hd_inspired Back to School Fest

Pairing(s): Harry/Draco (minimal Ron/Hermione and Neville/Ginny)

Rating: NC-17 for sex and violence

Summary: Voldemort has issued a proposition: if Harry Potter will return to Hogwarts for his seventh year, no harm will come to the students' families.  Harry's saving-people-thing won't let him say no.

Warnings: Explicit torture, bad language, frottage, wanking, very, very slight dubious consent. This story is an AU Seventh Year; it begins with the scene at the Burrow on Harry's 17th birthday and largely splits from canon there.

Word count: 39,000

# Survival Instinct

Harry's birthday had been great.  In fact - he thought again of the kiss in Ginny's bedroom - it had been very nearly spectacular.

Which was why Harry was not pleased at all when the Minister showed up halfway through his party,

barging in and demanding to speak with him.

"This had better be good," he said darkly, refusing Scrimgeour's offer to have a seat.

"Of course, Potter, so important.  So reluctant to leave your many admirers.  Surely there couldn't be anything happening in the world worthy of dragging you away from your tea and cake," Scrimgeour mocked.  Harry didn't rise to the bait.

"What is it?" he asked.

"Dismiss your bodyguards and I'll tell you." Scrimgeour looked back and forth between Ron and Hermione's identical stone-cold faces.

"They stay.  I'll tell them everything anyway."

Scrimgeour pulled a scroll from his robes and shook it in Harry's face. "Now you see here, boy. You may think you're something special - 'The Chosen One' - but I am the Minister of Magic and I will not be spoken to in that tone of voice. You need to learn some respect, young man."

"And you should learn some modesty," Harry retorted.

"Should I now?" Scrimgeour smiled maliciously. "Apparently we have much to teach one another. For example: I know how many lives will be lost if you do not return to Hogwarts. Do you?"

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Of course you don't," he sneered. "You cannot lie to me, Potter. I have heard of your plans. You intend to abandon your education and fight You-Know-Who on your own, without consulting the Ministry. Have you not considered the ramifications of your brash actions? Of course not," he spat, not giving Harry a chance to respond. "Harry Potter is above even the Minister now."

Harry stared at him blankly. He did not know what Scrimgeour meant, but he didn't want to

acknowledge that Scrimgeour was right about the three of them leaving school - or that there might be a fallout he hadn't anticipated.

"Ramifications?" Hermione asked. Harry sent her a silent 'thank you.' "What ramifications?" She sounded nervous.

Scrimgeour stared at her. "Oh, something you don't know, missy? Allow me to enlighten you." He unrolled the scroll he had been waving in their faces. "This is a list of everyone who has a relative attending Hogwarts. Witches, wizards, Muggles: everyone." The list was massive. Harry recognised a good deal of them: the Weasleys, Hermione's parents, Xenophilius Lovegood - that must be Luna's father - and so on. But there were more he had never heard of - many, many more.

"Hang on, what's that for?" Ron asked the obvious question this time. Scrimgeour grinned.

"I am not the only one who knows your plans. My office received a communication from He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named just this morning. He has sworn that no harm will come to anyone whose name is on this list--" He gestured to the scroll in Harry's hands. "--if Harry Potter returns to Hogwarts for his seventh year."

The three of them went silent with shock. Harry recovered first. "You're lying," he croaked. "You're not in contact with Voldemort." Scrimgeour cringed. "You just want everyone to think we're cooperating with the Ministry."

Scrimgeour shook his head grimly, but Harry could see the corners of his mouth twitch. "I am sorry to disappoint you, Potter, but this is not my doing. Though I will say I appreciate the offer. It is a generous one."

"Generous?" Hermione echoed.

Scrimgeour sneered down at her. "Yes, generous; you may be too young to recall the last war, missy, but I am not. We would have given anything for this sort of agreement then. You-Know-Who kills without care or conscience." He turned to Harry. "And he has made it clear that unless you return to Hogwarts, no one on this list will be safe. I guarantee this is not an empty threat. Their lives are in your hands."

"How do I know this isn't a trick?" Harry asked. "If I did go back, how do I know Voldemort wouldn't be waiting for me when I step off the train?"

"Afraid of him now, are you, Potter? What happened to that adolescent bravado?" He shrugged, as if to

show he did not care whether Harry lived or died. "I cannot guarantee your safety, boy. But consider this." He stepped closer, so that Harry had to look up to maintain his glare. "Do you believe he does not know where you are, even now? You have been a frequent guest in this house over the years. The Weasley family has all but adopted you. If You-Know-Who wanted you dead, he could have breached the wards days ago, searching for you. Where else would he look?"

He was right. The Burrow was the worst location they could have chosen to hide Harry. They might as well have hung a sign that read 'The Chosen One sleeps here.' Scrimgeour snatched the paper back and shook it in Harry's face. "If you choose to disregard this threat, and any of these people die, their deaths will be on your head, Potter. Think on that." He tossed the scroll aside and stood back to collect himself. "You-Know-Who has requested a response by tomorrow. I shall await your owl. Good night." And then he was gone.

Silence hung over the room. Harry felt he was being stretched in two directions. He couldn't return to Hogwarts; now Dumbledore was gone, there was nothing left for him at the school. He had to focus on locating the remaining Horcruxes and finding a way to kill Voldemort. Those were the most important things, he knew, yet he couldn't ignore the names on the list. All the people whose lives he risked by ignoring Voldemort's threat. All the people he could save.

"Guys-" he began, and was instantly cut off by Hermione's tight grip on his arm.

"Don't even think of it, Harry. You can't go back. I don't know why Voldemort wants you there, but it must be a plot. You'll be captured or killed, and then we'll never defeat him." Harry shook free.

"Do you think I don't know that? I know what could happen! But if I don't go back, he'll go down that list and kill them all, I know he will. All those people will die, because of me!"

Hermione spoke slowly, deliberately, like she was afraid of setting him off. "It'll be worse if we don't do what Dumbledore said and find the Horcruxes, though. Maybe Voldemort's caught on and he's trying to stop you, or maybe he doesn't know what we're doing and he just wants you dead. Either way, you can't go back. Dumbledore would have wanted us to keep looking."

"You don't know what Dumbledore would have wanted!" Harry argued. "Hermione, Dumbledore always said that help would be available at Hogwarts for anyone that needed it. Well, now he's gone and our friends need help, and I can help them! I think Dumbledore would have wanted me to do that!"

"If you want to help them, you should do what Dumbledore spent last year teaching you to do and defeat Voldemort. You're the only one that can, and you're the only one Dumbledore trusted enough to tell how. You can't ignore all that just because you have a thing for saving people!"

Harry couldn't believe Hermione was arguing with him. She knew how dangerous it was, especially for Muggles - she'd erased her own parents' memories and sent them to Australia! Why couldn't she see

what had to be done? "I don't want to ignore it! But you don't care about going back because you know your parents are safe! Don't you remember last year, when there was that attack near their house? You wouldn't stop me from going back if they were still in danger!" Hermione looked as though she had been slapped. Harry felt a twinge of guilt and rushed to change the topic. "Look, we can still search for the Horcruxes while we're at school, we'll find a way to sneak out. And we'll know everyone is safe-"

"No," Ron interrupted. Harry and Hermione wheeled around; they'd nearly forgotten Ron was there. "Not everyone. I'm not going back." Harry's mouth fell open; Hermione looked as though she might burst from pride. "Dumbledore gave us a mission, and it needs to be done. Sorry, mate, but if you're doing this to keep Mum and Dad safe, it won't work. I'm not going back with you." Ron leant back, like he was expecting a blow. His eyes widened when Hermione threw her arms around him.

"Oh Ron," she cried. Ron lifted his arms to hug her, but froze before his hands could touch her sides. He settled on patting her back awkwardly. When she pulled away, she was wiping tears from her eyes. "Harry, Ron is right. We have to do what Dumbledore said, the three of us. He wanted us to be in this together, once- once he was gone." She swallowed hard, fresh tears spilling over. "I know you want to help them, Harry, but you'd do more good by getting rid of Voldemort once and for all."

"So you won't come back either?"

Hermione shook her head. "No. I'm sorry, Harry, but I don't think we should. Finding the Horcruxes is too important." Harry opened his mouth to retort, but she cut him off. "I'm not saying that helping our friends isn't important. I want to help them too, Harry, but not as much as I'd like to see Voldemort

defeated!"

"Fine," Harry said. "If you won't come back, I'll go by myself. The two of you can keep up the search out here if you want. I can- I don't know, I'll find a way out somehow so I can help when you need me." He stopped. He hadn't expected to face this moment yet, the moment where the three of them parted ways. He could tell by their resigned faces they hadn't expected it either. "Maybe you two should take the Invisibility Cloak; you'll probably need it more than me."

"Naw, mate," Ron sighed. "You keep it. It's your dad's. Besides--" he smiled mischievously, "--you've got to give 'em hell for us."

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When the Ministry fell the next day, nearly everyone at Bill and Fleur's wedding reception was on the dance floor, singing along with the chorus of the newest hit from the Weird Sisters.

Harry had sent the note to Scrimgeour without much more argument from Ron and Hermione; though they tried to dissuade him, he stood fast. Hermione had grudgingly removed his belongings from the

pile of things to pack, but soon found herself in brighter spirits.

"Of course I still want you to come with us, Harry, but just think, I was going to leave Dark or Daring behind! I don't know what I was thinking, but now there'll be room, and oh, I could pack the supplement to Hogwarts, A History..."

Harry was glad they hadn't taken it too harshly. Hermione had even hunted down the spell to create a pair of matched mirrors--like the one Sirius had given him years ago--so they could communicate. She'd used a cosmetics mirror for his, nicked from Ginny's drawer, so it was small enough to fit in the pouch from Hagrid.

At the thought of Ginny, his stomach lurched. He looked for her through the throng of wedding guests and caught sight of her dancing with Charlie. The happy look on her face caused a twinge of guilt in his gut. They hadn't told her the plan yet; he wondered if he should. He imagined the look on her face when she learnt he wasn't leaving, and a teeny, tiny part of him was suddenly glad to be staying in school. Maybe there could be more moments like the one in her room yesterday, before Ron had barged in. He thought of her smile, the smell of her hair, the feel of her back under his hands...

No, he told himself. He couldn't. If he started dating Ginny again, he might be tempted to pretend it was just like last year, when death wasn't waiting behind every corner. When he didn't have a mission from Dumbledore. When he could afford to get lost in Ginny's eyes for hours on end. But he couldn't let himself pretend. It was too dangerous. He had to keep his wits about him, even if it meant seeing Ginny with someone else.

He would have expected a fight, a riot, something, when the Ministry fell. Some kind of resistance. But there was nothing; the transition was quick and clean. The only clue that anything had changed was Shacklebolt's Patronus announcing the death of Rufus Scrimgeour. The room went silent, spellbound - and just like that, the wizarding world was under Voldemort's control.

A rush of near-panic took over the congregation. No one knew what to do: Go home? Run away? Stay at the reception? Most of the guests were frozen with indecision. Only Hermione and Ron burst into action. They left the dance floor and sped towards him, and Hermione pulled him into a tight embrace.

"We've got to go," she whispered into his ear. He nodded and hugged her close. The catch in her voice made his heart ache; loath as he was to admit it, he knew they might be saying goodbye for the last time. When she released him, Ron leant in to shake his hand and give him a pat on the back. He didn't know what to say. He wondered whether he'd made the right choice. They should be doing this together, leaving the world behind to chase their fate. It was what Dumbledore had intended. Dumbledore, however, had never imagined Voldemort would hold the school hostage in exchange for Harry's presence. If he had, he would have understood. Or so Harry hoped. He had to stay.

"Goodbye, Harry," Hermione said, and smiled at him. "You're doing a really good thing, you know. A lot of people owe you their lives. Or they will." Ron nodded his agreement.

"I know," Harry said.  "Keep me updated, okay?  And let me know if you need my help."

"We'll talk every night," Hermione said, and then she grabbed Ron's arm.  "Bye, Harry."

"See you, Harry," Ron said, and with a crack! they were gone.

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By September first, Harry was getting anxious to return to Hogwarts, despite the fact that their welcome letters were signed 'Headmaster Severus Snape.'

He'd stayed on at the Burrow.  He didn't have anywhere else to go, not if he couldn't stay with Ron and Hermione, and Mrs. Weasley would not hear of him getting a room at the Leaky Cauldron again.  She'd had a careworn look about her ever since the wedding, when Ron and Hermione had disappeared together, and attempted to prise information from him at every turn.  Despite her constant efforts, however, he refused to tell her where they had gone - or why he had stayed.  She never stopped asking, but it wasn't so difficult to dodge her questions, and she seemed content enough to feed and fuss over

him in Ron's absence.  However frustrating she was at times, he couldn't bring himself to leave the Burrow for his own space.  Not when he knew he might never visit it again.

Mrs Weasley was frustrating, but Ginny was a hundred times worse.  While her first reaction had been to punch him in the arm - hard - the anger on her face had been quickly replaced by a dreamy look that made Harry go a little sick inside.  He could tell she was having the same thoughts Harry had already abandoned - fantasies of getting back together and having another year as pleasant as the last.  He'd given her the best explanation he could, then brushed her away and run into the packed kitchen to make his escape.  She hadn't spoken to him since.

So the first of September arrived both too soon and too late.  Harry could hardly sleep on the nights leading up to the start of the new year, but there was a sense that knowing what was in store for him was preferable to the interminable waiting.  He was almost relieved to finally pack his trunk and set off for the station.  When they arrived at platform nine and three-quarters, Harry could feel people staring at him.  Apparently his secret plan to leave school hadn't been so secret after all.  He ducked his head to avoid their questioning glances and said good-bye to Mr and Mrs Weasley, neither of whom seemed willing to let him go - they kept pulling him close for one more hug, one last handshake, one final spot of advice.  Harry didn't pull away.  He didn't know what the new school year would bring, but he knew there would be plenty of times when he wanted nothing more than to be back at the Burrow again.

They let him go just as the final whistle blew.  Harry dashed on board and settled himself into an empty compartment.  He thought about Ron and Hermione, and wished he were with them; they were at Grimmauld Place, now, preparing to infiltrate the Ministry and retrieve Slytherin's locket.  They made it sound like dull work, but he'd have preferred it to lumping about the Burrow, surrounded by emotional Weasley women.

"Hey, Harry."  Startled, he looked up to a crowded doorway.

"Oh, hey, Neville.  Hi, Luna," he responded.

"Hello, Harry," came Luna's dreamy voice.  "Would you like some company?"

"Er, yes, actually," he replied.  He hadn't seen either of them since the wedding, and suddenly found he'd missed them quite a lot.  Luna perched herself across from him, and Neville spent an awkward moment glancing from chair to chair until he chose the seat beside Harry.

"We didn't think you were coming back," Luna said bluntly.  "I think Ginny's angry because you won't kiss her anymore."  Then she blinked, as though this were a perfectly normal way to begin a conversation.  Harry had to smile.

"I know, Luna, I wasn't coming back, but-" He stopped.  He wasn't sure he wanted everyone to know why

he'd returned.  He dropped his voice.  "But there's something I've got to do at the school.  Something Dumbledore didn't finish."  Luna smiled sagely and Neville nodded beside him.  Harry was relieved when they didn't offer to help.  He spent the rest of the journey half-listening to Luna's stories about hunting nonexistent creatures in the Himalayas.

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Seeing Snape at the center of the High Table made Harry's fingers twitch towards his wand, but the sight of Amycus and Alecto Carrow flanking the Headmaster's chair stopped him cold.  He realised something then: the school wasn't just run by Snape; it was run by Death Eaters.  Yes, McGonagall was still there, and Flitwick, and Slughorn, but they'd been edged aside to make room for the dark trio at the center.  Harry half-expected to see Fenrir Greyback taking a seat beside them.  He clenched his teeth.  No wonder Voldemort had wanted him to return.

"Good evening," Snape intoned after they had all settled themselves.  Harry sat next to Neville again; Ginny was at the far end of the table with Dean and Seamus, flipping her hair every so often.  Harry seethed and tried to remind himself why he was there.

"In light--" said Snape, forgoing any pleasantries, "--of the death of the previous Headmaster, and the disappearance of our Muggle Studies professor, we have two additions to our staff this year.  Alecto Carrow has offered her services until Professor Burbage is located, and her brother Amycus will take my post.  In addition--" he paused until the room was quiet, "--the professors have agreed to shoulder the responsibilities of rule enforcement and discipline.  I should like to hope they will find you well-behaved and obedient, but my past experience leaves me doubtful.  I beg their indulgence until your turbulent

behaviours can be brought under control."  The Carrows nodded graciously, but Harry caught a gleam in Alecto's eye.  She reminded him of Bellatrix Lestrange, demonic and dangerous, but a dumpier version.  She looked out at the students like a dull-eyed predator, staring heavily and gnawing at her bottom lip.

Harry turned his attention to his food and ignored the Sorting.  He could tell when someone had been placed in Slytherin by the low hisses throughout the room, though they stopped once Alecto rose from her seat to glare down at the tables. Other than that, the meal was uneventful, but he knew it was only the calm before a great storm.  The Carrows couldn't intend to teach them anything useful, certainly not to defend themselves against Dark Magic.  No wonder their letters hadn't included any books for those classes; he doubted there were textbooks in existence that matched their lesson plans.

Things didn't remain quiet for long.  His first run-in occurred that very night.  He was unpacking his things and regaling Dean and Seamus with tales of Ron's non-existent Spattergroit when weighty steps from outside drowned out Seamus' laughter.  They all stopped to look toward the door.

"Mr Potter," wheezed Amycus Carrow.  "Making yourself at home, I see?"

Harry glared.  "I've lived here for seven years.  It's more my home than yours."

Carrow had a toothy grin that did not reach his eyes. "Of course you have. Welcome home, then. Thrilled you could return. Hogwarts wouldn't be the same without Harry Potter, would it? You bring such life to the place."

"Is there something you wanted?" Harry ground out. No one else was moving, but they didn't seem scared. Of course, they hadn't been on the tower with him that night. Only Harry knew the danger that could come of having this man in their dorm.

"Bedcheck, Potter. Have to make sure our favourite pupil gets tucked in safe. Oh--" he added thoughtfully, "--and I'd like you to call me Professor."

Harry swallowed. "As you can see, Professor, I'm right here."

"So you are." Carrow's eyes flicked to the other boys, who were watching mutely. "Very well, Mr Potter. Get some sleep; can't have you dozing in class tomorrow." He waved his wand dismissively and left the room.

A whoosh of air went through the room as all four boys let out the breaths they'd been holding. "Blimey, Harry, that's our new Defence professor? He's creepier than Moody, he is." Seamus laughed at Dean's

incredulous tone and Neville tittered nervously.

"Worse every year, aren't they, Dean?"  Harry replied with false humour.

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The next morning, Harry woke with a queasy stomach.  He'd barely slept the night before.  Ron and Hermione expected him to check in, and he'd had to wait until Dean and Seamus finished swapping stories.  They hadn't had any new information for him, but Hermione was just as concerned about the Carrows' involvement with the school as he, and she'd yammered on for ages.  Ron had only convinced her to put away the mirror once it was well past three and Harry's eyes were visibly drooping.

Exhausted and sick wasn't the way Harry wanted to arrive for his first class with Amycus Carrow, but there was nothing for it.  He filed into the classroom with the rest of the Gryffindor and Slytherin seventh-years and took a seat to the far side, trying to stay out of Carrow's line of sight.

"Mr Potter!  Avoiding the spotlight, are we?"  Harry cringed.  "None of that, now.  There's a seat for you right here."  Amycus kicked the table in front of him.  Snickers erupted from the Slytherin side of the

room.

"Yes, sir," he grumbled, and moved to the indicated seat. Harry groaned inwardly when he caught sight of an unmistakable white-blond head. The other half of the table was occupied by Draco Malfoy. Naturally. Harry sat and scooted his chair as far away from Malfoy as it would go. Thankfully, he was spared any snide comments. Malfoy's eyes were trained straight ahead. He gave no impression that he was even aware of Harry's presence.

"Better, better. Can see you just fine now. All right!" He called the students to attention. "Six years of Defence Against the Dark Arts you've had, then?" Carrow looked out to the sea of faces, many of whom were nodding in agreement. "Rubbish. You wouldn't know a Dark spell if it slit your throat." Harry paled and tried not to look reflexively at Malfoy. Visions of a tiled floor covered in blood filled his mind. A glance to the side proved Malfoy was squirming in discomfort, but he didn't raise his hand to inform Carrow that Harry Potter knew more Dark Magic than was wholly proper for the archetype of the side of Light.

"Yes, girl?" Harry's head snapped to follow Carrow's voice. Parvati's raised hand drooped a little at Carrow's harsh tone.

"Well, last year, sir, Professor Snape showed us some Dark Magic. A-and back in fourth year, Professor Moody showed us the Killing Curse, and the Cruciatus, and-"

"That's all you'll need, is it?" Carrow roared. "Show and tell and now you're an expert in Dark Magic? What would you do right now if I cast the Imperius on you, girl? How would you defend against that, eh?" He looked around the room. "Your education on the Dark Arts is pathetic."

Parvati looked as though she might cry. Harry's temper flared. "Yeah, not being taught to kill each other, that's real pathetic. What could Dumbledore have been thinking to send us off without that useful bit of knowledge?" He spoke loudly, and heard a sharp intake of breath behind him. Carrow spun around and Harry felt a sharp blow land across his face and a blast of pain explode in his ear. He shouted in surprise and had to grab the desk to keep from falling to the floor; he felt dizzy and unbalanced. He was pretty sure his classmates were whispering behind him, but he couldn't hear them through the ringing in his ear.

"I believe I asked you to call me Professor, Mr Potter," Carrow said gleefully. "I daresay Snape was right about the appalling lack of discipline in this school. Got no respect for your superiors, have you?"

"I wouldn't know, Professor," Harry retorted. The words sounded tinny in his ear. "I don't see any of my superiors here." There was no mistaking the shocked murmur that went through the class that time. Harry prepared himself for another blow, but Carrow only smiled.

"Mr. Potter--" he said, addressing the class, "--has just offered to aid our demonstration today. Please stand, Mr. Potter, we want everyone to have a good view." Harry pulled himself to his feet and stepped into the aisle beside his desk. "You, girl," Carrow gestured towards Parvati but kept his eyes locked firmly on Harry's. "What was your name?"

"P-Parvati Patil, Professor," she spoke in a small voice.

"Patil.  You say you've had some instruction on the Dark Arts.  Why don't you give us an example?  Surely you've mastered the Cruciatus by now."

"Sir, we've never used the spells, I- I don't know how..."

"Oh?  But you've just told me of your vast experience in this area.  Come on, then, just one little Crucio." Parvati looked at Harry, who nodded slightly.

"Sir, Professor, I can't-"

"Do it now!"  Carrow snapped.  "Or you can be our next volunteer!"

She was crying, now, little wet rivulets running down her cheeks.  Her hands shook as she pointed her wand at Harry.  "C-crucio!"  Her voice was soft and scared; she didn't mean it.  The ripple of pain through Harry's body barely caused him to wince.

Carrow laughed.  "What did I tell you, Potter?  Pathetic."  Harry found Parvati's eyes and smiled as best he could.  "Let's see if anyone can top Patil's effort.  Greg, my boy, your father has always had a way with the Cruciatus.  Has he taught you?"

Goyle looked dumbfounded for a moment, like he didn't recognise his first name.  "Uh, no, Professor."

Carrow shook his head.  "No matter.  Like father, like son, I'm sure.  Give it a go."

Goyle looked at Harry blankly for a moment, then smiled.  "Yes, sir!"  His hands trembled as he fumbled for his wand, as well.  No doubt he'd been itching to cast the spell on Harry for years.  "Crucio!"

The pain that erupted throughout Harry's body wasn't so bad as when Voldemort had hit him, but it still brought him to his knees.  He wanted to stand tall, pretend it didn't affect him, but it hurt: he thought his bones must be shredding into a thousand pieces.  He couldn't help it, he yelled and screamed and shook as the pain dragged on viciously.  When it stopped, he had to fight not to retch on the floor.

