

## No Mouth But Some Serpent's

<http://www.fanfiction.net/s/2612486/1/>

By Lightening on the Wave

Summary: AU of CoS, Slytherin!Harry. Harry goes back to Hogwarts, determined to protect his brother Connor, the BoyWhoLived, and stay in the shadows. But last year two people learned the truth about Harry... and this year, two more will.

**Warnings:** Language, violence, eventual HP/DM slash in fourth year and beyond. Also, beyond this point, **multiple character deaths**, including ones that do not happen in canon. **No one is safe.** If you find it very hard to read a story like that, bail now.

This story is also considerably darker than first year, and the series will go on getting darker from this point on.

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### Chapter One: The Scabbed Summer

"Harry, are you all right?"

Harry swallowed a groan before it could form, and smiled at his brother, who was sitting up in his bed. Connor was usually too heavy a sleeper to awaken for any sound in the same room. Harry must have sat up harder than he thought, or cried out when the dream let him go.

"I'm fine," he murmured. "Just a nightmare. I'm going outside to sit for a while." He threw the covers back and checked to make sure that his pyjamas were fastened all the way up. Then he threw on the jumper he'd worn that day, which was tossed over the end of his bed.

"You're sure that you don't want me to come with you?" Connor's words were already slurring, though, and a yawn slipped out from his throat. Harry let out a grateful little breath. He might wake up, but nothing could keep his twin from going back to sleep.

"I'm sure. Thank you."

"All right..." Connor was snoring before he could finish the sentence. Harry carefully crept out of their room, shutting the door behind him, and down the stairs. No sounds came from his parents' bedroom beyond the stairs, and no lights moved in the kitchen. Just to be sure, Harry used a *Lumos* spell to look at the family's clock on the wall. Sure enough, everyone else's hand pointed to IN BED, even Sirius's and Remus's, though they weren't in Godric's Hollow right now. Harry's hand pointed to TRUANT, but moved to TRAINING as Harry decided what he would do with his extra time.

He might as well, he thought as he slipped out of the house, just as silently, and padded to the edge of the front lawn. He wouldn't get any more sleep tonight.

It was two weeks since they had returned from Hogwarts for the summer, and every night Harry had dreamt of two dark figures. One curled in a place far too small for it, crying out in pain and misery. The other thrashed in a place that seemed only slightly larger, a steady stream of whimpers coming from its throat. Harry had no idea what to make of those dreams. He supposed they might be leftovers of the confrontation with Voldemort, but he didn't understand why they would be attacking *him*. He could understand if Connor were to have them. His twin was the Boy-Who-Lived, the one with the heart-shaped scar and the connection to Voldemort.

But Connor slept undisturbed, while every night, Harry dreamed.

He shook his head and put it from his mind. He'd had odd dreams during the school year, too, and worrying about them got him nowhere. When and if the significance of the two dark figures ever revealed itself, then he would be ready to do something about it.

For now, he would run through his array of wandless spells.

"*Wingardium Leviosa*," he said, concentrating, and when he pulled his hand back, his wand floated in the air. Harry smiled and glanced up at the bright crackle of isolation wards that surrounded their house and separated it from the rest of Godric's Hollow, somewhat dimming the sight of the stars beyond. The wards had been there all their lives, preventing attack by vengeful Death Eaters and other minions of Voldemort. They also prevented the Ministry from sensing the use of any underage magic within them.

Their mother had once claimed that was an accidental side effect of the wards. Harry doubted it. Lily Potter seldom did anything on accident. Besides, it somehow never got reported to the Ministry.

He hurtled easily through the array of spells he'd practiced so long without his wand that he came near to doing them in his sleep, and which therefore made good spells to use during the transition between sleep and waking. *Nox*, *Lumos*, *Finite Incantatem*, *Wingardium Leviosa*, *Incendio*, *Accio*, *Protego*, *Reducto*, the Blasting Curse, and several others, raced forth from his mouth, had their effects, and left him feeling nothing but relaxed and slightly more awake.

Harry frowned when he was done with the lot of them, concentrating. He knew what spell he most wanted to perform next: the cage spell that Voldemort had used on Connor during their deadly battle at the end of May, *Cavea*. Harry wanted to see if he could do it, and, importantly, reverse it. If he'd known how to reverse it during the battle, he could have spared Connor some pain and panic.

But the last time he had tried it, it had resulted in a pulse of blinding blue light which had beamed through the windows and awakened their parents. Harry had had to apologize and make up a tale of accidental magic while sleepwalking for James, who didn't know about Harry's extra training and silent vow to protect his brother. Their mother had taken him aside after that and warned him not to try it again until she was there to guide him.

She was not here now.

Harry closed his eyes and thought of a different spell, *Diffindo*. He was about to try it when a voice spoke from the grass beside him, startling him badly.

"*What are you doing? The magic is disturbing my sleep.*"

Harry whirled around and gathered his magic into a single focused point, calling the *Protego* shield up. That would defeat most hexes, and after so much experience, it was his as swift as thought.

But he saw no one standing on the grass, and he blinked, hesitating. Perhaps Connor had come out to play with him, but he didn't think his brother was so good at hiding in plain sight, nor at sounding so petulant.

*It could be a trick of Sirius's*, he thought, and smiled. His godfather often visited Godric's Hollow, and he would think it a grand joke to come sneaking up in the darkness and scare Harry like that.

"Very funny, Sirius," he called back. "You can come out now. You caught me. I was bored and practicing my magic."

"*Who is Sirius?*"

Harry saw a movement at the edge of his *Lumos* spell this time. He stared as the grass parted and a small snake slithered out of it, halting to look at him inquiringly. Her tongue flicked as if tasting his scent.

Harry hardly breathed. He recognized the snake's markings, variegated black on gold. If he tilted his head to the side and squinted just a bit, he could make out the shape of a skull and crossbones, repeated several times. This was a Locusta snake, a magical creature rare in Great Britain. One small bite from it could kill a man, and one snake contained enough poison altogether to down a whale. Worse, the venom itself was magical, altering from hour to hour to try and counteract any antivenin applied to it, and the snakes were clever and sadistic enough to hunt small children when they were angry, and to direct their poison to linger instead of killing at once.

Harry did not know how a Locusta had crossed the wards into Godric's Hollow. He did not know how it was speaking to him. He did know that he didn't want it anywhere near Connor.

"Go away," he whispered, wishing he knew *Avada Kedavra*, and readying his magic in an attempt to put all his will behind the Blasting Curse. "Just go away."

*"Why should I? I just arrived here. And I am rather enjoying your company."* The snake slithered a few inches nearer. *"It is not often that one finds a mortal who can speak to serpents. I knew one, once, but she and I did not have much in common. She spat at me and told me to leave after less than three seasons around me."* The snake lifted her head and twined back and forth in dancing patterns, which made the skull shine forth from her all the more strongly. *"Am I not beautiful?"*

"I don't know what you're talking about," said Harry. "I can't talk to snakes." The fact that he was, and understanding this one right back, was beginning to bother him. He tried not to let it. The important thing, as always, was to protect Connor.

*"Oh, yes, you can,"* said the Locusta, sounding amused. She lowered her head and blinked her eyes at him. They were a stunningly bright green, like Lily's when she was angry. *"You could some time ago, at least, when your battle disturbed the Forest I was living in, and I watched you fight the other one who talks to serpents. He gave an order to his snake."* The Locusta gave a small angry hiss which Harry thought meant the same thing as an offended pureblood matriarch's sniff of disdain. *"Degraded creature. That she lets him so command her! I would die before submitting to such control."*

"You saw Connor's battle with Voldemort?" Harry breathed. He remembered Voldemort speaking to Nagini, ordering her to attack, but—"He talked in English."

*"He did not,"* said the Locusta, and inched a bit nearer. *"He commanded her in Parseltongue. You understood him. You speak Parseltongue even now, but to your ears it sounds as your own language. I do not know why that is."* She did not sound very interested in it, either. *"I followed you because I was curious about you, and from what I have seen, you will do very well."*

"Do very well to do what?" Harry kept his wand leveled at her, and remembered other things he'd heard about Locusta snakes. They struck very fast, nearly as fast as runespoors. They were self-willed, serving no master for very long. The wizards who kept the snakes to breed them or observe them or milk them for their venom almost all died, and the snakes wandered on, free, making the mere possession of a Locusta a high crime in Britain.

Of course, from what Harry could remember, none of the wizards who had studied them had ever been Parselmouths.

*And neither am I*, he thought at once, his mind abruptly boiling on the edge of hysteria. *Only Dark wizards have that talent, and I'm not Dark. I'm not. The Sorting Hat put me in Slytherin, but Connor said I was still good. I must be.*

“*Take care of me,*” the Locusta said, pulling his attention back to her. Harry scolded himself for having lost it in the first place. Whether or not he was a Parselmouth, it was not as though he was ever going to use the gift, so he would not worry about it. “*I require someone to care for me, to burnish my scales and tell me I am beautiful and feed me the choicest bits of their food. I like eggs. And milk. And the flesh of birds. And sweets. And—*”

“I am not going to take care of you!” Harry hissed back at her, and for a moment, he thought he heard his voice the way she must be hearing it, full of intricate twists and turns and soft sibilants. It was certainly not speaking English.

He blocked the thought from his mind. He was *not* evil. He would not let himself be.

“*Yes, you are,*” said the Locusta. “*I've watched you. Your dearest possession is that lump of a boy who shares your nest. If you do not take care of me, I will bite him.*”

Harry swallowed. He knew she could do it. There was no way he could watch Connor every moment of the day and night, and unless he destroyed her now, she would find some way through and bite him.

*Unless I destroy her now.*

He lifted his wand, about to unleash a curse, but the Locusta *moved*, darting forward, looping herself up his leg, and coiling around his left arm. Harry prepared to be bitten, but changed the angle of his wand. He would still kill her, even if she died. He had always been prepared to sacrifice his life for Connor. He could do it now.

The Locusta did not bite him. Instead, she shimmered once, and then she was gone.

Harry brought his wand closer, to see his arm by the light of *Lumos*. The Locusta was a bright golden-and-black pattern on his left forearm. Harry poked it with his wand. He felt nothing but skin.

*Like the Dark Mark*, he thought, and for a moment trembled with revulsion.

*My name is Sylarana*, said the Locusta's smug voice in his head. *You will care for me and make much of me, while I stay with you like this, or I will come to life and bite your lump of a boy. Or anyone else I want to.*

“How can you?” Harry whispered. “I never heard that Locusta snakes could do this.”

*We can, with one who speaks to serpents. And I want to. Now, pet me and make much of me.*

Harry stroked the skin of his arm, feeling ridiculous, but not daring to do anything else. He thought up a few compliments that made his mouth feel full of sugar, and murmured them.

Her contented hissing resounded in his mind a moment later.

Harry fought back the desire to be sick, and went on petting her.

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“Mum! Mum!”

Harry looked up, smiling. He and Connor had spent most of the day outside—Harry doing the extra homework that Professor Snape had assigned him over the summer, Connor studying the books of magical history that Lily had insisted he start reading—and the heat had struck Connor half-stupid. Harry wasn't at all surprised that, when the Weasleys' battered old owl, Errol, had stumbled through the special hole created in the isolation wards for him, Connor had seized on both Errol and the letter he carried to distract himself.

From the sound of his twin's voice now, Harry thought the letter had carried good news.

"What is it?" Lily Potter asked, stepping out of the house. Harry felt himself relax a bit. Their mother was the only one who knew everything Harry had trained and prepared and put himself through, who had encouraged him to be Connor's secret guardian, who knew that Harry was to sacrifice his life for his brother's if necessary, and stay in the shadows, protecting him and not outshining him, at all other times. She didn't know everything about Harry, but she knew most of it, and so he could let down his guard with her, no longer careful to keep up a mask.

"The Weasleys want me to come shopping with them on Diagon Alley on July thirty-first!" said Connor, jumping up and down. He paused for a long moment, then added, as if Lily would forget the significance of the date, "That's our birthday!"

"I know," Lily said, and glanced once at Harry. Harry shrugged and blinked, letting his mother know that Connor going to Diagon Alley was all right with him, as long as he had proper protection. Their mother turned back to Connor, whose hazel eyes were beaming at her with hope. "All right, Connor. You may go. Your father and Harry and I will come along. We could certainly buy school supplies that day as well."

"Yes!" said Connor, and hugged Lily around the legs. "Thank you, Mum! I'm going to go write Ron right now!"

He darted into the house, presumably to find a quill and parchment. Harry shook his head. Connor had left all the writing implements he'd been using to take notes right beside his books, and could have used them.

Lily stood looking into the house for a long moment. Then she turned and strode over to Harry, sitting in the grass beside him.

*What does she want?*

Harry ignored Sylarana's question, though he did touch his left arm to gentle her. Sylarana seemed more curious than threatening whenever she asked questions about their parents. And she was willing to wait for the answers, which their mother gave in the next moment, talking in a low, intense voice.

"Harry, how would you say that Connor's training is going?"

Harry sighed and let the last trace of the smile slip off his face. When he spoke with Lily, very nearly equal to equal, and one guardian of the Boy-Who-Lived to another, he could not lie. "Not as well as I hoped, Mother. He doesn't see why he needs to learn all this history and politics now, after we've kept him ignorant of it for so long. I've talked with him a few times, about the Boy-Who-Lived needing to unite and lead the wizarding world so that he can get rid of Voldemort, but he doesn't see it that way. He sees it as a dramatic battle between him and Voldemort, the way it was in May. He doesn't think about what happens after, or about having help."

Lily sighed in return and nodded. "I thought so," she said. "Well, I will keep giving him books and telling him that he needs to learn. I'll also tell Remus to give him a few stories about life among the werewolves. That might let the virtues he needs to learn slip in unguarded. Connor likes stories better than history."

Harry nodded, feeling a glow of fondness deep in his chest. Connor liked stories better than history, and tales of duels best of all. He liked sweets better than learning. He knew the first-year spells he should know, and performed them competently, without any ambitions to have greater power. Until his confrontation with the Dark Lord, he had known little even of true evil; Voldemort had come hunting him, and scarred him when Connor reflected the *Avada Kedavra* back upon its caster, at an age when he was far too young to remember anything about it.

But Connor was marked for a life of hardship, and Harry was not about to let that hardship corrupt him or kill him. He would know the history, the pureblood courtesies, the spells—Dark and otherwise—that Connor had no time or use for. Perhaps that was why he had been placed in Slytherin, so that he could seek the best path among Dark wizards for Connor to take. It was the only reason that made any sense to Harry.

*You are a fool*, said Sylarana comfortably in his head.

The aspect of his relationship with the Locusta that most disturbed Harry was the way she seemed to see into his thoughts. He told her now that she was beautiful like the sunlight in grass, and she hissed and let herself be distracted.

“Harry?”

He blinked and came back to the present, the reality that was their mother bending over him.

“Sirius is coming with you to Hogwarts this year,” Lily began.

Harry stared at her. Their mother quickly put her hands on his shoulders and shook her head.

“Not because of that,” she said. “Not because of anything you failed to do, Harry. No one could have known that Voldemort was hiding in Quirrell’s head. No one.” She gave him a little shake. “Do not blame yourself for that.”

Harry nodded, but slowly. He thought the guilt was valuable. If he took it to heart, then he would be more alert in the future, when the Dark Lord’s attacks on his brother might become even subtler.

*A natural-hatched fool*, Sylarana announced.

“Officially, he’ll be Madam Hooch’s assistant, and help referee the Quidditch matches,” Lily continued, smiling at Harry. “Unofficially, he’ll keep watch over Connor, even in the Gryffindor Tower and the classes where you might have difficulty going. Just a little help, Harry. He’ll think he’s Connor sole guardian, of course, since he doesn’t know about you, but we both know what a wonderful job you’ve done for him.” She hugged him and held him close for a long moment.

Harry let himself relax, little by little. No, he *hadn’t* failed. He’d guarded Connor from a troll, and from the Lestranges, and helped hold Voldemort off until Connor could defeat him with the pure love he bore in his skin. He could do this. Really, he should welcome Sirius’s presence. Their godfather was wonderful fun to be around, he would help with Connor, and he had no tolerance at all of Slytherins or anything Dark. If Harry started to slip into murky, shadowy pathways, then Sirius would be sure to tell him, and haul him back to the Light—by the scruff of his neck, if necessary.

“Remus can’t come?” he did ask. Remus was Connor’s godfather, and as protective of Harry’s brother in his own gentle way as Sirius was in his rough one. Plus, he was the best one at enchanting Connor with stories.

Lily shook her head. “They still haven’t perfected the Wolfsbane Potion. Until they do, the parents wouldn’t tolerate Remus being at Hogwarts.”

Harry nodded. Well, even the addition of Sirius was good fortune he’d had no right to expect. He would enjoy his godfather’s company.

*He is someone else I would like to bite,* said Sylarana dreamily in his head.

Harry opened his mouth to say something, nearly forgetting his mother’s presence, and then heard her exclaim. Harry looked up.

A black eagle-owl was fluttering about outside the isolation wards. After a moment, it found the hole Harry had cut in anticipation of its arrival, and soared regally downwards, landing a few feet away from Harry. It held out a talon, around which a letter was bound.

“And who is this?” Lily’s eyebrows nearly reached her hair.

Harry flushed as he freed the letter. He had thought he would have time to explain to his mother before this actually happened—especially since he hadn’t thought it would happen at all. “Um, Mother, this is Imperius, Draco’s eagle-owl.”

Imperius stared at Lily with brilliant yellow eyes. Lily stared back with brilliant green ones, which narrowed.

“A Malfoy owl can find its way in through our wards,” she said.

Harry winced. “Um. Yes?”

“Harry,” said Lily, in the gentle, sorrowful voice that showed she was most disappointed in him. “That was dangerous.”

Harry ducked his head, flushing. “I know. But Draco wanted to write to me, and I thought it would be less dangerous for an owl to come here, maybe, than for Hedwig to be seen leaving.”

“You could have refused him,” their mother pointed out.

“It was hard, without telling him why,” Harry admitted. His mother hadn’t been there to hear Draco’s gaily chattering voice, and she certainly hadn’t been there to see the shock and dismay that crumpled Draco’s face when Harry hinted they might not be able to communicate over the summer. “And I didn’t think I should tell him why.”

“Well, of course not,” said Lily, and went on staring at Imperius for a moment more. Then she shook her head. “What does young Malfoy say?”

Harry scanned the letter, then closed his eyes with a sigh of exasperation. “He wants to meet me in Diagon Alley. On our birthday.”

“Of course he does,” muttered Lily. “Well, now it is imperative that we go with you and Connor.” She rose to her feet. “Write him back and tell him you will come.”

Harry nodded, standing. “And do you want to check for tracking and tracing spells on Imperius?” he asked, but his mother’s wand was already out.

Quietly, he went into the house, to find writing implements and to fetch food for Syllarana, who was indicating that Connor-flesh would taste quite good if there weren't Chocolate Frogs about.

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Lily sighed. She had performed every detection charm she could think of, and nothing had shown up. Imperius shifted from foot to food and gave her a look of quiet disgust, then took wing for the impromptu owlery in the back of the house, where the family's owls spent most of their time.

*Maybe it was silly to worry,* Lily thought, sitting back and letting the sun and the wind stroke through her hair. *But these are the Malfoys.*

She had been almost frantic with concern after Harry's first letter of the last school year, when he wrote that he was becoming friends with Draco Malfoy. What did the Malfoy boy plan? More, what did Harry think he was doing? He knew the Malfoys were Death Eaters. He had studied, in detail, all the families who were enemies to Connor or might be.

But the necessity of keeping Harry's power and position relative to Connor a secret had encouraged her to allow the friendship. So far, it had not had many negative consequences that she saw; Harry had even survived a visit to Malfoy Manor last Christmas intact.

So far.

Lily closed her eyes. *The Malfoys have always been drawn to power. And Harry...*

Harry was the most powerful wizard of his age she had ever seen, bar none. Since the night when she and James had reached the deserted house where the Dark Lord supposedly held their sons captive and realized, in awful blinding fear, the trick that Peter had played on them, and had charged back to the house at Godric's Hollow to find the wards down and the Dark Lord dead or less than dead on the floor, it had been so. Harry's power boiled around him restlessly, seeking something to do. It could easily have drawn him into the Dark. Lily had arranged for him to be protector to Connor for his sake, too, so that he could learn spells and even wandless magic with a dedicated purpose, working for the Light instead of against it.

But only partially for his sake. Connor was the Boy-Who-Lived, the most precious figure in this war. Harry was the sacrifice, the knight in the shadows to Connor's brilliant king. If Harry had to die, or give up life and safety and health and a normal childhood to guard Connor, then he would do it, Lily knew. He would do it gladly, after his long training. He thought there was no higher purpose in life.

She knew it was the right thing to do, since the prophecy had proclaimed so clearly that the younger twin of the two was their savior.

Lily Evans Potter ducked her head and clenched her fists together.

*I know it was the right thing to do. But I still lie awake at night and wonder if it was the fair thing to do.*

Thoughts like that were another thing that encouraged her to allow Harry's friendship with the Malfoy boy. Until Draco did something to hurt Connor, he might still be all right, even a consolation prize of sorts for a boy who had given up so much else.

*But the moment he does...*

*Well. The moment he tries to hurt Connor, Harry will know what to do.*

"Lily?" James's voice called from behind the house.

Lily rose and reached for her smooth, happy mask, tucking the edges back into place. She and Harry had given up their innocence; Connor and James retained theirs. It was too precious to stain. James must never know what was wrong.

“Here, James,” she called, and let her husband rush around the side of the house and embrace her.

She closed her eyes as she leaned against him. *Hold me, please*, she thought and dared not say. *When you hold me like this, then I can believe that everything’s going to be all right, and I don’t have to believe in Dark Lords.*

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## Chapter Two: Old Family Rivalries

“Ron!”

“Connor! Happy birthday, mate!”

Harry concealed a smile as he watched Ron and Connor rush together as if they’d been separated for a year instead of a few weeks. They didn’t seem to quite know what to do when they’d reached each other, but they settled for one-armed hugs and slapping on the back. Then Connor stepped back and peered around Ron at the other Weasleys, who had met them just outside the brick wall at the back of the Leaky Cauldron.

“Gred and Forge,” he said, with a grin, which Harry thought was probably a private joke that he didn’t get. “Invented anything interesting lately?”

“Yes,” said one of the twins at once. Harry had never learned how to tell them apart, since he hadn’t spent enough time in Gryffindor Tower last year. He resolved to do it this term. It would help keep him from becoming more Slytherin, and that was all to the good, after the extremes to which Professor Snape had been willing to take his “persuasion” last year. “Try it.” He held out a flat yellow cake to Connor, who eyed it nervously.

“Uh—no thanks, George,” he said.

“I’m Fred,” said the twin.

“No, I’m Fred,” said the other.

Connor laughed along with Ron. Harry watched. He sometimes wished he could be as easy around other people as his twin was. Connor had adapted wonderfully well when he had to leave Godric’s Hollow and go into the wider wizarding world. Things that others had taken for granted he learned to take for granted, too, even if he never appeared all that comfortable with his fame.

But then Harry pushed away his yearning for a life that couldn’t be, and reminded himself that it was better this way. If he really *were* in the middle of everyone like that, he would have to pay too much attention to other people. This way, he could watch out for Connor.

“Connor, dear,” said Mrs. Weasley, embracing Harry’s brother hard enough to squeeze the rest of the air out of him. Harry studied her face for a moment. He knew she had lost two brothers in the first war against Voldemort. But she didn’t show any trace of buried sadness. Perhaps the loss had been long enough ago that she had gotten over it. “I’m so glad that your parents agreed to let you come.” She looked up at Lily and James then, and extended a hand, with a slightly nervous smile. “Molly Weasley. This is my husband Arthur.” She nodded to the red-haired and slightly chubby man beside her, who was engaged in reassuring an anxious-looking red-haired girl, probably his daughter. He looked up, abashed, when his wife hissed at him, and moved forward to offer his hand.

“James Potter,” said their father with an easy smile, and clasped Arthur’s hand back. “This is my wife Lily.” Their mother nodded, her eyes scanning the way that Connor stood between the twins and Ron. Her face relaxed a second later when the girl eased nearer to Connor. Harry understood. Surrounded by so many people, his twin made a harder target to strike.

“You’ll have heard of our son Ron, of course,” Molly Weasley was fussing. “And this is our daughter Ginny. She’s just starting at Hogwarts this year.” Ginny ducked her head and flushed, hard enough to make her face compete with her hair. “These are our twins, Fred and George—” She pointed, a trifle uncertainly.

“Wrong again, Mum,” said the twin on the left. “*I’m* George.”

Molly Weasley ignored him, to her credit, Harry thought, and indicated the older Weasley boy who’d just stepped up behind Arthur, his hands calmly folded in front of him. “And this is our son Percy,” she said, pride unmistakable in her voice. “He’s a sixth-year, and a Gryffindor prefect, aren’t you, Percy, dear?”

Percy nodded. Harry stared at him for a long moment. Percy had huge dark circles under his eyes, and his hands weren't really folded so much as clenched. He looked as though he had been under some great strain or worry lately. But his voice was calm and polite as he said, "Yes, Mother. It's nice to meet you, Mrs. Potter." He took Lily's hand, and she stared keenly into his eyes for a long moment before smiling.

"It's nice to meet you as well, Percy," she said quietly, and then steered Harry forward with a hand on his shoulder. "This is our other son, Harry. He's coming back for his second year at Hogwarts, along with Connor."

Mrs. Weasley blinked at Harry, then said, to cover her confusion, "Oh, how nice." She paused for a long moment, then said, "I didn't know that you had another son."

James coughed and leaned around Lily to mess up Harry's hair. "Harry's our quiet boy," he said fondly. "He's Connor's twin, but you'd never know it, they're so different. Our Harry likes books and studying, don't you, Harry?"

Harry smiled back at their father. This was the way that things were supposed to be going. Harry often got the feeling that James loved him without quite understanding him. How could anyone *not* want to spend more time playing Quidditch and pranks than sitting around with dusty old books? But that was to be expected, since he didn't know about Harry's efforts to protect Connor. "Yes, Father," he said.

When he glanced back at Mrs. Weasley, her face had cleared a bit. "Percy was the same way as a child," she confessed, in that whisper that was never a whisper.

"*Mother*," said Percy, in long-suffering tones. Harry regarded him again. His face was still strained, and his cheery smile emphasized that instead of hiding it. Harry supposed it was family problems, which everyone else knew about and was ignoring. There was no law saying that the Weasleys had to share all their secrets with the Potters, or that Connor, if he knew, had to share the whole thing with his family.

"But you must be in Gryffindor, surely," Mrs. Weasley prattled on, ignoring her son. "Why hasn't Ron talked about you in his letters at all?" She frowned at her youngest son, who was currently daring Connor to eat one of the twins' cakes.

"I'm in Slytherin House, ma'am," said Harry softly.

He winced inwardly as the shine of her eyes dimmed a bit, but he told himself that he had to expect it. He didn't think that he could change his House, not any more; Dumbledore wouldn't permit it. But he could act as like a Gryffindor as possible. That was what he would do now.

*Why would you want to?* Sylarana asked him.

"Oh," said Mrs. Weasley, after a long, awkward silence. "How... nice." She perked up after a moment, though, and clapped her hands to gather her family together. "We're going to buy robes first, of course," she said, to the accompaniment of her children's groans. "But then we can go to Florian Fortescue's, I think." She smiled as Connor cheered. Harry smiled, too. Neither of their parents was particularly adept at the charms to make ice cream. "And from there, it's a surprise!"

She glanced at Harry. "You're welcome to come with us, dear."

Harry shook his head. "Thank you, ma'am, but I'm meeting friends."

Molly nodded, and then she and Arthur, who had been involved in a discussion of Quidditch with James, began to herd Connor off. Lily waited until they were almost out of sight, then turned to James.

"Sirius is following them?"

James snorted lightly. "Of course. He didn't work as an Auror for nothing, Lily."

“He didn’t *stay* an Auror,” said Lily, with a tartness that Harry had never heard in their mother’s voice before. Of course, he thought, when Connor was behind the wards at home, his safety didn’t depend on Sirius alone.

“That wasn’t his fault,” James said at once. “If Mrs. Zabini could only take a joke—“

“Regardless,” Lily all but snapped. “He’s following Connor?”

“Yes, my love,” said James, gathering his wife close. “Of course. You don’t need to look so worried.”

Harry thought she did. This was the middle of Diagon Alley, and it seemed as though half the wizarding community in Britain had chosen today to shop. Still, they could probably trust Connor’s safety to the Weasleys and Sirius for now, and they would have to, since Connor wouldn’t want his parents tagging along and Harry couldn’t follow openly.

“Harry!”

Startled, Harry had only half-turned when Draco Malfoy crashed into him, hugging him at least as tightly as Mrs. Weasley had hugged Connor. Draco then abruptly loosened the embrace and tried to offer his hand the way a pureblooded heir would, his face slightly flushed with excitement and his eyes shining. “Harry Potter,” he said. “I welcome you to Diagon Alley on this, the occasion of your birth.”

Harry blinked, but returned Draco’s handclasp. “Thank you, Draco,” he said. He found himself smiling nearly helplessly. It made no sense. The Malfoys were one of the greatest threats to Connor, and Lucius Malfoy had been a willing Death Eater—no matter *what* Draco thought on that particular subject—and they were all Slytherins to the core, and Draco had even made it his task to insure that Harry spent as little time with his brother as possible during the school year. Harry could think about all that when he was in Godric’s Hollow, and scourge himself for allowing the friendship. But when he was with Draco, none of it tended to matter.

“Mr. Potter.”

Harry turned swiftly at that. Lucius Malfoy was making his way towards them with leisurely hauteur, his wife Narcissa on his arm. Narcissa smiled when she saw Harry, the odd mixture of predatory interest and warmth that she had shown him during the Christmas holidays, when Harry had last seen her. Lucius locked his eyes on Harry’s and inclined his head slightly in a bow.

His gaze moved on to James and Lily, and grew icy. “Mr. Potter, again,” he murmured. “And the lovely Mrs. Potter.”

Harry glanced at their parents, and was startled at the transformation. Sometimes, he tended to forget that they had both fought against Voldemort, enough times to have made their destruction a priority for the Death Eaters. James had his wand out, and was trembling with the need to strike. Lily had her arms folded. Harry knew she could be ready to hurl spells in an instant from that position.

“Don’t you hurt my son,” James growled. “Don’t you *dare* hurt him, Malfoy.”

Lucius blinked. Harry had the feeling that he was truly discomfited, and tucked that odd fact away for future reference. However, it turned out he didn’t need to, as Draco’s father arched his brows and explained the blink at once. “I have no intention of hurting your son,” he said, and his gaze swept back to Harry. “Young Mr. Potter impressed me very much on his visit to our Manor. We understand each other.” He looked at James again. “I admit to being impressed that you could raise him in such a fashion, Potter. More wizarding than I suspected of you.”

Harry winced. The backhanded compliments weren’t *that* cutting, compared to some of the things Lucius had said at the Manor, but James had a hot temper.

James actually pointed his wand and began, “*Diff—*“

“*Expelliarmus!*” Lily said clearly, and her husband’s wand soared into her hands. She frowned at him. “Honestly, James.” She turned back to Lucius and Narcissa, and while her manner was no warmer than it had been, at least Harry

felt sure she wasn't about to hex them. "Please forgive my husband," she said. "He sometimes has... problems being reminded of things he would rather forget." She flickered another frown at James when he tried to protest under his breath.

"Of course," said Lucius, the picture of courtly grace. *One would never know that he's talking to someone he thinks of as a Mudblood*, Harry thought, watching him. He felt a tiny bit of admiration; he knew how hard it was to maintain that emotionless mask, since he'd needed to perfect it himself. "We should depart, in any case, if we are to buy the boys' school supplies and Harry's birthday gift."

Harry stared openly. "Mr. Malfoy," he managed to say after a moment, "thank you, but that's really not necessary—"

"Of course it is, Harry," said Narcissa, her smile widening across her face. Her voice was gentle, the exact opposite of her eyes. "Draco has talked about your birthday for most of the summer, until we are quite excited about it ourselves. I would feel *so* remiss if we did not give you a gift. Please, will you come with us and let us have the gift of presenting you with a small token of our esteem?"

Harry knew of absolutely no way to refuse something like that without the most appalling rudeness, so he managed to duck his head and murmur, "Of course, Mrs. Malfoy."

"Such a polite boy," said Narcissa, and nodded to Lily and James. "A credit to his training."

Neither of their parents appeared to know how to respond to that one, so they let it go. Lily did say, as she turned away, "Harry, we'll be in Flourish and Blotts when you're done."

"All right, Mother," Harry said.

Draco waited until they had rounded the corner before he burst out with, "That's *appalling*, Harry. Do they always treat you like that? And what about family friends? Do they always stare at them as if they were something the Kneazle dragged in? As if—"

"Draco," said Narcissa, in the mild way she had, and Draco cut off. He fumed, red-faced, for a moment, and then brightened.

"Wait until you see what we bought you, Harry! It's *wonderful*. And you can't guess what it is! Go on, guess!"

*Why does he think that you can guess what it is when he just told you that you couldn't?* Sylarana hissed into his mind. *This one is my second choice for someone to bite, if I cannot find your brother. He is spitting on me. Tell him to stop it.*

Harry spoke a few hasty compliments and drew his robe's sleeve over his left arm, to shield Sylarana from Draco's spittle. He caught Lucius Malfoy's eye as he did, and the raised eyebrow. He met the elder Malfoy's curious gaze with a cool one, and then turned back to guessing.

"A—a Snitch," he said.

Draco looked alarmed for a moment, then laughed and shook his head. "No! I want you to concentrate on catching the real one."

"Another owl?" Harry guessed.

"You already have Hedwig." Draco danced in front of him as they moved further down the Alley. "Go on, guess!"

Harry continued to guess, as well as to reassure Sylarana. It wasn't the easiest task in the world, and for once, he was grateful that he didn't have Connor around to take up his attention.

He was especially grateful that his brother wasn't there when he saw what the Malfoys had bought him.

“I—I can’t accept it, Mrs. Malfoy,” Harry stammered, staring down at the Nimbus 2001 broomstick that he held in his hands. “It’s too much. Please. I can’t—I feel embarrassed. I haven’t done anything to deserve this.” He tried to push the broomstick back at the beaming shopkeeper who’d brought it out from the back of Quality Quidditch Supplies.

Narcissa seized it before the shopkeeper’s beam could change into a frown, and pressed it gently back at Harry. She handled it with such reverence that Harry felt ashamed of his clumsiness, and this time cupped his palms to receive it, as one was supposed to with a gift of such great price. But he continued to shake his head and try to say something, at least until Narcissa leaned down and put a finger on his lips.

“It’s true that you’ve given us no gift of equivalent price, Harry,” she said gently. Her smile reminded him of Sirius’s when he had played a particularly good prank, but with a different twist to it. “You’ve given us something greater.” She glanced sideways at Draco, who was examining the broom in silent rapture, and lowered her voice. “I have never seen my son so happy as he was this summer.”

Harry blinked. “And you think I had something to do with that, Mrs. Malfoy?”

“Quite the contrary,” she said. “You had *everything* to do with it.” She tossed her head at Lucius, who had remained near the front of the shop. “My husband knows so, too, and that is one of the reasons that we agreed on this gift.”

Harry stiffened at that. The Malfoys had all given him different gifts for Christmas last year, all with subtly different meanings. Lucius’s had been a Foe-Glass, an ironic salute to an honored enemy. That he had agreed on this broom, which seemed to be a gift of friendship, if Narcissa was telling the truth...

Harry did not know what that meant, not exactly. He did know it would be an insult to the Malfoys if he didn’t accept it.

He nodded and let out a deep breath. “I’ll accept it, then,” he said, his voice slightly hoarse to his own ears. “Thank you, Mrs. Malfoy.”

Narcissa kissed him on the cheek, and nodded to the shopkeeper, who once more wore a smile. “We’ll take it.” She smiled at him. “Happy birthday, Harry.”

“I can’t wait to ride it,” said Draco dreamily.

*I still want to bite him*, Sylarana pointed out.

Lucius stared from the front of the shop.

Harry spared a brief moment to hope that things would be simpler when he got to Hogwarts, or else he did fear that he would go mad.

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“Such a commotion,” said Lucius, curling his lip, as they came into Flourish and Blotts a few hours later.

Harry had to agree. Apparently, some new celebrity was advertising his books here, and the shop was full of excited witches, crowded in to see him, craning their necks and cooing like doves.

Harry made out the “celebrity,” Gilderoy Lockhart, before he saw his parents. He stood on a stage in the center of the shop, waving to the constant click of cameras and now and then holding up a copy of a book entitled *Magical Me*. Harry curled his lip much as Lucius had. Lockhart looked like everything negative about a famous person distilled. Harry would not be surprised if—

Then Lockhart lunged downward, saying, “Two celebrities for the price of one!” and dragged Connor onto the stage beside him. Harry’s brother stood there, looking extremely uncomfortable, while Lockhart hugged his shoulders with one arm and beamed out a smile too white to be real. Cameras clicked and flashed constantly. Connor blinked.

Harry's irritation reshaped itself into rage. He felt Draco wince beside him, the way he always did when Harry grew angry. He'd tried over the summer to find some way to confine his magic behind a shield, so that he didn't give other wizards headaches when he lost his temper, but that hadn't worked so far.

And right now he wasn't concerned about it. He focused on the cameras aimed at the stage and whispered, "*Obscurus!*"

The cameras continued to click, but no flashes came from them anymore. Lockhart's smile dropped away. He took a few steps forward and waved *Magical Me* half-heartedly, as though that would make new pictures of him appear out of thin air. Connor took the chance to hop off the stage and back into the comforting embrace of the Weasleys.

Harry smiled, then paused. *Was that a smirk?*

*That was good work,* said Sylarana. *Now, hurry up and get home. I want food, and I don't want to bite someone just yet.*

Draco chuckled beside him, and thumped Harry on the back. "Good spellcasting," he said. "I hope that utter *prat* isn't really going to be our Defense teacher."

"Draco," said Narcissa. "You will show respect to your professors."

Draco turned and gave his mother an innocent look. "Even to him?"

Narcissa's lips twitched, and Draco beamed. Harry relaxed, though he had what Draco had said to think about. He hadn't connected Gilderoy Lockhart's name to the one on their list of books to be purchased this year. He didn't like the thought of this man coming to Hogwarts and continuing to harass Connor.

He forced himself to shrug it away. *I'll deal with that if and when it comes.*

He and Draco went about getting their books and loading them into their cauldrons. Harry was resigned when he found out that most of them were, in fact, Lockhart's books. He supposed that the Defense teacher couldn't be worse than Quirrell. He couldn't picture Voldemort hiding on the back of that useless fool's head.

"Harry!"

Harry turned around with a smile as Connor found him, though Connor paused, eyes flashing, at the sight of Draco beside him. Then his glance went to the Lockhart books, and he sighed. "We're going to have to deal with him, aren't we?" he asked.

"Yes," Harry said.

Connor pouted.

Arthur Weasley came up behind Connor, herding Ginny along. He smiled at Harry. "I see that you boys found—"

"Weasley," said Lucius's voice from behind Harry.

Arthur's gaze snapped to him, and he reacted much the way James had, though he didn't actually draw his wand. "Malfoy," he said, face clouding. "What do you want? Come to practice your sneer in warmer surroundings? I suppose one can't stay in a Manor packed full of Dark artifacts *all* the time."

"Your Aurors' latest search found nothing, Weasley," said Lucius. "And that's the way it will remain." He shook his head slowly, sadly. "You cannot let grudges go from the war. Tsk, tsk, Weasley. We are on the same side now."

"You were never on anyone's side but your own, Lucius, you *snake*," said Arthur, and took a step forward.

“I am, at least, on the side of my own family,” said Lucius. He looked at Ginny, who seemed to be trying to will herself out of existence, and raised an eyebrow. “For example, I can afford to buy them robes that *fit*.”

Arthur lunged at Lucius, shoving him into the bookcase behind him. Harry jumped out of the way, checked to make sure Connor was all right, and then shielded Draco and Ginny from the falling books as best he could. Ginny’s face was pale when he stood up, but she nodded that she was all right when Harry asked her.

Lucius rose, brushing dust off his robes, his face carefully controlled. “You will *pay* for that, Weasley,” he said. “Be assured. Come, Draco, Narcissa.” He completely ignored his son’s half-formed protest, and Draco gave Harry a disconsolate look and one final hug before trailing after his father.

Lucius passed behind Ginny as he stalked towards the door. His hand moved, snake-quick, and dropped a small black book into her cauldron.

Harry made his decision quickly. He didn’t think that anything Lucius Malfoy might drop into a Weasley child’s cauldron was innocent, his friendship with Draco notwithstanding. Draco was not his father. He darted his own hand in a moment later and picked up the book, putting it underneath his robe.

Lucius turned in time to catch the motion. He stared at Harry. Harry stared back.

Lucius shook his head, smiling faintly, after a moment, and then turned and left the shop. Narcissa moved after him, murmuring a farewell to Harry, a moment before Lily and James found him and Connor and bundled them back to Godric’s Hollow as swiftly as possible.

Harry held onto the book. He didn’t know what it was, but he would study it until he did.

“Dear? You’re smirking.”

Lucius smiled at his wife and murmured, “I’m well,” before he returned to his private contemplations.

He hadn’t *planned* for the Potter boy to receive the book that he’d held onto since fetching it from a secret hiding place on discreet instructions last Christmas, but it could be interesting. Lucius wasn’t sure exactly what was in the book, only that at one time it had been very important to the Dark Lord. He’d thought it amusing to give it to the youngest child of a man he had good reason to hate.

And now it was in the hands of the brother of the Boy-Who-Lived, a boy who had shown himself formidably powerful and unexpectedly educated in pureblood courtesies—and unexpectedly important to Draco.

*One could do worse*, Lucius thought as he and his family made their way back to the Leaky Cauldron and the nearest Apparition point, *than to have it in such a child’s hands. At the very least, the results will be interesting.*

~\*~\*~\*~\*~\*~\*

### Chapter Three: A Touch of Sirius

“Hello, Harry.”

Harry blinked. He was dreaming; he knew that, because in front of him the dark figure curled in the space too small for it screamed in pain and the figure in the space only slightly larger whimpered and writhed. But for the first time, he wasn't looking at the images like a painting in his head. He seemed to be standing back from them, in a cool, dry place.

He looked around. There was a stone wall at his back, like one of the corridors at Hogwarts. It stretched away beyond the dark figures, then curved back and vanished behind them. Harry studied the floor underneath him. It was made of stone, too, he thought, but covered with sand.

He thought he should be more frightened than he was. *At least*, he thought as he touched the familiar weight in his sleeve, *I still have my wand.*

“Hello, Harry,” the voice repeated, and this time Harry became aware of someone leaning on the wall next to him. He turned his head.

The figure was a young man, tall enough to be a sixth-year or seventh-year at Hogwarts, his face sharp and arresting. He had dark hair. Harry found himself looking automatically for scars, but couldn't see any. His fingers were long, though, in a way that reminded Harry of Snape's. He wondered if this man was also a Potions Master.

“Hello, Harry,” the man said a third time. There was an impatient tone in his voice now.

Harry saw no reason to answer strange people who appeared in his dreams, who might be only dreams themselves. He watched him instead, and said nothing. He had his wand ready to draw in an instant.

The stranger took a step forward, and Harry drew his wand. That made him pause. He tilted his head to the side, and Harry felt a brief bolt of pain in his forehead. It was similar to the pain he had felt in his scar during the last school year, when Quirrell tried to reach the hiding place of the Philosopher's Stone. Well, that only made sense, Harry thought. This was another prophetic dream, or at least an odd one.

“My name is Tom Riddle,” said the man at last. “Do you know me?”

Harry shook his head. He thought his best course for now was to stay silent and alert. He might have tried using pureblood courtesies, which put an acceptable distance between the speaker and strangers, but Riddle was no pureblood family name he had ever heard, and he couldn't be sure the man would understand them.

“I thought you didn't,” mused Tom, and glanced at the two dark figures. For a moment, he blinked, as though he didn't understand what he was seeing. Then he sighed and waved a hand.

The images vanished. Harry saw another stone wall where they had been. He brought his wand and his guard up. Perhaps Tom Riddle *was* just a dream, but he didn't trust other people who could do wandless magic. Harry himself had only learned it because he wanted to defend Connor. Who knew what purposes, obscure or even Dark, someone else might have for learning it?

Tom turned back towards Harry, his smile pleasant. Harry wondered if the presence of the images had been bothering him, and he had banished them because of that. Then he frowned. *Even if he did banish them because of that, that doesn't excuse the fact that he's doing wandless magic in my dreams.*

*No, it doesn't.*

Harry jumped for a moment, then felt a twist of motion about his arm and glanced down to see Sylarana moving there. She said nothing else, however, and after a moment faded into his skin again, this time on his right arm near his wand. Harry let out a shaky breath. *My dreams are getting rather crowded*, he thought crossly.

“You aren't going to speak to me at all?” Tom asked. “That isn't very nice.”

Harry heard the hard undertone in his voice, and knew that Tom was probably approaching the end of his patience. He decided it would be worthwhile to speak. If he could be sure that Tom would leave, he would not, but an attack by a powerful, peeved, apparently dream-walking wizard was not something Harry wanted to deal with.

And dreams could be real, could leave lasting effects. He had had enough nightmares this summer and last term to know.

“Hello,” he said, and then waited.

Tom smiled, his bad mood seeming to vanish. “Hello,” he said easily. “I know that your name’s Harry Potter. But I don’t know that much else about you yet. Why don’t you tell me about yourself?” He leaned on the wall, a comfortable slouch that made Harry confirm his impression of him as not pureblooded. Draco could not have leaned that way. He seemed to fear his mother’s voice appearing out of thin air to scold him if he so much as slumped in his chair.

“Why would you want to know?” Harry asked. He stepped away from Tom and mimicked his posture. That won him an even brighter smile. He didn’t know how much he had managed to fool the other wizard, but he thought it possible that Tom would underestimate his intelligence. “I’m nobody very special, really. Just Harry.”

Tom gave a different kind of smile, a quirk of his mouth that made him seem younger than before. “I think that’s wrong,” he said softly. “I wouldn’t talk to ‘nobody very special.’”

“Who *are* you?” Harry asked.

“I live in the diary,” said Tom.

Harry shook his head. “How can you live in that boring old book?” He’d examined the diary, performing every spell he could think of short of actually damaging the book. Written words sank into the page, but that was the only remotely magical thing he’d found. The diary, which Harry hadn’t even known was a diary until now, was tattered, and old, and apparently Muggle-made, and entirely blank. Harry couldn’t figure out the purpose of it.

“I’m a memory,” said Tom. “A dream. The book is a kind of Pensieve for me.” He sighed. “I’m afraid that something happened to me the next year, something not very pleasant. I don’t remember what it was, of course, since I’m still sixteen years old, stuck here, and I would have been seventeen when—whatever it was happened. But after a while I never saw my older self, and I can’t feel him anymore, the way I could when he was alive. I think he’s dead.”

“Oh,” Harry murmured. It *would* be rather a terrible thing, stuck in one place with no one to talk to and nothing to do—

*Except that he’s talking to you, isn’t he?* hissed Sylarana. Tom gave no indication that he could hear her, which Harry thought meant she was speaking in the dream equivalent of his inner mind. *I wonder how he can do that. Ask him, and hurry up about it. I want to go play in the grass. I will hunt mice, and you will make up stories to amuse me.*

“Why did you talk to me?” Harry asked.

Tom clapped his hands. *That gesture doesn’t fit,* Harry thought. *He’s too old for it.* “Because *you’re* interesting, Harry,” he said. “I don’t know very much about you, but what I can feel of your thoughts intrigues me. I think we’re a lot alike.”

“Really.” Harry peered at the man skeptically. Tom was guarded, like him, but Harry knew it couldn’t be for the same reasons. He was the only brother of the Boy-Who-Lived.

“Yes,” said Tom. “I can look around, you know, when you open the diary, even if I can’t see very much. I saw the robes with the Slytherin crest on them. You’re in Slytherin House, aren’t you? So was I.”

Harry lifted his magic quietly into place and held it there. No, not all Slytherins were evil; some, like Draco, were charming in an annoying way, and others, like Blaise Zabini, were merely annoying. And some were enormous gits, like Snape. But given everything else that Tom could do, it was a black mark against him.

“Don’t you like being in Slytherin?” Tom asked, apparently misinterpreting the quality of his silence. *Apparently*, Harry stressed to himself, his senses alive and alert now. He still didn’t trust Tom to be as oblivious as he appeared. “I loved it there. I’d had a lonely childhood. My parents died before I was born—“

“Your mother can’t have died before you were born,” Harry couldn’t help but point out.

Tom’s eyes narrowed for a moment, and then he shrugged and gave a careless little laugh that didn’t fit him, either. “Well, that’s true enough! She didn’t. She died as I was born, and my father before that, and I was given to an orphanage.” He paused, and an anger that seemed genuine filled his face. “I hated the other children there. They were Muggles. They hated me and made fun of me for doing magic.”

Harry couldn’t help but nod at that. The only time their whole family had ever left Godric’s Hollow before they went to Diagon Alley to buy school supplies last summer was on a visit to the Dursleys, their mother’s Muggle relatives, when Harry and Connor were six. Harry still remembered the terrified, half-crazed silence of their aunt, and the rude blusterings of their uncle, and how their cousin Dudley had screamed when Harry made a sweet float into the air. Harry had been very glad that he *wasn’t* going to meet any more Muggles, not if they were all like that.

“See?” Tom said, and his face and voice softened. “You know it, too. I think that’s another thing I already know about you. You’re lonely, and you’re powerful, and every so often you look around and see that everyone else is just so *ignorant* and full of themselves, and you want to do something about it.”

Harry hesitated. It was true that he felt that way sometimes, but—

*You feel that way hardly any of the time*, Sylarana informed him crisply. *Now, wake up. I desire mice and stories.*

Harry stepped away, sliding along the stone wall. “I’m going to wake up now,” he said. “It was—pleasant meeting you, I suppose. At least different.”

“Oh, don’t!” said Tom, all petulance. He took a step forward. “It took me a long time to get your attention.”

“I know,” said Harry. “I can come back and talk to you—“

*Not tonight*. Sylarana slid back up his arm under his sleeve. *Mice and stories!*

“—but not tonight,” Harry finished.

Tom sighed and stopped walking. “All right. But leave the diary open so I can see sometimes, will you? I don’t know you very well, and your brother hardly at all.” He shrugged and gave a helpless little wave. “Bye, Harry.”

Harry opened his eyes, and found himself lying in his bed. Connor snored in the other one. Sylarana was awake, slithering onto his chest so that she could stare him in the eyes and speak aloud.

*“Mice and stories! Now!”*

“I know,” Harry said, not caring at the moment if he spoke in English or Parseltongue, and glanced to the side. Sure enough, the diary lay on the table next to his bed, open to one of the blank pages.

He reached over, only daring to touch the cover with the tips of his fingers, and shut it.

There were some things that no powerful, wandless-magic-wielding, dream-walking wizard needed to see.

Once he’d done that, Harry felt a few inches better, and went outside to give his Locusta what she wanted.

“Harry! How’s my favorite godson?”

“Hi, Sir—“ was all Harry got out before his godfather half-crushed him, swinging him up and around in a circle, then putting him down on the grass and proceeding to mess up his hair thoroughly.

*I don't like him, I don't like him, I don't like him*, Sylarana sang in a tone that put Harry's teeth on edge. *He has twenty minutes to spend with you. That is all.* Harry felt her come to life and slither up his arm to his shoulder, where she coiled. He swallowed and hoped with all his might that Sirius wasn't watching the way his robes hung around his shoulders.

“I'm fine, Sirius,” he said, when he noticed that said godfather was still watching him expectantly. “I didn't know you were coming today.”

Sirius grinned and winked, tilting his head towards the house. “Neither did your parents,” he whispered. “*Or* Connor. This is a surprise.”

“It is?” Harry blinked. Usually, Sirius brought Remus along on his “surprises.” “Is Remus going to be here, too?”

Sirius snorted. “No. He'd fuss too much. He thinks I'm not healthy or something.” He pounded a fist into his own back, then bent over and coughed gratingly. “Must be getting old,” he wheezed. “I'm already thirty-two, I am! Bury me in a grave in a Muggle cemetery. Try not to cry too much. After all, I've already lived almost as long as Albus Dumbledore!” He laughed, the barking laugh that Harry had heard most of his life and associated with sudden presents and equally sudden pranks.

Harry smiled at him and shook his head. He supposed that Sirius was who Connor might grow up to be, although Connor didn't have *quite* Sirius's fondness for jokes. Harry also thought that Connor would need more gravity, as the leader of the wizarding world he had to become, but getting him there alive and still able to laugh were Harry's primary responsibilities.

“Wish I could make you laugh, sometimes, Harry,” Sirius muttered as he straightened up. “I haven't heard you so much as chuckle since you were a baby.” He brooded for a moment, then shook it off and smiled brightly, pulling a tiny object from his robes. “Ready to give them a good scare?”

Harry drew in his breath to answer, but caught his first clear glimpse of his godfather's face and wound up exhaling without answering. He could see why Remus thought Sirius was sick. His face was pale, his face bearing lines that made Harry think of Percy Weasley in Diagon Alley, and for the first time that Harry could remember, his smile didn't reach his gray eyes.

“Sirius?” Harry whispered. “What's wrong?”

“Wrong?” Sirius winked at him. “Nothing, of course! Why would something be wrong?”

Harry swallowed. “You don't look like you've been sleeping well,” he ventured.

Sirius lost his smile all at once, and sighed. “Yeah,” he said. “It was Daphne Marchbanks. I—I thought we might have had something special, Harry. And you know how I get when I realize it's not working.”

Harry nodded. He'd been awake several times over the years when James and Remus brought Sirius back to the house at Godric's Hollow after another bout of it “not working” with some other young witch, and kept him behind the isolation wards by main force. Harry had once heard their father say that his friends were the only reason Sirius didn't drink himself to death when he was depressed. But it didn't happen often. A few more days, Harry knew, and Sirius would be flirting with someone else and talking gleefully about marrying a Muggleborn to vex the ghost of his mother, who had died of apoplexy, apparently, about her only son not following her rigid pureblood ways.

“But you're all right to play a surprise?” Harry asked.

Sirius won his grin back in an instant, and this time it did reach his eyes. “I'm sure,” he said, and then put the object on the ground. He drew his wand, tapped the tiny thing, and stood back as it grew.

Harry felt his eyes widen as he realized what it was. He'd known that Sirius had a motorbike he'd enchanted to fly, but he'd never seen it. Sirius supposedly couldn't use it that often, for fear of the Misuse of Muggle Artifacts Office finding out about it, and for fear of leading Death Eaters to Godric's Hollow.

Sirius put a finger to his lips and nodded at the house. Then he stepped back from Harry and started yelling.

"Oi, Harry, what do you think you're do—Harry! They're Death Eaters! Coming through the wards! Run!"

Harry stared at him as shouts erupted from inside the house, but Sirius was paying no attention. He waved his wand and said, "*Praestigiae Draconigena!*"

A green smoke boiled from his wand, forming itself into the illusion of a dragon that Harry recognized as a Common Welsh Green. It turned towards the house on Sirius's low-voiced command and roared.

"They've got a dragon!" Sirius shouted, cupping his hands around his mouth. "Run, Harry, run!"

The door to the house flew open with a bang, and James charged out, his wand already spitting sparks. "Sirius, if this is a prank, *I am going to—*"

Sirius, laughing, grabbed Harry around the waist, sprang onto the motorbike, and kicked it into life. The dragon illusion foamed up around them and accompanied them. It would block anyone below from seeing the bike, Harry knew.

He could feel his heart pounding in his ears, his breath coming faster, and Sylarana slithering around on his shoulder, apparently trying to decide on a way to bite Sirius that wouldn't make the bike crash. He was not sure what he felt. Blank surprise was starting to give way to something else.

"Sirius! Damn you!"

Sirius laughed. Harry whipped his head around to see their father riding close beside him on his own broom, his wand still clutched in one hand. He was close enough now to see through the illusion, though, and know that it was Sirius, and not Death Eaters, who'd kidnapped Harry. James immediately began a long and impressive list of obscenities, including Muggle ones that Harry hadn't thought his father knew.

"Don't, James," said Sirius, slewing the motorbike around in a maneuver Harry wouldn't have tried on a broom, and turning them half upside-down. He ended up facing Harry's father, holding Harry securely in his lap. "Little children have big ears."

James snapped "*Finite Incantatem!*" and the dragon illusion broke apart and melted away. He steered the broom forward, fuming. Harry held grimly onto the bike's handlebars. He was sure that he would fall off before his father could rescue him, with the way Sirius was howling with laughter, his head bent and his arms clasped around his belly.

Just as James touched Harry's arm, a bang and a loud scream came from the house beneath.

James whipped his head around. Harry joined him, feeling his heart speed into a frenzy and his magic snap into place around him.

*Connor. That was Connor.*

James flew straight back down to the ground, shouting out obscenities again. Sirius followed him, fast enough that Harry felt the wind sting his ears. He clasped his godfather's hands, silently willing him to go faster. *Anything* could be happening to his brother, and he was stuck in the air on a bike, playing a stupid joke!

James landed first, but Harry flung himself off while Sirius was still five feet from the ground. He rolled, taking the fall the way he'd learned to in Quidditch, and then raced for the front door. His wand was already in his hand. Sylarana clung to his shoulder and hissed out a melody of complaint.

Harry entered the kitchen just in time to see a frightened-looking house elf vanish with a crack. A hovering mass of Connor's school books and robes dropped to the ground with a complementary crash.

"What happened?" Harry asked, turning to Connor, who stood backed against the wall, and Lily, who stood in the doorway.

His brother shook, tried to answer, and then started crying. Harry immediately went forward and took him in his arms. Connor clung to him, and Harry let his tears soak the front of his jumper while he looked to his mother for an answer.

Lily spoke slowly and calmly. "That house elf appeared and started talking about how Connor couldn't go back to Hogwarts this year, that it's too dangerous for him. Then he tried to hurt his school things. He kept me from entering. I was afraid he would hurt Connor, if necessary, to stop him from going back." She closed her eyes. Her face was white. Harry could guess why. He'd be surprised if his wasn't the same way.

James and Sirius came tearing in then. Lily explained the story for them, this time adding that the house elf had called himself Dobby and said that he belonged to a powerful pureblooded family who intended to try and hurt Connor.

Amid Sirius's angry growls of vengeance, and James's many scattered hugs for both his wife and his sons, Harry held his brother, and crystallized his rage, carefully packing down and tamping all his emotions into one shining block of anger.

*I won't let anyone hurt you, he promised Connor, who'd finished crying but showed no impulse to move away from him just yet. Not Voldemort, and not Tom Riddle, whoever he is, and not Dobby or Dobby's family. Not Draco, if it comes to that. Not anyone, ever. I'm so sorry I was away today. I won't be ever again. I'll be right here.*

He looked up when he felt a hand on his shoulder, and saw his mother staring down at him with those eyes that were mirrors of his own.

"Watch over him," she whispered. "I trust you even more than Sirius."

Harry nodded, accepting both the explicit message in her words and the implicit one: he was forgiven for not being there today when Connor needed him to be.

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"Come on, Sirius! We're going to be late!"

Harry studied his brother closely as Connor ran on ahead through King's Cross Station, now and then turning to shout impatiently at his godfather, who seemed determined to take his time strolling through the Station and talking with their parents. It had been two weeks since the incident with Dobby, and he sometimes doubted whether Connor was really all right. He'd had his first nightmare just a few days ago, and crept into Harry's bed for the rest of the night, much to Syllarana's displeasure. Harry had had to stay awake the rest of the night and entertain the Locusta to make sure she didn't bite Connor.

But Connor seemed aglow now, running in place and dancing with impatience when he couldn't run. Maybe it was just going back to Hogwarts, but he'd been healed of some of his pain.

Harry was glad of that. It gave him time to think about the vows he'd worked out during the last days of summer, a whole new set of them to go with the ones he'd had since he was a child, sworn to protect Connor and stay in his shadow.

He was *not* going to act Slytherin. If Draco softened the image of the House for him, Tom Riddle, with his endless inane conversations during which he tried to learn more about Harry for no reason he would state, had solidified it as one Harry would rather not belong to. And then there was the memory of Snape, and what he'd tried to encourage Harry to do: abandon Connor.

Harry permitted himself a small smile. Snape had given him extra homework over the summer to encourage his Potions talent. Harry had learned other things from the homework, though, things that he thought Snape wouldn't have wanted him to learn. He looked forward to employing them in the Potions class.

He was going to be as Gryffindor as he could. That meant not lying as much, and walking a fine edge between encouraging Connor to do more heroic things and apparently not encouraging Connor at all, acting like an ordinary student. Harry was confident he could do it. The strange attack by Dobby had given him a new resolve. Never again was he not going to be there when Connor got attacked, and his methods last year, all of which had relied on Slytherin cunning and deception, hadn't worked, so he had to try new ones anyway.

So he would get to know his brother's friends, too, Ron and Hermione and Neville Longbottom and the other Gryffindor second-year boys, and the half-giant Hagrid, and the Weasley twins. He would make them see him as more mundane and less irritating and Dark than they might think him. Then he could spend more time with Connor without anyone questioning him about it.

And he would put away as much of his potential Dark talent as he could. He would ignore Tom Riddle. He would speak with Sylarana only as much as he had to prevent the whole school from suffering a plague of Locusta venom. He would work on defensive magic rather than offensive. He'd asked their mother for books on medical magic, and planned to start studying it as soon as he could. That would be of the Light, surely, a talent for healing and not for killing.

Harry knew he wouldn't slip from the Light, that his commitment there was firm. But it was important that other people see him that way, or he would spend all his time suspected of being Dark—and getting noticed.

*That is very Slytherin of you,* said Sylarana, in that bored tone she adopted when everyone in the world except Harry knew something.

Harry ignored her. He could, without trouble, when she sounded like that. She sounded bored more and more often. Harry hoped he would wake up one day and find himself without her, since she would have wandered off to more interesting pastures.

Sylarana flexed; she was curled about the place where his right arm joined his shoulder like a huge bracelet, and Harry could already feel her whenever he shifted the path of his trolley a little. This was harder, indicating her irritation. *I am never going to get bored of you. You speak with serpents. That is rare. You are my human, and I am going to defend you from other snakes who might try to take you away.*

Harry sighed. *I know,* he told her in his thoughts.

“I can't get through!”

Harry looked up, blinking. Connor was standing by the barrier that led to Platform 9¾, his hands clenched at his sides. He looked back at Harry and waited a moment until a crowd of Muggles had passed by. He was chewing his lip, his eyebrows pulled into a frown.

“Watch,” he whispered.

He stretched out an arm and ran at the barrier. His arm reflected off it as if it were solid.

Harry stared. The platform barrier was made to be passable to any wizard. He'd never heard of it doing this before.

He stepped up next to it and pushed with one hand. He couldn't feel anything but solid brick. He turned back to his parents and Sirius, who had noticed something was wrong and sped up a little.

Sirius reached them first, dashed a hand into the barrier, and stared for just a moment before smiling. “Well, I *am* going to be teaching at Hogwarts,” he said, “and it's my responsibility to insure that all the students get there on time.”

“Yes, it is,” said Lily, her eyes icy. “That means that you have to ride the Express. And as it's going to leave in five minutes—“

“Don’t be so picky, Lily,” said Sirius, holding up a placating hand. “I meant that I have a way that Connor and Harry can get there on time.” He pulled out what Harry just knew was the motorbike. Instinctively, he looked at their father.

James wore the quiet, grave expression that made Harry pay more attention than any of his rages. “No tricks, Sirius,” he said. “I want my boys to reach school safely.”

Sirius lost his smile briefly, and nodded back. “No tricks,” he said. “I wouldn’t take any more risks with Harry and Connor than I would with my own sons, if I had any.”

“Are you sure that you’re all right to drive it, Sirius?” Lily asked. “Your face—“

“Another bad night,” said Sirius lightly, though Harry could see his face tighten when he said it. “I promise I’m all right to drive it, Lily. I brought James and Remus back from our drinking bout our last night at Hogwarts safe and sound, didn’t I?” He grinned at James. “Drank you under the table *that* time.”

“You spiked my Firewhiskey,” said James, but he was smiling, too. He nodded at Lily. “Let them, love. This might be the only chance that they ever get to ride it while Sirius is being responsible enough to trust with them.” He gave Sirius a stabbing glance that said he hadn’t forgotten or forgiven the fake kidnapping he’d played with Harry. Sirius wore a half-second look of remorse before breaking back into his smile.

“Someone might see them,” said Lily, but Harry thought she was wavering, not least because Connor had joined the match with a silent pleading look.

“The motorbike has a Disillusionment Charm,” Sirius told her. “And we can follow the train once we’re past the barrier,” he added, playing what was obviously a trump card.

“*Fine*,” said Lily, with an explosive sigh.

Connor almost squealed and hugged her around the waist. “Thanks, Mum!”

After that, it was a matter of finding a quiet corner where the Muggles couldn’t see them, shrinking Harry’s and Connor’s school things, and setting Hedwig and Godric free to fly to Hogwarts. Harry asked Sylarana if she wanted to crawl, and got nothing but an irritated squeeze in return. Connor was bouncing up and down.

Sirius grinned at them, restored the motorbike to its original size, and then climbed aboard. Harry and Connor sat behind him, Harry relaxing as he noticed the charms to keep passengers in place.

“Bye, Mum!” said Connor, waving frantically. “Bye, Dad!”

“Goodbye, boys,” said James, smiling at them. “Stay safe. Don’t forget to write.”

“Stay safe,” Lily echoed, and met Harry’s eyes in a private message. He inclined his head in a nod to her, and then nodded to their father, too.

“Enough farewells, they always depress me. Let’s get flying!” said Sirius, and kicked the bike.

It roared into life, and they sprang forward, then left the ground as the Disillusionment and Silencing Charms took effect. Connor was whooping with excitement. Harry looped his arms around his brother’s waist and held him safe and secure.

*It really will be nice, having Sirius at Hogwarts, he thought. Connor and I will have a better year with someone who can make him laugh. He’s going to need it when Voldemort attacks again, as I’m sure he will.*

Then Sirius said, “Look back, Connor. Are your parents out of sight?”

“Yes,” said Connor, an undertone of mischief creeping into his voice.

“Good,” said Sirius, and sent the motorbike into a faster plunge. Connor shouted himself hoarse. Harry leaned his head forward and clung on.

*Gryffindors, the both of them*, he thought fondly.

Yes, Sylarana agreed, her tone not nearly so complimentary.

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Sirius brought the bike lower as they came in towards Hogwarts, much to Harry's relief. They could see the castle glittering across the lake now, and the towers reflected in the water. Harry shielded his eyes with one hand, until he grew used to the dazzle of spells and wards. He had not realized until that moment what the purpose of some exercises Snape had given him was. They had strengthened his ability to see magic. He could make out lines of blue and green and gold that he knew hadn't been there last year.

"There's Hagrid!" exclaimed Connor suddenly, and leaned off the bike at a crazy angle to wave. "Hagrid! Hagrid, up here!"

Harry looked down, even as he pulled his brother back to a firmer seat on the bike, and saw the half-giant leading a creature out of the Forbidden Forest. Hagrid looked up and waved, calling back to Connor, but it was the creature next to him that caught Harry's attention. It appeared to be a black horse, but bat-like wings spread from its shoulders, and when it slewed its head around and looked up at them, Harry caught a glimpse of glowing white eyes.

"What is *that*?" he managed to say, strangled. If Hagrid brought such creatures out to play when Connor was with him, Harry had never heard of it, and he would certainly have to reevaluate how dangerous it was for his brother to visit the gamekeeper. Perhaps he could arrange to go on most of the visits from now on. That would serve his own goal of getting to know Hagrid, too.

"What is what?" Connor asked, this time leaning off the left side of the bike and looking at the ground.

"That thing next to Hagrid—" Harry started, and then looked up and caught Sirius's eyes. His godfather shook his head, face gone dark and sad again. Harry blinked, then laughed. The laugh sounded forced and shaky to his ears, but Connor turned around and looked at him expectantly, so he said, "Oh, it's just a tree. I thought it was something dangerous."

"Hagrid's pets aren't all that dangerous, really," said Connor, and waved a final time to the half-giant as Sirius turned the bike to land in Hogwarts's courtyard. "Everyone thinks they are, but they're more misunderstood."

Harry kept his opinion of that to himself, and sighed in relief as the bike touched down. Sylarana writhed on his shoulder, and then said, *I did not know that you could see thestrals.*

Harry was sure she could see the blank incomprehension in his mind, because she once again adopted the bored, lecturing tone. *A thestral is a creature of death and bad luck, originally. They live in the Forbidden Forest. No one can see them who has not first seen death.* She sounded as if she were quoting a book in that last sentence, though Harry was not sure if snakes read books.

*I didn't*—he started, and then remembered that he had seen Quirrell die. He shuddered. That had been a bad death, a frequent feature of his nightmares, when he wasn't dreaming about the two dark figures or Tom Riddle trying to cajole the answers to silly questions out of him. He was glad that he had prevented Connor from seeing it.

*So Connor could see the thestrals if I hadn't prevented him from watching Quirrell's death?* he asked.

*Yes,* Sylarana confirmed. *Of course, he would not know what they were, and would shriek. He is a great lump of a boy, really.*

Harry said nothing to that. They were always going to disagree about his brother. He climbed off the bike as Connor did so. Connor promptly began chattering about the flight to Sirius. Harry looked around. They seemed to have arrived before the majority of the students, as he couldn't see any of the carriages pulling up yet.

*In fact, that was probably where Hagrid was taking the thestrals,* he realized abruptly. *They probably pull the carriages that the older students take.*

Feeling pleased with himself for having figured it out, Harry turned back to watch Sirius restore their school things to normal size, and then stopped. A dark figure stood near the castle wall, staring at them.

Harry thought it was one of the two shapes from his dream, for a moment. Then it straightened and took a step forward, and he recognized it.

*Professor Snape.*

Harry wondered what to say, what to do. He had his battle plans for facing Snape, but most of them depended on specific scenarios and places, such as the Potions classroom or during detention. He hesitated, and in that moment Snape revealed himself with a lazy drawl.

“Black. I suppose that Potter hired you to bring in our arrogant celebrity, who is clearly too good to ride the Express with the rest of the commoners?”

Sirius shot around as though a bee had stung him, and Harry saw a fierce gladness in his eyes. Here was someone to rouse him from mourning about Daphne Marchbanks, or whoever had come after her. He was grinning, but it was not the kind of grin he used in his mock-fights with James and Remus. “Snivellus!” he called. “Good to see you. It was good of Dumbledore to turn out a welcoming committee for us, even if it’s just one greasy-haired git.”

Snape strode forward now, his robes billowing around him. His eyes had found Harry, and he stared at him even though the words that followed were clearly addressed to Sirius. “As you know, Black, it is against the rules for students to arrive at the school by any means other than the Hogwarts Express. I can and will take points from Mr. Potter. Gryffindor will begin the year in negative points.” He smirked. Harry folded his arms and glared. That just made Snape’s smirk grow wider. Connor looked too astonished to protest, his mouth simply gaping open.

“That’s where you’re wrong, Professor Snivellus the Sneery,” said Sirius cheerfully. “I’m going to be helping Madam Hooch with the Quidditch matches this year. That means that I’m technically a professor, and can take away points, too—and give them out.” He glanced at Connor and smiled. “Ten points to Gryffindor for being in a House without a bunch of slimy snakes,” he said.

Harry was watching Snape, and saw his face go dark with rage. He edged away. He didn’t think that he wanted to be in the middle of a contest of insults as foul as this one was about to become. He wanted to put his school things in his room and then slip back into the Sorting Feast without attracting any attention. Draco, doubtless, would badger him with questions if he were late.

That movement, unfortunately, drew Snape’s attention. “Potter,” he said, his narrowed eyes saying that he hadn’t forgotten the end of last year. “Come with me. There are matters that we must discuss before the school year begins, you and I.”

“No can do,” said Sirius, still with a manic grin on his face. “I need to take both Connor and Harry to the Headmaster. He’ll want to see and hear that they’ve arrived safe and sound.”

“I am the boy’s Head of House,” said Snape, his hiss a rival to Slytherin’s mascot.

*But not to me,* said Sylarana smugly from under Harry’s jumper. *No one hisses better than I do.*

“But *I’m* his godfather,” said Sirius, He shot out an arm and grabbed Harry’s shoulder, pulling him in close against his body. Harry stumbled and then turned to make sure he could draw his wand, should he need it. Snape’s fury was such that he thought he might. “And I don’t intend to let you hound him and ride him like you were doing last year, either, Snivellus. Harry should have been in *Gryffindor*. He’ll take lessons in courage and fairness from me, since he’s hardly going to learn them with your little vipers.”

Harry blinked, then relaxed. This was special treatment he would hardly have dared to ask for, since Sirius was here to protect Connor, but he would welcome it. Sirius was actually going to watch out for him, not just protect him from the Dark if he noticed Harry backsliding. Harry was relieved. It made his plan to act like a Gryffindor this year much easier.

Snape didn't say anything. Harry thought that might be a good sign at first, an indication of his bewilderment in the face of such a sudden assault, but when Snape spoke in a voice almost too soft to be heard, he realized it was a very bad one. Other people shouted when they were deeply angry. Snape whispered.

"Shall we make a bet, Black? Shall we make a wager? I recall Gryffindors to have been rather fond of them, in such days when I noticed anything about them other than their overwhelming incompetence at Potions."

"Professor Snape," began Connor, and he sounded nervous now, as if he could sense that a bet between professors might be bad for the school. Harry was proud of him for showing such concern, but he suspected that both men were too far gone to pay attention to the Boy-Who-Lived, and he was right.

"Of course," said Sirius at once. "What bet? And what stakes? They should be fair, Snivellus, since I recall Slytherins to have been rather fond of cheating, myself." His eyes shone.

"By the end of the year," said Snape, nodding at Harry, "I would wager that this Potter twin will have acted more Slytherin than Gryffindor, that he will have learned more from me than you will ever teach him." He paused, and Harry could almost see him debating as to whether what he would say next was a good idea. But the imagined sound of the words was too attractive, apparently. "And I will wager," Snape whispered, his voice on the edge of hearing, "that Harry Potter is the true Boy-Who-Lived."

Sirius burst out laughing. Harry could hear the dog's voice in his, and cringed. He knew, then, that Sirius was not going to resist the worst words he could speak, either.

"I'll take that bet, Snivellus, since there's no way I can lose," said Sirius, and put out a hand. Snape clasped it. Both men shook their hands off afterwards, as if to remove an invisible film of grease. Harry might have found that part amusing if he wasn't in such shock. "Connor's the Boy-Who-Lived, I know it," Sirius continued. "And Harry was always more Gryffindor than Slytherin. I don't know why the Sorting Hat decided he should be placed in your hissing House, but he'll be free of it before the end of the year." He paused. "And what are the stakes if one of us loses?"

"I will not try to influence Mr. Potter again," said Snape. "I will support his transfer to Gryffindor House myself."

Sirius nodded. "Accepted."

"And if you lose," Snape said, "then you will step aside as Potter's godfather, and relinquish all control of him."

Sirius stopped smiling. "That is *not* accepted."

"Your stake matches my own," Snape said. He paused, then, and taunted, "What are you afraid of? Not losing the bet, I hope?"

Sirius again jerked as if stung, and shook his head furiously. "Not at all," he said. "I should have known you were the kind of bastard who would try to separate a boy from his godfather, Snape." He bared his teeth, and all the amusement was gone from his voice. "You're on."

"Stop it!"

Harry blinked. Connor had darted out to stand between the two men, staring from one to the other of them. His dark hair had been mussed, as though he'd raked a hand through it. His fists were clenched in front of him now, and his eyes blazed with a force that Harry thought would have made James step back from him.

"You don't have the right to do that!" Connor said. "He's standing right there. You can't make bets about him as if he were—as if he were a *thing*, a Galleon!" He turned around and glared at Sirius. "How could you do that?"

Sirius knelt down, instead of exploding or trying to defend himself with bluster, the way Harry had expected. His face was grave, and that probably restrained Connor's tongue, too. Harry even found himself leaning forward to hear what his godfather would say.

“You don’t understand where the rivalry between Slytherin and Gryffindor comes from, Connor,” Sirius said gently. “We’re good. They’re scared of being good. They have to hide from the light, because otherwise it blinds them, destroys them, like snakes or cockroaches.” Harry heard Snape suck in a breath, but Sirius went right on talking. “Snape wants to turn Harry into a cockroach like him, teach him the Dark Arts and make him a Dark wizard. I’m going to make sure that that doesn’t happen. Don’t worry, Connor. We won’t lose Harry. And we’ll make sure that the Slytherins are sorry that they ever tried to harm someone who’s a Gryffindor, even if he sleeps in the wrong room and goes to the wrong classes.” His smile widened across his face, and he clapped Connor on the shoulder.

Connor glanced back at Harry. His eyes showed uncertainty. Harry could understand why. Connor had suspected him of being a Dark wizard last year, given his attempts to lie and his temper and his powerful magic. It only made sense, in the words Sirius was speaking, that someone like that had a greater chance of being lost to Slytherin than someone like Connor. Of course his brother would see that they needed to guard Harry, put that way.

And a bet would be a way to humiliate the Slytherins for ever thinking that they could take Connor’s brother away from him.

Harry understood all that.

The odd thing was that he found *himself* wanting to protest, to say that not all Slytherins were like that, that Snape had healed the damage he’d taken from *Crucio* last year, that Draco’s family had gotten him a broom for his birthday.

But he couldn’t say any of that. Connor still didn’t know about the broom, since Harry had decided it would only cause trouble and kept it packed away. Snape’s healing had been followed by his giving Harry Veritas serum, which Harry knew he couldn’t forgive. And if he thought Sirius was wrong about Slytherin...

That only showed how little he knew, didn’t it? It only showed how deeply the Snake House had already gotten its fangs hooked into him. Harry closed his eyes and shook his head.

*This is a gift. This is the excuse I was looking for to be more Gryffindor. I have to become that way, or the Slytherins will corrupt me. And I can’t let that happen. I’m no good to Connor if I’m Dark, or if I’m thought to be.*

His breathing relaxed. He opened his eyes and managed to smile at Sirius.

*You are such a fool,* said Syllarana. *There is food in the castle. I can smell it. And you are standing out here, talking.*

Snape hissed. For one wild moment, Harry thought he must have heard Syllarana, but then he realized that Snape had been waiting to see how Harry would react to what Sirius had said.

“I will destroy you, Black,” Snape whispered. “You will never see it coming, what will happen to deprive you of the rewards you expected to win. You will be, in the end, as ground down under my heel as a flobberworm is. And in the end, crawling on the ground, crying and screaming out to the stars, you will know this moment as the beginning of your end.”

Harry had never seen such sheer hatred on anyone’s face as was on Snape’s when he looked at Sirius—except last year, when their parents had come to the Slytherin-Gryffindor Quidditch match and Snape had glared at James that way.

And then, in a flash, he understood. He wondered how he could *not* have understood it before, or excused it.

“You hate my godfather,” he said quietly. Snape turned and looked at him, but did not relax the glare on his face. Harry had not really expected him to. “You hate our father. Of course you’re going to do this. It doesn’t really matter to you, whether I act more Slytherin than Gryffindor. What matters is that I’m *Sirius Black’s godson*, and *James Potter’s son*, and *the brother of the Boy-Who-Lived*. You’re only making this bet to get back at people who’ve wronged you, in real or imagined ways.” Harry paused, thought about trying to articulate everything that he was feeling, and in the end shook his head. “You don’t care,” he said, and was startled to hear a wistful tone in his voice. Had he *wanted* Snape to care?

*Maybe*, he answered that part of himself, and lifted his head to meet Snape's eyes. "You don't care anything about one student acting Slytherin or Gryffindor," he repeated. "You care about revenge." He shrugged. "I can't do anything to stop you from making the bet, or trying to fulfill it, but I can refuse to go along with you."

Snape's face was wiped clean of all expression. Harry knew by the slight widening of the professor's eyes, though, that Snape had received his silent message. Harry wasn't referring just to resisting whatever Snape tried to do to him in the name of making him more Slytherin. He was referring to the private dueling lessons that Snape had given him last year, and the extra Potions work Snape had had him do in class, and trying to win games on the Slytherin Quidditch team, and everything else where Snape had blackmailed Harry into doing what he wanted.

First it had been threats against Harry's free time, and then against Connor's. That wouldn't work anymore, Harry thought, oddly detached, as he watched Snape's face. Oh, Snape would put Connor into detention, no doubt. But detention was a small price compared to the devastation Connor would feel if Harry became a Slytherin.

He thought of Draco, then, and winced. But that was on the same order of things, really. He would hurt Draco when he turned away from him. Draco would scream and rage and demand explanations. And Harry could tell him the truth.

Connor came first. Connor would always come first. Harry had thought, someday, that he would regret the friendship he was forming with Draco, and he now had cause to regret it. Yes, he didn't really want to hurt Draco, but he wanted to hurt Connor even less.

"I choose you, brother," Harry told Connor, not caring that everyone, even his brother, was staring at him. He didn't have any responsibility to be a respectful student, or someone who didn't say things that made other people uncomfortable. He had *every* right to be what he was born to be, his brother's protector. This was merely the first public declaration of his allegiance. "I choose Gryffindor, and all the things that you love and value."

Connor's face lit like the sunrise. Harry basked in it, and didn't turn to take in Snape's expression. He knew that he wouldn't see anything valuable there.

Snape had never been in such a foul mood, and he knew it.

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*Now if only the recipient of said foul mood knew it, too.*

Harry Potter gave no sign that he knew he'd displeased Snape. He gave no sign that he knew he'd displeased Draco, even, and last year the brat had responded to Draco when he responded to no one else. Draco was sulking because Harry refused to spend time alone with him, and sought out his brother instead. He had had a screaming match with Harry in the corridor last week, just after Snape released the second-year Slytherins and Gryffindors from their first Potions class. Snape had watched. Harry had kept walking, his gaze fixed straight ahead, no sign of strain in his posture. It *must* be a strain on him, but he showed no sign of that. He made his resistance to Draco's pleas look effortless, and that just drove Draco into more and more angry displays.

*Or tearful ones.* Snape grimaced. *If I never have to spend another evening in my office while the Malfoy heir rants at me about a Potter ignoring him, then it will be too soon.*

Harry had not come, once, to Snape for dueling lessons. He had suffered pranks from his roommates, and never retaliated; he came to breakfast in the Great Hall with boils growing on his face, or hair on the palms of his hands, and calmly ignored the laughter. It had grown less frequent this week. Snape had had the deep displeasure of listening to the second-year Gryffindors, who included Ron Weasley, agreeing that anyone who could take a joke like that wasn't half-bad, and they ought to encourage Harry to come up to the Tower sometime.

And Harry no longer did the work Snape wanted him to do in Potions class.

Snape had realized he had made a mistake the first time Harry looked up, green eyes wide and innocent and perfectly clear, over a perfectly-made Hair-Changing Potion—which should have been a perfectly-made potion that would help the victims of the Cruciatius Curse recover from their shaking. In fact, he had made several mistakes, and the first of them was giving Harry extra homework over the summer. Harry had learned how to turn one potion into another with the addition of a very few ingredients. He didn't make noisy mistakes. He made quiet ones, and then widened his eyes and suggested that the potion would *work*, just not the way that it should have, had he followed the original instructions.

The potions were always perfect.

That only enraged Snape further.

He assigned Harry to work with Neville Longbottom. That was another mistake. He had intended to frustrate Harry, condemning him to work more slowly and with the chance of singeing off his eyebrows or melting through his cauldron in every class. Harry had happily trooped off to the other side of the classroom, however, and was soon instructing Neville in whispers and patiently coaxing him through his mistakes. Neville's potions improved, Harry did second-year work instead of the advanced work Snape had planned on instructing him in, and he sat among the Gryffindors, who now appeared to close ranks around him and bristle slightly whenever Snape came near.

By the end of the second week of the school year, Snape's colleagues had taken to avoiding him. Sirius Black, of course, grinned from a distance, and Minerva now and then looked at him as if asking why in the world Snape had made such a ridiculous bet, but none of them willingly shared a conversation or even a meal with him, eating quickly and leaving the Great Hall as soon as possible. Snape knew he spent too much time glaring at the Slytherin table, and the stubborn boy who had managed to defy him as he had never been defied before. The only exception, the only possible outlet for his rage, was that fool Gilderoy Lockhart, who made ceaseless conversation about himself and never seemed to notice Snape's insults—and whom it was not permissible for Snape to hex.

Something had to give. Something would crack.

Snape did not know what it would be yet, but he was determined to *find* the weakness, and exploit it. No twelve-year-old boy was as competent at defending himself from insults as Harry seemed to be. No student could consistently stand up to his professor like this and get away with it.

He found the weakness during the third week of school.

Snape was patrolling the corridors near the dungeons—something he trusted not even the Slytherin prefects to do properly—when he heard a low, continuous, disturbing sound. It made his spine stiffen with memories of some of the stranger curses performed during the Dark Lord's reign. He gripped his wand and eased around the corner, pressing his shoulders flat to the stone.

Harry Potter knelt on the floor not far from the Slytherin common room, hissing at a black-and-gold snake that Snape recognized in instants as a Locusta. Not far from him lay a broom finer than any the school possessed.

Snape lingered a moment, to absorb the scene and savor his triumph. The snake hissed back at Harry, whose face became a grimace. He shook his head and said something else in the snake-tongue, then sighed and reached out to stroke the serpent's back. She accepted his touch, something Snape had thought was impossible for a Locusta, and even twined under his fingers, as if enjoying it.

*The boy is a Parselmouth.*

Snape felt victory like ripe fruit in his mouth. He had only to bite into it.

And the broom—it was obviously Harry's. Harry had given no indication that he possessed it, and certainly not to Marcus Flint, who would have found some means of insuring that a member of the Slytherin Quidditch team rode it, even if Harry refused to participate. So far as Snape knew, Harry had not yet informed Flint of his decision not to play.

*And now he never will.*

Snape stepped out of hiding. Harry whipped his head up and stared, caught. Snape let his smirk widen across his mouth. The Locusta turned and hissed at him, but when Harry hissed something else in a commanding tone, she twined up his arm. Harry bowed his head and rose slowly to his feet.

“What do you want, Professor Snape?” he asked.

“I want to know things,” Snape said quietly. *Never let it be said that I rush my revenge.* “Why are you outside your common room?”

Harry looked up again, and this time there was a spark of hope in his eyes, as though he hoped he might get away with this. "Because I go flying at night, sir," he said, and indicated the broom next to him. "I just—need to relieve the pressure."

Snape nodded gravely. The admission was sweet to him.

And it was only a taste of the promises he would now extract from Harry. Snape felt near giddy with excitement and power. He pushed back the feelings, though. The last thing he wanted to do now was distract himself and let the chance slip past him.

"And why were you talking to a snake?"

"She introduced herself over the summer," said Harry, and gave a sort of helpless shrug. "She's a Locusta. Her name's Sylarana. She said that she would bite Connor if I didn't take care of her, and since then she's threatened to bite other people. So long as I take care of her, she doesn't."

Snape felt a faint shadow touch his good mood; of course the boy would have sacrificed himself to save his witless brother. But he pushed it away. Harry was still—

"You are a Parselmouth," he whispered.

Harry nodded. "I know it's a potentially Dark talent, sir."

"Yes," said Snape, and paused a long moment. "And one that you would give a great deal to keep concealed, yes?"

Harry stepped away from him, putting his back to the wall in turn. His magic was rising around him. Snape was glad that he had strengthened his shields. The exercises he had assigned Harry over the summer had worked almost too well. His power was tremendous now, leaping easily to his call. Snape wondered if Harry had yet noticed that he was reaching for magic more and more often, something that the seemingly harmless homework had made him used to.

"If you reveal this—" Harry began.

Snape shrugged. "You seem Dark," he said. "Slytherin." He paused. "And I win the bet. Do you imagine that your godfather and your brother will take you back when they find out you can speak with serpents, just as Voldemort can?"

Harry snarled at him, and for a moment the pressure of his magic broke through Snape's shields. Snape calmed his breathing and hoped that the strain of fighting the agony in his head didn't show.

Harry was caught, though, and he knew it. He dipped his chin and looked away after a moment. "What do you want?" His voice was strangled.

"Two things," said Snape. "In return, I keep two secrets: that you are a Parselmouth and that you fly outside the school."

Harry stared at him, calculating, then nodded. "That sounds fair."

Snape bit his cheek to restrain a delighted edge to his sneer. The boy spoke like a Gryffindor, but he reasoned like a Slytherin. He would win the bet with Black, after all. A dazzling rush of much-deserved good fortune had come on him tonight.

"The first," said Snape, "is that you will play on the Slytherin Quidditch team, and that you will use that broom."

Harry nodded slowly. "And the other?"

“That you will repair your friendships with your Housemates, or at least with Draco Malfoy,” said Snape. “Such resentments and rivalries could turn out to be deadly to our success on the Quidditch field.”

Harry stared at him. Snape knew that he didn’t understand. He would have expected Snape to ask him to let Snape win the bet with Black, or to stop making mistakes in Potions class.

What he didn’t know was that neither of those would have worked half as well for the professor’s ultimate goals. Snape intended to win the bet with Black on his own efforts, more subtle ones, that Harry would not see well enough to oppose. And there was nothing particularly Slytherin about a talent for Potions, though it would make Snape grind his teeth to see such a talent go to waste.

Forcing Harry back onto the Quidditch team and into the company of his Housemates would increase his Slytherin tendencies. It had worked last year.

And that would help Snape win the bet.

Harry bit his lip. It was obvious he wasn’t happy, but he slowly nodded. “All right, then. And you’ll keep the secret that I’m a Parselmouth, and you’ll let me fly at night.”

Snape nodded back. “I am not surprised that you need to fly at night,” he added delicately, as he turned away. “Fighting what you truly are surely requires a good deal of effort on your part.”

He could feel Harry’s eyes on his back, but he didn’t turn around. He also resisted the temptation to put a spring in his walk until he was around the corridor.

He was winning. He would plant doubts in Harry’s mind and draw him back to his own Slytherin qualities with stratagems too subtle to resist. The direct approach did not work with Harry. It had to be the indirect one. He would win the bet with Black, and put one over on two men he hated.

*And the boy is a Parselmouth.*

Snape could not restrain a shiver that he told himself was more excitement than fear. The Dark Lord had been a Parselmouth as well, true.

*But this simply marks the boy as Slytherin—beyond all question, Slytherin. When he finally takes his place as the Boy-Who-Lived, he will be ours. No one will dare call him a Gryffindor then.*

~\*~\*~\*~\*~\*~\*

## **Chapter Five: Like a Gryffindor**

*“How could you let him do that to you?”*

Harry shook his head and closed his eyes as he leaned on the wall of the common room. There were two seventh-years asleep on one of the couches, drooling on each other. He hoped they didn't wake up. He didn't think he could explain the broom in his hand, nor the snake hissing questions from his shoulder, nor the swimming confusion in his own head.

How *had* Snape caught him? Why hadn't Harry come up with some way to resist Snape's insinuations?

"*I know*," Sylarana announced, making Harry jump.

"How?" he asked, once again checking the seventh-years. They didn't look any closer to waking up. Harry relaxed a bit. He preferred the moments when he didn't have to worry about whether he was speaking English or Parseltongue.

"*You aren't sleeping well enough.*"

Harry blinked at nothing, then shook his head and made for his bedroom, despite the fact that he would have to stop talking to Sylarana aloud when he reached it. Blaise was a light sleeper, and Draco would probably attempt to ask him where he'd been, unless he gave up in disgust as he had the last few nights. Harry knew his friendship with the Malfoy heir was dissolving. He was pleased.

*I am pleased*, he thought. *Just not happy. And I don't want to have this conversation with Sylarana.*

"*Think about it*," she said, poking her head out from under his sleeve to look up at him. Her eyes actually shone in the dim light of the common room, which Harry found unnerving. "*You spend your dreams staring at dark figures who do nothing interesting, or talking to the equally boring Tom Riddle. Then you wake up and you fly, or you practice spells, or you talk to me.*"

"I'd be happy to stop talking to you," Harry muttered as he reached his door. He touched it lightly with his fingertips, but didn't open it yet. He did want to say these next words aloud, for emphasis. "And I need the flying. It's the only thing that's keeping me—grounded for right now." He pushed the door open.

*An interesting way of putting it*, Sylarana said, her voice retreating into his mind as she sank into his skin. *I know you're happy when you fly. And that is why you will join the Quidditch team. Then you will be happier, and you will sleep better, and I will not have to spend all my time talking you away from a precipice. And there will be flying. I like flying, but not when you are so tired that you are like this.*

"I'm not tired," Harry whispered as he made his way between the beds, ignoring the risk of waking someone up. Vince and Greg's rumbling snores said they weren't going to wake, and Blaise and Draco had the curtains on their beds drawn. "I'll be fine. These weeks are hard, but I knew they would be. I just have to keep going until I can—"

"Until you can what, Harry?"

Harry nearly leaped out of his robes. Draco's curtains were open after all, just on the side next to Harry's bed instead of Blaise's. He had his wand out, with a *Lumos* spell glowing steadily on the end, and he was staring at Harry.

Harry shrugged at him and shrank the broom with a tap of his wand. Then he reached for his trunk. He would put on his pyjamas, and lie on the bed, and close his eyes. Eventually, he would sleep. If Tom Riddle was there, he would deal with him. Sylarana was silly to worry.

*If you're going to be all stupid and silly, then you should have let me bite him*, Sylarana sulked. *Then he couldn't tell anyone that you speak to serpents. Though I don't understand why you wouldn't want to tell anyone. They would all be charmed to find out that such a beautiful snake deigns to talk to you.*

"No, Harry."

Harry looked up. Draco had gripped his arm where it rested on the trunk. His face was slightly flushed, his hair mussed. Harry supposed he'd been sleeping before he heard the door open.

As he had for the past three weeks whenever Draco tried to cajole a response out of him, Harry fixed his eyes on a point past Draco's left shoulder and waited with a bored expression for him to give up.

The force of Draco's punch sent him reeling back, crashing through his curtains and sitting down on his own bed. Sylarana hissed in agitation, and Harry put one hand down on his arm, hoping to calm her.

*It's not that bad*, he said, lifting his other hand to feel his face. And it wasn't. One cheek was bruised, and he'd probably have a faint black eye, but the hexes had been worse. He could bear far worse pain. It only took an effort of will.

*You are only saying that because you are stupid and silly with lack of sleep*, Sylarana said, but at least she wasn't slithering down his arm anymore.

"We're having this out now, Harry," said Draco, and climbed into the bed beside him. Before Harry could object, he drew the curtains, then cast a Silencing Charm and another one Harry didn't know, but which caused a pink tracing of light in the air that he recognized from Malfoy Manor. Some kind of ward, then, he surmised as Draco turned to face him.

