool's Orphanage. It was unlikely the man would be happy to find out.

"Why's the locket so important to you, anyway?" Harry asked, as if he didn't already know.

"This is the final piece. Everything has fallen into place." Voldemort cooed at the locket.

"Final piece of what?"

"Finally," the man was hardly paying attention to anything but the locket. "Finally, all the remaining pieces, together at last. Something from Slytherin, something from Ravenclaw, something from Hufflepuff..." He turned to look at Harry, sitting quite uncomfortably on the settee. "Something from Gryffindor."

"How did you know I was a Gryffindor!?" He had only told Ron and Hermione.

"Everyone knows you were sorted into Gryffindor, Harry," the man scoffed. "It is hardly a secret."

"Oh right." So, that's what he meant. "Yeah, I guess that's true."

"A complete set." The man's voice trailed off again, mumbling about his things all returning to him. None of it made much sense to Harry. What was a complete set? Pieces of what? While Harry tried to put together this strange new puzzle, Voldemort had turned his attention back on him. The predator was eyeing Harry hungrily. "I wonder..."

Before Harry knew what was happening, the serpentine figure stepped forward and laid the locket over Harry's head, around his neck. The young man waited another second to see if

anything else would happen, but it seemed that Voldemort simply wanted to put the locket on Harry.

“Er...thanks?” Why would Voldemort want the locket on him? Especially when he worked so hard to get it for himself?

However, the man looked positively rapturous as he gazed down at Harry wearing his locket. His eyes were shining with pride, and his smile was wide and gleeful and surprisingly unthreatening. He looked completely in awe. Harry glanced down at the locket to see if it was doing anything impressive. It matched his green outfit pretty well, but it wasn't doing anything to cause such a profound reaction.

When Harry looked back up, Voldemort had already turned away. The man quickly strode to his desk, where he made a complicated wand movement toward one of the drawers. When the drawer clicked open, Voldemort reached inside to pull out a glittering silver and blue tiara. It looked stunning and expensive as anything, even if it was a bit dainty and girly.

Without a word, Voldemort strode forward reverentially, holding the headpiece with tremendous care.

“That's a pretty tiara.” Harry tried to break the tension. The whole situation was beginning to feel very weird. “Where'd you get that?”

Voldemort didn't answer his question. He simply walked up to Harry and delicately placed the lightweight diadem on his head.

“Oh, you're just going to put that on me, too.” Harry was glad he had practiced keeping his head level. The tiara didn't look very sturdy, and he was pretty sure Voldemort would be royally cheesed if the thing slipped off Harry's head and shattered.

Again, Voldemort took a moment to admire the sight of Harry wearing his trinkets, before he darted back to his desk to grab something else. This time he returned with a metallic goblet, which he pressed into Harry's unresisting hands. Harry's wrists were still bound together, so there wasn't much he could do about it. Not that he would have complained either way. As nonsensical as Voldemort's behavior was, it was a lot better than the man threatening Harry's loved ones.

“Finally,” the man whispered. He looked down at Harry and the knick-knacks as if they were all his dreams come true. “All of you together at last.”

“All of who?” Harry was so confused.

“Perhaps I should wake Nagini.” Voldemort ignored Harry and continued muttering to himself. “She always hates being awoken from her naps, but this would be worth it. All of you together. I cannot imagine a more beautiful sight.”

“Did you just call me beautiful? Or are you talking about your snake?”

Voldemort paced, his bare feet moving soundlessly along the wooden floor, his black robes billowing behind him. "I never thought it would feel this good to have all of them together with me. My mind is finally as alert as it should be! My magic..." he waved the hand that wasn't holding his wand. Dozens of books began dancing from their shelves, swirling in the air. "...finally back within my control."

Harry could hardly believe that the man could do such impressive magic wandlessly.

Voldemort hardly seemed to pay any attention to the books he sent this way and that, he was so lost in his own thoughts. "This is a great victory for us, Harry."

"Us?"

"We shall be unstoppable. Our enemies shall tremble before us."

"Why do you keep saying 'us'?"

"We must have a toast to celebrate!" Voldemort announced. He strode excitedly to a corner cabinet. The bottle he pulled from inside looked absolutely ancient and covered in dust. Voldemort vanished the dust without using his wand again. Harry began to suspect that the man was showing off. His suspicions were all but confirmed when Voldemort snapped his fingers and all the swirling books returned to the selves, to what Harry assumed were their original places.

"Yeah ok," Harry admitted. "That was a little impressive." The smirk on Voldemort's face was triumphant. Apparently, he only listened to Harry when it was praise.

Voldemort held up the antique bottle for Harry's inspection. "1656 Elven-made mead." Harry would have to take his word for it since there wasn't any label. "Only the best for such an auspicious occasion."

"Er, yeah. This is a really...special moment?"

"Indeed Harry." A goblet appeared in the man's hand, which he filled with a small amount of pale brown liquid. After he took a sip, his smile grew even wider. "Perfectly aged." He filled the goblet that was already in Harry's hands before he refilled his own. "A toast, my Harry!" He held his glass aloft.

Harry considered not lifting his own glass, but Voldemort could always call Remus back. Besides, of all the things Harry had put up with since his arrival, this seemed like a strange place to draw the line. He lifted his goblet, only to notice a little animal had been etched into the side. Was that a badger?

"To my glorious victory!" Voldemort cried. "To the destruction of our enemies! To the supremacy of wizards above all lesser beings! And to the supremacy of us above all others!" With that dreary note, the man lifted the goblet to his lips and took a sip.

Harry gave his own glass a tentative sniff. It smelled a bit like honey. He was confident at this point that Voldemort wouldn't poison him, but there was still a warning voice in his head

which sounded suspiciously like Moody. It told him that he couldn't possibly drink anything given to him by Voldemort. On the other hand, Harry was really, really thirsty. When was the last time he drank anything? He'd been rather distracted since he arrived at Voldemort's lair, but now that he thought about it, he hadn't had anything to eat or drink since yesterday morning.

"What is the matter, Harry?" Voldemort looked annoyed again. Probably because Harry was just staring at his fancy three-hundred-and-something year old wine.

He was so thirsty, but this wine was really sketchy. What if it was another potion? "You know what," said Harry. "I just remembered I'm only 16, so technically I'm not supposed to have mead yet."

Voldemort blinked at him a couple times before he burst into laughter. "Very funny, Harry. Yes, indeed, you are underage, and therefore mead is not strictly legal." Voldemort was hissing with laughter. Harry had to admit, it had been a silly protest. Nothing else about this entire situation was remotely legal. "Drink, my Harry. It will be our little secret."

Harry gaped at those words. He had heard them so recently. The image of Dumbledore pouring a small amount of brandy into his cocoa flashed through his mind. Harry didn't want Voldemort seeing that particular memory dancing on the surface of his thoughts, so he quickly bent down to take a swig of perfectly aged mead. At least the honeyed taste was better than firewhiskey.

As soon as the syrupy liquid reached his dry throat, he was desperate for more. He hadn't realized how much he needed something to drink. He emptied the rest of the goblet and then looked up at Voldemort. "It's good. Can I have some more?"

The dark wizard did not look impressed. "That mead costs more than a standard vault at Gringotts. It is meant to be sipped, not gulped down like a man dying of thirst."

"But I am dying of thirst!" Harry complained. As if on queue, his stomach rumbled its agreement. "And I'm hungry."

Voldemort's annoyance immediately soured into concern. "Why are you so thirsty?"

"Well, I haven't had anything to eat or drink for about a day and a half."

An explosion of fury followed those words.

Less than an hour later, Harry was seated in an extravagantly decorated dining room. The baroque table had golden legs and a white marble top. The ivory walls were hand-painted with little cream and gold roses that bloomed before shrinking back into buds, over and over again. A mural-sized painting featured scantily clad nymphs dancing through rose bushes among majestic unicorns. A couple of the nymphs giggled and waved at Harry. The main feature of the room, however, was a large stuffed unicorn head, which hung above the fireplace. Harry was almost positive that it was real, and it was hardly comforting.

“Where are we?” he asked. He hadn’t seen many rooms in this building, but none of the decorations looked like things Voldemort would have picked out for himself. The serpentine man, in his intimidating black robes, looked extraordinarily out of place among the creams and soft golds. “This can’t be your house.”

“It is not.” Voldemort was sitting at the head of the table, with Harry directly at his right. Harry thought it was a little weird that the dark wizard wanted him to sit right beside him, when there were over a dozen empty seats, but the man had insisted. “This manor belongs to one of my followers, that is all you need to know. We are in a private wing, which is mine to use. There is the study, a few bedrooms, some spare rooms for research and storage, and of course, this private dining room, much smaller than the main formal banquet hall.”

“This is the *smaller* dining room!?” Harry cried. “Not exactly homey is it?”

“It is meant to convey wealth,” Voldemort spoke tersely.

Harry eyed him skeptically. He knew that young Tom Riddle had been raised a penniless orphan, so the young man would have been impressed the first few times he’d come across big displays of wealth. But Tom Riddle had grown up to be a man who had done everything he could to secure magical power, political prowess, and intellectual superiority. Voldemort probably had money at this point, but it had never been something he’d actively pursued or flaunted. Voldemort probably saw it as merely a means to an end.

“Admit it,” Harry gestured toward the hideous stuffed unicorn head. “You find all these frills and pompous decorations just as ridiculous as I do.”

Voldemort turned a skeptical eye on the prancing half-naked nymphs. They shuddered when he gave them his attention, and skittered to the furthest corner of the painting. “I will admit, I find certain displays unnecessary. When someone is trying that hard to impress you, it can only be because they are trying to hide their own weaknesses.”

Harry didn’t disagree. Whatever house they were in obviously belonged to some rich, stuffy pureblood family. Maybe they were in the LeStrange family home? Or the Carrows? Harry didn’t doubt that most of those ancient, snooty families would be overcompensating for something.

When his stomach grumbled again, he reached forward to take a sip of tea. He didn’t want Voldemort getting into another tizzy.

When Harry had first announced that he hadn’t eaten in over a day, the man had been apoplectic. First, he had called several house elves, trying to figure out who was at fault. It quickly became clear (to Harry at least) that the fault lay with Voldemort, who had never instructed anyone to feed him. When the man had been on the verge of punishing every house elf in the manor, claiming they ought to have reminded him that the boy needed food, Harry interceded.

He had insisted that he hadn’t been hungry yesterday because of the calming draught, and he wouldn’t have eaten even if he’d been given food. Voldemort had finally calmed down

enough to instruct the elves to make Harry breakfast. However, he had warned them that if Harry took a single bite of something he didn't like, they would all be punished severely.

That was probably why the food was taking so long. Of course, Harry didn't care if they served him tasteless gruel; he would still tell Voldemort it was delicious. But the poor elves didn't know that. At least he had breakfast tea to tide him over, which was perfectly steeped and had just the right amount of sugar.

It was a little awkward to hold the teacup with his hands still bound together at the wrists, but he was managing. He kept his head level, since Voldemort hadn't removed the tiara or the locket. The fancy badger goblet was next to his empty plate, now full of water. He also noticed that his place setting did not include a knife or fork, just a spoon. Apparently, Voldemort did not underestimate how much trouble Harry could cause with a simple fork.

When the food finally appeared on the enormous table, Harry could hardly believe his eyes. "Who's joining us?" he couldn't help but ask. There was enough food to feed two Weasley families.

"No one." Voldemort took a sip of his black coffee, but made no move to touch the food. "Help yourself, my resurrected body requires little food. This is for you alone."

Harry knew that it would be weird for Voldemort to invite other people to eat with them, but he still couldn't believe how much food the elves would make for one skinny teenager. There were several platters of flaky pastries that looked lighter than air. There were bowls of cream and jellies. Harry had no idea where the elves had found so many fresh berries in early January, but there were little mountains of them, along with glistening sliced fruit.

It definitely wasn't a traditional English breakfast. Everything was too light and delicate. Nothing looked fried or boiled. The heaviest thing on the table appeared to be some smoked meats and fragrant cheeses. Whoever the elves were used to cooking for, they clearly had a very dainty palette.

Harry shrugged and helped himself to the buttery pastries and fluffy eggs. It wasn't quite as good as the Hogwarts-style breakfast that he'd had at Dumbledore's house. And nowhere near as good as Molly's home-cooked meals. But there was no way he was going to say that. "Mmm, everything's delicious," he commented, as he tried to spoon some quiche onto his plate with his hands still tied together. It would be impossible to follow Augusta's table manners with these restraints, but it wasn't as if he cared about impressing Voldemort.

About fifteen minutes later, Harry was nibbling on some fresh melon slices, too full to touch anything else. Voldemort hadn't eaten a single bite; he'd simply sat there, sipping his black coffee and watching his guest eat an entire meal. As Harry had gone for seconds and thirds (it wasn't hard to eat a lot when everything was so light and airy), the man's expression had grown strangely satisfied. He looked as if he was the one responsible for filling Harry's belly, and not the abused house elves.

Harry was just sipping some more tea to help calm his overly full stomach, when the door banged open with a thud. “My Lord, I’m terribly sorry to disturb you,” Snape rushed inside with his black robes swirling behind him. “Bellatrix just saw this morning’s paper and now she’s...”

Once Snape stepped fully into the dining room, and he took in the setting, his voice trailed off. His dark eyes slid around the interior, first to the cream and gold walls, covered in roses and nymphs and unicorns. Then, his eyes swerved back to Voldemort, sitting at the head of the table, dressed all in black. Then, he took in the table itself, covered in dainty teacups and cream-filled delicacies and pretty confections. Then he looked back at the Dark Lord. Then his eyes slid inevitably to the young man sitting directly to Voldemort’s right. Harry, feeling a tad self-conscious, set his porcelain teacup back on its little saucer. Snape blinked at him, as if trying to determine if his eyes were deceiving him.

All of this took place in the span of a few seconds, but it felt like longer. Finally, Snape cleared his throat.

“I apologize, my Lord, I didn’t realize you were,” Snape searched for the right word, “Entertaining.”

“What do you mean Bellatrix has seen this morning’s paper?” Voldemort leaned forward with a glare. “What was in the Prophet today?”

“You haven’t seen, my Lord?” asked Snape.

“I have been busy...entertaining.” His lips formed a cruel smirk at the word. “Show me the paper.”

Snape stepped forward, pulling a newspaper from seemingly nowhere. Harry sat up a little straighter, hoping to get a better look. Snape gave Harry a nervous glance. “It concerns the boy,” he warned.

Suddenly Harry really wanted to know what the Prophet had to say. Hermione and the other SPEW members had been there when Harry had been kidnapped. He remembered walking to Selwyn’s Accounting Firm and talking to a couple of the man’s clients. He didn’t quite remember the exact order of events, but Harry was pretty sure the two men had been the ones who’d nabbed him. Surely Hermione and the Order would warn people what had happened to Harry. Dumbledore would believe them. He was probably searching for Harry right now. But would the Ministry believe Hermione’s story? Would they even care?

“Set it down, Severus,” Voldemort ordered.

Without any further protests, Snape set the newspaper on the table, between the lemon custard and the strawberry cream. Harry looked down at an enormous picture of himself that took up most of the front page, under the headline: “**Death Eaters Kidnap Harry Potter!**”

Well, there was no way the Ministry wasn’t looking for him with this on the front page. Half the Auror department was probably scouring the countryside right now. Would they find him? How well was he hidden?

“Bellatrix had seen this?” Voldemort seethed. “She knows he’s here?”

“She has ascertained that the boy is in your possession,” Snape confirmed. “She has convinced herself that if the boy were already dead, she would have been allowed to watch. She has already checked the dungeons and is now on her way to the werewolf camp to determine if he is being kept with Lupin. I can only imagine what will happen if she barges into their camp uninvited.”

“She’ll kill half my werewolves!” Voldemort stood up, already drawing his wand.

“I have no doubt that someone will be killed,” Snape conceded. “Likely several someones.”

“Remus is there!” Harry cried. He didn’t care about Voldemort’s werewolves or Bellatrix, but he couldn’t sit by while Remus was in danger.

Voldemort was already storming toward the exit. “I will intercede Bella, I can’t have her killing off werewolves while I still have a use for them.” Once he was at the threshold, he paused and turned to Snape. “Return Harry to his room. You won’t need to lock the door; the wards will automatically reset themselves once he is inside. He will be safe there.” With one final swish of the man’s black cloak, he was gone.

Harry waited a beat to make sure Voldemort wasn’t coming back, before turning to Snape with an enormous grin. He’d never been so happy to see the miserable git. “It worked!” he cried. “He’s gone!”

“What worked?” Snape returned Harry’s hopeful smile with his usual sneer.

“The distraction! You managed to get rid of him.” Harry waved toward the empty doorway. They were completely alone. He stood up, more than ready to be rid of this place. “So, what’s the plan then? Portkey? Floo Powder? Apparition? Do you know how we’re going to grab Remus?”

Snape didn’t say anything. His eyes were slowly travelling the length of Harry’s body, from top to bottom and then back up again. When the man finally spoke, his voice was strained. “What are you wearing?”

“What?” Harry looked down at the posh wizard robes. “This is what was available,” he explained. “Not exactly what I would have picked. Anyway, as I was saying…”

“Not the clothes,” Snape interrupted. “The thing on your head.” He paused, closed his eyes, and took a deep breath, preparing himself for something difficult. The words that followed sounded as if they were physically painful for him to say out loud. “Are you wearing a tiara?”

“Oh,” Harry had actually forgotten about that. “Er, apparently.”

Snape’s voice got quieter and more deliberate the longer this ridiculous conversation continued. “Why are you wearing a tiara?”

“I don’t know! Voldemort didn’t exactly explain.”

Snape's eye twitched at the name, but he seemed too distracted by the unbelievable situation to reprimand Harry for saying that word aloud. "Do you mean to tell me, that the Dark Lord put that tiara on your head?"

"Yes!" Harry shouted, all patience gone.

"*Why?*"

"I DON'T BLOODY KNOW!" Harry tried to calm down, but it was next to impossible. He was confused and frustrated, and no one would answer his questions or tell him what the hell was going on. There was a stupid tiara and a locket and a cup, and he had no idea what they were or why Voldemort had been so happy to give them to Harry. "He just put the damn thing on my head. He's not exactly known for sharing his private thoughts." Harry took a moment to breathe in and out a few times, trying in vain to soothe his tetchy emotions. "Now, are you going to help me escape or not?"

Snape quirked a brow. "Did you want to escape?"

"Obviously!" Harry gaped at him. "What does it look like?"

"It looks like you're having a tea party... with the Dark Lord... while wearing a tiara."

Harry opened his mouth. Then he shut it. It took him a moment for his brain to restart. He didn't particularly like what Snape was implying. "Well, I don't want to be having a stupid tea party. What do you know about it, anyway? Who are you working for? Are you working for Dumbledore or Voldemort?"

Snape didn't say anything, he just blinked at him with his usual contemptuous expression. "Come along," he said after a moment. "I'm supposed to take you to your room."

"Are you bloody kidding me!?"

Snape held the door open for him. "Are you going to walk, or do I need to levitate you?"

Suddenly, Harry got a spur of the moment idea. If Snape wasn't going to get him out, he would get himself out. He just needed Snape's wand. Harry kept his head down as he walked across the room toward the threshold. As soon as he was close enough, he lunged at the greasy man. He managed to get ahold of Snape's black cloak, and almost got his hand around the wand, when a powerful force shot him backward and through the air.

Before Harry knew what was happening, he was dangling by his foot, in the middle of the air, upside-down. "Put me down!" he cried. He couldn't believe Snape had used Levicorpus on him. The same spell Harry's father had used on Snape. The same spell that the Half-Blood Prince had invented. At least the professor wasn't threatening to remove his pants like James Potter had done.

"Look, I'm sorry," Harry relented. He didn't want to test Snape's patience any more than he already had. "I won't try that again. You can let me down now. I'll walk."

“You should have thought of that before you tried to tackle me.” The man didn’t seem to care about Harry’s predicament. He stepped out of the dining room. With the flick of his wand, Harry bobbed along behind him, still hanging upside down in the air.

“Dumbledore’s going to kill you when he finds out what you’ve done!” He knew Snape wasn’t afraid of Harry himself, but maybe he was afraid of the headmaster.

“I saw Professor Dumbledore only a few hours ago.” Snape strolled unconcerned through the wide hallway, past several priceless works of art. “If he was planning to kill me, he was doing a remarkable job of hiding the fact.”

“What do you mean you saw Dumbledore!? What did he say? What did you tell him?”

“Of course I saw him. Classes begin in a few days. I needed to submit my lesson plans for the next term. Although, you’ll be pleased to hear, the subject of your disappearance did come up.”

Harry tried to turn himself upright, as he floated along behind his professor, but it was impossible with his body hanging onto nothing. “Does he know where I am? Does he know that you refuse to help me?”

“He knows you are with the Dark Lord and still alive,” Snape confirmed. He stopped before an inconspicuous door. With another flick of his wand, a shimmering bubble appeared around the two of them. They were separated from the rest of the world with a glimmering, transparent wall of magic.

“And yes,” Snape continued. “He knows I’m not foolish enough to expose my position as a spy by trying to march you out the front door.” Snape floated Harry a little closer, until Harry’s upside-down face was level with Snape’s right-side up one. “The Dark Lord tweaked the wards just for you, Mr. Potter. You cannot be apparated, portkeyed, or floo’d out of this building. The only way you’re getting out, is if you manage to walk past every single Death Eater in the building and on the grounds, along with every locked door and detection spell. The headmaster is doing everything in his power to try and come up with an escape plan. In the meantime, you are not in immediate danger. I know this is extraordinarily difficult for you, Mr. Potter, but you are going to have to be patient and *not do anything stupid*.”

“I can’t just sit here doing nothing!” Harry cried back.

“Listen to me, Mr. Potter. Right now, your safety depends on you not infuriating the Dark Lord. Your well-being is in a very precarious position. Yours and Lupin’s. So, for once in your insufferable life, you are going to sit and wait for the responsible adults to deal with the situation. Do you understand me?”

Harry glared at Snape’s hook nose, which looked even more ridiculous from this angle. “If I find a way to get out, I’m going to take it.”

Snape glared right back. “Black died less than a year ago, because you had to rush into a dangerous situation, with no plan and no clue what you were doing. Will you really consign Lupin to the same fate?”

Harry gaped at him. He didn't give any answer either way, but Snape didn't seem to expect one. He knew he had made his point. Without another word, he collapsed the bubble, opened the bedroom door, ushered Harry inside, and then dropped him in a heap onto the floor.

"Ow!" he grumbled. When Harry went to rub his head, he noticed the tiara was still in place. Apparently it was a lot harder to knock off than he thought.

"Don't move Potter!"

Harry looked up at Snape's alarmed tone. The man had gone pale with fear. His wand was pointed at the center of the room. Harry's eyes darted in that direction. Nagini was coiled up by the fireplace, but she looked up in interest when the two of them entered the room.

"Make no sudden movements," Snape warned. "I shall call for the Dark Lord. He will be able to lure the creature away."

"He's not going to send her anywhere," Harry advised. He really didn't want Voldemort showing up again, not when he'd finally gotten rid of him. "She's supposed to keep an eye on me. It's alright though, she won't hurt me." He turned to Nagini, who was eyeing Snape suspiciously. "Hey Nagini, don't bite Snape, he's fine. Voldemort asked him to drop me off. Can you, I don't know, go over to the corner for a second? You're freaking him out."

"Nagini does not like humans interrupting her nap," she complained. "I will not attack the greasy human if our master would not wish it, though." She bowed her head for a moment, before slithering over to the far corner.

"He's not my...oh, never mind." He turned back to Snape, who was gaping at Nagini's retreating back. "See, she's not a problem. Well, she is a bit chatty, and she's overly fond of cuddling, but she's harmless."

Snape blinked at him. "I have personally witnessed that snake eat no less than three people. Whole." He turned to the door. "Anyway, sleep well tonight." With that, he was gone.

Draco Malfoy clutched his wand to his chest and marched forward through the thick snow. He was trying to follow his Aunt Bellatrix without getting close enough that she would spot him. It was hard, since his disillusionment charm wasn't the best, and he was trying to cover his tracks. Fortunately, she wasn't paying much attention. She danced along the path toward the forest as quickly as she could.

Draco had practically choked on his croissant when he'd seen the morning paper during breakfast. His mother, poised as always, had merely sighed and muttered, "How hard is it to find up-to-date photos of that boy? This is the same one they used during the Tri-Wizard Tournament."

Aunt Bellatrix had lost her mind. Or at least, what was left of it. First, she'd torn through the house and the dungeons, while Draco's mother and godfather tried to calm her down. When

Harry was nowhere to be found, she had announced that the boy must be with the werewolves, since that was where Lupin was being held.

Draco couldn't believe he hadn't thought of that. He had spent the entire previous night searching through every room of the house. He'd gone through every corner, except the private quarters. It had never occurred to him to check the werewolf camp, but it was certainly worth a shot. He knew Lupin was out there. Harry might be there, too.

Bellatrix squealed with delight as she skipped along past the tree line, into werewolf territory. Draco took a deep breath, before he recast the disillusionment, and followed her into the shadows. If Harry was in there, Draco had to find him first.

Chapter End Notes

I think that might be the funniest chapter I've written so far. I hope you all enjoyed it!

The Point of No Return

Chapter Notes

And we're back.

So close to the end of Part One. Don't worry, Part Two will pick up right where we left off.

For my fellow Americans, Happy Thanksgiving! For everyone else, enjoy a little pre-holiday entrée.

Remus Lupin was enjoying his second cup of tea that day. Well, perhaps 'enjoying' wasn't the right word.

"Are you sure there's no sugar?" he asked Howler. The young werewolf had been much politer about making tea for Remus after he had returned from the manor. Probably because Remus had shown him how to do a proper levitation charm.

"Nah, no sugar," Howler shrugged. His dark, lanky hair brushed against his jacket. "We got salt though. You want some salt?"

