Storyid: http://www.fictionalley.org/authors/gatewaygirl/teamwork.html
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Name: Teamwork
Author: GatewayGirl
Chapter 1 to 16

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Chapter: 1

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Author's Notes: Teamwork is the sequel to the extended version of Snakes and Lions. If you read the original version of S&L, read the additional chapters (45-53) before starting this. Expect romance, action, drama, and a lot of sneaking around as the boys try to get their houses in line.

I'm posting this as a WIP, so once I catch up, expect a wait between chapters. Thanks to sociofemme for beta work.

Canon Compliancy: Through Goblet of Fire

1 -- Not enough

Harry had only been back at the Dursley's for four days, and he was already sick of it. Dudley seemed to become stupider and more belligerent every summer. This year, school had managed to take a bit of weight off him, but that only made him a slightly more dangerous fighter, because it now took him a minute or two to run out of breath. He was still wide enough to trap Harry in the hall. Harry avoided him as much as possible, dodged when necessary, and reminded himself that he would be able to use magic at the end of the month.

"I told you, I don't know who you're talking about!"

Uncle Vernon's bellow brought Harry out of his reverie, and he darted to the top of the stairs to look though the railing supports at the front door. Professor Lupin was standing there, dressed quite competently as a Muggle, with Snuffles on a lead. The dog surged forward as he spotted Harry.

"Snuffles!" Remus scolded, after recovering his balance. "Behave."

"Get that filthy *animal* off my property!

Harry came down the stairs. "Hi, Professor Lupin!" he said brightly.

"Professor?" Uncle Vernon roared.

"Now, Harry!" Lupin reproved, removing one hand from the lead to wag a finger playfully at Harry. "I haven't been a professor in years. You know --"

Sirius, taking advantage of his handler's laxity, launched himself at Harry, who staggered back against the hall table from the weight of the dog's paws on his shoulders.

"Yes, Snuffles, I'm happy to see you too. Now get *down.*"

The dog sat, tongue lolling out happily. Uncle Vernon was ranting at Lupin about not being able to keep his mongrel under control, and ordering him off the property without giving him space to leave. Finally, Lupin gave up on his spurts of words abating and turned away from him. He tugged on the lead. "Come along, Harry."

"Harry is not going anywhere with some vagabond who waltzes in off the street --"

"His godfather sent me." Lupin smiled thinly as Vernon fell completely silent. "And he *will* come with me."

Harry was laughing as they climbed into a waiting car -- an old grey banger whose mere presence must have given Uncle Vernon fits. Lupin, to his surprise, climbed into the driver's seat.

"Get in," he said cheerily. "Don't worry about the lack of belts; it has less confining safety features."

As they turned the corner, the dog changed to a man, who grinned back at Harry.

"Just say 'charms,' Moony."

"Not when he has the door open!"

Harry laughed. "I knew what he meant, Sirius."

They drove along an assortment of roads, through a day that Harry had suddenly noticed was sunny and fresh. He sat in the center of the back seat, and leaned forward to talk between them.

"This car is perfect! Uncle Vernon must have hated it!"

Remus laughed. He seemed to be in one of his careless moods today. "He wasn't terribly pleased with my dog either," he said. "Especially when he got loose."

"A pity I didn't have time to chew on anything," Sirius volunteered, and they all laughed.

"I take it you don't hate me, then?" Harry said hopefully, as Remus pulled into a parking space alongside a high wall.

Sirius and Remus glanced at each other.

"Of course not, Harry--"

"However," Remus continued for Sirius, but in a much firmer tone, "we *do* need to talk."

His wand was out, but rather than casting a privacy spell, it shot out a net of bluish light at Sirius. The man's features wavered, and became rounder and more open, and his black curls shrunk back towards his skull and turned blond. Harry stared.

"How did--"

"It's a glamor, Harry," the stranger who was Sirius said. "There are ways to undo it, but someone would have to try. We should be safe enough for a couple of hours."

Harry nodded, but Remus looked back at him with a soft, speculative sound. Finally, his turned his wand on Harry. "You too," he said.

Harry felt a wash of disorientation, but it was nothing like the discomfort of a portkey. "Um ... okay?" he tried, as the world steadied.

The man who was Sirius shook his head. "*No.* I'm not going to know what any of his expressions *mean.* Can't we just take him back to our place, Moony?"

Remus frowned. "No. Too likely--"

"The Shrieking Shack?" Harry suggested. Remus grimaced, but Sirius laughed.

"That's what it always comes to, isn't it?"

Remus had to smile at that, even it was a bit ragged at the edges. "So it does. Hm. Or perhaps our place via the Shrieking Shack. Can you take three Side-Along Apparations, Harry? I'd like to muddy our tracks a bit."

"Sure."

Harry wouldn't have refused for the world, but afterwards, he thought it was just as well that he hadn't known what he was agreeing to. Remus seized his arm, and after a moment of horrible pressure, they were all three sprawled on the floor of the ramshackle house. As soon as Harry

stood, Remus took his arm again, and Harry found himself in a dirty alley, stumbling in the dirty rain. When Sirius grabbed him, Harry thought it was just to keep him from falling, but then he was being compressed again, and then he was in the front garden of a tiny stone cottage.

"Switching the apparator slows tracking," Sirius volunteered, with a grin. "Remus will lay a trail that would make a fox green with envy, and then he'll join us." He led the way in the door, ducking to clear the lintel, and into a little room.

Even with the bright sunshine outside, the room was dark, but Sirius, with a flick of his wand, set a cheery fire burning in the grate, and hung a kettle over the flames. With a little more concentration, he removed their disguises. "Welcome to The Den -- Darkmoon Den, if you ever need to Floo call. It's an old croft from before the Clearances, but we've expanded on it a bit -- mostly underground, where it doesn't show. Three rooms, and the outhouse is quite cushy. Would you like some milk? Only hours from the cow!"

Harry found that a bit strange to contemplate, but he nodded, and soon found himself with a glass of milk that tasted like the milk at Hogwarts or the Burrow -- good, but not at all like milk at the Dursley's. He looked up and found Sirius drinking some as well.

"Do wizards *do* something to milk?"

Sirius shrugged. "Preservative spells, sometimes, but not on this, because we get it fresh each morning. Muggles *cook* it, though, from what Remus says."

"So this is what it tastes like really?"

"I suppose it does!"

At that moment, the kettle began to whistle, and Remus, as if summoned by the sound, popped into the space outside the window. "Ah, good," he said, as he walked in the door. "You started tea."

When the tea was brewed, and cups of it had taken the place of the glasses, Remus sat, and Harry's nervousness returned full force. It was cozy and pleasant to be with the two of them, but they still hadn't said anything of import. In the time he'd had alone with Sirius, they had talked about *milk,* for heaven's sake!

"Er, so...." Sirius began.

Harry rubbed the back of his neck. "Um... where do you want to start?"

"Well, first...." Sirius looked rather lost. "Er, you thought I might be upset that you kissed a boy?"

"Oh." Harry felt his face heating. "Well, I didn't realize, then, that the wizard-raised students

weren't as bothered by it, mostly, and--" His voice caught.

Remus shifted his teacup and cleared his throat slightly. When Harry looked at him, he raised his eyebrows and smiled mischievously at him. "I gather we haven't been *too* obvious as a couple, then?"

"Wha--?" Harry's jaw dropped. He looked over at Sirius who was changing from rolling his eyes to laughing.

"Remus!" he choked.

"What?" Remus asked innocently. "Might as well just get it out there."

"You're, um ...." Harry scrambled for a word. "... involved?"

"Since about your age," Sirius said, and at Remus's huff, added airily, "with a few minor interruptions, of course."

"But..." Harry stared at them in turn. He'd known they were close, of course; that had been obvious from the start. *But lovers?* "Why didn't you come here right away, then? Once you escaped?"

They both looked unhappy at that.

"Well," Sirius offered, "this was a place the Aurors would look, right?"

"We'd been living together when Sirius first went to Azkaban," Remus explained. "I was raided rather regularly. After I left Hogwarts and returned here, when it was known that Sirius Black had eluded capture near my location...." He raised his arms in a helpless shrug. "Well. I think it was six times in the first month." He took a sip of his tea. "It died down eventually."

Sirius cleared his throat. "Also, though ... well, I wasn't sure I'd be welcome."

Harry looked at them wildly. "Why not?"

"Well, I had ... *lied* to him."

Remus reached out a hand over the table, and Sirius took it in a tight hold. Remus nodded. "He had. And it was painful in a way that darkened a significant portion of my life. However...." He shrugged. "I understand what he was trying to accomplish. I was certainly *angry,* but it was not difficult to forgive."

"But when I didn't come by...."

"I decided he wasn't interested in revisiting that relationship."

Sirius grinned. "Fortunately, old Dumbledore eventually stuck his nose into it."

With a reproving look, Remus tsked. "Fortunately, Professor Dumbledore *did* place us back into daily contact. Without that, I might have spent the rest of my life assuming he was no longer interested, now that I was no longer an attractive young man--"

"Because I'm so untouched by the years!" Sirius exclaimed, winking at Harry.

"-- *or* that Azkaban had deadened too much of his feeling."

"Because I'm so calm."

Remus smiled. "His positive feelings, then."

Listening to them together, Harry wasn't sure how he'd missed their connection. Of course.... "I haven't seen much of you together."

Remus nodded. "Understood. I was actually less surprised than Sirius was that you didn't know."

"It was a bit upsetting," Sirius confessed, "but only in the sense of making it obvious how little we know each other." At Harry's quick nod, Sirius reached across to set a hand briefly on his shoulder. "We'll have to work on that," he said sincerely.

"As much as is possible while you are a fugitive," Remus amended. "Which may not be much. We can't risk this often, Harry."

"However, we've intelligence that there's a big Death Eater meeting going on ri--"

"Enough!" Remus said sharply. "The letter."

Sirius sent him a look that promised argument later, but he did refocus. "The letter. Yes. You said there were ... other things that might upset me?"

Harry took a deep breath. "Yeah," he admitted. His tea had gone cold, and topped it up to warm it. "Um ... can we start with the one I think you shouldn't be angry about? I mean, you probably will be, but you *shouldn't.*"

Sirius and Remus shared another one of those looks.

"Yes, Harry?" Remus prompted. Harry clenched his fingers around the handle of the teacup.

"He's a Slytherin. The other boy, I mean."

Again, that look.

"Malfoy," Sirius said darkly, but he didn't seem surprised.

"Mm. We'd discussed that, and thought him a likely candidate."

"You can't trust him, Harry!"

Harry shrugged. "Well, I do, actually."

"He's a Malfoy!"

"Yeah, but...." Harry tried to rein in the threads of wild magic that he could feel coalescing around him. "He's *left.* He's going to testify against his father."

"Then he thinks you're a better bet, that's all that means."

"Sirius! His father -- Lucius -- is trying to disinherit him! He's risking a lot more than he's comfortable with, and he's worked with Hermione, and he *saved* my *life!*"

"Did he?" Remus asked, as if it was light gossip.

"When I flew off to fight Bellatrix, he didn't need to follow me! Slytherins aren't expected to do things like that!"

"Ah."

Sirius had sat back, brow creased in puzzlement, but Remus nodded and poured more tea. "He loves you, then."

"Slytherins don't fall in love, Moony."

"On the contrary," Remus countered evenly. "*Everyone* falls in love. A Slytherin, however, would *need* to be in order to do something so selfless." He looked over at Sirius. "Come *on,* Padfoot. You have to have a touch of sympathy for a young man who's trying to gain some independence from his vile family."

Sirius grimaced. "Enough of that." He turned to Harry. "You're clearly arse over teakettle for the Malfoy boy, and we're not likely to change your mind until the hormones subside. So, what else?"

"Okay." Carefully, Harry let go of the teacup. That was as good as he was likely to get about Draco, and better than he'd expected. "I've ... I've studied a bit-- a few spells -- well, one, mainly -- of Dark Arts."

"WHAT!"

"Not from Draco," Harry added quickly. "Draco was shocked. It was on my own." Snape wasn't something he felt required to confess to, especially with his godfather already upset.

"Oh dear," Remus said. "Well. *Which,* if you will tell us? And does Dumbledore know?"

"He knows," Harry said quietly. "I, uh, told him. I'd been practicing on snakes -- thinking of Nagini -- and I used the Imperius curse on the dragon, the one Bellatrix was riding."

"Harry," Remus said softly.

"Sorry."

"You damn well should be!" Sirius exclaimed. "There'll be no more of that, now, understand me? Your dad would be horrified -- his own son using Unforgiveables!"

"Sorry," Harry repeated. "I won't again -- unless it *is* Nagini, and I need to. I wouldn't on a person."

Sirius sat back with a huff, half-mollified. "You shouldn't at all," he said, but less angrily, now.

Harry nodded, but didn't promise anything.

"Very well," Remus said, still sounding greatly displeased. "Is that all you have to tell us?"

"Yeah." Harry looked up and smiled tentatively. "Enough, isn't it?"

"Quite. However...." He let Harry sweat for a few breaths before continuing. "There is another issue that Albus did see fit to inform your godfather about ... some matter of showing up drunk to Professor McGonagall's office?"

"Eh, Moony!" Sirius tried to wave that off, but Remus was having none of it.

"Harry?"

"Professor Dumbledore gave me *points* for it," Harry exclaimed angrily. "For Bellatrix. I was trying to lose them as fast as possible, and she'd been so angry before--" He looked away. There was silence.

Lightly, Remus cleared his throat. "Well. That's a better reason than I had expected."

"I'm all right, okay? Really."

"I hear you." Remus did not agree, he noticed. "However, it is your godfather's job to worry about these things, and if he won't, I'll do it for him."

Harry, amused despite himself, turned. "I hear you," he repeated back. "After all, that's what partners are for, right?"

"Of course," Remus agreed. Sirius smirked.

"Among other things."

When Harry got home, he was not surprised to have Uncle Vernon glower at him as he came through the door.

"Have a good visit, boy?" he asked, managing to make the question vaguely threatening.

"Brilliant," Harry said. "Saw my godfather and everything."

Uncle Vernon's eyes narrowed. "Why don't you go live with him, hm?" he asked shrewdly. "If he's your guardian, you shouldn't be sopping off us."

"Yeah, but he's a *fugitive*," Harry reminded him. "So he's not my guardian, although he should've been. And his partner is a werewolf, and they're--."

"That's ENOUGH!"

Harry tried not to smirk at the predictable bellow. "Okay. I'll just go up to my room then, right?"

With a disgusted expression, Uncle Vernon motioned him at the stairs. "And stay there!" he called, when Harry was half-way up the stairs. "You're not getting dinner tonight!"

Harry kept going. He had a greasy pork pie and an apple balancing his jacket pockets, and he didn't want to risk his uncle seeing his smile.

When he got to his room, he found a barn owl sitting on the far side of the room from Hedwig, who was sitting puffed out atop her cage. He immediately called for Susara. Although he'd never heard of a messenger owl attacking a pet, he couldn't keep from worrying about it.

"*Here, master*," she hissed sleepily, and then, belatedly, raised her head. "*You are happy?*"

"*Yes*," he confirmed. "*Happy.*"

While she was waking, in her slow snake way, he crossed to the strange owl. Immediately, he recognized the writing on the letter -- it was from Draco! The owl shifted impatiently from foot to foot while he got it a treat, and then flew off clutching it, still untasted, in his talons, apparently unwilling to eat under the glare of a territorial snowy owl.

"Sorry about being gone so long, Hedwig," Harry said soothingly, although he wasn't really. He gave her a treat, too, and then sat down with the letter.

Dear Harry,

Hogwarts is dull without any other students here, and especially without you. We could have such fun if you were here! Like over the winter holidays, but better, because now it's light all the time, and warm some days. I was lying in the grove by the lake, this morning, in a patch of sun, dreaming about making love to you there.

This is the first time I've ever wanted summer to be over as soon as it began. I spend my mornings alone, and in the afternoons, I help Snape or visit with the quiris. Horsyr is leaving soon, and I dread losing them. I've been spying on the staff and wheedling Snape, but I haven't found out a thing about the new Defense professor. I'm not entirely sure that Dumbledore has found one. At least the mystery provides me with some diversion.

Let me know about life with your least-favorite Muggles!

Love,

Draco

Harry smiled at the memories of December, but his breath caught at the thought of lying in the sun with Draco, slowly baring his pale skin to the golden light. He'd never be able to write anything that sexy, he was certain; he hoped Draco didn't expect it. Still, he fetched parchment and a quill immediately and began to write.

Dear Draco,

The Dursleys are as horrible as ever, but today was brilliant. Professor Lupin showed up and bullied Uncle Vernon into letting me leave with him. It turns out I needn't have worried about S. disapproving of me having a boyfriend; the two of them were together from sometime their sixth year until S. went to my parents died. I can tell you more about it when I see you -- it isn't really suitable for a letter.

That really was as detailed as he could get, he thought. It would be too dangerous to let on that he had seen Sirius, or that Lupin and Sirius were still involved.

It's been the one bright spot so far. Dudley still thinks I'm a punching bag. Fortunately, he's easy to outrun. Even if I were at the Burrow someplace fun, though, I'd still miss you.

The grove sounds I'd like to be in the grove with you.

Love,

Harry

As Hedwig carried the letter off into the fading light, Harry reflected that he still hadn't written to Ron, or Ron to him. He was unwilling to be first, though of course, Ron probably was too. He'd give it until his birthday, he decided, and he emptied his pockets, and lay down on his bed to picture the grove by the lake.

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Chapter: 2

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Chapter Warnings: Mild sex and teen angst

Canon Compliancy: Through *Goblet of Fire*

Notes: This was not actually *written* between GoF and OotP, but was plotted out then. I am actively writing it now. Thanks to sociofemme for beta work, and calanthe for beta work and Britpicking.

2 - Independence

Harry distributed the sausages he had just cooked to the plates on the breakfast table, and then returned the pan to the kitchen. When he got back, Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon were enthusiastically talking about taking Dudley to a boxing match. Dudley was replying to their questions in short grunts.

Eventually, Harry's aunt and uncle ran out of effusive things to say, and a silence descended. Harry swallowed his last bite of toast and cleared his throat.

"I'll be leaving for London in a few days," he commented, as if this was the most natural thing in the world. "On Saturday. I might be gone for a bit."

"London!" Uncle Vernon snarled. "And how do you expect to be getting there?"

"There's a bus I can call," Harry said. "The bus for my sort."

"You are not going anywhere!" Vernon fumed. "Those ... *freaks* can threaten us all they like -- trips are an indulgence that you are not entitled to take."

"I have a court summons," Harry said flatly. "I think defying it would cause trouble for all of us." With satisfaction, he watched Uncle Vernon's face pale. "If the Mag-- the people who enforce these things showed up, and I said you wouldn't permit me to go...." He let the sentence trail off ominously.

Uncle Vernon attempted a sneer. "Ended up in court, did you? What did you do?"

Harry bristled. "I'm not the defendant. I'm a witness for the prosecution."

"One of your friends get caught?" Dudley taunted.

Harry had a brief surge of anger, which he suppressed with the thought that it was a wonder none of Dudley's friends had yet ended up in court. Harry found himself pushing down the impulse to say "my boyfriend's father." *The backlash wouldn't really be worth the minute or two of entertainment,* he thought.

"A man named Lucius Malfoy." Unable to resist hinting, he added, "His son and I are quite close."

"But you're testifying against him anyway," his uncle said darkly.

"So's Draco -- his son. Lucius is real homicidal bastard," Harry said. "Perhaps you'll get lucky, and he'll have one of his mates off me," he continued gleefully. "It's more *your* sort he usually likes to kill, though."

There was something perversely satisfying about terrifying the Dursleys.

Harry took the Knight Bus to the Leaky Cauldron, persuading Stan and Ernie, through combined gratuities and flattery, to let him leave it with his invisibility cloak on. Stan actually held the door to the pub open, allowing Harry to haul his trunk inside. Harry left the unwieldy burden by the door and slipped into the warm front room. He was struck, suddenly, by the memory of when he was thirteen, and he had lived here for two marvelous weeks. It wouldn't be the same now, of course. That was before Voldemort had regained his body, and even with the supposed threat of Sirius Black, escaped convict, he had been free to roam Diagon Alley as he pleased. Now, even if no one was telling him it was too dangerous, he would be aware of how dangerous it had

become. The smell of beer washed over him, and incongruously, he found himself longing for tomorrow's breakfast, when the crowd would be thin, and that scent stale and bitter and comfortable.

Tom was behind the bar. When he stepped back into the kitchen, Harry followed. Once out of view of the patrons, he lowered the hood of his cloak.

"Tom?" he called softly.

Tom turned his head and dropped the bowl he had been about to fill with stew. It clattered on the countertop, but did not break. He was no taller than Harry, now.

"Sorry," Harry said. "I didn't want all of that lot to see me arriving."

"Understood, Mr. Potter! My pleasure!" Tom looked uncertainly at Harry's head, which Harry belatedly realized must appear to be floating in mid air. Harry set a hand to his hip, parting the cloak a bit, so he would have at least a column of his body showing. Tom seemed set at ease by this. "I should show you the Floo for private arrivals, sir."

"But I didn't come by Floo. My guardians are Muggles, you know."

Tom perked up. "You should have them put on the network! It can be approved for family, and it would make it easier for you to visit them."

Harry grimaced. "Why would I ever want to visit the Dursleys?"

Tom looked taken aback, and Harry tried sound calmer. "Look, remember the last time I'd stayed here? After I'd blown up my aunt? I have better control of my magic now, but we don't *like* each other any more than we did then. After I turn seventeen, I don't expect we'll ever talk, never mind visit. Besides, they hate magic, and they wouldn't *allow* a Floo connection even if they had a fireplace, which they don't.″

"Ah." Tom scratched his head, as if uncertain how to fit this information into his concept of Harry Potter, or, Harry realized belatedly, he might just be wondering how a household managed without a fire.

"My trunk is in the hall," Harry told him, eager to change the subject. "Shall I get it?"

Tom waved a hand in dismissal. "I'll have it sent up. Close up that cloak, Mr. Potter, and I'll show you to your room."

"Thank you," Harry said, and covered himself once again.

Tom brought him into a good-sized, pleasant room, with a window overlooking Diagon Alley. Harry wondered how that worked.

"Now, this is our protected hallway," Tom told him. "Dumbledore requested it for you, but I would have known, I wager, the times being what they are! Remember to carry your key, or you'll run afoul of the Confundus hex on the stairway. If you want anything brought up, the slate on the door copies to the kitchen, but I don't have extra servers, so you may need to wait." He nodded formally. "Will you be needing anything else, Mr. Potter?"

"Do you ... Will you take a message to another guest? Confidentially?"

"I will that," Tom said confidently, accepting the coin Harry passed him with good cheer.

"If Draco Malfoy is here, please tell him that I have arrived, and would like to have dinner with him, if possible."

"Draco Malfoy!" Tom looked shocked.

"The son of one of the defendants? In my class at Hogwarts?"

"But you...!" Tom stopped himself. "Of course, Mr. Potter. I'll let him know straight away."

"Thank you."

Tom, rather than leaving, looked hesitantly at Harry.

"What?" Harry asked.

"Professor Dumbledore and Mrs. Weasley both asked to be informed when you arrived. Do you wish to see them as well?"

Harry was surprised to find himself annoyed. He wanted a bath, he wanted to walk in Diagon Alley, and he wanted some pleasant time with Draco.

"Could you put it off till morning, Tom?" he pleaded. "Professor Dumbledore will have more elaborate schemes than Draco, and Mrs. Weasley --" He stopped. "Don't tell her at all," he said decisively. "It's none of her business where I am."

Tom looked uneasy. "I don't need to tell Mrs. Weasley, of course, but Professor Dumbledore reserved your room."

"He's not paying for it, though."

"Isn't he?"

"No. Even if he planned to, no. I won't have it." *Especially as you'll take that as giving him authority.*

"Still, he may wish to know you've arrived safely."

"I don't expect you to lie if he asks."

"But I did promise...."

And there was the problem, of course. Harry sighed. "Then tell him I'll meet him for breakfast or lunch, no earlier than ten. *Not* tonight."

Tom nodded, relieved. "Very good, Mr Potter. And I will enquire with Mr. Malfoy first."

Before Harry had finished unpacking, a knock came at his door. Anxiously wondering if it would be Draco or Dumbledore, he opened it, only to find Tom had returned.

"Oh, hello, Tom."

"Mr. Potter." Tom nodded, rather distantly, Harry thought. "Mr. Malfoy says he should not be seen with you in public, but suggests dinner in his room, at seven."

"Not be seen...!" Harry had imagined a warmer reception than that. He frowned. "Oh, fine! Tell him I accept."

Tom nodded again. "He also asked me to tell you that he is in room fourteen, just down the hall."

It wasn't fine, though. Alone once more, Harry wondered what it meant. He was a secret again? He couldn't be, really. Too many people had seen them together at school, and they must have told siblings and parents. It was a wonder it hadn't been in the *Daily Prophet*. Harry thought about that for a moment. It would be more likely to be in *Witch Weekly*, he decided, in one of those "Rumors" sections that Lavender sometimes read aloud in the common room. And maybe it had been; without Lavender around, he wouldn't know.

Still, what was the point in Draco trying to pretend there was nothing between them? Harry bit his lip. Perhaps Draco had agreed to break up with him in return for some favor from an ally? Or in his absence -- and Snape's presence -- he had become more dissatisfied that Harry wasn't a pureblood? Perhaps he was inviting him to his room only to tell him that he was ending it.

Harry was tempted to run straight down to room fourteen, but he didn't want to show up smelling of the Knight Bus and the artificial scents of Petunia Dursley's air freshener. Draco valued appearances, and if Draco was going to tell him to leave, he would at least do it with regret. Instead, Harry bathed and dressed as nicely as possible, in clothes he had bought while in

Hogsmeade with Draco. He chose the loose-legged black trousers, and the silk shirt that had once been red and gold, but was now green, black, and gold. Susara flowed reassuringly around his neck before disappearing under the silk to settle around his arm. When he checked the clock, it was quarter to seven already. He went back to the mirror, and tried to decide if he was ready for dinner with Draco.

After composing himself a final time, Harry knocked on the door. It swung open. On the far end of the room, to one side, Draco stood with his wand out.

"Come in," he said.

The distance, after his warm letters, could mean nothing good. Harry, in the beginnings of a defensive fury, strode in and turned to shut the door. He heard Draco moving towards him. When he turned back, the blond was only a few steps away.

"It's wonderful to see you, Harry," Draco said. His voice was uneven with emotion. Harry felt his anger turn to churning confusion.

"Is it?" he snapped. "Well you certainly had me fooled!"

"Harry?" Draco took a step closer. "Look, idiot, don't be angry --"

"You won't see me in public! You won't even open the damn door!"

"I've had death threats against me. I wanted to be sure it was you."

"Oh."

Draco closed the distance and put his arms around Harry. "It's wonderful to see you," he repeated soothingly. "Even better to touch you. And --"

Harry didn't let him continue. As soon as Draco had raised his face, he had moved to kiss him, and not a word was he letting out. Harry doubted Draco's tongue could produce any speech more eloquent than its eager dance in Harry's mouth. Harry pressed hard up against him, and made no objection, this time, when Draco began to shift his hips suggestively.

Harry whined into the kiss. *Tonight,* he decided. *I'm not holding back, tonight. And we'll see how Lucius Malfoy likes watching me comfort his son in the gallery.*

But that's public, noted a harsh voice in his head. *And you are only for private enjoyment.* Harry pulled away.

"Nice to know it's mutual," Draco said cheerily. "You wouldn't believe how I've missed you! I've

been protected into utter boredom at Hogwarts --"

"Better than my Muggle relatives," Harry retorted sharply.

Draco frowned at him. "You're still angry," he accused disbelievingly.

"I'm tired of being your secret!"

"It's just for another two days," Draco wheedled. His expression was very serious, all of a sudden. Harry thought it was odd how that made him look younger. "I'm sorry I couldn't explain in advance, but it wasn't until this afternoon that the matter came up. My solicitor is certain that my father's defense team will see our relationship as something to use to their advantage. He believes they have focused some of their strategy on revealing me as your lover. If you walk into the trial and openly sit with me, they'll be disarmed, and need to modify tactics in midair."

Harry thought through the implications of this. "So, rather than revealing myself as your boyfriend to increasing circles of friends, and have the idea distribute slowly, you want me to reveal myself as your boyfriend in the middle of a media frenzy, complete with photographers?"

Draco turned pink. "Sorry."

Harry sighed. "Well, at least it will be funny." *And I'll get to watch the look on his face.*

"You'll do it?"

"Better that than to have you refuse to meet me in the public room," Harry said. His tone was embarrassingly petulant.

Draco relaxed. He caught at Harry's hand and let him to the chairs. "Once it's underway, I promise -- dinner anywhere you like. For tonight, I've ordered a good meal -- as good as this place can manage, at least -- to share in private."

"I don't care if it's a ploughman's lunch, as long as it's with you," Harry said plaintively. He sat down. When Draco tried to step away, he tugged at his hand. "You're not going anywhere."

"Can't I sit?"

"On my lap, you can."

They kissed again, for a very long time. Harry enjoyed the way Draco shifted against him, but he was careful not to respond too enthusiastically. He didn't think he'd be able to stop if they really got going.

"So, how was summer at Hogwarts?" he asked, trying to distract himself. "I've always wished I could stay."

"Boring mostly. I'd have died of loneliness, if it hadn't been for the quiris."

Harry snorted. "Still messing about with those, are you? What a *good* little boy! When does Horsyr leave?"

Draco ducked his head in response to Harry's sarcastic comment. "She already has." He laughed nervously. "Two of the quiris stayed with me: Cheefi and Tuktuk."

Harry stared. "You allowed this? It was Dumbledore's idea, I presume?"

"Horsyr's, I think. It's not permanent -- she just wasn't sure they'd be safe where she was traveling, so she only took the older two, who have more control and are easier to conceal." He bit his lip for a moment. "And she said Cheefi didn't want to leave me. I may regret it, but I had been missing them in advance, and she asked me in front of them, so of course I jumped at the chance."

"But she'll take them before term starts."

"Maybe." Draco's brow crinkled as he looked at Harry. "What does it matter to you?"

Harry stared back. "You don't think that's a little suspicious? You're suddenly the ideal person to leave them with? Dumbledore arranged it, I'm sure. Either I break up with you, or he knows if I've been doing Dark Arts."

Draco's astonishment hardened to anger. "And people say *I'm* conceited. Everything is all about you, isn't it?"

"I don't know whether or not Dumbledore wants to control you. History has shown that he likes to have me loosely, but decidedly, in hand."

"I do appreciate that it restrains me, but you! Why should you care? I thought you weren't going to do Dark Arts, anymore."

Harry looked away. "Look it's--" He wasn't sure what it was. The loss of an option? "I don't like being controlled," he decided. "And what if I need to?"

"Need to," Draco repeated.

"Draco, don't get moralistic on me! You know better. I am going to *win,* do you understand? I kill Voldemort. I don't care if I survive it, and I don't care if my soul survives it. I *win."* He dared a glance at Draco. The blond had his forehead resting on one spread hand. Harry couldn't tell if his eyes were open or shut.

"Draco," he said gently, "I'll try."

"I don't know why I care!" Draco snapped. He pushed away, getting to his feet. Harry's lap felt cold where he had been. He watched Draco take a restless step clear of him and then turn back angrily. "I've done more Dark Arts than you've *heard* of. I can imagine situations where I wouldn't care *what* you used, but ...."

"You understand, then. But Dumbledore won't. You know that."

"Look," Draco said. "You can still use Dark Arts without him finding out, if we arrange things correctly."

"Can I?"

"Yes. You simply aren't with the quiris often enough for a four week gap to show -- assuming I even still have them, which I might not. *I'll* still know, but if you convince me you need to, we can keep it from everyone else."

"I'm still being watched, I just have a more flexible guard."

"If you can't convince *me*, what the *hell* are you doing?" Draco protested.

The question cut through Harry's anger. "I suppose that's a point," he admitted.

While Harry was still catching his breath, there was a knock on the door. Both of them froze. "I'll answer it," Harry volunteered.

It was dinner. When Harry opened the door, Tom stepped in, still looking rather wary, with a laden table floating behind him. He set it down by the window.

"Will there be anything else, Mr. Malfoy?" he asked politely.

"That will do, for now," Draco answered, instantly shifting into an imperious manner. "We may want dessert or drinks later. Check back in an hour."

"Of course." Tom nodded, and backed out of the room. Harry's presence had not been acknowledged in the entire conversation. He felt curiously unreal.

Draco let out a long breath and sent Harry a friendly smile. The whole room seemed to lighten. "There. Let's move to the table. Had we finished our argument?"

"I suppose," Harry agreed. The food smelled delicious. Lunch had been an apple, he realized, and the table held roast beef, and thick slices of dark bread, and a dish of butter, and a jug of gravy, and mashed swedes, and a vegetable mix of green beans, yellow beans, and long slices of carrot. There was also a carafe full of garnet wine. Draco poured them both glasses of it and raised his in a toast.

"To Now," he said firmly, and Harry echoed him and clinked his glass against Draco's.

By unspoken agreement, they kept their conversation at light as possible, given the circumstances, although weightier matters crept in from time to time. Draco gossiped about the staff at Hogwarts and about various of his relatives, but he also related that he had exchanged several tense letters with Pansy. Harry couldn't fully appreciate the food without remarking how good it was not be given the worst pieces of everything, and he admitted that he and Ron had not been in communication at all. For all the unpleasant elements, Harry felt his anxiety melting away. Spring hadn't been some sort of hopeless fantasy; being with Draco was really that good.

Harry tugged Draco a little closer to him. The room had no seating intended for two, so he had settled on a carpet on the floor with his back against the base of a stuffed chair, and Draco was sitting between his legs, leaning back against his chest. Draco sighed and relaxed further into Harry's embrace, and Harry stretched forward to kiss him.

"Certain you don't want more dinner?" Draco teased.

"Completely."

"More wine?"

"We finished it."

Draco giggled. Harry moved to tickle him, but then changed his mind. He started undoing Draco's thin shirt, instead.

"Ah!" Draco's head tipped back. "Harry, don't tease," he pleaded.

"Who said I'm teasing?" Harry heard his own voice drop to an unfamiliar growl. "Term is over."

Draco's pale eyes widened. "Oh!"

He twisted further, and Harry moved to take his mouth again. He felt a ferocious welling of desire that made him want to bite those bright lips, but kept his assault to a fierce pushing of mouth and tongue that made Draco whimper.

Someone knocked at the door. Draco looked uncertainly at Harry. "Want dessert?"

"Besides you?" Harry didn't stop to consider it. Nothing was worth the time away from Draco's lips. "No. Not waiting."

"Mr. Malfoy?" Tom called from the hallway. "Will you be wanting anything more?"

"Not tonight, Tom," Draco called. "I'd rather not be disturbed."

"All right, then," Tom answered. They heard him retreat down the corridor.

"Mm," Draco said. "Where were we?"

"On the edge of new territory."

"Ah. So we were."

Draco got to his feet. Harry had only time for a moment's confused hurt before Draco reached a hand down to him. "Come to bed?" he asked, his voice low.

Harry followed readily. He was trembling with excitement and uncertainty, making it hard to control his movements. Draco seemed the epitome of grace as he turned back the covers and beckoned Harry to lie down.

"Are you cold?" he asked.

"No," Harry muttered, blushing, and Draco responded with visible delight.

"Oh! My Harry." He reclined next to Harry and pushed him gently back to the mattress. "Lie down. I want to undress you."

Harry didn't know when he'd lost control, but he wasn't going to argue. He wasn't entirely sure he could speak. He lay back and let Draco unbutton his shirt and cuffs, and kiss at the skin underneath, resisting only long enough to push Draco's shirt off, so he could touch Draco's pale skin with whatever hand he had free.

"So lovely," Draco sighed, kissing along Harry's shoulder and down his arm. "Curl up a moment; I want this off."

Harry raised his torso, but couldn't help staring at Draco's soft trousers while he held that position. With the concealing drape of his shirt gone, it was obvious that Draco was hard beneath them. Harry felt a surge of panic. What if he didn't know what to do? What if he didn't like it, after all? He shook harder as he reached to touch. He had intended a caress, but it turned into something more like a grab. Despite that, Draco closed his eyes and arched in apparent bliss.

"Sorry I'm so clumsy." Even his voice was shaking.

"You're a *virgin*," Draco retorted. "It's *sexy*, the way you're trembling. Be graceful for me some other day, when it makes sense."

"I ..." Was this normal? Harry wondered. Before he could decide what to say, Draco was opening

his trousers and lightly returning the touch. "Draco! God."

"Mm. Let me slide these off, right? I want to make you feel so good...."

Harry raised his hips and the last of his clothes were gone, dropped carelessly on the floor by the bed. Draco paused to remove his own as well. Harry reached for it again, but Draco knelt across his legs, taking most of his body out of reach.

"Get back here!"

"Shhh." Draco kissed Harry's stomach, then lifted just his head, his hair falling straight along his face. "Patience."

"Please?"

"Mm." Draco kissed lower. "No," he said lightly. "I want to be right here."

When his mouth descended, wet and warm, Harry couldn't claim he disagreed.

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Chapter: 3

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Notes: Thanks to sociofemme for beta work, and Calanthe for more beta work and Britpicking. Departures from canon capitalization are my own. In this chapter, I needed to decide what bits of post-GoF canon I would incorporate into this story. So far, it's the Black family tree and a few minor characters. Consider the political OCs a reminder that you are in a branched universe. :-)

3 - Maneuvers

Before he was completely awake, Harry had a feeling that something was strange. Not *bad*, he thought, just strange and perhaps pleasantly *confining,* but that put him in mind of the Imperius Curse, and he forced himself to wake, determined to deal with whatever danger threatened.

None did. Draco lay close against his side, creating a line of warmth, with his head resting on Harry's shoulder, and his hand on Harry's chest. The unusual sensations had probably combined into the feeling of being restrained, Harry thought contentedly. Of course, he was also naked, so

it was no wonder something had seemed wrong to his sleep-fogged mind. Carefully, he stroked a hand over Draco's bright hair. Draco twitched. For a moment, his body tensed, and then it relaxed again, and he opened his eyes. In the morning sunlight, they were a soft, misty grey.

"Hey," Harry said softly.

"Finally awake, are you?" Draco replied.

"Finally?" Harry teased.

"Well, I woke earlier, but you didn't, so I went back to sleep." Draco yawned slightly. "We must have been up late. I can't, usually." He smiled slowly, that strange, new smile that seemed to be only for Harry. "Or maybe I've never had such a fine pillow."

"This is great, isn't it?" Harry replied, delighted. "Well, once I'd decided I was safe."

"Safe?"

Laughing slightly, Harry traced up Draco's fingers, still resting on his chest, to cover them with his own. "Well, between *this* and the nudity, before I quite woke up, I thought I was trapped."

"Oh you are," Draco said happily.

"Am I?"

"You don't think I'm letting you *go,* do you?"

Harry knew it was meant as flirtation, but the claim still irritated him. "Actually, I thought that was the plan. Scheduled and everything."

"Harry!" Draco complained. "Must you bring that up? You're spoiling Now, you know." He came up on one elbow and frowned down at Harry. "Promise me you won't talk about it?"

Harry hesitated. He *had* spoiled the mood, he realized, but he wouldn't have if Draco hadn't reminded him. "I think I'll have to. But I promise not to talk about it again when we're lying together feeling content. Just--"

"Just what?"

"Just don't bring it up like that, all right? No saying that you're going to keep me or going to stay. If you do that, I *think* about it, and then *I'm* not happy."

"Silly, literal Gryffindor," Draco answered. "All right. I didn't mean to bring you down, you know."

"I know."

"Hm." Draco traced the hand on Harry's chest down his torso. "Could I bring you up?"

"*That* should be easy."

Harry stopped to change into robes before going to meet Dumbledore, but he could still smell Draco's scent on his skin, and he felt so light and warm that he thought he *must* look different. Still, there was nothing for it but to stand across from the man and produce a flawlessly even "Good morning, Professor."

They were in a private parlor to one side of the pub. In comparison to the public room, it was small, but still too large for only the two of them. Their places had been set at one end of a dining table intended for ten or twelve. The one high window, grey with London grime, let in little light, but a cheery fire crackled in the grate.

Dumbledore looked up with a smile, but there was also something of evaluation in his gaze.

"Good morning, Harry. Please have a seat." He paused. "You are looking very grown up today."

With a wry smile, Harry settled in the offered chair. "Is that a euphemism?"

Dumbledore's evaluation sharpened. "I had not intended it that way," he mused. "Ah. Tom said you would not meet me, last night. Were you indulging other interests?"

Well, that was certainly vague, Harry thought, and it had a tinge of disapproval that he disliked. "I was with Draco," he answered boldly.

"I see." Dumbledore sat back. "May I remind you that you are not of age? You have a room here so that you can easily confer with other people involved with the trial, *not* to provide you with unsupervised time with young Mr. Malfoy."

Crossing his arms over his chest, Harry glared back at the headmaster. "I'll be 'of age', as you say, in less than three weeks. If you give me enough trouble, you probably *could* keep me out of his bed this week, but there's no *point,* unless you want to irritate both of us, and you *had* implied that I'm here to keep him happy."

He thought he saw Dumbledore's eyes widen slightly, but then the moment passed, and the headmaster's face smoothed to placid concern. "You do not feel obliged to rush matters, I hope?"

"God, no." Harry relaxed back into his seat. If that was what Dumbledore was worried about, he would be fine. "Waiting through last term was enough."

"Did you?" Dumbledore's mouth quirked in a brief smile. "I must say, I'm somewhat surprised. Perhaps you are gaining some control over your impetuous nature, at last." He sat forward, and poured Harry a cup of tea. "Very well. If I hear no complaints as to your behavior, I will not interfere. But I do *not* want you drinking, Harry, and I expect you to comport yourself with dignity and restraint in public. By this time tomorrow, Wizarding London will have reporters and photographers on every corner."

"I suppose I'd better get my shopping done today, then," Harry said lightly, trying not to show his relief.

"Had you planned on shopping?"

Harry shrugged. "I'd need formal robes, I thought. I mean, if you want me on display."

"Ah, I see." Dumbledore refreshed his own tea while he considered that. "Yes, formal robes would be best. Your school robes are not really appropriate, and Muggle clothing might enhance the mistrust of those members who will be inclined to treat Lucius Malfoy leniently." His raised an eyebrow at Harry. "Do recall, however, that I am allowed the eccentricities of my age. Your own clothing should be more sedate, as befits the solemnity of the circumstances."

Harry smiled. Dumbledore was currently wearing purple and silver robes with silver embroidered stars all over them, and long tassels on the sleeves and collars. More sedate was a given. "I'll keep that in mind, sir."

"Good."

That settled, Harry took a bite of his sausage and belatedly realized that he was starving. Dumbledore let him eat for a few minutes before raising the next issue. Harry was buttering toast when the headmaster next spoke.

"Mrs. Weasley is in the area, you know. She worked at Beatrice's Bits and Bobs during the school year, and Beatrice wanted some extra help this week. She was hoping to speak to you."

Harry put down his fork. It was suddenly difficult to swallow his food. He got it down and cleared his throat with a mouthful of tea. "I am not interested in speaking to Mrs. Weasley," he said stonily.

"Harry. You can't blame her for being concerned --"

"And how *did* she find out about that, anyway?" Harry shot back. "You'd no right to tell her. She's not family. She's not my guardian. She's not staff."

Dumbledore sighed. "I had been of the impression that she was virtually family, Harry."

"*No.* If she was family, I would have been at the Burrow last summer. She can't have it both

ways."

The headmaster steepled his fingers above his plate. "This grievance predates her unfortunate response in June, then," he said carefully.

Harry held back a snapped 'yes' and tried to answer logically. "*That* made it a grievance. Before that, it was a matter of understanding my place." He glared down at the remains of his beans. "Now, I expect her to understand hers."

"Oh dear," said Dumbledore softly. "Very well. I will relay your feelings about the matter."

"Fine."

After a moment of awkward silence, the headmaster cleared his throat. "Well. That aside, I believe we should discuss the trial. We wish you to be present, Harry, and seen, but whether or not you are called will depend on the flow of the proceedings, understood?"

"Yes, sir."

"If the defense calls you, it will be entirely in an attempt to make you look unreliable. You must keep your temper and answer questions thoughtfully and honestly."

"Really, I'm not stupid!" Harry caught himself and sighed. That was exactly the sort of response that he could not make at the trial. "*Yes,* professor."

"Good. Now, is there anything you wish to ask?"

Harry didn't know where to start. He wasn't all that sure how the Muggle courts worked, and his only sense of Wizarding trials was what he had seen in Dumbledore's pensieve during his fourth year. Certainly, Dumbledore was far more qualified than he to get Lucius and his cronies thrown in prison for the rest of their lives.

A daydream from several days ago asserted itself in his thoughts. "Do you think Pettigrew might come up, sir?" he asked hopefully. "If he's mentioned, we might be able to clear --" Despite the private room, ingrained wariness made him stop, his godfather's name unsaid.