"No one is going to bother us," said Draco. "And you're not going to sleep until you answer me."

Harry shrugged and stared at the curtains. He could wait.

*No, you can't*, said Sylarana sharply. *Answer him, so you can go to sleep, and I can go to sleep, and we can stop all this nonsense. It is making my scales dull.* She paused suggestively. *Biting an annoying pureblood wizard might put the shine back on them.*

Harry sighed and met Draco's eyes. Snape had ordered him to make up his friendships, after all. The trick would be doing it on the outside while leaving the core hollow. "What do you want, Draco?" he asked.

"I want to know what the *fuck* is going on," said Draco, his voice all the more impressive for being low, level, almost conversational. He moved his wand so that Harry could see only his face, all piercing gray eyes and set jaw. "I want to know why the *fuck* you're ignoring me and acting like a—like a Gryffindor. I was your friend all last year, Harry. We spent Christmas together." He paused, then said, wielding the words like a whip, "You accepted a life debt from me. That creates a bond between wizards. I deserve an answer."

Harry winced. He had hoped that Draco would not bring that up. He hadn't, so far. It was considered bad manners to mention a life debt once the one under it had fulfilled his obligations.

And then, as if borne on the singing of a phoenix, the answer came to him.

Here was a way out of Snape's blackmail, and to grow closer to Connor at the same time. He had been deceiving Draco about the real causes of his sudden uninterest in him—which was something a Slytherin would do, and something he had sworn he would stop doing. And he had concealed his Parseltongue talent, too, and that would give Snape something else to hold over him.

*He thinks I'm like a Gryffindor?* Harry smiled, and saw from the blink and the sudden mild falter in Draco's face that said he didn't know what was happening. That didn't matter, as Harry was about to explain it to him. *Then I'll behave like one. I should have from the beginning. I said that I would, and I didn't. I fell right back into Slytherin lying, Slytherin deception, Slytherin manipulation.*

*Time to show who I really am.*

"You're right, Draco," Harry said calmly. "I should have told you from the beginning what I'm doing and why I'm doing it." He met Draco's eyes. He could do it more easily now that the wand, and thus the *Lumos* spell, had drifted a bit away from Draco's face in his befuddlement. "I'm sorry. Will you accept my apology?" He held out his hand.

Draco clasped it, still staring at him. Harry shrugged, feeling innocent and free of burdens, almost ready to laugh. Was this how Gryffindors felt all the time, when they acted with clean consciences? He envied them more than he ever had, if so.

*That's the lack of sleep talking,* Sylarana informed him haughtily. *Their mascot is not a snake. Therefore, they are deprived, not blessed.*

“So. Why?” Draco asked.

Harry realized he had sat in silence for a moment, and Draco might think he was going back on his resolve to tell him. He hastened ahead. “I want to be closer to Connor. I don't really want to be a Slytherin. I'm tired of having my brother think that I'm a Dark wizard, that I don't support him or that I'm going to wake up one morning and say *Avada Kedavra* to him. My duty is to protect him, Draco. It always was.” That last was a risk, since he had promised their mother to keep *that* secret—there were too many people outside the family who wouldn't understand the importance of Harry's mission and might try to stop him from doing it—but Draco knew that, or could guess it, from having seen what Harry had done last year.

Draco's face went ashen, and then pink with anger. Harry nodded. He had expected this. It would be much easier, and in the end much less painful for the both of them, if he let Draco's rage sever their friendship.

“If Connor thinks you're Dark, that's his bloody problem,” Draco said, leaning close enough that Harry felt spittle hit his cheek. Sylarana made a prim comment from under his jumper that Harry didn't bother paying attention to. “I *know* you're not, Harry. And I *know* that you're a Slytherin. And I don't *care* that you want to protect him more than you want anything else. You're not losing me as a friend, Harry.”

Harry blinked. Somehow, acting like a Gryffindor wasn't going the way he had planned.

“But, Draco,” he said, “it's not fair to you. Don't you see? You shouldn't have a friend who thinks of you as second best to his brother. You should have an equal friendship. Besides,” he added gently, stirring in a truth he had learned last year, “I know that you're mostly fascinated with my magic, for whatever reason, and maybe with how a Potter ended up in Slytherin. You'll get bored of that someday. It's not enough to build a friendship on. I'm surprised you haven't got tired of me already, that this matters to you so much.”

Draco sat there for a moment, chest heaving. Harry had the impression he was trying to speak, and that anger was stifling his words.

“Has it occurred to you,” he finally said, sounding the most like his father that Harry had ever heard him, “that your two statements there are contradictory?”

Harry shook his head. “No, they aren't—“

“Yes, they are.” Draco was holding Harry's arm, luckily not the one that cradled Sylarana, hard enough to hurt. Now he shook it, sending vibrations all the way up to Harry's shoulder. “If you think I'm only fascinated with you, that I don't like you at all, you shouldn't care about my feelings. They'd be only the rantings of a spoiled child who's had his favorite toy taken away. And you do care how I feel. You care that your tie to Connor might put me second best.” He tilted his head like a hawk, or his eagle-owl, and made Harry feel transparent with the way he stared at him. “That means I matter to you, Harry. That was all I wanted to know. I'm staying your friend.”

Harry shifted his hand to intertwine his fingers with Draco's. “It's not fair to you,” he said.

“I'll choose what's fair,” said Draco. “And I think fair is your apologizing to the rest of our House, and—and doing whatever you have to do to prove that you're some kind of bloody Gryffindor-Slytherin hybrid, whatever you are. It doesn't matter. I *know* you're Slytherin, so your little missteps along the path to reality don't concern me.” He smiled. It wasn't quite like any smile Harry had seen from him before. “You're being honest with me, telling me that Connor matters more to you than I do. I know that. I accept that. I'm still here. And Connor means more to you than the whole bloody world does, so I'm hardly in a unique position.” He leaned back, smiling easily, not letting go of Harry's hand. “Besides,” he added, “I want to be there when you wake up to the fact that you're a Slytherin, and that Connor might

not be the most important thing in the world after all. Should cause a big fucking bang, shouldn't it?" Now he looked like a child anticipating sweets for Christmas.

Harry stared steadily at him. "That's never going to happen, Draco."

"Yes, it will."

"No, it won't."

"Yes, it will."

"No, it w—" Harry cut himself off. He was acting like a child, in Merlin's name. He sighed. "I'm tired," he admitted.

"I know," said Draco, and didn't let go of his hand. "You're always creeping about at night. What do you do?"

Harry started to tell him, but ended up yawning. Draco let go of his hand at once, and nodded to him. "I'll let you sleep. But I expect some answers in the morning, Harry Bloody Potter."

He released his ward and his Charm on the curtains, and slipped off to his own bed, leaving Harry to blink at the ceiling of the four-poster. Then he shook his head, and went to slip into his pyjamas.

*I can sense what you're going to do tomorrow, said Sylarana. I heartily approve. It is time that you stopped letting these silly children with their even sillier fears control you.*

*Snape's not a child, Harry felt compelled to point out.*

*He's an idiot. Let me bite him.*

*No.*

Harry kept up that steady argument until he managed to reach his bed and fall asleep. He felt Sylarana's presence slithering into his mind. He waited, in that brief half-moment of consciousness, for the nightmare dark figures, or Tom Riddle.

Neither came. For once, he slept soundly.

Harry leaned in through the doors of the Great Hall and checked the House tables one more time. He nodded to himself. He didn't think every student was there yet, since it was only halfway through breakfast, but the tables hummed with noise and there were few empty places. Conscientious students and early risers would be leaving soon. Even better, all the professors were there, including Sirius. This was the best chance he'd have.

He strode in, and made his way towards the middle of the room instead of towards the Slytherin table. More and more people turned to watch him as he went, and the buzz of conversation died a bit, then altered. Most of the people who were talking about him seemed puzzled.

*You don't have long to wait, Harry promised them, and halted in the dead center of the Great Hall, between the Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff tables. He turned to face Connor, who was staring at him with his mouth half-open, full of food. Harry smiled despite himself. His brother was being disgusting.*

His brother was a twelve-year-old boy.

His brother was the Boy-Who-Lived, and he deserved to know some things about Harry now.

"Good morning," Harry started. His voice hushed most of the conversations in an instant, and now everyone was staring at him goggle-eyed. Harry stiffened his muscles against the pressure of a thousand eyes and carried on. "I'm glad that you're all here, since I would have hated to make this announcement to just one person."

He looked straight at Connor and extended his arm. *Are you ready, Sylarana?*

*They are all going to get to admire me?* she asked, with a languorous slide to the last few words.

*They are.*

*Then I am ready.*

She slithered out of his sleeve and coiled about his wrist, showing herself off to dazzling advantage; the Great Hall's ceiling mimicked the sunny day outside, and beamed off her scales. There came gasps from the people nearest Harry. He couldn't tell if they were gasps of wonder or fear. Most likely both, though he thought the latter emotion would come from Sylarana being a snake. He doubted that many of the students knew what a Locusta was.

He darted a glance at the staff table, and saw from the dropped jaws and staring eyes that most of the professors did indeed recognize a Locusta, and had no idea what was happening.

Harry couldn't take the chance that one of them would interrupt him, but he did manage to savor Snape's thunderstruck expression for a moment before he turned back to his brother. He was breathing slightly faster now, a consequence of all the people staring at him, but he knew he could bear it. He would have to. This was for Connor.

"Connor," he said softly, deliberately not looking at Sylarana so that he could speak in English, "I'm a Parselmouth. I only found out a few months ago. I kept it from you because I thought you would think I was a Dark wizard, and I didn't want to hurt you that way. Now I'm admitting it. I'm sorry. Keeping that from you wasn't really Gryffindor."

He sank to one knee on the floor and bowed his head, the old gesture of surrender to a power greater than one's own. Sylarana, obviously concerned that people couldn't see her now, twined up until she crowned his head, her tongue flicking out and tasting the air. A low murmur of fear was rising from the students.

Harry glanced at the tip of her tail, which hung past his nose. "Sylarana, don't attack," he said.

The gasps increased tenfold, and Harry knew he'd said the words in Parseltongue. He closed his eyes and waited.

He'd chosen this. He couldn't let Snape have control over him. He couldn't run anymore from what he really was. He had to be brave, to face consequences, to do what he did for other people and not for himself. That was what Gryffindors did.

It would be easier if they weren't *staring* so hard. Harry clenched his fists and fought to stay calm. The long-repeated words of his vows were pushing against him, insistent now.

*To never compete with him, never show him up, and never let anyone else know that I'm so close to him. To be ordinary, so that he can be extraordinary.*

He was in the middle of the Great Hall, with all the students standing on tiptoe to get a better look at him. He'd just revealed that he carried a dangerous Dark gift, one that Voldemort had had most famously. He'd addressed his words to his twin, but drawn attention to himself.

There was a maelstrom of shrieking voices in his head, blending with the faster and faster beat of his heart and his breath, until he was close to hyperventilating.

*You can't draw attention to yourself. You're doing it. Why are you doing it?*

Harry fought with his training. He'd already broken the letter of his vows to preserve their spirit when he told Draco about protecting Connor. He could do this, because it was temporary, and only in the service of a higher good, and it would be over soon. He could do this. He could *do* this.

*You're not a real Gryffindor, not if you feel afraid.*

He held still. *No*, he answered that particular claim. *You're a Gryffindor if you feel afraid and still don't run away, and do what needs to be done.*

He heard a wild hiss, and felt the hex coming at Sylarana. He threw up a hand and called *Protego* around him, wandless, his lips barely shaping the word. The Shield Charm deflected whatever spell it had been. Someone cried out, and then the rest of the Great Hall was in motion, its tableau broken.

Harry looked up. The students were shoving back from their tables, some running to the door, some drawing wands—most especially the sixth- and seventh-year students—and some standing frozen as if they thought Sylarana couldn't see them if they were motionless. The professors were coming around the staff table, walking hastily towards them. Snape had his wand out, and Sirius's teeth were fixed in a snarl, and Professor McGonagall was shouting something stern about foolish boys who brought dangerous snakes into Hogwarts.

Harry glanced back at his twin, the only one who mattered. Connor looked frozen.

“Stop.”

The voice spread out over the Great Hall like a sea of calm, powerful, lapping them all in its embrace. Harry found himself breathing more easily. The pressure of the stares no longer seemed as disorienting as before.

“*What is he doing in your head?*” Sylarana said. “*I don't like him there.*” There was the feeling of a scuffle, as though someone had bounced a stone off the inside of his skull, and Harry winced.

Then the calm faded, and he threw himself to his feet, gasping, wanting nothing so much as to get out of everybody's sight and hide in the shadows—

“Harry.”

Harry glanced up, eyes wide, to see Headmaster Dumbledore in front of him. Dumbledore had one hand extended, touching but not beaching the Shielding Charm. His eyes were calm, and wise, and very blue. Harry realized then who the source of the powerful voice had been.

He didn't understand why the tranquility had left him, though. He tried to put his hands behind his back so that the Headmaster wouldn't see them shaking, but they betrayed him. Dumbledore gave him a keen glance and seemed to understand.

“Everyone, calm down,” he said, and the noise in the Great Hall diminished by half. “I will take young Mr. Potter to my office and discuss this matter with him further.” He turned and nodded to Connor. “And you, Mr. Potter, please come along as well.”

Harry sagged, relief washing over him like the tide. Connor stood up and hurried forward, as though Dumbledore's statement were the final answer he was waiting for. He enveloped Harry in a tight hug, and Harry let the *Protego* fade, his arms shaking as he clutched Connor back.

“*You may do that, since everyone has admired me,*” said Sylarana. “*And I threw the other one out of your head.*” She twined through his hair in a small victory dance.

Harry swallowed. The mere thought that Sylarana was so deeply embedded in his thoughts that she could throw off Dumbledore's influence—

“Boys?”

Harry looked up. Dumbledore stood near the entrance of the Great Hall now, motioning them along. He did look back at the staff table, though, and the professors standing frozen near it.

“Severus, if you would excuse the boys from your Potions class this morning?” he asked. There was a strength to his tone that Harry knew made it an order, and not a request.

Snape nodded. “Of course, Headmaster.” He turned away, but not before giving Harry a quite vicious final glance.

Harry didn’t care. Connor’s arms were around him. Connor was whispering into his ear.

“I don’t care that you’re a Parselmouth. I don’t care. It took courage for you to do that. Oh, Harry, you’re a Gryffindor after all!”

*No, I’m not, Harry wanted to say. I manipulated this. I set this all up. I would have just found you and told you alone, except that I wanted everyone to know so that they couldn’t hate me if they found out later. I made myself the center of attention. Why do I never notice that I’m acting like a Slytherin until it’s too late?*

He didn’t say that aloud, though. That, he was too much of a coward to do. He let Connor escort him with an arm around his shoulders, and they followed the Headmaster to his office.

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“Sit down, boys. Would you like a sweet?”

Connor accepted eagerly, though without taking his arm from around Harry’s shoulders. Harry shook his head in numb negation. He was still staring straight ahead, trying to reconcile what he’d done to what he’d *thought* he was doing.

Sylarana was no help, hissing on his arm and commenting on her own appearance and how she couldn’t go back to sleep yet, Connor had his lump of an arm on her favorite resting place. She wouldn’t bite anyone for the next little while, though. Harry knew that.

Dumbledore sat down behind his desk, after conducting an odd argument entirely in whistles with one of the small silver instruments he kept on the wall. He folded his hands and beamed at them. Harry lowered his head, unsure if he should meet the Headmaster’s eyes. He didn’t need to distract himself by looking around the office. He’d been here before, at the end of last year, after Connor defeated Voldemort. He knew what it looked like.

“Well, young Harry,” Dumbledore said cheerfully, “you’ve caused quite a stir.”

Harry winced. “I know, sir. I’m sorry, sir.”

“Nothing to be sorry for,” said Connor fiercely, and gave him a one-armed hug. “I’m glad you told me. I’m glad you told *all* of them. They can think you’re a Dark wizard, but I can say that my twin never lies to me!”

Harry swallowed.

“There is the matter, of course,” said Dumbledore in a considering voice, “of your being a Parselmouth. And having a Locusta on school property, Harry. She *is* quite a dangerous pet, my boy. I would not advise keeping her.”

“I know,” Harry whispered. “But she keeps threatening to bite people if I don’t keep her. And—well, sir, she was on school property last year, too. She told me that she came from the Forbidden Forest.”

“Really?” Dumbledore chuckled. “I am amazed that Hagrid never discovered her, then. He would admire you,” he added to Sylarana, in an aside. “He has a deep admiration for the dangerous and beautiful magical creatures of our world.”

*I like him, Sylarana hissed sleepily. Sometimes. But he still should not have been in your head. It’s mine.* She curled up and dropped off to sleep.

“So you will keep her, then,” said Dumbledore, nodding. “I really see no way to part her from you without killing her, and I am told that a Parselmouth can control a Locusta better than anyone alive.” He reached out and tapped another of the small silver instruments hanging on the wall. Harry felt a faint buzzing start in his teeth. “Nevertheless, I will ask

you to submit to a ward-setting, Harry. This insures that your little snake can never get too far from you without an alarm sounding in my office, which will alert me at once, and a cage coming down on her. That will be all right?"

Harry nodded. "Of course, sir. But won't the parents of the other students complain?"

"Undoubtedly," said Dumbledore. He chortled. "But they have been complaining about various things as long as I have been Headmaster. I am sure they will keep complaining when I am in my grave and another Headmaster sits in Hogwarts. It is a reality of our lives" He popped a sweet into his mouth and chewed it gravely. Harry wondered if he ever really stopped smiling.

He turned abruptly to Connor. "Mr. Potter, had you truly suspected your brother of being a Dark wizard?"

Connor flushed. Harry glared at Dumbledore. *Why does he have to put him on the spot like that?*

"I—well, ah, I don't know," Connor hedged, looking sideways at Harry. "He's in Slytherin, and he has a temper, and he's powerful, and Sirius said—"

Dumbledore closed his eyes and sighed. "Unfortunately, Sirius Black is no more willing to let childhood grudges go than—various other members of our staff," he murmured. "A fine man, an even finer Gryffindor, but he does have his limitations."

He leaned forward, his eyes open once more. Harry felt Connor wince, and wished he knew of a way to distract Dumbledore's attention, short of suggesting that Syllarana attack him.

"It is important that you understand this, Mr. Potter," Dumbledore said, his words grave and slow. "The survival of the wizarding world depends on unity. It was our fragmentation that allowed Lord Voldemort to attack us in the last war, the distrust that set pureblood against Muggleborn, the Ministry against its own Aurors, and—" He paused for only a moment. "Peter Pettigrew against your parents."

Connor flinched again. Harry had to stifle a growl. *Must he bring up Connor's most painful memories?*

Dumbledore touched a hand to his temple as though it hurt, briefly, then pulled it away. "In our school," he said, "unity is represented by the Houses. Most students think in terms of their own House. Few look outside them. And, in *some* cases, the rivalries linger even when one has left Hogwarts.

"It will be up to you to change that, Mr. Potter."

"Me?" Connor squeaked. He sounded terrified.

Dumbledore nodded. "Yes. You must learn to see the good in Slytherins, in Ravenclaws, and in Hufflepuffs as well as Gryffindors."

Connor bit his lip and plucked at his robes with his free hand. "But—some of them *are* Dark wizards, Headmaster."

"Yes," Dumbledore acknowledged. "That is very true, Mr. Potter. But your own twin is a Slytherin who acts like a Gryffindor. He has had you as an example all his life, and that may be—I think it is—why he is so different." His gaze slid sideways to Harry again, who felt pinned in turn. "Imagine," Dumbledore said softly, "what could be, Mr. Potter, once you take your rightful position in the fight against Voldemort. Imagine whom you might inspire to turn to the Light."

Connor was silent for a long time. Harry waited, no longer sure what to feel. Maybe it was for the best that Dumbledore had done this, since neither Harry nor their mother would have had the heart to slam the truth so fiercely at Connor.

Finally, Connor said, in a heavy, reluctant tone, "I'll think about it, Headmaster. But I don't know how to inspire anyone yet."

“Young Harry can show you,” said Dumbledore, and smiled again. “He knows well your influence in his life, don’t you, Harry?”

“I do,” Harry said, and turned to Connor. “You gave me the courage to do what I did today. You’re the most important thing in the world to me, Connor. I love you, and I promise you, you can do this.”

Connor just stared at him for a moment. Then his eyes filled with tears, and he grabbed Harry and crushed him into a hug, stirring a protest from Syllarana.

“That is all I wanted to talk to you boys about,” said Dumbledore, and this time he had a smile for both of them. “From here, you must find your own paths forward at least a short part of the time. But remember: do not hesitate to come to me for advice.” He nodded to Connor. “You are in a unique position, Mr. Potter. It is understandable that you will have troubles. But you are never alone.” He cast Harry a single oblique glance.

“Thank you, Headmaster,” Connor whispered. “I’ll remember that.”

He steered Harry gently from the room then. Harry, in love and in pride and in relief that this had turned out so much better than it could have, went with him.

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Dumbledore sighed and sank back in his seat, putting one hand over his face. Fawkes, the phoenix, gave a questioning trill from his perch, then flew over and landed on his friend’s shoulder when Dumbledore said nothing. He rubbed his warm head on the old wizard’s cheek until a hand rose to stroke him.

*Sacrifices*, Dumbledore was thinking as he gazed at the closed door of his office. *We all make sacrifices, for the sake of lifting the burden from those who cannot bear it.*

He was thinking of a young Gryffindor marked with a heart-shaped scar, and a young Slytherin with the Dark Mark branded on his arm swearing that he would turn against Voldemort and be loyal to the Light, and a young Slytherin with the heart of a Gryffindor.

And another Gryffindor, whom Dumbledore had watched, and pondered upon, and finally, against his will, chosen and explained a problem to. And that Gryffindor had made a sacrifice that still echoed down the years and troubled his mind to think of.

*It was willing*, Dumbledore thought, gently caressing Fawkes’s glorious plumage. *It was made with eyes open, with clear heart, with full knowledge of the choices.*

That was the only thing that let him sleep at night.

*Harry’s sacrifice is the same way.*

But when he’d seen the boy kneeling in the center of the Great Hall, a snake twined around his head, it hadn’t felt that way. He was only twelve years old.

With a heavy heart and a heavier conscience, Albus Dumbledore turned back to his work of making decisions that no one else was prepared to. There was another wizard he must speak to, about choices and sacrifices and how he could help the Light, given that he was in a unique position to do so.

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## **Chapter Six: Moons and (Would-be) Stars**

“Do you think he’ll use the snake to cheat on exams?”

“No, I bet he uses it to plot the deaths of innocent people!”

“No, I bet he uses her to help him...” And Harry couldn’t hear the last word, as the sentence trailed off in a burst of laughter.

Harry kept his eyes forward and his feet moving. He had known this would happen when he revealed that he was a Parselmouth. He had *known*. And he’d done it anyway. At least he had practice ignoring this kind of thing from the first three weeks of school, when he’d done his best to ignore his Housemates.

“I could hex them,” Draco, walking beside him, offered in a low voice.

“*All of them?*” Harry asked dryly. They were passing a group of fourth-year Ravenclaws, who hooted loudly and hailed the “Snake Prince.” Harry fought the impulse to hunch his shoulders. “Then you’ll have three-quarters of the school reeling around with boils on their noses and legs locked together. And you’d land us in detention besides.”

“We could do it,” said a voice behind him.

Harry turned and glanced at Marcus Flint. The older Slytherin’s eyes were burning, and he had his wand drawn. He hadn’t fired any hexes at anyone yet, but from the look on his face, it was only a matter of time.

Harry wasn’t sure what to make of Flint, nor the rest of Slytherin House. He’d annoyed them by ignoring them the first few weeks, and by not retaliating when they jinxed him. But since the moment he revealed he was a Parselmouth, they seemed to have closed ranks around him, determined to protect him as one of their own.

Harry enjoyed it, while trying not to, mostly because it puzzled him. He was sure it had to end soon, when their annoyance at him outweighed their pride that there was someone with Slytherin’s talent in their House. Or when he told Flint that he had a Nimbus 2001 broom. Flint knew he *was* planning to play on the Quidditch team. He didn’t know about the broom yet.

*There hasn’t been a right time to tell him*, Harry defended himself.

“*Of course there hasn’t,*” said Sylarana. Since his show in the Great Hall, she’d taken to hissing aloud more and more often, not caring if anyone heard her. Draco, as always, tried to peer under Harry’s sleeve at her; he never seemed to understand that a Locusta was both highly dangerous and highly unpredictable. “*Keep telling yourself that, if it makes you feel better.*”

Harry didn’t respond. He didn’t feel like arguing in his head, and speaking with Sylarana in Parseltongue in the halls made him feel self-conscious. The other Slytherins had assured him they didn’t mind. That only made Harry mind more.

They walked past two older Ravenclaw students, who half-turned towards Harry and smirked at him. “Maybe he keeps the snake on his pillow,” one of them whispered, voice low and vicious. “*There’s some pillow talk.*”

“He’s touched in the head,” said the other one, and snorted. “Thinking he can control that beast at *all*. I bet the snake’s just waiting until a certain point in the year, and then she’s going to devour everyone in the school.”

The return laughter had a nasty edge that made Harry more concerned than usual. Joking about him was one thing. Spreading rumors that Sylarana wanted to hurt the students might result in them trying to take her away, and that *would* result in someone getting hurt.

“I don’t think he’s mad,” said a small, calm voice. “If you can talk to a Crumple-Horned Snorkack, I don’t see why you can’t talk to a snake.”

Harry blinked. The Ravenclaw students reversed towards the sound of the voice so fast that he was left staring at their backs. They had someone cornered against the wall, he thought, someone small enough that he couldn’t see anything of —her?—over them.

“Loony, Loony Lovegood,” said the first student, the one who’d mentioned pillow talk, in a voice with an even nastier edge than he’d used to talk about Harry. “You’re not the best witness to someone’s sanity, are you? You and your Crumple-Horned Snorkacks and your radish earrings—“

Harry edged back, gently pushing aside Draco and a few third-year Slytherins who were bristling to strike back at the Ravenclaws. He could see between the two students now, and they’d edged a small girl towards the wall, a girl who seemed all straggling blonde hair and enormous eyes behind equally large glasses. She did indeed have radish earrings, dangling low enough to brush her shoulders. She blinked at the older students, even when one of them reached out and snatched her wand from behind her ear.

“You shouldn’t keep it there, Loony,” he said in a lecturing tone. “You could blow your own ear off.”

The girl nodded. “Yes, that’s true,” she said. “Thank you for the advice.” She held her hand out. “I’ll keep it behind my left ear in the future.”

The student who held her wand laughed. Harry growled softly. He didn’t *like* that laughter, which was of the same kind that Ron and Connor had used towards Hermione last year before they became her friends.

“I’m not giving this back to you, Loony,” said the Ravenclaw boy. “I’ll keep it safer than someone who believes in Hellpaths or whatever you call them.”

“*He-lio-path*,” said the girl, carefully enunciating each syllable. “And it’s true that they exist. Just not often in Britain. But the Ministry keeps an army of them. They don’t want you to find out, of course. It’s all very hush-hush.” She turned and looked at Harry, suddenly, disconcertingly, through the same gap he was using to look at her. “But brave people put the truth forward, even if they’re not believed.”

Harry decided at that point that he’d had about enough, and called his own magic. “Give her back her wand,” he said.

The Ravenclaw boys blinked and looked at him. Harry had the feeling that they’d forgotten all about him, that the girl was their more favored target.

*So they tease her this often?*

That irritated Harry. It was one thing for them to tease him; Parseltongue was a Dark talent, and he’d put himself forward, as the girl said. But all she’d done was defend him, and, apparently, talk about creatures that didn’t exist and wear radishes as earrings. Those weren’t enough to justify this kind of teasing. And she looked to be a first-year, so she couldn’t have built up any long-standing grudges.

“Why should we, Snake Prince?” the one holding the girl’s wand asked, grinning like a fool. “We just want to keep herself from doing harm. You can’t trust these mad witches. Quite mad, her mother,” he added, raising his voice to the students who had stopped and were watching the growing fight. “Destroyed herself in an experiment.”

“Yes, she did,” said the girl calmly. “I was there. I saw it happen.” She paused. “I miss her sometimes.”

Harry felt sick. He couldn’t imagine losing a member of his family like that. And for the boys to use that to *tease* her...

And she’d defended him.

Harry narrowed his eyes at the boys and whispered a spell he’d never tried wandless before. “*Apis Occaeco*.”

The Ravenclaw holding the wand shrieked and abruptly dropped it, clutching his hand. Harry nodded. The Invisible Bees hex was a mild one, but it did cause a sharp, stinging pain in the center of the hands, and that was worth it. Harry scooped up the wand swiftly and turned back to the girl.

“Thank you,” she said gravely, taking the wand from him and tucking it behind her left ear. “My name is Luna Lovegood. What’s yours?”

Harry blinked. "You were standing up for me, and you didn't even know my name?"

"We haven't been properly introduced," said Luna, and extended a hand.

Harry shook it, ignoring the stares he could feel behind him. "Harry Potter," he said. "Pleased to meet you."

"I am going to *mess you up*," snarled a voice behind him, and then the Ravenclaw not whimpering over his stung hand grabbed Harry on the shoulder and swung him around.

Harry met his eyes and thought of Sylarana. When he parted his lips, he knew the words came out in a hiss. "Can you come out of my sleeve and just coil on my wrist, not attacking them? I only want to remind them of you."

*"There is an audience?"*

"There is."

*"I am coming."*

Sylarana poked her head out of his sleeve and coiled on his wrist, in a perfectly lazy motion that Harry had to admire. She opened her mouth in an imitation of a human yawn, tongue flicking around her transparent fangs.

The Ravenclaw who'd been ready to beat Harry up had gone dead white. "Don't let her hurt me," he whimpered, shrinking away from Harry. "Please don't let her hurt me."

"Oh, she's not going to hurt you," said Flint, who had his wand trained on the Ravenclaw, "because I'm going to hurt you first."

"No, me," said Draco, and cast the Jelly-Legs Jinx. The Ravenclaw student sagged to the floor, half-screaming, as if Sylarana had already bitten him.

*"Stop this at once!"*

Harry winced as Professor McGonagall rounded the corner and bore down on them. Only Dumbledore would have been worse. The Head of Gryffindor House had her lips clamped together so hard that it was a wonder that she hadn't bitten through them. Her wand was out, and with a sweep, she ended both Draco's jinx and the Invisible Bees hex. Her eyes traveled through them all in the sudden silence, fell on Harry's face, and narrowed.

"Mr. Potter," she said.

*"Professor McGonagall,"* said Sylarana, her intonation a near-perfect mimicry of the woman's voice.

Harry had never been more glad that there wasn't another Parselmouth at the school. "Professor," he acknowledged, dipping his head, and waited to be given detention or have points taken away. Probably both.

"What happened?"

Harry blinked for a moment, then remembered the one good consequence to Professor McGonagall catching them. Unlike Snape, the Head of Gryffindor House was scrupulously fair. She would listen to all sides, and since there were no Gryffindors involved here, she wouldn't be personally prejudiced—

Except that he *was* a Slytherin, and a Parselmouth.

Harry shrugged. He would have to accept what she chose to give him, in that case.

“I heard these two Ravenclaws speaking some of the gossip that’s spread around the school in the wake of my announcement, ma’am,” he said, gesturing at the boys. “Then Luna defended me, and they turned on her, teased her, and took away her wand. I interfered, and asked my snake to defend me. One of them didn’t like me, and tried to attack me. Draco cast the Jelly-Legs Jinx. Then you appeared.”

McGonagall’s eyes narrowed further. “But you didn’t use magic?”

“I didn’t have my wand out, ma’am,” Harry started, since he knew he could get away with that much. He’d reveal his ability to use wandless magic if he had to, but he preferred not to.

“And second-year students can’t cast magic without a wand,” said Flint, intruding. He didn’t even flinch when McGonagall’s glare came down on him—well, not much. “Everyone knows that, Professor. None of us saw Harry draw his wand. We’ll all swear to that.” His face was the picture of innocence.

McGonagall sighed, then murmured, “Well, that is certainly true,” and stabbed Harry with a glare. “Why did you interfere, Mr. Potter?”

Harry blinked. “They were *teasing* her,” he said. “She didn’t deserve it.”

McGonagall glanced at Luna. “And this is true, Ms. Lovegood?”

“On my honor as a future trainer of Crumple-Horned Snorkacks,” said Luna with perfect gravity, “it is.”

McGonagall nodded briskly. “Very well. Forty points from Slytherin, Mr. Malfoy, for using magic on a fellow student, and a week’s detention to be served with me.”

Harry waited for Draco to object. He didn’t. He simply looked smug. Harry didn’t understand *that*, and resolved to ask him about it later.

McGonagall turned abruptly on the Ravenclaws. “Forty points from Ravenclaw for fighting in the corridors,” she said. “Twenty points from Ravenclaw for harassing a student younger than you are. You should be *ashamed* of yourselves, Mr. Gorgon, Mr. Jones. Casting aspersions on a student in your own House?” She shook her head in clear disgust, while Gorgon and Jones gaped at her.

Harry had just let his breath out when she turned to him. “Mr. Potter.”

Harry tensed, expecting points off from Slytherin for lying or fighting or calling his snake out to defend him. “Yes, Professor?”

McGonagall glanced at Luna, at him, and at the Ravenclaws. “Fifty points to Slytherin for showing that House loyalty is not the only thing that matters,” she said. “And for defending a student younger than yourself.” She had a funny sort of smile on her face when she looked back at him, one that just made Harry blink at her. “Now, Mr. Potter, if you do not wish to be late for Defense Against the Dark Arts, I suggest that you hurry.” She turned and swept away up the corridor.

There was a long, stunned silence, and then Flint said, in the voice of someone trying not to question a miracle lest it turn out to vanish when looked at too hard, “That means we came out ten points on top. McGonagall? *She* just gave ten points to Slytherin?”

“She gave ten points to *Harry*,” said Draco, and nudged Harry with one elbow. “I think that’s important.”

“You’ll pay for this, Potter,” said one of the Ravenclaws—Gorgon, Harry thought—as they backed away. “I know you used magic.” He held up his red, puffy hand accusingly.

“Come here and say that,” said Harry, and Sylarana stirred menacingly. Gorgon and Jones swallowed and hurried away.

Harry turned towards Luna. "Thank you," he said. "For defending me earlier, and with Professor McGonagall."

Luna simply nodded solemnly at him. "Parselmouths aren't evil," she said. "Wrackspurt-speakers, now they could be evil, because they would set Wrackspurts on people and make their brains go fuzzy."

Harry blinked. He hadn't ever heard of Wrackspurts. But since Luna didn't seem to think there was anything unusual about what she was saying, he decided that he wouldn't think it, either.

"Thanks," he repeated, and went on his way to Defense, the Slytherins chattering around him. A glance back showed Luna marching determinedly down the corridor, wand tucked behind her left ear, alone.

"Why did you look so smug to have detention?" Harry whispered to Draco as soon as they were seated in Defense. Lockhart hadn't arrived yet, which made Harry happy. When he was in the room, it was hard to concentrate on anything but how much of a fool he was, and he wanted to hear Draco's answer.

Draco hummed under his breath, and went on about setting his books on the edge of the desk. Harry eyed them in resigned distaste. They were doing *Adventures with Acromantulas* this week. He had already read more about what Lockhart ate for dinner each night in the remote villages he traveled to than he had ever needed to know.

But he shook the thoughts away as he realized that Draco had his chin on one hand and was simply studying him, a bright smile on his face. "Well?" Harry asked. "It's not like McGonagall makes detentions fun." Harry had never heard that she did, even for her Gryffindors, according to Connor. It mostly consisted of writing lines or scrubbing things without magic. Connor had seemed aggrieved that McGonagall wasn't at least a bit fairer to her own House. Harry had to admire her for it, in a perverse way. McGonagall was consistent, and principled, and unbending, and never let anyone around her forget it.

"I know," said Draco. "But I protected you." He sounded as delighted as though his mother had sent him a whole box of chocolates from home, something she did about once a week.

Harry blinked. "I don't understand."

"I protected you," said Draco. "It was the first chance I've had since you announced you were a Parselmouth—the first time it's come to drawn wands instead of stupid insults that a Slytherin could do ten times better." He gave a little wriggle of something Harry thought was more delight. "I've wanted to do that, Harry," he finished. "I know that you don't think of me as a very close friend yet. But friends protect each other. So I did."

Harry sighed, but found himself smiling. Something like that *would* be Draco's reason.

Of course, his good mood was ruined in the next instant when Lockhart swept in, beaming at them. Harry comforted himself with the thought that at least the Defense professor's teeth were not as blindingly white as they could have been. A progressive *Obscurus* placed on his smile and hair had been Harry's revenge when he saw Lockhart once again urging Connor to appear in pictures with him. The smile and the hair would both grow a little dimmer every day. Harry hoped to be there when Lockhart first started peering into the mirror, thinking his hair was turning gray or his teeth yellow.

For now, though, the Defense professor was as annoying as ever. He swept up to the front of the room and clapped his hands. "Who knows what today is?" he asked brightly.

"Your birthday," said Pansy Parkinson from behind Harry, sounding dreamy. Harry cast her a disgusted look, and was just in time to see Millicent Bulstrode, with an even more disgusted look, elbow Pansy in the ribs.

"Act like a Slytherin, for Merlin's sake!" the bigger girl whispered. "Stop drooling over him!"

Lockhart went on before Pansy could retaliate. "My birthday, yes, excellent. Ten points to Slytherin." Pansy beamed. Draco made discreet gagging sounds beside Harry, and Harry was inclined to agree. "And that means," Lockhart announced, "that each of you has my permission to practice what spells you wish until the end of class, at which time you can present me with the gifts you used the spells to make!"

He grinned at them, the perfect, polished smile that was on the copy of *Witch Weekly* that Pansy kept with her at all times. Harry could see the darkness haunting his front teeth. He kept his thoughts on that and not on the chaos that could result from a class of second-year Ravenclaws and Slytherins flinging around spells as he drew his wand.

“Is he barking, or just bloody stupid?” whispered Draco next to him.

“Bloody stupid, I think,” Harry whispered back, and shook his head. Lockhart *was* stupid, and it was a waste. Defense Against the Dark Arts was the most important class at Hogwarts, to Harry’s way of thinking. The students *had* to learn how to defend themselves against curses and Dark creatures, or they would be helpless when Voldemort returned.

For now, though, he could content himself with thinking about the “gift” he would create for Lockhart. He closed his eyes for a long moment, then smiled and opened them. The best way of doing this would have been via a potion, but since he didn’t have any potion ingredients here, he would do the best he could to approximate them with spells. He thought he could do it.

“What are you making?” Draco said, as he swished his wand and Transfigured a piece of paper into a slightly larger piece of paper. “I’m going to make something simple and pretend that it’s something complicated and very ancient and pureblooded. The idiot won’t know the difference.”

“Watch,” said Harry, and performed his own Transfiguration, turning one of Syllarana’s scales into a sticky orange paste. Draco raised his eyebrows and started to ask a question, but Harry warmed the paste and stirred it in quick succession, then made it float into the air and twist around itself. He could feel his magic almost purring with happiness at the use, and shook his head. Sometimes he got very strange ideas about his own magic, and they seemed to be more frequent than usual since the summer.

He smoothed out the paste, and then glanced around for a container. Lockhart had an empty jar on his desk that he’d used to contain Cornish Pixies on the first day of class. Harry raised his hand demurely.

“Sir?”

Lockhart turned to him. “Yes, Mr. Potter?”

“Could I borrow that jar from you?” Harry asked, lowering his eyes. “I need a container for my gift, and it would be an honor to touch something you’ve touched.”

Looking positively delighted, Lockhart said, “Certainly, Harry,” and tried to levitate the jar towards him. He mispronounced the Charm, and the jar shot up to the ceiling and nearly cracked, before Harry took control of it and floated it towards him. Lockhart chuckled. “I don’t know my own strength, sometimes!”

*What is that, one multiplied by the power of idiocy?* Harry thought, and grabbed the jar, directing the orange paste into it. He cast a final spell, a simple one that turned the orange color to gold and made it look irresistibly beautiful. Harry held the jar solemnly out to Lockhart.

“Happy birthday, Professor,” he said.

“Why, thank you, Mr. Potter,” said Lockhart, and took the jar from him. “What a surprise.” He looked at the golden paste for a moment, then frowned, as though he hated having to admit this. “Er—what is it?”

“A paste to help you take care of your skin and hair, Professor,” said Harry earnestly. “I noticed that you were looking just a *bit* peaky at breakfast this morning. I hope this helps.”

Lockhart turned faintly green. “Peaky? Really? Thank you, Mr. Potter. I will certainly apply it.” He walked back to his desk, already dipping a finger in the paste and smoothing it over his right cheek.

Harry turned at a tap on his right arm. “Really?” Draco whispered, staring at him.

“Of course not,” Harry said, taking care to keep his voice low. Lockhart probably wouldn’t hear him, but there were plenty of people in the classroom who would take offense and hex Harry for daring to play a prank on him. “It’ll make his hair shine brighter for a week, then turn his skin orange.”

Draco’s eyes widened, and he began to laugh. Harry smiled at him and leaned back on the table, ready to be pleasantly bored until the end of class as he watched Lockhart apply the paste liberally.

A mutter behind him warned him, but didn’t give him *quite* warning enough. A voice that wasn’t Slytherin said, “He hexed Gorgon! I *know* he did.”

“This ought to teach him, then,” said another voice, and Harry turned in time to see a brilliant green spell flying towards him. He panicked for a moment. He didn’t think that he could get up a Shielding Charm in time, and he definitely didn’t want to raise one in front of everyone. The students could think it was a professor who’d done it in the middle of the Great Hall, but here?

*Let me.*

Harry’s body vibrated with the force of that voice, and the world in front of him warped and spun. He saw colors dragging against each other, turning into sunburned smears. He watched his own hand move in a lazy gesture, and the green hex turned red and flew back towards the Ravenclaw who’d cast it. He felt distant, detached, as though he hadn’t done that. And he hadn’t, not really.

Harry heard soft laughter in his head, and then Sylarana’s agitated hiss. The next moment, the colors in the room stopped blurring, and he was back to normal, staggering, as the world appeared to begin again. Sylarana was visible, dancing on his wrist and lashing at nothing, as though she could bite whoever had spoken the words to Harry and laughed.

Draco grabbed his shoulder and stared into his face. “Harry? Are you all right?”

Harry nodded shakily. He still couldn’t believe what he thought he’d seen. How could he have turned a hex red, particularly when he didn’t know what it was?

“He hurt Margaret!”

Harry looked up swiftly, his heart pounding. A Ravenclaw girl, presumably the one who’d thrown the spell at him in the first place, was lying on the ground. Her eyes were closed, her face pale, and she had a mark like a handprint on her right cheek. The handprint spread as Harry watched, turning the whole of her face red. Margaret whimpered softly in her sleep.

“There, there,” said Lockhart, rushing over, his own face half-gold. “Bound to be accidents with these spells flying all over the place, yes? I really should have asked you to make small gifts for me, not special ones. Just take—er—Margaret to the hospital wing, Miss—er—“

“Turtledove,” sobbed the girl crouching beside Margaret. She shot Harry a look of sheerest hatred. “Professor Lockhart, aren’t you going to do anything to punish him? What did he *do* to her?”

“Er, well, I don’t know,” said Lockhart, and turned to Harry, attempting to look brave and heroic and failing miserably. “What did you do to her, Mr. Potter?”

“I don’t know,” Harry whispered. “I saw her spell flying towards me—“

“She didn’t cast a spell!” Turtledove interrupted hotly.

“Yes, she did,” said Millicent, leaning forward from the seat behind Harry. “I saw it. Harry deflected it. I don’t think he meant to hurt her, but that’s what happened.” She shrugged. “She shouldn’t have been playing around with spells like that in class. None of us should have.” She cast Lockhart a pointed glance that he missed entirely.

“So it was just a case of dangerous magic meeting dangerous magic, then,” Lockhart said, brightening. “So, please escort Margaret to the hospital wing, Miss, er, Turtleshell, and I’m sure she’ll get better.”

The Turtledove girl and three of her classmates helped carry Margaret out of the room. Harry could feel them glaring at him. He shook his head. He hoped that Luna wouldn’t suffer from her Housemates turning their anger back on her.

And he hoped that *he* wouldn’t suffer anything like that again. He touched his forehead and shivered. Then he paused. There was a specific pain in his head, and it was coming from his scar. He brushed his fingers over it, then flinched. It *burned*. He wondered that he hadn’t noticed it before.

*I felt him!* Sylarana hissed in his head.

*Who?* Harry asked. He thought the last thing anyone needed now was to hear him hissing aloud in Parseltongue.

*The one who visits you at night! Tom Riddle!* Sylarana twined around in circles. *I don’t know what he did. He was—there, for a moment, and you weren’t. Then I pushed him out, or he left, I don’t know which.* Harry had never heard her sound so worried.

Harry let out a breath, and glanced up when Draco touched his arm. “What happened, Harry?” he whispered.

“I don’t know,” Harry said back, watching as Lockhart moved up to the front of the room to daub the golden paste on his cheeks again. The joke seemed hollow now. “But I don’t think it was anything I want to experience again.”

“We’ll fight it together, then,” said Draco, and looped an arm through Harry’s.

*Yes, we will,* said Sylarana, and now she sounded grimmer than she ever had.

Harry closed his eyes. *If—whatever that was—happens again, does that mean I’m a danger to Connor?*

He decided quickly that that wasn’t the kind of decision he could make on his own. Nor could Sylarana or Draco, from lack of knowledge. But there was someone whom Harry needed to talk to who might know, who’d grown up around Dark magic and then fought it as an Auror.

*After lunch,* he decided. *I’ll go and talk to Sirius then.*

~\*~\*~\*~\*~\*~\*

## **Chapter Seven: Lessons In Courage**

Harry slipped rapidly down the second floor hallway to the office that Dumbledore had given Sirius. He had abandoned lunch early, which had made Sylarana protest and Draco, stuck in a conversation with Blaise, scowl at him, but Connor and Ron hadn’t been at lunch, either. Harry now had an extra urgency to his need to speak with Sirius. If they were in trouble...

He heard Ron’s voice coming from the half-open office door, and relaxed. They were well, then. It seemed that he hadn’t been the only one who had decided to seek out his godfather.

“—slimy Slytherin!” said Ron’s voice emphatically, just as Harry reached the office door.

Harry froze. Then he leaned gently against the wall and cocked his head so that he could see in around the door itself, heart pounding hard.

Sirius's office was the usual mess it had been since he moved in, crowded with photographs of himself and Harry, himself and Connor, the entire Potter family, Remus, the Potters' wedding, and some of his innumerable girlfriends. His own broom and motorbike stood in the far corner, accompanied by a school broom that Harry thought Sirius was checking over for jinxes. Gryffindor banners, or pieces of cloth Transfigured to look like them, hung jauntily from every available hook. Sirius's desk in the middle was buried under an accumulated load of paper, covered by a prominent Quidditch schedule with each Gryffindor match marked in red and gold ink.

And there were three chairs, now pulled into a triangle. Sirius sat in one of them, face like a thundercloud. Connor perched on the edge of another, almost vibrating with what Harry recognized as a mixture of anxiety and anger. Ron paced up and down in front of them, his back to the door so that Harry couldn't see his face.

*Perhaps now isn't the best time,* Harry thought.

*You're eavesdropping,* said Sylarana quite mildly.

*I know,* Harry snapped back. *Shut up.*

She just chuckled at him, which was an unexpected reaction. Harry went back to listening.

"He's not going to get away with this," said Sirius, voice like a growl. "The Ministry has *no* reason to sack your father, Ron, and surely not over something as mild as an altercation with Lucius Malfoy in a bookshop."

Ron spun around again, and Harry could see that his face had turned almost entirely red, obscuring his freckles. "But what if they do?" he whispered. "Dad's always told me that Lucius Malfoy had tons of friends in the Ministry, and now —"

"Not nearly as many since he was a Death Eater," said Sirius, and snorted. "Oh, yes, he has influence—every pureblooded wizard with money has a hold over that bastard Fudge—but that doesn't mean so much when anyone can look at his left arm and see the Dark Mark." He paused for a long moment, then, and a sly smile began to grow on his face.

"What is it, Sirius?" Connor had an echo of the same smile in his voice. He knew what it meant, almost as well as Harry did. Ron just looked from one to the other with a bewildered expression on his face.

Sirius coughed a bit. "Well, Malfoy's gone out of his slimy way to make this look all proper and legal, right?" he asked.

Ron nodded. "Advocates and everything! But—" He flinched and hunched his shoulders. "Well, my family can't respond as well because..." His voice trailed off into a mumble.

Kindly, Harry thought, Sirius didn't refer to Ron's poverty. "I know," he said. "So what you need is another pureblooded wizard with money to fight for you."

Ron just blinked, but Connor leaped up and threw his arms around Sirius. "Sirius," he whispered. "You would? You *really* would?"

Sirius messed up Connor's hair, affection in that gesture that made Harry smile a little, despite the way that the news of Lucius Malfoy going after Arthur Weasley had wound up his nerves. "Of course, brat," he said. "I still have my contacts in the Ministry, and I have a Black fortune lying around and not being used very often. Did you think I was going to spend it *all* on gifts for irresponsible godsons?"

Connor grinned at him. Ron caught on. "Oh, sir, no one would expect you to—"

Sirius held up a hand. "I know. I want to. It's not going to cost me anything I can't afford, Ron." His eyes narrowed, and he grinned in that way that always made Harry expect to see a tongue loll out of his mouth. "And I'll enjoy putting paid to that bastard Malfoy. I don't trust him any more than I trust Snivellus. Once a Slytherin, always a Slytherin. Once a Death Eater, always a Death Eater."

Connor paled and fell silent for a moment. Then he said, in a low, troubled voice, "Sirius, do you think that's true of Harry?"

Harry swallowed.

*They are ten motions of my body away from me,* said Sylarana thoughtfully. *I could bite both of them before the ward would descend and cage me. Just say the word.*

Harry pushed his angry refusal at her, and waited to hear what Sirius would say. The longer his godfather waited, the more tense he got. Sirius stared into space for long moments, then sighed and swiped a hand through his hair.

"I don't know, Connor, honestly," he said, shaking his head. "He's my godson, and a great kid. I always thought he studied a little too much. But I would never have said he was evil."

"But?" Connor asked, pressing forward. Ron was listening intently, too, Harry noticed. Ron had been at least a slight problem in his interactions with Connor since he and Connor became friends. He accepted Harry right now, but he would be glad to turn on him if Sirius said so.

"But he's a Parselmouth," said Sirius. "And he's made up with the Slytherins again even after he openly proclaimed his devotion to you, which I don't understand."

*That was them, not me!* Harry thought.

"I see," mumbled Connor, looking stricken.

"I'll never abandon him, of course," said Sirius, reaching out and giving Connor a rough shake and then a hug. "I've got the bet with Snape to win, haven't I? But I don't like that he waited so long before telling us he was a Parselmouth. It makes me uneasy around him." He blew out a sigh. "I'm still fighting for Harry, Connor, but it's going to be more of a battle than I thought."

Harry closed his eyes. He fought the temptation to walk away. He knew, now, that Sirius wouldn't take the news of what had happened in Defense Against the Dark Arts well. Harry would have to explain about the diary, and Tom, and what in the world he had thought he was *doing*, keeping it all concealed. It would be so much simpler to scurry off.

*So do it,* Sylarana urged him. *I can help you fight Tom when he appears again.*

Harry shook his head slowly. He had meant to be Gryffindor, he *was* meant to be Gryffindor, and if that was so, then that meant facing his fears. He'd done it once in the Great Hall, but that didn't mean that he got to stop doing it.

He knocked on the door.

There was a brief, startled silence, and then Sirius called, "Come in."

Harry poked his head around the door, and was greeted with a variety of expressions: surprise, relief, worry, antagonism. Harry swallowed. "Sirius, can I talk to you in private?" he asked, darting a glance at Connor.

Sirius narrowed his eyes. "Why, Harry?"

Harry let out a little breath. "Something happened to me today. Something Dark. Something Slytherin, I think."

Sirius sat back in his chair, considering him. Then he shook his head. "I think that it's time for the first of the lessons in Gryffindor qualities I promised you, Harry," he said gently, but with a tone of steel in the back of his voice. "I'm sure that you can talk about this in front of Connor and Ron. We can trust them not to spread it any further, can't we?" His eyes lingered pointedly on Ron, who, Harry remembered, had had a tendency to blurt out some of his friends' secrets last year.

A bit of the red returning to his face, Ron nodded. Connor was already nodding, his hazel eyes going wide with fear as they fixed on Harry.

"Tell me now," Sirius said gently.

Harry told them the story of the diary, the nightmares of the two dark figures, the dreams of Tom Riddle, and ended with what had happened in Defense Against the Dark Arts earlier. He forced all the emotion out of his voice, and kept his tone equally bloodless. His eyes fixed on a point on the wall above Sirius's head, so that he didn't have to watch all the changes of his godfather's expressions.

Finally, when he was finished, Sirius whispered, "Oh, Harry."

Harry turned slowly to face him. He couldn't tell what emotion predominated in his godfather's eyes—there were too many—and he didn't dare look at Ron or Connor. He nodded. "I think that I'm being possessed," he whispered. "But I can't figure out how. I haven't studied the diary in weeks."

"But you kept it?" Sirius pounced on that.

"I didn't know what else to do with it," said Harry, shaking his head. "It didn't seem that dangerous—"

"I think it is." Sirius stood up and came forward, kneeling down in front of him. Harry actually relaxed a bit again when he saw the look in his eyes. This was the way that Lily sometimes looked when she explained some facet of the adult world he didn't know about yet to him. "Anything that can cause dreams and possession like this is dangerous. Go and get the diary, Harry. I need to see it. There are a few spells I know about that you don't which I can perform on the diary to test for any hint of Dark magic."

Harry nodded and turned towards the Slytherin dungeons. He could hear talk break out again behind him, but this time he didn't stay to listen to it. He had had no right to listen to the first conversation.

He lengthened his strides, rubbing at his scar, which had begun to burn faintly again. Then he heard a startled hiss from Sylarana.

Harry opened his eyes slowly, carefully. It felt as though they'd been gummed together by sleep for a long time. His head hurt. He glanced around and didn't understand what he saw. He was lying in a bed in the hospital wing, with Madam Pomfrey standing not far away and talking to Sirius in a low, urgent voice.

"Sirius?" he said. His voice croaked. Harry shuddered. He sounded as though he'd spent hours screaming.

Sirius burst past the matron, ignoring her shocked cry, and knelt beside Harry's bed. He clasped Harry's right hand in his and reached up to brush back his fringe. He sucked in his breath.

Harry winced. Apparently his scar gave some sign of the intense pain he was feeling.

"It's changed color," Sirius whispered.

"What has?" Madam Pomfrey bustled up behind him, her hands on her hips. "If you are suggesting that the pain Mr. Potter sustained came from a bump on the head, then I am afraid I must—"

"No, his scar," Sirius whispered. "It's red. Why is it?"

“I’m sure *I* don’t know,” Madam Pomfrey said. “Now if you will clear out of the way so that I can run a few scans, Sirius...”

Sirius backed off, though he didn’t stop holding Harry’s hand. His worried gaze warmed something inside of Harry that he hadn’t been aware was frozen. He closed his eyes and moved his left arm carefully, to feel the weight of Sylarana. He was surprised she hadn’t commented yet.

She wasn’t there.

He opened his eyes and started to ask, but Madam Pomfrey began chanting her spells then, and he felt obliged to lie still and be quiet. He didn’t recognize any of the spells, but tried his best to shut the syllables away in his head so that he could remember them. Medical magic would come in useful if he ever had to heal Connor’s wounds.

The matron sighed and stepped away from his bed at last, lowering her wand. “Nothing is physically wrong with him,” she said. “There is no bump on the back of his head, no concussion, no broken bones.”

“I don’t understand,” Harry said, and winced at the sound of his voice. “What happened?”

“What is the last thing you remember, Mr. Potter?” Madam Pomfrey asked, her voice softening a bit as she stared into his face.

Harry shook his head. “Not much. That I was on my way back to the dungeons to fetch a book Sirius wanted to look at, and then—then Sylarana hissed—“ He stared at his empty left arm again. “Where is she?”

“Right here, my dear boy.”

Harry turned his head and breathed a sigh of relief. Dumbledore had come into the room, holding a glass cage in his hands. Sylarana wriggled inside it, hissing furiously. Dumbledore placed the cage gently on the bed and opened it.

“Headmaster, that is not wise—“ Madam Pomfrey began, her voice shrill.

Sylarana shot away from the cage as though it were charmed to sting her and slithered up Harry’s chest, coiling around his neck. She was demanding, “*Where did you go? I couldn’t find you. I couldn’t feel you. Where did you go?*”

“I don’t know,” Harry said, and saw from the minute flinches of the adults that he’d spoken Parseltongue. He sighed and turned back towards them, making sure to keep Sylarana out of his range of vision. “I don’t know what happened,” he said. “But we’d both like to know. Tell us, please?”

“It’s disturbing, the way he refers to that snake,” Sirius muttered.

Dumbledore ignored him and nodded slowly, his eyes less clear than they had been the last time Harry had seen him. “The ward in my office went off when your Locusta got a certain distance from you, my dear boy—or perhaps I should say, when you got a certain distance from her. When I went to fetch her, my way led me past a certain broom closet on the second floor. You were lying outside it, unconscious.” He paused, staring intently at Harry. “You truly remember nothing of what happened?”

Harry shook his head, dazed. “But Sylarana should be able to tell us—“

“*I can’t,*” she insisted. “*You put me down and told me to leave you alone. And the memories aren’t in your head. They’re gone.*”

“What’s there instead?” Harry asked, turning towards her and not caring if he did hiss.

“*Nothing. A hole.*” Sylarana tightened the hold of her tail around his neck a bit. “*It was disturbing.*”

“But no sign of Tom Riddle?”

“Nothing,” said Sylarana. “*I can’t feel him anymore.*” She paused a long moment, then added reluctantly, “*Perhaps he grew frightened at the dog’s suggestion that we examine his first home and fled.*”

Harry let out a slow breath. So that was one danger averted, then—the main one, that Tom Riddle would possess him again and let fly a dangerous spell of some sort at Connor or another student. He let the tension in his stomach relax, and looked up to meet Dumbledore’s questioning gaze.

“I had a presence in my head, sir,” he said steadily. “Possessing me. A young man with dark hair, who said that he’d come from a certain book I acquired from—” He faltered. Could he betray Draco’s father like that?

“From?” Dumbledore prodded gently, his eyes like daggers.

Harry shook his head. “I picked it up in Flourish and Blotts,” he said. “I didn’t know there was anything wrong with it at first, but then Tom started talking to me—”

“Tom.” Dumbledore’s eyes widened the slightest bit. “Tom Riddle?”

Harry blinked. “Yes, sir. How did you know? Did Sirius mention it?” He flicked a glance at his godfather, but Sirius, though he still clutched Harry’s hand, was watching Dumbledore with as much bewilderment Harry himself had showed.

Dumbledore sighed. “I am afraid that I have good, though unhappy, reason to think of that name first when I hear of any Tom,” he said. “And no, your godfather did not mention it to me.” He paused for a long, long moment, and then said, “Tom Riddle was Lord Voldemort’s name when he was a student at Hogwarts, Harry.”

Harry clenched his hands so that his fingernails dug into his palms. His skin crawled as if it had dirt on it.

*Voldemort.* He’d had *Voldemort* in his head. *Voldemort* could have gotten out and hurt *Connor*.

He could have made *Harry* hurt Connor.

Harry was shaking. He leaned to the side, and Madam Pomfrey gave a sharp exclamation and waved her wand once, moving a basin over to the side of the bed for him just as he threw up.

Sylarana, meanwhile, was hissing like a dragon disturbed on her nest. “*The degraded one who forced the snake to obey his commands? The one you fought last year? He could have controlled me. He was trying. I am glad he is gone.*” And then her tail tightened enough to force Harry to pay a bit of attention, if only because she was choking off his air. “*You are not dirty.*”

Harry rubbed a hand over his mouth and gave a weak nod to Madam Pomfrey in thanks, wishing he could agree with Sylarana. He did feel dirty, still, and horrified in a way that had nothing to do with the mere presence of possession. It had been *Voldemort*. The primary threat in Connor’s life, the one he was supposed to protect Connor from.

And he would have made Harry into a traitor.

Guilt and self-loathing were unfurling in the middle of his chest, and would eat him alive if they could. Harry took a deep breath and put them, carefully, into the secret box of his thoughts, the one where he pressed all his complaints and the occasional unfairness or jealousy he thought he experienced around Connor. The box had been holding things like that since he was five years old. It was bottomless. Harry thought it could hold a bit more.

“No one was hurt?” he whispered. “What about Margaret, the girl I hit with the hex earlier?”

“She’s awake now,” said Madam Pomfrey firmly, “and back in Ravenclaw Tower. Quite honestly, Mr. Potter, it was only a simple variation on an old spell. Beyond the skill of our Defense Against the Dark Arts professor to reverse, of course—“ her voice went acid on those words “—but not impossible for someone trained in medical magic.”

Harry nodded, his resolve to learn medical magic only growing stronger.

“Do give Professor Lockhart a chance, Poppy,” Dumbledore chided the matron gently. Madam Pomfrey only snorted. Dumbledore turned and met Harry’s eyes, his own expression thoughtful.

“Mr. Potter,” he said, “I know that what I am about to ask of you is unusual, but I feel that I have no choice.”

Harry nodded, his heartbeat spiking. Sylarana just uttered a hiss that was either wordless, all anger, or some obscene curse word that Harry didn’t know the translation for.

“I am afraid that I must ask you not to tell your brother, nor anyone else, about your possession by Tom Riddle,” Dumbledore said quietly. “Or, at least, not that Tom Riddle is Lord Voldemort,” he added, perhaps seeing a shadow in Harry’s eyes. “Young Connor already knows about the possession itself, I take it?”

Harry nodded. “And so does Ron Weasley. They’ve both promised to keep it quiet, Headmaster,” he said. “They *promised*.”

“I did not think they would break their words, Harry,” Dumbledore said gently. “But it is extremely important that no one else find out. I am afraid that it would mean your expulsion from the school. There are parents, as you know, frightened by the mere mention of His name. To find that a student had come into possession of an artifact to which a shred of his soul, or a memory of him, clung... they would demand your expulsion, and I am afraid many of the teachers would join them.”

Harry swallowed. “Why aren’t you *pushing* to expel me, sir? For that matter, why didn’t you do it after I revealed that—that I can speak with serpents?”

Dumbledore reached out and gently patted his head. Harry shivered. There was a weight to the older wizard’s hand, a feeling of immense strength and power and sorrow, and he was the only person besides their mother Harry had ever met who didn’t muss his hair further.

“Because there is no law that says a Parselmouth cannot attend Hogwarts,” said Dumbledore. “That would be rather hypocritical of us, when one of our Founders was a Parselmouth himself. And I have known many of Voldemort’s victims.” For a moment, his eyes flicked sideways to the door, and then came back to the bed. “I know that you are one of them, rather than a perpetrator of his evil.”

Harry nodded and closed his eyes.

“Headmaster,” said a cold voice from the door.

Harry’s eyes flew open again, and he turned to see Snape standing there. The Potions Professor’s eyes were fixed on him, of course.

Sylarana started to unwind from his throat.

“No,” Harry told her firmly. “Don’t bite him.”

“*You don’t control me*,” Sylarana snapped at him.

“Then I’ll force you to leave,” said Harry. “If nothing I can do keeps you from biting anyone, then I don’t want you around.”

Sylarana hesitated, as though weighing her options, but in the end gave up and coiled herself around him like a living necklace again, giving complaints that Harry didn't bother to listen to.

"You have searched, I presume, Severus?" Dumbledore asked conversationally.

"I have." Snape strode towards the bed with his robes swirling around him, his gaze still never wavering from Harry. "There is no sign of the book within the boy's bedroom."

Harry closed his eyes. He was so used to feeling terrified now, he noticed dully, that he barely noticed when a new level of fear piled atop the rest.

"I feared it would be so," Dumbledore said with a sigh. "I assume that Harry was possessed one more time and forced to hide the diary, and then his memories were taken, so that he could tell no one where he had hidden it." He looked at Harry and gave him an encouraging smile. "But at least, my dear boy, you are no longer possessed. Where the book goes, the—presence—must go. He has no foothold within your mind anymore."

Harry nodded, though he was hardly comforted. What he *had* done was enough. He had no idea how he would live it down, or make it up to Connor.

"Who possessed you, Potter?" Snape sneered.

Harry tensed. Would Dumbledore force him to tell Snape, since the man was another of Voldemort's victims?

But Dumbledore said only, "Harry has agreed to tell only a select number of people, Severus. We, in turn, have agreed not to spread it any further." His gaze went to Madam Pomfrey and Sirius. Sirius nodded at once, of course, while Madam Pomfrey paled at whatever she saw in the Headmaster's face and lowered her gaze.

"The boy is in my House," said Snape. "He is in my care. I have a right to know." Harry didn't need to look up to know that Snape would be watching him again.

"Really?" Sirius said, with that bark-like laugh. "In *your* care? When you didn't even know that he was a Parselmouth, or that he was being possessed?"

"And did you know those things before he came to school, Black?" Snape's voice had gone soft and eager. "Did you know that your *godson* possesses Salazar's talent? Or that—"

"Severus. Sirius."

The Headmaster's voice appeared to flash-freeze both men. Harry saw Sirius bow his head, a flush suffusing his cheeks, and Snape stiffen. Dumbledore looked from one to the other of them and sighed.

"When grown men cannot put aside their grudges, how shall we persuade our students to do so?" he murmured.

Neither of the men said anything. Dumbledore sighed again and looked back at Harry, his eyes gone quiet.

"I am so sorry this happened to you, my boy," he said. "Nothing like this should have been able to hurt you at Hogwarts. Please consider yourself under my personal protection. You may come to me at any time with any concern that you have."

Harry nodded. He planned to take the Headmaster up on it if something else dangerous happened that might concern Connor. He would have to tighten his vigilance, step up the amount of attention he paid to his brother. What if Tom Riddle had planned something else, or was lurking in the shadows? What if someone else found the diary?

Harry did not like to think of what might happen then.

“Headmaster,” Snape said abruptly, in a voice still cold, but less provocative than he had used before. “If I might make a suggestion that should root out any lingering traces of possession in the boy’s mind?”

“Of course, Severus,” said Dumbledore, sounding surprised and pleased.

“I extend an offer to train our accident-prone Mr. Potter in Occlumency,” said Snape. “Legilimency, as well. At the very least, it will heal the hurts this possession has left behind. At the best, I may be able to make sure that the boy learns how to guard his mind against further intrusions.”

Harry pushed himself back against the pillows, as far as he could without irritating Sylarana or making Sirius let go of his hand. A Legilimens! Snape was a Legilimens!

And Harry had trusted him without thought, and even looked him directly in the eyes too many times to count, his memories burning and flashing near the surface of his mind. Merlin only knew how much information he’d let slip directly from his mind into Snape’s, information that could damn Connor.

There was no way that he was letting the Head of Slytherin House look into his thoughts again, now that he knew.

“No,” he said firmly.

Snape turned and gazed into Harry’s eyes. Harry immediately looked away, and Sylarana supported him with a stern hiss.

“And why not?” Snape had lowered his voice. “Are you afraid of what I might find, Mr. Potter?”

“Yes,” said Harry bluntly. “I am. You hate our father, sir. You have already proven that.” He looked back in time to see something flash in Snape’s eyes, and found himself smiling, oddly, bitterly. “I think you’re only doing this because you want to find memories of a time when James Potter did something embarrassing and taunt me with them.”

“One might almost think you don’t trust me, Mr. Potter,” said Snape. Harry did not know what to make of his voice, which was free of inflection.

“I don’t,” said Harry. “You know why.” He met Snape’s eyes head-on and let the memory of taking Veritaserum shimmer on the surface of his thoughts.

Snape jerked back as if he had been stung, his eyes widening for a moment. Then they narrowed.

“Nonetheless,” he said.

“Professor Snape would be an excellent choice, Harry,” Dumbledore said, a tone of regret in his voice. “He knows—certain essential things about the presence that possessed you already. And he is your Head of House. He is also an expert Occlumens and will, I am certain, agree to an oath not to reveal what he finds in your mind to anyone else, unless compelled to legally.” He turned and met Snape’s eyes.

“I will,” said Snape, with no hesitation.

*“I won’t allow it!”*

Harry yelped as Sirius jumped to his feet, tugging viciously on his arm. He pulled his hand free, shaking it. Sylarana hissed, but once again said nothing in the hiss. Harry didn’t know what to make of her.

“Harry is *my* godson,” Sirius snarled, leaning forward. “He’s also a twelve-year-old boy who’s just been possessed, and needs rest and good food and the company of his friends. You are *not* going to go poking around in his head, you slimy, greasy-haired, yellow-toothed, sniveling, *Death Eater!*”

Snape did not smile. He merely watched Sirius with cold disdain, then turned to Dumbledore. “Headmaster?”

“We must do what is best for Harry,” said Dumbledore. “And I do think that Severus will be able to help him, Sirius. I will make him agree to the oath in front of you, if it will—“

Sirius stomped out of the hospital wing. Harry listened to each step he took out, and closed his eyes, knowing what would happen now.

Dumbledore explained the situation to Snape, softly, and took his oath. Harry didn’t look up the entire time. He was already sinking deep into himself, reaching for the courage Sirius had wanted him to show today, and which he would need to defend his twin.

Every movement he made to be Gryffindor only seemed to tug him back towards being Slytherin. He had to try something else.

It was a shame that he was no longer sure *what* he should try.

“*Sleep,*” said Sylarana forcefully.

Harry sighed. She was right. No one would blame him for going to sleep, and it might help relax him and give him ideas when he woke in the morning.

He turned over, made himself comfortable, and let his mind drift into darkness.

Snape waited until he was back in his office to let his stoic face slip. Then he drew his wand, conjured a dueling target, and flung hexes at it, one after another, charring it and melting its limbs, scarring and chopping it, and finally making it explode. It was a reflex he’d trained himself into long ago, since throwing things was hardly advisable in a room full of valuable potions and potions ingredients.

Finally, the initial edge of his mood taken off, he Vanished the target and the marks he’d made on his walls, and sank into his chair, closing his eyes.

Two memories burned clear as day in his mind: the night he’d force-fed Harry Veritaserum, and the words that Dumbledore had spoken as he warned Snape what he would probably see in Harry’s mind.

“*Tom Riddle is here, Severus. And his diary is now missing.*”

Snape knew what it meant. He’d barely let the thought enter his mind, though, before he shut it away.

Now, he could shut it away no longer.

*The Second War has already begun.*

And Harry Potter was at the center of it, as Snape had suspected he would be. As recently as a week ago, a day ago, the announcement would have made him smile. It was only more proof that Harry Potter, and not his brother, was the Boy-Who-Lived.

Not now. Not when Voldemort had gained such a direct link into Harry’s mind, and Harry had shown, clearly, that he did not trust his own Head of House to protect him against and help him with such a challenge, and had not for months.

*I was blind.*

Snape knew he had made mistakes in the past, even great ones, even horrific ones—sometimes it seemed as though his life had been one long mistake—but, at the moment, the only one that rivaled losing Harry’s trust and making the bet with Black was the night he had chosen to join the Death Eaters. And that would come rolling back on him, repercussions in all their myriad forms, if the Dark Lord returned. Nothing he had done in the past twelve years to make up for it would matter anymore.

*I will not allow that to happen. Against this, it does not matter that Harry is James Potter's son or Sirius Black's godson. It matters that he stands at the center of this.*

*And if I do not help Harry, then the other Houses may blame Slytherin for His return indeed.*

Snape stood up, letting out a harsh breath, and composed himself. He would have to teach a class of mingled third-year Hufflepuffs and Ravenclaws soon, and he had to be ready. It would not do to let the students see their cool, calm, controlled Potions Professor with rage and agony in his eyes.

*The Second War has begun, he thought, addressing the boy in the hospital wing who could not hear him. We are both soldiers in it. You stand not alone.*

*The trouble, of course, will be making you see it.*

~\*~\*~\*~\*~\*

### **Interlude: Lily's Letter**

*October 7th, 1992*

Dear Harry:

I have heard from both Sirius and Headmaster Dumbledore that Professor Snape wants you to take Occlumency lessons with him. Sirius, of course, urges us to refuse. Headmaster Dumbledore urges us to agree.

I have spoken with your father, and we agree that you should take them.

The reasons for this are complicated, but I will explain them, as I know that you, of all children, will understand the even deeper reasons that underlie them.

First, Professor Snape is in a unique position to understand someone, such as yourself, who might be tempted to turn to the Dark but is loyal to the Light. He overcame a year of working as a Death Eater to return to the Headmaster's side, and then served another year as a spy. I understand that he hates James, and that he might take that hatred out on you, as he has in the past. But I believe that that instinctive understanding will compel him to fairness soon enough. Even James cannot deny—though he would kill himself before admitting admiration of Severus out loud—that it took courage to acknowledge his mistake and return.

Second, there is a possibility that Occlumency and Legilimency themselves will be weapons you will need in the coming war—not only as shields, but as blades. The Dark Lord, the Headmaster has written me, is an accomplished Legilimens. His successful possession of even a mind trained as yours has proven that. If you would use these weapons, perhaps someday you could not only defend your own thoughts, but pierce his. This, I need not tell you, would give us an incredible advantage in learning Voldemort's strategies.

Third, I, too, fear what might happen if the Dark Lord gained control of such power and talent as you possess, my son—power and talent that is so much greater than Sirius realizes. It is our fault, of course, and not his, that he does not know. Still, you know what a disaster it might be if you turned against your brother.

Please, Harry. For Connor's sake, and for all of ours, I urge you to accept Professor Snape's teaching.

I love you, my son, and know that you will make the right decision.

*Lily Evans Potter.*

~\*~\*~\*~\*~\*

## **Chapter Eight: What a Tangled Web We Weave**

"Someone's coming," rasped a low, urgent voice from ahead.

"Oh, shit, it's *him*," said someone else, and then the noise of pounding feet grew stronger. Harry stepped around the corner just in time to see two taller students hurrying away from him, giving him a distrustful glance. Harry found it funny until he looked sideways and saw Luna Lovegood stuck to the wall with some kind of web that looked like it was made of chewing gum. Pink strands clung to her hair, her face, and her robes, and twisted her mouth shut.

"Harry!" Draco scolded as Harry stepped forward. "What are you doing? We're going to be late for Potions—"

Harry gave him a look that shut him up entirely. Turning around, Harry pointed his wand and murmured, "*Finite Incantatem*."

The web vanished. Luna dropped to the floor and shook her head, then stood. Her wand was still behind her left ear, Harry noticed, the long flow of her hair nearly obscuring it. She gazed at him with solemn eyes.

“Thank you,” she said. “But you didn’t have to do that, you know. They were under the control of Wrackspurts.”

“Did they hurt you?” Harry asked. He didn’t think they had, but he’d never seen that particular hex before, and for all he knew, the web could have pulled free skin or hair when it vanished.

“No,” said Luna. “I think they meant to humiliate me, if you want the truth. Wrackspurts like making people’s minds fuzzy, but they can’t change them. They wouldn’t really have hurt me, because they didn’t want to hurt me before the Wrackspurts possessed them.”

Harry wasn’t so sure of that, but he let it go. Ignoring Draco’s impatient shifting, he stepped forward and surveyed Luna for a moment. She tilted her head back so as to see him better; even for a first-year, she was small. This morning, she wore a necklace of bottle caps as jewelry. Her face was utterly smooth and calm. Harry had no idea what she was feeling.

“If anyone hurts you like that again,” he said, “and I’m not around, then I want you to find the nearest Slytherin when you’re free. Tell him or her that you have a message for Harry Potter, and tell them what your attackers looked like.”

Luna nodded. “But why?” she asked.

“What do you mean, why?” Harry glared up the hall where the older students had gone. They weren’t Gorgon and Jones, he knew. They hadn’t shown that extreme a level of fear. But he was fairly sure they *had* been Ravenclaws. “I don’t want them hurting you.”

“They want to humiliate me,” Luna corrected gently, “not hurt me. I said that once before.”

Harry took a deep breath. “Then maybe I want to humiliate them back,” he said. Draco drew in a breath beside him, but when Harry glanced at him, the other boy shut his mouth and gave him a pointed look. *We’re going to be late for Potions*, said that gaze, *and you shouldn’t be doing all this anyway, since you just got out of the hospital wing*. Harry ignored that in turn.

“Do you have a Wrackspurt in your head, too?” Luna asked.

“Maybe,” said Harry. “I don’t know. What does a Wrackspurt feel like?”

“Fuzziness,” said Luna. “Not remembering what you’re doing. Thinking odd thoughts, like hurting people.”

Harry tried to smile, though he was afraid it didn’t come out exactly the way he would have liked. “Why, yes, then. That feels like something I’ve been experiencing a lot of lately.”

Draco clutched his arm. “Are you *blind*?” he hissed.

“*What he said*,” said Sylarana. “*And tell him to kindly take his hand off me*.”

Harry shook his arm free and watched as Luna drew a clacking necklace from the pocket of her robe. It had small silver charms on it, including a horse and a bird that Harry thought was a swan, but also many more ordinary objects—more bottle caps, sweet wrappers, pierced playing cards. Luna held it out to him, and nodded solemnly as Harry accepted it.

“That will protect you from Wrackspurts,” she said. “I offered some to the people who bound me to the wall, but they didn’t want one. I don’t know why,” she added. “I think the Wrackspurts were confusing them further.”

“Thank you, Luna,” said Harry. He put the necklace around his neck. Draco spluttered, but didn’t actually manage to say anything, which was most gratifying. Harry nodded to Luna. “I think I can feel the Wrackspurt fading away already.”

“No, *that’s your stupidity coming back*,” said Sylarana.

“You’re welcome,” said Luna. “Now, I have to go to class. Someone might miss me, and then they would think Heliopaths had taken me.” She turned around and walked away without a further word.

Harry watched her go with a faint smile, and then Draco grabbed his arm—luckily, not the one Sylarana was wrapped around—and dragged him off in the direction of Potions.

“Professor Snape’ll be furious with us if we’re late,” he said. “And why did you take that necklace, Harry? They’re going to think you’re as mad as she is.”

“Some of them already do,” said Harry softly, tugging the necklace’s string so that it rode higher around his neck. “Speaking Parseltongue, fainting in a corridor upstairs…”

Draco stopped abruptly and reached out, clasping Harry’s shoulders. Harry looked into his eyes.

“I don’t think you’re mad, Harry,” said Draco. “I think you’re unusual, and always will be.”

Harry smiled slightly. “Thank you, Draco,” he said, and stepped around him. “Now, as you pointed out, Snape *will* be furious with us if we’re late.” He started down the corridor, and Draco followed obediently.

“*Do you like Luna more than me?*” Sylarana was obviously sulking.

Harry looked down at her head poking out of his sleeve and responded in what he was sure was Parseltongue. “Of course not. I would think you would be happy about my helping her, in fact.”

Sylarana turned her head and fixed him with brilliant green eyes. “*Why would I be?*”

“Because sometimes I might think you should bite a stupid Ravenclaw,” Harry pointed out.

Sylarana crooned at him for the rest of the way to Potions, telling him what a good human she had, such a *smart* human. Harry smiled to himself. By the time that he found the Ravenclaws hurting Luna, he might be in a bad enough mood to at least let Sylarana threaten them, and that would probably content her. He was learning how to manage her now.

His anger tried to return at the thought of older students tormenting a first-year, at the thought of students hurting someone in their own House, at the thought of no one *doing* something about it, but he shoved it away. He was going to be angry enough tonight, after his first Occlumency lesson with Snape. But he had promised his mother to try to be as cool and composed as possible. He had to be, for Connor’s sake.

Snape raised an eyebrow when Harry and Draco came in just before he would have closed the classroom doors, but he said nothing—until Harry turned to take his usual seat beside Neville Longbottom. Then his eyebrow climbed higher, and he said, “Up front, Mr. Potter, if you please. I think that you should partner Mr. Malfoy today.”

Harry saw Neville’s face fall out of the corner of his eye. The timid Gryffindor really wasn’t so timid when Harry partnered him. Harry didn’t point out all the obvious mistakes, the way that Hermione did, but tried his best to let Neville figure them out on his own, only lending help if he really needed it. That seemed the best way to teach Neville—in fact, the best way to teach a lot of the more fumble-worthy Potions students. Harry could only wonder that Snape didn’t realize it.

“Are we starting a new potion today, sir?” Harry asked.

“No, Mr. Potter, we will be continuing our work on the Calming Draught,” said Snape, his voice growing a bit sharper.

“Then I would prefer to remain and work with Neville, sir,” said Harry, sitting down. Neville beamed at him. Harry smiled back. “After all, we started the Calming Draught together, so I think we should finish it.”

Snape swept forward to stand over him. Harry looked up and met his eyes. Sylarana hissed softly, and he felt her sink into his skin. Her presence was in his mind now, and if Snape tried to read his thoughts in the next few moments, he was going to get a nasty surprise.

Harry had agreed to take the Occlumency lessons, and listened to Sirius's raging about it, and answered his mother's letter with a calm and reasoned one of his own, telling her that he understood and accepted every point she made. But it had been more than a week since his possession, and he had had that time to think on his own strategies for learning from Snape while keeping the man from seeing more than he should. Sylarana was one of those strategies. She was in his mind anyway, so he would make use of her willingness to be so.

And he would force Snape into the open and make him lose as many minor battles as he could. It was *important* that Snape know he distrusted him, and Snape hadn't won over Harry just because Harry would take private lessons from him. Whatever mad, conceited, Snapeish reason that the Potions Professor had had for thinking Harry would still trust him after his use of Veritaserum might possess his thinking again.

*Snape wants honesty, does he?* Harry thought. *He wants me to open my mind to him? This is a place to start.*

The air grew more and more tense as the Professor stared Harry down. Harry could see Connor leaning from two rows in front, looking at him. His face was pale, and so was Ron's. Hermione, who sat at the table in front of Harry and Neville, was staring at Harry in absolute shock and horror.

At last, Snape said, "Perhaps you are right, Mr. Potter. Mr. Zabini, return to Mr. Malfoy. You may partner Miss Parkinson at another time." He turned away and swept back to the front of the room.

Harry let out a small breath and faced Neville again. Neville was shaking, his head buried in his hands.

"Hey," Harry said softly, concerned.

Neville looked back up at him and shook his head. "Did you mean that, Harry?" he whispered. "Did you really want to work with me?"

Harry blinked. "Of course I do. Why wouldn't I?"

"I melt all the cauldrons," whispered Neville, as he began to copy down Snape's instructions for the Calming Draught. "And I'm just not very good at Potions. You're *really* good, or P-Professor Snape wouldn't have given you points last year."

Harry shrugged. "Then I should work with you, since I am good at Potions. Besides, I like you."

Neville's face lit up at that. Harry hid a sigh as he went to fetch the Calming Draught ingredients. Did no one *ever* tell Neville that they liked him? Harry couldn't see why. Neville had always been perfectly polite to Harry whenever he visited Gryffindor Tower, and he *listened* to other people's words, like he was going to be tested on them later. Harry couldn't imagine a less likely candidate for being pushed out and ostracized by his own House.

Of course, Luna got ostracized by the Ravenclaws, too.

Harry frowned and carried the ingredients back to the table he shared with Neville. So, what was it about Luna and Neville that made them targets? He could understand why *he* was a target, since most of the students in the school now seemed to think he was Dark. But Neville just wasn't talented at Potions, or Snape wouldn't let him be, and Luna wore odd jewelry and said odd things and carried her wand behind her left ear. Harry couldn't imagine that the others really thought those were Dark activities.

*They get pushed out because people are stupid,* said Sylarana. *I thought you knew that.*

"Mr. Potter."

Harry glanced up. Snape stood over them, and Neville was obviously shaking, trying not to slip out of his chair in a dead faint.

“I shall expect you tonight in my offices at eight-o’-clock sharp,” he said.

Harry lowered his eyes and nodded, turning back to look at the instructions for the Calming Draught. He knew how to make it, but it was always good to double-check.

“Did you hear me?” Snape demanded.

Harry blinked up at him. Perhaps Snape expected defiance in all things, even this. But Harry had agreed to the Occlumency lessons. He wouldn’t fight the lessons actually taking place.

“Yes, sir. Eight-o’-clock in your offices. I’ll be there,” he said.

Snape eyed him once, then turned away. Neville let out a shaky breath. “How do you *stand* him?” he whispered.

“I don’t, really,” said Harry, dropping in the first pinch of shrivelfig. “He stands me.”  
Harry let out a deep breath, put his anger in the box—this was for Connor—and knocked on the door to Snape’s office.

“Come in,” said Snape’s voice, perfectly polished and cold. Harry opened the door and stepped inside.

He’d been within Snape’s offices before, and so he knew immediately that something was different. The countless bottles of finished potions and their ingredients were gone, the shelves standing empty. The desk and chairs that usually sat in the middle of the office stood against the wall, and there was a long stretch of floor Transfigured to look like a mattress. Harry stared at it, then up at Snape, who leaned against the far wall of the office and watched him.

“Why is the mattress there, sir?” he asked.

“To catch you if you fall, Potter,” Snape said equitably. “Occlumency is a trying task. I fully expect you to collapse at some point during it, if only because you are keeping too much attention focused on your mind and not enough on your body.” He shrugged. “It happens to many students. It happened to me.”

Harry blinked. He was thrown by Snape’s tone, by the look in his eyes, by the fact that he had bothered to explain—and do it without snapping.

A moment later, as Snape stepped forward and pointed his wand, he thought he understood the purpose of answering his question like that. He stiffened his shoulders, and Sylarana took up her guard position in his mind.

“*Legilimens!*”

Harry felt as though someone were pushing at him, stepping through his eyes and into his mind. He fell through a tumbling chaos of impressions. Sylarana coiled around him and held him, and he stopped a few of the memories from escaping with her help.

Others, though, stormed past him and fled. He saw, briefly, the first time he managed to master wandless magic, the endless hours he’d practiced with *Protego* before understanding it, the time three autumns ago when his magic unexpectedly sprang up around him and whirled around his head like a ball on the end of a string when Connor had taken the last Chocolate Frog from a box of them—

And then Sylarana *twisted*, and pulled, and Harry found himself kneeling on the mattress, breathing hard.

He closed his eyes, not wanting to see Snape’s expression just yet. He had survived the first time. And he thought he could figure out the pushing motion Snape had made. There was a certain *direction* to the magic, a certain way one sent his will when performing it. He could learn quickly, and if he could keep Snape from seeing important memories each time, then he might be out of danger in a few weeks.

“On your feet, Potter,” said Snape quietly.

Harry stood. Snape’s face was utterly blank. This time, he said, “I am going to seek out a memory you do not wish me to see. *Legilimens!*”

Harry grimaced as the force pushed into his mind again. He tried to stand to face it, and it was too strong for him.

He dropped into the second of the strategies he had worked out with Sylarana, choosing shreds and shards of memory, the flashes of tiny things he might remember of a summer when he was six, and sending them up like a cloud of butterflies before Snape’s reaching will. Snape paused to examine some of them, and Harry whipped around and dived. He had a brief sense of vast, overarching corridors and deep black waters, his mind as wilder and stranger than he had ever thought it was, and then he felt Snape break through at his back.

Sylarana lunged and lashed, but she was too slow. Snape didn’t know Harry’s mind well, but he knew *minds*, and Harry caught a glimpse of what a skilled Legilimens could do, in that moment, how his own expertise might overpower even someone who knew his own mind well. Snape knew the general form of what he was looking for, while Harry knew only the memories he wanted to protect, and thinking of them would reveal their presence to Snape.

A memory exploded before Harry’s eyes like a shower of Muggle fireworks.

*“To keep Connor safe. To always protect him. To insure that he lives as untroubled a life as he can, until he has to face Lord Voldemort again. To be his brother and his friend and his guardian. To love him. To never compete with him, never show him up, and never let anyone else know that I’m so close to him. To be ordinary, so that he can be extraordinary.”*

*Lily knelt in front of him, her clear eyes filled with love and sorrow, and kissed the top of his head. “That is correct,” she said. “I’m so proud of you, Harry, for saying them all the way through and knowing what they mean.”*

*It was the first time he’d known, really known, what the vows meant. He was six years old...*

Harry shoved Snape violently out of his head. He looked up in time to see Snape stagger back against the far wall, while Harry sat down on the mattress again. Harry was pleased to see Snape sweating and panting, just as he himself was.

*I’m sorry,* said Sylarana miserably. *He was too fast. Too strong.*

*Don’t worry about it,* Harry told her. *We’ll just have to try something else. Now that we really know what he can do, it’ll be easier. And we still have some other strategies that we didn’t try.*

“Potter.”

Harry glanced up. Snape was holding his wand before him, but loosely, as though he didn’t intend to aim it.

“What was that?” he asked.

Harry blinked. “You know what it was,” he said. “Sir,” he added hastily, as the professor’s face clouded. “It’s one of the memories you tricked out of me with Veritaserum last year.” He couldn’t keep the hatred from coming out in his voice then, but he grabbed the worst vestiges of the emotion and stuffed them into the box. He *had* to learn from Snape. He couldn’t afford to anger him too badly. At the same time, it was a relief to speak openly of an incident he’d kept from everyone. “You know that I made vows to protect Connor. Those were them.”

Snape stood still for a very long time. Then he shook his head. “I can see the wounds in your head, Potter,” he said. “Gaping ones, where Tom Riddle touched you and tore the memories from your mind.”

Harry shuddered. Snape said *Tom Riddle*, but he heard *Voldemort*.

“How do I get rid of them, sir?” Harry asked.

“You do not,” said Snape. “Not easily. That is what the Occlumency is for. Eventually, it will fill those holes with fog, with defenses, and they will not be the pits they are right now.” He paused again. “And you must learn to defend yourself without your snake. Did you know that she is woven throughout your mind now, her thoughts braided around yours?”

“I knew,” said Harry steadily. “We planned that. We didn’t want you finding humiliating memories of James Potter, sir.”

Snape’s eyes narrowed. “So anxious to protect your father, are you?” he whispered. His wand came up. “*Legilimens!*”

Harry tried to avoid the push of the spell, but he was too late. Snape was in his head again, and this time he was hunting memories of James.

Harry created a false one as fast as he could, an ordinary time when he and James played Quidditch together, and set it in Snape’s way. He barely paused before plunging on, however. Harry knew he was aiming for a specific area of his mind, but he didn’t know where it was, or how to anticipate Snape’s movements.

Snape found and pushed past something, a curtain that parted on a veritable storehouse of memories.

They came out in a flood.

James helping him practice Quidditch... James playing pranks with Connor while Harry watched with a fond smile... James flying a kite in spring with Connor outside the house in Godric’s Hollow while Harry sprawled on the grass with a book and read about defensive magic... James tossing Harry in the air and spinning him around... James drawing his wand on Lucius Malfoy in Diagon Alley...

James expressing concern to Lily over Harry’s total dedication to learning magic, the way he never laughed or had fun

Harry pushed, and Sylarana pushed, and Snape was out again. Harry wasn’t sure that it wasn’t partially willing, however. Snape seemed to have found what he was looking for.

Snape was pacing up and down, rapping his wand against his knee. Harry closed his eyes. He didn’t have to look at him, he thought. There was no *law* that said that he had to look at him. Keeping his eyes closed allowed him to better think about the techniques of Legilimency, in any case, and Occlumency, which was its counterpart. Snape had pushed, had parted a flimsy barrier. That meant that the best chance of Harry concealing his thoughts was to hide them behind a hard one.

What was hard?

*Metal*, said Sylarana helpfully. *Stone. Scales. The ground when it hasn’t rained.*

Metal would do, Harry thought. He wondered if he should envision a metal door, or—

“Potter.”

Harry looked up, then remembered who he was dealing with and snapped his eyes sideways. Snape said only, “That is enough for your first lesson. I want you to practice clearing your mind before the next time we meet. That is the necessary first step for Occlumency.”

“Why didn’t you tell me this before, sir?” Harry asked quietly.

“I wanted to see how strong your defenses were,” said Snape. “And what wounds Riddle had left in your mind, that I might know the best way of healing them. Clearing your mind is the first step.”

“What about solid barriers?” Harry asked. “Metal doors to stop you—to stop Riddle from peering into my thoughts wherever he wants?”

“That will not work, Potter,” said Snape, all inflection stripped from his tone. “Occlumency and Legilimency are both arts of motion. A Legilimens confronting one barrier will turn around and go somewhere else. You may have felt the motion in your mind as swimming, or darting, or hunting. You will have noticed yourself that your best tactics came from moving about, either your sense of self or your memories. It is not unlike the pureblood dance, which I now know you to be skilled in. Clearing your mind is necessary because it give the invading Legilimens nothing save blankness to swim in, no matter where he goes.”

Harry lifted his head. This had to be spoken, given what Snape seemed intent on revealing. “Will you be telling anyone what happens in these lessons, sir?”

“No,” said Snape, his voice like a whip. “I will not. Will you?”

“I would prefer they were not happening at all, sir,” said Harry. “So, no.” He turned away and walked to the door.

“You must learn to defend yourself,” said Snape at him. “You must learn to do so without the use of your snake. And you must heal your wounds.”

Harry didn’t see any reason to respond to that, since Snape already knew what he would say. He pulled open the door and left.

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Snape Transfigured the mattress back into the floor, moved his desk and chairs into their rightful places, and reversed his earlier Vanishment spell, summoning the potions back to their proper place. He did all that before he allowed himself to think about what he had seen in Harry’s mind.

The wounds were one thing. He had expected them. They were gaping and ugly, sunken holes stained with foulness from Riddle’s touch. He had had no reason to be gentle, and he hadn’t been. Snape was confident that, in time, as Harry learned Occlumency, he could heal them, or fill them and make them neither vulnerable places nor wounds any longer.

The depth of the Locusta’s intervention was also worrisome, but not a surprise. She was a glowing golden braid, intertwined so deeply into Harry’s mind that Snape knew trying to tug her out would cause Harry permanent damage. He would still insist that Harry learn to defend himself without her. All the Dark Lord would have to do at the moment would be to kill the Locusta, and Harry would be rendered screaming and defenseless, overwhelmed by agony. A careful, a proper, training would prevent that.

Two things did worry Snape, and they were not what he had expected at all.

The first was the sheer form of Harry’s mind. Snape had walked in many different mental conceptions since he became a Legilimens, and seen innumerable wizards and witches defend and define themselves in innumerable ways. He had seen houses of the mind, labyrinths, forests, cave systems, oceans, replicas of Hogwarts or the Ministry, gardens, single large rooms, planes of drifting fog.