The room was silent - not even the Slytherins were laughing - but the sound of Harry's own heartbeat and breathing merged with a deafening high-pitched hum inside his head.  He barely heard Carrow congratulate Goyle and order him to return to his seat.  Thankfully, the demonstration seemed to have finished; he wasn't asked to stand again, nor was anyone else, and Carrow launched into a lecture on the many virtues of Dark Magic.  Harry tuned him out.  If he listened, he'd be tempted to make another smart remark, and he didn't want to give Carrow more opportunities to terrorise his classmates than the man already had.  So he stared down at the desk, and caught a hint of movement from the corner of his eye.

Hidden below the desk, Malfoy's hands were shaking violently.

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"It's not too late, Harry.  You can still leave.  We could really use your help, it's going to be tough with just the two of us."

He tried not to snap at her image in the mirror. "No, Hermione, I can't leave. This might not be the greatest place right now, but at least it's safe. And if I leave now, no one will be safe."

"I know, but right now you aren't safe and I think-"

"I'm fine!" He peered around guiltily to be sure he hadn't woken his roommates. They were all snoring loudly. "I'm fine," he repeated. "If they were going to try anything, they'd have done it by now. What's the point in waiting to kill me?"

He could see a response in Hermione's eyes and regretted asking. "Actually, I've been considering that. Why do you think Vol- oh, hush Ron- Voldemort wanted you back at the school this year?"

"To torture me? To keep watch over me? How should I know?"

"I don't think that's it, Harry, I think there's something more than that."

"Something more?" he asked, confused.  What more could there be?  What other reason could Voldemort have?

"Do you think--" she started tentatively.  "Is there a chance that you're the sixth Horcrux?"

"What?"  Harry wasn't sure how to take that.  He could hear Ron's frustrated protests in the background and knew he didn't approve of the theory, either.

"Well, just think: Vol- oh, fine, You-Know-Who said the soul should be divided seven times, or into six Horcruxes.  The ring and the diary are gone, and there's Slytherin's locket, and Hufflepuff's cup, and something from Ravenclaw.  That means there's one we don't know yet, but Dumbledore said You-Know-Who couldn't find anything of Gryffindor's."

"Dumbledore said Nagini was the sixth Horcrux," Harry said stubbornly.  That was the only sensible solution.  Voldemort would never have stored a piece of his soul in Harry's body.

"He thought Nagini was the sixth Horcrux, but he didn't know, just like he didn't know where to look for the Cup, or Ravenclaw's artefact!"

"And you know better than Dumbledore, do you?"

"Harry, please! Think about it. Has Voldemort tried to kill you since the night he returned?"

"Yes!" Harry began. "The night we left the Dursleys', he tried to kill me, and he did kill Mad-Eye Moody!"

"No, I don't think so. I think he was trying to kill members of the Order, there were so many with us that night! He didn't know they'd all be Polyjuiced to look like you. And if he wanted to kill you, why would you be at the school?" Hermione was speaking excitedly now. "I don't think he wants you dead at all, I think he wants to keep watch over you so that you can't die! That's why he wanted you at the school, with Snape and the Carrows!"

She sounded very sure of herself, but Harry still wasn't convinced. "But why would he make me into a Horcrux? He's tried to kill me before!"

"That's when he thought you could vanquish him! Remember, he didn't know everything about the prophecy; he thought he had to kill you, before you killed him. But the prophecy says neither of you can live while the other survives, maybe that means you can't really live when you have a piece of You-Know-Who inside you, and he isn't really alive while his soul is torn apart!"

"Er, Hermione... We have to destroy all the Horcruxes. All of them. Doesn't that mean I would have to die?"

She fell silent as she contemplated his question. "I don't know, none of the books have elaborated on the idea of using a living being as a Horcrux. But--" her face brightened with a new idea, "--you've been run through with a Basilisk fang before, when you destroyed the diary! And you survived. Maybe that could work again! We'd need Fawkes, and once the venom had destroyed the Horcrux, he could heal the wound..."

"Merlin, give it a rest!" He could hear Ron's distant voice again. She frowned into the mirror. "He's not a Horcrux, Hermione, I think he would have remembered having a bit of You-Know-Who's soul jammed

into him.  And I think he would have told us about it!"

"Of course, but You-Know-Who is a skilled Legilimens.  Perhaps he could alter Harry's memories..." Harry smiled at their familiar bickering and there was a tug at his heart.  He felt homesick.

"I miss you," he blurted out, and Hermione's eyes went soft.

"Oh, Harry, we miss you too.  Really, if it gets too awful, you must leave at once.  There's no sense in getting yourself killed."

"Not unless I'm a Horcrux, anyway."  Hermione protested, but he cut her off.  "Don't worry, it's all right. We don't even know if people can be made into Horcruxes, do we?"  She shook her head.  "All right then. See if you can find anything and let me know.  I've got to go to bed, talk with you tomorrow."

He lay down, but tired as he was, sleep would not take him.  He spent most of the night staring at the ceiling and wondering whether Hermione wasn't right - whether a piece of Voldemort's soul wasn't trapped inside him, possessing him and cutting off his chances at a real life.

~*~

The second day passed much as the first, though spirits were significantly damper all around. Everyone had had class with either Amycus or Alecto Carrow by then, and caught on that this year wasn't quite like all the others. Still, Harry consoled himself that while they were miserable, they wouldn't turn up dead. And neither would their families.

He was on his way to his first Muggle Studies lesson of the year. He'd never taken it before, seeing as he'd grown up Muggle, but the class was mandatory now. It was bound to be awful, but at least it was his final class of the day. And besides, he told himself, it couldn't possibly be any worse than Amycus' class. He wasn't really convinced, however, and he opened the classroom door with trepidation.

The desks were divided into three sections, running the length of the room. He caught Dean's eye and rushed to grab the neighbouring seat before one could be assigned to him.

"Mr Potter!" Alecto Carrow's voice was shrill yet hoarse in a way that made him think of Aunt Marge after she'd smoked a pipe. He waited long enough to take one deep breath before responding.

"Yes, Professor?"

"Sitting with the Mudbloods, are you?" Harry gaped.

"I don't-"

"Are you a Mudblood, Mr Potter? Have you got dirty blood, like your Gryffindor friend here?"

"I'm not-"

"I didn't think so. So you don't want to sit beside him. Who knows what you could catch? Your mother-your mother was a Mudblood, wasn't she?" Harry stared stonily at her. "Yes, I know all about her. And your blood-traitor father. Very well--" She spoke loudly, to cut off his protest. "--in the middle. Put your wand away and keep your mouth shut." Harry took another deep breath, then deposited himself next to

Seamus.  At least he didn't have to sit in the front row again - or share a table with Malfoy.  Malfoy and several other Slytherins were in the third row, the pure-blood row.  Most of Gryffindor occupied the centre aisle, though Neville was sitting uncomfortably in the pure-blood section.  Dean and a Slytherin girl whose name Harry didn't remember appeared to be the only Muggle-borns in the room.

"Do you know why I've divided you this way, class?"  Alecto stared at them expectantly.  No one raised their hand.  "Well, as you know, magic can only be acquired in two ways: either it has been passed down from generation to generation, mother to daughter, father to son, or--" she grimaced as though a bug had just flown into her mouth, "--it has been stolen from its rightful owner."  Indignant gasps came from every corner of the room.  "Yes, I know.  And that is why we must separate them from those witches and wizards who come by their magic honestly.  Their magic could run out at any moment, and then they will attack again.  Any one of you could be their next victim.  You could be forced to live as a Squib."  She said it the way Uncle Vernon had once mentioned lepers.  Harry's stomach turned.

"Yes, they are a danger to the rest of us.  And that is why--" she looked at Dean and the Slytherin girl, smiling maliciously, "--I must confiscate your wands."

"WHAT?"  Harry's shout met Dean's, Seamus', and those of several other students, too, if the volume was any indication.  Alecto looked absolutely elated.

"Your magical heritage is currently under investigation by the Muggle-born Registration Committee.  You have been accused of stealing magic from natural-born wizards.  Until your cases are decided, you are not allowed to practice magic.  If your names are cleared, your wands will be returned.  If not-" she practically salivated,  "-you will be convicted for crimes against Wizardry and sentenced to the

Dementor's Kiss."

"No!"  Harry shouted, disturbing the tense air that had settled over the room.  "You can't do that, they didn't do anything wrong!"

Alecto turned towards him, breathing hard and heavy.  "You don't think it's wrong to steal someone's magic, Mr. Potter?"

"They didn't steal magic!"  He couldn't believe what she was saying.  The thought of Dean receiving the Kiss, or Hermione, spending the rest of their not-lives as soulless shells...  It chilled through him, made his stomach clench in revolt.

"To the contrary, Mr Potter.  I believe I've just explained that there's only two ways to acquire-"

"That's a lie!"

"Mr Potter!  You are testing my patience.  One more word and it's detention for you."

"But-"

"DETENTION!"  Her eyes flashed with excitement.  "Detention for you.  And if you make one more outburst, I will take your wand as well."

Harry sat back in his seat and bit his tongue.  He looked at Dean guiltily, and watched him hand over his wand.  Carrow held it at both ends, bending it slightly, grinning as Dean balled his hands into fists.

"Who'd you steal this from, Mudblood?"  She bent it further and Dean's hands jerked.

"I didn't steal it, it chose me."  Dean spoke with determination.  Carrow scoffed.

"I doubt that, you Muggle filth.  But we'll know soon enough."  She walked over to the Slytherin girl, who held out her wand with a trembling hand.  Dean turned his head towards Harry and shrugged.  Harry gave him a half-smile in return.  He'd been wrong.  This was much worse than Amycus' class.

~*~

As soon as class was over, he rushed to find a secluded location to contact Ron and Hermione.  When he told them what Alecto had said, Hermione was speechless, but Ron was infuriated.

"That's the dumbest thing I've ever heard!  Dean didn't steal his magic, that's not-"

"I know, Ron."  Harry's skull pounded.  He was sick of arguing.

"But it's not right!  If Hermione were there, they'd have taken her wand, too, and she'd be-"

"I know, Ron! I don't like it either, but what do you want me to do? I've already got a detention tonight, and I can't let them take my wand, too." He butted his head against the wall behind him. Why the hell had he agreed to this?

"Of course you can't, Harry," came Hermione's calm voice. "You've got to be able to defend yourself. And don't worry, they won't do anything while you're at school. They can't risk upsetting you like that, not when they know you'll run. You've got them held hostage just as much as they have you." Harry sighed. He'd been back less than two days, and already he felt depressed and drained. How he'd handle the full year, he didn't know.

By dinner, he was exhausted and ready to collapse into his food. Hermione had insisted on going over the plans for infiltrating the Ministry again, with Ron making frequent interruptions to curse the Carrows, Voldemort, and everyone on the Muggle-born Registration Committee. All he wanted was to curl up in his bed and let this day be over, but he still had detention with the Carrows to survive before he could sleep.

"Mr Potter." Harry perked up at the sound of McGonagall's voice. "I'm afraid the Carrows won't be able to hold your detention this evening." He was about to smile with relief, but stopped at the look on her face.

"Can I serve it with you?" he asked hopefully, and she gave him a wistful smile.

"I'm sorry, no," she said. "You'll have to reschedule." He nodded, and she reached out to squeeze his shoulder. "You're welcome to see me anytime you like," she said kindly. "My door is always open if you'd like to talk, or just a spot of tea."

"Thanks," Harry said. She gave him a last squeeze on the shoulder and returned to the High Table.

~*~

Six hours later, he sat up in his bed, shaking and sweating. Alecto and Amycus Carrow weren't the only ones with Voldemort that night: Bellatrix Lestrange had been in his dream, as well, as had Wormtail, and Fenrir Greyback... and Draco Malfoy. Bile rose in his throat at the memory:

There was a family, two parents and a little girl. The girl couldn't have been more than six, and she was sobbing loudly from her perch on Greyback's lap while Bellatrix cast the Cruciatus on her father. Malfoy had his back against the wall, averting his pale face from the scene before him.

"Something wrong, Draco?"  There was laughter in Voldemort's voice.  "Don't you enjoy watching your aunt play with her toys?"

Malfoy looked over to where Bellatrix stood and swallowed.  "I-"

"Maybe you should help her; there are two of them and only one of her.  The odds are hardly fair."  Malfoy winced.  "Do it!  Or I'll let Fenrir silence the girl however he pleases."  Fenrir guffawed and tightened his claws around the girl's legs.  She screamed and Malfoy blanched, then stumbled to stand beside his aunt.

"You can have the bitch, Draco," Bellatrix cackled.  "I've got the cur."

Malfoy pointed his wand at the woman crumpled on the floor.  "Crucio!"

Harry wracked his brain for a clue to the family's identity, but he couldn't think of any. He didn't recognise them; he couldn't even tell if they were wizard or Muggle. He had no idea what Voldemort would want with them, why they were so important as to require the presence of several high-ranking Death Eaters. He prayed Voldemort had left them alive, that he hadn't - Harry's stomach clenched at the memory of the girl. He wasn't even sure where he could tell the Order to search for her.

At breakfast that morning, Harry searched the Slytherin table for Malfoy. He was there, all right, so pale he was nearly translucent and clearly sleep-deprived. Harry watched as he pushed his food around the plate dejectedly and felt a twinge of sympathy. He didn't feel much like eating, either, and he hadn't been there in person, hadn't been forced to-

An ear-piercing scream disrupted his train of thought; looking around, he saw Alecto Carrow standing behind him, her wand pointed at the floor. Following the line of the wand, Harry saw a Ravenclaw girl flopping uncontrollably and screaming in pain.

"No!" He stood and rushed towards Alecto. "No, you can't!" He hadn't taken three steps before he felt a spell send him flying backwards. It knocked the wind out of him, but he forced himself to stand again. "Stop it! You said you wouldn't, you said-"

He stumbled backwards again, this time from the force of two hands on his shoulders. Looking up from the floor, he saw Vincent Crabbe standing over him. He rolled to his side, but a kick to his stomach laid him flat again. He drew his wand and Stunned Crabbe. The Ravenclaw girl was still screaming, her skirt riding up embarrassingly as her legs flailed out.

"Stop," he wheezed.  It felt like Crabbe had broken one of his ribs.  "You said you wouldn't- hurt them..." Alecto looked up at him and laughed.

"No, Potter, we said their families would be safe.  And they are.  But the students are ours."

"No."  It felt like a knife was stabbing into his lung.  He took a shallow breath, but before he could say anything else, he felt a Body-Bind freeze him in place.  He fought the paralysis at first, but stopped when he realised he could no longer hear the girl screaming.  At least he'd succeeded at that goal.

"Crabbe!  Goyle!"  He heard Amycus snapping directions from somewhere above him.  The male Carrow must have been the one to hit him with the spell.  "Take him to the dungeons."  Harry's heart sank as he felt their hands digging into his skin and dragging him across the floor, through the halls, and down the several stairways leading to the dungeons.

~*~

It could have been worse; Carrow had directed them to drop his body at the end of a hallway Harry didn't think he'd seen before. Of course, he wasn't sure about that since he couldn't look anywhere but the ceiling as long as the Body-Bind held. Once they'd set him down, Carrow transfigured a chain to connect his leg to the wall.

"You'll have to learn to control that temper, Mr. Potter, or your time here will prove rather unpleasant." He'd turned and walked away without removing the Body-Bind, his laughter resonating off the stone walls.

The first hour had been annoying, trapped in his uncomfortable position and completely unable to move. Thankfully, somewhere in the second hour the spell had begun to wear off, and he concentrated on working his muscles as feeling returned to them. When the paralysis finally wore off, he felt relieved - until he realised he couldn't remove the heavy manacle around his ankle. He cursed and kicked and pried at it until his fingers blistered and his ankle was raw, but there was nothing for it. Without his wand, he was stuck until someone let him free. He sat and seethed and tried to ignore the piercing pain in his side.

The burning frustration eventually gave way to a gnawing hunger. He'd been too nauseous to eat that morning, which meant he hadn't eaten anything since the evening before. Time passed interminably slowly; minutes passed like hours, and hours like days. Noon came and went, and after an eternity the dinner hour approached. His stomach rumbled loudly; it was the first sound he'd heard in ages. No one had come by since Carrow left him there that morning. It occurred to him vaguely that his solitude was odd, considering the sheer number of Slytherins whose dorms were located down there somewhere. But he was too lightheaded with hunger to care. He checked his pockets for a spare chocolate frog, but

they were as empty as he'd expected.

By midnight, he was a mass of pain. He had a God-awful headache, his broken rib was throbbing viciously, and it felt like the acid in his stomach was eating through his spine. He lay down on the mercifully cold floor and tried not to move. Sleep would have been better, but he couldn't ignore the pain long enough to doze off. He considered contacting Hermione and Ron, but there was nothing they could do, and it would only make them worry. He closed his eyes and tried counting sheep, like he'd seen in one of Dudley's cartoons.

"Mr Potter." He jolted when he heard the voice, then groaned. Snape. Just when he thought this day couldn't get any worse. He braced himself against the wall but couldn't find the will to answer.

"You seem to have had a run-in with the newest additions to our staff," Snape said, amused. Harry glowered at him. "My advice may hold little appeal for you, Potter, but as your headmaster, I feel compelled to offer some. It is this: while you choose to remain at this school, I suggest you refrain from pushing our new disciplinarians too far. One never knows when they might... forget their orders." He reached into his robe and drew a wand. Harry flinched before he realised it was his own. "You'll be needing this," Snape said, and tossed it to the floor. Harry reached for it, grimacing with pain, but it was just beyond his grasp. Snape gave a nasty little chuckle and turned on his heel, abandoning Harry again.

Harry banged his head against the wall. It was several minutes before he realised the lock around his ankle had broken open.

~*~

When he arrived at the hospital wing, Madam Pomfrey didn't ask any questions. She set to work, lips pursed, stuffing him full of potions and sandwiches before ordering him to sleep. Harry was grateful for the silence, but the look of resignation on Pomfrey's face worried him. It meant he hadn't been the first casualty of the Carrows' tenure, and he wouldn't be the last.

Once she'd tucked him into bed and left the room, Harry fell back against the pillows, groaning with relief for his sore muscles. He was sorely tempted to let sleep take him immediately, Hermione and Ron be damned. Reluctantly, he opened his eyes and fished the compact mirror from his pouch.

"All right, Harry?" Ron asked, looking every bit as tired as Harry felt.

"All right," Harry answered. "What's going on? Where's Hermione?"

"-I'm here!" Harry heard her shout. "I'm just- Ron, can you take these for me?" Ron's face fell away from the mirror and for a moment Harry saw only a high ceiling through his compact. The image shook as Hermione lifted the mirror. "We're in Sirius' library, Harry, and you wouldn't believe some of the books here! They haven't even got these in the Restricted Section! I thought there might be some information about whether a being with a soul could be made into a Horcrux. I haven't found anything yet, but- Where are you?" Hermione's eyes darted over Harry's head, taking in the white walls and metal-framed bed that did not match the Gryffindor boys' dormitory.

"I'm-" Harry began, and stopped. Hermione looked worried already, and he really didn't want to bother her further. There was no hiding the fact that he wasn't in his own bed though. "It's the hospital wing. Had a bit of a run-in with Crabbe. It's just a broken rib!" he said quickly when her eyebrows shot up.

"Pomfrey already healed me, I'll be fine."

"Harry! That's nothing to take lightly! You could have been hurt much worse. Does McGonagall know?"

"Er, yeah, she knows." All too well, Harry thought. Hermione looked satisfied.

"Good. You can't let him get away with that, no matter who's in charge. If Malfoy and them give you trouble, you've got to see McGonagall straight away."

"I will," Harry promised, and tried to sound sincere. McGonagall couldn't do anything. Crabbe had probably received house points for what he'd done. As for Malfoy- well, Harry couldn't imagine Malfoy would be a problem this year. The boy was near-catatonic whenever Harry saw him. With good reason, he thought, stomach icing over as he recalled the previous night's dream.

Hermione nodded her approval. "Good. Like I said, we haven't found anything about whether you could be a Horcrux, but there's this book-" she leant away and returned with a tome sheathed in black leather, "-that discusses spells that are capable of destroying a soul. It doesn't list them, but theoretically there should be an incantation that is equivalent to the Dementor's Kiss: one that will remove your soul, but not kill you!"

"Hermione, I don't really want to have my soul sucked out..." Harry said tentatively.

"Oh, no! But I was thinking, if we could re-work the spell, maybe we could use it to remove the part of You-Know-Who's soul that's inside you!"

"If I'm a Horcrux," Harry interjected.

"Harry, I know it's hard, but I think you have to accept it's a good possibility. You're at the school right now, why isn't You-Know-Who trying to kill you?"

"I don't know!" Harry was suddenly very tired. There was never a reprieve; he survived one trying task only to face another, and another. All he wanted was to relax into his bed and sleep for the next month or two. "I don't know. When would he have cast the spell? Slughorn told Riddle there was a spell that had to be done."

Hermione thought for a moment. "I'm not sure. Maybe you don't have to be in his presence when the spell is cast? I'm looking, but there simply isn't a manual for Horcrux-making. At least not one I've found." She looked at him plaintively. "I'm sorry. You know I'm doing everything I can, don't you?"

Harry's stomach churned with guilt. They were doing everything they could; they were living as fugitives, trying to sneak into the Ministry, and researching whether or not he had a piece of Voldemort's soul inside him. They were completing the mission Dumbledore had given them. Given him. And Harry was attending classes.

"I know you are. Both of you. I just feel- I feel so useless, here. I want to help."

"You are helping, Harry. You've got more to do than anyone. You'll have to be the one to- to kill him, in the end." Harry nodded, and neither of them spoke for a moment. "You know we're going to the Ministry on Monday," Hermione ventured.

Harry nodded again. "I know. You're ready?"

"I think so; we've been over the plans a few times-"

"Oi!" Hermione started at Ron's shout. "A few times? You've practically had me tattoo it on my forehead!"

"And we'll keep going over them until you get it right!" Hermione snapped, a hint of a smile on her face. Harry tried to smile, too, but his mouth stretched into a yawn instead.

"Get to sleep, Harry," she admonished, and Harry didn't have the will to argue. They said goodnight and he collapsed into the warm, soft bed, asleep almost before he shut his eyes.

~*~

He woke sore and starving several hours later, the sun searing his eyes. He rose reluctantly and dressed himself in the clothing he'd discarded the night before that had somehow been laundered and folded and left beside his bed. He'd barely fastened his tie before Madam Pomfrey walked into the room.

"Oh, good, you're awake then," she said, assessing him with a careful look. "Feeling better?"

"Yes," Harry replied. "What time is it?" If it were early enough, he might be able to catch lunch. His stomach growled its approval.

"Half-three," Pomfrey replied, leaning over him to check his temperature. "You can still make your final lesson. I'll have Dobby bring some food." Harry nearly smacked himself. Dobby. Of course. The house-elf wasn't bound to him the way Kreacher was, but would still have come if Harry had thought to

call.  He chided himself for his stupidity.  "Of course--" said Pomfrey, taking in Harry's frustrated expression, "--if you'd rather rest a while longer, you are more than welcome to stay.  I'm sure your professors will understand."  Harry wanted to scoff his disagreement, but Pomfrey was looking at him so gently he couldn't bear to upset her.

"No, I'm fine," he said, wishing it weren't true.  He would have loved an excuse to crawl back into bed.  "I'll go to class."  Pomfrey nodded and gave him a pat on the shoulder before continuing her rounds.

~*~

"Mr Potter!  Welcome back!"  Alecto Carrow crowed.  The class followed her gaze to look at Harry in the doorway.  He could feel them watching as he walked across the room, but he kept his eyes locked on Carrow's.  Her face was nearly red with excitement as he slid down into his seat, but he set his jaw and refused to look away.