"No, I prefer my tea without salt, actually."

He still wasn't able to make tea for himself, since he was tied to a tree again. At least this time, Greyback had tied his hands together in front, and then tethered his bound wrists to the tree with a couple meters of lead. He could sit and stand and move around a bit. He could also drink tea for himself. It was just a little awkward with his hands tied together.

"Thank you anyway, Howler. This will do fine for now." He turned to address the rest of the assembled werewolves. They had gathered into the clearing to learn wizard magic. About two dozen pairs of shrewd eyes assessed him. "Now, where were we?"

"You were gonna show us how to disarm wizards!" shouted Grady, the other young pack member, barely in his twenties.

"Er, no, I don't think we're quite at that spell yet. It's a bit too advanced for our first day." It probably wasn't. Technically, *Expelliarmus* was one of the simplest offensive spells. Remus was more worried the werewolves might try to use it against the Order. "I think a better spell for now would be *Arresto Momentum*. It will slow you down if you're falling. Or you can use it on an object that's falling, so it doesn't break."

He set his tea aside and mimed the wand movement with a stick a couple times. Then he set them to practicing. All the werewolves in the camp were excited to learn some wizard magic;

all except one.

“We’re wolves, you know,” Greyback muttered from his corner. “We know how to fall without gettin’ hurt.”

“Well, they can use it to prevent something breakable from falling down,” Remus offered.

The students all seemed focused on their task, so he turned his attention to the alpha who was lounging in the corner of the clearing. Greyback had strung up some canvas between Remus’s tree and another one, making something like a hammock. He relaxed in it, picking at his teeth, while the other wolves waved their wands around. Remus grimaced just thinking about what the consummate predator might find caught in those sharp teeth.

“Learning wizard magic can be useful for anyone,” Remus insisted. “It isn’t going to make them any less wolf.”

“I know that!” Greyback snarled. “Why d’you think I’m lettin’ you teach your little lesson? The more wizard magic they know, the more effective my pack is gonna be. As long as they’re learnin’ useful stuff. Not this Arresto nonsense.”

“They need to learn the basics before I can teach them more effective spells.”

“If you say so,” Greyback snarled. “You’re the Hogwarts teacher. Just make sure you get to the effective stuff soon.”

By that point, the wolves had gotten the hang of the incantation and the wand movement, so Remus paired them off. One person would drop a rock, while the other partner tried to prevent it from hitting the ground using the spell.

“I did it! I caught it!” Grady yelled a few moments later, while his partner, Howler, yelled that he definitely didn’t.

“That’s a great start, Grady,” Remus called back. “But this time try using the spell, instead of just catching it with your hand.”

Greyback was watching the lesson shrewdly from his reclined position, still refusing to participate. “You’re in an awful cheerful mood,” he commented.

“Well, I always liked teaching, and I don’t get to do it often.”

Greyback narrowed his eyes at him. “Surprised you’re not more upset about your boy.”

“Harry? Well, obviously I’m not happy that Harry is also being held captive. But he seemed alright. He’s not hurt or anything.” Remus took a moment to check on his students. “No, no, I see what you’re doing,” he called out. “Yes, you over there! You can’t just throw your rock down into the ground. You’re supposed to drop it. Give your partner a chance to cast the spell.” He turned back to Greyback. “I didn’t quite understand why Voldemort would want Harry unhurt, but now I think I understand what that monster is trying to do.”

Greyback quirked a brow. “‘Bout time. Painfully obvious, that.”

“He’s trying to turn Harry Dark,” Remus concluded. “He knows if Harry Potter switches sides, it would be a tremendous blow against Dumbledore and the Ministry. Well, good luck I say, because Harry will never turn to Dark Magic.”

“Is that what you got from that little encounter?” Greyback laughed.

“Oh dear. No, no, no!” Remus called at the werewolves, when they inevitably started throwing the rocks at each other. “You’re supposed to be practicing the spell. Not one of you has performed it correctly yet!” He tried to remember how he got the younger years to pay attention in class. Then he remembered that battle-hardened werewolves probably required different incentive. “If you fellows are having trouble staying focused, how about this: Someone climb up that tree there and start dropping rocks on people’s heads. That way, if you don’t use the spell, a rock will fall on your head.”

They seemed quite enthusiastic about that game. The older, dark-skinned Wolfram immediately hauled himself up the tree with a sack of heavy stones on his back. “No one’s gonna be droppin’ rocks on my head!” he shouted down. Once the projectiles started falling from the tree, the werewolves seemed very eager to master the spell properly.

Greyback watched the spectacle with a curious eye. “They listen to you,” he noted, without much emotion either way.

“Only because you told them to.”

“Yeah, you ain’t got enough fight in you to be an alpha on your own.” Greyback leaned back into his hammock with a stretch. “Could be useful to have someone with some damn sense around here, though. Course, you’re innocent as a bleeding nun if you think the Dark Lord’s keepin’ that boy around just to turn ‘im Dark.”

“Well, what do you think he’s doing?” asked Remus.

“He’s – hold that thought.” Greyback sat up, sniffing at the air. “What’s that smell?” He leapt from the hammock with the grace of a predator, and lifted his nose as high as it would go. “Shut up you lot!” he barked at the rowdy pack members. They immediately stopped their antics. “You smell that? There’s wizards in the forest.”

Draco scrambled forward, through the dense trees. He barely kept his tracks covered, his wand hand couldn’t stop shaking in the bitter cold. He considered casting a warming charm, but he was worried that would melt the snow and give away his position.

His aunt Bellatrix was still dancing along ahead, trying to see if Harry Potter was behind each random tree. There was no way she would notice Draco following her. However, there was a pack of werewolves somewhere in this forest. They would find Bellatrix eventually, and werewolves would be far more observant than a half-crazed witch. Draco had to stay hidden.

When Bella twirled around in a circle, screaming “Come out, come out, wherever you are!” Draco immediately darted behind a tree. His disillusionment charm would help keep attention

away from him, but it wasn't good enough to prevent him from being seen if someone stared right at him.

"Well, well, well." The gruff voice was so low and rough, that it made his stomach churn. Fortunately, it was coming from the clearing several meters away. "Lookin' for a fight, are you?"

Draco didn't need to peak from behind his hiding spot to know it was Fenrir Greyback. He would know that harsh, husky voice anywhere. The man had already found Bella. Not that she made it difficult.

"I don't answer to filthy animals," she answered the filthy animal. "Now, tell me where the boy is!"

"You'll have to be more specific," Greyback's voice was surprisingly calm, waiting for her to bring the fight. "Got a lot of boys in my pack."

Draco focused on the woods around them, trying to listen if there were any other sounds among the trees. There were probably more werewolves out there, waiting for the inevitable fight to break out, but they were silent for now. Draco sank as low as he could to the ground, so that the shadows of the brushes and snow hid him even better than his disillusionment.

"This is your last chance!" Bella screamed. Draco closed his eyes.

"Ain't gonna happen, bitch. Now why don't you tell me who else you got with you, 'cause I know I smell more than one wizard in my territory."

Draco's eyes shot open. His smell. Greyback could smell him.

"What do you mean someone else is here?" Bella snapped back.

Just as all hell was about to break loose, a deadly crack shot from the other side of the tree. Draco heard his aunt gasp and Greyback mutter, "Bloody hell."

"What is going on here?" The hissing voice was even more familiar than Greyback's. Draco wished he could sink into the earth itself. It was the Dark Lord. The Dark Lord had just appeared.

"Bella!" The Dark Lord Voldemort was furious. He had been looking forward to spending the entire day with his horcruxes, and now he had to deal with this inconvenience. "What do you think you're doing?"

"My Lord!" his servant cried with ecstatic glee, as she threw herself at his feet. "My most glorious Lord, I saw what you've done! You have him, don't you? Is it true that Harry Potter is finally yours?"

Lord Voldemort smiled despite himself. His most loyal follower always knew what to say to flatter his ego. "Yes, Bella, he's mine. All mine."

She nodded enthusiastically. “Is he with the werewolves? Is he still alive? Where are you keeping him?”

“I would never give something so important to filthy werewolves,” Lord Voldemort scoffed. “The boy is being kept in my personal quarters, of course.”

“Of course,” Greyback muttered.

“Yes, my Lord.” Bellatrix looked up at him with manic exhilaration in her eyes. “May I visit with him, my Lord? I would love to play with your new toy.”

“He is not for you to play with!” Lord Voldemort felt his temper seethe. How dare she! How could she possibly think that he would ever share his Harry with anyone else. “He is for me, and me alone. He is mine!”

“Of course, my Lord. I did not mean to imply. I’m sure you are having... such fun with your new... playmate.” She took a deep breath, trying to calm her frenzied exuberance. “I can only imagine all the games you’ve been playing! All the terrible delights you’ve been taking out on him!”

“Yes indeed!” Lord Voldemort felt himself getting swept up in her excitement. He still hadn’t decided quite what to do with Harry, but toying with people was always fun. Watching the boy eat breakfast had been a pleasure. Watching him wear the other horcruxes had been utter bliss. What else would he enjoy watching Harry do? Not Quidditch, that was for certain.

He was pulled from his thoughts by the sound of Greyback sniggering. “Oh, I can just imagine the types of games you’ve been playin’ with your new boy.”

“Shut your filthy mouth, wolf!” Bella cried. “You have no idea what is really going on here.”

“Someone has no idea...” the alpha muttered.

“Enough!” cried Lord Voldemort. “I have better things to do than break up a ridiculous spat between underlings. Come, Bella, leave the wolves to their business.” Before either party could spout more nonsense, he reached out, took his follower by the arm, and apparated them back to the manor.

It wasn’t until Draco heard the sound of the Dark Lord apparating away that he let out a long breath. How long had he been holding that?

His brain had shuddered to a halt when he’d heard his master’s voice. He’d been so terrified that only one piece of information sunk into his panicked mind. Harry was in the Dark Lord’s personal quarters. That would explain why Draco hadn’t been able to find him. Harry was being held in the Dark Lord’s personal quarters, and he was being tortured for that monster’s amusement.

Draco had to find him. But how would he ever access the Dark Lord’s personal wards?

“I still smell wizard,” Greyback called out.

Draco froze. What could he do? He was still crouched down in the snowy bushes and disillusioned, but he didn’t know any spells to hide his scent.

“Spread out, boys. Keep your noses peeled. There’s someone still here.”

Draco couldn’t hide his scent, but he could make new scents. Fortunately, he knew one particular spell that he’d used on Longbottom a couple times in second year. He thought ‘*Felinus Fetorus*’ in his head, as he leaned his wand around the tree trunk to point at Greyback.

“Ahh!” the wolf howled, followed by a long string of colorful curse words.

“Where’d that come from?”

Draco could hear other werewolves shouting. He pointed his wand in the direction of the nearest voice and cast silently again. Technically, the spell was meant to keep rodents away from your garden, but what it really did was spray the strong scent of cat urine. The wolves would be drenched in the smell of cat piss. Based on their howling and cussing, they certainly didn’t enjoy the scent.

Draco cast it at six more wolves, before he took off running as fast as his legs could carry him. He didn’t even pay attention to where he was going, he just knew he needed to get as far away as he could before their confusion and horror wore off.

As he ran, he didn’t notice the brush getting wilder and the sunlight dimmer.

Remus was alone in the clearing with Howler, the only werewolf left behind to guard him. They had been sitting in awkward silence for several minutes.

“Can you teach me that spell that makes wizards scream in pain?” Howler blurted out suddenly. “The one the Dark Lord always uses?”

“I’m afraid I don’t know that one. It’s a Dark spell, and I don’t do Dark magic.”

“Well, what good are you then?”

“I know a spell that can chase away dementors,” Remus offered.

“Dementors? Really? Show me!”

“If you would be so kind as to fetch me another cuppa, I’ll show you.”

Howler snatched Remus’s small tin mug and darted over to do just that. As the werewolf leaned over to grab the dirty kettle, a stunning spell shot out of the tree line and hit him right in the back. He tripped forward and hit his head hard against the rocks around the campfire.

Fortunately, he landed next to the fire instead of in it. One stunning spell wouldn't normally be enough to knock out a full-grown werewolf, but a hard blow to the head would do it.

Remus watched a young wizard run out of the tree line. He was panting hard, his soggy robes dragging along the snowy ground. The last remains of a disillusionment charm were fading from his body, making him appear clearer with every moment. The blonde figure pointed his wand at the unconscious Howler, looking him over.

"I think you got him," Remus commented.

With a flash, two terrified grey eyes and one trembling wand swiveled to him.

Before he was also knocked out, Remus raised his hands to show his bound wrists. "I can't hurt you. You're safe for now. Although, I wouldn't recommend sticking around for long."

"Professor Lupin!?" Young Draco Malfoy gaped at him; scared, confused, disoriented. His wand lowered a fraction.

"Hello Mr. Malfoy. It's been a long time since I was your professor. What on earth are you doing in Fenrir Greyback's camp?"

"I was... I was looking for Harry, but then I got lost."

"You were looking for Harry? All on your own?" The boy was shaking from head to toe. He was pale as Professor Binns. "Please Mr. Malfoy, come sit down for a moment and catch your breath." The boy stepped forward as if he were in a daze. "Once you've calmed down, you need to leave right away. Do you know how to apparate? Do you have any idea who's in that manor up on the hill there?"

"Harry's there..." Draco sat stiffly on Greyback's hammock. His eyes were unfocused, and he looked so small and overwhelmed.

"Well, yes, but not just him." Remus took in the dark circles under the young Malfoy's eyes and the lankness of his hair. "Harry told me that the two of you had become friends. But I never would have imagined that you'd come all the way out here to try and..." Remus paused. Too many things didn't add up. "How did you even get here?"

"I ran."

"You ran? I don't understand. How did you..." And suddenly everything was clear as a moonlit night. "You ran here... from the manor?" The boy nodded. "The manor up on the hill? It's Malfoy Manor?" Again, the blonde head nodded as if in a daze. "The manor where the Dark Lord is staying?" Suddenly, the young man stopped nodding and looked up in alarm.

"I have to Obliviate you!" he cried.

"Wait, just calm down there. Do you even know what you're doing?"

“I’m not sure. I have to try. You can’t know that the Dark Lord is staying at my house. You can’t know about the party.”

“The party? You mean the Yuletide Soiree?” Lupin remembered that evening vaguely. He remembered going to the soiree and arguing with someone. He couldn’t remember anything after that, except waking in Fenrir Greyback’s camp. Come to think of it, all of his memories of that night were slightly fuzzy. Like that evening had been nothing more than a dream.

“Why would you care if Harry found out about the Soiree?” The clues were falling into place one at a time. “You invited Harry. He told me that you warned him not to go. You told him it could be dangerous. But he and I thought it would be safe for me, since the Death Eaters weren’t looking for me. I suppose I was more valuable than I thought.”

Young Draco was raising his wand to point it at Remus’s head. “I’m sorry. I don’t have any other choice.” Remus wasn’t sure if that comment was meant to assuage the professor or the former pupil. “Please just hold still. I’ve read about this spell, but I’ve never done it before. Try to clear your thoughts.”

“Oh, for Godric’s sake.” Remus had to stop this nonsense.

As carefully as he could, so as not to startle the already flustered teenager, Remus reached out his bound hands until they reached Draco’s. Slowly but surely, he wrapped his hand around Draco’s shaking wand hand. Remus didn’t move the wand itself. He allowed it to stay pointed at his head. Instead of wrestling the wand away, he focused on transferring as much warmth and calm as he could into the young Malfoy’s pale hand.

“Draco, listen to me young man. Don’t do anything foolish. You’re in an unknown and unsafe place with werewolves due to return any moment. Now is not a good time for your first foray into advanced Mind Magic.” Draco’s hand finally stopped shaking, and the wand lowered by about a centimeter. “Besides, who am I going to tell anyway? I’m tied up in Fenrir Greyback’s camp. Harry has already been captured by Voldemort.”

“Don’t say that name! Are you crazy? What if he hears you?”

“I’ve already been captured. I’m not going anywhere. But I can’t imagine where you’ll end up if you try a dangerous and powerful spell for the first time right here and it goes wrong.”

“What if you see Harry?” Draco was no longer shaking, but his breaths were still ragged. Remus noticed there were tear streaks down his cheeks. “What if you tell him about me? What if he finds out... it’s all my fault...”

“Mr. Malfoy... Draco, you need to calm down. Now, I’m not sure how exactly Harry got captured, but whatever happened, it wasn’t your fault. It was Vol- It was You-Know-Who.”

“But I...”

“Shh,” Remus tried to soothe him. “It’s ok. Everything’s going to ok, Draco. I saw Harry this morning. He’s a little shaken, but he’s mostly unhurt. I think You-Know-Who is trying to convert him to the Dark. He’d trying to lure Harry to his side.”

Draco blinked owlishly. “You saw him? You saw Harry? Today? He’s unhurt?”

“Yes,” Remus nodded. “And if I see Harry again... Well, there’s no reason why I need to mention that I ran into you, if you really don’t want him to know.”

“But why would you do that? Why would you help me?”

Remus gave the young man’s hand a gentle squeeze. “Sometimes, Draco, people need to be told things. But other times, I think they need to figure them out for themselves.” With that, Remus let go. If the boy was going to Obliviate him, he would have done so already. “You know, young man, I think you should take some time to figure a few things out for yourself. Maybe figure out why it was you tried to warn Harry about the party. Why you felt so guilty that he had been taken. Perhaps why you risked your life running into a werewolf-infested forest to try and save him. I think Harry might need to figure this whole situation out for himself, as well. I’m going to give him the chance to come to his own conclusions about you.”

They both jumped when they heard some howling in the distance. “Dammit, they must have scrubbed the scent off already,” the young Slytherin mumbled. “I have to go. And I have to throw them off my trail. I really am sorry about this.”

Before Remus could stop him, Draco raised his wand again and shot a spell in his face. He didn’t recognize the hex, but at least it wasn’t *Obliviate*. That’s what he thought, until he realized he reeked with the scent of cat urine. He was too busy retching to care much about Draco’s diminishing footsteps, or the arrival of Greyback and the rest of the pack.

“I bloody hate wizards!” Greyback cried. And in that moment, Remus couldn’t help but agree.

Harry paced the large bedroom. He was alone, apart from the snake, and he couldn’t go anywhere or do anything. Now seemed like a good enough time to plan his escape. Snape had been a complete prat, but at least he’d offered some useful advice. Harry wouldn’t be able to floo or portkey out of this situation. Even if he managed to get to Remus, they wouldn’t be able to apparate away. They would have to walk past the wards, just like Hogwarts.

That was one of several problems.

Voldemort didn’t know that Harry could now do some wandless magic, but would a wandless spell be enough to get past the defenses on the bedroom door? He’d only ever done simple spells before, and they always exhausted him. He didn’t think he’d be able to do more than two or three spells without a wand before he passed out.

His captor also had no idea that he still had his invisibility cloak, tucked into his pillowcase. However, if there were any alarms or traps outside his bedroom, the cloak wouldn’t do him much good. Besides, even if he got out of the manor, where would he go? He couldn’t leave without Remus, and he had no idea where his former professor was. The only thing he knew was that Greyback’s pack was somewhere in the woods.

“Stop walking so much,” Nagini snapped, pulling him from his thoughts. “You are getting me in the mood to chase, and there is nothing here I can eat.” Her hissing voice changed from annoyed to playful. “Perhaps you want me to chase you for fun. I promise not to swallow you.”

“No, I don’t want to play that game,” Harry insisted. He sighed and slumped into one of the leather chairs by the fireplace. “Snape said that you’ve eaten people before. Is that true?”

“I eat what Master feeds me. I like rabbits best. But lately he has been feeding me muggles.”

“That’s disgusting,” Harry blanched. Maybe he shouldn’t have let her into the bath with him. But she had seemed so pitiful. “You shouldn’t eat muggles, Nagini. You shouldn’t eat people at all. You’ve got to stop that!”

“You do not need to worry, little hatchling. Master would not feed me anything that was bad for my health.”

“I’m not worried that you’ll get indigestion!” Harry cried. “It’s not a health concern. It’s that... well... It’s wrong! It is morally wrong. Do you understand that? Do you know the difference between right and wrong?”

“Of course I know the difference,” she balked. “It is right for Nagini to eat. It is wrong for Nagini to go hungry. I don’t understand the other part, though. What does ‘morally’ mean?”

“Never mind; it probably means something different for snakes. Just... if your master tries to feed you muggles again, you should insist that you want rabbits instead. Tell him you like rabbits best. If you refuse to eat muggles, and only eat rabbits, I’m sure he’ll get you as many rabbits as you want.”

“You are a clever little hatchling,” Nagini curled up in front of the warm fire. “I can see why our Master wants to keep you.”

“Well, that makes one of us.” Harry glanced down at the locket and the tiara on the coffee table. He had tossed them there the moment he was alone. He felt a lot lighter without them weighing him down. Why had Voldemort insisted that Harry wear them? Harry could understand why the dark wizard would be excited to see the locket again, but what was the deal with the tiara? Or that cup?

He didn’t have time to dwell on that. He should practice his wandless magic while he had the chance. Would Nagini be able to tell what he was doing? Would she warn Voldemort? Probably not is she just thought he was lying down quietly.

“I’m going to take another bath,” he announced. He could practice a wandless warming charm in the water, and Nagini wouldn’t notice. “You can join me if you’d like.”

“Wake up, my Harry.”

This time Harry resisted the urge to scream when he saw the Dark Lord Voldemort practically hovering over him.

“Er, hello.” It was a lame reply, but Harry was still getting his bearings. He was in the large bed again, and Voldemort’s snake-like face was taking up most of his vision. “What’s going on? What time is it?”

“The house elves informed me that you did not eat any of the supper they sent up. I came to see why, only to find you asleep. Nagini tells me you slept most of the afternoon. Severus’s Calming Draught must have been stronger than I thought.”

“Oh, er, yeah,” Harry agreed, not wanting to admit what had really exhausted him. He quickly sat up and grabbed his glasses. “Must have been that potion from yesterday.”

With his glasses in place, he could see through the windows that it was already dark outside. He should have been used to wandless magic sucking so much energy from him, but it was still jarring. It was even harder to focus on keeping the spells less powerful. When he cast the warming charm on the tub, it had taken all his concentration to prevent him and Nagini from boiling alive. He’d only done one spell before he’d had to go lie down.

“I notice that you removed the tiara and the locket.” Harry turned back to Voldemort. He was sitting on Harry’s bed now, leaned in close, but not quite touching Harry. “Why would you want to be parted from such treasures?”

Once again, Harry had to resist the urge to respond with a snarky comment. He remembered Snape’s warning about not pissing off the Dark Lord. “I took a bath,” he said instead. “They’re such lovely pieces. Treasures. I didn’t want to get them wet.”

“Ah, of course, so much like myself. Taking care of your things.” With the flick of his wand, the locket and the tiara soared across the room and took their appropriate places on Harry once again.

“Oh. Er. Thank you?”

Once again, Voldemort’s serpentine face took on a look of pure joy. “Seeing you here where you belong brings such joy you cannot imagine, Harry. You make quite a sight lying in bed with your sister.”

“My sister? Wait, do you mean the snake!? What are you talking about?”

“I regret that my other responsibilities kept me away most of the day.” Was Voldemort creeping closer? Harry tried to shuffle away as discreetly as possible.

“That’s ok,” Harry assured him. “You can stay away if you need to. I’m not very interesting anyway.”

“I quite disagree. I wanted to return to you sooner, but so many things tried to steal my attention away.”

“Well, you’re a busy man.” Harry caught himself before he shuffled off the side of the bed. There was nowhere left to go, without falling to the wooden floor. “So, did Greyback kill Bella or did she kill Greyback?” He tried to change the subject.

“Neither. I managed to pull her away before she could cause any permanent damage. It took some time to explain to her that she is not to come looking for you.”

How was Voldemort still so close when Harry had scooted so far? The nightmarish man was practically lounging across the bed, leaning casually against one arm. The position was strangely reminiscent of a much younger Tom Riddle, and it was a rather disconcerting reminder that they were technically the same person.

“The thing that took most of my time,” Voldemort continued. “Was my meeting with Severus. He had much to report of the activities of the Order.”

“He met with the Order?” Harry’s interest was immediately piqued. “What did he say? What are they up to? Are they looking for me?”

Voldemort’s feral grin grew even more venomous. “They had a meeting, just this afternoon. A particularly unsuccessful and depressing meeting, by Severus’s account.”

Harry gulped. “Depressing?” His friends had been desperately trying to come up with a plan to save him while he had been fast asleep?

Those predatory red eyes gleamed with joy. “The one known as Mad-Eye Moody kept blaming Mundungus Fletcher for your disappearance. He claimed that the wretched little man must have told me something before I killed him. Not that I needed anything from that useless little thief.”

“So, you did kill Dung?” Harry wasn’t sure how he felt about that.

“The metamorphmagus girl was furious,” Voldemort continued without answering his question. “According to Severus, she got herself so worked up that she sprouted horns. Her superior auror kept trying to give her water to calm her down, but she kept breaking the glasses.”

“Tonks?” said Harry. “Kingsley?”

Voldemort was so thrilled by the despair and anger of the Order, his words came out as practically a purr. “Those little red-headed twins, what are their names again?”

“Fred and George.” Harry voice came out as a pained whisper.

“Ah yes. Severus tells me that they like to tell jokes. They like to think of themselves as funny. But they had no jokes to tell today.”

“I get it. You can stop.”

“But their mother,” Voldemort practically sang. “She was the worst.”

“I don’t want to hear about this.”

“The Weasley matriarch was inconsolable. According to Severus, she was crying hysterically. It got so bad, her husband had to take her from the room.”

“Stop it!” Harry shouted. “I told you I don’t want to hear about this.”

Voldemort narrowed his eyes, but he didn’t punish Harry for the outburst. “I thought you liked hearing about your precious little Order.”

“Not like this. Why would I want to hear about my loved ones despairing over me?”