Harry’s mind was meshed webs, strands of thought and training and memory and belief twined into one another, tangling with each other at every point. Riddle’s wounds were holes in those webs, places where the strands gaped and fluttered. The Locusta was another thread in them, a new and prominent one.

Snape had searched, and sought, even as he distracted Harry with memories that did not truly matter. He had not seen one place where the webs yielded, where Harry’s sense of self was free of them. Any thought he had took a tangled route along spirals and circles and branching intersections, bound as far as possible into the webs that he had already woven. And all of them wrapped as tightly as they could around the same goal, the one Harry had already told Snape mattered to him: saving and protecting Connor.

Snape did not know how such webs could have evolved on their own. They had been carefully tended.

He understood how and why, with Harry's memories of his vows and of studying. Lily—not James, evidently—had trained her son to be like this, weaving as many expectations as she could into the webs, teaching Harry what to think about the future before the future had happened.

He could not examine his own feelings on the matter, not yet. He knew that his emotions would burst from their own cocoon and savage him if he tried it. There was howling anger there, and the old hatred directed towards James Potter, and a sickness so great that he had no appetite for the late dinner he had planned—

Snape moved a sharp hand, cutting his own thoughts off. That was the reason he had decided not to think about them, because it would take him time to contemplate the full extent of what had happened.

The second thing that worried him about Harry's mind was the box. It appeared in Harry's thoughts as a small, low container of dark wood, padlocked with a strength that had stunned Snape. It floated like a ghost over the webs, indicating that Harry consciously thought about that part of his mind that way. It was not an unconscious way of seeing himself, as the webs were. It edged itself into view whenever Snape hunted, but darted away when he looked directly at it.

The box had opened, once, when Harry had cut himself off from the tirade Snape was sure the boy was about to give on the Veritaserum incident. Harry had *thrown* his hatred into the box, and it had slammed shut in the next moment and ghosted away again. Harry had done it with absolute ease, indicating yet another skill he had practiced for years.

Snape thought about at least six years—if he counted from the time that Harry had apparently fully understood his vows—of hatred and resentment and bitterness and any other emotion that might possibly damage his relationship with Connor, or the training he needed to help Connor. He thought about it all contained in one place, separate from the rest of Harry's mind and strictly ignored.

He decided that he did not want to think about it any more.

Snape pushed himself wearily to his feet. He was a Slytherin, and he was a former Death Eater, and he was a Potions Professor who had managed to teach for twelve years despite disliking most of his students. There was no reason for him to feel as weary and discouraged as he currently was. He had met challenges and overcome them. He would overcome this one, too.

Why did he feel as if the ground had dropped out from under him?

*Because, he decided, I never expected to have sympathy for any bloody Potter.*

It was not entirely true, but he made it be true for right now, and turned to his own preparations before bed.

~\*~\*~\*~\*~\*~\*

## **Chapter Nine: That Sharp Spark of Betrayal**

Harry's hand darted out, snatching the Snitch as it tried to bolt around him, and Flint bellowed twice, signaling an end to the Quidditch practice.

Harry turned and dived towards the ground. He barely remembered to pull up at the last moment. Part of him wanted to keep going, to see how low he really could skim over the grass before gravity and momentum caught up with him. His blood was thrumming, filling his veins the same way that the air filled his lungs. The broom the Malfoys had given him was *brilliant*. Harry had never known that a different kind of broom could make such a difference in the way he flew, adding an extra lightness to his turns and an extra speed to his motions.

He landed with a light roll and flip off the broom, and turned to see the Quidditch team staring at him. Harry paused for a moment. They hadn't been that pleased with him, particularly Flint, when Harry had had to admit at the first practice a week ago that he had a Nimbus 2001 broom now, and hadn't told anyone. They had got over that soon enough, but from their expressions now, Harry wondered if they were remembering it.

Then Flint grinned, an expression that made him look like a bulldog, and said, “We’re going to pound the Gryffindors into the ground next Saturday.” His gaze traced around the team. “We’ve got the toughest Beaters, the fastest Chasers—of course—the meanest Keeper, and the best Seekers.” His eyes came back to Harry. “*Don’t we, Potter?*”

Harry looked back calmly, undaunted now. He hadn’t worked out exactly how he was going to throw the next game back to Connor, but he knew he was. Connor was flying beautifully. Harry knew he wouldn’t have to do much to make it look as though Connor had beaten him on sheer skill alone.

Then Flint leaned forward and said, “It’s obvious now, the way that you were holding yourself back in the first game last year. I know you didn’t do it in the other matches, Potter, but this time you’re not going to do it in *all* of them. Slytherin plays to *win*.”

Harry figured it was best to back down for now. He bowed his head, as though Flint had managed to convince him, and murmured, “Of course.”

Flint drew back, satisfied, and made his way towards the showers. He said something to Adrian Pucey that made him laugh loudly, and the rest of the team bunched up close behind, leaving Harry to walk slightly on his own. That suited him just fine. He’d seen the shy figure lurking around the edge of the Pitch during practice, and Harry wanted a chance to speak with him.

“Harry,” came the expected voice from the side.

“Connor,” said Harry, turning around and smiling at his brother. “Coming to spy on our practice?” He smiled even more widely, to show it was a joke.

Connor jerked, once, but didn’t let the teasing distract him. He was looking at the broom in Harry’s hands. “When were you going to tell me that you had a Nimbus 2001?”

Harry sighed. “The day of the Gryffindor-Slytherin game, if I could.”

“Why?” Connor lifted his head and met Harry’s eyes. “I thought that you weren’t going to lie to me about anything any more.”

“It would have caused a lot of arguments during the summer,” said Harry. “And you had enough happen to you then. We *still* don’t know who sent that house elf, do we? And I know about the other things now,” he added. “You should have told me if you felt you couldn’t sleep, Connor. I could have helped.”

Connor stared at him for a long moment. “What are you talking about?”

“Ron told me,” said Harry. “That’s how concerned he was, that *Ron* willingly talked to me without you around.”

“He likes you—“ Connor began defensively.

“No, he doesn’t,” said Harry. “I know he doesn’t. But just listen to me, all right? He told me that you were having nightmares about Voldemort’s attack last year, and that you’d been taking Dreamless Sleep Potion to combat them.” He shook his head. “At least now I know why all those owls came with packages for you last summer. I thought there were only sweets in them.”

Connor lowered his eyes. “I didn’t want to disturb you,” he muttered. “And the potion handled the nightmares. I slept without dreaming for most of the summer.” He abruptly raised his head and stared Harry down. “And what about *you*, anyway? Why did you wake up and sneak outside so many times at night?”

“To play with Sylarana,” said Harry. “That was when I didn’t think you could stand to find out that I’m a Parselmouth.”

Sylarana stirred lazily on his shoulder. “*He can’t stand it,*” she said. “*He never looks at me.*”

*You're under my robe right now*, Harry pointed out.

*"That is no excuse."*

Harry glanced up and surprised a disgusted expression on his brother's face. Harry shook his head. "Is she really any different from the magical creatures that you go with Hagrid to see?" he asked Connor.

"Yes," huffed Connor, crossing his arms. "They aren't snakes."

Harry rolled his eyes. "I think we should see what Hagrid makes of her, myself. I know that you visit him on Saturdays. Are you going there? Can I come with you? I think it's time I met him properly, and thanked him for carrying me back to the school last year."

Connor nodded at him, looking baffled. "I'm not staying for very long. The Halloween Feast tonight, you know. But I did say that I'd visit him. And—well, he probably would like to get a look at a real live version of that thing," he said, glancing at the arm that Sylarana wasn't coiled around, an expression of distaste twisting his mouth.

*"Would he like to look at a real live Locusta bite?"* Sylarana asked. *"That can be arranged."*

Harry gave his own shoulder a light smack to shut her up, and then nodded at Connor. "Let me get changed, and then —"

"Harry!"

Harry turned in surprise. He hadn't seen Draco watching the Quidditch practice, but evidently he had been, and now he was jogging across the pitch towards them, looking as wind-blown as though he'd been flying. He halted beside Harry and gave Connor a cool stare, as much to ask, *What are you doing here?*

Connor curled his lip. "Malfoy," he said.

"Draco," said Harry. "I'm not going to be long. I'll see you at the Feast."

"Such a welcoming committee," Draco drawled, his eyes half-lidded and every bit of his attention on Connor. "It's Saturday afternoon, and I haven't spent any of the day with my best friend." Here, his glance came back to Harry, whip-quick. "I don't want to talk to you just at the Feast, Harry. I'd much rather play Exploding Snap with you this afternoon. And talk about your private lessons with Professor Snape," he added, as a warning, Harry supposed, that he wouldn't let Harry put it off much longer.

Harry still hadn't explained who had possessed him to Draco, and so hadn't explained why the Occlumency lessons were necessary. He didn't want to, either. Draco's father had been a Death Eater. It was possible that he was still obeying Voldemort's commands, in whatever form the Dark Lord could send them, and his being in possession of the diary argued that. Harry was *not* going to make Draco choose between his family and Harry. It would end up happening anyway, of course, if Draco insisted on staying friends with him, but then the War would break out, Harry would fight at Connor's side, and Draco would choose the Malfoys with a clear conscience. It was not going to happen like this, when Draco might feel horrified at what Lucius had done, and torn between his friend and his family.

Harry hadn't been sure how he would avoid Draco's probing questions, but luckily he didn't have to, now. "I'm going to shower and then visit Hagrid with Connor, Draco," he said. "I promised. I have to thank Hagrid for what he did for me, anyway, after the encounter with Voldemort last year." He noticed with private amusement that Draco still flinched at the Dark Lord's name. "I'll see you at the Feast."

"No, you won't," said Draco.

"Going to spend the night sulking in your rooms?" Connor mocked.

Draco didn't sneer at him, but gave him such a cold and piercing look that Connor's smile faded and Harry felt a snake of uneasiness coil in his belly.

"Another snake?" Sylarana half-unfolded herself from his shoulder. "*Where? You're my human. Don't forget that.*"

*It was a metaphor*, Harry explained, and then looked at Draco. "Do you want to explain what you mean by that?"

"I'm coming with you to visit Hagrid," announced Draco haughtily.

"I—but you can't!" Connor said. He was actually spitting as he said it, and Harry winced and was glad that there were no potential allies around, to see Connor looking as bad as that. "Hagrid doesn't like you!"

"He's never *met* me," said Draco, all aristocratic iciness.

"You're a *Malfoy*," said Connor. "You're *impossible* to like."

"My father's influence at the Ministry argues otherwise." Draco curled his lips in a smug smile. "As does my friendship with Harry." He moved sideways until his shoulder bumped Harry's.

Connor met Harry's eyes and held them. Harry sighed. "Can you give me a few minutes?" he asked.

Connor nodded. "You'd need them to shower, anyway," he said, still staring at Draco. "I'll be waiting for you at the edge of the Pitch." He turned and walked away, shaking his head.

"Don't start, Harry," said Draco, before Harry could try to persuade him not to come. "You spent the first three weeks of term ignoring me, and now you want to spend more time with your brother than me. No." His face was stubborn, and sulky. Harry let out a little hiss.

"If you insist—"

"I do."

Harry rolled his eyes. "Wait here, then," he said, and went in to shower.

"She's beautiful, Harry," said Hagrid appreciatively, caressing Sylarana's scales. He looked as though he were barely keeping himself from picking up and cuddling the Locusta, much to Harry's surprise. It seemed that Hagrid really did love magical creatures, no matter how dangerous, no matter how unpredictable. The half-giant looked up, beaming. "What does she say about me?"

"*That he had better not stop doing that,*" said Sylarana, arching, as Hagrid stroked her behind the head.

"She really likes being petted," said Harry, feeling a sense of unreality take him over. *He* had never touched Sylarana as much as Hagrid was, and watching his Locusta twine around someone else's hands with that kind of enthusiasm, and no sign of biting, made things odd.

Even odder was the fact that Connor and Draco had been in Hagrid's house for half-an-hour, sipping tea and munching biscuits only a little less hard than rocks, and hadn't yet drawn wands on each other. Oh, they'd come close a few times, when Draco made a remark about pureblooded wizarding customs and the absolutely *shameful* lack of them in Gryffindor House, or when Connor muttered something about Narcissa Malfoy looking as if she needed to be scrubbed inside and out to be freed of the taint of Dark magic. But so far it was going...

*Well*, Harry thought firmly. *It's going well.*

"Hagrid," he said again, "I'd like to thank you for carrying me back to Hogwarts last year—"

Hagrid waved one hand at him, blushing, once again not letting Harry complete his thanks properly. The other hand remained occupied with Sylarana, who now uttered the sort of crooning hiss that Harry had heard in the past only when he offered to let her bite something. “Don’ be silly, Harry. Yer Connor’s brother. And yeh were sick.” He leaned forward abruptly and peered at Harry. “What *did* yeh get into, anyway? I never did get the chance to ask.”

Harry coughed a bit. Connor had told Hagrid about You-Know-Who, as Hagrid would put it, but not that Harry had suffered *Crucio* at the end of Quirrell’s wand. Harry didn’t think he’d been able to hear the exact curse under Voldemort’s cage spell. And Harry had not told anyone else, either. It was enough that Snape knew, and that he had used the weakness the curse inspired that night to give Harry Veritaserum...

He caught the anger that memory inspired and tossed it into the box with practiced ease. The box had come in handy the past weeks, allowing him to slide past the Occlumency lessons and the times that he had wanted to get angry at his brother or Ron.

There was another reason he wasn’t about to tell anyone now, he thought, looking up, and catching Draco’s intent stare out of the corner of his eye. Draco would *fuss*, if he knew. Perhaps Connor would, too, though he was more practical about things like that; it was done and past, he would say. Draco never seemed to understand that part.

“A spell from You-Know-Who’s wand,” he said, avoiding Voldemort’s name out of deference for Hagrid’s sensibilities. “I’m not sure what it was.”

“Of course you aren’t,” said Draco from the side.

Harry glared at him. Draco never flinched, and never blinked, either. Harry looked away. Draco *bothered* him lately. He wanted to spend time with Harry all the time, and Harry no longer believed that it was solely to keep him away from Connor. That left the problem of what it was, though. It couldn’t be true friendship, Harry thought, even if Draco thought it was, because that would mean that Draco would have trouble breaking away from Harry when it was time and rejoining his family. He understood the Slytherins’ behavior not at all in general, of course, but Draco was the worst of them.

“Ah, well,” said Hagrid, with a sigh. “I’m glad yer out of it now, Harry. And yeh, too, Connor,” he added, with a nod to Connor. Then he looked back down, and a goofy, blissful smile widened across his face. “Would the beautiful Locusta like some eggs?” he crooned at her.

“*Tell him the beautiful Locusta would indeed like some eggs,*” Sylarana instructed Harry, turning so that the sunlight falling through Hagrid’s window glinted off her scales. “*Phrase it exactly like that.*”

Harry shook his head and phrased it exactly like that, determinedly not looking at Connor and Draco again. At least the afternoon was a success for two of them, he thought.

Harrysped up a little as they came closer to Hogwarts. Connor and Draco had started to bicker on the way back from Hagrid’s cottage, and it was growing steadily louder and more annoying. That they were bickering about *him* only increased Harry’s annoyance. He didn’t understand why they would. He’d made it clear where he stood with them—Connor first, Draco second; Connor his brother, Draco his friend; Connor his family, Draco his Housemate. Harry had said that outright on more than one occasion. Draco had even seemed to accept it when they made up after their fight in September.

And now, this.

“But he really should have been in Gryffindor,” Connor was saying. “*Everyone* knows that.”

“Someone forgot to tell the Sorting Hat,” said Draco, his voice smug. “And Headmaster Dumbledore. And Professor Snape. And me. And—”

“Whatever, Malfoy,” said Connor. Harry didn’t need to look back at him to know he would be waving his hand, as he did whenever he wanted to clear away what he thought was a stupid line of argument. “I saw the broom that your parents bought for Harry today. Do you really think it’ll make *that* much difference when it comes to the match next week?”

“Of course it will,” said Draco. “But that’s not why they bought it, you halfblooded *prat*. They bought it for Harry because he’s my *friend*, and because it was his birthday, too, not just yours.”

“I’m wondering just how much longer he should stay your friend,” Connor said, and lowered his voice. Harry, pausing near Hogwarts’s front doors, looked back at them in irritation. Connor had his face close to Draco’s. As Harry watched, he whispered, “You know that he would stop being your friend if I asked him to.”

Draco’s eyes widened, and for a moment he didn’t seem to know what to do. Then he drew his wand.

Harry snarled and sprinted back towards them, ignoring Sylarana’s complaints as she was jostled. Connor had his wand out, too, but luckily, Harry darted in between them before either could fire a spell. He put his back to his twin. He trusted Connor not to do something sneaky behind him more than he trusted Draco.

“Both of you are acting like first-years,” he said, his anger nearly choking him. He thought about putting the anger in the box, but he didn’t think he could. He had to spit it out instead. If nothing else, it might help them understand the simple concepts that they just *refused* to grasp so far. “Or babies fighting over a toy, at that.” He darted a glance back at Connor, who flushed. He particularly hated being called younger than he was, one reason Harry had chosen this line of reasoning. Harry looked back at Draco, whose face was burning with unshielded fury and who still had his wand up. “I said I was your friend,” said Harry. “I meant it. And I said Connor was my brother, and I meant it. What part of this don’t you *fucking* understand?”

His rage left him breathless. He shook his head. He *had* to calm down, or he would say something he really regretted, and not just something unfortunate.

He stuffed this anger into the box, too, and sighed at how that cleared his head. He looked back at Connor, and found his brother’s cheeks even more flushed. He opened his mouth to speak.

Harry shook his head again. “I don’t want to hear it,” he said. “I’m your brother, Connor, and that’s not *ever* going to change. You know it, so stop acting like an idiot around me.” He glanced at Draco. “And Draco, I’m your friend. We’ve been over this before. You know the limitations and the necessities of our friendship. Have I ever lied to you about that?” he added quietly.

Draco lowered his wand and rubbed his face with one hand. “No,” he whispered. “But, Harry—“

Harry took a slight step forward. Connor would be fine, and so it would cost him nothing if Harry listened to Draco right now instead. “Yes?” he asked.

He never got to find out what Draco would have said—at least not right then—because someone came flying out of the school screeching at the top of his lungs. “*Malfoy!*”

Harry swung around. It was Ron, and he had his wand out and pointed at Draco. With a small groan, Harry reversed himself, so that he got between Draco and anything Connor’s enraged friend might throw.

“Something wrong, Weasley?”

Harry grimaced at the tone in Draco’s voice. This wasn’t anything like the enmity Draco had for Connor. It was pureblood hatred. Whatever feud lingered between the Malfoys and the Weasleys—and none of the history books Harry had read explained the origins of that feud—both families were feeding and encouraging it.

Then Harry looked into Ron’s red, tear-streaked face, and thought he knew what was wrong. This round had almost certainly gone to the Malfoys.

“You want to know what’s wrong, Malfoy?” Ron bellowed, halting a few feet away from Harry. “You want to know what’s *wrong?*” He was breathing hard now, and his hand was clenched so tightly around his wand that Harry feared it might snap. “Your father got mine *sacked!*” Ron yelled at last. “That’s what’s *bloody wrong!*”

“Ron!”

Harry shook his head as Hermione hurried out of the doors. He didn't think she'd be able to intervene this time. He only hoped it wouldn't come to hexes.

“Ron,” he began soothingly, “if you think about it, that was Lucius's fault. He must have—“

Ron wasn't listening. “*Tarantallegra!*” he shouted, and the spell flew from his wand and towards Draco.

Harry brought up a hand. “*Haurio!*” he said, without much time to make the decision. He couldn't use *Protego*; that would reflect the spell right back at Ron, and there were no professors around to shield students from the effect of the hexes this time.

A dark green shield formed in his palm and spread rapidly outward from there. The light of Ron's hex hit it and vanished. Harry let out a short breath. *Haurio* worked as he'd read it would, then, absorbing the spell instead of bouncing it back.

Ron didn't give him much time to congratulate himself. “*Petrificus Totalus!*” he tried this time, and the Body-Bind Curse also made excellent food for Harry's shield. Ron huffed out a breath. “Drop the shield, Harry!” he screamed. “Let me at him!”

“No,” Harry said, and then felt slight movement behind him. “Draco, if you fire a spell at him, I *will* drop the shield, and then *I'll* hex you,” he added.

Draco stopped moving. Harry glanced backward briefly to make sure he was all right, and found Draco, oddly, *smiling* at him.

“My hero,” he said.

Harry rolled his eyes and turned to face Ron. Ron was aiming his wand, but Harry saw something he didn't and relaxed.

“*Expelliarmus!*”

Ron's wand soared through the air and settled firmly into Hermione's hand. Ron swung around. “Hermione!” he yelled, his rage appearing to change direction mid-flight. “You were supposed to—“

“*Calm down, Ron,*” said Hermione. She'd come up beside him and was panting. Harry imagined her chasing Ron all the way from Gryffindor Tower and winced. “It'll be all right,” she added softly, rubbing Ron's back. “We can go to talk to Professor Dumbledore. I'm sure he'll—“

“Harry.”

Harry snapped his head abruptly back around. Connor hadn't said anything during the battle, and Harry had thought he would be content to let Ron and Draco fight it out—or not, as the case might be. Now, though, he stepped forward. His face was intent, and Harry shivered at the expression on it. He supposed, distantly, that it was an expression he had wanted his twin to wear: one of awareness of power, composed and testing. He was seeing how much he might be able to order someone around, because he was the Boy-Who-Lived. He would need to get used to taking command if he was going to save and lead the wizarding world.

Harry really, really wished that Connor hadn't decided to be commanding *now*.

“Harry,” said Connor. “Step out of the way and let Ron have him. What Malfoy's dad did to Ron's dad was *horrible*. You have to see that.”

Harry closed his eyes. He felt Draco's hand touch his shoulder. *Where are the prefects when we need them?* Harry thought. *Where are the professors?*

Probably getting ready for the Halloween Feast, of course. That Harry knew the answer didn't comfort him.

"I see that," he whispered. "But, Connor, I can't. Ron would hurt him. Or Draco would hurt Ron. Or they would hurt each other. I don't want anyone hurt." He didn't dare open his eyes and look at Connor again.

"Harry, look at me."

*Shit.*

Harry managed to force his head up and his eyes open. Draco's hand was clenched on his shoulder now, and Sylarana was silent. Then she said, in Harry's mind, *I am going to kill him.* Her voice was quiet and resolved.

*No!* Harry said, but he couldn't think of much more than that. He was caught by the look in Connor's eyes. Love and loyalty, yes, but there was a calculating edge there as well, as though Connor were really seeing Harry for the first time.

"Harry," said Connor softly, "if you really think that you should have been a Gryffindor, step out of the way. This is Gryffindor vengeance. You've got to see that. And Draco had his wand out first."

"Connor, we're not supposed to use magic on each other outside of classes!" Hermione tried to intervene.

Connor raised a hand. "Well, Harry?" he asked, calm and implacable. "What do you think? *Should* you have been a Gryffindor?"

Harry was breathing fast, his thoughts near to being caught up in the maelstrom again. If Connor said something about him, it was true. He knew that. He had used it to reassure himself both last year and this one, when Connor had said he couldn't be evil for being Sorted into Slytherin or speaking Parseltongue. He clung to it.

If Connor said he should step out of the way or that would prove that he wasn't really Gryffindor—

And if Connor said that being a Gryffindor, Sorted into the wrong House by mistake only, meant that he was still good —

Harry wanted to run and scream and vomit. Of course, one of those would involve him stepping out of the way, one would involve bending, and he thought that he wouldn't be able to stop if he started screaming now.

But he stood there. And wasn't that really his choice, after all, made and proclaimed in the open where anyone could see it?

He looked up in time to see Connor nod, once. His eyes were sharp with betrayal as he stared at Harry.

"The Sorting Hat wasn't wrong after all, I see," he said, and then turned around and walked over to Ron, escorting him back into Hogwarts. He didn't turn around, not even when Harry tried to call after him, in a hoarse, strangled voice that didn't sound like his own.

Hermione lingered for a moment, looking at Harry and biting her lip. Harry thought she was trying to decide what to say, without making it look as though she either sympathized with Draco or was betraying Connor.

At last, she shook her head, whispered feebly, "He didn't mean it," and ran back into Hogwarts after Ron and Connor.

Harry closed his eyes and stood still, body tensed as though to absorb a blow. He *had* to put this into perspective. He *had* to try to tell himself that just because he had a fight with Connor didn't mean that he'd disobeyed his twin or taken

the opposite side against him. Sometimes he'd had to disagree with him, in the past, when Connor was wrong, like last year when he'd insulted Hermione on Halloween, and Draco on the Hogwarts Express.

He'd seen those hazel eyes filled with shame before, he argued with himself.

*But never betrayal.*

He'd done things Connor didn't want him to before, when Connor was wrong.

*But always before, he knew he was in the wrong at once.*

Harry lowered his head and drew in a few deep breaths. He jumped when a pair of arms wound around him in a fierce hug. Finally, he let the *Haurio* shield go and turned to face Draco.

"My hero," said Draco. "I meant that, Harry. Thank you."

Harry nodded. He didn't think he could speak. Luckily, Draco seemed to understand that.

"Do you feel up to going to the Feast?" he whispered.

Harry shook his head. Draco sighed. "I'll escort you back to the dungeons, then," he said. "And we'll talk after you've had some sleep."

Harry turned blindly towards the Slytherin common room, Draco's arm around his shoulders. He *did* want to sleep, he thought. He waited for Sylarana to make a comment on that.

"*I want him dead,*" Sylarana said.

*You can't,* said Harry wearily. *That would make me hurt worse.*

"*I know,*" said Sylarana. "*I did not promise that I was going to kill him. I promised that I wish to.*"

Harry thought about questioning her on that point, but in the end, let it go. They made it through the Slytherin common room and up to their dorm, drawing no more than a few curious glances. Draco pushed Harry into his bed and hovered over him for a moment.

"I'm going to the Feast," he whispered. "I'll tell the others what happened."

Harry opened his eyes and glared at him, as much as he could in the dim light of a bed with curtains mostly drawn. "Don't hex Ron."

Draco only nodded, gray eyes solemn. "I won't, Harry." His hand descended, smoothing over Harry's shoulder and tangling briefly in his hair. Then he gently drew the curtains and walked out of the room.

Harry lay where he was, breathing, for a moment. Sylarana crawled out and coiled on his chest.

"*Can you weep?*" she asked. "*I think it would make you feel better if you could.*"

"I can't afford to," Harry muttered, and set about the long process of tucking up all the anguish, all the pain, all the exhaustion, and putting them into the box.

Harry blinked and woke. He didn't know how much later it was, though judging from the cramped state his body was in, he'd slept without moving for a good long time. On his chest, Sylarana hissed at him.

"*I didn't know you could do that,*" she said.

“Do what?” Harry asked as he stretched. He had to admit, he felt refreshed, more than he usually would after a session with the box. That let him function, but did not give him his strength back.

“*Put me to sleep like that,*” said Sylarana, arching her neck luxuriously. “*I admit, I needed it, but I’m the one who influences your thoughts. Not the other way around.*”

Harry lazily stroked her neck. “Do you want to go see what’s left of the Feast? Or we can go to the kitchens and beg food from the house elves if you want.” Sylarana had sniffed out the way to the kitchens the second week of school.

“*Let’s,*” said Sylarana. She slid under his jumper, and Harry stood, smoothing as much of his hair as possible. He wondered if putting Sylarana to sleep was part of the reason he’d slept so well. He really *had* needed to rest.

His mind turned back to the fight as he exited the Slytherin common room, but he forced himself to put it in perspective. Yes, he had done something else that Connor found wrong, and he would have to find his brother and apologize. But that didn’t mean he’d chosen his allegiances and set them in stone. He would fight with his brother if necessary, to make him see that. He would point out that Ron would certainly have lost Gryffindor House points and landed in detention if he had succeeded in hexing Draco. He would say—

He froze and glanced around carefully. There was a strange—sensation in the air. That was the only word Harry could think of for it. It felt like a mixture of Dark magic and a powerful earthy scent.

“*I smell it,*” hissed Sylarana, and once again, there was no humor in her voice. “*Coming from upstairs.*”

Harry hurried. He had reached the second floor when Sylarana poked her head out from under his sleeve, swinging like a compass. “*To the left.*”

Harry turned the corner. Then he halted, fighting hard to keep from crying out.

He stood outside a girls’ loo, just beyond a massive puddle of water. Above him, cut into the stone, letters the color of blood declared: *The Chamber of Secrets has been opened. Enemies of the Heir, beware!*

Beside the puddle, just under the writing, lay the motionless body of Luna Lovegood.

~\*~\*~\*~\*~\*~\*

## **Chapter Ten: *Fugitivus Animus***

Harry turned as he heard footsteps coming up the hall. He knew who it would be. It was about time for the Halloween Feast to let out, and this loo was on the route to Gryffindor Tower.

Percy Weasley rounded the corner first. He stuttered to a stop at seeing Harry there, and stared at him. Harry stared back, and ducked his head. He could have ducked into the loo and hidden, he supposed, but that would have been worse. Everyone would suspect him anyway, given that they thought he was Dark, and he had associated with Luna in the last few days. At least standing in the open would look less suspicious than trying to run.

Harry wondered if he should be disgusted with himself, that his mind was working like a Slytherin’s even under the shock, trying to calculate damage to himself and what would happen next. At least he could be partially rational, he supposed. That was a gift. If it were Connor lying on the floor, he didn’t think he could have been rational in the slightest.

*That means that you are intelligent, not disgusting,* said Sylarana. *Although I think you might have tried to distance yourself from standing exactly at the scene.*

As he looked up and met Percy's widening eyes, Harry was inclined to agree.

The Gryffindor prefect shook his head, then turned and shouted to the younger students spilling along the corridor behind him. "Stay back! We've got an injured student here, and signs of Dark magic!" He drew his wand.

Harry was grateful for Percy's words, especially since he had assumed Luna was injured and not dead, but he knew they wouldn't work. It was a group of Gryffindors that Percy was leading, not a group of Hufflepuffs. One head, then two, popped around the corner, and then someone gasped, and Harry heard the burgeoning whisper of the message being passed back.

He knew what would happen next. He watched in detachment as Percy knelt beside Luna and cast a simple Life-Sensing Charm on her. He closed his eyes and sighed in the next moment. "She's Petrified," he said. "Not dead. *Finite Incantatem!*"

Luna lay there, unaffected by the spell. Harry nodded. The fading traces of Dark magic in the air argued that this was nothing as ordinary as a Body-Bind, nothing that could be undone with a simple sweep of a wand. Still, he should have tried himself. He should have thought of that.

*Do you always blame yourself this much, or is this a special occasion?* Sylarana demanded.

*You've only lived with me for four months,* Harry told her, as he waited for the inevitable confrontation. *You haven't seen me in all my moods.*

*I've seen enough. Harry—*

He didn't get to find out what she would have said, since Connor and Ron, followed by the Weasley twins, came around the corner just then. Connor halted and stared at the water and the bloody writing.

Then his eyes came back to Harry's face, and Harry let out a slow breath. If he had thought Connor was wounded earlier today, when Harry had chosen to show his Slytherin colors, then he had had no conception of pain. There was betrayal and worse than betrayal in Connor's gaze now, a kind of soul-deep horror that Harry knew he would have expressed, in a lesser form, towards anyone who had done something this heinous. But this was his brother who had done this.

*You didn't do it!* Sylarana was making his sleeve bulge and ripple with her dancing. Harry hoped that she wouldn't come into the open right now. The last thing that anyone needed to be reminded of was that he was not only a Parselmouth, but had a dangerous snake. *Doesn't that matter to you? Don't you remember it?*

Harry shrugged slightly. He would have answered her, but Connor stepped forward and spoke then.

"I don't understand," he said, his voice shuffling to a halt as he stared some more. "Harry—did you *always* hate me and want me dead? Or did you just start serving Voldemort this year?"

Ron jumped at the mention of the Dark Lord's name. Other students piling around the corner flinched. Fred and George Weasley were silent, looking from one face to another. Harry grimaced. He disliked their probing gazes most, since they would no doubt remember most of what was said here and then repeat it as the twisted gossip they delighted in.

"I don't serve Voldemort at all, Connor," he said. "I didn't do this. I came upon it as I was coming to the Feast."

"Good job, that," said Ron loudly, his face turning red as he strove to make up for his earlier fear. "Since this hall isn't on the way from the Slytherin dungeons to the Great Hall at all."

Harry shook his head. "I sensed Dark magic—"

"Stand clear, Mr. Weasley. The rest of you, stay back."

Professor McGonagall was among them then, like a cat among the chickens, Harry thought. Even Percy Weasley stepped back for her, his head bowed. She knelt beside Luna and checked her over, then stood and looked at the red writing on the wall. Harry saw her face briefly tighten with a spasm of some very old pain.

Her gaze slid to him, and softened slightly, which Harry didn't understand at all. "Always in the middle of great events, aren't you, Mr. Potter?" she murmured.

Harry blinked at her, and could think of nothing to say, though Sylarana was suggesting several ways of phrasing his innocence.

Professor McGonagall turned, moving in front of the writing and Harry both, shielding them from sight. But it was too late for that, Harry knew. If nothing else, the Weasley twins had seen them. It would be all over the school by the next morning—the writing, Luna, and how Harry had Petrified his friend.

He wished he could spare more time thinking of it, but the only thing he really wanted to pay attention to was Connor's words.

*He thinks I serve Voldemort.*

Harry looked up and tried to catch his brother's eye, but Connor had already turned away. Harry thought he was crying. Ron, extremely embarrassed, was patting his back and muttering something. When he noticed Harry watching, he gave him a glance that *burned*. Harry looked away.

"Proceed to the Tower immediately," McGonagall was telling the Gryffindors. "You are to stay there for the rest of the evening, unless you are a prefect specifically summoned by a Professor. *No side-trips*," she added, her gazing lingering darkly on the Weasley twins. One of them put his hands in his robes, while the other began to whistle in an innocent manner. McGonagall did not look impressed. "Yes, Miss Granger?"

Harry turned to see that Hermione had edged around the corner to join the gaggle in the hall. She had her head craned, as though trying to see past the edge of McGonagall's robe at Harry. "What do the words mean?" she asked now. "Who's the Heir?"

"All of that will be answered in the morning," said McGonagall briskly. She ignored the chorus of groans and the buzz of whispers from her students. She nodded to Harry. "If you will accompany me to the Headmaster's office, Mr. Potter."

*She thinks I did it, then, Harry thought. Or she thinks there's a reasonable chance that I did it.*

But he was still thinking about Connor.

*My brother thinks I serve the Dark wizard trying to kill him.*

Harry rubbed his face absently. Sometimes it *would* make things easier if he could cry, he thought. But he couldn't. So he followed the gentle grip of McGonagall's hand on his shoulder, towing him towards the Headmaster's office. Sylarana writhed out from under the professor's hand, but did not offer to bite her. Harry believed her too furiously in thought to notice.

"Harry."

And oh, he *knew* it was a bad idea, but he turned and looked. Connor had broken away from Ron's grip again and stood watching him. His face had already gone beyond fear and horror, and into anger. The other emotions lingered behind his eyes, though. Harry wondered if they always would from now on.

"What, Connor?" he asked, when it became clear that his twin was waiting for a response. So was McGonagall, who had stopped walking. And the rest of the students, for that matter. Not even Percy or Hermione had moved. They stood

as part of a silent tableau, waiting for what the heroic brother would say to the disgraced one. The Boy-Who-Lived speaking to the Snake Prince. Harry was not surprised that it made for good theater.

“When you can look me in the eye, and honestly tell me that you renounce all the Dark gifts that you have,” said Connor, “then I’ll trust you again. In the meantime, I’m going to do what I should have done when you started turning Dark. I’m going to catch and stop you.”

He turned and walked away.

Harry closed his eyes. *Now* the shock came, and the weight of the pain. He wanted to crawl into bed and sleep again. He felt as if he hadn’t napped at all.

“Come along, Mr. Potter,” said McGonagall, once again unwontedly gentle, and led him off.

“Ah, Minerva, young Harry. Do come in. Have a seat. Lemon drop, Minerva?”

“I think not, Albus,” said McGonagall primly, and gestured for Harry to take a deep-cushioned chair in front of the Headmaster’s desk. She sat in another one, and divided her gaze between Dumbledore and Harry.

“Harry?”

Harry looked up to make sure the Headmaster was really offering him a sweet, hesitated for a long moment, and then took it. He hadn’t eaten dinner at all, and he was starving. It was better not to be hungry than to be hungry.

*Now you are thinking,* said Sylarana. *I will still want to know why you did not run away and hide immediately, but this is better than nothing.*

“Now, Minerva, what seems to be the problem?” Dumbledore asked, sitting back and smiling at both of them. Harry kept his head bowed. He didn’t really need to see the expression on Dumbledore’s face. He could imagine how it would turn grave when McGonagall said he’d Petrified Luna.

As it turned out, the Head of Gryffindor House didn’t say that, but whispered instead, “Albus, the Chamber of Secrets has been opened.”

The Headmaster was silent for a long moment. Then he said, “Are you sure, Minerva?” There was a heaviness in his voice that pierced even Harry’s daze of shock and pain. He blinked at the Headmaster’s desk, without raising his eyes.

“I am,” said McGonagall. “The message on the wall said that the Chamber was open, and that the enemies of the Heir should beware. Beneath it was a puddle of water, and Luna Lovegood, a Ravenclaw student, had been Petrified. All the signs are the same as they were fifty years ago.” She was silent for a long moment, and then said, “Albus, I know how the problem was solved the last time the Chamber was opened. How could the same thing have happened now?”

“I don’t know,” said Dumbledore quietly, and then, “Harry?”

Harry blinked and looked up. The Headmaster leaned forward, staring deeply into his eyes.

*He’s a Legilimens, too!* Sylarana did not sound pleased with that discovery. *Out, you meddling old fool, out!*

“I’ll tell you, sir,” said Harry, and glanced down, breaking the eye contact. “There’s no need to read the information from my mind.”

“I am sorry, Harry,” said Dumbledore softly. “This is serious. I must know exactly what happened.”

Harry nodded and told the story, including the way he had found Luna’s body. McGonagall interrupted at that point to ask, “But why didn’t you run? Why didn’t you come and get a Professor?”

*I like her*, said Sylarana. She *has sense*.

“Because I thought that would look suspicious,” Harry whispered. “Everyone was going to suspect me *anyway*.”

“That much is certainly true,” Dumbledore murmured. “And was there anything else after that, Harry?”

“No,” Harry said. “I waited by Luna’s body until Percy Weasley came around the corner.”

“Albus,” McGonagall said then, “I would wager against Severus that he did not Petrify the girl. He saved her from a pair of bullies in her own House the other day. Mr. Potter is innocent.”

Harry closed his eyes, and felt as if he were falling. He had not realized how fervently he wanted someone else to say that.

“The circumstances will conspire to make him look guilty, alas,” said Dumbledore softly. “Harry, the Heir the message refers to is the Heir of Slytherin, the only one who can open the Chamber of Secrets.” Harry lifted his head, since he thought this was important, and met the Headmaster’s eyes. They showed nothing but fathomless sorrow and weariness. “Long ago, Salazar Slytherin built a mysterious chamber and buried it somewhere in the school itself. There is a legend that a monster lives in the Chamber, but it would only rise on the word of Slytherin or one of his blood descendants. The monster would stalk the school, killing children of Muggleborn descent—the ones that Slytherin did not wish to let into Hogwarts.”

“That is another anomaly, Albus.” McGonagall seemed determined not to be ignored. “Miss Lovegood is a pureblood, or at least a halfblood; I knew Aurelius Lovegood when he was a student here. Why would she have fallen victim to the Chamber’s monster, whatever it is?”

“I don’t know, Minerva,” said Dumbledore, and turned back to Harry. “You must understand there will be a clamor against you.”

“There already is,” said McGonagall. Harry heard a faint noise that he couldn’t identify at first, and then realized was her teeth grinding. “His brother has declared him guilty, and where Mr. Potter goes, a large portion of my students follow. To my shame,” she added.

A shadow slipped across Dumbledore’s face. “Please bring Connor to me when I am finished with Harry,” he said.

“With pleasure,” said McGonagall, and Harry glanced at her sidelong, in bafflement. Why was she so upset with Connor? *He* hadn’t done anything wrong.

Dumbledore turned back to Harry. “We do not know what happened tonight. I do not know if perhaps there may be an ancient and unsuspected connection between the Slytherin line and the Potter line. That is one of the things we must find out. Your gift of Parseltongue argues that it is possible. Also, we must take every precaution that we can to minimize the level of fear that will now infect the school.”

Harry nodded; he thought that was obvious.

“Do not go anywhere by yourself,” Dumbledore said. “Do not speak in Parseltongue unless you must. Do not threaten anyone with Sylarana. Do not, especially, wield any Dark magic, Harry.”

“I don’t know any,” said Harry in bewilderment. “Unless you count Parseltongue, sir.”

Dumbledore nodded firmly. “We must, for right now.” He paused, eyes darting over Harry’s face. “I am sorry to do this to you, Mr. Potter,” he said. “I for one do not believe that you opened the Chamber. But there are unanswered questions here, and we have to tread carefully or risk becoming enmeshed in the mysteries. Do you understand?”

“Of course, sir.” Harry shook his head slightly. He understood the commands. He didn’t understand, though he was grateful, why Dumbledore had explained the reasoning behind them.

“For now,” said Dumbledore, “I will ask Professor McGonagall to escort you back to the dungeons. And I will ask that you attend a special Occlumency lesson with Professor Snape tomorrow. I will inform him of this.”

“Thank you, sir,” Harry whispered. It wasn’t Sunday he was thinking of, but Monday. The school would get to stare at him, then if no other time.

“Is there anything else you can think of, Harry?” Dumbledore asked. “Anything else at all that might possibly help?”

“No, Headmaster,” said Harry. “I wish there was.”

“Thank you, my boy,” said Dumbledore, and gestured to the door. “If you need to speak with me, the password is *persimmon beans*.”

“Thank you, sir,” Harry said, and stood, Professor McGonagall keeping close at his side, as they exited the office.

The Gryffindor Head of House was silent as she led him into the dungeons and paused outside the blank stretch of wall concealing the common room. Only then did she say, voice sharp as the point of a sword, “Mr. Potter. Harry.”

Harry looked up at her, wondering if she was about to tell him that she didn’t believe in his innocence after all. McGonagall knelt down next to him instead, and gave him a fierce hug.

Harry stood there, and tried to figure out what he had done to deserve this.

“If you do not want to go to the Headmaster,” said McGonagall, “please come to me. I do not believe that you have done evil, and today I saw you face both accusations and your brother’s words with courage worthy of someone in my House. I would welcome the opportunity to talk to you.” She stood up and stared down at him. “You are going into darkness,” she whispered, “and you are unarmed. I would change that, if I could.”

“Why?” Harry whispered back.

McGonagall blinked once, and then her face hardened. “What will be done to you is neither right nor fair,” she said. “I remember how cruel children can be.” And then she turned and was gone, her robes swirling determinedly around her, before he could say anything else. Harry watched her stiff back, and hoped that Connor wouldn’t catch it too badly from her. He hadn’t done wrong, had only spoken what he thought.

He murmured the password to the door—*pureblood valor*—and stepped into an immediate onslaught of questions and murmurings. Harry answered all those he could, with Sylarana tightening steadily around his arm until she said, *That is enough. You need to sleep.*

*Again?* Harry protested, but he knew that he wouldn’t be able to keep up the mask for much longer. He nodded to the questioners and made his way to his room. He could feel eyes on his back. He walked tall under them anyway. None of them were as bad as Connor’s accusing gaze had been.

He stepped into their room, and Draco grabbed him and spun him around twice, then pulled him close and held him there. Harry blinked. He seemed to be getting an unusual amount of hugs this evening. Unlike Professor McGonagall, though, it felt safe to embrace Draco. He tentatively stuck his arms out and hugged him back.

“I thought something had happened to you when they said someone was lying there Petrified,” whispered Draco. “I thought you were in the hospital wing, that your brother had done something to you, that you were *dead*, oh Harry...”

Harry patted his back gently, and felt an echo of sadness, that so few people cared about Luna her name had not even survived the exchange of gossip. “It wasn’t me. It was Luna.”

“The mad girl?” asked Blaise from his bed in surprise.

Harry glared at him, and then came and sat down on his bed for a gentler round of questioning. Luckily, his roommates were much more inclined to let him go to bed when he wanted, not least because Draco sat there with an arm around his shoulders at all times and keenly watched his face, and announced that he had to sleep halfway into Blaise's fourth question.

Harry lay down gratefully. At least he might find some refuge in his dreams, as long as he didn't dream of the screaming and writhing dark figures.

*You will not*, said Sylarana, slithering into his thoughts. *Trust me to guard your sleep tonight.*

And he did, and he passed into slumber and darkness.

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"Mr. Potter. Come in. Take your place in front of the mattress."

The office looked much the same as it had for the last lesson, but though Harry took his place in front of the Transfigured stretch of floor, Snape did not at once move to practice Legilimency on him. He spun his wand in his hands instead, and stared moodily at Harry. Harry blinked at him. Always before, Snape had attacked him, and then they had discussed what defensive strategies Harry could employ to counter the attack. A patient Snape was an oxymoron.

So was an uncertain Snape, Harry knew, and yet that was what he thought he saw after a few more moments. Snape paced back and forth, his robes snapping, and then spun and launched—not a mental push, but a question.

"Mr. Potter. Are you aware that there is a box in your thoughts, one which you open several times a session so that you may slip your anger into it?" His eyes were narrow, his voice clipped, but not icy with the rage that Harry would have expected about such a question.

Harry froze. Snape could sense the box? He had been sure it was a private part of his mind, that his movements were so swift and well-trained that Snape couldn't actually sense where the anger went.

"Mr. Potter."

Harry took a deep breath, lifted his head, and nodded. "I am, sir," he said. He waited, then. If Snape wanted to talk to him about the box, then he would have to *ask*. Harry was not going to volunteer anything.

Snape clenched one hand around his wand, but asked the next question in an almost neutral tone, perhaps because of its rapidity. "What do you put into the box?"

"Anger, mostly, sir," said Harry. "And sometimes other emotions that I don't want to feel."

"What are those?" Snape asked, after another staring contest.

"Resentment," said Harry. "Jealousy. Envy, sir. Anxiety. The unattractive emotions." He shrugged. "The box contains them all."

Snape hissed air in and then out. "Are you aware, Mr. Potter, that keeping so many of your emotions closed off from the rest of your mind is extremely dangerous? The theory of Legilimency and Occlumency explains why it should be so. The mind is a moving thing by nature, with memories and thoughts free to come and go. When one part of it is constricted—as by an *Obliviate* spell, or by the Imperius Curse—then that part cannot move as it should. It will settle into place, and do, potentially, massive damage when disturbed. The rush of returned memories after someone has been Obliviated, for example, has driven some wizards insane."

Harry blinked. "But that's only if the constructs are disturbed, sir, isn't it?"

Snape bared his teeth. "Did I not just say so?"

“So as long as I don’t disturb the box, then, I should be safe.” Harry shrugged. “It seems simple to me, sir. I can keep the box locked up. I’ve had lots of practice. It’s been with me for a long time.”

Snape took a single long stride forward. “So imagine what is in there now, Potter,” he whispered. “Years of, as you put it, ‘the unattractive emotions.’” His voice edged the words with acid. “Imagine what will happen when the box shatters, as it must with the pressure that you put on it. Imagine what will happen when those accumulated years of rage flood your mind all at once. They could ignite your magic, and perhaps damage your sanity beyond repair.”

Harry shivered at that. He didn’t want to be left unable to help Connor. But, at the same time—

“But if I open the box at all, Professor,” he asked, “won’t the same thing happen?”

“Not if it is drained slowly,” Snape answered. “One emotion at a time, one memory at a time. Put them back into your mind, allow them to mingle with your other thoughts, and they should dissipate their force on their own.” He narrowed his eyes and leaned forward. “Of course, that does mean—“

“That I would be angry with Connor,” said Harry. He shook his head. “I’m sorry, Professor, but I can’t do that. I would have to stop using the box in the future, wouldn’t I?”

“That is precisely the *point* of this exercise,” Snape began.

“I can’t,” said Harry firmly. “I don’t *want* to be angry with Connor. If I really were above all the petty emotions, then I shouldn’t feel it, and that would be the best solution. But since I keep failing to do that, due to defects in my training or defects in myself, then the box is the best solution. That way, I can protect my brother without fearing that I’ll suddenly break out in hostility towards him.”

He breathed more easily as he pronounced the words. Yes, this was the best solution, the first time he had ever justified it aloud to himself. He would be no use to Connor dead, or brain-damaged, or raging at him. Confining his emotions and memories like this was the best thing he could do.

“You fool.”

Harry blinked and dragged his attention back to his Professor. Snape had his wand out and a bone-deep rage on his face. Harry stepped back warily.

“If you do not drain that box,” Snape whispered, “it *will* burst open someday. Some crisis will come upon you, or you will attempt to tuck one fury too many into it, and it will break. I will not have that. I will not see you broken beyond repair. And what if it happened in Hogwarts, Potter? Would you see your precious Boy-Who-Lived in such danger?”

Harry recoiled. “I—I can’t be a danger to him, Professor,” he said. “I have to be there, with him, beside him—“

“*Legilimens!*”

Harry found himself staggered, thrown, whirling hard. Snape pushed into his mind and turned in the direction of the box.

Harry fought. He hid the box behind curtains of drifting mist the way Snape had taught him, tossed memories into the air to distract him, and thought deliberately of what had happened with the Chamber of Secrets, though Snape must know that by now. Professor McGonagall had told him this morning that the professors knew, and that Luna would be in the hospital wing until the mandrakes they were growing in Herbology were ready to be harvested and heal her.

Snape strode through the puffing mist of that memory and knelt beside the box, reaching out to grasp its lid. Harry thought of suddenly suffering the strange thoughts he’d had about Connor yesterday—that it was unfair of Connor to put him in that situation with Draco and Ron—and panicked.

He didn’t know what he did, but in the next moment he heard Sylarana say, *On your word.*

Harry opened his eyes. Sylarana was coiled around Snape's throat, her fangs glistening like Veritaserum a few inches from his skin. Snape stood very still, his head tilted back to accommodate the snake. His face wore an expression of utter disdain. Only the sweat on his forehead betrayed his fear.

"*I want to kill him.*" said Sylarana. Her voice lacked the teasing tone that Harry had heard her use every other time she said that. "*He should be dead now. What he did was stupid and dangerous.*"

Harry swallowed and shook his head. "Don't kill him," he whispered, and heard Snape draw in a sharp breath. It probably sounded like hissing. Harry didn't care. "Come back, Sylarana, please."

"*You are sure?*" She was already uncoiling, however, and making her way gracefully across the floor to him. Harry knelt and put out his left arm. She coiled around his wrist and laid her head out along the back of his hand. Her eyes stared directly into his. "*I would have killed him.*"

"I know," Harry whispered back, and glanced up at Snape.

"We are done for today, Potter," said Snape, betraying nothing by his tone. "You will return for your lessons this week at the same time you always have."

Harry nodded, not daring to say anything, and slipped out of the room. It seemed Snape would pretend the next lessons were normal, and Harry saw no alternative. Death had been with them in that room. It was not so easily dismissed, but it could be ignored by mutual effort.

One thing was certain, however. The box was not going to be enough anymore. Harry had to find something else.

Harry sighed softly and slumped back in his seat. He'd been in the library for the past three hours, and hadn't found any spells that sounded like what he was looking for, even granted that he was looking through spells intended for use by adult wizards.

Then he turned the page.

*Fugitivus Animus.*

Harry let out a small gasp and slid closer to the page. The description of the spell lay there invitingly, as if waiting for him.

*Fugitivus Animus, or the Fugitive Soul, is a spell designed for concealment in particular difficult situations outside of battle. Its limitations make it impractical for use in a battle environment, unless one has a target already chosen and highly visible.*

*With this spell, the caster transfers attention from himself to someone else. He does not become invisible, but slips from the grasp of all thoughts in the area. Thus he reorders the perceptions of those affected by the spell, so that he drops from whatever position of importance he may originally hold to lowest priority, worthy of less notice than a fly that wanders through the room.*

*There are two orders of this spell. The first is Fugitivus Animus Cogitatio, which is performed with three sweeps of the wand to the left at brow height, emphasizing the three words of the spell, and transfers attention from the caster to one person in the immediate area. The caster may leave unnoticed, as everyone else in the vicinity will begin paying attention to the target. Anyone who departs the area of the target, however, will remember the caster, often quite suddenly.*

*Fugitivus Animus Amplector will permanently transfer attention from the caster to the target, and last as long as both caster and target are alive. It is performed with three sweeps of the wand to the left at brow height, as its lesser cousin, and then a sweep of the wand to the right at heart height. The caster must use much more of his will in casting it, as it is a harder spell by three degrees of magnitude.*

*The counter for both spells is the Finite, or Reparo Mentis. However, in dispelling the Amplector spell, the caster must use as much strength as the original wizard who created the spell.*

*Because both versions of the Fugitivus Animus spell interfere with others' thoughts and feelings, this spell is classified as **Dark**.*

Harry let out a small breath and closed his eyes. He was sure the spells would be difficult to perform; if not, this book would be in the Restricted Section, rather than kept in the open for students to research spells they would never be able to cast.

But it was what he needed. It was perfect.

He could keep people from looking at him while he struggled to deal with whatever emotions he was currently experiencing, if they couldn't go in the box. And if Connor was in the same room, then Harry could make everyone else pay attention to him, as befitted the Boy-Who-Lived.

*This is a bad idea, Sylarana hissed at him. It is Dark magic.*

*Are you afraid?* Harry challenged her.

*Of course not! It's just a bad idea.*

Harry went to put the book away, ignoring the small part of his mind that agreed with Sylarana. He had to do *something*. It seemed that the world was closing in on him, not letting him do *anything* right. Every move he made was anticipated, tracked, and turned aside.

He needed to figure out some way of keeping his vows, and until he came up with a better one, the *Fugitivus Animus* spell was it.

~\*~\*~\*~\*~\*~\*

## **Chapter Eleven: Threats and Throws**

Harry never wanted to go through a week like that again. The sooner he mastered the *Fugitivus Animus* spell, the better.

Monday had begun with a murmur of noise as he walked into the Great Hall, one that might have built to hexes and flung food—*would* have built, Harry was certain, if not for the professors seated at the staff table. Though he sat beside Draco at the Slytherin table, and the Malfoy heir looked as if he would kill the next person who so much as breathed wrong at Harry, he could still feel the stares. They made his breath short and his legs shake, and he ate little and left soon. Sylarana protested. Harry told her to shut up, and she sulked for the next three hours.

The Ravenclaws' taunts had grown worse now that he had, as they saw it, actually put a Housemate in the hospital wing permanently. Harry watched them, at least, with no emotion more complicated than bitterness. *They didn't appreciate Luna while they had her, did they?*

"Did you get your little snakes to hold her down while you Petrified her, Snake Prince?" one of them asked as he headed to Charms. "Was it fun?"

"Not fun enough for him," said a seventh-year Ravenclaw knowingly. "I heard he forced poison down her throat while she screamed for mercy, and then cast *Crucio* while she was still recovering from that."

"He probably bit her himself," said another.

Draco spun around, wand in hand. Harry touched his arm. "Don't," he said softly. "It's not worth it."

Draco spluttered and protested at him for the rest of the day about that, which at least gave Harry something to listen to beyond the taunts.

On Tuesday, Ron stomped up to the Slytherin table. Draco bristled. Ron ignored him entirely, though, and spoke to Harry through clenched teeth.

“This isn’t over,” he said. “I know there’s some kind of, of *plot* afoot. There’s no way that my dad could get sacked and his brother betray Connor in one week unless there was a plot. We’ll stop you. You just wait.”

“Oh, very good, Weasley,” said Draco, leaning forward until he had almost shoved his face into Ron’s. “I had no idea that you knew the word *afoot*. Picked it up from Granger, did you?”

Ron turned red in the face, but Harry asked quietly, “Why was your father sacked? What was the charge?”

“That *git*’s dad said that if he couldn’t control himself in a bookshop, he couldn’t control himself in the Ministry,” said Ron, through clenched teeth. “They did an unfair review of him, and he got sacked.”

“And the truth finally comes out,” Draco drawled. “Your father should have been forced from his job long since, Weasley. What my father did is a favor to the Ministry, the rest of the wizarding world, and humankind in general.”

“I’m going to *kill* you,” said Ron, and reached for his wand, at which point Hermione came up to him and slapped him on the side of the head. Harry stared in shock. Hermione met his eyes for a fleeting moment, and Harry blinked at what he saw there. She looked sorrowful, tired, but not contemptuous, nor as if she had decided he were the source of evil.

“Ron Weasley, you are going to come sit down *right* now and *shut up* before you lose Gryffindor points,” she hissed at him.

Ron opened his mouth to protest, but Draco said, “Oh, come, come, Granger. He was just showing us his new vocabulary, weren’t you, Weasel?”

Harry hissed at him. “Draco. Be quiet.”

Hermione nodded to Harry, as one ally to another, and marched Ron back to the Gryffindor table. For a brief moment, Harry felt as though this day might not be so bad after all.

Then he caught Connor’s gaze, merciless in judgment, radiant in innocence, and looked away. What did it matter if Hermione or anyone else believed he was innocent, as long as his brother thought Harry had betrayed him?

In Transfigurations class on Wednesday, someone Harry never saw enchanted the needles they were turning into quills. Several of them flew over, hovered in front of Harry, and spelled out T-R-A-I-T-O-R and S-N-A-K-E.

That turned out to be the only good part of the week, unexpectedly. The needles had just gone into their second spelling when McGonagall banished them with a wave of her wand, and turned a fierce gaze on Harry.

“Mr. Potter, stay after class, please.”

He did, and much to his surprise, she took him up to her office, gave him tea, and insisted that he discuss the finer points of Transfiguration theory with her. Harry let himself be drawn out on a subject he knew only from books, and found his knowledge matched and countered by McGonagall’s experience. Her description of what it felt like the first time she underwent the Animagus transformation—“as if my stomach were running out my ears”—made him choke on his tea and smile at her. McGonagall smiled back. Harry could almost ignore that her eyes were haunted, and, miraculously, McGonagall never reminded him why.

On Thursday, he went to the hospital wing to try and see Luna. Madam Pomfrey proved willing to let him in, and he sat by Luna’s bedside for an hour, his eyes fixed on her wide blank ones, trying to think of anything to say that didn’t sound self-serving.

He stepped out of the hospital wing, and someone ambushed him. There must have been a group of them, Harry thought later, since Sylarana didn't even have time to hiss, and the hexes that hit them both flew from all directions. He went down stunned, body-bound, with an Obscurus charm over his eyes, and then they began using both wands and fists on him.

It only lasted a few minutes before Sylarana managed to shed whatever spell the ambushers had put on her to keep her immobile and slither out from his sleeve. The hexers shrieked and ran. Sylarana, in a rage, slithered after them until the ward rang and the cage came down around her. Dumbledore came to fetch her and release Harry from most of the hexes a short time afterward.

Harry spent Friday in the hospital wing for his bruises and what Madam Pomfrey called his exhaustion, visited by a rotating group of anxious Slytherins, who told him that there were rumors that he'd set Sylarana on the ambushers deliberately. By Friday evening, there were people speaking of him as the new Dark Lord.

Given all that, Harry was actually almost glad to face his brother in the Slytherin-Gryffindor Quidditch game that Saturday. At least he knew that he'd be able to control what happened.

Harry closed his eyes and pushed open the door of Sirius's office. The voices inside stopped speaking at once. He knew that several pairs of eyes had turned to him, but it was a long moment before he managed to gather up his courage and face them.

Their parents stood in front of Sirius's chair, Connor, already in his Quidditch robes, between them. Remus sat in a second chair, his head cocked to the side, eyes soft and smile just fading. All of them, including Sirius, looked at Harry as if they had seen a ghost.

"Hello," said Harry softly.

Remus unfroze first. "Hello, Harry," he said calmly, as if nothing had happened. "I was just telling your mother how much I look forward to seeing you both fly today. It's a perfect day for Quidditch, isn't it?" He turned and smiled at Sirius, as if inviting him into the conversation. Sirius sat there, and stared at Harry. Harry looked away from him, too. He hadn't been near Sirius since Luna was Petrified, and Sirius certainly hadn't come to see him. He'd wanted to put the pain he felt about that in the box, but hadn't quite dared, so now it drifted along beneath the surface of his mind and made him uncomfortable. Harry had no idea what to do about it, what to say. The only comfort in this situation was that no one else seemed to have any idea what to do, either.

Except Remus, whom, Harry had noticed before, would carry on a conversation in the middle of a raging battle between James and Connor about how high he was allowed to fly on his broom.

"A beautiful, bright, sunny day," said Remus. Harry glanced up from beneath his fringe to see that the werewolf's amber eyes had chilled slightly, but he was looking at Sirius, not Harry. "A day for Quidditch games, and a day for families. There will be many parents here to see their children fly, I imagine. And godparents, too. I'm sure that true *godparents* wouldn't abandon their godchildren without even talking to them, would they?" He leaned back and turned a grim smile on James. "Or parents, either."

There was a long, long pause. Then James said, between his teeth, "Connor, would you wait in the hallway, please? We'd like to talk to Harry alone."

Connor opened his mouth to protest. Harry shot him a glance of sympathy that he doubted his brother noted. Connor *hated* being treated like a child, and James doing so wasn't the best way to get through to him.

"Come on, Connor," Remus said, standing and extending a hand to him. "I don't think I ever showed you the tunnel behind the statue of the humpbacked witch, did I?" He leaned nearer and lowered his voice, eyes warm. "It goes straight into Honeydukes."

Connor perked up a bit, but still turned his head and looked back at Harry. Harry nodded. He understood the import of that look. *I am doing everything I can to stop you.*

He certainly seemed to be, Harry thought, as he watched his brother depart. He was plotting something with Ron and Hermione, walking with them in close concert through the corridors. Every now and then Hermione made a muffled protest, but Connor would hush her, and explain something else that made Hermione bite her lip and nod thoughtfully.

“Harry.”

The door shut behind Remus and Connor, and Harry turned with a sigh to face their parents and Sirius.

Sirius still slumped in his chair, scowling. Lily stood in the same place she had been since Harry entered the room, eyes fixed on his face. It was James who spoke, his voice earnest but clumsy. Harry knew how he felt.

“Connor told us what happened,” James said. “All of it. The fight between Ron Weasley and Draco Malfoy—“ his distaste for Draco’s last name was boundless, Harry noted “—and then how he found you standing in the corridor beside the Lovegood girl’s body that evening.” James closed his eyes and drew a deep breath. “And the Parseltongue, and the way you’ve used magic on Ravenclaws before now. You sent some poor girl to the hospital wing, didn’t you?”

Harry nodded. No point in denying it.

*I can deny it, said Sylarana in his head. But none of them would listen to me.*

*None of them could understand you, Harry corrected her.*

*None of them would listen even if they could understand me.* The Locusta’s thoughts had a sulky tone that would have made Harry smile at any other time. But this was a conversation with his parents.

“And you were being possessed by You-Know-Who,” said James. “Or, at least, his younger self. I don’t *understand*, Harry. I thought the private lessons old Snivellus is giving you were supposed to help with that?”

He paused, and this time he clearly expected a verbal answer. “They’re helping,” said Harry quietly. “And I don’t think I Petrified Luna, sir. I was asleep when it happened, so I don’t know who did, but I don’t think Tom Riddle possessed me.”

“So he’s possessing someone *else*?” James asked. “But why?”

“James.”

Just a single word from their mother, Harry thought, and the room was already calmer. Lily came forward and knelt down in front of Harry, brushing his fringe back from his eyes. Harry watched the lines around her mouth tighten as her finger caressed his lightning bolt scar.

“I think we have to tell them,” she whispered.

Harry let out a short little breath, pitying her. He knew that she had wanted to keep their father innocent for much the same reason that they had wanted to keep Connor innocent. That clarity of mind, that purity of soul, was something worth fighting for.

But, if it came to telling a few people what Harry was instead of the whole world, then that was a better solution.

Lily stood, moving behind Harry and putting her hands on his shoulders. “I’ve been training Harry for most of his life,” she told James and Sirius. “I’ve asked him to learn all the spells he could, all the wandless magic he could, all the theories and pureblood customs he could, in case Connor needed them later.”

James managed to stutter out something that sounded like, “What?” Sirius was staring at both of them wide-eyed. Harry put his head up and reminded himself that the stares were tolerable. His mother was here with him. He did not stand alone.

Lily nodded. "Connor is Voldemort's enemy," she said. "You know it. Both of you know it. But he couldn't continue as a normal child unless he had some kind of extra protection." She gestured at Sirius. "You're here this year, Sirius, and I appreciate it more than I'll ever be able to tell you. But you can't go everywhere, can't be with the students in the way that another student can. Harry's been guarding Connor since last year. I've been training him to do so for most of his life," she repeated. She closed her eyes and let out a long breath.

"It is no wonder that Voldemort has come after Harry. His raw power and his importance to Connor both make him a target. If Voldemort could corrupt Harry, it would be the ultimate strike against the Boy-Who-Lived, short of corrupting Connor himself." Lily's hands tightened on Harry's shoulders, and he could feel the way she tried to restrain herself from pouring forth everything at once. There were some things that Sirius and James would take time to understand, no matter how much preparation she tried to give them. "So, while I hardly think this possession a good thing, I do not blame Harry. I blame Voldemort."

There was thunderstruck silence for a long time. Harry looked from James to Sirius, and found nothing worrying in their eyes. Both looked shocked, but that was understandable. James was opening and closing his mouth as though he wanted to figure out what question to ask first; that was nothing Harry had not expected. Sirius slumped back in his seat, his face dreadfully pale. Harry was a bit more concerned about that, but his godfather had grown up around Dark magic and warrior wizards. Of course he would be worried that a child was going to encounter them.

*He's worried about Connor, not you,* Sylarana said to him.

*Shut up,* Harry warned her, and shoved the pain away again.

James at last said, "But that means that you've kept the secret from us all for years?"

"Yes," said Lily. "I wanted you to be ignorant so that I could have your unthinking support in times of trouble, James. It was selfish, and I am sorry." She spoke like the witch Harry knew she truly was, her voice unflinching. "And I have kept Connor innocent because he needs to be innocent to defeat Voldemort. But now, when both of you might interfere with Harry's guardianship, there is no reason for you to be ignorant any more." She turned to Sirius. "Will you still obstruct him?"

Sirius shook his head. His face had grown paler. "But I thought so differently," he whispered. "Harry, I'm sorry."

"You can tell Connor the truth now, can't you?" asked James, his voice eager. "He doesn't need to fight with Harry any more."

Lily sighed. "No," she said. "It is still true that Tom Riddle possessed Harry, and that we don't know who Petrified Luna Lovegood. It's true that Harry has had his mind invaded by a powerful Dark wizard. And telling him all this might well sully his innocence. I don't want to do it, not yet." She paused. "Besides, there is one good consequence to Connor's suspecting Harry."

"What is that?" Sirius demanded, his voice rough. "I can't think of anything good about it, myself."

Lily moved around in front of Harry and knelt down again instead of answering him. She looked into Harry's eyes. "Harry, do you remember our discussion of the First War against Voldemort, and the reason the Prewett brothers led the Death Eaters such a chase before they finally caught them?" she asked.

Harry's eyes widened as he recalled the story. Gideon and Fabian Prewett, Molly Weasley's brothers, had been devastatingly powerful wizards, but more than that, they had been clever ones. They had run a deception only uncovered after their deaths, a deception worthy of a Slytherin.

They had made themselves into targets on purpose, irritating and distracting the most important Death Eaters from other tasks—tasks that would have included the execution of helpless Muggleborn families who were not nearly as well-trained as Gideon and Fabian. The Death Eaters had united to take them down at last, but while they did that, fifteen wizarding families escaped via Portkey to safehouses. By the time the Prewett brothers fell, Voldemort's inner circle could have taken vengeance on them for months and not been satisfied. The hunt had encouraged all the traits that Gideon and Fabian had wanted to encourage in the Death Eaters, including mutual suspicion of each other; they had begun to think that someone on their side was a traitor and *must* be helping the Prewetts escape each confrontation.

And Harry understood.

“You want me to do the opposite of that with Connor?” he asked his mother. “Act like a stag so he can act like a hound?”

“Like the leader of a hunt,” Lily corrected him, giving him the gentle smile which, reflected in her green eyes, showed that he’d pleased her very well indeed. “Connor has to grow wise to the political realities of the wizarding world, but he’s not going to do it the way you did, especially now that he’s made friends among the purebloods devoted to the Light. He’ll grow wise through action. Let him unite the school around one cause, and that will be good practice for the future.”

Harry nodded. He could feel his guilt and darkness of mind dissipating, centering on a new excitement. It was all right, now, if Connor suspected him and stirred the other students up against him. Those students would get used to following the Boy-Who-Lived. When the real perpetrator was found, it might make Connor look ridiculous, but Harry suspected it was likely that the real perpetrator was an innocent victim, not a willing servant of Voldemort. Connor could forgive that victim, perhaps rescue them from Voldemort’s control, and then turn around and forgive his brother, showing the height of Gryffindor justice and mercy. Harry’s acceptance of the forgiveness would show his own absolute loyalty.

It would require very careful planning, Harry knew, and there were half a dozen things that could go wrong. But it was a plan, one that would serve both his goals in defending Connor and making him look good, and that made it one he could live with.

“I don’t understand,” said Sirius plaintively.

Lily explained the plan in more detail to him and James, and Harry luxuriated in the silence. Yes, this was the best way to do things.

*If you are an utterly mad human, then yes, it is.*

Harry jumped. He always managed to forget Sylarana when she had been silent for a time, it seemed. And she hadn’t objected to the plan so far, so why was she objecting now?

*Because this is madness, said Sylarana flatly. How can you hope to make it work? And how can you hope to have time to feed me while you are making it work?*

Harry touched his left arm above where she rested as a mark on his skin. *I’ll always make certain to feed you first, I promise.*

He barely listened as his mother hashed things out with James and Sirius. He knew things were going to be better now. If he did have Slytherin qualities, as the Sorting Hat and Draco and Snape insisted, then he was finally going to put them to good use, in the service of the Light.

Harry was confident, as he swooped and turned and tumbled through the air, in a way that he had not been at last year’s Gryffindor-Slytherin Quidditch game.

Connor was aloft, of course, and there were the Bludgers to watch out for, but this time the Lestranges were not coming after him. Their parents, Sirius, and Remus sat in the stands below, and this time James and Sirius, at least, knew that Connor would win, because Harry would not let it be otherwise. It amused Harry that one of the last things their father had asked him before he went to dress in Slytherin green robes was whether Harry was the better flyer than Connor. Harry had been able to lie about that, since he’d never told their mother the true extent of his flying abilities, either. He’d assured James that Connor won the games on his own merits.

It was a small lie, especially compared to the ones he would tell and live in the coming months. But it was all going to be worth it in the end. It had to be.

*Mad*, Sylarana insisted in his head. She’d spoken little since they came onto the Pitch, except in words of one syllable. Harry supposed she wanted him to divine what the words meant. He refused. He had more important things to worry about right now.

There were the Bludgers, and the Snitch, and Connor on his broom, and hundreds of eyes watching from below, from both sides of the Pitch. He had all of them to fool. Luckily, most were easy. He flipped upside down almost lazily as one of the Weasley twins swatted a Bludger at him, and heard it go by, singing, above his broom bristles. The Nimbus 2001 was a great gift, he thought. It made maneuvers like these so much easier.

As he hung upside down—with Sylarana, forced to tighten her coil on his left arm, complaining about that, too—he saw the Bludger make a strange, wide circle and head back towards the game. It ignored the two Slytherin Chasers in the way, and actually made a circle around the Weasley twins. It was homing in on—

*Connor.*

*I see that it was a mistake to assume this game was going to be safer,* Harry thought, and shot forward.

He flew parallel to the Bludger, the wind tearing at his hair and glasses, the broom giving him all the speed he asked for and more. Harry timed the Bludger's impact with Connor and reached out, intending to use his will to yank it to the side, much as he'd used his will to make it hit the Lestranges last year.

It didn't work. Someone already had the Bludger. Harry felt it as a sharp cone of power twisting and steering and blowing the ball, one that sparked against his and forced it away. His eyes narrowed as he watched Connor go into a spiraling dive, avoiding the enchanted thing's first strike. It wasn't wizard magic that held the ball.

*A house elf.*

*Dobby?*

Probably, Harry thought. And that just made him angrier that he hadn't thought much about the house elf since school began, assuming that every other threat was a greater one.

That could change, now. Harry called his magic up around him, comforted in the knowledge that most people wouldn't be able to sense it. Dumbledore, of course, because such a trick should be in his power, and Draco and Snape, but they were the only ones who had ever reacted like that when he got angry.

And he *was* angry now, a roaring, frothing rage that he indulged, because it was for Connor. Harry watched as the Bludger curved back around, and reached out with a different kind of will. This time, he didn't want to affect the ball. He wanted the air in front of it to turn solid, hard as ground without rain, refusing the Bludger passage.

There came a loud *poing* sound, and the Bludger bounced back. Harry gasped and released the wall of air. That had been harder than he thought it would, probably because he'd had to call and release the magic suddenly. He would do better to anticipate the Bludger's next move and get in front of it, so that he'd have time to use all the precautions he needed to.

“And the Snitch has been spotted!” Lee Jordan's voice rose with a triumphant roar over the suddenly screaming crowd.

Harry snapped his head around, and saw Connor pursuing the Snitch, a gleam of gold fluttering madly ahead of him. It changed direction several times, but Harry's brother was never far behind. His hair streamed in the wind, his face shining with determination. Harry relaxed. Slytherin had been sixty points ahead the last time he looked, but if Connor caught the Snitch now, that wouldn't matter. He'd end the game, get safely out of the air, and secure the victory for his team all at once.

Then the Bludger began to move again.

Straight for the back of Connor's broom it went, this time ignoring the other targets completely in its haste. Angelina Johnson, one of the Gryffindor Chasers, got caught in its path and spun out of the sky clutching her stomach. She righted herself before she hit the ground, though, and Harry heard no commanding whistle from either Madam Hooch or Sirius to end the game.

Connor was utterly involved in claiming the Snitch, which had managed to fool him with a sudden course change and was now busily darting and spraying around the sky, leaving Connor to do the best he could in catching up with it.

That meant that it was up to Harry to do something.

Fierce, clean excitement took him over, and he knew he was grinning as he let all his speed, and the Nimbus 2001's speed, go.

The air narrowed to a short, defined tunnel in front of him. He flew past Angelina as if she were hovering rather than circling. He heard startled gasps and saw eyes turned to him, but didn't mind them. They would only think that he'd seen the Snitch, too, and wanted to claim it from Connor.

*Do.*

Harry felt the intrusion of Sylarana's mind into his as a distant ripple. He rolled over twice as the other Bludger screamed past him, and as he came out of the tumble, he had to decide which way the enchanted Bludger would go. It was almost to Connor now, and his outstretched hand grabbing at the Snitch.

*His outstretched hand.*

Harry chose.

He dived, to get the right angle, and then came up in a single blinding burst of speed. Up he rose, and got in between the Bludger and his brother. He would take the hit, Connor would take the Snitch, and all would be right with the world.

Connor gave him a single, bewildered glance, before fixing his eyes back on the tiny golden ball. Harry smiled, not caring.

The Bludger halted beneath him, twisted, and then tried to rise between Harry and Connor, and slightly ahead, so that it could hit Connor full on.

Harry made another choice, and shot straight across in front of his brother. Their broomsticks smacked together, but he wasn't close enough to foul Connor, and—

*Crack.*

The Bludger hit his right arm, making Harry gasp and lean to the side as his bones went liquid with pain. His left arm, caught wide of the broom, faltered and grasped for some kind of handhold. He found something small and grabbed it, thinking Connor had extended a hand to help him.

He wheeled away, right arm clutched close to his side, to see Connor's eyes going wide, a scream forming on his mouth, and the Bludger, free of Dobby's magic, falling limply to the ground beneath him. Everybody was shouting. Sylarana was hissing at him. Harry managed, by dint of concentration, to hear what Lee Jordan was shouting.

“Potter's caught the Snitch!”

*Well, of course Connor has, what—*

Then Harry became aware of the small, madly dancing thing in his palm, that thing he had grabbed in his desperate search for support.

“Slytherin wins!”

One side of the Pitch went mad, green banners fluttering in the air, hoots and catcalls ringing. The Gryffindor side was silent. Harry kept his head tucked carefully into his shoulder, and concentrated on the cool shock washing through him. He did not dare look at his parents right now, nor Remus. He had *promised* that Connor would win.

“Good game, Harry.”

Harry dared to glance over at his brother, and wished he hadn't. Connor's face was red with humiliation, his eyes glazed with tears.

“If you hated me so much that you wanted to humiliate me in front of our parents,” he whispered, “why didn't you just tell me?”

He dived then, and the rest of the Slytherin team was between Harry and the Pitch, offering loud congratulations. Harry accepted them as best he could, riding the cresting wave of his utter surprise. He hissed out loud when Flint embraced him and jostled his broken arm, though.

Flint blinked at him, then said, “Come on, Potter, hospital wing for you.” He gave Harry a large wink. “Madam Pomfrey should be able to fix you *right* up.”

Harry closed his eyes as they escorted him back down like a gaggle of geese. All his good intentions were *gone* again, burned to a crisp by circumstances that Harry did not know how to prevent. He wished he could cast *Fugitivus Animus* right now, and simply vanish from everyone's attention.

*I don't think it would work even if you could, Sylarana said, her voice oddly gentle. I think you're always going to be showing up, not shown up. I know that isn't what you want, but that seems to be the way it is. And snakes deal with reality, you know, not hide from it. It's no good pretending you've got a mouse when you don't.*

*I'm not a snake,* Harry said back.

She didn't bother responding.

Harry took Draco's embrace when they were on the ground, and accepted his congratulations, though Flint kept him from hugging Harry too tightly. And then off he went to the hospital wing yet again, his memory of Connor's betrayed look hurting more than his arm.

*What am I going to do? How can I keep from betraying him when I don't even mean to? How can—*

He gave in to temptation, and threw the circling thoughts into the box. His head cleared at once. His breathing calmed down. He was able to open his eyes and walk along with the Quidditch team instead of being half-carried.

*Snape's wrong. This has to be a good thing. It's going to let me plan.*

*Mother said to lead Connor a hunt. I will. I only have to figure out how to do it, and I should have some time alone in the hospital wing. I'll tell Madam Pomfrey that I'm tired.*

Harry woke, alone, in the middle of the night, his repaired right arm curled over his chest and Sylarana curled on top of it, and blinked. It was a long moment before he could remember what he'd been thinking of.

The middle of the night. Their parents had probably left Hogwarts, without coming to see him.

Harry told himself that he hadn't expected them to.

When the anger would not go away, he relegated it to the box, without waking Sylarana, and then went back to sleep, levelheaded and serene.

~\*~\*~\*~\*~\*~\*

## Chapter Twelve: Paralysis

*Harry isn't going to like this.*

*I don't care, Draco reassured himself fiercely as Harry stirred slightly in the hospital bed and then opened his eyes. He doesn't have to like it. He has to put up with it, though. I'm not leaving him alone.*

Draco clenched his teeth. He intended to tell Harry the truth about what he had seen yesterday, and then heard while Harry was in the hospital wing last night. Harry wouldn't like that, either.

Draco didn't care. Sometimes friends had to do things that friends didn't like.

"Draco," Harry said, staring up at him with obvious surprise, as well as other emotions that Draco didn't bother taking the time to figure out. Harry wouldn't want him there. He already knew that. It was time to move on to other, more interesting facts. "I didn't know that you would be here. Don't you have studying to do?"

"It's Sunday," said Draco, and leaned closer to him. "No classes. No homework unless I want to do it." He spent a moment studying Harry. Harry just kept on blinking at him. His eyes were clear and very green from this close, but wary. He had his head tilted so that, for once, his fringe revealed his lightning bolt scar. Draco smiled despite himself. Harry made him feel helpless in so many ways, and this was one of them—that he could simultaneously be powerful enough to make Draco's head ache and vulnerable enough to make Draco want to grab him and hold him close.

"It's Sunday, then," said Harry. "But aren't you hungry?" He turned and glanced out the window of the hospital wing. "I think it must be near noon already."

“I ate a big breakfast,” said Draco. He decided that he could be patient. Diverting Harry’s attempts to get rid of him one by one was good practice for dealing with the distinctly peeved Harry he would be facing in a moment.

“Oh.” Harry paused and tried to think of something else to say. Draco watched his mind work, and the lazy loopings of Harry’s Locusta on his chest. Sylarana fascinated him. She fascinated all the Slytherins, and some of the House practically worshipped Harry for being able to talk to her. Draco didn’t think that Harry had caught on to that yet. “Um, well, didn’t you want to celebrate the Quidditch victory yesterday?”

“There wasn’t much of a celebration without you there,” said Draco. He took a deep breath. “And no, Harry, I’m not tired myself, and I don’t think that I ought to be in the library studying ahead for Professor Snape’s class, and I’m not interested in a walk around the lake today. I even brought food for Sylarana. Here.” He dipped a hand into the pocket of his robe and found the treacle tart he’d put there from dinner last night. He extended it to Sylarana, who uttered a hiss that Draco dared to imagine was pleased, and swallowed several pieces whole. Draco saw her folded fangs gleaming as she ate delicately.

“Oh,” said Harry again. “Thank you.” Sylarana faced him and hissed something then, and Harry’s eyes widened. He hissed back. Draco half-closed his eyes. He had heard tales of Parselmouths, but had never imagined he would meet one, unless the Dark Lord returned someday. Even after a month of knowing Harry could do it, it still startled him, and touched off a shiver deep within a part of him that he had no name for. The most Slytherin part, perhaps.

“What did she say?” Draco asked, when the conversation seemed to have finished, and Sylarana went back to eating the treacle tart.

“She thanked you for bringing the food.” Harry’s eyes were carefully watching the door to the hospital wing now, as though he expected visitors at any moment. Draco allowed himself a smirk. Harry wasn’t really all that transparent. But Draco had been close to him for more than a year now, and had watched him carefully in all that time, and he knew what those tiny facial expressions meant.

“You aren’t going to be able to get out of this conversation, Harry,” he said. “I think we should have had it the first day we met, but I didn’t know you then. And since then, well, you’ve been busy being Connor’s brother, and I’ve been busy being a Malfoy.” He shrugged.

Harry winced. “Yes, I know,” he said. “I did tell you that Connor was more important to me, remember—“

“I can’t see why,” Draco interrupted, struggling to keep his voice to a level tone. If he thought too hard about the Boy-Who-Lived, he would begin shouting. “He treats you... Harry, he would treat dung on his broom better than he treats you. At least the dung would inconvenience him a bit, and he wouldn’t expect it to lie down beneath his feet and apologize for getting in his way.”

Harry’s chin rose, and the sense of magic he exuded when angry started chewing at the outer edges of Draco’s shields. Draco winced and strengthened them again. He’d had to do that constantly since the beginning of the year. Harry’s power continued to grow. Draco had never heard of that before, but then, he had never heard of someone like Harry, either. He would face both, and do what he needed to do to make sure both survived.

“He’s my brother,” said Harry.

“That doesn’t excuse the way he treats you!” Draco found himself yelling abruptly, and tried to rein in his voice. Madam Pomfrey had told him that if she found him making too much noise, his visit with Harry would be over. “It doesn’t, Harry,” he went on after a moment, lower but no less intense. “*Nothing* could, not even if you owed him a life debt and this was the way you were repaying him.”

Harry shook his head. “You don’t understand,” he said. “She told me that you wouldn’t.”

Draco blinked. “Who?” For some reason, bizarre visions of his own mother telling Harry such a thing filled his mind.

“Our mother,” said Harry. “Lily. She told me that no one outside the family would understand why I had to protect Connor. Or no one else *in* the family, even, except me and her. She told James and my godfather yesterday, and they

didn't take it well." He shook his head and sighed. "It doesn't matter, though," he went on after a pause so brief that Draco had no chance to fit in a word in edgewise. "I'll keep doing what I have to do. I hardly need anyone's approval to do so. That includes yours, Draco." The edge of his magic sharpened once more.

Draco raised the shields a little higher. "I'm not talking about approval," he said. "I'm talking about disapproval of the whole bloody thing. Don't you notice what he's doing to you, Harry? Don't you care?"

Harry shook his head slowly, his fringe once more brushing over and hiding his scar. "I know what it probably looks like from outside, Draco—"

"No," Draco interrupted slowly. "I don't think you do."

Harry just waited. When Draco closed his mouth again, he went on, patient as the streams that Draco had watched running on the edges of the Malfoy estates. "But *I* know what it looks like from the inside, and no one else except Lily does. I was trained to be a guard and a protector to Connor. That's what I am. Yes, I've suffered setbacks, and I've betrayed him." He closed his eyes for a moment, wrinkling his nose. Then he opened them, and his gaze cut through Draco. "I betrayed him the moment I was put into Slytherin, in many ways," Harry said, his voice so detached that it made Draco want to weep. "But there are subtler ways than that—doubting him, holding him back, outshining him. I've done all of them. But I am going to try to recoup them, to change myself back into the brother he wants and needs."

Draco slammed his hands down on the bed, then glanced hastily over his shoulder. Madam Pomfrey was nowhere in sight. She had, in fact, murmured something about being grateful that Draco was here to take care of Harry, just in case any more "mysterious hexes" manifested themselves. Maybe she'd meant it.

"Damn it, you shouldn't have to do that," said Draco. "Harry, don't you *understand* this? Just because you're in Slytherin doesn't make you evil. Do you think I'm evil?"

Harry paused, a faint shadow on his face. "Of course not," he said. "But—it's different for me."

"Tell me," said Draco. "Tell me how."

Harry pushed himself back into the pillow. Sylarana lay motionless on his chest. Draco was interested to notice that she watched Harry and not him. Harry had told him that she could speak in his head. Draco wished there was a way that he could eavesdrop on those conversations.

"It just is," said Harry quietly. "You're not Connor's blood relative, and—well, your father was a Death Eater—"

"Under Imperius—"

"*Not* under Imperius. I have the evidence—"

Draco recognized the diversion tactic for what it was, then, and had to smile. "Very Slytherin of you, Harry," he said. "Change this into a different argument. But I'm not letting you. Not this time. We've had the other argument often enough to satisfy me. We haven't had this one yet. Tell me how it's different."

"I'm his brother," said Harry. "His *tw*in. It would be too easy for people to compare us, Draco. I don't *want* them to compare us. I want to be ordinary." Sylarana apparently said something. Harry ignored her, or at least gave no reply that Draco could hear. "He's the Boy-Who-Lived. He's going to have to unite and lead the wizarding world someday. He needs to be set higher than he is. If I can do things that make people think better of him, I will. If I can do things that protect him, I will. If I can do things that make myself smaller so that he can stand taller, I will." By the time he finished, his eyes were shining, as though he regarded some sacred thing.

"But you shouldn't have to," said Draco. "My parents wouldn't have made me do that if I had a brother." *Horrible thought. Imagine having to share my toys!*

“Yes, but your brother wouldn’t have been the Boy-Who-Lived,” said Harry, giving him a smile of such patience that Draco wanted to slap him. “That’s the difference, the grand difference that I don’t think you’ll be able to get past. Our mother would never have asked me to do this if Connor was anyone else, or even if he was important to the war but not in the way he is. But he *is* the key to defeating Voldemort. I know it. That’s the central truth of my life, Draco. I live to serve him.” He took a deep breath and watched Draco carefully. “You *still* don’t understand,” he added a moment later. “I can see it from your eyes.”

Draco was shaking with anger and disgust. Of course, if he yelled out everything he was feeling, then Harry would just turn away from him, and perhaps the last chance that he had to get through Harry’s barriers would be lost.

He forced himself to speak calmly. “Of course I understand,” he said. “I just don’t agree.”

Harry smiled at him. “That’s because you’re not inside the family.”

“Do you have an answer for everything?” Draco snarled at him.

“Of course,” said Harry. “Our mother trained me in what kinds of arguments someone outside the family would make, the kinds of misunderstandings they would have, the ways they’d try to coerce or persuade me otherwise. I know them all. I know the counters to all of them. If I can defeat my own doubts, then I can surely defeat someone who doesn’t know that first thing about me.” For a moment, a pensive look crossed his face. “She never did tell me why someone would be so eager to convince me otherwise,” he added in a whisper. “That’s the part I don’t understand. Can you tell me, Draco? Why anyone would *care*?”

Draco laughed hollowly. *I’m not the only one who can’t understand something, Harry.*

But he didn’t think he would make much progress with that line of reasoning, either. He turned, instead, to what he thought Harry should know. “Do you know what your brother said about you yesterday?”

Harry’s head turned to him like a flower to the sun, his eyes wider and clearer than they had been, his lip snagged between his teeth, hope scorching his face. Draco caught his breath, and then remembered that Harry was only looking at him that way because he was talking about Connor.

Jealousy crackled and flared in him. He hadn’t envied the Prat-Who-Lived all that much before. Why should he? Connor was a complete Gryffindor, and that meant he had nothing Draco wanted.

*Except Harry’s loyalty. I want him to look at me like that. I want him to pay attention to me because I’m his friend, not just because I’m talking about his brother.*

“It wasn’t anything good,” Draco warned, to give Harry some excuse for his stare-filled moment.

“I know that,” said Harry. “It couldn’t be, after yesterday. But tell me.”

Draco swallowed back another surge of sickness, that Harry would welcome even taunting words from his brother, and leaned close. “He said that he thought you were still possessed,” he said quietly. “That there was no other way that you would foul him like that, reaching for the Snitch. That there was no way that you could hate him this much, could act opposite him instead of on his side, if you weren’t still possessed.”

Harry closed his eyes. This time, his expression was that of someone who had received an answer to a prayer. Draco found that he had to turn away. He wanted to punch something.

“Ah,” Harry whispered at last. “That means that I just have to try harder. I haven’t tried hard enough yet.”

Draco turned back. “And so you don’t care about that at all?” he asked. “Tell me, Harry. What’s your *first* reaction to hearing Connor say something like that? To know that you’ve worked so hard not to betray him, as he sees it, and still he thinks that you have, because you won a game for your House?”

Harry opened his eyes. Maybe it was the question. Maybe it was the fact that he'd obviously been feeling strong emotion a moment ago, and so was caught off-guard. Maybe it was just Draco's hopes that he would see a somewhat more normal side to Harry if he pushed hard enough.

But, whatever the cause, Draco was sure that he saw rage flaring in Harry's eyes for a moment.

Then it was gone, sudden as a bolt of lightning. Harry shook his head. "I'm angry, of course," he said in a completely level tone. "But I'm not supposed to feel that."

"Why not?" Draco challenged.

Harry watched him patiently, head on one side. He reminded Draco of no one so much as Snape trying to coax a particularly stupid student along.

"I wouldn't understand," he summarized, feeling a dull flush start in his cheeks.

Harry nodded and started to open his mouth to say something else, but a loud crack echoed through the middle of the hospital wing then, and startled Draco. He turned around to find, of all things, one of the Malfoy house elves standing at the foot of Harry's bed. Dobby's eyes widened and he squeaked at the sight of Draco, and he lifted a hand as if he would leap away again.

"Dobby, stay!" said Draco commandingly. The Manor's house elves didn't obey him exclusively, but when neither his mother nor father was in the room, he was the one they looked to first.

Dobby lowered his hand, shivering, and stared at them both for a long moment before he abruptly began to beat his head on the floor. "Dobby is sorry!" he wailed. "Dobby came to apologize, and found Master here, and Dobby—Dobby does not know—"

Draco gasped abruptly and sagged backwards as his head began to pound like a timpani. Harry had sat up in his bed. His magic was rising around him. Dobby stopped talking and stared around himself as the air turned into a clear cage of blue glass. He reached out one hand and felt at the glass, then turned and stared at Harry.

"Mr. Harry Potter, sir?" he squeaked, all trace of fear gone. "Mr. Harry Potter is—is like this?"

"I'm powerful, if that's what you mean," said Harry, his voice full of command. "And now I want to know why you tried to hurt my brother. I *know* that you threw that Bludger at Connor yesterday, and come to think of it, you probably prevented us getting through the barrier at Platform 9¾ too. So tell me what you thought you were doing. Why were you trying to hurt Connor?"

Dobby abruptly began to wail and sob again, beating his head and his hands on the glass cage. It didn't break. Draco cautiously took one hand off his head. Harry was determined, now, not angry. Draco could lean back and admire the crafting of the glass. He knew of no one who could make a cage like that, especially so suddenly, and especially not one that was apparently resistant to house elf magic. He wondered idly if Harry realized that he'd done the spell without his wand, and also without speaking a word.

"Dobby cannot tell!" the house elf was saying. "Dobby—Dobby cannot let Mr. Connor Potter be hurt, but Dobby—Dobby serves his Masters—his Masters wouldn't want him to tell—"

Draco narrowed his eyes. *What is the idiot elf babbling about?* "I am your master in this room, Dobby," he said. "And I want you to tell me what you're talking about right now."

Dobby flung himself on the floor in misery, gripping his ears and banging his forehead into the stone. Draco put a hand on Harry's arm when he tried to sit up further. The house elf wouldn't seriously hurt himself. He wouldn't be allowed to. He had to address the master who commanded him, and he had to be in good enough shape to do that.

Dobby sat up at last, and wiped at his streaming mouth and nose. Then he looked Draco in the eye, sniffled, and said, “Dobby—Dobby has heard Masters talk about Mr. Connor Potter. Dobby has heard them say that there is danger at school this year for Mr. Connor Potter. Master went and fetched a book. An *evil* book.” Dobby shivered. “Master put it at school here to harm Mr. Connor Potter this year.” He looked up, eyes large and pleading. “So Dobby tried to keep Mr. Connor Potter safe. Dobby is a *bad* elf.”

Draco stared, as shocked as if the house elf had flung a Blasting Curse at him. *An evil book.*

*He can't mean the diary Harry was talking about, the one that possessed him? He can't! Harry would hate me forever if—*

Then he glanced to the side, and saw Harry giving him a watery smile. He shook his head as if he knew exactly where Draco's thoughts were going.

“That book did come from your father,” he said quietly. “He was going to put it into Ginny Weasley's cauldron at Flourish and Blotts. I took it instead. I didn't know exactly what it was, but I knew it was probably Dark.” He shrugged as Draco stared at him. “I took the risk. I don't blame you, Draco. Will you *please* stop looking at me as if I should?” He squirmed under Draco's gaze and turned his face away.

“My father hurt you,” Draco whispered.

Harry whipped back around. “No! Draco, don't say that. I don't think he knew what it did, or why give it to Ginny? It would have made more sense to give it to me or Connor in the first place, since we're the ones that Voldemort would most want to possess—“

He stopped talking, and looked as shocked as Draco had. Draco couldn't appreciate it properly. He was reeling.