"I think you'll find today's lesson especially interesting, Potter," she continued happily.  "I'm glad you could join us.  I was just telling your classmates that it's the Muggle bitches you really have to watch for.  Blood-chasing whores, the lot of 'em."  Harry's jaw clenched and his fingers tightened around his edge of his chair.  You mustn't listen to her, Harry, he heard Hermione telling him.  She's trying to rile you.  He maintained his heavy glare.

"'Specially if you're a pure-blood." Harry saw a few of the Slytherins' backs straighten. "Filthy things can smell it on you. Once they suss you out, they're on you like a Sticking Charm, 'cause won't no pure-blood father a Squib. They'll birth you a whelp just to hide their dirty blood." Don't react, he told himself. That's what she wants. Don't react. The wood beneath his nails splintered into his skin, but he didn't let go. Carrow moved closer and stared down at him with narrowed eyes. "Mudblood bitch will spread her legs for any-"

"That's enough!" Harry jumped to his feet and Carrow flinched back in surprise. She recovered quickly, triumphantly.

"Sit down, Potter," she said, spittle punctuating each word.

"No."

"Already got one detention, haven't you?"

"Yes."

"Want another?"

"Yes."

"It's yours," she said.  "Now are you going to sit down and listen to the lecture, or should we make it three?"

"You can't expect us to listen to this.  Stealing magic?  It's a load of bollocks and you know it."

"I don't know what your Mudblood mother told you, but- Oh, that's right.  She's dead."  Harry's right hand balled into a fist.  "Least your father never knew what a thieving whore she was."

"That why Uncle Acteon left?"  For one moment, Harry and Carrow wore matching stunned looks.  As Carrow turned towards the voice, however, her face tightened, eyes sharp.  Harry turned as well, unable to believe his ears.  Sure enough, at the far side of the room, Neville was standing beside his desk and holding his head high.

"Gran never would say, but it figures in.  What's that make you?"  Neville furrowed his brow in mock thought.  "Half-blood?"

"Lacero!"  Carrow shouted, and Neville fell against the desk, hands shooting to his face.  Blood seeped through his splayed fingers.

"Neville!"  Harry could hear several voices echoing his cry.  He rushed towards Neville's desk, but stopped when his neck met Carrow's wand.

"Sit down, Potter," she said, jabbing her wand in further.  Harry looked over to Neville.  Blood was running down his arm, and some of the colour had left his face, but he looked all right.  More than all right: he was back on his feet, hands steady and eyes bright.  Harry sat.

"Professor--" Neville said with only the barest tremor, "--I, um, could I go to the hospital wing?"

Carrow looked like she might say no, but a drop of blood that had been gathering at Neville's elbow fell to the floor. The splat as it hit the ground echoed inside Harry's head. Neville was bleeding, for fuck's sake, bleeding over the ancient floor of the Muggle Studies classroom. It was surreal. He would have thought it a hallucination if not for the thrumming it set off deep in his bones.

"Fine," Carrow snapped. "Go. You'll serve detention with Potter tomorrow." Neville gathered his books one-handed, the other clamped over the gash on his cheek. He turned away from Carrow and caught Harry's eye. Harry stared at him, open-mouthed, as Neville puffed his chest and walked from the room, sending Harry a surreptitious thumbs-up on the way.

~*~

Harry threw open the door to the hospital wing and promptly collided with Madam Pomfrey.

"Mr Potter!" she exclaimed, stepping back and taking him in. "Why have you returned? Are you all

right?"

"I'm fine," he said quickly. "I'm here to see Neville."

"Oh!" Her eyes softened. "Mr Longbottom, yes. I've stopped the bleeding, but it looks as though he'll scar, poor thing. He's in the far bed. You're welcome to visit, but you're not to make him laugh. The wounds need to stitch together."

Neville sat behind a half-drawn curtain, face covered in bloody bandages. He smiled at the sight of Harry, then winced.

"Hey, Harry!"

Harry gaped at him. "Merlin, are you all right?"

"Pomfrey don' think I'll heal prop'ly," he slurred, muscles potion-weak.  "I don' mind.  B'sides that, 'm fine."

Harry didn't know what to say.  "Neville... you shouldn't have done that.  She could have killed you!"

"Nah," Neville said dismissively.  "Pure-blood, 'member?  They won' hurt me too bad."

"Too bad?  You're bleeding!  You're in the hospital!"

"'Cause you never woun' up in the hospital?"  This was all wrong.  Neville wasn't listening - he was smiling, of all things.

"You don't understand.  They don't want to hurt you, just me, you shouldn't-"

"Oh, come off it Harry." Harry wheeled around to see Ginny and Luna walking towards him. He smiled despite the look on Ginny's face. It was the first time she had spoken to him since they'd returned to school. "We're not going to sit back and let them have at you, or anyone else in the school."

"Anyone else?" Harry asked, confused. "Who else?"

Ginny fixed him with a stern look. "Colin, for one. Amycus used the Cruciatus on him this morning. And you saw Michelle at breakfast yesterday. It's not just about you, Harry; they hate us all. They want to hurt us!"

"Not if you don't-"

"If we don't what?" Ginny's eyes flashed. He closed his mouth. "If we don't talk back? Is that what you think we should do? Sit and listen to how our fathers are rapists and our mothers are whores?" She stepped close, but there was no light radiating from her this time, only a dangerous energy that reminded Harry he was face-to-face with Molly Weasley's daughter. "Is that what you would do?"

"Er-"

"I think we need a mascot," Luna interrupted them. "Maybe the Crumple-Horned Snorkack. They're very powerful." Harry and Ginny stared at her blankly, and Luna smiled. "For Dumbledore's Army!"

Harry felt a pang in his chest. "We're not-"

Ginny turned back to him. "We are," she said resolutely. "We're still the DA. And if we can't be Dumbledore's Army, we'll be Potter's Army. " Harry tried to protest, but she cut him off. "Come on, Harry. We didn't let Umbridge beat us, and we can't let them."

"Umbridge wasn't a Death Eater! This is different, Ginny. The Carrows, Snape - you provoke them, they might kill you."

"They won' though, will they, 'arry?" Neville asked. "Tha's why you're here."

Harry wanted to deny it.  He didn't want them to think he was there against his will, didn't want them to feel as trapped as he did.  But Hermione was right; there was a certain freedom in the knowledge that none of his friends would be touched by death while he was at the school.  He couldn't make them live in fear when he knew they were in no danger.

"Yeah," he admitted.  "That's why I'm here."

Neville smiled.  "Well--" he said, "--long as you got 'em by the balls, may as well have some fun, right?"

Harry's mouth dropped open.  He looked over at Ginny and Luna, both of whom were grinning, and couldn't help the smile that started to pull at his lips, as well.  "All right," he agreed.  "What do we do?"

~*~

Harry couldn't keep his mind on the page he was reading, no matter how many times Amycus threatened to Crucio him - again - if he lost his place.  His back was killing him after standing straight for an hour, and his eyes kept drifting towards the clock.  He'd be getting a break any minute now, he knew,

and while it wasn't a bonus he'd anticipated while talking with Neville, Ginny and Luna, he was grateful for it now.

"Stand up straight, boy, how many times do I have to tell you? And keep reading!" Harry looked up from the paper long enough to glare at Carrow, who was sitting with his feet up on his desk. Harry adjusted his slouch and continued reading the document in his hand.

"...despite the universal acceptance of this hypothesis, direct evidence has proven difficult to acquire. Study participants refuse to provide testimony, even after prolonged periods of Cruciatus use. Veritaserum has been ineffective; one wonders if Muggles are immune to the potion. If so, it is another reason to remove all Muggle-borns from society until their presence has been deemed non-threatening-"

A shout from the hallway stole Carrow's attention, and Harry sighed with relief as he sagged into his normal posture. He wanted to smile, but anticipation was prickling his skin. What if they got caught? What if the Carrows hurt them, really hurt them, the way they'd hurt George? At the thought, Harry willed them to back off, but he knew it was too late. What was done was done, for better or worse.

Another shout, and Carrow rose from his chair. He told Harry to stay where he was and stalked across the room, throwing open the door to reveal Alecto Carrow, levitated into the air by a Levicorpus, by the looks of it. Her heavy skirts were dyed in alternating patterns of red, blue and purple, and one of her hands struggled to keep them from falling around her head. The other hand scrabbled for her wand, which had fallen to the floor several feet beneath her. Amycus boggled at the sight, and Harry had to

suppress a laugh.

"Get me down!" Alecto ordered, red-faced. Amycus ended the spell and she fell in a heap on top of her own wand. "Those little brats! Where's Filch? I'll have him string them up by their toes!"

"Who was it?" Amycus asked, turning his suspicious gaze towards Harry, who straightened again.

"Couldn't see. They must've hid, filthy mongrels, then run off the other way." She waved her wand, but it was a few tries before her skirts returned to their original dusty black. "Let's see them try that again. I catch 'em, I'll have their guts for garters." Harry could see she was furious, but it was nothing to the fire in Ginny's eyes that afternoon. He smiled and crumpled the Ministry pamphlet he was holding into a ball.

~*~

The graffiti drove the Carrows crazy. They handed out detentions to any student who dared to stare at the words too long, but it didn't make a difference. Hardly a day went by without Filch muttering angrily to himself as he balanced on a ladder, paintbrush in hand, attacking the newest lettering. The location changed - outside the Ravenclaw common room, next to the Muggle Studies classroom, even on the

doors to the Great Hall - but the words were always the same: "Dumbledore's Army, Still Recruiting."

Compared with the rest of their pranks, however, the graffiti was a mere annoyance. By the end of their second week at school, they'd got the school owls to roost in Alecto's office, enchanted the Carrows' drinking cups to dispense nothing but vinegared wine, and taught all the portraits to sing "Weasley is our King" whenever Snape was in sight. At first it was only Neville, Ginny and Luna - with Harry's help on the off-day he wasn't in detention - but before long Carrow-baiting had become the school's favourite sport. Most students were reluctant to engage in open antagonism, but that didn't prevent them from using Silencing spells or tripping jinxes when shrouded by anonymity in the Great Hall. Enrollment in the DA had never been higher.

As the weeks passed, school became something of a free-for-all. True to his word, Voldemort kept his distance from the students' families, and it was easy to pretend there wasn't a war on when everyone inside the castle was immune to its effects. Not even the constant threat of torture dampened their spirits - each use of the Cruciatus curse against a student only fuelled the fire of rebellion. Receiving detention became a mark of honour, and the Defence classroom was so crowded with students every night it was nearly impossible to keep them all quiet, much less cowed in terror. A well-placed Crucio or two would calm them temporarily, but it couldn't contain their enthusiasm.

"Neville!" Ginny cried at dinner one night. "What happened?"

"What, this?" he asked, gesturing towards the sling around his arm and winking at Harry. "It's nothing, just a broken arm. Wouldn't use the Cruciatus on Lavender." He blushed as Ginny fussed over him and

cut his food, and looked over at Harry sheepishly.  Harry couldn't help but grin.

Hallowe'en had been Luna's idea, in a way.  She'd wanted to dress up as Professor Snape.  Ginny had been the one to suggest the Polyjuice.  Only Neville had been brave enough to collect the necessary handful of Snape's hair - which he'd done by feigning a spectacular trip and fall that sent both him and Snape tumbling down a flight of stairs.  He claimed the week of detention he'd received was worth it.  Harry hadn't been convinced at the time, but at least he was only assigned to help Hagrid search for injured animals in the Forbidden Forest.

Standing in his common room, however, surrounded by DA members dressed in Transfigured robes, he had to agree with Neville.  The confusion caused by having multiple Snapes wandering the castle would be worth any number of detentions.

"Cheers, Harry," Ginny said, raising her glass at him.  He looked at the liquid it contained; it wasn't quite the sludge he'd ingested back in second year, but it didn't look any more appetizing: it was dark and greasy, like motor oil.

"Cheers," he said, and watched her drink.  She gagged slightly, and stared in disbelief at her skin as it twisted and contorted.

"Ugh," he said, taking in her now-pale face and dark hair.  "You look awful.  I'll never be able to look at you again without thinking of Snape."

"Piss off," she said, turning her face into a familiar sneer.  Then she laughed, and it was so incongruous with Snape's usual scowl that he had to laugh as well.

"Sure you don't want to give it a go?" she asked in Snape's voice.  He shook his head.

"And miss watching them pull their hair out over you all?  Not a chance."  He looked out over the sea of sallow faces.  "Who's keeping the real Snape busy?"

"Oh, Luna drew the short straw.  We reckon she'd give up the game too quickly if she changed, too, though Neville offered to take her place if she wanted."  Ginny-Snape looked over to Neville-Snape with a loopy smile on her face.  It was grossly similar to the look Fleur had pasted on his face when she'd worn his skin over the summer.  He cringed at the sight.

"Ew, Ginny, please stop that.  You'll put me off food for a week."  She punched him in the arm - the

second time in several months - but there was no anger behind it this time.

"Git," she said, and ran off to meet with Luna and Neville.

In the end, they'd all wound up with another week of detention and a night in the hospital.  Even Harry.

"Oi!  Potter!"  Zacharias Smith hollered from across the room.  "What are you in for?"

"Broken nose!" he called back, blood bubbling in his mouth.  "Oh, and a few missing teeth.  What about you?"

"Nothing much, few cracked ribs.  Split lip, too, but Pomfrey won't heal it," he said with a wink at the mediwitch, who was bent over Luna's bed.

"In the hope you will learn not to get lippy with your professors, young man," Madam Pomfrey chided without looking up.  Smith sniffed and Harry couldn't contain a snort of laughter.

"Oh, you should have seen it, Potter.  Me and Neville, we saw Snape talking to Carrow - the bint, not the bloke - outside the Muggle Studies room.  She had Susan by the ear and wanted to give her twenty whacks right there.  We didn't know what to do, so Neville walked up and called Snape an impostor, and said Carrow must be the dullest knife in the drawer not to realise it!  Then he turns to Snape - you wouldn't believe the look on his face! - he turns to Snape and says: 'That's a fair likeness, Mr. Longbottom, but it hasn't been quite so long since I've had a bath.'  I damned near pissed myself.  Neville?  Hey, Longbottom!  Tell Potter what he did..."

The air crackled with energy in those months.  Despite his initial reluctance to the pranks, Harry couldn't deny their effect, the electric charge they ran through the student body.  At times it was all that sustained him: when he lay at Amycus' feet in the Defence room, shaking and vomiting blood.  When he woke sweating, Voldemort's laughter echoing in his ears and Malfoy's terrified face seared to the inside of his eyelids.  When Neville slipped into a coma and didn't wake for three days.  When he looked Ron and Hermione in the eye and told them, day after day, that everything was fine.

~*~

"You need to search the library.  Maybe there's a book I haven't read that will tell us something more about Rowena Ravenclaw."  Hermione worried her bottom lip as she spoke.  Ron barked out a laugh.

"If defeating You-Know-Who depends on finding a book you haven't read yet, we're all doomed."

"What's your bright idea then?  Fiddle with the radio until 'Horcrux Hunting with Harriet Jones' comes on air?"

"Oh, and reading Hogwarts, A History again is so much better?  How's that supposed to help us find-"

"Guys," Harry said, rubbing his eyes.  They didn't stop.  "Hey, guys!"

They both turned towards the forgotten mirror, guilty looks stealing across their faces.

"Sorry, mate." Ron sighed.

"Yes, Harry, we're sorry - it's just that it's been months since we found the locket, and we've no idea where to look next.  You've got to search the library for something we missed."

"Yeah?  What should I say?  'Excuse me Madam Pince, but do you have any books about Ravenclaw's most treasured artefact?  Magic slippers, enchanted belt buckle, that sort of thing?'  They'll be on to me in a second."

"I know that!  You'll have to look without anyone noticing.  But if Ravenclaw did have some special talisman, there's got to be a mention of it somewhere, right?  She helped found the school; the library has got dozens of books about her."

"Great, just the way I want to spend my holiday, reading every book ever written about Rowena Ravenclaw."

The glare Hermione sent him was enough to shut him up, even through the tiny compact mirror.

"All right, all right, I'll look!  But you'll have to tell me where to start."

~*~

Hermione was right: there were dozens of books on Rowena Ravenclaw in the library.  Five dozen and four, to be precise.  Harry looked at the shelves and groaned.

"If it's not here--" he muttered to himself, "--I'm never reading a book again."

An hour later, he'd discarded three of the books as useless.  Their absence barely made a dent in the massive pile.  Harry groaned again and rested his forehead on the table.  He really would be spending his break reading about the Hogwarts founder at this rate.  And he'd hoped he could slip out for a bit while classes weren't going on, to see Ron and Hermione.  Maybe visit Godric's Hollow, to see his parents' graves and their old house.  His old house.

"Hiding in the library, Potter?"

He stiffened at the heavy voice and sat up. Crabbe and Goyle were looming over his table, with Malfoy hanging several feet back. Great.

"If I'm hiding, I'm doing a sorry job of it, don't you think?"

"Looks like you're hiding," Goyle insisted. "Off in the corner, books piled up - you reading something you shouldn't?" He grabbed a book from Harry's yet-to-read stack and squinted at the cover. "You'll get detention for that, when I tell Professor Carrow."

Sweat coated Harry's palms. Shit. The Carrows couldn't know. They'd report to Voldemort and then he'd have no chance of recovering the missing Horcruxes. He needed a diversion. His eyes flickered anxiously around the room. What he wouldn't give for a Decoy Detonator just now.

"If by 'something you shouldn't' you mean 'something with words,' then yeah." He tried to grab the book but Goyle shifted out of his reach. "I know the Carrows aren't big on literacy." He paused and slowed his speech. "That means knowing how to read."

Goyle pushed Harry back so his shoulder blades cracked against the wall. He winced at the now-familiar feel of stone-on-bone. "I know what it means, dickhead!"

"Keep it down!" Malfoy warned, looking back over his shoulder to the librarian's desk. "Pince will throw us out if we make a scene."

Goyle dropped the book to the desk and turned to Malfoy. Harry took advantage of the momentary distraction to Levitate the books and hide them behind a nearby shelf. "Aw, is ickle Draco scared of the big, bad librarian now?" He laughed. "Merlin, you're pathetic. No wonder the Dark Lord took your dad's wand."

A light flush - whether from anger or embarrassment, Harry couldn't tell - stood out against Malfoy's pale skin. "Shut up, Goyle."

"No, you shut it. You can't tell me what to do no more. You think you're so big 'cause you got that Mark on your arm, but you're nothing. Not anymore."

At the mention of the Dark Mark, Harry's eyes latched on to Malfoy's robe-covered arm. I was right, he told himself. Malfoy was Marked, all last year. The confirmation of his suspicions should have satisfied him - he should be eager to gloat to Ron and Hermione - but it didn't. Instead he felt strangely empty, like when he used to wake on his birthday to discover that, just as he'd expected, there was no cake waiting for him, no presents. Nothing.

Malfoy's arm twitched. Harry looked up into Malfoy's grey eyes and realised he'd been caught staring.

"Fuck off," Malfoy said, eyes still fixed on Harry's. Harry wasn't sure if the words were meant for him or Goyle.

Crabbe, who had been silent until now, snorted. "It's true, innit? You're worthless. Can't even do the Killing Curse."

Malfoy's wand was in his hand and pointed at Crabbe in a flash. "Care to test that theory?" he said, voice tight.

Crabbe flinched, then laughed.  "You wouldn't dare."

"Wouldn't I?"  Malfoy's eyes were hard and his hand was still.  There was no evidence of the hesitation he'd shown on the tower six months earlier.

"Do it, Draco, and you'll wish you were never born," Crabbe said, and raised his wand in response.

Malfoy held his position.  Harry recalled the visions he'd had over the past several months, the look on Malfoy's face every time Voldemort forced him to torture the Muggles he held captive, and he could practically hear the response running through the other boy's mind:  I already do.

The standoff drew on uncomfortably.  Harry wasn't sure if he should interfere; he doubted Malfoy would curse his housemates, but he couldn't say the same for Crabbe.  He searched for an exit, but there was no way to slip out without drawing their attention, and then they might remember the books Harry had hidden away.  So he waited for one of them to back down or make a move.

Luckily, Malfoy had been right; Madam Pince did not take kindly to the scene they were making.  "What

is going on here?" she cried.  At the sound of her shrill voice, Malfoy and Crabbe pocketed their wands. "I'll not have duelling in the library!  Out, all of you!"

Crabbe and Goyle let themselves be ushered out.  "C'mon Malfoy," Goyle called over his shoulder.  With only a moment's hesitation, Malfoy followed, passing Harry an inscrutable look as he left.

~*~

Harry had grown accustomed to sitting beside Malfoy in Amycus' class.  They got on fine as long as they stuck to their routine of pushing their seats apart and ignoring one another for the duration.  In earlier years, seating them together would have been a recipe for disaster, but this year they hadn't so much as exchanged insults, despite their proximity.  They rarely even looked at each other.

Today, though, Harry couldn't stop looking.  The Mark on Malfoy's arm was attracting his attention like a magnet.  He'd seen it before, on Snape's arm, and Karkaroff's, and Bellatrix's.  He'd seen it so many times that it shouldn't affect him any longer.  But Malfoy's left arm was mere inches away, and he couldn't get past the thought that if he lifted Malfoy's robes he'd see a hideous black tattoo, and not the pale, unblemished skin his complexion suggested.  Part of him didn't believe it.  Part of him still thought that if he grabbed Malfoy's arm and pushed up his sleeve, there wouldn't be anything there.  He watched Malfoy's wrist shift and flex and wondered if the Mark would be visible if Malfoy moved just so...

"The fuck is your problem, Potter?"  Malfoy whispered.  Harry glanced up to see Malfoy scowling at him.

Harry was shocked into silence for a moment.  Malfoy was a Death Eater, a fucking Death Eater, and he was looking at Harry as if he was the crazy one.  "That thing on your arm is my problem," Harry whispered back.

"It's none of your business."

"It's exactly my business, Malfoy.  Or don't you know anything about the war you're fighting?"

Malfoy turned so he could face Harry full-on.  "You have no idea what I know, Potter, so fuck off!"

"Mr Malfoy!  Do you have something to add?"  Both boys started at Amycus Carrow's sudden appearance before their desk.  Malfoy adjusted his seat and fixed his eyes on a spot over Carrow's shoulder.

"No, Professor."

"Then why are you interrupting my lecture?"

"I'm sorry, sir."

"Too right you are, but that doesn't answer my question.  Why are you interrupting my lecture?"

Harry tried to read the expression on Malfoy's face as Carrow growled at him.  It was the first time all year he'd drawn the professor's attention to himself - drawn any attention, really.  He didn't volunteer to demonstrate Amycus' curses or laugh at Alecto's accusations like the other Slytherins did.  He never even spoke unless spoken to.  He seemed determined to fade into the background.  He was succeeding; if it weren't for the white-blond hair setting him apart, Harry might have forgotten he was there.

Malfoy wasn't fading into the background now though, now he had the full attention of the school's Dark Arts professor and resident disciplinarian.  And he was scared; though his face gave nothing away, Harry could see his ferocious heartbeat through the pulse-point on his neck.  Sitting so close in the noiseless room, it was a wonder Harry couldn't hear it as well, couldn't feel it reverberate through his own body.

"I- no reason.  I'm sorry."

Harry ducked out of the way in anticipation of Carrow's blow.  Malfoy, who hadn't expected it, nearly fell into Harry's lap before catching himself on the table.  Harry winced in sympathy as Malfoy raised a disbelieving hand to his head; he'd had his own eardrum repaired seven times before attaching the word 'professor' to every sentence became automatic.

"Let's try that again," Carrow said.  Malfoy blinked up at him.

"I'm sorry, Professor," he said, the words coming out too loud.  "It won't happen again."

Carrow seemed satisfied at that and continued his monologue.

"This is all your fault, Potter," Malfoy whispered, his hand clamped over his damaged ear.  "Just leave me alone."