With a discouragingly compassionate look, Dumbledore met his eyes. "I know how much you wish it, Harry, but it is unlikely."

"But maybe during questioning, someone on our side could ask who else was there. Or Snape --"

"Any mention of Peter will damage our credibility, Harry. You must remember, he is known to be dead. Such a maneuver would increase our chances of losing the case without much hope of helping Sirius."

That shocked Harry out of his disappointment. "Lose? How can we lose? They followed Draco to your office!"

"You would be surprised at what Lucius Malfoy can cast in a favorable light," Dumbledore warned. "Make no assumptions. He has evaded incarceration before."

Rather than returning to his room after breakfast, Harry stepped out to Diagon Alley and went straight to Madam Malkin's. The salesgirl who greeted him ran to get Madam Malkin herself, and the matron came breathlessly to meet him.

"Good morning, Mr. Potter! What can I do for you, today? A bit early for new school robes, I expect?"

Harry nodded. "I'm a witness -- well, potential witness -- in the trial."

Her expression grew somber. "Ah. I'd heard rumors to that effect."

"So I need something to wear," Harry went on. "Something a bit more wizardly -- and a lot nicer -- than most of my clothes."

"Understood." She eyed him appraisingly. "Any other requirements?"

Harry sighed. "It should probably scream 'Gryffindor,'" he admitted.

"Hm," she said. "Yet properly dignified. You do wish to be taken seriously, I expect?"

"Oh. Yes, of course."

They discussed parameters for a while, while Madam Malkin measured Harry. "Go and do your shopping," she urged. "In two hours, I'll have some pieces for you to try."

"Wonderful!" Harry hesitated. "Could you have something done by three?" Afraid of seeming too demanding, Harry amended that. "I mean, I don't need you to do, but I have an appointment then, and if you can, it would be useful to be able to ask if they were okay."

Madam Malkin smiled. "We shall see. If the first fitting goes well, then yes."

"Thank you!" Harry returned the smile as warmly as he could manage. "I appreciate that."

The robes -- deep maroon trimmed in harvest gold, and cut wider over the legs than he was used to -- were ready by three. Harry threw them on over his jeans before walking down to Draco's

room. The wide folds of the bottom swung with his stride, and did his best to tell himself that someone wizarding-raised would *not* think of it as a skirt. Recalling Draco's unease the night before, he followed his knock with calling, "It's Harry."

A man he had never met before opened the door. Harry was flexing to release his wand before he caught sight of Draco behind him. Draco did not look distressed, so Harry let his hand relax.

"Please come in," said the stranger. Harry looked to Draco.

"Yes, please do, Harry," Draco confirmed. "This is my solicitor, Mr Aloysius Clark. Mr Clark, this is Harry Potter."

Harry shook the man's extended hand and entered the room.

Clark nodded. "I'm pleased to meet you, Mr Potter." He ushered Harry towards a small, round table that had been set up in the space left beside the bed. "If you will forgive me speaking frankly, you seem rather more presentable than I had expected."

"I bought these robes for the trial; I just wore them down so Draco could see them."

"Ah. They will certainly do." The solicitor's sharp eyes flicked over him like a blade, as they took their places at the table. The seating reminded Harry uncomfortably of their tea with Dumbledore in the greenhouse, but Clark couldn't have been less like the old headmaster. He was dark-haired and sharp in features and language, and dressed conservatively in charcoal robes with black trim. Nothing about him soothed or amused.

"Have you considered something a little brighter? After all, reminding people of your past impressive deeds, and your Quidditch--"

"Enough," Draco snapped. "I have told you that I will not play up Harry as a loose cannon. Even for purely practical reasons, it would be short-sighted at best. Harry, ignore him. Those robes are perfect." He sat back from the table. "Mr Clark," he said to Harry, "is, obviously, not involved with the trial, nor in any way working with the prosecution." That, Harry thought, was a warning. "He is, however, advising me on issues affected by my involvement."

Harry nodded acknowledgement. He wondered if Dumbledore knew about this arrangement. Probably, as he had wanted to host all of Draco's floo calls.

The meeting was less than comfortable, but at least it was short. Harry suspected that most of Draco's business had been concluded before he arrived, and he had been invited in only for display. Afterwards, he and Draco were summoned down to the parlor where he and Dumbledore had eaten breakfast. This meeting was not just with the headmaster, but included Severus Snape; a black Auror whom Harry vaguely remembered from the investigation after Mr Weasley's

death; a Wizengamot member named Amelia Bones; a pleasant Indian gentleman named Ravi Yallapragada, and other, quieter people. They used the full table, spreading out papers between empty plates, and most of the discussion went over Harry's head. He wasn't entirely sure whetherYallapragada was a barrister or another Wizengamot member, but he got the impression that Bones was the leader of a faction of the Wizengamot and keenly wanted to cement an alliance with Dumbledore. They all seemed to know the minutiae of applicable laws, though Harry couldn't imagine why they were bothering with trespassing and coercion when they had treason and attempted murder to work with.

He sat and practiced looking attentive and well-behaved until the food arrived, at which point he gave up and ate.

Afterwards, he and Draco went up the stairs together, and by silent agreement, to Harry's room. "You know," Draco said, as the door closed behind them, "if you want people to consider you to be the dumb warrior, you're doing a very good job."

"What do you mean?" Harry demanded, outraged.

"That meeting. You weren't even trying to understand what Shacklebolt was saying."

"Shacklebolt was the Auror, right?"

Draco rolled his eyes. "The senior Auror. The large, black, senior Auror. The bland, slightly small, watery-eyed man in poorly cut blue pinstripe robes was also an Auror, as you might have noticed."

"Er, no."

"I didn't think so. If you'd like them to think of you as more than a tool, you need to try a little harder."

"I couldn't understand any of that!"

"Of course you *could* have -- you just didn't care to try."

"Why do we need to do all this planning and review obscure laws for charging him with? He -- they were obviously working for Voldemort! They had the masks on! And your father tried to kill you!"

"So? He's been caught red-handed before."

"I just don't see how he could possibly get out of it."

"Then just trust us, will you? And try to follow along when we're reviewing 'obscure laws', because they may make the difference between getting him in prison or having him free."

"Fine!" Rubbing the back of his neck, Harry sighed. "Really. I'll try. Will you stay, tonight?"

Draco hesitated. "I don't think I could ... *do* anything, you know? I mean...." He gestured helplessly out at the darkness beyond the window, and Harry nodded in understanding.

"That's okay. Just stay." Harry reached out to take his hand. "Like that night in Gryffindor," he whispered.

Draco was very quiet the next morning. Harry dressed for the trial, and then escorted Draco to his room to do the same. Draco, before they went to breakfast, cast repelling charms on their clothing in case something spilled. Harry watched, fascinated, as toast crumbs bounced off the dark fabric of his robes.

"Are you going to eat, or just dribble bits of food and admire my charm work?"

Harry looked up and put the toast down.

"Like you're eating."

Draco gave a small, tight shrug and poked at his mutilated egg. "Can't."

Auror Shacklebolt flooed into the parlor. He was followed by last night's junior Auror and by a cheery-looking pink-haired witch. To Harry's surprise, the witch was also wearing Auror robes. He would have expected, had he ever thought about it, that the MLE would be too conservative for hair like that. To Harry's embarrassment, she spotted his stare, flashed him a grin, and walked directly over. Harry was afraid that she would make a fuss over him, but instead, she gave Draco a brisk nod and a bright smile.

"Hullo," she said. "I'm Auror Tonks; I'm part of the official protection for you, so I thought I should introduce myself."

"Tonks?" Draco's brow furrowed. Any relation to ..." His eyes went over her shoulder to look at nothing, and Harry could tell he was thinking furiously. "Um, Ed or Ted or something?" He shook his head in frustration, but his attention was back on her. "Sorry. I'm usually good with names, but--"

She laughed. "But you only heard that one in whispers?" she suggested. "He's my dad. My mum is Andromeda Black."

"Oh!" Draco stared outright for a moment, sweeping her up and down with a calculating gaze,

until, recovering himself, he held out his hand. "Pleased to meet you, cousin. I'm afraid I was previously unaware of your existence." His mouth quirked in a slight smile. "And it was shouts, actually, but distant ones."

She took a step back, at first, as if she had not been expecting his response, but then, with a slight laugh, moved forward again and shook the extended hand. "Pleased to meet you also, cousin."

That settled, she finally let her gaze drift back to Harry.

"Hi," he said. Unsure of what to do, he held his hand out also. "Er, Harry Potter."

"I'd guessed," Tonks said solemnly, but then giggled as they shook hands. "I'm honored."

"Is everyone ready?" Shacklebolt called loudly. "Aurors, stations. Everyone take hold of the portkey."

That was relatively easy, for once, as the portkey was a length of rope. Tonks positioned herself next to Draco, so he was between her and Harry. Dumbledore was near Shacklebolt at the front. Together, they went to the Ministry, arriving in an otherwise empty chamber. The walls were dark stone, and there were no windows. They gathered into a tight group, and when the door opened, Shacklebolt stepped outside. "Clear the way!" he called, and bright yellow bolts shot from his wand. A moment later, they were crossing a corridor between two barriers of light. People shouted questions to Dumbledore and Draco and Harry, but they were quickly left behind for the muted hubbub of many low voices in a large chamber. Harry decided this must be the courtroom. It looked very like the one he had seen in Dumbledore's pensieve, during his fourth year, except the center of the room now had four chairs, with a wood-paneled pen to either side of them. The rest of the room was full of well-dressed wizards and witches, their whispers combining into a low roar as they settled on the benches that rose tier upon tier from the floor. Set apart from the others was a row of five, with their clerks clustered behind them. He recognized the wizard in the center, Valerian Cabot, from pictures in the *Daily Prophet*. The new Minister for Magic, Gilbert Ramsley, had appointed him as Special Inquisitor, within weeks of Ramsley taking over from Fudge. The post reminded Harry of Crouch, which did not incline him kindly towards Cabot. To the Special Inquisitor's right sat Minister Ramsley, and to his left, Amelia Bones.

The pens also had tiered seating. Harry's group was led to one of them. He and Draco sat together, three rows up, and Dumbledore sat directly below them, at the floor. Harry supposed that was easier, if the headmaster expected to be called frequently. "Catch you later!" Tonks whispered in passing, and she drifted up to the top of the box, another row above them. When Harry looked up, she was standing against the back wall, scanning the room.

"Cousin?" he asked Draco at a whisper.

"Her mother and my mother and Bellatrix were sisters. Her mother was disinherited for marrying a Muggle -- or possibly a Muggleborn wizard; I was never clear on that."

"Bellatrix *Lestrange*?"

"Nee Black, yes."

"She was your *aunt*?"

"Well, yes, but we'd never met. I suppose she saw me when I was a baby, but you must remember that she had spent most of my life in prison."

Like Sirius, Harry realized. *Sirius Black.* "Black? Any relation to--" *Not his sisters*, he prayed.

"Cousins, also. First cousins, but Mother says Sirius was a bad sort -- always in trouble." Draco gave him a little wink as he spoke, and Harry suddenly felt better. "The old pureblood families are all intermarried, of course."

"I didn't know Sirius was from an old pureblood family!"

"You didn't?"

Harry only just bit back a "he never told me." Horrified at nearly having revealed his contact with his godfather, he sat silent for a moment, and in that moment, Minister Ramsley rose to his feet. He gestured to a clerk, who pointed his wand at his throat and bounced quickly to his feet.

"14th July, Nineteen-ninety-seven, special meeting of the Wizengamot, Special Inquisitor Cabot presiding. The Wizengamot will now hear this case."

It wasn't until he heard the declaration in a familiar, fussy voice that Harry realized the clerk was Percy Weasley. He had muted his hair by darkening it and wearing a hat. Harry bit his lip. Even now, when Harry was avoiding Mrs Weasley himself, Percy's rejection of his family still raised his ire, and that he would reject them still more by changing his appearance seemed even worse.

Indignation proved to be the only excitement of the morning. Percy had sat, and Special Inquisitor Cabot stood, bowed to the people on either side of him, and then to the assembled members of the Wizengamot, and then sat again. He gestured to another clerk, who called the defendants, one at a time, out to the chairs. Once all were seated and chained, he read out the names of their accusers. Draco was not included in the latter category. Harry wondered if that was because he had not been of age at the time of the attack, or if it was some sort of tactical maneuver. Dumbledore was included, and stood in acknowledgement, but did not need to leave the box. After him came a member of the Board of Governors of Hogwarts, and then another, and then Professor Sprout, and then Mr Yallapragada, who turned out to be another member of the Board of Governors. When he sat, Cabot stood again and made a long statement about justice being the solemn duty of the Wizengamot, and how no one should make his or her judgment in haste. By that point, Harry guessed an hour to have passed, and "haste" was the last word he would have associated with the proceedings.

After that, it was back to the clerk, who read one name: Dennis Avery. He followed that with a long list of charges brought against the man. Harry wasn't terribly surprised when Avery stood and declared that he was innocent. He had escaped, after all, and it was only Snape who could say that he had been among the six who had pursued Draco. Lucius Malfoy came next, and the clerk read out his name and a similar, if slightly longer, list of charges. He also, declared that he was innocent, causing Harry to twitch forward. Draco, at his side, sat ramrod straight and silent. The next defendant was Nott, who in contrast, stood and ranted for five minutes about how he had pursued the ungrateful brat, blood traitor that he was, and would do it again in a heartbeat. He eventually wound down, and Cabot cleared his throat.

"May this body assume that you plead 'guilty' then?" he asked, and people laughed uneasily.

"Guilty," Nott growled, and that was that.

Talbot, on the other hand, also professed innocence. At lunchtime, Cabot called a ninety minute recess, and the witnesses found themselves dismissed.

"I'll keep you in sight, Malfoy," Tonks assured them, "but you can go where you want."

"Back to the Cauldron?" Harry suggested, and Draco nodded agreement. Tonks brought them to a private grate and flooed ahead.

"We could shake her," Harry pointed out.

"Do you think we should?"

"Not really."

Draco nodded and tossed in powder. "The Leaky Cauldron."

The moment Harry stepped out of the floo, he saw the Weasleys. With that much red hair in one place, it was impossible not to notice them.

To his embarrassment, Mrs Weasley looked up just at that moment and their eyes met. He pretended they hadn't, and walked for the stairs, although he had intended to have lunch, and ignored his name being called behind him.

Normally he would have turned with his wand out at the sound of people jogging up to him from behind, but this time he just counted on Draco's worried glance to mean that it was nothing unexpected, and Tonks, looking casually from near the bar, to intervene if it was. Hands closed on his shoulders.

"What's the matter, Potter?"

"Too good for us, now?

"Or have those Seeker reflexes--"

"-- finally failed?"

Harry flushed. He hadn't thought of it that way, but he probably did look snooty to them, walking off with Draco Malfoy, and in his new formal robes, as well.

"Look," he protested, "I've nothing against *you.* You're welcome to join us for lunch, if you want. I just don't want to deal with your *mother.*"

Fred shook his head. "No deal, Harry."

"You don't get to treat her like that."

"I know we're not the well-behaved sons --"

"-- but *we* don't even treat her like that."

"Though sometimes we want to."

Harry crossed his arms over his chest. "I don't care. I won't talk to her."

Draco sighed. It wasn't loud, Harry thought, just very obvious.

"What?" he demanded.

"Nothing," Draco said airily. "Really, if you don't think she will be useful in the future, there's little point in wasting time on her." Harry felt a slow expansion of rage about to boil, but before he -- or the twins -- was quite there, Draco continued. "Of course, there's the matter of whether she was helpful in the past, but that's much more a *Gryffindor* issue, so really, I wouldn't bother appraising it."

"You're a prick."

"That's the pot calling the kettle black, if anything is," Draco said nastily. "Have you even told her that you're angry at her?"

"It's not--" Harry began, but fell silent at the look Draco shared with the nearer twin. "Fine!" he snarled, and marched back to the table.

He stopped in front of her, feeling coerced and angry, and managed a tight nod. "Mrs Weasley."

She stared back at him in shocked dismay, and he felt a bit ashamed. After all, even Draco thought he was behaving badly. "How are you?" he tried awkwardly.

She frowned. "Is there a reason you didn't want to stop and say hello?"

Ron snorted. "That git with him, you think?"

"Oh, honestly, Weasley!" Draco shot back contemptuously. "He wouldn't have come over here at all if I hadn't intervened."

That was true enough, Harry realized, wincing. He tried to think of how to start this, but there didn't seem to be a good starting point. It was all a coiling fire in his mind. He forced himself to speak anyway, and let what would come out.

"You had no right to send me a Howler."

"Oh, Harry!" Mrs Weasley seemed almost to relax at that. She smiled a little as she shook her head. "*Someone* has to look after you. I know that no one else will!"

"That's NOT *true.*" Harry managed to pull himself back down from a shout at the thought that they were in a public place. He didn't want to look around to see who was staring. Auror Tonks, certainly. "I have Remus Lupin," he said fiercely, wishing he could say who else he had. "But even if I didn't, I'm *not* one of your sons, and you can't treat me like one when it suits you."

"Harry, love, you're practically family --"

"I AM *NOT*." He wasn't, Harry noticed ruefully, doing too well at the 'not shouting' thing. "If I was *family,* I would have been at the Burrow last summer."

"It wouldn't have been any fun--"

"Don't you think I *know* that? I knew you were mourning. But I didn't get to mourn *with you*. I got stuck with people who said 'oh, that horrible man who covered our living room with plaster dust -- good riddance!'"

For a moment, even the twins were silent.

Molly's eyes looked suspiciously wet. "Harry, it's just--"

"Just that you needed that time to be only family," he said softly. "I get that, as much as I wanted to be there. But you can't have it both ways."

Ron cleared his throat. "It *was* embarrassing, mum. Most people thought you were just one of those nutters who thinks he's public property, but a bunch of the other Gryffindors know your

voice."

"Oh, Harry." Molly started to reach a hand out to him, and then changed her mind. She clicked her tongue nervously. "I didn't mean to hurt your feelings. I didn't even know that I had."

"I know," Harry answered. He felt a little better. Shyly, he sat at the end of the bench across from her. "I ... I still *like* you, and everything, Mrs Weasley, and I appreciate everything you've done for me, but if you act like I'm *yours* again, I'll--" His mouth quirked into a smile. "I'll set my dog on you," he said suddenly, grinning.

She laughed, a little raggedly, and dabbed at her eyes. "Poor dear. Did Remus really talk to you?"

"Yes. Did Professor Dumbledore ever tell you that what I was *trying* to do was to lose a hundred house points in one afternoon?"

"No, he didn't--."

"Although Ron has certainly mentioned it since," George broke in.

"Repeatedly."

"Loudly."

"And we agree that it was --"

"-- treasonous," they finished together.

"It was points for *Lestrange*, and Draco faced her *with* me, and I would have died if he hadn't, and Slytherin deserved to get just as many."

"That may be true, as far as it goes --"

"-- but how many points *from* Gryffindor were unfair?"

"I can't fix everything. This was just *wrong*."

"And you're a hero to the younger years for it," Draco said placidly. "Not the first years; they were naive enough to believe that as it was obviously a mistake, it would be corrected, once someone brought it up to the right person."

Ron snorted. "True enough. The right person happened to be Harry."

Draco's lip curled. "Yes, but they still thought it would be Professor Dumbledore."

Harry shrugged. He couldn't blame Draco for not trusting Dumbledore. The Leaving Feast of his

first year, such a wonderful surprise when he was eleven, now disturbed him when he remembered it. "At least it was a Gryffindor," he said. "That means something, I think."

"That you're *mental*," Fred said, and Ron agreed loudly.

"Boys!" Mrs Weasley reproved. She smiled at Harry, and patted his hand. "Harry is right. Fair play is more important than winning a silly award."

"It's the House Cup, Mum!"

Harry laughed. "Look at it this way," he said. "All my ability to play unfair, I'm saving for the war, okay? I'll cheat to put one over on Voldemort -- not on a bunch of kids who are mostly younger than me."

"Ooo, Harry!"

"All grown up, are you?" The twins sniggered.

Ron started forward. "Mum, let's--" Clamping his mouth shut, he sat back. "Never mind," he muttered. Harry was almost certain he had nearly suggested something for his birthday.

He looked at Mrs Weasley, who was now smiling at him, and the twins, who just seemed to be making the normal amount of trouble, considered how much *better* he felt, and made a decision.

"I still like you too, you know," he said.

Ron shot him a suspicious look.

"Even if you are a git," Harry said, and that seemed to be the right tack. Ron rolled his eyes, but he was smiling, now.

"Will you stay and have lunch with us, dear?" Mrs Weasley asked. "Your friend too, of course."

"Oh, sure." Belatedly, Harry thought to look at Draco, who appeared alarmed at the idea. "Um, you know he's my, um, boyfriend, right?"

"It might have been mentioned," George said dryly.

"Possibly less than a thousand times."

Lunch with Weasleys was somewhat embarrassing. Harry could tell it was worse for Draco, who wasn't used to considering the twins' jibes in a friendly light. Fred and George had to rush back to work after a little while, however, and Harry, at least, belatedly appreciated how they had

filled every awkward silence.

At last, they could reasonably say that they needed to freshen up before their return to the trial, and they stood to leave. Draco bowed slightly to Mrs Weasley and said he was pleased to have met her, and they made their escape while she was still blushing.

They didn't make it far. Bulstrode and Parkinson, who had apparently been waiting for Draco to be free of Weasleys, intercepted them halfway across the floor.

"Draco, darling!" Pansy exclaimed. "We've been hoping to see you!"

Telling himself that he would only be in the way, Harry attempted to wave a farewell to Draco and move on, but Draco caught his arm in a tight grip.

"If I have to treat yours decently," he whispered viciously, "you have to treat mine decently."

His voice was low, but not so low that the others couldn't hear. Pansy tittered, and Harry felt his face heat.

"Sorry," he said. He nodded at the girls. "Hello."

Draco and Parkinson made almost identical eyerolls at his lack of breeding, but Bulstrode gave a nod that looked something like approval.

"Unfortunately," Draco said, once Harry was standing properly at his side, "we *are* in a bit of a hurry. We need to wash -- and other necessaries -- and have about ten minutes before we need to start back to the courtroom. Will you be in town long?"

"I'm here for the whole trial, but Millicent leaves tomorrow." Parkinson frowned slightly.

"Dinner, then?" Draco suggested.

"Oh, lovely! There's a marvelous new place down Fortune Row called the Grand Game -- you'd love the rabbit comfit."

"Excellent!" Draco indicated Harry with a quick motion of his eyes. "Dinner for four, then? At eight?"

"Dinner for four," Parkinson confirmed, beaming.

"Don't look so horrified, Harry," Draco whispered on the stairs.

"I was just hoping for a pleasant evening at the end of this."

"Oh, you'll get one." Draco smirked. "I may make you be nice to my friends, but intend for you

to find it *well* worth your while."

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Chapter: 4

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Notes: Thanks to calanthe for beta work and Britpicking. Any departures from canon capitalization are mine.

4 -- Stories

If the morning session of the trial was unsettling, the afternoon one was outright disturbing. Avery did as Harry had expected and claimed that he wasn't present. However, two of his witnesses were not available, so his matter was tabled and the trial moved on to Lucius Malfoy.

There were chains on the three remaining chairs -- Nott was no longer present -- but none of the defendants were restrained with them. When his name was called, Lucius stood with quiet dignity. He was impeccably, but sedately, dressed in robes of soft grey, and he held his head high.

"Witches and wizards of the Wizengamot," he said, bowing politely, "I do not deny that I was present at this gathering of supporters of He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named, nor that I followed those of his servants who pursued my only son and heir. However, my presence was not willing, and I followed Draco only to protect him."

Harry repressed a snort only out of a sense of the dignity of occasion. He looked towards Draco, expecting to share a moment of amusement -- surely no one would believe such tripe -- but Draco sat stiffly, lips pressed in a tight line.

"As you all know, I received the Dark Mark in my youth, while under the Imperius curse." Lucius grimaced. "That, unfortunately, gives He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named the ability to maintain an approximate idea of my movements, and of course it is difficult to know which of my companions who claimed the same are sincere, and which are hiding behind lies.

"Giles Goyle has been a friend of mine nearly all my life. When he invited my son and me to a social gathering, it was only natural to accept. But then, his portkey brought me to an unexpected location, and I was obliged to watch, hopelessly outnumbered by his loyal servants, while He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named attempted to similarly brand my son." Lucius took in a hard, painful breath, and Harry watched with growing hatred a performance that might have convinced

him had he not known better.

"When Draco escaped, I was, of course, relieved, but then several of those gathered turned to pursue him. I followed through the portkey trace and attacked Giles as he expanded his broom -- he'd got us into this situation, after all -- and he disarmed me, but I was too frantic to be sensible. Whatever his crimes may have been, he wasn't so far gone as to do an old friend real harm, and I followed. I could not do anything less for a child of my blood.

"Wandless, I could be of little help. Giles fought with both my wand and his own, leaving, no doubt, damning evidence. I swear, though, that I did nothing to endanger my son."

For minute, the room was silent. "Please continue, Mr Malfoy," a man on the floor said levelly. He was standing in front of the facing box. Harry thought he might be part of the defense team.

"I -- it's hard to know what to say," Lucius continued, his voice just slightly unsteady. More than one listener was dabbing at her (or even his) eyes. Except for Voldemort, Harry had never wanted to hurt another person so badly as he did Lucius Malfoy now.

"Draco -- my own son believes that I would try to kill him! I -- it's *Potter's* influence -- it must be! The boy is unbalanced, and Dumbledore has encouraged his paranoia rather than helping him, and he's been filling my son's head with his own delusions of persecution." Lucius closed his eyes for a moment, as if mustering his resources, and then opened them again. "It pains me," he said, with quiet dignity, "that we must be victims to such experiments in education as to turn our own sons and daughters -- our future -- against us." He glanced down at his unused chains, for just a second, and then raised his head to look again at the Inquisitor. "That is my statement," he said levelly, and sat.

"Bastard," Harry muttered, but Draco shushed him. Harry would have worried had Draco not also gripped his hand tightly, the contact nearly hidden under the wide sleeve of his robes.

The clerk had asked Lucius Malfoy if he wanted to call any witnesses, and Lucius waved the matter wearily over to his barrister, who took a few steps from the chairs towards the box Harry and Draco were in.

"Professor Albus Dumbledore," he called.

The defense questioned Dumbledore as to who had cast the Cruciatus curse, and while he said that he believed that it was Lucius Malfoy, he of course had not seen the curse cast. Draco had already been on the floor of his office before he had caught his first glimpse of the interlopers. He did use that word, and Harry, for the first time, began to appreciate the potential value of the trespassing charge.

Dumbledore wasn't even able to testify that he had seen Lucius with a wand. When he had first

emerged from the school, several of the Death Eaters had rushed towards him, and Snape had fired off Disarming spells from behind them. Dumbledore had been dueling Nott, and hadn't seen whose hands the wands had flown from.

Harry knew that this wasn't good. Snape had been cleared without a hearing, due to private testimony from various people -- including not only Dumbledore, but unnamed officials in the MLE -- that he had been working as an informant, but he still wasn't what most people would consider a reliable witness.

The prosecution, he thought, would probably have called Draco next, since he might have seen something definite, even while fleeing, but it wasn't their turn yet. The defense, instead, called Theodore Nott.

He wasn't the best witness either, Harry thought, as the pale young man rose stood and stepped out of the witness box to face the inquisitors. He had a strong resemblance to his uncle, whose hateful confession must still be fresh in everyone's minds. Still, he had a quiet, serious look that professors liked, and which Harry imagined that people in government might like as well.

"Now, Theodore," the man said, "you go to school with Draco Malfoy, don't you? Would you say he's a reliable witness?"

Nott hesitated. "He used to be dependable," he said.

"Ah. And what happened?"

Nott grimaced. "He started hanging out with Potter, and Potter's always in trouble. He's been drunk at school, and he spent half of last spring being punished for leaving the grounds, and everyone knows --"

Harry tensed, and he could feel Draco, beside him, do the same. Whispers spread through the Wizengamot. Dumbledore's voice cut through them.

"Objection," he said. "Mr Potter's reliability is not relevant to the matter at hand. Furthermore, he is a *minor*, and any disciplinary action to which he may have been subject is therefore not admissible at a public hearing."

Harry didn't feel any less like cringing at *that*, but the defense barrister did not dispute the point. Instead, he consulted with his clerk, giving the assembly more time to speculate among themselves. Draco reached over and squeezed Harry's hand. "Sorry," he muttered.

After a moment, the man cleared his throat. "Theodore, please continue, but restrain yourself to the matters relevant to Draco."

Nott nodded and sent Harry -- or perhaps Draco -- a vicious look. "Well, Draco used to be around the common room most evenings, but in December, he started going missing. He'd be gone

almost every other night, and we found out later that he was meeting Potter. They both stayed at the school over the Christmas holiday, and when we came back, it was even worse -- sometimes he'd be out well into the night, and come back smelling of alcohol. About a month into term, he started saying negative things about his family. I think it was to impress Potter, you know -- that he was too well-bred for Potter and had to play that down. In March, we started seeing him with more vulgar students, even--"

"Mr. Nott," the barrister interrupted, before Nott could say anything to damage his own case. "I'd like to review a few of your points. You feel that young Mr. Malfoy may have used animosity toward his father to impress Mr. Potter?"

"Oh, definitely. They fought about politics once, in public, and after that, Draco would make a show of being annoyed when he received letters from home. And he'd make trouble in other ways. When they were caught exchanging messages in Transfiguration lessons, Draco set their notes on fire. Potter was impressed with that one."

Draco nudged Harry. "You're so easy," he whispered, but there was a savage tension below the joke.

"And he would stay out drinking with him?"

"That's certainly what it seemed to be."

"Did he do anything else to impress Potter?"

Nott answered slowly, his attention going back to them. "Bought him presents," he said. "Clothes. And a torclinde."

Harry had left Susara at the Leaky Cauldron, afraid he might give in to the temptation of whispering to her. Now he knew he had made the right decision. His fingers brushed along his arm, where she should be, and Draco caught at his hand.

Conscious, suddenly, of the stares on them, Harry took a long breath, smiled as best he could at Draco, and folded his hands in his lap. What he needed to do was look well-behaved. Sadly, he'd never been any good at that, even when it was true.

Crabbe and another, older Slytherin -- ex Slytherin, Harry supposed -- gave similar testimony, talking about Draco's slide from responsibility, and never missing an opportunity to mention Harry's bad influence. Harry grew increasingly angry and embarrassed, and Draco, although silent beside him, was recognizably fuming. Harry could tell by the way his fingers slid against each other, as if missing the smooth strength of his wand. When the testimony ended and the court adjourned for the night, Harry didn't know where to look.

"Sorry," Draco whispered again.

"It's not your fault."

Draco shrugged. "It depends on how you think about it."

Tonks came down to meet them, and Harry felt an embarrassing rush of gratitude when she looked at him with ironic sympathy rather than curiosity or censure. "Come on, loves -- I can chivvy you past the press." She leaned closer. "And I'm bloody glad that *my* least friendly classmates were never invited to go on about my escapades in court."

As promised, Tonks escorted them back to the Cauldron, fending off a few intrepid reporters who had staked out the back corridor, and with an admonition to Draco that he was on his own until she came to walk him to breakfast, left both of them at Draco's room. Draco dropped into the room's only chair.

"The conniving bastard. 'Delusions of persecution' indeed!" He raised his head to look at Harry. "I can't believe he had the gall to try to cast *you* as the corrupter." With a groan, he sagged back against the worn cushions. "Except I can."

"The problem is," Harry said slowly, "that my friends can't deny the drinking, or the staying out late, or the sneaking out of school...."

"Gryffindors," Draco growled.

Harry was wondering whether to laugh or to take offence when a knock sounded at the door.

"Mr Malfoy?" Tom's voice called. "Mr Clark is here to see you."

Draco sighed and levered himself out of the chair. "Give us a few minutes, Harry? I'll come to your room when I'm done."

"Of course."

At the doorway, Harry and the solicitor walked past each other as if the other didn't exist, but Harry didn't make it far. Fred and George Weasley were waiting outside his room.

"How did you get here?" Harry demanded.

"We have a message from old Dumbledore."

"Which is enough to earn us an escort up."

"Where's the toff?"

Harry scowled. "*Draco* is with his solicitor, and I want you gone by the time he comes out."

"Ooo! Was that *his* room you came out of?"

"Fred...." Harry said warningly, but both twins were ignoring him. They parted to walk past Harry on both sides, which disconcerted him enough that it was a moment before he realized where they were going.

"Hey!" He hurried after them. "Draco's in a private meeting! You stay out of there!"

"Oh, we will!"

"Of course."

Fred's voice dropped. "We plan to stay--"

"-- out here."

In front of Draco's door, George drew his wand and whispered a spell.

"-- your mother," Mr Clark was saying, his voice now clear in the hallway.

"Inadequate," Draco retorted, his voice brittle. "Even were she not, Harry is non-negotiable. I will not say it again."

Harry had his wand drawn and pointed at George. "End that."

"Do you have some *better* strategy?" Clark said dryly.

"Don't try it, Harry," Fred warned.

Draco's reply was drowned out by competing incantations. Fred went crashing into the door, and Harry felt a stinging lash across his chest. He pressed forward anyway, standing over Fred. Footsteps clattered inside the room, and George hastily ended his charm.

"What is *this*?" Clark asked, at a vicious hiss, while Draco, behind him, glared.

"Just a little disagreement," Harry said, not lifting his eyes or his wand. "I said Draco wasn't to be disturbed."

Fred scooted back more tightly against the wall. "Damn it, Harry, it was just a message from Dumbledore."

"Urgent?" Harry asked sweetly.

"Private."

"Most of this business *is* too private for a public corridor, isn't it?" Harry retorted.

The twins looked at each other, and it was George who spoke. "Sorry, Harry. You're right. Let Fred up now, will you?"

With a roll of his eyes, Harry did. Draco looked searchingly at him a moment, and then nodded.

"Harry, take these two back to your room, would you please? If the message is too private to be given to you, they will need to wait." His glance raked scornfully over the twins before returning to Harry. "Of course, anything too private for you, I would hope the headmaster would have the sense not to tell to *them*."

"Er...."

"We'll talk to Harry then."

"We wanted to do that anyway."

Back in his room, Harry rounded on the twins. George was casting a spell on the door.

"What is *that*?"

"Privacy charm. Our own."

"So *my* business doesn't end up in the corridor?"

"Exactly." The twins looked at each other.

"We didn't mean...."

"We just thought he might be plotting against you."

"Well he wasn't, now, was he?"

"Not that we heard."

"Probably not."

"We won't do it again."

"I *love* him," Harry said angrily.

"All right, all right!"

"We're just looking after you."

"I don't want looking after!"

Another shared glance, and then George spoke. He sounded uncommonly subdued. "No one does."

"And we don't usually."

"Look, what are you actually here for?" Harry demanded. "Is there a message from Dumbledore or not?"

"Yes." George cleared his throat. "Er, he wanted to remind you to keep your temper, and to tell Draco that the prosecution will call on him in the morning, and that you should both join the group for breakfast."

"That's it?" Harry gaped. "That's ... that's hardly worth mentioning!"

"Ah. But we volunteered to carry messages, as we had intended to speak with you anyway," Fred explained.

Harry crossed his arms over his chest and waited.

"Maybe some other time," Fred said hurriedly.

"Oh since you're here," Harry said bitingly, "you might as well tell me."

The twins, amusingly, looked as if their mother had caught them at mischief. "Well...."

"The owl order business is doing really well," George blurted out.

"That's good."

"And we were hoping to open a shop."

"There's a place available right here on Diagon Alley."

"Just past Knockturn, but closer than Gambol & Japes."

Harry looked at their forced cheer and made a guess. "You need money."

"Profits are good," George said hurriedly.

"Just not good enough," Fred confessed. "They *will* be though, Harry, we know it."

"You won't regret it."

Harry stared at them. "Bad time to attack my boyfriend then, wasn't it?"

"It wasn't an *attack*--"

"You could have endangered him. You could have given away strategy for the trial. You didn't know what you were damaging, and you didn't care!"

Fred let out an exasperated sigh. George bit his lip. "You're serious about him, aren't you?"

"*Yes.*"

"Well, we thought it might just be..." George shrugged. "Good sex?"

"I was *serious* about him when we were still just friends, prat. *And* when we were involved and not doing anything."

George shook his head like a muddled dog. "Why bother with that?"

Fred nodded. "Right. Not like he can get pregnant."

"I wanted to be sure it--" Harry stopped. One didn't discuss *feelings* with Fred and George. He shrugged. "I'd never thought about blokes. I wanted to think it over a bit, and try snogging first, and make certain that liking each other wasn't just ... just not knowing what to do with *wanting*, you know?"

"And it wasn't?" Fred asked incredulously.

"Not by half." Harry smirked. The twins looked at each other.

"So, this shop--" Fred started doggedly.

At that moment, however, there came a knock at the door, and Draco's voice calling "Harry?"

"Come in," Harry called back. He looked back at the innocent expressions on the twins' faces and his anger returned. "Fred and George were just leaving."

When the twins were gone, and Harry had closed the door and cast his own privacy spell, he had to decide what to tell Draco. *Not* that the eavesdropping spell had been cast, he decided. As

annoyed as he might be at the twins right now, he generally liked them and wanted Draco to get along with them, eventually. That much information might set things back too far.

"They wanted to spy on you," he said, in compromise.

Draco rolled his eyes. "And you settled things the Gryffindor way?"

"More or less. I did try talking first."

"Good of you."

"They said they didn't trust you and it was for my own good."

Draco scowled at that, but Harry pressed on. "*Then* they had the gall to ask me for a favor."

"I do hope you refused."

Harry shrugged. "Not outright, although I did give them the impression I would. The last thing that I told them was that insulting my boyfriend was a bad move."

"I would hope so!" Draco exclaimed, but the word 'boyfriend' seemed to mollify him some.

With a sigh, Harry sat down on his bed. "The thing is, I'm not sure I want to refuse."

"Oh? Is it good?"

"Well, I'm part owner of their business."

"The owl-order joke shop?"

"Yes. I gave them my winnings from the Tri-Wizard tournament, and they made me a silent partner in return."

Draco blinked. "They just ... happened to," he said slowly. "You didn't make it a condition."

"I just wanted to get rid of the money!"

"Why would you want to do that?"

"Because Cedric had died! And I shouldn't have won! Barty Crouch had done his best to throw me the victory. I would have failed the Second Task completely if he hadn't arranged for me to get gillyweed."

Draco shook his head. "I will *never* understand you. So, you attempted to throw this money away, and they insisted on giving you something of entirely hypothetical value in return."

"Right, except it's not that hypothetical anymore. They're making good money. I get reports, and anyway, I see their wares around Hogwarts."

"Oh, so I have I. You will note that I knew what 'their business' is." Draco crossed the room and sat next to Harry, but twisted to face him. "So, what do they want? A public endorsement?"

"As if I would!"

"More money then."

Harry winced and nodded. "A shop's come available in Diagon Alley, but they don't have the reserves." Draco eyed him sternly, and he sighed. "Look, I'll turn them down, if you want me to. The problem is that they don't respect anyone -- or nearly -- so expecting them to respect you--"

"Put a sock in it," Draco said brusquely. He grinned at Harry's surprised look. "Listen for a moment. I don't want you to refuse them--"

"Really?"

"Hush. I want to negotiate the deal for you." He smirked. "Tell them it's penance."

At that, Harry had to laugh. Fred and George would be horrified. "Don't take too much," he warned. "I'm rich, and they're not."

Draco shook his head. "Don't worry. They will be." He sat down on the bed. "Was that all? I'd like to tell you some about my consultation."

"Fine." Harry sat next to him. "Let me guess -- ditch me?"

"Mm. Of course, but not only that. He feels that my father is offering to reconcile with me, and providing a path; it wasn't my fault, of course -- you seduced me."

"Did I?" Harry said flatly.

"Well, of course not! The entire idea is absurd. You'd have no idea how to go about such a thing." Draco waved the matter off. "Anyway, I said no, of course, and he asked what else I could do, and I said I would tell the truth -- that got a laugh." His lips compressed for a moment. "I meant it," he said petulantly. "He doesn't understand. Father has a temper, and it sometimes overrides his discretion. It doesn't always, but I believe that arousing his anger is my best play, and the truth -- properly approached -- will do that. With luck, he'll *react*, and tarnish this 'concerned father' image he's creating."

With a long sigh, Draco straightened against the sag of the mattress. "Merlin, but this is miserable!"

"Yes."

Draco sighed. "Well, we might as well get ready for dinner."

"Do you still want to do that?" Harry remembered Auror Tonks that afternoon and Draco's nerves when he arrived, and hoped that perhaps Draco would decide that they should stay in. For his part, Harry wasn't too worried, but he would far rather an evening in with just Draco than out with a group of Slytherins. Any reporters who saw them would probably assume he was dating Bulstrode. *Or*, he thought, smiling to himself, *that Parkinson is*.

Draco hesitated, but when he replied, his voice was firm. "I miss my friends, Harry, and this is the friendliest that Pansy has been since I fled back to Hogwarts. And she chose Millicent, who's not one of her usual set, but *is* a neutral. That means something. I need to talk to her while she's willing to listen. I wouldn't risk going out alone, or during business hours, but I've stayed in for the past two nights. No one will be expecting me to leave now, and there are no crowds of shoppers for an attacker to hide in. And I'll have you with me."

Harry couldn't keep from feeling flattered. "All right. I'll play bodyguard, then."

"My Gryffindor," Draco said, with mock adoration. He took in a breath and let it out, ending with a bright smile. "So. Do you know what you're wearing?"

"What's wrong with what I have on?" Harry thought his robes from the trial would do for any good restaurant, but Draco shook his head.

"Nothing, *per se*, but they're *today's* clothes. You want to get rid of that and start afresh, so you can enjoy yourself."

"I don't need to --"

"I insist then. I refuse to think of that horrible trial every time I look at you."

Once Draco had put it like that, Harry had no choice but to cooperate. To his surprise, he did feel marginally better once he was in fresh clothes. He thought he might even understand what Draco had meant. The change placed his day more firmly in the past. With more cheer than he would have expected, he stepped out into Diagon Alley, Draco at his side. Draco did not take his hand -- or his arm, as Harry could suddenly imagine him doing -- but he walked intimately close. Even dinner with Parkinson and Bulstrode -- *Pansy and Millicent*, Harry reminded himself -- seemed worthwhile just to have dinner out with Draco.

The summer day was still bright, but shifting to the golden light that presaged sunset. By that, he spotted a cluster of redheads a few shops ahead of them. He hesitated. It was Fred and George,

with Ron walking between them. One of the twins turned to walk backwards for a few steps, gesturing and speaking. If he spotted them, he gave no sign.

"Weasleys," Draco whispered.

"I noticed."

The Weasleys, however, remained ahead of them as they walked further. Aptly, Fortune Row turned out to be the street that came out onto Diagon Alley by Gringotts. Harry didn't think that was all that there was to the name. Smooth plank walks provided a raised path on either side of the street. The first building in, across from the side of the bank, was nearly as richly attractive, with marble pillars supporting a gate wrought of copper and something silver-bright. Further down, Harry could see what appeared to be a shop, closer to the street and ornamented with carved wood flourishes cleverly painted.

"Pansy said that it's past the first crossing," Draco elaborated, as they took the turn.

Harry nodded. He wondered if the Grand Game would try to express a hunting theme through its facade, and if so, how. He could see a few hanging signs out, but most were too tastefully ornate to be readable from a distance. He was peering forward, trying to decide if the furthest one showed antlers or a strange tree, when something came hurtling down from above, and Draco screamed and shoved him so that they fell away from each other. Harry hit the ground already rolling and came up to a crouch with his wand in hand. He didn't see an attacker, but thick ropes were winding around Draco's torso. Draco had his right arm upraised and was waving it back and forth, keeping it from being trapped. No noise came from his wide open mouth.

"DRACO! *Libero!*" The spell was a dueling standard and came easily to Harry's tongue. The ropes fell from Draco. As they did, however, something else came from above, landing heavily behind Harry. He whipped around and found himself facing someone masked and cloaked as a Death Eater.

His Petrifaction hex was blocked, and the man advanced, his left hand wielding a knife that was fully as long as the wand in his right. With Draco behind him, Harry was afraid to dodge. He threw up a shield spell of his own, hoping to block whatever his opponent tried next.

"*Av*--"

A fist-sized missile hurtled past his head and caught the man in the chest. He fell back, the curse unfinished, and Draco grabbed Harry's arm and pointed to his own throat. Footsteps pounded from Diagon Alley as he undid the Muting hex on Draco. Immediately, Draco pointed his wand over Harry's shoulder and Harry whipped around to defend them, only to find that they now had two attackers to deal with.

"*Ossum*--" Draco stopped. "*Expelliarmus!*" He growled in frustration. "Bloody *hell*!"

The Disarming spell had worked, sending both wand and knife flying, but the second Death Eater hit Draco with a tripping hex, and he went down. Harry retaliated with *Impedimenta*, darting to the side so that Draco would not be in the line of fire. As he did so, he realized that he had miscalculated. The disarmed man was lunging for Draco, hands outstretched. Inches away from his goal, he was suddenly knocked backwards in a flash of light.