Suddenly, Voldemort’s thin, pale arm shot forward and grabbed Harry’s forearm in a vice-like grip. “They are not your *loved* ones!” he spat. His disdain for the ‘L’ word was obvious. “They do not care for you. If they knew what you were...”

“What are you talking about?” Harry interrupted, trying in vain to tug his arm away. “What am I?”

Voldemort said nothing for a moment. He simply stared down at Harry with a look that couldn’t be placed. The snake-like man seemed to be flitting between several different conflicting emotions. When his face finally settled on one single expression, it was a possessive and insidious smile.

“Oh Harry...”

His other arm came from the other side, directly toward Harry’s face. Harry tried to duck out of the way, but with his arm locked in Voldemort’s grip, there was nowhere he could go. Instead, he braced himself for the inevitable pain.

Voldemort’s sharp-nailed finger reached up and stroked slowly, almost reverently, along Harry’s lightning bolt scar.

Harry gasped. The feeling was almost impossible to describe. It didn’t hurt. It was nothing like the mind-shattering pain that had come in the graveyard. If anything, it was the exact opposite of that. Waves of pleasant euphoria echoed through his entire body, emanating from his forehead. His toes curled, his eyelids fluttered, his breath hitched, his mouth hung open. It was quite possibly the most phenomenal thing he had ever felt.

And then it was gone.

It took Harry a few moments to get his bearings and catch his breath. When he looked back up at Voldemort, the other figure looked awestruck. He was staring down at his finger as if he hadn’t realized that it could do that.

“Wha... What was that?” Harry gasped between ragged breaths.

Voldemort blinked and turned his attention to the young man. His shocked expression quickly morphing into satisfaction. “That, my precious soul, was proof. Proof that you are rightfully mine.”

“Please, please, please.” He was so close. He was sure he could get there with just a little more finesse. “Come on, just a little more...”

“What do you think you’re doing?”

Draco swung around when he heard the cold voice behind him. For just a moment, he thought for sure he was dead. But then he saw the expression of long-suffering annoyance on Professor Snape’s face.

“Oh, it’s just you,” he muttered.

“Yes, it’s *just* your professor for the last six years,” Professor Snape’s words came out with their usual biting sarcasm. “*Just* your godfather. *Just* the one who has saved your life countless times...”

“You know what I meant. I thought you might be the Dark Lord.”

“Yes, I can see why you might expect to find the Dark Lord, considering you are right outside his door.” Professor Snape gestured to the thick oak panelling which Draco was squatting on his knees in front of. “Which leads me back to my original question. What are you doing at this hour, outside the Dark Lord’s private wing, with your wand trained on the doorknob? You are keyed into the wards. You can enter if you need to.”

“Not without alerting the Dark Lord,” Draco muttered.

Professor Snape ignored him and kept going. “If I thought you were profoundly stupid... Truly, utterly, and completely lacking any sense of self-preservation or foresight. Then, I might suspect that you were trying to dismantle the wards. But surely, after so many years with myself, with Narcissa, with Lucius; you would have learned to use at least a few of your brain cells.”

“Harry’s in there!” Draco couldn’t hold back anymore. “Harry’s in there, and I’ve almost gotten through the last of the wards! It took me some time, I know it’s getting late, but I broke through the first two layers and I’m almost done with the third one!”

Professor Snape raised an eyebrow. “That would be extraordinarily impressive, if it weren’t for a few mitigating factors. First of all, you’re lucky you’re a Malfoy and the Dark Lord incorporated his own wards into the Manor’s wards. Otherwise you would have set off at least twelve alarms, and would have been dead before you could even analyze the first ward. Second, it’s not getting late. It’s early. I don’t know how long you’ve been at this, but it’s almost eight in the morning.”

“It’s morning?” Draco gaped. He’d been hunched over that doorknob all night. If his surly professor hadn’t found him, another Death Eater would have been by soon. Or the Dark Lord himself.

“Finally,” Professor Snape continued. “Unlike most purebloods, the Dark Lord doesn’t use a three-layer ward system. I happen to know he uses seven layers.”

“Seven!?” Draco had never heard of such a thing.

“And each one is exponentially more complex than the last. So, congratulations on removing the first two. If Potter wants to drop a rock out of a window, he might be able to manage it now. However, I doubt you’re going to be making any rescue attempts today. Are you even packed?”

“Packed?” Draco had spent all night trying to dismantle the most complicated wards he’d ever seen, and they had only been the first two layers. His mind was fried, his fingers were numb, and he could barely understand what his professor was saying. “Packed for what? To escape?”

“For the train ride!” Professor Snape leaned in close, looking him up and down. “When was the last time you slept? Do you even know what day it is? It’s Sunday. The holidays are over, the Hogwarts Express returns to the school today. Your mother will be taking you to King’s Cross Station in two hours.”

“Two hours...” Draco’s mind couldn’t begin to contemplate what he was hearing. “I can’t leave... Harry...”

“I can’t believe how many times I’ve had to give this ridiculous speech in the last few days,” Snape muttered. He grabbed Draco’s collar and tugged him up to his feet. Their noses were level and close enough to feel each other’s breaths. “Listen carefully,” his voice was slow and deliberate. “You cannot help him by stupidly rushing into danger. You can help yourself, your mother, and everyone else you care about by acting like the Slytherin you are, going to school, keeping your head down, and waiting for the right time to strike.”

Draco blinked. His professor was right, of course. Draco wasn’t some stupid, brash Gryffindor. He had simply panicked when he found out Harry was literally in his house. “I just...what if it’s too late.”

“The Dark Lord is not planning to kill the boy any time soon. There is time. We are Slytherins, Draco, we do not go looking for trouble. We think, we plan, we wait, and we do not act until we are sure we can win.”

Draco let out a breath and gave a slow nod.

“Good,” said Professor Snape, finally letting go of his collar. “Now go shower and change. I will inform your mother you will need help packing.”

“Slytherin!” Harry cried. “You have a book about Salazar Slytherin? Is it accurate?”

“As accurate as any book can be considering the man lived over a thousand years ago.” Voldemort answered without looking up from the paperwork on his desk.

Harry turned back to the green leather book on the shelf. It was the first book he'd found in the vast collection that wasn't on Dark Magic or something equally nasty. So, he figured he'd give it a shot.

Harry had been having another surreal morning. Voldemort had woken him up again with his usual looming and creepy stares. Harry had changed in the loo again, before another uncomfortable breakfast. While Harry nibbled on smoked meat, Voldemort bragged about the ministry's failed attempts to find the missing Chosen One. Apparently, Minister Scrimgeour was looking increasingly foolish in the eyes of the public. Harry wasn't nearly as upset about this as he was about the Order of the Phoenix and his friends.

After breakfast, Harry started heading in the direction of his bedroom from the day before, but Voldemort informed him that Nagini would still be asleep. He didn't want to leave Harry alone without a sitter.

This was why Harry now found himself back in Voldemort's study, wearing the tiara and the locket yet again. He tried to make himself comfortable on the settee as he flipped through Voldemort's biography on Salazar Slytherin.

"If you do not treat my belongings with care, Harry," Voldemort's words seeped from his lips like oil. "Then I will not treat your belongings with care."

Harry immediately stopped flipping through the pages. "Got it."

"Now stop fidgeting. I have much work to do, and I cannot entertain you every moment of my day. Surely a sixteen-year-old student knows how to read quietly."

Harry sighed. He really wanted to give a snarky comment back, but he shut his mouth and nodded. It was remarkable how much better he behaved when Voldemort threatened Remus, compared to how he usually behaved for his professors. Besides, Harry didn't want to talk to Voldemort anyway. He preferred not having the man's attention.

Voldemort hadn't touched his scar again since the night before, and Harry wasn't sure whether to be upset or relieved. It had been such a bizarre yet wonderful feeling. It had felt so good. It made Harry uncomfortable just how comfortable it had been. They hadn't talked about it since last night, and Harry would much prefer to never mention it again. Voldemort didn't seem to want to discuss it either, so Harry turned to the first chapter on Salazar Slytherin and tried to distract himself.

Harry had been annoyed that Dumbledore's Gryffindor book was too biased toward his famous ancestor, but Voldemort's book on Slytherin was the complete opposite. According to this author, Salazar Slytherin was basically the most intelligent, cunning, charming, and powerful wizard that had ever lived. The other founders were completely in awe of him, or possibly just jealous of how amazing he was.

On the other hand, according to the book, Godric Gryffindor was as stupid as Crabbe, as clumsy as Neville, as poorly mannered as Peeves, as unreasonably arrogant as Lockhart, as likeable as Umbridge, and as reckless as... well... Harry himself. There was no way that the

real Slytherin would ever have been friends with the real Gryffindor if the man was anything like what this book portrayed.

Harry thought back to the journal he had found in his vault only a few days ago. At some point long ago, Salazar Slytherin had given his private journal to Godric Gryffindor himself. They had definitely been friends. Harry wondered what the truth was. It had to be something in between Dumbledore's book and Voldemort's book. However, with the journal sitting in Hermione's little bag somewhere far away, he had no access to those answers.

The only redeeming quality about this version of Slytherin's biography, was that it had several mentions of Ancient Magic. It confirmed that Gryffindor was known for Blood Magic, just as Ravenclaw could do Mind Magic, and Hufflepuff could do Elemental Magic. Of course, the book went on and on about how great Salazar Slytherin was because he could do Soul Magic.

The book also mentioned that the founders each had another special skill. Rowena Ravenclaw had a perfect memory, and could recall anything she had previously learned. Helga Hufflepuff had a natural immunity to most illnesses and poisons. Harry held his breath when he got to Gryffindor's special power. Did he inherit some cool special power that he hadn't realized?

'Gryffindor, being brash and without any sense, was lucky to have a natural strength of body. He could withstand great pain and fatigue without collapse, or else he might have died before he even reached adulthood.'

That was it? That was his power? Harry huffed in disappointment. He almost certainly had inherited that trait; he could handle more pain than most people. But what good was that? Why couldn't he get something cool, like a perfect memory? However, when he thought about it, it was pretty lucky that he had been able to run across the graveyard to grab Cedric's body and summon the cup. That was after he'd exhausted himself from competing in the third task, fighting off an Imperius'd Krum, dueling with Voldemort, and overcoming the Dark Lord's killing curse in Priori Incantatem.

Maybe having a body that refused to quit was the reason Harry had survived to almost-adulthood.

Harry turned back to the book. When he realized that the next five pages were an endless litany of praise for how special and wonderful Slytherin was because he could speak to snakes, Harry lost his patience and set the heavy tome aside.

Trying to be as quiet as possible, so as not to draw too much attention, he went back to the bookshelf to find something else. His eyes skimmed over books of curses, ancient dark magic, blood rituals, even something on how to disembowel your enemies. He quickly skipped past that. Suddenly, his eyes caught on a familiar word: Horcrux. Where had he seen that word before?

"Pick something and sit down," Voldemort snapped. "I cannot work with you distracting me like this. There is a book on Goblin Rebellions in the corner if you refuse to expand your mind with knowledge of Dark Magic."

“Oh, goody! The Goblin Rebellions!” Harry sassed, because he couldn’t help himself. He did pick up the book, though, because it was less horrible than anything else he’d found.

“I thought you were interested in goblins,” Voldemort commented, finally looking up from his thick stack of paperwork. “The Daily Prophet made it seem as though goblin history was your favorite subject.”

Harry quickly moved past his surprise that Voldemort had read Cynthia Roscoe’s article about him. It made sense that Voldemort would read everything in the newspaper. “I like goblins. I just don’t care that much about their history. I’m not even taking History of Magic.”

“You *like* goblins?” Voldemort said it in much the same way one would say ‘You *like* finding worms in your apples?’ “Shall I assume then, that you have never met any?”

“I’ve met plenty. They’re a bit rough around the edges, but all the ones that I’ve met were nice enough. Plus, they were really helpful and offered some good advice.”

Voldemort was now thoroughly distracted from his paperwork. He was blinking at Harry in disbelief. “I have never heard words such as ‘nice’ or ‘helpful’ used to describe goblins,” he hummed. “Ah, but of course, I am forgetting.”

“Forgetting what?” asked Harry, sitting down again, and ignoring the book.

“I forgot that your life is a never-ending cycle of meeting new and interesting people, most of whom adore you. Then you go on incredible adventures, where you escape death at the last moment through inexplicable and unexplainable circumstances. Then you flitter through your studies and social obligations with minimal effort, wherein you coincidentally know the one important piece of knowledge that you needed, due to happenstance. Then, in the end, you receive the highest possible praise from everyone around you.”

“I...” Harry was about to rebuke that, only to be hit by the uncomfortable realization that it was strangely spot on. How did Voldemort pin him with such deadly accuracy? “That’s not all I do!”

“Indeed?” Voldemort red eyes lit up with mirth. “What else do you do, Harry?”

“Sometimes I play Quidditch.”

That lipless mouth seemed to quirk just a bit at one corner. “Of course, Harry. How could I forget? However, you will not be playing Quidditch this term, will you?”

“What do you mean?”

That slight quirk broadened into a sadistic smirk. “Why Harry, the school term begins tomorrow. The train left hours ago. You will not be returning to Hogwarts.”

Harry’s mind froze. How could that possibly be true? He had always escaped at the last moment before. How was it possible that he was going to miss the new term? “I’m not going back? But... it’s home...”

Just as quickly as it had appeared, the smirk vanished as if it had never been. Voldemort stood up. For one crazy moment Harry thought the man was going to walk over to comfort him. But then, the dark wizard seemed to get a grip of himself and sat back down. "I..." Voldemort's words came out slowly, like they had to be forced out. "Understand..." He seemed to be having trouble wrapping his mind around some foreign concept. "How you feel..."

Was this Voldemort's first experience with empathy? Had he never once before felt a sense of camaraderie with another person? Understood exactly how they felt?

"Er... So, can I go back?"

"No, you are not leaving!" Voldemort spat, his venom returning in earnest. "You belong to me, and you shall remain with me, at my side, where you belong. If you need to learn something, I will teach you."

It took considerable effort for Harry to force himself not to roll his eyes. Oh well, so much for empathy. "I saw those books you left out for me; Dark Magic and Advanced Potion Theories. Why would you think I would want to learn that stuff anyway?"

"Severus informed me that Potions was your worst subject." Harry did roll his eyes at that, but by that point Voldemort had returned to his paperwork. "I thought you could use supplemental material."

"I have all the supplemental material I need," Harry muttered, thinking of the Potions text he had found in Slughorn's cupboard. "Actually, now that I think of it, there is something I want to ask you."

Voldemort glanced up again, his expression slightly curious. "Yes?"

"You know a bunch about famous wizards and such. Have you ever heard of someone called the Half-Blood Prince?"

"You mean Severus?"

"No, I'm not talking about him!" Harry didn't want to spend any more time than necessary thinking about his least favorite professor. "I want to learn about someone who went by the name: the Half-Blood Prince."

"Severus called himself the Half-Blood Prince when he first became a Death Eater. He quickly dropped that term, though, when he realized it was just a silly, self-proclaimed title."

Harry was so surprised by this revelation, he didn't even comment on the hypocrisy of Voldemort accusing someone else of having a silly, self-proclaimed title. "Snape? The book was Snape's?"

"What book?" asked Voldemort, completely distracted again. "Where did you hear that phrase?"

“Nothing,” Harry waved away. He leaned back into the couch, while trying not to dislodge the ridiculous tiara. “It was just a used textbook I found. I think it used to belong to Snape when he was a student.”

Harry assumed that Voldemort would now return to his work, but he kept his eyes on Harry for much longer than necessary. Finally, he spoke again. “How is it, Harry, that the circuitous twists and turns of your life have led you not only to my old schoolbook, but to Severus’s as well?”

“Merlin, I don’t know,” Harry reached over to take a sip of water from the badger cup sitting by the settee. “My life is so strange even I don’t know what’s really happening half the time. Plus, powerful magical items just have a way of falling into my lap when I least suspect it.” He gestured to the locket around his neck as evidence. “Most of the time I don’t realize what they are until later.”

Suddenly, Voldemort swept to his feet again. “You need to leave now.”

“What?” Harry gaped.

“You are eminently distracting.” Voldemort strode forward with his eyes locked on Harry, still holding the cup and wearing the other trinkets. The man seemed torn between exasperation at Harry’s ability to prevent him from getting work done, and exuberance that there existed something that was able to entertain him in such a way. “I still have much work to finish, and it is now evident that you are incapable of not drawing attention to yourself.”

When Harry stood to leave, Voldemort lightly brushed his arm. The feeling of euphoria and bliss barely had time to simmer through his body before it was gone. Harry took a steadying breath, before he took a definitive step away from Voldemort. Why did that keep happening?

“Alright everyone, watch the stick carefully. This wand movement is much faster than the other spells.”

By Sunday afternoon, Remus could no longer put off teaching the werewolves offensive spells. They had been getting more and more impatient. It was a small comfort to know that it would take them several hours to master *Experliarmus*, if their skill with the other spells was any indication.

Once the pupils had paired off to practice disarming each other, Greyback prowled up beside Remus. “‘Bout time you got to the good stuff. This is just a kiddy spell, though. When you gonna teach those spells that explode your organs from the inside?”

“Never,” Remus grimaced. “Even if there was a spell that did that, which I sincerely hope there is not, then I certainly don’t know it.”

They watched the wolves practice for a minute. Grady managed to knock Howler right on his rear end, his ripped trousers scuffing along the muddy ground. The spell didn’t knock the wand out of the other’s hand, though.

“I’m not sure if they’re even going to be able to disarm each other,” Remus commented. “The spell was designed for wizards. Sometimes these types of spells aren’t strong enough to work on half-bloods.”

“Long as it works on wizards,” Greyback grunted. “No self-respecting wolf would use this kind o’ magic in a real fight between werewolves.” He gave Remus a shrewd side-eye, as if to imply that Remus both would use this type of magic, and that he wasn’t a real wolf.

“Don’t worry, I wouldn’t use a disarming spell on you anyway,” Remus conceded. “Now that I know about that cat urine spell, I’d probably start with that.”

“I’m gonna rip that bloody wizard to shreds when I find out who did it!” Greyback snarled. Remus simply shrugged. He had told the other werewolves that he had been hit by a spell coming from the tree line and that he never saw who cast it. “Probably one of them Lestranger brothers,” Greyback muttered. “Maybe I should just rip out both their throats and be done with it.”

Remus was distracted by his students. They had mostly gotten the hang of the spell by this point. Unfortunately, because werewolves were almost impossible to disarm, they were shooting red lights at each other and knocking each other into the snowy, muddy ground without trouble. But they weren’t disarming their opponent’s wand. Which meant that their opponent was quick to cast the spell back at them. Each pair consisted of two grown men who continued to knock one another into the mud, over and over again. The ‘lesson’ was looking more like a mud wrestling contest than a duel.

“This how your classes usually go, teach?” Greyback teased.

“Not even the fourth years act like this. And they’re usually the rowdiest. Perhaps if you untied me, I’d be able to give a proper demonstration.”

“I ain’t untying you ‘til after tomorrow night.”

“Tomorrow night? What’s special about tomorrow night?”

Greyback barked out a laugh. “Boys, knock it off,” he shouted over the ruckus. “Listen to this, Remus here calls ‘imself a werewolf, but he ain’t got no idea what tomorrow night is. Can’t even feel it.”

Remus went pale. He had been feeling rather fatigued all day, but he had assumed it was his new diet of salted meat and poor-quality tea. “Tomorrow is the full moon?”

“There we go, feel it now?”

“But you can’t untie me tomorrow night! There’s a house full of people just up that ridge, and I’m not used to transforming with other wolves.” Remus had transformed a few times with Sykes and his pack, but they had been far from civilization, where there was nothing to tempt him.

“You don’t need to worry ‘bout that. You just need an alpha. A real alpha who will keep you in your place, show you how to be a wolf. And don’t you worry ‘bout that wizard manor up there. The Dark Lord’s got a nice little village he wants us to visit tomorrow. I’ll teach you how to hunt, pup.”

“No.” The word barely escaped Remus’s lips as a pained whisper. “No. I won’t.”

“Oh, don’t worry pup. Once you’re there, once you’re in the moment, you won’t be able to stop yourself.”

Harry was alone again, save for Nagini. The tiara and the locket were back on the coffee table. He kept taking them off as soon as Voldemort wasn’t around to check. They felt heavier than they ought to be, and Harry found it slightly harder to breathe when he was wearing them.

He considered practicing his wandless magic again, since he had a few hours before bed. But he knew he would just exhaust himself and miss the rest of the evening. He figured he would wait until he was ready to sleep.

There wasn’t much else to do, though. Desperately trying to stave off boredom, he decided to glance through the books that Voldemort had left out for him. As he glanced over the creepy titles, he remembered the book that he’d seen in Voldemort’s study, the one with the word Horcrux. Suddenly, Harry remembered where he had seen that word before. It had been on the cover of the Soul Magic book that Dumbledore had caught him looking through.

Did Voldemort have books on Soul Magic in his study? Should Harry have looked for something other than the ridiculous biography.

“Hey Nagini,” Harry called over to the snake. She was sitting by the window, hungrily watching the birds fly by.

“Yes, little hatchling,” she hissed.

“Have you ever heard Voldemort talk about horcruxes? Do you know that word?”

“Yes,” she turned and slithered closer, seeming interested. “That is my nickname. Master calls me his little horcrux when he is very pleased with me.”

“That can’t be right. Are you sure you’re not mixing it up with something else? I think horcruxes are some type of Dark Soul Magic.”

“I am very sure.” Nagini slithered up the chair, so she could look Harry in the eyes. “When Master is in a good mood, and he is most pleased with his Nagini, he says ‘Such a good girl, my precious horcrux.’ And then he pets that spot on my back that feels very nice.”

“This spot?” asked Harry, as he reached to pet her just a little behind her head.

“Yessss,” she hissed, and rested her head on the back of the chair to enjoy the petting. Perhaps Horcrux was her nickname. If anyone would use the name of a type of Dark Soul Magic as a pet name for their familiar, it would be Voldemort.

“I am pleased to see the two of you getting along.”

Harry spun around when he heard the high-pitched, hissing voice of the man in question. The nightmarish figure stood just inside the dark bedroom, having already shut the door behind him. “Why Harry, I believe this is the first time I have found you awake.”

“Did you know,” Harry kept his voice polite, but couldn’t resist being a little snarky. “Most people who go to visit someone, and then they realize that person is asleep, they just leave.”

“Ah, but we are not like others, are we?” Voldemort stalked forward slowly. As his eyes assessed Harry’s form, as his mouth formed a displeased frown. “Why have you removed your treasures yet again, my Harry?”

Harry glanced down at the locket and tiara. The cup had shown up at some point, as well. “They’re heavy,” he said.

Voldemort flicked his wand and yet again the ridiculous trinkets returned to Harry’s person. He had to bite his tongue to keep himself from complaining. He was getting really sick of wearing these stupid things. Why? Why was it so important to Voldemort?

Before Harry could say something he’d regret, Voldemort had swooped in before him. Without warning, the man’s pale hand reached up to cup Harry’s cheek, and all thought disappeared.

It was bliss. It was rapture. Uncontrollable waves of soothing pleasure emanated from the point of contact. How could this feel so good? How could anything? Harry hummed with contentment, and slowly realized that he had leaned closer. His cheek was resting peacefully on the dark wizard’s cupped hand.

It felt so nice, but it shouldn’t. It shouldn’t feel like this. He couldn’t give into this.

With monumental effort, Harry lifted his head and took a few steps back. As the feeling faded, he felt like he had lost something. Like he had left a piece of himself behind. How could Voldemort make him feel like he was finally whole?

“Why? What’s happening?” Harry panted, trying to catch his breath. “What is that?”

Voldemort was looking down at his hand again. He seemed just as effected by Harry’s abrupt retreat. As if he had lost something also. Before he answered, Voldemort looked over at the bedside table, where the stack of books lay. “Did you read the books I left for you?”

“What? No, I told you...”

“The book on top,” Voldemort interrupted. He strode over to lift a heavy black tome from the top of the pile. “This is the one I was most eager for you to read. There is knowledge in here that I was looking forward to sharing with you.”

Harry blanched at the shimmering silver title. “I don’t want to learn the ‘Secrets of the Darkest Arts!’ Why would I ever touch that?”

“I left you my personal copy,” Voldemort continued. “It contains all my annotations and personal notes. This book had quite a profound impact on me when I was your age. Particularly, the sixth chapter. You could say it shaped who I became.”

“I’m going to repeat this slowly, so maybe you understand.” Harry took a deep breath. “I do not want to learn the Dark Arts.”

Voldemort narrowed his eyes. He strode forward again in the blink of an eye, faster than any normal person ought to move. “And what do you want to learn, Harry?” He grabbed Harry’s shoulder, his grip painful and threatening. “Pranks? Quidditch?”

“I...” What did he want to learn? “I’m not...” What had he been searching for information on? “Do you know anything about Soul Magic?”

Voldemort immediately let him go. He stood over Harry, his impressive height painfully obvious. His red eyes went from narrowed with anger to wide with shock. “Harry...” he whispered. Had he switched to Parseltongue? “My Harry...” He lifted his hand, as if to cup Harry’s cheek again, but Harry stepped back. Voldemort blinked at the sudden movement. He seemed to get a grip of himself.

“My precious little Harry, you wish to learn Soul Magic?”

“Er...” He had. But he hadn’t expected Voldemort to be so excited by the idea. “I mean, just a few really basic things. Simple, harmless, beginner stuff. If you know it. I don’t need anything advanced.”

“I can show you the first step in achieving true power.” Voldemort stepped forward again, but didn’t try to touch Harry. “I can show you what Soul Magic is capable of.”

“I don’t think I need the full capabilities,” Harry was already regretting this. “Maybe just step one or two. The lowest level stuff.”

“Step one is to create a tear in your soul.” Voldemort’s eyes were gleaming with excitement.