Harry was tempted to point out that it was Malfoy's own fault - all of it, from the Death Eaters to Dumbledore - but he couldn't bring himself to spill any salt on Malfoy's wounds.  The other boy probably wouldn't be able to hear him anyway, not over the ringing in his ears.

~*~

"Amycus tells me you've been causing trouble, Draco.  Fighting your friends, disrupting class - making friends with Harry Potter?"

Malfoy's head was bowed, eyes on the floor.  "I wasn't making friends with Potter."

"So you don't deny the rest?"

Malfoy said nothing.

"You will answer me when I ask you a question!"

"I'm sorry!"

"Stop being sorry and start being honest.  Are your loyalties wavering?  Do you wish to leave my service?"

"No, no, my Lord, I don't."

"But do you wish to?"

Malfoy's head shot up. "No!"

"Your aunt has taught you well, young man, but her tricks cannot shield your mind from me. It is time you learned that. And time you learned what happens when you lie to me! Crucio!"

Screaming sharply, Malfoy crumpled to the floor. Once the pain ceased, he rolled onto his knees, prostrating himself. "I'm sorry! Please, I'm sorry."

"Why are you sorry?"

"I- I was weak. And I was scared."

"So you admit it.  You have considered leaving my side."

"No, I wouldn't, I wouldn't, I'm sorry!"

Harry woke with Malfoy's pleas still ringing in his ears.

For just one moment, he wasn't sure what to do.  He wasn't sure if he should do anything.  Malfoy had made his choice, after all.  He'd joined the Death Eaters on his own and he could deal with the consequences on his own.

Except... maybe Malfoy hadn't made his choice.  Harry had seen him lower his wand, the night Dumbledore was killed.  He'd seen Malfoy at the precipice of a great decision, one he hadn't had the chance to make once Snape arrived to finish the job and steal him away.  That had been months ago, but the idea must still be present in Malfoy's mind, if Voldemort had seen it. Oh God, if Voldemort had seen it, if he knew Malfoy wanted out... The thought of leaving Malfoy at Voldemort's mercy, even after everything the other boy had done - it made him feel sick inside.  He couldn't sit next to Malfoy every day and ignore the visions of the boy screaming and begging at Voldemort's feet.  Malfoy was in trouble. He needed help.  If it had been anyone else in the vision, he'd already have woken half the school to go after them.  The fact that it was Malfoy shouldn't change his response.  It didn't change his response.

Ron and Hermione were going to kill him for this.

~*~

"Goddamnit Malfoy," he muttered, staring down at the Marauder's Map. "Where are you?"

Malfoy always returned after the Death Eater meetings. He always looked frail and frightened and a breath away from falling over, but he was there, staring at his breakfast plate and rearranging his food until it was time for classes to begin. So he had to come back at some point, hopefully by a route that would allow Harry to meet him before he could enter the Slytherin common room. And hopefully before the sun came up and the castle came to life.

He prowled the halls for an hour before a dot appeared in the Headmaster's office with the name Draco Malfoy written beside it. Unfortunately, there were two other dots in the room as well, bearing the names Severus Snape and Amycus Carrow. Snape remained in the office, but Carrow accompanied Malfoy on the way to the dungeons. Under the cover of his Cloak, Harry waited for them to part ways.

As they approached, Harry could pick out Malfoy's hunched posture, the red rims around his eyes. He stared at the floor as he walked, Carrow at his side.

"Get in, then," Carrow barked, and Malfoy glared up at him.

"I don't need a nanny," he snarled.

"Dark Lord's not sure about that. He reckons you might run off."

"Where would I go?" There was no humour in Malfoy's voice, only tired resignation.

"You've got quite cosy with Potter, yeah? Maybe you think he'll help you."

"I have not got cosy with Potter!"  Malfoy said the words like he was tired of speaking them.

"You just keep it that way.  Now get yourself in."  Malfoy said the password and the wall slid open.  Not until he stepped inside did Carrow return to his own quarters.

Malfoy was in his common room.  Harry doubted he'd be leaving again.  If he didn't act now, he'd lose his chance to talk while Malfoy's defences were down.  He followed Malfoy through the open space, stepping through just as the wall began to slide shut.

Once inside, Malfoy did not stop walking, he continued on towards an opening in the wall at the far end of the room.  Harry stopped; he wasn't willing to follow Malfoy into his bedroom.  One of his roommates might hear.

"Malfoy," he said, and the boy jolted to a stop.  He spun around, wand out, but his shoulders dropped and his head fell back in frustration when he saw Harry pulling off his cloak.

"Oh, for all the- What do you want, Potter?"

"I want-" Harry was suddenly questioning the wisdom in coming to Malfoy like this. Malfoy wouldn't accept Harry's offer. At best he wouldn't listen, at worst they'd end up duelling in the Slytherin common room - somewhere Harry definitely didn't want to be open to attack.

"Spit it out or go away," Malfoy said. "No, forget that. Just get the hell out."

God, was Malfoy incapable of having a civil conversation? "Gladly," Harry spat. "You're impossible. I can't believe Dumbledore offered you protection." Whatever colour Malfoy had drained from his face instantly.

"How did you-"

"I was there, idiot. And I saw everything." Malfoy's eyes shifted to the left and Harry wondered which moment he was remembering: when Dumbledore offered to hide him? When he lowered his wand? When Snape finished the job anyway?

"Well, good for you," Malfoy said sourly.  "Thanks for sharing.  Now get the fuck out of my common room so I can go to bed.  It's been a long night."

"I know," Harry stated.  "I saw that, too."  He let the statement hang in the air, heavy with meaning.  Malfoy eyed him suspiciously.

"Saw what?"

"Saw you, tonight.  With Voldemort."

Malfoy shook his head.  "I have no idea what you're talking about," he said, but his voice broke over the words.

"Oh no?  I think you do," Harry said, stepping closer.  "I know you do.  He likes to send me visions, especially when he's angry.  And he was angry tonight, wasn't he?"

Malfoy looked stricken.  "You're lying.  You're messing with me."

"I'm not messing with you," Harry stressed.  "Rowle, the Prescotts, that girl with Fenrir?  I've seen all of it.  And I saw you tonight."

Malfoy was shaking his head again, backing away.  "I don't care what you've seen.  Just fuck off and leave me alone."

"No," Harry insisted.  "I know Dumbledore offered to protect you and your family.  I'm here to tell you the offer is still open."

Malfoy's laugh was high-pitched, insincere.  "You? You're going to save my family?  No thanks.  I'll take my chances with the Dark Lord.  At least then I won't turn up dead!"

"Oh yeah?  How much longer do you think you'll last, now he doesn't need you? "

"Longer than if I run away!"  Harry couldn't find a retort for that.  In a sick way, it was true; Malfoy was probably safer at Voldemort's side than if he tried to leave it.  Right now, the worst they'd do was torture him.  If he joined the Order, however...

"We can hide you."

"The way they hid your parents?"  Harry reeled back as though he had been struck.  Malfoy took advantage and turned to leave, but was stopped by Harry's hand on his arm.

"Don't touch me," he warned, but Harry didn't release his grip.

"Don't talk about my parents," Harry countered.  "And don't pretend you're on his side.  If you were, he wouldn't have to force you to torture anyone.  Now stop being a stubborn shit and let us help you!"

"Damnit Potter, you can't help me!  Now go away before you make things worse!"  He shoved Harry hard enough to break his grip and stormed out of the common room.

Well, he thought, that went just about as well as expected.

~*~

He didn't see Malfoy again until the final breakfast before Christmas holidays.  When Malfoy walked out, Harry tried to follow him, but stopped short at the sight of Justin Finch-Fletchley, trunk in hand, trapped between the wall and Alecto Carrow.

"Where do you think you're going, Mudblood?"  From the look in her eye, Harry could tell the correct answer was 'nowhere.'

"Home," Justin replied, fingers tensing around the pocket where his wand should have been.

"Muggle-borns aren't allowed off school grounds--" she jerked her head towards his bag, "--so you'd best be putting that away."

Justin drew himself up and looked down at her. "It's Christmas, and I'm of age. You can't stop me going home." Carrow laughed.

"Of course not. You go on home, and we'll prepare a cell in Azkaban for you. Do you prefer an ocean view? Only they get so draughty in the winter." Justin seemed to shrink several inches at her words.

"But I'm not- I'm not leaving! It's the holidays. Everyone goes home."

"Not everyone, Mudblood. Not the ones who can't be trusted. Who knows how many people you'd attack. Now make your choice; put that away, or spend your holiday in Azkaban." Justin's mouth opened and he took a breath, but let it out in a heavy sigh.

"Fine," he said, and trudged back to the Hufflepuff common room, trunk in tow.

Harry ducked back into the Great Hall before Carrow took her eyes away from Justin's retreating form. Malfoy was long gone by then anyway. He'd just have to wait until after the holidays.

~*~

There were no Christmas trees in the Hall that year, no ribbons and ornaments hanging from the rafters. There were no presents, either; now that all the owls were being searched, no one bothered sending them. He wouldn't have expected many gifts anyway. Sirius was gone and Ron and Hermione couldn't risk giving away their location - still, it would have been nice to wake up with a package or two waiting at the foot of his bed, like usual. It didn't feel like Christmas without them.

He spent his Christmas the way he had every other day of the holiday, tucked into a far corner of the library, flipping through yet another book on Rowena Ravenclaw. He'd learned his lesson from the run-in with Crabbe and Goyle and only took one book at a time now, exchanging it for another when it proved unhelpful. They all had, so far: 42 books done and not one mention of Ravenclaw's most prized possession, only endless recitations of her exceptional wit and beauty and tenacity, accompanied by lists of all the spells she'd developed. In addition to coming up empty, he was beginning to feel terribly ignorant.

At least it's quiet, he thought, opening book number 43 to a frustratingly familiar index page. He could swear all these books were written by the same person, they were so similar. Or maybe someone came along every couple centuries, punched up the old language and added a new picture or two, then made a few Galleons by selling them to whoever was in the market for a forty-third Rowena Ravenclaw biography.

"Blah blah blah... early work on the Tenets of Elemental Transfiguration, blah blah blah..." He skimmed the pages; they weren't looking to be more helpful than any of the others. Oh well, he thought, staring down at a particularly regal-looking portrait which depicted her sitting on a grand throne and wearing a crown.

"Mr Potter. Developed a taste for fourteenth-century oil paintings, have we? Or does your interest lie with the subject matter, perhaps?"

Harry jumped at Snape's oily voice and slammed the book shut. Oh, great idea, he told himself. Show him the name of the book, why don't you? He tried to push the book away, but Snape took it up in one hand, holding it out of reach and inspecting the cover.

"The Wonderful Wit of Rowena Ravenclaw. Ah, Potter, it's so rewarding to see you take an interest in your education," Snape said. Harry wanted nothing more than to wipe the smug look off the man's face.

With his fists.  "Perhaps we ought to have brought on our new professors earlier.  Their presence has been quite motivating for you."

"I'd hardly call it an education," Harry said, recalling Alecto Carrow's most recent diatribe comparing Muggles to sewer rats.  Snape's expression did not change.

"Not from this rubbish, certainly." Snape Banished the book with a wave of his hand.  "You'd do better to take a lecture from Peeves."

"I'll read what I want," Harry responded defiantly.

"Of course you will." Snape's voice was laden with scorn.  "You never could take advice, you ungrateful wretch."

"Ungrateful?"  Harry couldn't restrain his anger any longer.  Just looking at the man made him want to lash out, to use curses he'd never consider otherwise.  "Don't talk to me about ungrateful!  Dumbledore trusted you, he brought you in and you repaid him by killing him when you knew he couldn't fight back, you coward!"

Snape waved his wand and Harry was suddenly mute.  He took out his wand and brandished it feebly, cursing his poor grasp of wordless magic.  "I have no desire to talk to you about anything, Mr. Potter, and you are causing a disruption in the library.  I would be remiss in my duties if I allowed you to continue.  You may return to your common room."

Harry held his ground to wait for Snape to leave, or at least lift the Silencing spell, but he did neither. Finally, with a great huff, he left his workspace, feeling Snape's eyes on him all the while.

~*~

When he returned, Gryffindor tower was full of nearly all the students who had not been able to go home for the holidays.  They looked up as the portrait swung open and he was greeted by a somber chorus of, "Hi, Harry."  He waved and pointed towards his mouth in their usual manner to indicate a Silencing spell at work and handed his wand to Dean to remove it.

"Thanks," he said when his voice returned.

"Don't mention it," Dean said softly, handing back Harry's wand with a wistful look. Harry had half a mind to let him keep it for a while. It was Christmas, after all. At least the only ones whose wands had been taken were Muggle-borns; they were used to living without magic. Harry had grown up as a Muggle as well, though, and he couldn't imagine not having his wand, even if he couldn't use it. Over the summers he may not have been allowed to practice magic, but at least he knew it was a possibility - just in case. Dean and everyone didn't even have that.

"I'm bored," Colin Creevey announced. "If we're stuck here, why can't we do something? Does anyone know how Fred and George used to sneak into Hogsmeade?"

The room rustled with excitement for a moment before Marianne Harris, a sixth-year Ravenclaw, raised her voice over the commotion. "Don't get all worked up over it!" she announced. "They've sealed off all the passages. There's no way in but through the gates."

Colin didn't give up. "Maybe they don't know about the passage Fred and George used?"

Marianne looked at him as though he were a small child, not a student in her own year. "Of course they know about it. If a couple of Weasleys could find it, Snape and them certainly can."

"You shut up!" squeaked Dennis Creevey, whose voice had still not changed. "Fred and George were brilliant! You're just sore 'cause you don't know how to get out!"

Harry spoke up before Marianne could respond. "It's all right, guys, I think I've got a better idea anyway. Dobby!" Everyone but Harry jumped at the sight of the tiny elf appearing in the middle of the room and bowing when he caught sight of Harry.

"Harry Potter is calling Dobby?" Dobby asked, voice filled with awe.

"Er, yeah, Dobby, would you be able to get us some food up here? Snacks, desserts, that sort of thing? And maybe some Butterbeer if you could find some?"

Dobby's face lit up at the request. "Of course!" he said, bowing low again. "Dobby will do anything for Harry Potter! And Harry Potter's friends!"

"That's great, Dobby.  Could you make sure there's enough for everyone?"

"Yes, yes, Dobby will bring everything Harry Potter has asked for and more!"  The elf disappeared with a snap of his fingers, leaving the students in stunned silence.  Colin spoke first.

"You've got a house-elf, Harry?" he said excitedly.  "That's wicked!  Think he'll let me take his picture?"

Over the next half-hour Dobby reappeared several times, always with a new tray or basket in his arms. When he was finished, there were mountains of tarts, cakes and puddings and a tub of Butterbeer bottles set out for them.  Dobby had even brought a few bottles of Firewhiskey, which Justin had immediately decreed to be off-limits to anyone under 17 years old.  It was a brilliant spread, and yet no one was touching it.  Harry looked around the room to see everyone staring back at him, as though waiting for permission.

"What are you all waiting for?  Tuck in!"

~*~

The impromptu Christmas party was such a hit, they decided to have another for New Year's Eve. The second party was even more festive than the first, thanks to a grand decorating effort by several of Dobby's house-elf friends and a feast that had probably taken the whole day to prepare. By midnight, Justin's "no underage drinking" rule, which had been (mostly) enforced on Christmas Day, was thrown out the window. Most of the sixth- and seventh- years were pissed, and a good deal of the younger students were having their first tastes of drunken revelry.

"Oh, I wish Ron could see this," Dean cackled, pointing to the couch and doubling over with laughter.

Harry followed the line of his finger to find a couple snogging earnestly on the couch, both of their faces shrouded by the girl's long hair. "Is that-" he asked, squinting to make them out.

"Lavender!" Dean managed between laughs. "And Creevey!"

"Colin?" Harry leaned forward to get a better view and stumbled over, nearly falling to the floor.

"No!"  Dean choked out, barely able to breathe.  "D-De-Dennis!" he roared, and promptly fell from his chair, rolling with laughter.

"Really?"  Harry asked, but Dean could no longer form words.  "Oh that's brilliant, I've got to tell Ron!" He ducked into a dark corner and pulled out the compact mirror.  "Ron, you won't believe this!" he cried, but there was no answer.  Frowning, he shook the mirror.  "Ron!  Ron come here, you gotta see, it's too funny."  There was still no answer, so Harry held the mirror as close to his mouth as he could and shouted.  "RON!  HERMIONE!  WHERE ARE YOU?"

"Merlin's balls, can't a bloke get a snog around here?"  Ron's voice came from somewhere distant to the mirror.  "It's bloody New Year's, Harry, go find yourself a girl!"

Harry stared at the mirror, unsure if he should believe his ears.  Did Ron just say- were he and Hermione finally-  He closed the compact and slid it back into his pouch, then returned to join the rest of his friends.  For one night, it seemed, everyone was having a great time.

They weren't the only ones.

The long table was packed full with men - and a few women - in dark robes.  Pieces of broken glass from empty bottles lined the floor, and the people at the table laughed as the house-elves tried to maneuver their way through without being cut.  Every so often, one of them would cast a spell at the man who dangled above them, held in the air by ropes that dug into his wrists. They'd started with simple spells, ones that caused only the slightest tickling and itching sensations, because it was such fun to watch as the man whimpered and writhed and begged for each torment to end.  But it had been a long night, and the man was losing his strength, and so they used the Cruciatus and listened to his anguished screams. He was impressive, this Muggle - he must have been close to death, his muscles growing so weak they lacked the power to suck in a much-needed breath, and yet each time the Curse hit he shook and strained against his bonds.  It was an unexpected pleasure; by this time of night the entertainment had usually long since expired.

How wonderful to see the men enjoying themselves.  They had earned this night, and were obviously eager to take advantage of it.  Most of them, anyway - the Malfoy boy was staring into his full glass, looking as though he were unaware of the ruckus going on around him.  Clearly his mind was elsewhere, but what could he be thinking of that could draw his attention so completely that even the bound man's blood-curdling screams would not pull him from his stupor?

Ah, of course.

"Draco."  The boy looked up, startled.  Frightened.  Lovely. "You're not enjoying yourself?"

The boy's eyes widened.  "No, no, my Lord.  I mean yes, I am."

"Oh?  Then why have you not had your fill of our guest?"  The wide eyes looked towards the body dangling from the ceiling, but darted away again instantly.  Interesting.

"I'm sorry, my Lord, I was just-"

"Thinking of Potter."  Whatever noise had filled the room ceased at once.  The boy's eyes grew wider still - impossibly wide, like an animal in an open field, hoping to catch even the slightest warning of attack.

"I wasn't-"

"Stop lying to me, boy!  Do you wish to meet the same fate as our Muggle toy?"  Another darting glance, and a shake of the head.

"No," he whispered.

"Then you must learn not to keep secrets from your Master!" Drunk as they were, not one of the men at the table made a sound. Good. Let them hear this. "I know that Harry Potter offered to protect you, and your family, should you take to his side." A flurry of movement from Lucius and Narcissa. Fevered denials and assuagements. Panic on the boy's face.

"Calm yourself, boy! I also know that you refused his offer." Relief now, too much relief. A chance for some additional entertainment. The Muggle had grown boring. He hadn't even the strength left to plead for death.

"Do you wonder, Draco, what could have compelled our mighty hero to offer you his aid?" The boy's nod was hesitant. "It is a fascinating question, is it not? You have no expertise. You are too weak to carry out the simplest of orders. You possess not an ounce of valuable information. What use could you be?" The look on his face spelled confusion.

"Indeed, what service could a seventeen year old boy possibly provide?"

Every inch of Harry's body ached as he woke. His head pounded, his throat scratched, his stomach turned. All thoughts of the previous night's vision left his mind as he concentrated on not vomiting inside the dormitory. He rose from the bed slowly, slowly, so as not to make the throbbing worse, and moved one foot in front of the other until he reached the bathroom. He had to step over someone with curly blond hair who was sleeping in the doorway and envied them their position, sprawled out on the cold tile floor. A few more steps and he was at the toilet, kneeling down and resting his forehead against the seat. There. He'd done it. He'd made it all the way without losing the contents of his stomach, without thinking of-

"Would you spread your legs for Potter's favour, Draco?"

The liquor burned twice as much coming up as it had going down, as Harry vomited into the bowl.

~*~

He wanted to talk to Malfoy. He wanted to let him know his offer had been sincere, that the Order could hide his family so Voldemort would never find them. The Malfoys might all have been Death Eaters once, even Voldemort's most dedicated followers, but Harry would have to be blind not to see they were just as trapped in their current situation as Harry was in his. They weren't loyal any more, weren't

interested in fighting for the cause, they were just scared.  Especially Draco.

Problem was, every time Harry caught sight of Malfoy, all he could think of were Voldemort's words and the dumbstruck expression on Malfoy's face when he'd heard them.  If he approached Malfoy now, he might think that Voldemort was right, that Harry wanted... Well, wanted something that Malfoy was not willing to give.  Harry was afraid to even be caught looking at the other boy, for fear of bolstering Voldemort's ridiculous accusations.  He didn't want Malfoy to think his offer was only good if Harry was getting something in return.

So he tried not to stare.  He tried.  He ate with his back to the Slytherin table. He kept his eyes forward in class and trained on the ground when he walked the halls.  For all his efforts though, he couldn't keep his eyes from straying over to Malfoy's face, couldn't help but consider the boy he supposedly wanted. Wanted, like he'd wanted Cho and Ginny.  The thought was ridiculous.  Not that Malfoy wasn't attractive. He was the sort that Uncle Vernon would call a nance and encourage Dudley to beat up on at school: almost pretty, with long eyelashes and a mouth that looked even softer than Ginny's.  But Malfoy wasn't like Ginny - Ginny was one of his best friends, and Malfoy was a stubborn, prejudiced bastard who had spent the past six years of his life making Harry's as awful as possible.  He didn't want Malfoy - he didn't even like Malfoy!

"Potter," Malfoy whispered one day in class.  "Stop staring at me!"

Harry detached his eyes from Malfoy's mouth and dropped them to the desk.  "I'm not staring at you!" he whispered back, praying Malfoy hadn't noticed how long he'd been doing just that.

"Whatever.  Just knock it off, okay?  Don't look at me, don't talk to me, don't touch me."

Harry's neck flashed with heat.  "I wouldn't-"

"What did I say?  Shut up and leave me alone!"  Malfoy moved over so that his papers nearly fell off the desk.  Harry opened his mouth to respond, but the noise from Malfoy's chair scraping over the floor had attracted Carrow's attention, and he closed it again.  Malfoy would definitely hate him if they landed in detention together.

From then on, every time his gaze landed on Malfoy, it was met with hard grey eyes and a deliberate silence.  Harry would have liked to clear the air, but it was obvious that any attempts to engage Malfoy in conversation would go over very badly, so he resigned himself to upholding the pretence that he wasn't thinking about Malfoy every second of the day.

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Harry was just about to take his second helping of potatoes when he noticed Dean resting his head on his hand, staring up at the enchanted stars illuminating the ceiling. He set down the serving spoon and caught Neville's eye, then Ginny's.

"I'm headed back," he announced, standing back from the table. "Anyone else ready to go? Neville? Dean?"

"I'll come with you," Ginny said, and Neville nodded as well. Dean ducked his head as they gathered their things.

"You don't have to leave on my account," he said, keeping his eyes down. "I'm in no rush."

"Don't worry about it," Seamus said, coming to join them. "We've got to work on that essay for McGonagall anyway. Can you believe that old bat still wants twenty-two inches by Friday? You'd think we didn't have detention all week." Dean smiled a bit and followed them from the Hall.

They hadn't gone far when they heard the soft noise of someone crying.  Turning down a hallway, they saw Charles Perring, a second-year Gryffindor, sitting against the wall with his hands held aloft by heavy chains.  They exchanged knowing glances and hurried to release him, but before they could discern the counter-spell they heard a shout.

"What d'you think you're doing?"