*The Dark Lord. Harry had the Dark Lord in his head. And my father was the one who gave him the book that made it possible.*

He found himself stumbling to his feet. Harry watched him with wide eyes and shook his head once.

“I haven't told anyone,” he whispered. “Your father isn't going to get into trouble, Draco. Please. I promise. I took the risk. I don't think he knew.”

“Master knew the book was evil,” Dobby volunteered from his cage, and then began beating his head on the floor again. “Dobby is *bad!* So *bad!*”

Draco just shook his head back at Harry. He wanted to scream and cry now, but for different reasons. His father had put Harry in danger, even after knowing how much Draco valued Harry, even after listening to him talk about Harry all summer.

“Harry,” he gasped. “Harry, I'm so sorry. I just—I have to think about this.”

“Draco, wait—“

But Draco bolted and ran out of the hospital wing. His heart and his head thrummed with something near to madness, and he was sobbing as he went. The only good thing he could hear behind him was the crack that meant Harry had let Dobby go.

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Harry stared at where Draco had been, and then closed his eyes. *That did not go well.*

“*The boy had to know about his father,*” said Sylarana, and then she crawled up his chest towards his face, and laid her head on his chin. “*He should know his father is loyal to the one who degrades snakes to do his bidding, and what his loyalty means.*”

“But I didn’t want him to find out like this,” Harry muttered. He rubbed his head. It ached, probably from lack of food. “I didn’t want to force him to choose between his friend and his family. This wouldn’t have happened if I’d just pushed him away from me in the first place. I—“

His voice choked off abruptly. Colors blurred and swam across his vision. He felt Sylarana give a single cry and then fall silent. When he reached out for her, someone swatted his reaching mental hand away.

*There. That is better.*

Harry tried to scream. He knew that voice. Tom Riddle.

*Not so strong without your little snake, are you?* Riddle purred at him. When Harry’s eyes closed briefly in a blink, he could see the young man, standing in front of the stone wall he had first seen him near, his face fixed in a smile. His eyes were bright, and his cloak blew around him in a storm of power. The power stabbed dark fingers into the stone walls and sandy floor. Harry didn’t have to think long to know that that power was being used to control him. *Now, I’ve waited long enough, and I’m bored, and I want to hurt you some more. Let’s have some fun.*

Harry felt himself stand and begin moving out of the hospital wing. Riddle laughed and adjusted the tendrils of power that he held. Harry’s walk altered slightly, as though he were a horse on a rein.

Harry fought. He used all the Occlumency that Snape had taught him against Riddle, flinging up visions to distract him, tempting memories to make him let go of his power, curtains that would part on deeper areas of Harry’s mind and let Riddle have a firmer grip. Riddle ignored them all, and finally snorted and clenched one hand shut. The storm of images ceased. Harry felt a firm door close on that part of his mind that knew how to practice Occlumency.

*I know you,* Riddle told him in a bored voice. *I’ve been in your mind all the time that Severus Snape—his voice on those last two words was absolutely vicious—tried to teach you any of the mental arts. When I have a firmer grasp on you, when I have become you, then I intend to wait for a session when he isn’t expecting it and leap on him.* Riddle was hissing now, and Harry thought the next words he spoke might have been in Parseltongue. *I’ve read your memories, Harry. Severus Snape is a traitor. He will pay. I swear he will pay.*

Harry tried again to get away, calling to Sylarana. She didn’t respond. Riddle snorted at him. *Did you think I would overlook her? Of course not. She is asleep, the way that I put her once before.*

Harry’s world collapsed inward like a dark star. *That means—that means—*

*That you were the one who Petrified the mad girl? Of course.* Riddle sighed. *I could simply have killed her, but I find that I prefer this way.* His voice turned abruptly cutting, slicing, making Harry writhe in pain in his head, but not in his body. His body was still walking steadily down the stairs and along the hallways, pausing in a hidden corner whenever someone might come by. *I want to hurt you, Harry, and Petrifying your friends one by one will do that to you.*

*I don’t understand,* Harry thought. He couldn’t win the struggle against Riddle, not yet. Now was the time to save his strength and try to figure out some way that his possession could still help Connor. *Why do you want to hurt me so specifically? Why not my brother?*

Riddle laughed, sounding like a dragon gone mad. *I know what you are, Harry. How do you think that I was able to hide in your head?* He paused a long moment, then added impatiently, *Your scar. A conduit to me. So peaceful here. So at home.*

*I can tell Snape about you,* Harry said, as they rounded the corner to the third floor. *He’ll get rid of you.*

*No,* Riddle disagreed cheerfully. *I don’t think he can. He never found me in all his searches of your head, did he? And he won’t get the chance. You’ll be suspected this time, Harry. Either you’ll tell them the truth, or they’ll catch you at it. I haven’t decided which is more fun yet,* he said.

*Then I'll be expelled*, Harry snarled. They were proceeding rapidly along the third floor now, and he readied himself to watch for the entrance to the Chamber. Perhaps he could throw all his strength against Riddle there, and resist opening it. *Fat lot of good I'll do you then.*

A flare of fire down the middle of his head silenced Harry. He doubled over briefly, clutching at what he guessed was his scar, and then kept walking.

*I don't like defiance*, Riddle said calmly, but with a dangerous undertone to his voice. *And you are defying me, Harry. How, when you are mine? You'll Petrify another friend of yours now. You'll turn the school, and most especially your brother, against you, even if you tell them the truth. Possessed by Lord Voldemort? Who would shelter you then? And then, when I'm strong enough, you'll bring me back to life. How does that sound, Harry? Months and months waiting for something to happen, while I gather my strength?*

Harry didn't answer. It would probably be counted as defiance again if he did. He kept to himself, breathing carefully, seeking areas of his mind that were beyond the control of those fingers of power.

He thought he had one. He readied himself. He had to see, if nothing else, where Tom Riddle was hiding in his head that Snape hadn't managed to find him.

*Sorry, can't let you see this part*, said Riddle abruptly, and the colors in front of him turned the shade of sunburn. Harry found himself blinking a moment later. He stood in front of a large puddle of water, once more, and this time the message cut into the wall said: *Who shall resist the Heir? Stand before him and despair!*

On the floor lay Neville Longbottom's Petrified body.

Harry sagged to his knees and clutched his burning head. That was as far as Riddle let him get before he reasserted control.

*You'll stay here until someone comes*, Riddle murmured. *I hope it will be your brother, but I suppose I can't plan on that.* He sighed. *Meanwhile, I think I should tell you what I'll do to your brother, when I have him in my power—in your power. It will be the same thing soon.*

*Fuck off!* Harry yelled, and accepted the pain that answered him. That was better than doing nothing. And he was still watching from the unoccupied corner of his mind.

Footsteps sounded abruptly around the corner. For a moment, Riddle stood to attention in Harry's mental vision; then he frowned and shook his head.

*It would be him*, he muttered. *I am not ready to face him, not yet.*

He dived. Harry watched him, and watched him go, and felt the control leave his body at the same moment as Sylarana came back to life, hissing furiously. Harry sagged to the ground, tears on his cheeks.

He heard the footsteps round the corner, pause, and then come running towards him. Someone knelt beside him and turned his head around. Harry found himself staring into Snape's face.

The pain in his head grew worse. Riddle was trying to incapacitate him before he could tell, Harry knew.

He held onto the strong stare of Snape's black eyes, and forced the words out before he let pain and guilt together whirl him into the darkness.

“Tom Riddle is hiding in the box.”

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### **Chapter Thirteen: A Grim Hope**

Later, Snape reflected that it would have all gone far differently if Draco hadn't caught him before he could bundle Harry into his office.

"Professor Snape."

He turned, because the tone was not one he had been expecting. He could have ignored the hysterical crying of a child, or a mere innocent question about Potions homework. Those were less important than finding some way to heal Harry and help him control Tom Riddle.

But Draco spoke in the coldly courteous tone of a pureblooded wizard, a tone that Snape had learned very early in life not to ignore. When he turned around, he blinked. For the first time, he could see Lucius Malfoy in Draco—Lucius as he had been the night he helped initiate Snape into the Death Eaters, Lucius the night he explained the power and glory of the cause.

Snape found himself with the urge to bow his head. That, of course, only irritated him further. He wasn't young anymore, and he certainly was no longer an idiot.

"Draco." He made his own tone scathingly cold. He might never be able to imitate Lucius Malfoy himself, but he had developed his own brand of ice to hurt people who made inane requests of him. "As you can see, I am quite busy—"

Draco caught sight of Harry then. His mask only grew firmer, which Snape did not understand. He had thought Harry and Draco were close, at least after the screaming tempter tantrums Draco had indulged in earlier that term because the boy had ignored him.

“He’s had another attack, hasn’t he?” he asked. “The Dark Lord’s in his head.”

Snape narrowed his eyes. *Has the idiot boy been telling the truth to everyone who crosses his path?* “That is not your concern, Draco,” he said. “Return to the Slytherin common room at once. You may tell anyone who asks that I will be unavailable for the rest of the day.” He attempted to brush past Draco. Harry was growing heavy in his arms, and the Locusta had not stopped hissing once. Snape did not want to have her wrapped around his neck again, as he suspected she would be if she thought for one moment that he was not doing everything possible to help Harry.

“It is my concern,” said Draco. “And take him to your private rooms, not your offices. I’ll come with you.”

“You dare to order *me*?” Snape swung around. Harry was in danger, but he could not allow such disrespect to go unpunished. “I will not hesitate to give you a detention.”

“I have to firecall my father,” said Draco, his face perfectly calm. “He was the one who gave the book that held the Dark Lord to Harry. And Harry didn’t tell anyone. He *protected* him.” There was some intense emotion behind his voice, but Snape could not tell what it was yet. “My father owes Harry a debt of honor. He is going to pay it, right now.”

Snape narrowed his eyes further, ignoring the shock that the news had given him. He would deal with it later. “Do you really think that your father will be of any help in prying the Dark Lord out of the boy’s head?”

“Not with that,” said Draco. “With the far-reaching consequences.” He only stood mutely when Snape stared at him, before adding, with a viciousness that made him sound more like a Death Eater than ever, “That, and I want him to see what he did.”

Snape decided that he could not waste time arguing. Harry was moving, about to wake up. His shields of guilt and self-loathing would rise then. Snape wanted to peer into the boy’s mind while he still slept and see if Tom Riddle was lurking about. “Very well,” he said, and swept down the corridor to his offices, whispering the password to the wall. It slid open.

Draco followed him into the room and went immediately to the hearth. Snape decided he was not going to watch. Draco would oppose Lucius and lose. But his concern still had to be Harry.

He laid the boy out on a low divan and paused to watch his breathing. Harry’s scar stood out on his forehead, more than the general shape of it lost under a thin film of blood. Snape hissed between his teeth. *A curse scar. Of course. That must be what gives the connection between Harry and the Dark Lord. I do not think I can remove it, but I might at least ease the pain.*

He reached out and laid one hand on Harry’s temple. When necessary, he could use his Legilimency without eye contact. It would leave him with a pounding headache a day or so afterwards, but that was the price he paid. And there was no price he would not pay at the moment to be free of Tom Riddle. Snape suspected that, if he had shared the boy’s memories, he knew about Snape’s betrayal. He himself was in danger.

“*Legilimens*,” he whispered.

He sank into a mind gone far too still. Snape glanced about, and recoiled. The reaction was one of instinctive shock, fear, and disgust. A moment later, he thought about what pain Harry must be feeling. He knew he was clenching his teeth, a muscle jumping in his jaw.

He forced the physical sensations away. He had to be utterly concentrated to accomplish this.

He moved slowly forward. Around him, the edges of webs flapped and unraveled in a foul-smelling wind. The Locusta was woven all through the boy’s mind, a recklessly bright thread that had only sunk in further since Snape had last

looked. The plunging center of Harry's thoughts remained the solid block of protecting his brother, but more webs than ever were woven about it now. Snape thought it looked as though some thoughts had struggled to escape, and Harry's training had tied them down.

And the box was there.

Snape shivered at the sight of it. The padlocks on it had grown more extensive, and he could feel the touch of Dark magic on the locks that was not Harry's. Tom Riddle had been here. He was indeed hiding in the box. Snape steeled himself. He would have to force it open.

*"Do not."*

The voice was cold, and everywhere, and beat on his skin like sunshine. Snape turned. The golden thread had moved towards him. For the first time, he heard the Locusta's voice wash over him.

*"If you open the box now, you destroy him. Tom Riddle is waiting. He would prefer not to fight you now, but open the box and he will, desperately. At the very best, that would tear Harry's mind apart at the seams. At the worst, Riddle would gain command of Harry's magic and possess him completely."*

Snape considered that, or tried to consider it; the thought sent up one long scream in his mind. He shook his head. "But if we leave the box intact, then Riddle can hide and grow stronger."

*"I know."* The Locusta arranged herself in front of said box, her head half-lowered. *"But there is no choice. At least Harry is alive now, and while he lives, he can fight."* The voice acquired a tone of flat amusement. *"While he has me, he will fight."* Her head swung towards him again. *"But if you crack the box, you break his safeguards. You bring Tom Riddle. You bring the emotions that Harry has been hiding. You bring out darkness."*

Snape did not like the way she said that last word. "You do not speak of Dark magic."

*"I speak of Harry's unattractive emotions blended with his magic, and released all at once, and under Riddle's control."* The Locusta sounded impatient. *"Think of that, Snape, if you will."*

Snape let out a slow, shaky breath. "But then what do you suggest we do?"

*"Ask Harry. It's his mind. And he's waking up now, so he will want to talk to you anyway."* The Locusta lowered her head and twined herself about the box like a second lock. *"I will prevent Harry from putting any more emotions into this thing."*

The webs around Snape abruptly contracted, flinging him outward and to his knees. He opened his eyes. Harry was gazing back at him, wild-eyed and panting. He turned his head away, his face a mask of concentration, and then let out a soft cry.

Snape didn't understand what he said next, since it was in Parseltongue, but apparently his Locusta did not yield and let him store his emotions away. Harry's next tactic was to hide. He hunched into the divan, his shoulders rising up around his ears, his hands clasped in front of him. Snape could hear his breath rushing fast, mingled with small moans of desperation and pain.

"What is wrong with the boy?"

Snape turned abruptly. Lucius Malfoy was just stepping from his hearth, dusting soot off his cloak and glancing about with a slightly curled lip, as though he had to disdain Snape's rooms on principle. His gaze came back to Harry, and he smiled slightly.

"What's wrong is with him is that he has the Dark Lord in his head."

Draco stepped forward to confront his father, face still a mask of perfect ice. Lucius glanced at his son, then looked at him again for one long moment. Snape saw no yielding or curiosity in his expression, but he did frown, looking like a man who had laid his wand down somewhere and did not want to use a Summoning Charm to find it.

“What are you speaking of, Draco?” Lucius asked. “You coaxed me with talk of a debt of honor, but I cannot see that I owe a debt to a child who cannot even control himself.” Harry uttered another moan, more urgent, as though in answer. Snape turned back to him and saw tears leaking down his face, mingled with a thin stream of blood that had probably come from the scar.

Snape hesitated for a long moment, then blew out his own breath in irritation—with himself, with Harry, with the situation—and moved forward to arrange his arms carefully around the boy. The Locusta, lying motionless on Harry’s left shoulder, brushed against him but did not bite him. Snape, more grateful for that than he should be, sat back carefully and balanced Harry against his chest.

“Hush, Harry,” he said softly. “It is all right. We will fight him.” Harry stiffened and tried to pull away. Snape held him closer. So long as the Locusta didn’t react, he thought Harry wasn’t in danger of injuring himself or anyone else with his actions. “Hold still,” he whispered, forcing affection, or a parody of it, into his voice. “You need to be held.”

Harry went still, though Snape had no idea if it was his voice or what his Locusta might have said in his mind or something else. He was still breathing hard, and his heart thrummed against Snape’s chest, fast as a small bird’s. Snape gently stroked the boy’s hair back from his face, relieved to see that the scar had stopped bleeding. Harry had his eyes clenched tightly shut. From the look of it, he never wanted to open them again.

“The debt of honor, Father, is one that you incurred when you gave the book to Harry, and then he told no one of it.”

Snape looked up. Draco had moved between Snape and his father, or more precisely, between Harry and his father.

He was holding his wand.

Snape narrowed his eyes. He understood only a very little of what was happening here, but if it was what he thought it was...

“I see no reason to hold myself responsible for a child’s foolish pride,” said Lucius. His gray eyes contained no emotion except boredom, now. Even the slight frown Snape had seen was gone. “He could have told his guardians that I gave him the book, or, more precisely, that I dropped the book into the youngest Weasley brat’s cauldron and he chose to pick it up. I would have weathered the storm. I fear no wrath of Potters.”

“He *chose* not to,” said Draco. “Dumbledore knows about this possession by the Dark Lord, and Harry still concealed you from him. Do you really think that you could have stood up to Dumbledore, Father?”

Lucius hissed softly. “Draco,” he said, shifting so that his gaze rested on his son alone, “I will tolerate no disrespect.”

Draco glared right back. Snape had never seen his student so still, his eyes so wide, or his stance so poised. His voice did not falter for a moment. “This is not disrespect, Father. This is honest truth. Harry Potter has gone out of his way to grant the Malfoy family his protection and patronage—“

“*Patronage?*” Lucius repeated the word in his shock, and then clamped his mouth shut. A faint blush touched his cheeks. Snape dimly remembered that such a flinch would lose him a step in the pureblood dance. As if to confirm that, Draco gave a smile as faint as the blush, as cold and distant as the moon.

“Yes, patronage,” he said, as if savoring the word. “He has protected you from Dumbledore, Father. He has protected me, first from the wand of Ron Weasley and then *from his own brother*. The Boy-Who-Lived ordered him to stand aside, Father, and he would not. He tried as hard as he could to prevent me from finding out that you were the one who had given him the book in the first place. And do you know why?” Draco’s head rose enough that Snape could see his pulse. It beat slow and serene, a definite contrast to the pulse he could feel racing against his chest.

Lucius shook his head, as if hypnotized.

“Because he did not want to force me to choose between my friend and my family,” said Draco, every word sharp. “He wanted me to believe that you were still honorable, that you had not given such a Dark artifact into the hand of one who had never done you harm—and who was my friend besides. He cared for my well-being, for my safety, for my lineage.” He paused. “He has been a better protector of our honor than you have been, Father.”

There was a long silence after that. Snape found that he could not quite watch the two Malfoys. He gave his attention to Harry instead, stroking the boy’s hair and murmuring reassurances. He didn’t let himself hear the reassurances. He could not live with himself if he did.

Harry quieted at last. Then he spoke, in a voice scraped so raw with tears and rage that Snape was surprised he could speak at all.

“Mr. Malfoy.” That made Lucius stare at him. “I never meant for you to find out about this. I am sorry. I don’t want the Malfoys in my debt, and you need not fulfill any claim that Draco has made on you.” Harry leaned around Snape’s neck to glare at Draco. “Leave it, please, Draco. I would rather you choose your family.”

Draco shook his head. “I already made my choice, Harry. You had your say. You undertook your actions to spare me and keep the Malfoy honor safe. Now I’m doing what I want to do.” He turned, degree by degree, until he was facing his father. “And I want the Malfoy honor back.”

Snape saw the shot go home. Lucius turned white about the lips. Then each cheek flushed with a spot of red, and he inclined his head to Harry.

“Mr. Potter, I am sorry for whatever inconvenience you may have suffered from that book,” he said. “I will swear on the Malfoy name that I did not know what it was. I was instructed to fetch the book from a secret hiding place and insure that it reached Hogwarts. Allowing you to take it reveals a level of carelessness unbecoming a Malfoy, the more so when the one who came into possession of it was a friend of my son’s who has always treated us with grace. I beg your forgiveness.”

Harry nodded. “I don’t need anything from you, Mr. Malfoy—“

“But you do,” Draco interrupted. “Harry, when they find someone else Petrified, which I assume must have happened from the state you’re in, they’ll try to expel you. My father is among the governors of the school. He can keep them from doing it.” Draco looked up at his father. “He can *persuade* them otherwise.”

Snape held his breath. He feared Draco had gone too far. But, after a long moment, Lucius smiled, and actually knelt down and embraced his son.

“If I must be out-danced by someone,” he murmured, “I would rather it were my son. Well *done*, Draco.”

“Thank you, Father,” said Draco, and embraced him back. Snape shook his head. Despite devoting himself to their ideals for a time when he had joined the Death Eaters, he still found pureblood families hard to understand.

“I go now to repay my debt of honor,” said Lucius, and inclined his head to Harry. “Mr. Potter. I look forward to our meeting again, under...less extreme circumstances.”

Snape glanced sidelong at Harry, certain his face would wear a look of horror. But Harry actually had a faint smile of his own. “Thank you, Mr. Malfoy,” he said. “I don’t blame you for the diary, you know. I knew your loyalties when I became friends with your son.”

And he probably really didn’t blame Lucius, Snape thought. He shook his head again. There were times Harry acted more like a pureblood than Draco did. *Although today*, he thought, his gaze drifting back and forth between the two boys, *I believe they are evenly matched*.

Lucius nodded slowly, his eyes narrowed and distant. “Draco has told me that you are a Parselmouth,” he said abruptly. “Is that true?”

Harry closed his eyes, as if concentration, and began to hiss. A moment later, his jumper wriggled, and his Locusta pushed her head around the edge of it, hissing back at him.

Lucius's eyes narrowed further. Snape watched him appreciate the snake, and knew that he understood his old friend and old enemy this time. Lucius had been a Slytherin long before he had been a Death Eater. He would respect the gift of Parseltongue, find it fascinating...

*Be drawn to it?* Snape thought as he watched Lucius's eyes follow the dart of the Locusta's tongue. *Perhaps.*

Lucius nodded once. "I shall look forward to watching your exploits in the future, Mr. Potter," he said, and then swept back to the fireplace. He Flooed out as Snape watched, and the flames snapped green briefly around him. Draco watched him go, his head high and his neck unbending.

Then he turned around, came over, and tried to pry Harry out of Snape's arms. Snape gladly let the boy go. He would help Harry, for their sakes and the sake of the school and the sake of the war, but he was not meant to hold little boys who had Tom Riddle in their heads. Draco, cradling Harry against him and not moving until the other boy gave in and held him back, was a much better choice.

Draco met Snape's eyes over Harry's head. "What are we going to do?" he asked. One of his hands rested on the back of Harry's neck, fingers tangling in his hair. Snape wondered idly if Draco realized how possessive the gesture was.

"We must find some way of fighting Tom Riddle," said Snape, when he had cleared his throat. "He is hiding in a box in Harry's head, one that Harry has used to contain strong emotions." He wondered for a moment about the wisdom of speaking of this in front of Draco, but the boys had shared enough in the last few minutes that he would have felt odd hinting about. And Draco could not help at all if he did not have specific information. "We cannot open the box without releasing Riddle, who will fight us, and we would also, his snake assures me, destroy Harry's sanity."

"That choice is gone, then," said Draco, in a voice that showed, so far as he was concerned, it had never been an option. "So what else can we do?"

Snape leaned back and touched his fingers together. "I have been teaching Harry Occlumency," he said. "We could try to construct shields within his mind, to hold Riddle. But I fear they would not endure forever. And we cannot destroy the box for fear of what would happen, and we cannot drain the box a memory at a time, which would be my preferred course. I fear Riddle would try to prevent that." He remembered what the snake had said, and shuddered. *I cannot fight the Dark Lord, young or not, in Harry's head, with him having access to all or even part of Harry's power.*

"Those are out, too, then," said Draco, sounding undaunted. "What else is left?"

"To grow strong enough to fight him."

Harry had lifted his head and finally started to strain backwards against Draco's embrace. Draco hesitated, then let his arms fall. Harry turned around, his hands clenched in front of him, his face half-streaked with blood from his scar.

His eyes were furious, with the kind of deep and focused rage that Snape knew Harry would ordinarily have put in his box. He breathed deeply. Harry was frightening, but not as frightening as Riddle, and if he contemplated one without fainting, then he could face the other.

"I know what has to be done," Harry told Snape. "I don't know *how* to do it. But you'll teach me, won't you?"

Snape lifted his head. "I will. I will *not* see Voldemort returned." He heard Draco gasp softly, and wondered if it was at this final declaration of his loyalty or because he had spoken the Dark Lord's name. He did not care. He could see nothing at the moment but Harry's eyes, the fury in them, and the need to answer that fury.

He found himself remembering Harry's talents in Potions, on his broomstick, at defensive spells. Harry had used them all well, but without delving as far into them as he could have, because his attention was always elsewhere, on his twin. The same thing had happened with Occlumency; for all that he knew it was important, he had passively resisted the lessons, Snape thought, because he could not immediately apply them to saving his brother.

Now that Harry knew he must defeat Tom Riddle or die or become his brother's enemy...

Snape felt a hard, grim hope catch him about the heart and begin to squeeze.

"Then I know how I'll do it, too," said Harry. "First of all, Professor, can you surround the box with a shield so that Riddle doesn't know what we're doing?" His eyes had frozen hard. "I don't want him to know what we're doing."

"I can try," said Snape carefully. "I was a better Occlumens than he was a Legilimens, or I would not have survived. But you realize that he may be listening to us now, and so know the plan?"

"Do it," said Harry.

"You trust me this much?" Snape had to ask, because he could not help himself.

"I don't trust you at all," said Harry frankly. "But I know it has to be done. It's for Connor. He's the only reason I would ever agree to do something like this, the only reason that I wouldn't go and give myself up to Dumbledore. Dumbledore would want to put me in St. Mungo's or something for my own safety." Harry shook his head. "My safety is less important than Connor's."

Snape noticed Draco about to say something before he caught himself. He arched a brow. *The boy has already shown loyalty to a fellow Slytherin, to at least one person besides his brother. I wonder if he noticed that?*

But the important thing at the moment was doing what Harry asked of him, so Snape met his eyes and intoned, "*Legilimens.*"

In moments, he was back among the foul, fluttering webs, but this time Harry was with him, urging him forward, parting the barriers that would have naturally stood in Snape's way. Snape watched him at it even as he swam towards the box and prepared to weave the shields. Harry seemed to have accepted, finally, that the art of Occlumency was about motion and not stillness. The webs almost danced in the wind of his power, and that same wind rose behind Snape and urged him forward the last few lengths to the box.

*The boy will be a natural Occlumens, if he puts this much effort into it, Snape thought as he laid his hands around the box. And he will, if he thinks it will save his brother.*

He had made many mistakes, Snape had to admit, but none as profound as trying to use Harry against his loyalty to Connor. That would not break. Snape would remember it in the future.

He began the shield.

He had been a Death Eater, and then a spy, and as a result he could safely say that he knew Voldemort better than anyone alive. Dumbledore might come close, but he was too much a part of the Light. He could have matched Voldemort at Dark magic; he had chosen not to exercise his power in that direction.

Snape, meanwhile, had once reveled in casting whatever strength of Dark spells his Lord would let him get away with, and had invented several potions that Voldemort had delighted in, all for the purpose of causing pain.

He knew what to make the shields out of.

He wove memories of Harry weeping on the divan, his face covered with blood. He inscribed the agony he had seen on Harry's face in the moments before Riddle knocked him unconscious, as he whispered that Riddle was in the box. He recalled, deliberately, the helplessness that had assaulted Harry when his own Locusta prevented him from dealing with his emotions as he was used to doing.

The snake, wrapped around the box still, hissed then. Snape nearly faltered. But she went silent again, and watched as the memories rotated around each other and assembled.

Now came the difficult part. Snape worked fast but delicately, not allowing himself to falter, his magic answering his mind the moment a thought came into being. He trailed threads from the edges of the memories, linking them together, using the webs of Harry's mind for inspiration. So that Riddle would not grow suspicious after he saw the same memories over and over, Snape spun slight variations of them, similar images of Harry in pain and agony that would content and fascinate Voldemort's sadism. He arranged the threads behind each other. They would spring into view slowly, and make Riddle have a sense that time was passing and still Harry was writhing in anguish and terror of the possession.

Snape wove a final cloud of fog as a shield around it all, and as a last-minute precaution. Should Riddle burst free of both Harry's and the snake's restraints, the fog would baffle him and give them at least a few moments' warning.

Snape tugged the threads into place, used one moment more to admire his fine work, and then launched the shield.

Images of Harry in pain began to play around the box. Snape closed his eyes, exhausted, and let himself fall out from the boy's mind.

He must have been more exhausted than he thought, as he went unconscious for a few moments. When he came to, the boys were arguing quietly.

"...cannot possibly be as fine as you look." That was Draco.

"Fine?" Harry's voice was edged with something Snape had never heard from him before, something that might almost have been humor. "Of course I'm not fine. But I can put it aside, Draco. I have to. I have to focus on Connor, on helping him and protecting him and saving him. When—when I can collapse, I promise you, I will. When I've driven Riddle out of my head." He gave a sound half-snort, half-sob. "I don't have the box to put my emotions in any more."

"That's not good enough," Draco demanded, and Snape opened his eyes to see the boy move over in front of him. "Professor Snape," Draco said, "is there a way that you can connect me to Harry's mind? Can you let me watch over the box? Can't I help *somehow*?" That last was the closest to a child Snape had heard him sound in an hour.

"Since you are not an Occlumens, it would take deep trust—" Snape began.

"I trust Draco," Harry cut in.

Snape did not understand himself at all, because that statement gave him hope. He sat up and squinted at Harry. Harry gazed back. His emotions were clear across his eyes, fear and resignation with that adamant fury and resolve cutting it all, and Snape caught a glimpse of the possible future in that moment.

It was *only* a glimpse, and he told himself to distrust it. Harry would probably still try to go back to the box, from sheer force of habit. Riddle was powerful, and they might not win. Should they win this battle, there would be hundreds of others to fight.

But Snape saw, in that glimpse, something grander and more glorious than a world without Voldemort, or even a brighter reputation for Slytherin House. He saw the whole wizarding world changed, transformed into something better. He saw, for once, a powerful wizard who could bend his strength to improving matters with all his will, and not crack and change his ideals into a reign of terror, or cloak it in riddles and talk of sacrifice.

It gave him hope. It broke parts of his heart that he had not thought were still there.

*It is making you sound like a babbling idiot*, Snape told himself, and nodded shortly. "Then there is a way that I can link Mr. Malfoy to your mind, and myself as well," he said. "There will be three guardians on the box, then, with your snake and ourselves—"

"Four," said Harry quietly. "It will be hard, I know, but I *will* do this."

Snape had to turn his head away. He was liable to show an entirely embarrassing reaction if he continued to look at Harry.

“Four,” he agreed, voice rough, and they would only think it was with sarcasm, wouldn’t they? He got to his feet. “There is a potion to be prepared as well as the mental link. I suggest that both of you rest for right now. Stay here. We are not telling the Headmaster about this, I presume?”

“We aren’t,” Harry agreed. “He’d never let us do it. And, Professor Snape?”

Snape turned and looked at him. Those green eyes cut through him again.

“Thank you,” Harry said.

Yes, Snape thought, matters would have resolved rather differently if he had taken Harry to his office and Draco had not stopped him.

But, he was inclined to think as he tried not to feel hope, the way they had fallen out was better.

~\*~\*~\*~\*~\*~\*

## **Chapter Fourteen: Paying the Piper**

Harry told himself he was ready when someone knocked on the door of Snape’s office.

He wasn’t, not really. He could feel Sylarana shifting where she held the box, agreeing with him, and the distant, prowling guardian presences of Draco and Snape near the back of his mind. Both had their eyes focused on the door. Harry was faintly surprised to notice that he couldn’t tell much difference between their emotions. He had assumed Draco would feel distinctly annoyed, but Snape felt annoyed in almost the same measure. Harry didn’t think their irritation came from the same source, though.

He took a deep breath, throat still tingling from the potion he’d swallowed which bound him and Draco together, and then walked over to the door and opened it.

Professor McGonagall stood there, her eyes aimed higher than his head and her mouth just opening to say something. Then she lowered her gaze, and an expression of blank surprise washed over her face before she turned it into sheer blankness. Harry watched her and waited.

Regret drummed in his head. McGonagall had been pleasant to him when her entire House suspected him of evil. That would have to change now, though. Now, one of her Gryffindors had been Petrified.

McGonagall said nothing about Harry being the embodiment of evil, however. She only said, "Mr. Potter. This saves me the trouble of a search. I was going to ask Severus if he had seen you." Her eyes darted to Snape, too quickly for Harry to read the meaning in them. "The Headmaster wants to see you right away."

Harry nodded. "I thought he might, Professor McGonagall." He scowled at himself when he heard his voice. *Must* it sound so breathy, as if he actually feared what Dumbledore would do to him?

*You don't need to fear what he will do*, Draco said, his voice seeming to spring from the left side of Harry's skull. *My father is going to take care of everything*. The iron-hard faith in his voice made Harry smile.

Professor McGonagall gave him an odd glance as she escorted him out into the hall, Draco and Snape remaining behind. Harry suspected the unusually free play of emotion on his face had caused it.

*What? Is she surprised to see me feeling?*

He calmed his irritation. It took effort, far more than it would have when he could use the box, and the irritation remained just below the surface, as if someone speaking harshly to him would make it erupt again.

*Do other people feel like this all the time?*

The thought made him experience a vague nausea, and for a long moment he didn't hear the question Professor McGonagall was asking him.

"...must ask if you've been with Professor Snape for the last hour, Harry," she said at last.

Harry coughed and focused on her face. His experience was still shot through with bright streamers of trailing emotion, including resentment. He forced himself calm again. It would not do to ache like this when he faced Dumbledore, for all that he did resent the Headmaster for promising and failing to keep him safe. "Yes, ma'am, I was."

Professor McGonagall glanced around once. They were in the corridor that led to the Headmaster's office, Harry noticed, but no one was with them. Professor McGonagall sighed and knelt down in front of him. Harry stiffened, ready to bolt if it looked like she would hex him for his actions.

"Mr. Potter," she said softly, "did Professor Snape do something to you? You look—odd. Peaky. Not like yourself."

Harry shook his head. "No, ma'am." *Unless you mention the little matter of shields of pain built around a box in my head and creating a potion and a bond for a second person to be in my head, and then leaving a bit of his attention there himself to hold the shields*. He swallowed a giggle that he suspected would turn into full-blown hysterical laughter if he let it out. Then he paused. That thought was unexpected. Harry could not remember the last time he had laughed.

Professor McGonagall gazed at him for a long time, then nodded, troubled. "If you say so, Mr. Potter," she said, standing, "I think I can trust you."

Harry winced. He would have liked to tell her the truth, of all people. She had been kind to him. She seemed wise, and not just in the matter of Transfiguration theory. She could help him.

But her help would almost certainly consist of urging him to trust the Headmaster and accept *his* presence in Harry's head instead, and Harry did not intend to do that. He trusted Sylarana and Draco. He didn't trust Snape, but he knew the man was necessary to maintain the shields. The Headmaster he didn't even trust to serve the agenda of keeping this safe and secret and trying to fight Riddle out of Harry's head. Dumbledore was too unpredictable, and Harry hadn't managed to work out what his ultimate goal was yet.

He was so involved in that kind of thought that he didn't notice they had arrived at the statue, nor who waited there, until Professor McGonagall said, "Mr. Potter," in a sharp voice. Harry glanced up.

Connor turned around from the gargoyles, face red with startlement for a moment before it fell into wariness. His gaze jabbed his brother.

Harry would have looked calmly back, or sorrowfully, he thought, imploring Connor to trust him again, only a few hours ago. Now his brain raced and sparkled with anger bordering on the urge to scream and throw things.

*How could you distrust me like that? I'm your brother. You were swearing that you would trust me when I was put in Slytherin and when I showed you I was a Parselmouth. Yet you turned against me the moment my friend's father did something wrong and I refused to let Ron hurt my friend. Why, Connor? What is it about that one thing specifically that set you off? I don't know, and it's wrong, and it hurts—*

He halted the flow of his thoughts as he realized Connor was backing away from him. His brother had actually drawn his wand before McGonagall said, "Mr. Potter! That is *quite* enough. Why are you here?"

"I have to see the Headmaster, Professor McGonagall, ma'am," said Connor, looking as if he wanted to glare at Harry around her robes again, and not quite daring. "There's been another Petrification. Neville, this time."

"Yes, Mr. Potter, I am aware of that," said McGonagall. "I am taking your brother to see the Headmaster now."

Connor's face transformed like the sunrise. "Does that mean he did it?" he asked. "Does that mean I was right?"

*You were right, Connor, and you didn't deserve to be. You never deserved to be. All those times that I—*

Harry stamped down the flow of his thoughts again and reduced them to another lava flow hiding beneath a scab, frightened at the turn they had taken. His brother was making a mistake now. That did not mean that he had made mistakes his whole life, as Harry might have shouted out if he decided to speak right now. Indeed, Connor's judgment had been clearer than that of many children his age. Harry could picture other brothers turning their backs the moment they found out a sibling was a Parselmouth.

*You have no right to feel like that,* he told himself firmly. *None. Anger is one thing, irrationality another.*

"Mint Humbugs," McGonagall told the statue, and it leaped aside. Harry followed her towards the staircase. He was breathing softly now. He could make it up the stairs. He would count the stones in the walls, and watch the way that the professor's robes swished ahead of him, and he would ignore Connor.

Then Connor spoke again.

"You didn't answer me, Professor McGonagall," he said, voice that of a teacher chiding a student for an oversight. "Does that mean that I was right? Does that mean that he was the one who's the next Dark Lord?" He nodded his head. Harry saw it as a glimpse of blurred motion in the corner of his eye. "I knew it. No one could have *that* many Dark traits by coincidence. Be Sorted into Slytherin and be a Parselmouth, maybe, but not stand against the Boy-Who-Lived."

The flood of his rage was instant. It didn't help that neither Syllarana nor Snape and Draco, though his sense of their presences had faded with distance, objected to the flood.

Harry swung around and glared at Connor. This time, Connor blinked and fell silent. Then he smirked and opened his mouth to add something else.

"*Silencio*," Harry snapped at him. Connor blinked one time and put a hand over his mouth. His resulting wail—apparently it was a wail—made no sound at all, of course. Harry stepped back and let his shoulders rest against the wall, never taking his eyes off his brother.

That wasn't enough. He wanted to use his magic in other ways, or maybe his fists, to make Connor hurt as much as he'd hurt Harry that week.

But he couldn't. There was a professor here with him, a professor who was looking at him strangely.

"I did not realize that you actually *could* perform wandless magic, Mr. Potter," she said.

Harry nodded. He hadn't meant to reveal that, but it was revealed now, and there was no turning back time. He just watched his brother instead, and breathed. The shame would be along any moment now. It hadn't come yet, but it would come. He was wrong to use magic against his brother like that. He would have been wrong to use it against any student without cause, but most especially the Boy-Who-Lived, the one he was sworn to protect. He knew that. Any moment now, surely, he would experience the red face and the apologetic stammer that were the natural consequences of such an act.

*It isn't happening yet, he reassured himself. But it will happen.*

McGonagall spoke at last. "Ten points from Slytherin for hexing a fellow student, Mr. Potter," she said at last. "And ten points from Gryffindor for accusing a fellow student without proof, Mr. Potter. *Finite Incantatem.*"

Connor let out a loud, angry breath, and stood staring at Harry for a moment. Harry just looked back. He didn't think his brother knew how to accept this open attack. Of course, given that he hadn't known how to accept Harry standing up for himself earlier in the week, this would only be harder.

*I wasn't standing up for myself, Harry thought. I had betrayed him.*

His mind felt very odd right now. He seemed to believe that line of reasoning and disbelieve it at the same time. He could feel his heart thundering in his ears. He could hear Sylarana's mental hissing, turned almost to a croon. He could feel his magic, swirling about him in exaltation.

None of them seemed to argue that he had betrayed Connor. The old training said that of course he had, and he knew that Connor would write to their mother almost immediately and tell her so, and then Lily would write a letter to Harry, and he would feel crushing disappointment in himself when he read it. He *knew* all that was going to happen, and always before that clear vision would make him recoil and beg forgiveness.

It was not happening now. Oh, doubtless he would feel the shame and disappointment in time, but that was in the future. For now, he savored the uncertainty that crossed Connor's face.

"Go back to Gryffindor Tower, Mr. Potter," said Professor McGonagall at last, her voice weary. "I will come and speak with you later."

Connor turned and trotted off, back stiff and head high. Harry watched him go. He wanted to say something, but he had no idea if it would come out as an insult or a cry for reconciliation, so he kept his mouth shut.

"This way, Mr. Potter."

Professor McGonagall led him up the stairs again. Harry walked with her, and listened to his magic singing. He had thought himself the victim of odd thoughts this summer, when Snape's exercises had led him to attribute a strength and motivation to his magic that he wasn't certain existed.

Now he thought it was no coincidence. He had acted without the box, and his magic moved around him like a stream of singing birds, brushing him with warm feathers. Harry knew that might not be an entirely positive thing, but for now he would enjoy it.

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"Ah, my dear boy," said Dumbledore. He was sitting behind his desk when they entered, and leaned across the desk, smiling pleasantly, when he saw them. "Minerva, leave us, please. I would like to speak to Mr. Potter alone."

Harry cocked his head. He could feel the slight edge of magic that rode those words, briefly parting his hair like a thrown blade. It didn't bother him, as it was aimed for McGonagall, but it was interesting that the Headmaster felt he had to make sure that the Gryffindor Head of House would not stay.

McGonagall shut the office door behind her, and Dumbledore turned his attention to Harry.

*He is too strong a Legilimens for you to conceal your thoughts from him, Sylarana advised him. Bow your head slightly. He'll be looking for shame. You can feign that.*

Or not, Harry added. Shame was waiting there, too, another of the emotions that he could reach up and snag from the mental air—though it really should have been there earlier when he confronted Connor. He was ashamed that Riddle had managed to gain such a foothold in his head, that he had not been strong enough to resist. He had trained to fight against Voldemort since he was a child. He had lost the first battle, or perhaps the second one if he counted last year, spectacularly. That was something to be ashamed of.

He felt a blush heat his cheeks, and then the shame hit him, so that he was actually feeling it. Harry winced. Why *had* Riddle held him so easily? Could it be that the similarities between him and Voldemort went deeper than one shared Dark gift?

*I wish you would stop thinking Parseltongue was Dark, Sylarana complained in his head. I am not accustomed to being kept in the background and scorned or ignored, as you know. I am only agreeing to stay in your head for right now because someone has to keep this damn box shut.*

Harry concealed his smile. The Headmaster would hardly understand it if he saw it.

“What happened, Harry?” Dumbledore’s voice was steady, and infinitely reassuring. It made Harry relax, and then he reminded himself that the Headmaster wanted that.

*Why do you distrust Dumbledore this much?* That sounded like Draco, but it could as easily have been the voice of his own thoughts, his younger and more innocent self, the one that had trusted the Headmaster because he had been a Gryffindor and was the leader of the Light side.

*He doesn't share my goals,* Harry answered, and then said, “It was Tom Riddle, sir. I felt his presence this time. There’s no doubt that he’s the one who’s managing to Petrify those students.”

Dumbledore went still for a moment. *Which didn't he expect?* Harry thought, shocking himself with his own cynicism. *The information, or that I would admit it?*

Dumbledore moved past his own shock quickly, though, and sighed. “That is bad news, my boy,” he said. “I fear that many parents will be clamoring for your expulsion after this. One Petrification, in which no one could prove the culprit, they were willing to let go. But another one, in only a week... And you say that you know that Tom Riddle was behind this one.”

Harry nodded. “I felt him in my head, sir.”

Dumbledore froze for longer this time. Harry was sure that this news was completely unexpected.

The Headmaster sighed again, but the sound was shaky. He extended a hand. His phoenix rose from his perch and soared across the distance between them, landing on the Headmaster’s shoulder and laying his head against Dumbledore’s cheek. The Headmaster turned his face into the feathers. Harry blinked, moved against his will by the display of despair.

*That is what he wants you to think,* said Sylarana.

*Probably,* Harry admitted, and waited until Dumbledore gently sent the phoenix back to his perch and turned to face Harry once again.

“I am sorry, my boy,” Dumbledore whispered. “I thought, from what I had heard about this book that you held, that Tom Riddle’s home was the diary. He could only venture forth from that for short periods of time. Instead, it seems that he has made his home in your mind. I am sorry,” he repeated. “That is supposed to be impossible.”

“I think I’m used to impossible by now,” said Harry softly. “It should have been impossible for Connor to survive the Killing Curse, too, shouldn’t it, sir?”

Dumbledore nodded. He looked distracted. “But there remains the question of what will happen to you, Harry,” he said. “If many of the parents ask that you be removed from the school, I may have no choice but to do so. And I must consider it in the best interests of other students as well. If you are gone from Hogwarts, the Chamber cannot open, and the attacks will cease.”

“Where would you put me?” Harry asked, as though a voice had not opened up just behind his forehead to chant *No, no, no!* He could conceal his emotions better from the Headmaster than from Connor, he thought, as long as he didn’t look Dumbledore in the eyes. The Headmaster could be infuriating, but he didn’t tug and pull on the chains of Harry’s heart in the way that Connor did.

“St. Mungo’s would be the best place,” Dumbledore murmured. “There are skilled healers of the mind there, who helped many of the former Death Eaters who had been under Imperius.”

Knowing how many Death Eaters had managed to escape imprisonment by proclaiming they had been under the Imperius curse, Harry was skeptical about these skilled healers of the mind. He went for an attack instead. His road lay clear before him. Dumbledore didn’t have Connor’s status as a beloved brother who simply didn’t understand Harry, nor Draco’s status as a confusing friend or Sylarana’s status as a Locusta willing to speak with him. He was only an obstacle in the way of protecting Connor, and that meant Harry could lay aside some of the confusing emotions that poured through his mind whenever he made a move and concentrate on defying Dumbledore.

“But what would happen if they tried to help me, and Tom Riddle possessed me?” Harry asked. “It’s true that he couldn’t open the Chamber at St. Mungo’s, sir, but he told me that he could use my magic if he possessed me completely.” He was sure that Dumbledore’s pallor this time was not feigned. “Would they really be able to stand up to an angry young Voldemort in a hospital? And what happens if Riddle found some of the patients who were there to be treated?”

Dumbledore closed his eyes. “I am sorry, Harry,” he said. “This should not have been able to happen.”

His words carried another edge of magic this time, one that Harry thought the Headmaster had sent forth automatically. He wanted to make Harry believe that he *was* sorry, and that this would never have happened if only things were a little bit better. Harry ducked the power. He didn’t want to believe the way that Dumbledore wanted him to believe. It was probably true, but if it was true, then he could come to understand that for himself.

“There is another solution,” Dumbledore was saying now. “You may be able to stay in Hogwarts and undergo the theoretical part of your education, Harry, though not the practical part, if you will allow us to cage your magic. With a close watch on you, you would not be able to go to the Chamber without our knowledge, but—forgive me, dear boy, but I cannot trust someone with your power and Riddle in his head even if we find and seal the entrance to the Chamber.” He opened his eyes and looked at Harry, sad and stern and commanding. “Surely you must see that this is the best solution.”

Harry had angry words on his tongue. He wanted to say them. He wanted to ask Dumbledore if he would consider suppressing anyone else’s magic, such as Connor’s if the suspicion for the attacks had fallen on him. He wanted to say that Lockhart was more a danger to the other students than Harry was right now, now that he knew about Riddle. He wanted to ask Dumbledore why he didn’t prevent Snape from making any Potions involving half a hundred ingredients, all of which could potentially scar or disfigure a student for months or years.

He swallowed them all. Rage, good as it felt to entertain it, would not serve him right now.

“Do you really think you *can* cage my magic, sir?” he asked quietly.

Dumbledore’s gaze came knifing to his face. This time, Harry met it full on. He trusted Snape’s shields to hide the box and Sylarana, and Snape’s skills to hide himself. Only Draco might be left out in the open, and Harry was willing to take the risk. He wanted to show his magic to the Headmaster.

He called on it fully, the way that he would if he were about to defend Connor, and let it rise around him.

He started as one and then another of the delicate silver instruments the Headmaster kept began to chime and vibrate. Fawkes lifted his head and trilled. A few dozing Headmasters stuck their heads towards the front of their portraits, or cupped their hands around their ears. Harry briefly thought he could hear something himself, a distant voice singing in happiness and glad, confident power, before the room filled with stronger sensations to catch his attention: warm pressure over most of his skin and a clean smell like a waterfall.

He sat there in wonder. *Why have I never felt this before? Was I putting part of what I felt about my magic in the box, too?*

“Harry.”

Harry looked back at Dumbledore. The Headmaster’s face was calm, and if Harry squinted, he thought he could make out a white shell around him, probably locking his own magic in and keeping it from mingling with Harry’s. If he didn’t, Harry supposed, then there might be an explosion, or Harry might possibly learn things about the Headmaster that Dumbledore didn’t want him to know.

Harry wanted to know them, suddenly. He wanted to sing and wander Hogwarts’s corridors with his magic showing him secret tunnels and ancient wards just for the fun of it. What good was magic, after all, if one tamed and constrained it and used it for only a few simple tasks?

“Harry,” Dumbledore repeated.

Harry took a deep breath and reined his power in as he had earlier controlled his anger. Yes, magic could show him wonderful things, but he didn’t want it to get him thrown out of Hogwarts, and right now he thought there was a danger of that. “I’m sorry, Headmaster,” he said, listening to the last coil of wild song fade. “I went a little too far in making my point.”

Dumbledore beamed at him. “Quite all right, my dear boy! And you are right, caging your magic would not work. I think it best if you stay here in Hogwarts, where the wards can protect you. You are never to be alone. If you are, it will result in detentions for you and lost points for Slytherin, I am afraid. I will ask Professor Snape to strengthen the wards on the Slytherin common room, and construct one that will alert him if you are wandering after curfew. And there will be a few other precautions taken to insure that the students stay safe. I think Hogwarts is the best place for you, after all.”

Harry raised an eyebrow. *What made him decide that?*

*Your power,* said Sylarana, in the bored tone that indicated everyone in the world knew this except him. Given how serious she had been lately, Harry was just as glad to have it back. *He doesn’t want someone with magic as powerful as you are in St. Mungo’s, or anywhere that isn’t under his immediate control.*

Harry blinked. *But I just called it up. And Dumbledore is the strongest wizard in the world.*

*That may not matter,* said Sylarana cryptically. *Sometimes the thing we fear most is what might happen.*

*Who’s this ‘we?’ All the other snakes who speak with Parselmouths?*

She sulked at him. Harry surprised himself by smiling. He had not often teased her like that before. He wondered if it would be an obstacle on his road to defending Connor and getting Tom Riddle out of his head, but it did not seem as if it would be.

“You do realize,” Dumbledore was saying, “that the governors of the school might object to having you stay. Most of them have children here, and the threat from the Chamber and from a powerful young man possessed by Tom Riddle —“

Fawkes turned his head abruptly and trilled. A knock sounded on the door, and when Dumbledore called, “Come in,” Professor McGonagall walked in, carrying an enormous golden-colored owl with a letter tied to its leg. She had a peculiar expression on her face.

“This is a letter from the school governors, Headmaster,” she said, and extended the owl to him.

Dumbledore’s eyes flickered to Harry. Harry looked down so as not to meet his gaze.

“How strange,” said Dumbledore cheerfully. “We were just discussing them.” He took the letter from the owl’s leg and broke the seal, then read the letter within. His happy, patient expression did not change, except at the end, when he looked up and beamed at Harry. “Wonderful news, my boy! It seems that Lucius Malfoy has firecalled the other governors, and they have agreed that you should stay in school, as it is the best and safest place for you. Mr. Malfoy also pointed out that so far the attacks have been against purebloods, which is not what the legend of the Chamber points towards, and suggests that we may be jumping to conclusions, that this is a particularly nasty and vicious prank.”

Harry knew that Dumbledore did not believe that. He also knew that Dumbledore was wondering how Lucius Malfoy had learned of Neville’s Petrification so fast, and why he had made it a point to put himself between Harry and harm’s way.

*Not telling,* said Syllarana, in a voice of utterly childish delight. *Not telling. We have a secret. It is fun.*

Harry bit his lip to stifle a snort, and looked back up to see Dumbledore nod to him. “If you will escort Harry back to his common room, Minerva,” he said. “I think we have reached an understanding. Even the governors of the school seem to agree.”

“But, Albus—“

“I will explain later, Minerva,” said Dumbledore calmly. “In fact, if you wish to return immediately after escorting Harry down, I can explain it to you then.”

Professor McGonagall nodded uncertainly, and led Harry down the stairs. This time, unlike last Saturday, she did not speak with him. Harry read her darting glances and the hesitant way she clenched one hand in her sleeve, and knew she could not decide what she wanted to say.

Well, for that matter, neither could he have, and he was not sure what his response to one of her overtures would have been. His heart was pounding, and he was biting his lip until it was close to a bloodied mess. He was starting to feel the shame he had expected for hurting and humiliating Connor, but he also still felt the delight in fooling the Headmaster, and irritation with Dumbledore’s intent to ship him off to St. Mungo’s, and determination to protect Connor, and, and, and—

The emotions kept going off like firecrackers beneath the surface of his chest. Harry told himself he would only feel them as long as he needed to, only until Tom Riddle was flushed from his mind and his brother was safe. Then he could use the box again, surely.

*No,* said Syllarana calmly.

*No,* Draco agreed, as they came nearer to the common room and Harry could hear him again. *I like you better this way. I want to see what happens the next time Weasley says something.*

Harry put aside the temptation to revel in the emotions. He had letters to write, and, surely, letters to receive—mostly from his parents. Connor would write to their father and wail that Harry had betrayed him. James would write sternly to Harry. Harry would explain; he thought he could do a better job of staying calm in writing than he was doing right now. And then their mother would write him, giving him advice on protecting his brother and staying true to his cause, and then Harry would reply and explain what had happened.

He was not sure what would happen then. Neither their mother nor Harry had ever thought that *he* might be possessed by Voldemort. Lily had theorized once about telepathic connections hidden in curse scars, but perhaps Voldemort was strong enough to possess anyone he wanted.

*I’ll get books on Occlumency. I’ll study. I’ll do whatever I have to,* he thought, the edge of his will slicing through his crowding emotions again.

*I'll master my mind, and then thank Draco and Snape for their assistance and get them out of my head. This is only a temporary change. Given that, I can handle it, surely.*

He ignored the part of him that hummed and sang in his magic, that enjoyed the emotions, and wanted to make the change more permanent.

~\*~\*~\*~\*~\*~\*

## **Chapter Fifteen: No One Ever Notices a Hufflepuff**

*...never knew that there would be such a problem with one of my sons acting Gryffindor...just can't understand why you would do it, Harry...Connor told me that you used magic against him, against him, when you've never done that before...*

Harry closed his eyes. He'd read his father's letter, which had come in early on that morning, a Wednesday, several times. Each time, one more emotion broke free and joined the mess of emotions swimming around his head.

Disappointment (it had had to turn out like this, hadn't it?), worry (he didn't want to anger his father at him, he really didn't), regret (he would have chosen a different way of dealing with Connor if he'd thought about it), sorrow (he was sorry that James was angry at him), despair (if Connor was angry at him, Harry wanted to find him at once and apologize, never mind that he wouldn't accept the apology), satisfaction (he probably would cast *Silencio* on Connor again, given the opportunity), anger (why had Connor had to tattle to their parents about something so minor, rather than about suspecting Harry of Luna's and Neville's Petrifications?)....

He could not master them, not yet. They swam and swarmed around him, and sometimes slipped from his grasp completely for a moment, the way that his goals to protect and defend Connor did. He could be thinking quite firmly of how he would never use magic on his brother again except in Connor's defense, and then that definition would suddenly expand to self-defense and stopping Connor from doing something stupid, and then it would narrow again.

"I don't understand that part," he muttered aloud.

*I do.*

Harry started and looked up. Draco stood in front of him, one eyebrow cocked expressively. He tossed Harry's tie at him. "Breakfast is over in ten minutes, Harry," Draco pointed out. "And you've just been sitting here and staring at that letter. I don't think you're going to get anything new out of it."

Harry stood up and knotted his tie, looking to be sure that Syllarana was still wrapped about his arm. Of course she was. She had not moved away from him since she had coiled herself in a kind of Gordian knot about the box. *What makes you say that you know what's happening?* he asked Draco as they fell into step on the way down to the Hall. He had not exactly reveled in speaking in his head over the past few days, but he had grown used to it. It had to be done. It was silly to whine about it, even mentally, given that it wasn't just Syllarana who could overhear him and scold him about it now.

*Because of the holes in the webs, said Draco. Snape told you about the webs?*

Harry nodded. He had been disturbed that he saw his mind that way, or that other people saw his mind that way, or whichever it was; he had had two lessons with Snape since Sunday, and still he did not understand everything there was to know about Occlumency. The crowding emotions and thoughts might have had something to do with that, of course.

Worry (was he ever going to master Occlumency?), pride (he had done well so far), grim determination (he would have to be ready when Riddle broke free, because he would set the timetable and not Harry or Snape or anyone outside the box), dread (he feared what would come forth from the box)...

The emotions abruptly danced madly and then flew away from him. Harry blinked and looked up at Draco, who had a hand on his shoulder.

"Harry," said Draco soothingly. "Look at me. Breathe. I can help you clear your mind some of the time, but not all."

Harry glanced around nervously, but there wasn't anyone there to hear them. He glanced back at Draco, nodded, and managed to make himself breathe and think, for at least a few moments, the way a normal person would have.

Draco went back to the mental speech the moment he seemed to think that Harry was stable enough to hear the truth. *Riddle tore some holes in your webs the first time he possessed you, and then again the other times. So now your patterns of thought aren't exactly the way they used to be. You can have thoughts that you wouldn't be able to have the rest of the time. You can think about hurting your brother, if you want, even turning against him.*

Harry recoiled from Draco—

For a moment. Then a rebellious voice in his head muttered that that wasn't such a bad idea, especially after the rumors that had spread around the school in the wake of Harry's *Silencio*.

*Do you see?* Draco asked him. His voice was calm, but Harry thought it was only with an effort. *Your mind is different from what it was, Harry. Snape is working to fill the breaches with mist, but he can't heal all the wounds. Your mind has to do that, has to fill the spaces in the webs with new weaving.*

Harry nodded. *So the more I think about protecting and defending Connor, the likelier I am to think like that?*

*You could say that,* said Draco, and glanced ahead. They were almost at the doors of the Great Hall. *Better prepare your spells now.*

Harry nodded again and called on the *Protego*, which he wrapped around himself just a few inches above his skin. It caused all the malicious hexes that the other students cast at him when the teachers weren't around to bounce right back at them. Next, he cast a spell that Snape had shown them, *Muffliato*, one which made the voices of the other students sound like a distant buzzing in Harry's ears. Snape had looked vaguely ill-at-ease when Harry had managed to change it so that it obscured the conversations of not just one person but all of them, except Draco, the other Slytherins, and the professors. Harry did not know why. It was a useful spell, and the variation was easy to make, just involving a bit more emphasis on the first two syllables than normal.

It was necessary, he reassured himself as he and Draco dashed into the Great Hall, snatched a few hasty bites of breakfast before it disappeared, and then hurried on their way to classes. He had been able to hear the students' taunts on Monday, and his reaction to them had been—unpredictable. Some he could shrug off or ignore as if he still had access to the box, some made him flinch and turn away, and a few had caused him to pull out his wand and hex the students teasing him. Snape had hauled him into his office on Monday night and taught him *Muffliato*, not letting him go until he mastered it. *To prevent accidents*, he'd said, one of the few times he'd ever actually spoken in Harry's mind, his voice sharp. Most of the time, he seemed as uneasy in Harry's thoughts as Harry was to have him there, and restricted himself to maintaining the shields.

Things were better now, Harry told himself firmly. They *were*. The other professors merely thought that Harry had learned to ignore the other students after an intense scolding by his Head of House, and none of them knew about the *Protego*, since the students picked times that the professors were safely distant to try and cast magic on Harry. So what if the students had started a rumor that Harry really *must* be a Dark Lord in training, to reflect spells back so effortlessly?

One of the suits of armor they were passing at that moment shook and rattled and detached itself piece by piece, clanging into the wall, falling precisely in time with the angry beat of Harry's heart.

*Are you all right?* Draco asked.

*Yes*, Harry said, and pushed the rage through one of the holes in his mind, so that it would slither around in the darkness and not bother him for a while.

By Friday, Harry felt as though he had gained some semblance of control over his swimming emotions. It wasn't perfect, of course, and it still disconcerted him when he uncovered something he had never suspected he was capable of feeling. But he could sit down and write a letter to his parents, or concentrate on the simple, well-known spells they were learning in Charms or Transfiguration, without having to deal with half a dozen exaggerated reactions. Then he would relax the control and live in a world of mad colors for a time before he needed to summon his concentration and buckle down to a certain task.

Draco was grinning at him as they came into the Great Hall for breakfast Friday morning. *Pretty impressive, Harry*, he said. *Most of the holes are filled with mist already. I think you'll be ready by the time Riddle breaks free.*

*Tell him to stop talking about Riddle*, Sylarana instructed Harry primly. *He rattles the box when he's talked about. He can hear us or sense us doing it, though imperfectly. And I want some treacle tart.*

Harry shook his head. There was no treacle tart at breakfast, but he soothed Sylarana with promises of a sausage. "Sylarana says to stop talking about *him*," he murmured aloud. He had to keep reminding himself that the link between the four of them was temporary. Draco seemed quite at home in Harry's head, speaking mentally even when he didn't need to. Harry would move it back to audible conversation whenever possible.

Draco tended to resist the subtle suggestion, or just pretend he was immune to it, and he did so now. He only shrugged and danced backward in front of Harry. *Don't look now, but I think you have someone else who wants to talk to you.*

"Harry!" called a voice from behind him just then.

Harry turned slowly. It was Sirius. Apparently, he had left a gap in the *Muffliato* spell that he hadn't noticed; he still thought of Sirius as a professor, so his godfather's voice could get through.

Harry braced himself for a scolding or a berating about how no Potter had ever turned to the Dark Lord. But Sirius staggered up the aisle between the tables and collapsed to the ground in front of Harry instead. He was breathing loudly, as though he had run all the way from his office. His eyes were wild and staring. He started to speak and then stopped, choking.

As he studied Sirius, Harry was struck by just how bad he really looked. The dark circles around his eyes had increased until they looked sunken. His hair had grown longer than Harry remembered seeing it in years, almost to his shoulders, and was tangled and clotted with sweat, as though he hadn't bothered to brush it when he got out of bed. He was gaunt, and Harry had no idea why. It wasn't as though the overabundance of food in the Great Hall would let anyone starve, and Sirius certainly knew where the kitchens were if he needed to eat.

But the oddest change was the way that Sirius reached out and clutched at Harry's hands as if Harry could save him from drowning.

"Harry," he whispered. "Harry, forgive me."

Harry blinked. "*What?*" he said after a moment. Most of his emotions had melted away in the sheer shock of confronting Sirius, and the only one left was surprise.

"Forgive me," Sirius whispered, nodding earnestly. "I should never have said the things I said. I should never have let the problems between us go unreconciled for so long. I'm your *godfather*. What kind of godfather have I been, always believing other people before my godson?" He shook his head. The gesture just alarmed Harry more. It didn't look like ordinary negation, but as if Sirius had palsy. "I've been wrong, so wrong, and I want the chance to make it up to you. You have every right to refuse me, of course." He tightened his grip on Harry's hands and waited.

Harry's thoughts were swimming in disjointed circles once again. Forgive him, tell him there was nothing to forgive, argue, turn his back and walk away?

But his love for Sirius, which was older than the wounds in his mind, prompted him to ask at last, "Sirius, what's wrong with you? You don't look good."

Sirius uttered a hollow laugh. "No, I don't, do I?" he muttered. "But it's no more than I deserve, Harry. Moony sent me a—a *very* stern letter. You wouldn't *believe* what it said. And I think he talked to Lily and James, too, because their next letters to me were more subdued. You know how Moony can be, all those soft words that turn hard just when you're least expecting them?"

"I suppose," said Harry doubtfully. When their father told tales of his time in school, he usually said that Remus was the most reluctant rule-breaker, but still a rule-breaker, one his friends could coax into going along with them even when he knew it wasn't right. Nothing like Peter, of course, who had wound up a traitor, but still with not such a strict sense of right and wrong that Harry would imagine him writing Sirius a stern letter.

"He is," said Sirius. "He *is* like that." He was almost babbling. "And then—then, Harry, I realized that I hadn't thought at all about what Lily told us, that you were trained to protect your brother." Harry glanced around nervously, but Sirius's voice had calmed somewhat from his initial shout, and Draco was holding his wand casually. No one tried to inch nearer and listen to Sirius's confession. "And that was wrong," Sirius rambled on. "Imagine, my godson prepared to defend his brother, and I never saw it. And you trained yourself all those years, and you never wanted recognition for it. I would have. I would have. I would have given myself away, I think, if I did something like that for Regulus."

"Who's Regulus?" Harry asked in mild confusion. He could not remember hearing the name before.

Sirius shook his head so fast that his hair whipped around him. "Nothing," he said. "That is, no one. Someone I knew once, who needed protecting, and I thought about giving him protection, but in the end I didn't. In the end, nothing I did was enough." He abruptly burst into noisy tears. Harry could *feel* Draco's lip curling without even looking at the other boy.

*Shut up, he's tired*, Harry snarled in his head, taking Draco by surprise, and then he tucked an arm around his godfather's shoulders. "I think you need to go to sleep, Sirius," he said. "You haven't been sleeping well, have you?"

Sirius let out a little breath. "No," he whispered. "Nightmares. About protecting you, mostly, and failing."

Harry felt a small spark of compassion ignite in him. It was a welcome respite from the mad emotions. "I would feel the same way about Connor, if I failed to protect him," he said. "I do think that you were wrong, Sirius, but I accept your apology. Why don't you go and get some sleep? You don't have to referee a Quidditch practice today, do you?"

Sirius shook his head. "No." He sounded dazed.

"Then go back to sleep." Harry urged him to stand and turned him gently towards the door. "I think you should. I forgive you. That should ease some of the nightmares about failing to protect me, shouldn't it?"

“Not all of them,” muttered Sirius, but he looked appeased. “You really mean that, Harry? You forgive me?”

Harry hesitated for a long moment, and then gave in to his curiosity. It wouldn't be fair to go back and ask the question later, when Sirius had managed to smooth over these emotions in his mind. “Yes. But I want to know why this happened so suddenly. Why could you not forgive me for a week, and it only happened now?”

“Because it took that long for the full impact of what Lily said to hit me,” Sirius whispered in a brooding tone, eyes fixed on Harry. “You trained to sacrifice your childhood, Harry. You gave up everything for Connor. I *know* that I couldn't have done that.”

“You never had a brother,” said Harry gently. “It's different for only children, Sirius.”

Sirius's lip trembled, and he looked as if he were about to say something for a moment. Then he shook his head, and his lip firmed again. “And I'm sorry about that stupid bet,” he said. “I should never have made it. Not only was I going to lose, you wouldn't let Snape win, either. You would do whatever you had to do, Slytherin or Gryffindor, to protect your brother, wouldn't you? And you're so devoted to him, and of *course* he's the Boy-Who-Lived.”

Harry nodded. “Of course he is,” he said.

Draco snorted in his head.

*Shut up*, said Harry, and did something he hadn't known he could do, shutting Draco out of his immediate thoughts. Draco's presence flailed, closed into a small corner of Harry's mind concerned with him. Harry ignored him for the moment. He had more important things to do.

“I'm sorry about the bet, Harry,” Sirius said, and looked as if he would start crying again. “Forgive me for that, too?”

Harry nodded, hesitated, and then hugged his godfather. That soothed some of his less attractive emotions, especially when Sirius hugged him back, his arms catching Harry's shoulders in an almost desperate clutch.

“Of course,” Harry whispered. “You were only doing what you thought best, Sirius, and sometimes that *isn't* the best.” He was thinking of the way that their father had told him the story of Sirius's prank on Snape in their school days, when Sirius had acted as if Snape wouldn't have *died* confronting Remus in his werewolf form. “Just come and talk to me in the future before you blame me, all right?” His resentment wouldn't let Sirius leave without twisting that particular knife.

Sirius winced. “You got it,” he said, and then he messed up Harry's hair and turned away.

*At least he is entertaining when he is wrong*, Snape's voice remarked from his distant corner of Harry's mind.

*Shut up to you, too*, Harry thought, and released Draco from the corner of his mind. Draco flailed and complained about that, until Harry shut him in the corner again and then adjusted his *Muffliato* spell to exclude Draco's voice from his ears. That lasted only until lunch, but in the three hours in between, Draco had to make his apologies in complicated sign language, which entertained Harry.

Someone tapped him on the shoulder. Harry turned around carefully, his hands full of the pot containing the Mandrake. He assumed that someone wanted to use the raw dirt, which he was standing in front of. By now, two weeks after Neville's Petrification, most students seemed to have resigned themselves to the fact that Harry was ignoring them, and simply maneuvered around him with gestures as needed.

To Harry's surprise, the student—Justin Finch-Fletchley, one of the Muggleborn Hufflepuffs who shared Herbology class with them—didn't move around him. Instead, he caught Harry's eyes and slowly, carefully mouthed a few words, letting Harry read his lips.

*Drop the spell. I want to talk to you.*

Harry blinked and thought about it. It *was* true that he hadn't heard any taunts out of Justin in the past few weeks, but then, he hadn't heard any taunts out of anyone thanks to the *Muffliato*. He missed hearing Connor's voice more than he could say, and he was tiring of Draco's and Snape's and even Syllarana's presences in his head, but dropping the spell was just too great a risk.

On the other hand, he had grown more and more used to the *Muffliato*, and he could adjust it easily. He decided he could let Justin in for a moment. If the curly-haired wizard said something stupid, Harry would just exile him from being heard before he could lose his temper and throw a hex.

At least, Harry hoped so. He had not realized how quick his temper would be once he stopped putting all his anger in the box.

Cautiously, he turned the buzzing around and let Justin in. "I can hear you," he said. "Talk. And if you say anything insulting, you should know that I'm quicker with my wand than you are."

"I know that," said Justin. There was something odd in his eyes, something that Harry finally identified as a mixture of respect and curiosity. That increased his worry. Ron, Hermione, and Connor hadn't come to him, instead sticking with their whispering and plotting and planning, and Harry had thought—or *hoped*, at least, he admitted to himself—that they would be the first ones. To see a Hufflepuff looking at him without hostility was odd.

"The rest of my House sent me," said Justin. "I said I was willing to talk to you, and they figured I wouldn't be in much danger, since I'm Muggleborn and the attacks have only been on purebloods so far." He shrugged. "So, tell me. Is it true that you're evil and you go around Petrifying people?"

Harry glared at him. Justin shivered a bit, but stood his ground. "It's only what everyone is wondering," he added defensively.

"If you think I would do that to my friends," Harry snarled, moving past him to set the Mandrake carefully in its new place in the greenhouse, "what makes you think I wouldn't do it to you?"

"Well, I don't know, really," said Justin amiably, following him down the rows. "But, see, that's one of the nice things about being a Hufflepuff. The Ravenclaws think that you have some deviously intelligent plan that your every motion is part of. The Slytherins think—or would, I assume, if any of them were aligned against you—that you're just lying about everything. The Gryffindors are sure that you're Dark, and they're in an agony trying to make everyone else see it. But Hufflepuffs rely more on common sense. So I thought I'd ask. *Are* you evil and Petrifying people?"

"Everyone thinks I am," said Harry, and carefully packed the soil around the Mandrake. This far along towards winter, the plants were nearly docile, and they didn't have to take the special precautions that they did earlier in the year to keep from hearing their cries. Harry watched his breath puff out in front of him as he tamped the soil down, and focused on both the sight before his eyes and the sensation between his fingers to keep from getting angry at Justin. "So that should be enough for you. After all, everyone knows that what everyone says is true."

"That's the problem," said Justin. "Everyone says that you're the next Dark Lord in training, and that you must be near the end of your plans to take over the world, or you wouldn't be running around Petrifying people in the open. On the other hand, *I* think Headmaster Dumbledore would be fighting against you if you were the next Dark Lord in training. He doesn't like Dark Lords. And why would you Petrify a few random people in the halls when you could Petrify the whole school at once, or kill them? It doesn't seem like a very efficient plan. At the very *least*, you could sneak out here and sabotage the Mandrakes some night, so that we can't wake up the people you Petrified and hear whatever it is that you don't want them telling us."

Harry shot a sidelong glance at Justin. "You're really not afraid of me, are you?" he asked, finally. No one else in his head was commenting on the conversation. Harry suspected that they didn't know what to make of Justin, either.

The Hufflepuff grinned at him. "I'm terrified. Utterly shaking in my boots. That's fear, of course, and not cold."

"Why?" Harry asked.

Justin cocked his head to one side and assumed a pensive expression. “You’re the evil House, you know,” he said. “Everyone always tenses up when there are Slytherins around. And they relax with Gryffindors, or the Gryffindors think they do, and the Ravenclaws get asked for help on homework. But we just get *ignored*. It’s *weird*. But I like it, sometimes, because it means that I can get close enough to conversations to overhear them without anyone paying attention to me.

“And I heard your brother talking in the library yesterday to Weasley and the know-it-all. I sat at the table right next to them. They gave me these *looks* that said, ‘Oh, it’s just a Hufflepuff,’ and I was able to listen to them. And do you know what they said?”

“No,” Harry admitted. “That spell keeps everyone out, even my brother.” He yearned to know what they had said.

*It’ll be something hurtful, because Connor’s a prat,* Draco said darkly in his head. *You know that.*

*Hush,* said Sylarana. *I want to know what the prat said. It’s been too long since I was able to be sarcastic about his stupidity.*

Harry ignored them both, and fixed his eyes on Justin’s face.

“They said you must be Dark,” said Justin. “It sounded as though they were trying to prepare some speech to convince the school, and they listed all the justifications they could think of. There were the Petrifications, of course, and the fact that you can talk to snakes.” Justin did give a slight shudder there, and Harry decided he must be at least a little afraid.

*Well he should be,* Sylarana said. *I am a Locusta.*

“And then there were—other things,” said Justin, his lips quirking in a smile that Harry didn’t quite understand. “That you beat him at Quidditch, and that you cast *Silencio* on him, and that you were ignoring him instead of coming to him and apologizing.” Justin shook his head. “That’s just stupid. I have a younger brother, and I do the same things to him. Well, okay, he’s a Muggle, so I beat him at football instead, but you know what I mean. That’s just sibling stuff. I think Connor’s jealous of you, and that’s all. That other ‘Dark’ stuff is just him being stupid.”

“Then how do you explain the Petrifications?” Harry challenged him.

“Lots of people being stupid,” said Justin without hesitation. “Including whoever’s doing it. Neville and Luna are going to get better, eventually. And I know that you go and see them in the hospital wing every few days, and Madam Pomfrey trusts you to come in and sit with them.”

“How do you know *that*?” Harry asked before he could stop himself.

“No one tends to notice Hufflepuffs, I told you,” said Justin. “You Slytherins lose something swaggering around and *proclaiming* that you’re above the other Houses with every breath. We Hufflepuffs just *know* we are.” He assumed a densely superior expression cracked by a smile in less than three seconds.

Harry laughed before he could stop himself. Then he touched a hand to his mouth, and blinked. Justin gave him a different kind of smile and nodded.

“I don’t really know what to think about you, Potter,” he said. “But I know that I don’t want to think what your brother thinks about you, because he’s being a *brother*, and not the Boy-Who-Lived, when he goes around proclaiming that you’re this and that and the other thing just because you beat him at Quidditch. Well, the whole school’s not his parents.”

Harry nodded once. He had wanted to hear those words, or something like them, he thought. Connor’s perceptions about good and evil were quite often correct, but this time he had the facts wrong. And anyone could be factually wrong. It was a way he could think about his brother being mistaken without wanting to panic that Connor being mistaken meant that he, Harry, wasn’t really good.

“I’ll go back and tell the rest of my House that you’re all right, really,” said Justin, and glanced over his shoulder. Harry followed his gaze, and blinked. Professor Sprout stood over Hannah Abbott and Ernie Macmillan, who were asking her countless innocent questions about repotting the Mandrakes, and about the consistency of the soil, and about many other things. The Herbology Professor was answering them, her face alight with pleasure at having two such eager students. Harry had to admit it was quite an effective way to keep her from interfering with his and Justin’s conversation.

“Did they do that on purpose?” he asked Justin.

“Of course,” said Justin. “But they really needed help in Herbology, too. They’ve spent too much time in the last few weeks collecting Chocolate Frog cards instead of studying. They’re worried about exams.” He gave Harry a gentle push on the shoulder. “Be seeing you, Potter.”

He sauntered back to his Housemates. Hannah and Ernie finished asking their questions, and Professor Sprout swept on around the greenhouse, carefully adjusting her hat on her head.

“What was *that*?” Draco asked then, pouncing on him, upset enough to speak aloud—at least in a whisper, though, since Professor Sprout’s glance briefly flicked towards them.

“I was making a new friend,” Harry answered blandly, checking his Mandrake one more time. He found that he rather enjoyed the expression of frustration on Draco’s face. Draco got his own way with Harry much too often, especially now that he was in his head.

“But I’m your best friend,” said Draco.

“Of course,” said Harry. “But Justin’s a new friend.” He looked over his shoulder and smiled at the Hufflepuff, who was watching him. Justin nodded back and then leaned over to whisper to Hannah. Hannah glanced back at Harry, her eyes speculative, wary but not angry.

“He’s a *Hufflepuff*,” said Draco. “And a *Mu*—“

Harry’s hand was near Draco’s arm. It was a simple thing to reach over and pinch Draco on the shoulder, hard enough that his arm went dead.

*Ow!* Draco wailed in his head. Harry could hear Sylarana snicker-hissing.

“You were saying?” Harry asked, without glancing up.

“A Muggleborn,” said Draco. “That was what I was going to say. Really.”

*Liar*, Sylarana accused him. Harry nodded in agreement.

Draco rubbed his elbow and glared sulkily at Harry for a moment. “I don’t always like you when you’re like this,” he muttered.

Harry shrugged and stripped off his gloves. Herbology class was almost over.

Abruptly, his vision warped sideways and bled colors. Sylarana gave a hiss of anger and bore down with her body. Tom Riddle stopped bucking in the box after a moment, and Harry’s vision returned to normal, but he knew it was the first test.

Riddle might have sensed the conversation with Justin, he thought, as he nodded to a worried Draco that he was all right. He might have decided that Justin was his next logical target.

And, abruptly, Harry realized that he had a plan for dealing with Riddle.

He found himself smiling, and ignored the bubbling curiosity from Draco and Sylarana for right now. Sometimes, it was nice to have a secret.

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## Chapter Sixteen: Battle Plans

Harry knocked on the door to Snape's office in high good humor, and felt the man's presence inside his mind grow cruel with suspicion. Harry was never in a good mood when he came for his lessons. Either he was stressed, after dealing with the emotions that swam his thoughts and the other students all day, or he simply was grim and determined, wanting to master the new Occlumency techniques as swiftly as possible.

"Enter," Snape said after a moment, and Harry stepped inside, glanced quickly around just to make sure that no one else was here, and shut the door behind him.

"Professor Snape, sir," he said, feeling rarely-used emotions of excitement and hope rise to the surface of his mind. Snape leaned forward from behind his desk, eyes intent. Harry suspected he was about to get some lecture on how Occlumency was an art of motion again, and that he had to be able to shut away happiness as effortlessly as he was working to shut away grief and anger. "I have an idea for a plot on how to defeat Tom Riddle."

The box bucked in his mind, and Sylarana hissed at him. *Could you avoid talking about him unless you absolutely must? You know how he gets.*

*I do know,* Harry told her, and stroked her back where she lay on his arm. *And you are a wonderful snake, a magnificent snake, for holding him in so effectively.*

Sylarana made a small suspicious sound under her breath, but accepted the praise and the petting. Harry looked back at Snape, who had his head on one side and had already stood up from behind his desk.

"You *think* you know a way, at least, Mr. Potter," he whispered. "Can you keep thinking of it even as I attack? *Legilimens!*"

Harry rolled his eyes and leaped aside in his mind as Snape started to probe it. Their training lessons were always like this, now. Snape provoked Harry's anger and frustration on purpose, and then told him to keep that concealed or steady while he searched Harry's thoughts. Harry suspected it was indeed useful training, but Snape was growing predictable in the way he maneuvered.

*He shouldn't be predictable. That could be bad news for Connor as well as for me. Snape is the only well-trained Occlumens I can persuade, certainly the only one Dumbledore and other adults would be inclined to listen to. I have to make sure that he keeps up with his own training, too.*

He launched his plan as hard as he could, into Snape's face. Snape gasped and reeled back from him, and Harry could see something other than darkness swarming with colors. Snape sat down hard in his seat and blinked at Harry, then shook his head.

"That was—impressive, Mr. Potter," he said, in a tone from which all colors had been bleached.

Harry rolled his eyes again. "Thank you. But what do you think of the plan? Or are you referring to the plan as well as your expulsion from my thoughts?"

"You would want to kill me, of course, if I were a real enemy, or at least disarm me," Snape went on, sitting up in his chair and folding his hands in a lecturing pose. "After all, if I escaped knowing your plan, you would not be pleased."

Harry nodded. "And what do you think of the plan?"

Snape clenched his hands in front of him. "That is insanely dangerous," he said. "The kind of risky scheme more likely to be concocted by a Gryffindor. In a fever dream."

"If you compare me to my brother, Professor Snape, you're complimenting me, not insulting me," Harry said, his tone pleasant with sheer determination. "And having Tom Riddle in my head is already insanely dangerous."

"That it won't work," said Snape. "The whole thing depends on a combination of timing and skill that is hard in the extreme to achieve."

"I believe it can work," said Harry, meeting and holding his eyes. The fact that Sylarana had not objected to it gave him hope. Her support would probably be the most important element of this. "No, we can't do anything about *his* growing restlessness, but we can make sure that I defeat him."

Snape leaned forward across the desk. "That it requires—a *depth* of magic that you do not have yet, Harry. Strength, yes, of course, but you cannot fight the Dark Lord on the grounds of magical strength alone. He knows more. He knew more even when he was his present age, and he may have drawn more of your magic through the box. It is impossible to know that without venturing past the shields, which I will not do."

Harry nodded. "By depth, sir, do you mean something like this?" He closed his eyes and brought his magic up around him, the way he had in Dumbledore's office. He smelled the clean scent of the waterfall again, and heard the bells ringing, and the voice singing in the distance.

The magic *was* coming from some place under him, for lack of a better word, he thought. If his mind was a series of webs, the way that both Draco and Snape insisted, then this came from beneath the places where the webs ran out, slender bridges over a black gulf. This was the magic beneath, the magic embedded in his body and his bones and his heart.

"Mr. Potter."

Harry opened his eyes. He could just barely see Snape through a shimmering, swimming haze of power. The professor's eyes were slits, and he had his wand in one hand. Harry hoped that he wouldn't try to read Harry's mind right now. Harry was not entirely sure whose mind he would get.

“That is something like what I meant, yes,” said Snape quietly. “Put it away now.”

Gently, Harry folded the magic back into its proper place, tucking the folds of cloth and wings in place over each other. His magic grumbled about it. Now that it was properly awake, it wanted to be used. There were spells he could do with it about him like this, protections he could create, small discontinuities in space that it could mend for him if he wished...

But it listened to him when he told it to go, and sank away from sight.

Harry shook his head. He felt diminished, somehow, after standing in the midst of all that power. But he reminded himself, as Lily always had, that there were greater things than power, greater things than magic. Love was one of them, and he had to love Connor, for his innocence, his purity, even his stupidity that insisted standing with Slytherin House equaled to being Dark. So long as his brother could think those things, he was still a child, his heart unstained.

Harry, meanwhile, made insanely dangerous plans for getting Voldemort out of his head.

He felt Tom Riddle buck in the box again, but ignored it. He looked up and held Snape’s eyes, and waited for his verdict.

Snape shook his head once, slowly. His eyes were the least blank that Harry had ever seen them, though he could not tell what emotion struggled behind them. He was still not good at reading anyone else’s feelings save for Connor’s. “I could wish that you had no necessity to do this,” he murmured. “That you had never been trained into the warrior that it seems you are becoming.”

Harry tilted his head to the side. “That’s an odd thing for you to wish, sir. If I were more like my brother, you would hate me. If I were not what I am, then you would not like me as well as you do.”

Snape flinched at that, actually *flinched*, though Harry supposed his chances of seeing it that way were heightened by Snape’s presence in his head. The professor closed his eyes and shook his head.

“It is a dangerous plan,” he said. “And one that depends too much on power. And I think that once such magic as you possess is summoned forth, it may not tamely lie back down in its place again.”

Harry waited.

Snape opened his eyes and nodded to Harry. “But it is the only plan that will work. We will work on it. In the meantime, I suggest you go to the Headmaster. You will need to stay in the school over Christmas holidays for it to have any chance of working.”

“Yes, sir,” said Harry. “Thank you, sir.” He turned and left. It wasn’t very late yet, but the Headmaster might go to bed soon. Harry didn’t know what kinds of hours he kept.

*That’s bad*, he thought as he trotted along the entrance hall. *I have to know his hours, He’s not my enemy, but he could not be my friend without a strange twist in circumstances, and I should know him better than I do.*

“Brother.”

Harry turned slowly. He realized, finally, that he hadn’t renewed the *Muffliato* spell when it ran out after dinner. He had gone to see Snape, unable to think of anything else, and now it was being taken advantage of.

A huge crowd of students stood around the hall, an obviously arranged crowd. They formed a rough circle. Harry had walked into the middle of it without so much as noticing.

He bared his teeth despite himself, fury and anxiety surging to the front of his mind. Connor, who was stepping forward from the far left side of the circle, flanked by Ron and Hermione, smiled thinly at him.

“See how he shows his teeth like a beast?” he asked the other students, mostly Ravenclaws and Gryffindors. “I can’t believe that the professors let him stay here in school with us. It’s only a matter of time before he loses control completely and attacks someone else.”

Harry held his brother’s eyes. He saw nothing of compassion in them, nothing of mercy, nothing of forgiveness. He saw nothing of the innocence he always looked out for. Connor looked like nothing so much as a bully getting ready to enjoy the tears and wails of a captive victim, like the Ravenclaw bullies who had tormented Luna. Harry thought he could see them out of the corner of his eye, in fact—Gorgon and Jones, pressing forward and ready to enjoy the show.

Harry’s resolve hardened and pinned down the other emotions. He had his new plans and his new priorities and Tom Riddle in his head, yes, but his first and oldest duty was taking care of Connor. He had indulged his brother thus far. They had been childish games, things that could not truly hurt him.

But now Connor was getting ready to make the kind of mistake that his future leadership in the wizarding world might never recover from. Harry had to stop him.

Sylarana started to stir on his arm. *No!* Harry snapped at her, and she stopped. She said nothing, knowing better than to contest him.

Draco felt his danger then, and sat up in his bed down in the Slytherin dungeons. *I can be there in two minutes with five other Slytherins, Harry. Just say the word.*

*There are too many of them,* Harry disagreed calmly, his eyes never moving from his brother’s. *And I want to handle this one by myself. It’s been a long time coming.*

Draco grumbled in his head, but said nothing else. Snape’s presence was watchful and silent. Sylarana coiled herself about the box and said nothing, either.

Because he was looking for it, Harry saw the motion near the edges of the crowd. He turned his eyes in that direction without turning his head. Sure enough, Justin and several other Hufflepuffs stood there, watching intently. He could not tell if they were more interested in him or Connor.

*Equally, probably,* he thought, and then turned back as Connor pulled a piece of parchment out of his robes and began to read aloud.

“We, Connor Potter, Ron Weasley, and Hermione Granger,” he began officiously, “have compiled the following list of evidence that Harry Potter is a Dark wizard, and should be banished at once from Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, for the good of all other students.”

Harry sighed. Sometimes his brother crossed the line into foolishness, and this was one of those times.

“Who are you going to present the list to?” he asked, cutting his brother off in mid-pontification. It wasn’t even hard. His voice was mild, but it could slice through the crude logic Connor was spouting. “By law, a list like this has to be presented to the Headmaster if you’re on school grounds, or to the Ministry if you’re not. You should know that, Connor. Several Dark wizards were removed from school grounds during the First War. There’s a procedure for it.” He let his eyes flick sideways and catch Hermione’s. “Someone should have told you about the legal precedents.”

Hermione flushed in such a way that Harry thought she knew exactly what the list should have done. He held her gaze for a long moment, wondering why she had gone along with this. Was it just because Connor was the Boy-Who-Lived? Or was her friendship with him deeper than Harry had thought? That satisfied him, if so, that she would think she should break the rules for the sake of friendship, but he wished she had chosen some less conspicuous way of doing so.

“Shut up,” said Connor, his face flushing. “I know that it has to be presented to the Headmaster to be legal. But I’m reading it out here first because I want the whole school to know your crimes.” He drew in a breath to continue.

“The whole school?” Harry looked around again, but his first impression had not been wrong. The students standing there were Ravenclaws and Gryffindors, with a smattering of Hufflepuffs on the edges of things. Not a single Slytherin,

nor most of Hufflepuff House, nor even all of Ravenclaw and Gryffindor; Harry knew that the two prefects Dumbledore had assigned to watch him, Percy Weasley and Penelope Clearwater, were missing. “No. I think that you should have done it in the Great Hall at mealtime if you wanted to catch everybody—“

“Shut up!” said Connor again, and this time rattled the parchment for emphasis. “Unless you fear the proof that we have made up to convict you.”

“Made up,” said Harry, turning back and smiling at Connor. He was starting to enjoy himself now. Guilt lay twined with the enjoyment, running alongside it, and yet he did not think he could have kept himself from speaking if he had tried. “That’s an interesting slip of the tongue, brother.”

“Shut *up!*” Connor yelled, and then began to read hastily. “We have reason to believe that Harry James Potter is responsible for the Petrifications occurring in Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. One victim was Luna Lovegood, a pureblood Ravenclaw first-year whom the accused was often seen near in the weeks before her Petrification. The other was Neville Longbottom, a pureblood Gryffindor second-year whom the accused often worked with in Potions. He was found near Lovegood’s body, and could easily have been found near Longbottom’s body.”

“Opportunity doesn’t mean that I did it,” said Harry calmly.

Connor’s eyes flashed viciously at him over the top of the paper. “The accused would also have had the time and opportunity to do it against his own will. He was possessed by an artifact, a book, which apparently whispered into his head and made him forget his surroundings. Could that book be involved in the Petrifications that followed? Could the possession have made the accused into a Dark wizard? Investigations are pending.”

Harry froze for a long moment as the whispers escalated around him. That Connor would expose this secret to the people around him...

He had gone too far. He had forgotten family loyalty and the forgiveness of enemies, justice and mercy both, in his pursuit of this silly rivalry.

Harry closed his eyes. A moment later, his brother yelped. Harry looked again to see the paper flickering and flashing and falling to ashes.

“I can guess the other things that were on there,” Harry said softly, his eyes never straying from Connor’s face. His magic trembled around him, raised wings, wanting to strike. Harry ignored that impulse. He was always going to defend Connor, never hurt him, even if right now his brother would have a hard time seeing how Harry defended him. “Beating you at Quidditch. Not letting Ron hurt Draco. Speaking to snakes. Casting *Silencio* on you. Not trusting you as much as I should have.” He paused, then added, “Being Sorted into Slytherin. Did I get all of them?”

Connor’s face drained of blood. “How did you—“

Harry sighed aloud. “Has it occurred to you that only possession and Parseltongue are Dark traits out of those, Connor? I could defeat you in Quidditch and still not be Dark. I prevented Gryffindor from losing massive House points by protecting Draco from Ron and not hexing Ron myself—or you. I cast *Silencio* on you because you were being a prat, and you know it, ordering Professor McGonagall around. I didn’t trust you because I thought you would probably do something like this, something that’s going to damage your reputation with adults and Slytherins alike.” He let out a soft breath. “And if being Sorted into Slytherin means I’m Dark, why were you telling me last year that I was still good, still part of the Light, still a potential Gryffindor?”

He could feel his riled emotions calming. He was still speaking back to his brother instead of bowing his head and taking this in silence, but he was not striking back. That should work. It *would* work, he thought, since he could feel the insistent brush of magic along his sides and knew he could do much worse than this, should he choose.

“You were good then, I think,” said Connor, his face a horrible mixture of red and green and pale. “But not now.”

“You didn’t start getting upset at me until after I beat you at Quidditch, though,” Harry pointed out.

“That’s not true,” Connor argued. “I was upset about Luna’s Petrification.”

“But the first thing, the very *first* thing, even before that, was about my not moving out of the way so that Ron could hex Draco,” said Harry. “You were telling me to give up my friends for you. What kind of brother does that make you?” The other students were being very quiet, he noted. Not even Ron and Hermione looked as if they would interfere.

“A true brother!” said Connor, clenching his fists. “I put loyalty to family first. You should have, too!”

“Ah.” Harry nodded slightly. “Then you would have let Draco hex Ron, if I had asked you to?”

Connor’s face turned entirely pale, and he clenched his hands. He knew what he had to say next, Harry thought, lost somewhere beyond the swirl of both his emotions and his magic, in the plotting that he knew exemplified pureblood wizards. Connor knew what the situation would demand of him. And he was self-aware enough to realize how utterly ridiculous it would sound. It could have drama in the right situations, but this was not one of them. It had ceased being one of them the moment Harry argued back with logic instead of falling on his knees and begging forgiveness, or striking out with Dark magic to slay them all.

“But I’m the Boy-Who-Lived,” said Connor, and then flushed.

“I know,” said Harry. “But even the Boy-Who-Lived doesn’t have the right to demand everything from his brother that he likes. He *certainly* doesn’t have the right to demand that his brother let him hurt other people.” He swallowed, since he would have argued with that if Draco or someone else brought up it to him, but they weren’t speaking of Harry and Connor here, a Harry who had been trained to serve his brother that way and a Connor worthy of being served. They were speaking of Boys-Who-Lived and brothers in the abstract. So long as Harry thought of it like that, and focused on the fact that this would, eventually, make Connor a better leader, repaying him in the future for what it would cost him now, then he would not go mad. “The Boy-Who-Lived is shining forgiveness and compassion, Connor. Where has that gone with you?”

“But you—you’re a *Slytherin*,” said Connor.

“The Boy-Who-Lived should reach out and unite all the Houses in the school,” said Harry. *Breathe. Breathe. Think of the future. Don’t think of the dawning look of betrayal in his eyes.* “Or doesn’t that matter to you? Are you only going to recruit Gryffindors and Ravenclaws because one’s your House and the other hates me? And then what happens when I die? The Ravenclaws have no other reason to hold with you. And what about the Hufflepuffs and the Slytherins? Do only Gryffindors fight with you on the final battlefield, Connor?”