“A tear!? In my soul!?” Harry stepped back until he felt his back hit the paneled wall. “How? Why?”

“You merely need to take a life. Any life. A simple murder will create the tear you require.” Voldemort stalked forward.

“Step one is to commit murder!?” Harry tried to shrink away. No wonder Dumbledore didn’t have anything nice to say about Soul Magic. This couldn’t be right, could it? Soul Magic had to be more than just tearing up your soul and murdering people. Right?

“Yes Harry, with your first murder, you will be able to unlock the true potential of Soul Magic.” Voldemort was slowly prowling closer. His eyes were lit up with a hunger far more

intense than anything Harry had seen so far. “You will be able to achieve true immortality as I have. I will be able to keep you forever.”

Harry shook his head. “I’m not killing anyone. You can’t make me.”

“There are ways.” Voldemort licked what would be his lips if he had any. “I will bring you a muggle tomorrow. I think it will be easier for you if it is someone you don’t know. I want this to be very easy for you, my precious Harry. I will make this so easy. Either you kill the muggle, or I will kill the wolf.”

Harry tried to think. How had this gone so wrong? There had to be a way to talk his way out of this. He tried to remember Augusta’s lessons. “I’m so happy!” he practically shouted. He coughed and got ahold of himself. “I mean, I’m really happy here with you. I’m so happy to know Remus is ok, and that you haven’t hurt him. I’m happy that you haven’t made me hurt anyone else.”

He pulled himself to his full, unimpressive height. He looked Voldemort right in his monstrous eyes. “If you do this, I will never forgive you. If you try and force me to kill a muggle, or anyone else, I will never be happy again. I will do everything in my power to escape. And if you succeed, if you force me to commit murder, the guilt will kill me. I will die, and you’ll be alone again.”

“Oh Harry,” Voldemort crooned, unaffected by the threats. “If I succeed, you will never feel guilt again. You will have no fickle morality left to keep you unhappy. You will be mine completely.”

Without another word, Voldemort turned on his heel and swept from the room. Harry tried to stop him, but he wasn’t fast enough. He reached the door, right as it slammed in his face.

“Voldemort!” Harry screamed. He pounded against the invisible wards to no avail. “Don’t do this! Voldemort!”

Flight of Desperation

Chapter Notes

Happy Holidays Everyone!

I hope you're all staying safe this season. Best of luck to everyone. Enjoy your early present!

Trigger Warning:

There are some allusions toward Non-Con in this chapter, but no actual Non-Con.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

“Voldemort!” Harry screamed until his throat was so raw it cracked. Then he kept screaming. “Please! Please, I’ll do anything! Come back, don’t do this!”

He pounded his fists into the cold, hard floor. When had he fallen to the floor? What time was it? How long had he kept up this futile tantrum? He could see the locket and tiara lying on the hardwood nearby. He must have thrown them off at some point during his fit.

Harry needed to get ahold of himself. He couldn’t just sit around waiting for someone to save him. His friends weren’t coming. Snape would be back at Hogwarts by now. The Order was lost and desperate. The Ministry was useless.

Voldemort was going to come back tomorrow with a Muggle. Harry had no idea when. But the man would bring some stranger. A human being full of their own thoughts and feelings and hopes and fears and dreams. And then Voldemort was going to force Harry to kill them. Either that or Voldemort would kill Remus. Would Voldemort really kill the one thing making Harry behave? Was it just a bluff? Harry couldn’t possibly count on that, especially with how unpredictable the madman was.

Harry had to escape. There was no other choice available. It didn’t matter that he didn’t have a real plan. It didn’t matter that he didn’t know where Remus was. It didn’t even matter that he might get them both killed in the attempt. He had to escape, and it had to be tonight.

Harry felt something nudge his foot. “Little hatchling?” It was Voldemort’s snake. She had watched him throw a fit without a word, but now that his breathing had returned to normal, she was trying to get his attention. “Don’t worry little hatchling,” she soothed. “Master will not let you get hurt. You do not need to be afraid of the Muggle. It can’t hurt you.”

“That’s not...” Harry let out a desperate laugh despite himself. “Thanks, Nagini, but that’s not what I’m worried about.”

“Ah, I see,” she curled up around his leg. “You mentioned that you do not like the taste of muggles. Do not fret, hatchling. When Master brings the muggle, I will eat your muggle and you may eat my rabbits.”

“Eat?” Harry was already so panicked by the whole situation, Nagini’s words were one step too far. He ran for the bathroom, dislodging the snake from his leg in the process. A moment later, he was on his knees retching up his last meal into the toilet. He had never been this terrified before, not even when he faced a dragon.

What if he couldn’t find a way out? What if Voldemort really did make him kill someone? How would he ever live with himself? He couldn’t think like that. He had to focus on escape.

“Does hatchling not like rabbits?” Nagini slithered into the bathroom. “Are you ill? I should summon our Master!”

“No!” Harry cried. He had been screaming for Voldemort for what felt like hours. He had hoped desperately that if he could just talk to the man, he’d be able to convince Voldemort to forget about whole ‘tearing Harry’s soul’ idea. Now that he had a chance to calm down a little, he knew that such a conversation was pointless. Voldemort hadn’t listened to Harry once since he arrived at this place. Now, the maniac had his sights set on turning Harry into a murderer. His mind would not be changed.

Harry’s only hope was to escape tonight. Which meant that he couldn’t attract any attention.

“Nagini, I’m ok. Please don’t worry him.”

“If the hatchling is ill, then our Master would want to know,” she hissed.

“I’m not ill. I’m just tired. Let’s go to bed. Come on, I’ll pet you in that one spot you like.”

Nagini gave off a little annoyed hiss, but seemed to accept this. “If you are certain,” she mused.

Harry led her to the enormous bed. He sat on the edge and patted the blankets for her to curl up beside him. If Harry was going to escape, his first step was to distract Nagini or incapacitate her in some way. She had a means of communicating directly with Voldemort, and he couldn’t let her set off any alarms.

“Yesss,” she sighed in contentment. “That’s the spot.” Harry carefully stroked the scales behind her neck.

“Good girl,” he told her. “You’re a wonderful Horcrux.” He wondered if that was what Voldemort would say.

“Yes,” her eyes began to droop. “Nagini is a precious treasure.”

“Yes, you are.” Harry encouraged her. In the back of his mind, he focused on the phoenix song. It always helped him calm his mind and focus on his Blood Magic. So far, every time Harry had practiced Blood Magic, he had focused on gaining control over his own body. He wondered if he’d be able to feel out Nagini’s body instead.

He didn't think he'd be able to do a wandless spell on her. Voldemort would have placed protections on her from regular magic. But Dumbledore had said that Blood Magic gave you control over other people's bodies. If you were good enough, you could heal them, hurt them, even make their hearts stop. Would such a thing work on a snake? He didn't want to hurt her, but maybe he could coax her asleep. It would be easier if she was already relaxed.

"That's it Nagini." Harry slowed his petting as she curled up into a sleeping position. He tried to reach out his consciousness to feel out her body instead of his own.

It was surprisingly easy. Maybe it was because he'd once had a vision that he was inside her body, and he already knew what it felt like to be a deadly snake. One moment, he was sitting on the bed petting her smooth scales, and then suddenly he was a long, powerful animal, curled up and comfortable.

He hummed the soothing phoenix song, not letting himself panic. It was ok that he was a snake. He needed to relax and stay perfectly calm. He felt how soft the blankets were beneath his scales. The room was warm from the fire, and the bedding was nice to curl into. The hand had stopped petting him, but he was already so comfortable. *Sleep*, he hissed in his mind. *That's it, you're safe and warm, just fall asleep.*

And he did.

A moment later, Harry jolted awake. He was a sixteen-year-old boy again. Nagini was fast asleep on the bed beside him. Had he knocked himself out as well? How long had he been asleep? What time was it? There was no way to know, and no time to dwell on it. He needed to focus on what to do next.

He could perform wandless magic without alerting her attention now. But he doubted he'd be able to do any powerful spells. He approached the bedroom door again. Just like every time before, he was met with an invisible barrier. That seemed like a dead end. He tried the window next. To his surprise, he was actually able to touch it. It was locked.

Could he unlock it? Surely, there would be more protections than a simple lock, right? It was worth a shot.

This time, Harry sat and focused on his own body, feeling his magic flow through his veins. He was able to reach the state of calm much quicker than before. It only took about five or ten minutes of careful breathing. Once he was sure he could feel his magic dancing along his fingertips, he reached his hand up and pointed it at the window clasp. He imagined his magic flowing through the little mechanism as he muttered "*Alohomora*," under his breath.

He heard a tiny click.

"No way," he gasped. He jumped to his feet and reached for the handle. To his utter astonishment, the window swung open with ease. He waved his hand out into the night sky just to be sure. It was open. He could lean out. As he did, he saw a very long drop below, to a paved courtyard. He must have been at least three or four stories up.

What should he do next? He could try to jump and catch himself with a levitation charm. But it always took him several minutes to get himself calm enough to do a single wandless spell. He didn't think he'd be able to keep that meditative state while falling out a window. Was there a better solution?

He scanned the dark grounds trying to see anything that might be useful. The moon was large, practically full, and it illuminated the sprawling land below. There were snowy gardens, a frozen hedge maze, several icy fountains, and off in the distance, what appeared to be a Quidditch Pitch. Harry squinted his eyes, wishing not for the first time, that he had better eyesight.

Was that a little shed next to the Quidditch Pitch? Was it a broom shed? It must be. Would it have any brooms in it? Harry had experience summoning brooms from great distance, but he'd never done it without a wand before. If he could get a broom, he could fly out the window, find Remus, and the two of them could soar past the wards before morning. It was perfect. As long as he could get a broom.

He closed his eyes, but quickly realized that he wasn't going to be able to clear his head with the freezing air drifting through the open window. First, he ran over to the bed to wrap Nagini in the blankets. He didn't want her waking up from the cold, only to find him half out the window. Next, he grabbed a heavy winter cloak from the wardrobe. Finally, he half-sat on the window ledge and closed his eyes. He thought about Fawkes and the phoenix's soft, hypnotic melody.

It was harder with the window open. Even with the thick cloak, he felt the frigid air biting at his ears and nose. With every deep, steadying breath, he felt his throat constrict a little more. He tried to ignore it. He was a Gryffindor. He could take the pain; he could take the discomfort. He had to focus.

Harry had no idea how long it took before he finally felt his magic dancing in his blood, but by the time he raised his hand toward the broom shed, he was distantly aware that it was shivering. He didn't feel cold anymore. He only felt his magic, but he knew that his body would be protesting this treatment.

It didn't matter. The only thing that mattered was escape. He could recuperate once he and Remus were safe.

"*Accio* broom," he spoke out loud. He focused all his will on extending his magic out of his outstretched fingers and toward the shed. He felt his magic like a physical thing, slipping out bit by bit, like a leaking sieve. It was searching. It was trying to conform to his will. "Come on," Harry encouraged. "Find a broom." He pictured the shape and feel of a broom in his mind, hoping that would help.

The magic kept going, kept extending out in its search, just as he felt more and more leak out of him. He tried not to let it pour out all at once. He might need more later. But it was so hard to keep the dam from bursting. "*Accio* broom," he tried again, desperately. "Please."

How long would this take? How long had he been propping himself against the windowsill with his arm held out into the blistering, cold night? It felt like a lifetime. Harry sunk down

until he was fully sitting against the ledge. His head felt incredibly heavy, so he leaned it against the side. It felt like more was draining out of him than just his magic. It was getting harder to breathe, harder to keep his eyes open, harder to stay upright.

His extended right arm wasn't remotely cold now. On the contrary, it felt like it was on fire. His magic leaked out bit by bit, and Harry barely held himself up. And yet he kept his arm held out ahead of him. The minutes ticked by, feeling like hours. Maybe it really was hours? His arm screamed at him, begging him to just lower it a little, but he ignored the call.

He had to keep his mind clear, or he'd lose his ability to do Blood Magic. And he had to keep control of his magic, or it would burst and he'd lose consciousness. But it was so hard to stay focused with this constant tug in the back of his mind. He was aware that his fingers were freezing over, his magic was draining what little energy he had left, and most of all, his arm might just fall off if he kept it outstretched any longer.

Harry didn't care. He wouldn't quit. And he wasn't going to lower his arm until he had a broom clasped in his grasp.

Finally, he felt a tug. His magic had found something. There was something at the other end. '*Accio broom,*' he thought as hard as he could '*Please please please! Bring it here. Bring me a broom.*'

He couldn't tell if it was coming or not. He felt that his magic had latched onto something, and yet he couldn't see anything coming. "Come on!" he murmured. He carefully let the stream of his magic increase, and almost fell out the window, but managed to barely stay upright. He focused on his breathing. He tried to hum Fawkes's song out loud.

His voice was rough and sore. His breaths were coming out as sharp little spikes that shot pain to the back of his mind. He suppressed the pain, he suppressed the discomfort, he focused on his magic. He could do this. He had to do this.

He could see that his outstretched hand wasn't shaking anymore. It looked like ice had started to form on his fingertips. Did he have frostbite? That's ok, that could be healed. Once he and Remus were safe, they could get Madam Pomfrey to heal that. But first he needed a broom.

He wanted to use more magic, but he wasn't sure he had much left. He had been leaking it out for a long time. It felt like he had been practically wrung dry. What would happen if he used it all up? Was there a limit? Would he get back the magic he'd used or would it be gone forever?

Finally, when Harry began to seriously worry that he might turn himself into a squib, he saw it. It was small, but coming fast, gliding across the night sky through the moonlight. A broom. He could have cried.

When it reached his hand, he tried to grab it, but his fingers so frigid and frozen, they barely worked. He had to reach up with his other hand to grasp it properly. Then he fell back, and let his senses return to him.

He tried to breathe through the pain and the dizziness, but it was almost impossible. He could not remember ever feeling worse in his life. It wasn't quite as bad as the Cruciatus Curse, but it was certainly worse than the aftereffects. Every muscle in his body screamed in protest. The only blessing was that he couldn't feel his right arm at all, but that would surely hurt worst of all once sensation returned.

Worse than the pain, was the exhaustion. He couldn't stand. He couldn't even open his eyes. All he could do was lie in a fetal position, shivering and panting on the floor, clutching the precious broom.

That's when it happened. He caught a whiff of the wonderful scent of cherry blossoms. Ginny. The smell instantly reminded him of Ginny's perfume. But why on earth would he be smelling Ginny's perfume in some hidden manor way out in the English countryside?

He forced his eyes to open a crack. Every part of his body hated the idea. He pulled the broomstick closer and took a sniff of the handle.

It smelled exactly like the broomstick polish Ginny had given him for Christmas. It couldn't be, could it? He managed to pull himself onto his elbows and looked over the whole broomstick. Sure enough, there was the logo for the Firebolt. And there was the small oval-shaped knot on the left side that Harry must have polished a hundred times. This wasn't just any broom. This was Harry's broom.

He sat up.

This was his Firebolt. But how was that possible? He had left it in Ron's room back in the Burrow. Had it still been there? How far from the Burrow was he? No wonder it had taken so long to come and had seeped so much of his magic. His broom may well have travelled halfway across the country.

Well, it was here now. Harry had his broom, but he didn't think he could ride it. Not in this state. His upper body was already drooping back to the floor. He couldn't even mount a broom in this condition. Let alone fly through the woods searching for Remus.

Maybe if he shut his eyes for just a couple hours, he could still sneak out the window before Voldemort returned in the morning. He didn't know what time it was, but there wasn't any other choice. He needed to regain some energy.

First, he managed to reach up and shut the window. He didn't bother locking it. There was no way he could perform another wandless spell in this condition. Then, he dragged himself across the floor, barely able to crawl. Once he reached the bed itself, he stuffed his precious broom under the edge of the mattress. Just in case Nagini woke up, he didn't want her to see the broom.

It took every ounce of strength Harry had left to pull himself up into the bed. Once his head hit the pillow and he curled under the blankets, he was fast asleep before he could let out a relieved sigh.

“Hatchling?”

Harry stirred. He felt so weak and tired. He didn't want to wake up. He just wanted to sleep, preferably for the rest of his life.

“Little hatchling? You missed breakfast. It is time for you to eat.”

Harry tried to bury himself further into his pillow. His head pounded, his throat burned, his muscles ached. This was even worse than the hangover in the Room of Requirement. His arm was the worst. His right arm felt like it had been dipped in basilisk venom. Why did his arm hurt so much?

Harry's eyes shot open and he bolted upright. He remembered.

“What!? Nagini, what time is it?” He turned to the window. The sun was high in the sky. How long had he slept?

“It is midday. You missed breakfast. Our master came by this morning. When he saw you were still asleep, he made a strange comment about how visitors should leave when their host is still sleeping.”

Harry let out a strangled laugh. Voldemort had actually let him sleep in for once. “But what about the muggle?” he asked. “Did he change his mind?”

“Of course not.” Nagini slithered closer to curl up around Harry's burning arm. He winced, but didn't say anything. “Master said he had much work to finish today. He said he would finish it this morning and then return to bring the muggle. Don't worry hatchling, once Master returns, there will be nothing to disturb us.”

“When's he coming back?”

“I told you. When he finishes his work. In the meantime, there is lunch. You must eat hatchling. You do not look well.”

Harry was sure he looked like death itself. That was certainly how he felt. But there was no time to waste. He was lucky that he had bought some time, since Voldemort had to finish whatever Dark Lord duties kept him busy. But Voldemort could be back any minute, any second. Harry was on borrowed time now.

“I just have to –” Harry stumbled out of bed, but then immediately collapsed to the floor. “Ow,” he muttered.

There was no time to lose. He pulled himself to his feet and limped slowly toward the wardrobe. Apparently, he had slept in the winter cloak, but last night had taught him that he desperately needed a hat and gloves.

“Hatchling!” Nagini slithered to his side, almost tripping him. “You are still unwell. You are not tired. You must have some sickness. I will call our Master. He will make you well.”

“No, don’t call him!” Harry had finally reached the handle of the wardrobe. He used it to brace himself upright as he turned to face the snake. “I’m fine. Seriously, this is normal. I’m not sick, I’m just... going through a phase...”

“What sort of phase? This does not seem normal. When Master was weak and barely able to move, it was because he was unwell.”

“It’s not exactly like that.” Harry thought desperately. He couldn’t let her call for Voldemort. If the man arrived, then all hope was lost. “I’m going through puberty!” he blurted out.

“Puberty?” she tilted her head in confusion.

“Yeah, that’s it. That’s what this is. It’s puberty. Perfectly normal transition that all humans go through.” With that lie in place, Harry turned to open the wardrobe. He almost jumped when he saw his reflection in the mirror. If he hadn’t already known that his boggart was a dementor, he might have thought he was facing one now.

He was paler than he had probably ever been in his life, with an eerie tinge of grey. His hair was still messy, but it lay dank and lifeless on his forehead. His eyes were strangely dim, as if the color had almost entirely seeped out. And yet, the skin under his eyes stood out dark and haunting. Worst of all were the fingertips on his right hand. They weren’t black, which he had half-expected, but they were a very blotchy reddish-purple color. When he tried tapping the tips together, he couldn’t feel them at all.

“This is puberty?” Nagini slithered up behind him. “What does that mean? Why is this normal?”

“Oh, er, yeah,” Harry turned his head away from the mirror, not wanting to be haunted by that sight any longer. “Puberty is when a human transitions from childhood to adulthood. We all go through it. I’m about that age now. So, I’m reaching... er, maturity. It’s kind of rough on the body, but it’s perfectly normal. Just like a snake shedding their skin. Nothing to trouble your master about.”

He looked through the drawers for some mittens or a winter hat. He couldn’t find any. Of course, Voldemort would have expected Harry to stay inside. He unbuttoned the cloak and put on several layers of sweaters underneath. Maybe he could use wool socks instead of gloves? However, that would make it harder to hold onto the broom.

“So, puberty is when humans become sexually mature?” Nagini asked, while Harry pulled on a second pair of trousers. “It is when a human becomes ready for matehood?”

“Er,” Harry didn’t particularly like her tone. “Technically, yes. I mean, I could... If I found the right person...”

“So you are ready to find your mate!” She slithered up close. She looked like she wanted to crawl up his leg again, but his legs were so busy fumbling with the trousers. “I think I know the perfect mate for you.”

“Look Nagini,” Harry tried to be gentle. “You’re a very nice snake. And I’m sure you’d make a lucky boy-snake very happy. But... You see...”

“I am not looking for a mate,” she interrupted. “Nagini is very independent. Nagini does not wish to settle down yet.”

“Oh,” Harry tried to think of appropriate words. “Well, that’s good for you.”

“Master does not have a mate though. You should mate with him.”

Harry startled so much that he fell to the floor. When he gasped, his throat was so dry and sore, he couldn’t stop coughing. “I...” He tried to speak through his coughing fit, but his throat was protesting every word. “Don’t... think...”

“You are not well!” Nagini hissed. “I don’t know how humans puberty, but it should not be this bad. You need mating now!”

“No!” Harry screamed. He saw red. It distracted him for a moment, and he looked down. His hand was covered in blood. He had been coughing up blood into his hand. Oh well, he would deal with that later. He wiped his mouth and tried to distract the snake. “Nagini, this is all normal. I just need to... I need to nest! That’s what I need. Voldemort can’t come here until after I nest. Come on, let’s go back to the bed.”

“Are you sure?” Nagini asked skeptically.

“Yes, I’m very sure. They teach all of this to young humans so we know what to expect. This is just as normal as hibernation for a snake.”

He got cozy on the bed and gestured for her to join him. She did after a long moment of hesitation. “I am sorry that your puberty is so difficult,” she commiserated.

“It’s ok,” Harry whispered. He needed her to fall asleep again, so he could escape out the window before Voldemort arrived. “It will be over soon. I just need to nap. You should nap with me.” He reached out to pet the spot she particularly loved. He would need to use Blood Magic to knock her out fully. He wasn’t sure if he had enough magic left to do it, but he didn’t have any other choice.

Before he knew it, he was humming the phoenix song out loud, as if he were humming a lullaby to Nagini. She curled up into the blankets, and let out a pleased hiss as he scratched her scales. “That’s it,” he encouraged. “Just relax.”

It was even easier the second time. One minute he was a scrawny teenager, and then he was a powerful snake. *Sleep*, he thought as hard as he could. *I should sleep, I’m so tired. I’m safe and warm and I should sleep.*

Just as he felt her consciousness slipping, he wasn’t a snake anymore. But he wasn’t Harry Potter either.

He was standing in his study, facing one of his pathetic followers. “Pass these off to Thicknesse, and make sure these letters get mailed out immediately.”

“Yes, my lord.” The man bowed and scurried away.

Finally, all his inane paperwork was complete. Now he could turn his attention to what he had been looking forward to all day. He would travel to London and find a lone muggle that no one would miss. Harry would put up less fuss if the muggle was clearly a stray. And then he would have all night to show Harry the true power of Soul Magic. Salazar! Not just all night. They would have the rest of eternity.

Lord Voldemort turned on the spot and apparated away.

Harry Potter gasped and opened his eyes. It took him a moment to remember who he was and what he was doing. As soon as it came back, he didn't waste any time. He pulled the invisibility cloak from the pillowcase, careful not to wake Nagini. He wouldn't have time to put her to sleep again.

He tripped as he climbed out of the bed, but managed not to make too much noise. His legs were shaky and weak. Instead of bothering to waste time trying to stand, he crawled to the side of the mattress and pulled the broom out. He considered hobbling over to the wardrobe again to find something else to keep him warm, but there wasn't time. He would have to settle for the layers of sweaters.

With what little strength he had left, he pulled himself to his feet, threw the cloak on, and mounted his precious Firebolt. The broom hovered obediently for him, knowing exactly what he needed, like the old friend it was. “I don't have the strength to push you on ahead,” he whispered. He couldn't even sit up in the proper riding position. He was practically draping off the side.

Usually, Harry knew exactly how to maneuver the stick to get it to go precisely where he wanted, but he wouldn't be able to guide it in the pathetic condition he was in. “I just need you to fly through that window, and then on toward the woods.” His cheek was almost brushing the handle, he was slumped over so low. He wasn't sure if the broom would be able to follow his murmured instructions, but to his immense relief, it slowly lifted up higher from the floor and drifted carefully toward the window. Harry reached up his arm to push open the unlocked window. It swung open with just a touch. He drifted through the opening and out into the chilly winter air.

He was outside. He was dead tired and barely hanging onto his broom and he still couldn't feel his fingertips, but he had made it outside. Now he just needed to get to the woods. He needed to find Remus before Voldemort made it back and realized Harry was gone.

Remus Lupin hadn't slept a wink. He knew that part of it was the usual skin-crawling feeling that always accompanied an approaching full moon. However, it was far worse this time. Later that night, when the full moon rose, he would be expected to hunt.

Remus had been careful his entire life. He was sure that he had never killed a person while transformed. Not once. The closest he had ever gotten was the incident with Severus Snape. Would he be able to maintain enough sense not to kill anyone later that night?

He had gotten a little better at remaining calm when transforming with other wolves. He had hunted wild deer with Erwin Sykes's pack for a few months. He was good at following the rest of the pack and following cues from the other members. That only made him more nervous now. If Greyback and the others tried to encourage Moony to hunt human beings, he wouldn't have the wherewithal to ignore his hunting instincts.

This gave him only one acceptable option. He had to escape. He had to escape before sunset.

It wouldn't be easy, though. He had to time it right. He maintained the façade of teaching the other wolves simple spells during the morning. This time he taught them the exploding charm. He would feel bad about teaching them a dangerous spell, except that *Bombarda* had one of the most complicated and obvious wand movements. It was therefore one of the easiest to shield against. It also provided him with the distraction he needed.

After lunch, his students had finally mastered the wand movement, and he set them to the task of trying to blast the bushes outside of their camp. This meant that he couldn't stay tied to the tree. Not if he was going to supervise. Greyback seemed unsure of this idea, but he was also eager for his wolves to learn blasting charms. So, he agreed to lead Remus out of their usual clearing.