They whipped around to see Crabbe and Goyle approaching, with Malfoy several paces behind them. He'd taken to spending most of his time with them again, ever since Harry had offered to help him.  Or maybe they had made a point of keeping by his side.  Either way, the three were rarely apart any more.

"What's it look like?"  Neville challenged, drawing his wand.

Crabbe drew his as well.  "Looks like you're asking for a fight."

Harry searched around nervously.  He wasn't worried about losing - three on five was hardly fair odds, even if Dean didn't have a wand - but he knew if the Carrows found them there'd be hell to pay.  The last

time they'd been caught setting someone free, Zacharias Smith had spent a week with his jaw spelled shut to reset the bones.  He didn't reckon the Carrows would go any easier on them this time.

"Scared, Malfoy?" Ginny asked snidely.  Harry looked over to see Malfoy backing away a bit, his wand low at his side.  He stopped at her voice and sneered.

"Of you?" he said, his lip curling.  "Not a chance."

"You sure about that?"  Ginny raised her wand.  "Maybe you forgot my Bat-Bogey Hex from fifth year. Need a reminder?"

He snorted.  "A Bat-Bogey Hex, Weasley?  Is that the best you can do?"  Crabbe and Goyle laughed and he shifted a little.  "Apparently you haven't learnt much this year."

"I'll show you what I can do," she said, and took a step forward.

"Wait!"  Harry called out.  Everyone turned to stare at him.  "Just leave him be, Ginny.  He's not going to fight us."

"Like hell I'm not!"  Malfoy protested.

"Like hell he's not!"  Ginny cried.  They glared at each other and Harry in turn, and Ginny didn't drop her wand.

"He's not," Harry insisted.  "Just leave him out of it."  She shot him a questioning look, but dropped her arm to her side again.

Goyle snickered.  "Hear that, Malfoy?  Harry Potter's coming to your rescue.  Does that make you the damsel in distress?"

Malfoy shot him a heated glare.  "I don't need rescuing from the she-weasel," he spat.

"I'll show you a weasel, Malfoy," she said, raising her wand.

"Ginny!"

"Ms Weasley!" McGonagall's stern voice rang through the hall, and everyone dropped their wands guiltily. "Are you threatening Mr Malfoy?" Crabbe and Goyle snickered again, and Harry saw Malfoy's jaw twitch.

"No, ma'am," she said matter-of-factly. "We were trying to help Charles--" she gestured towards the boy who was now standing, but still chained to the wall, "--and they tried to stop us." She glared at the trio of Slytherins.

"Oh my goodness," McGonagall gasped. "I'm sorry, Mr Perring, let me help you." She rushed over and spoke the incantation to unlock his chains.

"Professor," Crabbe started, a wicked smile on his face. "You know it's not allowed to interfere with the Carrows' punishments."

She drew herself up so that they were nose-to-nose. "Are you telling me how to do my job, Mr Crabbe?"

"No," he said, sticking a thumb over his shoulder. "But they were breaking the rules."

Harry, Dean, Seamus, Neville and Ginny all glared at him. McGonagall gave him a stern look. "Thank you for informing me, Mr Crabbe, but it is not your responsibility to see to Mr Perring's punishment, nor anyone else's. Now please return to your common room, and refrain from hexing your classmates in the hallways!"

"What're you gonna do," Crabbe snickered. "Land us in detention?"

She pursed her lips. "Unless you have all dispersed from this hall in the next ten seconds, I will do exactly that!"

He held her gaze, but dropped his eyes when she did not so much as blink.  He walked away with a furious look at Harry, Goyle on his heels and Malfoy trudging after them as well.

"Now, Mr Perring--" McGonagall said gently, "--what say we get you a cup of tea?"  He smiled weakly and nodded, and she led him away.  "Oh--" she called over her shoulder, "--I meant the five of you, as well. Please return to the common room at once."

They pocketed their wands and began to walk towards Gryffindor Tower when Harry caught sight of Malfoy down an adjoining hall.  Maybe he'd finally extricated himself from Crabbe and Goyle...

"Hey, guys," he called.  "Go on ahead, I'll catch up."

"You're sure?" Neville asked.  Harry nodded and waved them on.  "All right," he said, and led them away.

Harry rushed to catch up to Malfoy, hoping he was alone.  He was - or at least close enough to it.  Crabbe

and Goyle were several paces ahead, seemingly ignorant Malfoy had fallen behind.

"Malfoy!" he whispered loudly.  Malfoy jerked around at his name and scowled when he saw Harry.

"Shit, Potter," he whispered back.  "What the fuck?"

"I need to talk to you," Harry said, raising his voice as Crabbe and Goyle continued walking, putting more distance between them.

"Unbelievable," Malfoy said, shaking his head.  "Are you trying to get me killed?"

"No!  I'm trying to help you, if you hadn't noticed!"

Malfoy rolled his eyes.  "Yeah, so you've said, a few times.  Are you too thick to take the hint?"

"I want you to know that I mean it," Harry said earnestly.  He paused.  "And also that, um..."

Malfoy stared at him impatiently.  "What?"

Suddenly, with Malfoy standing so close, with his eyes searching Harry carefully, he found he didn't have the words for the message he wanted to convey.  "I wanted you to know," he started again, taking a breath, "--that you wouldn't have to, to, you know..."

Malfoy looked confused for a second, his head shaking slightly.  "I don't -" he began, then his eyes widened as realization dawned over him.  He took a step back.  "Oh my God, is there anything you don't see?"

Harry flushed and took a step closer to Malfoy, though he wasn't sure why.  "Look, I'm sorry, I just wanted you to know-"

Malfoy took another step back, but had to stop when his heels hit the wall behind him. "I know!" he said, looking around anxiously. "I know. Fucking hell, like the Boy Who Lived would force anyone to suck his cock before he helped them."

If Harry's blush diminished at all, it was only because every ounce of blood in his body had pooled in his groin at the words "suck his cock" leaving Malfoy's mouth. He stood there, gaping at Malfoy while the other boy fidgeted uncomfortably.

Finally, Harry's senses returned enough for him to say: "Well, the offer is still good."

Malfoy looked at him, eyebrows raised. Harry felt his blush return with a vengeance, because now he knew that Malfoy hadn't only said "suck his cock," he was actually thinking about it, and thinking about Harry thinking about it, and oh God, this was so wrong.

"The- For the help, Malfoy, God!" He tried to sound mature and unbothered, but the way Malfoy's mouth formed a perfect O around the word "cock" was forcing some interesting images into his head that refused to leave. He could only imagine that Malfoy was having similar thoughts. Or maybe he was doing in on purpose. Maybe Malfoy knew that he had the power to wreak havoc on Harry's mental state with nothing but a few impeccably pronounced words. Suddenly he didn't care whether Malfoy accepted the offer or not; in fact, he rather hoped Malfoy would get killed by his own side. It would

serve him right, for being such an infuriating, frustrating, bothersome git.

Malfoy rolled his eyes and laughed - laughed! - and Harry wished he knew a spell to Banish himself to a faraway land. Nepal, maybe. Luna always said such lovely things about it. "Yes, Potter, I know," Malfoy said, and miraculously the floor did not open up and swallow Harry. In fact, he felt a certain satisfaction in knowing he was responsible for the small smile on Malfoy's face - even if it was at his own expense.

The satisfaction dissolved, however, as Malfoy's face fell and he turned away. "Though I can't understand why you're pushing this so hard."

A whole new sort of awkwardness settled over them, and Malfoy suddenly seemed very small, despite the fact that he was taller than Harry. He had the urge to say something comforting.

"Because," he said, fumbling for words. "Dumbledore thought you were worth it."

To his surprise, this didn't seem to appease Malfoy, who tensed and shrunk even further into himself. Harry swallowed and tried again.

"And- so do I," he said in a rush.  Malfoy's head snapped around, and he stared at Harry with a bewildered, unguarded expression.  It reminded Harry of the way he'd looked up on the tower, not a year earlier, his defences completely stripped away...

The moment was interrupted, however, by the sound of dinner letting out and hundreds of students flooding the halls.  Harry stepped back quickly at the noise, turning to see if anyone had seen them. They hadn't, but before he could say anything else Malfoy took off for his common room, leaving a thoroughly confused Harry in his wake.

~*~

"Malfoy," Harry said in a voice that was barely a whisper.  "Malfoy!"

Though he knew Malfoy could hear him - they were sitting right next to each other! - Malfoy was refusing to respond.  Harry gritted his teeth and leant closer.  "Malfoy!"

They were so close Harry could see the gooseflesh spreading over Malfoy's neck as Harry's breath hit it, and yet there was still no response. Merlin, but he was annoying. Gathering his courage, he positioned his mouth next to Malfoy's ear and whispered, "Draco!"

That got a reaction. Malfoy jerked so his head hit Harry's nose, and Harry sat back to make sure it wasn't broken. They both looked around for Amycus, and were relieved to find he was busy intimidating a terrified Lavender Brown.

"Isn't it a bit early for you to be whispering sweet nothings at me, Potter?" Malfoy said in a low voice.

"I'm not- I'm trying to talk to you!" Harry insisted, fighting the heat working its way up his neck. "Just like I've been trying, only you won't let me!"

"What is your deal, Potter? Why, after seven years, do you need to talk to me?"

"Because I'm trying to help you!"  Harry said, growing more flustered by the second.  He was starting to feel like a broken record.

"And I'm trying to tell you no!  Honestly, how hard is it to-"

"What's going on there?"  Carrow's booming voice cut off their conversation and they stared at each other, wide-eyed, before twisting swiftly in their chairs.  He moved brusquely towards their table and gave it a good shove.  "I'm tired of your disruptions, the both of you!  Stand up!"  Malfoy hurried from his seat and Harry was only a half-step behind.  He glanced over at Malfoy, but Malfoy had his eyes cast down to avoid contact with anyone.  Harry could tell he was nervous; Malfoy may have been told off a few times, but he'd never gone so far as to receive the Cruciatus.  He was probably wondering which one of his friends - or enemies - would be assigned to administer the curse.

"I'll teach you to make a scene during my class.  Malfoy!"

"Yes, Professor?"  Malfoy said, clutching his robes to steady his hands.

"I don't believe the class has had the chance to watch you at work." Carrow trained his gaze on Harry and smiled, a dangerous spark in his eye.  "I think they would appreciate the opportunity, don't you?

Especially Mr Potter, here."

Malfoy didn't respond, but Harry could see his chest moving rapidly and caught the sideways flicker of his eyes.

"Go on, then," Carrow pressed, his delight written across his face. "Let's give Mr Potter a taste of your talent."

Slowly, jerkily, as if his body were frozen in place, Malfoy turned towards him. His eyes were wide and his breath heavy and Harry knew they were both dreading what would happen if Malfoy couldn't perform the curse. He doubted he could fake a convincing performance - he couldn't replicate the uninhibited screams, not even to get Malfoy off the hook.

"Yeah, Malfoy," he said, thinking quickly. "Let's see you give it a go. Last I remember, you couldn't do an Unforgivable to save your life." Malfoy balked. "But what do I know? That was ages ago. Maybe a year as Voldemort's whipping boy taught you a thing or two." At the mention of Voldemort, he saw Malfoy's jaw clench and his eyes harden. Good.

"What are you waiting for, boy?"  Carrow prodded.  "Do it now!"

"Yeah, Malfoy," Harry said.  "Do it now.  I've got this itch on my back, maybe your pathetic attempts at a-aghh!"  He screamed, doubling over with pain, and then fell to the ground.  It went on and on, and he was distantly aware of someone sniggering above him.  Finally, he heard Carrow bark an order, and the pain ceased.  He wiped his mouth on his robes and hoped no one noticed the small puddle that had formed beneath his head.

"That'll do," Carrow said.  "Unless you fancy another, Mr Potter?"  Harry shook his head and tried to steady his breaths.  "Sit up, then."

He climbed back into his seat and Malfoy did the same, head bowed and eyes resolutely avoiding Harry's.

"That's the last outburst I'll hear from you, understand?"  They nodded in agreement.  "Very good."

He went on with his lecture, though he kept his eyes on their table for several minutes.  When he seemed satisfied they wouldn't talk to each other again, he stepped away to demonstrate the proper

wandwork for a blood-boiling curse to Crabbe.

Malfoy checked over his shoulder to be sure he was out of earshot, then muttered a quiet, "Thanks."

Harry looked at him, but Malfoy's eyes were still focused straight ahead. "Don't mention it," he said, and couldn't help but think being on civil terms with Malfoy was worth a Crucio or two.

~*~

"Are you certain you read them carefully, Harry? I know you have a tendency to skim when you're bored." Harry controlled the urge to hurl the mirror across the room. As if class with Alecto and detention with Amycus wasn't enough, now he had to endure a lecture on his reading habits from Hermione.

"I'm sure," he replied in a tight voice. "It's hopeless. I've been through every book, and there's nothing there. Snape was right, it would have been just as helpful to ask Peeves. And a whole lot quicker."

"Oh!"  Hermione shrieked and Harry nearly dropped the mirror.  "Sorry, Harry, but I think Snape was right!"

"You think I should talk to Peeves?" he asked, confused.

"Yes!  Well, no, not to Peeves.  But the ghosts!  They've been there for hundreds of years - maybe one of them knew Rowena Ravenclaw!"

As with everything else, Harry wondered why he hadn't thought of her suggestion before.  Snape had said that weeks ago, and it hadn't registered, but Hermione had it in just a few seconds.  Dumbledore had been right, when he'd told Harry to confide in his friends; they were meant to do this together.  They couldn't have done it apart.

"That's brilliant!  I'll find Nearly Headless Nick, he's bound to know something."

"Harry, Nearly Headless Nick was alive hundreds of years after Hogwarts was founded, I doubt he'll know anything about Ravenclaw.  You'd do better with one of the other ghosts: the Fat Friar, or maybe the Grey Lady."

"The Grey Lady?"  Harry asked, trying to remember if he'd heard the name before.

"She's the Ravenclaw ghost, Harry, honestly!  Have you never read Hogwarts-"

"A History?"  He grinned for the first time all day.  "Nope.  Can't say that I have."

Hermione rolled her eyes.  "Of course not.  Oh, I wish I were there!  There's so much the ghosts have seen over the years, but I don't think anyone's ever interviewed them - I can't believe I never made an effort to talk with them while we were at school!"

Harry cut her off before she could travel too far down that route.  "Right, well, you can fix that next time you're here.  But for now, can we please focus on finding the Horcruxes?  Or at least the ghosts?"

"You're probably best off asking Nick, he'll help you find the other ghosts.  Maybe he can even tell you which one to talk with.  Oh, I think this is it, Harry, I think we're going to learn what the next Horcrux is!"

Harry wasn't so certain, but her optimism was infectious.  They'd gone too long without any new information, and the thought that they had just caught a break - even if it had come from Snape, in a roundabout way - was almost reason enough to celebrate on its own.  With any luck, they'd be much closer to their goal by the next day.

~*~

"You aren't going to believe this," Harry huffed into the open mirror as he ran up the stairs to the seventh floor.  He shouldn't have the compact out in the halls, not where anyone could cross his path, but he didn't want to take the time to find a private space, not with everything he'd learnt from the Grey Lady.  "It's here.  The Horcrux is here.  It's a diadem, and Voldemort hid it here in the school when he came to ask Dumbledore for a job."

"That's fantastic!  But where is it?  Do you think your map could-"

"Don't need it," he said as he sprinted down the hall, pacing outside the Room of Requirement. "I know where it is. It's in the Room of Requirement, I'm sure of it." Right on cue, a familiar door appeared in the wall: the room where he had left his Potions book, where Malfoy had rebuilt the Vanishing Cabinet, where Voldemort had hidden a piece of his soul.

"It's here," he said after several minutes of wandering through the high stacks of forgotten possessions. The tarnished silver crown was just where he'd remembered, high atop a stone bust and curled white wig. He had to stand on tiptoe to reach it, but then, without any fuss, he had it in his hands. Just like that, one more obstruction in his path to defeating Voldemort was gone. "I've got it!"

"He's got it?" He could hear Ron's distant, excited voice. "He's really got it? Ravenclaw's magic toenail clippers, or whatever?"

"That's not funny, Ron!" Hermione tried to sound stern, but there were excitement in her voice as well. "This is serious! And besides, it was a diadem -that's like a crown- not toenail clippers. Honestly! It's like you never got past second year."

"You don't mind it." Ron's voice was clearer now, and Harry could see him in the corner of the reflected image, pressed close behind Hermione. A blush spread over her face.

"Erm, guys, the diadem?"  It wasn't that he minded his two best friends as a couple; he just preferred they didn't get all touchy-feely in front of him.  Hermione's blush deepened, and Ron gave him a wry smile.

"Sorry," he said, not sounding very sorry at all.

"You need to find someplace to store that," Hermione said, all business once more.  "It's too dangerous to leave it lying around.  You have to make sure no one finds it before we can destroy it."

"Should I leave it here?" he asked, looking at the mountains of junk.  If he picked just the right spot, a person could search for ages and not find the crown.  "I can't keep it in the dorm, it's not safe there."  He wished he could get it to them for safekeeping; they had the whole of the Fidelius-protected Grimmauld Place at their disposal.  He couldn't guarantee that his trunk was free from the Carrows' probing eyes.

Hermione furrowed her brow.  "You're right, it's not safe in the dorm.  Is it too large to keep in your pouch?  Yes, I suppose it is.  Only it's so risky to leave it in the Room of Requirement; that's the first place Vol- You-Know-Who will look if he learns we're destroying the Horcruxes."

"But if I move it, then he might not find it; I could pick somewhere he wouldn't think to look," Harry said, winding his way through the towering stacks.  He was looking for someplace different, someplace innocuous, someplace that wouldn't be worth a second glance should Voldemort come looking for the diadem.

What he found was Draco Malfoy, standing just inside the door and wearing a completely unreadable expression.

"Potter."  He sounded somewhere between explosion and collapse.  He hadn't drawn his wand, but his eyes flickered to the diadem and the small mirror in either of Harry's hands.

"Is someone there?  Harry?  Harry, what's going on?"

"Malfoy," he said dryly.

"Oh fuck," Ron swore, and Hermione shushed him, but it was too late. Malfoy looked around, searching out the source of the voice.

"Who's here?" he asked, pulling out his wand but leaving it down, against his side. "Granger?" he called. "Weasel?"

"They're not here, Malfoy," Harry said, closing the mirror with a gentle click and stashing it in his pocket. "No one else is here."

Malfoy took one more glance around, then eyed him suspiciously. "How did you get in here? What's that for?" he asked, motioning towards the diadem.

"It's not your business," Harry replied, wishing the pockets in their robes were large enough to conceal the Horcrux. He felt rather stupid, standing in front of Draco Malfoy with a crown dangling from his hand. "What are you doing here? Another Death Eater plot you're running?"

Malfoy looked taken aback by Harry's accusation; no, he looked worse, like Harry had just knocked the

air from his lungs.  He recovered quickly though, and the anguished expression disappeared from his face.  "That's right," he said sarcastically.  "That's why I'm here.  I've been spying on you.  Isn't that what all good Death Eaters do?"  He looked behind him, measuring the distance to the door, but he didn't step away.

"Unless you want me to believe that's true--" Harry said severely, "--you'd better tell me what you're doing here.  Did you follow me?"

Malfoy snorted.  "I virtually lived in the Room of Hidden Things last year, Potter.  I don't need your help getting in."

"And that turned out just brilliantly, didn't it?"  The tendons in Malfoy's neck stuck out as he clenched his jaw.  Harry drew his wand and held it at the ready; Malfoy gripped his tighter in response.  "One more time, Malfoy--" he warned, "--and you'd better tell the truth.  What are you doing here?"

Malfoy regarded him a moment longer, than replaced his wand inside his robes and crossed his arms over his chest.  "It's the Room of Hidden Things," he said, as if that explained everything.  "What do you think I'm doing here?"

Searching him quickly, Harry saw nothing that Malfoy would have brought to hide, not unless it was so small as to fit in his robes without creating lumps in the pockets.  "What have you got to hide, then?" he asked.

Malfoy took one deep breath, then another. "Myself," he said at last, forcing out the word from between clenched teeth.

It was obviously a difficult admission, so Harry conceded to drop his wand, but he still wasn't satisfied. He'd been trying for ages now.  "You said you didn't want us to hide you."

Malfoy crossed his arms tighter over his chest and looked away.  "I didn't want your help," he muttered.

"Didn't?"

Malfoy looked back at him.  "That's right," he said, voice stronger that time.

"And now?"  Harry couldn't keep the interest from his voice.

"I'm not here to ask for your help," Malfoy said quickly.  "I didn't know you'd be here."

"Maybe not," Harry said, shrugging.  "But here I am.  And you're looking for a place to hide."

"I'm not looking," Malfoy said.  "I have a place.  Or had, at least.  Of course you'd know about it, though, so now it won't work."

"Why won't it work?"  God, but Malfoy was exasperating.  "Haven't I been offering to help you for weeks now?  What, you thought I didn't mean it?"

"No!  I thought you were talking about holing me up somewhere so I could wait for the Secret Keeper to give me up!"

"I wouldn't have given you up!"  Harry shouted, the thought of Wormtail bringing fresh heat to his skin.

Malfoy raised his eyebrows and a sardonic smile tugged at his lips.  "You?" he said.  "You'd be my Secret Keeper?"

The heat stayed at Harry's neck, though for a different reason this time.  "Yeah, well," he said uncomfortably.  "It doesn't have to be me.  But I don't know who else you'd trust."

"But you think I trust you."

"I don't- God, Malfoy, stop playing around.  You still haven't told me why you're here."

Malfoy took a deep breath and his eyes fell on Harry's chest, but they were focused so lazily Harry could tell Malfoy wasn't really looking at him, he was thinking on something very important.  He waited for Malfoy to finish, fidgeting with the diadem as the silence drew on.  Malfoy's eyes followed the

movement then rose to Harry's face again.

"I'll tell you--" he said gravely, "--if you'll tell me what that is."

"What?"  Harry asked, glancing down at the crown in his hands.  "No, I can't.  Dumbledore said-"

"Dumbledore said a lot of things," Malfoy snapped.  "What I'm saying is, if you want me to trust you, you have to do the same."

They glared at each other and the metal edge of the diadem dug into Harry's palms.  "Fine," he growled.  "It's a Horcrux."

If he'd thought about it, he would have expected more of a reaction from Malfoy - didn't his father teach him all about the Dark Arts? - but all he got in return was a blank stare.  He sighed.

"It's- Well, it's a piece of Voldemort's soul," he explained, and Malfoy's eyes widened. He seemed to shrink away from the object held so carelessly in Harry's hands. "It can't hurt you," he said snidely, but Malfoy didn't look convinced.

"What--" he said, his eyes fixed on the diadem, "--are you doing with a piece of the Dark Lord's soul?"

Harry sighed and explained about the Horcruxes - what they were, how they kept Voldemort alive, why he had to destroy them. Malfoy nodded as he spoke; he might not have known what a Horcrux was, but apparently he understood their purpose just fine.

"So--" Harry said when he was done, "--now you. What are you doing here?"

Malfoy hesitated, and Harry wondered whether he was going to have to beat the answer out of him, but he looked at the diadem in Harry's hands and relented. "It's my parents," he said dully, his eyes still focused on the crown. "They're in Azkaban."

"What?" Harry asked, his mind spinning. "Why? Isn't your dad a Death Eater? Wasn't Voldemort using

your house for headquarters?"

Malfoy's attention left the diadem and his eyes shot to Harry's. "How do you know- oh, of course," he said, deflating. "There's nothing Harry fucking Potter doesn't know."

Harry ground his teeth and tried not to listen to the voice in his head that was encouraging him to give Malfoy a whack over the head. "Not quite, Malfoy. I still don't know why you're here."

Malfoy frowned. "I've just told you, haven't I?"

Harry raised his eyebrows. "You're here because your parents are in prison?"

"In prison for being Muggle sympathisers," Malfoy stressed. Harry didn't see the message Malfoy was trying to convey, and shrugged. Malfoy huffed. "Oh, of course you wouldn't understand. It's a death sentence, being called a sympathiser. It's worse than being a Mudblood. At least they can't help it."