“That’s a long way in the future,” said Connor.

“The War is here now,” said Harry. “And you made it a legal matter when you accused me of Petrifying Luna and Neville.” He turned his head to look upstairs. “I’m on my way up to see the Headmaster. Did you want to come and recite your accusations to him, so that you can get me taken out of school?”

His brother made a tiny little sobbing sound. Harry looked back at him, and saw Connor’s face crumpling as his head turned away.

And then Harry understood.

It really *had* been about what Justin had told him it was about: jealousy and a child’s wailing uncertainty over the new place of things. Connor just wanted Harry to break and admit he was wrong. That was *all* he wanted. He hadn’t prepared for opposition at all, even for Harry to take this seriously as a legal matter. He just wanted his brother to say he was wrong. He just wanted to win the argument. No one more stubborn than a spoiled child sure he was right, after all.

Harry felt an enormous weariness come over him. While Connor’s failure to take this as seriously as he should have meant there was no deep and irreconcilable rift between them, it did mean that Connor still wasn’t thinking about the War, about the future. He still thought as a boy. That would have to change.

“Connor,” said Harry softly, taking a step forward.

“Don’t talk to me,” he wailed in Harry’s direction, backing away a step. “You were right, all right? You were right.” He turned and fled in the direction of Gryffindor Tower, crying. Harry knew he could have done nothing else, as strongly as he was feeling right then, but he also knew what Connor would feel when he came back to his senses. He had started *crying* in front of everybody.

He would only be more embarrassed and furious than ever.

Harry sighed and glanced at Ron and Hermione. Ron’s eyes were wide, and he couldn’t seem to say anything. Hermione glanced away from him.

“You should have known better,” Harry said, speaking mostly to her. “If you were going to accuse me legally, then you should have made sure it was *legally*, and that all the proper forms and procedures were followed.”

Hermione nodded once, her lips pressed together.

Harry shook his head and turned to go up to the Headmaster’s office. Gorgon and Jones were in his way. They scrambled out of the way when Harry made a little impatient gesture, but they looked stunned as their eyes followed him.

Harry was stunned himself. That wasn’t what he had expected to happen. He had thought he would explode at any moment, or use his magic to strike out at Connor, or give in and just do whatever his brother wanted of him. Any of those would have suited what he knew of himself lately—emotional, obsessed with his power and in danger of being corrupted by it, still obedient to Connor’s every whim if Connor was deserving of such obedience.

*Deserving.*

Harry breathed more easily. His vows.

*To be his brother and his friend and his guardian.*

Only one of those was a term of blood relation, and only one of those a term of companionship. Harry’s responsibility as a guardian came first, given the weight of his other vows. His primary duty was to *protect* Connor, not make him happy. He had made his brother unhappy last year in the name of performing his duty. He could do it again.

He could ride out this strange course his life had taken and return to what Connor needed him to be. At the end of the year, if no sooner, he could explain to Connor what had happened and receive him as a brother again.

For now, he had a Headmaster to talk to about staying over the Christmas holidays.

He climbed.

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“Of course, my dear boy,” Dumbledore agreed calmly. “I would have suggested your staying here over the holidays myself, if you had not. I think that Hogwarts’s wards are the best protection for you in any event, and that it would not be wise to take Tom Riddle within the walls of Godric’s Hollow.”

Harry sat back in his chair and narrowed his eyes slightly. The Headmaster beamed at him. His face showed nothing wrong, while his hand moved steadily to a bowl of sweets on his desk and popped them into his mouth. Harry could smell the strong tart scent of them from here.

But around Dumbledore, his magic was coiled, ready to strike or enforce his will. Harry didn’t know why. Was it simply because he had walked into the office with his own magic roaring around him?

“May I ask what your plan to deal with Tom Riddle is?”

Harry did not want to tell the Headmaster. Ducking his head slightly, so that he didn't meet Dumbledore's eyes well enough to let the man read his mind, he murmured, "I have it set, sir. Tom Riddle has one particular weakness, and I'm playing to that. I'll make sure that he's taken care of and that no other students are in danger, sir."

"And what about you, Harry?" Dumbledore leaned forward over the desk, the very picture of a concerned mentor. "You would be in danger, still."

Harry decided abruptly that he wanted to know something. He raised his eyes fully to Dumbledore's and asked, "Sir, you know what my mother raised and trained me to be, don't you? You *must*."

Dumbledore's eyes widened in brief surprise. Harry felt his mind pass effortlessly into his thoughts. His Occlumency technique was different from Snape's. Instead of swimming and hunting among the various memories, he shone light instead, and called up certain thoughts so gently that Harry barely felt them hum along the surface of his mind, barely glimpsed them himself.

Harry waited for him to see and sense the box, and Snape's shields, and comment on them.

To Harry's astonishment, Dumbledore didn't seem to sense them, or even Draco's and Snape's presences in his mind. He merely looked about, humming, and then floated back out again. When Harry blinked and looked, Dumbledore was crunching sweets behind his desk again as though nothing had happened.

"It happens that I do," said Dumbledore. "A powerful warrior of the Light. You know defensive magic and wandless magic well already, I think?"

Harry swallowed slowly. *Is he playing with me? How could he not know about the Dark that's hiding within me?* "A guardian of Connor first and foremost, sir," he said. "And I couldn't let him just accuse me of being a Dark wizard and possibly get me taken out of Hogwarts. Do you understand that?"

Dumbledore chuckled. "Of course I do, my dear boy. It is as I told Connor when you first revealed you were a Parselmouth: he must learn to unite the Houses and lead the wizarding world. And throwing a Slytherin out of the school, and encouraging House prejudices, is hardly the way to do that."

Harry leaned forward in his seat. His emotions had let him have too much peace, apparently, as they were now returning with a vengeance. Anger and worry and something perilously close to hatred choked his voice as he spoke. "Then why didn't you *tell* him that, sir? Why did you let him go around spouting this nonsense that I was Dark and that Slytherins were evil? For that matter, why do you let the other students say that so often?"

"Because Connor must be the one to unite them, and not I," said Dumbledore, and his face became ancient and sad. "You know that many people follow me, Harry, but I will not last forever. Connor must take my place as the leader of the Light. It will do no good if someone else earns that loyalty and then transfers it to him. It *must* be him. I have done what I can and remained out of the way." He turned his head and fixed his eyes to Harry's face. "But rest assured, I would not have done so if he were attacking students who could not bear it, true innocents. You know far more about the world, Harry, and you are well-trained to be anything that Connor needs you to be, including a target. You could bear what he was doing to you."

Harry felt the breath rush out of him. The Headmaster regarded him as a sacrifice, much the same way that Lily did.

He *understood*.

That had been what Harry really wanted to know. Anyone could know about the extent of his training, as Snape did, and still not understand. It was the concept of sacrifice they needed to grasp, that Harry was secondary in emotions and everything else to Connor's need of him.

"You have given up much," Dumbledore went on quietly, never looking away. "That includes your brother's good opinion of you, for the moment. But it will return, and it will be the stronger for what you have done tonight. Connor needed to look in a mirror and see himself reflected. He will sorrow for it, but he will be stronger in the end. Thank

you, Harry. You are doing as you should. You are fighting your part in this War. If you gave in and did as Connor the boy demanded of you, you would not be strong-willed enough to be of use to Connor the war-leader.”

Harry bowed his head. It was comforting to have someone say that to him, and really believe it. It made up for the breaching of the box, for having Tom Riddle in his head, for his parents’ and Connor’s tangled opinions of him.

“Thank you, Headmaster,” he whispered.

“It is my pleasure, my dear boy,” Dumbledore replied, beaming at him. “Now, pursue your plan for getting rid of Tom Riddle however you must. I will leave the details up to you. I trust you.”

Harry was not sure, as he slipped out of the office, that that was true. He and Dumbledore were not allies, not really, not yet.

But they were something like it.

Fawkes barely waited until the door had closed behind Harry before giving a trill of disapproval and turning his back.

Dumbledore blinked at the phoenix. He had been feeling relieved again—Harry was doing as he should, Connor had learned a lesson, and having Tom Riddle in Harry’s head would not prove so disastrous after all, even if Dumbledore had been unable to see Harry’s exact plan, wrapped and shrouded as it was in Dark magic he would not touch. But Fawkes rarely expressed disapproval so obviously unless something was wrong.

“What is it, old friend?” he asked softly.

Fawkes tucked his head under a wing and said nothing.

Dumbledore stood. “I know it is unjust that a child should have to pay such a cost,” he said, walking over to the perch. “But he is willing. And he will spare many others from having to pay a similar cost.” He reached out to stroke Fawkes’s feathers.

Fawkes fluffed his tail and edged along his perch, then stuck his head back under his wing and went firmly to sleep.

Dumbledore was left to wonder what he had done wrong, if something *was* wrong, and what it might be. Phoenixes often had too pure a view of the world, but he had come to trust Fawkes’s judgment.

In the end, when nothing was forthcoming, he shook his head and went to prepare for bed, leaving the slight uneasiness behind him. Matters were unfolding as they should, given the sacrifices and that they were living in a time of war.

It didn’t help that he dreamed of disapproving phoenix eyes that night. But he had lived a long, long time, and dreamed of them before, most often twelve years ago during the height of the First War with Voldemort. As the Second War began, it was only natural that he would begin dreaming of them again.

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## Chapter Seventeen: Comes the Test

Harry was standing before the dark figures in his nightmare again, one screaming in a confined space, the other whimpering in a larger one, and trying to figure out what they meant when Riddle attacked.

The first he knew about it was Sylarana's hiss, trailing overhead like the hiss from Nagini, Voldemort's snake, when he flung her over the Forbidden Forest. Harry turned swiftly. Snape's shields were fraying. He could feel Riddle bucking in the box, while Sylarana fought to keep her coils lashed around it. The box's lid was starting to rise, Harry's own padlocks and chains fraying.

*Wake up!* Sylarana commanded him. *You don't know your own dreams well enough to face him here.*

Harry opened his eyes, and pain slammed into him. He moaned softly and touched his head. His scar was on fire, and already slick with blood.

The curtains jerked open on the right side of his bed, and Draco was there, his hands clenched on Harry's wrists, taking his hand away from his scar. Harry was grateful for that, and tried to convey as much with his gaze. Draco smiled back, but it was a grim smile, and his face had gone nearly as pale as it had when confronting his father.

"I'm here, Harry," Draco said, and his voice in his corner of Harry's mind echoed him. *I'm here. It's all right.*

Harry felt Snape wake in the next moment, worried for just a moment before he hid his worry under the coldness, and then flow to the attack. The shields strengthened. Snape would hold them so that Riddle could not rip through them, if Harry only asked.

Harry didn't want him to. That would assault the professor's mind, too. And he meant to use this as a test of his plan.

*Let a bit of him out, Sylarana.*

*I should not—*

*Just a bit, Harry insisted. I know it might harm me, but we're never going to know if this works unless we try.*

Sylarana relaxed her clutch on the box, and Snape stirred his shields backwards like curtains. Riddle was apparently suspicious at the sudden lack of pressure. The lid of the box opened, just a bit, and a fleeting black tendril stuck out.

Sylarana slammed the lid shut again, and the tendril, cut off and isolated in Harry's mind, slithered out, looking for some way to link to Harry's thoughts and control them.

Harry floated around it, using the training Snape had given him in Occlumency over the last two months to make himself look as insubstantial and fleeting as a mere memory. He felt rage flow around him, adding a red tinge to the haze inside his head. Behind him darted Draco. He often seemed to be almost as at home within Harry's mind as Sylarana or Harry himself did, and Harry wasn't worried that he would be hurt unless the tendril turned suddenly.

It tried.

Harry raised his magic, just a small portion of it—it wouldn't do to have Riddle figure out what he was doing from inside the box—and wrapped the tendril within it. The magic abruptly took form, when he thought of it, as a whirling, cutting maelstrom, edged with knives instead of winds. The knives stabbed down several wild times, slicing and dissecting.

When Harry dissipated the magic, Riddle's tendril was gone, one piece of him destroyed forever. Harry found that he was not sorry for it. It was less than Riddle would have done to him. At least the rest of his personality survived in the box. Harry doubted that he would have anything of himself left, if once Voldemort possessed his mind.

Besides, it wasn't destruction of Riddle's personality that he planned, so it wouldn't matter that much even if Riddle figured out what he had done just now.

He opened his eyes and nodded to Draco, the signal that this contest was done. Draco uttered a shaky breath and sat back on his heels, rubbing one hand across his own forehead. He was sweating, Harry saw with some surprise.

"I'm sorry," he said. "Did that frighten you?"

Draco glared at him. "I was frightened *for* you, you prat. This plan of yours is insanely risky."

Harry shrugged. "I know, but it's the only one that has a chance of succeeding." He glanced up as the curtains on the other side of his bed shivered and opened, and Blaise stood looking in, frowning at them.

"What's the matter, Potter?" he asked, with not quite a sneer in his voice. He knew Harry and Draco had a secret of some kind, and it was obviously driving him mad. "Nightmares?"

"Yes," said Harry calmly.

Blaise blinked for a moment, the wind taken out of his sails, and then winked at Draco. "Yes, of course it's a *bad* dream," he said. "That's why it requires Draco to be in bed with you."

Draco flushed and sputtered out a denial as he scrambled from Harry's bed. Harry didn't see why he bothered. Blaise was going to think what he liked, and it wasn't as though the accusation was *true*. Harry didn't have time for that kind of thing yet.

*Nor will I ever, with Connor as the center of my life,* he thought.

*You're a prat,* said Draco childishly into the forefront of his mind. *And Connor's a prat.*

Harry shut Draco away into his corner again as Snape reweave the shields to keep Riddle blind and uncertain. They had proved what Harry had wanted to prove, that they could act together as a team when danger threatened. Obviously the test of facing Riddle himself, and not just a piece of him, would be different.

But Harry was confident, now, that he could face it.

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“All right there, Potter?”

Harry blinked and looked up. A green tinge had covered his eyes since he got up that morning. It was the eighteenth day of December, and Harry had held Riddle captive for nearly a month and a half. He was quite obviously getting tired of it, since he was twisting Harry’s vision whenever he could.

But he wasn’t free. Not yet.

Justin Finch-Fletchley was staring at him in concern from in front of the table, ignoring the Slytherins, including Draco, who gave him odd or resentful looks. Ernie Macmillan and Hannah Abbott stood at his shoulders, and they were—well, they didn’t look *concerned*, exactly, Harry thought, but they weren’t screaming in panic about there being something wrong with Harry, either, and that was enough for him.

“I’m not exactly fine,” he said, and closed his eyes with a sigh. “But I should be better with a little food and sleep.” He poked ineffectually at his dinner. He hadn’t eaten more than a few bites, despite Draco urging him to and Syllarana making a point of humming in delight whenever she took a mouthful.

“Take care of yourself, Potter,” said Justin, and gripped his shoulder briefly. Then he turned and strode out of the Great Hall. Ernie and Hannah peeled away from him as he reached the doors, heading in the direction of the Hufflepuff common room. Justin looked as if he were going upstairs, probably to the library.

Harry’s vision warped and twisted and swam, and Harry heard Syllarana cry out in surprise and pain.

Harry let out a low breath and tried to calm himself, though his heart had picked up enough speed to sing in his ears.

*It’s now, he told Draco and Snape. Tom Riddle is attacking now.*

He heard a sound from the staff table, where Snape had set his goblet down a little too loudly. He didn’t think that anyone else was suspicious, though. Draco stood, one arm around Harry’s shoulders, urging him forward. Harry moaned despite himself. The room was entirely a blur now. His scar burned as though doused in oil. His body shook, and he fought the need to be sick.

“Here we go,” murmured Draco as they left the Great Hall. “We can get you to the dungeons, and—“

“No,” Harry said, pulling away and drawing his wand. He wasn’t sure that he could perform the spell that he needed to without his wand. “We *discussed* this, Draco.” Every word came harder and harder through the haze. He could hear Riddle’s voice now, as he hadn’t heard it in months, whispering and laughing, promising Harry rewards if he set him free and pain if he didn’t. “You have to go back to the dungeons and I have to face him alone physically, except for Syllarana. You’ll hold yourself back as an alarm system.”

*And I?* Snape asked in his head. Harry started. Snape spoke so rarely that, were it not for the spiked feel of his mind, Harry would forget he was there.

*Stay where you are, thank you, Harry told him. Or anywhere else where you can sit in comfort and hold the shields, sir. You’re the last line of defense if the rest of this doesn’t go as planned.*

*You give me such confidence, Potter.*

Harry took comfort even in the sneer. It was the same. Everything about it was the same, and he was about to do something entirely new and unexpected.

He looked through the Great Hall doors, and forced his eyes to focus by sheer effort of will. He could see Connor sitting at the Gryffindor table. He’d looked up when Draco took Harry out, but then glanced back down at his plate. He’d made a point of not looking at Harry lately, and going out of his way to avoid a confrontation. Harry didn’t know what that meant, except that he wasn’t going to take it for an apology until his brother actually offered one.

*Stop thinking about that, Harry. Concentrate.*

He did, bringing up the battle-trained well hardened to steel in the last months by his struggles with his emotions and his training with Snape, and whispered, "*Fugitivus Animus Cogitatio.*"

The air stirred, and he felt the spell rush away from him in one long, cool purl of strength. It hit Connor, and to Harry's eyes, he acquired a faint shine. Everyone around him, except Snape, turned towards him like flowers to the sun. There were low murmurs about him, and Harry could hear speculations about how good he was at Quidditch, whether he had been right about his brother, whether he would defeat Voldemort again at the end of this school year, and more.

*Mr. Potter.* Snape's voice was a snarl. *Where did you learn that?*

*From a book,* said Harry blandly, and then winced as his sight fled again in the wake of Riddle's attack. *We don't have time for this right now, Professor. I have to make sure that no one wants to leave the Hall. This is between me and Riddle alone, and someone intruding will just make it harder.*

Snape said nothing, which Harry took to be agreement. He couldn't really care if it wasn't, he decided. He had other things to care about.

He felt Draco squeeze his shoulder and whisper, "Good luck." *Good luck,* his thoughts echoed, with an edge of warmth to them that was buried by fear in his voice.

Harry nodded, and then headed upstairs.

He had deduced that the entrance to the Chamber of Secrets had to be *somewhere* on the second floor, since all the attacks had happened there, and he didn't think that the monster could have roamed around from floor to floor without encountering and Petrifying more students. It was a gamble, of course, an educated guess, but one he had to make. Riddle had shut away or stolen his memories of opening the Chamber completely; Snape had encountered no trace of them in his thorough searches of Harry's mind.

Harry climbed the stairs, his head bowed and his will bent. He gathered strength around him like lassos, like claws, like coils. He could not know what form Riddle's strength would take when it finally came out of the box, and he prepared several forms of his own, mind shifting from shape to shape.

He had just reached the top of the staircase to the second floor when Sylarana screamed. Harry closed his eyes and felt her near to tearing apart at the seams.

*Let him out!*

*But you—*

*I'll be fine,* Harry lied, his pulse high and fast and thready in his throat. *Let him out. You know what you have to do.*

Sylarana released the box.

Riddle boiled out, a cloud of fury and power and loathing, and aimed straight for Harry. Harry wondered if he was even aware of Sylarana looping around the box again, locking his retreat against him.

Now Riddle couldn't go back, and neither could Harry. They faced each other in his mind, and Harry smiled. He felt much the same way he had when facing the Lestranges last year. It was dangerous, it was battle, it was war, but it was what his training had bred him to answer, and there was a certain satisfaction in knowing that his highest purpose in living was about to be fulfilled.

Riddle presented a less composed picture to Harry's mental eyes than he once had. His hair stood out wildly from his head, his mouth was pursed, and his eyes flashed dark lightning. He extended one hand towards Harry, a gesture that was menacing enough in and of itself, never mind the words he said.

“Do you know what I am going to do to you for keeping me cooped up in there? Do you know what I will *make* you do?”

“I can make a fairly good guess,” said Harry. He spared a brief moment to wonder what was happening to his body, if he had fainted or stood upright and said these words to no one at all, but that did not matter. He was fighting Riddle now. “You will possess me and make me use my magic against my friends, and make me open the Chamber of Secrets and set free the monster inside again.”

Riddle laughed, a laugh that was too knowing and too cold for someone his apparent age. *Do not be fooled*, Harry reminded himself as he gathered the last breath and the least burst of strength he thought he would be permitted to before the battle began. *This is Voldemort.*

“That is only the beginning,” Riddle whispered. “I have had a month to think.” And then he sprang, and his magic came with him.

Harry rolled, not directly engaging him but coming in from beneath. His magic lifted and lashed in firm coils around Riddle’s, binding him to Harry and not letting him fly too far. Riddle let out a surprised gasp, then spat and turned on Harry, wielding his own magic like claws.

Harry found the limit of his power almost immediately. Riddle was stronger, that was all, and he knew techniques of sheer raw battle that Harry had never learned. Harry could hear him muttering spells, and almost enacting them. The spells were spells of compulsion and control, and they would flood every corner of Harry’s mind soon, giving him other enemies to battle.

Harry dived.

He left some of his magic behind, so that Riddle rolled and bounced about for a good while before he realized Harry wasn’t there and tore loose to follow him. Harry felt him dive through the Occlumency fog that filled the wounds in his mind, now and then pausing to rip at them.

Harry felt the pain, but did not let it settle at the top of his mind. For the first time, he could see his own thoughts as webs, spiraling around him in vast dizzy patterns just as Draco and Snape had said they did, and he knew where he had to go. He plunged towards the center of them, and Riddle came behind him.

He could feel Draco’s and Snape’s anxious presences, waiting to assist him if they could. Harry knew they wouldn’t be able to. This was a contest of strength, not to destroy but to win, and he knew, without having to brag about it, that neither Draco nor Snape were as magically powerful as he was, though Snape was, in some ways, close.

Down he plunged, down, and the webs whipped past him, faster and faster. Riddle came along, never far behind, snarling. Harry controlled his fear, and replaced it with confidence, not quite blithe but close. He had practiced for this and practiced for it, and in the end, he would drive Riddle from his head. He did not have to destroy him.

They reached the center of the webs, and Harry dropped past what he saw as an enormous glinting block of white marble, wound with strands of silk. That was his goal of saving, protecting, and defending Connor, and it sang out as Harry dropped past it. It gave him a renewed surge of strength and reminded him of why he was doing this. Harry smiled and increased the speed of his fall.

His thoughts were lessening as he dropped, thinning, becoming a narrow and focused cone. For a moment, he still felt Riddle above him, pausing to consider the white marble block and then deciding that it wasn’t worth the effort to destroy. Then he lost the sensation of that, and fell through the hole in the center of the webs.

Riddle would not be far behind, he thought, his thoughts coming as difficult bursts, even though he could not feel him.

Harry whirled in the blackness beneath the webs and called on his magic.

It rose in answer.

Harry felt it as cold water, streaming around him and up through him and past him, the relentless tides of a black sea, eating the barriers that had kept it pinned so far. Harry drew and drew and drew, called and called and called, and still the magic answered him, wave after pulsing wave of power. He sent down one final call, hoping this would be enough, not sure if it would.

An icy voice spoke in his head, a new voice, neither Draco nor Snape nor Sylarana nor Riddle, but resembling Riddle's more than any other of those voices.

*I come.*

And a freezing tsunami caught him, howling, and bore the faint spark that Harry still clung to as himself in the midst of all that power back up through the gap in his webs, back into the flickering light of memory and conscious purpose.

Riddle was screaming. That was the first thought that came to Harry, and he rejoiced in it. The icy voice laughed around him, and he found himself laughing with it, pushing forward, crashing over Riddle and drowning him.

Riddle also held furiously to himself in the middle of that, as Harry had suspected he would. This was Voldemort, the man so determined to live that he had not been killed when hit by Connor's reflected *Avada Kedavra*. He would not die that easily, even if he was a fragment of himself, a memory of sixteen years old. He turned, and Harry felt him whisper a spell that he didn't recognize, caught and glittering in spikes. It floated towards Harry's webs, landed on them, and began to tear them apart, chewing them wildly, sending memories flickering and spinning through the water.

Harry closed the waters around Riddle, pinching him in pure magic, and began to squeeze.

Riddle screamed again, but did not stop whispering his spells. And now he was drawing power from somewhere *else*, a warm funnel of magic that sprang from far above them and felt like Harry's own. Harry stretched out a brief flicker of perception in Sylarana's direction, and found her still locked about the box. The magic was not coming from there.

Then he remembered what Riddle had said to him when he first let Harry know he was still in his mind, just before he had Petrified Neville.

*Your scar. A conduit to me. So peaceful here. So at home.*

Harry had no bloody clue how his scar was a conduit to Riddle—it was Connor who had taken the curse scar from Voldemort's wand, not him—but he was sure that that was where the magic came from, skimmed off his own being and warmed and twisted to Riddle's own foul purposes. The problem was that he didn't know how best to fight it. He had planned only so far as enraging Riddle, blocking his retreat, fighting him and trying to drive him out of his head, and then having Draco and Snape wait in the background as last-minute guards.

The icy voice laughed at him. *He is reaching high, taking the magic from the conduit. You know what you must do. The opposite.*

“Sap magic from my feet?” Harry sniped, and bore down harder on Riddle. He tore more viciously at Harry's memories in response. Harry blinked away a sudden intense vision of himself at his and Connor's tenth birthday party, and listened intently to the voice's answer.

First a sigh, which blew across him hard enough to leave a pattern of frost on his skin, Harry was sure. Then the voice said, *No. Go deeper.*

Harry swallowed. He had already gone as far down as he dared, drawing all this magic that he had floating about in him to combat Riddle, and that had not been enough. He feared that if he reached down any further, he would find only the scraped and belittled dregs of his magic, all of it drained for this duel.

*No, you won't,* the icy voice said, and caressed his mind. It sounded eager. *Go down deeper. Further. Is there any end to the heart of a wizard's magic? No, not until he finds it, and you have not found it yet.*

Harry reached down further, plunging through dark water and tearing webs, and back into the hole underneath the webs. It seemed almost tame now, no longer seething with power, and he sank through it, and down, and down, and still found no trace of new magic waiting for him.

Then he called.

With wild rejoicing, with a glad cry, the power was free, and rushed up and around him. Harry had never felt such magic. It was mad. It would tear everything apart if it could, take the sun and the moon from the sky and use them as juggling balls. It knew no boundaries, no limitations.

*Except that it will,* thought Harry, and brought down his own will upon it.

The magic bucked and fought him like a wild horse, and it was ten times worse than Tom Riddle's fighting had been, because Riddle was at least foreign to his mind, and this was familiar. But Harry was stern. He would call that power to defeat Riddle and to help Connor. He was never going to call it simply to sit around awash in it, as he had that day in Dumbledore's office. Their mother had trained him well. He could be corrupted if he did that, and he would not be corrupted.

*This is for you,* said the icy voice.

*This is for my brother,* said Harry, and bore down, and the icy voice died with a snap and a wail, and Harry was back in his mind, fully in control of his own actions, identifying Tom Riddle as a drifting speck, identifying...

He stood on the second floor. The shadow of an enormous snake played on the wall. It was just around the corner, and was writhing eagerly, hungrily, wanting to come around the corner and feed.

In front of him was Justin, one hand extended and nearly touching him. "Harry?" he breathed.

Harry felt a surge of pure fury. Riddle had brought forth the monster in whatever memory-destroying way he had while Harry was engaged in battle with him, and he would have Petrified someone else whom Harry considered a friend.

The snake started to come around the corner.

*Snake who Petrifies people,* Harry's training whispered to him. *Basilisk.*

Harry swung to face the shadow. He held up one hand, and pushed both down and out with his magic—down on Riddle, outward to the waiting basilisk. "*Stay,*" he said, and knew it was in Parseltongue, and heard Justin gasp, and did not care.

The shadow continued moving forward.

Riddle laughed at him—pained and breathless, but still a sound of amusement. *Any Parselmouth can speak to a basilisk. Only the Heir of Slytherin can control the basilisk in the Chamber of Secrets.*

Enraged, Harry whirled on him, and managed a grim smile as Riddle squeaked. *Thank you for telling me that, Tom.*

He tore Riddle's voice out and forced it through his own mouth, the same way that Riddle must have before, when he used Harry to open the Chamber and command the snake. "*Back! Back to your nest. Wait there until I, and only I, instruct you to come forth again.*"

The basilisk responded in a voice nothing like Syllarana's, a voice of mindless hunger. "*I want to rip. Tear. Grind bones. Crunch. Blood. Kill.*" The basilisk's shadow grew a flickering appendage that Harry suspected was its forked tongue. "*I can smell the Mudblood. Want a proper feast.*"

Harry felt his lip curl, and wasn't sure if that was his own reaction or Riddle's. He decided it didn't matter right now. "*Back to your nest. You have no choice. Slytherin raised you, made you, tamed you. Obey me.*"

The basilisk whined for a moment longer, and then turned and slithered back down the hallway. Harry waited until the shadow faded and stuck his head around the corner, hoping against hope that he would not see another Petrified student lying there. He did not know how long the basilisk had been free.

The hallway was empty of both students and basilisk. Harry let out a low breath, and then turned his attention to Riddle, still lost in both pain and astonishment in Harry's mind.

*I don't want you here any longer,* Harry thought, more determined than he could ever remember being, and bore down with all his weight.

Riddle crashed against the webs of Harry's mind, against the marble block, and barely escaped the black hole waiting to eat him. He wailed, his web-shredding spell and his sheer presence ripped and torn between the force of his unyielding will, Harry's unyielding will, and Harry's magic.

At last he screamed. *You have not seen the last of me, Harry Potter!*

*What an insipid thing to say,* Harry said, and squeezed one last time. *Go away now, little boy.*

Riddle wailed again, and was flushed from his mind. Harry felt his scar briefly burn as Riddle shot away, and opened his eyes swiftly to make sure that Riddle didn't go into Justin. Justin only stood there in bewilderment, however, and Harry felt Riddle's presence shoot away from him, curving downward. Harry smiled. *Probably going back to the diary, which I would bet a dozen Galleons is in the Chamber of Secrets. I don't think he could survive anywhere else outside it.*

And then it was done.

Harry sagged to his knees, breathing harshly. His scar felt like an open wound, and blood poured steadily down his face. Every muscle in his body ached. Sylarana shifted weakly on his arm. But none of those was as great a potential problem as the magic shifting and beating its wings around him.

He lifted his head and felt the magic snap to attention. It would do anything that he wanted of it. He was stronger than he had imagined. He could perhaps have killed Tom Riddle after all, though he didn't want to count on it. He was certainly stronger than Connor. What did he want his magic to do?

"What I want you to do," Harry whispered, "is to go away."

The power reared in protest, but Harry was already catching it, binding it in the coils and ropes he hadn't used to catch Riddle, dragging it back down. He put it in the hole under his webs, pumped his mind clear of the cold water, and ordered the magic to shut its eyes and go to sleep. He would content himself with the ordinary, everyday kind of magic he could carry in his mind and being most of the time.

He thought he heard a snarl from the icy voice before it shut its eyes. He did not care. He was master of himself, and he *would not* use his magic for evil.

"Harry."

Harry lifted his head. He could feel Draco pounding upstairs from the dungeons and Snape making his way swiftly along the corridors, but it was Justin who stood over him now, one hand extended and his face solemn.

"I saw the monster's shadow," he said. "And I know that something was wrong, that you were fighting—something. The possession that your brother talked about, maybe, assuming that he isn't *always* full of shit. Thank you for my life."

"I'm sorry for endangering it in the first place," said Harry, clasping the hand and letting Justin shake it. He couldn't stand yet. "I didn't know you were there until it was almost too late."

Justin shrugged. "Can't change the past. Besides, it was my fault. I thought I saw you following me, and I doubled back to talk to you." He eyed Harry's face and grimaced. "Merlin, you look bad."

Harry nodded, not surprised. "Will you excuse me a moment?" he asked. "There's something I have to do."

"I don't think you can walk to the hospital wing," said Justin, kneeling down beside him.

"Not that," Harry murmured, and closed his eyes. He could see the bonds with Draco and Snape now that he looked for them, not the golden braid woven deep into his thoughts that Sylarana was, but clear strands running from the very outer edges of his central web.

He broke them. There was a brief flare of pain, and of surprise from both Snape's and Draco's sides. Harry didn't care. He had studied up on the potion that created the bonds in the first place, and learned how to cleave them. He wasn't living with other people in his head.

*Except for me,* said Sylarana.

*You're a special case,* Harry pointed out as he dropped forward. His body had decided that it had enough of sitting up and wanted to lie on the floor.

*I'm very special,* Sylarana agreed dazedly.

*Such a beautiful snake,* Harry murmured. *And such an obedient one, to hold the box through all that battle and not come rushing to my aid.*

*I don't obey you,* said Sylarana. *I judge you. And you looked as if you had the battle well in hand. I will take the other compliment, though.* And then her voice cut off, and Harry knew she'd fallen asleep.

"Harry!"

Harry heard the rush of footsteps across the floor, and smiled as he felt Draco drop down beside him. "I'm all right, Draco," he said, his voice slurring with exhaustion. "Or I will be."

"If you will stand aside, Mr. Malfoy, Mr. Finch-Fletchley," said Snape's cold voice, "I will escort Mr. Potter to the hospital wing."

*More like carry,* Harry thought, and then he was gone.

~\*~\*~\*~\*~\*~\*

## Chapter Eighteen: Recovery

Harry opened his eyes slowly. The hospital wing bed was not uncomfortable, but he could feel the sheets scraping against him when he tried to roll over. It felt as though Madam Pomfrey had wrapped him as tightly as she possibly could, for fear of him escaping. Harry snorted at the thought. He was tired and had a pounding pain in his head. The last thing he wanted was to leave.

“Harry. Oh, thank Merlin.”

Sirius loomed into view for a moment, staring at him, then fell into a chair beside the bed and clenched Harry’s hand in his. For a moment, he tried to say something, but he ended up bowing his head. Harry felt a touch on the back of his hand, tears and a kiss.

“Hi, Sirius,” he said, and blinked. His throat didn’t feel as though he needed much to drink, but his voice was hardly louder than a rat scratching around a well. “How long has it been?”

“A week,” Sirius whispered. “Today is Christmas Day.” He smiled. “And this is a pretty great Christmas gift.” He messed up Harry’s hair.

Harry nodded slowly. “Can you get me some water?”

Sirius already had a goblet from the nearby table in his hand, and he helped ease Harry up the pillows so that he could drink. Harry was annoyed to find out that he couldn’t move by himself, even when he tried. It was the effect of a week of bedrest, he knew rationally, but he didn’t *like* it. He had important things to do.

“Has anyone else been visiting me?” he asked Sirius. Many things could have changed in a week, even his relationship with Connor. He had to know so that he could figure out what to do next.

“Oh, of course,” said Sirius. “Malfoy every day—and he really does seem to be your friend, Harry, though Merlin knows why. Snivellus sometimes.” Sirius frowned as if he didn’t like that, but hadn’t yet come up with any arguments to refute it. “And Lily and James came yesterday. The Headmaster’s been in at least once a day to inquire about your health.” He smiled, but his eyes were misty. “We were so afraid that you weren’t going to wake up again, especially after what Sn—Snape told us about the damage to your mind.”

Harry touched his head. “My scar hurts, but what does he mean by damage?”

“Apparently, during the—battle with Tom Riddle, you lost some memories,” said Sirius carefully. “Sn—Snape thought it should be restricted to mild gaps, but he couldn’t be sure. The longer you remained asleep, the surer he was that there

was some other, more permanent harm done.” He smiled, and this time it looked more like the carefree grin Harry knew. “He’s a gloomy bastard. I’ll tell him so.”

Harry smiled back, then hesitated. There was a question he really wanted to ask. But the answer was obvious from what Sirius had said.

In the end, though, the pressure, the hope that Sirius had just forgotten to mention the answer somehow, was too much.

“Did Connor come and see me?”

Sirius’s eyes lowered. “No,” he said quietly. “I’m sorry, Harry.”

Harry breathed in, out, in, out. His eyes fixed on the wall. “Why not?” he whispered. “I know that he was embarrassed about facing me, but I could have died.” Then he winced. He was whinging. He did *not* want to sound like he was whinging, and he knew now that he shouldn’t have asked the question.

“I think he’s embarrassed, even now, that he didn’t believe you at first and tried to get you expelled from Hogwarts,” said Sirius. “I know that your parents had a very stern talking-to with him about that, and I think Professor McGonagall also had something to say. But—he’s not ready, Harry. I don’t know why, but he’s just not, yet.”

Harry nodded. He could accept it. He *had* to accept it. He didn’t know everything that was going on in Connor’s head yet. Until he did, then he had no right to judge his brother, no reason to think that Connor hadn’t come to the hospital just to punish him. It could as easily be the bewilderment and confusion that Sirius believed it was.

He became aware that Sirius was making a show of looking around the hospital wing, his eyes darting in every direction. Harry raised his eyebrows and looked back at Sirius, who laughed at him and scooped him out of bed.

“Sirius?” Harry squeaked. He felt weak, still, but he didn’t object to being carried—until Sirius began to walk out of the hospital wing.

“You’ve been cooped up in here too long,” Sirius said firmly as they trotted down the halls. “Madam Pomfrey isn’t here right now, she went to visit some niece of hers. And the Headmaster and Sn—Snape and all the students who stayed are down at the Feast. There’s no one to see us if we go flying.” He turned Harry around and winked at him. “And I have to give you your Christmas present.”

Harry fell silent as they sneaked through the halls. He knew that trying to talk sense into Sirius was no good, and if no one really would see them...

He just hoped they could be back before Draco and Snape left the Feast.

Sirius took a side door out of Hogwarts, one that Harry had never seen before. *Of course*, he thought, as the door opened onto drifts of snow and a wide, glittering expanse that shone with blue shadows in the sunlight, *if anyone would know secret ways out of the school, it would be a Marauder.*

“Here we are,” said Sirius, and cast a warming charm on Harry. “Now, your choice. Would you rather fly on my motorbike or your broom?”

“The motorbike,” Harry said at once. He thought it was safer. At the least, it had more room for two people. And he was going to do what he could to preserve their safety, if Sirius wouldn’t.

He supposed he should protest. He couldn’t bring himself to do so. He’d missed this casual camaraderie that his godfather showed him, including Harry in his pranks without thinking twice. And if this was what would make Sirius comfortable, serve as an apology of sorts for what he’d done over the school year, then Harry was willing to indulge him.

*So am I.*

Harry started. He'd forgotten Sylarana until she spoke, though the presence of a weight on his left shoulder had led him to assume she was there.

*Thank you so very much,* she said, and stretched. *The warming charms feel nice. I'm hungry.*

*We'll go and get some food after this,* Harry promised, as he watched Sirius put the motorbike on the ground and bring it back to normal size. *But he wanted to be nice. I think we should let him.*

*Are you still angry at him?* Sylarana asked.

He was, Harry acknowledged. Not that he had any right to be angry. He started to put the anger in the box.

He couldn't. Harry frowned. He tugged, but the near-instinctive motion produced no effort worthy of note. The box remained closed.

*I locked it,* said Sylarana. *With a pattern that Locustas know, and only Locustas. You can't open it unless I let you or something cancels the pattern.*

Harry felt irritation at that, too. But he refocused the irritation towards the need to know things. *Why didn't you just use that pattern when we were training to fight Riddle?*

*Because I didn't have the time and the peace necessary to make it,* said Sylarana. *This week has provided me with plenty of that.*

She shifted out from beneath Sirius's hand as he lifted Harry onto the motorbike by the shoulders. Then Sirius put his arms around Harry's waist, settled behind him, and kicked the bike into life.

Harry leaned against Sirius's chest and listened to his godfather's laughter while his breath steamed in front of him. He was not sure how to feel. The irritation at Sylarana and at Sirius and at Connor—even though he told himself several times over that he shouldn't feel irritation at Connor—danced along the surface of his mind like lightning in a dark sky. He could live with it, he supposed. But it would have been simpler and easier to put it in the box.

*I didn't think that you wanted to do things the easy way,* Sylarana remarked. *You never have so far.*

Harry frowned at her and went back to work on controlling his emotions. He didn't have the goal of defeating Riddle to occupy him now. He would have to find something else.

Then he found it—the goal that was never far from his mind, the one that he had devoted his life to.

*Protecting Connor. But what would be the best way to protect him, now that I've sent Riddle away and I'm no longer a danger to him?*

*Make him a leader, of course. And show him that I'm really not a danger to him anymore, no matter what he thinks.*

Harry had just started to think of ways to prove that when Sirius stopped the bike and made it hover. Harry twisted around to stare at him. Sirius's face was solemn as he pulled something from a pocket of his robe.

"I wanted to give you this when no one else was around," he murmured. "It's private and special to me, Harry. I want you to—well, keep it with you, and never feel that you have to hesitate before using it."

Harry traced a finger along the edge of the object. It was wrapped in black cloth, so thick that he could make out nothing more than a general round shape. The cloth itself had a pair of small words stitched in silver along the bottom edge. Harry squinted to read them. *Tojours Pur.*

Harry sucked in his breath. He recognized the Black family motto. "Sirius, is this—"

“Something from my family,” said Sirius. “Something from the last War, in fact. Go ahead, Harry. I promise. I want you to have it.”

Harry slid the cloth away. Beneath it was a round circlet of metal, made of some black material that Harry didn't recognize and edged with shimmering silver. The silver made it difficult to see how wide the circlet was, flashing and playing tricks with his eyesight when Harry tried to squint at it. He couldn't tell if it was meant as a bracelet, a crown of some kind, or something else.

The silver pattern didn't only exist on the edge, he found out as he turned the circlet around. It dipped down into the middle of the black material, and finally coalesced into a single figure. The figure was a serpent, rearing, its mouth portrayed as open. Harry saw a tiny thread of silver in the very center of the mouth that might have been a forked tongue.

“I don't understand,” Harry whispered.

“This belonged to an ancestor of mine who was a Parselmouth,” said Sirius calmly. Harry could hear the strain beneath his voice, and didn't quite dare to look at his face. “Supposedly, it strengthens a Parselmouth's magic, especially as it relates to serpents. Dumbledore thought it might give someone who couldn't understand snakes an edge over Voldemort in the last war. It didn't, though, and eventually we put it back among my family's treasures and just forgot about it.” Sirius let out a small breath. “But I don't have a son of my own, and you're a Parselmouth, Harry. You should have it. After all, I'm not going to give it to Voldemort, am I?” He smiled at that, and looked more like himself again.

Harry couldn't speak for a long moment. He stared at Sirius's face and then at the circlet again, which he thought was meant for his upper arm. Sirius had done more than just give him a Christmas gift. He had shown that he accepted what Harry himself still thought of, automatically, as a Dark gift.

*It isn't, said Sylarana, and Harry sensed her shifting closer to the edge of his sleeve. And I can't sense anything from that thing. Perhaps you have to be wearing it in order for the magic to manifest? As if you need help being stronger.*

*Maybe,* Harry answered her absently, and slid the circlet into the pocket of his robes. “Thank you, Sirius,” he whispered. “Merry Christmas. I'm sorry the gift I got you is at home, but—“

Sirius messed up his hair. “It doesn't matter, Harry. I'll probably visit Godric's Hollow in a little while. I don't know if Dumbledore will let you go with me yet, but—“

“*Harry!*”

Harry looked down resignedly. Draco was standing in the snow beneath them, so bundled up it was nearly impossible to tell who it was—except that he was shrieking in a voice that Harry knew very well.

“What are you doing out of bed? Madam Pomfrey said—you couldn't—just wait until I tell Professor Snape—“ And he started hopping up and down in rage, as though he couldn't think of anything else to say.

Harry looked at Sirius. “I suppose we should go down.”

“I suppose we should,” Sirius said. He put a hand on Harry's shoulder and squeezed, briefly. “I'm glad that you're still here, Harry.”

Harry nodded. He felt the weight of the Black circlet in his robes all the way down, and held Sirius's acceptance tightly to himself. It seemed as though his reunion with someone else who claimed to care about him was not going to be nearly so happy.

Sure enough, Draco began shouting again just as the motorbike landed. “*Harry!* Why didn't you wake up while I was there? I come back from the Feast, with some treacle tart for you and that damn snake—“

*Treacle tart!* Sylarana sounded delighted. She stuck her head out of Harry's sleeve, then shivered as her neck met the edge of the warming charms, but didn't withdraw. *Where, where, where?*

*Probably back in the hospital wing,* Harry replied, his eyes on Draco in fascination. He wondered if Draco realized how much he sounded like his mother, or if that was just coincidence.

“—and, and, and you were gone, and no one could tell where, and Professor Snape's running around the school thinking you've been kidnapped, and I finally came out here and you were flying like a *prat*, and I decided to stay here and miss Christmas at the Manor for *this*, and—“

“Draco,” Harry managed to cut in. Sirius was coughing, the way he did on the (rare) occasion when he didn't want to laugh aloud at someone. Harry suspected he would start chuckling in a moment, and he didn't think Draco would take that well.

“What?” Draco paused, his face flushed and his breathing difficult as he glared at Harry.

“Thank you for staying for me,” Harry said.

Draco's face melted into a dazzlingly sweet smile. He reached forward and actually dragged Harry out of Sirius's loose half-embrace, something Harry hadn't thought he was strong enough to do. “Prat,” he muttered, his face in Harry's hair. “And it's more than you deserve, too, after the way that you shut me out of your mind so rudely. Well, not to worry. Professor Snape can make that potion again, and—“

Harry put a gentle hand on Draco's shoulder. This was something he had thought was clear the moment he severed the bonds, but perhaps it wasn't. “Draco,” he said. “I only had the bonds because I needed your help to defeat Riddle. I won't be renewing them. My task now is guarding Connor and keeping him safe, and I don't think that's something that you need to be in my mind for.”

Draco pulled back and gaped at him for a moment. Then he began to splutter. Since Harry had expected that that would happen, he managed to look calm, he hoped, instead of as exasperated as he felt.

“But I liked hearing your thoughts,” said Draco, who had evidently decided that the best way to get Harry to change his mind was to pout about it. “And I thought that you needed someone in your mind now to help you heal the damage. Professor Snape was telling me about it. You could have wounds from your battle with Riddle. I could help fill them in.”

“Occlumency will do that,” said Harry firmly. “And I thank you for wanting to share my thoughts, but *I* don't want you to.”

“Why *not*?”

“You would tell me to do things differently,” said Harry. “Not just try to help me heal the wounds or protect Connor. You would tell me that protecting Connor was wrong and that I should be doing something else, and—well. I just can't do that, Draco. Being available to my brother is always the most important thing.” He braced himself, hoping that Draco would understand.

Draco stared into his face. Harry wondered how deeply he saw. Someone trained by a man like Lucius Malfoy should see quite a bit more than was apparent on the surface, in Harry's view, but Draco had surprised him before, especially when he was determined to get his own way.

Draco looked away from him then, and muttered something that Harry couldn't make out. It had words on the end about “come first,” but when Harry asked him to repeat it, Draco shook his head, his face gone cold and closed.

Then he smiled again and hugged Harry hard around the shoulders. Sylarana moved out of the way again with a patient sigh. “But I'm still glad that you're better,” he said. “And I can't wait to give you my family's gifts.”

Harry blinked, then flushed. He had forgotten entirely about getting Draco or the Malfoys gifts—or he had thought of it once, in early October, and then it let it slip his mind again once Riddle started possessing him. “Ah, Draco, I—”

“That doesn’t matter,” Draco interrupted him. “Really, Harry, since you woke up on Christmas Day and you’re going to come back to the hospital wing with me now, you don’t need to give me a gift.” His voice challenged Harry to comment on anything at all in that sentence.

Harry shook his head and gave in. He knew he should ask more about what was troubling Draco, should apologize more about not giving a gift, and should attempt to reason out just *why* Draco was so troubled about not sharing his mind any more, when it had always been a temporary thing. But that would involve digging into subjects that Harry wasn’t sure he was ready to see, subjects that would hurt both him and Draco.

Harry could see the edge of an abyss he had nearly tumbled within, and was glad to step away from it as he said farewell to Sirius, hugged him, and then followed Draco back to the hospital wing.

*I know I can't be too close to Draco, or it would get in the way of my friendship with Connor. I always knew that having friends in Slytherin might do that. And even though he's shown me loyalty so far, and even chose me over his family, this is one choice I don't want to ask him to make yet. If we just ignore it, then we can pretend we're untroubled for a little while longer.*

Snape was waiting for them when they got back to the hospital wing. He narrowed his eyes at Harry and glided forward from the bed, his robes sweeping behind the way Harry imagined the basilisk’s tail moving. “And where have you been, Mr. Potter?” he whispered, hard enough to make Harry feel as though frost still nipped at him.

“Black took him flying,” said Draco, and bundled Harry back into bed. “Even though he’s not strong enough yet, and started shivering on the way back from outside.”

“Draco,” Harry managed to say half-heartedly. It was true that he’d started shivering. It was not true that he saw any need to bring this up to Snape.

“Flying,” said Snape, in a voice that promised doom and gloom.

“Flying,” said Draco, with a nod, and then turned away and gathered up three gifts from beside the bed. He dumped them in Harry’s lap. “Does that potion send Harry to sleep, Professor Snape?”

“Yes,” said Snape. “It prevents Mr. Potter from doing more damage to his mind. Of course, he seems determined to do that on his own already.”

Harry ignored him as he opened the first gift. He blinked. He’d had no idea...

“Draco, where did you get this?” he whispered, tilting the object so that he could see it better in the hospital wing’s light.

“Oh, my family’s had the frame for ages,” said Draco airily. “Genuine dragon’s tooth, mixed with crystal and—”

“Draco.” Harry turned the picture around so that Draco couldn’t pretend to ignore that it was a photograph of them together, walking down the hall at what must have been some point early in the year. The Draco in the picture was poking the Harry, who looked to be trying to sidle away from him without being obvious. The Harry had a fond smile on his face that Harry found deeply familiar, and the Draco was trying to keep his own face from breaking out in a smile of glee. “This, I meant. Where did you get it?”

“Around.”

Draco’s face had that shuttered look again. Harry decided not to ask, lest it would mean discussing all the *other* uncomfortable things they had lying around. He gently put the photograph back in his lap and stroked the crystalline frame, which shimmered with light and subtle facets under the surface. “Thank you,” he said.

Draco shrugged and dipped his head. A light blush had started on his face.

Harry sneaked a glance at Snape, only to find the man simply standing there and watching, his face neutral. Of course, it sprouted a sneer the moment Harry looked at him. Harry rolled his eyes and opened the second gift, which turned out to be Narcissa's, a regal sculpture of a phoenix, made of what Harry thought might be genuine gold, with rubies for eyes and the tips of the feathers. Giving in to temptation, he stroked its breast, which, though made with metal, looked real enough to shed downy feathers and let them drift around the room.

The phoenix began to sing. Harry had to close his eyes when he recognized the song. It was one that Narcissa had sung and played for them when he'd been a guest in the Malfoy Manor last Christmas. One of the old history songs of the wizarding world, about the founding of Hogwarts and the final exile of Salazar Slytherin.

Harry swallowed around the lump in his throat. "Tell you mother thank you for me, Draco," he whispered, taking his hand away. The phoenix hushed at once.

"You can write to her and say thanks yourself," said Draco. "She would welcome a letter from you, you know." He had an intent look on his face now, which didn't reveal anything of his other emotions.

Harry shook his head, too overwhelmed to start speaking, and then, with some caution, opened Lucius's gift. It had been a Foe-Glass last year. Harry expected something else like it this year, double-edged and ironic, a sharp reminder that they were on different sides.

He frowned in puzzlement to find only a ring. He turned it around in his hand, flinching, half-waiting for a needle to sprout from the stone on it and stick him with poison, or for his hands to swell and turn blue with some horrible contagious disease.

It remained as it was, though, a simple silver ring set with a single clear stone the color of snow that picked up light and reflections from everywhere in the room. Harry knew the stone wasn't a diamond, but he wasn't sure what it was. He touched it, at last, flinching just in case the needle was activated by touch.

The stone was shockingly cold, and Harry understood, then. It wasn't a jewel. It was a piece of ice kept frozen by charms Harry had never heard of.

He half-closed his eyes as he remembered his training. Ice rings were a rare gift now, but they had once been common, just like so many of the pureblood traditions Harry had insisted on learning. They meant a balanced regard, acknowledging the danger and power of a potential enemy while showing that the giver wasn't exactly ill-disposed towards him.

They were also, or had been once, the very first gift given when a truce was being negotiated between two powerful wizards.

Harry blinked at nothing, then shook his head. He knew that Lucius Malfoy wouldn't abandon Voldemort, not after the things he had done in his name. This ring was a token of regard, probably to satisfy his son, and not the opening move in a truce. Harry couldn't imagine why Lucius would want to do that.

He could very well imagine why Lucius would want to play a game like this, though, and a grim smile formed on his lips. He thought he might ask Sirius to visit Diagon Alley for him and buy the next gift in the game, a triangular piece of ebony cut exactly like the ice on the ring. That answered power with power and announced lingering suspicion. Harry knew Lucius wouldn't continue the farce for long, since the gifts grew steadily more serious and expensive, but it would be interesting to see what he did when he'd received Harry's gift.

"Thank your father for me, Draco," he said, slipping the ring onto his left middle finger. "And tell him his message was accepted." He paused. "No, wait. I'll tell him myself in a letter."

Draco eyed him for a moment. "You won't write to my mother, who likes you," he said. "But you'll write to my father, who's a political enemy. I don't understand you at all, Harry."

Harry shrugged. “That’s all right. And maybe I’ll write to your mother, too.” He picked up the photograph and the phoenix from his lap and stuck them carefully on the table next to the bed. “Thank you, Draco. Very much.”

Draco flushed again, then leaned forward and hugged Harry. “Merry Christmas,” he said.

“If you are *quite* finished, Mr. Malfoy,” said Snape, “I should present Mr. Potter with his potion.”

Draco nodded, whispered a farewell, and slipped away. Harry turned to face Snape. He had noticed that Snape hadn’t interrupted the ritual of gift-giving, for all that he’d sneered at it. Harry was under no delusions that Snape *liked* him, or even really that he liked Draco, but at least Snape was fair enough that he was no longer unwarrantedly hostile.

*Towards me*, Harry amended, when the first question out of Snape’s mouth was, “Do you have any idea what you are doing to yourself in the name of serving your feckless brother?”

Harry shook his head. “I know very well. You keep assuming I’m a child, sir. I wish you wouldn’t. These actions are all the results of decisions that I made a long time before I came here.”

Snape snorted at him. “You cannot tell me that you expected to be possessed by Tom Riddle.”

“Of course not,” said Harry. “That was an unpleasant surprise. But I expected that I would face Voldemort. And learn Dark spells, before you can ask about the *Fugitivus Animus Cogitatio*. I really did get it from a book. I’ll use it again if I have to, and others like it, to make people pay attention to Connor. I assume it dissipated when people finally did leave the Great Hall and escaped Connor’s presence?”

“Yes,” said Snape grudgingly. “It worked as you expected, Mr. Potter. But that is not the point. You have dozens of new wounds in your mind now. You are missing memories. I suspect that your magic has been strained, and that it will be some time before you can perform as competently in class as you have done.” He paused, then added, tone etched with acid, “I sincerely hope that this upset has not affected your potion-making skills.”

“If it has, sir,” said Harry, never looking away from Snape’s eyes, “I promise you that I’ll study to get them back.”

Snape shook his head and dragged in a breath. When he spoke again, his voice was rough. “Why are you *doing* this? There is no reason to. Others can protect Mr. Potter—that is to say, your brother. I was under the impression that Black was here for the express purpose of doing so. And he must face the Dark Lord on his own terms sooner or later.”

“Of course he must,” Harry said calmly. “And when he had to do that last year, he did very well, and burned Quirrell to ashes. I’m here to handle the other threats that might come his way, lesser ones—“

“Tom Riddle is hardly a *lesser threat*, you idiot child!”

Harry waited a moment, just to be sure Snape wouldn’t interrupt him again, and shook his head. “Yes, he is. He’s only a fragment of Voldemort, not the whole thing. Connor didn’t need to deal with him. He needs to reserve his resources for the bigger prize. So I’ll get in the way as long as I can, and also work on making him a better leader and more skillful—something I’ve sadly neglected so far. There’s a limit to how far I can train him, of course, since I can’t show how advanced my own skills are. But I promise you that he’ll save us, sir.”

Snape looked at him in silence. Then he handed the potion over, saying, “We must resume your Occlumency training after the holidays. That is the only way to fill in and eventually heal the wounds in your mind.”

Harry nodded, drank the potion, and lay down to go to sleep. It was a relief to escape the probing eyes of his Potions Professor, and the nagging guilt that, once again, he’d failed to convince Snape of Connor’s importance.

Snape stood watching Harry for long moments after the boy’s eyes had closed. He found himself grateful that Harry had not awakened until a week after his battle, for all that Snape had been more certain with each passing day that he would never return to consciousness.

The delay had given Snape time to deal with his own emotions—the shock he'd experienced when Harry's magic expanded from the depths of his being, the fear he'd felt that Tom Riddle would break free, the sudden release of growing weeks of tension and fear.

And the grudging pride, or something very like it, that Harry had used Occlumency and knowledge of his own mind as well as he had against Riddle.

Snape reached over, hesitant despite his knowledge that the potion would keep the boy firmly asleep, and carefully brushed his hair away from the lightning bolt scar. It still burned fiery red. It had not calmed since Harry arrived in the hospital wing, though at least it had stopped bleeding after the first hour.

Snape had heard fragments of Riddle's conversation with Harry, so hard had he been concentrating. He only believed it more likely, not less, that Harry was the Boy-Who-Lived. How else could he have such a deep connection with the Dark Lord?

But he also knew that trying to convince Harry of that truth would be nearly impossible.

*So don't speak to him about it, he decided as he stepped away from the bed. Let him believe what he needs to believe, or wants to believe, in regard to his brother. Instead, offer him training, what he doesn't have and will yet need in the battles to come.*

*It is more important that he succeed than know why he is succeeding.  
But if and when he ever changes his mind...*

*I will be ready.*

Snape turned and left the hospital wing, cloak swirling determinedly behind him. He meant to find and taunt Black into a guilty rage about taking his godson out of the hospital wing while he was still weak. It would please him, and Black had truly been stupid.

Besides, Snape had to do *something* to keep up appearances now that he had decided the bet with Black had also been a mistake on his part.

~\*~\*~\*~\*~\*

## Chapter Nineteen: Coterie

Harry didn't like what he had to do.

But he knew it had to be done.

*You've been thinking those two thoughts for the last half hour, Sylarana pointed out, sliding up towards his neck. Think about something else. This is boring.*

Harry reached up and stroked her back. *I'm sorry. I'm just—I don't want to do this.*

*That's only a small variation on the general theme, said Sylarana. Vary it more. I would like to see some variation in your head. Think about food. The Feast will start soon.* She sounded as if she would be drooling, if snakes could drool.

Harry nodded. They were already sitting in the Great Hall. The doors would soon open, and food would appear on the plates, and the students who had gone home for the Christmas holidays would reappear...

And his thoughts stuttered to a halt and returned to their circle.

*Harry.*

He blinked and looked down as Sylarana stuck her head out of his robe. She almost never called him by his name, as though she thought her intimacy in his head would give him a good enough idea of who she was talking to. *Yes, Sylarana?* he asked, since that seemed to be what she wanted.

*It will go well, she said, and nudged at the side of his neck. Relax. You have me in your head to warn you if you're about to do something stupid.* She turned and slithered back down his arm again.

Harry let out a short, harsh breath and turned as the doors opened. Draco, sitting beside him, the only other student at the Slytherin table, squeezed his arm. "I'll be right behind you," he whispered.

"Only if you promise not to talk," Harry muttered out of the corner of his mouth.

"Would *I* say anything to mess this up?" Draco said back. His face was the picture of shining innocence when Harry looked at him.

"Yes, you would," said Harry darkly. "Well, fine then. You can come with me, but if you annoy him in *any* way then you're not getting your Christmas present."

Draco perked up. "You got me a Christmas present?" He said it loudly enough that heads started to turn—including, Harry saw, heads among the returning Gryffindors. He grimaced. He wanted things to happen when they were

supposed to. He was going to have a confrontation with Connor and force his brother to acknowledge him, but only on his own terms.

“Yes!” he hissed back. “Why do you think I made you leave the hospital wing those times that Hedwig returned with my post? Now, shut up. Or you won’t get your gift.”

“What about my parents?” Draco asked with a slight whine in his throat. “It wouldn’t be fair to punish them for something I did.”

“When did you ever care about fair?” Harry could see Connor now, messy dark hair marking him out in a crowd of red-haired Weasleys. He didn’t look at the Slytherin table. From the way he walked and laughed and talked, it might as well not even have existed. Harry swallowed bile, which burned all the way down. *Not this time, brother. This time, you are going to acknowledge me.*

“I care about fair,” Draco insisted. “When it applies to my family, at least. And why are you watching that prat *now*? You’re supposed to be talking to me.”

Reluctantly, Harry shifted his attention back to Draco. “I got your mother a swan,” he said. “It’s made of crystal, and enchanted to act as a mirror when she, and only she, speaks her name to it. Saying her name twice will cause it to animate and fly to you or your father as a message if she’s in danger.”

Draco looked impressed. “That’s a paranoid gift, Harry, even if it *is* brilliant.”

Harry shrugged. “I thought it would work,” he muttered. “And I got your father a triangular piece of ebony, cut like the ice on my ring.”

There was a long moment of silence. Harry could see Draco trying to work that one out, and failing. He really didn’t have as much of an education in the ancient pureblood ways as he should, though Harry supposed he couldn’t blame him for that. Draco had been educated in the modern dances, and that was the most anyone could expect of a normal wizarding heir.

“Why?” Draco asked at last.

“He’ll know why,” Harry answered. “Ask him, if you really want to. It was the same reason he sent me the ice ring.”

Draco looked as if he would ask more, but Blaise dropped into a seat on the other side of him just then and leaned over to ask how Christmas holidays had gone, giving Harry an abstracted smile while he was at it. Draco turned away to answer, and left Harry free to watch Connor.

For a moment.

“Potter.”

Harry blinked and glanced over his shoulder. Millicent Bulstrode, who never talked to him much at all, stood there, frowning at him. She had her arms folded across her chest, making her an even more impressive sight; she was both taller and stronger than he was. Her dark eyes were fastened to his face as if nailed there.

“Yes, Bulstrode?” he asked at last, when it became clear that she wasn’t going away.

“Are you recovered from your possession by Riddle, then?” she asked.

Harry stared at her. Then he said, “Who said that was what happened to me?”

“I hear things,” said Millicent vaguely. “I just want to know if you’re recovered, or if you’re going to come at night and kill us all in our beds.”

“Of course not,” said Harry, still trying to figure out what the fuck was going on.

Millicent eyed him, then added, “I hear things on the second floor,” and turned away. Harry watched her back as she sat down, then decided she’d been trying to unnerve him. After all, the bathroom the basilisk had somehow come out of was on the second floor, and the attacks had happened there, too. Of course it would make sense to say that she’d heard about Riddle on the second floor.

Dinner appeared then, in the midst of a speech by Dumbledore that Harry didn’t pay any attention to. Dumbledore knew what he was planning to do tonight, and he’d given Harry not only approval but permission. *It is time that Connor be made to understand what his actions do to others*, he had said. *They might cause people to turn against him someday, and then how can he be a leader?*

Harry had pointed out that he would never turn against his brother, and Dumbledore had laughed indulgently and patted his shoulder, pointing out that loyalty had to expand outwards from him. Connor would hold him, of course, but at the moment, it looked as though he and Harry had turned against each other. Other students had to see that Harry and Connor were loyal to one another before they could be loyal to the future savior of the wizarding world.

Harry barely knew what he was eating, as he stared across the room at Connor throughout dinner. The only interruptions were Sylarana nudging him for a piece of food, or asking when the treacle tart would arrive. *Treacle tart!* appeared with regular exuberance in Harry’s head, making an odd contrast with the focus of his thoughts. *Want treacle tart!*

Dinner finished at last. Harry stood up. Eyes came to him at once, mostly curious. Everyone knew by now that he’d fainted and spent time in the hospital wing, though Harry hoped most of the students—Millicent excepted for whatever reason—remained ignorant of why.

He pretended not to notice the glares among the glances, mostly from the Ravenclaw table, and ambled out of the room. He would wait for Connor to leave. He was not going to force his brother into acknowledgment of him in front of the Great Hall. He thought their last confrontation hadn’t worked well partially because it was so public. If he faced Connor in an isolated corner of the entrance hall, his brother’s reactions were more likely to be sincere.

*Perhaps*, said Sylarana, who was so full of treacle tart that Harry had thought she’d gone to sleep. *On the other hand, he is a prat.*

“I don’t think he’s a prat all the time,” Harry whispered, pacing back and forth to work off some of the nervous energy that filled him. Draco gave him a curious glance, then an annoyed one. His latest trick was to be jealous of Sylarana, because she could speak into Harry’s thoughts and he couldn’t. Harry thought that was absolutely ridiculous, and did them both the favor of ignoring it. “Just some of the time. And this time—well, I just need answers. That doesn’t mean that he’s a prat to ignore me like he’s been doing.”

Draco began speaking in a bored drawl, as though he were musing aloud and Harry just happened to be in the vicinity. “Prats accuse their brothers of going Dark. Prats don’t see the desperate measures that their brothers are taking just to try and stay alive. Prats don’t visit their brothers in the hospital wing. Yes, I think Connor fits all the characteristics of a prat perfectly.”

Harry spun around and glared at him. “It wasn’t his fault! He’s just a child, and I kept the measures from him, and, well, I’m sure he had a good reason for not visiting me in the hospital wing! He *must*.”

“Harry,” Draco said, catching and holding his eyes, “has it occurred to you that you think about him a lot more than he thinks about you?”

“Of course,” said Harry. “That’s the point. He has to divide his attention and time among many people who all need it. I’m just one person.” He wondered why Draco had chosen to bring this up again. It was irrelevant. Or, rather, it was Draco understanding but then refusing to take it to heart.

“Maybe he doesn’t deserve your intense consideration, either,” said Draco carefully. “Maybe other people do.”

“Like you,” Harry said, with a sigh. “Yes, Draco, I know I haven’t been the best of friends—“

“Like yourself,” Draco cut in.

Harry didn’t bother justifying that with an answer, as he looked sideways and saw Connor emerging from the Great Hall just then. He only had Ron and Hermione with him, wonder of wonders and thank Merlin. Ron walked close at Connor’s side, as though he were going to take his wand out and hex anyone who so much as greeted him. Hermione walked a short distance behind, her face troubled.

“Connor,” said Harry, and took a step forward.

Connor hunched his shoulders and kept walking.

Harry narrowed his eyes. *Forgive me for the insult, brother, but you go too far.* “Aren’t you going to face me?” he asked. “I think a true Gryffindor would have. You lot are the House of courage, aren’t you?”

That brought Connor spinning around, and Harry saw the mask on his eyes and face shatter, the anger and jealousy spewing forth in the next instant. “*You lot?*” he spat. “I should have known that you’ve given up wanting to be in Gryffindor, Harry. Getting all nice and comfortable in the viper pit?”

“Oh, no, you don’t,” said Harry, his voice so fierce that Connor stared at him and blinked. “We aren’t talking about me now. We’re talking about you. Why didn’t you come and visit me in the hospital wing when I was sick? Were you too proud? Too nervous? Too *afraid?*”

Hermione turned a horrified gaze on Connor. Ron gave him a puzzled glance. “What’s that, mate?” he asked. “You told me you visited him. That was the day you couldn’t come to the Burrow because you were Apparating here with your parents, remember?”

Harry stared. *He didn’t tell them, either? He is acting like a coward, a liar—a Slytherin. I can’t let that happen. If he keeps showing those qualities instead of the Gryffindor ones he needs, then Dumbledore is right, and no one is going to follow him.*

And, of course, it made the confrontation much nastier than Harry would have envisioned, because it meant that Connor was forced into defending his honor. His eyes flashed, and he voiced a low growl that reminded Harry a lot of Sirius in his Animagus form.

“I didn’t visit him because I couldn’t stand to be in the same room with him!” he yelled, looking back and forth between Ron and Hermione. “For eleven years, he’s always been there for me, and then—then he just *turned* on me, started acting like other people were more important, started acting like *he* was some big important *someone!* He should have been expelled, you know that! Any other student who went around Petrifying people would have! But no, not Harry Potter.” Connor whirled, and his eyes were filled with loathing. “We were the ones who went around trying to save the school, just like last year when we guarded the Stone and defeated Voldemort. And my brother’s trying to *ruin* it all.”

“Bollocks,” said a very loud voice behind Harry, before Harry could say anything.

He turned, ready to hiss at Draco for interrupting, but he realized quickly that Draco was standing, mouth open, just as dumbfounded as he was. Justin Finch-Fletchley was the one who had spoken, and he was striding forward from one cluster of students lingering around the argument, his wand out. Flanking him were Hannah Abbott and Ernie Macmillan, and behind them trailed a blond boy whom Harry knew only vaguely. He thought his name was Smith. Zacharias Smith, or something similar.

The Hufflepuffs stepped up around Harry, and stopped. Smith worked his way to the right, but Hannah and Ernie stood on either side of him like guards, and Justin stepped out in front of him, his wand leveled Connor’s way.

“What are you doing?” Connor asked. He looked as though someone had hit him in the head with a Blasting Curse. Harry, a little dazed himself, wondered if it came from the sight of other students defending Harry, or from the sight of

*Hufflepuffs* doing so. “You know that he’s evil. You were there when we made the accusations. You know that he only got away with them because he’s Snape’s pet.”

“He saved my life,” said Justin, loudly enough to be heard all over the entrance hall. Harry winced, but he didn’t think he could step in; his shock had closed his throat off. “The monster was right around the corner. I saw its shadow. And then he shouted at it and made it back off. And since then he’s been fine. He beat the possession. I’ve asked Professor Black about it. You should have, too,” he added, eyeing Connor. “He’s *your* brother, and I’m just his friend.”

Connor worked his mouth, but apparently couldn’t think of anything else to say.

“I don’t know what you think you’re playing at,” said Justin, “coming up with high and mighty reasons to object to Harry when you’re really just a jealous brat. But it’s hurting Harry. So grow up, and get a mind, and stop it.”

“I don’t have to,” said Connor, and Harry saw his inherent stubbornness come to life. “I’m trying to protect the school from evil. That’s my duty.”

“Oh, good,” said Justin, giving him a fierce smile. Harry was reminded that, while snakes and lions might be more purely dangerous, angering a badger was a really bad idea. Also, a badger was much harder to detach from one’s leg. “I was *hoping* you’d say that. That means that we have an excuse to stay around Harry and protect him from the kind of ambushes that your little friends will engineer.” He glanced over his shoulder at Harry. “Sorry about this, mate, but I think it’s the best course. Merlin knows what he’d try, otherwise. I know that you were ambushed and beaten once already.”

“I really don’t think that was Connor,” Harry said, stating the truth.

Justin shrugged. “Yeah, but he was part of the reason that someone else did it, I bet. So we’ll just stay here and make ourselves nice and comfortable.”

“You can’t come into the Slytherin common room,” said Draco, snobbishly.

“Yes, I know that,” said Justin patiently. “But we trust you to look after him there. We’ll help guard him in the hallways outside.”

“I really don’t think this is necessary,” said Harry as calmly as he could. He could see glimpses of Connor’s face from the corner of his eyes, and that told him this was going all wrong. Connor was flushed and looked ready to cry. Harry had planned to be gentle, so gentle that his brother would forgive him almost before he knew what he was doing. It would show Connor to be capable of gentleness and mercy on his own, rather than being forced to them. And now the plan was in ruins again, and all because of something that, though Harry thought he might want it very much—he was tired of being alone—he did not *need*. “Thank you. I consider you a friend, Justin. But Connor doesn’t need this, and neither do I.”

“Oh, yes, he does,” said Justin. “I think your brother needs to be taken down a peg or two. Zacharias?”

Harry blinked and looked at Smith. He sauntered forward a step, his eyes bright with an odd glow. Harry thought it very similar to the feverish look he’d seen Hermione get in pursuit of new knowledge, but with a distinctly cruel edge.

“Why did you decide that Harry was evil?” Smith asked Connor, in a calm and casual voice.

“Because he started possessing people,” said Connor.

“How did you know he was possessing people?” Smith asked.

“It was obvious,” Connor said shortly, and his face started to turn such a deep red that Harry was momentarily afraid he would snap and start shouting. “Once I heard what he was doing, and he—“ He stopped.

Smith leaned forward and peered into Connor's face. "See," he said, with the air of a professor lecturing a student, "if I were thinking of reasons why my brother might do such things, then I would not think 'possession by an evil Dark Lord' right away. I would probably think that there was something else wrong. That he'd been falsely accused, maybe, or that he'd been blackmailed and forced into this, or even that he'd been tricked into it and honestly didn't think he was doing anything wrong until the first Petrification happened. It seems that you did none of those things. What a shame. Why did you think of possession?"

Connor mumbled something.

Smith cupped a hand around his ear and coughed politely. "I can't hear you," he said.

"Stop it," said Harry, abruptly knowing what Smith was trying to make Connor admit. He started to push forward, but Justin shook his head at him.

"He needs to be knocked down," said Justin. "Let him, Harry. He's an overbearing, pompous arse right now. Everyone in Hufflepuff thinks so, and I would imagine that even some of the Gryffindors are starting to believe it."

Harry stared at him.

Justin stared back, and then smiled, a smile with an emotion uncomfortably like pity somewhere in it. "I thought so," he said quietly. "You thought everyone believed him and hated you? Because that was what he said, wasn't it?"

Harry nodded, his head spinning. Did that mean that most of the school didn't think Connor was wonderful? Harry would have to not only repair the damage Connor had done but the damage that had gone on in people's minds? His title as the Boy-Who-Lived and the defeat of Voldemort last year hadn't sufficed to make most people listen to and trust him instinctively?

That put a different light on things. Harry stopped trying to move forward.

"Let Zacharias do this," Justin whispered. "He's the best I've ever heard at this. He's skeptical of *everything*. He even talks back to Professor Snape if he doesn't think the potions are made right. And people will take it better if they see it coming from someone who's not the person he's accusing, or a Slytherin."

Harry let Zacharias do it, but it was still painful to watch. He kept coaxing Connor to speak loudly, until Connor erupted in a burst of anger and humiliation, and then nodded like a wise parent.

"So you heard that your brother was possessed in confidence and then repeated it aloud for the whole school to hear? Tsk, tsk, Potter. That imaginary brother I don't have would have received my full support. I can't *imagine* having You-Know-Who in my head, and I don't want to, either. I'm sure it's not hygienic." Zacharias shuddered fastidiously. Someone laughed. Harry thought it was Millicent. "And then Harry beat him, and saved Justin's life," Zacharias went on, his voice effortlessly sliding into scorn. "That rather makes you look bad, doesn't it, that you're accusing him of being Dark? Especially since you betrayed him before anything happened."

Connor clenched his fists near his knees. "Then you tell me why he isn't Dark!"

Zacharias shook his head slowly. "You can't prove a negative, Potter. Pay attention to elementary logic, next time. And you have the burden of proof, since you're the one making the accusations."

"Fine!" Connor shouted. "Why do you think he's in Slytherin?"

"Because the Sorting Hat sat on his head and put him there," said Zacharias. There came some more open laughter from the gathering crowd at that. Harry could see his brother biting his lip until it turned bloody. "Slytherin isn't the evil House, you know, and Gryffindor isn't the good one. Try again, Potter. I *am* interested in seeing what you come up with next." He looked it.

"He beat me at Quidditch!" Connor tried.

“Someone has to win a game when two people play it,” said Zacharias. “And he won that one, just like you won the one last year.” He paused for a moment, then added, “Apparently, anyway.”

Connor let out a screech and lunged for Zacharias.

“Forty points from Gryffindor for attacking a fellow student,” said Snape’s voice, and he swirled down on them. Harry frowned at him. He would have bet a large amount of Galleons that Snape had been watching the argument for some time, and hadn’t made a move to interfere until Connor attacked. Snape simply returned Harry’s gaze for an opaque moment, then smirked at Connor. “And a detention with me on Saturday night, Mr. Potter.”

“Professor!” Connor wailed.

“Twenty more points for acting like a first-year,” said Snape, and then swooped away. Harry scowled at his back. Snape didn’t seem inclined to treat Connor any better than he had. Harry had hoped that Snape’s slowly lessening hostility for him would eventually include his brother. Why not? Connor was the Boy-Who-Lived, and Snape hadn’t been insistent that Harry was, lately. Perhaps he had finally seen the light.

*Apparently not*, Harry thought.

“Where do you want to go, Harry?” Justin asked as Zacharias sauntered back over to them, dusting his hands off and coolly accepting Hannah’s and Ernie’s congratulations. “We’re entirely at your service tonight, since classes haven’t started yet.”

“The library,” murmured Harry, trying to figure out how he was supposed to be in charge of four second-year Hufflepuffs. “If none of your mind?”

“Of course not,” said Justin. “Like I said, yours for tonight. We’ll work out the guard schedule later.”

“I don’t need a *guard* schedule—“

“Yes, you do,” said Ernie. Harry had always thought of him as pompous. He had forgotten that pomposity could hide immense seriousness. “You need some kind of protection, Harry. I think Riddle could come back. And there are any number of people who might still like to hurt you until you get your stupid brother under control. The Ravenclaws are being idiots about it, still. The professors won’t do anything because they don’t know enough. We’re coming along with you.”

“We really don’t mind,” Hannah said, giving him a soft smile. “Justin told us how you saved his life. That *matters* to us, Harry. Justin’s our friend. So you’re our friend. And you saved a friend’s life.”

“Hufflepuff loyalty,” Draco muttered.

“Would you like to explain why that’s less than Slytherin loyalty?” Zacharias asked, leaning forward.

Draco declined hastily, and they trooped off to the library. Harry went along, his brains still scrambled, trying to decide how he was going to rescue Connor from the depths of his own stupidity.

“Harry. I need to talk to you.”

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Harry turned around, his eyes wide. He had gone into the shelves to return a book on Transfigurations to its proper place, barely out of sight of the table where Draco and the Hufflepuffs sat making idle conversation, and he hadn’t heard anyone come up behind him. But there stood Hermione Granger, one of her hands yanking at her a curl of her hair. She caught his eye, then looked away from him and flushed.

“Is it Connor?” Harry asked, his mind springing to the worst possibility. “What’s wrong?”

Hermione folded her arms and glared at him, her nervousness apparently dissipated. “Not him. Don’t *worry* about him. He got exactly what he deserved. Harry, I wanted to say—that I’m sorry. I don’t know why I went along with Connor

for so long. I just felt *compelled*. On the other hand, I let him mess everything up with that legal document that I prepared against you. I knew it had to be read to the Headmaster to be legal, and I let him read it in the entrance hall anyway.” She closed her eyes. “And he said there weren’t any Gryffindor Death Eaters, and I thought of Peter Pettigrew, and didn’t say anything. I was being stupid, or making myself be stupid, because I think there’s something good in Connor, and I thought he was trying to do a good thing. And then it turned out that you fought off the possession and saved Justin’s life, and I didn’t know what to think. Tonight was the last straw. If Hufflepuffs think you’re not evil, you’re not evil. I trust their judgment over anything Connor says.”

Harry let out a slow breath. As much as he appreciated the apology, he thought that Connor needed her friendship more than he did. “Don’t you want to stay friends with Connor, Hermione?” he asked. “I don’t think he would like you coming to me and talking to me like this.”

Hermione huffed and put her hands up. “You’re just like him sometimes,” she said. “And like Ron. *Boys*. You tell girls what to do, and you don’t even realize you’re doing it.” Her glare this time was more pointed.

Harry felt himself flush. “Sorry,” he muttered. “I didn’t mean it that way—I mean, I didn’t mean it the way it sounded. I meant that I thought your friendship with him was important to you.”

“It *is*,” said Hermione, and for the first time, Harry detected a slight red puffiness around her eyes, as if she’d spent some time crying about it. “But it’s not more important than truth and sense! I’d break all the school rules to help Connor if he wanted me to. But he’s breaking too many principles. If I’m going to do the right thing, then I have to apologize to you and then tell him that I can’t support his ridiculous campaign of rumors against you anymore.”

Harry swallowed. He knew that feeling. He was doing the right thing now, he thought, but it would put Connor’s back further up and hurt him in the meantime. Harry was determined to reach the day when he could put his arms around Connor again and know his brother truly welcomed him, and wasn’t just embracing him for the sake of their parents or their blood birth. He would work towards it as hard as he could, even if he made it harder for himself, because, in the end, it *would* be better for Connor than coddling and being lied to. It had to be.

“So,” said Hermione, when they’d stood in silence for a moment. “Do you accept my apology?” Her hand had gone back to yanking at her hair again.

Harry nodded. “Thank you, Hermione. I know this was hard for you. And—well, come to me if you want to talk about anything.”

“Thank you,” said Hermione, and flashed Harry a small smile before she turned away. Harry watched her go. He wondered if he would have the strength to choose the right thing over friendship with Connor, if he’d still been in his brother’s good graces and this was happening to someone else.

Well, he’d already done it, in a way. He’d defended Draco against what Connor wanted him to do.

That wasn’t the start to this whole mess, he thought, but it was close. The mess had really started the day he was placed in Slytherin. If he’d been strong, if he’d been true to Connor, he would have ignored Draco’s attempts at friendship and simply stuck to Connor’s side no matter what.

But that would have hurt Draco, and surely that wouldn’t have been right, either.

Harry shook his head and gathered up the book he’d come to find. In a way, perhaps he *had* made the right decision. Connor was made of stronger stuff than Draco. They would get past this eventually, and repair their brotherhood. Draco would have sulked and sulked forever if Harry had refused him, his happiness becoming bitter resentment.

*And that may still happen in the future, when you finally make him understand Connor is most important.*

Harry shoved that thought away. He thought of Draco’s Christmas present instead, and the expression he would wear when he received it.

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As it turned out, his first expression was puzzlement. He held up the crystalline bottle Harry had given him and tilted it back and forth, staring at the lights in it. The lights had turned out rather well, Harry thought. They swarmed and sparkled through several different colors, red and purple and green and gold, all deep and jewel-like in hue.

“I don’t understand,” Draco finally admitted, after studying the bottle for several moments. “What is it?”

Harry smiled at him. “Gold represents calmness and contentment, red means anger, green means fondness and friendship, and purple means protectiveness,” he recited. The description of the spell he’d used to create the lights said as much.

Draco stared at him. “And?”

“Those lights are the emotions I feel for you,” said Harry. He shrugged when Draco stared at him harder. “I know that you miss the mind-bond, but no, I’m not going to let you back into my thoughts. But this way, you’ll still know how I’m feeling about you. You can look into the bottle whenever you think that I might be ignoring you or losing interest in our friendship, and be reassured.”

Draco shut his eyes. Harry watched the bottle glow bright green, and then looked back at Draco’s face as his eyes opened. There was a distinct shimmer there. Harry blinked. *Are those tears? Why?*

“Thank you,” said Draco. “Thank you, Harry.” He lay down, the bottle cradled in his hands, and stared at it.

Harry, glad that his gift appeared to have gone over well, turned to studying the Transfigurations book he’d taken out of the library. A moment later, Draco reached over and caught his hand tightly.

Harry peered at him, but Draco didn’t look at his face, just held his hand. Harry shrugged, deciding that it would work and he would never understand Draco anyway, and started reading again, while the light in the bottle alternated steadily between green and gold. Draco never took his eyes off it.

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## Chapter Twenty: Lockhart's Very Special Idea

“Connor, if you would just listen to me—“ Harry began soothingly, hoping it would stop the spiraling, out-of-control mania that his brother seemed to have developed.

“*No!*” shouted Connor, and stamped out of Sirius’s office. For good measure, he slammed the door behind him, making one of the banners hung on the wall sway and collapse across the chair beneath it.

Harry sat down in a free chair and breathed to calm himself, while Sirius hung the banner back up. Neither one of them said anything. Harry didn’t think he could, and Sirius was probably blaming himself for suggesting the meeting in the first place. His office, with him looking on, had seemed a safe enough room to Harry. He had very firmly disinvented Draco and the Hufflepuffs from the meeting. They had been present during the three confrontations he and Connor had had throughout January, and their presence always made things degenerate.

But it had gotten out of control yet again, the moment Harry mentioned the Quidditch match. Connor’s face had turned the color of spoiled meat as he yelled. In retrospect, Harry thought he might have been worried about the upcoming Gryffindor-Hufflepuff match, but that was hardly an excuse.

*No, of course it is,* insisted his mind the moment he thought that. *You’ve never felt nervous before a match, but you have more talent than Connor.*

Harry paused. The thought was on the right track, in the right tenor, and yet—something was wrong.

He had had these thoughts more and more often since December and Riddle’s possession of his mind. He would be thinking, believing, behaving as normal, and then some suspect thought about Connor, some backhanded compliment where he should have admired his brother unconditionally or a resentment that had no place being there, would come slithering through. Harry was sure that that would stop once he managed to fill the gaps in his mind-webs with Occlumency fog, but for the moment, it was disconcerting.

*And in the meantime, it makes the failures of these meetings my fault as much as Connor’s.*

*Of course it is. Because I should have anticipated his every move and known that he would snap like a child when I mentioned Quidditch.*

Harry jumped to his feet and began to pace around the room in agitation. Sirius looked at him solemnly over a shoulder. Harry imagined that his godfather was still too shocked to really give him comfort. It didn’t mater. Since Christmas he’d had a warmer relationship with Sirius, and if he still mocked Snape and Slytherin and Malfoys without thought, at least these days he noticed immediately afterwards and apologized.

Harry would have been quite content with life, in fact, if it weren’t for the holes in his mind and Connor not coming around.

Someone knocked on the door of Sirius’s office. Harry, assuming it was Madam Hooch come to discuss Quidditch business or one of the team Captains wanting to ask Sirius for hints, moved to go.

Ron Weasley stood beyond the door, his face as red as his ears. He stepped past Harry without even appearing to notice he was there, walked up to Sirius, and stood there staring at him.

“What is it, Ron?” Sirius asked, but he was trying to conceal a smile.

“You got my dad his job back,” said Ron, in a voice flat as his face with shock. “You got my dad his *job* back.” He reached out abruptly and hugged Sirius, mashing his face into his chest. Sirius chuckled and stroked his hair. Harry smiled inwardly for the way this happiness lit up his godfather’s eyes. Sirius hadn’t been sleeping well again, though he insisted he was and that the few nightmares were about Daphne Marchbanks. Harry, not feeling it his place to interfere, merely watched him, and made him go to bed when he could.

“I thought hearing that Sirius Black favored Arthur Weasley would put a wind up the Ministry’s collective arse,” he said now, his smile flashing with good humor as he pulled Ron away from him and pounded him on the back.

“But how did you do it?” Ron asked, his face beaming with something much like hero-worship. Harry nodded. *Good. Sirius needs it, with the way that Connor and I both are behaving.*

*No*, Sylarana said in his head, sounding as though she had just awakened from a nap. *Only him.*

Harry shushed her and watched Sirius smile in that mysterious, knowing way that said he knew about a *really* good prank the victim would never see coming.

“I was an Auror, you know, before the misunderstanding that caused the Ministry and I to part ways,” he told Ron casually. “But a lot of people underestimated me, since they assumed I drank *all* the time. And there might, possibly, just with the smallest tiny smidgeon of a chance, have been secrets that one drunken Auror could overhear and remember in the aftermath of Ministry parties. And there might, also just possibly, have been Ministry officials who would cover up their oily reputations by making sure that said drunken Auror’s friend got what he wanted.”

Harry blinked. That smacked more of Slytherin manipulation than Gryffindor courage to him. But Ron’s eyes had lit up.

“Were the Ministry officials Slytherins?” he asked.

“Almost to a one,” said Sirius with a wink, and then flashed an apologetic look at Harry over his head. Harry flapped a hand in dismissal. It *was* true that Slytherin produced more than its share of slimy Ministry officials, as it had produced more than its share of Dark wizards.

“That’s not strictly true,” Draco had told Harry once, his chin tilted at a haughty angle. “The stupid Slytherins are the only ones who get caught. The rest of us are pure quality. No one can ever prove we did anything wrong.”

Harry had pointed out that that did not mean they never *did* anything wrong, and Draco had pouted at him for the rest of the evening.

“*Brilliant,*” said Ron, an almost deliriously happy smile on his face. “Wait until I tell Connor!”

He ran out, still not seeming to notice Harry. Harry shrugged. It was Ron’s privilege not to. Since he was nearly Connor’s only friend by now, Harry would prefer that the Weasley boy’s eyes keep on shining for his brother.

Once Justin had called his attention to it, Harry could see how much the rest of the school despised Connor. He would never know the deepest reason—whether it was Justin’s story or because Connor had been acting like a prat in their eyes, too—but that was the way it was. Most of the Slytherins taunted him now, most of the Hufflepuffs went out of their way to avoid being in his company, and even Ravenclaw had drawn away and contented themselves with idle glares in Harry’s direction. Gryffindors would still react to insults against their House, but would uncomfortably look the other way when Zacharias Smith or Draco made a comment solely about Connor.

It frustrated Harry to no end, watching the damage his brother was doing his future leadership ability among the other Houses and even in his own, but there was nothing he'd been able to do about it yet. His every argument with Connor ended somewhere on the petty accusations, such as Harry winning the Quidditch match. Harry couldn't explain the important things to him.

He'd written to their mother, suggesting that she start sending books to improve Connor's political education again—especially talking about those times in history when wizards other than Gryffindors had been in power—but she had never replied to him. If she sent the books, Harry thought, sunk in gloom, then Connor didn't read them.

“Harry.”

Harry blinked and looked up. Sirius had knelt down in front of him, and his eyes were solemn. He held out his arms. Harry leaned forward and let himself be hugged, noting the way that Sirius's hands barely paused on the bulge of Sylarana under his jumper any more.

“I know it's hard,” Sirius whispered. “But you'll win him over, I have no doubt of it. There's such *loyalty* in you, Harry. I never knew it until Lily explained everything to me, those days that I was home for Christmas in Godric's Hollow. Then I understood the full extent of your sacrifice. And I want to say thank you, and to assure you that your brother will come around someday. He has to. He's a Gryffindor. It's not in our nature to stay away from our friends forever.”

Harry closed his eyes, let himself soak in the warmth from his godfather's body, and tried to believe it.

“Thank you, Sirius,” he murmured.

*Now if Connor would only stop being a prat, Sylarana remarked wistfully, then maybe you could think about something else.*

Harry didn't respond. What she said was true enough, but so obvious that he didn't think it interesting.

“Excuse me! I have a special announcement to make!”

Harry blinked and turned his eyes up to the staff table, where Professor Lockhart had just risen to his feet and was beaming down at the crowd of students. His skin no longer looked orange, somewhat to Harry's disappointment; he'd quit using the paste that Harry had enchanted to glow in Defense Against the Dark Arts. His hair and teeth were still suffering from the *Obscurus* charm, though. Lockhart had tried to brighten them, but since he was a less powerful wizard than Harry, the best he could do was make his teeth and hair flicker like Christmas lights. He preened under all the attention he drew. Harry managed a smile now, thinking that Lockhart would probably never understand the source of that attention, even if someone explained it to him.

“Today,” said Lockhart, gesturing at the red and pink hearts hung along the walls of the Great Hall, and the small floating hearts jogging in circles near the ceiling, and the stones crawling with pink and red spells for the occasion, “is Valentine's Day.”

Draco rolled his eyes and mouthed, “No *shit*,” with just the right intonation. Harry put a piece of sausage in his mouth to keep from laughing.

“Because I've been *Witch Weekly's* Most Charming Smile award-winner five times in a row,” said Lockhart, beaming at them while his mouth winked on and off and on, “I've decided to do something today at Hogwarts that will put a smile on *everyone's* face!” He turned to the doors of the Great Hall and clapped, once.

The doors opened, and a swarm of fairies flew in, all of them beating delicate wings to which someone had fastened lace. Harry stared. He knew what fairies looked like in their natural state, and they were quite pretty and girly enough. Why Lockhart had wanted to add this touch bewildered him.

“The fairies will be granting wishes all day today!” Lockhart finished triumphantly. “So long as your wish relates to your true love, of course. Let's all get started, and smile, smile, smile!”

Harry closed his eyes and put his head in his hands. He could feel Draco patting his shoulder.

“Come on, Harry,” he whispered. “Maybe it won’t be so bad—ouch!”

The tiny fairy who’d flown up and blown a cloud of glittering dust on him flew on, giggling. Draco felt his face and then stared as nothing came off. He looked back up, and Harry choked again. His eyes were big puddles of gray in the middle of a face gone absolutely silver.

“Harry!” he shouted. “Did you wish for this to happen to me?” He was trying to scowl as threateningly as he could, which admittedly wasn’t very much, given the fairy dust.

“I’m not your true love,” said Harry, and then put his head down on the table and gave in to the urge to simply laugh.

He did manage to stifle it to snorts when someone came up behind him and said, in a timid voice, “I wished that for you, Draco. I just thought—I just thought you’d be so pretty, with your golden hair and your silver eyes—“

“My eyes aren’t *silver*,” said Draco, as though horrified by the mere thought. Harry glanced up to see him glaring at a stunned Pansy Parkinson. “And you aren’t my true love. Sod off.”

Pansy’s lower lip quivered for a moment, and then she fled the Great Hall with a sob. Millicent got up to go after her, giving Draco an irritated look.

“That was rude of you, Draco,” said Harry, mildly, more interested in watching Millicent leave than in examining what Draco’s face looked like. She’d been dropping rumors again lately, this time hints that she knew why he and Connor still weren’t getting along. Harry was fairly certain that that was shit. She would have spoken outright by now if she really knew something incriminating.

“How do you get fairy dust *off*?” Draco whimpered. Harry looked up to see him rubbing frantically at his face with two fingers. The silver dust stayed. It looked to be caking as Harry watched.

Harry tried a Removal Charm—wandless, just to be showy. Then he regretted the impulse, because since when did he want to be showy? But Draco’s shriek of shock kept him from worrying about it too much.

In fascination, Harry watched as the silver dust rearranged itself, gathering thickly above Draco’s eyebrows and around his mouth. He looked like a clown when it was done.

Fighting to hold back his laughter, Harry shook his head. “Sorry, Draco. It’s Lockhart’s wonky magic again. I don’t know what else I can do but leave it. I don’t want to remove your skin next time.”

“Harry, what do I look like?” Draco asked, his eyes narrowing dangerously as Harry bit his lip and then choked.

“Funny,” Harry admitted, and then put his head down on the table again and howled.

Draco slapped him several times on the back of the head, and then Blaise asked Draco if he had any fake wands for the first-years. While Draco was attempting to hit a grinning Blaise, Harry slipped away and out of the Great Hall, shaking his head.