"HARRY!

The twins and Ron were running over, wands out. Harry's opponent fell in a flash of pink. For several seconds, he thrashed under what appeared to be a coating of bubblegum, and then, with a sticky pop, he vanished.

The remaining man dove for his wand and followed.

The street was quiet, except for their panting breaths. Harry helped Draco to his feet, and they kept their arms around each other. With the Weasleys, they stood in the suddenly quiet street, looking warily around. A few shreds of bubblegum, an abandoned knife, and a displaced chunk of flint were the only signs of the battle. Harry saw a curtain edge flick down in the nearest house. He let out a shaky breath.

"Thanks."

"No problem." Fred sounded equally unsettled. His freckles showed darkly in his pale face. "As it turned out. You okay, Malfoy?"

Draco nodded. Harry could feel him trembling.

"Sorry," Harry said. "Guess I'm not much of a bodyguard."

Draco laughed slightly and leaned into him. "Oh, you did pretty well. Just need training up, I think."

"I wasn't expecting him to keep going for you when he was disarmed."

"Neither was I."

Ron, who had been looking stunned, finally found his voice. "Looked like he was trying to grab you."

"Yes." Draco straightened. "In hindsight, I think the goal was abduction."

"But why?"

Draco grimaced. "The trial? They don't want me talking?" He hesitated. "Though they could have killed me, easily enough. They must have more complicated plans."

Everyone understood that wasn't a good thing. Ron shuddered.

"Thanks for saving him, Ron," Harry said finally, since it seemed that Draco wouldn't.

Draco twitched. "Was that you who knocked him back? Yes, thank you."

"No problem," Ron said, echoing his brother. Harry thought he couldn't quite manage 'you're welcome,' but his shoulders settled at having the matter out of the way. "Look -- maybe we should come along with you two."

Fred nodded. "A larger group never hurts."

"Except when sneaking," George amended.

"But you obviously aren't."

"We *were* going out to dinner," Draco said. "Now, though, I think we should return to our rooms."

"Do you think Par-- Pansy set us up?"

"She wouldn't." Draco scowled. "I'm sure she wouldn't do that to me. But we've been seen here, in any case. Going on with it would be reckless."

Harry nodded grimly. He didn't find it nearly as unbelievable that Pansy had betrayed them, especially if she had been promised that Draco wouldn't be killed.

"We need to tell her, though," Draco said. His trembling, rather than easing, was growing worse. "I won't have her thinking that I stood her up."

"Wait!" Ron protested. "What if she *did* set you up? If Harry thinks so--."

"I think it's a possibility," Harry clarified. "That doesn't mean--"

"If she *did*, she won't show her hand by attacking a messenger," Draco interrupted. Abruptly, he twisted out of Harry's hold and sat down on the plank walk. "One of you can go and tell her."

"You want us to bring a message to a Slytherin?" Ron countered, disgust sharp in his voice.

"I want one of you to bring a message to one of my closest childhood friends," Draco retorted through clenched teeth. Harry moved forward.

"Enough. Ron, go and tell Pansy, please? But one of the twins should go with you, in case those bastards come back."

"Or someone's waiting with her," Ron said darkly.

"Right. And if she acts off, let us know."

Ron nodded. "All right. Where?"

"The Grand Game. Just past the first corner, we're told."

Ron nodded again, and set out with Fred. As soon as they were moving, Harry dropped down by Draco.

"Are you okay?"

"No." Draco grimaced. "But I can make it back."

George dropped down on Draco's other side. "What hurts?"

"Everything." Draco probed his ribs gingerly before pulling his hands back to his sides. "But mostly my ankle. Damn cobblestones."

"Mm. I'm not bad with healing charms. A necessity, really, considering our line of research. May I check it?"

"Go ahead."

After a few spells, George announced that the ankle wasn't broken, and cast one spell to reinforce where it was strained and another to dull the pain. Draco came gingerly back to his feet.

"Perhaps we could just apparate in?" he tried.

George shook his head. "Not into the building itself. We could to the entrance, but I can't take both of you, and I don't think either of you should be alone."

"I can apparate."

"But it's still before us or after us, right?"

"Oh. Yes, I see what you mean." Draco set his shoulders back and lifted his chin. "Walking it is."

They walked.

"We make a pretty good team."

"Mm." Harry snuggled against Draco's side. George had helped remove visible bruises from both of them before he left, but Harry was still sore all over from the fight. Not moving was good. Warmth was better.

"So, I have a plan."

Harry's eyes opened, much as they might have had someone said "look -- a charging dragon!"

"I'll take over Slytherin," Draco confided, "and you take over Gryffindor. That gives us --"

"What?"

"I take over Slytherin; you take over Gryffindor," Draco repeated, as if this were simple. Harry sat up. It hurt.

"Nobody runs Gryffindor!" he protested.

Draco rolled his eyes. "Not because it can't be done, though. Just because Gryffindors don't usually do that sort of thing. But *you* could."

"You think so, do you?"

"Yes," Draco said boldly. He rolled onto his back, pulling Harry on top of him. "Because you're that good."

Harry rubbed up against him. He wasn't so sore after all. It was hardly noticeable under the effect that Draco was having on him as he rocked into him, back, and forward again. Draco's loose trousers were intended to be worn under robes, and didn't hold much in. "I am, am I?"

Draco smirked. "You got Ron Weasley to run a message for me."

"So I did." Harry kissed him. He had to.

"And--"

"Later."

"Mm?" Draco prompted, failing to look innocent.

"Plan *later*. I want to try something."

"Something that doesn't require planning?"

Harry pushed a hand down between them, rubbing awkwardly. "Yeah." He moved his knees,

pushing up a little to give his arm more room, and managed to get his hand into Draco's trousers, letting out a little moan at the brush of his knuckles against smooth skin. "God, yeah."

"I'm sure you've done that before," Draco said, but his voice was ragged.

"A little." The first time, Draco had been so close when he had come into reach that Harry had hardly had time to do anything. It had been gratifying, but not educational. The next morning had been more of a languid rubbing together, supplemented by inefficient, but pleasantly mutual touches. Draco reached for him, but Harry shifted down, out of easy reach.

"No. Stay."

"I'm not a dog," Draco complained, but the words came with a wicked smile, and he pulled Harry's pillow a little further down under his head. He looked so satisfied that Harry worried about what Draco might expect. He was still uncertain about how far he would go.

"I want to see what I'm doing," he remarked, to clarify things without stating that he was.

"Go ahead. I'm not shy."

Eyes narrowing at the challenge, Harry stripped off Draco's trousers and looked his fill before reaching out to trail his fingers through pale curls, and then slowly up.

"Oh," he breathed. On himself, that didn't feel like *power*.

"Please."

"Yeah."

Draco had a lovely response to pleasure. He moaned and tipped his head back, emphasizing his throat. Harry remembered exploring that with his tongue the morning before, tracing the lines of tendon and the rise of that Adam's apple. It was tempting even now. Instead, he moved lower, too close for his glasses, which he set aside. Draco shuddered beautifully. A moment later, he was wailing softly and grabbing at Harry's hair.

Draco's fingers moved restlessly, making little circles over Harry's scalp, teasing at the locks as if he'd leave him looking like a hedgehog. He made high, desperate sounds and low, lustful sounds and everything in between while Harry did his best to drive him mad.

When Draco finally collapsed back, boneless and satisfied, Harry couldn't help feeling smug as he crawled up Draco's body. "Okay for a first try?" he asked teasingly.

With an affirmative moan, Draco fell back into the pillow. His face was pink and sweaty, his eyes dark with the wideness of the pupils, and his hair was as messy as Harry's own, pale locks pointing in competing directions. He looked gorgeous. Harry settled in to kiss him. Within

seconds, Draco was reaching for him. Under his touch, Harry could feel his mind overloading, thought drowning under sensation. He was only vaguely aware of breaking the kiss, first to breathe, and then to roar with a rising surge of pleasure that blinded him like lightning.

He lay there afterwards, regaining his breath. Draco tipped him to the side and then came up on one elbow beside him.

"That was marvelous." His mouth twitched in a sly smile. "I'm ridiculously pleased at the thought that the whole floor may have heard you."

Harry couldn't feel upset at the idea himself.

Harry stayed sprawled out on the bed and watched lazily as Draco pulled on a shirt -- which he left unbuttoned -- and began to arrange his hair.

"If we're going to do this...."

Draco made an inquiring sound and Harry realized that "this" was highly ambiguous, under the circumstances.

"Take over our houses, I mean. If we're going to do that, being together will be a problem."

Draco set down the brush. "How so?"

"Well, it rather undermines our credibility, doesn't it? In our own houses?"

Draco's cheeks raised in an unguarded smile. "Not at all. We just need to be sure that the Gryffindors believe that you are in change, and the Slytherins believe that I am."

"And how do we do that? Orchestrate scenes? I'm not much of an actor, if you'll recall."

"We take advantage of house differences in perception." Draco sat on the bed and bumped Harry lightly on the nose with one finger. "If you give me orders, and I take them, the Gryffindors will think you're in charge, correct?"

Harry twitched his head to the side and back to nip at the finger. "Mm-hm."

"But if I give you advice, and you take it, the Slytherins will *know* I'm in charge."

Harry laughed, dislodging the finger, which he had started to suck on. "Take charge, then, Draco! I clearly need all the advice I can get." In a sudden move, he grabbed Draco and pulled him over onto the mattress.

"Hey!"

Harry's voice dropped to a low growl. "Make it work." *Because I'm not giving you up for anything*, he wanted to say, but that wasn't really true, of course. Both of them knew he would give Draco up for a wife, someday. Having forbidden Draco to ignore that, he shouldn't do so himself. Instead he held Draco close and kissed him with a need that had not been at all abated by sex.

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Chapter: 5

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5 -- Machinations

Breakfast had even more people in attendance than the day before, but the additions were all from Hogwarts. Harry saw Professor McGonagall tuck a section of the *Daily Prophet* in her bag as he entered the room. He didn't ask to see it. The sick dread in his stomach probably left him better able to behave than the anger that would replace it.

He kept waiting for someone to scold them about last night's activities, but after both Auror Tonks and Dumbledore had greeted them without their excursion being mentioned, he decided they must not know. He and Draco should tell the Aurors, he knew, but he didn't want to. They couldn't identify either of their attackers -- or even prove they had been attacked -- but someone would question his judgment, and Dumbledore might put him under guard.

After Dumbledore continued on his circuit of the room, Draco leaned close to Harry. "Your Weasley friends kept quiet," he whispered approvingly, and Harry nodded.

Breakfast hadn't arrived yet, so Draco, with a brush of his hand along Harry's shoulder, left to talk to other people in the room. Harry tried not to watch him. When Dumbledore stood at the head of the table, cleared his throat, and asked for people to take their seats, Harry was surprised to see Draco speaking to McGonagall. He was perhaps less surprised to see him passing back a section of the *Daily Prophet*.

"If I may have your attention, please," Dumbledore said clearly. "For the benefit of those not familiar with the structure of this type of hearing, I would like to review the basic schedule.

Today, it is our turn to select and question witnesses. That may continue until the end of the day. After that, they may question our witnesses, and we may question theirs. After that, the Inquisitors will begin direct questioning, and at the end of that, both sides will be allotted a certain time, at young Mr Cabot's discretion, for final statements, and possibly, additional testimony. After that stage concludes, they will deliver a verdict, and we will continue on to Mr Talbot. We must remember that today's testimony is on the matter of Lucius Malfoy's actions only."

Draco, at Harry's side, was sitting with his lips pressed tightly together. Harry thought he looked paler than usual.

"We will start our testimony with Severus Snape," Dumbledore continued. He raised his hand to quiet murmurs around the table. "With his many unique advantages and disadvantages, for they are substantially intertwined." Snape, Harry noticed, looked no better than Draco, though his mouth was tight with a scowl. "After that, we will call either Minerva McGonagall or Draco Malfoy, as the situation warrants. From there, there are more paths yet.

"If you are called, keep the following facts in mind. One: you are testifying against Lucius Malfoy, no one else. Two: your testimony may be effective not only by revealing facts today, but by leading the Inquisitors to probe in particular directions in their turn. Three: you must at all times seem respectful and willing, even if you must deflect a particular line of questioning." He smiled benevolently around at them. "Although I would hope that our preliminary discussions were complete enough that such an action would only be necessary *after* today." Another smile and a slow nod. "We have twenty minutes until our portkey leaves for the Ministry. Please enjoy your breakfast."

In the courtroom, Harry watched Severus Snape stalk out onto the floor. The man looked like a vampire in a Muggle suspense flick. Harry felt his stomach clench. He leaned toward Draco.

"No one will believe him," he whispered.

"A few will," Draco whispered back. His voice was unsteady, and Harry regretted raising his doubts. "I may be next, and I doubt I'm better."

"Of course you are."

Draco smiled at him uncertainly, and then, to Harry's surprise, settled an arm around Harry's shoulders and tugged him close. "Cuddle," he said, in quiet command.

Harry found it unnerving to be suddenly in the role of the protected -- and he couldn't help but think of it that way -- but they were almost of a height, and it worked as well as the reverse position. It wasn't at all like being a girl, he decided, but it did make him worry that people would think Draco was in charge. Still, it was a relief to be claimed, and he could understand if

Draco *needed* to feel in charge today. He leaned against his boyfriend slightly, and relaxing wasn't as hard as he had expected. He wondered how Draco felt about it when he did that.

From that comfortable position, he looked up and saw Malfoy senior's glare. Spontaneously, he grinned back. Snape, waiting for the signal to speak, saw him and pinched the bridge of his nose as if holding back a headache. Harry didn't pull away from Draco, but he did try for a more solemn expression.

Draco's breath touched the side of his neck. "Mine," he whispered, and Harry shivered.

"Mr Snape." The speaker was Professor McGonagall. Apparently, the questioner didn't need to be a barrister after all. Harry wondered how much of the trial he was misunderstanding by trying to impose a Muggle structure on it. "Please summarize how you know Lucius Malfoy and Draco Malfoy."

Snape nodded curtly. "Lucius Malfoy was Head Boy when I was in my second year at Hogwarts -- and, of course, a prefect in my house the year before that. When I was sixteen, mutual friends brought me to his house to discuss support of He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named. Over--"

"Objection," a wizard for the defense barked out. "These matters were reviewed in court in 1982. Since that time, witnesses have died or vanished, and evidence decayed. For Mr Snape to revive these allegations --"

"Sustained," Cabot clipped out.

"Mr Snape," McGonagall said coolly. "Please minimize your references to events prior to 1982."

Snape nodded curtly. "I became," he said, sending an odd look at Lucius Malfoy, "a friend of the family." His gaze turned to Narcissa in the gallery, who looked coolly back. "I was present in the house when Draco was born, and accepted the position of his spellfather, so I do not believe that assertion is at all tenuous."

Snape's voice shook slightly. Harry had realized how difficult this situation was for Draco, but it had not occurred to him that Snape, despite the resentment of years of hidden opposition to Lucius, might also be similarly torn. Indeed, Snape kept his gaze on Narcissa, like a dog waiting helplessly for some sign of belonging.

"Please continue," McGonagall said, incongruously gently.

"When Draco started school, he was, of course, in my house," Snape said, his attention finally shifting to the young man at Harry's side. "I began to communicate with Lucius again, as teacher to parent, although we had largely fallen out of social contact in previous years."

"So you saw him only as a parent of a student?" McGonagall prompted.

Snape hesitated, but then nodded. "Until Headmaster Dumbledore requested that I return as his spy to the service of He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named. There, of course --"

"Objection!"

"Denied. Continue, Professor Snape."

Snape nodded acknowledgement at the Special Inquisitor. "As a Death Eater, I of course saw Lucius more frequently, and we slowly resumed some contact outside of the Dark Lord's service and his son's education."

Beside Harry, Draco nodded, as if to himself. Across the floor, Lucius Malfoy managed to look disbelieving and offended.

"Was it your impression that Mr Malfoy wished his son to join him in service of He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named?" McGonagall asked.

"Yes, of course. We discussed it frequently over the last year. Lucius feared the boy was too soft, and felt he should be brought in as soon as possible. I hoped to delay the matter until Draco had acquired more political independence, so I argued for after he left school, saying it would be awkward if Draco and I often vanished at the same time. I had believed I had persuaded him to at least wait until Draco was of age."

"That was recent, was it not?"

"A few weeks ago, yes. I was surprised to see him presented in April." Snape hesitated. "However, I was far more surprised to discover that he was unwilling."

"You expected that he would want to become a Death Eater?"

"Yes. Though as he pointed out to me later, he knew me as someone in his father's circles as a fellow servant of the Dark Lord, and he was quite careful to give me no reason to question his loyalty." Snape's mouth twisted. "When he started to become friendly with Harry Potter, Draco went out of his way to convince me that he was gaining Mr Potter's trust in order that he might betray him later. That caused me much unnecessary anxiety, especially as Potter -- who was equally certain of my opposite allegiance -- blithely told me that Draco would never harm him, and merely didn't trust me." He shrugged. "His opinion was correct, perhaps, but also unwarranted."

"What happened at the meeting? Did you see Lucius and Draco Malfoy arrive?"

Snape scowled. "No. Since people arrive already masked and cloaked, and the Dark Lord -- quite wisely -- discourages socializing before meetings, I did not see them until Draco stepped forward and dropped his hood. He had not been masked, of course, but he had kept his face hidden, nonetheless."

"And what did young Mr Malfoy do?"

"He spoke a few polite words, with all of his father's charm. He then said that before he could take the Mark, there was a slight complication of something that a 'companion at school' had given him. He opened a small pouch at his neck, as if to show what was inside to He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named, but it was a portkey, and when he touched it, he vanished."

"What happened then?"

"Lucius was furious -- and, no doubt, terrified of retribution. He leaped forward to begin the portkey trace even before He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named shrieked at him to do so."

"Giles Goyle did not do it, then?"

Snape sneered. "I doubt Giles was *capable* of performing a portkey trace. No, Lucius cast it, and emerged in the Shrieking Shack in full possession of his wand, with five of us accompanying him. We saw a flash of light through the boards on the windows, and apparated outside to see a silver dragon hanging in the sky, and by its glow, the boy flying away, already out of hexing distance...."

Harry had never heard this story from Snape, and it filled in gaps between his vision and Draco's arrival. He could imagine it: Draco bent low to his broom, fair hair white under his own silver light, black robes flapping behind him as he strove for yet more speed.

A flash of gold shooting towards him fitted into thoughts of flying. Doubt came fast, but not as fast as honed Seeker's reflexes. Harry was already snapping his arm out to grab the tiny Snitch, his body moving too quickly to stop. The arm around his shoulders tightened, and Draco threw his weight back, pulling him away. Harry crashed to the ground on top of him, kicking Professor Flitwick in passing and bruising his shoulder on the edge of the bench. Around them, people were shouting and moving. An orange hex shot overhead.

"NOBODY MOVE!" roared a deep voice. The clatter of footsteps stuttered to silence. Harry stared down at Draco and found him drawing in deep, desperate breaths, as if he had just outrun a manticore. "TONKS," the voice added in a more even tone, only the enhancement of the Sonorus charm keeping it loud. "REPORT."

Tonks, from a few steps away, answered. "THE POSSIBLE TARGETS ARE BOTH HERE AND ALIVE. THE OBJECT IS SECURED."

"GOOD. I STILL DON'T WANT ANYONE MOVING AROUND, BUT YOU MAY ALL SIT *IN THE NEAREST SEAT*.

Carefully, and with belated regret, Harry extricated himself from Draco's hold and moved back onto the bench. Tonks had the Snitch in a magical net that sparked slightly when fluttering wings

dragged against the purple lines of it. Harry looked across the room to where he thought the Snitch had come from, and saw the forgettable Auror moving along the back wall, his attention on the spectators below him. It was possible he was a plant and a threat, but it seemed more likely that he was looking for the source of the trouble. A far more obvious movement was the large, black Auror striding across the room. He opened the gate of their enclosure and was up beside Tonks in three great strides.

"What did you find?" he said, his voice hushed now, but clearly the one that had been giving orders before.

"A Snitch, with randomization and evasion charms presumably deactivated. It's also a portkey," Tonks replied.

"Huhn. We should get someone from Artifacts in to trace it." The Auror looked over at them. "Potter, Malfoy -- are you all right?"

"Just bruised, sir," Draco answered.

"Draco pulled me down, so yeah," Harry said, appreciating what a narrow escape that had been. "Bruised, but okay."

The Auror touched his throat with his wand.

"A Snitch portkey, sir. The boys are both Seekers -- either might have been the target."

In front of Special Inquisitor Cabot, a quill scribbled on a paper. He read the message and stood. "Under the circumstances, I think we shall call a recess--"

The bland Auror was moving down through the tiers, now. Harry jumped up onto the bench.

"No!" he shouted. The Inquisitors looked taken aback. Unable to cast a Sonorus charm, Harry had to settle for just projecting. "No one was hurt. Someone tried to take me out, or to take Draco out, and we should *not* give them time to make new plans. Let's get *on* with it."

There was some scattered clapping, and even more scattered laughter. The Inquisitors leaned towards each other. Draco tugged at Harry's hand, and Harry, suddenly embarrassed at his own presumption, sat. Eventually, Percy Weasley stood up.

"This hearing will continue while we await the arrival of additional Aurors. Professor McGonagall? You may continue to question the witness."

Professor McGonagall cleared her throat. Harry thought she was trying not to smile. "Severus? You were telling us about the chase?"

Snape straightened. "Yes. I had expected the boy to land at the doors, but he stayed high, heading

for a tower...."

Snape told about how a window had opened just in time to admit Draco, and how, with no time to pause, he had bent down and tucked up his feet to go straight through, and how someone -- either Lucius, whose hood was down, or the person directly behind him -- had struck him with the Cruciatus curse as he passed over the window ledge. He talked about landing on the lawn, and the attack by the staff, and how, in a split-second judgment, he had attacked his companions from behind, rather than fighting with them against his patron, Professor Dumbledore. His painfully tense delivery did nothing to rob the account of its excitement, and many members of the Wizengamot were on the edge of their seats. Still, Harry wasn't sure they *believed* him the way they did Lucius.

Snape's testimony went on until the lunchtime recess, when Tonks once again escorted them -- or Draco, really, Harry reminded himself -- from the courtroom. Before they made it through the doors, a spectator -- not in somber Wizengamot garb, but in elegant robes of soft cream that were both feminine and modest in cut -- moved down the seats to intercept them.

"Mother," Draco greeted her.

"Mrs Malfoy," Harry said neutrally.

She nodded at him, the gesture gracious enough to surprise him.

"Mr Potter. So good to see you again. You would not mind, I hope, if I deprived you of my son's company for the next hour?"

Harry looked querulously at Draco, but despite his lover's obvious pleasure, he couldn't make himself step back. He knew that Draco trusted his mother, but was less certain that such trust was deserved. The Auror came to his rescue.

"You can't take him anywhere without me, I'm afraid," she said cheerily. "But I can stay at a discreet distance."

"Oh, yes." Draco looked torn. "Mother," he said neutrally, "this is Auror Tonks, who has been assigned to protect me. And she's quite right -- I wouldn't want anything to happen to you, and I have been attacked twice."

"Of course, dear." Narcissa nodded regally. Harry felt a flash of indignation at the way she acted as if the Auror's name meant nothing to her.

He finally managed to speak. "As long as you have adequate protection." He nodded at Mrs Malfoy, including her in his consent, but spoke to Draco. "Enjoy your lunch."

That left him alone, wondering morosely how he would make it anywhere without being mobbed by reporters. A black robed figure stalked by.

"Are you coming, Potter?" it called in passing. "Or are you planning on a repast of stray memorandums?"

Harry hurried to catch up. Not surprisingly, Snape was also accompanied by an Auror, although this one gave the impression of trailing awkwardly after the intimidating professor.

"Thanks," Harry said, as they were hustled down a back corridor. "Draco and Auror Tonks went off with Draco's mum--"

"Idiot." Snape's disapproval was too mild to be alarming. "She loves him, but that should not be enough to give him confidence. The Auror was on her guard?"

"Yes."

"Good."

Snape's Auror escort stepped through the Floo, and Snape followed without a word of farewell. Harry expected him to be gone when he stepped out at the Leaky Cauldron, but Snape was hovering near the grate, and immediately seized him just under the elbow.

"If I may have a moment of your time, Mr. Potter?"

"Okay."

Harry tried to pull loose without appearing to struggle, but Snape pretended not to notice. Trailed by the guard, they went up the stairs to the secure rooms, and Harry found himself released into a bedroom much like his own, while Snape told the Auror guard to remain outside in the corridor.

The first thing Snape did was to write "Tureen soup, two bowls, one cup" on the slate by the door, an amenity that Harry had forgotten. That settled, he transfigured his trunk into a chair, floated it over to another chair of unknown origin, and motioned Harry to sit. Harry leaned against the back of it, instead.

"What is it?" he asked pointedly, and Snape, who had set up pacing in the narrow space between chairs and bed, paused to roll his eyes.

"Your sense of self-preservation still leaves much to be desired, Potter," he announced, and for a moment, Harry was afraid that he knew about last night's attack. If he had heard from his fellow Death Eaters.... Belatedly, Harry remembered that Snape was now known to have betrayed Voldemort, and the Death Eaters were unlikely to be telling him anything.

Snape was continuing, apparently oblivious to the direction of Harry's thoughts. "This morning's scene could not have been better if we'd orchestrated it. An apparent attack on you will restore much of the public's good feeling for you. However, you are a complete idiot. If they had waited until Draco was testifying, you would be dead."

"It's a reflex!"

Snape turned and sneered at him as if he had just said something abysmally stupid. "And everyone knows it. Seekers have been assassinated that way before, you fool!"

"Really?"

"Yes."

Severus thumped down into his chair. "You'll survive this. *We* will survive this. You have kept your temper admirably, Potter. Continue to do so."

"I'll try my best." Harry looked down. "I, uh, decided not to look at the papers this morning. I was afraid it would make me, um...."

"Angry?" Snape suggested. "Defensive? Yes, probably. They've picked up on the idea that you are an out-of-control mess." He shrugged. "By the end of the week, you will no doubt be a healthy young lad having a bit of fun."

Harry frowned. "I think I'm something in between, really."

"Of course you are." Snape turned to stare at him, dark and intense even in the strangely intimate room. "People love to *talk* about darkness and light, but truth is always grey."

Harry laughed. There was nothing funny about it, he just felt strangely lighter at the pronouncement.

"I don't think I'm supposed to agree with you."

Snape settled back, a slight smirk curving his lips. "Yet you do." At a knock on the door, he flicked his wand at it, and a young woman came in with their soup.

"Well, let's keep that between ourselves, shall we?" Harry suggested. The surreality of lunching with Snape was catching up with him. Snape had a flash of that young, sly look that Harry had seen during their lessons.

"Indeed."

Lunch with Snape bordered on pleasant, and afterwards, Snape insisted that Harry share his escort back to the trial. While they were crossing the public room, however, a familiar figure moved to intercept them.

"May I have a word, Potter?" Blaise Zabini asked coolly.

Harry glanced at Snape. "I'm getting a lot of that."

"If you wish to converse, I believe we have five minutes leeway." Snape frowned briefly at Zabini before returning his attention to Harry. "I was not aware that you had other connections in my house."

Harry shrugged. He wasn't sure Zabini qualified. "Wait then. I'll stay in sight."

He led Zabini to the wall, moving out of earshot. "Go ahead."

Zabini glanced nervously at Snape, but he didn't ask questions. "I want you to know that I haven't forgotten my obligation."

It took Harry a moment to sort through the formal words and recall that the Slytherin had offered to send him a bottle of something.

"Oh, that. I thought you hadn't figured out Muggle post."

"I hadn't realized you were underage." Blaise bit his lip. "I thought it advisable to wait."

Harry laughed. "God. When I'm old enough, I can buy it myself." At Zabini's tense look, he recalled Draco's opinion about Harry's tastes being over Zabini's budget. "Look, don't worry about it, okay? If you feel like you need to do something, you can just owe me a little favor."

Zabini looked uneasy. "How little?"

"I'll ask when I think of something, and if you tell me that the thing is too much, I'll let it go, and you'll still owe me."

Zabini nodded stiffly. "Accepted."

"Good."

They shook hands, the action formal and strange, and Harry returned to Snape.

"An agreement?"

"That he'll do some unspecified thing for me at some unspecified time in the future. Nothing to

worry about."

"Oh?" Snape's eyebrows came up. "Worry, no. Keep an eye on? Perhaps."

The Auror cleared his throat impatiently, and the three made their way to the Floo.

Snape was conservative in his timing, and members of the Wizengamot were still trailing in when they reached the enclosure for the defense. Draco had his head lowered in a sullen manner that Harry recognized all too well. He jumped when Harry slipped in beside him.

"Problems?" Harry whispered.

"I'll tell you later. For now, don't get upset at my testimony. I've arranged something with McGonagall."

Indeed, as soon as everyone settled down, Professor McGonagall called Draco to testify. Harry was apprehensive, but at first, Draco hardly mentioned him. He talked about his father's expectations for him, and how he knew he was supposed to swear fealty to Lord Voldemort, and about the unusual summons home and the list of Dark curses that he was to study. Only then did he mention speaking to Harry, and Harry's insistence that he could get out of it.

"Of course, we had to bring Hermione Granger in on it, as by then, I had got Harry in enough trouble that he couldn't go anywhere without a prefect." Draco straightened and set his shoulders back. "And yes, I *do* mean that." He looked nervously at McGonagall. "He didn't get in that sort of trouble without me to instigate it. Not that I *wanted* to get him in trouble, but he can be such a grim hero. I felt that he needed some time as a wild young man."

McGonagall hesitated. Harry thought she was likely to agree with the first point, if not the second, but then she pursed her lips and lifted her head to look down her nose at him. "As I recall, you were *not* responsible for that particular punishment, Mr. Malfoy. You were at Hogwarts when the Muggle village was attacked."

"Oh." Draco bit his lip, and then tossed his head in a way that seemed guaranteed to look guilty. "I was there at the start, whatever he said. I'd got us the cognac and even brought goblets. Can you imagine if the Death Eaters had known? Harry Potter, right by the village green, too drunk to fly, never mind fight, when they displayed the Dark Mark?" Draco cocked his head to the side, a slight smile on his face. Harry thought he didn't need to look so entertained by the idea. Whispers spread through the gallery.

"I am not amused, Mr Malfoy."

"Oh, neither was I. I got him away, of course."

"You *what?"* Lucius Malfoy had jumped to his feet and nearly shouted the question. Hands grabbed at his sleeves.

Draco put on a sullen pout. "He's *mine*. I don't want your lot getting their hands--"

"You TRAITOR!" His father's ivory face was red with rising blood. "I'll diso--"

Another two people helped the defense counsel pull Lucius down to his seat, and he silenced abruptly, sagging forward into his hands as he realized how much he had said.

"Temper, temper, Father." Draco smiled thinly. "But yes, it *could* have been that easy, if I'd still approved of your murderous pursuits." Decisively, he returned his attention to McGonagall. "Should I tell you about the list of curses? It might be better if Aurors asked us individually for specifics. Harry and Hermione won't remember all of them, but I showed the list to both of them, and Professor Snape received another copy from my father."

McGonagall studied him for a minute. The staccato hisses and pops of whispers continued to come from scattered locations around them. This time, Harry enjoyed speculating on what those whispers must be. *Traitor, is it? Did you see his face? Didn't sound so unwilling to be a Death Eater, did he?* On the other hand, more than one member of the Wizengamot was rubbing his or her forehead as if to stave off a headache.

McGonagall lifted her head. "I have many more questions for you, Mr Malfoy, but few pertain to the trial. No, take your seat, for now."

She's giving them time to whisper, Harry realized, smiling proudly at Draco as he watched him make his way back to the empty place beside him. Their hands met and clasped immediately, fingers intertwining.

"I'm so glad that worked," Draco whispered. "I was afraid it wouldn't, and then you'd be angry--"

He looked up. Someone poked Harry, and he realized he had heard his name.

"If you have finished your conversation, Mr Potter?" McGonagall asked tartly.

In front of the Wizengamot, that was worse than in lessons. Harry straightened, alarmed, and tried to play back the seconds that he hadn't been paying attention. She couldn't have called him as a witness, could she?

She had. Harry slunk down the stairs, but then, noticing his manner, straightened. It was just McGonagall, right? And she wanted him to look good, really. It wasn't like he was being called by the defense. His dress robes swung around his legs, first one way, then the other, as he crossed the floor to the witness chairs.

It was clear that the tide of the trial had turned. When people whispered, their eyes went to Lucius more than to Harry. While Harry was talking about waiting for their arranged signal, he saw a note flutter down to the prosecution's box. Dumbledore caught it, and when Harry's testimony was over, he beckoned McGonagall over, and stood to take her place.

"Next, the prosecution calls Narcissa Cassiopeia Black Malfoy."

Harry's head turned of its own accord to see Narcissa rise to her feet in the gallery. She floated down the stairs in her cream robes, looking innocent and flawless as an angel. A quick glance at Draco showed him sitting still, hands folded in his lap, knuckles white from the force of his grip.

Dumbledore nodded gravely at her. "You wished to speak, Narcissa?"

"Please." Narcissa stood straight. She looked pale and slender against the dark wood and stone behind her. It was easy to imagine that she was frail, but Harry suspected her slight form was no more yielding than a steel blade.

"I would like to say that my husband honors his family and his heritage." As Harry silently cursed the woman, her head lifted still further. "But it would not be true."

That produced a buzz of reaction. Harry wondered what she was playing at.

"It is how I remember him. I have hoped and striven for the return of the gentleman that I married, but the Dark Lord has infected him with some madness more insidious than compulsion, and his decline is now more than I can conceal, with my son at risk."

Dumbledore stroked his beard. "To the best of your knowledge, did Lucius take Draco willingly to be Marked?"

"Yes, of course. He had started to prepare him the previous summer. He spent much of August instructing Draco in Dark Arts." Narcissa sighed. "Including, I am afraid, at least one of the Unforgivable curses. When Draco had ... *difficulty* mastering the Cruciatus curse, and I protested the tutelage, he demonstrated it on --" She looked down, and her shoulders bent. "On both of us."

That was it, Harry realized, as mutters of disbelief competed with gasps of outrage. *Unforgivable* meant just that. If she made this charge stick, the trial was over. He wondered if it was actually true. He didn't doubt Lucius had cast that curse on Draco -- after all, Draco had told him so last winter, and in a late-night confession, when people often spoke truths under the cover of darkness. To commit such a crime on a proud, adult woman seemed far riskier, however, than to do so to an underage dependant.

On the floor, Narcissa straightened. "A gentleman does not so heinously mistreat his heir or his well-born wife. I can no longer trust his judgment. That in one of his rages he would be mad enough to pursue Draco to Hogwarts Castle itself, I do not doubt."

"You consider, then, Professor Snape's account to be more reliable than your husband's?"

Delicately, Narcissa hesitated. "I cannot claim to trust either," she answered finally. "Severus Snape, I find, has deceived us for years about his loyalties, so I can hardly expect honesty from him. However, I know that Lucius took Draco to that meeting to be Marked for service to the Dark Lord, and that he had planned for that event with pride, so his testimony starts with a lie. No, in all of this, the one I believe is Draco, my son." Her eyes sought out her son in the crowd and she gazed at him lovingly. Then, to Harry's surprise, her attention moved to him, her look growing more speculative. "And, though I would never have thought to say it, Mr Potter, who seems a more thoughtful young man than certain people would have us believe."

Testimony continued, through a steady buzz of background conversation, but Harry doubted any of it mattered. Draco sat ramrod straight, jaw clenched, as the talking continued. When the day was over, Harry was relieved to lead him back to his room. He scarcely noticed Auror Tonks beside them, even when she tripped over a dog lying by someone's chair in the Leaky Cauldron.

When they were alone, he took Draco's hands, but Draco didn't look at him. "Is there anything--"

"No!" Draco pulled free. "No, there is nothing you can do. I'm angry and hurt and humiliated, and *winning* isn't helping at all, because he's my *father*, and I don't want--" He stopped abruptly, his cheeks burning red.

"Yeah," Harry said quietly. "I can see ... there's no way it could end that you'd like, is there? But this is better than him staying at large."

"Is it? I'm seventeen, now. A legal adult. He can't demand I return."

"That wouldn't keep him from sending his thugs after you, would it? He's vicious, Draco. You know it."

Draco turned away, as if the grey sky outside his window was fascinating. "I know. That doesn't make it easier. Talk about something else, Harry. Do you have plans for your birthday?"

The sudden false brightness of that query was dismaying. Harry sighed and sat down on the edge of the bed. "It's complicated. Will you keep a secret?"

That got Draco to look at him, even if his expression was scornful. "Of course."

"All right. It's like this. Supposedly, living with my mother's family protects me somehow. Dumbledore told me that when I tried to get out of it."

Draco nodded. "Thus the presents -- just like you have to live there, they have to give you a

Christmas present each year, so the spell believes that you are family."

Harry shrugged. "If you say so. I'm not, really, but-- Well, I suspect this protection will end when I legally become an adult." He waited for Draco's nod, and when he had received it, continued with more confidence. "Voldemort probably knows it too, so I think that he'll attack as soon as it's my birthday, and that Dumbledore will see to it that I'm not there."

Draco's mouth twisted. "But no one has told you anything?" he guessed.

"Of course not. Dumbledore will spring it on me right before, I'm sure." Harry hesitated. "I plan to be gone before then."

"Really." Draco stepped closer. His expression was unreadable. "And where will you be?"

"Well, that's the problem." Harry stood. He didn't like Draco looking down at him. "Originally, I had thought here, but Tom would tell Dumbledore--"

"But you'd *die,*" Draco amended fiercely.

"I wouldn't go out except under the cloak."

"Even so--"

"Since I can't get around Tom, it doesn't matter!" With a huff, Harry leaned against the wall. "You don't have a spare flat in London, do you?"

"If I did, it would have been my father's, and his associates might have ways into it."

"Do any of your friends--"

Draco laughed. "And I'd tell them what?"

"I might be able to rent a place in Muggle London, if you'd do the Confundus charms and such for me."

"No." Draco bit his lip. He settled into the chair. "Harry, *anything* could happen to you there."

"I won't stay!"

"Calm down, Potter, will you?" Draco pushed his hair back. "Harry. Have you considered confronting Dumbledore? Tell him it's Hogwarts or nothing? Or the Weasel's place, if you'd rather."

"He'll still keep me there as long as he can!" Harry protested. "And I won't have the Dursleys killed. They deserve something, but not *that.* And we can't feed Voldemort information through

Snape anymore, so I'll need him to know that I'm missing, and there's no point in going to Little Whinging."

"But then they'll look for you! You can't stay any place he'd expect! Except Hogwarts, I suppose." With a huff of annoyance, Draco stood. "Let's order dinner. I could scarcely manage a bite at lunch, and it's been an exhausting day."

"You're changing the subject!"

"Yes, I am. Do you think this place can manage pheasant? Perhaps if they send someone out to poach it...."

"Stop it. I want you to help me."

"I will not help you get *killed*, certainly not to protect some Muggles that even you despise."

Harry glowered. "And to keep me sane?"

"Don't be dramatic."

"Two more weeks at the Dursleys, I can take, but if it ends up capped by one or more of them dying...."

"We will ask Dumbledore if you might come to Hogwarts. It is worth *trying*, Harry. It would be simple, safe, and give us time together. Surely you cannot object to that?"

He couldn't object, Harry knew. He also knew that he wouldn't stop there if Dumbledore said no.

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Chapter: 6

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Notes: Thanks to calanthe_fics for beta work and Britpicking.

6 -- Offers

In the morning, the defense waived further testimony on Lucius Malfoy, and he was found guilty

of treason and three counts of using an Unforgiveable curse. The attempted murder charge was dismissed. Draco gripped Harry's hand so tightly that Harry wondered if his bones would break. Draco's hold slowly loosened as the trial moved on to Talbot, but Harry wasn't sure if that was through acceptance or tedium.

While the new defendant spoke, there was nothing to do but listen. Harry had no personal knowledge of Talbot, so he didn't even have indignation to bring him energy. The man insisted that he had been coerced through threats against his family, and Harry found himself wondering if that was true, at least in part. Certainly Voldemort would do such a thing, but would anyone who needed that level of coercion be summoned by him directly, to something like an initiation? Harry remembered Draco, when they first spotted Bellatrix, referring to the Death Eaters as an 'inner circle'. Talbot talked about Lucius casting the portkey trace -- they certainly had no compunction about throwing him to the wolves now -- and Harry mentally placed the question of Death Eater status on his list of things to ask Snape about in September.

Whether or not Talbot was telling the truth, his testimony turned Harry's thoughts to a related problem. Even if he didn't stay with the Weasleys after his birthday, they could still be attacked to flush him out. On the other hand, that had always been true, hadn't it? Visiting the Weasleys would give Voldemort a more concrete reason to attack them; it made sense to stay away. And leaving the Dursleys should keep them safe -- certainly Voldemort would know that he didn't love them, wouldn't he? And Voldemort -- Tom Riddle -- had hated his own Muggle relatives, so there, at least, he should not invent affection where it didn't exist.

Harry wondered if there was anyone he could stay with whom Voldemort wouldn't suspect. An older friend, perhaps? The problem was that he hadn't known most of the older students well enough to trust them with his life. Oliver, for example, was only his former Quidditch captain; Harry didn't even know if he was a pureblood or not, much less his thoughts on blood purity off the pitch. The only ones he could count on -- mostly -- were the twins. His thoughts spiraled down through a cataloguing of prospective hosts. It was only when he heard Percy's voice that he realized that they had reached the end of the morning session.

"My room?" he whispered to Draco, and Draco nodded. But when they reached the floor, that plan was thwarted. Dumbledore was waiting for them.

"Mr. Malfoy, Mr. Potter," he greeted them cordially. "Please join me for luncheon. We have matters to discuss."

The old wizard led them to the Floo and sent Auror Tonks ahead. After a few seconds, he offered the Floo powder to Draco. "Dunhorse Cottage," he said, and Draco nodded.

"Harry?" Draco prompted, rather than tossing the powder on the grate. Harry nodded and took some as well. If Dumbledore was trying to separate them, it wouldn't work. He tossed the powder down immediately.

"Dunhorse Cottage!"

He stumbled out into the low-ceilinged kitchen of an old farmhouse. The beams over the stove were black with the smoke of centuries, and the mingled scent of stone and cooking was solid and warm. By the window, Tonks was talking with an older woman. They looked over at Harry's arrival, and Tonks waved. Draco stepped through behind Harry. Immediately, he started over to the window, snagging Harry's arm in passing. Harry suspected that he had wanted to look outside, not to socialize, but the view was of a walled garden that could have been anywhere.

Before Harry could say anything, Dumbledore arrived.

"Ah, Petra! Thank you for hosting us."

"My pleasure, Professor Dumbledore," the woman answered, dropping a slight curtsey. "Lunch is on the table, with tea and pumpkin juice. Shall Miss Tonks and I leave you to your meal?"

"That would be welcome, Petra. If you don't mind, Nymphadora?"

Auror Tonks hesitated, but then gave a brief nod. "Under the circumstances, I could wait in the next room."

"But--" Draco protested. Dumbledore motioned him to silence.

"She knows this place and our hostess, Mr. Malfoy, and rightly believes that I can keep you safe here."

"And I did check for anomalies," the Auror added. "Don't think I'm just taking their word for it. This place is even blocked against Apparation, in or out. Oh, and sir?" She grinned cheekily at Dumbledore. "You'll understand if I lock the Floo. Kingsley would expect it of me."

A flick of her wand towards the grate, and she left.

Once they were alone, Dumbledore sat at the table, checked the teapot, tsked, and then gestured to the platter of sandwiches.

"Please help yourselves," he urged. "I vouch for anything Petra made to be both safe and tasty. Now. I thought both of you might want to know how we expect the week to progress. Each guilty verdict makes our further cases easier, as you might imagine. Harry, unless something unexpected happens, I don't believe that we will need you to testify again." The old wizard checked the tea a second time, and found it ready to pour. He filled Harry's cup, and then

Draco's, while Harry fidgeted impatiently. "Draco, you may take this afternoon off. However, since you can speak of the defendants' visits to your father, we will need you to stay for the remainder of the trial. After that, I believe you have some post-trial legalities to attend to?"

Draco nodded. "Yes. I'd like to retain my inheritance -- what the Wizengamot doesn't take as 'reparations'. Under the circumstances, Father's move to disinherit me is suspect, and my solicitor believes we can have it overturned, but I will need to speak to a few people in person, at best."

"Yes, of course." As if contemplating the matter, Dumbledore leaned back in his chair and stroked his beard. "I should tell you, my boy, that Severus has expressed some concern about your safety. At his behest, I have spoken to the head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, and I have persuaded her to extend your Auror protection for a week past the end of the trial, or until you return to Hogwarts, if that is earlier. I do not think you need worry about your next departure -- by then, your potential attackers will no doubt have moved on to more recent adversaries."