"Stop right there," Harry said sharply.  "If you want my help, you have to stop using that word."

"Who says I want your help?"

"You're still here, aren't you?"

"Only because you won't leave!"

Harry closed his eyes and rubbed his forehead.  This was so, so much more trouble than it was worth.
"You're going to stay in here?" he asked.

"Yes," Malfoy said cautiously.  "Why?"

Harry set his jaw.  "Because, you prick, I have a better plan!"

~*~

"This is your great plan?"  Malfoy hissed as Harry wrestled with the task of trying to cover them both with his Invisibility Cloak without any of their body parts coming into contact.  "You're going to hide me under a cloak?"

"Shut it, Malfoy!" he whispered, opening the door and heading out, Malfoy close at his heels.  Too close, really; even if they weren't touching, he could feel the warmth of the other boy's body beside him.

"Okay," he said, trying to ignore the way Malfoy's arm brushed up against his when they walked.  "Now we cross in front of the door three times, and you have to think about-"

"I know how to get in!"  Malfoy whispered, and Harry felt the hairs on his neck bristle.  He tried not to shiver at the feeling.  "Didn't I tell you?  I virtually-"

"We're not trying to get into the Room of Hidden Things, Malfoy!" Thank God Malfoy was such a prat. It made it so much easier to keep his mind on the task at hand and off the way the two of them were sharing body heat. "It's called the Room of Requirement. Now think of what you require that isn't stacks of old garbage!"

He didn't look over his shoulder, but he would bet Malfoy was seething over Harry knowing something about the room that he didn't. "Got it?" he asked.

"Yeah, I think I've got it," Malfoy replied, and Harry couldn't help but smile at the bitterness in his voice. He was right, Malfoy was upset that Harry knew more than he did. They walked back and forth and on the third rotation, another door appeared in the wall. As soon as they were inside, Harry pulled off the cloak and stepped away from Malfoy.

"Oh," Malfoy said, taking in the room that had opened before them. There was a fire at one end with a couch set before it, a writing desk, and a wardrobe, but the majority of the room was taken up by a large bed. Harry's head shot towards Malfoy so fast his vision swam for a second.

"You asked it for a bed?" he said in an accusatory voice. Malfoy flushed.

"I asked it for a place to stay!" he replied, though he wouldn't quite meet Harry's eyes. "And seeing as I'll be sleeping here, I don't think a bed is too far out of order!"

Oh. Malfoy had a point. "Well--" he continued in the same tone, "--where's the kitchen?"

The blank stare on Malfoy's face was all the answer he needed.

"Great." Harry rolled his eyes. "I'll have to bring you some food, then. Or maybe I can get one of the house-elves to do it."

"Certainly, Potter, anything to make your life easier," Malfoy said, walking across the room and collapsing onto the couch. The action was so easy, so familiar, Harry wondered if the room he was standing in was a replica of Malfoy's bedroom at home. He had half a mind to sit down, but with Malfoy on the couch the only remaining spaces were the wooden desk chair and the bed - not just any bed, but Malfoy's bed. He remained standing.

Malfoy didn't say anything for a few minutes.  Harry wondered if he had fallen asleep, and if he had, if he should simply leave without saying anything.  He cleared his throat and Malfoy looked over at him, blinking, as if he had forgotten Harry was there.

Harry gestured to the diadem in his hand.  "I need a place to keep this, for now."  He paused and cleared his throat again.  "Will it be safe here with you?"

Malfoy sat up and gave him a strange look, his surprise at being trusted with something so valuable written over his face.  "Yeah," he said in a scratchy voice.  "That's fine."  Harry nodded and set it down on the desk and it seemed to catch all the light in the room, shining spectacularly.

"Okay then," he said.  "I'll come back later to bring you some food.  Or maybe Dobby will, though I might have to come with him, since he's a little, er, uncomfortable around you.  You'll have to make sure we can get in, but just us, you don't want the Carrows-"

"I get it, Potter, thanks," Malfoy said, falling back against the couch.  "I'd have forgotten the whole 'no Death Eaters' bit for sure if it weren't for you."

Harry might have had a smart remark to return, but he was too busy trying to keep his eyes off the bed on one side of the room, and Malfoy sprawled across the couch on the other. "Right," he said instead. "Well, then, I'll be back later."

He turned and fled the room, and when he peeked back over his shoulder he noticed the door had disappeared once again. He considered knocking and demanding Malfoy adjust his request for the room, but decided against it. Malfoy probably needed to be alone for a while.

~*~

Keeping Malfoy hidden was a greater task than Harry had anticipated. The school had gone into immediate lockdown when it was discovered Malfoy was missing, and the students were forced to wait in the Great Hall while every nook and cranny of the castle was searched. As it turned out, there were quite a few of them - they weren't released to their common rooms until the next morning. Harry received suspicious looks from the Carrows, Filch and Snape and was thankful for the millionth time over for his father's Invisibility Cloak.

When he arrived the next morning with a basket of food from Dobby, the door had reappeared. Malfoy must be hungry, if he was welcoming Harry in like that. He pushed open the door, and immediately closed it again. The room was dark save the glow of a few embers in the fireplace, and Malfoy was

asleep on the bed. Harry stood outside wondering if he should come back later for a few moments, then decided the best course of action would be to leave the basket inside the door, where Malfoy would see it when he woke. And to make absolutely certain that none of his future visits occurred while Malfoy was tucked into his bed.

They cornered him on the way to lunch. At first, he cursed himself for wandering the halls on his own, but let go of the thought when he realised it wouldn't have made a difference. If he'd been with his friends, they'd have taken them as well, even though they didn't know anything about Malfoy. At least his friends wouldn't have to suffer for his actions this time.

"Oh, my," Filch said, grinning as the Carrows brandished their wands. "We are in trouble, aren't we?"

Harry ignored him - he didn't want to give the Carrows any excuse to use a Silencing or Binding spell - and allowed the three of them to march him towards Dumbledore's office. He hadn't been inside the room since the man's death, and a part of him believed the door would still open to reveal the former headmaster perched at his desk, a jar of sherbet lemons in his hand.

It didn't. When the door opened, it was Snape at the desk, hunched over a stack of papers without a sweet in sight. Harry planted his feet and received a brutal shove from Amycus, forcing him inside the room. His legs smacked against a side table, eliciting a yelp from him and drawing Snape's attention.

"Mr Potter."  There was no anger on Snape's face; he looked almost - amused?  Of course he did, he'd probably been salivating at the thought of having Harry at his mercy for years.  And there the bastard sat, behind the desk of the very man who had protected Harry all those years, exulting in the fact that he had killed the only obstacle that had ever stood in his path.  If the Carrows hadn't snatched away his wand, he was sure he could have mastered the Cruciatus curse just then.  "It seems one of our students has gone missing.  You wouldn't know anything about that, would you?"

Harry did not reply.  He wondered if he'd be able to get one good punch in before the Carrows could get out a Binding spell.

"Where's the Veritaserum?"  Alecto cut in.  "Let's find out what he knows."

"Veritaserum?"  Snape said lightly.  He sounded coy, and Harry had known him long enough to recognise the danger that tone carried.  "But why should we employ a potion when we could learn what he knows through much more... enjoyable means?"

Harry heard Filch chortling behind him and felt his heart drop into his stomach.  It wouldn't be so bad, he assured himself; he would never grow accustomed to the pain of a Cruciatus, of course, but he'd endured it many times before and he could do it again.  Snape laughed.

"Surely you don't believe the Cruciatus is our only means of persuasion, Potter?" he asked in that same careless voice.  "I'd have hoped the Professors Carrow would teach you better.  Haven't you shown him the Adstringo, Amycus?"

A darting glance showed the male Carrow grinning ominously.  Harry's heart rate doubled and his fingers stung with a rush of adrenaline.

"Now you mention it--" Amycus said, "--I don't believe that curse has come up.  Do remind me to slate it for next week, won't you, Snape?"

"Of course," Snape said, settling back into his chair as if he were preparing to take in a show.  Harry repressed the urge to shiver - there was going to be a show, he realised, and he was to be the star.  "But I think Mr Potter would enjoy a preview, don't you?"

"I daresay he would."  Harry took a breath and made sure his tongue was clear of his teeth.  He steeled himself as Carrow raised his wand: "Adstringo Totalus!"

It wasn't what he'd expected; there was no pain, not immediately.  Instead he felt a slow burn spreading through his body as his muscles contracted, forcing his fingers to curl and his spine to bow, and soon he was in a ball on the floor, fighting a scream as his muscles pulled tighter and tighter.  Harry willed his body to stretch out again, but he could not fight the effects of the curse - it was like being frozen in place, only he continued to cramp closer and closer into himself.  He wondered if it were possible for his muscles to grow so taught they would snap away from the bone, but then a spike of heat spread through him and he could think no longer.  He tried to scream, but the only sound his clenching muscles managed was a high, pathetic whine.  Breathing was near impossible - there was no capacity to his lungs...

"Finite," Carrow said, and Harry sprawled across the floor as his body relaxed.  He took several breaths, filling his grateful lungs with cool air.  "Can't break you on the first try, can we?  What fun would that be?"

Harry closed his eyes and groaned inwardly, wondering how many spells the Carrows had in their arsenal, and whether one of them would push him past the breaking point - whether they'd force him to a place where he was willing to give Draco up, just to make it stop.

~*~

He wished they'd taken him after lunch - as the torture kept on, Harry's stomach tried to expel its

contents, but the lack of digesting food meant he could only manage painful dry-heaves. After several hours he began spitting out the only things he could - pockets of blood and acid that seared his throat and lingered in his cotton mouth.

Someone was talking above him as he shivered with the after-effects of a Cruciatus - they'd worked it into the session after all - but he couldn't pin down exactly what they were saying. Something about Malfoy, most likely. They wanted to know where Malfoy was. And Harry knew! If he told them, maybe they'd fix whatever was making him feel as though he were burning from the inside out...

Longbottoms. He knew that word. That was Neville's name. And hey, his parents had been tortured, too. Maybe that was why they were talking about them. If it wasn't, it was a pretty funny coincidence. He tried to laugh but felt his stomach quiver, so he stopped. That was funny, he didn't remember it hurting to laugh before. He wanted to ask why it hurt now, but his tongue wouldn't work properly, so he concentrated on listening for more words he recognised.

"...no good," someone said, someone with a haughty, oily voice that made Harry's stomach turn all on its own. "...know anything. Take him to Pomfrey."

Pomfrey. He knew her, too. She would probably know how to make the burning stop, she knew everything else. She might even give him a chocolate. He smiled at the thought and didn't fight the darkness that settled over him.

~*~

"I must insist you remain in bed, Mr Potter," Pomfrey said sternly. "You've had extensive damage repaired and your body needs time to recuperate."

Harry smiled at her as he donned his robes. "If we got all the bed rest you prescribed, we'd never leave the hospital."

"Well, maybe then you wouldn't have to make so many visits," she said, but the look she gave him was fond and indulgent.

"But then who would keep you company?" For everything he'd been through that day, Harry felt oddly high, like he'd sucked in enough oxygen to have him nearly floating. It may have been a side effect of Pomfrey's healing potions, or it may have been the knowledge that he'd made it through hell and managed to keep Malfoy's secret safe, he couldn't be sure which. Perhaps it was a mixture of both. He didn't really mind where it came from so long as he could face Malfoy next time with absolute conviction that he could keep the boy's secret, keep him safe.

"I could do with a little less company, thank you!" Pomfrey called after him as he sprang from the room. Just a quick trip to the kitchens, he told himself, and then he could visit Malfoy. He didn't even try to quash the hope that he'd find Malfoy in his bed again.

~*~

"Finally decided to show up, did you?"

Malfoy's icy words and dismissive glance over his shoulder were not the reception Harry had hoped for. After all, he was the one risking his neck, he'd come up with the plan, he'd spent the afternoon being tortured - properly tortured, he thought with a hint of pride - and now he was bringing food for the ungrateful prat. What more did Malfoy want?

Coming down from his high, Harry dumped the basket Dobby had packed on the desk, taking care to disrupt the book Malfoy had left open. He looked at it quizzically - where had Malfoy found a book? - but then remembered this was the Room of Requirement, and was glad he hadn't said anything aloud. As he scanned the desk for other items the room had delivered to Malfoy, he realised something else: the diadem, which he had set on that very desk the evening before, was missing.

"Er, Malfoy?" he asked, spinning around. "What'd you do with the Horcrux?"

"What, this thing?" Malfoy leant back a little and flipped the crown into the air, watching it spin and sparkle before catching it in his waiting hands. "Don't worry, I've got it."

Harry didn't know whether to be more annoyed that Malfoy had barely looked at him yet, or that he was playing with a piece of Voldemort's soul like it was a child's toy. Didn't Malfoy have any sense of propriety? He stopped himself from blowing up, however, when he remembered the reason Malfoy was there to begin with - of course Malfoy understood. His parents had been sent to prison and he probably wouldn't have been far behind, except that he was cooped up in the Room of Requirement with only Harry to rely on for safekeeping. Harry supposed that, given the circumstances, Malfoy had a right to be a little aloof.

That didn't mean he forgave the prick for not at least looking at him, though.

"You shouldn't play with that," Harry said, a little harsher than he'd intended, and Malfoy stopped flipping the diadem long enough to look over his shoulder and give Harry an unimpressed look.

"And why not?" he asked. Harry didn't have an answer for him. Sure, the diary had caused a lot of

trouble back in second year, but that was different, right? Ginny had been interacting with the book, telling it her secrets and letting it talk back. That was how Riddle had been able to possess her. But the diadem - well, it was different. Wasn't it?

"Because you don't know what it could do," he settled for, and it was the truth. Hopefully he wouldn't have to admit that he didn't know what it could do, either. There was no way Malfoy would take his warnings seriously then.

Malfoy just shrugged. Apparently he wasn't going to take Harry's warnings seriously anyway. "I don't see what it could do," he said, and returned to flipping it above his head and catching it, repeating the process over and over until Harry felt a little hypnotised at watching the spinning, gleaming crown.

"You don't want to find out," Harry said, his attention still focused on the ring of light.

"I'll take my chances," Malfoy replied, and he tossed and caught the crown so deftly, so rapidly, that Harry wondered if he was even blinking. He forced himself to tear his gaze away.

"Malfoy, stop," he said, but Malfoy didn't say anything, didn't halt his movements. "Malfoy, STOP," he commanded, and walked over to snatch the diadem from the top of its arc. Malfoy was surprised when

it didn't fall into his lap, and finally looked up at Harry, an accusation clear on his face.

"Hey!" he whined, sounding very much like a child whose favourite toy had been taken away. "What'd you do that for?"

Harry walked back to the desk and set the diadem on it, just as he had the night before. "I told you, you shouldn't be playing with this. We don't know what it could do, and we don't want to find out." Malfoy opened his mouth to protest, then closed it again, pouting.

"Fine," he assented. "Were there any other orders you wanted to give me tonight, or was there just the one?"

Harry, in a remarkable feat of self control, did not allow himself to ponder all the possible orders he would like to give Malfoy just then. "Just don't play with it, all right?"

"Fine," Malfoy said again, crossing his arms and staring into the fire.

Harry considered staying, if only to tell Malfoy what had happened that day, but he could tell where he wasn't wanted.  He opened the door to leave and tried to ignore the knot in his gut when Malfoy did not so much as wave goodbye.

~*~

To Harry's immense relief, Snape and the Carrows seemed satisfied from their session that first afternoon that he didn't know anything about Malfoy's disappearance.  Though he found himself 'volunteering' in class more often than before, they didn't attempt to force the information from him again.

He was constantly aware of Malfoy's absence from everyday life, especially during Dark Arts class, where Harry's front row centre seat guaranteed he had Carrow's full attention at all times.  Amycus would glance at Malfoy's empty chair then glare meaningfully at Harry, as if trying to communicate that he knew Harry knew where his table mate had gone.  Of course, at those moments, Harry couldn't help thinking of Malfoy's comfortable room on the seventh floor - but by some happy twist of fate, Carrow was not a Legilimens.  He said a silent prayer of thanks each time Carrow's suspicious but unknowing eyes passed over him.

The 'visits' - if he could call them that - with Malfoy were not much more pleasant.  Cooped up in the

Room of Requirement with nothing to keep him occupied but the books the room provided, Harry could not blame Malfoy for being irritable. But the boy was growing more resentful with each day, and as much as Harry looked forward to seeing Malfoy, even for just a few minutes, he had to admit those minutes were becoming less and less of an enticement.

He walked into the room one night to find Malfoy in his usual spot on the couch. Malfoy didn't look up when Harry walked in, or when he shut the door behind him with a bang, or pulled the desk chair out so its legs scraped against the floor. His focus was locked on something in his lap - probably another one of his books. It was nothing new, but it was still infuriating. Harry didn't enjoy being insulted, but he preferred it to being ignored. After a few awkward, silent moments, he stood and walked to the door.

"Running off already, Potter?" Malfoy hadn't so much as looked at him the whole time Harry was there, and yet he sounded bitter that Harry wouldn't stay. Harry sighed. Try as he might, there was just no pleasing Malfoy. He caught the unintended innuendo and blushed at his own thoughts, glad for once that Malfoy was not paying him attention.

"Yeah, I'm leaving, unless there was something else you needed."

"Oh no, I couldn't ask anything more of the great Harry Potter. Can't inconvenience the Chosen One like that. Don't worry about me, I'm just fine. Never mind I can't leave the room." Malfoy was muttering almost under his breath, so Harry had to work to hear what he was saying. Was he even talking to Harry? He hadn't looked up from his lap yet, and he was still speaking softly. "Never mind I can't see my family. No, there's nothing I need, not from the great Harry Potter..."

"Damnit Malfoy, if there's something you want, bloody well ask for it!"

Malfoy raised his eyes long enough to send Harry a hot glare, then dropped them again. Harry felt taken aback. He'd seen that look before, when he'd beaten Malfoy to the Snitch, when he'd had received his Firebolt back in third year, when he'd won the Felix Felicis in Slughorn's class. It was a dark, covetous look and it made Harry nervous to see again.

"No," Malfoy said, and again it sounded like he was talking to himself more than Harry. "No, there's nothing you've got that I want, Potter. Nothing."

"Okay," Harry said cautiously. "If you're sure."

"I don't want anything from you."

"Fine.  I'm going.  See you tomorrow."  Harry stormed out and tried to ignore the way his ribs felt tight against his lungs.

Occasionally, he'd walk in to find Malfoy wasn't on the couch, or at the desk, but on his bed.  It had only happened three times so far - that first morning when Malfoy had still been asleep, and again one evening when Harry walked in to find Malfoy propped against the headboard with a few pillows at his back, a book in his hands.

The third time had been just that morning, when he'd walked in to see Malfoy sitting up in bed, the blankets pooled around his waist and his thin singlet the only thing shielding his skin.  For a minute, Harry could do nothing but stare dumbly, not even the visible edge of Malfoy's Dark Mark pulling his gaze away from the skin of Malfoy's arms and neck and, if he used just a bit of imagination, chest.  His viewing had been cut short, however, when Malfoy had noticed him staring and pulled up the blankets with a yelp.  He probably should have walked out immediately, but he was taken by the way Malfoy's whole body flushed when he was embarrassed.  It seemed so incongruous, the Marked Death Eater with the pale skin and the easy blush, like not even Malfoy's body knew who he wanted to be.

He hadn't left until Malfoy had shouted at him to get out, and even then it had taken Harry a minute to process the direction.  He'd backed into the door, which left a tender bruise on his head, and still he'd spent the rest of the day half-hard over the memory of Malfoy's near-naked skin.

Harry walked into the Room of Requirement the next night to find Malfoy on the bed again, sprawled across it with a book open before him and the diadem in one hand, twirling around his finger.  Heat spread through Harry's body at the sight, and he was very grateful Malfoy was fully dressed that time

because Harry had left his robes back in the tower, and he certainly would have had something to hide if anything other than Malfoy's face and hands had been visible. Hell, even his hands were distracting, the way his long fingers manipulated the diadem- wait.

"I told you not to play with that," Harry said, and Malfoy jolted in surprise. He sat up immediately when he noticed Harry, but did not drop the diadem.

"Since when have I cared what you say?" Malfoy said, holding the crown aloft. "What's your problem anyway? Don't trust me not to break it?" He tossed it into the air and caught it one-handed, smirking at Harry.

"Hardly," Harry said under his breath. If only Malfoy knew how to destroy a Horcrux, then they wouldn't have to keep the thing around. "Just... leave it, okay?" Shouldn't Malfoy of all people know that handling Dark artefacts was dangerous, especially when you didn't know what they could do?

"No," Malfoy challenged. "I don't think I will. You think just because you're helping me, you get to tell me what to do?"

"No," Harry said quickly. Malfoy was more agitated than Harry had ever seen him. He should talk to Ron

and Hermione about finding someplace else for Malfoy to hide; there was no way they would make it through the next few months otherwise. Tight quarters obviously did not agree with him. "I'm not trying to tell you what to do--" he placated, "--but you don't know what happened last time G-, uh, someone spent too much time with a Horcrux. It's not safe." He tried to keep his voice even so he wouldn't aggravate Malfoy further, but it didn't seem to be working. Malfoy's eyes flashed as he drew himself up to his knees on the bed.

"You're right," he spat, looking down at Harry from his high perch. "I don't know. You won't tell me. You hole me up in here and want me to trust you, but you won't tell me anything. I doubt this is even dangerous." Malfoy's face was growing redder and his grip around the diadem was so tight his knuckles were white. "You wouldn't leave it with me if it were. You wouldn't trust me with it."

Right, Harry needed to get out of there. Malfoy was too worked up and Harry had no idea how to calm him down - if he didn't leave, there was no telling what would happen. They'd probably end up having an all-out brawl, and that would not be good for their tenuous relationship.

"Malfoy, the last time someone got too close to a Horcrux, Voldemort possessed her, and she nearly died. And I don't know if it could happen again, and that's why I'm asking you to stop playing with the damn thing!"

Malfoy slid off the bed and stalked towards him. "Possessed?" he said angrily. "Do I look possessed to you?"

Yes, Harry wanted to say, but bit his tongue to fight it. Malfoy did look possessed just then, eyes hard and wild and poised like he would attack at any second. Harry stepped backwards and felt for the door handle. He really, really didn't want to fight Malfoy, and it looked like that was where they were headed if he didn't walk out immediately.

"No," he said instead, fingers closing around the door handle. "Look, I think I should go-" He tried to twist the handle, but it wouldn't budge. He checked the other way, but that didn't work, either. Panicking, he forgot all hopes of a graceful exit and began tugging on the door. It still didn't open - they were locked in. "Fuck," he breathed, giving the handle a final frustrated yank.

"Can't get out?" Malfoy asked. "Well, that's convenient."

Harry felt a growl in his chest and turned around to face an angry Malfoy. "Convenient?" he said. "Only if I wanted to be stuck here with you - and believe me, I don't." He really didn't. Not when Malfoy looked like he was six seconds from taking a swing at him.

"Sure you do," Malfoy pressed on. "You've been waiting for this for months. You probably planned this whole thing."

"What?"  Harry asked, bewildered by the accusation.  "Why would I do that?"

"It's what you've been after all along, isn't it?"  Malfoy took a step closer, eyes dark, and Harry's pulse raced as he realised what Malfoy meant.  "And now you've got me right where you want me."

Harry might have said that it was Malfoy who seemed to have him - stuck between a locked door and a crazed Death Eater - but his breath caught at their proximity and there seemed to be a disconnect between his brain and his mouth.

"I'm trapped here--" Malfoy said, in a voice that was low and dangerous and shouldn't have made Harry's stomach tighten like that, "--hidden in this room only you can find.  This was your plan from the start, wasn't it?"

"No," Harry choked out. "That's not it."