*I didn’t know Pansy had a crush on Draco*, he thought absently as he peered about for Connor, wondering if he could catch his brother and try to have a private talk while everyone was still screaming and running from the fairies. *I should start paying better attention to my Housemates. Those are the kinds of details that could mean life or death for Connor someday.*

He got somewhat distracted as a fairy flew towards him and hovered in front of him, staring intently into his face. Harry folded his arms and glared flatly back. A spark of magic should send the fairy scurrying if it tried anything, but he would rather stare it down. He had worked over the last few weeks on not always reaching for his magic first of all.

A subtle movement in his sleeve warned him, but he wasn't quite quick enough. Sylarana lunged, grabbed the fairy in her mouth, and vanished back under his jumper.

"Sylarana!" Harry said. Hardly anyone looked around at the sight of him speaking Parseltongue now. Harry would have been more grateful for the change if he wasn't currently bloody furious with his Locusta. "Put her back!"

"*Yum,*" said Sylarana.

"She's a fairy!" Harry tried. "An intelligent creature!"

"*About as intelligent as one of those fat little dogs that Muggles keep for company,*" Sylarana disagreed as she slithered up to his shoulder. "*The stupid ones die, and the smart ones survive. And I am much smarter than she is. Yummy.*" Harry heard a series of small popping sounds that he assumed were the distinct cracks of fairy wings bending as Sylarana swallowed the poor thing headfirst.

He hissed and reached into his jumper, trying to pry his snake out, but someone loomed over him and boomed cheerfully, "Ah, there you are, young Mr. Potter. I wanted to talk to you. Come with me, please!"

Harry glanced up, and froze. Lockhart stood over him, and Harry was pretty sure that he had just seen Sylarana eat his fairy. He didn't think there was any polite way to refuse, especially with Draco not here to rescue him. He sighed and followed the great git to his office.

Lockhart's office, unsurprisingly, was filled with pictures of himself, winking and waving and grooming their hair in front of hundreds of different wild and lonely places—caves, forests, cliffs. Harry knew they were the places that Lockhart had supposedly been on his adventures, but he found it difficult to believe. For one thing, he doubted that Lockhart could survive away from a regular source of running water and hand lotion.

Lockhart waved Harry to a chair in front of his desk and sat down in the chair on the other side of it, making a soft pleased noise through his teeth. "Now," he said. "Enjoying Defense against the Dark Arts, are you?"

Harry stared at him. Had the man really brought him here just to talk to him about his performance in the class?

"Overwhelmed, you're overwhelmed, I know," Lockhart chuckled, bending down and fumbling for something in a drawer of the desk. "Imagine, talking privately with a celebrity like me!"

Harry gritted his teeth. "The class is going well, sir." He cast around for something else to say, something that would sound adoring of Lockhart without actually being adoring. He couldn't think of anything. That Lockhart was a git was shouting too loudly in his head.

Lockhart straightened back up and pointed his wand at Harry. Harry was abruptly focused, his frustration and irritation running away like rainwater on a glass window. He met Lockhart's eyes, and decided that the man didn't know about his wandless magic, though Harry had assumed it was common knowledge among the professors now. Otherwise, he would have made sure that Harry was gagged before he showed him the wand. Of course, that wouldn't have done much good, since Harry could also cast some non-verbal spells, but it would have shown more sense than Lockhart was showing right now.

*What kind of idiot leaves his wand in his desk?* Sylarana asked, slithering to the edge of his sleeve. *Especially when he's just loosed a lot of fairies in the school that he knows most wizards won't approve of? Not that I know why they wouldn't approve of them; they are delicious.*

*I don't want you to bite him,* Harry told her flatly. *Not yet, at least. Let's see what he wants.*

That seemed to satisfy his Locusta, who calmed down. Harry met Lockhart's eyes and asked, "What's all this about?"

"I traced your magical signature on the *Obscurus* charm," said Lockhart. His voice sounded different, Harry realized, lacking the round, full tones that made it melodramatic. It reminded him of Quirrell, and Harry had the brief urge to

close his eyes and groan. Could Dumbledore hire *no* Defense Against the Dark Arts teachers who weren't hiding some kind of secret? "I know that you've been the one dimming my beauty for the past several months. You're probably jealous of my monumental good looks. Remove the charm."

Harry blinked at innocently at him. "But, professor, you're a great wizard, and I'm just a schoolboy. I'm certain that you could remove the charm yourself if you *really* wanted."

Lockhart's wand wavered for a moment, and then his face recovered its mask of arrogance. "Of course I could. But I don't want to. I want you to remove it, since you were the one who insulted me by putting it on me in the first place." His wand kept on pointing at Harry.

Harry studied Lockhart for a moment. He supposed he could remove the *Obscurus*, and it really wouldn't make much difference. The man wasn't doing anything to make Connor's life miserable any more. He was too busy doing that himself to notice even if Lockhart had been, Harry thought, his mind recalled to its preoccupation with his brother.

He shrugged. "All right. *Finite Incantatem*."

Lockhart's eyes and teeth began sparkling again, and the Christmas lights effect vanished. Harry was sorry to lose it, but it would have grown boring in a short time anyway.

*Now you are learning to think like a Locusta*, Sylarana remarked to him.

Harry stroked her back and watched as Lockhart patted at his hair and teeth with a trembling hand, flashed an exploratory smile at the mirror that occupied one full wall of the office, and then nodded. "That will do," he said. "And I know that you surely didn't mean it for to last so long, Mr. Potter. After all, you probably intended it for your brother Connor, since he says you're so jealous of him."

Harry shuddered. He hoped that the desperate desire for company who could tolerate him hadn't driven Connor to talk to *Lockhart*. "Can I go now, Professor?" he asked, thinking that he needed to dream up a new hex for the git—one that wasn't so immediately noticeable.

"Of course," said Lockhart. Harry hopped out of his chair and made for the door. He did turn around as Lockhart called out, "One more thing."

He saw the determination on the other wizard's face, and suspected something even before the wand was pointed at him and the word "*Obliviate!*" was muttered.

Harry felt the spell coming at him and reacted instinctively—not by moving away, but with Occlumency. The moment the spell struck the outer surface of his mind and tried to eat those memories concerned with Lockhart and his asking Harry to remove the *Obscurus*, Harry's webs flipped it off, bounced it off the solid defenses that he had locked still in other places, no matter what Snape said, and then shattered it to dust and silence. Harry shook his head and looked back up at Lockhart.

The blond wizard had opened his mouth, probably to give Harry a command or tell him what false memories would replace the real ones, but now he closed it and reeled backwards, sitting down hard in the chair behind the desk. Harry took a step forward. Lockhart's face turned the color of old cheese.

"You resisted it," he said.

"Yes," said Harry. "And you had no need to *Obliviate* me at all, except that you tried." He could hear Sylarana's angry hissing and her pleas to be let at the man who had threatened Harry, but his own mind was racing, trying to come up with ways to use this situation to his advantage. "Were you *that* worried that I would tell someone about that silly charm?"

But he knew the answer even as he asked. No, Lockhart wasn't that worried about being embarrassed, certainly not enough to produce the spell out of nowhere. That had been a long-practiced reaction, coming from someone who had used the spell so often that it was his first defense.

Harry's eyes flicked to the photos on the wall, and he remembered his earlier thought about it being unlikely that Lockhart had gone to so many places, fought so many battles, and yet posed for pictures looking like that. *You'd think*, Harry's mind murmured with the sarcasm that seemed to have become natural to him lately, *that he'd want at least one photo where he posed with blood all over himself and the corpse of whatever monster he killed at his feet.*

*Unless he didn't really kill them, of course.*

Harry looked back narrowly at Lockhart. "You let other people kill those Dark creatures," he said. "And then you *Obliviated* anyone who could have told differently, didn't you? Those were other wizards and witches, actual brave heroes, who did the dirty work. You just showed up and claimed the credit."

Lockhart became even paler. He tried to say something, but the only thing that would come out of his throat was a strangled noise.

Harry prowled closer to the desk, abruptly feeling better than he had in a month, the last time he'd really had hope that a confrontation with Connor would go as planned.

"You know that a secret like that would get you sacked from the school," he said. "And more than that, no one would ever trust you again. You'd get laughed at and smeared by the *Prophet*. And *Witch Weekly* would never choose you for their Most Charming Smile award again."

Lockhart gave a little gurgling cry and put his hands over his face. He was shaking badly.

Harry cocked his head to the side. He knew he was going to blackmail Lockhart, and he also knew he was doing it for his own reasons. This was a Slytherin tactic, and he had a Slytherin motivation. He couldn't really claim he was doing this for the side of the Light, except inasmuch as every action to heal his wounds with Connor was an action taken for the side of the Light.

And he didn't care.

"I think that I know what you should do," he said calmly.

"What?" Lockhart lowered his hands and stared at him without much hope.

"I think that you should stop worrying," said Harry softly, and folded his arms over his chest. Sylarana slithered out of his sleeve, muttering petulantly that he could have told her if he didn't need her. Harry ignored that, too. "I'm not going to expose you—unless you try to Memory Charm me again, or unless you don't do what I want you to do."

Lockhart's face actually relaxed. Harry blinked, then supposed that this kind of wizard was more at home with underhanded tactics than fair ones. Briefly, he wondered if Lockhart had been a Slytherin when he was in school. Draco would say that he wasn't a proper one, of course, since he got caught.

"Anything you like," said Lockhart, leaning forward. "Would you like a photograph, autographed, that would usually go for a hundred Galleons? An advance copy of *Run-ins with Runespoors*? A cream that—"

"None of those," said Harry. "I want you to assign me a detention with my brother, some time next weekend." He thought that was the best time, since Connor would have played Hufflepuff and won by then, and he couldn't take the excuse of hurrying away for classes or homework that was due the next morning. "And then make absolutely sure that we aren't disturbed by anyone, not even Filch or one of the other professors."

Lockhart gave a slow blink, as though he could not imagine why Harry wanted such a thing, but then he nodded. "I can do that."

"Do it," said Harry, "and I'll forget about this." He paused, wondering if the man needed another reminder, and then decided that it wouldn't hurt as Lockhart's eyes slid sideways to his wand again. He was entirely too dependent on

Memory Charms. “As long as you don’t try another *Obliviate*. Then I’m afraid I would have no alternative but to go to Dumbledore.”

Lockhart nodded. “Of course.” He studied Harry for a long moment, then said, “Why?”

Harry raised his eyebrows at him.

“You’re a powerful wizard,” said Lockhart. “I knew it when I couldn’t remove the *Obscurus* myself.” Like this, his face was almost pleasant. Harry wondered if the git persona was part of the act, too. “Why would you want to make up with your brother instead of just blasting him into oblivion?”

“You don’t understand anything,” said Harry, shifting the balance of power back, and felt unexpectedly satisfied when Lockhart paled and looked away from him. “And you’re in no position to be asking questions of me.”

Lockhart nodded, then stood up. “I’ll see you in detention next week, then, Mr. Potter.”

“Actually, you won’t,” said Harry, and made his tone cool and conversational. “If you interrupt me while I’m finishing things with my brother, I’ll hex your balls off.”

Lockhart swallowed, looking as though he didn’t doubt Harry would do it, and stayed stock-still as Harry slipped out of the office. Sylarana hissed cheerfully at him as they made their way back towards the Great Hall. *Now you are acting like a snake. Attacking what you want, acknowledging reality.*

Harry barely paid attention to her. He was thinking, the edge of his resolve slicing through his uneasy thoughts about Connor.

That was the problem with all their other meetings, he decided: Connor had felt compelled to play up to their audience, even one as small as Sirius was, and he could leave the room. Stuck in a place he couldn’t leave, and without anyone else to feel he had to impress, he was going to *listen* to Harry.

*He had better.*

Harry shivered and shook his head. That last thought had sounded like the cold voice of his magic, like Tom Riddle.

But he was not like Tom Riddle. He was not. He was not going to turn on his brother. He was going to make up with him.

*By force, if necessary.*

But that didn’t mean he was evil. It just meant he was...forceful.

Not forceful enough to keep from dissolving into laughter when he saw Draco, of course. The other boy’s latest attempt to remove the fairy dust had ended up smearing the silver stuff into a single large splotch on his cheek, a splotch that just happened to look like the Gryffindor lion.

Harry took great delight in pointing this out, and even greater delight in running down the dungeon corridors while Draco chased him yelling threats.

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## Chapter Twenty-One: A Renewal of Bonds

Harry glanced up and caught Lockhart's eye a moment before he knocked his books and his ink off his table. The ink bounced and sprayed in every direction, coating his books and a good portion of the other Slytherins' robes before finally coming to rest. Harry bit back a smile. He should be looking horrified, like everyone else. No one else would understand that his grin came from the nonverbal Levitation Charm he'd performed on both the bottle and the ink simultaneously, to insure that it went in all the right directions.

"Mr. Potter!" Lockhart exclaimed as he swooped down on them. "That is a *very* naughty mess that you have just created! What is your explanation for it?"

"Sod off, Professor," said Harry pleasantly, and then bent down to pick up his books. There was silence for a long moment, save for Millicent's hastily stifled guffaw. Harry could almost feel Lockhart wondering if Harry was enjoying the opportunity to criticize him without Lockhart being able to retaliate in any way but the one they'd agreed on.

*That's a silly thing to wonder about,* Harry thought as he straightened and smiled at Lockhart's shocked expression. *Of course I am.*

"Mr. Potter!" Lockhart managed to splutter at last. "I am surprised at you! Showing such disrespect to a teacher, and one who has achieved more than you ever will, no less! Your brother, now, he might rival me if he applied himself a bit more. But not you!"

Harry couldn't help himself. He held Lockhart's eye and raised his brows. Both of them knew what his "achievements" were really worth. Harry couldn't believe that he'd used that line on *him*.

Lockhart waved a finger at him. "Detention, young man!" he said. "Come to my office at noon on Sunday. You'll stay until all my fan letters are properly answered."

"Of course, sir," said Harry, and sat down in his seat again, ignoring the ink that still smeared the legs of the table. Let Lockhart clean it up. It would do him good to perform a useful spell for once.

He calmed his urge to grin at Lockhart's back. He was only doing this for Connor. That was the only reason he was acting like a Slytherin. He *had* to remember that, or he was too likely to start acting like one for its own sake.

"Good one, Potter."

Harry turned around and stared curiously at Millicent. "What do you mean, Bulstrode?"

"I can't imagine why you want detention with the grinning git," said Millicent, turning back to her quiz on Lockhart's adventures with the Baden Banshee, "but it seems as though you're getting what you wanted."

Harry carried on staring at her for a moment. Millicent, he decided at last, was just unconscionably nosy.

"What does she mean?" Draco whispered to him. "What do you want detention with him for?"

Harry, too aware of the listening ears behind them, shook his head. "I'll tell you later," he said.

He wrote for a few more moments, then gave Millicent a glare for good measure. She just smirked back at him, her eyes sharp with curiosity.

*Stop looking at me*, Harry thought, and that helped to reassure him. He couldn't have grown too far away from what he was supposed to be, if he was still nervous about the attention.

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*Did you see the look on his face?* Sylarana asked as they walked towards Lockhart's office on Sunday. She was wrapped around Harry's neck, for once, flashes of her golden scales visible where his robes fell away. Her head rested just below his chin. *Draco, I mean. When you told him that he wasn't coming with you?*

Harry nodded. He was too embarrassed to say anything aloud yet. Draco had assumed he was going with Harry to the detention to confront Connor, once Harry told him what it was about, and then thrown a fit when Harry revealed that he wanted to talk to his brother alone. Harry had calmly answered him until Draco finally flung himself on his bed to sulk.

Then he had noticed that bloody bottle that Harry had given him, and noticed that it was purple, which indicated that Harry felt protective towards Draco. That had made Draco immediately smile and begin teasing Harry about how he wanted to keep the poor little Malfoy safe from his big nasty brother. Harry had tried to answer, but ended up flushing and getting away as fast as he could.

*Think about the funny things*, Sylarana instructed him. *It is beyond me why you must think of the depressing ones.*

Harry sighed in relief as he finally reached the door of Lockhart's office. He already knew the git wasn't there; he had overheard Connor talking and saying that his detention began at five minutes before noon, so the professor would have summoned him and made some excuse to slip away.

Harry let out a long, slow breath, then said, *I think it's time for you to think about something depressing*. He unwound Sylarana from his neck, and she let him, absolutely astonished. He put her on the floor. *When I said that I was going to talk to my brother alone, I meant it.*

*But if I get too far from you, the ward will sound and the cage will fall down around me.* Sylarana sounded absolutely childish, her tail lashing so hard that it hit the wall. *I hurt myself*, she whined.

*I must*, said Harry. *And as long as you don't move too far away from the door, then the ward won't activate. I know it falls at a greater distance than ten feet.*

*You think I'm going to sit here and wait for you like a dog?*

Harry shook his head. *As you pointed out, the ward and the cage are the only things waiting for you if you don't.* He pushed open the door and stepped inside before she could complain about anything else, and shut it behind him. Of course, a piece of thick wood wouldn't stop her from speaking in his head, but he thought she would respect this meeting enough not to do so.

*Maybe.*

Connor sat in a chair in front of Lockhart's desk, wearily sorting through a large pile of post. One pile, mostly pink and blue letters on scented paper that Harry could smell from here, looked like women's letters. There was a smaller, white pile in front of Connor, and a gold pile off to the side.

"I'm almost done with the sorting, Professor," Connor said, without looking behind him. "Which pile do you want answered first?"

Harry closed his eyes. His brother sounded so tired. Of course it was tiring, having all the school against you. And Connor didn't have the comfort of an entire House rallying around him, the way that the Slytherins had rallied around Harry after he declared that he was a Parselmouth.

*Truly, his life is harder than mine is. It's easy to forget that when he's acting like such a prat, but it's the truth.*

"It's me, Connor," he said quietly.

Connor jumped as if stung, dropped the last few letters he held, and whirled around without getting out of the chair. His eyes had narrowed, and so many emotions flashed across them that Harry was momentarily astonished. He was too used to being around people who controlled their emotions now, or at most showed only one, the way that Draco tended to. But in Connor's eyes were weariness, sorrow, anger, desperation, and fear.

*He's afraid of me. My own brother is afraid of me.*

Harry braced himself. This was one of the things they would speak about, then. At least it made a fresh start to an argument, the way that trying to talk to Connor about Tom Riddle or Quidditch simply didn't anymore.

"Why are you afraid of me?" he asked.

Connor gaped at him a moment, then drew himself together and snapped, "I'm not! Gryffindors are never scared!"

*Oh, Connor, thought Harry, feeling as if his heart could break for his brother. Your courage is your greatest virtue, but I could wish you weren't so stubborn.*

"Yes, you are," he said. "You're scared of me, and I want to know why. Do you really think that I'm going to Petrify you, or hurt you? I would never do that, Connor."

"You've been hurting me almost every day since September," said Connor, staring at him.

Harry winced as he acknowledged the truth of that, but said, "I wouldn't hurt you on purpose, then. And I've come here to try to make it up to you."

"How can you?" Connor muttered, sounding sulky and rebellious. He was grinding his chin into the back of the chair now, and his hands were clenched together. "You can't change the past, and you can't give me my Quidditch victory back, and you can't make it so that you never Petrified Luna or Neville."

Harry held onto his temper. He was not going to let Connor turn this argument onto those overtrodden paths. "Connor," he said quietly, "I want to know why you're afraid of me. I want to know why you lied and told Ron and Hermione that you came to see me when you never did. I want to know why, every time I've tried to repair our arguments in the past several months, you've never listened, but always run away like a hurt, spoiled child. That's not who you are. I *know* that's not who you are. The brother you are is the one who welcomed me even when he found out I was a Parselmouth, who said I was good even after I was Sorted into Slytherin. What's wrong with you? What's the root of all this?"

The terror in Connor's eyes was growing. He turned away from Harry and wrapped his arms around himself, shivering.

Harry took a tentative step forward. This was at least better than having Connor scream at him, but it felt as though someone were regularly punching him each time he saw his twin tremble. "Connor," he whispered. "What's wrong? It's something more than just having me look evil, isn't it?"

Connor gave the tiniest of nods.

"Tell me," Harry whispered.

"No!" Connor leaped off his chair and landed in front of Harry, his fists clenched and his eyes blazing. Harry recognized another attempt to move their argument back in the direction of old, familiar territory, territory where they would *both* be screaming too hard at each other to speak. "It's nothing, it's nothing you would understand, you wouldn't even *care*, you're too busy betraying me and hurting me to notice!"

Harry held onto his temper again. He wished now that he still had the box, since his anger was boiling and shifting about under the surface, and it would have been a great help to clear his mind so easily and efficiently.

But he reminded himself that there was something wrong here. There *had* to be something wrong. Connor had just admitted that there was. This was the most progress that Harry had made with his brother since the end of October, and it was now nearly the end of February. There was no way that he would let this slip away from him.

He'd missed Connor. He'd missed hearing his brother's voice, joking with him, laughing with him, trying to provoke him into a scowl. He'd missed knowing that his place in Connor's life was sweet and simple and uncomplicated, that Connor considered him always as a brother and friend and would never go to anyone else, even Ron, with news about something first. In reality, that part of their bond had disintegrated even earlier than October, since the moment Connor told Ron that he was having nightmares about Voldemort's attack rather than tell Harry.

*It stops now. I want my brother back.*

"I've never betrayed you, Connor, except in the service of an ideal greater than just brotherhood," he said calmly.

Connor stared at him, eyes narrowing. *You're not following the script, his gaze said. I don't understand.*

"I may sometimes have betrayed what you wanted of me," said Harry, his gaze firmly on Connor's. "But that doesn't matter. I've never betrayed the Boy-Who-Lived. And that *is* who you are, Connor, even though you haven't been acting like him these past few months."

Connor paled more than before. He choked out something, then immediately put a hand over his mouth, as though he hadn't meant to say that.

Harry stared at him. That—*that* was the thing that had been worrying Connor? Where had he got *that* idea?

*If I find out it was from Snape, I am going to set a nasty trap for him in our next Occlumency lesson, that's for sure and certain.*

Harry came forward, gripped Connor's shoulders, and forced his brother to meet his eyes. Miserable hazel eyes stared back. This was the emotion at the root of it all, Harry could see, though it had become clouded with self-loathing and self-doubt. Harry gently stroked his brother's hair back so that he could see the heart-shaped scar on his forehead more fully.

"You *are* the Boy-Who-Lived, Connor," he said. "Who else could have defeated Voldemort when he was a baby? Who else could have defeated him last year? I don't know where you got the ridiculous idea that you aren't. You are." He hugged Connor close, fiercely, and shut his eyes as he did it.

*No wonder he's been acting like a prat. He thought he'd had his entire identity ripped away.*

"No one—no one *told* me," Connor whispered. His words were barely intelligible, choked with months of pent-up anguish, but Harry had trained to understand this voice since they were both a year and a half old. He could make out what Connor was saying. "I just started—thinking. I thought about how much stronger magically you are than I am, Harry. And don't say you aren't," he added, though Harry hadn't gathered breath for a denial. "I know you are. I can feel it more, now. And then I thought about how long you fought V-Voldemort last year, and how you saved me from the troll, and the Lestranges. And I thought about how fast you fly. I thought it was your new broom that let you beat me in Quidditch, but it wasn't, was it? It was your own talent." He put his arms around Harry, holding him desperately. "And V-Voldemort attacked *you* this year, not me. Maybe he really wants *you* dead. Maybe *you* were the Boy-Who-Lived, Harry. You even have a scar, too."

Harry shook his head. He felt warm, and strong, and more certain than he ever had been of anything. His brother was holding him again.

"None of that matters, Connor," he whispered.

Connor seemed to be trying to pull away so that he could look into Harry's face, but Harry wouldn't let him. He just shook his head again. The world was the way it should be again. If only Harry had known that this was what was bothering his brother, he could have reassured him long ago.

"Power doesn't matter," Harry continued. "Voldemort is strong, and look at *him*. He's a Dark wizard, Connor, unable to love, unable to live. You defeated him the moment he approached you. Power doesn't make someone born to do something, not the way that love does. I may be strong, but it would mean nothing if I didn't love you. I'd turn to the Dark as easily as Voldemort did if I didn't have some kind of anchor holding me to the human side. More power just means more temptation."

Connor had stopped moving. Then he said slowly, "But Headmaster Dumbledore is even more powerful, and he's of the Light."

"Headmaster Dumbledore is one in a million," said Harry firmly. "He knows all the temptations, and when a Dark Lord appeared, he defeated him. That's because he knows that he wouldn't have been happy serving the Dark, that he would have been defeated eventually. He has *wisdom*, and that's better than power." He paused for a long moment. "Do you know who the next strongest wizard in the school is, after Professor Dumbledore and me?"

Connor shook his head. His hair rustled against Harry's cheek. Harry breathed in his brother's hesitant belief and felt it burst in him like song, like fireworks, like the feeling he had when he flew. He was the one who could give Connor reassurance. And this really *was* power. He could have thrown Tom Riddle off without a struggle now if he had tried to take possession of Harry's mind. Sheer magical power was as nothing against love.

"Professor Snape," he said, and felt Connor jolt. This time, he let his brother draw back and smiled into his face. "Yes, I know. That surprised me, too. But it's true. And Snape turned to the Dark for a long time, and had to fight his way back to the Light on a long and bitter road. So you see, Connor, wisdom has to be united with power, or it means nothing. You have the wisdom already." He dared to shove his brother's shoulder gently. "Though not so much as all that, or you could have come to me the moment you started suspecting this and I would have reassured you. *Prat*."

Connor slowly nodded. "And the Seeker talent?" he asked.

Harry snorted. "Do you really think being a good Seeker has anything to do with being the Boy-Who-Lived?"

"Well, no, I guess not," Connor said. "But I thought—I don't know. I thought I was supposed to be the best at everything because I was the Boy-Who-Lived, and I was letting everyone down if I wasn't. And I thought I *was* a better Seeker than you were." He leaned back and stared steadily into Harry's eyes.

Harry grimaced. He supposed that if he had to shed one of the gentle cloaks of concealment he'd wrapped Connor in, better that it be this one than one of the others. He didn't think Connor was quite ready to hear that Harry didn't expect to survive the Second War, that he assumed he would die defending Connor as Connor defeated Voldemort, and that he had embraced his future death joyously. "You're not," he said, and it hurt, and the expression on Connor's face revealed that it hurt him, too.

"But then why?" Connor asked. "Why hide that from me?"

"Because I thought it would be best if the Boy-Who-Lived looked to be good at everything, too," said Harry. "But Quidditch is a small arena to succeed in, in the end. Really, Connor, you've done much more damage to yourself in the school elsewhere."

Connor blushed and bowed his head. "In a minute," he said. "Tell me in a minute. First, tell me more about why you don't think that you're the Boy-Who-Lived. Voldemort attacked you, not me."

"Because he knew that would be the best way to make you miserable," said Harry sharply. "And it *worked*, didn't it?"

Connor stared at him with wide eyes.

“Have you ever felt so bad in these last few months as you felt then?” Harry asked, this time shaking Connor’s shoulders slightly. He let his own pain creep into his voice, the mingled pain of losing Connor, of losing his place in the scheme of things as he understood it, and of knowing that part of him had rejoiced in the sudden freedom, shaking off its bonds as though they were actually chains and not bonds of love that Harry had assumed freely. “Have you ever spent so many days just chewing on your lip and wanting things to be different?”

Connor closed his eyes and began to cry.

Harry rocked his brother against his chest, and felt Connor’s arms crush him frantically closer. “Voldemort did that because he knew it would hurt you,” Harry whispered. “He knew that it would hurt you to make you think your own brother was capable of Dark things, and he *made* you doubt me, because you’re so naturally of the Light.” Connor stiffened in his arms, but Harry pretended not to notice, though he knew they would address it in a minute. “You can’t let him get to you like this, Connor. Everyone needs you strong and shining. You’ve lived against him twice. You can get past this, too.”

“And the scar?” Connor whispered, as if he were insistent that everything in his original list needed to be addressed before they could move on.

Harry snorted again. “Didn’t you ever listen to Mum?” he scolded. “They came back after you defeated Voldemort. They know that you were the one who had the curse scar, Connor. They could *feel* that. They knew that a piece of ceiling had fallen and carved my head up. That’s all.”

“If yours was an ordinary wound, then it should have healed without a scar,” Connor whispered stubbornly.

“Then so should yours have,” Harry pointed out mercilessly. “Besides, Mum told me about this, the first time I asked her why I had a scar at all. She *did* try to heal me, but she was scared and shocky. They’d thought we were Voldemort’s captives, thanks to Pettigrew’s lies, and then come back to find us bleeding. She tried to help one of her children instinctively, but she’s never been the best at medical magic, and she only healed it partially.” He shrugged. “It’s been the same for so long now that it would do me serious damage to have someone try to heal it again.”

“And they tried to heal mine, too?” Connor whispered.

“Yes,” said Harry, on firmer footing now. Lily had told him this part of the story, too. “They tried, but it wouldn’t get further down than the heart mark it is right now. And then they realized it was a curse scar. You *are* the Boy-Who-Lived, Connor, and I don’t want you to hear you doubt yourself again without coming and telling me about it.”

Connor gave a little sob, and abruptly started trembling. Harry held him closer. “What is it?” he asked.

“But the Boy-Who-Lived is supposed to be of the Light,” Connor whispered. “And what if I’m not?”

Harry frowned in perplexity. *What can possibly be bothering him now?* “What do you mean?”

“I—I learned that I have a magical gift,” Connor whispered. “A Dark one. Worse than Parseltongue. I don’t know what to do, Harry. I didn’t know I was using it at first, and then I tried to quit, and then I tried to hide it, and it *hurts* knowing everyone would blame me for it and hate me, and I couldn’t tell anyone if I couldn’t tell you, and I was already angry and upset with you because I thought maybe you knew you were the Boy-Who-Lived and were just lying to humor me, and then I tried to forget about it—“

“Show me.”

Connor froze, then swallowed. “But it’s Dark.”

“I showed you that I could speak Parseltongue,” said Harry, stepping away from his brother. Connor swayed as if he would collapse without the support, but Harry stopped himself from going to him. Connor had to learn to start standing up and acting like the Boy-Who-Lived again, as soon as possible. He *was*, but everyone else needed to think so, too. “Show me this.”

Connor closed his eyes, then opened them again and met Harry's gaze with a cool, calm directness.

Harry felt as though a wind had entered his body through his eyes. He could feel it curling around his mind. He could have stopped it using Occlumency, but, curious, he watched as it turned and rustled here and there, seeking he didn't know what.

Then it vanished, and he found himself taking a step forward that he hadn't known he was going to take. He blinked.

"You see?" Connor whispered. "I wanted you to take that step forward, so you did. It's compulsion, Harry." He looked sick with himself. "I didn't even realize I was using it to compel Hermione and Ron to go along with me at first, and then I let it go, and Hermione stopped believing in me. So did a lot of other people. Ron just stays with me because he's my friend, and that's wonderful, but—I used it! I have it! It's Dark, and I don't know what to *do*." With a wail of distress, he sat down hard on the floor of Lockhart's office.

Harry shook his head, smiling. Then he knelt down and hugged Connor, who promptly stopped trying to cry in his shock. "You really are a prat," he whispered to him. "You should have known that I would accept this. I accept all that you are, Connor, even when you are acting like a prat."

"But it's Dark," whispered Connor.

"Of course it is," said Harry, and ignored Connor's sudden attempt to break free from him. "*Untrained*. If it's untrained, then you're going to go around influencing people's minds for selfish purposes, and they won't know it. But if you're trained, then you can choose when to use it and when not to, and you'll know when it's best to use it and when it's not, too." He gave Connor's shoulders another little shake. "I can't believe that you were so worried about this that you ran around trying to hide it. Dumbledore has that ability, too, you know. You remember how he calmed down everyone in the Great Hall after they found out I was a Parselmouth? And you remember that he's of the Light? The greatest Light wizard?"

Connor sniffled once. Then he said, "I do remember that. But—that was a good thing. Someone might have hurt you, or someone might have fired off a spell meant for you and hit someone else."

"Very good," said Harry, and restricted the dry tone to his voice and the sarcastic things he wanted to say next. Connor wasn't really ready for that kind of humor yet. "It *can* be a good thing, Connor, just the way that I could have used Parseltongue to restrain Sylarana or command her to attack other people. It's Dark if you just let it run around untrained."

"Oh," Connor murmured.

"So go to Dumbledore," Harry encouraged him. "He can find you a teacher if he can't actually train you himself. He'll train you to use your compulsion ability, and then you'll be even more charismatic than you were before. This ability can be an asset to the Boy-Who-Lived, Connor. And once you have Dumbledore's wisdom, then you won't use it wrongly or selfishly."

Connor sniffled once. Then he said, "So you forgive me, Harry?"

"Of course," said Harry, shifting so that his arms were fully around his brother once more. "If you forgive me."

"Of course," Connor whispered back, and they sat there in silence for a few moments. Harry closed his eyes and savored the feeling of being purely *happy*. It had been rare this year. Even when he'd been in Connor's good graces, he'd been trying to distance himself from the Slytherins and Draco, and then he'd been their friend but distrusted by most of the school, and then he'd been Connor's enemy. Now he could think that everything was going to be all right, for the first time in a long time. His life had finally resumed the course it was meant to.

Then Connor stirred and said, "You said I'd done myself a lot of damage. What does that mean?"

Harry sighed and sat back, taking his brother's hand in his own. Connor's eyes were big and earnest, and he appeared willing to listen for the first time. Even this summer, Harry remembered, he'd fussed and sighed over the wizarding history their mother tried to make him learn.

"You need to be a leader," said Harry softly. "You need to lead *everybody*. That means that you need to lead Slytherins as well as Gryffindors and Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs, and that you need to lead pureblooded wizards as well as halfbloods and Muggleborns."

"But I don't see why," said Connor, blinking at him. "I mean, when the Boy—when I defeat Voldemort, that will be it, won't it? They just need me to fight him. They don't need me to do anything else."

Harry smiled. If he had to destroy this piece of his brother's innocence, at least he could give him good news in its place.

"They do," he said gently. "You're their icon, Connor. You make them feel safe. You make them feel like you can't do anything wrong. There will be times when you mess up, of course, but you'll mess up less if you accept that you're a political leader, a war leader, as well as a fighter against Voldemort. I think you'll probably end up the next Minister of Magic if you want to."

Connor just stared at him. Harry could see that those were bigger dreams than he'd ever cherished. For a moment more, he held on to the idea of Connor as a child, playing, radiantly unselfconscious and ignorant of the eyes upon him.

Then he broke it. It was time to show Connor just who he really was, how much of the Light was in him.

"I know that you can forgive anyone," Harry whispered. "I know that you can unite *anyone*, once you put your mind to it. And that's what you'll need to do. The other Houses here distrust you. You'll have to put your mind to reassuring them and calming them down."

"Even the Slytherins?" Connor asked, with a sharp moue of distaste.

"Even them," Harry affirmed calmly. "They're not all like me, Connor, but they're not all like Lucius Malfoy, either. And with time and pressure enough, you may swing even the Death Eaters to your side."

"What makes you so sure?" Connor scowled at him.

"Because you *are* the Boy-Who-Lived," said Harry. He knew his own faith on this score was absolute, and he let it shine through his eyes. "You were chosen for that because you have such purity and love. Let it shine through, and they'll see and accept you for who you are. Who could choose to follow a madman like Voldemort when they see someone else standing with his arms open, accepting even purebloods and others who made a mistake in the past? Yes, they resisted Dumbledore, but he had a certain reputation long before Voldemort started his rise. You're different. You're new. You can make an impression on them that the Headmaster never dreamed of. You'll save us all, Connor. I really believe it."

Connor blinked, once. Then he said, "I—I can see it, Harry, and it's wonderful. I'd like to help make a world like that."

Harry buried his face in his brother's shoulder to hide a smile. He could see the vision, too: Connor, grown strong and mighty, shining with light after Voldemort's defeat, with men and women gazing up at him in awe as they listened to him mend old rifts and rectify old injustices.

And at his right shoulder stood Harry, wrapped in shadows, with no one paying attention to him beside his brother, but *there*.

Of course, they would never get there if they didn't start working to repair Connor's last few months of horrible, deeply undiplomatic behavior.

"The first thing you need to do," Harry said, "is make some gestures towards House unity."

Connor nodded. "What would you suggest?"

"A visit to Slytherin House," said Harry, with no hesitation at all.

Connor protested, of course, but Harry managed to persuade him after only a half hour of arguing. Then they left, Connor saying that he would apologize to Hermione and the rest of Gryffindor House, then go to the Headmaster and ask for training for his compulsion ability. Harry would go back to Slytherin and somewhat prepare them for Connor's visit the next weekend.

Connor paused at the bottom of the stairs and gazed solemnly at Harry. "Thank you, Harry," he said. "Thank you for loving me. I would never have learned this without you."

Harry managed not to wriggle with delight, but only by a stern effort with himself. He knelt, both to let Sylarana crawl up his arm again and in a gesture of submission to the Light's new leader. "Thank you, Connor. I love you. I believe in you."

Connor nodded once, face still uncertain, then blew out his breath and climbed the stairs.

Harry closed his eyes, soaking in the silence. He expected Sylarana to say something that would ruin the mood at any moment.

*Of course I am not going to, she said. Why would I? It heartens me to see you so happy. I wish there was a way that you could be happy and show off at the same time, of course.*

"There isn't," said Harry.

*I know.*

Harry decided that he wouldn't ask about the small sad tone in her words, and instead set off to the Slytherin common room. Draco would whine and rage and pout, and Millicent would smile too sharply, and the others would question.

*Too bad, Harry thought, chin lifting higher. I might belong in Slytherin, but I belong with Connor, too. They're just going to have to learn to accept each other.*

~\*~\*~\*~\*~\*~\*

## Chapter Twenty-Two: A Gryffindor Among the Slytherins

“No,” said Justin.

Harry paused and stared at him. They were waiting in the greenhouses for their Herbology class to begin; since it was a warm day and they would need to protect their ears when they moved the Mandrakes again, Harry had thought he’d better talk to Justin before then. He’d assumed it would be a simple task. He’d tell Justin that Connor had changed his mind and wanted to make up with the other Houses, and while Justin would probably be skeptical, and the rest of the Hufflepuffs even more so, it wouldn’t be nearly as hard as it would be with the Slytherins. Then Harry could move on to Ravenclaw, perhaps talking to Penelope Clearwater, the prefect whom Dumbledore had assigned to watch him, and then have another talk with the Slytherins to prepare them for Connor’s visit. The first one...hadn’t gone well. Harry had expected to spend the most time on convincing his House of his brother’s good intentions.

Instead, Justin was proving unexpectedly stubborn about the whole thing.

“No,” he repeated, frowning and shaking his head. “I’m sorry, Harry. I don’t believe that he’s suddenly a different person.”

“He’s not,” said Harry, quashing his annoyance at Justin. He was better at controlling his temper than ever now, after living without the box for two months. Besides, it had probably been something he said, some odd wording he’d used, that made Justin react this way. “But he *is* sorry. He was worried about thinking I was the Boy-Who-Lived, and that influenced his judgment.” He wasn’t going to tell anyone about Connor’s compulsion gift until his brother was ready to announce it to the school in general. “Really, Justin, I promise that he’ll try hard not to act like a git. Can you find it in your heart to forgive him?”

“You don’t understand,” said Justin quietly.

“Obviously,” said Harry, before he could stop himself.

The other wizard gave him a small smile. “We could forgive him, as you call it, for acting like a prat,” he said. “*If* it was just anything he’d said about our House or one of us, and he hasn’t said much. But he hurt *you*, Harry. And we find it a lot harder to forgive when someone hurts one of our friends.”

Harry blinked. He would not have thought of that objection himself, left a decade to do it in. “But I forgave him, Justin.” Maybe he hadn’t been clear on that part. “I said that I understood why he’d hurt me, and he promised not to anymore. We talked it all out.”

Justin narrowed his eyes. “And you think that really excuses four months of dodging around you and trying to make you look bad? You think that excuses lying to his friends about visiting you in the hospital wing?”

“Not *excuses*, as such,” said Harry. “Just... I understood why he did it.” He shrugged. “And since I’ve forgiven him, and I was the one most directly affected, it would look odd for you to go on disliking him, wouldn’t it?”

“Not at all.”

Harry jumped and looked over his shoulder. He hadn’t heard Zacharias come up behind him. He found himself wondering where Professor Sprout was. Surely she could get here and save him from having to have a conversation with the sharpest of the second-year Hufflepuffs?

Justin, the prat, was stepping back with a small smile and just letting Zacharias handle this.

“Now, I’ve been listening,” the other boy began, with no immodesty at all. “And from what I could hear, I don’t know if Potter’s suspicions about you being the Boy-Who-Lived have any basis in reality at all. I would say they don’t, since we all know Potter’s not the brightest candle.” Harry bristled, but Zacharias kept right on going. “But, either way, I think he’ll make a poor leader. He didn’t even notice he was alienating people, from what you said. You’d make a better one.” He paused and waited to see what Harry would say to that.

“It doesn’t matter what might or might not happen,” said Harry. “He *has* to be the leader, because he’s the Boy-Who-Lived.”

“I told you, I don’t know much about that,” Zacharias said amiably. “But I know a little about leadership. My mum took me to watch the Wizengamot operate, the way that any good pureblooded mum should. And you’re more like them than Connor is.”

“He’ll lead a different way,” said Harry. “It’s war-time, after all.”

“And then he’ll go into politics?”

With the suspicion that he was being herded into a particular conversational trap, but not quite able to see what it was, Harry nodded slowly.

“Ah.” Zacharias flashed him a cheerful smile. “And what makes you think that someone will make a good political leader just because he made a good wartime leader? The two require different sets of skills. Not much use saying ‘Charge!’ in the Wizengamot.”

“Headmaster Dumbledore is both,” said Harry. “Or was both. He led in the First War with Voldemort.”

Zacharias shrugged. “I told you, I know politics.”

“Not as well as you think you do, if you think that someone can’t be trained to be good at it,” Harry muttered, glancing over his shoulder and seeing Professor Sprout hurrying through the snow. He sighed in relief and jerked his head in her direction. “Looks like we’ve got to stop talking.”

“In just a minute,” said Zacharias. “And I’d rather have someone who’s naturally good at it than someone who has to be trained. Like you.”

Harry shook his head. “That’s not ever going to happen.”

“Are you a Seer?” Zacharias sounded *very* interested.

“No, I’m not,” said Harry, and luckily Professor Sprout arrived then and he could cover his ears. Throughout it, he could feel the Hufflepuffs’ eyes on him, and he frowned back at them. He didn’t understand why they were resisting so hard. Connor had made a mistake. He hadn’t committed a crime. He was only twelve, and he had much, much more time to grow better. If by some miracle Harry survived the Second War, then he would continue training Connor, of course, but in case he didn’t, he still expected his twin would do well. That was the reason he’d been chosen for this duty.

*And Zacharias Smith wouldn't know genuine innocence and purity if it bit him on the arse, he thought.*

Yes, said Sylarana sleepily. The cold made her so sluggish that she barely spoke at all when they were in the greenhouses, but curled up on Harry's arm and dozed.

*Yes what?* Harry asked her.

She was asleep again, so Harry shook his head and turned to tend to his Mandrake, his mood not much better in shade than the flat white sky overhead, currently shedding more snow.

*I don't understand why more of them can't see it. Connor's been much more pleasant this week than usual. He's won over most of the Gryffindors. He smiles at me and laughs with me. The Slytherins I expected would be suspicious, just because of the House rivalry, but why the Hufflepuffs? I don't understand.*

Harry braced himself and stepped into the Slytherin common room. He was going to speak with Draco, Blaise, Vince, and Greg again. Their last confrontation about Connor had escalated into screaming (on Draco's part) and thrown objects (on Blaise's part). But Harry was going to *make* them see reason. Connor was coming for a visit this weekend. Harry wanted Slytherin House to be following Connor before the end of the year, or at least be in a tentative alliance with him.

*It's not like I'm asking them to make nice with all Gryffindors, he thought as the wall slid shut behind him. Just one. And that one is the Boy-Who-Lived. You'd think that more of them would realize living under Voldemort isn't pleasant and that their parents made a bloody mistake...*

He paused. It looked as though the entire House had gathered in the common room, including the sixth- and seventh-years, and they were waiting for him. Their chatter fell silent as he stepped in, and they stared at him for a second. Harry blinked at them, and blinked further when he saw Draco and Blaise sitting on a couch near the fire, a place that Marcus Flint usually liked to occupy.

Flint was standing up, though, and walking towards him. He paused, staring keenly down into Harry's face. Harry cleared his throat nervously. He'd thought his relations with the Quidditch Captain were working out well. He'd caught the Snitch when they played Ravenclaw, and he attended every practice.

"What is it, Flint?" he asked, trying to make his voice sound bored and unconcerned.

"Draco told me what you said," Flint murmured. "About wanting your brother to visit the common room."

*Oh, shit. I didn't think they'd tell.* Harry glared at Draco and Blaise. Blaise smirked at him. Draco just waved a lazy hand. He had his other hand in the pocket of his robe, holding something. Harry would bet it was that bloody bottle. Draco never seemed to leave his room without it.

"Well, yes," said Harry, deciding he would have to tough it out on his own. Sylarana's mutters of help by biting were nothing he wished to entertain. "Why not? People have friends of other Houses in here all the time. And sometimes more than friends," he added, hoping that would be enough to disconcert Flint. He'd supposedly had a Ravenclaw boyfriend in here more than once, though Harry had never known if the rumor was actually true.

Flint blinked, but all he did after that was give a small smile and shake his head. "Not Gryffindors, however," he said. "And especially not someone who's been trying to discredit and work against one of our own for most of the year."

"Connor's changed," said Harry. "And he really is sorry for what he did. But if you just shut him out of the common room, Flint, then you won't get a chance to see how sorry."

"I say let him in."

Harry turned his head, blinking. That was Vince, who barely said anything at all when he wasn't in class. Now he stood up, and, though he flushed, otherwise ignored the eyes on him.

“Harry’s right,” he went on. “We’ll never know what the Boy-Who-Lived is like if we don’t actually get to see him.”

Flint looked thoughtful. A murmur traveled among the older students, and Harry heard the speculative edge to it. Vince’s comment had twisted the conversation in a new direction. Those Slytherins who were the children of Dark wizards or Death Eaters must be wondering now if it wouldn’t be better to get a close look at the Boy-Who-Lived, see what he was like, before he was fully-grown and dangerous.

Harry set his teeth. He would have to remain by Connor’s side every moment of the time he was here. He wouldn’t put it past someone else to try to curse his brother or slip him some kind of poisoned sweet when he wasn’t looking.

“That’s true,” he said. “And you’ll never know what other possibilities he might bring with him if you don’t actually talk to him, either.”

Flint’s eyes snapped back to him. For a moment, he looked incredulous. Then his face shut down, except for a small smile that teased the corner of his mouth.

“Possibilities, Harry?” he asked. “Possibilities like joining the side of the Light? Dumbledore’s side?”

Harry kept his gaze steady. There really hadn’t been another way to phrase it. And if this was going to be a political battle, it might as well be in the open, and not hidden behind slippery words and phrases. That would give Connor an advantage, rather than giving it to the Slytherins.

“Yes, like those,” said Harry.

Every eye in the common room was on him now. The silence was growing oppressive. Harry didn’t look at them, though. He only looked at Flint. He couldn’t change everything that had happened in the past. He certainly couldn’t alter Slytherin into a House devoted to the Light overnight. Connor would have to do that, and it would be a long and slow process.

But he could place the possibility on the table, and acknowledge where he stood: that being Slytherin did *not* mean he would turn against the Light and serve the Dark. He’d thought that was pretty bloody obvious, given who his brother was, but if it wasn’t, then now was the time that they could see and understand it.

Flint leaned slightly forward. He said softly, “So young, and you’ve already chosen your political loyalties, Harry?”

Harry let out a long, slow breath. *He really wants to know? They really want to know?*

*Well, why not? If it will help Connor visit my House, then yes, I’ll bloody well do it. And I think I may surprise them.*

He glanced at Draco, making the direction of his gaze obvious, and slowly everyone else turned to follow it. Draco smiled slightly at the attention, looking very much like his father at that moment.

“I’m friends with Draco Malfoy,” said Harry calmly. “I spent Christmas at Malfoy Manor last year. I might have gone this year, only I was rather busy with being possessed at the time.” That raised a few chuckles, though not many; the gazes were too intent. And if it wasn’t true, if he would have spent the Christmas with his family instead, then nobody was ever going to know. “I know the pureblood ways. My father is James Potter; my godfather is Sirius Black. I asked and asked until they taught me how to act like a pureblood, and I read books on pureblood history myself.”

“Yet you were shocked when you were put in Slytherin?” Flint’s voice had a sneer to it now.

Harry flicked him a glance. “My brother is the Boy-Who-Lived. I’m a Potter, and we’ve *always* been Gryffindors. Family is important, isn’t it? You’d probably stand by yours no matter what?”

Flint nodded slowly, a faint gleam of appreciation in his eyes.

“So, yes, I was shocked,” said Harry, and then shrugged. “But I accept that I’m a Slytherin now.

“That doesn’t mean that I’m about to abandon my brother. That wouldn’t be very loyal to my family at all. And it’s no good trying to pretend to be something I’m not. My mother is Muggleborn, and she told me stories about the First War, what it was like, and about the war with Grindelwald. I’ve learned more about what happens to Dark wizards who face Gryffindors than I’ve ever wanted to know.”

“Gryffindors died in those wars, too,” Flint breathed, just a trace of warning in his tone.

Harry nodded. “And Gryffindors brought down each Dark wizard in the end. So, no. I can see how history tends, thanks. I want to survive—which I’m sure is a Slytherin trait.”

He asked Sylarana to emerge. She did, sticking her head out of his sleeve, then her whole body, and coiling on the surface of his sleeve in plain sight. She flicked her tongue at everyone watching, and Harry heard a few caught breaths. It was one thing to know he was a Parselmouth, and another to see his Locusta.

Harry smiled at her. “I think it’s time that we remind them of something,” he said, knowing he was speaking in Parseltongue. He didn’t quite understand the expressions that crept over most of the Slytherins’ faces, expressions of reverence and awe, but he could use them. “Agreeable?”

“Of course,” she said. “For all that I love being so close to your skin, your sleeve does get hot and stuffy sometimes.”

Harry nodded and held up his arm so that Sylarana’s scales flashed in the firelight. She hissed at everyone, darting her tongue out to taste the air. Delight mixed with a keen dread shone in most of the eyes Harry met.

“I am a Parselmouth,” he said, careful not to look directly at Sylarana in case he ended up hissing. He wanted to say this so everyone else could understand. “And I’m not going to deny that—the same way I’m not going to deny that I’m friends with Draco Malfoy and the brother of Connor Potter, the same way that I’m not going to deny I’m a Slytherin from a Gryffindor family, the same way that I’m not going to deny I’m a halfblood who knows a lot about pureblooded ways. I don’t see any reason to deny any of what I am.”

*Liar*, said a sudden cold voice in his head, the flicker of his magic that he’d tamed and subdued in the struggle with Riddle.

Harry ignored this. *It was the liar*. Yes, his magic might be Darker than most people would think, but it was *his* magic. It obeyed him. He could ignore anything it might try to say.

The Slytherins watched him for long moments. Then Flint nodded slowly. He had an amused expression on his face, but not only or even primarily amused, Harry knew.

“I say we allow the little prat to visit Slytherin,” he said, “as long as Harry stays right by his side at all times.”

Harry nodded. He had no intention of ever leaving his brother alone with Slytherins, either—for the safety of both sides.

He coaxed Sylarana back under his sleeve and went up the stairs to the second-year boys’ room, ignoring the eyes he could still feel on his back. They seemed to think he was impressive.

*Let them see Connor when he’s defeated Voldemort, Harry thought as he got ready for bed. That’ll be impressive.*

“But I don’t think that the Chudley Cannons stand a chance of winning against the Montrose Magpies, of course,” said Draco in a bright, chatty voice. “What do you think, Potter?”

Harry could feel Connor fuming at his side. He knew well enough why Draco had chosen the Chudley Cannons to pick on—after all, they were Ron’s favorite team, and Connor had made them his, too, out of loyalty. It was also true that they weren’t a very *good* team. Draco had been casually mentioning this many different times while Connor visited, but now was the first time he’d actually spoken about it directly to Connor.

Harry willed his brother to respond calmly. The visit had gone much better than he had expected so far—which meant, no one had actually tried to punch or hex anyone else. It probably helped that there was a small central group of them: Harry, Draco, Connor, Blaise, Vince, Greg, Millicent, and Pansy. Other Slytherins wandered past from time to time, as though to stare at the tame Gryffindor out of his natural habitat, but no one stayed long.

“I think,” said Connor at last, his voice carefully neutral, “that everything depends on circumstances, Malfoy. You can’t deny that the Cannons have a brilliant Seeker this year.”

“Yes,” Draco acknowledged, which made Harry blink. He should have guessed what was coming next. “Too bad she can’t make up for the other six dead logs in the air that fill the rest of their positions.”

Harry clenched his hand on Connor’s arm—a good thing, too, or he thought his brother might have exploded out of his seat. Connor closed his eyes, breathing tightly, then opened them and went for the meat of the matter with his usual Gryffindor directness.

“Why are you doing this, Malfoy?” he asked. “I’m supposed to be here as a gesture of peace, of sorts. Shouldn’t you be trying to be, well, peaceful, instead of insulting me all the time?”

Draco opened his mouth to make some crack, but Harry said, “Draco, why don’t you check your bottle?”

Connor glanced sideways at him, curious. Harry just raised his eyebrows and waited until Draco opened the pocket where he kept the bottle and checked it. His face turned paler than normal. He would have seen, Harry thought, that the bottle was gleaming red as a ruby right now. Harry was angry with Draco, though he wasn’t showing it openly.

Draco swallowed, let his pocket fall closed, and said, “It’s just hard, Potter. You’re a Gryffindor. We’re Slytherins. This is unnatural.”

Connor barked a laugh. “It feels that way, doesn’t it?” he murmured. “But my brother says that I need to unite all the Houses, and I think I should listen to him. So I’m here, trying to make nice. The least you could do is play along.”

“Why did he say that?” asked Pansy, speaking up for the first time. She leaned forward and stared at Harry. Harry met her gaze as calmly as he could. He didn’t really know what to make of either of the second-year Slytherin girls. He hadn’t paid them enough attention, and now that was coming back to bite him on the arse. He would have to remedy that next year.

“Because I’m to be the leader of the wizarding world someday,” said Connor, thankfully sparing Harry from having to answer the question. “And I don’t think that he wants me to leave the Slytherins out.” He half-smiled at Harry, who smiled fully back. There was a reason that he was at Connor’s side on a couch across from Draco and the others, who were arranged in chairs around them. He wondered if any of the Slytherins had noticed the political dimension of his positioning yet, or if they simply dismissed it as Harry needing to be close enough to restrain his brother in case Connor did something foolish.

*Both, Harry thought. Whoever said that a gesture should have only one meaning? I’m a Slytherin, so I get to make sly little double-handed gestures too.*

“You really think that?” It was Millicent’s voice, elevated a little in surprise, and the question was directed at Harry.

Harry shrugged. “Of course I do,” he said. “The Boy-Who-Lived, Bulstrode. Who else would do?”

Millicent blinked as if he’d slapped her, then sat back in her chair and scowled thoughtfully at Connor. Harry didn’t know what was going on with her, but then, he didn’t know what was going on with Millicent in general. She could play her little games if she wanted, but if she really thought that someone else would have a better chance at Minister of Magic than Connor, then she was living in a dreamworld.

“We were talking about Quidditch,” said Blaise. “And now we’re talking about politics. I find both of them boring.” *Or uncomfortable, Harry thought, watching the small smile on the boy’s dark features. Blaise had tried out for the Quidditch team as Chaser and failed to make it, and his mother, Arabella Zabini, though Dark, was notoriously*

unaffiliated with anyone except her husbands, who kept dying. “I’d like to talk about something else. Namely, why you’ve gone from such a prat to someone trying to ‘make nice’ with Slytherins.”

“I don’t think those things are too far apart, really,” Connor retorted.

Harry could feel the tension rising, saw Draco’s eyes narrowing, and knew he was about to say something unfortunate. He intervened. “We had a talk,” he said firmly. “He came around, Blaise. He apologized. I told you all this already.” He really couldn’t comprehend why Blaise had brought this up again. It was part of the original argument that had led to Harry insisting that Blaise was being more of a prat than Connor, and the other boy throwing a book at his head. “He really does want to make friends, or he wouldn’t be here.”

“Actually,” said Connor, “I wouldn’t be here if not for Harry. He was the one who convinced me to come.” He leaned back and looked seriously at Harry. “And he’s the only one convincing me to stay.”

Harry sighed. Now all the Slytherins, except Millicent who still appeared lost in her own world, were fuming at the implication that they weren’t good hosts. “Does anyone want to play a game?” he suggested.

“Of course,” said Draco at once. “Wizards’ chess.”

Harry winced. Connor *hated* chess, not least because Ron could so easily beat him at it. “Not that one,” he said hastily. “What about Exploding Snap? Or—“

“I want to go flying,” said Pansy, her voice abruptly bright and mindless. “Ooh, doesn’t that sound marvelous? I love seeing you on a broom, Draco. Your golden hair blows so beautifully in the wind.”

*I know she isn’t that stupid, Harry thought in confusion. Then he understood. She’s pretending to be that stupid. And, damn it, Connor’s playing right into her hands. Look at that condescending look he’s giving her. Merlin take you, Pansy. And you, too, Connor. Just because a girl sounds as if she’s giggling all the time doesn’t mean that she doesn’t take time out in between the giggles to think. You’ve been spoiled with Hermione.*

“Of course,” said Connor. “I love flying. And no one’s on the Pitch. The Hufflepuffs should have finished their practicing by now.” He stood up and grandly motioned for them to follow him. “Come on, everyone!” He sprinted for the entrance to the common room.

Harry took the opportunity to hiss at Pansy, his voice covered by the noise of moving bodies. “What are you doing?”

“You’ll see,” said Pansy, her voice self-satisfied. Then she giggled and blinked her lashes. “And what makes you think I’m doing anything, Harry?” she asked.

Harry ground his teeth. “Just leave him alone,” he said.

“Oh, I’m not going to hurt him,” said Pansy. “Why would you think I’m going to hurt him? Would I really attack him using spells? I’m just a poor widdle girl, Harry.” She swept past him towards the door.

Harry followed, agitated, doing his best to get in front of everyone and beside Connor. It did no good. Blaise, Vince, and Greg had stood up before him, and Draco was in front, walking beside Connor and actually *complimenting* him on his performance in the Hufflepuff-Gryffindor game. Harry was beginning to suspect a plot, and not just on Pansy’s part.

“Oi, Potter, you forgot this.”

Harry turned, just in time to catch a shrunken package that Millicent flung at him. He recognized his Nimbus 2001 after a brief moment. He shook his head. “I’m leaving it behind,” he said. “I’ll fly a school broom.”

“Why?” asked Pansy, and she giggled. “I think it’s wonderful to watch you fly on your broom, Harry.” She giggled louder, attracting Connor’s attention. “Just wonderful,” she said. “You never lose when you’re on it.”

Connor's eyes narrowed in competitive fervor, and Harry began to have some inkling of what the Slytherins were doing.

"No, damn it," he said.

"Why not?" Connor asked, sounding curious. "I'd like to see what you can do when you're flying full out, Harry, and we're not both after the Snitch."

*Shit.* Harry knew what was going to happen, and he disliked it *immensely*. He made one more attempt to break free. "But you've seen me and Connor fly against each other," he said. "I think it'd be more interesting to see Connor and Draco race. Draco's a good flyer."

"This isn't a game," said Draco, who'd turned backward so he could keep an eye on Harry. "It's a race, and that's different. Just a contest of speed, instead of seeing who can snatch a golden ball out of the air. I want to see you fly, Harry. I know you're fast."

Connor's eyes sparked even more.

*Shit,* Harry thought sickly. If he lost this contest, Connor would assume that Harry was lying to him again, since he'd already admitted to being the better Seeker. And if he won...

His brother might take it like a good sport, but Harry knew it would drive a little wedge between them that didn't need to be there.

"I want to race you," said Connor, and that sealed it.

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Harry and Connor stood on the far end of the Quidditch Pitch, each with his broom lying beside him on the grass. It was an unexpectedly pretty day, with the sky a very sharp, pale blue, and looking higher than normal. Draco and Blaise stood at the far end of the pitch, with the other Slytherins arrayed in a ragged line along it, to see how the race might vary as the twins actually flew it.

"Come on, Harry," said Connor out of the corner of his mouth. "This is going to be fun."

*No, it's not,* Harry thought. His stomach was roiling and clenching in misery, and Sylarana's soothing thoughts did little to help him.

"*Tempus!*" Draco intoned from the far side of the pitch, and a small hourglass appeared in the air beside him, filled with tiny grains of sand. One would fall for each second it took them to race, Harry knew.

"I'll call when they should start," said Pansy. "Stand ready. On five, gentlemen. One—"

"Show me everything you've got, Harry," Connor whispered.

Harry stared at his brother. Connor nodded back at him, then turned and fixed his gaze on the far side of the pitch.

"Three—"

*How can I disobey that? If my brother asks me to do it...*

"Five!"

Connor was on the Cleansweep in a flash, but Harry had already called his Nimbus 2001 up and was mounted. Connor rose, striving for height, and Harry followed just behind, fighting for one more moment.

Then he remembered again that Connor would think he was lying if he lost. And he would rather see a small spark of betrayal in his brother's eyes than a large one.

He let his breath go and unleashed his speed.

The Nimbus seemed to dance beneath him as he soared upwards and sped past Connor, and Millicent and then Pansy yelped as he blasted over them. The feeling that always filled his chest filled it now, as though nothing could happen to him when he was up here except triumph, and he swooped past Vince and Greg and touched down beside Draco and Blaise like a swallow come home to roost.

“Well bloody done, Harry,” said Draco, and then grabbed him and held him tightly in a hug. Harry turned his head to look at the hourglass. A tenth grain of sand was just falling.

Connor landed five grains later. He was quiet for a long moment. Harry fought his way out of Draco’s embrace and turned to face his brother.

Connor drew in a deep breath, nodded once, and then said, “You told me the truth, Harry, and you did as I asked. Thank you.” He reached out and clasped his hand. “If you say that making up with the other Houses is a good idea, then it is.”

Harry felt a surge of dizzy joy. Connor trusted him the way that he trusted Connor, then—implicitly. He swallowed and swatted at his eyes, which wanted to tear up.

The other Slytherins were clustering around them. Harry thought he could hear Pansy chattering about what a beautiful sight he was on a broom, but he didn’t care. If they’d tried to tear him apart from his brother, then they’d lost. This was what Connor had needed to lose the last of his doubt.

He turned briefly, and caught Draco’s eye. Draco didn’t look disappointed. He looked smug. He caught Harry’s gaze and winked.

Harry shook his head. *I don’t know what his goal was, then, but it’s not going to deter me. They will learn to accept each other sooner or later.*

And, abruptly, he knew what the next step was.

~\*~\*~\*~\*~\*

## Chapter Twenty-Three: Two Snakes in the Lions' Den

"You are not visiting Gryffindor Tower without me," Draco declared, looking as though Harry had decreed he was going to go jump off the Astronomy Tower.

"I know that," said Harry, glancing casually up from the latest Transfiguration book he'd borrowed from the library. It contained interesting information on how to see someone in Animagus form. Harry didn't know if Voldemort had any unregistered Animagi running around his ranks, but he wouldn't put it past him, and in any case it might come in useful someday. *Everything* might come in useful someday. "I wasn't intending to."

That caught Draco with his mouth open and his eyes slightly widened, as though he were a cornered mouse McGonagall had decided to play with. Harry had often thought the Head of Gryffindor House must be more terrifying as a cat than she was as a woman, at least to things smaller than she was.

They sat there in silence for a while, and Harry learned that one sure way of telling an Animagus in animal form was to look at the color of their aura. Of course, he couldn't see auras yet. He bit the inside of his cheek thoughtfully and wondered if he could learn.

*Not yet*, said Sylarana abruptly. Harry jumped a little. He had thought she had gone to sleep in the room's warmth. *I think you might have the gift for it, but it takes more concentration than you have. And a more focused mind*, she added. *You're still using Occlumency to get through day-to-day.*

Harry narrowed his eyes. *I think I'm doing very well, considering—*

Sylarana's head nudged him under the chin. *You are doing very well, considering. Is that what you wanted to hear? But not well enough to see auras yet.*

Harry felt irritation trying to rise, but he caught it and bounced it off one of his Occlumency shields, sending it into a dark and quiet corner of his mind. Sylarana hissed something about that becoming a second box if he kept it up. Harry ignored her. It was true that he needed Occlumency to get through day-to-day, but Snape had assured him that the breaches Riddle had opened in his webs were steadily filling with fog, and in some cases healed completely. He appeared to have lost no memories except a very few of his childhood.

"What?" Draco croaked at last.

Harry glanced up at him. "I thought we could visit Gryffindor Tower together," he said. "It's not going to make enough of an impression if I go by myself. The Gryffindors are uncertain right now, shifting around. They don't know *what* to think. And I think having someone they associate for sure with Slytherin among them will make it more difficult to ignore what House we come from."

"What if I said that I don't want to go now, and I don't want you to go, either?" Draco folded his arms and glared mutinously at him.

"You will," said Harry.

"Why?"

“Because otherwise I’ll get annoyed at you for forcing me into that stupid race with Connor last weekend,” said Harry. “I haven’t got annoyed so far. I could, you know.”

“That wasn’t just my idea,” Draco protested.

“I know that. But you’re the one who cares the most if I’m annoyed with you,” said Harry. “And you *participated* in it. You made sure that I couldn’t get to Connor in time, along with the rest of them. And I heard you buttering him up about his performance in the last Quidditch match. You were trying to set him up for a fall, weren’t you?”

Draco turned his head sulkily away.

“It was a stupid idea,” said Harry, and turned pointedly back to his book.

“Harry?”

Harry ignored him.

“Harry? *Please* don’t ignore me.” The absolute desperation in his voice made Harry twitch, but he didn’t turn back around. “All right, it was a stupid idea. And all right, we can visit Gryffindor Tower. Just don’t be annoyed with me. *Please*. I went through that in the first weeks of last term, and I can’t tell you how I suffered.” The bed beside Harry dipped, and an arm wound through his. “Please?”

Harry sighed and clasped Draco’s hand, glancing up at him. “Tell me what you were trying to do with that race.”

“Separate you from your brother,” Draco admitted, without enough of a flush for Harry’s taste. “Harry, I don’t understand why you want the Houses to unite so badly. We can learn to tolerate the Gryffindors—maybe. But does it have to be *right now*? And does it have to be behind Connor? I think you’re pushing this too fast. Everyone thought you were mad and a Dark wizard, and then they thought Connor was a prat, and now suddenly you’re back together and pushing pretty openly for us to join Dumbledore’s side—Connor’s side, I suppose, if you want to look at it that way. You *know* it’s not that simple. You’re not the only one doing a balancing act in Slytherin, you know. There’s my father, for me.”

Harry blinked once, then twice. “Then you admit your father was a Death Eater?” he asked at last. “And not under Imperius?”

Draco winced and glanced away from him.

“Draco?”

“I don’t know,” Draco whispered. “I think that it’s likely, at least, and isn’t that enough for right now?” He abruptly buried his head in Harry’s shoulder, and shivered once, a bone-deep tremble that seemed to run from his shoulders to his toes. “I don’t *know* what to do. I can’t give up being a Malfoy. I love my parents.”

“I would never expect you to give up being a Malfoy, or to stop loving them,” Harry began gently.

“But I can’t give you up, either,” said Draco. “I *can’t*.”

Harry shifted around so that he wasn’t twisted in quite so awkward a position, and draped his arms around Draco’s shoulders. Sylarana hissed as she was forced to move. Harry ignored her again. “I don’t want this struggle to tear you apart, Draco,” said Harry. “I want you to be able to make a decision.”

“But no matter what happens,” Draco whispered, “I’m going to regret this decision.”

Harry nodded. He wanted to say something comforting, but he didn’t think he could. He switched the conversation back in its original direction instead. “And you think there are a lot of other Slytherins in the same situation?”

“Oh, Harry,” said Draco, looking up with an unhappy smile, “I know there are. I’m sorry, but there are certain things they’re just not going to talk about in front of you. Part of it’s a pureblood thing, and part of it’s a—a political thing. They’ve known me from childhood, a lot of them. They didn’t know you.”

Harry nodded. His head was throbbing, and he felt a bit numb. He *had* been moving too fast. He didn’t want to take back his promise to visit Connor in Gryffindor Tower, but it seemed that it was going to be more complicated than he had thought it was.

Then he shook his head. *It was always going to be more complicated than I thought it was. And I need to remember who I’m dealing with all the time. The children of Death Eaters are different from the ones who might be more receptive to the Light, and Gryffindors who think Dumbledore is great are different from the ones who don’t care about him, and Ravenclaws who tease Luna are different from the ones who don’t...*

He caught his breath and leaned away from Draco. The other boy’s hands tightened convulsively on him for a second, and then let go. Draco was watching him carefully, as though he expected Harry to leap up and declare that he couldn’t stay in the same room with someone whose father had been a Death Eater.

“Make the visit to Gryffindor Tower with me,” said Harry. “After that, we’ll discuss different strategies for working in Slytherin. Will you help me?”

Draco smiled at him. “You know, all you had to do was ask.”

“Mr. Potter.”

Startled, Harry turned. He was just leaving Defense Against the Dark Arts, and here was McGonagall, swooping down on him. Harry braced himself, trying frantically to remember if he’d done anything wrong. “Yes, professor?”

“Come with me,” said McGonagall, sweeping past him. “I would like to see you in my office, please.”

Harry nodded to a bewildered Draco and followed McGonagall, now feeling more curious than concerned. Usually, if she really meant to get a student in trouble, her voice would have been cold and her eyes narrowed. Harry had the feeling that it was something else, this time.

They reached her office, and McGonagall led him inside, gesturing him to the chair Harry remembered from the time they’d discussed Transfiguration theory. He sat down, and accepted a cup of tea from her, all the while trying to keep his eyes from straying around the room. She had charts of things he didn’t even *recognize* on the wall, and thought must be descriptions of esoteric transformations. He itched to study them, and see if he could work out what they meant. Perhaps they would be useful in battle.

McGonagall took a cup of tea herself and sat down across the desk from him. Her eyes narrowed at him for the first time, and Harry saw a glint of—worry?—in them. He shook his head, not understanding.

“Mr. Potter,” said McGonagall quietly, “Headmaster Dumbledore has spoken with me.”

“About what, ma’am?” Harry asked. He had no need to try and appear clueless, he thought. He really was.

“About—the argument that you and your brother had, about your new efforts to promote House unity and why that’s important to us, and about why he is pleased to see Connor Potter turning into a leader.” McGonagall sipped at her tea. “About everything, really, including why you care so deeply about your brother’s success at this.” She raised her eyebrows at Harry.

Harry let out his breath in a rush. So here was someone else he could speak to honestly. He was not sure if he should feel relieved or ashamed of his relief. It wasn’t *that* difficult to keep the secret his mother had entrusted him with, or shouldn’t have been.

“I’m glad you know, ma’am,” he said. “You’re Connor’s Head of House. I thought you should know. I thought maybe you did,” he added, “but not how much.”

“I knew a little,” said McGonagall, her voice treading carefully. “But only bits and pieces. And—I do not think I understand now, not fully. There is a difference between knowing and understanding, as I have often tried to remind Miss Granger.” She put her teacup down on her desk with a faint *clink*. “In particular, Mr. Potter, I brought you here to answer a question, one that I believe only you can answer fully.”

Harry arched his brows curiously. “I’ll answer it if I can, ma’am, but I’m not sure what it can be. I’m trying to help Connor, but I can’t see everything he’ll become. Headmaster Dumbledore would be better at that.”

“The Headmaster has told me what he can,” said McGonagall. “Now, Harry, I need you to tell me something.”

“Of course,” said Harry, sitting up attentively. She had used his first name for a reason, he was sure. It was important. He wondered if she had noticed some oddity in Connor’s behavior that she wanted explained.

“Did you choose this?”

Harry felt his jaw drop open, and he stared at her. McGonagall was gazing at him sternly, her hands clasped in front of her. There was such a confusing mixture of emotions in her eyes that Harry was not sure which one he should pick out to address first. There was sorrow, and anger, and shock, and pity.

Well, that last one he didn’t understand at all, so he would approach the others instead.

*I know why she pities you*, Sylarana whispered into his head.

*You be quiet*, Harry snapped back, and said, “You’re talking about my duty to my brother, Professor McGonagall?”

She nodded, once, a sharp bob of her head that reminded him of the way an eagle might peck at something. Her eyes certainly seemed eagle-sharp now, with the anger tightening her face. “Yes, Harry. I want to know if you chose it. Headmaster Dumbledore has assured me that you did. Now I want to hear it from you.”

“Of course I did,” said Harry, his puzzlement growing by the second. He knew the reasons and ways that Professor McGonagall was loyal to Professor Dumbledore. He could not fathom why she wouldn’t trust his word. But, if she wanted additional reassurance, then she would get it. Their mother *had* warned him that it would be hard for someone outside the family to understand.

“Of course I did,” he repeated, when he saw that she didn’t seem to believe him. “Really, Professor McGonagall, I did. I’ve trained hard all my life for the moment when I can defend him. I’m trying to help him with politics and House unity now, but I’m afraid it’s not working out well yet,” he added, with a small smile. “And then we had this argument, and it was nasty for both of us. But it’s been resolved. In fact, Draco and I are coming to visit Gryffindor Tower and Connor this weekend.”

McGonagall closed her eyes. Harry was beginning to wonder what she had wanted to hear. His word was not enough, and neither was Professor Dumbledore’s. Perhaps he should owl their mother. Lily was good at persuading people of the truth; she had persuaded Sirius, after all, and from what she had said in her last letters, she was working on persuading James.

“I would normally trust the Headmaster’s word,” McGonagall whispered at last. “But for something as profound as this—the sacrifice of a child...”

“Lots of people sacrificed in the First War, Professor,” said Harry, and then shut up, because doubtless she’d sacrificed a lot, too, maybe even seen some students die, and he didn’t think he had a right to lecture her.

“I know that, Mr. Potter,” said McGonagall, and opened her eyes. “But even the youngest who fought were older students, old enough to know what the threat of You-Know-Who meant. You are the youngest warrior I have ever heard of.”

“Connor was younger when he defeated Voldemort, ma’am,” said Harry, comfortable now. She was about to accept his word. He was sure of it. There was no reason she wouldn’t. “Much younger.”

McGonagall smiled faintly, but her eyes were troubled, and too intense when they rested on him. “You will come and talk to me, Mr. Potter, if you ever feel—pressured or constricted by your role?”

“Of course,” said Harry. “I can’t imagine that happening, ma’am, but it’s true that we’ve got a long road ahead of us, and I might like to talk to you sometimes.” He could feel himself relaxing. It was no good going to Draco about these things, not when he had his own burdens, and Snape would snap at him. McGonagall was a good choice, a safer choice. She was a Gryffindor. Gryffindors understood sacrifice better than most Slytherins would. “If you don’t mind?”

McGonagall shook her head, eyes shadowed. Then she stood and moved around the desk, kneeling in front of him. Once again, as she had when he was being accused of Petrifying people, she hugged him. Harry hugged her back this time, because, *this* time, he thought he understood. She wanted reassurance that he was not going mad because of his role. He was not. He was happy, busy but happy.

“Please come talk to me, Mr. Potter,” she whispered, “if what you think is impossible happens, and you grow tired.”

“Of course,” said Harry, still not comprehending how he could, really, but willing to say that, since it made her relax and let him go. He smiled at her and trotted off, his mind already filling with plans.

Tomorrow was the visit to Gryffindor Tower, the first time he had been there in months. He wanted to make sure that everything was ready, including his new goal for the time he left.

It was time to see how well Connor had made up with his Housemates.

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“Honeysuckle,” said Harry to the portrait of the Fat Lady, and she swung outward, though she was still staring at the Slytherin crests on their robes as though she couldn’t believe they were there.

“Did Connor give you the password for this week?” Draco asked behind him, as they stepped into an immense silence.

“Of course,” Harry muttered.

“And you didn’t use it to come in and play pranks on the Gryffindors?” Draco shook his head and clucked his tongue. “Harry, Harry, Harry. I am so very disappointed in you.”

“This is exactly the kind of stupid thing I don’t want you doing,” Harry muttered at him, and to his gratification, Draco shut up.

“Harry! Malfoy!”

Harry turned his head, smiling, ignoring the frozen, hostile stares from the chairs around the hearth. It seemed that Connor hadn’t told his Housemates that two Slytherins were visiting. Or perhaps he had told them it was only his brother. The Gryffindors were used to Harry visiting them. They wouldn’t be sure about a Malfoy, especially a Malfoy who was currently sneering at the common room’s color scheme.

Connor came down the stairs from the second-year boys’ room, waving at them. His eyes were so bright that Harry relaxed further. It was going to be all right, he told himself. It really *was*. They wouldn’t achieve House unity today, or tomorrow, or next year, but eventually, they would. And Connor would know how best to do it in Gryffindor House, as Harry had in Slytherin.

*Except that it turned out you didn’t know very well how to do that, did you?* a voice that sounded like his own murmured to him.

Harry ignored it. No, he hadn’t. He had made a mistake and he was going to fix things, with Draco’s help. He didn’t see why his mind muttering at him about mistakes was going to change things. A mistake was not a crime.

*But it can still cost. Look what Connor's mistakes have cost him.*

Harry ignored that, too, because Connor had reached the bottom of the stairs and was hugging him. Harry returned the embrace, then stepped back and looked expectantly between Draco and Connor.

Draco stuck out his lower lip, but Harry's gaze didn't yield, so he stalked forward and put out his hand in Connor's general direction. Connor shook it with equal stiffness, and said, from between gritted teeth, "Malfoy."

"Potter." Not even Snape could have sneered their last name so effectively, Harry thought. It made Connor flush and drop Draco's hand.

"Look here—" he began.

"Harry. Malfoy."

Harry blinked as Hermione came down the stairs from the girls' dormitory, her footsteps loud even among the mutters that had sprung up around their entrance. She walked straight past Connor as if he didn't exist and stretched out a hand. Harry shook it. She turned and held out her hand to Draco then.

Draco frowned. Harry could almost see him recoiling at the idea of having to *touch a Mudblood*.

Then he met Harry's eyes and stretched out his hand. His shake with Hermione was perfunctory, but still less stiff than the one he'd shared with Connor. Hermione nodded, as if satisfied, when he let go of her hand.

"You can come sit over here," she said, and marched them both off to a corner of the common room. There were several first-years sitting there, but she made them move with a *look*. Harry raised an eyebrow. For some reason, he hadn't thought Hermione was as bossy outside of the classroom as she was inside it, but it seemed he'd been wrong.

"Sit down," said Hermione, and Harry made himself comfortable, while Draco made himself the least uncomfortable he could. Hermione took a seat across from them and gave Harry a bright, brittle smile. "So. How's your month been?"

"Less eventful than it seems yours has been," Harry muttered back to her. "Did Connor not apologize?"

"Not enough," said Hermione tartly. "He did *that* to me, and then he just thought he could wave it off."

"He did what?" Draco asked in interest.

"Nothing you need to know about," Harry told him, and Draco pouted and sank back on the couch. He turned back to Hermione, trying to conceal his surprise. Connor had seemed so sweet with him, and had taken his loss of their race last weekend so well, and had done very well among the Slytherins, considering. That he hadn't managed to make up with one member of his own House was surprising.

"Harry."

Harry glanced over the back of the couch. Connor was standing there, biting his lip and fiddling with his hands.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I'm trying. But it's an uphill struggle with some people." He scowled at Hermione.

"You were in my *head*," said Hermione, standing up and putting her hands on her hips. Harry, for the first time, reflected that she could be intimidating when she wanted to be, and not only because of her intelligence. "And then you tried to make a *joke* out of it. I don't *like* that." Her voice was rising, and heads were turning all over the common room. Or perhaps they'd always been turned, Harry reflected, and he was noticing their gazes more.

"I didn't mean to do it, though," said Connor, a flush coming into his cheeks. "Doesn't that mean anything to you?"

“Not when you treat it as a *joke*.”

Harry stood up in alarm. Hermione’s friendship with Connor mattered to him, or he would never have tried to compel her belief in the first place. And it seemed as though he was close to inflicting a few more months of wear and tear on that friendship.

Harry caught sight of Ron, frozen on the stairs, and looking as though he didn’t know whose side to take. Harry made a silent appeal to him for help, and Ron shook his head, but jogged over.

“Hey, mate,” Ron said, putting a hand on Connor’s shoulder. He spared the obligatory scowl for Draco, but was more focused on Connor, for which Harry was grateful. “Maybe making it a joke wasn’t the best thing you could have done with Hermione.” He shrugged. “It worked with me, but I’m different.”

“You’re a *boy*,” Hermione uttered direly, as if that explained everything.

Ron glanced at her nervously, then looked back at Connor. “Yeah, and girls want apologies,” he said.

“I apologized.” Connor looked stubborn.

“Not the right *way*.” Hermione stamped her foot.

Harry shot a quick glance around the Gryffindor common room. He saw interest on many faces, but not a whole lot of sympathy. He sighed. It seemed that he had assumed Connor’d made much more progress here than was actually the case.

“Connor, can you apologize the right way, please?” he asked. “It won’t take all that much more time, and then I think Hermione would think of you better.” He looked at Hermione, to see if this was actually the case.

Hermione nodded. “Well, a little, anyway,” she added. “And then it wouldn’t be a bloody *joke* to him.”

Harry winced. When Hermione swore, things were serious.

“But I apologized,” said Connor. “I don’t see why I should have to do it twice.”

“You apologized to me more than once,” Harry said quietly. “Connor, she’s one of your best friends—or she was. Please?”

Connor glared at him, then at Hermione, then at Ron, who just nodded slightly, instead of giving him the support for only one apology that he obviously wanted. Connor sighed huffily.

“All right, I’m sorry,” he said. “There. Is that enough?”

Hermione eyed him for a long moment. Then she said, “Maybe. If you still mean it in the next week, then I’ll accept it.” She turned and glanced at Harry. “Thank you, Harry, for making your brother see sense.”

She went off, head held high. Harry shook his head at her back and glanced back at Connor. “Rocky road, then?”

Connor tightened his lips for a moment. Then he said, “She just wasn’t in the right mood to hear it joked about, I guess.”

“Wonderful. A deduction that didn’t come from either Granger or Harry,” Draco drawled from his corner of the couch. “I sometimes have hope that you use your brain for something other than screaming at your brother about Quidditch games after all, Potter.”

Connor flushed further, and took a step forward, as though he would go around the couches to get at Draco. Harry stepped in front of him, and Ron tightened the clasp of his hand on Connor's shoulder.

"Don't, mate," he said. "He's not worth it."

"I heard that, Weasley," said Draco. "I am *too* worth it."

"Will you *shut up*?" Harry appealed to Draco, and then faced Connor. "Please, Connor. You know what Draco's like. And you know what Hermione's like." He paused, considered rephrasing the question, and in the end decided he had to know what Connor's answer would be when it was phrased exactly like this. "Why did you apologize to her that way, when you knew she wouldn't take it well?"

"I apologized to Ron that way, and he took it well," Connor defended himself.

"But he's not the same person as Hermione," Harry pointed out, controlling his exasperation with an effort. "Never mind that he's a boy and she's a girl, she's a *different person*, Connor."

Connor bit his lip. Harry could see him struggling with the temptation to admit that he knew that, to admit that he'd been wrong, and that his stubbornness was once again costing him one of his friendships.

But it seemed that he wasn't quite ready to admit that, at least in front of everyone else. Harry thought he would have done it if they'd been alone. Instead, he raised his chin and said, "Why can't anyone just take a joke?"

"That's what we've been wondering," said a voice from behind Connor and Ron. "Many times a day, I say to myself, Fred, why can't anyone just take a joke?"

"That's right," said a second voice. "And I say to myself, George, *anyone* ought to be able to take a joke, especially people who complain about others not being able to take a joke."

"Right," said Fred's voice. "And when they don't—"

"Then we show them up. Ready, Fred?"

"Ready, George. *Exhibeo!*"

Connor's robes, and the clothes under them, abruptly shimmered and turned transparent. He gave a shriek and tried to cover himself, hunching over as though he thought that would protect him. It couldn't protect him from the shocked laughter already ringing out across the common room, of course, laughter that even Ron was apparently having trouble refraining from joining in. Of course, he turned around in the next moment and bellowed, "*Fred! George!*"

"Yes, Ronnie-kins?" asked one of the twins. Harry, pulling off his own robe to toss around his brother, saw them both standing behind Connor and grinning like idiots. From the voice, he thought it was Fred who responded. "Did something happen to one of his friends that ickle Ronnie-kins doesn't like?"

Ron bellowed and ran at them. The twins nimbly dodged his fists and ran off around the common room, heading for their own room. Ron made it as far as the stairs before he slipped on something that definitely hadn't been there when he came down and slid back into the common room.

"Anyone should be able to take a joke, Ron," George called back down. "Remember that!"

And then they slammed the door of their room behind them, cutting off their own congratulatory chortles..

Most of the people in the common room were still laughing. Harry tuned them out and bent over Connor. "What is it?" he asked. "Something on your robes, or on your skin?"

“Must be my robes,” Connor whispered back. “I th-thought they felt a little heavier this morning, but I didn’t know what—“ He turned his face away, breathing hard, so deeply embarrassed that Harry thought it would be cruel to make him speak again.

He felt a small round object in one of Connor’s pockets, and levitated it carefully out; he didn’t *think* touching it would make his own clothes go transparent, but he couldn’t be sure. He examined it as it floated in front of him. It looked like a gray stone, probably an ordinary pebble, imbued with a spell Harry had never seen before. It would be the spell to turn clothes transparent when the command word was uttered, Harry was sure. He scowled. There was no denying the twins were magical prodigies, but why did they have to pick on his brother, of all people?

“It’s gone now,” Connor whispered, shrugging off Harry’s robe. Underneath, his own clothes were back to normal. “Thanks.”

Harry nodded, then turned and looked at the little pebble. Drawing his will up wasn’t a problem under the circumstances, and the pebble cracked clean through and shattered.

He caught Connor’s wide eyes and shrugged. “At least they’ll have to make another one if they want to do that to you again,” he muttered.

“Thanks,” Connor repeated, and then closed his eyes, his cheeks reddening further at the furtive snickers still sneaking around the common room. “I think you’d better go, Harry.”

Harry sighed. He agreed. Their visit had been an unmitigated disaster. He nodded to Draco, who popped to his feet and dusted off his robes as though dusting loose all the Gryffindor diseases he was sure to get from sitting on Gryffindor furniture. Luckily, he followed Harry without much prompting, and without, most importantly, saying anything until they were outside the portrait.

Then he said, “I *told* you he was still being a prat.”

Harry scowled. “You made it worse,” he said. “Well, you, and Hermione, and the twins.” He started back to the dungeons at a pace that forced Draco to hope and scabble to keep up.

“Really?” Draco echoed mockingly. “All of us? None of this would have happened in the first place if your brother weren’t so stubborn, Harry. I’ll grant you he’s changed a little, but I don’t think it’ll be enough until he changes towards other people and not just you.”

“He made a mistake,” Harry muttered, knowing he sounded sulky, and not caring.

Draco gripped his arm, forcing him to stop. “Yes, he did,” he said calmly, meeting Harry’s eyes. “And the sooner you make *him* see that, the better off everyone will be.”

Harry nodded. Perhaps he *did* need to have another talk with Connor, before all was said and done.

He ignored the worm of doubt that was squirming at him, the part of his mind laughing in the same taunting voice as before.

*You don’t want to admit that it’s Connor who’s the problem, not everyone else. You don’t want to admit that maybe Connor just isn’t what you want him to be—not smart enough, not perceptive enough, not talented enough yet, not committed to all the things that you think he ought to be committed to.*

“Shut up,” Harry muttered, glad that Draco would only think he was talking to Sylarana.

*Actually, I agree with your thoughts this time, Sylarana said primly in his head. You’ll have to shape and mold Connor himself, not just the others, if you want him to be a leader.*

Harry nodded quickly. He'd never doubted that, he reassured himself. Of course Connor needed practice. Of course he knew this would take time.

But he would never think that his brother just wasn't the right *person* for the task. The Boy-Who-Lived was going to be important to the wizarding world, like it or not, by simple virtue of who he was, and Harry would much rather that it be a good importance than the kind of importance that would make the *Daily Prophet* attempt to smear him and call him mad, the way they had done to Headmaster Dumbledore in the past. He would be their hero, or he would be their scapegoat. They weren't just going to forget about him.

*Maybe he just isn't right for this task at all, and you should abandon your hopeless efforts to make him so.*

Harry threw that thought through one of the holes in his mind not yet filled with the Occlumency fog. There were some things he refused to think.

~\*~\*~\*~\*~\*~\*

## Chapter Twenty-Four: The Past Comes Home to Roost

Harry let his breath out slowly, and didn't know if he was doing it in the physical world or in the dream. All he knew was that he was *going* to figure out what these two dark figures meant this time, or wake up trying.

Still they hovered before him, exactly the same as always—solid figures filled in with black, not silhouettes that might reveal details of their features, nor yet people that he could examine and identify. One curled into a small space and cried, his voice so wracked with pain that Harry thought he must be mad by now. Was that a vision of Azkaban?

If so, he didn't know why he would be having it, but then, he had never understood his dreams. He'd had dreams about Quirrell last year, too, and he had not understood why they would come to him and not Connor.

The second figure writhed on outlines Harry had finally decided, tentatively, made up a bed. His whimpers were louder, and he definitely had more room than the cramped figure on the left, but Harry could tell no more than that. What was he in pain from? Harry didn't know that, either.

*Well, I have to figure it out.*

If his dreams about Quirrell had been warnings, then perhaps these dreams were, too. And Harry was certain that he wanted to grasp the warning in time. It would do less than no good if he learned it too late. He would blame himself forever if something happened to Connor that he could have prevented.

The dark figures abruptly vanished. Harry frowned. Was he waking up?

But he remembered, then, when and how that had happened before, and he was ready when Tom Riddle came slicing into his mind like an angel of vengeance.

Harry ducked and dodged and rolled around him, in constant motion, luring Riddle towards the center of his Occlumency shields. He would prefer to bewilder the boy in fog than call up his magic and drive him out of his mind again. He had no wish to wind up in the hospital wing.

Part of him marveled at how calm he was being about it all.

*Well, I can panic when I'm awake.*

“Hold *still!*” said Riddle, his voice a whipcrack, as he flew around Harry, attempting to grab him. Harry ducked again, and he heard Riddle let out an audible, huffing breath. “Or are you too frightened to stand your ground?” he taunted.

“That only works with Gryffindors,” Harry pointed out, and then called on Sylarana.

She was beside him in a moment, a hissing vibration that seemed to run all along the webs. Well, she was deeply entwined into them, Harry thought, as he stopped to catch his breath and rest his mind. She would be able to defend him almost as well as he would himself.

Sylarana lunged at Riddle, twisting the webs up around him. Riddle reached down as if he would shred and tear them again.

*No*, Harry thought, and the thought rang like a bell in his head. *No. I cannot afford to let him do this, not again, not when I'm finally making some progress with Connor.*

This time, it was not darkness but light that answered from the depths of his mind, red and gold like fire, and singing like—like nothing Harry had ever heard, but like something he wished to hear again. The light and the song together struck Riddle and simply blotted him out of Harry's mind. Harry was left alone, blinking, in his own head. Sylarana twined around him and hissed at him to wake up.

Harry sat up in his bed, feeling it wrong that the room was still dark around him. It had been so bright in his mind.

Sylarana stirred on his shoulder, and said, in a voice loud enough to wake his Housemates, *"He came for the box. He was aiming for it."*

Harry nodded. He had not been able to see that, not in the chaos of battle, but he had guessed it. He was more interested in something else, though. "What was that light and song in my head? Did you cause that?"

*"I had nothing whatsoever to do with that,"* said Sylarana, and performed a looping motion with her head and tail that Harry had learned was her equivalent of a shrug. *"I would not have arranged for a defense so showy."*

Harry chuckled, but most of his mind was busy with the voice—the singing voice, not Tom Riddle's. There had been little surprise in Riddle's attack. Harry supposed it was valuable to know he was still there, still a threat.

"I know I've heard something sing like that before," he whispered. "What?"

*"I don't know, and I don't care."* He could feel Sylarana sliding gently through his mind, poking at the webs. *"It doesn't look as though you've taken any damage. Go back to sleep. I certainly will."*

Harry nodded, absently, and then lay back down. He would have to go to Dumbledore tomorrow, and tell him about the attack. Perhaps he could also ask the Headmaster what the flaring light in his mind might be. Snape could, possibly, know, but if he had seen this radiance before and simply refused to tell Harry that it was there, then he had his reasons for keeping silent. If he hadn't seen it...

Harry wondered where it could have been hiding, even as he fell back asleep at last.

"Professor Lockhart, I need to go see the Headmaster," said Harry in the middle of Defense Against the Dark Arts the next day, and yet another quiz on yet another one of Lockhart's interminable books.

The professor's head jerked up, and he stared worriedly at Harry. Harry blinked, then smiled. *He probably thinks that I'm going to tell Dumbledore he's a fraud.*

He looked back coolly, and gave the tiniest shake of his head. Of course, Lockhart would understand that Harry revealing the secret was an option, should Lockhart displease him.

Such as by keeping him in class when he asked to see the Headmaster.

Harry could see the exact moment when Lockhart figured it out. He waved a hand at Harry. "Off you go, then," he said. "But you'll miss the next exciting revelation from *Year with the Yeti*."

"I'll try to hurry back, then, sir," Harry said, not letting any of his sarcasm into his voice, and ignoring Draco's gaze on his back, too. He could tell Draco what was happening later, if and when the Headmaster said he could.

Harry was rather proud of himself for that thought, he acknowledged as he slipped through the halls towards the Headmaster's office. He was being more responsible, more like an adult than he had been in some time. He was letting Connor go on at his own pace with making friends in other Houses. He wasn't *entirely* pleased that the first Ravenclaw

friends Connor had chosen were Gorgon and Jones, the bullies who had harassed Luna the first day Harry met her, but he could hardly forbid his brother from extending the hand of peace to certain people. They were responding better to him than they ever had to Harry, that was for sure.

*Like calls to like.*

Harry started, thinking that had been one of his own, angry, odd thoughts, and then recognized Sylarana's voice. He frowned. He hadn't known she could hide so deeply in his mind that she sounded exactly like him.

*Stop that*, he reprimanded her as he reached the gargoyle and began trying out various sweet names to open the door to the Headmaster's office.