"*Bombarda!*" Howler shouted, but his wand movement was just a little off.

"*Bombarda!*" Grady tried, but he didn't get the pronunciation quite right.

Remus offered suggestions and encouragement. He just needed one of them to get it right. Just one blast would be enough of a distraction.

"You excited about tonight?" Greyback teased. He still refused to participate in the lessons. Instead, he hovered around Remus, watching him like a hawk.

"I'm trying not to think about it," he answered honestly.

"Funny that I've never seen you transformed," Greyback muttered. "Considerin' I'm the one that turned you. Wonder what kind of wolf you turned out to be. Wonder if any of my bloodlust made it through all them years of bein' a house pet."

"I've never hurt anyone before," Remus answered curtly.

"Never given yourself the chance. I bet you could be bloody ruthless if you let yourself."

BOOM.

Greyback and the other wolves jumped at the small blast that Wolfram had caused with his properly performed exploding charm. Remus had been waiting for it though. He dove at the nearest wolf, while the others stared at the mound of exploded brush. In a split second, he had knocked Grady to the ground and was wrestling for his wand.

A moment later, Greyback had a hand on his throat. He was pulling Remus back. "Get off!" he screamed.

Remus did, but he took the wand with him. In an instant, he turned and pointed the wand in Greyback's face. "*Felinus Fetus*," he cried.

Greyback howled, but didn't let go. Remus's eyes watered, both from the horrible smell and the firm grip tightening on his throat.

"You're gonna pay for that!"

Remus shot *Confringo* next, right into Greyback's face. The wolf was flung back into a tree. As he flew, a dozen other wolves turned their wands on him.

"*Bombarda!*" Wolfram tried again.

"*Expelliarmus!*" Howler shouted.

A dozen spells shot toward him, each one an incantation he'd taught them over the last few days. Each one hit his shield and fizzled. Their spells were no match for his *Protego Maxima*. But his shield was no match for an angry werewolf.

Greyback threw himself at Remus from behind. Remus tried a stunner, but it had almost no effect. Greyback had one hand on his throat and the other was grasping for the wand. The stench of the Fetus spell was nauseating, but Remus fought through it. He shot another *Confringo*, but this time Greyback was ready. The spell blasted across his face, but Greyback refused to let go, twisting Remus's neck until he felt like it might snap off. They both screamed.

"*Expelliarmus!*" Howler tried again.

"He's mine!" Greyback snarled at the younger wolf. He had finally pinned Remus's wand hand. Remus couldn't twist it toward the alpha, but he still refused to let go. "I've been waiting a long time for this," Greyback whispered into his ear. The smell of cat urine was making Remus dizzy, and he could hardly breathe with Greyback clenching his windpipe. "I'm finally gonna show you who you belong to."

Remus's vision was turning black. Greyback was too strong to pry the fingers from his neck. And the alpha's large body was all muscle; too heavy to shove off. Remus felt teeth brush his neck. "Remember where I bit you the first time? Feels like only yesterday, don't it?"

Was he falling asleep or was he dying? He hoped it was the latter. And yet he couldn't die, not when Harry was in Voldemort's clutches. He needed to survive to help rescue Harry. And then there was Dora. He wanted to at least say goodbye to her.

He gasped what little air he could and let his mind go blank. It was easy when he was only half-conscious to start. Greyback was muttering something, but he no longer cared. He was distantly aware that the wand had finally been knocked from his hand, but it didn't matter. He wasn't planning on using it anyway.

Remus shut his eyes. He focused on the feel of the air around him. He felt the chilly breeze blow gently between the dense trees. He felt out the biting winter winds, swirling in the sky

far above. He embraced the rancid stench of the air that clung to his lungs. He let it fill him. He was not going to choke, and he wasn't going to let Greyback win this fight.

He was still, and he waited until he felt his magic completely intermingle with the air.

"What's the matter, pup?" Greyback's voice was almost tender. "Aren't you gonna fight back? Come on, I like it when they fight."

Remus opened his eyes. He had always been so careful when practicing this before, but now he had nothing to lose. He would let all the magic go in one burst. His amber eyes met Greyback's silver ones. "If you want a fight, here you go."

He forced his magic out and blasted all the air around them into the greatest explosion of swirling tempests he could muster.

Harry was shivering and struggling to stay on his broom as he drifted, still invisible, through the forest. He had no clue where Remus could be, until he heard a loud blast, far off toward his left. It sounded almost like a *Bombardo*. He could barely steer his broom in his weakened state, but he encouraged it to follow the sound of the blast, and it obeyed.

It took him several minutes to find where the hubbub had come from, but by the time he reached Remus, he found the man struggling with Fenrir Greyback. Greyback had Remus in a chokehold, and the man had knocked a wand from Remus's hand. If Harry could just reach that wand, he'd be able to stun Greyback.

Harry had to act fast before the werewolf caught his scent. But to his relief, as his broom crept closer, Harry's nose filled with a terrible and unfamiliar scent. Whatever that horrible smell was, it would certainly cover Harry's scent. He ignored the instinct to tackle Greyback off of Remus, and went straight for the wand instead. He was almost there, his hand reaching down to carefully pluck the wand from the ground.

Suddenly, all hell broke loose.

With an explosion of power, the sky swirled into a vortex of swirling air. A powerful cyclone erupted in the forest, knocking Harry completely out of the clearing and high up above the tops of the trees. In seconds, Harry was above the clouds. The air was painfully cold and wet. The chill burned. He barely managed to hang onto his broom as it spun through the sky like a leaf on a blustery day. Even the Firebolt's powerful magic was barely enough to keep Harry from tumbling to his death.

A fearsome twister had appeared in the middle of the forest. It tore out ancient trees with the force of its shocking arrival. And then, just as suddenly, it was gone and all was quiet.

Harry was lucky his cloak had been wrapped around him so tightly, or it would have ended up halfway across the valley. Harry wanted to cry. He was so exhausted and so cold and so miserable. Why in the hell did a bloody tornado appear in the middle of a small wooded

clearing? And why had it disappeared so suddenly? Had Remus done Elemental Magic again? Could he really make something that powerful?

The near-death experience had forced Harry wide awake. He was still in pain and hanging on by a thread, but he was alert and determined. He steered his broom through the now calm air, back toward where the tornado had sprouted. He could see Remus down below, in the center of an enormous path of destruction. All the trees and brush around the professor had been blasted away.

The group of men, who Harry assumed were the other werewolves, had been flung almost ten meters. Half of them looked dazed, while the other half had been completely knocked out. There was one werewolf, however, that had managed to withstand the explosion.

Greyback was slowly returning to his feet. He was getting back up, and his eyes were trained on Remus. Harry had to do something, but the discarded wand was long gone. There had to be something he could do.

Remus tried to keep his eyes open, but it was so hard. The blast of Elemental Magic had taken everything out of him. He managed to sit up with tremendous effort, but he didn't think he'd be able to stand. He would pass out any moment.

"Now that was bloody impressive." The low, growling voice came from the other side of the wrecked clearing. Greyback had survived the blast, and he was slowly stalking toward Remus. "That's how werewolves fight." His lips quirked into a dangerous smile. "My turn."

Greyback tilted his head. He looked like he was about to pounce.

That was when Remus saw it. A large rock was falling through the air, from seemingly nowhere. Greyback swiveled his head to see what Remus was looking at. He looked up just in time for the bludger-sized stone to hit him right between the eyes. The werewolf hit the ground hard.

"I told you those spells come in handy," Remus mumbled. Then he passed out.

Lord Voldemort scowled when he felt the tug of the Dark Mark. Bella had called for him twice in less than a minute. He didn't have time for her hysterics. He still hadn't found the right muggle. On the other hand, if something was amiss at the Manor...

Harry jolted back to the present. He was out of time. Voldemort would be back any second, and he'd know right away that something had gone horribly wrong.

He flew past Greyback's unconscious form and over to the collapsed Remus. Harry tried shaking the man awake. "Remus please!" He patted the man's cheek. "Wake up! You need to wake up!"

Remus stirred. “H’ry?” His voice was barely discernable. “No H’ry,” he tried to speak.

“Remus, we need to get out of here. Can you get onto the broom?”

“No, liv me...”

“Live you? What are you saying? Leave you!? No, of course not. I’m not going anywhere without you.”

“No, H’ry. The fu... m’n.” With that, Remus could no longer maintain his tenuous grasp on consciousness, and he fell over into the frigid ground.

“Foomun? What in Merlin’s name are you talking about?” It didn’t matter. Harry needed to get them both out of there right now. But he had no wand, no strength, and no energy. All he had was a broom, and a very heavy, unconscious, grown man.

Harry encouraged his Firebolt to lay almost flush with the ground, and then he carefully rolled Remus onto it. Without a hint of grace or decency, Harry climbed on top of him, and wrapped himself around the older man, until his legs and hands reached the broom. It was awkward as anything, and probably would have looked very stupid if they weren’t invisible. But it would just maybe work, and that was good enough.

“OK,” Harry whispered to his Firebolt. “Let’s go, nice and easy, up into the air.” It flew up. As soon as it passed the height of the trees, Harry screamed.

His sore, battered throat tore open in an unholy wail. Pain like he couldn’t believe ripped through his scar. His entire head felt like it was boiling. Voldemort was furious. Painfully, vindictively enraged. Which meant he was back.

The broom fell down to the earth. By the time Harry regained control of his breathing, he realized he and Remus had fallen into a snow bank next to each other. Harry took just a moment to calm his racing heart.

Voldemort wasn’t right there in the clearing. He had probably stopped at Harry’s room first. Harry could feel the frantic desperation across the link. The dark wizard had probably found Nagini asleep, the window open, and Harry gone. What would he do next? He would probably only spend a few moments investigating the area outside the window before he went for Remus.

Harry dragged himself back on top of Remus, who was thankfully still lying across the broom. Harry dug his hands into the snow and gripped his Firebolt as tight as he could. All the while, he hummed Fawkes’s little song. He needed to keep his mind clear. He wanted to keep the pain at bay, but mostly, he needed to keep Voldemort from reading his mind and seeing where they were.

Up into the clear air they flew. Once they were above the tree line, Harry did his best to keep the broom level and keep moving forward. He tried to maintain the speed as best he could, but didn’t even attempt maximum velocity. They had to get as far from the clearing as they could before Voldemort apparated there. But Harry also didn’t want to risk dislodging

Remus, who was uncomfortably squashed between Harry and the broom. He hummed his song louder as the wind roared past his ears. In the back of his mind, he felt Voldemort's fury, his desperation, and his fear. Voldemort was afraid. Harry ignored it.

The two peculiar fliers had travelled a fair distance from the clearing, when Harry's ears rang with a tremendous call. It wasn't in his mind, but all over the valley.

"HARRY POTTER!" Voldemort's voice was magnified with an incredible Sonorous charm. "RETURN TO ME NOW AND YOU SHALL BE FORGIVEN. RETURN NOW AND I SHALL SPARE YOU AND YOUR WOLF." So Voldemort had discovered that Remus was missing too. That's why he had resorted to bargaining. "I HAVE JUST SENT EVERY DEATH EATER AT MY DISPOSAL TO TRACK YOU DOWN. THEY ARE SCOURING THE ENTIRE VALLEY AND THEY *WILL* FIND YOU. YOU HAVE NO CHANCE AT ESCAPE. RETURN OF YOUR OWN ACCORD, AND IT SHALL GO MUCH BETTER FOR YOU."

Harry ignored the words and focused on his breathing. It was so insanely hard with the biting wind blowing in his face. He had to keep his mind blank. He let the phoenix song fill his head. He pointed his broom in what should be North, based on the late afternoon sun. He rode toward freedom.

As he calmed his mind, the biting wind didn't bother him so much. The awkward position wrapped around Remus didn't feel quite so uncomfortable. The burning throb in his scar faded into the background.

At some point, he saw a black-robed figure flying through the air on a broom of their own. He didn't let it bother him, or scare him out of his calm state. The figure didn't seem to be coming his way. In fact, it was lower than him, hovering right above the trees. Every once in a while, the figure would point their wand into the trees and cast a pale blue spell. Harry suspected it was the *Homenum Revelio* spell. That made sense. They didn't know he had his cloak or his broom, so they suspected he was hiding among the trees. He flew on.

He could still feel Voldemort's emotions in the distant recesses of his mind, like an annoying itch. However, he was able to ignore them with his mind focused on that calm, meditative state. Voldemort was getting increasingly frantic, but Harry ignored those feelings. He passed a few other Death Eaters on brooms of their own, but they didn't fly close to him.

He could see the edge of the trees ahead of him. He was so close.

That's when he heard Voldemort's voice fill the valley again. "*HARRY, COME BACK!*" he cried. It sounded different from his call before; sharper and higher. It was Parseltongue, but very, very loud. "*COME BACK AND I WILL GIVE YOU WHATEVER WEALTH AND TREASURE YOU DESIRE. I WILL SHOW YOU SUCH INCREDIBLE POWER, SUCH AWE-INSPIRING MAGIC, THAT YOU CANNOT COMPREHEND. YOU WILL BE IMMORTAL AND ALLPOWERFUL. COME BACK TO ME AND YOU SHALL HAVE EVERYTHING!*"

Harry flew on. If Voldemort hadn't figured out yet that Harry didn't want wealth or power or immortality, that was his own fault. Harry knew exactly what he wanted. And he would fly all night through the cold, wet sky until he found it.

As he passed the edge of the trees, he felt the wards shimmer and fall behind, and then he kept going.

Harry kept his mind clear as he flew on through the sky. He didn't know where or when he could stop, so he kept soaring. The meditative state was pretty easy to keep going once he'd started, despite his extreme exhaustion. It helped that he wasn't using any magic. The calm state of mind allowed Harry to keep the pain in his scar at bay, not to mention the pain in the rest of his body.

He had never found a hat or gloves, so he half-suspected his fingers had frozen solid at some point, but he was too scared to check. His arms and legs had gone numb a long time ago, but Harry's mind was busy drifting along. The concerns of his body would be dealt with later.

Remus never woke as they continued north. Harry passed over several valleys and forests. He saw a few villages in the distance as he continued. He knew better than to stop at the first village he found, but at a certain point he'd have to stop somewhere. When should he land? Should he try to find a quiet muggle village?

He didn't want to land too early, and make it easy for Voldemort to find him. However, he didn't think he'd be able to fly all night. The air was quickly dropping in temperature as the sun got lower in the sky.

If he landed in a muggle area, he could try to find a phone. He didn't have money for a pay phone, but maybe a corner store would have a phone they'd let him borrow. Who would he even call? Mrs. Figg would have a way to contact the Order, but he couldn't remember her number. Aunt Petunia would know it. But then Harry remembered that Dudley had accidentally blown up the house with fireworks. The Dursleys would be even less enthusiastic to hear from him than usual.

As the sky changed from blue to pink to red, Harry settled on the best plan he could come up with. He would land in a muggle village and hide Remus and the broom in an alley under the cloak. He would walk to a store or pub and ask to use their telephone. He would call Aunt Marge, and immediately offer to pay the Dursleys for all their stupid home repairs, if they just give him Mrs. Figg's phone number. He'd buy the Dursleys a whole new bloody house if it meant he could get ahold of the Order tonight.

It wasn't perfect, but it was good enough. Or at least, it seemed that way, until the sun got so low in the sky that it was barely a sliver, and the moon shined down with the reflected light. Harry smiled at the wide full moon for a moment, until something finally clicked. *Foomun*. Remus hadn't been saying 'Foomun,' or whatever nonsense Harry had heard. The man had been trying to say full moon. He'd been trying to warn Harry.

There was a full moon tonight.

Harry's meditative state broke with the shock of that realization. Suddenly, all the pain, the soreness, the exhaustion, the cold, and the panic, returned to him in an overwhelming wave.

His grip on the broom slipped. He tried to hang on, but Remus was already sliding out from under him. The man felt extremely heavy, and Harry could barely control his frozen fingers.

“No, no, no!” Harry cried, as his broom plummeted down in the middle of nowhere. Harry’s scar fired up again. Voldemort could probably sense his thoughts, but all the other man would be able to tell was that Harry was scared and lost and confused. Even Harry didn’t know where he was, so he was sure Voldemort wouldn’t be able to find them.

Harry’s broom crashed into a tree, and then both he and Remus were tumbling to the ground. Harry tried to snag a branch, but he was too weak and uncoordinated to stop his heavy landing. As he hit the ground, his ankle twisted painfully. The cry of agony erupted from him at the same time his joint made a terrible pop. Had he sprained it or broken it?

His head was throbbing, and all the wind had been knocked out of him. Remus wasn’t far from him, lying just as still as he had all afternoon. Maybe he would stay asleep even after he transformed? Maybe he wouldn’t transform at all? Maybe Harry would be dead in the next ten minutes? Maybe he should have stayed with Voldemort? No, he’d rather get eaten by a werewolf than turn into a murderer.

Before Harry was able to muster the energy to sit up, the sun disappeared, and Remus’s body began to shudder.

“No,” Harry tried to cry out, but his voice was barely a whisper. “Don’t change. Please. Not now that we’ve come this far.”

It was useless. He might as well beg the sun not to set.

Harry could hear Remus’s bones crunching. The man’s voice ripped into a terrible snarl as his body began to change. Harry was out of time. There had to be something he could do. If Remus woke up tomorrow morning to find that he had eaten Harry Potter, it would be unimaginable.

Harry desperately looked around for something that might help. The broom! The broom was lying several meters away in a snowy bush. If Harry could just reach the broom, he could fly to safety. Remus’s body let out a terrible howl. Fur had begun to sprout all over. What was left of his robes, ripped apart and fell to the forest floor.

Harry closed his eyes. He needed to get to the broom. But first, he needed to gather his strength. He could do this. He had to do this. He was a Gryffindor. That meant he could push his body further than it was meant to go. He could withstand the pain. It didn’t matter. He just had to get to that broom.

Harry stood up. His knees almost immediately buckled, but he didn’t let himself fall back down. He moved toward the broom. He was barely able to hobble. There was nothing that didn’t hurt. His legs could hardly hold him up. His left foot was sticking out at an odd angle. None of that mattered. Harry was getting closer.

Just as his hand reached out for the stick, a great howl pierced the night. It wasn’t a half-human howl anymore. It was the howl of a werewolf. Harry turned.

Moony was barely three meters away. He could probably reach Harry in a single leap. He looked haggard. He was panting heavily; hot air visible in the cold moonlight. He was clearly weakened, but he was very much awake. His eyes were trained on the young human across from him. Did he recognize Harry?

“Moony? It’s me. It’s Harry.”

The werewolf leapt.

Harry snatched the broom while the enormous beast flew through the air. Harry didn’t think. He just called on his magic and tried to force as much strength into his swing as he possibly could. He pulled the broom around like a beater’s bat. He slammed the handle right across the werewolf’s face right as it came into range.

SMACK.

The terrible crack of wood hitting skull echoed through the trees. Harry didn’t even see if it worked. The force of calling on his magic had taken too much out of him. His eyes fell shut and he collapsed into the snow.

He would drift off soon. The thought of sleep sounded so appealing. But was Remus ok? He wasn’t making any noise, so he must have been knocked out. Did he need medical attention? Would he wake up before sunrise and attack? Would Harry wake up at all? His body felt so weak, and he was lying without much protection in the cold snow. What if he froze to death in the night?

Harry needed help. He needed to call for help or he would curl up in the snow and never wake up again.

There were two options.

He could reach across the link to Voldemort. Maybe, the man would be so grateful to find Harry clinging to life, he wouldn’t punish Harry after all. Maybe he’d save Remus, too. Harry wasn’t going to do that, though. Voldemort wanted Harry to tear apart his soul. Harry would rather die.

The other option was infinitely more difficult. Just the idea of it made Harry’s stomach churn. If Harry wouldn’t reach across the link to Voldemort, maybe he could reach for help with one final wandless spell. Harry didn’t even have the energy to open his eyes, but maybe there was something left inside of him that he could draw on to cast a Patronus.

It was his only hope.

Harry took a deep breath and cleared his mind. He would have one shot at this. If he didn’t think of a happy enough memory to form a fully corporeal Patronus, he wouldn’t get another chance. As he reached out toward his magic, he could feel a few little sparks dancing through his veins. There was barely any power left. Would it be enough?

It had to be.

He just needed a memory. A really good memory. Something that was guaranteed to make him brim with joy. He thought of Ron and Hermione, but they felt so far away from him in that moment. He thought of Remus, but it was hard to think of happy memories when he was worried that the man might be bleeding to death beside him. What else could he think about?

For some reason, the mental image of Tom Riddle appeared in Harry's mind. Probably because he had only just escaped Voldemort, and the man was almost certainly still hunting him. The Tom Riddle he imagined, though, wasn't nearly as scary as Lord Voldemort.

Riddle was in the potion's classroom, helping Harry mix Slughorn's assignment. "Why Harry," he whispered in his ear. "You and I make a good team. We really ought to work together more often."

And then Harry imagined Riddle in the cupboard under the stairs. He was crouched next to Harry on the small cot. "I understand why you don't want anyone else to know about... all of this. Your uncle, the cupboard, the food. Your secret is safe with me."

"I like you like this." Riddle was drenched in suds, and his chest was flush with Harry's. "I like seeing you happy."

Voldemort was sitting at his desk with a strangely uncomfortable expression. "I... understand... how you feel..."

Did Voldemort have goodness in him? Was there still some small part of Tom Riddle that was capable of kindness? Of empathy? Of redemption? Some tiny fragment of goodness underneath the layers of evil and crazy? If even someone as terrible as Voldemort had the capacity for virtue, then surely there was hope in this world after all. And if that wasn't a happy thought, Harry wasn't sure what was.

"Expecto Patronum."

Chapter End Notes

One chapter to go. Just a reminder, this will continue in Part 2. So, the overall story isn't ending just yet.

Flashing Badges

Chapter Notes

This is it! The final chapter (of Part 1). If you want to see what becomes of all these characters going forward, be sure to check out Part 2: Blood Magic. I'm posting the first chapter simultaneously with this one.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Colors flashed before his eyes. Pink. Green. Blue. Yellow. What was making such vivid, bright light?

Harry stirred. His body ached, and the waking world felt far away. He pulled his mind to the surface, toward the dancing colors. He opened his eyes.

Purple. Orange. Turquoise. Red.

The first thing Harry saw was a bright button, about the size of a snitch, flashing different colors not far from his face. The next thing Harry noticed, was that the button was attached to a set of lavender robes, which were being worn by a very familiar, silver-haired man.

“Good morning, Harry.” Albus Dumbledore beamed down at him. “Or should I say, good afternoon.”

“You found me!” Harry cried. His throat was still sore, but he hardly cared about that. “The Patronus? It worked? Wait, it’s afternoon already?” Harry looked around. His vision was blurry without his glasses, but he could still make out the familiar white linens and tall windows of the hospital wing. He couldn’t see any other people around. “Where’s Remus?”

“Remus Lupin is perfectly fine,” Dumbledore was quick to assure him, before handing Harry a familiar pair of wire-rimmed glasses. “I can see you have a lot of questions. It might be best to answer them in order of importance. First and foremost, Remus is just fine. When we found you both, you were each unconscious, and he was still in werewolf form. We thought it prudent to bring him to St. Mungo’s. He’s there now, in the process of making a full recovery.”

“He’s ok? I didn’t hurt him too badly?”

“Harry, please.” Dumbledore held up his good hand. The little button on his lapel kept dancing through the different colors. Green. Magenta. Yellow. Cyan. “Kingsley practically had to tackle Remus to prevent him from storming off here. I don’t want to have to do that with you. I understand that you’re anxious, but everything is alright now. You and Remus are both safe. Give me a moment to explain.” Harry nodded and allowed Dumbledore to continue his story.

“As for your Patronus,” said the headmaster. “It marched into my office late at night while I was trying to finish some research. Your voice said ‘Please come find me,’ before Prongs trotted off through the wall. It’s lucky I was able to trace the magical signature back to your location. I wasted no time in summoning Minerva, Alastor, and Kingsley to join me.”

“Where was I?” asked Harry.

“In the Cotswolds Hills. You were in a small, wooded area. If the little forest has a name, I’m not aware of it. As for your earlier question, it is indeed the afternoon. However, it might not be the afternoon you expected. We brought you back to the school late Monday night, or early Tuesday morning, depending on your perspective. It is now a few hours past lunchtime... on Thursday.”

“Thursday!?” Harry gaped. “I slept over two days?” Harry still felt exhausted, but he forced himself to sit up. Dumbledore was reclining in a chintz-covered seat, which the man must have conjured himself. Now that Harry was wearing his glasses, he could see that Dumbledore was the only one in the hospital wing besides himself. Even Madam Pomfrey was noticeably absent. However, when Harry looked around, he noticed several packages on the floor by his bed, some large and some small. There was also an enormous pile of letters. “Where is everyone? What’s all this?”

“At the moment, your friends Ron and Hermione are in class. I’m sure they’ll be delighted to hear you’re awake. They’ve come by several times to check on you.”

“I’m surprised they can stand being in the same room as each other.” From what Harry remembered, Ron and Hermione hadn’t spoken since she went to Slughorn’s party with Draco Malfoy.

“Oh,” Dumbledore waved his hand. “You’d be amazed at the sort of misunderstandings people are willing to set aside when their best friend is kidnapped by a deranged dark lord.” The little round button pinned to his chest kept shining different colors in Harry’s face. Orange. Blue. Pink. It was very distracting.

“Sir, I’m sorry,” Harry interrupted. “But why are you wearing that thing on your chest?” He pointed at the circle, not much larger than a walnut. When Harry squinted at it, he noticed that there were letters written across the face, barely discernable under the rabidly blinking colors.

“Oh this?” Dumbledore pointed proudly to the badge. Harry could make out an S. Was the second letter a P or an F? “It’s my SPEW badge of course.”