"Yes it is," Malfoy said, pressing in closer still. "What else would it be? Why else would you come after me, and stick me in this room, this bedroom? And oops! The door is locked? How fucking thick do you think I am, Potter?" He clutched the front of Harry's robes, the diadem still in one hand, and shoved him back against the wall. "What else would you want me for? What else am I good for?"

"Malfoy," Harry managed. "Stop. That's not it at all, you need to-" He looked down at Malfoy's hands on his chest and remembered the diadem. Of course. "You need to get rid of that thing," he snarled, reaching up to take hold of the crown. Malfoy pulled away, hiding it behind his back.

"No," he snapped. "You can't take it. It's the only thing I've got that you want. Well--" he laughed, a panicked, humourless noise,"--not the only thing."

Harry couldn't take anymore. He was certain that this wasn't Malfoy talking, that his antics tonight - and possibly the past few weeks, as well - were down to the Horcrux he refused to release. He marched over and tried to rip the diadem from Malfoy's hands, but the boy spun around, pulling it out of his reach again.

"No," he said frantically, backing away with a hunted expression. "You can't have it, you can't have me."

"For fuck's sake, Malfoy!" Harry said. "Put that thing down!"  He lunged forward and Malfoy tried to move away, but he'd retreated to the bed and could only lean back against it as Harry tried to grab the crown from his hands.  Malfoy raised it over his head and Harry stood on tiptoe to match Malfoy's height, their bodies lining up and pressing flush against each other.

They both froze as their bodies came into contact, chest to chest, arm to arm, hips to hips.  Leaning so close, it was impossible to avoid looking into each other's eyes as they discovered that they were both hard and straining against their trousers.

Harry took advantage of Malfoy's momentary distraction and snatched the crown away, flinging it to the other side of the room.  Malfoy let out a strangled cry as it left his fingers, but then a strange expression crept over his face, one of fear and confusion and revulsion.

"What the hell was that?" he said in a small voice, so different from the one he'd been using before.

"I'm not sure," Harry replied. "But it obviously had something to do with the Horcrux.  So just leave it alone from now on, all right?"

Malfoy nodded up at him, blinking swiftly. He held the rest of his body motionless, as if afraid to remind Harry that they were pressed up against together, bent over the bed. But Harry didn't need a reminder; he was acutely aware of the movement of Malfoy's chest as he sucked in rapid breaths, the twitch of his arm, the pressure of his still-hard cock lined up with Harry's. Harry held his own breath and fought the urge to lean in even closer, closer, until there wasn't a wisp of empty space between them.

"Uh, Potter?" Malfoy said finally. "Feel like letting me up now?"

Heat gathered at the back of Harry's neck as he looked down into Malfoy's nervous eyes. He drew back, embarrassed, but as he did his body rubbed against the one below him, and Malfoy bucked slightly into the contact, biting down on his lip. Somehow, Harry knew that if this didn't happen right now, he would never get the chance again.

"No," he said, and Malfoy's eyes - which had fluttered half-shut, flew open. He looked scared, but not angry, as Harry leant over him and crashed their mouths together. Malfoy made a noise that Harry couldn't decipher, but it must not have been protest because he let his lips part under Harry's, and their teeth scraped together. Harry relented long enough for Malfoy to relax his jaw, then dug back in, running his tongue along the ridge of Malfoy's teeth and finding his tongue. Malfoy laid a hand on Harry's chest, but didn't push him away, so Harry moved his tongue against Malfoy's again and this time Malfoy moved his in return.

It was better than kissing Cho, even better than kissing Ginny - where Ginny's kisses left him light-headed

and woozy, Malfoy's electrified him, sending nearly painful shocks of arousal through his body. Ginny had always made him feel like he was floating, but Malfoy dragged him back down to earth and provided him a place to land. Maybe it should have disturbed him that it was Malfoy's tongue in his mouth, Malfoy's hand on his chest, Malfoy's breath he was swallowing down, but it didn't. It only made the moment more real, more immediate. This didn't feel like a dream; it felt like his final wish before facing a firing squad.

One of his hands had found its way to the place where Malfoy's shirt met his trousers, and worked at the gap until his fingertips brushed over warm skin. Malfoy gasped into his mouth and arched suddenly, and their erections that Harry had somehow forgotten ground together. Harry gasped as well and pushed back against Malfoy's hips, working to find the perfect angle. He wrapped his fingers around Malfoy's side, surprised at how thin he was, how he could feel the outline of Malfoy's ribs.

"Can I-" he said, tearing his mouth away from Malfoy's and tugging on the hem of his shirt. He hoped Malfoy understood; he didn't want to have to articulate that he was anxious to get Malfoy undressed so he could see that skin again - for real this time, not just a stolen glimpse.

Malfoy looked down at their chests, at his hand clutched in Harry's shirt, and said nothing. The silence caused a dark pit to open in Harry's stomach - he didn't want Malfoy to pull away. So he leant in again, tucking his hand around the waistband of Malfoy's trousers and pulling him into Harry's body just as he ran his tongue over Malfoy's parted lips. Once their mouths and their cocks were back in contact, Malfoy came to life, bucking up and biting down on Harry's tongue. Harry groaned, going dizzy at the scrape of Malfoy's teeth and the heat of his erection. He began to rut mindlessly against Malfoy's hips - he had never done this before, but his body seemed to know well enough what it wanted. Malfoy pushed back against him, but let Harry set the pace, content to work Harry's mouth with tongue and his teeth. That was just fine for Harry - he wasn't sure he had the strength of mind to control the stimulation at their cocks and their mouths both at once.

"Wait," Malfoy said suddenly, the word echoing in Harry's mouth. "This isn't-" He inched back a little, and Harry felt his heart drop.

"Oh," Harry said, so full of disappointment and frustration he felt a hot prickle behind his eyes. "Oh, okay." His body felt weak and cold as he lifted himself off Malfoy, and he tried not to gaze at the boy's visible stomach, which he still hadn't seen properly.

"No-" Malfoy said quickly, and that almost-familiar pink tinge painted his skin. "It's just..." He crept back further so he was laid out on the bed instead of bent backwards over it. "My back. That's all."

He looked embarrassed - at letting Harry kiss him, at wanting more, at not being able to hold the position. Harry wasn't going to humiliate him any further if he could help it; there was no telling where Malfoy's tipping point would be, and he desperately wanted to keep on. So he lifted himself onto the mattress and crawled atop Malfoy, watching barely-veiled terror fill his eyes as their bodies settled together once more.

That look was almost enough to steer Harry off course, but he dropped his head to avoid it and pressed his open mouth to Malfoy's neck. Malfoy moaned and tilted back his chin, and Harry thrilled at the

invitation.  He nipped and sucked at the pale skin, leaving reddened marks in his wake.  It was Malfoy controlling the movement of their hips now, his fingers hooked into Harry's belt-loops and pulling at them in time with his own frantic jerks.

Before long, a strange numbness spread throughout Harry's body, and he removed his mouth from Malfoy's neck to brace his head against the bed.  He wrapped one arm behind Malfoy's back and pulled them tighter together, bucking so harshly they'd probably both have friction burns the next day.  Malfoy didn't complain; he met Harry's thrusts, making a small whimpering noise at each one.  For a few seconds, time seemed to stop, and the heat and the pressure and the numbness joined with a spark at the base of his spine.  And then-

"Oh, God," he choked, the spark igniting and sending a wave of electric pleasure through his body.  He rode it out, hips jacking relentlessly into Malfoy's still-hard cock, barely hearing the boy's murmurs of approval below him.  When it was over, he collapsed, breathless and spent.

Malfoy growled in frustration and released one of his hands from Harry's trousers to work in between their bodies, and Harry felt his energy return instantly.  He stole a look at Malfoy's closed eyes, then raised his body enough to watch Malfoy rub himself off, quick and efficient, like he'd done it a million times in the past and knew just the right rhythm to set.

It had never occurred to Harry that Malfoy would wank - he seemed so distracted and depressed usually. But there he was, hand and wrist working in tandem to bring him over the edge.  Harry would have been content just to watch, but as Malfoy began to pant breathily, he realised it would all be over in a few seconds and he might never have this opportunity again.  So he reached out with one shaky, unsure

hand and closed it over Malfoy's, trying to match the speed and pressure Malfoy was using on himself. He looked up to see Malfoy staring down at him, surprise and arousal warring for space before his lids fell closed again and his back arched, a cry escaping his throat as his cock pulsed under Harry's hand. He kept up the pressure through the jerky aftershocks of Malfoy's orgasm, stopping only when Malfoy relaxed against the bed and sighed heavily.

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He woke the next morning to the high-pitched screeching sound of metal on metal, punctuated by angry shouts.

"Malfoy?" he asked, sitting up and searching the room for the source of the noise.

Malfoy rose from behind the couch, a wild look in his eyes. "Where is it?" he demanded, abandoning his search and walking back to the bed. "What did you do with it?"

Oh, shit - he'd forgotten about the diadem. He shouldn't have assumed Malfoy would forget so easily. He needed to find it before Malfoy did - and he had absolutely no idea where it had ended up the night

before.

He jumped out of bed and looked around. The silver crown was nowhere in sight; it must have fallen under or behind something when he'd tossed it aside. Dropping to his knees, he checked first beneath the wardrobe, then under the bed - yes, there it was. Hidden beneath the mattress, the diadem glimmered brightly despite the lack of light. Harry flattened onto his stomach, but before he could wrap his fingers around the crown, he felt a hand gripping his leg and pulling him backwards.

"Don't touch it!" Malfoy yelled as Harry slid over the floor. "It's mine, don't you touch it!"

When he was clear of the bed, Harry sat up and pushed Malfoy away with both hands, the other boy falling backwards from the force. He lay down again, but Malfoy was on him in a flash, flipping Harry onto his back and straddling him to keep him down.

"I said don't touch it," Malfoy growled, his nails digging into Harry's arms and his eyes blazing.

Harry froze. He couldn't let Malfoy get at the diadem - what if he tried to run away with it and got caught? If that happened, their plan would be shot to hell. He had to keep Malfoy in the room - and his

mind off the diadem - as long as possible.

That he was keen on kissing Malfoy again anyway was just an added bonus.

He wrapped one hand behind Malfoy's neck and pulled him down so their mouths met. Malfoy responded without a hint of hesitation, kissing him harshly and pressing him into the floor. The feeling of Malfoy's tongue against his was just as good as he remembered, rubbing roughly and finding places that made Harry's skin tingle and his stomach flip. A small piece of him felt guilty - he couldn't be sure if Malfoy wanted this, or if it was some sort of Horcrux-crazed lust, but it sure felt like Malfoy wanted it. And besides, Harry wasn't forcing him to do anything - Malfoy was the one on top of him, kissing him, holding him down. He relaxed against the floor, happy to let Malfoy control the contact so long as he didn't stop.

He didn't. Malfoy moved his mouth against Harry's with single-minded fervor, seemingly oblivious to anything around them. Harry moaned at the slide of his tongue and whimpered when Malfoy bit his lip a little too hard and after a few minutes gathered the courage to try Malfoy's shirt again. He pulled at it gently, only to have Malfoy sit back and bat his hands away.

"Don't touch me," Malfoy snarled, but before Harry could reply Malfoy was lifting his own shirt over his head and dropping it to the floor. He stared at Malfoy's bare chest, at the white-pink scars stretching from his collarbone past the line of his trousers, at the violently black Mark on his arm. His breath caught and he reached up with one hand, not sure what he wanted to touch and not getting the chance before Malfoy grabbed his wrist and slammed it down to the floor.

"Don't fucking touch me," Malfoy muttered again as he tore at Harry's shirt, yanking it roughly over his head. It gathered around his shoulders, trapping his arms above his head, but before he could try to remove it Malfoy's hands were on his wrists, holding them down against the stone floor. The gleam in Malfoy's eye - and the Dark Mark at the edge of Harry's vision - made him wonder if he should be afraid. But Malfoy started rocking against him then, rolling his hips in the most amazing way, and Harry didn't care anymore.

"Fuck, Mal-" he panted, trying not to close his eyes even as the heat and the pleasure increased. Malfoy hovered just above him, the fading scars on his collarbone close enough to lick if Harry could sit up far enough. He couldn't though, not with Malfoy's iron grip anchoring him to the floor and his furious glare just daring Harry to move.

"Shut up," grunted Malfoy as he ground his cock into Harry's harder and faster, harder and harder until it nearly hurt. It was frustrating beyond belief, being pinned in place and forced to accept the not-quite-right pressure that gave him no chance to get off, but he couldn't stop it, wouldn't stop it, not if it meant scaring Malfoy away. And no matter how frustrating it was, it was a hundred times more perfect, the feel of Malfoy's body bearing down hard against his own.

At one particularly well-aimed thrust, Harry arched up, then gasped as their chests pressed together. Malfoy's skin was hot and smooth and covered with just enough sweat for them to slide against each other. God, it felt good, felt brilliant, but it wasn't enough - he wanted to pull Malfoy down on top of him, wanted to kiss those angry lips, wanted to touch-

"Fuck it," he said, ripping his hands away from Malfoy's and tangling them in the boy's pale hair, bringing their faces together.  Malfoy looked ready to bite, but Harry shoved his tongue into Malfoy's mouth and felt the resistance melt away.

Once he was sure Malfoy wouldn't push him off, Harry released his grip on Malfoy's hair and started working on his trousers instead.  Malfoy seemed to agree with his train of thought and kissed back ferociously while trying to undo Harry's fastenings with one hand.  Eventually the buttons and zips gave way and they pushed their remaining clothes down as far as they could without their mouths losing contact.

"Oh God," Harry moaned as Malfoy lay on top of him again, bringing their erections into contact.  He would never have guessed Malfoy's naked body would feel so gloriously, heart-stoppingly good.  He closed his eyes and held onto Malfoy's hips - he swore if he didn't cling tightly, the floor beneath him would give out and he would fall and fall forever, because there was no way anything this good would last long in his hands.

He expected Malfoy to start rocking against him again, so he was surprised when Malfoy braced himself by one arm - the Marked one, planted right beside Harry's head - and brought the other between their bodies, wrapping his long fingers around Harry's cock and squeezing lightly.

Harry nearly came right then, at the cool touch of Malfoy's fingers on his hot, sensitive skin. No one had ever touched him there before, but Harry could already tell it was a million times better than touching himself. He opened his eyes to find Malfoy looking down at him, the anger in his eyes gone and replaced by a fierce hunger. The combination of Malfoy's eyes on his and Malfoy's hand on his cock made Harry's stomach want to drop. But there was nowhere for it to go - absolutely everything in Harry's body was gathered in his groin already - and so he came instead, emptying himself onto his own chest as Malfoy continued to work the length of his cock. Fuck it was good, lying back to enjoy the spasms of pleasure while someone else coaxed him through. No, it was better than good, it was amazing.

When it was over he looked up at Malfoy, grinning stupidly, but Malfoy wasn't looking at him. He was touching himself now, eyes closed and teeth digging into his lower lip. Something in Harry's foggy brain told him that wasn't right, Malfoy shouldn't be doing that, not when Harry knew how brilliant it felt to have someone else do it for you.

"Let me," he said, moving Malfoy's hand out of the way and replacing it with his own. Malfoy looked like he might argue, but Harry pumped his fist over Malfoy's cock and the boy's mouth fell shut.

"Oh," Malfoy said, exhaling softly and closing his eyes.

"Yeah." Harry couldn't think of anything more eloquent to say, and judging by the look on Malfoy's face, nothing more was necessary. He worked his hand over Malfoy's erection, marveling over how different it felt, how much softer the skin was than his own. It made him want to be gentle, having that soft,

delicate skin under his hand, but he could tell Malfoy wanted it hard and fast and didn't care if it chafed. So he moved his hand quickly, making sure to rub his thumb on the sensitive spot just under the head.

"Oh," Malfoy said again, and that was all the warning Harry had before he was covered with more hot, sticky fluid. This time, however, it wasn't his, it was Malfoy's, and he might have been embarrassed to be coated in Malfoy's come if it weren't for the blissful expression on Malfoy's face. It was the closest to happy Malfoy had looked in a long time, and Harry wanted nothing more than to see him look that way again - and again and again, if possible.

"Hey," he said softly. Malfoy's eyes flew open, then grew wide.

"Oh no." He backed off Harry, fumbling to replace his trousers. "No, I didn't mean-"

"It's okay," Harry said miserably. He should have known it was too good to be true. "I know you didn't want to. It's not your fault."

"No," Malfoy said, shaking his head. He looked like he was going to be sick. Harry's insides twisted at the thought - that Malfoy was sick over the fact he'd got off with Harry. "No, that's not-" He stood up

and rushed to the bathroom door, slamming it behind him.

Harry sat up and pulled on his clothes.  If being around the diadem was making Malfoy do things he didn't want to do, it was time to separate them.  It was time to call Hermione.

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"And there's nowhere in the room you can hide it?"

Harry shook his head.  Hermione was taking this all remarkably well - of course, he hadn't told her exactly what had happened between him and Malfoy, only that Malfoy was spending too much time with the Horcrux and had begun acting strangely.  But still, she was extremely composed for having found out they likely had another possession on their hands.

"No, there really isn't.  There's hardly anything in here, just the, er, bed, and the desk, and the wardrobe- what?"

Hermione had a look on her face - not just any look, but the look, the one that meant she'd come up with something brilliant.

"The wardrobe!" she cried.  "Harry, the wardrobe!"

He didn't follow.  "No, really, the wardrobe won't work, he'd find it in a second-"

"No!" she shrieked.  "Not that wardrobe.  Don't you remember?  Don't you remember where Dumbledore said Riddle kept the things he stole from the other children at the orphanage?"

Harry did.  He couldn't forget if he tried.  Riddle had kept them in his wardrobe, the very same wardrobe Dumbledore had set on fire to prove he was a wizard.  Of course.  Voldemort had always kept his prizes there - why should his Horcruxes be any different?  And why hadn't they looked there first?

In the mirror, Hermione was still talking anxiously, unaware that Harry was lost in thought.

"Okay, Ron and I will go straight off.  With any luck, Harry, you won't have to worry about the diadem much longer.  We'll be able to destroy all of them soon.  In the meantime--" she smiled lightly and Harry knew she was about to make a suggestion he wouldn't like, "--why don't you stay with Malfoy?  You can hide the diadem from him and make sure nothing else happens."

Great, he thought.  Stay in the room with Malfoy.  Who had just been tricked into sleeping with his arch rival.  Terrific idea.

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As it happened, he needn't have worried.  Malfoy didn't leave the bathroom the rest of the day, either to go after the diadem or to give Harry a well-deserved verbal thrashing.  After a few hours sitting on the couch and staring at the crown, Harry couldn't take anymore.  The guilt over what he'd done - what he'd let Malfoy do - was too much.

He knocked softly on the bathroom door.  "Malfoy?"  There was no answer.  He knocked again.  "Look, Malfoy, I'm sorry.  I didn't mean to-" To what?  Kiss him?  Touch him?  Have sex with him while he was under the influence of a Dark spell?  "I'm sorry if I made you do anything you didn't want to.  We're going

to get the diadem out of here soon, and then you can- I don't know, maybe Dobby will bring you the food and things you need.  But you won't have to see me anymore."

The door opened to reveal Malfoy standing there, arms crossed over his still-bare chest.  "You know, I used to think this self-sacrificing thing was just an act, but you really are the most stubborn fucking do-gooder in the world, aren't you?"

"I'm-"

"Harry!"  They both started at Hermione's excited cry.  "Harry, are you there?  We've got it!"

"I'm coming!" he called, turning away from Malfoy to grab the mirror from the table.  "It was there?  You found it?"

"Yes, we found it - look!"  Hermione flipped the mirror around so Harry could see Ron standing proudly, Hufflepuff's Cup in his hands.

"Wow," he breathed, his excitement building quickly.  "It that it, then?  We've got them all?"

"Yes!"  Hermione cheered, and the image shook.  She turned it around again.  "Now we just need to destroy them!"  Her face fell as she realised what she had said.  "Well, not all of them, of course.  We'll find a way to be rid of the piece that's inside you, Harry, I swear."

"If I'm a Horcrux," Harry said, but he sounded in denial even to himself.  Of course he was a Horcrux.  That was why he'd been here this whole time as a human playtoy for the Carrows.  There was no other reason to keep him alive.

"Harry," Hermione started, pity drawing over her face.  "You might have to accept that-"

"I've accepted it," Harry replied firmly.  He hadn't, but he'd resigned himself to it, and that was close enough.  He just had to hope Hermione would find a way to kill the piece of Voldemort's soul inside him without killing him, as well.  "Honest, I have.  Now how are we going to destroy the rest of these?"

She perked up at the new topic.  "Basilisk fangs, remember?  We'll just have to take them from the Chamber of Secrets."

"We?"

She smiled.  "Of course, we!  Oh, I suppose you could grab them and meet us here, but I need to take a few more books from the Restricted Section, and I'd really rather pick them out myself.  You understand, right?"

"Er, of course," he said.  "But how are you planning to get in?"

Her bright smile faltered a bit and she looked past the mirror, locking eyes with Ron for a second before nodding.  "Well, considering all the other entrances are blocked off... We thought we'd try Borgin and Burke's."

"Borgin and Burke's?"  Harry repeated, confused.  "Why, what do they- oh." He remembered the year before, Malfoy bragging to Dumbledore about how he'd fixed the Vanishing Cabinets all on his own and

let the Death Eaters in through the one he'd left at the shop.  His eyes slid to where Malfoy was standing, head down, as he buttoned up his shirt and pretended not to hear.

"Yes," Hermione said delicately.  "Do you think you could find out if they still work?"

Malfoy looked up at him briefly and Harry tried not to smile.  "Yeah, I think I could manage that."

~*~

"Why do your brilliant plans always include covering me in a bloody cloak?"  Malfoy asked irritably as Harry led them from the room, diadem in hand.

"They don't," Harry whispered back, but he couldn't feel too frustrated.  Not only had Malfoy not punched him immediately on opening the bathroom door, he was actually talking to Harry, teasing him, as if they were friends.  It was a small victory, but a victory all the same.  He was fighting to keep a gloating smile off his face.  He wasn't sure it would go over well, and he wasn't looking to press his luck.  Teasing was fine for now.

"Oh, not all of them, I suppose," Malfoy said, voice tinted with laughter. "Some of them involve sticking me with a Dark object that tries to possess me. I'll admit I prefer the cloak."

Harry smiled in spite of himself. He preferred the cloak as well, especially when it meant their arms would brush together as they paced the hallway. "I didn't do that on purpose!" he replied. "If you remember, I was the one who told you not to play with it!"

"Don't you know anything? That's the best way to get a person to do something. Tell them they ought not do it, and you can bet it'll get done in no time."

"Yes, well--" Harry said, pulling open the door that had appeared for the Room of Hidden Things, "--not all of us think like Slytherins. So next time a Gryffindor tells you not to touch something, take him at his word, okay?" He tore off the cloak as the door closed behind them.

"Sure thing, Potter," Malfoy said with a smirk, and Harry braced himself for the innuendo. It didn't come. Maybe Malfoy was pretending the whole thing hadn't happened?

Harry looked over at Malfoy, who had done his best to clean up by tucking in his shirt and brushing off his clothes, but was still disheveled.  No, he wasn't ignoring everything, otherwise he'd have been spelling the bruises off his neck while he was locked in the bathroom.

Malfoy glanced over and when he caught Harry inspecting his neck, he blushed and turned away again. "What are you staring at?" he asked.

The marks I left on your neck that you haven't got rid of yet, Harry thought.  "Nothing," he said quickly, looking away as well.  "You think it will still work, right?"

Malfoy shrugged.  "I don't see why not."

"Okay then, I'll let them know they can come through."

Less than five minutes later, Ron stepped out of the cabinet, followed closely by Hermione.  The three of

them rushed together in a crushing embrace, holding on longer than was comfortable and not caring when they lost their breath and finally had to release one another and gasp for air. None of them could stop grinning. Not only were they together again after so many months apart, they were nearly finished with their quest. In just a few hours, the only part of Voldemort's soul that would remain would be the one in Harry's body, and with any luck the answer to that riddle was hiding in the library somewhere.