"About returning to Hogwarts," Harry advanced. "Could I come back there too? Rather than spending more time at the Dursleys'? I don't want to endanger the Weasleys, but the school is safe, and--"

Dumbledore held up a hand, and Harry, not without resentment, stopped.

"Your aunt's house is still the safest place for you, Harry, if just for a little longer. I don't want to sacrifice that protection before we absolutely must."

"I think waiting until the last minute--"

"Harry. No." Dumbledore sighed. "I am sorry, but no."

After lunch, Dumbledore returned to the trial, and Tonks escorted Harry and Draco back to the Leaky Cauldron.

"I'm on until six," she said. "Is that to be active duty, or sitting in the hall duty?"

Harry glanced at Draco before looking back at her. "We need to talk privately," he said. "My room. After that, I think we'll want an escort in Diagon Alley."

Draco's eyebrows came up. "Will we? I suppose I'll see." He nodded at the Auror. "His room, then. I'm afraid you'll need to wait outside."

"I know excellent cushioning charms," she said archly. "An unsung specialty of field Aurors."

"So," Harry said, once the door was shut and the privacy charms cast. "Hogwarts is out. But I have an idea."

His eyebrows rising, Draco leaned back against the bed. "Do tell."

"The twins--"

"Absolutely *not*. Don't you think people will look for you--"

"But the new place!" Harry interrupted excitedly. "That shop they want to rent! It won't be ready to use yet. They'd still ward it though, right? Because they'd want to protect their secrets and the things that they're moving in, and it would be perfectly *normal* for them to come by at strange hours with takeaway and odd bundles--"

Draco's eyes lit up. "Now *that* could work. Wait a moment. Let me think." He paced back and forth, while Harry took his place at the bed. Finally, Draco stopped. "All right. Don't ask them directly, though. I said I was going to negotiate this deal for you, and I will. Wait until I've given them terms they can't *quite* accept, and then you come in and say you want to hide there for August, and I'll ease up on something else to compensate. If it's part of the contract, even vaguely, we can bind them to secrecy."

"Contract?"

Draco rolled his eyes. "You were planning to do this on verbal agreement and a handshake?" He sighed. "Oh dear. You were."

When they told Auror Tonks that they wanted an escort down to Fred and George's flat, and then privacy once they were there, she cheerfully shook her head. "I can stay out of earshot," she said, "but I need to have you in sight."

"You left us at lunch time."

"*With* Albus Dumbledore," she said firmly. "In a known and warded house. Sorry, but this wouldn't be the same."

Harry wasn't about to discuss his summer plans in front of her. In the end, he ended up writing to the twins and requesting that they come to Draco's room at the Leaky Cauldron within the hour.

Fred and George showed up within minutes. George looked around the room and his eyes narrowed. "Where's the fire, Harry?"

"Dumbledore may send me home today. I needed to talk to you before that."

The twins still looked put out. Draco stepped forward. "I understand you were interested in estate capital?"

"Estate..."

"Yes."

"Harry?"

Before Harry could formulate an answer, Draco had stepped in front of him. "Since my lover has a highly generous nature and several appallingly obvious weaknesses, and the two of you are capable of getting people to *pay* for sweets that make them break out in spots and vomit, *I* will be handling the negotiations. Harry, please stay out of the way."

Harry, much to the distress of the twins, nodded.

"Harry!"

"What has he done to you?"

"You can't be leaving us--"

"-- to a Slytherin."

Harry smiled. "As the Slytherin, I think this is more his sort of job than mine. Don't mind me; I have some summer assignments to work on." With that, he sat down in the armchair to peruse Draco's Charms text. The first time one of the twins appealed to him, he looked up, but let Draco wave him off. After that, he ignored them. It was surprisingly amusing.

Finally, it was Draco who said his name, and Harry put down the book and walked over. Fred was looking mutinous and George worried.

"Having trouble?" he asked.

"If we take his terms, you'll own more of the shop than we will!" Fred exploded.

"Well, he has provided most of the capital, so far," Draco said, as if this were eminently reasonable.

"And they've provided all the research and ideas," Harry objected mildly. "I'm not sure I'm due a third, Draco."

Draco rolled his eyes. "Which is why you should not negotiate the price of a polishing charm, never mind a business contract."

"Harry, really! We can't afford what he's asking."

"You'd be stuck supporting us for years."

"We can't ask Mum to, you know."

Both twins had turned beseechingly towards him; behind them, Harry caught Draco's amused look. "Okay," he said amiably. "Let me look at the terms so far."

The contract as Draco had drawn it up wasn't too bad, until he got to the item that gave him sole ownership of the property, and laid out a high rent -- optionally payable in increased shares -- for any month that shop profits dropped below 15%. While his finger rested under that item, Draco's nails pressed significantly into his back.

"Draco, this bit seems unreasonable."

"Thank you, Harry!" George exclaimed.

"Because it is!" Fred added.

"We could lower the percentage," Draco said doubtfully.

"No, you're missing the point," Harry protested. "I don't *want* to be the owner of record. That's just trouble. Actually ... I have an alternative proposal."

"Harry...." Draco warned.

"No, listen. You can argue it with me if you like, but I want you all to hear this."

"If you must. We did start with a secrecy binding for the negotiations."

Harry had heard them, but he was grateful that Draco would point it out.

"Good. Here it is, then," Harry said. "Much more than all this extra money, I would like a secure and secret place to stay from a few days before my birthday until school opens in September. This would be perfect. I'm willing to strike this item altogether in return for living -- unofficially -- in the shop during that time, with the two of you bringing me food when needed and keeping my location absolutely secret -- including from Dumbledore and members of your family, no matter how worried they might be."

"I'm not sure it's of comparable value," Draco objected.

"Draco, Voldemort is trying to *kill* me. It's comparable. Fred? George?"

The twins exchanged a glance, and then nodded.

"We knew you'd be reasonable, Harry."

"Once we could get your attention."

"We'd have to get the shop ready while you were there, though."

"I'm counting on that to make it look natural," Harry said. "I'll even help. Just make sure the loo works, as soon as possible. Draco, draw up the contract, and we'll all sign it."

"Now?" the twins asked together.

"You want to get your money before Dumbledore sends me back to the Dursleys' right? If we do it now, we can go down to Gringotts while Draco's bodyguard is still on duty."

Another, longer look passed between the twins, but they agreed. Draco set about preparing the contract.

"I don't know how I'll survive six weeks without you," Draco murmured, as he brushed sweaty hair back from Harry's brow. After leaving the twins outside Gringotts, Harry and Draco -- with Draco's Auror guard -- had returned to Draco's room, where Draco had sent Auror Tonks away for an hour, and without delay, led Harry to bed.

"Is it six?" Harry had to stop and calculate the days. It was hard to keep track of weeks without a calendar.

"More. Seven weeks from Monday last."

"Damn. And there'll be no way to visit; you can't leave Hogwarts and I can't go there." Harry propped himself up on one elbow. "Maybe they won't send me back right away?"

"You don't believe that."

"No. Not really."

Draco sighed, but this time it was more theatrical. "Back to my lonely existence at a deserted school!"

"Better than sharing a three-bedroom house with people who hate you," Harry said darkly.

"Tedious, though," Draco protested. "Even Severus isn't always there, and regardless, he can't abide the quiris, so I've taken a room up the corridor from his."

"The quiris, right." Harry hadn't given the creatures any more thought. They might not be any trouble at all, he reflected. After all, he didn't plan to do any more Dark Arts. But there was still the matter of what he was going to do about Voldemort, and there were so many people to protect. He knew there was nothing he wouldn't do, if it came down to a question of Draco's life. After all, Lucius Malfoy was right, in a way. He *had* seduced Draco away from his family and into danger. What Lucius hadn't seemed to understand was how little it had taken to do that.

"So," he asked, trying to sound merely curious, "how long is 'not permanent'? You never said."

"Unclear," Draco answered. "Madam Horsyr expects to be back in a few weeks, but she may not be able to take them with her at that time, either. If so, I could have them for several months more. Also, if this arrangement works, I've said I might take them again later." He laughed at the expression on Harry's face. "Really, now! They're a Potter creation; you ought to be proud to be reunited with them."

"They've addled your brains."

Draco shrugged gracefully. "Possibly. They do decrease my options in some ways, but they expand them in others -- I doubt there is any other way I would have the headmaster's trust -- and that is arguably of more current value than the option of using Dark Arts." He shrugged. "Though I rather miss sitting with Severus in the evenings, even if we hardly said a word to each other.

"Why didn't you?"

"He doesn't like frivolous conversation."

"But the quiris can't answer."

Draco nodded, but didn't say anything. Harry sighed. "You're more social than I am. I wouldn't mind as much."

"I don't know why I do. I was often alone during the summer, but it was different in my home and my gardens." Harry could see a twitch at the side of Draco's jaw. "I hope I'm back in Slytherin in September."

"Why wouldn't you be?"

"Because I'm a traitor, of course," Draco said flatly. "For understandable reasons, perhaps, but I still am."

"Draco! You are not."

"Traitor," Draco recited, "one who betrays a cause."

"But it implies faking loyalty to do people in," Harry objected, "and I think it's usually used for countries, and anyway, you have a right to change your mind, and to tell the truth about being in danger."

"I know I do," Draco answered, but his head was too high, and his face too empty. "I just don't know if Pansy still wants to have dinner with me. She never replied about rescheduling. And I want to go back to my dormitory, but I don't want to be murdered in my sleep."

"I'll sneak in and protect you; how's that?" Harry suggested.

"Mm." Draco's coolness began to recede. "Perhaps you should lie on top of me to shield me from attacks."

"As long as you don't expect me to stay still!" Harry answered with a laugh.

They had just begun to kiss, and Draco was rocking suggestively against Harry, when they heard a knock on the door.

"Damnation," Draco muttered. Grabbing his wand, he dropped the silencing charm that he had put in place hours ago. "What is it?"

"Professor Dumbledore is here to see you," Auror Tonks called. "He seems to be genuine. Professor Snape is with him."

After a panicked glance at each other, Harry and Draco jumped out of bed and began scrabbling for clothes. "Just a minute," Draco called. Their garments were confusingly intermixed, and Harry couldn't find his shirt. When Draco straightened the bedclothes, it fell clear of them. As soon as they were both presentable, Draco patted down his hair, cast an air freshening charm, and walked over to the door.

"Hello, Sir," Draco said brightly. "Please come in. Severus," he added, with a polite nod of greeting.

Harry leaned back against the table and crossed his arms over his chest. He had an idea what was coming.

Snape looked around the room with notable suspicion, but Dumbledore, in contrast, had a slightly questioning air, which Draco ignored.

"To what do we owe the pleasure?" he asked blandly.

"As it happens," Dumbledore replied, "I was looking for Harry, but it is probably for the best that you were together. Harry, Professor Snape expressed a willingness to escort you home."

"To the Dursleys', you mean."

"Do not be difficult, Potter," Snape snapped. "Whether you like it or not, it is your home, and it is my time that you are wasting with this pointless defiance. You will be packed in ten minutes."

Professor Dumbledore shook his head slightly, but did nothing to intervene. Harry got the impression that he would gladly have used another ten minutes of Professor Snape's time to get to the point gently.

"Fine," he said sullenly. "Come on, Draco."

With a bland smile, Draco gestured his guests back to the door. "If you don't mind...? We will meet you at Harry's room in ten minutes."

"Excellent," Dumbledore replied, as if everyone had been cheerful about the arrangements. In the hallway, he briefly laid a hand on Harry's shoulder. "I appreciate your maturity and cooperation, Harry. I know that your Aunt's house is not your first choice of dwelling place."

Harry nodded silently, afraid of how his voice would sound if he spoke. He knew that the praise would have made him feel guilty, even six months ago. He now realized that it was intended to influence him to cooperate, and instead of guilt, he just felt anger, and a surge of satisfaction at the escape he had planned.

Draco followed Harry into his room and watched while Harry changed back into his jeans, and then gathered things from chairs and the floor and threw them hodge-podge into his trunk.

"Oh, stop that!" Draco said finally, and with a wave of his wand sent everything flying back out of the trunk and onto the bed.

"Draco!"

"Use a *spell*."

"I'm underage still, remember? I try to reserve magic for when I need it."

"Oh." Draco smirked. "Not at school, you don't."

"Right. And I don't think twice in a fight."

Draco nodded. "All right. *Colligio!*"

He gestured at the things on Harry's bed and then at the trunk. Books settled at the bottom, clothes folded themselves neatly and formed piles on top, and miscellanea clustered on top of the clothes.

"Thanks," Harry said. "I'll have to try that in a few weeks."

"It helps if you've gathered everything in one spot," Draco said. "Otherwise, the charm may try to pack things you don't want. And the first time I tried it, I was too forceful, and it packed the bedclothes as well as everything on the bed."

They looked at the door.

"Well," Harry said lamely, "This is it, I guess."

"Yeah." A light pink crept up Draco's cheeks. "Thank you, Harry. For being here, I mean. For the things that *weren't* fun."

Harry bit his lip. "Any time. Look, don't worry about Pansy, okay? She'll get over it, or if she doesn't, she isn't really a friend. That shouldn't depend on you doing what she wants in politics."

"*You* want me to share your political outlook."

"Yes," Harry said stubbornly, "and we fought, and I understand fighting, but I was willing to go on with you even if you didn't."

Draco looked absently past him, at the light of the window. "I know you were under a lot of pressure from your friends not to."

"Yes."

"She's not as good with that. Status among her friends is very important to her."

"You said Buls-- Millicent was a neutral."

"Millicent isn't a usual companion for her, though. That's why it was significant that they approached me together. She spends much more time with Daphne and Cassandra."

"Cassandra?"

" Cassandra Vere. She's a year younger than us. Dennis Avery is her mother's cousin."

Harry hadn't ever thought about Death Eater relatives who might not share a name with the ones he knew. "Does Avery have any kids in school?"

"Not anymore. Both of them are older than us. I think one is work--"

There was a sharp rap at the door. "Time's up, Potter."

"One moment!" Draco called back, as Harry grabbed him. "Fuck!" he whispered. "We forgot a

silencing charm!"

"Too late now," Harry said, and pushed into a kiss. They kissed fiercely until a voice outside the door began to count.

"Ten. Nine. Eight--"

"Hell," Harry growled. "I'll write, I promise. It'll be okay."

"Five--"

"All right!" Harry shouted, and opened the door. "Honestly! Can't we say goodbye?"

"You have had ten minutes to do that."

"I had to pack!"

Draco smirked. "He was doing it by hand, Sir. Since he *is* underage."

Snape glared at Harry. "What a curious time to begin obeying rules, Potter."

Harry reddened. "It's not like I knew any packing charms anyway."

"But you are ready now?"

Harry looked over at the trunk. After a moment's scan of the room and one look under the bed, he got back to his feet and nodded. "Yes, Sir."

"Let's go, then." Snape nodded at Draco. "Leave the room first. The locking charms require that."

"As you wish, sir." With a smart bow to both of them, Draco left the room, closing the door behind him. To Harry's surprise, Snape then gripped his arm as if about to drag him off somewhere.

"Sir?"

"I will apparate both of us. Take hold of your trunk."

Harry was glad he had apparated with Remus and Sirius previously. He didn't stumble, but he still felt a little queasy as he appeared with Snape behind the rubbish bins at the Dursleys'. They stepped out from behind the wall just as Vernon's bellow of "What was THAT?" roared out through the open dining room window. Snape looked questioningly at Harry.

"My uncle," Harry murmured. "So, um, thanks for the lift, but I can take it from here." He hefted the heavy trunk and started to walk towards the door. To his surprise, Snape continued to walk with him.

"Look," Harry puffed, "Uncle Vernon doesn't like strangers. Especially our kind. Or even, you know, Muggles that dress weird."

"How unfortunate for him."

Harry grinned at the cold humor. "I don't much care if it's bad for his heart, Professor. I'd just rather he didn't take it out on me when you leave. And you *are* dressed weird."

"Am I?" Snape asked coolly. "The Muggles won't notice. I am surprised that you do."

They had stopped on the top step before the front door. Harry looked over at his professor. He could still see Snape as he knew he was -- cleaner than usual, and in formal robes, with his hair pulled back in a tie -- but overlaid on that was Snape in an impeccable black suit, over a silver-grey shirt.

Harry's eyes widened. "Excellent, Sir!"

"But you can still perceive the robes?"

Harry nodded. "I can see the suit if I look, though."

"Absurdly strong-willed," Snape muttered, but before he could continue, the door opened.

"Who's skulking out on my--" Vernon began, and then froze. His face twisted into a scowl as he recognized Harry. "Oh, *you.* Back already, is it?" Without waiting for an answer he turned to Snape. "I'll take him from here," he said. "Get inside, boy, before the neighbors see you."

Snape stepped smoothly forward, blocking Harry from entering the door.

"I am afraid," he said to Uncle Vernon, "that I must confer with young Mr. Potter before I leave."

Vernon eyed Snape, clearly weighing the expensive-looking suit against the man's association with his nephew. "And who are you?" he snarled.

"I am one of Harry's professors, and the Head of Slytherin House."

"Oh, no, you don't!" Vernon roared, his face growing red with anger. "I don't allow your sort in my home. This is a decent house, you know, and I won't have my wife and son exposed to more abnormal freaks from That School. Bad enough that we have to house the boy --"

Vernon silenced suddenly. His mouth kept moving, but no sound came out. With a look of terror,

he fell back, and Snape stepped inside, pulling Harry after him.

"I do not recall saying that you had a choice."

"Vernon?" came Petunia's high voice. "Who's there?" He head appeared around the wall, and her eyes widened.

"Your nephew's escort," Snape said coldly. "We will go to his room. If you do not complain or interfere, I may restore your husband's voice before I depart."

"Okay," Harry said, as the door closed behind them. "Here's my room. Why are you here?"

Snape looked around at the nearly empty space, but did not comment on it. "I wished to talk to you," he said baldly. "Why else would I arrange to be the person who escorted you home?"

"What?" Harry asked.

"Have you heard that Draco Malfoy will be keeping the Quiris?" Snape asked.

"Two of them."

"Two too many. You realize the intent?"

"Dumbledore will know if Draco practices any Dark Arts, and he expects to know if I do."

"Precisely."

Harry looked incredulously back at the scowling potions master. "You can't think you needed to come here to tell me that."

"No." Snape raised his eyebrows. "I came to ask if there was anything you wished to learn before the first of August."

Harry stared. "Oh," he managed finally.

"You don't have much time," Snape pointed out.

Harry nodded absently while counting in his head. He had only a fortnight, and he expected to be hiding for some of that. "What could you teach me?"

"What do you need to know?" Snape countered. "There are thousands of spells that will never be mentioned to you at school. The Praetermissius Charm is one you would find useful. You cast it on yourself to go unnoticed. It does not make you invisible, and will not guard you against

people who are seeking you, specifically, but someone who sees you pass will not notice you are Harry Potter. It is good for hiding in crowds."

Harry swallowed. He could travel, walk through Diagon Alley, sit anywhere at school.... "Don't teach me that," he said.

"Oh?"

"I would never stop using it. I would use it to go to dinner at school. I would use it to walk into the Leaky Cauldron. I would spend the rest of my life hiding."

"I see." Snape looked curiously at him. "How *unlike* your father."

"Well, he probably had the option of not being famous. What else?"

"There are many spells which block off or enhance feelings in yourself or others -- jealousy, anxiety, recklessness, caution -- almost anything but hatred or love."

"I've heard of love spells."

"A misnomer. Such spells cause or enhance lust, devotion, sentimentality, or receptivity. They do not cause real love."

"Why would I want to affect my own feelings?"

"It is less common, but I have, for example, used *immisericors* on myself when I thought I might be tempted to show mercy at a time when I must not. In such a case, you need to remember to use a compound incantation that ends the spell at some preset time or condition."

"Is the Killing Curse the only one that kills, or is there one that would get me in less trouble?"

Snape smiled thinly. "It is the only one that kills without a cause. There are many spells to do things that will cause death."

"Like burning someone's bones."

"Yes."

"Anything more subtle? Could I cause a severe stroke?"

"A ... what?"

"A rupture of blood vessels in the brain. Or heart failure. Or failure of some other vital organ or function, like breathing."

"All of those. None kill immediately, however, and all can be blocked, deflected, and countered. A trained Auror could also detect all as magically induced."

"Huhn." Harry sat back and tried to think. Morals aside, what would be the most effective way to destroy Lord Voldemort? The problem was, he realized, that he had no idea. He didn't even know if he could. Naturally, there were hundreds of ways he could fight the Death Eaters, with or without Dark Arts, but he had no idea what, if anything, would work against Voldemort. Choosing Darker weapons would not necessarily make him more successful.

"Is there a spell to find a person's weaknesses?"

Snape's eyebrows shot up. "There, you are talking about Divination, which is not one of my strengths."

"Well, don't send me to Trelawny. She's useless."

"Predicting the future is unreliable from anyone, but seeing that which is present and hidden is another matter. I could guide you to someone of more skill."

"Someone who won't betray me?" Harry asked warningly.

"Yes, at least not willingly. Of course, learning Voldemort's weaknesses will be difficult. Many people have tried. At minimum, you need some bit of him."

Harry nearly laughed. "Will my blood do?"

Snape hissed in surprise. "Oh yes." His eyes gleamed. "That would do indeed! But then the Seer can find your weaknesses, as well."

"I suppose I need to risk it."

Snape hesitated, but rather than the caution that Harry had expected, he extended another warning. "By using blood as a component, you will make the divination legally Dark Arts. There is some ... thaumaturgical basis for that, as well. You should expect to compensate the Seer well for the risk. And you may wish to keep it from the Weasleys -- even yours."

Harry looked intently at Severus Snape. "And any other training from Draco."

Snape raised his eyebrows. "Would you hide such a matter from your paramour?"

"I don't know. I mean, I think I'll probably tell him when we're together. But for now, you did not make me this offer, and I certainly did not consider it. Anything further that may happen therefore did not. Agreed?"

"I am not completely certain I should be doing this," Snape confessed. He nodded. "However,

that only leads me to agree with you. This did not happen, so there is no reason to mention it to Draco."

"I *will* tell him about the divination, if it is useful, but I'll tell you beforehand what I plan to say, so that our stories agree."

Snape's mouth twisted. "Forewarning would be appreciated, this time."

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Chapter: 7

html> **Notes:** Thanks to calanthe for beta work and Britpicking. (Departures from canon capitalization are mine.)

7 -- Seeing

Harry spent most of the next two days thinking about what to ask, not just of the Seer, but of Snape. He had expected Snape to return at night, but it was ten o'clock on Monday morning when he heard the front door slam violently closed, and then, equally violently, slam open. Aunt Petunia shrieked. He ran to the stairs, his wand out, only to find his aunt cowering in front of Professor Snape.

"You!" she shrieked, but with a touch of desperation, as soon as she spotted him on the steps. "Tell this man to leave immediately!" Her face tightened. "And put that *thing* away!"

Harry shrugged and sauntered down to the first floor, sliding his wand out of sight with deliberate slowness. "Can't see why," he said. "He never listens to me, either. And any way, he's much better company than you and Dudley."

"How dare you say such a horrible thing!" Aunt Petunia gasped. Snape stepped forward.

"Indeed, it is damning with faint praise. I expect I am 'better company' than a Blast-Ended Skrewt, in that case." His eyes raked Harry up and down. "Put on some decent clothes, Mr. Potter, and I will escort you to our meeting."

"Robes?" Harry asked.

"I did say 'decent', did I not? Of course, robes!"

With a sidelong glance at his aunt, Harry snorted, nodded, and headed back upstairs.

They apparated to a windswept field that overlooked the ocean far below. Curls of white speckled the grey water, and Harry's robes whipped about his calves. He felt a spiral slide up his arm as Susara moved further from the draught of his jacket cuff.

"Atmospheric," Harry commented. "When you showed up in the middle of the morning, I thought we might be apparating into an office block."

Severus turned back from starting down a faint path. "You expected a Seer to receive you in the dead of night?" he asked, his eyebrows rising.

Harry shrugged. "Seems more mysterious. Who would have guessed Seers worked business hours?"

They walked together down the mild inland slope. Harry watched the ground to avoid sheep droppings.

"You may, perhaps, have taken the wrong impression from my warning that this divination will be Dark Arts. There is nothing particularly Dark about the witch we will be seeing; she is merely practical enough to know all her tools."

"Ah." Harry wasn't quite sure that he understood the distinction. He himself, he decided, was moving towards that line, but he was under very special circumstances. He wasn't sure he would trust many people who knew Dark Arts. *Well, Snape, of course, but that's different, too. I sort of think of him as someone who was a Dark wizard, but isn't really anymore.* Harry looked sidelong at Snape. Perhaps he thought of it that way because Snape was more ambiguous than he wanted to deal with. "So -- have you told her who she'll be seeing?"

"Of course not! She is a half-blood and no friend to the Dark Lord, but the temptation -- and the risk -- is too great." Snape rolled his eyes. "And it's 'whom.'"

"You brought the money, right?"

"As we agreed. I trust you will repay me promptly in September."

"Of course."

The witch's house was a grey stone cottage with larkspurs blooming by the gate. An enormous grey cat greeted them just as they stepped onto the garden path, and wove between Harry's feet, purring loudly. The door opened as they reached it, and Snape pushed forward to enter first, his wand drawn.

"Professor Snape," said a pleasant, lilting voice. "Please sit down. There's tea on the table."

A grandmotherly witch was sitting by a table, turned so that her hands were visible where they lay in her lap. She smiled at Harry warmly, without even a flicker of surprise. "And Mr. Potter. So good to meet you. I am Madam Langston. Pardon me for not offering my hand -- I cannot touch anyone until after the reading, and I'm afraid one of you will need to pour, as well. Sit."

The table was square and sized for four -- two places, at one corner, had teacups. Snape sat next to the witch, leaving Harry to take the chair across from her.

"I suppose you cannot drink the brew, either?" Snape said sourly, suspiciously raising the knitted tea cozy to peer at the teapot underneath. From the rest of the decor, Harry expected English porcelain, but instead, it was a beautiful Chinese pot, ornamented with a coiled dragon. Ignoring Snape's disapproval, he lifted it and poured for both of them. As if this ended introductions, the witch turned her chair towards the table, and the grey cat leapt into the remaining chair and sat there, looking curiously at Harry.

"Er, is that a cat?" Harry asked, and then at the looks he got, winced. "I mean, full time?"

The witch laughed. "Unlike your head of house, you mean? Yes, my Greyling is a cat, but also my familiar, and so he has a genuine interest in the proceedings." She cocked her head and looked at Harry. "You don't have a rat. What interests him?"

"I have a snake. A torclinde."

"Ah. An unusual thing to wear concealed."

Harry was about to say that he sometimes discussed things with the snake, but Snape cut him off.

"The boy's pets are not your affair. You cat will know not to attack an animal carried by a wizard, correct?"

"Yes, of course. As long as the snake stays on Mr. Potter's person, it will be safe." She focused on Harry. "Now. Professor Snape did not tell me who would be visiting, but he did say that you wished me to perform a blood divination on He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named -- one to search for weaknesses. Is that correct?"

"Er... More or less."

She frowned. "In what way 'less'?"

"Well, the blood is--" Harry swallowed. "A servant of Volde--"

The cat hissed.

"I must ask you not to say that name here," Madam Langston said, frowning.

"Right. Um, so the Dark Lord's servant made him a new body from, among other things, my blood. Since that blood is also his now, we hoped that you might be able to do the divination with blood from me."

"I see." The Seer looked thoughtful. "That would explain why I-- Well, it's of no matter now." She tapped a dirty fingernail on the table. "It is possible that it will work," she said, "however, I cannot guarantee it, and the risk...."

"You will be compensated for divination by Dark Arts," Snape cut in, "whether or not the results we hope for are achieved."

"Good. To start with, I must have the payment. You brought it?"

"In silver, yes. I trust there is some reason for that bizarre request?" As he spoke, Snape removed a small pouch from each of his side pockets. From the way they pulled down on their strings, they were heavy, and Harry was not surprised when Severus tapped the first one with his wand and it quadrupled in size. He did the same with the second.

"Spill it on the table."

"Would you like it counted too?" Snape sneered, but the Seer merely smiled.

"No. Spilled into a small heap. I will know if it is enough."

"I hardly think that shows talent in farseeing," he answered disdainfully, but spilled the coins out as instructed. One landed on its edge and rolled off the table, but the grey cat leapt from its chair in pursuit, and then returned with the Sickle in its mouth. Delicately, it placed it on the heap, before returning to its seat.

Madam Langston drew her wand, which was pale and wavy, and moved it over the pile of silver, muttering under her breath. Slowly the coins blended into a single mass, which she then drew out into a shallow bowl. The more tarnished coins left lines of grey and black that marbled the surface as it hardened.

"Now," she said, "we have the vessel." She levitated a flask over from the sideboard, bringing it to rest beside the bowl. "Next, we need the blood. Mr. Potter, please tell me where on your body you were bled, and by what means."

"I..." Harry felt a trembling start deep in his gut, and tried to keep the surface of his body still. He could remember the details all too well: how tightly he was bound, the flat headstone unyielding against his back.

"Inside the right elbow." He took a quick breath. "With the point of a knife." He pushed up the arm of his robe to bare the skin. His hands, to his disgust, were shaking.

"I could restrain you," Snape offered, drawing his wand.

"No!" Harry knew he must look wild with fear. "No. I mean, that would make it worse. More like-- I'll stay still."

"While being cut?" Snape sounded a little incredulous.

"Yes." It was calming, somehow, to have the horror reduced to physical matters. "I can take pain."

"I see."

Madam Langston had drawn a little knife. Harry could see the ground edge of the blade, where the polish changed. Snape's wand came down between his eyes and the bright metal. "I will do the bloodletting," he said.

"No," she said firmly. "I must wield the knife."

He snarled audibly. "Fine," he replied. "However, I keep my wand out and on you, understood?"

She nodded serenely. "I understand why you protect him. It is not needed, but I do not take offense. Your arm, Mr. Potter?"

She put out her hand, and Harry, although conscious of each lost inch between them, still extended his arm in one steady motion. His dread spiked as her fingers closed around his wrist.

"No!" he said, and she looked up, surprised. "No restraint," he explained. "You can steady my arm, but don't hold it."

Snape snorted. "I now know one thing that you and your paramour *don't* get up to," he commented slyly, and Harry, taken by surprise, laughed in quick, rough breaths.

"I can't believe you said that!"

"You are breathing now, are you not?"

He was, Harry realized, and he nodded gratefully. "Go on," he told the woman, as she pulled his arm over the bowl. "I'm ready."

The actual pain was bearable. He wasn't sure that either of them had believed that he would stay still, but he did. He stared down at the knife point and imagined that he was alone, floating forward onto it, because it would bleed Voldemort out of him. Slowly, the point touched, pressed, penetrated, and he exhaled into the pain, willing the blood out with his breath.

He might have overdone it, because he didn't think blood should bubble out like water at a spring, but with only a slight yelp, she tilted his arm to the side so the blood flowed into the silver bowl.

"Damn it!" Snape exclaimed. "That's enough!"

"Cover the bottom," she whispered. "Cover...." For three heartbeats more she steadied his arm, and the blood dripped red and warm, and then, with a soft breath out, she folded his forearm up. "Done."

Feeling suddenly real again, Harry looked into the bowl. That was a mistake. His head swam at the sight of so much of his blood, displayed in that vessel like some garish punch, and he was only vaguely aware of the warm itchy feeling of a healing spell on his arm.

"Here." Smooth glass was pressed to his lips. "Blood Replenisher. Drink. I will not have you wasting my time by fainting."

The voice helped him look away. "Er ... thanks, Sir." After the first awful swallow, his head slowly began to clear. It was reassuring to think that his dizziness had not been entirely emotional weakness. Harry tried not to look at the bowl again, but the motion of the Seer lifting her flask drew his eye. She tipped it over the bowl, and a muddy liquid flowed out of it and dripped down to collect in a green-grey puddle in the dark blood. With her wand, she stirred the air above the bowl.

"Blood of man, blood of vine, blood of earth, all combine," she chanted, and the two thick substances mingled in ugly swirls, spiraling fully around the vessel before she lifted her wand. As they stilled, the change started. The grey lines blurred into the red, and together they altered, becoming a single liquid, transparent and ruby-bright. Once again, Harry could see the lines of tarnish in the silver at the bottom of the bowl, but now they seemed to move and twist, almost as if they were about to form into a picture. If he could just get a little closer....

"Master?" Susara's uneasy voice hissed, and he jerked his head up.

"Try not to look," Madam Langston said soothingly. "It will not spoil the divination, but you will find it unpleasant." She cleared her throat. "Now I must anoint myself. Once I have done that, you may ask me one question, and one question only. Do you understand?"

"Yes."

Harry took a deep breath. He and Snape had discussed questions by owl, but they did not have enough information to identify anything specific. They would start, this time, with a general inquiry, and hope it provided them with some sort of lead. Snape had said that if this worked they could return to ask a more targeted set. Harry watched the Seer. She dipped the tip of the middle finger of each hand into the blood mixture, and then touched them to her eyelids, leaving a bright red spot on each. Despite its clarity, the potion was still thick enough not to drip. Next, she extended her index fingers, and dipped those. With them, she traced just outside her lips, outlining her mouth in scarlet. Harry shuddered.

"As I see," she said distantly, "so I speak."

With that, she leaned forward to look into the bowl.

Harry looked nervously at Snape, who nodded. He cleared his throat.

"What is Voldemort's greatest weakness?"

He remembered, afterwards, that he was not supposed to use the name, but that hardly seemed possible to avoid in this context, and indeed, even the cat did not chide him.

Madam Langston stroked the sides of her bowl as if it were the face of a lover.

"Pure blood, mixed blood," she said, her voice sing-song. "Mingled blood, the enemy within. Could have been an ally, would have been, might have been, but the move was wrong. You must know your enemy before seduction."

Harry nodded. The time he had talked to young Tom ... well, if Tom had understood him better, and he hadn't known about his parents, and Ginny hadn't been lying there dying ... well, then it might have worked.

"Seduction, sweet," she continued. "Grey eyes, laughing, and a ghost cries. A monster rises from the cauldron...." There was a longer pause, and then, her voice still vague and dreamy, Madam Langston commented:

"That would be Him. I'm getting more of you than Him, I'm afraid. Mixed blood, shared blood, not something to sort like corn from chaff."

The cat shuddered all down its body, as if it had been picked up against its will and had just escaped. Madam Langston crumpled down in her chair moaning. Severus scowled. With a sigh, Harry leaned back, crossing his arms over his chest.

"So much for that."

Madam Langston raised her hand wearily. "Wait. A cup of tea. A moment."

Nodding, Snape refilled Harry's cup. "We will give her a few minutes to recover. Still, I did not find it promising."

"Well, the first part was about him," Harry protested. "Or him and me. The first time we talked to each other."

"*Talked*?"

Severus sounded incredulous. Harry felt his shoulders tighten. "He wasn't fully corporeal, so it was all he could do," he explained, "and he did try to, well, win me over."

"Ah. Don't tell me more here, but I want the full story later."

Madam Langston straightened. For a moment, she just stared straight ahead, and then, shaking herself much like the cat had, summoned a cup of water.

"Not entirely successful," she said.

Snape snorted. "*Useless*, you mean."

The Seer was not cowed. "The vehicle was too ambiguous, but I did see Him, at the start. Not as he is now, but as he was, years ago...."

"Which does not convince me that this could work."

She lifted her head. "Not with me, not with this blood. There are other ways we could try."

"Other than my blood, you mean?" Harry asked. He thought she still sounded a bit strange.

"Yes, of course." She looked away. "None so pleasant...."

That was a horrifying idea, Harry thought, recalling the swell of his blood.

Snape was not so put off. "What would you require?" he asked.

"Best would be the body of a victim," she said, still looking blankly past them, "someone he took power from killing. Not my Calvin, no, he was only killed by servants, let him rest--"

"No," Harry said, horror turning his voice to iron.

"But it is no harm to the dead. The other is worse -- unicorn's blood, I Saw that it might--"

Harry jumped to his feet. "I will *not!*"

"Hush, Mr. Potter," Snape said quietly. "I quite agree." He also rose to his feet. "Have you any

tenable suggestions, Madam Langston?"

She looked at them hesitantly. With a soft "wow!" the grey cat jumped to the table, and from there to his mistress's shoulder.

"You truly intend to slay him?" she asked Harry. For the first time since the Seeing, she sounded rational.

"Yes."

She nodded. "Because of that, and because I value your trust, I will tell you: there is nothing more I can do." Quickly, she held up a hand to stop him from leaving. "*However,* one who knows you well might be better able to filter your presence from their Sight. He *is* of your blood; you were right about that." With that, she rose to her feet. The cat swayed slightly, but stayed on her shoulder. "I advise you to look closer to your heart for guidance, Harry Potter, and I wish you the best of luck."

"*Evanesco!*"

Harry and the Seer both jumped at the incantation, and the cat hissed. Snape was just tucking his wand away. Madam Langston sputtered in indignation.

"I trust you to a certain point," Snape said coolly, "but not, my good witch, with Potter's blood. You will find your pretty new bowl unharmed."

Turning, he seized Harry's arm, and before Harry knew what was happening, he was being squeezed unbearably by the inward force of Apparation. When they popped out on the other side, Harry stumbled, tried to catch himself, and crashed into a bush.

"Yes, I can see why your grace is so widely admired, Potter," Snape said dryly.

"Oh, piss off!" Harry snapped, as he brushed leaves and twigs from his robes. "I'm only graceful in the air."

"Do you think so?" Snape asked idly. He didn't sound like he expected an answer, so Harry didn't give him one.

"Why didn't we just apparate to my room?" he complained.

"It's--" Snape stopped for a moment. "It's just not *done*," he said finally. "Of course, neither is apparating out of someone's house, but I didn't want both of us to have our backs to her."

"So she creeped you out too, huh?" Harry asked. "At the end?" He had recognized where they were, now -- between the shed and the bushes at the edge of the park. He pushed his way out into the sunlight, Snape following behind him. A vaguely familiar woman stared at them, wide-eyed.

"Crap!" he said at a whisper, looking down at his robes.

"Don't worry," Snape said, his voice low. "I cast a weak glamour. She should see your usual clothing."

"Good." Harry relaxed. "Come back to the house? I think we need to talk that over."

"Unquestionably."

They discussed the divination, and Harry told Snape about what had transpired in the Chamber of Secrets, and why he thought that was what the Seer had drawn on. Snape concurred, especially as Madam Langston had said that the Dark Lord had appeared in his original form.

"Still, that event, as a weakness, only tells us that he is arrogant, and we knew that."

"Arrogant and not a pureblood," Harry pointed out. "I've mentioned that to a few of his more dogmatic followers." He sat down on the bed. "Feel free to transfigure yourself a chair, by the way."

Snape studied him. "Draco?" he asked. "Early on?"

"Not so early," Harry countered. "And even so, he didn't believe me. I think he does now."

"So you believe it may have been of use?"

Harry considered. "Possibly." He grimaced. "He had other reasons to lose faith."

"Hm." Snape looked down to where he was running his fingers along the edge of the small table by the bed. "Another thing about which I am curious, Potter...."

"Yeah?"

"Blaise Zabini." Snape's eyes snapped up and bored into him, and Harry couldn't keep from laughing slightly. Of all the things for Snape to latch onto!

"It's nothing, really," he said. "He was around when I, you know, lost all those points, and he appreciated it, and I've decided I should get to know the Slytherins better."

"You should?"

"Well it's a bit of a waste, isn't it, just assuming they're all enemies? I'm still cautious." Harry bit his lip for a moment, thinking, and then looked up. "I'm going to need them. Gryffindor courage is all well and good, but it won't be enough."

For at least a minute, Snape studied him silently. Finally, he turned slightly away.

"You could ask for re-sorting, you know. It's not common, but there's a spate of it every hundred years, or so."

Harry shook his head. "That would ruin everything," he said lightly.

Snape scowled. "Ruin?"

"Think about it. If I'm in Slytherin, what have you got? Another house member -- powerful, I suppose, but capable of losing points by the hundreds -- and a lot of media attention focused on your house." Snape still hadn't sat, which made Harry uncomfortable. He got to his feet and began to pace. "But if I'm in Gryffindor, *then* you have an ally." Snape's eyes flashed up as he understood. Harry continued anyway. "An ally with some portion of Dumbledore's favor, some sway with Gryffindors, and more of the community trust. Also, many opponents will underestimate my guile, and how far I will go to win. Isn't that better than another Slytherin?"

Snape nodded. "When you put it that way." He relaxed enough to lean back against the wardrobe. "But what do you want in return for this *alliance,* Potter?"

"The craft of your house," Harry replied baldly. "All that I can win over." He grinned. "And your willful ignorance when I sneak into Slytherin to shag Draco, of course."

Snape coughed.

"Well?" Harry demanded.

"There are ... certain things of which I am always willfully ignorant, Potter -- part of the arrangement between myself and my house. Any matter of willing sex is beneath my notice."

"Drinking?" Potter guessed. "Dark Arts?" Snape nodded to the first, then hesitated at the second. "With either," he said. "I may have a little talk, or several, with the student in question, depending on how I see the matter developing." He looked archly at Harry. "However, as you are not re-sorting, none of that should affect you. *You* will still need to deal with McGonagall, and with anxious Gryffindor prefects."

Harry shrugged. "Anxious, yes -- but not, I think, as aware."

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Chapter: 8

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8 -- Letters

July 21, 1997

Draco,

On the recommendation of the person who brought you this letter, I went to a Seer, hoping to get some information that would help us with strategy. The divination was less successful than we had hoped. We used my blood, for obvious reasons, but that caused the Seer to pick up more information about me than about the target, because of the mingled blood. She said we might be able to work with the blood of a fresh victim, or maybe with unicorn's blood. Neither, obviously, is acceptable to me.

Once she was convinced that I would not return to her with either of those things, she made one additional suggestion -- that someone with the Sight who was personally closer to me might be better at filtering me out of the divination. Are you any good at that?

Harry

July 21, 1997

Dear Harry,

Divination has never been one of my skills. As you know, true divinatory abilities are rare, and frequently when they do manifest, it is at levels that can go unnoticed.

Have you considered Ron Weasley? I have oftentimes recalled the divination that he performed last spring -- quite informally, and without any belief in his own skill. I think you rather can be regarded as having pissed on the House Cup, and your House was certainly divided. Might he be persuaded to venture into blood divination? I would be happy to research potential scrying potions and rituals.

Incidentally, drop the absurd attempts at circumlocution. I've included a few strands of my hair, so you can charm letters to only appear to me. I, of course, long ago took the precaution of collecting a few of yours. Anyone else who picks up this parchment will see a very boring

account of the weather in Scotland, and of how I tossed off into the lake.

Kisses,

Draco

July 21, 1997

Mr Potter,

I know we have never been on such familiar terms as to exchange correspondence, but I need to communicate with you about Draco. I know that you believe he is happy with you, and for the moment, he seems to believe he is happy with you, but you must understand that this is <u>not</u> a healthy relationship for him. In order to please you, he is behaving contrary to his nature. For the moment, he may find this worthwhile, but he will eventually come to resent you. Surely you can see that as a Gryffindor, you will eventually either overpower him, completely subsuming his personality to yours, or fall victim to his manipulations and lose your own?

I beg you, if you care for him as you have claimed, to end this relationship now, while you are still apart and may both have time to heal.

Regards,

Miss Pansy Parkinson

July 22, 1997

Dear Draco

If Ron really has the Sight -- and that's a frightening thought -- well, he knows me about as well as anyone. The problem is that it would be Dark Arts. I'm not sure how I'd convince him, and I'm not sure what we'd need. Have any advice?

Did you really wank by the lake? Or are you just trying to drive me mad with imagining it? I haven't done anything at all sexy -- they don't even let me take long showers, so I just get off under the covers, fast and hard. I think about you, though.

On another subject, I've included a letter I received from Pansy Parkinson. What the hell?

Love,

Harry

July 23, 1997

Dearest Harry,

Please disregard Pansy's well-intentioned interference. I told her about the Quiris, and she can't believe that keeping them would be my decision. We, in contrast, know how little I am pleasing you with that act. Also, as I had no difficulty performing when she had sex with me, she cannot believe that I am genuinely attracted to my own sex. I am, Harry. As you know, you are not even the first man that I physically indulged in, and I preferred even him to her, so you need not worry that you are somehow inducing this 'unnatural' reaction by force of will.

You may laugh, Harry, but don't be angry at her. She sees how I love you, and it frightens her. She feels she must protect me, since I will not protect myself from you. Accept it, as I accepted Hermione's suspicion, and she may learn to trust you as Hermione trusts me.

As to the other matter .... You know Weasley better than I do, of course, but the approach I would consider is to emphasize that your life is at stake, and the safety of his world is at stake, and to perform a blood divination for you would therefore be a heroic (Gryffindor) disregard for the rules, rather than a selfish (Slytherin) disregard for the rules. That is, as far as I've ever been able to determine, how your lot think about it. Of course, Gryffindors are just as selfish as anyone else, so also stroke his ego (delicately!) with how rare such a skill is, and how impressed you would be if he succeeded. I am sure the promise of your admiration would entice him to do almost anything.