*Why should I?* she asked. *There are things you need to hear, things you will barely acknowledge when I say them. But when your own mind throws them at you, then you respond.* He felt an odd rustle, as though her place in the webs was shifting. *And there's that dark corner where you've been throwing everything lately. You're not to throw any emotion in there again.*

Harry ground his teeth. His temper could still surge with frightening quickness, when he let it. "Fizzing Whizbees," he said, and the gargoyle leaped aside. He stepped onto the staircase. *I have to get rid of them somehow, Sylarana.*

*Why? Because you might listen to them otherwise, and begin to make your own decisions?*

*You don't have the right to say what I should put where.*

*Yes, I do*, she said, and then she shifted the corner where Harry had started to pile his irritation and anger, locked behind one of the Occlumency fog-shields in his mind, and he couldn't feel it anymore.

*You're annoying.*

*I'm practical. And always right. You would do well to remember that.*

Harry shook his head and knocked on the Headmaster's door. He had more important things to think about than an argument with his snake right now. He was being responsible. He was telling Dumbledore about something that might become a threat to his brother before it could manifest as a threat.

"Come in, Mr. Potter."

*How does he do that?* Harry wondered, but he knew a few simple spells on the staircase were all it would take. He dismissed the question as likewise unimportant and opened the door.

Dumbledore sat behind his desk with a Pensieve in front of him, and his beard dripping with the silvery liquid that filled the bowl. Harry smiled in spite of himself. He must have interrupted the Headmaster just as he was reliving a memory. Judging from the smile on his face, it had been a pleasant one, and not one related to the First War. Harry was sorry for stepping in, but he really didn't think he should wait.

"Sir—"

A trill interrupted him. Blinking, Harry turned his head and watched Fawkes fly over to him, landing on his shoulder and lowering his head so that his beak brushed Harry's chin. Sylarana complained and shifted out from beneath the phoenix's talons, but did not actually dare to bite him. Harry raised his hand and smoothed slowly down the shimmering feathers.

Fawkes chirped at him, eyes brilliant, and then abruptly loosed a short phrase of song that made Harry snap straight.

*That was it. That was the voice that I heard in my head last night. It was a phoenix singing. Was Fawkes somehow watching over me in my sleep?*

“My familiar seems to have taken quite a shine to you, Mr. Potter,” said Dumbledore, chuckling. “He only lets people he likes touch him. Now, was there something you wanted to see me about?”

Harry ceased blinking at the phoenix for a moment and sat down in one of the chairs in front of Dumbledore, Fawkes a warm weight on his shoulder. “Yes, sir. Tom Riddle attacked me again last night.”

Dumbledore’s face became grave at once, and Harry was surer than ever that he had interrupted a happy moment. The Headmaster sighed, and his blue eyes pinned Harry with the gaze of an old warrior. “I see. And were you able to send him from your head again? Or do you fear that he remains lodged in your thoughts?”

Harry shook his head. “Something else sent him away from my head, sir. A flash of flames, and a voice I didn’t recognize until I heard Fawkes sing.” The phoenix gave another trill, as though responding to his name. Harry found his hand rising to stroke the feathers again. The warmth they gave was deep and subdued, like a room where a fire had burned for a long time. “I wanted to ask what it meant, if you knew, sir. Perhaps Fawkes was somehow watching over me in my sleep? Or could another phoenix have been doing the same thing?”

Dumbledore closed his eyes. Harry was surprised to see that his face took on an even heavier look, as though the news were unwelcome.

“I do know what it was, Harry,” he said quietly. “But I cannot tell you what spell it was for right now. There were—spells of protection that your mother asked me to place on your brother when we first understood that he was Voldemort’s destroyer. They are not to activate except in the last extremity, since they have dangerous effects on the world around them. We thought you had escaped contamination by them, but it seems you have not.” He sighed and opened his eyes again. “I am sorry, my boy. This is yet another burden that you must bear in an overcrowded brain. I would spare you it if I could. I think a Locusta and Tom Riddle’s attacks and Occlumency shields quite enough.”

Harry nodded slowly. “Can you tell me why it had a phoenix’s voice, sir?”

Dumbledore nodded at Fawkes. “As Fawkes is my familiar, he had some influence on the spells as they were cast. There is a remnant of that influence within you, Harry. It will be even stronger with your brother, of course, given that his wand actually contains one of Fawkes’s feathers, and so does Voldemort’s wand. I am sorry,” he repeated. “We wished to preserve you from the possible dangers of sharing this kind of bond with your twin, but since you *are* twins, and not only brothers by blood, the connection is extremely hard to block. It seems so far that the bond has protected you only, and for that I am pleased and grateful. But please do not rely on it.”

Fawkes uttered a low croon this time. When Harry looked at him sideways, he found the phoenix’s head bowed, pressed against his neck so that it was difficult to see anything but his beak. A moment later, gentle wet drops fell onto Harry’s neck.

“Fawkes?” Harry asked, wondering if he had somehow hurt or upset the phoenix. He didn’t think so, as he’d only been sitting there, but he didn’t know very much about phoenixes, either.

Fawkes lifted his head, and Harry could see that his eyes were filled with tears. They fell on his shoulder as he watched in fascination, warm and soft and smelling slightly of spring flowers. Fawkes laid his head against Harry’s temple and wept.

“A phoenix’s tears heal,” said Dumbledore quietly. “I believe that Fawkes is attempting to heal you of spell contamination.”

The phoenix gave a low musical sound that might or might not have been agreement, and shifted a little closer to Harry. Harry turned his head slightly away. This close, the heat was stifling, and Fawkes’s golden tail-feathers brushed along his cheek like the very touch of fire.

“Not too close, Fawkes,” said Dumbledore. “Mr. Potter needs to be able to breathe.”

Fawkes uttered a loud chatter that Harry couldn’t take for anything but a scolding, and continued to weep for a few moments. Then he lifted and flew back to his perch. Harry rubbed his shoulder gingerly. It wasn’t scalded. He hadn’t

thought he would find it so, but the imprint of the phoenix's talons lingered anyway, as though Fawkes were still sitting there.

Dumbledore cleared his throat. "Given that we cannot trust the spell contamination to protect you again, Harry, I think it is time to turn to weapons that can." He leaned forward and stared intently at Harry. "You must understand how important this is. Voldemort *must not* be able to turn you against your brother."

Harry opened his mouth to say that he would never turn against his brother, then shut it again. That was the whole point of Dumbledore phrasing his statement the way he had. Voldemort had proven that he could turn Harry without Harry knowing in his conscious mind that he was being turned.

Dumbledore reached behind him and drew forth a long, slim sword from a glass case on the wall that Harry hadn't even noticed. He held it solemnly towards Harry. "This is the Sword of Gryffindor," he said. "When Tom Riddle was a student here, he several times took books from the library that contained information on the Founders' artifacts, and I believe that he tried to, ah, *acquire* the sword several times before he was finally convinced not to try again." Dumbledore's eyes gleamed, and Harry wondered for a moment just who had convinced him; he thought he knew. "I believe he was interested in it for a reason. It is a powerful artifact. Do you think you could use it to defeat him?"

Harry hesitated for a long moment, meeting Dumbledore's eyes, then reached forward and curled his hand around the hilt of the sword.

He snatched it back a moment later, gasping, and stared at the red center of his palm. This time, he thought grimly, he knew the difference between the gentle heat that Fawkes shed and true fire. His hand was already beginning to blister. He shook it and tucked it into his lap, shaking his head at Dumbledore.

Dumbledore's eyes were narrowed speculatively. "I see," he said quietly. "Well. I am sorry, Harry. I am not entirely sure what happened." He turned and put the sword carefully back in the glass case. "Perhaps it would not be a good choice, anyway, given the damage that Tom Riddle has already inflicted on your mind and how close he has come to winning over you. It would not do to give him what he wants."

Dumbledore was diplomatically not mentioning how much the sword had hurt him, Harry thought, and certainly not *why*. He gritted his teeth. He thought he knew. *I'm not meant to be a Gryffindor.*

"Sir," he said, "Sirius gave me a gift for Christmas that he found among the Black family treasures. He said it was an armband that was supposed to amplify a Parselmouth's power. He did say that the Order of the Phoenix had tried to use it during the First War, against Voldemort, and it didn't do anything." Harry let out a long breath. "But I'm a Parselmouth, sir."

*Make sure you remember it,* came Sylarana's stern voice in his head.

"Could I try that?" Harry asked.

Dumbledore regarded him for a long moment in silence. Harry could almost feel the tenor of his thoughts. *A Slytherin, with serpent magic. That does not mean he is evil. And yet, the Sword of Gryffindor burned him.*

Dumbledore nodded in the end. "Yes, I think that would be an excellent candidate, Harry," he said cheerfully. "I don't think Sirius is busy right now. Would you like to go to his office? I will grant you special permission to be out of classes myself."

Harry thought about it, then decided he had better. He had an Occlumency lesson with Snape that night, and most of the material they were covering in their other classes was what he had already learned on his own. "Yes, sir. Thank you."

Dumbledore smiled and waved him on his way. Harry slid out of his seat, inclined his head, and set off.

Fawkes trilled once more to him before he left the office. Harry met the phoenix's dark eyes and saw they were sad again, glimmering with tears that Fawkes did not seem inclined to let fall.

*He certainly is a sorrowful bird, Harry thought as he shut the door behind himself. Not at all what I expected of a phoenix, and especially Dumbledore's familiar.*

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"Protego!"

Harry waved his wand and cast the spell perfectly, enunciating every syllable with what he knew was total control. The armband was clasped snugly around his upper left arm. He could feel it as he waved his wand.

Nothing happened. The shield simply snapped into place and hovered there in front of him.

"Finite Incantatem," said Harry, disgusted, and watched the shield fade.

"Well, not defensive magic, then," Sirius murmured soothingly from the other side of the office. "We can try medical magic next. You said that you knew a few of the spells for that?"

Harry nodded. He was becoming more and more frustrated. No matter which spell he cast, the armband did *nothing* to help his magic—or to hinder it, from what he could see. He performed every spell exactly as normal.

So far they'd gone through hexes, jinxes, simple household cleaning charms, most of the spells that Harry knew to affect someone else in a gentle way such as sending them to sleep, and now most of Harry's defensive spells. He supposed medical magic might be it. For all they knew, Sirius's ancestor who was a Parselmouth could have been a Mediwizard.

*Not much use in battle, though, unless Connor falls dying at my feet,* Harry thought morosely.

Before he could begin the spell to remove boils, he heard a grumbling sound. Surprised, he looked down and blinked. He supposed he *had* missed dinner, but usually his stomach didn't complain so loudly about it.

"Thought that might happen," said Sirius, and ducked, rummaging behind his desk. He came up with a pair of apples, one of which he bit into himself. "Catch," he added, and tossed the other in an arc that Harry knew would fall far short of him. His godfather's idea of a prank to lighten the mood, probably.

Irritated, Harry cast *Wingardium Leviosa*, both wandless and nonverbal, to pull the apple to him.

The armband grew warm around his skin, and then the apple soared across the office and smacked into the wall beside him. Harry turned to stare. He found the fruit actually *embedded* in the stone. He lifted a hand and tugged gently at it. It was no use. It didn't move.

Harry stared some more, then licked his lips. He glanced at Sirius, who had his mouth open, some pieces of half-chewed apple still visible within it. When he became aware of Harry looking at him, Sirius shut his mouth and shook his head.

"Well," said Sirius. "I suppose we know what kind of magic your armband works with now."

"Wandless," said Harry. "Or is it only wandless and nonverbal?" More carefully this time, he looked at the apple in Sirius's hand. "*Accio* Sirius's apple."

Once again, he felt the warmth, and then a wild surge of power. The apple darted out of Sirius's hand and towards him. Harry barely caught it in time. He bit into the side that Sirius hadn't touched, feeling vindicated.

"That's mine," said Sirius, but it was a mild protest. He was still staring cross-eyed at Harry. "That's it, then," he breathed. "None of us thought to try it with raw magic, or wandless. Of course, none of us could perform wandless magic but Snape anyway, and like we were going to trust *him* with something like this. And perhaps it really does work only for wandless magic performed by Parselmouths."

"Yes," Sylarana said abruptly, making Sirius jump badly as she emerged from the collar of Harry's robe and slithered under his sleeve to nudge at the armband. "*It is no accident that it bears the image of a serpent, and that the black*

*coating is made of scales. It was made to call only to the magic that other wizards considered Darkest and most primal, magic performed without a wand in the minds of those who could speak to beasts.*" Syllara flicked her tongue out, and Harry felt it against his skin, still warm from the armband. *"But that is only the knowledge that comes from the thing itself. Beasts, indeed. Something like the basilisk is. But some of us are more civilized."*

"What did she say?" Sirius's voice was still incredulous, as though he couldn't believe he was asking what a snake had to say.

Harry translated, looking away from Syllara so he couldn't accidentally speak Parseltongue. "She says that—that the serpent in the band is calling out to the serpent in me," he added, as Syllara hissed at him again.

Sirius sighed and closed his eyes. Harry tensed, wondering if his godfather was about to say something about no Potters before him ever having a trace of serpent in them. Hard as Sirius was trying to understand, Harry didn't trust him not to make an unfortunate remark.

Sirius came forward abruptly and embraced him. "Don't look at me like that, Harry," he whispered into his ear. "Lily explained everything to me. It's *fine*. I'm living proof that you can grow up with a touch of the Dark in you and still turn out fine. And Peter came from a good home, was wonderfully taken care of and pampered and spoiled and had all our friendship, and look where he is. In Azkaban." His hands tightened on Harry's shoulders. "I won't reject you again, I swear it."

Harry breathed out shallowly and nodded, daring to hold Sirius back. He forced his mind past the moment, to concentrate on what really mattered.

*At least I have a weapon to use against Tom Riddle.*

The boy was unusually distracted tonight, Snape thought, which was probably the reason that he was able to push past Harry's defenses and enter his mind so easily. That was no longer a simple task. Of course, part of that difficulty came from the composite state of Harry's mind, both so wounded and so healthy, and Snape didn't wish to encourage Harry to keep it that way. His compliments were few and sparse.

This time, he dodged past the shimmering golden thread that kept the Locusta in touch with Harry's thoughts at all times, only noting that it now lit nearly all the webs with its fire, and the locked box, and the simple well of webs that led downward to Harry's ultimate goal of protecting his brother. He wished to see how well the specific wounds that Tom Riddle had left in his battle with Harry were healing.

One of them was nearly gone, he thought with subdued pleasure. The Occlumency fog had provided a gentle, cool place for the webs to connect and heal, and if Harry had lost any of his memories there, he would not be able to tell now. Better an oddly seamless summer or birthday party, with the nagging feeling that he had forgotten something, than the sheer gap that it would have been otherwise.

Snape swam on to the most chewed web. This one, the Locusta had taken it on herself to repair, and that, Snape was not so pleased with. She was too much a part of Harry's mind, had made herself too integral, for him to be easy with her. Not even wizards who had familiars let them this far into their heads.

*Perhaps it is a special case for Parselmouths and magical serpents,* Snape thought, absently dodging a whirlwind of false memories that Harry wanted him to look at. *But still, I must speak with the boy about it. When he can hold all the other wounds shut, then he must learn to unwind her and function without her help. She is not a good enough guard against the Dark Lord.*

Snape was drifting towards the third wound when Harry hit him with his most powerful attack yet, a flung hammer of remembered pain from Tom Riddle's cutting spells that drove Snape downward. Before he could recover himself, he found the dark well of the boy's magic before him, the place all the webs spiraled inward to meet. Snape hurriedly shielded himself from the pain with a darting, slicing push from his Legilimency, and floated away from the hole. He had no wish to go into the blackness, not after feeling the barest part of what Harry could do when he had battled Tom Riddle in December.

Yet, for a moment, he was looking straight down, and he caught a glimpse of something that was not darkness. It took his breath.

A glorious web of light ran deep beneath the surface of Harry's thoughts, glittering with red and gold and sometimes flashes of blue and white as if it would imitate fire. Snape noticed its intricacies, its dense patterns, as well as he could while Harry was trying to push him out of his mind, and thought the web was at least as complicated as all the others combined.

Then he landed in his chair, sent staggering by Harry's push, and thought, *No. That is the guide for Harry's mind. It anchors the webs above it. It shows them where to run, like ley lines beneath the surface of the earth.*

Snape found himself immensely curious about what exactly that made the web of light, especially since he had never seen it before. He recovered himself, and found Harry's face gone shuttered and wary, his head lowered and his eyes a dark instead of a brilliant green. Snape nodded. He had no chance of fighting his way in again tonight. That was all to the good.

"What is the web of light in your thoughts, Potter?" he asked.

Harry blinked. "You *saw* it?" he blurted.

Snape sneered. "Control, Mr. Potter, control," he said. "Yes, I saw it. If you reveal it when you lower your guard, then I can only instruct you not to trust me. We *must* guard your mind at all costs if Riddle is attempting to find his way in again." *We cannot have Voldemort taking over the body and magic of the Boy-Who-Lived*, he added, but only inwardly. He was glad that he had made the choice not to try and convince Harry of that again. Harry had dedicated a good portion of his time lately to making sure everyone thought his brother deserved the title.

But Harry was shaking his head. "I don't know what it is," he said. "It showed up in my dream last night when Riddle attacked, and drove him away. It was gold and red, and sang like a phoenix—like Fawkes." He hesitated a long moment. "Headmaster Dumbledore said it was spell contamination, from magic that they cast on my brother to protect him," he said at last, a question in his voice.

Snape stared at him. *Spell contamination? With the web running at the deepest levels of his awareness? Not bloody likely.*

But, of course, Dumbledore would have known that. He was a Legilimens himself, a better one than Snape. He would have seen the web of light long since, and understood its significance if not its full meaning or origin.

And yet, he had told the boy this.

Snape wrestled with himself for a long moment. If he spoke the truth, said exactly what he had seen, he stood some chance of building trust with Harry. And perhaps he could encourage the boy's mind to heal further if he told him about this important part of it.

On the other hand, he would be acting against what the Headmaster evidently wished Harry to believe. He would encourage Harry to distrust Dumbledore, when that could lead to utter disaster. And he could not say beyond all doubt what the web was. Perhaps it truly was spell contamination, from a spell that Snape had never heard of. Dumbledore was a more powerful wizard than he was, by several orders of magnitude. Perhaps he was only telling the truth.

Snape met Harry's eyes, and chose the middle road.

"I would not say that is what it is," he said carefully. "On the other hand, I have never seen anything like it before." He did not need to view the web again, he knew; the sight was burned into his memory. "You say it sang like a phoenix?"

"The flash that showed up in my dreams did, sir," said Harry, head tilted to the side, watching him carefully.

"And you have never seen it before?"

Harry shook his head.

Snape nodded. "I will research this, and offer you further answers when I find the information out. I have none at this time."

Harry stood watching him for a moment longer, then said, "Am I dismissed, sir?"

"You are," said Snape, and watched him leave. Then he sighed and turned to the shelf of books behind his desk. He doubted he would find anything, but he felt compelled to start the research he had promised Harry.

*Every time I think this is becoming easier, it becomes harder instead. Who would have thought a Potter could be so complicated?*

He scowled as what Harry had said about Dumbledore's words returned.

"Old friend," he whispered as he opened the first book, *Side-Effects of the Dark Arts*. "What have you done now?"

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## Chapter Twenty-Five: Over Easter Holidays

Draco was fussing and whining about Harry not coming to Malfoy Manor for Easter, and he'd been doing it since yesterday, so Harry was paying more attention to his breakfast than Draco when the other boy abruptly gripped his arm. "Look," he breathed. "What's *he* doing here?"

Harry looked up, blinking, but saw no one looming in front of their table; he'd assumed Connor had come over to visit, from Draco's incredulity. Then he realized Draco was looking upwards. Harry followed his gaze.

A great horned owl had swept in majestically through the windows, circling over the tables as though it didn't know its ultimate destination. The post owls had come and gone, so everyone's eyes were on it. Harry shook his head slightly. "You recognize that owl?" he whispered to Draco.

"It's Julius," Draco said, which wasn't an answer. He still hadn't looked away from the bird.

"What?" Harry attempted to convey in that one word that he had no idea what Draco meant.

"My father's—formal owl," said Draco, as though he had looked for a better way to phrase it and hadn't found one. "I've only seen him send Julius with a message once, when he'd argued with Pansy's father and wanted to talk to him about it. I don't know what it means that he sent him now."

Harry watched in silence, and wasn't surprised when Julius swept one more circle and then alighted on the Slytherin table in front of him. This close, the bird's size was even more impressive. Harry met the immense golden eyes under the swept-back tufted horns, and waited.

Julius, never looking away from Harry, extended one talon. Harry took the small bundle from him and unwrapped it. It was folded in a silken mesh, woven to be both delicate and strong. Harry had heard of it, though he'd never actually seen it before. It would have acromantula silk somewhere in the weaving.

Inside, as he had half-expected—but really, no more than half—were a piece of parchment, folded in half, and a small green stone. Harry turned the stone over. It was carved in the shape of a fingernail, and it wasn't an emerald, though it had the color of one.

He glanced at the parchment, more a note than a letter.

*For Harry Potter, on this first day of spring. May our truce in the future grow as bright and green as the stone that binds us.*

*Lucius Malfoy.*

Harry smiled thinly and looked at the stone again. Yes, today was the vernal equinox, the first day of spring. Lucius was following the very oldest of traditions in sending his truce gifts near the turn of the seasons; the first had probably even arrived on the winter solstice, though Harry had still been unconscious in the hospital wing at the time. By linking the truce gifts to the natural cycle of the solstices and equinoxes, Lucius demonstrated his sincerity and his earnestness to make the truce as long-lasting and permanent as the seasons themselves were.

Supposedly. Harry still did not trust the elder Malfoy to do *anything* that was not for his own benefit. This was a game. He was intrigued that Lucius had gone this far, and he knew he could afford to respond. He would send the next gift in plenty of time to let Lucius send the fifth gift on Midsummer. He really did not think it would happen, however. Sooner or later, practicality and prudence would overcome whatever perverse enjoyment Lucius was getting out of this.

“What does that mean?” Draco asked, his attention caught. He took the green stone from Harry and stared at it. “It’s pretty. But what does it mean?”

“Tell you later,” said Harry, and scooped the stone back into his own hand, and then into a pocket.

“Harry,” Draco whined. “Tell me what it means.”

“If I do,” said Harry, standing up from the table to make his way to Charms, “does that mean that you’ll stop pestering me to go home with you over Easter?”

Draco pouted. “Can’t I have both?”

“No,” Harry pointed out.

Draco shut up.

Behind him, Harry heard Julius’s wings unfold as he took to the air. It was an insult to feed or pay a formal owl, so Harry hadn’t tried. He watched as the great bird skimmed to the window and rose out of sight.

“Come on, Harry!” Connor yelled from the bottom of the stairs. He’d been permitted into the Slytherin common room, though not actually into the room covered with clutter from five busily packing Slytherin boys. “Sirius said he’d meet us out in front of the school with his motorbike in five minutes, and that was five minutes ago!”

Harry scooped the last of his clothes into his trunk and hugged Draco one-armed. Sylarana was on the other arm, sleeping so deeply that Harry didn’t want to disturb her. Draco turned his head sulkily away.

“I’ll see you when the summer term begins,” Harry reminded him. “It’s not as if it’s that long, Draco. You *know* it isn’t.”

“But you could have come to the Manor,” said Draco. “You could have spent time with me outside of school. And you didn’t.”

Harry huffed out a little sigh. *This has gone on long enough*, he thought. *I’ve tried to be patient, but there’s only so much I can take.* “I spent Christmas with you,” he said. “And last Christmas with you. And now I want to know what my parents have been keeping from me, why they didn’t come to visit me at Christmas, and what they’ll say to Connor. I’ve no doubt that I’m due some scolding, too.” He shook his head. “I *need* to see my family, Draco.”

Draco closed his eyes. “I know,” he said in a small voice. “But every time I lose sight of you, I’m afraid that you might not come back.”

Harry stared at him for a moment. He had not realized Draco was that far gone down the road of his strange obsession with him.

He reached out, clasped Draco’s hand, and said, “Draco, the enchantment on the bottle—it’s permanent, you know, unless the bottle is broken or unless something happens to me.”

Draco opened his eyes and fixed them on him.

“If I die, you’ll know,” Harry whispered. “I promise. The colors will stop shifting and shining, because there will be no one there to feel them any more. I know it’s not much, but it’s knowledge.”

Draco swallowed once, then said, “All right.” He looked as if he would have said more, but Connor yelled from the bottom of the stairs again.

“Harry! Come *on!*”

Harry smiled slightly at Draco and levitated his trunk behind him. He had to hurry back, though, for the small object and letter he'd hidden behind the books on his shelf. It would not have been a disaster if he had forgotten to send them now, but he didn't want to concern himself with it while he was home.

Connor perked up at the sight of him and gestured Harry grandly towards the entrance to the common room. "Come on," he said. "I've been shouting for you for ages already."

"I know," said Harry, his mind on the object in his hands and on Draco. He really should have been thinking more about his family, he knew, and about Connor. Here was the chance to find out the answers to the questions he'd thought of over the last few weeks and grown steadily more frustrated about. One way or another, when he returned to school, he expected to know more than he did now. Even his parents' refusal to answer the questions would tell him something.

But he thought instead of what Draco had said, and the object in his hand burned like a hot coal.

*But every time I lose sight of you, I'm afraid that you might not come back.*

It made sense on one level, Harry acknowledged. He had faced Tom Riddle this year, and helped Connor battle Voldemort last year, and his life would be in more danger as the War mounted. But he was worried about what it might indicate for Draco. How far was he willing to go? What was he willing to risk, in the impossible—well, impossible at least for someone with the name of Malfoy—attempt to float between the two sides of the struggle?

He would have to have a serious talk with Draco when he came back, Harry thought. He would have to convince him that easing off on their friendship was the best thing for him. He had been willing to let it play out for as long as he had because he enjoyed Draco's company, and enjoyed him for what he was, for being so pure an example of his particular personality. But it was selfish. He had made another mistake, just as he had when trying to press Connor's friendships too fast, but now he would correct it.

*Yet he's not going to take it well, is he?*

Harry sighed. He would still hurt Draco less if he told him now than the War would.

"Mr. Potter."

Harry blinked and glanced up. He hadn't realized that Connor had been talking until he hushed, nor that they were almost out the front doors of Hogwarts. Snape had stopped them, standing in front of them like a wall of shadow. A quick sideways glance showed Connor scowling. Harry wasn't sure if Snape had been speaking to him, but he spoke quickly just in case.

"Yes, sir?"

Snape nodded at him and extended two slim books. Harry took them gingerly. They sparkled and crackled with wards that fell still when they felt the touch of his fingers.

Harry turned them so he could look at their spines, since neither bore a title on the covers. There were no titles there, either. He lifted questioning eyes to Snape.

"These are the only books I was able to uncover with information on the odd phenomenon in your mind," said Snape curtly. "I have sorted through them myself, but since I have only secondhand information and not your firsthand experience, it is up to you to make sense of them."

Harry nodded, dazed. He was amazed that Snape had been this much help to him. He had assumed the professor would either find nothing or not report it to him if he did. It was not as though Harry *trusted* Snape to be anything other than a bastard out for himself.

Snape's lips tightened, and Harry was reminded that Snape could read his thoughts.

He dropped his gaze and shifted his grip on the books, so that he was holding them firmly under his left arm. Sylarana still slept on, thankfully. “Thank you, sir,” he said quietly. “I will study them. I should have something to report to you after the holidays.”

“See that you do,” said Snape, and swept away.

Harry continued walking, and Connor had no choice but to follow. He waited until Snape was probably out of earshot before asking his question, at least. “Why did you accept the books from him, Harry? And why take so long in the Slytherin dorms? I thought you couldn’t wait to be home and rid of all this Slytherin nonsense.” He gave a dramatic shudder, as though someone had enchanted serpents to crawl up his legs. Then he hurriedly patted his robe pockets. Harry hid an exasperated smile. Connor had developed a nervous habit of that every time he had a potentially frightening thought, as though he believed the twins would read his mind and come up with another pebble that did what he’d imagined.

Of course, not all his exasperation came from that. “Connor,” he said quietly, as they emerged into the sunshine and saw Sirius waiting for them with the motorbike and Hedwig and Godric in their cages, “you should know that I can’t forget about this ‘Slytherin nonsense.’ Wherever I go, I’m Slytherin, at least until I’m out of school.”

Connor gave him an odd look. “But you don’t have to act the same way you do when you aren’t around Malfoy and Snape and all the rest of them. Why would you keep acting the same way?”

“Do you consider yourself less a Gryffindor because you’re out of the Tower?” Harry shifted the small object and the letter he held to his right hand. It was becoming tricky, juggling those things and the books while trying not to wake Sylarana, but he would be rid of the stone and the letter in a moment.

“Well—no,” said Connor. “But I’m not acting a particular way because that’s my House and that’s how people expect me to act. I really *am* Gryffindor, Harry.” He gave his brother a winning smile.

Harry could see where this was going, and that it would all end in tears, and he decided he needed to say it anyway. He had been mistaken in trying to direct how Connor related to everyone else in the school. But he could refuse to live up to his brother’s misconceptions. “And this is how I am, Connor,” he said. “I *am* Slytherin.”

Connor froze and turned to stare at him. Harry met his gaze as steadily as he could. Of course, after a moment, shame overcame him, and he looked down and away. He could feel Sirius’s grin dying as he watched them, though they were still too far away for his godfather to hear what Connor said next.

“I thought—then there’s something wrong, Harry,” Connor began slowly. “I thought all Slytherins were false and fake and only cared about money and blood status. I thought most of them were *evil*.” He bit his lip. “So either I was right in what I thought earlier this year and you’re evil, or I was wrong about Slytherins. And how can either be true?”

Harry breathed carefully, his eyes never moving from his brother’s. He had a chance to make this right, as long as he didn’t screw it up. “Connor,” he whispered. “Which do you think is true? If one thing or the other has to be true, which do you choose?”

Connor stared back at him, his eyes widening. Then he said, “But I *can’t* be wrong about Slytherins, Harry! How can I be? Dad and Sirius always told me how evil they were!”

Harry closed his eyes and was conscious of his heart beating rapidly in his ears, over and over again, like the sound of velvet being crushed. Connor had passed the test. He was on the road that would lead him to the right conclusions in the end. Harry could hardly speak, he was so dizzy with relief and joy, but he tried.

“Maybe they were wrong, too,” he whispered. “Adults can be wrong, you know.”

Connor drew breath as if he were about to respond, but Sirius called out, “Hey! What’s up with the two of you?”

“Coming, Sirius!” Connor called, and started running. Harry followed behind him, more slowly. The morning shone around him, and he was no longer as delicately balanced as he had been. He smiled oddly, knowing that Sirius and

Connor were staring at him, and largely indifferent to it. He thought he could grow used to feeling his emotions more freely, if they would always be emotions like these.

He was so distracted that he almost forgot to take Hedwig from her cage, bind the stone and the letter to her talon, and whisper, "Take this to Lucius Malfoy, Hedwig."

She hooted at him obediently, nipped at his hair, and then jumped into the air, wings spread wide. Harry watched her vanish, and then climbed onto the bike as Sirius shrank their trunks.

"What was all that about?" Connor asked.

Harry smiled mysteriously. He didn't care if it was a smirk. Connor would have to get used to them sooner or later, now that he had a Slytherin for a brother.

His mind had wandered back to the package now winging its way to the Manor, the small red stone, and the simple note:

*If you mean to bind yourself to me in green, then you must first overcome the blood that has been spilled between our families. I await your bride, and send this stone to remind you what you must build it over.*

*Harry Potter.*

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"Harry!"

Harry looked up with a smile of pleasure. Remus had finally joined them; the full moon, and traveling to the safe stronghold that he kept for it, had kept him away since the boys arrived, but now he was here. Harry dropped the book on phoenixes that Snape had given him to read, and hurtled across the room, wrapping his arms around Remus's waist.

He could feel the werewolf's surprise. Harry was usually much more reserved than that, especially since Remus was Connor's godfather and not around as often as Sirius. His hand lingered hesitantly on Harry's hair for a moment, then smoothed down his back.

"Harry? Are you all right?" he asked.

"Of course," said Harry firmly. "I just wanted to thank you for whatever it was that you wrote in your letter to Sirius. It was brilliant. Thank you. He's been treating me a lot better since he got it."

Remus growled slightly. "And so he should be. If it was anyone else, then I might have been able to believe the way he was treating you at first, but *Sirius*, of all people! I'm very glad that he changed his mind." He embraced Harry, actually managing to lift him from the ground. Harry hid his surprise. He always forgot how strong Remus was until he actually saw him demonstrate it. "He told me that he was doing better, in his letters," Remus whispered in his ear, "but I didn't know if I could trust him to tell the truth."

"He was," said Harry, and waited patiently to be set back on the floor. "And Connor and I have made up."

"I noticed," said Remus, tilting his head slightly. Harry supposed he was catching the scent of happy camaraderie in the air instead of the scent of tension and stress and fear, assuming that such things had scents. "But what about you and your parents?"

Harry blinked. "We didn't argue, Remus."

"You didn't have the chance." Remus steered him towards the chair he'd jumped out of, one of a large number in the Potters' comfortable central room. When he sat down across from him, Harry realized Remus had wanted to talk to him privately. He kept his head up, refusing to look down as he wanted to. He didn't have to hide *everything*; surely not. If he could be honest with his mother and Sirius, and now his father, then he could be honest with Remus, too. The intent stare did make him breathe a little faster, though. "I want to know," said Remus quietly, "what they said about—about what they've done in the past."

“How much do you know?” Harry asked bluntly. This conversation was going to be impossible unless he knew where he had to tread carefully.

“Almost nothing,” Remus admitted. “Lily told me some of it, but then she kept backing off and saying it wasn’t the right time. She promised to tell me the next time you were home.” He closed his eyes and sighed, and Harry saw dark circles under his eyes and a pallor on his cheeks that he had excused as the effects of the latest transformation. Now, he wasn’t so sure. “I’ve been patient, Harry, because you don’t just come out and accuse one of your oldest friends of abusing her elder son—“

“Abusing?” Harry spluttered. He should have asked their mother to tell Remus at once, he realized. Then he would not have had ridiculous ideas like this. “That’s not true at all, Remus! She’s given me extra training. Taught me wandless magic and pureblood customs and so on. It was all things I *wanted* to learn.”

Remus opened his eyes, and though his gaze was mild, it still felt as if it cut right through Harry, which he didn’t consider fair. “Why?”

“Why, what?” Harry rubbed his head. It hurt. “Why did I want to learn them? I’ve *always* wanted to learn things, Remus, you know that. I’m kind of surprised that I didn’t end up in Ravenclaw, come to think of it—“

“Not that,” said Remus. “Why was she training you in it? It would have made more sense to train Connor, if she really wanted him ready to face You-Know-Who.” Then he shuddered. “Not that I think she should have done that, either. Connor has time to learn as he grows. It would be a horrible thing to do to any child, to dedicate his entire life to learning like that because you fear that—“

Abruptly, he cut himself off and made a strangled noise in his throat. “Oh, Harry,” he whispered.

Harry could barely hear him. His head was pounding fiercely, and he closed his eyes. Behind them, flares and flashes of fire rampaged across his mind. He felt Sylarana, who had been watching the box closely, turn with a sudden hiss. She could not stop the agony that grew fiercer and fiercer, though, or the phoenix song that rang in Harry’s ears until he felt as if all his thoughts were vibrating in sympathy.

“Remus.”

Harry opened his eyes and turned his head, with difficulty. Lily stood in the doorway between the central room and the entrance hall, her eyes wide with horror. She shook her head and rushed to Harry’s side.

Harry closed his eyes and let himself slip into darkness. It hurt too much for him to stay awake any longer. Faintly, he heard Sylarana calling him, but he couldn’t respond. The fire was loose, and burning every corner of him, and over all of it rode the ringing phoenix song.

“Harry.”

He heard the voice, but he didn’t want to answer it. He huddled in the center of his bed instead, and sometimes quivered. His head felt hot, as though fever had hit him with a bludgeon.

“Harry,” the voice said again. Their mother’s voice. “I’ve come with medicine and food for you, but I can’t get past until you ask your Locusta to stop hissing at me.”

Harry forced his eyes open then. Sylarana was on the floor between his bed and Lily, he saw at once, her head swaying back and forth as she watched Lily. Her hissing was a steady threat, a stream of words that Harry could understand. He shivered, because there was none of her usual teasing tone in them. “*Come near him and I will kill you. I don’t want to, because you are precious to him, for reasons I cannot fathom, but touch him and I will bite you. The venom will cause convulsions at first. Then you begin to lose the ability to breathe. Then it dissolves your stomach and sets free the acid there. Come near him, and that will happen to you. Come near him, and I will kill you.*”

“Sylarana,” Harry called out weakly. He knew from his mother’s flinch that he’d spoken in Parseltongue. But it was the one thing that might calm the Locusta and move her, so he continued speaking in it. “Please let her by. I promise that she’s not going to harm me.”

*“She will. She already has. If I had known where you were, I would have come here and poisoned her years ago. You are my human. I defend you against other snakes. She is one.”*

“Please,” Harry whispered. “I want you to.”

He knew that he couldn't force Sylarana to do it, and he didn't want to try. He simply concentrated, opening all his thoughts to her, letting her see that he really didn't want Lily dead. He might be more confused than before, less sure of his purpose, but he *knew* that he didn't want to see what would happen if the Locusta bit her.

“*You could look away,*” Sylarana suggested, but her resolve was weakening.

“Please,” Harry whispered.

Sylarana turned and slithered onto his bed, wrapping herself around his arm again. But she remained present and in sight, tongue flickering angrily, as Lily approached and set the tray of food carefully down beside the bed. Lily, in turn, never took her eyes from the snake. She dipped a cloth in a basin of water, and then held it out to Harry. He took it and placed it on his forehead. He closed his eyes and sighed. The coolness soothed the hot ache of the fever somewhat.

“Harry,” his mother whispered. “Harry, you must listen to me. I have medicine for the ache in your head, but first, you need to tell me what it looks like. What do you see when you close your eyes?”

That, at least, was not a hard question, and Harry was glad to be able to answer it. “Flashes of fire,” he said. “And sometimes brighter flashes than others. They were especially bright when Remus was trying to talk to me.” He could barely remember what Remus had been talking about, but he managed to open his eyes, curious to see how Lily would react. “And there's a song over all of it. I think it's a phoenix singing, like Fawkes.”

For the first time in his life, Harry saw Lily panic.

Her body slammed stiff, and her green eyes turned glassy. Then she closed her eyes and bowed her head. Harry realized a moment later that she was crying. He would have sat up and tried to comfort her, but the warm weight of Sylarana on his arm and the agony in his head warned him not to move.

“Oh, Harry,” Lily said at last, taking a seat on the edge of the bed. She ignored Sylarana's warning hiss. Harry wasn't sure that she even heard it, so desperately were her eyes fixed on him. “This should never have happened. It wouldn't have, if not for Tom Riddle's attack. That's torn your mind so badly that the spell contamination is showing up, climbing to the surface. This is a thing better left buried.” She reached out and held his hands. “I know how to make the pain go away. Do you trust me?”

Harry nodded without hesitation, then stopped with a soft moan as that stirred up the pain in his head again.

“Good,” Lily whispered. “Harry, do you believe that Connor's innocence and purity are essential to defeating Voldemort?”

“Yes.”

A good portion of the headache suddenly ceased to bother him. Harry touched his temple with trembling fingers, but remembered to listen to his mother. Lily leaned closer to him, and her eyes were the whole world.

“Do you believe that you would give up everything else if he asked you to?” Lily asked.

“Of course.” Harry was puzzled as to why she was having him repeat the essence of his vows, but he would do it if it pleased her. Besides, it was nothing but the truth. “I not only believe it, I would do it.”

“Even your friendships?” Lily's fingers traced the bones of his wrist.

“Yes.”

“Even your life?”

“Yes.”

“Even your snake?”

Sylarana hissed angrily, but Harry knew the truth. She had to have known it, too, if she could see inside his mind and examine his thoughts. “Yes,” he whispered. He didn’t want to, no more than he really wanted to give up his friendship with Draco, but Connor came first. That was still immutable truth. And, when he was with Lily, all the complications of life outside Godric’s Hollow and the excuses he made to himself about being part of Slytherin House and wanting to stay friends with Draco and wanting Connor to grow up and all the rest of it melted away. Here was only simplicity. Here was only faith.

His fever melted.

Lily let out a short, sharp breath. Then she said, “Good, Harry. That is good. And now—now I think I need to tell you some things.” Her hand skimmed the surface of his forehead, stroking over his scar and disturbing the cloth. That was all right, Harry thought, never looking away from her face. He didn’t need it any more. He needed far more to see the truth that made her eyes flare with passion and deep-held belief. “There was—there was a prophecy, Harry. A prophecy about Connor. That’s how we know for certain that his goodness and purity are so essential to defeating Voldemort.”

Harry nodded slowly. He had sometimes suspected something like that, though never known for certain.

“But prophecies are the wildest form of Divination magic,” Lily whispered. “There’s a chance that it might mean different things. It would still come true, but it could turn out meaning something different from what it seemed to say the night it was made. In this case, we knew, from other things in the prophecy itself, that it had to be Connor. And you’re in the prophecy, too, Harry. It’s essential that you play your own role, that of guardian to Connor. Otherwise, he’d pass through darkness that would destroy the goodness and love in him, and we would be doomed. And we had to do everything we could to lock you into that role, to sculpt you that way, so that the prophecy couldn’t possibly wander off and mean someone else, someone we wouldn’t know in time to protect, someone that Voldemort could perhaps kill. *Everything* in the prophecy had to come true. You *had* to love Connor, and before everything else. We couldn’t take the chance that it would be otherwise. Do you understand?” Her eyes grew brilliant with tears now. “I am so *sorry*, my son.”

Harry shook his head slightly. The last of the pain had vanished. He felt calm, and sleepy, and not really inclined to understand what his mother was apologizing for. “Of course,” he said drowsily. “I understand. It’s what I would have chosen, anyway. I like the way I am.” He yawned. “You could have told me about the prophecy.”

More tears fell from her eyes, then, but Harry didn’t understand why, and in another moment he was asleep, anyway. Lily drew her hands slowly back from her son’s face and settled them in her lap. She was shaking. That had been closer than either of them knew—than *anyone* had known. The light and the song in Harry’s mind were weapons of last resort. That they had come so near the surface...

*It was Voldemort’s fault, she reminded herself. He is the cause of every evil thing that has happened in this family.*

She opened her eyes to find the Locusta watching her. Its green eyes were disconcerting. It hissed at her, and sounded angry. Lily stood and carefully drew back from the bed.

Overwhelming sadness and weariness weighed her down, and she wanted nothing so much as to leave the room and seek James’s comfort. He knew, now, even as she did. And after long months of argument, during which she’d had to keep him away from Harry in case the sight of him reversed James’s fragile, necessary decision, she’d finally got him to agree that matters were best as they stood.

There was Remus to confront, too.

But she could not take her eyes from Harry, she found, and after a moment she came back to him and placed a kiss on the lightning bolt scar. It *was* only a scar from a bit of rubble, she reassured herself. It could not mean anything else. They would not *let* it mean anything else

She touched the pocket of her robe, and the letter that had come from Dumbledore. He had spoken of the phoenix song in Harry's mind, and the fact that he had offered the Sword of Gryffindor to Harry. Perhaps they had been wrong. Perhaps one last test was needed.

And the Sword had *burned* Harry. The message in that was unmistakable.

*No*, Lily thought, as she left the room to seek her husband and her friend, *it does not mean anything else. We chose rightly how to raise both Harry and Connor.*

~\*~\*~\*~\*~\*~\*

Harry woke to the sound of shouting. He blinked and touched his temple. He felt calm and clear-minded now, though a bit light-headed. After a few moments of thoughts, he realized it probably came from not having enough food, and stretched for the tray his mother had left beside the bed. The bread and the soup were cold, but he would eat them, the way he was feeling. It was good practice for the future, anyway. He was hardly going to be able to choose his food on the battlefield.

The shouting intruded on his consciousness again, just as Sylarana stirred and said, "*I have wanted to bite everybody who has come and seen you, except the werewolf.*"

"You haven't bitten anyone, have you?" asked Harry, hurtled abruptly into worry as he sipped at the cold soup. Chunks of slimy vegetables slid down his throat. He tried to ignore them. "Please tell me you haven't."

*"I haven't. Share the soup. The werewolf and your rabbit-father are arguing now. I hope the werewolf eats him."* Sylarana slithered up his arm and laid her head along the rim of the bowl, tongue flicking as she sipped at the soup. She gave him one glance out of eyes that had turned almost the color of his own. "*How much do you remember of what happened before you fell asleep?*"

Harry shook his head. "Not much. I know that my mother confirmed the existence of a prophecy, and Remus—Remus was angry about something. What—"

Then the shouting rose loud enough for him to hear it. Harry had assumed that it was one of Remus's and Sirius's endless arguments about the way Sirius went out drinking and womanizing. They were one of the constants when they were both in the house at Godric's Hollow. But now he realized that it was their father and Remus arguing. He tensed and listened.

"—going to take Harry with me," Remus was saying, with a raw anger in his voice that Harry had never heard before. "*Merlin*, James, can't you see that he'll suffer here? I still don't know what Lily's doing to him, because she backed off when she saw she wasn't convincing me, but I know that he needs to be taken away. I'm bringing him to Dumbledore."

"You don't understand, Remus!" James sounded as if he'd been repeating that for a little while. "I didn't either, at first. But I promise you, this is what needs to happen. If you would just sit down and let Lily explain it to you—"

Remus cut him off with a growl. Harry blinked. Remus was *gentle*. Remus went out of his way to avoid reminding people that he was a werewolf. That he would do it now was beyond Harry's comprehension.

"Why don't *you* explain it to me, James?" Remus said, and the growl was lurking behind his words. "If you understand it so well, if she convinced you of it, then explain it to me. *Now, James.*"

Harry heard a solid thump, as though their father had fallen against the closed bedroom door. "Remus," Harry heard him say helplessly. "There are so *many* things that you don't understand, so many things that have to come true."

"Name one."

"You know about the prophecy," said James.

"Yes." Remus sounded as if he had bitten off the word, and his voice was closer than before. Harry shivered and hugged his arms, fighting the temptation to go out there. He didn't know what his appearance might provoke Remus into doing, though. It sounded as though he had managed to provoke Remus quite a bit already, though he didn't remember how. "And I know that that can't excuse what you've done, James. There was *nothing* in the prophecy about teaching one son to master wandless magic by the time he was twelve."

"That's one of the requirements, though," said James. "Remus, you were there, that night—you came back before everything had calmed down—you know what we saw, what we felt—"

"*Damn you, James.*," said Remus, and Harry flinched. "Is *that* what this is about? I thought you'd got over that when you befriended me in school. How could someone who wasn't afraid of being friends with a werewolf be afraid of his own son?" His voice sounded more weary than angry now. "Now, step out of the way. I'm taking Harry with me."

“Remus, don’t make me hurt you,” James whispered. “Please. We lost Peter. I don’t want to lose you, too.”

“I might, *might*, be able to forgive you someday if you step aside now,” said Remus. “Let me through.”

There was a long pause, and then the sounds of scrambling. The door opened in the next moment, and Remus strode into the room. His eyes came to rest on Harry, and he let out a long breath and came to him, enfolding him in a hug that made Harry feel decidedly odd.

“You survived,” Remus whispered into his ear. “But Merlin knows how much more of this you can take before you crack. I don’t intend to let you take any more. Come on, Harry. I have to get you out of here. Dumbledore will know what to do. He’s protected people in danger from their own families before. Come on.” He started to lift Harry out of the bed.

Harry resisted, particularly when he found that he wearing only pyjamas. “I don’t understand, Remus,” he said. “Why do you think they’ll hurt me if I stay here? I promise, they’ve never hit me.”

“I know that,” said Remus, though there was doubt in the back of his voice that it hurt Harry to hear. “But they’ve done other things, Harry. I don’t even know the full extent of them. I just know they’re evil.”

“They’re *not*,” said Harry, feeling his headache start again. A brief explosion of yellow ran across the back of his eyelids. “If you understood everything, Remus, you would see that—“

“Put him down, Remus.”

Harry stared over Remus’s shoulder. James was back in the doorway, holding his wand and—something else. Harry frowned. He thought it was a knife of some kind, but he didn’t know why his father would rely on a knife when he had his wand near at hand.

Remus shook his head even as he turned around, still holding Harry. “This has gone on long enough, James. I—“

And then he stopped, and made a strangled sound that Harry felt against his chest and his throat as well as heard. Then he whispered, “Silver. You would actually threaten me with silver. James, what has happened to you?”

Harry recognized the knife in his father’s hand then. It came from a set of ceremonial daggers that Lily sometimes used for drawing runes. It shed the light in shaky patterns, and Harry thought James’s hand was trembling, but that did not matter. What mattered was that he had it.

And the Marauders had suffered another betrayal. This one was connected to Harry in some way, though he couldn’t remember what had happened. He began squirming.

“Please, Remus, put me down,” he whispered.

“Harry, you don’t know what you’re saying,” said Remus. He hadn’t moved, but he began to growl now, a sound that made James’s hand shake even harder. “I can fight my way out.”

“But I don’t want you to lose your friends because of me!” Harry whispered back fiercely. “*Please*, Remus. I promise they won’t hurt me. I want you to leave, to get away from here.”

Remus stood still for a long moment. Then, slowly, every motion obviously made against his will, he lowered Harry onto the bed. He backed away, hands up, and James changed the angle of the knife and used it to point the way sharply out the door.

“You don’t know what you’re talking about, Remus,” he said, quietly but firmly. “And until you do, you can’t expect to do anything but anger the rest of us.”

“I’m going to talk to Dumbledore,” said Remus, edging out sideways. “I swear it, James. I think you’ve gone mad, the lot of you. And he’s the only one who has a chance of bringing you back to sanity.”

“Good,” said James. “Speak with Albus. He can explain it to you.”

Remus bared his teeth. Harry had never found them threatening before. Now, with Remus’s head slightly bowed, his amber eyes focused, and a thick, musky smell like that of a wild animal filling the room, he did.

“If you or Lily hurt him again before we come back,” said Remus softly, “then I promise I’ll take revenge.”

James paled. He swallowed several times before he managed to say, “Dumbledore can explain all of this. I promise, Moony.”

“Don’t call me that,” said Remus, and half-lunged, his teeth snapping shut on air. James dropped the knife. Remus didn’t move closer, but his gaze was filled with murky emotion that, in turn, filled Harry with guilt. “You don’t have the right anymore.”

He turned and stalked out, shutting the door behind him. James stayed by the bed, so silent that Harry could hear the *crack* of Remus’s Apparition a few moments later, when he was outside the wards.

Then James sat down on the edge of Harry’s bed and put his head in his hands. Harry hesitated. He wanted to comfort his father, but he thought a touch might set him off. He had a previously unsuspected talent for making people angry, he thought.

“It’s all right, Harry,” James whispered, lifting his head and looking at him, finally. His hazel eyes were clear, though weary in a way that reminded Harry of Connor’s when he thought he might not be the Boy-Who-Lived. “Come here.” He held out his arms, and Harry crawled into them, leaning his head against his father’s chest and hearing the strong beat of his heart.

James stroked his hair. Then he said, “You understand why we have to keep you here, don’t you, Harry?”

“Of course,” said Harry. “I don’t know what made Remus so angry. I mean, you *know*, don’t you? You know how Mum trained me, and why, and what kinds of things I learned?”

“Of course,” said James. “And it took me months to accept it, and I’m your father. I’m not surprised that it’s taking Moony longer. He’s Connor’s godfather, and he’s always had—well, kind of a soft heart in some ways.” He laughed. The laugh didn’t sound sincere. “But I understand your training, Harry. I know why it was necessary.”

Harry felt his incipient headache vanish. He nodded, and James’s arms came around him more firmly.

“Lie back in the bed, Harry,” his father said a moment later. “I don’t think that you’re completely recovered yet.”

Harry let James lay him down, and tuck the blankets around him. That felt odd, too, if nice. Harry wasn’t used to this kind of treatment when he wasn’t sick or severely injured, and then he usually knew what had happened to land him in bed. This time, he really couldn’t remember.

James leaned near him and smoothed his hair down over his forehead, much as Lily had done the last time she came to see him. His gaze was completely serious. Harry met his father’s eyes, squinting a little as James shifted around in front of the window and the April sunlight haloed his face.

“Has your mother ever told you about the capture of the Lestranges?” he asked.

Harry blinked. “No. She said it was your story to tell, Dad. Are you going to tell it to me now?” He felt his heart beat a little faster. He had already faced Bellatrix and Rodolphus Lestrangle in battle last year, and had regretted his lack of intimate knowledge about the way they fought, the spells he could expect them to use, then. It looked as if he were

finally going to get that information. If he faced them again in battle—and eventually, he thought he would; eventually, all the Death Eaters would rally to Voldemort’s side when he found a way to return—then this would be good to know.

“Yes,” James whispered. “It was just after the attack on us, you know. You and Connor were still healing when we received word that the Lestranges had attacked the Longbottoms and tortured poor Frank and Alice into insanity. Or maybe I should say that *Bellatrix* did that,” he added, with a little twist to his mouth. “Rodolphus was never as dangerous as she was.

“The Aurors nearly captured them when they left the Longbottoms’ house, but they managed to Apparate away, and they couldn’t trace them. They turned to me, because they knew that Bellatrix was a Black, and I was Sirius’s friend and had some knowledge of Black family homes where they might be hiding.”

“Why didn’t they send Sirius?” asked Harry.

James closed his eyes and let out his breath for a long moment. “That was—two days after the attack,” he said. “And Peter’s betrayal hit Sirius hardest of all. He was in the Ministry when they interrogated Peter. I don’t think he slept for three more days after that. He had to hear every last detail, every last confession.

“Well, I didn’t. But I wanted—I wanted to *kill* something, hurt someone. We’d come so close to losing both of you.” His hand came out and rested tightly on Harry’s shoulder for a second. “The Aurors gave me a purpose and a reason to go looking. When I heard about what had happened to Frank and Alice, I was even angrier. Neville lived, but he could have died. He was in that much danger. And what if we’d been in the house when Voldemort attacked, Harry? He would have killed us, too. You would have been left orphaned. Neville’s situation could so easily have been your own. I wanted Bellatrix squirming and screaming at the end of my wand. It was the one time in my life I think I was ready to perform the Cruciatius.

“I Apparated to a family home that Sirius told me about, a little cottage in the woods where he and his cousins used to spend the summer together. No one was there, but I found signs that someone had been, and a message in a code that Sirius taught me to read. It directed Rodolphus’s brother Rabastan, and anyone else who could read it, to follow the Lestranges to another safehouse. And this safehouse was one I knew well, since it was Sirius’s home when he was a child.”

“Grimmauld Place,” Harry whispered, remembering the stories that Sirius had told him.

James nodded slightly. He still hadn’t opened his eyes. “Yes. So I Apparated there. I was able to get most of the way into the house before they noticed me. They’d been expecting company, you see, but of the Death Eater kind, and they were supremely confident that no one else could have found them.

“I dropped Rodolphus while he was still fumbling for his wand. And then I faced Bellatrix.” James squeezed his eyes more tightly shut, as though to prevent the fall of tears. “And we *fought*, Harry. I’d never been that angry. I’d never wanted to kill someone so much.

“But Bellatrix is a powerful witch—“

Harry shivered in remembrance of the curses she’d cast at him, and nodded.

“And she’d had a lot more practice at that kind of hatred than I had. She fought me to a standstill, and got me to the point where I thought I couldn’t throw another hex. She laughed at me, and even that wasn’t enough to give me extra strength in my wand hand, though it would have been when we were still in school.

“And then she said—she said, ‘It should have been me going after your sons, Potter, and would have been if Wormtail were a bit smarter. I wish it had been. I enjoy the way that babies scream under the *Crucio*.’”

Harry found he could envision it well: Bellatrix standing there and taunting his father, James with his head bowed but eyes suddenly full of fire as he listened to the Death Eater.

“What did you do?” Harry whispered.

“I held her under *Crucio* for ten minutes,” James responded.

Harry could not help it; he gave a massive shudder, and then raised his head and stared at his father in disbelief. James was *gentle*. Oh, it wasn't the same kind of gentleness as Remus's—he would yell and punish if he had to—but it wasn't their mother's sternness, either. He was the one who would rather laugh off mistakes than scold for them. And Harry had never seen him use a curse, only hexes and jinxes on Sirius, who could return as good as he got.

“What?” Harry said at last.

“Yes,” James said. His face had a very strange smile on it. Harry found that he didn't like it very much. “I did one of the things she probably did to Frank and Alice—though knowing her, she varied the timing of the curse and the intensity of it, so as to break them. But I think I might have driven her partially insane before she ever went to Azkaban.”

He shifted closer to Harry, eyes still shut. “After I brought them both in, I gave up my position as an Auror. Part of it was necessity, and that was what I told Sirius and Remus when they asked. We had to stay hidden behind the isolation wars while we raised you. If the Death Eaters—excuse me, former Death Eaters—knew where we were, they would have spared no effort at that point to destroy your brother. Better to stay close to home, and only venture out to Diagon Alley or elsewhere when we absolutely had to.”

“But that wasn't all of it,” said Harry, not having to ask. He knew, now.

“No,” said James. “I'd found something in myself that disgusted me. I never knew I could torture someone like that. I couldn't believe that, after I did it, I wanted to do it *again*. I was still shaking with the urge to make Bellatrix suffer when I handed her over to Alastor Moody. And the *power* that filled me, Harry, the power was its own temptation. I knew, then, what kind of magic my grandparents had given up when they decided to ignore some of the older pureblood customs and dedicate the Potter line to the Light permanently. It was Dark power. All purebloods feel it to a certain extent. It's the power that can most stir up magic, can make it flow through you so that you feel like you can do anything.”

Harry closed his eyes and sat perfectly still for a long moment, remembering the magic that had answered him when he fought Riddle in December.

“The way the older purebloods lived, the dances and the marriages and all the rest of it, made that power grow,” James whispered on, his voice like water murmuring in the darkness. “It was a way of sculpting terrifying wizards. They pruned all the ones who couldn't control themselves, and that's the part most people don't understand; they only see the exile of Squibs and the scorning of those wizards with average or lesser power. But they got rid of powerful dunderheads, too, and those who just didn't fit. Rodolphus wouldn't be alive if the Lestranges had followed all the old customs, and that Sirius survived being born a Black is a miracle. Bellatrix would be alive in that kind of world, though, and Lucius Malfoy. That's the world I looked into when I tortured her. It's the world that my grandparents gave up.”

For a long moment, he sat there and simply breathed. Harry put out his hand, and felt his father's heart beneath his fingers, beating as fast as that of the rabbit Sylarana had called him.

*The rabbit has fangs*, said Sylarana in his head, subdued. *I am willing to grant him that.*

James opened his eyes, finally, and fixed Harry with his gaze. “And it's the kind of world that you would have fallen into, that your mother and I are afraid you would have fallen into, if she hadn't taught you dedication to your brother,” he said. “The dances wouldn't have been enough, not if you just learned them by themselves. They're designed to channel power, but for selfish benefit.” He grimaced for a moment. “It's not an accident that so many of the powerful pureblood families went into Slytherin House year after year, you know.”

Harry bowed his head. “And so, when I was Sorted into Slytherin, you thought—“

“Your mother was frantic,” said James quietly. “I didn't know about your training then. But she feared for a little while that all her efforts had been for nothing, that you were going to be that kind of terrifying wizard.”

“We see now that you aren’t, that your dedication to your brother is intact.”

Harry nodded, and felt a bright, warm glow fill his heart. He was glad that his parents could see that. He would have persevered whether or not anyone else believed in him, because he believed in himself, but it was nice to have company on a road so lonely.

“And now she’s told me everything,” said James. “I didn’t understand at first. I even cursed her, if you can imagine that.” He smiled slightly and shook his head. “But she made me remember what I felt when I captured the Lestranges. I’m not as strong as you are, Harry, and I’d been trained since I was born to resist temptation, to bow to the Light, and to be a Gryffindor. And I *still* gave in, even if it was only for ten minutes.”

He leaned forward and picked Harry up, cradling him against his chest. “You’re stronger than I ever was, son,” he whispered. “It is absolutely *essential* that you never feel what I did, the temptation to make someone suffer like that.” He kissed the top of Harry’s head. “I never want you to be able to cast *Crucio*. You have to *want* to cause someone else pain to do that.”

“And a more powerful wizard would have more of a temptation to do it,” Harry whispered, thinking again of Snape, the raw magic he could feel shifting and snapping under the wizard’s tight control. Oh, Snape controlled it, but it was only too obvious that his shields weren’t the trained ones that Harry had, or the ones based on the dance and pureblood custom that Draco did. These were reflexive shields, born of wariness and experience with that power flowing unchecked before Snape finally dammed it. Harry pitied him, and wouldn’t have wanted to be like him for anything in the world.

“Oh, yes,” James whispered. “And since so many powerful wizards were born to the pureblood families, and they were taught to control themselves in such a way as gave priority to their families, and damn anything else...”

He wrapped his arms more tightly around Harry. “I know Remus probably thinks that we’ve done the same thing, warping you only to obey your own family exclusively. But it’s the way that Lily chose to control your power, Harry, the best guide she could give you. And even then, she’s sometimes afraid it wasn’t enough. When you fight with Connor, for example.”

“I might fight with him sometimes,” said Harry firmly, “but only because I want him to succeed. I would never want to be Minister of Magic or something while he was just an ordinary wizard.”

James nodded. “She’s finally coming to that conclusion. And Dumbledore will help Remus come to the same conclusion, I’m sure.”

He laid Harry gently back in the bed, and hovered over him. Harry looked up at his dad, and managed a small smile.

“I’m so sorry that it took me this long to notice,” whispered James, trailing a hand over Harry’s forehead. “Lily didn’t think I could be trusted for a long time. And I probably couldn’t. I just wanted to retreat after what I’d done to the Lestranges. I wanted the perfect family life. I didn’t want any reminders of the outside world disturbing us. So she and you handled the outside world, and Connor and I grew used to living behind the isolation wards and not thinking of anything but our family.”

“And now?” Harry whispered. “You don’t hate me or anything, do you?”

“Of course not!” said James, sounding shocked. “I love you. I’m sorry that you were born into this burden, Harry. I can wish you’d been born with less magic, or that you had been Sorted into Gryffindor, so that you could be surrounded by people who are dedicated to the Light and control their power in a different way, instead of purebloods dancing their dance. But I know neither of those things can come true. So this is the best compromise. And the moment Lily managed to make me see what I had in common with you, that she’d been trying to prevent an experience like my torturing the Lestranges ever happening to you, then I understood.” He sighed. “I only wish Remus had had an experience like that.”

“But he’s a werewolf,” said Harry. “He has to try and keep that part of himself under control. Couldn’t you use that to convince him?”

“No,” said James quietly. “That’s what we were arguing about before he tried to abduct you, in fact. He doesn’t understand why, if Sirius and I trained ourselves into Animagi during the school years just to be with him, we couldn’t compromise with your power too.” He shrugged. “He thinks we’re afraid of you, so much so that we bent and clamped down on you and twisted you into some foreign shape, instead of acknowledging your magic and just hoping for the best.”

“But just hoping for the best would have been stupid,” Harry pointed out. “It would have been leaving too many things up to chance.” He felt a bit sorry for Remus. He clearly didn’t understand the devastation that Harry’s magic could wreak if it ever got out of control.

“I know,” said James. “But we’ll let Dumbledore convince him.” He studied Harry for a moment, his face pensive. “Are there any other questions you have?”

“No. But I’m really glad you know, now,” said Harry, leaning back against his pillow and smiling sleepily at his father.

James smiled, bent, kissed him on the forehead, and then left the bedroom, shutting the door gently behind him.

*They are afraid of you, said Sylarana. And they should have hoped for the best.*

“Why?” Harry asked, returning to the soup. “What if I’d been the kind of child to get angry at Connor for stealing my toys, and my magic had exploded and really hurt him?”

Sylarana did not have an answer to that, as Harry had expected. He finished the soup and went to sleep.

“Harry! Harry! Remus is here!”

Harry looked up anxiously as Connor leaped up from reading the latest Mad Muggle comic and dashed for the door. Remus was ducking in, and he picked up Connor and swung him around, laughing as his brother laughed.

Harry studied Remus’s face as he came nearer, but though Remus smiled at him absently and embraced him, he didn’t seem inclined to stay and talk. Harry bit his lip, debated on the ethics of it a moment, and then decided he had to know.

“*Legilimens*,” he whispered, with a flick of his wand, and pushed gently into Remus’s mind.

He saw Remus arriving at the school three days ago, having a cup of tea with Dumbledore, staying at Hogwarts to talk with the professors for a time—including Snape, on the progress of the Wolfsbane Potion—and then leaving again. Harry blinked and pushed back a little further.

He could find no memory of a visit to Godric’s Hollow.

Harry understood, then. Dumbledore had *Obliviated* Remus.

He sighed and fell back into his own head, which was beginning to ache, and Remus glanced at him curiously, mildly. Harry smiled at him, sad that there hadn’t been any other option. Of course, this had kept the Marauders’ friendship from cracking completely, which meant it was the best course.

“What’s wrong, Harry?” Remus asked.

Harry shook his head, and Sirius came into the room just then, shouting “Moony!” and tacking him. Remus laughed and began teasing Sirius about which one of the female Hogwarts professors he’d been having an affair with.

Harry went back to his book. It wasn’t the ideal solution, of course not, but it was something that had to be done.

*Liar.*

That could have been any one of the voices in his head. Harry wasn't going to bother figuring out which one. He knew the truth, knew what was really important, and was sorry for what truths and ethics had to fall between the cracks. That was just the way it was. That was the way he had to live.

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## **Chapter Twenty-Seven: Home Is The Hunter**

Harry wound down at last. He sat back on his bed and wondered what Draco was thinking.

Draco sat on his own bed, his legs folded beneath him, in the same position he'd adopted since Harry had told him he wanted to talk to him. He'd listened while Harry recited all the reasons that their friendship should ease. There were his father's status and danger to Harry, of course, but there were also the future conflicts that would spring up between Voldemort's side and Harry's, the fact that Draco was obviously unhappy being second to Connor in Harry's affections and loyalty, the pureblood customs that said Draco should really pay more attention to friends who weren't such political liabilities, Draco's dislike of Connor, Harry's inexperience, even now, within Slytherin House, and many, many others.

Harry had spent all the flight back from Godric's Hollow composing them. He was sure Draco would respond to one of them—to the fondness that he could sense behind the words, if nothing else. He would know that Harry wouldn't have wanted him safe so desperately if Harry didn't care about him. He would agree, because what else could he do?

"No, Harry," said Draco calmly.

Harry blinked at him. He had expected a thunderous outburst if he did get disagreement, tears and shouts that he could ease past, and that would in themselves lessen the friendship between them by introducing rifts of distrust. This serene refusal was not supposed to happen.

"What?" he responded. It wasn't the most intelligent thing he'd ever said, and the amused smirk on Draco's face let him know it. But the smirk disappeared in the next second, and he leaned forward, eyes intent.

"No, Harry," he said. "None of those matter next to my friendship with you."

"Family loyalty *has* to, Draco," said Harry. "Remember, I know well enough what purebloods teach their children." The words made him wince, for some reason. He supposed he connected them to the conversation with James. He shoved the thoughts away. Whenever he thought about Godric's Hollow, he felt all twitchy.

"It matters," said Draco. "But so far, Harry, I've managed to contain the damage that could have caused. And until something actually happens to split us apart, then I'm staying. Unless you don't mean to give me a choice, of course. Do you mean to use compulsion magic on me?"

Harry flinched. "Of course not!" His voice carried a desperate edge he didn't understand. Sylarana hissed soothingly on his arm, and Draco blinked at him, then reached out and put a hand on his shoulder.

"Well, then," said Draco slowly. "I still have the right and the will to make a choice. And I choose to *be* with you, Harry. I choose to remain your friend until something happens that makes me choose to split our friendship apart."

"And what if I betray you?" Harry whispered. "What if our friendship lasts until the War begins, and then I leave to fight at Connor's side?"

Draco just watched him. Harry couldn't tell what he was feeling, as he was deliberately keeping every emotion out of his gray eyes. "Then it lasts until then," he said. "That's still years more than you would let me have if I turned my back on you and sulked right now."

"It's not that I don't want to let you have them," Harry said, peering at Draco. "It's that—circumstances are forcing this, not me."

Draco snorted, then, and allowed a frown to cross his face. "Oh, at least have the courage to claim your own actions, Harry. You should know as well as I do that that's not true at all. Circumstances would be my father trying to kill you, or your brother forcing you to choose between him and me. No one at all is forcing this but you."

Harry put his head down, breathing shallowly. "I just want you safe," he whispered.

"I know that."

Harry glanced up to see Draco holding the bottle again. It shone with the steady purple color of protectiveness, and the only thing brighter than it was his smug smile. Harry sighed. "I should never have given you that bloody thing."

"Yes, you should have," said Draco. "It's reassured me more times than you can know, Harry. And it reassures me now that you aren't doing this because you've suddenly turned against me in some fiery burst of hatred." He moved over to the bed with one arm still wrapped around the bottle, and wound the other around Harry's shoulders. He leaned his head on Harry's and sighed. "You came back," he said. "I wasn't sure that you would."

Harry shook his head. He knew he should be feeling stern and disappointed, since his attempt to force Draco away hadn't taken. But he could only smile as he buried his face in Draco's hair and hugged him back. "I'll always try to come back."

"You better," said Draco. "Or I'll come after you and drag you back myself."

Harry opened his mouth, then closed it. He had meant to give some taunt, but he couldn't, not when Draco's voice was serene affection undergirded with layers of steel.

They sat there in silence for a bit longer, until Draco remembered that he hadn't finished his Transfigurations homework and scrambled for it. Harry found himself frequently glancing at the bottle as the evening wore on, as if he needed his own kind of reassurance.

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"Nothing?" Snape could not have sounded more disappointed, Harry thought, if he had confessed that he still wanted to be in Gryffindor.

"Nothing, sir," Harry repeated, and handed him the slim books back. "The only thing I found of interest is that phoenix magic can't be used in any Dark Arts spells. That means that the web in my mind, whatever it is, has to be of the Light."

He blinked when an enormous relaxation flooded his muscles in the next instant. It was as if he had been carrying a weight he didn't know he was carrying, and now could let it drop. Was it just the mention of the web not being Dark Arts that had done it? And why, if so?

*Do not worry about it*, instructed Sylarana. He could feel her moving and shifting in his thoughts, though he couldn't always tell what she touched. *I will take care of it. I will take care of everything.*

"Why did the werewolf come to Hogwarts?"

Harry found himself abruptly focused outward again, his attention on Snape's face and his heart pounding hard in his chest. Snape was watching him. The question had sound casual with a side of irritation, but Snape's eyes narrowed further the longer Harry took to answer, and he knew that he would rouse the man's suspicions if he delayed much longer.

"He—he wanted to consult with you on the Wolfsbane Potion, didn't he?" Harry said, stuttering as he grasped at straws. "He—he told me it was nearly done when he came back to Godric's Hollow."

"He consulted with me," said Snape, and paced forward a few steps from behind his desk. "That is not the reason he originally came here. When I asked him why, he laughed uncertainly, rubbed his head, and said that he didn't know, really, and he should be getting back to Godric's Hollow and spending time with his *friends*." The vicious bite Snape gave that word was really quite magnificent, Harry thought.

"He did come back—"

"And now, this," Snape whispered. "I know the signs of someone desperate to hide a secret, Potter, and you are that. The stammering, the flushed cheeks, avoiding my eyes. What is it? Why do you fear to talk about the werewolf with me?"

Harry forced himself to meet Snape's gaze, all the while keeping his Occlumency shields up. "You don't care about Remus. You would have been just as happy to see him dead if you could."

“And deprive myself of a test subject for the Wolfsbane? Never.” Snape was smiling with his eyes, sneering with his lips. “But I find it interesting that, two weeks after the werewolf leaves Hogwarts displaying the telltale signs of an *Obliviate*, you come back and display the telltale signs of someone with a secret to hide.” He tilted his head. “Did *you* do it, Potter? Did *you* *Obliviate* him?”

“No,” Harry whispered. He could feel the world narrowing down to a tunnel, at the end of which was a light shining as fierce as fire. Hot hands seemed to squeeze his forehead, pressing in waves of pain. It had been a mistake to come here, he thought, even if he hadn’t had a choice; Snape had commanded him to attend an Occlumency lesson after a week of avoiding them. “No, I didn’t.”

“But you know who did.”

“Don’t—“ said Harry, and dropped to one knee as the pain and the heat grew worse. He felt a hand grab at his arm, but that didn’t ease the agony. He was breathing hard now, memories swimming just under the surface of his mind, ready to breach it if he looked for them.

He didn’t want to look for them. He didn’t want to see.

“Tell me,” Snape whispered. “*Tell me.*”

“Why do you care?” Harry asked, in a last-ditch effort to make things go back to the way they had been. Everything around him was light and fire, and the phoenix song in his ears made it hard to hear his own words. “You *don’t* care about Remus, I know that. And you *don’t* care about what happens to me, beyond it giving you a chance to humiliate my father and Sirius.”

“I do not give children Occlumency lessons for the pleasure of humiliating old school rivals, Potter,” Snape replied, and Harry heard his robes rustle as he knelt in front of him. “And this has gone beyond that. You should know that now. It went beyond the first time that Tom Riddle, and all that he is, tainted your mind. I will not *see* him rise like this.” There was a long pause, and then he added, “And I will not see him gain a victory by corrupting or distressing you. Tell me who *Obliviated* the werewolf.”

Harry was falling towards light and fire. If he opened his mouth and said *Dumbledore*, he knew, the web would snap into the front of his mind and burn it. He could recover, but it would take time, time during which he might not be able to help Connor or convince anyone he was living a normal life.

And he wanted to convince them of that. He didn’t want anyone to find out about the web. He could hear what his mother would say. *They wouldn’t understand, Harry...*

And inspiration came to save him.

“Lockhart,” he gasped.

The web vanished, and cool darkness appeared in its place. Harry sagged into Snape’s arms, his breathing ragged. He tried to push himself away again at once, but Snape held him still, hands combing through his hair. He thought that Snape paused and stared at his scar for a time, but if so, he wasn’t in the mood to make ridiculous comments on it.

“Lockhart?” Snape whispered. “The man is a fool. He cannot tell which end of a wand is which.”

“I found him out,” Harry whispered, glorying in the relief that flooded his head and heart as they moved further and further away from the web. “He didn’t really defeat any of those monsters or have any of those adventures that he writes about in his books, you know. He sought out wizards and witches who defeated the monsters, took down their stories, and then *Obliviated* them so they would forget having done it.” Harry breathed for a long moment. “He tried to *Obliviate* me after I found out his secret, but I bounced it off me.”

“You bounced it off you.” Snape’s voice was flat.

“I used the Occlumency shields to smash it to dust.” The last of the pain was gone. Harry sat up and propelled himself backwards. Snape let him go, watching him with fathomless dark eyes all the while. “It wasn’t something I planned, but I saw it coming at me and then bounced it several times.”

Snape closed his eyes, breathing lightly, before he opened them and stared again at Harry. “I have never heard of that.”

“It’s true.” Harry took a step backwards, feeling defensive. Sylarana crooned at him, and this time, Harry could feel her wind herself tighter into the webs of his mind.

“I have no doubt that it is true,” Snape said. “The impossible is possible with you.” He spent a long moment studying Harry, then rose to his feet in a graceful swirl of black robes. “You are telling the truth about Lockhart,” he said. “I will make sure that Dumbledore knows of this, though he is unlikely to sack the man before the end of the year. We *need* a Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher, and he will not give the post to me.” He sneered through his teeth.

“Professor?” Harry asked uncertainly, not sure if he should stay or go. “Is it possible to recover memories from behind an *Obliviate*?”

“It is possible,” Snape agreed, folding his arms and tilting his head like an enormous bird. “But dangerous. The *Obliviate* is a block on the mind, and dangerous in the way that solid shields always are. If it is simply broken and the memories released in a rush, then they can cause the wizard to go insane.” He leaned abruptly near to Harry. “Do not, do *not*, Mr. Potter, attempt to break the block on the werewolf’s memories. Whatever Lockhart wanted him to forget was no doubt trivial. I will teach you to break such a block in time. For now, unless you want your precious Lupin to go mad, do not attempt it.”

*But it wasn’t Lockhart, it was Dumbledore—*

And Harry was on his knees with the roar and whoosh of flames in his head again, and Sylarana hissing in agitation. He felt her curl around something and tug, and then the flames quivered and fell still.

Snape had a hand on his shoulder again. “Do you want to tell me, Mr. Potter,” he whispered, “what that was?”

“I can’t,” Harry whispered, and the pain retreated a bit. “Not yet. Sylarana is—trying to help me with it.”

“One day, you must learn to stand on your own without the benefit of that snake,” Snape murmured, but so softly that Harry could pretend he hadn’t heard him. They stayed like that in silence for a few moments, and then Snape removed his hand. “Go,” he added, turning away. “There will be no Occlumency lessons for tonight.”

“Why not, sir?”

Snape glanced over his shoulder, and Harry told himself he imagined the spark of compassion in his eyes, or that he had mistaken it for something else. “Because your mind is fragile enough already,” he said quietly, and then gestured Harry out the door. Harry stepped out, shut it behind him, and stood in the hall, blinking.

*He...he almost sounded as if he cared what happened to me...*

But without such strong evidence as there was of Draco’s attachment to him, Harry could shake it off, and he did that, striding down the corridor towards the Slytherin common room. He had promised to play a game of Exploding Snap with Blaise, and help Pansy with her Transfigurations homework.

He was trying to live like a normal person, he thought. He was trying to avoid thinking about the web.

*As you should,* said Sylarana. *The web will be gone very soon.*

*How do you know?*

*I will make sure of it.*

With that, Harry thought, he had to be content.

“You can’t actually *want* to take Divination,” said Zacharias Smith, leaning over Harry’s shoulder to peer at his schedule. Harry glanced at the Hufflepuff in annoyance. He was sitting in the hospital wing, between Luna’s and Neville’s beds, and trying to choose his classes for next year—and it was no accident that he had come here. He wanted to do this in peace and quiet, and he had counted on having it, since almost everyone else was at the Gryffindor-Ravenclaw Quidditch game, the last one of the year.

“Yes, I can,” said Harry, and pointedly turned his back on Zacharias. Things had been strained between them since Slytherin beat Hufflepuff soundly in *their* last Quidditch game, mostly due to Harry snatching the Snitch right out from under Cedric Diggory’s nose. Justin and Hannah had shaken his hand afterwards. Ernie had sulked, but got over it. Zacharias had immediately started to pick at his technique, and hadn’t stopped picking about something since, in every class he shared with Harry.

“Why?” Zacharias started to sit down on Luna’s bed, caught Harry’s glare, and flopped into a chair instead. His gaze remained intent and interested. “Everyone knows that Trelawney is a fraud. *Everyone.*”

“I know,” said Harry patiently, and went back to scanning the selection of classes he could take in his third year. “But that doesn’t matter. She might have good material in her class in spite of herself, and anyway, Connor is taking it.”

Zacharias made a mild disgusted noise. Harry ignored that, too. One good thing about the disagreeable Hufflepuff targeting him was that he no longer targeted Connor. And Connor *was* doing better, now. He’d almost made up with Hermione.

“How long are you going to be in your brother’s shadow?” Zacharias asked, leaning towards Harry. “Most of my House might not hate him quite so much anymore, but we still know that you’re more powerful than he is.”

“Power doesn’t mean everything,” Harry murmured, quelling the first traces of the headache that had sprung up the moment Zacharias began questioning him about Connor. It did that all the time now. Whatever the golden web’s business was in his mind, Harry hoped it would finish it soon, or that Sylarana would tug on it—ah, there she was—and quell the pain permanently. He was breathing more easily in a moment as she soothed the web. He scratched a firm “yes” next to Divination and went on looking over the other classes. He half-wanted to take Care of Magical Creatures just because Connor was taking it, but he had promised Draco that he would at least consider joining him in Arithmancy.

“It means a lot,” said Zacharias. “And sometimes you hear the most intriguing rumors, you know.”

“Rumors?” Harry kept his eyes on the paper, but he could feel his shoulders tense up again. “About what?”

“About what power means,” said Zacharias carelessly. Harry knew that if he looked up, he would find the Hufflepuff’s eyes weren’t careless at all, that he was leaning forward with an intent expression. He didn’t look up. “About what it might mean if someone has a lot of power, and is in Slytherin House, and has saved a few lives besides.”

Harry sighed as he once more felt the pain well behind his eyes. He took off his glasses and rubbed them. “I’m not the next Voldemort, Zacharias, if that’s what you’re trying to imply.”

Zacharias laughed. “Of course not! When did You-Know-Who ever save lives? But I think you might be something else.” He leaned forward, voice taunting. “Don’t you want to know what that is?”

“I’ll pass, thanks,” Harry said as coolly as he could, and then turned his head with relief as he heard footsteps outside the hospital wing. Draco was coming back, then. He’d nipped out to see how the Quidditch game was going. He couldn’t stand not seeing the Ravenclaw Seeker, Cho Chang, beat Connor.

Draco dragged back in, looking sulky. Harry hid a smile. “Connor won, then?” he asked casually.

“Stupid Ravenclaws,” said Draco, and kicked the foot of Luna’s bed. He went to sit down, but Zacharias was in his chair. He settled for glaring at the Hufflepuff, then folding his arms across his chest and glaring at Harry. “And stupid you. You don’t have to look quite so smug, you know.”

“Three Galleons,” said Harry. “It was *only* three.”

“He probably cheated.”

Harry winced as the headache once more began to pound. *Is my web going to act up every time someone says something negative about Connor? It's going to hurt me a lot, then.* He let Sylarana soothe it before he shrugged and said, “He’s just a naturally good Seeker, Draco. I told you.” He held out his hand. “Pay up.”

Draco, sulking harder still, dug three Galleons out of his pocket and slipped them into Harry’s palm. Harry took them, gave Draco a beatific smile, and slid them into his own pocket. He was breathing more easily now. Keep the conversation away from Connor, and he found that he could function. He spent almost all his time around the Slytherins now for precisely that reason. They had more interesting things to talk about, at least in their view, than the Boy-Who-Lived.

*The web isn't going to go away if you ignore it, you know,* Sylarana said abruptly in his head.

Harry ignored her, too. She was working to soothe the pain, wasn’t she? And she was confident that she was well on her way to controlling it, wasn’t she? He didn’t see what the problem was.

*Harry,* she sighed at him, and went back to whatever problems in his mind so occupied her.

Harry shifted to make room for Draco on the edge of his chair, prepared to ignore Zacharias. He had just about decided to take Arithmancy when more footsteps sounded down the hall, and Madam Pomfrey ducked into the hospital wing, beaming. She held a beaker of some thick liquid in her hand.

Harry caught his breath. He had hoped he would be here when the potion was ready, but he hadn’t thought it would be this soon. “Is that...?”

“Yes, dear,” said Pomfrey, bustling over to Luna’s and Neville’s beds. “The Mandrakes matured, and Professor Sprout plucked them and Professor Snape brewed them. We can finally revive Miss Lovegood and Mr. Longbottom.” She beamed at him, and then bent over and spooned some of the lumpy, glistening yellow potion into Luna’s mouth, rubbing her throat so she would swallow.

Luna trembled, her eyes abruptly blinking for the first time in months, her limbs shaking after that, her head twitching. Harry watched her swallow more of the potion, and then she turned and looked directly at him. He prepared for some form of accusation. After all, he was probably the last thing she would have seen before she was Petrified, other than the basilisk’s eyes.

Instead, she said gravely, “I know it wasn’t you, Harry. It was a plot by the Ministry. They couldn’t find a Crumple-Horned Snorcack, so they had to use a snake instead.”

Harry leaned forward and hugged her, not sure how he felt at the moment as waves of emotion trembled through him. Then they sorted themselves out, and became relief, and amusement, and a heart-pounding sensation of joy. *She's still here. She's awake. She doesn't blame me.*

Madam Pomfrey had moved on to Neville. Harry held his breath, his arms still around Luna, as the Gryffindor boy jerked back to life. He trembled far more than Luna had, his eyes darting from side to side as if he expected the basilisk to emerge from around a corner or under the bed. Then he saw Harry and paled.

“It wasn’t Harry,” Luna assured him gravely. “It was the Ministry.”

Neville didn’t look as if he understood this at all, but he nodded timidly. *If nothing else,* Harry thought, as he shifted and extended an awkward hand to the other boy, *he probably knows that I wouldn't be allowed in here with them if I'd really meant to hurt them.*

“I’m sorry that happened, both of you,” he whispered. “I was possessed. It’s gone now, but it was horrible while it lasted, and you suffered the brunt of it. I’m so sorry.”

Luna said, “I was right. It was the Wrackspurts.”

“I—I don’t blame you, Harry,” said Neville, giving him a shy smile. “You didn’t look at all like yourself, you know. I *knew* that you didn’t have red eyes, or hair that stood on end and moved by itself.”

Harry chuckled at the thought of the picture he must have presented, and leaned closer to them. For a moment, at least, all was right with the world, and he was intent on leaving it that way.

“Harry?”

That was his brother’s voice. Harry sat up, rearranged himself so that he had his left hand on Neville’s shoulder and his right hand on Luna’s, and faced the door.

Connor lingered shyly there, his hand opening and closing as though he didn’t know what to do with himself. He was still dressed in his scarlet Quidditch robes, and his hair hung frazzled over his ears. He met Harry’s eyes and then glanced away, looking at the ground and biting his lip.

“Connor,” said Harry. “I heard you caught the Snitch. Congratulations.” He hesitated, then decided he could say it without it sounding like a taunt to Connor and awakening the web. “I bet Draco that you could. He didn’t believe me, and so I have three of his Galleons now.”

Connor looked back up at that, smirking. “You should learn not to bet against the Potters, Malfoy.”

Draco grunted something under his breath.

Connor appeared to realize exactly what was happening for the first time, his eyes widening as he looked at Luna and Neville. “They’re awake?” he whispered.

“Yes!” Harry abruptly laughed, the emotions boiling in him too hard to be contained. “Un-Petrified. Awake. Themselves again.” He wasn’t sure why he said what he did next, except that he didn’t think he could contain the words. “And they don’t blame me.”

Connor froze for a long moment, then blinked as if in surprise and smiled. “That’s wonderful, Harry,” he said quietly. “I—I’m going to go change out of my Quidditch gear now. See you at dinner?”

Harry nodded, smiling still, and watched Connor leave the hospital wing. He rolled his eyes, but said nothing, when he noted that Zacharias stood and followed him. Sometimes his twin had to fight his own battles, and he really didn’t want to leave Luna and Neville right now.

The web tried to pulse at him for thinking that, but Sylarana caught and caged it this time before it could do any damage. Harry let out his breath, and started answering Luna’s and Neville’s questions about how long they had been Petrified, and let himself think it really would be all right.

“Prat,” Draco said, shoving him in the shoulder as they finally emerged from the hospital wing. “Did you have to tell them about the bet?”

“They *heard* me tell Connor about it,” said Harry, and gave him a shove back. “What was I supposed to do when Neville asked me about it? Lie?”

“Yes. I’m your best friend. You’re supposed to lie for me.” Draco gave him a glare that would have been more intimidating if it didn’t look like he was going to break into laughter at any moment.

“I’m a terrible liar,” said Harry, lying through his teeth.

Draco laughed aloud, and then Professor McGonagall came around the corner, and all Harry's mirth died at the expression on her face.

"Mr. Potter," she said quietly. "Please come with me."

Harry followed her in silence. He knew where they were going before they rounded the corner on the second floor, but he did not know what he would see. Nothing in the world could have prepared him for it.

Zacharias Smith lay motionless beside a puddle of water outside the girls' loo where, Harry thought now, the entrance to the Chamber of Secrets had to be located. He was still, but Harry thought he was Petrified, not dead. *Please let him not be dead. Please.*

And then he saw the writing on the wall, and was too terrified even to pray.

*Potter—*

*I've taken your brother. So nice a home his scar made for me.*

*Tom Riddle.*

~\*~\*~\*~\*~\*

## **Chapter Twenty-Eight: Walk These Roads**

Draco was behind Harry, so he couldn't see his expression as he read the words scribed into the stone. But he saw the walls of the corridor change to ice, and he *certainly* felt it when Harry's rising magic made him black out.

Luckily, it was only for a few moments, and when he woke up and scrambled to his feet, Professor McGonagall was obstructing Harry's passage down the corridor. "No, Harry," she said firmly, one hand on his shoulder. Draco could see that her face was pale, but she didn't back down. "I must know where you are going."

"He's going to rescue his brother, Professor," Draco said, forcing his voice into a drawl. He slipped one hand into his pocket, to feel the warm glass of his bottle and reassure himself that *his* Harry was still there, somewhere under the cold rage he'd grown. "And I'm going to help him. Now, please step out of the way."

McGonagall whipped around and stared at him. Draco raised his eyebrows. She was more frazzled than he had thought, if the strands of gray hair escaping from her bun were any indication. That settled him.

"Mr. Malfoy, I certainly cannot let two students go into danger—" she began primly.

"Then you'll have to stop me."

Draco closed his eyes and fought back the headache that wanted to overcome him as Harry turned his attention to Professor McGonagall. Harry was angry, and it was an anger beyond anything that Draco had seen in him before. The ice on the corridor walls was spreading, swarming over the stone in delicate tendrils of frost and probing at the ceiling.

"Mr. Potter," said McGonagall. She didn't sound afraid, but she was a Gryffindor, wasn't she? Draco knew they didn't know when to turn tail and run, when it was sensible for their own safety. "I will not let two *more* students put their lives in danger."

"Tom Riddle has my brother."

Draco risked a glance at Harry's face, and then wished he hadn't. Harry's face and mouth were set in grim lines, but from his eyes, he was screaming steadily, and simply not letting the sound out.

"That does not mean you need to risk your life, Mr. Potter," said McGonagall. She folded her arms.

*Interfering old cat*, Draco thought. He wished it had been Professor Snape who had found them. He would have understood Harry's intense need to go hunting his brother, at least. He had shared Harry's mind.

As had Draco, and he understood that Harry was not going to be turned aside now. The best thing he could do was keep quiet and go along for the rescue mission, so that Harry had at least one person there who understood him, one who could not be possessed and turned against him. Otherwise, Draco knew, he would go to wherever Riddle had taken his brother—most likely the Chamber of Secrets—alone. And Draco was not going to let that happen.

"It does," said Harry. He was speaking through gritted teeth now, as though he had a headache of his own, and his snake stirred on his arm, sticking her head through the end of his sleeve. "I am the best person to rescue him, for reasons I can't take the time to explain to you."

"Headmaster Dumbledore—" McGonagall began.

Harry laughed. The sound was eerie to Draco, utterly flat and cold. It sounded more than a little like the laughter he'd heard Tom Riddle give, during the battle when Harry fought against him and Draco hovered in the shadows, permitted to watch but not help. He edged closer to Harry. It had nearly driven him mad last time, not being able to help. He clutched at the bottle, and felt the lights shift and press against his palms.

"The Headmaster made decisions you knew about, Professor," said Harry. "And you know what he would say if you went to him. He might agree to help—but he would never go back on those choices. And it's because of those choices that I have to go after Connor."

Draco blinked. *He blames Dumbledore for this? I never saw that when I was in his mind. Is this a recent thing? Why didn't he tell me? Where did he learn it?* Seething curiosity filled him, and somewhat helped to drive back the pain of the headache.

McGonagall paled, proof that she knew what Harry was talking about. Her eyes closed, and she stood as if debating with herself. Draco scowled at her and then at Harry. *We will have things to talk about when we're done fighting Tom Riddle, Harry, specifically about why you're able to trust Gryffindor Heads of House who would stop you from doing what you need to.* He edged closer to Harry again, this time standing at his right shoulder, close enough to feel the breaths Harry was drawing in and the very slight cold aura he was putting out. The ice had reached the ceiling now. Draco touched Harry's shoulder, expecting it to be cold, too, and then flinched. His skin felt as if he had a fever.

And it grew worse the longer Professor McGonagall dithered about whether or not she should stop them.

*Hurry up, Draco thought in her direction. Deny us and let Harry hurt you, or stand aside and let him do what he has to. But don't do this. Can't you see that you're hurting him?*

McGonagall started as if she'd heard his thoughts, and for a moment looked straight at him. Draco smirked as he met her eyes. That made her frown, and she turned back to Harry.

"I will wait an hour before I go to the Headmaster," she said quietly. "That is all the time I can give you."

"Brilliant," said Harry, in a voice that made Draco wince as it deprived the word of every meaning, and then turned and went to the Slytherin dungeons. Draco followed him, glancing back now and then at the Gryffindor Head of House. She still had a frown plastered on her face, but she didn't seem as if she would renege on her word. Gryffindors didn't, usually.

Draco glanced ahead at Harry's straight back and determined stride, and for a moment wondered if he should insist on stopping to find Professor Snape.

Then he shook his head. *No. Harry has to go ahead and do this, and it will hurt him more if I hold him back. Go alone for the ride now, Draco. At least you'll be there when the world explodes.*

Once they were back in the Slytherin dorms—which were empty, luckily, as everyone had already gone to dinner—Harry moved quickly. He slipped over to the trunk at the foot of his bed and opened it, pulling out a black armband that made Draco blink. He saw the silver serpent on it as Harry turned it over, though, and smiled slightly. It was a good weapon to take into a Chamber where he might have to battle a basilisk.

Thinking that, Draco searched to the very bottom of his trunk for what he needed, and had just found it when he realized that Harry was walking out of the room.

"Harry!" he cried, standing up.

Harry glanced back at him, and Draco saw eyes like shuttered windows. "What?"

"I'm coming with you," Draco said.

Harry said nothing for a moment, but the air around him turned cold enough that Draco could see his breath the next time he spoke. "No," he said quietly. "I won't risk your life. You're staying here. You can go and tell Professor Snape what's happening. In fact, I would prefer if he knew before the Headmaster."

It probably *would* be a good idea, Draco thought, but he knew someone else would have to enact it. "No," he said. He removed the bottle from his pocket and placed it gently on the table next to his bed. He didn't want to risk it getting broken. He turned back to Harry. "I'm coming with you," he repeated.

Harry lowered his head slightly, and Draco felt the pain in his brow spike as Harry called his power. When Harry next spoke, he once again sounded more like Tom Riddle than himself.

"I could knock you out and leave you helpless on the floor, Draco. I could hit you with a spell that wouldn't let you remember that any of this happened. I could cast *Imperio* on you and make you go at once to Snape and say whatever I wanted. Given all that, why are you still insistent on standing up to me?"

Draco looked at the bottle. There was no trace of red, which showed Harry's anger with him. Purple and green danced in a fierce mix that made the glass look like a sky just before a storm.