A cough from behind Harry made them all turn around to see Malfoy standing there, arms crossed over his chest and an impatient look on his face. He might have been imposing if it weren't for his wrinkled clothes and still-mussed hair. Harry resisted the impulse to snicker.

"Malfoy," Ron said curtly. He didn't take a step forward to shake hands, but he didn't try to curse him either - that was a promising start.

"Weasley," Malfoy responded in the same tone. They glared at each other, Harry shuffled his feet nervously, and Hermione's eyes danced back and forth between them. Harry knew she was taking in all the information available to her: his refusal to tell her exactly what made him believe Malfoy was possessed, the remaining marks on Malfoy's neck, their similarly rumpled appearances. He should have known Hermione would pick up on it eventually anyway, but he was a little embarrassed they'd been so obvious about it. To her credit though, Hermione didn't say anything, just raised her eyebrows at him. Harry was grateful - he wanted to keep peace between Ron and Malfoy as long as possible.

"So, er, what's the plan?" Harry asked to diffuse the awkward moment.

"We need to get to the Chamber of Secrets--" Hermione said, as if working through a mental checklist, "--so we can grab the fangs, and destroy the Hor- um, things," she said with a sideways glance at Malfoy.

"He knows, Hermione," Harry said, earning surprised looks from all three of them

"Right," she said. "Well, once that's done, we're going to the library for some books. Then we're headed back here as soon as possible, so we can clear out of Borgin and Burke's before sunrise."

"What do you mean, 'we?'" Harry asked cautiously. "I'm not leaving, you know what Volde- oh, for God's sake, Ron, are you still on about that? Voldemort said they were safe as long as I stayed here. I'm not leaving just 'cause we've found the other Horcruxes." He peeked over his shoulder to see Malfoy watching him with interest - didn't he know why Harry had come back that year?

"Harry, I understand. Really I do. But you've got to stop thinking about everyone else for once, and think about the fact that if you stay, something really bad could happen."

"No, it won't," Harry argued. "Nothing worse than already has, anyway. No one's going to die unless I leave."

"Look, mate," Ron said. "It's not they don't appreciate what you've done. But I think everyone would prefer if you could just, you know, beat the bastard once and for all?" He smiled apologetically. "If you can't do that here, it's time to leave, yeah?"

Harry considered that. Why couldn't he defeat Voldemort while he was still at the school? Hermione could still do her research and tell him if she found anything. And they had an easy way in and out of the school if he ever needed it. He doubted Voldemort knew what they were doing, so they didn't have to worry about him making more Horcruxes...

"Potter," Malfoy said in a stern voice. "Am I to believe you know how to defeat the most powerful Dark Wizard of all time, but you're passing it up to stay here and protect your classmates?"

"Well, not exactly-" Harry tried to explain, but Malfoy cut him off.

"It doesn't matter.  If I've got the gist of it, then you need to stop playing the martyr and go save the fucking world, because I for one have had all I can take.  So get off your high horse, get your fangs and your books, and get the hell out of here.  All right?"

The idea that Draco Malfoy was ordering him to stop being selfish was enough to bring a smile to Harry's face, even as Ron and Hermione glared at him.  Well, they had to admit Malfoy had a point.

"All right," he replied, barely containing a grin as his friends stared at him in shock.

~*~

"You just had to give them the Cloak, didn't you?"  Malfoy complained as they made their way to Moaning Myrtle's bathroom, pausing frequently to listen for footsteps and peer around corners.

"Well, I had to show you not all of my great plans include covering you with it, didn't I?"  Harry remarked, feeling a thrill of satisfaction as a smile stretched across Malfoy's face.  It wasn't laughter yet, but it was

something.  "Besides, Ron and Hermione needed it more; they're not supposed to be here."

"I'm reserving judgement on the greatness of your plan for when this is all through," Malfoy said, throwing open the door.  They both froze, the memory of their brief duel in sixth year returning to Harry at once.  Harry half-expected to see the floor covered with a pool of watery blood.  He realised then that he'd never apologised to Malfoy for what had happened in that room a year earlier, and wondered if it would be a good idea to do so now, or if Malfoy would think it was only because he felt guilty, or something.

"Right," Malfoy said shakily, before Harry had a chance to formulate the perfect apology.  "How do we get into this Chamber?"

They emerged triumphant an hour later, covered in dirt and dust and glowing with pride.  Malfoy had taken special satisfaction over driving the basilisk fang into the diadem; it had taken several minutes for the venom to corrode the ancient metal, but Malfoy could not be deterred.  Harry had watched as he forced down the bone, millimetre by millimetre, until the crown snapped in two with a deafening crack.  The delight on his face when he'd destroyed a piece of Voldemort's soul caused Harry's stomach to flip; he was discovering he rather liked seeing Malfoy smile.  Especially when he was smiling at Harry.

"Are there more?" he'd asked, eyes shining with excitement, and Harry had laughed and handed over the cup and locket, content to watch Malfoy's gleeful face as he banished every last trace of Voldemort's soul from the world.

That was where their luck ran out, however; after a few moments spent brushing off the spider webs that had stuck to their clothes and washing the dirt from their hands, they opened the door to see Alecto Carrow waiting for them, wand at the ready. Before they could react, she cast a Body-Bind spell on each of them, freezing them in place.

"Mr Malfoy," she purred. "And Mr Potter. Fancy finding you here--" she grinned perversely, and Harry felt a sudden need to shower, "--together."

She stepped close to remove their wands, and panic rushed over Harry. What was she going to do with them? Where were Ron and Hermione? Did the Carrows know they were in the school? What was going to happen to Malfoy? A dozen possible fates sprung to Harry's mind, none of them good. There was no way they'd be allowed to just return to school, not after keeping Malfoy hidden away for so long. They had to get out of there. Luckily, once she'd collected their wands, Alecto removed the Body-Binds holding them immobile.

"Now," she said, near giddy with excitement. "We're going to pay the Headmaster a visit. March!"

As they made their way to Dumbledore's - Snape's - office, Harry tried to send Malfoy a comforting

message, but he looked as though he'd retreated into himself - shoulders drooped, eyes downcast, breaths shallow. He didn't even look up as Harry tried to catch his eye, so Harry had to settle for brushing their shoulders together as they walked. He was desperate for a way to let Malfoy know they'd get out of this, somehow.

"Professor Carrow," Snape said as they entered the office. "I see you've brought guests."

Harry glared at him, but Snape's eyes were focused on Malfoy, who was still staring down at the floor and breathing quickly.

"I found him," Alecto gloated. "He was with Potter, just like we thought."

"So I see." Snape looked over at Harry then, returning his glare. That only upset Harry further - what did Snape have to be angry about?

"Let's call him, then," she said. "The Dark Lord wants to be called straight off. He wants to teach this little blood traitor a lesson." She gave Malfoy a shove in the back as she spoke, but he didn't protest, just caught himself before he fell to the ground.

"Of course we must--" Snape agreed with a nod of his head, "--but should we not locate Amycus first and let him share the glory?"

Alecto's eyes lit up and she licked her lips. "Of course!" She gestured towards Harry and Malfoy. "But what about these two?"

Snape waved his wand and before Harry could think of reacting he was on the floor, bound and gagged with Malfoy similarly trussed up beside him. "That will hold them," Snape said with a smile, ignoring Harry's heated look as he walked past, leading Carrow from the room and locking the door behind them.

As soon as the door shut, Harry began fighting against the ropes. They needed to find a way out of there, fast. If Voldemort arrived, he'd not only punish Malfoy for disappearing, he'd see they'd been destroying the Horcruxes - had destroyed them, save one. Harry didn't know what would happen when Voldemort learned there was only one piece of his soul remaining, and he didn't care to learn. Somehow they had to escape and take Ron and Hermione with them.

After a few minutes, Harry was beginning to think dislodging the ropes was hopeless. He searched around for a sharp surface to cut them on and noticed Malfoy working against his ropes, as well, but in a

practiced, methodical way.  Harry stopped his own struggles and watched as, slowly, the knots around Malfoy's wrists loosened enough for him to slip his hands through.  When his arms were free, he reached up to remove his gag and wipe his face, then turned to face Harry.

"Here," he said, scooting closer and untying the gag in Harry's mouth.  The feel of his fingers tickling Harry's neck made Harry want to shiver, but the embarrassment of needing Malfoy to set him free dampened his enjoyment of the sensation.  When the gag was free of his mouth, Harry tried to wipe his face against his shoulder, not wanting Malfoy to see the drool that had spilt down his chin.

"Thanks," he said as Malfoy began working on the knots at his wrists.

"Don't mention it," Malfoy said behind him, his breath hot against Harry's neck.  Harry squirmed; it was definitely the wrong time for his body to be responding to the touch of Malfoy's fingers, but he couldn't help it.  For all they'd done the night before, Harry couldn't remember if Malfoy's hands had ever come into contact with his skin.  It felt nice.

"How'd you do that?" he asked to distract himself from the light brushes against his arms.

"Do what?"

"Get free so quickly."

To his surprise, Malfoy laughed.  Well, chuckled maybe.  But it was close.  "Oh come on, everyone knows that's a pathetic excuse for a binding spell."

"Seems all right to me," Harry said, tugging his wrists in demonstration.

"Stop that, you'll tighten them again.  Just like you did the first time around, so sit still."

Harry did, fuming slightly at having been told off, but before long he felt the knots at his wrists give way. He shook off the ropes around his arms, and they each went to work on the ones around their own legs. Finally they stood, sweating and aching but free of their bonds.

"Now what?"  Malfoy asked.

"Now we find Ron and Hermione and get out of here," Harry replied, taking the mirror from the pouch around his neck.  Thank goodness for that, or Carrow might have found the compact when she took their wands.  He opened it up, but the image was blank.  "Hermione?" he called cautiously.  "Ron?"

There was no answer.  He held the mirror up to his ear, to see if he could catch any bits of sound, then swore.

"What?"  Malfoy asked, confused.

"Carrow," Harry said around the knot building in his throat.  "And Filch.  They found them.  They're coming here."  He tried to swallow, but the knot was growing bigger, and there was another forming in his stomach.  "They're going to call Voldemort.  He'll kill them.  And you."

"And you," Malfoy pointed out, not at all helpfully.

"No," Harry shook his head and laughed, a hysterical noise he couldn't remember making before. "No, not me. He won't kill me." He looked at Malfoy, who was watching him with confusion. "I'm the last Horcrux, you see. He can't kill me, or else he'll-"

All at once, he stopped talking. Malfoy was still looking at him, the confusion on his face fading away as he absorbed Harry's meaning. A plan was forming in Harry's mind - he just hoped they had enough time. And the right tools for the job.

"Start looking for a wand," he instructed, and Malfoy's confusion returned.

"What?" he asked. "Why? Are you going to duel him? Don't you need your wand for that?"

Harry raced over to the desk - Snape's desk - and began rummaging through the various drawers. There had to be a spare wand around somewhere, there just had to be.

"I'm not going to duel anyone," he said, dumping the contents of one large drawer on the floor and kneeling to pilfer through it.  "The wand isn't for me."

"What do you mean, it's not for you?"  Harry could hear the caution in Malfoy's voice, the apprehension. He couldn't know what Harry was planning, not exactly, but he'd cottoned on to the general idea.

"I mean--" Harry said, jumping to his feet and shoving an old, chipped wand into Malfoy's hand, "--it's not for me."

Malfoy looked down at the wand Harry had given him, then up into Harry's face.  "No," he said, holding it out for Harry to take again.  "No, I can't-"

"You have to," Harry said firmly, closing his hand around Malfoy's so he wouldn't drop the wand.  "If I die, he dies.  He'll be gone."  He looked at Malfoy with pleading eyes.  "But if I don't die, and he comes here, I don't know what will happen."  Harry released Malfoy's hand and was pleased when Malfoy didn't drop the wand.  "Please?"

Malfoy stared down at the wand and swallowed, then met Harry's gaze. He looked frightened; it was the same face Harry had seen over and over again in his visions, the one he wore when Voldemort ordered him to torture someone. "I don't know if I can," Malfoy said softly. "I've never been able to, before."

"I know," Harry placated him. "But you can. You have to."

Malfoy choked out a laugh.

"What?" Harry asked. His nerves were already shot, he didn't know if he could take Malfoy laughing at him on top of everything else.

"You, Harry Potter, asking me to cast the Killing Curse on you." He laughed again. "That's it, this is a dream. I thought so before but now I'm sure. I'm actually back in fifth year, and I've eaten too many sweets and they've made my dreams all screwy."

Harry tried to smile with him, but the twisting knot in his stomach was growing larger, more insistent.

"It's not a dream, Malfoy.  It's real, and we're running out of time."

Malfoy stopped laughing suddenly.  "What if I fail?"

Harry shook his head.  "I don't think we want to find out.  So, don't, okay?"

"Easy for you to say," Malfoy muttered, then adjusted his grip on the wand.  He looked down at it and nodded.  "Okay," he whispered.  He took a deep breath then raised his head again, locking eyes with Harry.  "Okay."

"Okay," Harry agreed.  He saw Malfoy raise his arm a little, and closed his eyes.  How strange, he thought, that it all came down to this.  To a hasty Killing Curse from his long-time rival, recent- well, something else.  It all felt so rushed, so anticlimactic.  He'd never even had the chance to say goodbye to his friends.  Harry clenched his eyes shut tighter.  His body was starting to tremble with fear and anticipation and sorrow, and he wished Malfoy would hurry up and get this done.

A hand on his chest shocked his eyes open to find Malfoy standing very close and wearing a look of sheer determination. Before Harry could say anything, Malfoy's mouth was on his, and all the emotion that had been building up inside him released in a great rush, like climbing to the top of a roller coaster then tipping over the edge - exhilarating, but not entirely pleasurable. It was just as hungry as the last time, but even more desperate; their first time may have felt like his last, but now he was absolutely certain of it. This was the last kiss he would ever have. It was a shame, really, because it was also the best kiss he'd ever had - if he weren't about to die, he would have liked to experience more of them.

It started somewhat tentatively, but only until they were each certain the other wanted it just as badly, and then it turned rough. Maybe he should have been doing something else with his last minutes - try to reach Ron and Hermione, leave a note for everyone he'd never see again, something, but all he really wanted was to feel Malfoy's mouth on his one more time. Harry wanted to compensate for every kiss he'd never have in this one moment, and if it meant taking a layer of skin off Malfoy's lips, leaving them bruised and raw, then so be it. Malfoy didn't mind. He let Harry abuse his mouth and returned the favour, clawing at Harry's back and neck like he wanted to leave marks.

Harry wondered if they had time for more - it wasn't fair, there was so much he'd never experienced. He'd never done all those things the older boys had talked about in the Quidditch locker room, like having someone's mouth on him when he came. He'd never 'gone all the way,' he didn't even know what it meant, he just knew it was one more thing he'd never have. He bit down on Malfoy's tongue as the thought hit him, and it took him a moment to realise the bitter taste in his mouth wasn't disappointment, but blood.

"I'm sorry," he said as he pulled back, relaxing his grip on Malfoy's hips. Malfoy stared at him dumbly, bowing his head as he came to his senses and remembered the task at hand.

"It's fine," Malfoy mumbled, hesitating for a long moment before he stepped back. He kept his eyes down as he repositioned the wand in his hand, looking up when he found a comfortable grip.

"Are you ready?" Harry asked, resisting the urge to reach out and touch him again. He would have given anything to make that moment last longer, but they didn't have any more time. They were pushing their luck as it was. Snape and the Carrows would be back any minute, with Voldemort quickly behind.

Malfoy didn't look ready, he looked tired and scared and out of his depth, but he nodded anyway. "Yeah," he said shakily, then cleared his throat. "Yeah." It came out stronger the second time.

"Okay." Harry dug his nails into the wood of the desk at his back to keep from falling, or fleeing, or anything else his body was screaming at him to do. He only had to hold on for a few more seconds. A few more seconds, and it would be over - he'd be gone and he'd take Voldemort with him.

"Okay," Malfoy agreed, and took in a steadying breath. Harry left his eyes open that time as Malfoy raised the wand, held Malfoy's steel gaze as the other boy spoke the words: "Avada Kedavra."

And then it all went black.

~*~

"I know you're awake, Potter.  Spare us your dramatics and sit up."

Harry pried his eyes open and blinked at the bright light.  A tall figure with black hair leant over him, standing in dark relief against the white ceiling.

"Eyes open.  It's a start."

A thousand questions sprung into his head.  Where was he?  Why wasn't he dead?  What had happened when Malfoy cast the spell?  Why was he in a room with- "Snape?"

"Can't put anything past you, can we, Potter?"

Harry strained to sit up, groaning as a piercing pain shot through his head. "What's going on? Where's Malfoy?"

The bright light was beginning to settle; he could make out a sinister smile on Snape's face.

"I'm afraid Mr Malfoy is indisposed at the moment," he sneered, and Harry saw red.

"Where is he?" Harry asked insistently. "What did you do with him? Where are Ron and Hermione?" He tried to stand, but found his muscles felt too weak to hold him.

"Oh, Severus, do stop rattling the poor boy. He's been through quite enough." Turning, he saw Madam Pomfrey making her way over to them, a tray of potions in her arms. Oh. He was in the hospital wing at Hogwarts. That was a good sign. She came to his side and smiled warmly. "Mr Weasley and Miss

Granger are in your common room, dear."

"And Malfoy?"

She nodded to a bed on the opposite side of the room. "Is getting some much-needed rest, just as you should be. Now take this, and lie back." He accepted the potion she handed him, but didn't drink it yet.

"What happened? Why is-" He looked over at Snape, who was glowering at him as always. "I don't understand."

"Yes, well, logical deduction never has been your strong point, has it?" Snape said, and Harry gave him a nasty look.

"Neither has being a two-faced snake," he retorted. To his surprise, Snape just shook his head.

"Quiet, the both of you," Pomfrey directed. "Severus, if you cannot prevent yourself from agitating him, I'll ask you to leave." Snape huffed but did not say any more.

"What happened?" he asked again, steadily growing impatient. Pomfrey took the potion from him, setting it aside before she sat down on the bed, cradling his face between her hands.

"My dear boy," she said, smiling warmly. "You're quite remarkable, aren't you?" Tears shone in her eyes. Harry wasn't sure how to respond. "You've done it. He's gone."

Harry blinked. "It worked? But, then, why am I still..." He trailed off and looked away. Did they know what had happened in Dumbledore's office? Was Malfoy going to be in trouble if he told?

"Once again, the world has been saved by pure Gryffindor bravado," Snape said, looking as though he'd been forced to swallow a spoonful of castor oil. He rolled his eyes at Harry's blank stare. "It appears your noble sacrifice has spared you the typical fate of one who has endured the Killing Curse, Potter."

"My sacrifice?  What sacrifice?"

Pomfrey squeezed his hand and he turned his attention back to her.  "You were willing to give your own life to save everyone else's."

"Mr Malfoy's spell destroyed only the remainder of the Dark Lord's soul," Snape continued.  He sounded disappointed.  "Yours remains intact."

"So Voldemort is dead?"

"Yes."

"And I'm not?"

"In defiance of all logic, yes."

Harry gaped at him.  "Have you been... this whole time..."

"Yes?"

"Playing both sides."

Snape raised an eyebrow at him.  "I'm afraid you're alone in that distinction," he said with a glance at the bed where Malfoy slept.  "I have not been in the Dark Lord's employ for some time."

Harry's blood turned hot, both at the realisation that Snape knew about him and Malfoy, and at Snape's claim of loyalty to Dumbledore.  "But you helped them!  You let them torture us!"

Snape closed his eyes and shook his head minutely.  "I see things have not changed; despite everything, you remain painfully myopic."

Before Harry could ask what he meant, Snape turned on his heel and walked from the room. "I shall inform McGonagall he is awake," he called over his shoulder as he flung the door open to reveal a crowd of students waiting outside.

"Is he awake?" Hermione asked, peering around the door frame. "Harry!" She rushed into the room, Ron at her heels and Neville, Ginny and Luna close behind.

"I don't think that will be necessary Severus, thank you," Pomfrey said with a smile. Snape exited quickly, muttering something about a 'trampling horde of Gryffindors' under his breath.

"All right, Harry?" Ron asked as Hermione threw her arms around Harry.

"All right," he replied through a gap in Hermione's bushy hair. "Hey, guys."

"Oh, Harry, that was incredibly brave of you," Hermione whispered.

"Thanks," he said. "But do you think you could ease off? I'm still a bit lightheaded."

"Oh!" She jumped back and let Ron wrap his arms around her stomach.

Harry looked around at the weary but beaming faces. "So you all know what happened?" They nodded. "How?"

"Malfoy," Neville said. "He was still with you when we got to Snape's office."

"When you got to- Why were you in Snape's office?"

Ginny sighed loudly and brushed a length of hair over one shoulder. "Really, Harry, did you think we'd let

the Carrows take Ron and Hermione to You-Know-Who? We went to stop them as soon as we got Hermione's message."

Harry looked at Hermione questioningly. "Message? What message?"

"On the coins!" Luna announced. "We all kept them. And they're oh-so-good at warding off Nargles." She nodded seriously and patted her pocket, just in case he imagined she was joking. "I hide one in each shoe at night."

"Er, right," Harry said to break up the silence that had fallen in the wake of Luna's admission. "So you guys fought off the Carrows?"

Neville shrugged. "Only Amycus. And Filch, but he wasn't any trouble."

"But just as we left them, Harry, the strangest thing happened!" Hermione cut in. "We had Carrow in a Body-Bind, but he broke right through it, shaking and yelling and grabbing him arm, the one with the Dark Mark. We thought something must have happened, so we went looking for you and found Snape and Alecto the same way."

"It looked like a Shorl Gnat attack," Luna offered.  Hermione looked sideways at her.

"Right.  Anyway, when it was done Snape stood up right away and led us to his- Dumbledo- the Headmaster's office.  And there was Malfoy-"

"Who looked like he'd fainted," Ron added with a grin.  Hermione gave him a look over her shoulder.

"Who told us what happened," Hermione finished, and her eyes softened.  "Oh, Harry, I can't believe you did that.  It was so brave."  She brushed Ron's hands away and hugged him again, and Harry thought he might collapse from the effort to keep himself up and return her hug and attempt to breathe through her crushing embrace.

"All right, enough of that," Pomfrey said as she walked back over to them.  "I'll not have you killing my patient.  He'll be here in the morning."  She ignored their protests and shooed them out.  They all promised to return the next day, and Harry couldn't help but notice the way Neville and Ginny's fingers twined together as they walked out the door.

Pomfrey turned back to him and pressed the waiting potion into his hands. "Drink up, love. Your friends will be here when you wake." She must have caught the way he searched out Malfoy's bed, because she added: "And so will Mr Malfoy."

Harry blushed. Did everyone know about him and Malfoy? He wasn't even sure there was a 'him and Malfoy' to know about. There'd only been those two times in the Room of Requirement, and both times Malfoy hadn't been quite himself. Yes, there was the kiss in the office, but that hardly counted; they'd both thought Harry was about to die. Malfoy probably wouldn't want anything to do with him, now. He stole another look at Malfoy's bed and his stomach tightened.

"For God's sake, Potter, stop staring at me! I can feel it from here." Harry started at the sound of Malfoy's sleep-rough voice and dropped his gaze to his lap, heat creeping up his neck.

"I wasn't staring," he said, a hint of a smile at his lips. He risked a sideways glance at Pomfrey and she smiled back at him.

"Drink that down," she said, indicating the potion in his hands. "And get some sleep."

Harry did as he was told, swallowing the slightly bitter liquid.  He wasn't anxious to sleep; he had so many more questions, but he supposed they could wait.  Voldemort was gone and his friends were safe - Malfoy was safe - and that was all that mattered for now.

And he had to admit: relaxing into the warm, soft bed and drifting off to sleep felt very nearly spectacular.

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