Also, of course, avoid the phrase 'Dark Arts' for as long as possible. Tell him that it is 'illegal', that it has 'elements of Dark Arts', that it is in the 'nebulous area of Grey Arts', that it is 'somewhat Dark.' Emphasize the risk, rather than moral judgments, if you think that will entice him as it does you. If he enters the act not fully understanding, he will forgive you. You forgave me, after all.

I want you. I am remembering all our fights from last year, and more so, each time we reconciled. I remember after I found out what you had done with Snape -- what I required, and how you looked at me, kneeling shirtless in the cold Chamber, hot with changing emotions. I would demand a different forfeit now. I'm imagining that, imagining pushing aside your shirt and sitting on that low table in its place, so close to those lips you are biting to full redness. I part my robes and banish my trousers and tell you to win your forgiveness with submission to my pleasure. You, of course, are wide-eyed and shocked, but brave above all, and lean forward to do as I require, but you keep your eyes up, watching me. Absorbing me, and how my face changes to the motion of your tongue. (I'm so hard, Harry -- I'm lying in bed with a hand down my pants in the most undignified rut, using a damn dictation charm to capture words.) You are beautiful

pleasing me, and your eyes close as you find your own pleasure -- so surprised, Merlin! I tell you to touch yourself for me. I want you to enjoy this, and you do, squirming until I pull you up to writhe against me and

You

Aaaaa. Gods.

Fuck. You're so

Harry!

Hm. There are drawbacks to a Dictation charm, obviously.

Really, I think you would have hit me with a Stinging hex and run away. Tell me a fantasy instead.

Love,

Draco

July 24, 1997

Ron,

This letter is not for anyone but you. If you're not alone, wait until you are, and don't tell anyone about any of this.

Still there? Okay. I went to a Seer. Not to the kind that makes prophecies, but someone who tries to see things far away. We gave her some of my blood (told you you couldn't tell, but that makes sense, right? Think back to the Tri-Wizard Tournament) for her to try to see something about Voldemort, so I could find a way to defeat him.

The thing is, she couldn't quite. The blood idea worked -- she got bits of things about him -- but she got more about me. She thought that someone who was close to me would do better, because they could filter out me without even thinking about it much.

Annoying, really. Now I have to figure out if anyone I know could do that -- and would. The use of blood makes it illegal, of course, though really, it's my blood, and I think I should be able to say who can use it. Don't tell Hermione, though -- you know how she can get about stuff like

that.

How are things at the Burrow?

Harry

July 24, 1997

Dear Draco

You drive me mad, you know. Reading your last letter, imagining what you wrote about, and then picturing you touching yourself while you spoke for the quill -- absolutely mad! I spent so much time wanking that I fell asleep right after, and didn't get anything else done last night (like replying to you). I had really good dreams though. You were in all of them.

Sometimes I think about last winter, and the times I missed you trying to let me know you were interested. Nothing would have happened in your room -- I was far too drunk -- and I didn't get why you were worrying about which bed to use in my dormitory. But remember when you talked me into jumping out the window? I flew back in all elated, expecting you to be impressed, or at least amused, and instead, you shouted at me about how stupid I was. After the night in your room, I was certain that you didn't intend to kill me, but that was the first time that you sounded like you cared.

I was confused and you were frustrated that I didn't understand, and sometimes I imagine that -- that instead of looking away, you grab my shoulders, and when I'm bracing for a push, yank me close and kiss me. And then it all makes sense, and I don't have to think about it, because Gryffindors can do that afterward, you know. And your mouth is sweet, and your lips are strong, and I won't break free to say yes, so I pull you down, and we tumble to the carpet, and I pull you close, and your body is light and hot, and I move against it while I kiss you back, because I don't know what else to do.

When we pause for breath, you take the lead, ever so lightly, and lead me to the fire and begin to undo my shirt. We start out slow and deliberate, undressing each other, and your skin is so beautiful in the firelight that I want every inch of it bare. I kiss the smooth inside of your arm, where the Dark Mark isn't, and I tell you no one but me can touch you there. You don't promise, but you pull me down for more kisses, until our touches turn frantic and haphazard, and we push at each other, grasping for skin, until we come on the carpet, and stray clothes, and each other, and you laugh at my inexperience, but not in a bad way, and I tell you I'll learn, but all the time, we're tangling up in each other again, and we fall asleep there, in the warm flicker from the flames.

I love you.

(But I can't write it, see? Perhaps I can learn that too, but I'd rather just be with you.)

Harry

P.S.: (And believe me, I'm adding this rather later!) What would we need to do a blood divination at school? Snape's been in on it here, but he would rather not know details when it happens there, I think, so the more supplies that I can get in advance, the better.

July 26, 1997

Fred and George,

Would it be possible for you to come and fetch me on the 28th? I could get there on my own, but I think you could do a better job of obscuring my trail than I could on my own.

Harry

July 26, 1997

Harry,

You have no idea how much has been written on the subject of scrying with blood, and how hard it is for me to access any of it. If you were here, I would borrow that cloak of yours, but I won't risk having you without it for days. I'm longing for the library at Malfoy Manor!

Be warned, therefore, that this information is based on the most cursory of preliminary investigations. I expect that we will studying the subject for all of September, at least. So far, however, I have identified several substances that appear to be frequently used in a blood-enhanced scrying, and encountered many warnings about how more common scrying liquids are often ruined by the addition of blood. For example, hazel is useless. Here is my current list:

-- Beryl (even with blood), but I don't know what color yet.

-- Spring water

-- Pomegranate seeds (from a whole pomegranate)

-- Sphinx feathers (or, less powerfully, Great Eagle feathers)

I also think that in your particular case, something from a Red Cap (bone or hair) might

strengthen the work, because of the multiple murders he has committed in attempts to murder you. Using Red Cap elements could draw power and focus from his blood guilt. Actually, now that I think about it, it may also provide a means to integrate the actual blood to less compatible substances. We can look into that once you're here.

Spring water and some varieties of beryl are readily available from the student cupboards, and you could probably get a pomegranate from the house-elves, but the others you will need to obtain through some other means. Red Cap parts, of course, are restricted items associated with Dark Arts, and will present the most difficulty, but Sphinx feathers won't be easy (or cheap!), and Slug & Jiggers would make you sign for them, if they can get them. Perhaps you will be able to sneak down Knockturn Alley, at some point? Caligula's Cauldron (I know it sounds like some sort of dodgy club, but it's really an apothecary), past the Troll and Club, will sell anything to anyone, given enough incentive, and would probably be able to obtain Red Cap parts. I'd advise against stealing from there -- the proprietor has protections that don't rely on seeing you -- but you'll need a glamour to avoid the risk of blackmail. He doesn't violate charms that alter your appearance; he wouldn't have any customers if he did. Other people in the shop might try anything, though, so be careful. Actually, you might want to use the glamour to get someone else to go for you, or something even more convoluted.

your Dragon

P.S.: I like your writing. Now I want you in front of a fire. Maybe next Christmas?

July 26, 1997

Mr. Potter,

Hi, Harry! (If you can't place the name, I'm the Auror who was watching Draco Malfoy, and happened to be his cousin.) I had the honor to be one of the questioners for Lucius Malfoy's Veritaserum interview, and a little bird told me that I should be sure to ask for names. I cannot tell you what unexpected name emerged, but a trusted source informs me that you would know, and would find this information encouraging.

If anything else is declassified, I'll let you know.

Cheers,

Auror N. Tonks

July 27, 1997

Harry,

We can talk when you're at the Burrow. Mum wants you here for your birthday, though we can't have a party, really. I wish we could. It's not right that you miss that when you're coming of age, even though it's during the summer!

Things have been mind-numbingly dull here, except for when they've been utterly mad. Charlie showed up unexpectedly, with some girl that no one had heard of before, and some Romanian chap that we had heard of before, but who was piss-poor at Translation charms. (Not that any of us are great, mind, but we're not the ones travelling to some other country.) We never knew what he meant, because what he was saying couldn't have been it. They stayed for three days, in a tent outside, with Charlie refusing to take his room, and Mum desperately trying to suss out if he was involved with the girl, and Ginny desperately trying to suss out if he was involved with the bloke. I'd say you corrupted her, but she has a point. With Charlie, it's hard to tell -- he hugs everyone. It's bizarre. After three days, they left, and then everything was boring again.

I think those laws were to keep people from taking other people's blood, but then they wanted them harder to get out of, you know? Anyway, I'll see you on the 31st, I'm sure!

Ron

July 27, 1997

Harry,

Your seventeenth birthday -- a momentous occasion -- is approaching, and you have doubtless been awaiting some communication in regards to the invitation extended by the Weasleys. I assure you that I have not forgotten the matter, but there are still factors in play that delay my decision. However these settle, you shall see me soon, and you will not remain in your Aunt's house past July 31. All else, I must tell you in person.

On a more cheerful note, we may be making progress on your godfather's exoneration. I believe you have heard news from a certain Veritaserum session. That has given our friends in the Department of Magical Law Enforcement the justification needed to reopen certain cases that had previously been closed as resolved.

I hope that you are enjoying your holiday as much as possible under the circumstances, and taking no unnecessary risks.

Best regards,

Albus Dumbledore, Headmaster

Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry

July 27, 1997

Harrykins --

We'll be there. You can't complain if we make you dizzy! Be packed.

--F&G G&F

Fred

George

Fred

Weasley & Weasley

The Terrible Two

July 27, 1997

Harry,

Good luck.

Draco

July 29, 1997

Sirius and Remus,

Please don't be alarmed when Dumbledore tells you that I'm missing. I know my protection at home will end in a few days, and it seemed like a better idea to get out early than to wait for an ambush. I'm being careful, I have the cloak, and I'm as safe as I can be -- and the Dursleys and the Weasleys are a whole lot safer than otherwise.

I'd meet with you if I could, but I'd need a promise that you won't betray me to Dumbledore or Mrs. Weasley or anyone else, and since I expect owls can be followed, I'm not receiving them, so

there's no way for you to give me a promise, even if you would. I'll write to you, though. I know you'll feel better if you hear from me regularly. I think I'll make it every other day, though some of them will just be 'Hi, I'm alive' notes.

Don't worry. I'm being careful.

Harry

July 31, 1997

Ron,

Sorry about not showing up today, and I hope your mum's not having fits, but I didn't want to wait until the last minute to leave and endanger everyone. Even the Dursleys don't deserve what they'd get from Death Eaters.

I'm safe, I'm lying low, and I'll see you on the Hogwarts Express. Don't try to reply -- I'm not accepting owls.

Best wishes,

Harry

July 31, 1997

Dear Hermione,

I know what I'm doing. I promise.

See you in September,

Harry

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Chapter: 9

html>
Notes: Thanks to Calanthe for beta work and Britpicking, and to Atropos-lee for extra discussion of London Chinatown. Any mistakes are my own.

x
9 -- Alterations

Harry yawned, stretched, and pulled out some fresh clothing from his trunk. He started to pull on the jeans, and then, wrinkling his nose, cast a cleaning charm on himself. The shop had a loo, but no bath or shower, and he probably ought to visit the twins' flat soon; cleaning charms could only do so much. On the other hand, he was finally an adult wizard, and could at least cast them unnoticed.

Once he was dressed, he finished last night's Thai noodles, wrote a short note to Remus to have the twins send later, and then conjured a mirror to set a glamour on himself. Susara rippled across the table to look at the new object.

"Hi, beautiful," he said softly. *"You were asleep."*

"Now, I am awake," she answered simply. Her scarlet tongue flickered out. *"Why this ice?"*

The mirror, she meant. Harry smiled. "I *am going out, but I cannot be seen, so I am changing my appearance. I can see what I am doing in the ice."*

Curious, Susara circled behind the mirror and then back in front of it. She didn't seem to notice her own image. Harry brought his hand to the surface and touched his fingers to their reflection. He could feel her understanding. It reminded him of light returning as the sun emerged from a cloud.

"Clever, Master," she said approvingly. *"After this, will you change your scent?"*

Harry laughed. *"People are not good with scent."*

Her upper third twitched back in surprise. *"How sad! Even you?"*

"Even me," Harry informed her. *"So I only need to change what I look like. It would be easy, if I did not have this scar."*

She reared up, coming strangely close to his eyes to look at the scar. He could feel her distaste as she tested the air in front of it. *"It feels like another man."* She sent a flash of frustration. *"Not scent, exactly...."*

"It was left by an enemy," he explained. *"My enemy. Magic cannot change it, but if I make my hair look like just the right red...."* He found the color in the mirror. *"There! Now the lines of it look like the hair above. It becomes hard to notice."*

That done, Harry made himself look heavier, especially in the face. When he was satisfied with his appearance, he extended his hand to Susara. *"Do you want to ride?"*

With a flicker of tongue and a warm feeling of agreement, Susara spiraled onto his wrist and up his arm. Harry put on his Invisibility Cloak and slipped out the deliveries door into the narrow walk between the twins' future shop and the next building. It was time to scout Knockturn Alley.

In a hidden alcove a few doors down, he took off the cloak and stowed it in his bag. From what Draco had said, he gathered that some shops had security charms that would detect an invisible person entering. It was safer to be seen.

The people on the street were just as unpleasant as he remembered, but from an adult perspective, he found more of them pathetic than frightening. Of course, he amended to himself as he sidestepped a grab from a hunched man with sharply pointed teeth, the scary ones might actually be more frightening now. What he found himself watching for was not hags or half-trolls or wild-eyed addicts, but the people who were a little too well dressed and too focused for the area...

"Come inside, good sir," a voice invited him. "We have the most eager young girls--"

... a class that apparently included him. Harry shot the speaker a contemptuous look and kept walking.

The Troll and Club was a rowdy, dirty pub, with dried vomit on the street in front of it and streaks on the walls. Without it, Harry would not have seen Caligula's Cauldron. The entrance was discreet, the windows darkened, but the stench, when he entered the place, horrific. All apothecaries smelled odd, but this one smelled like dead things, and Harry tried not to think too much about what 'anything' could include. Susara tightened around his arm.

An old man, two stray teeth lost in his wrinkled mouth, grimaced at him from behind the counter.

"And who are you?" he spat.

Harry tensed. "A potential customer," he huffed. For a moment, the man looked him up and down, and then he gestured at the shop, which ran in one narrow room, bisected by waist-height bins and barrels, from front to back. Harry glanced at the bins and the dimly lit shelves, but had no desire to look more closely at them. Instead, he stepped up to the counter.

"I'm looking for--" Something from a Red Cap, he meant to say, but the words wouldn't come out. "-- Sphinx feathers."

The man's eyebrows, which were thick and tangled, came up. Harry got the feeling that they didn't do that often. Indeed they descended back into a scowl almost immediately.

"You could look a long time," he said. "Sphinxes are rare enough. Winged ones?" He spat on the floor. "Vicious besides."

Harry narrowed his eyes at the man. "I was told that you could get things. Rare things."

"For those that has the gold, yeah, I can."

"I expect I do."

"Don't dress like it."

"You expect me to walk down Knockturn Alley in silk?"

"Toffs don' walk down the Alley." The man sneered at him. "They floo in straight."

Harry rolled his eyes. He had to work to keep his head still, so that his scar would stay covered. "How much," he said clearly, "for two sphinx feathers?"

The man snorted, but he looked more interested now. "Sixty G apiece," he answered. "If I can get 'em. All up front."

Harry knew he should talk the man down, but being treated as too poor to deal with rankled. "Forty-five," he countered. "None up front."

"So you can steal 'em when they come in? Get out o' here."

Harry took out his purse. He had fifteen galleons in it, and another fifteen hidden in an inner pocket of his robes. It was enough, he hoped, to impress. "I'm good for it," he said, spilling money into his hand.

"That's not ninety."

"I don't carry ninety on a scouting trip."

"Well, I don't order without prepayment. Give me your name and address, and I might consider it."

"Give me your floo name, and I might come back with more."

"Caligula's Cauldron."

Harry nodded. "Simple enough. If I order, what surety will you give me?"

After he left Knockturn Alley, Harry still felt like the grime of it was clinging to him. He needed to go somewhere normal, he decided, and settled on Flourish & Blotts. He could get a book on far-seeing or possibly something on hexes. As he entered the shop, he wondered where he could find information on Red Caps. Draco's theory on their usefulness made sense; he *knew* it did. The problem was, that he couldn't help thinking of them as sort of people-like -- too much so to use parts from. Were they really, though, or were they just people-*shaped*, like doxies? They were vicious, he knew, and he wouldn't mind killing one in a fight. Buying parts, though, seemed macabre. Bones, especially, might look like the bones of a child. He shuddered, remembering the apothecary on Knockturn Alley. A place like that might actually try that counterfeit, if they thought the customer couldn't tell the difference.

Flourish & Blotts had a Dark Creatures section at the top of the Magical Creatures shelves, and there was an adults-only section at the back of the shop that he had heard was more Dark Arts than sex -- maybe that would have information on potions. Feeling uncomfortable, he ducked into the empty Household Charms aisle and swung his cloak on.

As Harry was hurrying towards the restricted section of the shop, a large bulk suddenly cut into the stacks in front of him. He dodged as best he could, but there was little leeway. He didn't fall down, or lose the cloak, or crush Susara, but he crashed into the other person, who lurched forward, spilling books on the floor around him. She dove down to gather them -- it was Millicent Bulstrode, he realized -- slammed bruisingly into his legs, and froze.

"Watch it," he whispered, crouching. Remembering his promise to Draco, he thought he ought to help with the books. He decided it was safe to let his hands emerge. "Sorry, Bulstrode. I'm wearing an invisibility cloak."

"Go away!" One of her large hands grabbed at the book he was holding, and the motion startled Harry into looking down at the cover. *Permanent Sex Change with Potions* it read. Harry was still staring when it was pulled from his hands.

"Tell me who you are, *now!"*

"Harry." He pulled his right hand back to ready his wand. "Harry Potter."

"Oh fucking hell! Look it's just research, got it? If you say a word to anyone --"

"What?" Cancelling the glamour, Harry pushed back the hood of his cloak to meet her eyes. "Look, why would I--"

Breathing heavily, like someone about to attack, she stared at him, her small eyes sharp in her heavy face. "Name your price," she said flatly.

"No price." Harry shrugged. "It's all right, Bulstrode."

"NO, IT ISN'T!" Bulstrode dropped her voice. "Perfect little Granger will send me witch's empowerment pamphlets, and my *parents*--"

Harry was distressed by the near-hysterical tension behind the words. "I won't tell. I swear." He looked down at the more generic *Dark Draughts,* picked it up, and handed it to her. "Look ... can you maybe do me a favor? If you're planning -- oh hell, this is awkward. Come somewhere where we can talk privately?"

She looked at him grimly. Harry wondered if he was going to be hit, but she merely stood and nodded. "Let's go."

She was still expecting him to name terms, he realized suddenly. He could blackmail her. Embarrassed, he flipped the hood of his cloak back over his head. "Come on, then. Buy your books and we'll go. The Leaky Cauldron will do."

Bulstrode walked silently down the street, her wrapped purchases clutched to her wide chest. She didn't say anything as she entered the Leaky Cauldron, and he whispered for her to wait while he spoke to Tom. When they were in the back salon, and Harry slipped his cloak off, she remained silent, staring straight ahead like a soldier on review. Harry was still wondering how to begin when Tom appeared with a platter of cheeses, breads, sausage, and apples, and a pitcher of ale. Harry nodded, thanked him, and threw in an extra five galleons with his payment, hoping that was enough to keep the man silent, at least for the hour. Tom tugged respectfully at his cap and closed the door behind him when he left. Harry cast his own privacy charm at it.

He sat down and cut a slice off one of the apples. Bulstrode was still standing. "Sit," he said.

Stony-faced, she sat. "Your price, Potter."

Irritated, he let out a harsh sigh. "Will you *listen?* I *won't tell.* Have some food, will you?"

"If it was that simple, you wouldn't have paid for a private room." Despite her words, she poured herself a mug of the ale and sliced a chunk off the sausage.

"Look," Harry hazarded, "I don't have any idea of how magical sex-change works, but I saw you had potions books. Shouldn't there be a charm for that?"

She laughed harshly. "Dozens, Potter. They work in seconds and can be undone as quickly."

"Is that a problem?"

"Yes, it's a problem! If my parents can just grab me and change me back, don't you think they

will?"

He shrugged and took some of the cheddar. "No idea. Raised by Muggles, you know." He grinned at her. "Enlighten me."

"My parents have money, but because of my grandfather, *not* status. And despite efforts that I hear *far* too much about, I'm an only child. They want me to make a good marriage."

"Couldn't you marry a girl?" The look she sent him was so withering that he had to qualify. "As a man, I mean."

"I understood *that."* She scowled. "No. It's unacceptable. Scandalous. I'll be considered damaged goods. The only reason for anyone to marry me would be for *me."*

She smiled slightly at that, despite her fear, and in that instant, Harry knew that he would help her in any way he could. He had to take a swallow of ale to clear his throat.

"Do you really want to be a man, though?" he asked. "Or just to avoid being married off?"

She sighed and stared at the bread in her hands. "Look, I'm a *horrible* girl, and I'll be even worse as a woman. The troll blood shows too much. And I don't *like* it, either. I'm much happier as a Slytherin Beater, where I'm treated as one of the boys....."

Troll blood. That's true, then. "If you're a man, though, you'll still...." He trailed off, realizing that he had left no tactful way to continue.

"Be a hulking, coarse-featured goon? Yeah. Sometimes people don't mind that in men, though."

"I--" He looked at her -- really looked -- at her rough face and broad torso and muscular arms and intimidating height, and tried to imagine that she didn't have breasts the size of melons. "Okay. I can see what you mean. You wouldn't be my type, as a bloke, but you'd be impressive."

She sat back, looking relieved. "Thanks." Her face screwed up in a sour smile. "So...."

"So it looks like you're planning to do something with potions."

She nodded. "Somehow. I've heard there's a six month course that would take years to reverse...." Trailing off, she shrugged. "I'm still researching, though. Now why do you care? If, as you claim, you *won't tell*?"

This was it. Harry realized that he was nervously turning a piece of cheese into crumbs, but he couldn't manage to stop. "Look, I need to obtain some proscribed ingredients, and I expect that you do too, is that right?"

She sighed. "Obviously."

"It's occurred to me that those purchases may actually be less suspicious made together. I mean, the things I want may indicate what I'm doing, and the things you want may indicate what you're doing, but if one of us buys both...."

"I'm not taking your risks for you, Potter. I haven't even figured out how to get what I need myself."

"I'm one of 'us' too, you know, and I have potential connections." He traced the grain of the tabletop between them. "What do you need?"

"Not from Professor Snape."

Harry sighed. "No. Well, I'll get some things from him, but no, I wouldn't risk anything of yours, and most of mine can't be through him, because Dumbledore might find out, and curiously, I no longer want Snape fired. *Other* connections."

Her eyes narrowed. "You're offering to help me."

"Yeah."

"What do you *want,* Potter?"

He had to answer that with something, he realized. She would never stop being suspicious if he didn't. "Well," he said, "look after Draco for me? I mean, I can't protect him in Slytherin, and you're strong...."

She nodded thoughtfully. "I can do that. Not in his dormitory, obviously, but in the Common Room. Will you keep him from reporting me? If I need to be out late brewing?"

Harry nodded. "I can arrange that. I might even be able to get you a safe place to do it."

"Yeah?"

"I've brewed long term potions on the sly before." He grinned at the look on her face. "Okay, I've helped Hermione do it -- better?"

At Hermione's name, she made a face. "Less frightening at least."

Calmer, now that she thought she knew his price, she topped off her ale and leaned back in her chair. "So, did you mean it about buying for me?"

"Possibly. Why don't you do your research, and we can discuss what you need next week?"

She nodded. "Meet here, same time?"

Harry wasn't sure it would be safe to come back here, now that he had revealed himself to old Tom, but he considered it. After a minute, he shrugged. "It might be safe; it might not. Just come to Diagon Alley, okay? And I'll send you a message."

She snorted. "Paranoid much, Potter?"

"It's not paranoia if they really are out to get you," he returned with a grin, and got back a laugh in response.

"True enough. Same time next week, then."

Harry finished his beer, put on his cloak, and left the Leaky Cauldron on the Muggle side. He came back an hour later, in the guise of the red-haired man, with provisions for three, and made his way back to the shop. He found Fred and George there, busily setting up their workroom.

"Hi. I brought food."

"We found your note."

"Are you supposed to be out?"

"I was careful."

One of the twins snorted and looked meaningfully at the food that Harry was laying out on the top of a crate.

"Not enough," the other said. He peered at the round, glossy buns. "What are those?"

"The label said 'pork bun'. They're from Chinatown -- in Muggle London, and I used a glamour."

"Why were you there?"

"I've never been. And I was bored, and I'm not likely to be noticed, there." He grinned. "And the gate has a Gryffindor color scheme."

"So you bought food you couldn't identify?" George picked up one of the buns, bit into it, and twitched.

"Isn't that the point?" Harry countered. "Is it awful?" He picked up another one.

"No -- good, really."

"That's not what your face said," Harry observed, but took a small bite off his, anyway.

"I was just startled. It's sweet."

"Let me try." Fred pounced on the remaining bun. "Mm."

"Anyway," George said, "glamours are chancy."

Harry shrugged, the motion tight. "I can't stay here all the time, though. And I have things I should buy."

The twins came up, one to either side of him, one swallowing quickly.

"We were talking about that..."

"... and when it would happen."

"And we have an idea."

"Oh?" Harry asked. "What?"

"We have some polyjuice--"

"-- though we'll only give you one dose at a time --"

"-- and only if you promise not to do anything we wouldn't do."

Harry grinned. "I think I can manage that. After all, my boyfriend is at Hogwarts."

The twin on his left -- Fred, he thought, though he'd lost track when they moved -- laughed. "Quite right."

"Neither of us would snog a Malfoy."

"Though he's not that bad --"

"-- for a Malfoy."

Harry rolled his eyes. "I'll settle for that, I suppose."

"Oh, and speaking of your *boy*friend...." George said, in a singsong voice.

"You have a letter."

"Does he write to you every day?"

Harry shrugged, trying not to look too eager as he reached for the thick envelope. "A couple of times a week, usually," he answered, and ignored their sniggers in favor of extracting the thick parchment.

The first thing that Harry noticed about the letter was the bookmark contained in the folds of it. It was a thin wooden bookmark, carved into a lace-like pattern at the curved top, and it was encased in a vellum sleeve. On both sides of the sleeve, someone had written "Read letter before opening". The hand was not Draco's, but it looked familiar. Harry turned to the letter.

Dear Harry,

Mr. Lupin contacted me yesterday. At first, I couldn't think how he made it into the school, but then I remembered -- he knows about one of the tunnels, so he may well know about the others. At any rate, it was quite a shock to see him in the back corridor by the bust of Sir Belduf.

I told him I didn't know where you were, and he quite amiably informed me that he didn't believe me. He then swore a fairly simple but powerful oath to me, binding him to keep your secrets of your location and my collusion if you came to him of your free will. (It explicitly left him free to do as he pleases if he finds you.) He also gave me the included bookmark, which he says is a two-way portkey to and from his home. I leave the decision up to you. Please let me know if you believe I should inform Professor Dumbledore of his intrusion into the castle.

Professor McGonagall, who has been on holiday, returned to the school, today. It is apparently time to start planning for the new students. As you might expect, she had some questions stemming from my testimony. I have tried to stay to matters that she already knew about, but hearing about it again has put her in a strop. The problem reminded me of our plans last spring -- do you think an independent study project with her might get you back in her good graces, and perhaps improve her opinion of me? We would need to think of something that we would actually like to learn, of course. I had been thinking of your foray into metalworking before Easter. That's on the edges of Transfiguration, of course; do you know if she has any interest in that area?

The Council of Birthright and Family Affairs will be reviewing my case next week. Wish me luck!

Love,

Draco

Harry smiled as he refolded the letter. "Well." Looking up, he found both twins staring at him with identical expressions of confusion on their faces. "Lupin sends me a portkey and swears secrecy, McGonagall is irritated, and the Ministry is considering overriding Draco's father disinheriting him," he summarized. At that, they looked even more confused.

"We read that letter --" George admitted baldly.

"-- and it didn't--"

Harry burst out laughing. "Oh, but you have to be me to read the *real* letter!" he crowed. "Was his substitute entertaining?"

They glanced at each other. George ducked his head.

"Oh, it was about us --"

"-- and how nosy and ill-mannered we are."

Harry laughed more. "And he *so* got you!"

They seemed okay with that, so he took a real bite of the chicken, his heart lifting. He could visit Remus -- and, he hoped, Sirius.

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Chapter: 10

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10 -- Encounters

Harry wanted to go to Remus -- and Sirius! -- right away, but after he had eaten, he forced himself to spend some time planning his visit. While he helped the twins set shelves into place in the front room, he examined the idea, thinking about what could go wrong. Sirius, he realized almost immediately, had not sworn to secrecy. Mulling this over, he found himself unable to believe that his godfather would betray him for taking matters into his own hands and leaving. If he kept his head and sounded sensible, he should be able to trust Sirius.

On the other hand, he and Remus could have guests. Harry didn't have any way to see who was in the cottage before he arrived, but if he wore the Invisibility Cloak to portkey in, he could leave again immediately if anyone else was present. That should be safe enough.

He would have to explain his reasoning for leaving, of course, and he expected Remus to think he should trust Dumbledore more than that, but Remus wouldn't go back on his word. They

would want to know where he was, and he couldn't tell them that. He wondered if there was something he *could* tell them, by way of a distraction.

Susara moved slightly, reminding him that the snake might disturb his godfather, and with a soft hiss, he greeted her. As one, the twins stiffened, causing the charmed shelf they were lifting up along the wall to attach itself at the wrong height.

"Harry...."

"I need to talk to her. Should I go in the back room?"

They looked at each other. "Please."

Harry sat on the bed, and invited Susara out. She curled affectionately around his wrist.

"Yess?"

He smiled. *"I need to go out,"* he said. *"Alone."*

If a snake could frown, she would have done. He could feel her distress. *"You should not travel alone."*

"I will not travel alone long. I will visit my...." 'Godfather' didn't translate. *"Elder."*

"I could come, yes?"

He shook his head. *"Sorry. He disapproves of snakes, I think."* Before her little kernel of hurt could grow, Harry stroked her shining scales. *"I do not plan to hide you, beautiful, except for whilst I hide. I need that he not doubt me while I am not safe."* Things still, he thought, came out oddly in Parseltongue sometimes.

Trustingly, she flowed once around his wrist before moving to the worn blanket. *"I will hunt. You will be back before night?"*

"Yes."

As she left, Harry wondered if all pets were as protective. It was sweet, if a little amusing. She was such a tiny thing! Still, she was busy for now, and there was no time like the present. He called out a goodbye to the twins, donned his Invisibility Cloak, and slid the Portkey out of its protective sheath. Immediately, he felt the familiar tug behind his navel and the room around him vanished.

Although the floor in the cozy kitchen of Darkmoon Den was uneven, Harry managed to maintain his balance while the room settled around him. Sirius was at the cooker, frying a mess of mushrooms, and Remus was sitting at the table, reading a letter. No one else was visible. Harry began to cross the room to check the doorway to the next, but as soon as he took a step, Remus's head shot up.

"What's--" Sirius began, but Remus snapped a hand up and shushed him.

Before matters could escalate, Harry shook his hood back. "Just me."

Sirius barked out a laugh, and Remus rolled his eyes. "Spying on us, Harry?"

"I wanted to be sure you didn't have guests," Harry corrected, swinging the cloak off completely. "You promised, and I trust Sirius, but--"

"You don't trust me?" Remus interrupted.

"Not if Professor Dumbledore's in the room." Harry shrugged. "I expect you don't approve."

"I don't necessarily disapprove," Remus countered gently. "It depends on how well you have hidden yourself."

"Well enough, I think."

"Will you tell me, so I can decide for myself?"

Smiling, Harry shook his head. "Sorry, but no. The fewer people that know the better."

"Draco Malfoy knows."

"Yes. And he shot down the first two plans as not safe enough."

"Mm." Remus folded his hands on the tabletop in front of him. "And what if something happens to you? Will anyone know to raise the alarm?"

"Yes," Harry said firmly. "I am in frequent sight of someone else -- someone I trust not to betray me."

"And do you think I would betray you?"

"Not to Voldemort." Harry cocked his head. "Maybe to Dumbledore."

Sirius laughed, but Remus did not look amused. "I do not consider Dumbledore your enemy, Harry. Do you?"

"For the next three weeks, yeah."

"Harry," Remus said steadily, "I don't disbelieve that you *think* you're safe. But at your age, you know, it is common to feel as if you are immortal --"

"Believe me, I know I'm not!"

"-- even when you *know* you're not."

"I'm being careful, sir. Really."

"Last spring --"

"Look, I worked it out, then, okay? Why I'm so important. And I talked to Dumbledore about it, and he told me what my parents had done...." Harry trailed off, unable to continue. Remus looked stricken.

"What *we* had done too, Harry," Sirius said firmly, taking the pan off the heat and stepping over to lay a strong hand on Harry's shoulder. "We were all involved. We got caught up in it, you know, and it seemed like such a clever idea. *That's* the sort of thing that has Remus worried."

"That I'll be too clever, you mean?"

"Right." Sirius smiled engagingly. "In the manner of young men."

"All of you...." Harry considered that. "Wormtail, too?"

At their nods, Harry sighed. "So Voldemort knows."

"Yes," Remus said heavily. "He knows."

"Here, now!" Sirius reproved. "What's done is done." He grinned. "And another thing that's done is the mushrooms. Will you eat with us, Harry?"

"I just ate, really," Harry said. "Though those do smell good."

"Well, I'm putting them on a pork roast, but there are extra for toast, if you want some now." Sirius nudged him. "I always make about twice what I need, or we don't end up with enough."

"I didn't know you cooked," Harry said.

"I didn't have the chance on the run," Sirius pointed out. He shrugged. "Actually, I didn't cook much before; scrounged food for that long changed the idea of cooking from a chore to a treat."

Remembering the desperate hunger with which Sirius had attacked the leftover chicken he and his friends had brought out to his cave, years ago, Harry nodded. "Yeah, I can see that."

Belatedly, Remus summoned the spare chair from the side of the room to the table, and gestured to it. "Sit down, then," he invited.

Harry did, and did not protest when Sirius set a small plate down in front of him. "So," he said, "about this spell on me...."

Remus shook his head. "It's not on you now. It *was cast* on you, and you still have the effect."

"Whatever."

"The distinction is not unimportant. If the spell were on you now, it could be dispelled or detected."

"Okay. I'll try to be more precise. But anyway, I don't really understand why you did it. I mean, wouldn't that be too long to wait? It turns out not to have been, I suppose, but I can't imagine putting that much effort to something that would kill him fifteen to twenty years from now. Isn't that like saying you'll live with it until then?"

Remus sighed. "It did mean that none of us could defeat him earlier...."

"I sometimes wonder if that was why Peter betrayed us," Sirius interrupted. "Was that the point where he just couldn't live with the risk? We hadn't given up, though. Other people could have defeated him -- other people can still, you just have a better chance."

"But why not choose one of you," Harry persisted, "or your strongest ally?"

Shaking his head, Sirius went back to the stove. "You can't do that to an adult," he explained over his shoulder, as he took toast from the oven, "or even to a baby, really. We changed your essential ability to manipulate energy -- *his* energy -- and we gave you luck, besides. A developed human can't handle that level of alteration."

"Lily wasn't willing to risk it too far into the pregnancy, actually," Remus volunteered. "The source spell we built on advised casting before the seventh month, and she insisted it be by the fifth."

"Here," Sirius said, setting a rack of toast and a bowl onto the table. "Mushrooms." He sat down and took a slice of the toast. "Enjoy."

Despite taking a slice of toast and spooning some mushrooms onto it, Harry couldn't let the matter drop yet. "How did you link it to him?" he asked.

Remus and Sirius looked at each other uneasily.

"I ..." Sirius cleared his throat. "I feigned interest. In the movement. We ... met; I had a Portkey. As he leaned close, I cut him, and then portkeyed out."

"Between the blood on his knife and what had soaked into his sleeve, we had enough."

"So am I linked to the sleeve too?" Harry wasn't sure why that, of all the questions he could have asked, came out. Predictably, Sirius rolled his eyes.

"Yes, Harry," he said. "Should my second-best dress robes have ever magically attacked you, you could have rebounded that magical energy -- of which they had none -- upon them."

Harry chuckled. "Okay. Um, do you think that made it easier for random people to believe you'd been working for him?"

Again, a look passed between the men. Harry frowned at it. Sirius poked at his toast with a fork.

"I suspect that was more my family background," he said blandly.

"Oh, yeah!" Harry exclaimed. "Draco says his mother is one of your cousins; he was shocked that I didn't know you were from an old pureblood family. He thinks I'm woefully out of touch."

"Harry," Remus said wearily, "there is nothing about being from an old pureblood family that should interest you."

"Well *family* interests me," Harry retorted, "and don't you dare say it shouldn't." He pushed ahead, unwilling to listen. "Oh, Sirius, I met another cousin of yours, an Auror, you wouldn't know her--"

"Tonks?" Tension melted from the room as Sirius, who had been looking worried, smiled. "I've heard of her."

"Where did you--" Remus began, and then his face cleared. "Oh. The trial."

"Right! She was Draco's bodyguard."

Sirius snorted. "He must have loved that."

"They got along quite well, actually," Harry said hotly. He tried not to think about how Mrs. Malfoy had ignored her niece's name.

Remus cleared his throat. "Well," he said. "Good."

"I still think he's going to get you into trouble." Sirius growled. "From his testimony at the trial, he already has."

"Trouble I went into willingly," Harry pointed out.

"Oh, I don't doubt that."

"Harry." In comparison to Sirius, Remus was gentle and mild. Harry didn't believe for a moment that he was easier to dissuade. "We *do* worry about you, and you cannot say that it is without reason. If Draco Malfoy -- or anyone -- gives you advice that you find suspect, I would be grateful if you would give us the chance to contribute an opinion."

Harry hesitated. That was very delicately put. And he had been worrying about Red Caps, not that Remus or Sirius was a Potions expert, as far as he knew-- He nearly laughed at the thought as he recalled what Remus had taught. He was an expert in Dark Creatures, which was even better.

"Actually...." he said slowly.

Although Sirius sat back in obvious surprise, Remus didn't blink. "Go ahead, Harry."

"Well, it's.... He even pointed out it was a bit dodgy, but Draco's very good at Potions, you know, and he thought that we might be able to brew something protective from Red Cap parts--"

Sirius snorted. "*Not* a protective creature."

"Yes, but Voldemort has tried to kill me multiple times, and did kill my parents, and he was talking about harnessing blood guilt."

They made no immediate outcry. A shared look, an uneasy shifting of position, and Sirius started.

"That would be, er, Dark--"

"But not a bad theory," Remus concluded. "You should keep it to research for now, of course -- you're not to confront him. You need to learn energy manipulation--"

"Let's discuss it when you leave school," Sirius said.

"Okay," Harry said. It wasn't lying really; they could discuss it then. "But Red Caps ... they're not intelligent, are they? They seem sort of humanlike."

Remus shook his head. "Only in form. They are entirely a magical manifestation of violence,

with any thought or will borrowed from the hatred left by the dead. A Kneazle is closer to human."

"Okay." Harry relaxed back. "I just wanted to be sure, before I let him look into it." He made a face. "Actually, I can't stop him, and he probably already is, but before I agreed."

Another shared look, and Remus and Sirius both smiled. "I'm glad that you asked," Remus said. "You're a good boy, Harry."

"A fine young man," Sirius corrected.

Harry ate his toast and was glad he had reason to blush.

When Harry returned to the shop, the twins had left, but on the crate by his bed were two doses of Polyjuice, a few ginger hairs caught in folded parchment, and a note:

You should only go out as one of us while we are working in here. (Of course! It wouldn't do for us to be seen in three places!) Until then, these are only for an emergency.

See you tomorrow!

The next afternoon, while the twins were working, Harry took advantage of the offer. He was surprised to find that Polyjuice Potion with Fred's hair wasn't disgusting, just hotly spicy and a bit odd. It was the perfect time, he decided, to return to Gringotts and get the money he would need for sphinx feathers. He stuffed his Invisibility Cloak in his bag, just in case, and headed out.

He had already been to the bank, to Flourish & Blotts, and to a confectionary, when he spotted a familiar face. Blaise Zabini was sitting out on the patio at Fortescue's, eating ice cream and reading from a small book. The tables near him were empty.

Harry stopped and considered. He had wanted to talk to Zabini. Of course, now he was Fred, whom Zabini had no reason to talk to, and no one with a drop of sense would believe Fred if he said he was someone else on Polyjuice. Harry checked the time. He had less than ten minutes until his own form returned. Perhaps he could send Susara over with a note to ask for a parley?

At the thought of his snake, he reconsidered. Quickly, he crossed the street, went up the steps to the patio, and slid into the chair across from Zabini.

Zabini looked up, and the nascent welcome on his face turned to disgust. "Get lost, Weasley."

"I'm not a Weasley," Harry replied, his voice low. "I just grabbed a hair last time I was visiting."

Zabini rolled his eyes. "Right. And I'm Merlin's lost bastard."

Harry laughed. "Really? Brilliant." He turned his thoughts to his snake. "Susara!"

Zabini twitched at the sound of Parseltongue. When a torclinde wove its way from the sleeve of Harry's robes and wrapped around his arm, he sucked for a moment at his lip.

"Ah. What was my previous debt to you?"

"A bottle of cognac," Harry answered.

Slowly, Zabini nodded. He scraped up some ice cream with his spoon. "Well. What can I do for you, Weasleyish?"

Harry smiled. He could feel that it looked a little hesitant. Zabini was a real person to him -- more than Bulstrode had been when she had run into him -- and he felt shyer with him. "I want a parley. Meet me in five minutes, in the alley behind Flourish & Blotts?"

Zabini shook his head. "Too damn obvious, P-- pet. Tell you what -- there's a nightclub down Nimue Close."

"It wouldn't be open at this hour."

"Exactly. And I'm very good with locks."

Harry grinned. "Yeah? Me too."

Zabini shot him an odd look, but didn't ask. "I'll meet you there, then. Ten minutes, because I'm not leaving my ice cream, and it's a longer walk than Floor and Bore."

After agreeing to the change, Harry ducked around a corner and put on his cloak. Invisible, he returned to watch Zabini. The boy didn't seem to have moved in the few seconds he had been out of Harry's sight, and he made no move to contact or signal anyone, as far as Harry could see. When he left Fortescue's, Harry followed.

Zabini walked directly to Nimue Close. He opened the wrought iron gate at the front and stepped inside. Harry had to move quickly to get inside with him, and he was pulling in his breath to fit past Zabini in the narrow way.

There were four doors off Nimue Close, two with hanging signs. Blaise immediately set to casting charms at one, and then to working at it with two devices from his pocket. When he got it open, Harry slipped in ahead of him and looked around. He was in the front of a large room, with carpet at the edges and a smell of long-stale beer. The furniture looked solid and hard to move.

On the other side of the dance floor stood a bar, bottles of liquor arrayed behind it. From a shimmer in the air before it, Harry judged it to have stronger protections than the door. He cast a quick charm to detect living mammals, and it picked up nothing other than himself and Zabini, and a few little speckles of mice.

The slight glow caused by the charm was invisible to anyone other than the caster, but it did draw his attention to Zabini, who was standing nervously at the slightly open door, presumably waiting for him to arrive. Harry put his hood down and parted the cloak.

"You might as well shut--"

Zabini whirled, wand out, and then sagged in relief. He closed the door. "Honestly, Potter! Couldn't you have warned me?"

"And not seen if you sent an owl?" Harry returned. Zabini sighed.

"A point," he said, walking towards Harry. "And don't think it hasn't occurred to me, after you came to me so readily during the trial. But I've thought about You-Know-Who, and the state of people like Malfoy and Nott, and I've decided I can do without that sort of favor." A few yards from Harry, he threw himself down on a wide cushioned seat that looked like a giant's footstool. It could have held half a dozen people if they all faced outward. Blaise leaned back, holding in one knee to balance. "So. That parley. Did you track me here?"

"No. I was just shopping. I've disappeared, you know."

From the interested flicker of Zabini's eyes, he hadn't known, which to Harry meant he was allied with neither the Order nor Voldemort -- at least not actively.

"Shopping?" Zabini asked lightly. His eyes dropped to Harry's invisible body. "Or stealing?"

Harry rolled his eyes, and settled on another of the strange seats a few feet away. "Please. I always leave money. Ask Draco if you don't believe me."

Zabini snorted in amusement. "*He* doesn't."

"Well." Harry shrugged. "It's something we fought about, early on. He couldn't see why I did, and I said it was important to me that shopkeepers have money to live on. He has trouble understanding how that matters, unless someone makes him think about it."

"I can't see that he'd care," Zabini retorted. His look grew more wistful as he studied Harry. "But maybe he does for you."

"Sorry," Harry said, feeling his face heat.