Harry gaped. “You’re wearing one too?” Sure enough, the last letter looked like a W. It was almost impossible to read with the colors shifting so rapidly.

“Well, when the whole thing started, I did make a donation to Miss Granger’s cause, of course.” Dumbledore pulled the badge from his robes and handed it to Harry to inspect. Up close, Harry could read the four letters much easier. “However, as a public figure, it seemed imprudent to wear something that made such a controversial statement. And as I told you over the holidays, I was worried it might upset my house elves.”

“Yeah,” Harry remembered talking about that. “So, why are you wearing one now?”

“Well, at a certain point, it seemed almost too controversial *not* to wear one. You see Harry, when you first gave your interview with Miss Roscoe, those little pins started to pop up here and there, because people associated SPEW badges with their support for you. However, after you went missing, and the public learned that you had been kidnapped by Lord Voldemort...” Dumbledore’s voice trailed off. “Let’s just say, people wanted a way to show their support for you in a physical way. I had to go to the Ministry over the weekend, and I don’t think I saw a single person who *wasn’t* wearing one. Even Dolores Umbridge managed to find a pink one.”

“Umbridge was wearing a SPEW badge!?” Harry shouted. “Umbridge? But she hates magical creatures. And she really hates me.”

“That’s all true,” Dumbledore agreed. “But she likes keeping her job. And her job requires she at least maintain the appearance of supporting the Chosen One.” He reached out to take the badge back and pin it once again to his chest. “Once I saw that everyone else was wearing these wonderful little badges, it seemed silly to be holding out.”

“You certainly picked a bright one,” said Harry. “Did you enchant it to change colors like that?”

“No, I bought it this way.”

“From Hermione?” That didn’t seem like her.

“No, of course not. I bought it from Mistery Fred and George Weasley.”

Harry’s mouth fell open. “What? When?”

“They were here on Tuesday afternoon to visit you. You weren’t in the best state to be hosting, but I assure you, they didn’t mind. Once it was established that you were alright, they made something of a killing, selling badges and other products to half the student body. I’m not sure how many Thunder Crackers they managed to pawn before Mr. Filch and Professor Snape had them escorted off school grounds. I think it was a lot.”

“Fred and George were here?”

“As well and their parents, yes.” Dumbledore stood from his conjured seat and sauntered over to the pile of packages. He appeared to be looking for something. “Bill and his fiancé, Mademoiselle Delacour, also stopped by. She must have kissed your forehead at least ten times. I’m afraid you missed it.”

“That’s ok,” Harry shrugged. “Fleur’s nice and all, but her kisses don’t seem to affect me near as much as Ron.”

“I never understood the appeal myself,” Dumbledore shrugged back. “Here we are!” The headmaster pulled out a large tin full of homemade fudge, as well as a small green badge. “The fudge is from Molly. The badge is from her sons.”

Harry set the fudge on the bedside table and looked over the SPEW badge. As soon as his finger brushed over the letters, a loud voice filled the entire hospital wing.

“Oh Potty Wee Potter, what can we do with you? Your holiday getaway is to escape from You-Know-Who!”

“Oh yes, I should have warned you.” Dumbledore smiled as the music got louder. “It sings.”

Harry quickly tapped the button again. The singing faded away.

“Probably for the best,” said Dumbledore. “I’ve heard that whole song, and it gets very inappropriate by the third verse. Peeves is quite fond of it. He’s been singing it all over the school for the past two days. He’s added a few verses of his own.”

Harry carefully set the badge next to the fudge as if it might explode.

“Your friends Fred and George also left you at least six boxes of fireworks,” Dumbledore continued. “I hope you don’t mind, but I took the liberty of moving those to my house in Godric’s Hollow. It’s just that Mr. Filch has been coming and going quite a bit in the last few days, and I didn’t think you’d want to spend your first weekend back polishing trophies in detention.”

“Filch has been stopping by?”

Dumbledore gestured toward the piles upon piles of packages. “As you recall, it is his job to inspect the mail for any dangerous or unsavory items. Ever since the newspapers printed the article about you escaping Voldemort’s clutches... Well, the school has been receiving more mail than usual.”

Harry finally took a moment to peruse all the parcels and packages. Most of them were giftwrapped, but he saw several flower arrangements, some ‘Get Well Soon’ balloons, and an enormous stuffed griffon which waved at him. There were also several gift baskets, mostly filled with various candies and sweets, but some were filled with fruits and cheeses.

“Who sent me all this stuff?”

“I think an easier question would be: Who *didn’t* send you something? This isn’t even the half of it. We’ve got three classrooms down in the dungeons full of fanmail and best wishes and gifts. Poor Argus has been trying to sort through it all, but it will probably take him another week to catch up. He’s been bringing things up by the wheelbarrow, but you may have to be patient.”

Harry was excited to see what was there. However, when he tried to jump out of bed, he realized how weak his body still felt.

“Calm down, my dear boy. If I allow you out of bed, Poppy will make me eat my badge, and I doubt it tastes as good as it looks. If you want to inspect something, I’ll be happy to show you.”

“I just want to see what my friends got me.” Harry didn’t care what complete strangers had sent him, but he was curious if his friends had sent him something nice.

“I believe your friends Ron and Hermione were waiting to give you their gift when you woke up. Neville Longbottom left you that lovely bouquet. Luna Lovegood brought you three left shoes. I cannot fathom why, but she seemed to think they were good luck. I’m afraid Mr. Filch already confiscated Ginevra Weasley’s gift.”

“What was it?” Harry asked.

“A Hogwarts toilet seat.”

Harry burst out laughing. “She takes after the twins.” Then he remembered one friend who hadn’t been mentioned yet. “Er, do you happen to know if Draco sent anything? Has he stopped by at all?”

“Oh no,” Dumbledore beamed at the mention of Harry’s newest friend. “Young Mr. Malfoy has not set foot inside this hospital wing since you arrived. In fact,” Dumbledore’s eyes glinted with mischief. “I must have passed by him at least ten times on my way to and from this ward. It’s such a strange coincidence how many times I’ve spotted him *just outside* the hospital wing, sometimes right outside the door, but never inside the room itself.”

“He was trying to listen in?” Harry asked. “He wanted to know if I was ok?”

“I can’t speak on his behalf,” said Dumbledore. “However, he did seem more nervous and fidgety than usual. I’m sure he’ll be happy to hear that you’re awake. I know you haven’t asked, since apparently your own welfare is of minimal importance to you, but you are on track to make a full recovery. Madam Pomfrey quite expertly healed your frozen fingers, your sore muscles, and your broken ankle in a matter of hours, as well as a few scrapes and bruises.”

It was then that Harry finally looked down at his own body. Truly, that hadn’t even occurred to him. His fingers looked perfectly normal, and when he twirled his feet around, his ankles didn’t hurt at all.

“The reason you slept so long,” Dumbledore continued. “Was because you were suffering from severe magical exhaustion. I’m not sure if I’ve ever seen a more serious case. If you had used up any more of your magic, it might have killed you. You’re lucky you had such a plentiful reserve to begin with.”

“Magical exhaustion? I’ve never even heard of that.”

“It’s not usually a concern if you’re doing magic with a wand. They make such marvelous magical conduits, that spells don’t use much of your own reserves. However, if a wizard were doing some form of Ancient Magic, like wandless Blood Magic for instance, it could take quite a toll on their body and their magic.” Dumbledore gave him a knowing look; a look Harry was intimately familiar with.

“Er,” he muttered. “Interesting.”

“Harry, my dear boy, I think it is now time,” Dumbledore announced.

“Time for what?”

Dumbledore levitated a particularly large package from the floor and maneuvered it onto the bed, right into Harry’s lap. “I think it’s time you opened this package from Ambrosius Flume. He owns Honeydukes. The gift he sent was so large and so beautifully wrapped, I’ve been eyeing it for days. Now that you’re awake, I would absolutely love to see what’s inside. Perhaps if it contains delicious sweets, as I suspect, we could sample some together.”

Harry tore into the wrapping. Sure enough, the enormous box contained a wide selection of Honeydukes candy. There were Pepper Imps, Drooble’s Best Blowing Gum, Fizzing Whizzbees, Honey Toffee, Pink Coconut Ice, and of course, Bertie Bott’s Every Flavor Beans. Harry went straight for the beans.

He untied the drawstring pouch as quickly as he could. “Better luck this time, sir?” He offered up the bag to his headmaster.

“Oh no,” Dumbledore insisted. “Not after the earwax. I think I’ve finally learned my lesson with those. I wouldn’t mind trying a few of your licorice wands, if you’d oblige me.”

Harry nodded and popped a pale jellybean into his mouth. It was onion flavored. He quickly tried to cover that with another jellybean, only to discover it was peppermint. They didn’t pair well.

“And now Harry, we find ourselves in a familiar situation. You have had yet another harrowing encounter. Now that you’re comfortable, and you have some delicious treats to sweeten the mood, I need you to tell me everything that happened. The more details you can give me the better. If it helps, I can get things started from my side.”

Dumbledore launched into his version of events. He had been at the school on Friday afternoon, when he was alerted by Mad-Eye Moody that Harry had gone missing. He arrived at Selwyn’s Accounting Firm shortly before a team of Ministry Aurors. Hermione, Penelope Clearwater, and Mr. Selwyn had all been questioned.

“They all gave a similar account, which was that you had been apparated away by William and Duncan Travers. However, when we arrived at the Travers Estate, it quickly became clear that the two gentlemen had no idea what was going on. They had no memory of such an event, and they both had firm alibis proving that they hadn’t even visited the accountant that day. This meant that whoever had taken you, was using a Polyjuice Potion.”

“I don’t know who took me,” Harry admitted. He popped a yellow jellybean next. It tasted like mustard. “Whoever it was knocked me out as soon as we landed. I woke up in Voldemort’s study. He was acting weird.”

“Weird?”

“Well, he didn’t immediately kill me.”

“Yes, I noticed that.” Dumbledore smiled. “Did he happen to mention why the change of heart?”

“Not really. He just said he was going to keep me. And he forced me to drink this super strong calming draught. Oh!” Harry almost choked on a toothpaste-flavored bean as he remembered something important. “Snape! Snape was there! He’s working for Voldemort!”

Dumbledore cut him off with a wave of his licorice wand. “*Professor* Snape, Harry.”

“Seriously?”

“Severus came to see me right after his encounter with you. It was a relief to learn that your life wasn’t in imminent peril. However, it did create several new questions.”

“No kidding!” Harry went on to describe the rest of his evening. It wasn’t hard, since it had just been him and the snake. He mentioned that he took a bath, but didn’t think it was necessary to tell Dumbledore that he’d let Nagini share it with him.

“I certainly hope the snake didn’t harm or threaten you.”

“Nah, she was fine.” Harry popped a red jellybean into his mouth. He smiled at the taste of red velvet cake.

When they got to the end of the evening, Harry wondered if he should tell Dumbledore about his dream with Tom Riddle. The dream had felt rather intimate. They had swum around in the Prefect’s bath. In the end, Harry decided Dumbledore didn’t need to know. The headmaster wanted to hear what happened with Voldemort, not some memory of a younger version of Voldemort.

“So, the next day I woke up and Voldemort took me to see Remus.”

“Ah yes, our dear Professor Lupin mentioned this encounter when I spoke with him.” Dumbledore had moved on from the licorice wands and was unwrapping a couple of Pumpkin Pasties. “It would be nice to hear about it from your perspective, though.”

Harry continued his story until he got to the point where he had called for Kreacher. Suddenly, he realized that he’d forgotten all about his house elf. “Kreacher!” he shouted without thinking.

Just as before, Kreacher appeared in the middle of the floor with a loud crack. This time, he didn’t look annoyed. He looked absolutely terrified. His little head was bent down as low as it could go, and his floppy ears drooped down. “Master called,” he mumbled.

“Kreacher! You’re ok!”

At Harry’s excited tone, the house elf looked up to see that they weren’t in Voldemort’s clutches, but were in the middle of the Hogwarts Hospital Wing. “Master...” his voice no longer quivered with fear. “Master Harry escaped?”

“Yeah, it’s ok now. I just wanted to make sure...”

Before Harry could finish that thought, the house elf clambered up onto the bed, threw himself forward, and wrapped his little arms around Harry's waste. The beans flew everywhere, littering the floor in bright colors.

"Master Harry saved Kreacher! Master Harry took Crucio for pathetic Kreacher! Master Harry stood up to the Dark Lord for Kreacher!"

"Er..." Harry tried to pry the elf off, but the little thing had an iron grip. "It's ok, Kreacher. It's over now." Kreacher had started crying and was getting Harry's hospital robes all wet.

"Master Harry is too kind to ungrateful Kreacher! Kreacher saw his new young Master take Crucio! It was all Kreacher's fault!"

Why did house elves always cry so much? "Ok, well, we'll discuss this later. For now, maybe you should take a break?" That just set off another round of waterworks. Finally, Harry couldn't take it anymore. "Kreacher, go back to the kitchens," he ordered. The house elf disappeared with another crack. Harry felt a bit bad, but he figured Kreacher would have some other elves there to help calm him down.

"Sorry, sir."

"That's quite alright."

"Where were we?"

"You had just lost all your jellybeans." Dumbledore vanished the spoiled candy with a wave of his wand. "Hopefully you've realized the error of your ways and will be sampling a more reasonable candy."

"No way," Harry reached down for the Hogsmeade box and pulled out another bag of Bertie Botts. "I haven't had these in ages, and it's nice to have something that reminds me of simpler times." He popped a green one into his mouth that looked like pistachio, only to realize it was spicy wasabi. He tried to vain not to show the pain in his face. He must have failed, because Dumbledore looked like he was trying not to laugh.

"Alright there, Harry?"

"It's still worth it," Harry insisted.

Dumbledore took over the story for a moment. Apparently, Remus had already told him about the locket and Voldemort's strange behavior toward Harry.

"It was Merope's locket!" Harry was excited to share. "I recognized it! I didn't tell Voldemort though. He still doesn't know about our private lessons."

"Wonderful!" Dumbledore had switched from Pumpkin Pasties to Candy Floss. The man certainly had a sweet tooth. "Now Harry, do you happen to have any idea why he was so determined to keep you alive and well? Did he tell you anything?"

“Not really,” Harry admitted. He popped a questionable brown jellybean into his mouth. Mercifully, it was chocolate pudding. “He kept saying that I belonged to him, but he didn’t explain why or how. He said he wanted me to... keep him company, I guess. He told me that he wanted me to be happy, but that I needed to... be companionable.”

Dumbledore paled drastically at those words. He set the candy aside. “Harry, please know that you can tell me anything, and I won’t think any less of you. I want you to feel safe to talk to me. Did he... did he touch you?”

“Yes!” Harry cried, remembering the incident that happened later that night.

“Oh Harry,” Dumbledore reached out to squeeze his shoulder. “My dear boy, I’m so sorry.”

“He did touch me!” Harry continued. “He touched me right on my scar!” Harry pointed to the lightning bolt on his forehead. “He touched my scar and it felt... I don’t know how to describe it, but it felt weird.”

For possibly the first time ever, Dumbledore seemed at a loss for words. “He touched you... on your forehead?” Harry nodded. “Nowhere else?”

Harry tried to think. “He touched my cheek at one point.”

“Let’s get back to your story.” Dumbledore leaned back and reached for the candy. The badge of his chest still blinked merrily, but Harry had grown used to it. “You were telling me that Voldemort had just regained ownership of his heirloom locket.”

Harry described the scene that had occurred after Remus had been led away. It was awkward retelling such a surreal event. Voldemort had pulled out strange trinkets and placed them reverently on his supposed enemy. Harry assumed that Dumbledore would be just as perplexed as he had been. But Dumbledore didn’t look confused at all. He looked like Harry was confirming his suspicions.

“And the last item was a goblet, which he shoved in my hands,” Harry finished. “No idea why.”

“Tell me Harry, this goblet, did it happen to have a badger etched into the side?”

Harry glared at his professor. “You know something.” He forgot all about the candy. “You actually have some idea what the hell was going on that day.”

“I know that the locket belonged to Slytherin,” Dumbledore admitted. “And I suspect the tiara was Ravenclaw’s famed Lost Diadem.”

“And what?” asked Harry. “The goblet was the famous Cup of Hufflepuff?”

Dumbledore smiled jovially and nodded.

“That’s a thing?” Harry gaped. “There’s more, though, isn’t there? I think you know more than just that. You have to tell me.” Harry peered intently at Professor Dumbledore. The man didn’t look like he was hiding anything, but it was hard to look suspicious when you were

taking bites of pink candyfloss. “You said you wouldn’t keep secrets from me anymore. Why were those items so important to him? Why did Voldemort want to give them to me? He made me wear them the whole time I was there. Why?”

Dumbledore let out a quiet sigh. “I have an idea, yes. And I did promise not to keep secrets from you. Perhaps I should have told you earlier. Perhaps I should tell you now. But I don’t think now is the time.”

“Are you kidding me!?” Harry shouted.

“I will tell you.” Dumbledore held up his hands in surrender. “I promised I would, and I will. However, there is still one piece of information that I am missing. Something that I want to be absolutely certain of. A piece of information that we *will* cover over the course of our lessons, as they continue. Once I have this one final clue, then I’ll know without any doubt whether I’m right. Then I will feel comfortable sharing this information with you.”

“I don’t understand why we have to wait.” Harry felt like a child throwing a tantrum, but he didn’t care. All of this felt so unfair. “Voldemort didn’t tell me anything, and now you’re not telling me anything either. I deserve to know what’s going on.”

“Harry,” Dumbledore’s voice was calm and reassuring. “I cannot begin to fathom how scary and overwhelming it must have been for you to be trapped in a situation like that. I know you weren’t maimed or tortured, but what Voldemort did to you was cruel. It’s cruel to keep someone against their will. It’s cruel to force them to behave as you wish, under threats of harming their loved ones. It’s cruel to force someone into a situation where they have no control over what happens to them, and they have no idea what’s going on.”

Dumbledore let out a sad sigh. The lines on his face stood out sharply. He looked older than usual.

“I’m sure that what I’m doing seems almost as cruel. I have no doubt that you will be unforgivably angry with me for keeping such important knowledge from you.” Dumbledore reached out and squeezed Harry’s hand. “The only excuse that I have, is my desire not to cause you any more pain than is absolutely necessary. If I tell you, and I turn out to be wrong... Well, I would never want to put that sort of undue burden upon you. I will tell you everything once I know beyond a shadow of a doubt that I am right.”

Harry considered this. He didn’t like it. He still wanted to know, but it didn’t seem like he had any other option. Finally, he nodded.

Dumbledore offered a hopeful smile. “I sincerely appreciate your understanding and patience.”

Harry picked up the pouch of Bertie Botts again to distract himself. He selected an orange one. Mango. Not bad.

They returned to Harry’s tale after that. Harry skimmed through his breakfast with Voldemort quickly, but lost his temper again when they returned to the subject of Snape.

“Did he tell you he saw me?”

“He did. He didn’t mention the tiara, but it might have been too much for Severus to utter the words: ‘Harry was wearing a tiara.’ I did hear about the encounter though.”

“He didn’t even bother to help me!” Harry complained. “He just sneered and told me not to make Voldemort mad if I could help it. He wanted me to wait around and do nothing.”

“Well, in his defense,” Dumbledore began. He was sucking on a blue lollipop that had turned his lips a bright blueberry color. “At that time, he and I were working on a plan to rescue you. We were hoping there might be a way to get both you and Remus out of there, without exposing Severus as a spy.”

“So I was just supposed to wait around for you to come up with a plan you thought was good enough?”

“Your life wasn’t in immediate danger.”

“But my soul was!” Harry shouted.

Dumbledore froze. “What do you mean by that?”

Harry skipped quickly past the morning in Voldemort’s study, and went on to his third evening at the Manor. He broached the subject as carefully as possible. “I may have mentioned in passing, that I kind of had a vague interest in possibly learning some basic information about... Soul Magic.”

Harry was worried Dumbledore might be angry, but the man just gave Harry an indulgent smile. The same smile one might give a three-year-old who had just admitted they may have eaten the last cookie. “Is that so? How did that go?”

“I didn’t realize he was going to lose his mind,” Harry insisted. “Suddenly he went on and on about how he knew all the secrets about Soul Magic. He wanted me to tear up my bloody soul. He said he would go get a muggle and I could kill them and blah blah blah...” Harry made an on-and-on gesture with his hands. “I think he mentioned something about immortality. As if I’d care about that.”

“You didn’t...” Dumbledore’s voice was hesitant.

“No, of course I didn’t kill anyone! That’s the night I summoned my broom, and then I got out of there first thing in the morning.”

“Ah yes,” Dumbledore’s smile grew mischievous again, the way it had when he’d been levitating Madam Pince’s books around the library. “I would very much like to hear how you summoned your broomstick all the way from Devon.”

Harry frowned. How much should he say? He wasn’t supposed to be practicing Blood Magic, but it seemed Dumbledore had already figured that out. To buy some time, he inspected another bean. It was a soft cream color. He took a bite. “Ack!” He spat it back out into his hand. “Soap? Why do they even have that flavor?”

“They have every flavor, Harry. That is, quite frankly, the entire point.” The elder man vanished the offending bean, before holding up his blue lollipop. “Are you sure you want to keep going with those beans? There are far worse flavors than soap.”

“I’ll risk it,” Harry insisted, holding onto the purple bag. In for a knut, in for a galleon. “Remember when I snuck out to Gringotts? I went and got an Inheritance Test. I found out I was the Heir of Gryffindor.”

Dumbledore’s jaw dropped. His tongue was bright blue. “You are the Heir of Gryffindor?”

“You didn’t know?” Sometimes it seemed like the headmaster knew everything.

“Elphinstone Urquart had been the Heir of Gryffindor. I knew that.”

“Was he a friend of yours?” Harry asked.

“He was a friend of a friend. I have always been quite close with his wife, Minerva McGonagall.” It was Harry’s turn to gape. He hadn’t even realized Professor McGonagall was married. “The two of them worked together in the Department of Magical Law Enforcement. Elphinstone passed away shortly after the last war. Minerva inherited most of his personal effects, but his Gryffindor Lordship passed on to a distant relation. Neither of us knew who that was. Until now.”

“The goblins told me I shouldn’t tell anyone,” Harry admitted. “They said that the Gryffindor Lordship was particularly powerful, and they warned me that someone might try to take advantage.”

“The Gryffindor Lordship is more powerful than most other families,” Dumbledore agreed. The blue lollipop in his hand reflected green, pink, orange as he held it close to his badge. “You get an automatic vote on several subcommittees. Not to mention, you can join the Hogwarts Board of Governors without needing to be voted in. There’s a fair amount of influence that can be wielded, once you know how. But don’t worry, I won’t tell anyone.” Dumbledore gave him a wink. “I’m good at keeping secrets.”

“I’ve noticed.” Harry bit into another jellybean. Somehow, it tasted just like steak and kidney pie.

“Allow me to offer my theory on what happened next,” Dumbledore volunteered. “I gave you the book on Godric Gryffindor while you were staying at my home. You must have discovered that your ancestor could perform powerful Blood Magic. You were already curious about the subject of Ancient Magic. When I found you perusing my private study, I remember you asked me if your family had any history with Ancient Magic. I told you that your grandfather could do Blood Magic.”

Harry nodded along. He munched away on several more beans, including salt, macaroni salad, strawberry cream, and grass.

“When did you actually begin practicing Blood Magic?” Dumbledore asked.

“While I was staying with you,” Harry admitted. There didn’t seem any point in hiding it anymore.

“You began practicing Blood Magic shortly before Christmas?” Dumbledore asked. “And within two weeks, you were proficient enough that you were able to summon your broom wandlessly from across two counties?”

“Are you mad at me?”

“Oh no, I’m far too impressed to be angry at the moment. That was… I don’t think I could do that.”

“Seriously?” Harry dropped the jellybean he’d been holding.

“My specialty was always Mind Magic,” Dumbledore explained. He had finally finished the lollipop and had moved onto the pink coconut ice. Now his lips weren’t just blue, but also dusted with powdered sugar. “I’ve dabbled with Blood Magic, and I can do some wandless spells, but not like that. Summoning a magical object, from such a tremendous distance, in such dire circumstances. Harry, you astound me.”

Harry tried to hide his blush by grabbing a handful of Bertie Botts and shoving them all in his mouth at once. He gagged on the combined flavors of pumpkin pie, scrambled eggs, trout, and several things he couldn’t identify.

“If the magical exhaustion didn’t kill you, your tastebuds might do it in revenge,” Dumbledore warned.

“I thought you said that Blood Magic was really bad.” Harry didn’t understand why he wasn’t in trouble.

“I told you Blood Magic was bad, because I was worried you could hurt yourself.” Dumbledore waved his pink confection, raining powdered sugar on the floor. “You did hurt yourself. You almost killed yourself. If you had the magical capacity of a normal wizard, you *would* have killed yourself. It will take several more days before your magic levels return to normal. However, you were also in a dire situation, with no other means of escape. I’m not going to fault you for resorting to desperate means when you were in a desperate situation.”

Harry frowned. He hadn’t realized Blood Magic could be so dangerous. No wonder he still felt like he was barely holding himself up. “I won’t use it again unless I’m in serious trouble,” he promised.

“I’m glad to hear it.” Dumbledore nodded. “And now, my dear boy, it is time for you and me to conspire.”

“Conspire?” Harry froze in the process of chewing on a banana split bean.

“We need to get our stories straight. I’ve been fielding questions from the Ministry and the Daily Prophet. I’m trying to keep them away from you, but just in case, I don’t want you to say anything that contradicts what I tell them.”

“Why would our stories contradict? Aren’t you going to tell them the truth?”

“Do you think we should tell them the truth?” Dumbledore gave him a look of innocent curiosity.

“No,” Harry admitted.

“Nor do I.” Dumbledore gave his wand a wave, and all the powdered sugar disappeared from his fingers and the floor. It was easier to take him seriously when he didn’t look like he’d been clapping chalkboard erasers.