"Because you wouldn't really do any of those things to me," he said, and turned back to Harry. "I trust you."

Harry closed his eyes. "I should never have given you that bloody thing," he muttered, repeating a frequent lament.

Draco waited.

"I have to do this alone," Harry said softly. "You know what I am, Draco, what I was trained to be. I have to go into the Chamber and rescue Connor, and I fully expect that I may die. There's nothing that says anyone else has to come along and die with me. Why would you want to?"

"Because my loyalty is to you," said Draco. "Not to Connor, or Dumbledore, or whatever fucked-up ideas your family may have had." He was surprised to find that he was shaking, and tried to defuse the tense emotion that filled him by holding up the object that he had retrieved from the bottom of the trunk. "And because I'm the only one here with a really functioning brain."

Harry blinked at the mirror. "What—"

"I felt you think that the snake was a basilisk," said Draco calmly. "And a mirror is, if not a *very* effective weapon against a basilisk, at least better than marching in empty-handed."

Harry's eyes turned frighteningly blank again, and he made a gesture that could have indicated his magic, or his snake, or the black circlet he'd slipped around his right arm. "I'm hardly going in there empty-handed." He reached for the mirror. "But I could take that. Thank you for identifying it."

"And you are carrying too many things already," said Draco, slipping the mirror into its cloth and the cloth into his pocket. "I'll just hold this for you."

Harry stared at him for a long, long moment. Then he shook his head and whispered, "Why?"

Draco snorted. "Do you really want to have this out now, when Riddle is doing Merlin knows what to your brother?"

He was sorry for what he'd said a moment later, as Harry sucked in a breath and closed his eyes, gripping the sides of his head. Then he managed to open watering eyes and focus on Draco. "I think we have to. I don't want to hurt you, and I don't want to let you come with me, either. Please, Draco. I have to know. You say that your loyalty is to me. You've defied your father and manipulated him for me. You refused to give up our friendship even when I made it clear that I thought you would. *Why?*"

Draco swallowed. His hands were shaking. It didn't help that his own truest answer sounded inane, even to him.

"Because you're *Harry*," he said. "You're *you*. That's all I really know, Harry. I like you and I'm loyal to you, and if you don't tie me up or *Obliviate* me or Apparate away from me right now, then I'm coming with you."

Harry closed his eyes. Draco stood in silence for a long moment, unsure what his response would be. He could almost feel the pressure in his head urging Harry's steps forward along the road to the Chamber. If he chose to walk that road alone, despite all Draco's impassioned pleas, there was really nothing Draco could do to stop him.

And he didn't *want* to stop him, if Harry made the decision to go alone, he thought. That was the difference between him and someone like Professor McGonagall—or maybe Dumbledore, if Harry had really learned something disturbing about the Headmaster. He *trusted* Harry. He trusted him to make the right decision. He wasn't afraid of his power except in an abstract sense. He didn't think Harry had to be chained up and coerced to walk the right road. Whatever road he chose to walk was, by definition, the right one.

*And I am such a child, to be standing here and thinking such wide-eyed Gryffindor thoughts.*

They were the truth, though. And Draco's parents had always taught him never to lie to himself. At least he knew he *had* the wide-eyed Gryffindor thoughts, and could put them to use instead of avoiding them.

"Thank you."

Draco opened his eyes, and saw Harry stretching out his hand towards him. He hurried forward to clasp it, before Harry could change his mind, and leaned his head on Harry's shoulder, trying not to show how profoundly relieved he was that Harry hadn't simply taken up on his offer and forced him to stay here somehow. He couldn't even imagine Harry's torment, lingering up here while Connor was in danger, but he would have felt a faint shadow of it, if he'd had to stay here while Harry walked into that same danger.

Harry turned his head so that his nose brushed Draco's hair. "Besides," he added, "Sylarana has just reminded me that I don't actually know the way to the Chamber, so dashing out the door and hoping to get there first wouldn't work."

Draco's laugh was quiet. In the midst of everything, and even thinking of facing Tom Riddle and a basilisk, he could feel a great hope bearing him up. He set most of it aside for right now and said, "Is there any way you could find out? What were you planning to do, anyway, if you went alone?"

"Just go to the girls' loo where all the attacks happened and root around," said Harry. "The entrance to the Chamber is there, but I don't know *where* it is. Riddle took the memories from me—"

Abruptly, he froze, and Draco realized Sylarana was probably speaking into his mind. He held his peace. He was jealous of the Locusta's connection to Harry, of course he was, but now wasn't the time to voice it.

"What is it?" he asked, when Harry just went on staring, white-faced.

"Sylarana doesn't think Riddle took my memories of opening the Chamber with him, or destroyed them," said Harry, through obviously numb lips. "She thinks that he put them in the box. It would have been the most convenient place for him to store them, and now that she thinks about it, she can remember small sensations in that part of my mind the time that I Petrified Neville."

Draco clutched at Harry's hand again, convulsively. He had seen the box while he was connected to Harry's mind. It was nothing he wished to see again. It had frightened him more than Riddle had, in its way. Riddle was an open menace. The box was a lurking one.

"Do you have to open it?" he asked.

Harry again paused, apparently communing with Sylarana. "She'll let me," said Harry, "but she's afraid I'll get overwhelmed by the memories without someone to anchor me, and she'll be busy waiting to shut the box again as soon as I've found the memories I need." He let out a deep breath, and his eyes met Draco's. "And she says that she can bind you, briefly, to my mind, since you were already connected to me once before. Can you hold me steady while I go into the box?"

Draco did not even hesitate before nodding. He did not want to see the box. He was not entirely sure that he wanted to see the inside of Harry's head right now.

But he knew, more than either of those, that he did not want to see Harry dead.

"Thank you," Harry whispered, and extended his hand. He was shaking lightly. Draco wondered if he was afraid of the box, or of losing Connor, or of letting Draco into his head. Probably some combination of all three, Draco thought, as he watched Sylarana move down Harry's arm.

He took a deep breath, and tried to prepare himself, as Sylarana wound about his wrist, trying their hands together.

Nothing could have prepared him.

He plunged into the middle of gold and light and noise, a dark field flooded with radiance. He could see little through all that, and he could hardly hear anything through the deafening song. Draco winced. The song was beautiful, but so loud... how did Harry sleep with it in his head?

*"I help him."*

Draco jumped and turned around. A different kind of golden fire shone in the midst of the fiery gold, and he realized it was Sylarana. He was hearing her voice, and though she hissed and he knew it was definitely not English, he still understood her. He let out a little sigh. *Wait until I tell Father about this. He'll never believe it.*

*If I tell him. If he would try to use this to hurt Harry...*

*And he was the one who hurt Harry in the first place. If not for the diary, none of this would have happened.*

Draco focused on the matter at hand. He had his own tangled and confused thoughts, yes, but the important thing right now was Harry. He followed the thread of gold until he reached the box. Beside it curled a tendril of glittering dark and gold that Draco suspected was Harry, or a representation of him. The box looked just as bad as it always had, though this time, instead of the locks that Draco thought it had possessed, it shone with the Locusta's shifting coils.

*"Are you ready, Harry?"* she asked, and Harry's voice gave soft assent from everywhere around them. Draco felt Sylarana turn her attention to him. *"Hold him as he plunges."*

Draco nodded, and reached out, curling his arms around the tendril of dark and gold. It seemed to be enough.

Sylarana shifted, and relaxed her hold, and the box opened.

Draco felt fear seize him as the lid lifted just a bit, and darkness and cold swarmed around them. But Harry was going into it, was twisting fearlessly among the memories stored there, searching for the ones he wanted, and Draco had to go with him, had to fall with him, had to hold him steady as Harry searched and sorted.

Draco saw some of the memories himself, of course, because there was no way to avoid that when he was immediately next to Harry.

*Harry reading a book under his covers by the light of the Lumos spell, studying frantically to try to get the Shield Charm right, convinced that Voldemort could come tomorrow and kill Connor, and he would not be ready—*

*Lily crouched in front of Harry and asked him to try the spell again. She knew it hurt, but practice was the only way to get it right. Harry nodded, and gulped, and tried the spell again. This time, it worked—*

*Lily whispered to Harry that everything would be well, even as she stroked his head and soothed him. He was four, nearly too young to remember, but he did remember that he'd had an argument with Connor and his head had begun to ache, and it had hurt until his mother came and soothed him with a few words. Words were his medicine—*

*Remus Lupin, and saying something about abuse—*

Draco screamed. He was *burning*, the fire behind him surging forward as they met that memory. The golden light and the beautiful song didn't like that memory at all, Draco sensed. It was supposed to be crisped away to ashes and never trouble Harry again. It should not have been in the box.

*"No, it should not have been,"* said Sylarana, her voice beyond anxious. *"It happened after he stopped using the box. How did it get in there? Harry? Harry!"*

But Harry could not hear them. He was far beneath them, Draco thought, plunging further and further into the darkness, and if he had not found the memories he needed already, then perhaps he was caught up in the whirl of half-forgotten things he'd placed here, all the resentments and fears and petty jealousies.

*He watched Connor at the center of attention, himself so quiet and reserved that no one really thought he wanted attention. And he didn't, he supposed, but sometimes he wanted it, and the secret that he and his mother shared wasn't enough. And he had to stop thinking that, because then he might be jealous of his brother, and then he might hurt him, and how could he let that happen?*

*He watched James flying a kite with Connor, and wished he were as close to their father as Connor was. But James and Connor were more alike, and James didn't really understand Harry's liking for books, and why should he? Neither Harry nor Lily had ever told him what they were doing. He had no reason to understand them. But that unreasonable longing was still there.*

*Harry glanced up from where he'd just wandlessly performed the Summoning Charm, and his father stared at him from the doorway. Harry looked back, challenging James to respond somehow, to ask him what had happened, why he knew wandless magic, and why he was keeping it a secret. Instead, James stepped back and shut the door and never mentioned it again. And Harry saw the fear in his father's eyes, and buried a seed of contempt deep, deep under the surface of his mind, where it could never flower into full-blown scorn.*

*Harry lay on the grass in front of their house, beyond exhausted with all the magic he'd been practicing, and ran lists of pureblood customs over in his mind. Meanwhile, almost below his level of hearing, a voice shrieked that he was tired and wanted to go to bed. But he hadn't had much chance to study last night, because Sirius and Remus had come to visit, and they'd had a party to celebrate Sirius's birthday. He had to make up for lost time now. Voldemort was coming, and he couldn't be a child.*

*He said his vows, over and over, and sometimes he violently hated them, but he always caught and extinguished the hatred before it could go too far.*

Draco persevered through all of them, though he suspected that he was crying back in his own body, and kept his hands strongly clasped around Harry's waist. And then he felt Harry rising back through the box, the memories of how to open the Chamber of Secrets lodged in his brain.

Draco caught a glimpse of those, too, as they soared outward again, and nodded. A sink, then, with a snake on a tap, and when a Parselmouth commanded it to open in Parseltongue, it would. A good way of protecting the Chamber from almost everyone but Slytherin's descendants.

He thought that, because the memories he'd seen had left him numb with shock. That would end in a moment, and he would speak to Harry, but until then...

He opened his eyes, and found himself back in his own body. Sylarana was unwinding from his hand. She darted up Harry's robes to his neck and wound around it, crooning. Or so Draco imagined her hiss to sound like.

He wished he could understand what she was saying. He wished he could find the words for the emotions he'd experienced in the box. "I'm sorry" was not enough, and neither was "Harry, are you all right?" He really *wanted* to say, "Don't you want to cast *Crucio* on your parents?" but he had the feeling Harry wouldn't want to hear that.

Harry murmured something in Parseltongue, the hissing words slipping from his mouth in a fluid stream. Then he took a deep breath and closed his eyes. Draco watched his mask drop back into place over his pain and everything else he felt. He scrubbed at his own cheeks, and felt tears there.

"Harry," he whispered, figuring that was a good start.

Harry's shoulders hunched, and he snapped, "Don't. We have to go rescue Connor. Or I have to."

"I'm still coming with you," Draco assured him, patting his pocket to be sure the mirror was there and then following Harry out the door. "But I'm worried about the box. Why were there memories in there that shouldn't have been? How could you use the box when Sylarana locked it?"

“I think the box almost opened when—when that happened,” said Harry, his tone thick with an emotion Draco couldn’t identify. “And I managed to slip that memory in there.” His voice strengthened. “It’s ridiculous, anyway. I remember now. Remus was going to accuse our mother of abusing me.” He snorted. “That’s rich, isn’t it?”

“It’s the truth,” said Draco.

Harry turned and looked at him, and Draco shut up. Harry still had the cold anger in his eyes, and that desperate need to do something, to go and fetch Connor, but he was trembling on the edge of an even bigger explosion. It wouldn’t do much to trigger that explosion, Draco sensed. Seeing his own memories had shaken Harry. And he had plumbed further than Draco. Merlin knew what else he had seen.

Draco made a private decision in that moment. When this was all over, when Harry had Connor back and could think about something else, then he was going to *drag* Harry to someone who could help, by force if necessary. Professor Snape would be his first choice. Then he’d go to his parents. Merlin, he’d fetch Harry’s werewolf if he had to.

No one did *that* to one of his friends and got away with it.

Harry didn’t seem to notice Draco’s decision. Perhaps the silence was all he’d wanted. He nodded, his face smoothing out. “Thank you for not saying anything about it, Draco.”

*That’s what you think*, Draco thought, and followed Harry to the loo on the second floor.

By the time they got there, of course, there were students wandering around and staring, and professors trying to herd them away. Harry cast a Disillusionment Charm on them both before they rounded the corner. Draco wrinkled his nose at the unfamiliar sensation, but had to admit it worked. They sneaked into the loo without anyone noticing them. Not even the wailing ghost of a young girl who appeared out of a toilet seemed to see them. Draco found himself slightly relieved for that.

Harry strode to the sink from his memories and bent down, aiming his mouth directly at the small carving of the snake. He hissed. Draco assumed he hissed the word for “*Open*,” as the sink began whirling in the next instant. White light flared for a moment, so brilliant that Draco couldn’t help but glance nervously over his shoulder at the ghost, and by the time he looked back, there was a tunnel into the floor.

Draco grimaced, thinking of the slime that was probably down there.

“Come on,” said Harry, showing a Gryffindor-like lack of fear, and jumped into the pipe. Draco gave a grimace of resignation and leaped after him.

The slide that followed, twisting and turning in several different directions and fighting frantically not to lose either his wand or the mirror, was not Draco’s idea of fun. He resolutely ignored the slime that got on his robes and his longing to shriek like a first-year. He would land, and everything would be all right, and when *everything*, including the helping Harry part, was done, he would make Harry buy him some new robes.

Harry abruptly vanished ahead of him. Draco tried to be prepared, but he couldn’t find anything to hold onto.

He shot out of the end of the pipe, and would have hit the ground hard, but Harry’s shouted “*Wingardium Leviosa!*” caught and held him. Draco floated gently to the floor, patted his pocket to make sure the mirror was still intact, and nodded to Harry. Harry’s wand flared with *Lumos*, but it didn’t really illuminate his face; it made him look half-mad instead. He nodded back to Draco and then moved forward, his eyes on the floor ahead of them. Draco swallowed as he heard the crunch of something that sounded like bone under Harry’s feet.

But he had come this far, and even if he was afraid, he wasn’t going to back off and leave Harry alone simply because of that. He followed.

Harry walked among the scattered bones as though he saw this kind of thing every day, and from what Draco knew about his home life, perhaps he did—or worse. Draco himself cringed and kept away from the skeletons, though his eyes insisted on identifying them. Rat, mouse, bat...

Then he squeaked as they caught sight of an enormous snakeskin ahead, looped over and over itself like a spider's web.

"What is that?" he whispered.

"We're fighting a basilisk," Harry said back.

Draco looked at him, and found him standing with his head tilted back, studying the snakeskin as though it were a set of Potions ingredients to be diced and cut into the proper measures. He turned briefly to look at Draco, and Draco swallowed. Harry had gone cold again. In fact, now that he was watching for it, he caught the faint gust of ice around Harry as he moved forward.

Draco was at a loss for how Harry could have done that, plunged so deeply into the freezing fury at Tom Riddle when he'd seen his memories of his parents and what they had done to him, but he could hardly ask. They were on the verge of battle now.

Draco wasn't sure what he thought about that. He'd accepted, in a vague way, that he might have to fight in a War someday, when and if the Dark Lord came back. But here he was, only twelve years old—*well, almost thirteen*—and going into a room where he *knew* he would have to fight a basilisk, and maybe Harry's possessed brother.

More, he was fighting the *Dark Lord*. Or some version of him.

Draco supposed he knew where he stood then. It was almost comforting. He set his shoulders back and followed Harry again, more confidently than before.

He found Harry standing in front of a pair of enormous stone serpents, staring up at them. Their eyes shone in the light of the *Lumos*, and Draco felt an odd shiver in his belly when he realized they were emeralds, as green as the Locusta's eyes.

*As green as Harry's.*

Harry looked at him, his face solemn. "Last chance to back out, Draco."

Draco stiffened. "You insult me by thinking of it."

Harry smiled thinly. "You're right. I'm sorry." He faced the serpents and hissed again. Draco wished, in a moment of pure selfish jealousy that he used to distract himself from his sweating palms and rapidly beating heart, that he could understand what Harry was saying.

The wall groaned and cracked open, in a jagged shape that reminded Draco of Harry's scar, and the serpents dropped out of sight. Draco came forward slightly so that he stood at Harry's shoulder, and they walked into what waited for them.

~\*~\*~\*~\*~\*~\*

## Chapter Twenty-Nine: Fang to Fang

Harry felt odd the moment he moved into the Chamber, which was as he had remembered it from the box: long, straight, narrow, crowded with pillars and filled with grim green light, with a statue of Salazar Slytherin at the far end. His mind felt pulled and stretched, and his head began to ache. A moment later, his scar flared with dazzling pain.

Tom Riddle stood at the base of the statue, nearly fully formed, not a memory but a dark-haired young man. He held Connor by the neck, one hand over his scar. At his feet lay the diary, and a thick link, green as the light, green as *Avada Kedavra*, stretched between the book and his hand.

“Harry Potter,” said Riddle. “Welcome. I have been *waiting* for you.” He clamped his hand onto Connor’s scar more firmly.

Harry called gladly on his magic. It roared up around him, turning the immediate floor to ice—

And springing Riddle’s trap.

Harry felt the magic flood out of him, seemingly pouring out through his scar and across space to Riddle, tracing the route he must have taken when he fled Harry’s mind after their first battle. Riddle tilted back his head and laughed as he absorbed the magic, and his image wavered and grew stronger. At the same time, the link between the diary and his hand flared with life, and Connor screamed and began writhing in pain.

Harry gagged aloud as he shared his twin’s anguish, flowing down the connection he supposed they had always shared by virtue of being born at the same time, but which he had never sensed before now. Dimly, behind the agony, he heard Dumbledore’s words again, speaking of the spell contamination.

*“We wished to preserve you from the possible dangers of sharing this kind of bond with your twin, but since you are twins, and not only brothers by blood, the connection is extremely hard to block. It seems so far that the bond has protected you only, and for that I am pleased and grateful. But please do not rely on it.”*

Now the bond had been turned against them. And Harry’s magic continued to surge in response to the threat, trying to protect him, and more of it flowed over to Riddle, and more pain flowed from him to Connor and from Connor to Harry. It was more intense this time, as the initial blast of magic had been stronger. Harry could see the world pulsing white around him.

“Into the diary, I think,” Riddle mused aloud. “Yes, I could put you both there, and who would think to look for you? Or perhaps I will put you alone there, as I would rather like to retain your twin in his own body for a while longer. He is, after all, my greatest enemy.”

Harry could not have answered if he had tried. The pain in his head was total, and not even the urging of the phoenix fire and song could compare. He felt his muscles trembling, his mouth jerking. A thin line of drool marked his lips. He was suffering, and his brother was suffering, and he could do *nothing*.

“Don’t hurt him, you bastard!”

But he was aware enough to know when Draco moved forward from the side, his wand out and his face contorted with a mixture of fury and fear that Harry had never seen before. His wand lashed, and he snarled, “*Incendio!*”

The diary briefly began to smoke, before Riddle gestured lazily, once, and the fire went out. He smiled at Draco. “Did you think that you could stop me, little boy? I am sure that—”

It was not enough to end everything. But it was enough to make a pause in the link, as Riddle’s hand lifted from Connor’s scar to calm the fire. And a small interruption was all Harry needed.

He surged to his feet and called for his magic, plunging deep, gathering up all he could and spreading it out around him. Anything he could do that wasn’t corrupted or controlled by Riddle could be valuable in this battle.

The walls around him turned to ice, and then cracked and crazed, falling in frozen shards. At the same moment, the armband warmed, and Harry felt the magic escaping Riddle’s control deepen and strengthen. He felt it asking him what he wanted, trying to follow the desires of his will.

Riddle hissed, and Harry heard his words. *“Come, creature of Slytherin, obey your master and Slytherin’s Heir!”* The shadows behind Slytherin’s statue began to lash and churn.

Harry ignored the temptation to try to speak Parseltongue himself, and control the basilisk. He was fairly sure that Riddle had been telling the truth, and he would not be able to. Instead, he told his magic, *I want something that will destroy the diary. Something that will eat it up.*

The air in front of him turned dark, as if he had torn a hole in the midst of the light, and then Harry saw a pair of snapping black jaws. They were connected to no mouth, but they went soaring at the diary as if they were. Riddle saw them and snarled at them, flinging out his hand.

*“Reducto!”* he shouted, and the jaws shuddered once, though they stubbornly tried to continue moving forward. Harry turned his attention away from them briefly. He knew they would keep Riddle busy for at least another moment, and the vicious, pounding pain in his head urged him to try and get to Connor.

*Why should you?* It was the cold voice, and it had more hatred in it than Harry had heard before. *He is the cause of your pain. He is the reason that you have suffered as you have, then and now. You know what your parents did to you in his name.*

Harry felt the memories trembling in the corners where he had put them, shuddering and ready to slide out into his awareness once again. He ignored them. He could not afford to listen to them, nor to the cold voice. He would listen when he could, and then he was sure he would find that what his parents had done for and to him was all for the best.

He whipped his hand in a descending half-circle, sending the cold blasting before him. It hit the emerging basilisk, and the creature screamed in Parseltongue, throwing its green head back. Harry caught a brief glimpse of the long, thin fangs and the staring yellow eyes, and brought his head down.

*“Get the mirror out!”* he hissed at Draco, hoping he spoke English. He either did, or Draco was quick enough on his own to understand what he needed to do. He pulled the mirror from its cloth and his pocket with fingers that shook and trembled with cold.

Harry turned back to Riddle as the fragment of Voldemort finally blasted his attacking black jaws apart, and tried to renew his hold on Connor. Harry concentrated intensely, and spoke through his magic and his will. *Fetch me my brother. I want him. I will him to be at my side.*

All around him, a wind began to howl, rising with a chill in its teeth. The cold voice snarled at him. *You could do so much more with this. Why will you not do it? We might—*

Harry shut it out of his awareness and focused all his attention on Connor, who lay on the ground pale and still now, his scar seeping red liquid that Harry did not think was all blood. *Come to me, brother. Come here. Come here!*

The wind scattered forward from around him, flinging hail and bits of snow on the floor. It whirled around Connor, and he shifted and moaned. Harry concentrated, throwing his magic into the task, hoping that it would be strong enough to pull Connor back to safety.

Unfortunately, Riddle turned just then and clamped his hand back on Connor’s scar, trying to renew his link with the diary. He hissed at the basilisk in the meanwhile. *“Attack them. Kill the one who smells like chalk. Leave the other one alive.”*

Harry glanced quickly sideways, to see that Draco held the mirror ready, and then touched his left arm. *“Sylarana? Are you awake?”*

He could feel her, but sluggish and struggling. She was as affected by the cold of Harry’s magic as the basilisk was, sending her into a torpor. Harry cursed under his breath and tried to think of fire spells.

*“You are going to lose, Harry Potter,”* Riddle gloated, even as the basilisk slid forward around him, in a maze of sea-green motion. *“And do you know why? I am draining power from your brother even now, and from you through him. I*

am going to eat you alive, and then put you in the diary, and possess him again. Such a tragic story, the Boy-Who-Lived losing his brother, and coming up from the Chamber alone with such scars on his soul. And with someone beyond his eyes, looking out, as I have been for the last five months...”

*Five months Connor spent alone with that madman inside his head. Five months he struggled, he screamed, and no one could hear him.*

Harry closed his eyes, and then opened them. He could feel his magic rising like wings, as had happened only once before, when he faced Voldemort in Quirrell’s body. This time, though, he faced only a fragment of Voldemort, and there seemed to be hope that they might be more equal in power.

Draco held the mirror high, crowding close to Harry’s side, though he shivered at the touch of the rising cold. The basilisk came slowly forward, and Draco tilted the glass at it.

*“Close your eyes!”* Riddle commanded abruptly in Parseltongue, and Harry saw the wink of yellow vanish as the basilisk’s eyes shut. A moment later, its tongue flickered out, hunting for them by scent. Then it slithered straight at Draco.

*“Move!”* Harry shouted, shoving at Draco, making him tumble to the side. He turned back, feeling his magic soar to an absurd height, joined by his fear for Connor, his fear for Draco, his fear of Riddle, and his anger at having to battle Riddle like this at all.

He focused that all into one enormous blast, back through the connection between Riddle and his scar, and this time it broke through whatever shields Riddle had in place. Riddle’s head snapped back, and he dropped to the ground with a cry. The diary flew into the far wall. Connor moaned weakly, his scar still seeping, and tried to crawl in Harry’s direction. Harry took a step forward to help him.

And then Draco screamed.

Harry whirled to face him, his heart pounding in his chest. The basilisk had managed to corner Draco against one of the pillars that held up the Chamber. It was swaying, its immense head engaged in a deadly dance, its fangs sticking out and glistening.

Harry felt his mind clear of everything but the sight in front of him. He was fairly sure that he, himself, could take a bite from the basilisk and survive due to his magic. He hurtled towards the serpent, letting the vibrations of his feet distract it, and shouted insults in Parseltongue. He lessened the cold he was projecting as he did so. He wanted the enormous snake to think he was an easy target.

The basilisk flickered its tongue out and turned towards him. Perhaps it would have obeyed Riddle’s injunction not to kill him, but its hisses spoke of hunger and the desire for blood, and Riddle was still trying to recover from Harry’s blast, rather than commanding Slytherin’s snake. The basilisk came for Harry.

Harry raised his left arm to meet those fangs, his breathing light and fast, his thoughts crystalline. He was going to do this. He could take the bite, where Draco could not. He was fairly sure he would not sacrifice his life. He was—

*“No! Mine! My human! I defend him from other snakes!”*

Sylarana reared out of Harry’s sleeve, and as the basilisk’s head came down, she flung herself off his arm, coiling around its neck. She stabbed her fangs home, once and then twice.

The basilisk screamed in Parseltongue, a sound of agony that made Harry want to cower. He watched in wonder as the Locusta venom took effect, and it began to twitch and convulse, its smooth glide already turning to jerky angles of movement as Sylarana bit it again and again, hissing in vengeance.

Then the basilisk flung its body to the ground and rolled over, still convulsing, crushing Sylarana between its neck and the floor.

Harry went to his knees screaming as she died, and the box burst open.

All the light in the Chamber fled. Harry knelt alone in darkness, and screamed as the searing pain ran up and down his limbs, worse than *Crucio*, and the webs of his mind fluttered uselessly in his head, filling his thoughts with equally useless flashes of light and phoenix song and vows and memories.

*So he can be extraordinary...*

*Sylarana coiling close around him and demanding Chocolate Frogs...*

*Connor grinning at him as they turned seven, and blowing out the flaring candles on their cake, then frowning again as they flared back up despite all his breath could do...*

*Sirius frowning at him as Harry demanded tales of pureblood customs, not understanding, telling him that he had left all that was Black behind him and he would advise his godson to do the same thing...*

Claws cut at the inside of his skull, shredded and tore at his brain, and his vision and world smashed and tilted sideways. Within him, the cold voice laughed and rose, free from the deep gulfs of its imprisonment.

*I told you! I told you that you could do so much more. Would you like to see the magic they have hidden away from you? Not content to bind and hold your personality, they have also hidden your power—*

And then the cold voice was silenced, because a different self had come forth from the box.

It had no voice. It had no boasting. Harry could feel its rage, though, and the coldness of that rage.

He opened his eyes to see Draco encased in ice, the dead basilisk frozen, and blue-white fire cutting the darkness and racing towards Tom Riddle and Connor. In a moment, Connor, too, was a statue, and then the magic reared high above Tom Riddle and the diary and stared at them.

Riddle stared back for a long moment. Then he swung his head to look at Harry, and his eyes had gone mad.

“Not him,” he breathed. “Never him. It was *you*, it must have been, and the nature of our connection—“

The silent self had had enough of him. Down it coiled, and made itself into a snake, a constrictor, so black that Harry’s eyes bled as he watched it. His own voice was distant now, a sobbing scream, worse than a kicked animal would make. He could do nothing but watch. He was not in control right now. The silent self was.

It coiled around Tom Riddle and broke his ribs with one squeeze, his newly formed body with another, and then his life from him with a third. Then the snake placed him on the floor, stretched its jaws wide, and ate him. Harry felt, distantly, that cold power settle within him, consumed by his own magic, adding to its strength.

The snake flowed over to the diary and ate it as well, tearing it apart and absorbing every crumb of magic within its pages. Harry felt a brief knot of resistance at the center of the book, a knot that seemed self-aware, oddly like a piece of a soul, trying to escape. But the snake crushed it utterly, stripped it of its magic, and then spat out the self-awareness. It fled, wailing, naked and alone, and tattered as it flew. Harry did not think it reached the far side of the Chamber before it was gone, dissipated into oblivion.

He knelt there, and screamed, and the pain was very great.

The magic came slinking back to him. Harry could feel it studying him. For the moment, he held all its attention in the middle of that frozen Chamber. He wondered, oddly calm, the pain making him half-crazed, whether it would destroy him, too, not needing his body as a shelter any longer.

He gasped as shards of the phoenix song crunched like glass in his gut, reminding him of what he had vowed to save Connor. He could not let the magic hurt Connor. He had already let it freeze Connor. He had to control it.

He held up one hand. His fingers were blue with frostbite in the light of the white, searing cold that marked the magic, and seemed absurdly small. He reached up towards this immense force that had somehow come out of him, this force that terrified him and that was his to master, and waited. He could hear himself screaming, somewhere still, but it was not important. His throat stung and hurt with the ice particles that had slid down it, but that was not important, either.

The silent self did not speak in the cold voice again; nor did it coil back into his body and let him do what he would with it. Instead, it showed him pictures.

*Lily instructing him again and again in the ways of his vows, repeating it endlessly when he would have faltered.*

*Harry performing mild hexes and jinxes on himself as he learned to withstand physical pain, because someday he would suffer pain like this on the battlefield, and he had to be able to keep going.*

*The battle with the Lestranges, and how he had given all the credit to Connor, and how that was not fair, was beyond unfair, was cruel and unjust.*

*His envy of Connor for being in Gryffindor.*

*His envy of Connor for being the favored of their parents.*

*His hatred of Dumbledore, for agreeing with him and using him as a pawn, and giving him the Sword of Gryffindor, which had burned him.*

The shards of the phoenix song in his mind stirred and pushed back, trying to reassert themselves. Harry had long since lost his breath to scream, but he knelt, hands around his head, and gasped and trembled. He could not hate Connor the way the self from the box wanted him to. How could he? Connor was a child, and had been possessed by Riddle even as he had, and was a victim of their parents even as he was.

But how could he hate his parents?

An absolute torrent of images answered him.

*Ignoring him in favor of Connor.*

*Not knowing anything about his wandless magic, or praising him for keeping it secret.*

*Their disappointment when they could not get him moved from Slytherin to Gryffindor.*

*Lily's suspicion over the Malfoy owl, whether Harry's friends could be trusted not to betray them.*

*The way that they had accepted the story last year, the way that Dumbledore had accepted the story last year, about Connor defeating Voldemort, and no one had ever asked whether Harry had been hurt or had suffered in that battle, and no one had known how long he fought against him.*

*His parents not coming to see him in the hospital wing when he had battled with Riddle and lain unconscious for a week.*

*Connor lying about coming to see him.*

He couldn't help it! He was possessed! Harry felt himself begin to dissolve and shred on the edges of that truth. He had to think as he always had, or what was the use of things? He could not possibly think badly of Connor. It was not in him to do so. He had to remember that. The things the magic wanted him to think were not true.

But the magic steadily presented him with truths, jealousies and resentments he had forgotten, treatment he should never have had to endure, and yanked him forward, even as the truths he knew pierced him again. Harry could feel his mind beginning to unravel, pushed and pulled between those two opposing forces.

When he heard the song begin, he thought it was imagining it, or that the golden web in his head had grown stronger. He gasped and lifted his eyes towards the ceiling of the Chamber, from which the music came, blinking away blood so that he could see.

Fawkes circled there, holding something long and glittering in his talons. With him came fire, and with him came light, and when he circled down and landed on Harry's shoulder, dropping the Sword of Gryffindor not far from Harry's feet, it was as if all the beauty in the world had entered the Chamber of Secrets.

The phoenix bowed his head and wept on Harry's temple. His tears melted the ice that had begun to take Harry's hair, and Harry reached up and clutched convulsively at the warm feathers. The magic hesitated.

He felt a third force move into his head, gently inserting itself between him and the tattered shreds of his duty, and blocking the magic from showing him any more memories. Relief from pain was the most wonderful sensation Harry had ever known. This time, the phoenix's voice that moved through his head brought true beauty and peace, and he could finally take a breath without the urge to scream.

Fawkes could not heal everything, of course. Harry was well-aware that this was only temporary, that his webs were torn beyond all redemption, and that the magic wanted to reach out and do unforgivable things to the people who had hurt him unforgivably. But it permitted him a breathing space, and in that breathing space he reached out and pulled the ice back into himself.

It collapsed in ringing shards from Draco, who abruptly gasped and coughed and spat out half an icicle. He turned and looked at Harry, stumbling hard enough—he'd been frozen in an awkward position—that the mirror dropped from his hand and shattered. He didn't appear to notice. "Harry?" he whispered.

Harry turned his head from the trust and fear in that voice—fear for him, not of him. He could not bear it. How could he tell Draco that he was going to die in a short time? He faced Connor, and saw his brother breathing slowly and regularly, a healthy tint coming back into his cheeks.

His magic stirred. *You are not leaving without doing something to him*, said the cold voice.

Harry tried to resist, and lost. The best thing he could hope for was not to do permanent damage to Connor. The magic would be satisfied with nothing less than an impact on his mind, the kind that he had had on Harry throughout the school year by stirring up his emotions and doing unfair things and ordering him to stand aside so Ron could attack Draco and—

Harry gasped and pushed away the anger. There was a time and place for the rage, and it was not here. He reached out, and, as Connor opened his eyes, whispered, "*Obliviate*."

Connor blinked and stared at him with glazed eyes.

"You fought Tom Riddle," Harry told him quietly. "Fawkes brought the Sword of Gryffindor for you, and you picked it up and stabbed the basilisk through the mouth, but not before it bit you and one of its fangs broke off in your arm. You used the fang to destroy the diary, and with it gone, Tom Riddle was also destroyed. Fawkes healed your wound from the fang." The lies spilled from his mouth, automatic. He had always been a good liar.

*Not for very much longer*. Almost greater than the rage and the pain was his desire for rest, but strongest of all was his frantic desire not to hurt anyone. He had to get them out of here as soon as he possibly could, and then go somewhere else to die and release his magic, in the fervent hope that it would be content to wreak havoc on its surroundings and not Connor or their mother and father.

Connor blinked, then nodded. "How are we going to get out of here?" he whispered, looking up at the phoenix.

Fawkes trilled once and then turned and swept his tail over them.

“Phoenixes can carry great weights,” said Harry, remembering something he’d read in the books that Professor Snape had given him. *I’ll see him once more, if ever.* “He’ll carry us.” He reached up to Fawkes, and grabbed his tail. He felt Draco grab hold behind him, seething with silent curiosity and questions. Connor picked up the Sword of Gryffindor, which of course did not burn him, and caught Draco’s hand.

Up Fawkes soared, away from the Chamber and Sylarana’s body, and Harry leaned his head on the tail and wished he could cry.

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They were in the Headmaster’s office. Their parents had Apparated in, which was not a surprise, Harry thought distantly, when they heard about their son taken into the Chamber. He knew his safety would have been one of their concerns, but a secondary one.

His magic lashed angrily. He calmed it, and felt the walls already weakening. With Sylarana gone—

*She is gone.*

—he could not hold the cold self and the silent self much longer, but he would have to hold them until he could fight his way free. He had already decided what he would do. He only wanted to wait until Draco left the office. It wasn’t fair to subject him to this.

Draco had at last gone, after admitting that he didn’t remember anything between distracting the basilisk with his mirror and finding it dead, and Madam Pomfrey had taken charge of him. That left Harry in the Headmaster’s office with Dumbledore behind his desk, Fawkes on his perch, the Sword of Gryffindor on Dumbledore’s desk, Lily and James in the corner with Connor between them, Sirius kneeling in front of and hugging Connor as if his life depended on it, and Professor Snape scowling suspiciously from a chair. Connor was telling his story, his color high and flushed with excitement. He had no obvious wounds, and neither did Harry, who had made sure to avoid the eyes of both men who might be able to read his mind.

Harry let a bit of his magic free. It was longing to be used, and he would use it in the best way he could.

“*Fugitivus Animus Amplector,*” he whispered.

The magic flooded out of him, catching the attention of everyone else in the room and directing it fiercely towards Connor. Harry slipped in their perceptions, sliding down the ladder of importance to them. He had the distinct feeling that Dumbledore had let the spell capture him, and Snape’s mind had already begun subtly struggling against it; its effect on him would probably end when he left the room. But his parents and Sirius were decidedly victims of it. It increased their near-obsession with Connor into true obsession. The magic rather liked that.

So did Harry, but for different reasons. Oh, they would grieve when they knew he was dead, but it would be a muted grief. Harry knew Connor’s grief would be true, and he wished he could give his brother another gift than this, but if he stayed here, he would hurt him. The anger he had locked in the box and beneath the webs of his mind was wild in him now, swirling around, and it wanted to hurt Connor.

No. He could not hurt Connor.

Harry closed his eyes as the tug-of-war began again, and sighed. He would find nothing here. He had to leave the school as soon as possible, and get as far away as he could. He would generate a magical explosion when he died, he knew, but Hogwarts’s wards should protect her. And then Connor would be alive, and a true hero, and a true Gryffindor, and he would have done all he could.

He turned and slipped out of the room.

He ran, silently, for Hogwarts’s front doors. The walls in his head were already collapsing. He was remembering more and more, a whirlwind of memories, a maelstrom, dancing and catching him up, flinging him from image to image and phantom pain to phantom pain. He was dying. He was going to die. He had never hurt so much, and he did not think that anything could hurt so much and live.

He burst free from Hogwarts and ran across the grounds. Night had come. Harry could see stars, and the rising slim crescent of the moon, and a distant light growing from Hagrid's hut. The dark shape of the Forbidden Forest paced him.

He went to one knee, abruptly, as the last of the walls fell in his head. He expected a moment of regret that he hadn't been able to get further away.

Then the magic roared out of him and into the heart of the sky, and called down a storm. Harry closed his eyes and let himself be swept away.

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### **Chapter Thirty: The Heart of the Storm**

Snape frowned. He could feel an odd pulling sensation in his mind, the urge to step out of the Headmaster's office and —do something. He couldn't make out what he wanted to do, whether brew a potion or go to the hospital wing to check on Draco, but he knew that he wanted to leave.

Yet how could he, when there was Connor Potter in front of him, still listening to Dumbledore as the Headmaster told him what a wonderful story his tale was, and how it would inspire the other students when they heard it at the Leaving Feast?

Snape grimaced. He could translate Dumbledore's words. *Gryffindor House has just won the House Cup. Again.*

He glanced away from the insufferable brat, but found his eyes returning. For some reason, hate him or love him, Connor Potter was the center of this room.

That made Snape suspicious. It reminded him of the effects of a spell. He would remember the name of the spell in a moment, he was sure. It was on the tip of his tongue, and he could not grasp it. He closed his eyes and rubbed his head with one hand.

"Severus?"

Snape glanced up. Dumbledore had noticed his distraction and was smiling at him kindly.

"If you would like to check on young Mr. Malfoy," he said gently, "I am sure that he would be happy to see you, as his Head of House."

Snape nodded stiffly. He couldn't quite remember why he'd come to the Headmaster's office in the first place, he thought as he left. Of course there was the Petrified student—some Hufflepuff—and a message about Potter going into the Chamber of Secrets to defeat Riddle, but he hadn't known then that Draco had gone along. And why should he have? He was hardly friends with Potter—

He stepped out of the office, and out of Potter's immediate vicinity, and the realization hit him like a blow.

*Harry.*

Snape began to run.

He had aimed for Hogwarts's front doors, guessing that Harry would not have gone to the hospital wing or back to the Slytherin common room. But perhaps, he thought, as he sagged against the doors and stared at the sight in front of him, he had instinctively felt the call of the magic Harry was projecting.

It was night. The stars and the moon were blazing somewhere. That somewhere was not over Hogwarts.

Instead, a long tail of darkness, black enough to make Snape's eyes hurt, rose from near the Forbidden Forest and made lazy circles in the air, growing in speed and power as Snape watched. It formed a solid wall of whirling black wind, and it brought winter. He could feel the cold from here. It stung his throat and the inside of his nostrils already, and he thought that snow probably covered the lawn inside the storm itself—assuming that there was still lawn there. The winds bore along branches and slats of wood that might have come from the shed used to store Quidditch gear, and once Snape thought he saw a whole tree. And the storm was expanding, slowly but with determination. He had no doubt but that it would be tearing at Hogwarts's wards soon.

Worse than the physical power, though, was the magical. He could feel it spilling over the shields that Lucius had trained him to raise, leaking into every unoccupied corner of his body and mind and demanding his attention. It was like the Dark Lord's power, and Snape in fact sensed a touch of familiarity that made him wonder if it was Tom Riddle and not Harry at the heart of this storm after all. But no; if it were, then the power would have that familiar cruel edge Snape had felt night after night when he still served among the Death Eaters. This was wild power, with an undercurrent of honest rage. It was so busy exulting in its freedom that it hadn't attacked anyone else yet. Snape supposed he could be thankful to Merlin for small favors.

Harry was in there.

Harry was in need of his help.

Snape closed his eyes, breathing lightly, and began carefully to release the locks he kept on his own memories and his own power. In a sense, he had had boxes of his own in his head, but fluid and safe, given that he let the memories out every once in a while and kept them constantly in motion. And he had seen no reason to tell Harry of the tactic, lest he think himself justified in keeping his own box.

These were pools of quicksilver, and from them Snape pulled his memories of being a Death Eater, of the year that he had served willingly under Voldemort and the year he had been a spy, of walking among death and torture and never flinching from either. It was not courage in the way that Gryffindors would understand it, being dark and hard and bitter, but he needed it now. And he could not afford to lock away any experiences he had with Dark magic at the moment.

He opened his eyes and felt his own magic answering his call, rising in ridged patterns like steel bars around him. He nodded once and took a step away from the safety of the school and her wards.

The winds grabbed him, snarling, and flung him into the air. Snape had barely enough presence of mind to call on his own wandless magic and cushion his landing with a charm. He built a shield over himself a moment later, as the wind screamed and shrieked and swept by above him.

He eyed the whirling black wall for a long moment. He thought it would be easier if he could just get past the outer edge, but he did not know how to shield himself from the physical force of the wind in the meanwhile.

So loud was the screaming of the storm, and so heavy the pressure of the magic, that Snape did not hear the hooves crunching across the grass of the lawn until they were close. He started and turned. A centaur stood there, turned pale by the crazed flashes of silver lightning beginning to play in the storm.

Snape stared at the centaur. The centaur stared back, then turned and inclined his head towards the storm.

“This is the first stroke of Mars’s hand, and the most dangerous,” the centaur said, in that low-pitched grave tone that all of them used. “From this we might receive another Dark Lord, another champion of war. I will take you through the storm to him, that this might not happen.”

Snape shook his head slowly—not in denial, but in disbelief. “Why?” he asked, even as he worked his way to the edge of his shield and the centaur knelt down, waiting for him to scramble onto his back.

“Because he is ours, too,” said the centaur, utter seriousness on his face. His eyes were piercing, bright. “*Vates.*”

Snape paused for a moment. He knew the word. It meant a poet, but also a prophet, a seer—

A visionary.

Snape shook his head again and scrambled onto the centaur’s back. The moment his shield left him, he felt the wind try to blow him backwards. He clung with all his strength, bowing his head, and the centaur bore him forward into the storm.

It grew darker and darker as they approached the heart. Snape knew it didn’t all come from the cloud cover that Harry’s power had given the sky. This *was* Dark magic. He had not been wrong. It might be content to throw trees around and turn the air cold for now, but sooner or later it would unfold itself and strike, and if anyone but Dumbledore could stop it, Snape would be surprised. It was stronger than he had known Harry to be, stronger than he had sensed it was when Harry fought Riddle, and the rage hovering under the surface could rise at any moment.

*All the more reason for me to enter it and help him.*

Snape shook his head again as the centaur, straining, his legs rising and falling as though through water, finally took him as close as he could go. He was not sure how he was supposed to help Harry. He knew Dark magic, and he knew the arts of the mind—he was sure that Harry’s webs must have shredded somehow, for this to happen—but he had never seen anything like this storm.

“You will help him.”

Snape started again and turned to the centaur. “I will try,” he corrected the irritating creature. “That does not mean that I will succeed.”

“The stars do not say that you will succeed, either,” the centaur agreed. “They say that you will try, and do a better job than many others could, and that we will have a new Dark Lord or the beginnings of our *vates* after this evening.” He turned before Snape could question him, using the sheer bulk of his body to shield him from the newest blast of air. “Now, enter the storm.”

Snape turned and held his wand out before him. He could use wandless magic when he needed to, but it taxed him, and he thought he would need all his strength to deal with whatever he found inside. “*Diffindo!*”

The black magic fell apart, cut into two neat halves, and Snape strode forward. He felt the gap close immediately behind him, and he let out a deep breath. He was cut off from the outside world now.

No, that was not quite true. He was cut off from the outside world, but he was with the small, motionless figure who lay crumpled at the center of this storm. Snape moved forward, slowly, not able to take his eyes off the sight.

Harry did not appear to be breathing, though Snape knew he must be or the magic would not have been able to continue growing. He lay as though someone had dropped him, his head lolling to the side and his shoulders lifted towards the sky. A thin, cold black flame appeared to cover him, from head to feet, and stretched higher into the sky, thickening until it gave birth to the storm.

As Snape had thought, it was calm here, the grass still untouched, though the air was freezing cold. It was not wind but his own awe and fear which made him approach the boy slowly. Then he sat down beside him, let out a deep breath, and caught Harry’s chin, tilting the boy’s face towards him.

His eyes were empty, wide and glassy and without a trace of tears. Snape knew, had known, that Harry’s expression would tell him nothing.

There was only one way that he might learn more, and, perhaps, stop the storm from attacking the school—and, if the centaurs and their stars were right, prevent the rise of a new Dark Lord.

He pointed his wand at Harry, ignoring how his hand shook. He intoned the word, ignoring how his voice trembled. “*Legilimens.*”

Pain swallowed him.

Snape tumbled and turned, his own consciousness awash in a sea of agony. He could feel memories and thoughts flashing past him, too swift to be seen, too scattered to be counted, and then he landed with a crash on what felt like a solid floor. He fought his way to his feet, terror making itself known in the wild beat of his heart. He had never felt such *bodily* sensations when in someone else’s mind. That Harry had created a world like this was an indication of wondrous power.

And also loss of control. Snape lifted his head, remembering the spiraling webs he had seen before—lately twined around the marble block of Harry’s devotion to his twin and filled with breaches full of fog that marked the Occlumency shields.

It was gone. It was all gone. The mind above Snape was cold and dark, howling and hardly human, with strands of coherent thought shifting back and forth like a spiderweb torn apart by a careless hand. He saw memories spinning like butterflies with nothing to hold them, dying in the endless wash of magic. He saw the shards of the golden web that he had noticed once, far down in Harry’s consciousness, crouched like a giant insect on one side of his mind, attempting to repair itself and failing badly, because it had nothing on the opposite side to cling to.

It was worse than Snape had imagined, but he knew the cause at once. *His snake is dead, and in dying, she tore out every web she was wrapped around.*

Snape took a deep breath and moved a step forward.

“Who are you?”

Snape froze for a long moment. That voice had been Harry’s, at least nominally, but it sounded like the Dark Lord. He turned, and felt the floor shift under him, real and solid in the way that ice was. He quelled his fear about going so far into someone else’s mind. He’d had no choice about it.

A small figure stood before him, its head cocked to one side. Snape could not see it very well. It seemed to be made of shadow and ice, except for the brilliant green eyes that shone when it turned its head, and the jagged lightning bolt scar that blazed just as green above the eyes, shining like *Avada Kedavra*. It moved towards him. Snape felt the cold come with it. The floor beneath his feet firmed and looked more than ever like ice. The air around him howled in utter mockery. Snape firmed his grasp on his wand—in this mental world, he had it if he thought he did—and waited.

“No, wait,” said the figure, as though in answer to a question Snape hadn’t asked. “I know you. You’re his Potions Master. The one who told him that he shouldn’t keep a box in his head, or have that snake wrapped around so many levels of his mind.” The figure laughed without humor. “Looks like you were right.”

“Who are you?” Snape kept his voice calm and level. He *had* done something like this once before, when he had entered Alice Longbottom’s mind on Dumbledore’s request and attempted to repair the shattered fragments of her sanity. It had not worked, but he had met a young witch who had giggled at him and told him that she was Alice’s childhood, one intact part of her locked behind solid walls. Snape racked his brain for the questions he had asked then. “What is your name?”

The figure smiled at him, a nightmare grin of icy teeth, and the scar and the eyes both flared wildly. “I don’t have one. I don’t need one. You could call me Harry, but I’m not all of him. Just his magic, free at last.” It turned and gestured at the broken, glowing golden web. “That kept me imprisoned. So much of me. You should feel how strong I am, how deep.”

“I could,” Snape murmured. “The storm is your doing, isn’t it?”

The figure ducked its head modestly. “It is. And when Harry manages to look out of the center of himself, then I’ll expand it, and we’ll tear down the walls of Hogwarts together.”

“Would Harry *want* to tear down the walls of Hogwarts?”

The figure shrugged. “I don’t really care. I’ve been tied down most of his life. I should get to do what I want to do.”

Snape allowed himself to sneer. This was not as hopeless as Alice Longbottom’s case, after all, where the bars of pain that Bellatrix had imposed had remained motionless through all of Snape’s attempts to remove them. “You do realize,” he asked, coating his tones with false solicitude, “that the longer you are free, the less force of personality you will have?”

The figure faltered, blinking at him. “What do you mean?”

“Exactly what I said.” Snape restrained his temptation to insult this—this construct of magic, or whatever name would be appropriate for it. “Most wizards’ magic does not have a personality of its own, because it is free and integrated with them. You only have one because you were tied down and compressed for so long, and the power created you rather than do nothing. But you are free now. The further you spread, the more things you do, the less strength you’ll put towards maintaining your own identity. Sooner or later, you’ll fade, and the magic will belong to Harry, as it should.”

The figure champed its teeth. Snape didn’t move. He was thinking of arrogant wizards he had confronted during his Death Eater days, Dark wizards who had thought that the Dark Lord would never dare touch them. He had taken much pleasure in showing them the error of their ways. He would do the same thing now. He had always enjoyed being right.

“You’re lying,” the figure breathed. “You *must* be.”

“I am not,” said Snape, making his voice bored. “You said yourself that you cannot tear down the walls of Hogwarts, not yet. You need Harry’s will and consent behind you to do that. You haven’t got it. The longer you spend waiting for it, the more compliant you’ll become.”

The figure turned and screamed up towards the golden web. The shards of it stirred and tried to unfold themselves again, then collapsed crookedly back against the wall they clung to.

“I want it back, then,” said the figure, green eyes crazed. “If the only way I can survive is to be confined, I want it *back*.”

Snape made a sound that was neither agreement nor disagreement, and looked carefully back up through Harry’s mind. There was a point at the center of it that exuded the harshest cold, the blackest terror and pain. He knew that was where he had to go. He was not looking forward to it.

“Good luck.”

Snape stared briefly at the construct of Harry’s magic. It bared its teeth, and he realized it was laughing at him.

“Wait until you meet the silent self,” it whispered, and then turned towards the golden web again, trying to call it down.

Snape turned, crouched, and then launched himself upwards, heading straight for that center of blackness. He felt the walls part to embrace him this time, without his having to cut through them as he had through the storm.

In a moment, he hovered in a second dark well, one that shut out every sight of the tattered mess that Harry’s mind had become. He could see nothing but blackness, hear nothing but silence, feel nothing but cold.

It became quite obvious, however, that he was not alone in that darkness.

Snape felt *something* else move to encircle him, rubbing against his body like a snake made of ice. He lifted his imagined wand in front of him and breathed, “*Lumos*.” His voice sounded far breathier than he would have liked, given everything.

The thing revealed itself. It was a snake, at least in form, and it shone silver. It turned and met his eyes with green ones.

Snape saw.

He saw the memories that Harry had put in the box, endless arrays of them, envy shuttered and shuffled aside, talent denied, connections destroyed, everything but duty forsaken. Cruelty justified and supported was there, and neglect excused with any one of a thousand breathy sentences. Snape could hear a chorus of voices crying out in his head, most of which sounded like Lily Potter, all beginning with “*But if you only knew everything, then you would understand...*”

Snape did not know how old Harry had been when these memories began, but he looked young in at least some of them, perhaps no older than three or four. He felt his breath catch, and then his heart start beating again, as though it had stopped when the snake began to show him the memories.

He had been a Death Eater. He had been a Dark wizard, and still was, in the sense that he knew the Dark Arts. He had sometimes thought that his sense of right and wrong had long ago drained away from him. He had made his choices, but for selfish reasons as much as anything else. His courage was nothing that a Gryffindor would recognize.

He learned in that moment that he still had a sense of right and wrong. What these memories indicated was wrongness, and he felt emotions swelling in him in answer. Because it might have been too difficult or compromising to separate them all out, he translated the emotions into rage. That would work better.

He reached out and put one hand on the snake’s head. His fingers tingled and then lost all feeling. Snape ignored them. He met the snake’s green eyes and spoke the words carefully.

“Take me to Harry.”

The green eyes studied him.

“I want to help him,” said Snape.

The snake—the silent self, the magic had called it—would have known if he had lied. It turned and flowed away from him instead, leading him through barriers that parted like smoke around him. They would have held like steel, Snape knew, if he had wanted to harm Harry.

Or, more likely, he would have simply died. The silent self was practical. It would slaughter its enemies, which were Harry’s enemies and those who had hurt him, Snape thought, and never experience a moment of regret.

He hoped fervently that there was a way Harry could harness and master that practicality.

The last barrier parted, and then they were in front of a small, shattered, broken heap. The silent self floated away. Snape knelt in front of the tattered bunch of emotions and memories, and wondered where he should begin.

He took a deep breath. There had to be a foundation to any mind, a guiding pattern that exemplified the shape it took. And much as he hated it, he knew what the foundation had to be, too. There was only one that Harry would respond to, particularly in this state, with his own survival instinct and his power separated from the center of him.

“Harry,” he whispered. “Harry, do you remember your brother?”

The heap in front of him stirred. Then Harry’s voice spoke from around him, infinitely weary and infinitely tattered. “Do I have to?”

Snape closed his eyes. He could admit that what he was feeling was pity, at least to himself. “Yes. Unless you know of something else that will anchor you and bring you back to yourself?”

He could feel the negation before Harry spoke it. “No. I—how did you get in here? Why did they let you through?”

“I wanted to help,” said Snape carefully. “Harry, it will not be the same as it was before, even if you use your devotion to your brother as the anchoring pattern. For one thing, the web tying down most of your magic is gone. You’ll need to master it, and to use it at least some of the time.” He extended one arm and let his own magic blaze around him. “When the effort of not using my own Dark magic is too much, I go into the Forbidden Forest or conjure a target and spend it harmlessly there. I can show you how to do the same thing.”

“I don’t want to,” Harry whispered. “I swallowed part of Tom Riddle’s power, in the Chamber. I don’t *want* that much magic.”

“But you have it,” said Snape, making sure that his voice sounded gentle. To his surprise, it really didn’t take that much effort. “And you should use it, Harry. Otherwise, it will make an impact on the world, and not one that you desire. It has its own personality at the moment, and its own desire for freedom. If you try to deny it, the same thing will happen again. And perhaps this time you will kill someone else, instead of trying to escape doing so.”

Harry let out a little sob. “But the—I—my parents are *afraid* of me, Professor.” He laughed bitterly, and Snape felt the silent self stir nearby, filled with memories. “That was why they tried to tie my magic down in the first place. They didn’t want me to become another Dark Lord. How am I supposed to avoid that?”

“You are closer now to becoming another Dark Lord than you have ever been,” said Snape.

He knew he was taking a horrible risk, and he felt the silent self surge towards him, ready to hurt him if Harry was hurt. But Harry merely froze, and then whispered, “Why? I don’t understand.”

“Because this magic is being ignored,” said Snape. “Just as your envy and resentment of your brother built over all the years that your accomplishments were ignored, the magic built, and what you have done to exercise and train it is not enough. And now you are stronger than ever. This *must* be used, Harry, not pushed away or cast aside. I very much doubt that you could ever cage it again.”

Harry was silent for a long time. Snape tamed his impatience, his fear that the magic was doing irreversible things to Hogwarts and its grounds and perhaps the students inside, and waited. Some things could not be rushed.

“It’s not true that I don’t want it,” Harry whispered at last. “It’s true that I want it too much.”

The air around them surged, and turned noticeably warmer. Snape dared to breathe a bit more easily. “That *is* the truth,” he said softly. “But consider this, Harry. You have always wanted to defend your brother, is that not true? And others?”

Harry glanced up at him and nodded slowly.

“Master this,” said Snape, with a sweep of his arm that was meant to indicate the storm and the shattered bits of Harry’s personality and the silent self and everything else, “and you can do wonderful things as easily as hurtful, Harry. You can protect. Defend. Guard. *Heal*.” He saw the boy’s head lift then, as if hearing a trumpet call, and pressed on. “There is no law that says every powerful wizard must fall to the Dark.”

“I thought there was,” Harry muttered.

Snape quelled the surge of protective fury. *That will wait*. “I will help you,” he said. “Draco will help you. Anyone whom you choose to take into your confidence will help you.”

Harry looked at him keenly for a moment. Then he said, “You saw the golden web, Professor?”

Snape nodded.

“That was meant to tie my magic down,” said Harry, an edge of bitterness slipping into his voice. “Amid other things that I don’t even know yet. And I know who created it.” He let his breath out. “Dumbledore.” He stared hard at Snape. “That means that, if you stand with me and train me, then you’re acting against Dumbledore. And I *know* you’re loyal to him.”

Snape felt the world around him wrench into utter clarity.

He had suspected this for some time. All he had been able to learn about the web was that it was most likely powerful Light magic, and compelled Harry to act in defense of his brother—somehow. But that had been enough. If it were not a Dark spell, then Voldemort could not have set it, and the Potters were not that strong. It was Dumbledore’s work.

Dumbledore, who had protected him and believed him when he fled the Death Eaters. Dumbledore, who had supported him in the Order of the Phoenix when the others would have cast him out. Dumbledore, who had saved him from Azkaban.

Dumbledore, who had protested that Sirius Black was merely playing a prank when he nearly sent Snape to die on Remus Lupin’s fangs. Dumbledore, who had made no secret in the last years of how much he favored Gryffindor House. Dumbledore, who had set the golden web on Harry’s magic. Dumbledore who, it seemed, had *Obliviated* Remus Lupin.

Snape had accepted Harry’s ridiculous story about Lockhart *Obliviating* the werewolf because he had wanted to. If he could pretend just a little longer, then he could avoid confronting the fact that his mentor was someone who would meddle with a child’s mind and magic. He could pretend that his loyalty to Dumbledore was uncomplicated, that the man was a paragon of Light.

He had chosen ultimate loyalties twice in his life, twice sworn to follow a powerful wizard and meant it. Must he do it a third time?

He opened his eyes and looked down at Harry.

Yes, he must. And he must do it again and again if he had to. Only Gryffindors thought the world was so simple as to require one choice and one choice alone. And Snape was no Gryffindor.

*I will choose every day if I have to.*

He stretched out his hand to Harry. "I will help you," he said. "If you promise me that you will strive to master your magic and your memories."

Harry blinked, then gave him an astonishingly sweet smile. "Thank you, Professor," he said, and moved forward to clasp Snape's hand.

Snape felt the moment when Harry reached out and claimed control of his mind. A voice that thrummed in his head and his very bones said, *That is enough.*

The pain and the magic both screamed back at him. He could not think to rebuild himself into a whole person, not yet. The damage had been too extensive. How was he to deal with his memories? How was he to deal with his power? He had denied both most of his life. How could he heal himself wholly in the wake of that?

Harry's answer was as silent as the cold snake with the green eyes, and as simple as his destructive rage. He was not trying to heal himself wholly, not yet. He was trying to heal himself just enough to restrain his power and learn to master it, Snape thought, watching in a daze. He had never known the boy could do something like this.

He had never, of course, been present in the reconstruction of someone else's mind, let alone Harry Potter's.

Harry touched the golden web first, unfolding the shattered pieces of it, testing its strength. It held up under his probing hands, and Snape heard Harry sigh. Dumbledore's magic was still stronger than Harry's desire to be rid of it. It had to go somewhere, had to attach to something.

Harry found the perfect place for it, winding it around the steadiest part of himself, his trained devotion to his brother. The golden web glued itself to the rock and held there. Snape nodded. He was not surprised that Harry had chosen a foundation of duty. The time when he could wake from that, if ever, was far in the future.

Above the web, Harry gathered up the memories that had tossed like dying butterflies in his mind, drew them in, and breathed them out. Snape blinked as flashes of color lit the darkness like green and silver and blue lightning, save that when the flashes faded, they left behind bridges as well as afterimages, fragile patterns that stretched across the deepening gulfs. Harry's thoughts were unlikely to be linear for a time, Snape knew, but this method would work to *let* him think, at least.

Between the scattered, acknowledged memories went the memories from Harry's box, silver webs that filled the color with ice. Snape shuddered at the sight of them, but Harry simply placed them, one by one, and moved on. At least he knew it would do no good to ignore them any longer, Snape thought, though he did not know how long it would take Harry to deal with them.

Then he turned and beckoned to his magic.

It slunk towards him. Snape could feel that it had already lost a great deal of its sentience, its individual personality, and it snarled at Harry instead of speaking. It appeared to have diminished in the shadow-figure it could cast, as well, and now looked to consist of a pair of green eyes and a green lightning bolt.

Harry held out his hand, and *pulled.*

Snape watched as the magic flooded into Harry, and then outward, through him and around, acknowledged and embraced, no longer denied. Harry embedded it as jewels in the walls of his mind, green crystals and golden and black. Snape blinked. It was perhaps the most beautiful thing he had seen.

Faintly, he heard a protest. *But I was free—*

And Harry's voice, impatient. *I was free. You are not just me. You are mine.*

The magic's voice fell silent.

Harry took a deep breath, and then turned towards something behind Snape. Snape turned, as well, and saw the silver snake floating there, its green eyes fixed on Harry. Harry closed his own eyes briefly.

Snape opened his mouth to ask a question, then shut it. Harry had dealt with the memories from the box that birthed the silent self in the first place, or had created a way of eventually dealing with them. He had not yet confronted the rage that lay behind them, the urge to destroy.

Harry stood there for a long time. The silent self waited. Snape curled his fingers into his fists. He could not imagine what was racing through Harry's mind, or why he was hesitating.

*A new Dark Lord, or a new vates—whatever the last is. I must be mad, to stand here and let him do this on his own.*

But, mad or not, there was no other option, so Snape waited.

Harry clenched his hands into fists. "I want to destroy," he said. "Several people, really. But it will take a while."

The silent self abruptly rushed towards him and slammed into him. Harry closed his eyes and gasped. Snape could not look away as he watched black lightning skim up and down Harry's face and body. It tightened, solidified, and then wrapped him in a dark cocoon. From behind it, Harry's voice emerged, weary.

"This is the last time I'll be able to speak to you so clearly for a while, Professor," he said. "My mind's going to look like a mess from outside."

Snape was unable to contain his snort at the understatement.

He could feel Harry smiling. "I—I used *Fugitivus Animus Amplector* on my parents and Sirius. I should have some time before they're even able to focus on me and think about me properly. But I don't trust myself. I can hold the rage, but I can't damp it or get rid of it. Promise me that you'll get me away from them for at least part of the summer? I don't trust myself not to kill them."

Snape nodded. "Though you mistake the source of my concern," he couldn't help adding. "I am much more concerned about what they might do to you."

"Thank you, Professor," said Harry quietly. "Farewell."

Snape found himself abruptly kneeling on the grass of Hogwarts's lawn. He lifted his head and coughed, staring around.

The walls of the storm had collapsed. The lawn was scattered with branches and odd drifts of snow that looked at least a foot thick, but it was otherwise unharmed. The greatest change, Snape thought, was in the air. Still cold, it bore the heavy aftertaste of Dark magic that had come and gone.

He took a deep breath and looked down at the boy in front of him, just as Harry stirred and opened his eyes.

There was still pain in them, and he turned his face away in the next moment, so that Snape couldn't see the expression in them. But he was hovering in his rebuilt mind, holding on to a fragile kind of sanity. No matter how long the road, he seemed willing to walk it. He'd made his choice.

And so had Snape.

Gently, he reached out and scooped Harry into his arms, then stood, holding him, and began to make his slow way back to the school. There were so *many* things to be done, so many people to confront and rage at, and so many decisions to be made in the attempt to heal Harry—not least, where Harry should go over the summer.

Somewhat to his surprise and confusion, Snape found that he was quite looking forward to making them.

~\*~\*~\*~\*~\*~\*

### **Chapter Thirty-One: The Boy-Who-Survived**

Snape hadn't gone far towards the school when he heard footsteps pounding behind him. Curious, he glanced back. He wondered if Hagrid had come out of his hut to check on the damage to the Forbidden Forest. If he had, then Snape would make him useful and send him to Madam Pomfrey so that she could have a bed ready for Harry.

His perspective altered dramatically when he realized that the two figures running towards him were a wizard and witch—in fact, a wizard and witch he knew, Lucius and Narcissa Malfoy. They must have Apparated as close as they could to Hogwarts and run the rest of the way. Snape narrowed his eyes and waited for them, gently shifting Harry against his chest when he moaned.

Narcissa was the first to reach him, her hair trailing behind her like a cloud of moonlight. “Severus,” she said, barely taking the time to nod to him. “The wards on the Manor sensed—magic from Wiltshire.” Even here, Snape thought, she was not going to say aloud that those wards were tuned to strong Dark magic, perhaps more keenly than any others in Britain, and could identify where it was coming from. “Has something happened to our son?”

Snape said, “In a sense.” Narcissa’s face tightened so much that he hastened to reassure her. “Not to him, but to someone he values very much.” He shifted so that she could see Harry lying against his chest. He did not think that he needed to explain. It would take too long to probe all the details of what had happened anyway, and she would be able to sense the power rolling off the boy.

“Ah, no,” said Narcissa softly.

Snape stared at her. She did not look *quite* as stressed as she had when she assumed Draco was hurt, but it was close. She put out a trembling hand to stroke the hair back from Harry’s forehead, and Snape was so astonished that he let her. Narcissa winced at the sight of the red, silver-limned lightning bolt scar.

“I know that my son values him,” she explained, without looking away from Harry. “He is nearly all that Draco talked about this summer. And I have reason to suspect that he is a more suitable friend for Draco than most.” She lifted her eyes to Snape’s. “Please, tell me what happened.”

He would have, but Lucius came close then and said something unfortunate.

“It had something to do with the rising of our Lord, I thought,” he said, with a gesture to his left arm, ignoring his wife’s sharp glance. “And now I am here, and there is no risen Dark Lord.” He paused for a moment, his eyes narrowed and filled with some complicated, cold emotion. “I am disappointed.”

That was, perhaps, the most stupid thing he could have said.

Snape’s rage was still very near the surface. And angering him had been known among the Death Eaters as a tactical error. Only Bellatrix Lestrange was worse, and Bellatrix was often too angry to take any coherent revenge. Snape never was.

He didn’t need his wand, which was a good thing, as getting it would have meant shifting his arms from under Harry. He merely focused on Lucius and breathed, “*Sectumsempra.*”

The spell had barely flown before a voice from the general vicinity of his chest shouted, “*Protego!*”

Snape’s spell hit the misty shield that had formed in front of Lucius, and Snape barely ducked aside in time as it came back at him. He watched it fly past, and endured regret—both that he hadn’t managed to hit his intended target, and that Harry gave a little shudder and moan after protecting Lucius, the effort of actually using his magic still too much for him.

Snape moved so that he could see Harry’s face, and snarled, “Why did you do that?”

Harry glared back at him, as much as he could glare when he looked weary to the bone. “Because,” he said, “he’s Draco’s father. That means I value him. And honestly, he said that to test *you*. That was part of the dance.” He rolled his neck, slowly, so that he could see Lucius. “I’m sorry, Mr. Malfoy,” he said formally. “That spell was launched to protect me, and I am the one who must ask that you forgive its use. Do you?”

Lucius was frozen. Snape felt a self-congratulatory smirk spreading across his face despite the mistake that Harry said he’d made (and damn purebloods, anyway, with their dances and their games). At least events had moved so fast that Malfoy hadn’t been able to keep up with them, either.

Lucius gave a deep, choked cough, as though the *Sectumsempra* had actually hit him after all, and then nodded. “Of course, Mr. Potter,” he said. “And I ask that you forgive my...callous remark.” His eyes landed on Snape again, and this time they had the proper wariness in them. “I had not known that you had such a fierce protector.”

Snape decided there might be mockery in those words. If so, he was determined to ignore it. He simply nodded and then turned back towards the school, Harry cradled more closely against his chest than ever. He was going to put him in the hospital wing, instruct Pomfrey to let no one near him except Draco, and then go to Dumbledore. There were some things that needed to be said.

To his surprise, both Malfoys walked behind him. Snape met Narcissa’s gaze, and only Narcissa’s. “Draco is safe, I said,” he murmured.

“I know,” said Narcissa softly. “And I would still like to know what happened. I *know* you, Severus. Why did you become so angry at Lucius when he talked of the Dark Lord’s return?”

*This, at least,* Snape thought, *Harry cannot cast a spell to interfere with.* “Because your husband is the reason that Harry is like this,” he said, and had the satisfaction of seeing her eyes widen. “He gave him a diary at the beginning of the year that turned out to contain a piece of the Dark Lord’s memory. It possessed Harry and destroyed a good portion of his mental defenses. And now Harry’s mind is ripped to pieces by that and the destruction of his familiar, who was bonded to his mind. You can see why I would not be in the best of moods around Lucius.”

The rage was still there, but he could contain it, and even better was watching Narcissa turn around, standing like a wall between Snape and her husband, and draw her wand. Lucius stopped walking, a look of utter bafflement on his face.

“Narcissa—“

“*Silencio,*” Narcissa said, and Lucius’s mouth refused to work. Narcissa went on without a pause. “Lucius Abraxas Malfoy,” she said, very slowly. “Did you think that you could hurt someone who is dear to my son and not have me find out?”

Lucius just stared at her.

Narcissa moved a step forward. “You *knew,*” she hissed, with a viciousness in her voice that Snape thought would have done credit to Harry’s snake. “You *knew* that Draco needs him, and you still tried to destroy him.”

Lucius made some gesture that Snape knew would attempt an explanation—probably trying to say that he had not known the diary contained a fragment of the Dark Lord at first. From the look on Narcissa’s face, it wouldn’t have been enough even if he could say it. Snape watched in glee.

“If what I suspect will happen now happens,” said Narcissa, her voice gone smooth and dark, “then I *will* make sure he is safe from you, Lucius. And if that means that Draco and I must leave the Manor for the summer, so be it.” She glared at her husband for a long moment, all poised, cold beauty. “I am disgusted with you,” she added, and turned towards Snape, holding her arms out for Harry.

Snape hesitated briefly, then handed the boy over. “He needs to be taken to the hospital wing immediately, Narcissa.”

“I am not an idiot, Severus,” she said. “Unlike some people standing on this lawn,” she added, and swept away.

Lucius must have managed the nonverbal counterspell, as he gasped out, “What does she think she’s doing?”

“Choosing her loyalties,” Snape told him, and then turned away to find Dumbledore and do the same thing.

“Come in, Severus.”

Snape determined not to be put off by the fact that Dumbledore had known it was him before he knocked on the door to the Headmaster’s office. He opened the door instead, stepped inside, shut it behind him, and fixed his gaze on Dumbledore.

*How can he look so normal?* he thought, when Dumbledore merely returned his gaze blandly. *Does he know what news I bear with me? Does he know what I have discovered? I would think not, and yet... I have been fooled before.*

Snape called gladly on his rage again. He was not trying to match magic with the Headmaster, and there was no Harry to interfere this time. He narrowed his eyes and drawled, "How long did you think this could continue before I discovered the truth, Albus?"

"I have no idea what you are talking about, Severus," said the Headmaster cheerfully. "I'm not omniscient, you know. Sherbet lemon?"

Snape shook his head. He didn't take a seat, either, even though Dumbledore was clearly looking between him and the nearest chair. "I've seen the web that you put in Harry's mind," he said. "I know that you had something to do with suppressing his magic and changing the course of his thoughts. Did you *really* think that no one would ever find out?"

Dumbledore sighed. "Ah, yes. The web was necessary, Severus." He sat back and met Snape's gaze calmly, as if he really thought that would be all.

"Necessary," Snape echoed. "Just as his training in wandless magic was necessary, I suppose, and his blind devotion to his brother, and the utter *shattering* of his mind that he's experienced now?"

Dumbledore's face changed. "I had assumed that young Harry's familiar would stabilize him," he murmured.

"His snake is *dead*, Albus!" Snape slammed a palm into the middle of the Headmaster's desk. "She died in that Chamber! And don't think for a moment that I'm accepting Connor Potter's story as the real one. He believes it, yes," he added, as Dumbledore opened his mouth. "That does not make it true. And I will no longer stand back and allow that kind of truth to obscure my mind. *I* was the one who stabilized Harry, Albus. *I* was the one who discovered the truth about what you've done to him, and about what your precious Gryffindors have done to him." He was breathing hard by the end of it, his magic sparking and snapping at its shields. "Give me one good reason that I should not take this to the Ministry and see you sacked for condoning and enhancing the abuse of a helpless child."

Dumbledore's face was stern. "I had faith in your skills as a researcher, Severus," he said. "It seems that I overestimated them."

Snape simply stared at him, and waited.

"If you had studied the phoenix web," Dumbledore continued, "you would have found that not only is it Light magic, but it must be accepted *willingly*. It is not abuse, and it is not illegal. I could never have placed the web in Harry's mind unless he had agreed to it. He chose to become what he is, Severus, and it is our choices that make us who we truly are. In this case, it is sacrifice for his brother. That is Harry's role, the one chosen for him by the prophecy and his parents, but also by his own will. I fear that you have severely underestimated the depth of Harry's commitment to Connor. I am disappointed in you, Severus." Dumbledore's eyes shone with that disappointment, which might have nearly broken Snape an hour ago.

Snape straightened his back. *That was an hour ago. And if it isn't as simple as showing the web to the Ministry and demanding they do something...well, I never thought it would be.* He ignored the slight, sour taste of his own disappointment, and forged ahead.

"He cannot truly have known what he was agreeing to when you placed the web, Albus. How old was he? Six? Seven?"

"He was four," said Dumbledore quietly. "And he *did* know. By that age, his mother had already taught him his vows, and about the danger that Voldemort presents to his brother."

Snape shook his head. He wanted to say something, but his disgust and his rage were holding him silent for now. His magic reached out instead, and one of the odd silver instruments on a shelf behind Dumbledore exploded with a *spang*.

Dumbledore glanced at it, then turned his calm gaze back to Snape. "Do control yourself, Severus," he scolded.

Snape controlled himself with a massive effort. He was obviously not going to convince Dumbledore that he was wrong. He bowed his head slightly. "And you are determined to persist in this?" he asked. "The web has caused damage to Harry's mind, giving him headaches when he tried to tell me—something that you had done." He was not sure it was the best course to reveal that he knew Dumbledore had *Obliviated* Lupin. "It was badly damaged by the wounds in Harry's mind, and by the death of his snake, since she was involved in it as she was in every other turn and twist of his thoughts. It has served its purpose. Surely you could remove it now."

"That would not be the best course," said Dumbledore. "I *have* made tests, Severus, to see if perhaps Harry would be trustworthy without the web. None of them have proven so."

"Trustworthy for what?" Snape sneered. "Trustworthy to trot across a battlefield and lay his head on the chopping block?"

"Severus," Dumbledore chided him.

Snape once again stared at him, and waited for an answer.

Dumbledore nodded to the Sword of Gryffindor, still laid across his desk. "I tested Harry with the Sword. It burned him. It was reacting to the potential in him to become like Voldemort. I cannot be sure that Harry, free of the web, would still continue to act in the name of the Light and goodness."

Snape braced himself, then reached out his left hand and gripped the sword's hilt. He snatched it back at once, and showed Dumbledore the reddened blister in the center of his palm. "You know well enough that the Sword reacts to the presence of Dark magic in another wizard," he snarled. "That is *not* a final test, Albus."

"There have been others." Dumbledore's face was gentle, but implacable. "I sent Fawkes with the Sword to help anyone in the Chamber who might need it, the moment Minerva informed me of what had happened. You heard young Connor's story. He used the Sword to kill the basilisk, and Fawkes healed him of his poisoned wound."

"Then why do you think Harry's magic was loose in him, if that is all that happened?" Snape said. He was beginning to get a headache. He had hoped for—*something* from Dumbledore. Some concession, some sign of remorse, some sigh of grief. He had not expected to meet this wall of quiet stubbornness. "I know that you felt what was happening to his mind. You practically sent me after him!"

"It was the presence of Riddle that caused him to react that way," said Dumbledore, firmly. "And I sent you after him because I knew that you could, and would, choose to save him, Severus. I assume that his magic is now under control?"

"Barely," said Snape, forcing out the words that he needed to speak and not the ones that he wanted to use. *Well, the best expression of my feelings right now would be a wordless scream.* "He needs quiet and privacy for the summer. He asked me to make sure he would not have to stay with his parents, because he is afraid that he would kill them." He saw Dumbledore's brows draw down, and suspected that he had just chalked another black mark against Harry on the old wizard's slate. He hardly cared. "I was planning to take him to Spinner's End with me."

Dumbledore was already shaking his head. "You know that your wards are not strong enough to contain magic like his, Severus. If it burst free... And, forgive me, Severus, but you are not anyone's first choice for the caretaker of a child."

Snape clenched his hands into fists. He would not bother addressing Dumbledore's second accusation, but the first was true enough, and something he had not thought of. Spinner's End was not deep-warded, because Snape only lived there two months of the year, and because it was not a hereditary home. If Harry created another storm, he did not think he would be able to hold or hide it.

And then Snape thought of another solution, and smiled unpleasantly.

"Harry will go to Godric's Hollow for the summer," Dumbledore continued, unaware of Snape's private elation. "I am sure they will treat him well, since his life was in danger in the Chamber, or else they will respect his privacy because of the *Fugitivus Animus* spell. Yes, I felt him cast that, and admired the touch," he added to Snape's raised eyebrows. "Either way, he will have the family around him, and powerful wards."

“I am not a parent,” said Snape casually. “And my wards are not powerful enough.” He took a deep breath and tried out another smile that he hoped was less unpleasant than his first one. “But I know a set of parents whose wards are the most powerful in Britain, easily able to contain Dark magic of the kind that Harry wields by nature. And they would be more than happy to take Harry.”

Dumbledore stared at him for a moment, then narrowed his eyes. *Give the old man credit for that*, Snape thought, in the middle of emotions that wanted to become laughter. *He has always been quick.*

“Harry’s parents would never agree to let him go to Malfoy Manor,” said Dumbledore quietly.

“Under the *Fugitivus Animus* spell? They will not care.” Snape shrugged carelessly. “And Narcissa Malfoy is already here, Headmaster. If you believe that you can take her from Harry’s side now, with Draco there and Harry so important to her son, then you are a better wizard than I am.”

Dumbledore sat quite still for a long moment. Then he said, “Severus, you do not understand a great many of the choices I have made.”

“Nor do I want to,” said Snape, making his voice as cool and polite as possible. “But I understand what even half-understood truths can do. Try to remove that spell from the Potters, Headmaster, or try to remove Harry from the Malfoys before he is ready, and I *will* go to the Ministry. It will take only a few words in the right ears to stir suspicion of you.” He braced himself and waited.

Dumbledore’s eyes came to him, shining and sad. “Why have you turned against me, Severus?” he whispered. “I have \_\_\_“

“Done me good, yes,” said Snape, not in the mood to hear it. “And done Harry evil. You forget, Headmaster. I am a Slytherin. I know Dark magic intimately. Whether it is Dark in name or not, I recognize the consequences, and I will be more than happy to spread the knowledge I have obtained—unless you make this bargain with me.”

He waited. Dumbledore waited. Snape thought they both wanted some sort of invisible balance to tip, some way of yielding without losing face. He wondered if Dumbledore would try to *Obliviate* him, but suspected that he would have done so already if he were going to.

In the end, it was Dumbledore who gave in, and Snape suspected he did only because he still needed Harry for his thrice-damned prophecy. He looked away and waved a hand. “In the end,” he said, “you will see that things are falling out as they must.”

Snape turned towards the door without answering. He suspected the Malfoys would already have made their own decision, but he wanted to see and speak with them.

And if he had anything more to say to Dumbledore, he did not know what it could be.

It was only when he stepped out of the office that he realized Fawkes had not been on his perch in the corner.  
*It was like a fever dream.*

The first time Harry opened his eyes, it was to become aware of someone clinging to him like a limpet as he lay in a bed in the hospital wing, and that someone was Draco.

*Or maybe it's not like a limpet. Maybe it's like a shark and remora. I'm a shark, aren't I, capable of destroying?*

Harry gave a giggle. He sounded drunken.

“Harry’s awake,” said Draco, in what might have been an address to himself, or his mother, who hovered nearby, or the universe in general, and then snuggled into Harry’s shoulder and refused to move.

Harry managed to sit up and fix his eyes on Narcissa Malfoy, who gave him the faint, cool smile that he remembered from last Christmas. Her eyes were much warmer, though. Harry told himself to concentrate on that, and not the faint aura of Dark magic he could see rising from her like a black flame.

“Harry,” she murmured. “Draco has decided that you should stay with us for the summer. That is,” she added, with a gentle glance at her son, “Draco has refused to leave Hogwarts unless we let you come with us to the Manor. And since I have no desire to leave either my son or my son’s best friend here under the control of people who have proved—less than the best caretakers—” Harry caught his breath at the cold rage in her eyes “—I have opened my home to you, if you will be so gracious as to accept our invitation.” Her eyes came back to him, and her smile warmed. “Will you accept?”

“Mrs. Malfoy,” Harry managed to say awkwardly, “are you sure that you want me there, after Professor Snape attacked your husband?”

“Do not be ignorant, Harry,” Narcissa chided him gently, and Harry felt himself flush. Ignorance was not an acceptable part of the dance. “You saved my husband’s life, or at least his chest, this evening.” She tilted her head, and her eyes were diamonds. “And I have since found out that my husband did—certain unfortunate things to you. In fact, we should offer you the hospitality of the Manor in abject humility, as you would have every reason in the world not to accept. I will personally take it upon myself to see that my husband does not harm you while you are there.”

“And me,” said Draco, tightening his hold on Harry’s arm until Harry thought he might have cut off the circulation. “He’s never going to hurt you again, Harry. Never.” He lifted his face, and he was smiling, but Harry wasn’t fooled. Draco *never* gave up when he was holding his head like that.

Harry thought for a moment of raising all the potential problems with that. He thought of cautioning Draco that Harry might someday become the Malfoys’ enemy, and then it would not be Lucius’s or Snape’s fault that they were at odds. He thought of saying that he did not deserve this hospitality. He thought of saying his Dark magic might destroy them all.

But he could not. He needed this too much. He would warn them about his magic, but he could not refuse their invitation.

“Thank you,” he murmured, and saw Draco’s face light and Narcissa’s become softer. “But—Mrs. Malfoy, my magic —“

“We felt it,” Narcissa interrupted him, calmly. “The Manor has wards for a reason, Harry. You will be safe there.”

Harry licked his lips. “You do not think I will present a danger to you?”

“I would never invite anyone into my home who I thought posed a danger to my son,” said Narcissa.

Harry nodded, slowly, never taking his eyes from her face. He believed that. Draco might protest that he was safe with Harry in total ignorance of the situation, and Merlin alone knew what kinds of games Lucius was playing, but he could trust Narcissa.

Abruptly, the world filled with a drifting golden haze, and Harry felt his thoughts and magic rise like fire, trying to send him to sleep. He yawned, and Narcissa reached out and gently touched Draco’s shoulder.

“I think we should let Harry sleep now,” she said.

Draco turned around to glare sulkily at his mother. “But—“

“Draco,” said Narcissa, in that way she had, and that was that.

Draco sulked a bit, then put a hand on Harry’s forehead. “I’ll see you soon,” he whispered, and Harry, lost somewhere beyond the gold, nodded.

The Malfoys headed towards the entrance of the hospital wing. Harry watched their blurring figures for a moment before his awareness shattered on the sharp edges of reality as if he were falling down stairs, and he fell asleep.

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*Like another fever dream:*

Harry woke to a croon he had reason to know, and a high-pitched voice attempting desperately to keep to a whisper that he recognized after a moment.

“Harry Potter? Is Harry Potter awake?”

Harry shifted and moved until he found a comfortable position for his aching head, then opened his eyes. A pair of brilliant black eyes met his. Fawkes sat on the edge of his bed, and crooned again as Harry looked back at him. Then a house elf moved into view. It took Harry another moment to connect Dobby with the voice that had whispered to him, because the elf wasn't wringing his hands or pinching his ears. His face was calm and intent.

“Harry Potter is awake,” he whispered. “Dobby is glad.”

“What are you doing here?” Harry asked softly. “Did you hear the Malfoys discuss taking me home for the summer?”

Dobby nodded. “Dobby's masters will say that Dobby is a bad elf,” he said, still whispering. “But Dobby will protect Harry Potter. Dobby works in the Manor. If Lucius Malfoy tries to attack Harry Potter, Dobby will not let him.”

Harry experienced a brief and entirely unexpected stab of pity for Lucius.

He did move past it, though, when Fawkes trilled at him and moved closer, nudging at his shoulder with his head. Hesitantly, Harry lifted his hand and scratched the phoenix's neck. Fawkes crooned again, and blinked slowly, like an owl.

“Fawkes says that Harry Potter is on the road,” whispered Dobby. “Harry Potter is beginning.”

Harry felt his jaw gape slightly. “You can understand what he says?”

Dobby eyed him. “All house elves understand phoenixes, Harry Potter, and all phoenixes understand house elves.”

“I never knew that,” Harry muttered.

“Harry Potter has never asked Dobby,” Dobby said simply. He listened as Fawkes uttered a stream of notes, then smiled. Harry didn't know what to make of that smile. It was intent and dreamy, as though Dobby saw something in the future that he truly enjoyed. “Fawkes says that Harry Potter is on the road to being a *vates*,” he said.

“What is that?” Harry tried to force his aching brain to work. He knew the word, he knew that, but he didn't know what it meant right now.

“All of us know,” said Dobby, instead of answering. “All the magical creatures know. House elves, phoenixes, centaurs, unicorns, dragons.” He shuddered convulsively as he spoke the last word. “We know what might happen. No prophecies, no destiny, no masters. What might happen, if it is chosen. We wait, and we hope.”

Harry felt his eyes drifting shut again, despite his desire to keep them open. “Is that why Fawkes helped me?” he murmured.

Dobby's answer was nearly lost between the planes of sleep, but Harry managed to hear it. “Not all of it, Harry Potter. Some of it is because he likes you.” A pause. “And because he is sorry.”

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*And a third dream, or occurrence, or odd meeting that Harry would not have imagined for himself:*

He found himself abruptly awake, staring straight up at the ceiling, but with the consciousness that there was *someone* at his bedside. He turned his head, and saw Connor asleep in a chair, his arms piled on Harry's bed and his head resting on top of them.

Harry watched his brother for a moment. Connor's dark hair was ruffled as though with wind, and the sound of his breathing was soft with dreaming. Harry reached out a shaky hand and touched his shoulder.

Connor jerked up, blinked, then oriented himself. They stared at each other.

Harry was the first to look away. He'd seen the first cracks of childhood in his brother's hazel eyes. Connor had started to grow up. He'd seen horrible things in the Chamber, nearly died there—both in reality and in his altered memories—and survived. He knew about his compulsion ability now. And he was free of Riddle's possession, probably for the first time since Harry had sent the madman from his own mind.

"Harry," Connor whispered, as if reading his thoughts. "I—I had Riddle in my head. I understand more about you now."

Harry turned back. Connor met his gaze and gave him a thin, tremulous smile. Harry let out a harsh breath. "Was all of it him?" he asked. "I mean—were you trying to compel Hermione because of him, and did you argue with me because of him, and did you act strangely because of him?"

Connor nodded slowly. "A lot of it. But the compulsion ability is mine. And he had to let me out to deal with you in our conversation after Valentine's Day. He has no clue how to confront love, Harry, no clue at all." He smiled grimly, fleetingly. "I understand him so much better now." His smile dropped away, and he trained his eyes on Harry's face. "Some of the things you said during that conversation convinced him that you suspected he was there, so he did draw back and let me act more naturally in the months since then. But I—I could always feel him." His hand drifted up to his scar. "Such *slime*, Harry, such *filth*. How did you stand it?"

"Pretty much the same way you did, I imagine," said Harry, and heard his voice crack down the middle. "I survived."

Connor caught his gaze, and his eyes were wild and fierce and bright. Harry had never seen his brother look that way. He felt the shards of his heart stir, just a little.

"Yeah," said Connor quietly. "We did, didn't we?" He stood up abruptly, and reached across the bed, and put his arms around Harry. Harry turned his face into his brother's shoulder, and held on that way.

"I know that something's wrong," Connor whispered to him. "Mum and Dad and Sirius haven't said one word about you since you landed here, not one word. They don't seem to see you when I'm here and they come in. I asked them about you once, and they were on the verge of asking who you were. It's like you moved away a long time ago." He paused. "Did you do that?"

"Yes," Harry whispered, his voice cracking again. "I *had* to, Connor."

"Shhh, I know," Connor said. His hand moved up and down on Harry's back. "When Mum came near your bed, your magic started spitting around you, and a lightning bolt nearly took her down. I think it's best if you stay apart from all of us a little while." He let out a breath. "I don't think that going with the *Malfoys* is necessarily the best choice, but it's not my decision. You're leaving today, you know."

"Today?" Harry tried to sit back and see Connor's face, but his brother wouldn't let him. "How long have I been asleep?"

"Nearly two weeks," Connor said. "They canceled our exams with all the excitement, you know. Hermione was moping." Harry could hear the smile in his voice. "Neville and Luna were telling anyone who would listen that you didn't Petrify them, that it was something called Wrackspurts. And they got Smith revived, the prat, and he's been poking me to know when you're going to get better." He paused for a long moment, his hand still. "Do—do you want to attend the Leaving Feast? It's tonight."

"I don't think I could," Harry said honestly, and closed his eyes. He was already tiring again. It was less a physical than a mental tiredness, as though his mind were weary of thinking. "I want to *rest*, Connor. That's why I'm going to the Malfoys, to rest. You can tell the others—whatever you want."

“I’m going to tell them the truth,” Connor whispered back. “That we were both possessed, and you’re the bravest person I know.” His hands tightened once more on Harry’s back. “And don’t worry about Dad and Mum and Sirius. I’ll figure out what’s going on. I promise.”

Harry tightened his hold back, and felt the first emotion that wasn’t tired in some fashion bubble up inside him. It was fury, and it was cold and dark and could easily build.

*If Mum hurt me, she could hurt Connor.*

“Write to me,” he whispered. “Let me know you’re all right. And—and take care of Remus for me?”

“Sure, Harry,” Connor said. “Don’t worry about it. Take care of yourself.”

Harry closed his eyes. The future was coming, and when it got here, he would have to worry about any number of things. There were still the memories to face, and his magic, and the concerns about the Malfoys, and what Dobby had said, and what was going to happen when he finally saw his parents again.

But, for now, he could think about resting, healing, taking some time for himself, and he didn’t even have to feel guilty for it.

“Ready, Harry?”

Harry recognized Draco’s voice, and drew gently back from Connor. “I’ll see you soon,” he whispered.

Connor hugged him once more, roughly, and then hopped off the chair and made a beeline for the door. “Malfoy,” he said with a cool nod as he passed Draco. Draco just scowled at him. Harry concealed a smile.

Draco turned and looked up at him, eyes brilliant with emotions that Harry supposed he could spend some time exploring. “Ready, Harry?” he repeated.

“Yes,” said Harry, and he was, the world stretching clear and crystalline around him suddenly. He looked up and saw Narcissa Malfoy standing in the doorway, ready to carry him if he couldn’t walk. “Let’s go home.”

~\*~\*~\*~\*~\*~\*

### **Interlude: Two Letters**

*June 12th, 1993*

To: Auror Department

Ministry of Magic

To whom it may concern,

My name is Severus Snape, Potions Master at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. I am currently doing research into the properties of Pensieves, in the hopes of developing a Potion that will behave like a Pensieve for short periods of time.

I should like to view some of the Pensieves that your department has stored, containing records of trials deemed appropriate for public viewing, among the following trials chosen at random:

Trial of Mundungus Fletcher, June 19th, 1980

Trial of Flora Skeeter, October 23rd, 1981

Trial of Peter Pettigrew, November 6th, 1981

Trial of Hawthorn Parkinson, May 11th, 1982

Trial of Mundungus Fletcher, September 9th, 1983

Please let me know at your earliest convenience whether I may be obliged in this matter.

I remain,

*Severus Snape.*

*July 1st, 1993*

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Lucius:

I trust that you will let no opportunity slip by you as you did with the diary I asked you to fetch. You know what you need to do, and if you do not perform your task adequately, there are others, more loyal to our master, who will.

I see no need for a name. You do not know who I am, and that is the way it will remain. Know only that I stand high in our Lord's councils.

The Dark Lord *will* return.

~\*~\*~\*~\*~\*~\*