"No, you're not."

"Well, not that I have him. But ..." Harry dropped his eyes for a moment, but then, remembering the danger, raised them again. "I think you were at the wrong time for him. He hadn't grown up enough for you, yet. You might do for after me, but I don't want *anyone* after me." He knew he sounded fierce at the last, but it was half frustration. He wouldn't get what he wanted any more than Zabini had, and that already rankled.

"Don't worry about it," Zabini answered. "He was fun, but he doesn't matter to me much, in that way. I wish it had ended better, but not that it didn't end."

"Okay," Harry said with a nod. "So."

"So." Zabini smiled wryly. "That's sorted. You want that favor, now?"

"Um..." Harry shrugged. "Not really. More the other way round."

Zabini cocked his head to the side. "You want me more in your debt."

"Slytherin," Harry taunted. "Look, I'm making an apothecary purchase in Knockturn Alley, and since I saw you..." He shrugged. "Anything you want me to pick up for you?"

Zabini blinked. "You're ... *what*?"

"I'm going down Knockturn for potions ingredients, and there's no need for all of us to do it. I'm already picking up a few things for one of your housemates. Want anything?"

"Excuse me. *Who* are you?"

Harry made a face. "Harry. Take it or leave it."

"Fine. I'd like a pint of unicorn blood."

"Not on your life."

"Well, that's a relief. So you'll pick up anything that *you* find acceptable, is that it?"

"Yes. Tosser."

Blaise grinned. "Well, as I'm currently lacking a gorgeous lover, yes. Hm." He leaned forward, his feet coming to the ground. "Why? If I may ask."

Harry shrugged. "Well, I need some things. I expect other people--"

"Potter, I don't actually believe that you are a gormless idiot. *Why?*"

"If I buy things for multiple people, what I might be doing doesn't show."

"Ah." Blaise straightened. "Well, then... would you buy me a quarter-ounce of gargoyle dust?"

Harry cocked his head to the side, trying to recall anything he had heard about gargoyle dust, but nothing came to mind. "What's it for?"

"A few things, but I want it for memory enhancement."

"Is it dangerous? I mean, I don't know anyone else ...."

"If you use it constantly, yes, but the proscription is more that true gargoyles are rare. I'm not planning to take it all term -- just for a few key sessions and for N.E.W.T.s."

"Isn't that cheating?" Harry reddened as he heard the words come out of his mouth. *That was a stupid thing to say to a Slytherin.*

"What, do you think it would be fair otherwise?" Blaise scoffed. "I don't have a *name,* Potter. I don't have a family that *endows* places. I don't even have custom-tailored dress robes. When I leave school and look for a job, all I've got is my O.W.L.s and N.E.W.T.s. I'm buggered if I pit *merit* against a Malfoy or a Parkinson. We won't even mention *you.*"

Harry tensed. "Actually, I've worried about being too much of a security liability."

"Huh." Blaise shrugged. "All right. You're a special case, but you do see what I mean? And it's tempting to support You-Know-Who, because in theory his lot wants that I'm a pureblood to count for something, but looking at what they *do*, and who they kill, I'm not so sure they bear that out in actions." He scowled. "So was that a no?"

"No, just a question. I mean, I'll look it up, but if what you say seems right, fine. I'll get it. What is it likely to cost?"

Zabini laughed uneasily. "I don't know. I'll go up to 20G; don't get it if it's more than that."

"Okay. Would a smaller quantity be useful if it is?"

"Hm." Zabini's knee came up again as he rocked back. "Yes. For half that I'd go up to 15."

Harry nodded. "All right. Payment on delivery?"

"That's fine. Hogwarts Express if we can?"

Harry nodded. "Right. Some dungeon corridor if we can't."

Zabini shook his head. "Care of Magical Creatures. We can duck behind a rhododendron and no

one should notice."

When Harry got back to the shop, the twins were waiting for him. They had apparently stopped working, unless they were doing the planning sort of working; he found them at the table in the back room, with two mostly empty pint glasses of dark beer. Whatever they were saying was cut short by his arrival.

"Harry!" One jumped to his feet, grinning broadly.

"Thought we'd have to come after you, mate." That was George, Harry decided, now standing too. He downed the remainder of his beer.

Harry shrugged. "Nah. I ran into a ... an acquaintance and put on my cloak to see what he was up to."

"Mm."

"Friend, enemy, or just fit?"

Harry laughed. "None, really. Well, maybe fit, but not my thing. One of the Slytherins."

"Right."

"Good to know you're not into all of them."

"One's enough, thanks. They're exhausting." Harry dropped down to a crate and yawned. "So ... I was wondering something."

"How two such witty and gorgeous men as ourselves manage to stay unattached?"

"The load-bearing capacity of jelly?"

"What's for dinner?"

"I frequently wonder what's for dinner."

Harry laughed. "Look, just ... after I go back to Hogwarts, I may need some things. Would you be willing to buy me potions ingredients and owl them to me?"

"Ah!" Fred exclaimed. "The source Outside."

"You can owl-order from apothecaries, you know."

"Yeah, but--" Harry ducked his head. "I'm likely to want a few things I won't want my name attached to."

Fred nodded knowingly.

"Any particular things?" George asked.

"Well ... Red Cap parts? Skull dust would be best."

Silenced, the twins looked at each other. Harry felt suddenly awkward. "It was -- Draco feels I can use Voldemort's blood guilt against him, and build a protection. Remus thought the theory was sound, but he doesn't want me to do it until I leave school. He's afraid I'll go looking for trouble, or something, but really, Voldemort has found me enough times that I'd like to be prepared."

Slowly, the twins relaxed. George nodded. "That would be...."

"-- reasonable," Fred concluded. "Anything else?"

Harry shrugged. "I don't know, yet. Draco's still researching how to do it. And since I'll have to be nice to some of the other Slytherins--"

"You do not!"

"Harry! Think of the principle of it!"

"The *principle*, as Draco says, is that if he has to be nice to mine, I have to be nice to his." Harry shrugged. "He has a point. I do expect him to be civil to Hermione and Ron and Neville, so I can't really go after Zabini, right?"

George crossed his arms over his chest. "And what does this have to do with apothecary purchases?"

"Well, I don't want to seem too well-behaved. I mean, it's not natural, right? And besides, it will be stressful."

"Mm?"

"So I'll have to play some tricks on someone, whether it's Ravenclaws, or Hufflepuffs, or Slytherins that Draco doesn't like."

"Slytherins," Fred said promptly.

"Whatever. So I may need things for projects I haven't devised yet."

"Dear little Harrykins," Fred said, looking past him at George.

"I'm so proud of him."

"Don't get ahead of yourself," Harry said, heating. "You're willing to consider it, though?"

"Oh, absolutely."

"Just tell us what you want."

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Chapter: 11

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11 -- Plans and Preparations

Dear Harry,

School letters have more than the usual information this year, and Professor McGonagall was distressed at yours being returned. She has distributed copies of your letter (sealed) to a number of people. All of us have assured her that we cannot contact you, of course, but she is hoping that you will initiate contact with one of her chosen list. It might seem simplest for me to send you mine, but considering that the headmaster has a certain amount of authority over me whilst I am in residence, it would not do for my copy to be the one that reaches you. As the werewolf has proved trustworthy, and I am quite certain that he has a copy accessible, I suggest that you pay him a visit.

In other news, the Council of Birthright and Family Affairs found in my favor, although we expect at least one challenge. Despite the theoretical return of my theoretical fortune, I am still bored, and want school to start. Above all, I look forward to your return. I may, perhaps, even be anticipating the challenge of managing my housemates again. I hope your August has been as tedious as mine, as if it has not, either something has gone wrong or you have failed to take adequate care.

Your owl disappeared for two days, and when she returned, she deigned to sit near me, but would not accept a sausage. I believe she is looking for you, and hopes you will return to me.

With longing,

Draco

Harry wanted to reply immediately, but he held back. Draco would not approve of him meeting with Bulstrode, he was certain, so it would be better to have that done before he wrote back. However, there was nothing to keep him from an immediate visit to Darkmoon Den.

He wore the cloak again, but he stumbled this time. By the fire, Remus looked up.

"Harry?"

Chuckling, Harry opened the cloak. "Got it in one."

"Oddly, I don't have many invisible visitors. How is life in hiding?"

"Dull," Harry said, almost honestly. "I miss having people to talk to. It's better than the Dursleys' though, and I won't risk the Burrow." He shrugged. "So, I thought I could visit you again before school started. Where's Sirius?"

"Out having a run." Remus chuckled. "He doesn't like being cooped up, I'm afraid. I imagine you're rather the same."

"Yeah." The room had a sofa as well as the one chair. Harry sat on the end nearest Remus. "I have a new appreciation of what it must be like for him. And I've been doing this for less than three weeks." Speculatively, he looked at the door. "I wish I could turn into a dog."

"You could probably learn to turn into something, with proper effort. You're a talented pupil, as I recall."

"Thanks."

"I mean it quite sincerely." Remus set his book aside. "Now, I expect you are actually here for a letter?"

"Letter?" Harry widened his eyes innocently, but then ruined the effect by grinning. "I am so bad at that! Yes, I heard there was a letter." He laughed. It felt good to be here. "You should be flattered, you know. Draco described you as 'trustworthy.'"

"Really?" Remus's brow creased as his eyebrows rose. "Well. I'll be happy when the feeling is mutual."

"Remus," Harry warned.

"What? I am entitled to my opinion. You would do well to have friends who keep their own and express them honestly."

Harry rolled his eyes. "I do, I think."

"Really."

"Really. I may have had too much influence on Ron, at one point, but not in the last three years."

"And Draco?"

"He says what he thinks." Harry considered that. "Well, mostly. Sometimes he's too subtle for me."

"Subtle. Would you give me an example?"

"Well, he thought I knew he was interested in me, for example. And I didn't, but I'm kind of clueless sometimes. I mean, it was Seamus that told me, and I think Hermione knew, so he can't have been exactly unreadable." Harry didn't want to be taking about this. "Do you know who the new Defense against the Dark Arts teacher is?"

"No. Why would I?"

"I don't know. You know people." Harry shrugged. "I'll find out soon enough, I suppose."

"You don't look happy."

"Well, most of them have been awful. Four out of six."

"I gather I am one of the exceptions?"

"You and Horsyr."

"*Professor* Horsyr, Harry."

Harry grinned. "Not any more, but okay. Professor Horsyr."

Still looking rather disapproving, Remus stood and opened a drawer in a small table. "Your letter," he said, handing it to Harry. "I'll tell Professor McGonagall that you received it, shall I?"

Harry nodded. He fingered the letter, which was thicker than usual. He wondered if it had some personal message added --telling him to behave himself, no doubt -- or if the added bulk was all

due to the extra information for seventh year students. "And that I won't be visiting you again."

Remus raised his eyebrows. "Would you if I *don't* tell her?"

"During the next twelve days? Probably not."

"Ah. But later?"

"Of course! When I'm out of school. Of *course,* Remus."

"All right."

While Harry was wondering if he needed to say more, there was a bark at the door, and then Remus went to open it. Only when the dog was safely inside the cottage did he change form.

"Harry!"

Then it was hugs and friendly conversation, and Harry tucked the letter away for later.

Back at the shop -- and it was starting to look like a shop, now -- Harry drew the letter its envelope and unfolded it. On the first of two sheets, he read the following message:

Dear Mr. Potter,

August is drawing to a close, and it is time to consider your return to school. At least, I earnestly hope you will be returning. As school owls were unable to deliver your original letter, I have taken the liberty of distributing copies of this one to several people who believe that you may contact them before September. Should you read this, please do me the courtesy of acknowledging its receipt.

Seventh year studies are taxing and require dedication, effort, and focus. As for all seventh-year Gryffindors, I have reviewed your O.W.L.s in comparison with last year's marks in order to evaluate what changes to your schedule might optimize your performance in your N.E.W.T.s. Please give serious consideration to my advice, whilst remembering also that as an adult wizard poised to enter wizarding society, it is your duty to remain true to yourself.

Recommended:

Charms: As it forms the core of magical practice, I recommend continuing with this course to all but those most dedicated to narrow specialization.

Defense against the Dark Arts: I need not tell you this is your shining talent. Continue with it.

Transfiguration: As your professor, I believe that this class challenges you to develop a theoretical understanding of magic, establishing a valuable counterpart to your natural strengths in intuition and will.

Questionable:

Care of Magical Creatures: This course is likely to be of little use to you professionally, but it is also only a minor drain on your schedule. If you feel the time outside benefits your overall outlook, it may be worth continuing. Use your own best judgment.

Potions: Although your Potions marks improved greatly last year, this is a time-consuming course of study and a difficult N.E.W.T. to obtain. Continue in it only if you are likely to pursue a career which requires or weights in favor of this N.E.W.T. (e.g., Auror, Mediwizard, Magical Pest Controller).

Not Recommended:

Divination: I see no reason whatsoever for you to continue with this course of study.

Herbology: Due to the effort involved in replenishing stocks lost in last year's incident, Professor Sprout has asked that only truly dedicated N.E.W.T.-level students sign up for Herbology this year. Continue in it only if you are likely to pursue a career which requires or weights towards this N.E.W.T. (e.g., Mediwizard, Landscaper, Herbologist).

History of Magic: While it is my hope that you will someday acquire some understanding of the history of our culture and knowledge, you clearly will not learn it from Professor Binns.

For each two courses that you drop, you should consider adding an optional course. I recommend the following options:

Cursebreaking: The incoming Defense Against the Dark Arts instructor plans to teach an introductory Cursebreaking course for sixth and seventh year students. As one of our best Defense against the Dark Arts students, I believe this would be a natural fit for your talents.

Symbology: Professor Sinistra offers this as a one-year overview in runes, glyphs, and other symbols for seventh-year students who have not taken Ancient Runes.

While there are years of experience behind my recommendations, you know yourself best. Consider your interests and aspirations, and come prepared to discuss your final schedule with me on the second of September.

Best Regards,

Professor Minerva McGonagall

Head of Gryffindor and Deputy Headmistress, Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry

Harry stared at the paper. Cursebreaking? He couldn't help wondering if Bill was the new Defense instructor. In any case, he *knew* he wanted to take that course. He would be happy to be rid of all the Not Recommended courses as well, so that gave him one free slot. He looked back up at the word "Potions," and the strong line beneath it and shook his head. "Any other year," he muttered.

There was a tickle of motion across his collarbone as Susara, coiled comfortably around his neck, raised her head. *"Master?"*

"I have schedule recommendations from school. Any other year, I would have been thrilled to drop Potions. Now I want to stay in it."

"You should do what you please," she replied placidly, and he laughed.

"*The professor said the same*."

He moved on to look at the second and third sheets. Because exact schedules for his year were not set until the first day of school, it listed the supplies for all the lessons he might take, with a reminder that most would be available by owl order once at school. Of course, this also gave him a way to get a better sense of what the options might be like. He should go to Flourish & Blotts and look over the required and suggested texts.

Once that plan was set, he recalled the matter of Millicent Bulstrode. He was due to meet her tomorrow, although he had deliberately not set a place. The book shop was a natural location for her to look for him, as that was where they had run into each other before. It would be simple, if he trusted her.

He didn't. Draco had said she was a neutral, but that didn't make her an ally. He didn't doubt she could get a good deal of money for betraying him. On the positive side, money didn't seem to be what motivated her. He thought over everything she had said, trying to get a grasp on what did. *Respect*, perhaps, but while she wouldn't get that from Voldemort, she might be misled into believing she would. *Freedom* -- which had the same problems. He wished he had at least made their second meeting closer to the first of September, so his secrets needed less protection. On the other hand, that would have given him less time to make purchases.

And once he found her, where could he take her that was private, but didn't give those secrets away? He considered reusing the nightclub, but he hadn't asked Zabini what protections he had

dismantled, and getting caught by Aurors would be not only dangerous, but embarrassing. He had thought up and discarded a dozen schemes before the most useful modification of Zabini's occurred to him -- he would lead Bulstrode out into Muggle London and make similar use of some Muggle place. The protections would be easier to disable, and if he by some ill chance failed, he could deal with Muggle police easily enough.

So he scouted out the far door of the Leaky Cauldron, questioned the twins (who had not, to his surprise, dealt with Muggle alarm systems, but were impressed that he had), and made a quick trip to the book shop to look for information. It occurred to him, as he settled down with a copy of *Living within the Invasion -- How to Ignore Muggle Intrusions* to wonder how other readers used this information, but he quickly pushed that thought away. Wizard thieves were the MLE's problem; Voldemort was his.

After lunch the next day, armed with a hip flask of Polyjuice, his Invisibility Cloak, his school list, and a fresh knowledge of how to tie Muggle alarm systems in knots, he went down to Flourish & Blotts to check out the required texts for Cursebreaking and Symbology.

Millicent was there, as he expected. As Fred, he even gave her a long look as he was paying for his purchases, but outside, he ducked out of sight, tossed on his cloak, and waited. Approaching her in the bookshop would be efficient, but dangerously predictable.

He caught her on the street, walking towards the Leaky Cauldron.

"Hi."

"Shove off, Weasley."

He grinned. "I've been told you should go through. To the Muggle side, you know."

She sent him a suspicious look, which quickly turned contemptuous. "In these clothes?"

"Can't you cast a glamour?" Her shuttered expression told him that she couldn't, and he silently berated himself for thoughtlessness. "I'll do it for you."

She snorted. "I may not be brilliant, Weasley, but I'm not a fool."

He frowned. He couldn't actually blame her for not wanting one of the twins to change her appearance. "Well, is there anyone you would trust?"

"I'm here alone. Your friend should have told you that. I doubt he'd see me elsewise."

"Look, what if you conjure a mirror, all right, and then I do the glamour? We can do it in the space behind the pub."

The bins were just as smelly as Muggle ones, the overly hopeful grass that poked between the

stones just as pathetic, but they did have a modicum of privacy in the space between the brick wall and the back door to the Leaky Cauldron. He changed only her clothes, so that she appeared to be wearing black chinos, a light blue shirt, and a loose, dark blue, sweatshirt jacket. She frowned at herself in the mirror, conjured a new one and frowned again, patted her hands down her sides to feel that her clothes were actually unchanged, and then, with a sigh, nodded.

"All right. Lead on, Weasley -- and no tricks."

He led her through the pub, and a few streets away from it on the Muggle side, to a nondescript door that led to stairs up to several offices, all of which should be empty for the weekend. The outer door had a simple lock, easily dealt with by Alohomora, but the individual businesses had better protections. He tested several for alarm systems, opened the first one without, and turned to usher her into the Muggle space.

She had her wand out, but pointed to the side, as her arms were crossed over her chest. "Is he in there, Weasley? I'm not going any further until he shows himself."

He could see her eyes flick to the side, calculating her escape path -- a short, straight run, and then a dive down the stairs with a cushioning spell was how he'd do it. Smiling, he leaned in the doorway. "I'm Harry, Bulstrode. It's Polyjuice." He managed a laugh. "I thought I'd be Ron, which might cause a bit less suspicion...."

She snorted. "Ronald Weasley talking to a Slytherin? Not a bit of it."

"Point."

She scowled. "And I still don't move until it wears off."

"It should be any moment now."

"But you're good with glamours."

"I still need a wand for them."

"Of course." She frowned. "What were you sending at the other doors?"

"Oh -- looking for alarm systems. This one doesn't have one."

"Harry Potter knows how to detect Muggle alarm systems," she said, a touch of sarcastic disbelief in her tone.

He shrugged. He could feel his form about to take hold, and had to stay alert through it -- he didn't distrust her, really, but he didn't *trust* her either. "Wouldn't I just?" he countered. "You know I never stay where I belong."

She snorted. "True enough." Her body tensed, but she held her position, wand pointed away, as he clenched his teeth through the change, trying not to double over from the pain. In a few seconds, it had passed, and as he caught his breath, she slipped her wand into her sleeve, slightly hampered by not being able to see it. "Okay, Potter. Let's go inside."

The office had the sort of look Harry had expected, with matching furnishings of a regimented fashion -- flawlessly executed, but not truly attractive, just as his Aunt Petunia's precise flower beds would never be beautiful. He sat in the swiveling padded chair behind the blond wood veneer desk and put his feet up on it. It was a comfortable position and one that allowed him to keep his wand at hand without appearing to. Millicent pulled up the solid chair beside the desk and sat in that, her feet flat on the floor and her elbows on knees. She also was prepared to move, Harry recognized, but in a very different way. However, the first thing she did was to swing a bag from her shoulder and pull out of it a sheaf of notes and a half-sized bottle of wine, which she handed to Harry.

"I brought refreshments. You can unseal it."

Slytherin manners, he thought, and grinned. "Sure." He dumped the pens from a pencil cup, and transfigured that and a blown glass paperweight into glasses. The seal on the wine was intact. He slit it with his pocketknife and uncorked the bottle with a charm.

"Never knew you were so good at that sort of thing," Millicent said, taking the glass of wine that he handed her. "Transfiguration, I mean. They almost match."

"Yeah, well." He shrugged. "I got a lot better at Transfiguration last year, when I was going over things with Draco."

"You're good at glamours, too," she said flatly.

"Self-preservation, really. You'd be good at them too, if your life depended on it."

She sighed. "It might."

"Oh?"

"Well, not like yours does." She took a swallow from her glass, put it down, and lifted the papers. "So. I've finished my research -- the first round, anyway."

"And?" he asked, belatedly taking a sip of the wine. It was good -- clean and somehow giving an impression of spice.

"Well, the first set isn't so bad. That one is to make changes in my bone and muscle structure -- I'll get slightly taller, and my hips will change, for example. The sources all say I'll be a bit achy

through it, but the components are all ones used in healing potions. I still don't want to buy them openly, of course, because no one's going to think anything good of a student needing that many unauthorized healing potions, but that's the worst of it." She took a quick breath. "If I start that in late September, I should be done with the course during December, but as that is also the point at which it can be paused for a few weeks, I plan not to start the second course until after the Christmas holiday."

Harry studied her. "These will be visible changes."

Her shoulders sagged. "Yes. I'll need glamours."

"And over Christmas?"

"Oh Merlin! I hadn't thought of that. Maybe I can stay at school." She closed her eyes for a moment. "No. My mother will expect me to attend all the balls and parties...."

Harry sighed. "Well, we have until December to teach you to do your own glamours, then. Or maybe if you saved hairs from before you started the course, you could polyjuice into your former self?"

Shaking her head, she sat back. "I don't know. It's worth trying, I suppose." She shrugged. "Anyway, the next set of potions is taken for nine weeks, and then a slightly different formula for nine days. You won't like that one."

He braced himself. "Don't say unicorn blood."

"Oh, Merlin, no! No, it's satyr's hooves -- well that's the difficult bit."

"Rare?" he asked.

"Not so much, as trimmings will do, though they need to be fresh, but it's mostly used for, uh, getting it up." Her face reddened. "For blokes that can't, you know."

"Oh!" Harry found himself heating at the idea. "Um...."

"Of course, the quantities I'll need would be enough to supply half a dozen men for that time."

Harry bit his lip. "Um ... I'm throwing marathon orgies?"

She threw back her head and laughed. "Maybe."

"Well, I might want to consult Draco; he's good at alibis. Would you mind if I told him, once things are underway?"

She frowned. "If you swear him to secrecy.... Oh, give me a while to think about it. I'll tell you

during September."

"Okay."

"You can back out of this whenever you like, of course," she added brusquely. "But if you do, my side of the deal is off, too. That's not a threat; I just won't protect him."

"Understood." Harry took another swallow of the wine. "What does this potion do for you?"

"It will make me more masculine. I'll get facial hair --" she rolled her eyes -- "well, more of it -- and my breasts will shrink, and my, um, one of my female parts will become more like a penis. The final formulation will add blood and semen from a man, and that will complete that change."

"So that's it?"

"No. There's one more potion that I need to take for two weeks. That will get rid of my female organs."

"Is that as nasty as it sounds?"

Millicent looked slightly green. "The things inside shrink down and then come out through my cunt, which will seal behind them. So, yeah -- nasty. And I'll be bedridden for the last day and night."

Harry winced. "Okay. So...."

"*That's* the potion which will need the dodgiest supplies. As you can expect, the main components are Dark, and best known for some horrible poisons. The suspicion will be of causing harm, not hiding it."

"Understood." Harry wondered what other sources he had if the twins balked. "Well, I'll do my best." He set his feet down on the floor. "Can you give me more specifics?"

"Better than that," she said. "I made a copy of my notes." She handed him the sheaf of papers she had been holding, and Harry took it without thinking. It wasn't a portkey, apparently, and his hand didn't shrivel up when he touched the parchment, so he shrunk the lot and tucked them in his pocket. "All right, then. I'll look over the components for the first set, and if I can, I'll get them for you. If I can't, I'll let you know by owl as soon as possible."

"Good enough." She drained her wine and stood, holding out her hand. "A pleasure doing business with you, Potter."

"Bulstrode," he said in acknowledgement, shaking her hand. "Can you find your way back to the Cauldron?"

She shook her head. "Through that mess? I'll just apparate, thanks. See you in September!" With a grin and a clap of collapsing air, she vanished. Harry left quickly, locking the door behind him.

He took his time about getting back to the shop, doing some shopping and taking advantage of the press on the Tube to collect some stray hairs from forgettable-looking Muggles of roughly his size and build. He was just putting his cloak away when the twins came into the room.

"Harry!"

"What've you got?"

Embarrassed, Harry looked back at the box on his bed. "Er ... cognac? Mostly? I was out on the Muggle side, today."

They walked over. Fred opened the carton and pulled out a bottle. He frowned at it for a moment and then let out a low whistle. "Rather dear, isn't it?"

Harry sighed. "It's made from champagne."

George leaned against the wall, his arms crossing over his chest. "So, Harrykins, why are you buying *that*?"

Leaning against the bed, Harry took the bottle from Fred. "Because my introduction to drinking was from the Malfoy heir? Why, would you suggest something else?"

"Er, beer?" George said.

"I don't think a year's supply of beer would fit in my school trunk."

"Ah. Well, I had wondered about the volume."

"We may still be wondering about the volume."

"But you should try firewhisky," George said more brightly.

"Or even Muggle whisky."

"You'll be in the heart of Scotland in another week."

"Why bring French booze from London?"

"Er..." Harry shrugged. "Can I *buy* whisky in Hogsmeade?"

Fred sat down. "You *are* of age, you know."

"I suppose. I figured everything there would get back to Dumbledore."

"Ah."

"Well, a lot does."

"But we recommend the Hogshead. Anything the barman serves, he'll sell you by the bottle."

"Discreetly."

Harry thought about this, and then nodded. "All right. For now, would you like to try some French booze from London?"

George grinned. "We're always open to new experiences, aren't we Fred?"

"Especially ones with a fifteen Galleon price tag, offered for free," Fred agreed. He summoned three mismatched glasses from the kitchen. With a snort, Harry turned them into snifters.

"There," he said, handing the first to George. "Now it looks expensive too." He gave a second to Fred and then poured one for himself.

"I have to say...." Fred began.

"We were wondering..."

Fred, who had just taken a sip, coughed.

"Hm?" Harry said. He was still inhaling the fumes off his.

"Definitely whisky. Bloody strong, that is!"

"Oh. Um, when I said 'made from champagne,' I meant '*distilled* from.'"

"So, as we were saying...." George resumed, having tasted his more cautiously.

"We were wondering if this drinking thing was entirely made up."

"Not having seen any of it--"

"In over two weeks."

"Oh. Well, exaggerated." Harry shrugged. "Though we did overdo it sometimes. Especially me, I suppose."

They shared a glance. "Malfoy didn't keep you company?" Fred asked.

"He wanted control more, I think." Harry grinned. "Afraid he'd tell me I was hot, maybe."

George snorted. "Think much of yourself?"

"Well, it's what he says now." Harry stuck his tongue out at George. "Which gives us a few better things to do when we hide out together."

Fred laughed. "I think you may have over-packed, then!"

"Well, Draco won't have been out, so it's for two." Harry tried not to look embarrassed. "Okay. Maybe. But I need bribes too."

"Now you're just making excuses," George said, shaking his hair back.

"Probably. Can we say we're done?"

"Probably," Fred mimicked. He lifted his head. "Actually, we wanted to ask you a favor."

"Oh? Don't you know better than to hassle me beforehand, yet?"

Fred waved off the objection. "Just -- it will make sense."

"See, this weekend, and the next--"

"The two before Hogwarts starts."

"Are the biggest shopping weekends of the season."

"And the shop's almost ready."

"Would you mind moving to our flat?"

"For a few days?"

Harry stared. "I came here to avoid--"

"But that was then!"

"The enemy's already scoped it, don't you think?"

"Just for Saturday and Sunday."

Harry sighed. "Oh..." On the verge of agreement, he stopped. "Look, part of why I felt this was safe was it wasn't widely known to be yours."

"Just next weekend, then? The Hogwarts Express is on Monday."

Harry considered this. It wasn't too dangerous, and it would make a big difference to the business. "Okay, you can open. I won't move to your flat, though. This is the *office*. No one should see it."

"But what if someone notices?"

"You can't be entirely quiet."

"Yeah, but what if I just take a flask of polyjuice and leave for the day? I can go the zoo, or something."

"As us?"

"Nah. While I was out, I picked up a few hairs from passing Muggles. It should be safe enough."

"All right."

"But you need some way to signal us."

"In case it's not."

"We can charm a set of rings."

"If you take yours off, ours will burn."

"And you need to bring the portkey that Lupin gave you."

"Okay." Harry grinned. "Sorted."

That night, he wrote two letters.

Professor McGonagall,

I received your letter from Remus Lupin. I would be happy to meet with you when I return to Hogwarts, but I'm fairly sure that I want to take these courses:

Defense against the Dark Arts

Transfiguration

Charms

Potions

Cursebreaking

Symbology

I've bought all the books already. I'll see you on the first of September! (I wouldn't miss it for anything.)

Regards,

Harry

Dear Draco,

I miss you terribly. I miss you every night, and I miss you when something interesting happens and I want to tell you about it, and I miss you when nothing's going on, and I know that together, we'd have fun somehow.

I probably haven't been as bored as you, though -- I have the twins to entertain me. I've also been out a few times, and I've met up with Bulstrode and Zabini (separately), so, yeah, probably not as careful as you'd like, but I promise I was very careful with both of them.

Do you want to take Cursebreaking with me? The texts look interesting, and if the professor is at all competent, it should be a great class. I'm also staying in Potions, though I'm sure Professor McGonagall would rather I dropped it.

Should we meet in our place after the Welcoming Feast, or maybe after lights out that night?

Love,

Harry

The next two weeks passed slowly. Harry acquired sphinx feathers, gargoyle dust, and the first batch of the harmless components for Millicent's first potion. Some components had to be fresh; he estimated that he would need two deliveries from Fred and George. The quantity required for

a three-month course was also more than he could walk into an apothecary and buy anonymously, but the twins, as commercial producers, should have an easier time with that. He decided he would tell them that he had formed an unofficial dueling club with some friends, and that they needed to make some custom healing potions in order to avoid notice. Fred and George would approve of that sort of thing.

The weekend that the shop was open passed without incident, except for Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes making a lot of money. It was the day before that, on Friday, that Harry spotted Ron and Hermione coming out of Slug & Jiggers. He managed to keep from revealing himself, but he followed them all over Diagon Alley, feeling lonelier by the minute, and longing to be back at Hogwarts, where he could both talk to them and be with someone the way they were with each other.

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Chapter: 12

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12 -- Back to School

King's Cross was a simple Tube ride. With agreement from the twins, Harry used a last dose of the Polyjuice potion and a hair from a random Muggle that he had bumped against the day before. He enjoyed the anonymity of traveling as this unknown man, but he wasn't entirely sure that the barrier would admit him, so he had to time the dose carefully. It turned out that there was no problem crossing through, whatever his body looked like.

"Oi!" called out a voice, as he set his foot on the train steps. "You sir! Students only!" Bustling into conversational range, Ernie Macmillan returned to his usual self-important tone. "Regulations, my good man, you understand -- for the children's safety."

Harry moved to the side of the steps and leaned back against the vibrating train. It didn't quite obscure the strange, queasy feeling of the Polyjuice starting to wear off. "How do you know I'm not the new Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher?" he challenged.

Ernie's chest puffed out. "I, sir, am a *prefect*. We have been informed as to all the staff members that will be traveling today."

Harry started to reply, but the potion didn't give him time. With a sickening wrench, his body

warped back to its accustomed shape. It was a relief to have his trousers fit comfortably, again.

"Potter?"

"It seemed the safest way to get here. May I board the train, now?"

"Can't you ever be *normal*?" Ernie huffed.

Harry shrugged and hoisted his trunk. "Probably not. See you!"

"Oi, Potter! Wait up!" With a wide grin, Blaise Zabini skidded to a halt beside them. His trunk bumped into the side of the train. "How did you get past me?"

"He was using," Ernie said, with audible offense, "Polyjuice Potion."

"Brilliant!" Zabini maneuvered his floating trunk onto the train. "Did you brew it yourself?"

"Nah," Harry said modestly. "Some friends of mine did." He followed Zabini up the iron steps, only absently noticing how Ernie was staring. "Let's find an empty compartment."

"No Gryffindor friends this year?"

Harry grinned. "Last I saw, they were snogging in an alcove. They probably won't start looking for me until the train's in motion."

They hadn't seen any empty compartments by the time they reached one that Harry considered to be as good -- the sole occupant was Millicent Bulstrode. He caught Zabini's arm. "Bulstrode okay with you?" he asked.

Zabini looked startled. "Fine with *me*," he said significantly.

"All right, then." Harry slid open the door. "Hi, Bulstrode. Mind if we join you?"

Her already small eyes narrowed for a moment, heavy brows coming ominously down. "Can you mind your tongue?" she asked tartly.

Harry winked at her, hoping she took it as understanding. "Wasn't I all right last time?" he coaxed.

Rolling her eyes, she sat back, but her scowl faded. "You can't blame me if it's hard to get used to, Potter. Fine. Have a seat."

With a laugh, he settled across from her. Zabini, to his surprise, not only sat next to him, but twisted to face him.

"So, Potter...."

"Mm?"

"Before your friends show up...." Zabini's head lowered in stubborn uncertainty. "Have you got what you said you would?"

Bulstrode snorted, which made Harry want to laugh, but he kept it to a smile. "The whole thing," he said. He took a small packet out of his jeans pocket. "Eighteen Galleons."

"And it cost you?"

"Eighteen Galleons."

Zabini eyed him balefully. "It would be so easy to hate you."

"For not charging extra?"

"For it just not *mattering* to you." He cocked his head to the side. "Why don't you give it to me for free, Potter?"

Harry rapidly thought through several replies. *Should I? No, it would probably make him resent me more. And then it's a present, and that makes me more responsible, and we're not that close.* "Because that wasn't our deal," he said. "And besides, eighteen Galleons? It matters some."

"All right," Zabini said amiably. "Can't blame me for trying." He dug out a small purse and held it out towards Harry. Harry suddenly thought of Portkeys, and what Zabini might do for money or favors. While he was hesitating, Bulstrode reached across the space between the seats and grabbed Zabini's wrist.

"Shall I check it for you, Potter?"

He couldn't not think of Cedric. "But if it's--"

"I'll be fine," she said.

"Cedric--"

"Didn't socialize with the Parkinsons and Notts," she replied, rolling her eyes.

"You're wasting your time," Zabini protested. "But go ahead. It's not a bad precaution."

Bulstrode dumped the contents of the purse out into her lap, and then ran one of her thick fingers all around the inside of it. That done, she picked up a coin and touched the entire surface of it before placing it back in the purse. In this manner, she checked all twenty coins. Zabini,

meanwhile, opened his packet and examined the contents. With a wetted finger, he picked up a few grains of the grey stuff and tasted it. He made a face like he had bitten a lime, but afterwards, he smiled. "Excellent. Thanks."

"You're welcome," Harry said, accepting the vetted purse from Bulstrode. "And thank you for checking it, Bulstrode."

She grinned at him. "You can call me Mill, if you like."

"Okay." He felt a flush of accomplishment at that. "And you can call me Harry, you know."

She laughed. "That might take some getting used to, but thanks."

Blaise opened his mouth, but whatever he had intended to say was interrupted by the slide of the door. Harry looked up. Ron was standing there, looking shocked. Behind him, Ginny had her lips set in a thin line and her hands on her hips, managing to look remarkably like a younger, slimmer version of her mother.

"Well," Blaise said, coming to his feet. "Weasley has finished that snogging session, I see. I think I'll be moving along. Coming, Millicent?"

Her eyes fixed on Ron, Bulstrode stood up. In the doorway, she paused, and after meeting Harry's eyes inclined her head briefly. Expressionless, she turned and left.

"Slytherins bowing to you?" Ron remarked, coming through once the door was clear. "Something you want to tell us, Harry?"

"Bowing?"

"Subtly. That 'not quite a nod' thing."

I thought it was just a polite goodbye." Harry shrugged. "She's not much for talking."

"And you know this," Ron challenged.

Harry shrugged. "Ran into her a couple times over the summer. Where's Hermione?"

Ron's eyes narrowed. "Off being Head Girl, and don't change the subject. You hid out with some friend of Malfoy's, didn't you?"

"What?" Harry shook his head. "Are you *mad*? I wouldn't trust any of them -- *he* wouldn't trust any of them!"

"But you saw Bulstrode."

"She *collided* with me when I was wearing my Invisibility Cloak. No, I stayed with the twins."

"WHAT?" Ginny shrieked.

"Well, not in their flat, you know? I'd expect Voldemort to have that checked. The new shop."

"It was *open*!"

"Only for the last two days. I took a flask of Polyjuice Potion and spent the time in Muggle London."

"How can you say the Burrow is too risky and then take a chance like *that?*"

"I'm not going to endanger your family!" Harry shouted. He bit his lip. "The Burrow was too risky for *you*. For all of you. It's about the same for me."

Ron sank to a seat. Ginny's scowl turned more pensive. "And the twins?" she asked wryly.

"What they were doing was unlikely to be noticed. Ginny, if I'd gone to your house, Voldemort would have known. You know he would've."

She nodded, and sat also, looking between the two of them before selecting the spot beside her brother. "You should write to Mum. She was hurt."

"I told Ron--"

"And he said. But you should write to her."

"She's not my mother!"

"True, but that doesn't mean you don't owe her anything."

Harry sighed. Draco had said -- or rather, implied -- much the same thing. "All right. I'll write to her tonight." He slouched back and kicked at his trunk, which was still on the floor. "Since Draco won't meet me anyway."

"Has he lost interest?" Ron asked, just a little too eagerly. Harry responded with a rude gesture, which made Ginny laugh.

"So eloquent, boys."

"If you must know, he says he'd love to see me, 'but Slytherin doesn't work that way.' Apparently the first night back is too socially important for him to disappear."

"Is he back in the Slytherin dormitories?" Ginny asked.

"Yes."

"Is that safe?" Ron asked. "They can be a nasty lot."

Harry shrugged, trying to ignore the implied criticism of Draco. Did Ron think Gryffindors couldn't be? "He says Snape has put some protections in place, and Crabbe isn't coming back, since Goyle isn't. Nott is, but you can't have everything."

"But they'd be sharing a dormitory! How safe can he be?"

"Malfoy has always had his own room, actually. His father used to pay for it, and apparently Snape decided he should keep it this year 'for security reasons.'"

Ron rolled his eyes and looked away.

"Still dangerous, though," Harry continued. "I've asked Bulstrode to keep an eye on him for me."

"Oh! Was that why she was here?"

"Well, it's why I talked to her this summer. We have a deal."

"And that other kid?"

"Zabini. He's been friendly since last spring." Harry decided to push ahead. "You know, since the House Cup."

Ron glowered. "Yeah. I can imagine."

Ignoring Ron's darkening mood, Harry continued conversationally. "Draco thinks you may have the Sight, you know," he said.

"What?"

"My brother?" Ginny chimed in incredulously.

Harry chuckled. "Well, he said if that wasn't pissing in the House Cup, nothing was."

For a moment, Ron just stared at him. Then he burst out laughing, rough and tight, as if it were choking him to find that funny. A moment later, he was lying on the train seat, punching the back rest. After the fit passed, he lay there, grinning at the luggage rack, with the atmosphere in the room considerably lightened.

"You're mad, Harry. You know that, don't you?"

"Could you fill me in?" Ginny asked. "What about, um, in the cup?"

"It was Ron's off-the-cuff-interpretation of a divination picture," Harry explained. "Last spring. Draco had things to say about it."

"He'll be disappointed," Ron said obliquely.

Harry snorted. "He didn't seem to be. Really, if I was *that*, er, large--"

Ginny giggled.

"What, have you *done* it?" Ron exclaimed, offended. "I thought you weren't--"

"Over the summer."

"So you met up with *him,* while Hermione and I get pushed off?"

"At the trial, you prat! In his room. I slept there."

"Figuratively, as well as literally?" Ginny suggested.

"Right."

"Could we not talk about this in front of my sister?"

"You started it!"

"Yes, but she was supposed to be *embarrassed*."

"Oh, I don't know. She looks fairly red."

"So do you," Ginny replied tartly. "And you haven't even given us any details!"

"I'm not going to tell you *details*!"

"Lavender does."

Before Ron could get out more than an indignant "Ginny!" they were interrupted by the door opening. Ron hastened to sit up.

"Hello?" Neville said tentatively.

"Hi, Neville! Come in." Harry shifted over in invitation, and Neville came in and sat beside him. Harry tried to pretend he wasn't flushed. "Have a good summer?"

Neville nodded nervously. "Pretty good. Glad to be getting out of my Gran's house, though. How about you?" He blushed. "I mean, I know about the trial, but --"

"After that, I went back to the Dursleys' until right before my birthday, and then I went into hiding."

"With Fred and George," Ron protested.

"Yeah. They were pretty good about it. Gave me Polyjuice Potion, even, so I could get out a bit." Harry glanced around at them. He didn't want Ron to start talking about Bulstrode. "So, has everyone decided what they're taking? I want to pick up Cursebreaking. I've skimmed through the text a bit, and it looks brilliant."

"You've skimmed through the *text?*" Ron repeated.

"I didn't *read* it!"

"Heaven forefend!" Ginny commented, rolling her eyes.

"Well, he has gone a bit odd!" Ron insisted.

Neville looked nervously among them. "I read anything I can in advance," he said, and Harry immediately felt guilty. Ron didn't want him to be too studious, but it was a sort of showing off, wasn't it, for them to say they could manage without studying?

"That's good of you," he said awkwardly. "I should probably do that."

Neville shrugged. "It doesn't help me much in lessons. I forget everything when I'm called on. It helps with essays, though."

"Have you ever tried memory enhancing potions?" Harry asked. "I was reading about gargoyle dust, this summer...."

Choking, Neville sat up. "That can be really dangerous, Harry!"

"Yeah? I thought it was okay if you didn't take it more than twice in a month."

"Right, but what's the point of that? I think if I could remember *sometimes*, but not--" He broke off as Hermione entered.

"Hi?" she tried.

Harry tried to greet her, but his voice wouldn't work.

"What's up?" she asked, puzzled.

"They were talking about memory enhancers," Ginny told her.

"Mnemonics?"

"Gargoyle dust," Neville explained, "but I think that--"

"Neville!" Hermione protested. "Do you have any idea how *dangerous* that is?"

"Er, yes?"

"I think that's what he was about to tell me, Hermione," Harry said. "Go on, Neville."

"Well, as I was saying," Neville resumed, darting nervous glances at Hermione, "you can't take it more than twice a month, and I think it would be worse if my mind worked that way twice a month. More frustrating, I mean. And I'd be ..." He looked down. "You know. Tempted."

"What about just for tests, though?" Harry suggested.

"Harry!" Hermione, who had sat beside Ron, jumped to her feet again. "Really! I would hope that *none* of us would ever do something so unethical, even if it were safe, which it is absolutely not!"

"Calm down, Hermione!" Harry protested. "It's just something I read about, that's all."

She sniffed. "I know you. You do not 'just read about' things."

"Well, life as a fugitive is kind of boring, okay? I promise you, I have no intention of using gargoyle dust."

"Good." Her expression softened as she looked across the aisle at him. "You don't need it, anyway. You'd be an impressive student, if you just applied yourself."

He smiled. "Yeah. I think I got a taste of that studying with Draco, last year."

Her nose wrinkled with distaste. "I don't think you were applying yourself last year."

"Well, I was sometimes! More than I ever had before, really."

"Well. You're doomed, then, with the Head Girl as a friend, and the Head Boy as a boyfriend."

"Head-- He's Head Boy?"

"You didn't know?" Hermione winced. "Oh. Maybe I wasn't supposed to tell you. It's a nuisance, though, because he isn't on the train, and I had to lead the prefects' meeting by myself."

"No, he hadn't...." Harry trailed off, thinking. Draco had often spoken of Hermione as a rival. "I suppose that makes sense."

"Except that he spent most of last year breaking rules!"

"But if he's the top boy in our class, that doesn't matter so much, does it?" Harry retorted. "Especially if the headmaster is pleased with him now."

"Just for politics."

Harry stared at her. "And aren't you?"