“First and foremost, the public is very fond of you right now, and significantly less fond of werewolves. I told the Prophet that we found Remus Lupin quite far from where we found you. I didn’t think it would bode well for werewolf rights if it got out that the man who’s planning to adopt you, tried to bite your head off. If anyone asks, you dropped Remus off before the full moon. Then, you continued flying for a bit, until you were overcome with exhaustion and crashed.”

“Sounds good,” Harry agreed.

“Don’t mention anything about hitting Remus with your broom,” Dumbledore warned. “I’ve told the Prophet that your broom shattered in the crash.”

Harry’s breath hitched. “My broom shattered?”

“Oh,” Dumbledore paused. “I’m so sorry, Harry. I didn’t realize that you didn’t know. When you hit Remus, it shattered the broom.”

“But,” Harry tried to get control of his breathing. “But my Firebolt...”

“You’ve got more Firebolts!” Dumbledore leapt to his feet and began rifling through the packages again. “It was on the front page of the Prophet that you’d lost your broom in your escape. Look, see hear, Puddlemere United sent you a new broom that’s been signed by all the players! And the Chudley Cannons sent one, as well.”

“I don’t want another Firebolt, I want mine!” Harry felt lost in despair. “It was my first gift from Sirius. He said it was to make up for all the birthdays he missed.” It felt like losing his godfather all over again. “I already broke the mirror he gave me. The Firebolt was the only thing I had left from him!”

Dumbledore dropped the broom that had been signed by the entire Puddlemere United team as if it were nothing. “Oh Harry. I really wish there was something I could do, but magical items like that are so particular.”

“I know. I understand.” Harry refused to break down into an emotional wreck over a broom. “It’s fine. I’m safe. Remus is safe. No one died. That’s what matters. I don’t know why I’m so upset over an inanimate object.”

“Sometimes inanimate objects represent something much more profound than the object itself. I understand that more than most.”

“I don’t want to talk about this anymore,” Harry insisted. “What else do I need to lie about?”

“If anyone asks, you stole a wand,” Dumbledore answered without hesitation. “I already told them we found one on your person. Just say that you stole it from a Death Eater. Don’t give any other details. You used a wand to summon your broom. Don’t mention your invisibility cloak at all.”

“Is my cloak ok?” Harry immediately looked around for his cloak.

“Your cloak is perfectly fine. Your friend Ronald was kind enough to carry it up to your room in Gryffindor Tower, with the rest of the clothes you were wearing. It’s waiting for you in your trunk.”

Harry breathed a sigh of relief. “Anything else?”

“Just one thing,” Dumbledore sat back down and gave Harry a careful gaze. “It’s not necessarily a lie, but it might feel like one to you.”

“What do you mean?”

“The public perception is that you were horribly mistreated by Voldemort. What I told the Prophet was vague. Most people assume that you were abused and tortured, until finally, you managed to barely escape with your life. The fact that we found you in such a weakened state has lent credence to such assumptions.”

“It wasn’t all that bad,” Harry began.

“Yes, that’s exactly what I’m afraid of.” Dumbledore waved his finger at Harry. “Your natural inclination is to downplay the severity of anything bad that happens to you. That’s fine when you’re talking to your friends. However, for your own sake, you cannot make it public knowledge that you didn’t mind the time spent in Voldemort’s custody. If the public believes that you believe that it ‘wasn’t all that bad,’ they’re going to wonder why. They’re going to wonder if you really are against Voldemort. If you’re really willing to fight against him.”

“I’m course I’m willing to fight against him! I wouldn’t care if he gave me kittens and promised to be my best friend. I’d still try to stop him. He’s evil.”

“I know that,” Dumbledore assured him. “And you know that. And your friends know that. But we also know that the wizarding public is fickle and has the attention span of the niffler in a Gingotts Vault. I don’t want public sentiment to turn against you again.”

Harry felt strange that the public might be giving him credit for something he didn’t do, but he agreed. He didn’t want people to assume he was in league with Voldemort, just because the man had decided to act weird around Harry.

“Well my boy, now that I’ve thoroughly spoilt my appetite, I think that covers everything.” Dumbledore clapped his hands together. “I’ll go find Madam Pomfrey and inform her that you’re up. I’m sure your friends will be by shortly. Did you have any other questions for me?”

“No more questions.” Harry held up his near-empty pouch. “But there’s one Bertie Bott left. Are you sure you don’t want it?”

Dumbledore gave the single bean a shrewd glance. It was pale yellow. That could be good or bad.

“I think not,” he decided. “Fool me twice, as they say.”

“If you insist.” Harry took the final bean and popped it into his mouth. It was delicious. “Wow,” he cried. “I think it’s sherbet lemon.”

Dumbledore pinched the bridge of his crooked nose. “Alas, the sweet and subtle tragedies of my life.”

The headmaster was almost to the door when he paused one last time. “Oh Harry, I almost forgot to tell you the reason I was in the Ministry this weekend. Stan Shunpike finally had his trial. It was proved quite unequivocally that he was not a Death Eater. Congratulations. You helped free an innocent man.”

Then he left Harry to enjoy the aftertaste of sweet lemon.

It didn’t take long for Madam Pomfrey to arrive and fuss over him.

“Come along now, sit up, take these.” She handed over five different potions while she checked his vitals. “You haven’t had a proper meal in days now. Have you eaten anything since you woke up? An apple at least?”

“One of the Bertie Botts might have been apple flavored.”

She gave him a disapproving frown. “Albus is a terrible influence. I don’t know what’s gotten into that man. He used to be much more careful about his diet, but this year he’s been eating sweets like there’s no tomorrow.”

Harry didn’t have time to ponder Dumbledore’s new diet, because just then the door to the hospital opened. He saw two very welcome faces.

“Harry!” Ron and Hermione shouted at the same time, as they rushed to his side. Before Harry could properly sit up, Ron was clapping his shoulder and Hermione was trying to hug his neck at an awkward angle. Madam Pomfrey made a comment about giving them time to catch up, before disappearing again.

“Er.” He spat out bushy brown hair that found its way into his mouth. “Hi guys. Nice to see you’re on speaking terms again.”

“Speaking terms?” asked Ron, grabbing a seat on a nearby bed.

“What on Earth are you talking about Harry?” Hermione conjured a seat of her own, although it wasn’t nearly as ornate as Dumbledore’s. Harry noticed they were both wearing SPEW

badges, but neither one was dancing through the colors of the rainbow, thankfully.

Harry couldn't believe they were acting as if they were best mates again. "I'm sorry, did you two forget that you've been fighting for the past couple months? Or am I remembering that wrong?"

"Fighting? We weren't fighting," Hermione insisted. "Well, maybe we were a bit..."

"But who cares about that!?" Ron cried. "You got kidnapped by You-Know-Who!"

"As soon as you were taken," Hermione explained, "Tonks dropped me off at the Burrow. I spent the rest of the holidays with Ron. We were trying to come up with some plan to get you out."

"Bloody hell, Harry, if we had any idea where you were being kept, we would have stormed You-Know-Who's hideout just the two of us. The Order refused to tell us *anything*, of course. All we knew was that you were still alive somewhere."

Harry was touched by their show of loyalty, but he was even more excited that his two best friends were getting along again. "So, you two have been spending the past week and a half together?"

Hermione nodded while Ron answered, "We were working together."

Harry tried to understand what had been going on without him. "So, are you and Lavender broken up then?"

Ron's complexion turned as red as his hair. "Well... I guess we're..."

"They're not officially broken up," Hermione answered. "They haven't exactly had the time to work out what they are. They've hardly spoken since the train ride."

"She's been giving me space," Ron explained.

"Really? Lavender? Why was she giving you space?" Harry asked.

"You were kidnapped by You-Know-Who!" They both shouted in unison, as if this perfectly explained why no one was acting like their usual selves. Maybe it did.

"Ok," Harry put his hands up. "What about Draco?" He turned toward Hermione. "Have you talked to him about..."

Ron interrupted before Hermione could answer "That ruddy bastard!" His face had changed from red to a violent purple. "He's lucky I haven't smashed his face to a pulp."

"You'll do no such thing!" Hermione snapped, before turning to Harry. "We saw Draco on the Hogwarts Express. I told him that he was welcome to sit with Ron and me. He sort of..."

"He turned back into an evil wanker!" Ron's voice rose with righteous indignation. "He told Hermione, and I quote: 'I don't have the energy or inclination to keep up this ridiculous

charade of pretending I'm attracted to you.'" Ron was able to imitate Draco's posh accent surprisingly well. Although his phrasing was far harsher than the actual Draco probably would have been. "He broke Hermione's heart! Just like I knew he would. He was pretending the whole time. Hermione's completely devastated!"

"I'm not exactly devastated." Hermione fidgeted and looked away. "It's fine Ron, really."

Harry gave her a skeptical glance. Hermione had always known that Draco was gay and just pretending to date her. Apparently, she hadn't informed Ron of this important detail.

"You're amazingly strong, Hermione." Ron gave her a sympathetic smile, as if he was proud that she was being so brave. "I can't imagine what you're going through."

"Probably not," she mumbled, with a slightly guilty expression.

Just then, there was a scuffle at the door, and suddenly the young man in question burst into the hospital wing.

"I thought I heard..." Draco began, but then his voice trailed off when he caught sight of Harry sitting upright on the bed, with Ron and Hermione on each side of him.

Despite the fact that Harry had spent days in the hospital wing, Draco Malfoy looked in much worse condition. His already pale skin had lost what little color was left, and he had purple bags under his eyes. His hair was disheveled and almost as greasy as Snape's, as if he hadn't bothered to shower in days. His clothes were rumpled, like he'd slept in them. On the other hand, it didn't look like he'd slept in days, so Harry wasn't sure how he'd managed to get them quite so wrinkled. He wasn't even wearing a tie.

"Draco?"

Had Draco Malfoy really been that worried about him? Had he really felt that guilty that Harry had been taken by Voldemort? Why had Draco been fretting so much, especially after Harry had escaped?

"Harry, I'm sorry," Draco choked out, almost on reflex. Then he turned to see Ron's glare and Hermione's pitiable frown, and he cleared his throat. "I mean, I'm sorry I didn't realize you had company. I'll leave you to it."

He turned, but Harry called after him before he'd even taken a step toward the door. "Wait, don't leave."

"What?" Ron spluttered. "Harry, just let him go. You can hex him once you've got your strength back."

Draco ignored Ron. His face turned back to Harry, with a horribly pained expression. "What do you want?"

"I just..." What did he want? He wanted Draco not to look so awful. "I have all this candy." He gestured to the piles of packages. "More than I could eat in a lifetime. Do you want any?"

Draco gaped at him. Ron was glancing between them like he was trying to figure out what Harry was playing at. Hermione was doing a poor job of hiding a smile.

“Harry,” Draco’s voice was strained with so many emotions, Harry couldn’t process them all. “You were kidnapped by the Dark Lord. He hurt you and I... I shouldn’t be here. You need to recover.”

“It wasn’t all that bad!” Harry called back, before Draco spent the rest of the evening sulking. Dumbledore had just talked to Harry about not downplaying the ordeal, like Harry was doing right now. However, the headmaster had also said that Harry could be honest with his friends. Draco was his friend, right?

“I’m sorry, mate,” Ron interrupted. “It wasn’t all that bad? As far as holiday plans go, I’d rank ‘being held captive by a deranged psychopath’ pretty low on my list of preferred activities. What exactly would you consider worse?”

“Well,” Harry gave his friend a casual smirk. It warmed some deep part of him to hear one of Ron’s jokes again. “Don’t forget that I spent a brilliant weekend with Professor Dumbledore before I had my weekend with Voldemort. So, if you average it out, this year’s Christmas holiday was pretty middle of the bar.”

“Ah,” Ron’s cheeky grin had returned. “But you’re forgetting that you had to listen to Mum sing along to Celestina Warbeck. Surely, that brought the whole thing down a couple notches.”

“Point taken,” Harry was chuckling now. “But you’re the one who’s forgetting that I got to see your magnificent ‘My Sweetheart’ necklace. I think that if you were to model it for me, then this might become the best year of my life.”

Ron’s ears had turned bright red, but it was Draco who responded. “What is wrong with you two?”

Harry turned back to the blonde. For a moment, he’d forgotten that he was trying to cheer up the Slytherin. It was really nice to be around his friends, chatting casually and making jibes.

“They’re always like this,” Hermione answered. “They can never be bothered to take anything seriously. I suspect it’s a coping mechanism.” She held up a packet of peppermints. “There really is a lot of candy. You’re welcome to join us, Draco.”

“Hermione!” Ron snapped. “He was never really in love with you. He’s just going to hurt you again!”

“I think I’ll live.” She shrugged, before turning back to the blonde. “Harry seems like he’d appreciate your company right now, Draco.”

“Then he’s an idiot.” Draco looked Harry dead in the eyes with a fierce look of anger and fear and something else. “The weasel’s right. I’m just going to hurt you again.” Then he marched out of the room before Harry had a chance to call him back.

Harry wasn't sure what to make of that. Draco was acting like he felt personally responsible for Harry's situation, but it didn't make any sense why. Ron was scowling at the door while he munched on chocolate frogs. Apparently, Draco's comment had confirmed whatever Ron already thought of the Slytherin. Meanwhile, Hermione was sucking on a peppermint with a pensive expression, as if the comment had confirmed her thoughts as well. Harry had no idea what Hermione thought of the situation, but based on her track record, she probably understood what was going on better than him.

Harry wasn't looking forward to going over the entire story of his capture again. He had just told Dumbledore everything not an hour ago. However, his friends deserved to know what had happened to him. So, he went through everything again.

It wasn't quite as bad as he expected, especially since they asked very different questions than Dumbledore had asked.

Hermione's questions were more academic, while Ron's commentary was especially colorful.

"So, you're friends with You-Know-Who's snake now?" asked Ron. "Well, I guess she probably makes better conversation than Malfoy."

"Don't be silly," Hermione snapped. "Harry was in serious danger. That snake almost killed your father, if you haven't forgotten."

"Oh, I definitely haven't forgotten. But Harry can talk to snakes. He possesses snakes. Snakes like him. He's like a snake-master."

"A snake charmer?" Harry offered.

"Oh man," Ron smacked his forehead. "It was right there, and I missed it."

The conversation took a weird turn as he continued his story.

"He placed a tiara on you?" Hermione had started taking notes. "Did he mention why?"

"Isn't it obvious?" Ron had made it through about five boxes of chocolate frogs during the story, but hadn't found any cards that he didn't already own. "You-Know-Who doesn't have any hair. He knows he'd never be able to pull off a tiara. I bet Harry looked peachy."

"Er, I guess I looked alright. Snape could barely speak when he saw me."

"Snape saw you in a sparkly, pretty tiara?" Ron gaped. "I have got to see the Pensieve memory of that!"

"Yeah," Harry chuckled. It was kind of funny in retrospect. "That was after breakfast with Voldemort."

"You had breakfast with him?" Hermione shuddered.

“What did he eat?” Ron asked. “Babies? The blood of the innocent? Haggis?”

“He just had coffee,” Harry admitted. “And before you ask, he takes his coffee black.”

“Really?” Ron rolled his eyes. “You don’t say? He seems like a cream and three sugars kind of guy.”

It continued like that for some time. It was nice that they didn’t make a big deal out of it or offer him empty platitudes. They probably knew from experience that Harry didn’t want sympathy or condolences.

When he mentioned the books that Voldemort left in his room, Hermione immediately perked up.

“Did you bring them with you?” She huffed when Harry shook his head. “What did they say exactly? Did you copy down any passages at least?”

“I didn’t even open them.”

She jolted as if he had physically pained her. “Your aversion to reading and knowledge is going to get you in trouble one of these days.”

“Probably already has,” Harry gave her a cheeky grin. “I just haven’t noticed, because I’m too busy not reading things.” Ron laughed, while Hermione looked torn between annoyance and fondness. “If it makes you feel better, Hermione, I did read one book about Salazar Slytherin. Not that it helped much. But I do read some books.” Harry froze. He remembered one book in particular he had been reading a lot lately.

“I just remembered something!” he cried. “The Half-Blood Prince! I asked Voldemort if he knew that name. It’s Snape. Snape is the Half-Blood Prince.”

This had the opposite reaction he expected.

“Oh, well then Ron was right,” Hermione smiled. “The book is perfectly safe!”

Meanwhile Ron was shaking his head. “No mate, Hermione was right. You’ve got to burn that thing.”

Just like that, they were bickering again. The sound of his two friends arguing was almost as familiar as Ron joking to cover his emotions or Hermione giving Harry a hard time about not reading enough.

“If those annotations were written by Professor Snape,” said Hermione, “Then they’re basically the same as teacher’s notes. There’s nothing wrong with using supplemental materials, if they’re from an approved source.”

“What makes you think Snape is an approved source?” Ron spluttered. “Harry, you cannot mess around with the spells in there. Who knows what kind of horrible Dark spells Snape put in there? You could disembowel someone on accident!”

Harry doubted Snape would have put any spells that horrible in his potions book. Then again, the Sectumsempra spell had said it was ‘for your enemies.’ What sort of spells would Snape use on his enemies? Suddenly, Harry was glad he had never tried it out on Crabbe and Goyle.

Ron and Hermione missed their last class of the day, but spent the time listening to Harry’s story. When Harry pointed this out, they insisted they wouldn’t get in trouble because they were supposed to be helping Harry with his classwork anyway.

Harry’s stomach sank when he was reminded that he had missed four whole days already. On top of that, Madam Pomfrey had warned him he would miss classes on Friday as well. He wasn’t looking forward to spending his first week playing catch-up.

“Don’t worry about all that, Harry,” Hermione assured him. She lifted her bag and pulled out a large stack of papers. “I’ve made copies of all my notes for every lecture. I’ve color-coded them for you based on subject.”

“And I made copies of mine.” Ron added, holding up a much smaller stack. “They’re not colored, and they’re not as in-depth, but they won’t take as long to read. I even tried to use nice handwriting.”

Ron set the papers next to Harry’s bed. Sure enough, they were moderately legible.

“We got a few assignments, including an essay for Snape,” Hermione warned. “But I’ve already got them started for you, so it shouldn’t take you any time to finish. And I’ve written the outline for your essay to make it easier.”

Harry gaped at her. “You started my essay? But you never start my assignments for me. You’ll check them, but you never start them.”

“You were kidnapped by You-Know-Who!” she cried, as if that was the answer to every question.

“Speaking of what you missed,” Ron interrupted. “I’ve got a present for you!”

“I thought the homework was the present?”

“Ah, nonsense.” Ron reached out his hands toward Hermione, and she pulled another huge stack of papers from her bag to hand over. “I told you I would be your financial advisor. It’s time to financially advise.”

Harry peered at the intimidating stack. “Is that the stuff from the Gryffindor Vault?”

“It is.” Hermione confirmed. “Ron and I went over all the paperwork while you were asleep. We thought it would be nice for you to have some answers when you woke up.”

“It took forever, mate. You’re lucky you slept through it. But I think we managed to follow the paper trail and figure out which properties belong to you, which ones were sold off, and which ones you should be getting rent on.”

“Ron did wonderfully!” Hermione piped up. “He did everything really, I just helped.”

“She helped a lot.” Ron gave Harry a serious look. “A lot.”

In the end, it turned out Harry owned several cottages that were supposed to be collecting rent from the tenants. Ron promised that he’d figure out who the tenants were, and how to go about collecting this long-overdue rent. Harry also owned a large estate.

“Sorry, mate, we looked into the estate first. It’s not much to brag about.”

“The repairs would probably cost more than the building is worth,” Hermione warned. “But the land is supposed to be quite valuable, so you could always build a new house there if you wanted to.”

“And last but not least,” Ron gave a devious smile. “You are the proud owner of 17 Sickle Street, in Hogsmeade.”

“Is that an address?” Harry asked.

“It’s the address of a popular and well-trafficked retail establishment,” said Hermione.

“It the address of Zonko’s Joke Shop!” Ron cried. “You own Zonko’s!”

“I thought Zonko’s went out of business?”

“You own the empty building where Zonko’s used to be!” Ron didn’t lose any enthusiasm.

“Er...goody. An empty building with no joke shop in it?” Harry shrugged. “What am I supposed to do with an empty building?”

“If only you knew some people who own a joke shop in Diagon Alley and were hoping to expand their business into Hogsmeade.” Ron wriggled his eyebrow.

Harry snatched the deed from the pile. “Wicked! Yes! Give this to your brothers.” He held out the deed. “Tell them they can have it, if they use it to expand their business.”

“Aw,” Hermione cooed. “Harry, that’s so sweet of you.”

“No it’s not.” Ron shoved the deed away. “It’s bad business. As your financial advisor, I can’t allow you to just give away your property.”

“But Harry’s not going to use it,” Hermione pointed out.

“Yeah,” said Harry. “I don’t need it. And there’s no way I’m going to charge them rent when I’m their backer.”

“Fine,” Ron pulled out a blank piece of parchment. “Let them use it. Let them use it rent-free if you want. I can write up a contract that lets them use the property for ten years rent-free if that’s what you’d like. Or twenty years. Or even fifty years. I just need to read the chapter on contracts because I skipped that one.”

Ron had scribbled the word contract on the top of the paper.

"I think the words you're looking for are Tenancy Agreement," Hermione whispered helpfully.

"Whatever." Ron gave Harry a serious look. "Let them use it. But don't give away that deed. Don't give away any of those deeds. You might not want or need those properties. But you're going to have kids someday, right? And they'll have kids, and so on. One day, your grandson might want to open a joke shop of his own, and he's going to be pretty pissed that his ever-so-generous granddad gave away the expensive business location in Hogsmeade just because he thought he didn't need it. Take it from someone who isn't going to inherit anything, Harry. You want to leave something for your family."

Harry was at a loss for words, so he simply nodded and put the deed back in the pile.

Before anyone spoke again, they heard footsteps in the hallway. The final class must have ended, and the students were free. Hermione quickly hid all the paperwork just in time for them to get more visitors.

Luna Lovegood wandered into the hospital wing as if it were a complete accident that she'd ended up there. She was dressed in her usual eccentric accessories, with the addition of a couple SPEW badges pinned to her socks, as if that were a reasonable place to put them.

"Oh Harry, there you are. I was curious where you'd wandered off to." She smiled jovially at his left ear. He wasn't sure if she was talking about where he'd gone while he was sleeping, or if she just hadn't heard that he'd been kidnapped by Voldemort, but he thought better than to ask.

Neville almost tripped over his own feet when he saw Harry. The SPEW badge on his chest looked quite old, as if it had been sitting in his trunk for years.

"Gran's been going crazy!" he stammered. "First she was angrier than a Hungarian Horntail when you were taken. Kept saying the Ministry was full of incompetent... Well, I'll spare you the exact words she used. For a pureblood witch, she can swear like a curse-breaker when the mood takes her. Anyway, I'm sure she'll tell you what she thought of your escape from You-Know-Who, when you have your next lesson."

"Oh yeah," Harry had almost forgotten about his private etiquette lessons. "I suppose we'll still do that every other Sunday."

"She said she'll see you this Sunday, if you're up for it?"

Harry nodded. "Yeah, sure."

Another person had snuck in with Neville, but she'd been quiet during the boy's enthusiastic greeting. Ginny Weasley was leaning casually against one of the stone pillars, looking as carelessly pretty as always. Unlike Hermione, who had obviously been holding back tears for the past hour, Ginny looked much more in control of her emotions. Her expression was soft, though, and she never once took her eyes off Harry.

Harry couldn't seem to take his eyes off her, once they'd landed there. "Hey Ginny." His voice was soft, like no one else was there.

"Hey Harry." Her smile turned devious. "Glad to see you're awake. You looked absolutely terrible when you first arrived. Really unattractive. You ought to give Dumbledore a hard time for letting us all see you like that. I used to think you were kind of cute, but now I know better."

"You thought I was cute?"

"I said 'kind of.'"

"Do you mean to tell me that you weren't fussing over me?" Harry asked in mock offense. "Kissing the top of my head and all that?"

"Ugh, no way." Ginny made a face. "Fleur got there first. I'm not putting my lips anywhere near where she's been. In fact, you're going to have to shave all your hair off and grow a whole new batch. Otherwise, I don't think I'll be able to look you in the eye again."

"You're looking me in the eye right now," Harry teased.

"Only because I feel so bad for you." She moved closer, so she was right next to his bed. She was close enough he could touch her. "You poor, poor thing. Did it burn when she kissed your forehead? Could you feel it searing your skin, even from the brink of death?"

Harry just gave her a wry grin in return. He wasn't going to be goaded into a silly argument. "Thanks for the toilet seat," he said instead.

"Well, I could have gotten you flowers." She leaned in close. "Or something personal," she whispered, close to his ear. "But then I thought: Nah, I'll get him something he can use!"

When dinnertime arrived, Harry wanted to join his friends in the Great Hall, but Madam Pomfrey put her foot down.

"You're still very drained, Mr. Potter. You'll need more rest before you're fully recovered."

"I don't need to be fully recovered just to have dinner," Harry whined. "Please! I'll come right back after pudding. And you can keep me trapped in this bed all day tomorrow."

When his pleas fell on deaf ears, he tried mentioning the fact that he was kidnapped by You-Know-Who. However, that just earned him a stern glare, so he resorted to planning an escape.

Ron and Hermione hadn't left his side since their arrival. The moment Madam Pomfrey returned to her office, he gestured for them to help him out of bed.

"I don't think this is a good idea," Hermione whispered. "She says you need more rest."

“Harry’s fine,” Ron whispered back. “He’s been sitting and talking to us for hours. He can do that just as well in the Great Hall.”

Hermione still seemed torn, until Ron interjected with, “Hermione, he was kidnapped by You-Know-Who. Let him eat with his friends.”