"Yes, but that doesn't change-- Oh, never mind! The Head Boy just ought to *behave*, that's all." She laughed. "I may feel better about it once I see him again."

"I don't see why," Ron said crossly.

"Well, if he's friendly, still." She sighed. "I know I liked him at the end of last year; it's just hard to remember over more than five years of hating him." She glanced over at Harry. "And my parents saw one of the *Daily Prophet* issues during the trial; I had to say that yes, that was my friend Harry that it was talking about, and yes, he was romantically involved with this other boy, and yes, that was the same Malfoy who was calling me names and making threatening comments during earlier years."

"Ah." Harry felt himself blush. "I didn't read the papers."

"What?"

"My job was to keep my temper."

"But afterwards--"

"I was too busy planning my escape." He shrugged. "Anyway, it wasn't all his fault, you know. I don't do what he wants unless I *want* to. He's just a lot of fun."

"Well. There's a lot I don't like about your recent ideas of *fun*."

Ron snorted. "Not to mention his recent ideas of friends."

"Harry?" she asked. "Who have you been with?"

Ginny sniffed. "Slytherins. There were two of them in the car when we arrived. My brother was horrified, of course."

"Zabini and Bulstrode," Harry volunteered, as Hermione looked at him. "They're both neutrals."

"Since when are you friends with *neutrals*, Harry?"

He stiffened at the accusation in her tone. "Since I grew up enough to realize it could make a difference!"

"Do you think you're *mature?*" she challenged. "Whatever you may think, your behavior last year was anything but. What was in the papers was anything but."

"I spent the last month making my own decisions about my life," he protested, "and making them work. I'm learning how--"

Ron snorted. "You were living with the twins."

"Not in their flat. In the shop."

"Did you pay rent?" Hermione challenged.

Taken aback, Harry frowned for a moment. "Sort of," he said.

"How 'sort of'?"

"I supplied the money to buy the place, partially in exchange for the right to stay there. We drew up a contract and everything. Draco insisted on that, so he could put in a secrecy clause that would keep them from telling anyone."

"Oh, so they *couldn't* tell?" Ron said, sounding relieved. "That will make Mum feel better."

"But what if you were seen?" Hermione persisted.

"I was careful. They supplied me with food, and when I wanted to go out, I used Polyjuice Potion and left as one of them while they were both working on the place."

She frowned for a moment, thinking, and then surprised him by smiling at him. "That's really quite clever."

"Thanks. The Polyjuice was their addition."

"Well, good. I thought you might have been off on your own." She sniffed. "Really, I was terribly worried about you, Harry."

"Not so much so as to track me down when you got on the train."

She blushed and smiled. "Oh, I ran into Ernie, so I knew you were safe. He was so offended!"

She paused. "And he did mention a Slytherin boy."

"Zabini," Harry said. "Look, I think it's important--"

"They are *not* your friends."

"They could be allies!"

"Draco was a special case," she warned.

"Forget Draco! I told you, they're *neutrals*."

"So they can't be trusted," Ron said sharply. "Stay away from them."

"Think about it!" Harry insisted, looking between them. "There are two sides to a conflict that you haven't made up your mind about. One side talks to you, and the other one doesn't. Which way will you drift?"

"They're Slytherin!" Ron answered, throwing up his hands. "They'll go to whichever one gives them a better deal."

"Great! Then all I have to do is be better than a sadistic madman. I think I can handle that."

"That's not exactly the choice," Hermione answered warningly. "You're not going to be Minister for Magic, Harry."

"Neither is Voldemort!"

In the moments of silence that followed, Harry saw everyone steadying him or herself in some way -- Ron pulling at his hair, Neville chewing at his lip, Ginny smoothing her skirt, Hermione closing her eyes. It was Hermione, almost timidly, who spoke first.

"I don't want you as Dark Lord, Harry."

His breath came out in a whoosh as he suddenly understood the tension. "Of course not! But it's not about that, or even about who's Minister -- it's about *influence*."

"See, he even sounds like a Slytherin," Ron complained.

"*This* is why we don't get anywhere!" Harry said hotly. "You think it's a virtue not to negotiate or compromise, or even to figure out *what people think* -- and it's not just *you* you, I mean -- that's typical! And I'm trying to learn, and it's *working*, and I really think I can *get* somewhere. And with a good portion of Slytherin as allies, we could bring him down *permanently*."

Again, there was silence, lasting until Ginny smiled brightly at him. "Good enough for me," she

said.

While the Hogwarts Express was pulling into the station, Harry watched out the window to see the platform move into view. Hagrid's great bulk was obvious as he waited for the first-years, but beyond him, Harry saw the glimmer of blond hair over black student robes.

"Draco's here!" he exclaimed.

Ron rolled his eyes. "I suppose I can let him into our carriage."

Draco, however, had other plans. By the time Harry joined him on the platform, he had a sixth-year girl by his side. After a moment of confusion, Harry placed her as the girl that had been with Zabini and the aggressive boy -- Cecil something, or maybe something Cecil -- last spring.

"There you are, Harry!" Draco said, stepping forward to give him a frustratingly chaste embrace. "Will you ride with Linnet and me?"

Harry eyed the girl for a moment, trying to push down his resentment. "Of course," he said, managing a smile. "Hello, Linnet."

Ron snorted. "Come *on*, Harry."

Harry waved him off. "I'll see you at the Welcoming Feast."

"Oh, get your brain out of your prick, will you?" Ron snapped.

"*Ron,*" Harry warned.

With a rude gesture, Ron stormed off, and at a glance and nod from Harry, Hermione followed him, and Neville followed her.

"Well." Draco motioned to the carriages. "Perhaps we should discuss that inside."

Just as they opened the door to one of the carriages, Millicent Bulstrode stepped up to intercept them. "Room for one more?" she asked companionably.

Harry looked at Draco in silent question, only to find Draco looking at him in much the same manner. He shrugged. "Mill's okay with me," he said cheerfully.

Draco's eyes widened, and Millicent sniggered. Theatrically, he sighed. "I see you were *not* a good boy over the summer."

"I think he may be incapable of it," Millicent volunteered, as she hoisted her trunk into the

carriage and then turned back to get Linnet's. Harry lightened his and nudged it into place. "But he was reasonably careful. I would have had to have been devious and determined to carry him off."

"Have you met with anyone else of questionable loyalties?" Draco asked Harry.

"Zabini, but only once, by chance."

"They came onto the train together, though," Millicent said.

"Mm. And thus Ron's temper." Uneasy and not wanting to show it, Harry slung an arm over Draco's shoulders, and Draco cuddled down to let him. "Well, that and you." The other occupants of the carriage didn't seem like an adequate reason to hold back from kissing Draco, so he did, pinning him back against the seat when he seemed as if he might be easing away. Only when their vehicle had lurched into motion did he let up.

"We're not alone, you know," Draco said wryly.

"Obviously. If we were alone, I'd be doing a lot more than kissing you. Sneak out tonight, Dragon, please?"

Draco smiled at him fondly, but still shook his head. "No. I'd love to, but I have responsibilities. I'm Head Boy."

He looked terribly proud of himself, and Harry had to grin back at him. "Yeah -- I heard on the train. Congratulations."

"Thank you."

"I didn't think that involved plans this evening, though."

"Of course it does. I am staying in Slytherin to listen to Professor Snape's welcome, and to review the prefects, and beyond duties, to *see my friends*. And *you* are going back to Gryffindor to show Weasley that you still *are* friends, and to show Finnigan that you're still worthy of his protection. Is that clear?"

Answering with an exasperated sigh, Harry thumped back against the stiff cushions. This was in keeping with their plans, but that made it no less frustrating. The carriage rocked and creaked beneath him, and he found himself looking into the evaluating study of the girl on the facing bench. "I'm on display already, apparently," he remarked. "Hello, Linnet. Sorry about ignoring you."

She was already smiling with amusement; now she attempted to rein it in. "Quite all right," she said politely. "Who is Finnigan?"

"Irish Gryffindor boy, my year?" he responded, and she smiled again.

"I just can't imagine anyone your age who *could* protect you."

"Oh. Well, he's the closest of us to Dean, and Dean's Muggleborn, and had a bit of a fit about me liking blokes, you know. It's nothing big, except that we share a dormitory." He glanced to the side, his mouth brushing blond hair. "Not like Draco and Nott."

Draco rolled his eyes. "Oh, so you don't think he was one of the lot that attacked you?"

"If he was, he got over it. We were on decent terms by the end of the year. Though like a lot of people, he assumed what I did about the House Cup was vengeance on my housemates, and that really had nothing to do with it."

Millicent's heavy eyebrows lowered. "He forgives you even though he thinks that?"

"As far as I could tell, he forgives me *because* he thinks that -- he feels they treated me badly, and I was entitled."

Draco sniffed. "Gryffindors are strange."

"Isn't everyone?" Harry shot back.

Linnet, who had been watching with wide eyes, giggled. Harry winked at her.

They were coming up the last curve of the drive, and he still wasn't sure why Draco had wanted him to meet this girl, but Draco wasn't leading the conversation. Instead, he snuggled contentedly into Harry's side. "This isn't enough of a reunion. Let me know when you're done meeting your Head of House tomorrow?"

"If you promise to sneak off with me," Harry returned. "Well, once you're done with yours."

"Already had it," Draco answered. He straightened suddenly, reaching into his pocket. "Oh -- I nearly forgot! Here's my schedule. Match it as much as you can."

"Great!" Harry glanced at the paper. He saw "Cursebreaking", but had no time for more. The carriage was rolling to a stop. They exited into a milling crowd of students, and were quickly separated.

The Great Hall decorated for the Welcoming Feast was still a sight to take Harry's breath away. Just inside the door, he paused for a moment to look, and listen, and *feel,* smiling as the crowd flowed past him. When he had acclimated enough to continue, he made his way to the Gryffindor table and settled next to Hermione. Seamus shifted over to close the gap on the other side of him, and Dean gave him a self-conscious nod. Ron, on Hermione's other side, leaned forward.

"Have a nice ride?" he asked.

Harry shrugged. "Privacy would have been better, but I guess it was okay. I've no idea why Draco wanted me to meet that girl, though."

Ron might have responded, but at that moment, the doors opened, and McGonagall led in the new first-years. Hermione shook her head. "Can you believe we were that *young?*"

"Weren't," Seamus answered jovially. "They're taking them at six now, haven't you heard?"

People all about them stifled giggles as the Sorting Hat began its song.

In Ancient Days four comrades

set out to work as one

To ensure their people's future

through the training of the young

The pupils best inspired

varied for them each

So in one school four houses

they formed to help them teach

Ravenclaw was learned

-- some did call her cold --

and favored those who knowledge loved

apart from base reward

Seeking ever more to know

Throughout all the world below

Raven ride the wind

Gryffindor was fearless

-- reckless, if you will --

and favored those who moved ahead

trusting strength and skill

With courage bright unquestioned

the charge they choose defended

Lion blaze the way

Now Slytherin was canny

-- some did call him sly --

and favored those who saw all paths

both the low and high

To each reward selected

all action best effected

Serpent flow unseen

Now Hufflepuff was steady

-- boring, some might say --

And favored those who persevered

until they found a way

Willing, true, and diligent

'Do our best' their full intent

Badger dig the den

The whole that was once broken

Must be made again

Perhaps it will in this year

Perhaps in ten times ten

Wherever you are summoned

Whoever loves you best

Remember you may still

Have worth to all the rest.

The hall was quieter than usual after the Hat's song. Harry wasn't sure anyone else had liked it, although the last verse had given him a thrill of satisfaction. The staff, especially, looked put out, to a one -- except, perhaps, for a stranger, who appeared to be hiding a smile behind his cup.

For his own part, Harry wished he had been sitting with Draco. He knew exactly how Draco would have nudged him at "reckless," and how he would have retaliated at "sly," and how their hands would have joined at the conclusion. He looked over, just as Draco finished saying something to Pansy and looked back. Their eyes met. Harry wished they could whisper to each other.

"That must be the new Defense Against the Dark Arts professor." It was Hermione, instead, who whispered to him, as "Atlinger, Ogden" was sorted into Slytherin. "He looks awfully young -- for a professor, I mean."

Distracted, Harry looked back at the stranger at the staff table. After a quick scan across the others, he decided Hermione was right. This had to be the new Defense professor. He was at least a few years older than they were, but almost certainly still in his twenties. His hair was a sandy brown, and he seemed to be in constant motion, first fidgeting with his fork and then shifting restlessly in his chair. Only infrequently did he pause long enough to take in a bite of food, which might explain how thin he was.

"Grant, Samuel" was sorted into Gryffindor, requiring Harry to return his attention to the Sorting. He clapped for the boy, whose cheeks burned pink as he crossed the hall to the cheers of his new housemates.

After that came a nervous-looking girl with a honey-gold ponytail bound up with pink ribbon. "LeFay, Gentian," McGonagall read. The Sorting Hat took some time about it before sending her to Slytherin. Harry clapped politely, though he thought he was probably the only non-Prefect in Gryffindor to bother.

After that, "Miller, Graham" was sorted into Hufflepuff, and "McDuffie, Robert" into Gryffindor. "Mello, Yolanda" followed. By the time the Sorting was over, Gryffindor had eleven new members, six boys and five girls, and Harry thought Slytherin had nearly as many.

"My dear friends," Dumbledore said, as the last first-year student settled at the Ravenclaw table, "students and colleagues, let me welcome you to Hogwarts. Some of you are returning to a second home, while some have just crossed the threshold of a new adventure. Welcome, all!

"Before we begin the marvelous feast that awaits us, I have a few announcements. First, I would like all of you to still be here at the end of the term. *Therefore*, please remember that the Forbidden Forest is, as the name clearly states, forbidden. Second, the girls' lavatory on the second floor is closed for repairs. Third--"

Harry didn't hear the third item. The blood in his ears drowned out everything around him. He stared across the room at Draco, and Draco stared back, but they did not spontaneously develop telepathy. The second-floor bathroom! If they couldn't get in there, how would they get down to the Chamber of Secrets? Harry didn't believe it was chance. Dumbledore must know what he was doing.

Despite his worries, it was impossible not to enjoy the Welcoming Feast. While he sampled delicious dishes, Hermione was cheerfully babbling about what options to take for her final year. A stranger might have called it fretting, but Harry could tell she was enjoying every tortured choice. Some of the younger students were looking at him and whispering, but everyone in his year seemed to be fine -- even Dean gave him a quick smile. Further down the table, Damian, one of the Gryffindor Beaters, pointed to him and said something to the younger girl with him. Harry felt his relaxed mood fade. Hermione tsked.

"I wish the younger ones wouldn't gossip about you. It's not as if they can't speak to you in the common room. Do you see how they're staring?"

"Mm, yeah." Harry pushed his nearly empty dinner plate a few inches away. "I'm wondering if I should have brought my hip flask."

"You have a hip flask?" Hermione asked, scandalized. Harry was aware of the conversations around them fading.

"Of course," he said. "Hermione, I practically *lived* on Polyjuice Potion--"

Seamus sprayed pumpkin juice halfway across the table. Dean and Ron burst out laughing.

Hermione laughed too, the sound tight and high with nerves. "You're awful," she said, when she could.

The spattered juice vanished and desserts appeared. Harry grinned and pounced on the treacle tart. "Let them stare."

After dinner, the seventh-year students stayed together on the walk up to Gryffindor. Harry said hello to Parvati, who blushed and made polite conversation for a flight of steps, and to Lavender, who gave him a flirtatious look and then resumed her conversation with a sixth-year boy. Hermione left them to attend to the first-years, so when they got to the tower, the boys continued up to their dormitory. There, they settled down, Harry and Ron on Ron's bed, and Dean and Neville on Seamus's bed, and Seamus on the window seat between. Harry floated his trunk out as a table and brought out Muggle ginger chews, and Ron chocolate frogs, and Seamus some sort of oat thing that wasn't half bad.

For a while, Harry just listened to the others chat about their summers, and at first, they let him stay out of it. It was Dean who finally looked his way.

"So, Harry," he began. His voice was carefully neutral, and Harry tensed, expecting an attack about Draco. "One of the Slytherins came by our carriage, can you believe that? Didn't even try to pick a fight. He was asking about you."

That was interesting. Harry tried to keep his voice as light. "Really? Do you know who?"

"Zabini," Seamus said.

"Wanted to know how you spend your money, how you treat your friends, that sort of thing."

"Ah. What did you tell him?"

Dean shrugged. "You and Ron are either best friends or not speaking, but it's all straightforward, and you're fair more than not, and I didn't know you *had* money until Malfoy got to you."

Harry couldn't keep from looking at Ron, who was turning red. He thought he must be himself.

"That is," Seamus added, shrugging, "not more money than it took to buy a sackful of sweets to share, but what else would we have bought at that age?"

"How did he react?" Harry asked, worried.

Dean sniggered. "Like a Slytherin."

"Considering it," Seamus qualified.

Dean twitched, and for a moment, Harry thought that something about the account bothered him, but then he reached into his sleeve. "Splotch woke up," he explained, and with an apologetic dip of his head, reached into his sleeve. When he drew out a rat, Ron visibly flinched.

"Sorry," Ron said quickly.

Harry tried not to let his own tension show. At least the rat was nothing like Scabbers. It was a young, sleek animal, its body mostly white, and its head mostly brown, but with a glossy brown patch on one white flank, and a white blaze down its brown face. Its pink nose twitched curiously, vibrating white whiskers. On his arm, Harry felt a tightening, just as Susara's curiosity nudged into his mind. He gave her silent permission to move, and she wound down his arm and peeked out, testing the air with her tongue.

Dean's rat, now on the bedspread, raised its back and rattled its tail, producing an uncharacteristic hiss from Susara.

"Pet!" Harry scolded. *"He's too big for you to fight."*

"I want it to leave," she retorted sulkily.

"He belongs with--" Names would not translate. *"My den-friend. He will not leave."*

"It--" Her tongue flickered again. *"She belongs with your friend like me with you?"* she asked uncertainly.

"Yes."

"Ssss." With a contemptuous flick of her tail, Susara went up his arm, this time setting possessively around the back of his neck. Harry stroked her and chuckled at the sight of Dean similarly soothing his rat.

"Care to translate?" Seamus suggested, raising an eyebrow.

Harry shrugged. "What do you expect? He's my roommate's; he lives here too."

Dean smiled weakly. "*She,* actually, but yeah. That's about what I'd tell her if I could."

The silence grew too long. Neville cleared his throat. "So," he said bravely, as if Ron wasn't rigid with tension, and Dean visibly uneasy, "what are people going to ask for? Tomorrow, I mean. For lessons."

"I'm dropping Potions," Ron said quickly.

"Me too," Dean agreed, and they shared a quick, relieved smile.

"I wish I could," Neville said mournfully.

Ron nudged him. "Your gran won't let you?"

Neville looked offended. "That's not her decision now. No, it's Herbology. I know that's what I want a career in, and I need supplemental Potions knowledge for most options. It doesn't have to be a high NEWT -- I can get a tutor and retake a qualifying exam in many cases -- but I need to have attempted the NEWT to qualify for that."

"Rough," Ron sympathized.

"At least I can drop Transfiguration," Neville said. "That will give me more time. I'm still deciding about Charms."

"I'm dropping Care of Magical Creatures," Harry said, glad to be talking about something safe. "And I'd better tell Hagrid before someone else does -- first thing tomorrow probably."

Ron looked sympathetic. "Can't say as I blame you, but he'll take that hard."

"Well, I want to take Cursebreaking and Symbology, so I had to drop four."

"Let me guess: Divination, Potions, and Herbology?"

"Divination, Herbology, and History of Magic."

Ron stared. "Not Potions? Are you feeling all right in the head, mate?"

Trying to pretend he didn't notice Seamus's intent study, Harry focused on Ron and shrugged. "Well, you know. Like Neville, I think I may need it."

"Ah." Ron sat back. "Yeah, I suppose if you want to try for the Aurors or something...."

Harry nodded. *Or something.* "Right," he said. "I'd like to keep my options open."

Seamus was still watching them.

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Chapter: 13

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13 -- Positioning

Harry had planned to look for Draco after his conference, but there was no need. When he stepped out of McGonagall's office, Draco pushed off from the opposite wall of the corridor. "Shall we walk?" he said, by way of greeting.

"Um, fine. How did you know--?"

"Hermione told me, of course. Let's go outside. It's a pleasant day." Draco led the way to the staircase and down the broad steps. "Schedule all set?"

Outside would provide some chance of privacy, which the tricky echoes of Hogwarts corridors made difficult. "Yeah," Harry answered. "It looks good." *We're mostly in lessons together.* "Professor McGonagall was surprised that I wanted to keep Potions, but it's a requirement for some jobs -- Auror, for example. I told her I wanted to keep my options open."

Draco shot him a hard look, but then nodded. "And it would be a pity to waste my spellfather's expertise. But for the political situation, you wouldn't have a brewer of his measure teaching anyone but his own apprentice." They crossed the Entrance Hall. "Any surprises?"

"Mm. That Professor Dumbledore didn't ask to see me." Harry pulled the door open, and they crossed into the sunlight. It was fair, but chilly. "I was expecting words about crossing him." The door shut behind them, and Harry breathed more easily. No one else was in sight.

"Perhaps you had them by proxy," Draco said, striding quickly away from the walls and any potential open windows. "The second floor girls' bathroom?"

"Yeah," Harry said grimly.

"And I expect you noticed that we received exactly nothing that we were promised."

"It would be hard to miss."

"Do you suppose the headmaster thinks we will have forgotten?"

"I have no idea." Harry let out a quick breath. "I'll talk to him. I mean, unless you want to."

Draco pursed his lips. "No. It had better be you. Attempt to be civil, however."

Nodding, Harry set the matter aside. "Now, about the Chamber...."

Looking back nervously, Draco made a chopping motion with one hand. "Later. I want to know what you promised Snape."

"What?"

Draco raised his eyebrows in a scornful look that Harry thought came more from his spellfather than his father. "What was your end of the deal, Potter?"

Potter? Harry stared. "What makes you think there was a deal?"

Draco huffed. "Don't think I'll fall for that. You're trying to decide what lies might work."

Harry rolled his eyes. "And you don't actually *know* anything. And I don't know what you're talking about, so I can't answer."

"If it's more lessons, I'll catch you out, you know. I have the quiris."

Harry stared at him incredulously, and Draco's sneer dissolved into a sigh. They were a good distance from the castle, now. "When Professor Snape talked to the house last night, he said that you should be regarded as a potentially valuable resource, and as such, were to be considered as under his personal protection."

"Oh." Harry bit his lip. "Um, I didn't consider that anything so formal as a *deal*, but yeah. He offered me re-Sorting, and I said I'd be more valuable to him as a Gryffindor."

"Ah. Well, he's helped you significantly. You still won't be *safe* in Slytherin, but your potential attackers will be fewer. Did you promise anything in particular in return?"

Harry shook his head. "An alliance. I *asked* for things, really -- that he let me try to win support in his house, and that he look the other way about us."

Thoughtfully, Draco nodded. "For you to use Slytherin, though ... That would be a benefit to us in itself, in some ways."

"I suppose. And he badly wants Voldemort destroyed, I expect."

"So he knows about you."

Harry couldn't remember if he and Snape had discussed his extraordinary potential to destroy Voldemort. On the other hand, Dumbledore may have told any number of people. "I think so. Not from me, but ...." Harry shrugged. "He seems to. We've certainly discussed how I might go about it."

"Not surprising, really."

"Yeah."

Draco looked over his shoulder again, and then led the way to some nearby rocks, in a middle of

a clear space. "Let's sit. I think we're safely out of earshot of anything visible."

"Any visible human, you mean."

Sniffing, Draco rolled his eyes. "Most people don't think of that, you know."

"Most haven't been bitten by it twice." Harry cast a spell that Snape had taught him. He and Draco glowed briefly, but he didn't see any other bright spots. "We seem to be the only magical beings in range."

"Clever." Draco did not sound as if the cleverness pleased him. "Who taught you that one?"

"Snape. He said it's not Dark, even."

"It's not," Draco said flatly. "However, it is considered *rude* among wizards and witches, and doing it in front of Muggles would violate the Statute of Secrecy."

"It was just in front of you," Harry protested. "We know who we are, right?"

"Did Snape explain all that to you?" Draco persisted.

"Yes. Well, the rude part seemed like more around strangers who might be Squibs...."

"That's how it *became* rude," Draco corrected.

"Ah." Harry ducked his head. "Should I ask next time, then?"

"Please do." Draco finally stopped frowning. "It *was* the right solution, though. And it's a good one for you to know, I suppose. So, let's talk."

Harry thought back to when Draco had cut him off. "The Chamber?"

"Exactly."

"Dumbledore might just be trying to force me to come and talk to him."

"Mm. Or he might want to be sure we're not together alone."

"Then he should have come through with the Uncommon Room, shouldn't he?"

Draco laughed. "The thought did occur to me. At any rate, don't mention the girls' bathroom when you talk to him. He's only guessing, and it would confirm the guess."

"What do you suggest we do, then?

Draco shrugged. "There must be spells to cut doors. We need that spell and a way to determine which rooms are directly below Myrtle's bathroom, on either side of that chute, so we can gain access to the tunnel."

"And if that doesn't work?"

"Then we will try the ones below that. The dungeons go over that far. The chute needs to be between rooms on each level. There must be some way to get into it."

"You don't think Salazar Slytherin would have put protections on it?"

Draco shook his head. "You can't protect every square foot of something that large. Traditionally, one concentrates on the entrance, and has a sequence of them, as he did."

Harry nodded. "All right."

"So. We get to spend our afternoons together ... in the library."

"I'd much rather spend them in your bed."

Draco bit his lip. "Don't. I don't dare yet, and you'll tempt me."

Harry felt a surge of relief lessen a tension that he hadn't known was there. "Will I?" he asked, reaching out to touch the side of Draco's face. Draco closed his eyes and leaned into the touch.

"Merlin, yes."

"Are we done talking?" Harry crossed his foot over one of Draco's, rubbing their ankles together with a subtle motion. "Shall we find some place a little more visually private?"

Draco hissed in surprise. "Yes."

"The birch grove by the lake?"

"In the hemlocks would be more concealing." Draco smirked. "But I prefer the symbolism of birches. Yes."

They started to walk again, angling over to the lake, this time. "That doesn't make any sense to me, you know. But I am taking Symbology, this year."

"Good! You could use it." Draco's hand stole into his. "Though your intuition is good. Hemlocks are death and sorrow. Birches are birth and creativity."

Harry laughed and gave his hand a little squeeze. "Well, birth is out of the question, but I enjoy your creativity."

"Ah, but it can be a symbolic birth -- the birth of a spell, of a plot, of..." Draco stopped and shrugged. "Anything."

He sounded almost sad at the last. Harry didn't know what to say at the turn of mood, so they walked in silence all the way to the trees. When the leaves veiled them to all but the keenest eyes, he decided there were easier things than talking. He stopped, and tugged Draco's hand, and when Draco turned towards him, covered any question with a kiss.

To his relief, Draco returned it, first with warmth, and then with increasing desire. Harry set his hands at the small of Draco's back and pulled him close.

"Oh," Draco sighed, pressing into the contact. "Mm." Harry wondered if this was a good idea. Then Draco pushed one hip forward, rubbing across him, and Harry knew it was a splendid idea. He tugged Draco's robes to the side searching for the opening. Draco lifted his head.

"Let's lie down. No should be able to see us in that hollow."

Harry's heart was racing. "Sure." He let Draco lead him a few yards further, to where the ground dropped a couple of feet. Draco cast a quick charm on it and sank gracefully down, Harry following more clumsily after.

"We have to leave our clothes on though," Draco whispered. "In case someone comes here, like Cecilius, last year."

"Damn."

"Oh here -- let me push your robes up." In a few seconds, Draco was fumbling with Harry's zip. "In an emergency, just do the button and drop your robes into place."

"Done this before?" Harry asked, nipping Draco's ear, while he worked a hand under Draco's robes, bunching them up and getting in his way. Draco panted harshly at the contact.

"Last autumn, yeah. In the dormitory."

So, Zabini, then. He was too thoroughly out of the picture for Harry to be jealous.

"That must have --" Harry had no idea what he'd been going to say. Draco had his hand in Harry's trousers and Harry's brain wasn't bothering with anything else. "God." It took him a few fumbling tries to get enough access to reciprocate. "Not enough."

"It'll do for now."

"Yeah." He sucked at the edge of Draco's ear, and then at his neck. "Fuck. Want you."

Draco laughed shakily. "I won't let you fuck me yet. And not here in any case."

"Didn't mean--"

"I know."

It was over far too fast. Harry had to bite hard to hold in the noises his body wanted to make, and the world went black at the edges, narrowing to a section of skin and hair. Slowly, it widened again, and he realized he was lying limply on the ground, with his robes a mess.

"Oh."

"Mm. Did that take the edge off for now?"

Harry groaned. "For a few hours, maybe."

Draco ran a finger over his lips. Harry nipped at it, and then flicked his tongue over the pad.

"Hm. Well, consider this my vengeance for last spring. I won't tease you nearly as thoroughly as you did me, I promise."

"Obviously." Harry sucked the tip of the finger in and watched Draco's eyes close. He continued with that for a minute, moving his mouth up and down until Draco was squirming. That accomplished, he lifted his head away. "For how long?"

Draco sat up. "Until we're back in the Chamber. It will give us incentive. Cleaning charms, now."

After lunch, Harry went to talk to Dumbledore. It took him only four tries to guess the password (ice mice), and then he was rising up the spiral stairs. As he had almost expected, the headmaster called him in immediately.

"Mr. Potter," he said. "What a pleasant surprise."

"Is it?" Harry shot back. "That's hard to believe."

"I'm always glad to see you."

Harry shrugged, but relaxed enough to sit down. "Even if that's true, I don't believe you're surprised."

With a sideways nod that seemed to both acknowledge and dismiss the remark, Dumbledore

resettled himself behind the desk. "You feel we have something to discuss?"

"Mixed house social space. Pick-up Quidditch. You promised us both of those, but you didn't mention either of them."

"I see." Dumbledore didn't seem in any hurry to answer. "I had expected a different inquiry. Is that all?"

"Yes." Harry glanced down for a moment. "From my side, anyway."

Stroking his beard, Dumbledore leaned back. "I should point out, of course, that you have hardly been cooperative yourself. I was very concerned, you know, by your disappearance."

"Which was why I let Remus know I was okay."

"An appreciated accommodation, but still not what you were instructed to do. It would have been better if you had waited."

"No," Harry said stubbornly. "I don't believe that. The Dursleys would have been in danger."

"I had made arrangements for their protection--"

"Which weren't necessary, were they? As I managed things, that is."

"True, Mr. Potter, but that was not my primary concern." Dumbledore straightened, looking at him over steepled hands. "Your safety is of the utmost importance--"

"I was safe enough."

"Perhaps, but I have far more experience in evaluating and mitigating risk. I had hoped that you would trust that."

"I *do* trust your experience! Of course you have a better idea than I do what can be done. What I *don't* trust is your priorities, and you *won't* listen to what matters to me."

For a moment, Dumbledore was silent. When he spoke, his voice was querulous, as if he were puzzling over the matter. "You have never expressed any affection for your mother's relatives."

"I don't have any! I just don't want to be the cause of any more deaths, even if they aren't really my fault. And you probably would have had me go to the Burrow next, and then the Weasleys wouldn't have been safe."

Dumbledore relaxed back. "Ah. I see. Harry, none of the guilt for Cedric's murder, or Arthur's--"

"I know that! It's not *guilt*. It's just ..." Harry tried to think. "Determination. My personal goal for

this year, all right?"

Dumbledore's mouth lifted in a quick smile. "I believe Professor McGonagall had been hoping for something more academically oriented." He peered at Harry over his half-moon spectacles. "You do remember that you have N.E.W.T.s this year, I hope?"

"Between Hermione and Draco, am I likely to forget?"

Dumbledore laughed. "Ah, yes! I had not considered it in quite that light." All trace of reproach had vanished, leaving his manner as cheerful and guileless as he had seemed when Harry first saw him. "Well. Let us return to your original question then, shall we? I have not forgotten, and I hope that by now you would know that my word is good. The first week of school, however, seems a bad time to implement changes, and several of the professors were none too happy when I introduced these ideas last spring. After everyone has settled in, I will bring the matter up again." He smiled. "I must tell you, Professor McGonagall's support will be much easier to come by if you and Mr. Malfoy manage to stay out of trouble."

Harry did his best not to show his growing rage. "Professor Snape's too, I expect," he said, almost lightly.

"Perhaps, perhaps. Although with Severus, one never can tell. And his support may lose you that of your own head of house."

"Understood, sir." Harry got to his feet. "Thank you for seeing me."

"My dear boy, not at all!" Dumbledore replied, beaming, as he rose to shake Harry's hand. "You are always welcome to visit. Is there anything else you wish to discuss?"

"No," Harry said steadily. "Nothing."

He wasn't going to fall for it, he decided, as he descended from the office. Professor Dumbledore could put him off forever with stories of disagreement among the staff, but what he could have wasn't defined by what the headmaster would give to him. He had made his own way before, and he would do it again. Feeling strangely cheerful, Harry started off down the corridor. Ron should be back by now. They could compare schedules, and maybe he could start to sound Ron out on the divination.

Turning the corner, he saw a group of small students by the stairs. Two of them were pointing in different directions, and one had hidden her face in her hands, and the last had sat down on the floor in a despairing huddle. Harry quickened his pace.

"Lost?" he called cheerfully, when he was near. Arms came down with guilty speed. The boy on the floor scrambled to his feet. Familiarly wide-eyed stares fixed on him, but Harry suspected

that any seventh-year would have produced almost as strong a reaction.

"No, we're just--"

"Sammy!"

Harry laughed. "If anyone here tells you they didn't get lost as a first-year, they're lying." He studied them for a minute. All four were Gryffindors. He recalled the dusky-skinned girl as having an odd name, and one of the boys as being Mc-something. With a smile, he held out his hand to the closest boy. "Hi. I'm Harry."

The wide-eyed look returned, perhaps at the reminder of who he was. "Er, hello, Mr.-- um, Harry. I'm Rob, Rob McDuffie."

"Pleased to meet you, Rob," Harry said, and went on to the girl, who gave her name as Yolanda. When introductions were finished, he looked around at them all. "Okay. First thing, don't be embarrassed about getting lost. Not for at least a couple of weeks, anyway. Now, why don't you all follow me? I'll show you how to get back to the tower, and we can make a stop at the library on the way, so you'll know where that is." He grinned. "And then next time you get lost, you don't need a Gryffindor. *Anyone* can tell you how to get to the library, and you'll know how to get to Gryffindor from there."

They looked at each other. "But don't ask a Slytherin, right?" Sammy said. Yolanda looked despairingly at him, her thick, dark braid swinging with the motion. Harry met her eyes and gave her a quick smile.

"Well," he said, "the Slytherins aren't all bad, you know. But there is a good deal of house rivalry between Gryffindor and Slytherin, so you should take anything they tell you with a grain of salt. I'd say ask, but be polite when you do it, and cautious about the answer -- don't just blindly do what you're told."

"If we can't trust the answer, why ask?" Rob demanded.

"Well, if you do, maybe it won't get as bad in your year as it is in mine."

"But people from other houses won't know where Gryffindor tower is?" Sammy cut in.

"Most won't." Harry started up the steps, moving at a leisurely pace, so they could still talk easily. "I don't know where Hufflepuff is, and I'm not exactly sure of Ravenclaw, though I could probably find it. I do know where Slytherin is."

"Because Draco Malfoy is your sweetheart, right?" Yolanda said quickly. Sammy turned and stared. She giggled. "It said so in Witch Weekly."

"Well, yes and no," Harry answered. "I mean, he is my, um, boyfriend, but that's not why I know.

The thing is that we hated each other up until last year, and one time -- when I was in my second year -- a friend and I followed him down there, because we were certain he was doing something awful, and we planned to catch him."

"Oh!"

"Anyway, this floor is the library. Let me show you; we'll go to the door, and then walk back."

They didn't ask him any more questions about his relationship with Draco -- Harry suspected that the boys were too young to understand, and it was clear that Yolanda had the idea only in a vague gossip-column sort of way. He got them talking about their first classes instead. They had had Herbology, which Sammy said didn't seem so magical. He was delighted with Charms. Potions had terrified all of them.

"Have you had your first Flying lesson yet?" Harry asked Sammy, and Sammy had made a face.

"Don't. I won't believe *anything*, you know, just because my parents are Muggles."

"What?" Harry looked at him in surprise.

"People don't *fly*. Professor Flitwick said so."

Rob and Jeremy burst out laughing. Yolanda clapped her hands over her mouth.

"People don't," Harry answered cheerily. "But brooms can. You *will* have a few flying lessons, and it's brilliant! I play Quidditch, which is a Wizarding sport played on brooms."

"He's really good at it, too," Rob said, eager to talk about something he understood. "He was mentioned in "Young players to watch" in *Quidditch Review* last year."

"I'll bring down an issue or two for you, when we get back to Gryffindor," Harry offered, in sympathy. "I know it's confusing; I was raised by Muggles too --"

"You were?" Yolanda asked. "I thought your parents were magical."

"Well they were, but Voldemort killed them. And my mother was Muggleborn, and I went to her sister when I was still a baby." He shrugged. "Anyway, don't worry, Sammy. You'll learn your way around."

Once inside the tower, the first-years split, the boys disappearing up the boys' staircase, and Yolanda running over to two other first-year girls. Harry looked around for Ron, didn't see him, and started over to the sofas by the fireplace.

Just as he was leaning back against the cushions, a girl plopped down into the place beside him. Startled, he twisted to find Parvati looking at him.

"Hi!" she said.

"Er, hi?"

"You looked almost tall, you know, walking in with a gaggle of first-years. It's good to see you're still my size."

"Oh, thanks!"

"Don't mention it. Did they get lost?"

"Yeah. They'd fallen into despair at one of the third floor landings. I told them it happens to everyone."

She chuckled. "They were probably mortified, just the same." She glanced down. "Well ... how was your summer?"

He had to think about it for a moment. "A lot better than usual, and you probably know about the worst moments. I mostly hid out, after the trial."

"Ah." She shrugged. "So, I heard Hermione and Ginny arguing about what you said on the train."

"Oh? Which thing I said?"

"About the Slytherins being able to help. The Ravenclaws could too, you know."

Harry nodded. "Right. Remember the Interhouse Common Room project?"

Parvati nodded. She and her sister had been part of the group that Harry had invited to discuss the matter last spring. They had only met twice. Dumbledore had showed up to the second meeting, listened carefully, and said that he had sufficient information.

"Well, you've noticed it wasn't mentioned at the Welcoming Feast, I expect. So I went to talk to Professor Dumbledore."

"And?" she prompted, when he hesitated.

"Well, he said he wants everyone to 'settle in' first, but I'm not sure he'll actually do it."

"No?" Her brow furrowed. "But why wouldn't he?"

Harry grabbed at air, trying to form his vague suspicions into words. "He likes to be in control. If

we actually start to cooperate, it will diminish his control."

Parvati laughed. "I don't disapprove of Draco, Harry, but you're spending too much time with Slytherins. Give him a few weeks before you suspect the worst."

He sighed. "All right. You're probably right -- but it's not Slytherins, I think, just a month of hiding from everyone."

"I'll bring it up with Professor McGonagall," Parvati offered.

"That would be great."

Seamus wandered over then. "Why the conference?" he asked.

"Oh, it's that interhouse common space issue," Parvati said, stretching back. They kissed, long and deep, making two nearby fifth-years giggle. Harry wondered if he should leave, but when they finally finished, and Seamus had sat at the other side of Parvati, he looked at Harry. "That still on?" he asked.

"What?" *Oh, the common room. Does he realize how long they were kissing?* "We hope so, but not right away."

"Too bad," Seamus said. "Of course, it doesn't matter when the weather's good."

Harry nodded, remembering that morning, and hoped he wasn't blushing.

"Harry?" came a tentative little voice. He turned to see Yolanda standing beside the sofa. "One of the third-years told Evie that Professor Snape is a vampire, and now she wants to go home. Will you come and talk to her?"

"Course," Harry answered, standing up. He grinned at Seamus, who was trying unsuccessfully to muffle a laugh, and Parvati who was managing an almost convincing concerned expression. "Catch you two later."

He didn't see Ron until dinner, when he finally showed up, Hermione's hand held firmly in his.

"I was wondering where you were," Harry said quietly, as they sat down. "Catching up, huh?"

"Don't I wish," Ron muttered.

"Ah," Seamus said. "T'was a fond reunion with her darling library, was it, then?"

Ron whooped, and Hermione looked offended. "It's important to--"

"Hermione," Harry said urgently. "Together again, right?"

"I know, but ...." Her shoulders twisted in a helpless shrug. "This is our N.E.W.T. year!"

"Hermione," Harry said again, "*September.*"

"But it's so easy to fall behind...!" For a moment, she lifted her hands in front of her face. "I know," she said, her face still hidden. "I know I shouldn't panic yet, but...."

"It's our N.E.W.T year, yes," Harry completed. "But you'll do fine." He looked over at Ron. "Make her relax tonight, okay?"

"And if you can't," Seamus added, "get another girl."

Harry couldn't help laughing. Seamus appreciated it. Ron and Hermione did not, but they accepted his apology, and diner went on.

Throughout the meal, Harry found his eyes straying to the Slytherin table. They no longer seemed as intimidating -- nor as alike -- as they had in years past. Draco was sitting between Linnet, whom Harry had found pleasant enough, and Zabini, whom he thought he rather liked. Millicent was sitting further down, in seemingly friendly argument with a younger boy that Harry didn't recognize, but who laughed with almost Gryffindor abandon. Pansy Parkinson, looking as unpleasant as ever, sat with Daphne Greengrass and two younger girls, one of whom kept glancing uncomfortably away. Near them was Theodore Nott, the only one that Harry was still sure of as an enemy, now that Crabbe was gone.

Perhaps he should go down to Slytherin after dinner and see what happened. He had planned to wait until further into the term, but now that plan reminded him unpleasantly of Dumbledore's delay on his promises. Tonight, he decided. He didn't need the Slytherins settled. He didn't *want* them settled, and their alliances negotiated. Just a quick visit, to see how they reacted. *And I can stop by Snape's room on the way back and pay what I owe him for the divination.* He had been carrying the money since morning, but on his one trip down to Snape's office, had found the door closed. After that, other things had distracted him.

Accordingly, he lingered at the dinner table until most of the students had left, and Hermione was starting to look restless, and then got to his feet.

"Back to Gryffindor?" Ron said eagerly, rising as well.

Hermione shook her head. "I still haven't found half the recommended texts for Ancient Runes."

"You're not supposed to find them all before the class starts, Hermione," Harry said patiently.

"I've been trying to tell her that. Maybe if we both take an arm...."

Grinning, Harry shook his head. "No. I have other plans."

"Harry..." Hermione warned.

"Nothing elaborate," Harry said. "In fact, they may even involve the library, but I have to go down to the dungeons first."

"Do you think that's safe?" Ron asked, his brow furrowing.

Harry shrugged. "Maybe not, but I'm a Gryffindor, aren't I?"

"Strange way to put it," Ron groused.

"Do be careful, Harry."

"I will."

He walked down to Slytherin openly, no cloak, no subterfuge -- not that there was anyone to see, for most of the way. In the last stretch, he heard light footsteps racing behind him, and turned to see two small children whip around the corner. He recognized one as the first-year girl that the Hat had taken so long to sort. They clattered to a stop beside him.

"What are *you*--" the girl began, but then the boy took off again. "Not *fair*!" she shouted, as she pursued him. Harry chuckled to himself. Definitely a Sorting problem. He lengthened his stride, and caught the shifting section of wall before it could close behind their argument. The stones stopped in mid slide, much like the door to a lift, probably due to much the same safety considerations, however differently fulfilled.

"You can't--" the boy tried, but Harry poked his head in, checking those closest for people he knew.

"Zabini!" he called. "Is Draco around?"

Silence shot outward from his voice, a few words at the edge of the room briefly audible in the central quiet. Everyone stared. Shrugging, Harry stepped through the door. "Please?" he asked, half-jokingly, and there was a strangled laugh from someone.

"You are not supposed to be here, Potter," came a harsh voice. Nott. Harry pretended to be unconcerned.

"Really?" he said, leaning back against the now-closed door panel -- for safety as well as a pose; no one could come at him from behind. He flexed his arm slightly against the length of his wand. "I'd heard a rumor that Snape implied I could visit."

"I believe," said Draco's voice from the door to the right of the fireplace, "that he expected you to be *somewhat* circumspect." He sounded amused as well as exasperated, and Harry smiled at him as he came into sight through the crowd around the fire.

"Why would he expect that?" he asked innocently. "I'm a Gryffindor." People were still staring, but less as if they were waiting for him to die on the spot.

"Excuses!" Draco scoffed. "You're perfectly capable of sneaking, Harry."

"But why bother?" Harry returned. "I'm just here to ask if you want to come to the library."

"Why? Do you need help already?"

"Ha! Not until lessons start, at least."

"Hm." Draco looked thoughtful. "I did have a few things I'd wanted to look up...."

"So you'd mentioned. Thus the invitation."