After that, they both swiftly helped him out of the hospital ward. Ron ran to get an extra set of school robes, so Harry wouldn’t have to wear his hospital clothes. Meanwhile, Harry stumbled and fumbled down the hall. He hadn’t even made it to the first set of stairs, by the time Ron returned. This was fortunate, because it took both his friends to help him down the steep steps. Harry’s head was pounding, and his legs felt weak. Maybe Madam Pomfrey had a point about his recovery. But it was just dinner, and Harry really wanted to see everyone and have a normal meal in the Great Hall.

Unfortunately, a normal dinner was the furthest thing from anyone else’s mind.

It took half an hour for Harry to make it to dinner, dressed in his school robes and leaning heavily on both his friends. The moment Harry Potter stepped into the Great Hall, halfway through mealtime, the entire school fell silent.

“Harry!” Someone called from the Hufflepuff table. Someone who was wearing one of Fred and George’s flashing SPEW badges. “It’s Harry Potter!”

Suddenly, he was surrounded. The Hufflepuffs got to him first.

“Harry, you’re back. We were worried sick!” Justin Finch-Fletchly was wearing five badges on his chest.

“Harry! Good show old chap!” Ernie Macmillan, who had a badge clipped to his tie, gave Harry a light punch on the shoulder.

“Harry, you’re amazing!” Susan Bones cried. She had two little badges clipped to her braids. Her friend, Hannah, was nodding along. Hannah had a ring of badges around the edge of her skirt.

The Ravenclaws got to him next.

Terry Boot, Michael Corner, and Anthony Goldstein all ruffled Harry’s hair. He noticed they were all wearing Fred and George’s colorful badges, although they weren’t flashing quite as much as Dumbledore’s.

“Harry!” Padme Patil threw her arms around him. Her blue SPEW badge matched her uniform.

Her twin sister arrived right after her. “You’re completely brilliant Harry!” Parvati pulled him in close and kissed his cheek. Her red badge matched her Gryffindor colors.

The rest of Gryffindor house wasn’t far behind. Seamus’s color-changing SPEW badges were arranged across his chest so that all the badges spelled out SPEW. Dean had his badges

running up the side of his trouser leg. Lavender had decorated her SPEW badge with lace and glitter to make it look even more ridiculous.

Harry almost jumped in shock, when he saw a color-changing monster. But then, he realized it was a student. A short, sandy-haired student. Colin Creevey had covered his entire uniform, head to toe, with hundreds of SPEW badges. He looked like he was being eaten alive by a swarm of colorful buttons. Harry was mildly impressed that he could afford that many.

Harry was so busy staring at Colin's flashing colors, he missed the camera being pointed at his head. It was probably the first time Colin's camera flash didn't blind him, since his eyes had already grown accustomed to everyone's bright badges.

"Wow," Harry whispered in Hermione's ear. "Dumbledore told me the badges got more popular after I was taken, but I didn't realize it was this crazy."

"They did get popular after you were taken," Hermione whispered back. "But that was nothing compared to what happened once you escaped! It's lucky I already had an accountant, and Penelope is keeping track of all the new members. Ron's the one who helped me find a magical manufacturing company to make the badges in bulk. I think he went through Fred and George, but I still appreciated the help."

Harry felt bad when he realized that he, himself, was not wearing a SPEW badge, since he left the singing one on his nightstand. He was probably the only person in Gryffindor house without one. He felt a little guilty, since he was the reason everyone else was decorated with them. Now he knew how Dumbledore felt.

The Hufflepuffs and Ravenclaws finally headed back to their seats. Harry was trying to follow his housemates back to the Gryffindor Table, when his way was blocked by a figure with dark skin and perfectly styled black hair. Blaise Zabini was dressed impeccably in a Slytherin uniform tailor-fitted to his tall figure. The only oddity was the small, silver badge pinned to his lapel. Harry could hardly believe that Blaise Zabini was wearing a SPEW badge. A sleek and stylish one, but still a SPEW badge.

During their last interaction, Zabini had tried and failed to embarrass Harry at Slughorn's holiday party. Harry half expected the git to hex him, but he wouldn't do that in front of witnesses, would he? Instead of drawing his wand, Zabini held out his hand.

Harry glanced at the hand, but it was empty. What did Zabini want?

The other boy huffed. "Oh yes, I forgot you have the manners of a troll. I'm offering you a hand, Potter. You're meant to shake it."

"Why would you want to shake my hand?" Harry gave to appendage a skeptical glance. "You don't even like me."

"I'm sorry I was rude before." Zabini kept his hand held out. "I still don't like you. But I shouldn't have taken my personal feelings out on you. I apologize."

"What is this?" Harry frowned. "Why would you apologize to me all of a sudden?"

“All of a sudden?” Zabini’s jaw dropped. “Potter, you were kidnapped by the Dark Lord!” Why did people keep saying that as if it explained why it was opposite day? “I don’t like you, but I never wanted you to...” His voice trailed off, then he let out another huff and finally dropped his hand. “You know what, never mind. You’re here, you’re annoying as always, maybe now Draco will finally get some sleep.”

Without another word, Zabini stormed off back to the Slytherin table. Harry was impressed to see how many Slytherins were wearing SPEW badges. Not all of them, but maybe half. None of them had gotten quite as into it as the Gryffindors though. Draco slouched in his seat and refused to make eye contact with anyone, so Harry wasn’t sure if the blonde was wearing a SPEW badge or not.

“Don’t worry about him, mate.” Ron helped him to the table. “All those Slytherins are weird.”

Once Harry was seated, everyone in Gryffindor house tried to start a conversation with him at the same time.

“Things were crazy without you, mate.” He could make out Seamus’s Irish accent.

Parvati and Lavender chattered on and on, but he could hardly understand a word. Neville had scooted closer and was trying to tell him about the Herbology class he’d missed, but Harry tuned it out when he heard the word ‘pus.’

Suddenly, a booming voice filled the entire hall. “My dear students, I can see that most of you have noticed our late arrival.” Dumbledore was standing in the center of the staff table, and his Sonorous Charm amplified his voice above the general din. “Yes, yes. Welcome back, Harry Potter.”

An enormous round of applause followed these words. Harry could see Hagrid crying as he cheered. Most of the staff table was enthusiastically applauding. McGonagall had an enormous smile, and Flitwick was jumping up and down. All except for Snape, who was clapping at a rate of about one clap every six seconds. How was it even possible to clap sarcastically?

Ron scooted close and had to yell in Harry’s ear to be heard. “You should have heard the applause when he told everyone you’d escaped, and they had you in the Hospital Wing. He announced it over breakfast, before the Prophet arrived. People lost their minds!”

Once the cheers settled down a little, Dumbledore continued. “Yes, I’m sure Harry appreciates your support. Now, it has been a difficult week for everyone, Mr. Potter especially. Harry will be returning to the Hospital Wing after dinner. Therefore, I must ask you all to allow him to settle back in on his own time. In the meantime, I have some house points to award.”

Another round of applause erupted, this time mostly from the Gryffindor Table. Clearly, they thought they were about to get a lot of points, and they were probably right. Harry didn’t join in the cheering. House points seemed kind of pointless after everything else that had happened.

“Fifty points to Gryffindor, for Mr. Harry Potter, for his extraordinary determination and ingenuity in the face of dire circumstances.”

The Gryffindors continued to cheer all around him.

“Five points to Gryffindor, each to Mr. Ronald Weasley and Miss Hermione Granger, for their commitment to their friend, and their patience in preparing Mr. Potter’s study materials.”

The cheers grew louder.

“And finally, fifteen points to Slytherin...” The Gryffindors stopped cheering. Harry’s jaw dropped. “...For Mr. Draco Malfoy, for his constant vigilance outside the hospital wing, and his impressive loyalty.”

The hall was silent for a moment. Harry looked around Dean’s head to see that Draco was almost as green as his tie.

“Woo!” Suddenly, one person’s clapping echoed loudly in the silent hall. It was Blaise Zabini. He nudged the blonde girl next to him, and she also started clapping. His applause got faster and more exuberant as he continued. “Yeah! Go Draco!”

Harry started clapping as well. Draco looked like he could use a round of applause. And suddenly, the rest of the school joined in, taking their cue from Harry. It wasn’t just the Gryffindors who followed Harry’s lead, but the Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs, too. The Slytherins were clapping as well, but Harry assumed they were following Zabini’s example, and not his.

“Dumbledore’s lost his mind,” Ron muttered. “I swear he’s just throwing out points like they’re candy.”

“To be fair, I think he’s always done that,” Hermione pointed out.

It was a wonderful evening, and Harry was glad he’d snuck out to enjoy it.

He ate roast beef for dinner and treacle tart for dessert. His housemates kept trying to get his attention and share the stories of what had happened while he was gone. It was grounding to be surrounded by people who felt familiar to him. Nothing felt like home quite like Hogwarts.

So, he let himself relax for a joyful dinner with his friends. Harry would have plenty of time this weekend to regain his strength, and catch up on homework, and track down a SPEW badge that didn’t sing. But just for tonight, it was nice to simply enjoy himself.

Lord Voldemort had been searching for Harry in the dream world for three nights. Each night, Harry was just out of view, just out of reach. By Thursday, he was forced to drink two bottles of sleeping draughts to force himself into slumber.

When Lord Voldemort opened his eyes to crisp white sheets and the light smell of healing potions, he knew he had finally arrived back in Harry's dreamscape. Looking down, he realized he was in his younger form again. He carded his fingers through the softly curling hair on his head.

Speaking of hair, there was a mop of black, messy hair on the pillow beside him.

Harry Potter was there. He was right next to him, in a narrow hospital bed. The boy was turned away, but there was no mistaking the unruly locks, or the slight form which was slowly breathing up and down.

It wasn't going to be breathing much longer.

Lord Voldemort had finally caught the traitorous little brat. The boy who had run from him. The lying, manipulative, trickster who had made a fool of Lord Voldemort. Harry Potter had told the Dark Lord that he was happy, and yet he had still escaped the first chance he got. Lord Voldemort was going to make him pay.

He reached his arm forward to strangle the boy for daring to defy him. His hand was inches away. He was finally going to take out all his anger and resentment on the boy who had the gall to leave him. He was so close. Harry was lying quietly. Not moving; not fighting back. He looked so peaceful in his slumber. Lord Voldemort watched a small tuft of hair on the young man's forehead fly up and down with every breath Harry took. Without really meaning to, his arm diverted from Harry's throat toward his forehead. Without another thought, he gently tucked the strands of hair behind Harry's ear, out of the way.

Why wasn't he viscously angry? Why didn't he feel murderous?

Just moments ago, in the waking world, he had wanted to kill everything. Burn the world to the ground in his fury. He had wanted to punish Harry with pain and despair for his treacherous escape. He had entered the dream specifically to find Harry and enact his revenge against him. So why wasn't he hurting Harry? Why did it feel so much better to gently run his fingers through his hair?

All the fury had melted away. With Harry breathing softly beside him, Lord Voldemort just felt empty. The anger seemed unimportant.

The important thing was understanding why Harry had left. The Dark Lord had offered Harry knowledge, power, and immortality. The greatest, most desired things in the world. Harry should be on his knees, reverential and thankful. And yet, Harry was sleeping peacefully in the hospital wing of Hogwarts, having flown through the night to get away from everything that Lord Voldemort had fought for.

It was strange to watch the boy breath in and out peacefully. Harry didn't look obnoxious and insufferable in his sleep. He looked... It was hard to put to words. But the Dark Lord knew he wanted to possess Harry. Own him. He needed to get Harry back. And once he did, he would keep Harry forever.

Slowly and carefully, he wrapped his arm around the boy, until he his chest was pressed to Harry's back. This felt right.

When Harry began to stir, Lord Voldemort lifted his chin and rested it on the top of Harry's hair, pulling the young man even closer. Harry's fidgeting increased. "Shh," he told the boy.

Harry stopped fidgeting. Lord Voldemort could feel Harry's head tilt down. The boy must be looking at the arm wrapped around his waist.

"What the – " Harry began struggling in earnest. With a sigh, Voldemort loosened his grip slightly to let the boy at least turn around. As soon as he was able, Harry flipped over to see who was curled around him. He didn't look happy to see Lord Voldemort, even if it was his younger, more handsome form. "Tom?"

Lord Voldemort was tired of hearing that name, but he didn't say anything one way or the other.

"What do you want, Tom? Are you here to get revenge for Voldemort? Why are you in my bed?"

"I want to know why."

Harry frowned. They were so close, Lord Voldemort could see the small crease between Harry's eyebrows. "Why what?"

"Why did you leave?" Lord Voldemort had to know. He was desperate to understand. "You weren't mistreated. You were given proper food and accommodations and books. You were allowed to keep the werewolf. You could have had everything. Wealth, knowledge, power."

"What do you mean I wasn't mistreated?" Harry gave him a look, as if Lord Voldemort was the one who was being unreasonable. "He kept me locked up. I was a prisoner. He threatened to kill Remus if I didn't behave. He made me wear that stupid tiara."

"Stupid tiara?" Lord Voldemort could hardly believe that he wasn't erupting with rage. His mind was so much calmer when he was sharing it with Harry. All he could think was how desperately he needed to understand. "How is it possible that you could feel anything other than proud and thankful to be honored with such an important artefact?"

"Important?" Harry blinked at him. "What was important about it?"

"That 'stupid tiara' as you call it, was the Lost Diadem of Ravenclaw."

"Ok," Harry shrugged. "What does that mean, though? What even is that?"

It was Lord Voldemort's turn to blink. "Very well. Perhaps more explanation would have been beneficial. Your treatment could have been slightly improved with better communication. However, your disorientation hardly outweighs the things you were promised. You were promised wealth and knowledge and power."

"Tom," Harry whispered. "I don't want wealth or knowledge or power." They were so close. Lord Voldemort had propped himself up on one elbow to properly look down at Harry. The young man was still lying back on his pillow. Their legs were touching. "It wasn't just about how I was treated."

"What was it then? What is it that you want, Harry?" Lord Voldemort didn't fully understand why this was so important, but it was. Maybe if he understood what Harry wanted, things could be made right again.

"Well, I want my freedom for one thing." Harry was squirming slightly, like he was trying to scoot further away. There was nowhere to go. Not unless he wanted to jump out of bed.

"There is no greater freedom than immortality."

"I don't want immortality!"

Lord Voldemort reared back in shock. Was that a lie? Who could possibly not want immortality? "You want to die?"

"Not today," Harry insisted. His voice had changed from soft and secretive, to righteous and fierce. "Not tomorrow. Not even soon. But one day, when I'm old. All my friends will die, and my family will die, and I don't want to be left all alone. Immortality just sounds lonely. I don't want to spend all of eternity by myself."

"You wouldn't have to be by yourself. I would be with you." Didn't Harry understand that they would both be immortal? If Harry really needed someone to while away the time with, he would have the most powerful and cunning wizard in all of Britain. If Harry wanted someone to confide in, then who could be better than the Dark Lord who already shared his soul? Lord Voldemort was already looking forward to spending his eternity with Harry. To finally have someone around who wasn't incompetent and sycophantic.

Harry became quiet again. After another moment of silence, Harry's brows furrowed, and he muttered, "What do you mean you would be with me? Don't you mean Voldemort?"

"Voldemort. Me. It doesn't matter."

Harry gave him a thoughtful look. "I know you're linked to him. I know you're more than just a dream. But you act so different from him. You're patient, and you listen, and you don't blow up every time I say something you don't like. Not to mention, you're..." Harry's voice trailed off as his cheeks blushed bright red. "Well, I mean, you don't exactly look like him."

"This is how I am when I'm inside your mind," said Lord Voldemort. "I thought the Dark Lord would become more like this when you were in his presence. Perhaps it will take more than just that. I will have to look into other methods of restoration."

"What are you trying to restore?" Harry inched closer again, so their noses were almost touching. It felt like they were the only two people in the world. Perhaps they were the only two people in this dream world. "Is he trying to be a better person? Is that what you are? Are you the part of him that's still good?"

“Maybe. I don’t feel particularly good. I do feel... better.”

“I think you’re a lot better.” Harry gave him an encouraging smile. “You’re easy to talk to. And you have a sense of humor. And as much as I hate to admit it, you’re a very good dancer.”

“You don’t think the Dark Lord can dance?”

Harry snorted, right into Lord Voldemort’s perfect young face. “Voldemort? Dancing? Can you imagine?”

“If I can dance, that means he can dance. Or at least he could in his youth.”

“He’s nothing like he was in his youth, though,” Harry stressed. “You’re so different. I don’t think you were ever a particularly good person. You were never nice or giving or considerate. But you’re smart and sharp and witty and magnetic and...” Harry let out a slight cough as his cheeks turned red again. “Anyways, what I mean is...”

“Come now, Harry,” Lord Voldemort interrupted. “Now’s not the time to change the subject. I like hearing you describe me. Tell me more about what you think I am.”

“I think I’ve covered the basics. You’re all too aware of your own virtues. And all too unaware of your faults. You’re flawed, Tom. But Voldemort is fundamentally broken. There’s something empty about him.”

Lord Voldemort sucked in a breath. How was it possible for Harry to so accurately describe what he was feeling, when he hadn’t even been aware of it himself. “I don’t want to be empty anymore.”

“I don’t think you’re empty, Tom. I meant Voldemort. Or the rest of Voldemort? I’m not sure how connected you two are. I think you’re the part of him that hasn’t quite drained out yet. The part that’s still hanging in there.”

“What if he found a way to fix himself? What if he wasn’t empty or broken anymore? Would you go back?”

“Go back?” Harry gaped. “I almost died getting away the first time.”

“What do you mean you almost died?” Lord Voldemort couldn’t help it. He reached out across the small space between them and cupped Harry’s face. The young man’s cheeks seemed to heat up in his hands. “What happened? Are you alright?” He pulled the blankets back so he could inspect Harry for injuries.

“I’m fine. Madam Pomfrey healed me. I’m fine now.”

“But you weren’t fine before? You were hurt in your escape?” Harry was wearing hospital pajamas. Lord Voldemort tried to pull them away so he could inspect the body.

“Bloody hell! Keep your hands out of my shirt.” Harry fidgeted, but the Dark Lord managed to get several buttons undone before the young man could stop him. He pulled the lapels

apart to reveal Harry's chest underneath. He could see a smattering of dark chest hair and Harry's right nipple, but no bruising or injury. Lord Voldemort ran his fingers across the chest to make sure there were no sensitive areas.

"Ah! Tom, stop! Seriously, that tickles." Harry squirmed under his ministrations. It was rather amusing once he realized Harry wasn't injured. "Tom, knock it off. You're..." Suddenly, Harry's face turned such a bright shade of red it looked as though he had been choked. "No," Harry whispered. "This can't be happening."

"What's wrong?" Lord Voldemort looked closer at Harry's chest. What had he done?

"Nothing's wrong," Harry stammered. He quickly shoved Lord Voldemort's hands away. "I'm fine. Everything's fine." Despite his words, Harry flipped himself over, so he was facing the opposite wall.

"I knew you were injured! Turn back around this instant." The Dark Lord leaned over Harry's hunched form. He tried to peer through the gap in his robes to find what might be the problem. "What needs to be healed?"

"Nothing," Harry snapped. "I'm already healed. I don't need healing. Stop putting your hands all over me. It's not helping."

"Not helping what? What's wrong with you?" Lord Voldemort wrapped his arm around Harry and pulled the robes apart to get a better look.

"Tom! Seriously!" Harry looked highly flustered. More anxious than pained.

"You're not hurt." He leaned in close to whisper in Harry's ear. "There's something else bothering you. You're embarrassed. Why?"

It wasn't just Harry's cheeks that were red, his ears and neck were also flushed. "I just want some space. That's all. Can't you scoot over a little?"

"You want me to scoot over?" He let his teeth brush against Harry's ears. It was fun seeing Harry as unsettled as the young man always made him. When Harry nodded, Lord Voldemort acquiesced. He 'scooted' right over on top of Harry.

"What the hell!?" Before Lord Voldemort could even get properly positioned, Harry rolled over onto his stomach, still turned away as much as possible. "Get off me, Riddle."

"I won't hurt you. I just wanted to make sure you were alright. You said you almost died in your escape."

"I did. I didn't make that up." Harry squirmed slightly underneath him as Lord Voldemort straddled the young man between his legs.

The Dark Lord leaned forward to whisper in Harry's ear again. "Tell me what happened. I need to know you're alright."

Harry turned his head to meet Lord Voldemort eye-to-eye. The young form of Tom Riddle was sprawled across Harry's back. He had leaned down close to speak into Harry's ear. When Harry turned, their noses actually brushed slightly. The Dark Lord refused to move back even a fraction. "What are you doing, Tom?" Harry's voice was so soft, it wasn't even a whisper. If he hadn't been a hair's breadth away, he wouldn't have heard it. "Are you doing this on purpose?"

"Doing what?"

Harry let out a soft sigh, which rang loud in Lord Voldemort's ears. When Harry swallowed, it sounded as clearly as a bell. "I don't want to play games right now."

"I didn't mean to start a game. I want to know you're alright."

Every tiny movement was so clear, the young man wasn't hiding anything. Harry blinked, and the subtle surprise was on full display. He bit his lip, and there was hope in his eyes. Harry frowned and his features formed the same fierce determination that so frequently settled on that scrawny face.

When he spoke again, there was no hint of uncertainty or embarrassment.

"We only barely managed to get out of the wards. I was tired, and Professor Lupin had been knocked out trying to fight Greyback. I didn't realize it was a full moon until he started turning. I crash-landed in some forest. Remus was already transforming into a werewolf before I knew what to do. If I hadn't fought him off, I'd be scrap meat right now."

Without thinking, Lord Voldemort wrapped his arms around Harry. He held him tight. "The werewolf almost killed you?"

"If you ever lay a finger on him, I'll do a lot worse than fly off on a broom," Harry warned. The Dark Lord barely listened. He had almost lost Harry. His Harry, his horcrux, the boy he now planned to spend eternity with. He had almost lost him because of a werewolf. "I'm fine," Harry whispered in his ear.

Lord Voldemort turned them slightly, so Harry was curled up beside him. The young man didn't seem bothered by this. Whatever had flustered him before didn't seem to be affecting him anymore.

"After I knocked out Remus, I didn't have any strength left. I was seconds away from passing out in the snow. I knew if that happened I'd either freeze to death, or Remus would wake up at some point and finish me off."

Lord Voldemort pulled him tighter. "I felt your fear that evening. I felt your panic, but I didn't know where you were or what was happening. Why didn't you call to me? You need to know that you can call out to me if you're in danger."

"I know," Harry spoke into his neck. "I knew Voldemort would hear me. I knew he would come to save me and take me back. That's why I didn't call for him."

"I don't understand."

"He wanted me to commit murder."

"You wouldn't have to kill anyone that you knew personally."

"It doesn't matter." Harry leaned back enough to meet Lord Voldemort's eyes. The Dark Lord wasn't entirely sure what was happening, but it felt important. "I don't want to kill anyone," Harry said. "It doesn't matter if I know them or not. I won't kill anyone. I'd rather die alone and forgotten in the snow."

Lord Voldemort looked at Harry Potter. Harry was brave. Harry was selfless. Harry was being honest when he said he would rather die than commit murder. Lord Voldemort had looked at Harry so many times, both in dreams and in person, since he realized the boy carried a piece of his soul. He had looked at Harry and he had seen how similar they were. There were many small and large similarities.

This time, Lord Voldemort looked, and he saw how profoundly different they were.

"It was a mistake to try and force you to commit murder. It would be a terrible shame to tear your soul."

Harry's mouth dropped open for a moment, before he snapped it shut again. Lord Voldemort's eyes were drawn to Harry's throat when the young man swallowed again.

"I knew I was going to die, so my last hope was to cast a Patronus. I needed a happy memory, but I couldn't think of anything besides Voldemort."

"What did you do?"

Harry shrugged. "I thought of you, Tom."

"Your memories of me were strong enough to power a Patronus?" Lord Voldemort ran his fingers gently through Harry's hair. It felt so right to hold him in his arms. Harry didn't shy away or blush. He held his green eyes to the red ones and nodded without an ounce of shame. "And yet, you didn't send your Patronus to me."

"I sent it to Dumbledore. He came and rescued me."

"I heard. I know you won't listen to me, but you can't trust that man."

"I definitely can't trust Voldemort."

"What if you could?" When Harry opened his mouth to respond, the Dark Lord put a finger to Harry's lips. "Hush. Listen to me. What if Lord Voldemort were to change? What would it take to convince you to come back? Willingly?"

Harry narrowed his eyes, but thought for a moment before he responded. "What would he be willing to change?"

“I suppose we’ll find out.” With that, Lord Voldemort cupped Harry cheek, and leaned in to whisper a promise. “You do not need to worry about further kidnapping attempts, my precious soul. I do not want you locked away. I do not want you bound and caged. I will have you at my side. Before the school year ends, you will come to me, happily and willingly.”

When the Dark Lord leaned back to take in the full sight of Harry’s face, the young man had a thoughtful expression.

“What’s the matter, Harry? Are you worried I’m lying?”

“No,” Harry whispered back. At some point, his eyes had dropped. He stared down at Tom Riddle’s young lips. “I’m not worried. If you manage to convince me to go to him, it will mean I’ve won. I’ll have changed you into a good person.”

Lord Voldemort wasn’t sure about that, but he was more than certain that he would have Harry by the end of this. He did not yet know how he would seduce Harry to his side, but he knew he would succeed. By the summer, Harry Potter would be his. Things were going to change. He could not envision how they would change, but he knew it was going to be so much better.

Chapter End Notes

Just a reminder, this story picks up where we left of in Part 2: Blood Magic

This feels like the end of an era! Seriously, I’m genuinely emotional. I’ve been posting this story for years now. Thank you so much to everyone who read this to the end, everyone who left kudos, and especially everyone who offered kind words and comments.

My biggest thank you goes to my two wonderful betas; Michele and Natalie. They have been with me since the beginning, and this story wouldn’t have been nearly as good without their input.

See you all in Part 2!

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!