"All right, then. Just let me get something to take notes with."

As he walked back into the boys' dormitories, Millicent moved forward, shielding Harry from Nott as if by accident. He suspected otherwise. As a Beater, she knew all about interference.

"How's Gryffindor?" she asked.

"Eh, fine. Ron had calmed down by the time we got to the Welcoming Feast."

"He runs hot, doesn't he?" she asked, frowning.

"You might say that, yeah. And he didn't think much of me sharing a carriage with Slytherins."

Draco showed up, a mostly-empty school bag over his shoulder. "Let's go!"

"Right." Harry grinned at his protector. "Later, Mill."

She stuck her tongue out at him. "Yes, *Harry*."

"That was idiotic," Draco said, as they headed up the stairs.

"Why? Better to do it now than later. I took them by surprise."

"Well, you won't next time! We need some safer way we can find each other."

"If I'd just wanted your company, I could have caught you before you left dinner."

"Oh, that was an excuse to walk into the Slytherin common room?"

"Well, I couldn't just say 'I'm here to see what you all do,' now, could I?"

Sighing, Draco rubbed his face. "Gryffindor."

"But they didn't *do* anything," Harry protested. "Nott wanted to, but I think most people were just shocked."

"Millicent protected you."

"Yeah, I noticed." Harry grinned. "Just like a Beater."

"Ha! Yes."

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Chapter: 14

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Alternative Plans

"At the end of this year," Professor Snape declared. "You will take your N.E.W.T.s."

The entire class was silent. Harry thought they had probably all forgotten how intimidating Snape could be. *He* certainly had, during July's almost friendly chats and private tutoring sessions. The Snape who had loitered against his bedroom wall was gone now, replaced by a looming, sneering, contemptuous bat that Harry had prematurely categorized as a figment of childhood trauma.

"You are the best and most dedicated of your year--" He paused to sweep them all with a

disdainful glare -- "which means far less than you think it does. The Potions N.E.W.T.s are rigorous and demanding examinations, and the prospects of many of you are abysmal. However, I will do my best to provide you with the opportunity to do well. The onus to *realize* that opportunity is upon each of you. If you do not complete your readings, put thought and effort in your assignments, and concentrate meticulously upon your practical work, your chances remain ... abysmal.

"Today, we begin work on elementary Healing Potions. You should all have read Chapters 1 and 2, and pages 58-65 of Chapter 3...."

One by one, students in the lesson began to breathe again. Draco's quill scratched lightly over a page in his notebook. He shifted his arm back in invitation for Harry to read.

Another intimidating first day speech. I think this is his favorite part of teaching.

Harry nodded, but he didn't write anything back. Draco, as a Slytherin, could get away with that. He was a Gryffindor, and could lose points for his house.

After class, Draco lingered, waiting for Harry to finish his deliberately slow job of packing his equipment. Harry made subtle shooing motions with the hand behind his bag, and Draco frowned.

"I'd wanted to talk," Draco said quietly.

"Meet in the kitchens then."

"Why do you--"

Snape appeared at their side. Everyone else, it seemed, had left. "Are you unable to place your scales in your school bag, Potter?"

"I wanted to talk to you about --"

"If you need special assistance, Potter, come to my office during my scheduled hours, as other students do. *I* intend to go to lunch -- but *not* until I have secured my classroom."

"Right, sir. Thank you." Harry jammed the rest of his things in his bag and left the classroom, Draco on his heels.

"I do rather like the idea of the kitchens," Draco said, gracious now that Harry's plans had been foiled. "Shall we take a picnic?"

"I'd like that," Harry said blandly.

Draco shot him a challenging look, but didn't argue. Fifteen minutes later, they were outside the wall of the rose garden, too close to it to be seen from the castle windows, spreading out the loot from an over-laden basket. Harry wasn't surprised at the first word out of Draco's mouth.

"Snape?"

"What about him?"

"Don't pretend to be as stupid as he's claimed you are. What did you want to ask him?"

"I wanted to ask him about the Uncommon Room -- about what Dumbledore had told the staff." It wasn't a lie; that was something he wanted to ask.

"If it was that, I wouldn't have to leave."

"Look," Harry argued. "He tells me more when you're not around."

"That was last year -- when he thought I was working for the D-- Voldemort."

"Still." Harry sighed. "I know it doesn't make sense. Maybe it's -- I don't know -- image in front of a Slytherin student? In front of his spellson? But he does." He shrugged and reached for a sandwich. "What had you wanted to talk about?"

"I don't half-believe you, you know."

Harry stuck out his tongue. "Slytherin. Of course you don't."

"Don't show that off unless you intend to use it."

"Any time, love. You're the one holding out now, remember?"

Draco laughed, and the mood lightened. "It's for our own good."

"Of course it is," Harry answered, rolling his eyes.

"Well it is!" Draco leaned forward, his eyes sparkling. "Here's my idea. Last night, when you came down to Slytherin, I was thinking that we should make proximity detectors, so we can find each other."

"But I--"

Draco waved the objection away. "Yes, I understand that now. And your instincts may have been good -- you are the talk of the house, this morning, and it's not all bad. But it occurred to me that the same tool could be helpful for identifying the rooms below the bathroom."

"How so?"

"Well, the entire corridor isn't aligned. We know that -- if it was just a matter of counting doors, it would be easy. But we can estimate a general area. If we make a proximity detector and reproduce the notebooks, then one of us can stand outside the bathroom door while the other walks around below, and the person next to the bathroom can tell the walker when they are closest."

"Like a game of 'button, button'."

"Pardon?"

"Warmer, warmer, warmer, cooler," Harry tried.

"Ah, yes!" Draco sat back. "We call that 'seeker'."

Harry choked. "Perfect!"

For a few minutes, they caught up on eating. Harry had started off thinking about where they would go to enchant new notebooks, and how they would keep from having them confiscated. Having thought of a place to work, however, he found himself devising other uses for it. "About the Uncommon Room?" he said.

"Yes?"

"If Dumbledore doesn't come through, I want to make an unofficial one."

"Where? The Shrieking Shack is a bit out of the way."

"And too good to lose," Harry agreed. "But there are a couple of blocked secret passages. I've been checking them out, and the one on the fourth floor has a large, dry, flat area before you get to the caved-in part. We could expand that, and just bring people in on it individually."

"A 'by invitation only' Uncommon Room?"

"Well, if we just tell everyone, someone will rat."

"True." Draco looked thoughtfully off into the distance. "I'll need to think about candidates."

"Not just people who agree with us."

"No, of course not. But neutrals will need to be carefully selected."

"Tested, perhaps?" Harry suggested. "We could have invitations to some other place first."

"And see what they do?"

"Right."

Draco nodded. "That will be part of it."

Their next lesson was Transfiguration, during which Harry and Draco sat together, but made it a point to behave exceptionally well. Ron and Hermione, two tables in front of them, talked more. Harry didn't want McGonagall to have any chance to criticize his behavior with Draco. He had even left Susara back in the dormitory, partially to make it easier not to whisper, and partially because he wasn't sure how dangerous Cursebreaking would be. He didn't suppose he and Draco could maintain this level of behavior for long, but a good start might make a difference in the professors' attitudes later.

After Transfiguration, Hermione headed off to Arithmancy, and Harry and Draco started off to Cursebreaking. Ron was taking the class too, Harry knew, and it was strange to know he was behind them. Inside the room, he and Draco settled -- as always -- near the back. Ron paused in the aisle beside them and gave Harry a measuring look.

"Would you like to sit with us?" Draco offered suddenly, making Harry blink in confusion. "We can edge over."

For a moment, Ron looked grateful, but that changed suddenly to a scowl. "No thanks, Malfoy. I'd rather sit with someone sane." With a dirty look at Harry, he walked up to the very front of the room and an empty seat next to Padma.

Harry expected Draco to be furious, but he just leaned close. "You ask, next time. He was offended that it was me."

"Why ask?"

"Because we need him, which means he needs to stop thinking of me as a rival."

Just then, the instructor dashed into the room. His brown hair was mussed, and his robes askew. He tugged them quickly into place and gave the class a quick smile.

"Hullo, everyone! I'm Professor Hecksban, and I'll be teaching this class, as well as Defense Against the Dark Arts. My previous teaching experience is entirely seminars for professional curse-breakers, so let me know if I move too fast or use jargon that you don't know. Oh, and don't expect me to remember names right off." He grinned at Ron. "Except for you. You must be Bill's brother Ron, right?"

"Um, yeah."

"Brilliant. All right, let's go around the room. Tell me your name, whether you have any experience with cursed objects, and how comfortable you are with-- No, on second thought, just name and experience. Let's start with you."

He pointed to a table in the back corner. The first student was a Hufflepuff, Susan Bones, who mentioned a few family curiosities. Justin Finch-Fletchley, next, confessed he had no experience at all. That brought matters to Draco.

"Draco Malfoy," he drawled. "My father made quite a hobby of cursed objects, but I confess that I know next to nothing about *breaking* curses." A few nervous giggles rose throughout the room, but Hecksban just nodded.

Harry, realizing he was next, shrugged. "Harry Potter," he said. "I've been at the wrong end of a few cursed objects."

Ron outright laughed at that, the sound familiar, and a few others followed. Hecksban grinned and let the whispers die out before continuing on to a Ravenclaw that Harry didn't know. Beside him was Blaise Zabini, whom he had previously not noticed.

When they had all introduced themselves, Hecksban cleared his throat. "All right. Let's go over a few scenarios. There are no right or wrong answers here -- or, well, there are, but you're not expected to know the difference yet. I just want to get an idea for your styles."

Hecksban opened a package of colored chalk. Doodling a little house on the board, he continued. "Okay, let's say you've been sent out to a cottage that everyone says is cursed." He added jagged green grass in a line under the yellow house. It was a typical child's representation, with a peaked roof, a centered door, and two windows. "You check out the front door, and don't find anything. You open it and check out the door jamb, and something seems odd, but you can't pin it down and aren't entirely sure it's malevolent. What do you do?"

Zabini raised his hand.

"Yes, Blaise?"

"Make the same checks on a window."

"Oh, very good!" Hecksban outlined the door and windows in orange. "Let's say it's the same. Harry?"

"Um, bring a friend to wait outside with his wand out, and walk in, staying alert."

Draco's hand shot up.

"Draco?"

"Pull my *idiot* boyfriend away from the door, summon the nearest small animal, and toss that through instead."

Some of the sniggering that followed that was rather high-pitched.

"But what if it needs to walk in to be affected?" the Ravenclaw objected.

"Oh!" Ron exclaimed. "Then a friend could float you in."

"How about Apparating?" Susan suggested. Everyone turned and looked at her. "Well, if the curse is on the doorway...."

"Clever," Hecksban acknowledged. "Justin?"

After the lesson, Harry told Draco that he was going to walk up to Gryffindor with Ron. Draco, as he expected, approved of that, since he now saw a use for Ron. Once he was there, however, Harry ditched half of his books, replaced them with a small bag of gold, invited Susara to ride, and started back down to the dungeons and Snape's office.

"Master?" Susara hissed in his ear as they walked. *"Must I stay alone tomorrow?"*

"Was it too long?" he asked guiltily. He'd been hoping for a few more days to reassure people.

"I miss your warmth."

"Is not your lamp warm enough?"

She coiled uneasily down and up his arm. *"The lamp has adequate heat,"* she said, confusion flowing from her. *"You are warm."*

The answer was sweeter than she could understand, and he immediately decided he would just have to be circumspect.

"You can come with me," he promised. *"We cannot talk during lessons."*

"I will be as still as pure gold," she assured him, and he paused to run a finger down the warm gold of her scales.

"I am sure you will."

There were young voices coming from Snape's office, so Harry waited around the corner for the

students to leave. When he heard footsteps moving away, he peered around, and then walked to the open door.

"Professor?"

"Ah, Mr. Potter. Shut the door."

With a grin, Harry did that. When it was closed, and muted, he flopped down into a chair, and took the bag of gold out of his school bag. "Here," he said, tossing it Snape. "Thanks for the loan."

Snape caught the bag neatly, and gave it an experimental bounce in the palm of his hand. "You're welcome," he said politely. "Knowing you, I believe I can count it later." The bag was swept into a drawer. "From the way you have made yourself comfortable, I suspect that is not your entire business."

"No, not really." Harry shrugged. "There are a few things."

"Then please start."

"Well, first, I thought we didn't need to be secretive, this year."

"It rather depends about what, doesn't it?" Snape asked. "Voldemort will not call me to account for not killing you. A number of people might still want to know what I have to talk to you about."

That made sense, actually. McGonagall, for example, might take it amiss if Harry were to be seen disappearing into Snape's workroom for long periods. In fact, hadn't Dumbledore warned Harry that seeking Snape's support would cost him others'? "All right. So you may still need to give me detention, now and then."

Snape smiled evilly, showing his uneven teeth. "I rather expect I will have cause, as usual."

"Right, but if I want to talk--"

"You will misbehave? No. Seventh-year potions are not toys."

A tightening of Susara's hold gave Harry an idea. "What about Susara?"

"Pardon?"

"My snake -- the torclinde. If I wear her around my neck in your class, go ahead and overreact to something."

"I never overreact," Snape lied baldly. "But yes -- an excellent signal. Those students who notice

will likely assume I am angered by your presumption."

"Okay," Harry said, nodding.

"The next item?"

"Draco."

"Ah. What about Draco?"

"Well, he knows that you took me to the seer, of course. If you're willing to consult with me on divinatory potions, may I let him know?"

"I cannot obtain proscribed ingredients for you."

Harry waved that away. "Sorted."

There was a flash of something in Snape's eyes -- approval? interest? -- but his voice was bland. "I will consult on theory, discreetly."

"Equipment? Space?"

"Let me consider how it might be done."

"Okay." Harry shifted uneasily. "Er, last spring, Draco and I discussed something with the headmaster."

"Something," Snape repeated with amusement. "Might you be more specific?"

"Mixed-house social space."

"A frightening thought."

"He said he'd discussed it with the staff."

Snape's brow tightened into bands. "Discussed, no. It was mentioned and laughed off, as I recall."

"So, he's not really doing it."

Snape waved the matter aside. "This is Albus Dumbledore we are talking about. I would make no assumptions. He often approaches things with levity."

"All right. Will you let me know if it's mentioned again?"

"Certainly. Anything else?"

"Well, in general, I wanted to ask you about Talbot and DE status--"

Snape cut him off. "Adequate treatment of that subject would require a lengthy discussion. Some other day, yes, but not during my office hours. I can only leave the door closed for so long."

"Fine. Should I go?"

"No." Snape's voice was suddenly harsh. "Tell me, rather, what you were thinking when you *walked into* the SLYTHERIN common room?"

"Uh." Harry wet his lips. "Um, I wanted to see what they'd do."

"What *who* would do?"

"The Slytherins. The ones who don't know me. If they'd attack or watch. If it would make me more real. If it would make me less of an enemy."

"Ah." Steepling his hands, Snape sat back. "So this was a deliberate risk?"

"Yes."

Harry waited to see how that would be received. Slowly, Snape nodded. "It was not *entirely* moronic, then. And it may make you less of an enemy to those who formerly had no opinion."

Harry nodded. "I'll do it again, I think, but I'll be careful about when, and who's there."

"I suggest bribes, also," Snape nodded. "Unopened sweets, or other indulgences."

"I may have a few things that will do."

"I am unsurprised," Snape said dryly, coming to his feet. "Go then. And leave the door open."

"Yes, sir."

The Slytherin first-year girl from last night was waiting in the hallway. Harry gave her a smile as he waved her in.

Draco still had the copper mirror from last year, and the magical ink for charging the notebook was not difficult. They started it that evening, in the collapsed tunnel behind the mirror on the fourth floor, and when Harry saw Draco get a package in the Saturday morning owl deliveries, he knew to meet him there without being asked. By mid-afternoon, they had a new *Liber*

Geminus.

"We'll need to be more circumspect this year," Draco confided, as they headed up the stairs. "I suggest we don't use them in Transfiguration at all, and probably not in Potions, either. Charms should be safe, if we're not disruptive."

Harry nodded. "Defense and Cursebreaking, too. I get the feeling Professor Hecksban won't mind that sort of thing."

"Less distracting than passing notes, really." Draco agreed. "Ah. Here we are." He gave Harry a friendly nudge. "Your floor. I'll go up to the bathroom door."

Harry set off down the corridor. At first, it went in the same direction as the one on the floor above, but then it ended in a T. He turned left, and then right, and then entered some sort of storage room. There, he stopped and took out his book.

How's this? he wrote.

You could be closer. Move a few steps in some direction, and I'll tell you what changes.

Harry went to the far corner of the room.

Warmer. Can you go mor

The writing stopped. *Draco?* Harry queried. There was no response. Someone must have come down the hallway, he decided. Draco had hid the book. He would just wait here.

After a few minutes, he began to worry. Nothing too horrible should happen in that corridor -- well, barring odd monsters loose in the school -- but what if Nott had drummed up some support and gone looking for Draco? He decided to head back to the stairs, but he kept the book out, just in case Draco wrote to him again, and shared his attention between the page in front of him and the corridor ahead.

Before he saw writing in the book, he saw Draco. He was leaning against the wall, just around the corner from the stairs, and pulling out his quill.

Curious, Harry looked at the page.

Had to leave. Meet m

Not waiting for the rest, Harry hurried forward. "How about here?" he asked. Draco jumped, splotching the page.

"Harry! What are you doing here?"

"I decided to go looking for you, in case you were in danger."

Draco scowled. "Only of exploding from frustration. This won't work."

"Why not?"

After a quick glance around the corner, Draco pulled his quill back out again.

We shouldn't talk about it here. "Shall we go get some chocolate?" he asked aloud.

Harry had to puzzle that out for a moment -- the passage to Honeydukes. "Good idea," he answered.

When they were safely in the hidden space, Draco cast a privacy spell.

"It was Dumbledore," he said. "I hadn't been at the door a minute before he showed up. He has to be watching the place, somehow."

Harry grimaced. "Damn."

"Yes. Interfering old coot."

"We'll need to use the Shrieking Shack."

"That's far more dangerous."

"Not to mention a nuisance. It takes half an hour to get there."

They looked around at the cramped space around them and both decided it wouldn't do. Harry could see it when he met Draco's eyes.

"Too small."

"We don't need to share the one on the fourth floor--"

Draco shook his head. "The fumes might leak out into the corridor." He frowned. "I wonder if there's a place we could send your snake through."

"I won't send Susara into the walls! What if she gets lost?"

"Well, maybe we could send a phantom through the wall," Draco said. "I expect Myrtle is terrified of-- Oh!"

"What?"

"*Ghosts* can go through walls. And floors. Moaning Myrtle could tell us what's below her bathroom."

"Brilliant!" Harry exclaimed. "Except...."

"Do you have a problem with that?"

Harry scowled. "Neither of us can cast Control Spirit on her. We've both done it once, remember?"

Draco stared at him in surprise for a moment, and then rolled his eyes. "True," he said, "but there are other methods."

"Oh?" Harry asked, interested. If there was a second spell that would enable them to control ghosts, he could--

"We could *ask,*" Draco snapped.

Harry bit his lip at the obvious reprimand. It wasn't as if he hadn't thought of that, he just didn't think it would work. "After last year, I doubt she'll--"

"She loves attention; you know that. She may not tell us outright, but we should be able to get enough information, given a little time. Now come on!"

"Where are we going?"

"The Prefect's Bathroom. There probably won't be anyone there this early, and with any luck, she'll be taunting the mermaid."

Draco entered the room first, and then, after confirming that no one else was there, opened the door for Harry.

"No Moaning Myrtle," Harry pointed out.

"True, but she likes to watch," Draco said loftily. "Sometimes she notices when you run the water."

He turned on a tap, releasing steamy water and the scent of jasmine. For a few minutes, they just sat on the bench, watching the water fall and the steam rise. Harry wished they could take their clothes off and slide in.

"We should come here some time," he whispered, his hand inching closer to Draco. "Really late at night."

A familiar giggle came from the drain in the floor. Harry jerked back. Moaning Myrtle shot out of the drain in a silver blur.

"Oh!" she exclaimed in dismay. "You have your clothes on!"

"Yes, actually--"

"We were looking for you," Draco interrupted, beaming at the ghost as if she were his best friend.

"Don't make fun!" she answered, stamping her foot even as her eyes brimmed with silver tears.

"We were!" Harry said hastily. "I wanted to apologize, er, for my behavior last year."

"Oh!" she cooed, as if he'd handed her a dozen roses. She swooped closer. "You don't have to worry. I *understand*."

"You do?" He couldn't see how she could.

Myrtle giggled. "Well...." she said suggestively, and Harry tried not to shudder. "Harry!" she said sweetly. "You know I hear *all* the school gossip. You should have told me you were *safe*, and then I wouldn't have been so forward. I'm not *mean*, you know, not like *some* people."

"Er, safe?" Harry asked. He couldn't imagine when he'd been safe.

"Bent," Draco clarified. "You know -- not about to take advantage of an innocent young woman."

"Oh!" Harry blushed. He had a brief impulse to protest that he was bi, but if thinking he was gay would stop Myrtle from throwing herself at him, he could live with it. "I don't think I've ever heard, um, that one. Maybe Muggles don't use it now."

"Mm." Myrtle still looked alarmingly and ineptly coquettish as she leaned her head to the side. "Is it true that the two of you are *boyfriends*?"

For a moment, they looked at each other. Then Draco reached over and took Harry's hand. "Yeah," Harry said.

She squealed. "I want to see you kiss. A *real* kiss, not a peck."

"Well...."

"Hush," Draco ordered. He turned to Myrtle. "If we kiss for you, do you promise to tell us what room is directly below the second floor girls' bathroom, and what is directly below that?"

She nodded. "Uh-huh."

"In a useful manner that we can understand," he warned.

"Well." She pushed up her glasses. "How can *I* tell what you'll understand?"

"If we find what we want," Harry said, "we'll kiss for you again."

"Ooo!" She giggled. "With your shirts off?"

"We wouldn't want to get caught," Draco said smoothly. "However, I'm willing to add touching."

"Below the waist?"

Draco scowled. "*Above* the waist."

"Hmph." She pouted. "Are you *really* homosexual?"

"Yes," Draco answered sharply. "However, I am *not* an exhibitionist."

Harry grinned. "I think that's the best you'll get out of him," he told her. "Malfoy pride, you know."

"Oh, all right." She sat on the edge of the tub. "So. Kiss."

"Promise first."

"I promise, yes. I'll tell you what rooms are directly below my bathroom."

Hesitantly, Harry leaned forward. He needed to not think about Myrtle, he told himself, as his lips touched Draco's. He needed to think about something else. Sliding into that tub, perhaps, late at night, with the drains blocked to ghosts. Draco's arms came up around him, interrupting the thought, and suddenly he didn't need to imagine anything. Draco's mouth was soft and warm, his lips pressing just as Harry liked, his cheek not yet scratchy, but not quite as smooth as a girl's. Harry played the tip of his tongue along the line of slightly parted lips, and they opened further, inviting. He moaned into the kiss....

Someone squealed. Harry's eyes went from barely closed to squeezed shut. With a warning brush of contact, Draco lifted his head, and Harry opened his eyes.

"Oh," Myrtle said. She fanned her face with one hand. "You look *so* sexy together! You'll do more next time?"

"A little more," Draco said firmly.

"I want five minutes."

"Agreed. If you give us enough information for us to find what we want, we'll kiss for you for five minutes, next time."

"Okay. Well," she simpered, "there are two rooms under my bathroom, one under most of it, and the other under just the end of the sinks."

Harry nodded. That made sense. The passage would drop down between them.

"I don't know what either is called, but one is full of odds and ends of old furniture. I've only been in there for a moment, because it doesn't have any plumbing, but I appeared in a disconnected bath there once, when I was startled. A terrible bath -- it was lined with seashells, and horribly uncomfortable to even *think* of sitting in! It's all things that no one wants, I think -- cobra candelabras, and crocheted pink and green antimacassars, and a folding bed carved to look like crocodile jaws."

"Lovely," Draco said dryly. "And the other room?"

"A caretaker's room," she said. "I'd call it a cupboard, but it does have a sink -- a plain, deep one, that always smells of dirty floors."

Harry grinned and got to his feet. "Great. Thanks, Myrtle. You've been a big help."

"Will you come to my bathroom?" she asked. "No one comes there now."

"It's been put off limits," Harry explained. "By Dumbledore."

"We'll meet you here," Draco said, "in a week's time."

"Ooo!" With a little shiver of delight, she looped up into the air and down again. "In a week, then!" In a quivering flash, she was gone down the drain.

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Chapter: 15

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15 -- Return to the Chamber of Secrets

Harry wanted to start right in on looking for the room after dinner, but Draco pointed out that they had spent all day with each other, and probably both had housemates to placate. "Besides," he said, "I need to get *some* work done. I have another five inches to write for my Ancient Runes essay. I suggest tomorrow morning, before breakfast. No one else should be about then."

That, Harry decided, as he heard a distant meow, had not accounted for the strange schedules of cats. Draco met his eyes. There was a door up ahead -- perhaps even the one that they were looking for -- and they hurried to it and checked inside. It was the storeroom, cluttered with hideous junk, just as Myrtle had described. They stepped in, Harry cast a freshening spell down the corridor, and they closed the door.

"Harry, if you don't mind my asking...."

"Removing our scent. To a creature that's used to wizards, it should seem like we took a portkey."

"Oh." Draco looked a bit put out. "Good thought," he said, without much enthusiasm.

Harry grinned. "Thanks, but not mine. It's something Snape taught me."

"Why would Severus wish you to evade Mrs. Norris?"

"We were discussing Nagini, actually."

"Ah. That makes more sense." Draco perked up a little. "Now that I think of it, that may explain your claim that he tells you more when I'm not present."

"Oh?"

"Well, he fears what I will do with it, of course."

"Do?"

"You're expected to use such things against the Dark Lord."

"Oh, right. That could be it." *Not,* Harry added to himself, *that Snape is under any delusions that I don't evade school rules as well.*

They spent a minute just looking at the room. It was dimly lit by a single high window on the far wall. Harry spotted the bath Moaning Myrtle had mentioned, and the folding bed, which was near the wall to their left. He pointed. "Along that wall, do you think?"

Draco frowned. "It depends on whether the cupboard is the next thing down this corridor, or along another corridor. Get out your notebook, and I'll go and find it."

"You're volunteering to risk Filch?"

"I," said Draco grandly, "am Head Boy."

Harry sighed. "Right."

The cupboard turned out to be along a perpendicular corridor, but still backed up against the left wall. *Warmer*, Draco wrote, as Harry started towards the back of the room. As Draco used the proximity spell to detect any change in his distance, Harry worked his way along the wall, stepping around random things on the floor. The worst was a mummified kappa in a candle-holder cage, but there was also a lectern of piled skulls -- the top two of them human-looking -- and a bronze chandelier in the shape of intertwined cobras, hoods raised and glass eyes glittering. Next to that, oddly, was a child's table shaped like a big, sparkly pink daisy. He was just past the crocodile-head folding bed when Draco wrote *cooler*. Harry stepped back. *That's it*, Draco confirmed, and Harry touched the wall. Draco was right here. The chute could be right here. Or, he realized, the chute could be to one side or the other of the cupboard, in the corner made by the cupboard and room.

Draco returned, and they began their investigations. Draco used a hole-cutting charm that they had found the previous night. A section of wall about an inch and a half in diameter came out in an even cylinder, but it was nearly a foot thick. They couldn't see anything through the hole.

"Lumos?" Harry said doubtfully.

"The wand will just block more. Besides, will yours reach? Mine won't."

Harry drew his doubtfully and laid it against the cylinder. "About the same length," he said. "I couldn't really keep a grip on it if I put it far enough in."

Draco snorted. "And you have a long one," he commented, which made Harry smirk.

"That? Haven't you seen Ron's?" He held a hand several inches past the tip of his own wand, making Draco snigger.

"Never looked in that detail," he said. "Not that I want him poking it in our business," he added.

Harry looked at the hole again, his expression sobering. "Susara could look."

"I thought you weren't willing to send her into the walls?"

"Well, not to, you know, explore. But this would just be looking with me here."

Susara had begun to move sleepily at the mention of her name, and now she spiraled down his arm and slipped her head out the sleeve. *"Master?"*

"Hello, beautiful. Would you do me a favor?"

"Of course," she answered, but he could feel a little uncertainty behind it. He raised his hand to the hole so she could see.

"We have formed this hole, but the wall is so thick that we cannot see through it. Could you go until you can just see out the other side, and tell me what is there?"

With a wordless feeling of consent, she slithered into the hole until just the tip of her tail -- curved to one side -- showed.

"Is there space?" he asked.

"It is dark."

"Hold still. I will make light." Carefully, he slid his wand in above her, as far as he safely could, and then cast a mild, focused Lumos. Her tail-tip flicked.

"Some space," she said. *"Would you like me to go further?"*

"No. I want to know if there is enough space for me."

A wave of constrained motion came down her body. *"There is a large metal basin. If you made the hole in another place, there is space in this room."*

Harry sighed. *"Okay. Come back."* As she coiled around his wrist, he turned to Draco and shrugged. "This goes straight to the cupboard, apparently, behind the sink. The chute must be to one side or the other."

Draco sighed. "Well, I suppose we can't expect to get it on the first try."

Suddenly, his head snapped to the side, and in a sudden move, he pushed Harry against the wall, just by the crocodile bed.

"Wha--"

"Shh!" Draco's hand covered Harry's mouth, and Harry realized he must have heard something. That was disappointing; there were better reasons, Harry thought, to be in this position. After several seconds of nothing happening, Draco began to relax. Harry stretched his tongue out and dragged the tip of it against Draco's palm. With a strangled sound, Draco stepped back. "My mistake," he said coolly, his expression haughty. Harry, who could recognize that as discomfiture, tried to repress a smile.

"So," he said, to cover for it, "which way along the wall?"

Draco looked back and forth, and finally pointed to the bed. "Behind that," he said. "It would be the most convenient, anyway."

"To hide a door?"

"Yes, exactly."

"It doesn't look like anyone comes in here," Harry pointed out. "The further we get from the door, the dustier everything is."

"Which is why we want a place not visible from the door."

They slid the cylinder back in the wall and rejoined it with a repair charm, and moved further down. There was room for only one of them behind the bed.

"Let's move it a few inches further out," Harry suggested. "That shouldn't be obvious from the door."

"Is there room?" Draco looked doubtfully around the bed.

"Sure. We just need to shift this chandelier--" Harry reached over. As his hand closed on one of the wrought brass cobras that formed the chandelier, it softened in his grasp. Then it hissed.

"Shit!"

"Petrificus!"

"Stop!" Harry tried, in Parseltongue, as Draco's target clanged to the floor. The snakes had all unraveled from their ornate knot, and were advancing menacingly. They paused at his command, raised heads wavering uncertainly side to side, but then slowly began to descend. The fastest one resumed its approach. Harry glanced at Draco, who jerked his head to the side. Understanding, Harry began to back into the center of the room, while Draco retreated along the wall. That caused a little more head waving, and they both got off another Petrifaction hex. The problem was, there were a lot of cobras, and their uncertainty lasted only a moment. Each serpent -- darkened bronze with streaks of verdigris -- slipped across the floor towards one or the other of them. Seeing one aimed for him twining through two snakes headed towards Draco, Harry tried a Corrosion hex.

As he had hoped, the three snakes stuck together. Their untangled parts still moved, if jerkily, producing a horrible clanging as they banged together. The tangle slowed the advance of another snake behind the mess, but cost Harry the time to cast a Muffling charm. He risked a desperate look at Draco, who was standing on the pink daisy table, his wand raised, while at least four snakes wove around it, trying to get high enough to strike him over the wooden petals. That was all that Harry had time to see before he had to fall back and petrify another snake that was after

him.

No sooner had the petrified snake fallen than it rose in the air, a frozen squiggle. Harry ducked its tail and watched open-mouthed as it joined back into the chandelier construct with most of the others. His three corroded ones couldn't detangle and shape properly, but Draco cast another two spells, and soon they were back where they belonged. Carefully, Draco levitated the chandelier a little back from its original location, and just as carefully, Harry levitated the crocodile jaw bed a foot back, to where he had wanted it. They looked at each other.

They were too far apart to speak without being audible from the corridor. By silent agreement, they met back by the wall.

"We will need to redistribute the dust," Draco remarked. His eyes widened as he continued. "D-U-S-T, dust."

Harry choked back a laugh.

"Prat!" Draco snapped. "P-R-A-T, prat."

Harry bit his lip to restrain a snigger. It was only funny if they could stop it. "Try a sentence," he suggested.

Draco glared at him. After a moment, he raised his head. "The fucking table is fucking cursed. C-U-R-S-E-D, cursed. Ouch. O-U-C-H, ouch."

"Ouch?" Harry asked. "Oh, never mind."

Draco pulled out their notebook. *My tongue hurts when I swear*, he wrote.

Harry couldn't hold back the laugh. "Sorry," he gasped. "Curses for tots, damn!"

Fix it, Draco wrote, and glowered.

"How?" Harry asked. "I mean, I'd love to, but I haven't the faintest idea what to do. Madam Pomfrey--"

Draco shook his head. *She might recognize the curse,* he wrote.

"Point." Harry could not seem to stop his mouth from twitching. "It is rather memorable."

There must be something that stops it.

"Saying you're sorry?" Harry suggested. "Oh -- what happens if you *try* to spell something?"

Draco frowned. He straightened, standing as if he were presenting something in a lesson.

"C-H-A-R-M," he said, and then his mouth opened again. His lips twitched and twisted, and he grabbed on to Harry's arm. "NO!" he shouted, then shuddered, and then relaxed. "I think...." He paused, waiting, his breath coming hard. "I think that did it."

"Great," Harry said, "Now let's hope no one heard you. I didn't bring my cloak."

Draco caught Harry's hand and pulled him behind the bed. "Don't touch it," he warned at a whisper.

"You're thinking that everything in this room is cursed?"

"Yes. I gather you've reached the same conclusion?"

Harry nodded. "It seems likely. How did you stop the snakes?"

"*Reparo*."

"That's it?"

Draco looked smug. "It took me a moment to think of, but yes. Repaired, they were again a chandelier."

"That's clever!"

For a minute, they were silent. Harry watched Draco -- his cheeks flushed pink, his eyes dark in the dim light, his smile sharing a secret accomplishment -- and wondered what would happen if he leaned forward, inviting a kiss. Just as he was about to try, Draco turned away.

"We're safe, I think. Someone would have come in by now -- or at least run by in the hallway -- if anyone had heard. Let's get back to it."

They made a new hole in wall behind the folded bed. This time Susara said Harry might fit, if he got in sideways.

"Do you mean on my stomach?" he asked.

"No." She had come back out and now her tail trembled in frustration. *"It is not as big as one of your doorways. It goes down between the walls like the down-hole to the den you used last year, but it is narrower, and with no slope."*

"The--" Harry figured out what she meant. *"That is what we are looking for. The down-hole."*

Her upper body drew back. For a moment, she hissed. *"Silly master! You should tell me what you need! It is there."* She turned her head and stretched it out towards Draco. *"Put me down, and I will show you."*

Embarrassed, he put her on the floor. She slithered through the dust, past Draco, and to the very edge of the bed. There she reared up, and flicked her tongue out at the wall. *"Here,"* she said. *"Or a little further."*

"How can you tell?"

"It still smells of the great snake," she said matter-of-factly, *"and of you, and of your mate. And I saw the slant of it from below, in the last place."*

"Thank you," he said, and turned to Draco. "One more test hole. She thinks she knows where it is."

She was right. At the next hole, she told them that she was at the edge of the chute. Harry punched the air, and Draco sagged back against the wall in relief.

"Brilliant!" Harry said.

"And now for a door," Draco said, his eyes closing. "I have the notes on two spells. We should do a second review bef--"

Harry pinned him against the wall and kissed him. Draco's eyes flew open. "Mmph--!"

Harry decided that if Draco really minded, he would make it clear, and he concentrated on Draco's warm mouth and firm body against his own. For at least a minute, the only sounds were the soft whispers of skin on skin and fabric on fabric, and increasingly loud breathing.

Then Draco reached out and grasped Harry's arm, stopping him. "Harry." His eyes were promisingly unfocused, but he closed them and took a deep breath. "We *cannot* get caught here. We should always be in this room as briefly as possible."

That made an irritating amount of sense. Harry drew back with a scowl. "Let's get to it, then."

After debating the two spells, they settled on the one that would make a section of the wall temporarily intangible -- though still visible -- at an assigned word or phrase. After they had discussed several possibilities and discarded them as being either too obvious or favoring one of them too much, Harry suggested "bats", and Draco agreed. That made "snitch" (or rather, Draco corrected, "snitches") the obvious counter-incantation.

That done, they opened the passage down to the chamber.

It was, after everything, that simple. Draco pointed his wand, zigzagged it back and forth, and said a two-word incantation, and then met Harry's eyes.

"Bats," they said in unison.

The wall looked just the same. Of course, it was supposed to. Harry reached a hand out to it. His fingers disappeared into the stone.

"How does it feel?" Draco asked.

"Cold. No, cool. Like mist, not like a ghost."

He brought his hand out and looked at it. It was fine. Shrugging, he put his head through. He couldn't see anything. *Of course I can't!* he chided himself, pushing back alarm. *It's dark.* He cast Lumos. It was the chute, slanting steeply down from the left, their vine ladder still lying against the rock wall. At a tug on his ankle, he pulled back through the wall.

"Well?" Draco demanded.

"We're here. It's one of the more slanted sections. Our ladder's still there, by the way."

Draco covered a smile with a sniff. "I wouldn't trust it, at this point. We should Vanish it and cast a new one. That will keep us from climbing too high, as well."

"Good point. Shall we go?"

Harry vanished the ladder. Before he could cast a new one, Draco had done it. "Not as severe a change of energies," he explained. "It wouldn't matter if we were just using it for a day or two, but...."

Harry nodded. He hadn't heard that before, but it made sense.

Draco looked hesitantly into the gloom. "Perhaps you should go first," he said. "Coming in not through the official entrance might trigger something, and--"

"And you'd rather I faced it?"

"And I expect it will require a Parselmouth, like the other tests."

Harry frowned. "Isn't it sort of risky, relying on the same trick for all the entrances?"

"It's a very rare talent." Draco hesitated. "And there was the basilisk."

"I suppose." Harry couldn't help thinking that was yet another Parselmouth trick. He might be able to sway a basilisk now. "I suspect he just didn't know much yet. He was only sixteen."

Draco turned out to be right. They descended the ladder unmolested, but as soon as Harry set

foot on the corridor, there was a creaking of stone, and a large, black snake slithered out of either wall.

"Who comes?" they hissed, in stereo chorus, each staying to its side.

Harry thought quickly. Claiming to be Tom might trip him up -- he was reluctant to lie at all -- but he had better sound like he belonged here. *"The heir to the Chamber of Secrets."*

They hissed and writhed and tested the air with flickering tongues, but slowly settled. *"You did not use the door."*

"It is watched. I made another."

They relaxed further, coming together so he might have taken them with one blow. Harry settled himself, trying to project confidence. *"I no longer need your services,"* he said firmly.

"Are we released?" The question was eager enough to give Harry second thoughts. Still, he did not want them.

"You are released."

They hissed with harsh pleasure, coiled about each other ... and crumpled under the contact. As Harry stepped forward, the last withered remains fell into dust. He froze.

"Harry?" Draco's voice wavered. Harry couldn't blame him. "What did you do?"

"I ... I said they were released."

"Merlin and Morgana." Draco shuddered, but stepped forward. "I'm so glad I didn't join that madman."

"Yeah. Me too."

The rest of the walk was uneventful, and they met nothing larger than non-magical spiders. Still, Harry felt a thrill of fear when he commanded the great door to open. Draco, apparently similarly nervous, held his wand forward, and lit the torches as soon as there was enough of a crack to point through. Flames flared to life, showing still water and grand stone, but amidst the vast space, a green and orange plastic sofa, shaggy throw cushions, a stone coffee table, and two folded blankets. Scattered rubbish littered the ground beside the sofa and the surface of the table: crumpled parchment, empty bottles and sweet wrappers, and a broken quill or two.

Harry grinned. Draco sniggered.

"We left rather a mess, didn't we?"

"Yeah," Harry admitted as they stepped in. "It didn't occur to me to clean up, for some reason."

"Or to me," Draco pointed out, with a shrug. "The perils of doing without House Elf service." He looked around critically. "Collect the empty bottles," he said, "and I'll show you something Severus taught me."

Harry grinned. "That's what you want to do first?" he asked, raising his eyebrows. He turned and sealed the door behind him. "Here?" he asked, leaning against it. "Together?"

Draco sucked on his lower lip. Harry licked his upper one. "How about showing me how good you are at transfiguration?" he suggested huskily. "Maybe that sofa would make a nice bed."

Turning his face to the side didn't stop Draco from keeping his eyes on Harry. "I have something better," he said suggestively.

"Oh?"

"Yes." Draco reached into his pocket. "I've been exploring this summer," he said. "And practicing size changes." From his pocket, he pulled what looked like a dollhouse version of a Hogwarts bed -- a four poster with blue curtains. "I hope you don't mind Ravenclaw colors -- it had the best mattress of the surplus ones. Where should we put it?"

"You expect me to make design decisions when you're holding a *bed*?"

"Well, it's not good to shrink and expand something too many times."

"All right. Past the next pillar?"

"As if it's another room?"

"Yeah, I guess."

Draco smirked over his shoulder as he turned away. "Are we playing happy families, then?"

"Mm." Harry caught Draco around the waist as he straightened from putting the bed down. "This is the part where the children are busy somewhere else."

With a bright laugh, Draco stretched back to give him a kiss. "Very busy," he agreed. "Let me just...." With a quick spiral of his wand, he cast an expansion spell, and the bed wavered and whooshed out to its full size.

"Brilliant," Harry said. When he reached out a hand to Draco, he could feel that he was trembling. Twining his fingers through Draco's helped. He had to swallow before he could speak again. "Shall we?"

He led Draco to the bed as if they were walking on eggshells. Draco sat down and tugged his hand, so Harry sat, half-facing him. For a long moment, they just stared at each other, and then both of them laughed tensely.

"Circe!" Draco's face was pink. "This is worse than the first time."

Harry nodded. "Well, we'd been sitting and kissing for a while, then, right?"

"Right," Draco said decisively. He toed off his shoes and scooted back against the headboard. "Come on, then. Let's kiss and not worry about it."

Harry tried to crawl up to join him, but his school robes got in the way. He pulled them off as casually as he could, and in trousers and a jumper, joined Draco at the top of the bed.

"Very nice," Draco said, running a hand covetously over his shoulders.

"The jumper?" Harry teased.

"No, the jumper is horrid."

Harry kissed him.

Draco's lips were soft, but moved hard against his own. Harry pulled him closer as they went on. This, at least, was familiar to the point of safety. He had to pull back a moment, afraid of laughing in Draco's mouth.

"What?"

"I was just remembering...." He had to think how to phrase this so Draco would understand he wasn't reluctant to do more. "The first time we kissed, it felt so dangerous. And now it doesn't."

"Good," Draco said fiercely, drawing him back.

Kissing was good, but very soon, it wasn't enough. Harry worked a hand between them to undo Draco's robes, and Draco immediately responded by sliding his hands up under Harry's jumper. Unease fell away in a surge of lust, and having opened Draco's robes, Harry went straight for the front of his trousers, and when he couldn't get them open, started working his hand under the waistband.

"Harry--"

"Want you."

"Let me...." Draco's trousers were apparently held closed with hooks, which he undid with two

practiced pinches of fabric. Harry immediately pulled them down to Draco's knees. For a moment, he knelt there, distracted by the view. An uneven pitching of Draco's hips turned out to be Draco kicking trousers and pants off the rest of the way.

"Yours now," Draco insisted, reaching ineffectively. He pouted. "It isn't fair if I'm the only one undressed. I can't even reach your trousers."

"All right." Harry moved back off the bed and stood to push the offending garment down. He was very aware of how on display he was, even with the jumper still on. It didn't cover much of importance. "Better?"

After a shaky exhalation, Draco lifted his chin and pretended he hadn't been staring. "Yes. Now come back here."

Harry crawled back onto the bed, but only as far as he'd been before. He nudged Draco's legs apart to kneel between them, and returned to blatantly looking.

"Want to touch you."

"Go ahead."

Other sounds became loud in the absence of words: Harry's breathing, long with control, and Draco's, growing quicker and higher; the whisper of skin on skin; the unmistakable squelch of wetter contact. Harry wondered distantly if proper breeding sex sounded as vulgar, but he didn't pause to speculate.

"Harry," Draco implored. His cries rose, until Harry could hear him on the edge. He pushed his hands up Draco's sides and grabbed his nipples, squeezing tight, and Draco cried out and arched up in pleasure.

Harry stilled his motion, only then realizing that he had been rocking against the mattress. Shakily, Draco tugged at his arms, urging him up.

"Here. Wann' touch."

It was immensely satisfying to have broken Draco's diction. Harry grinned as he crawled up to lie beside Draco. There wasn't much room on the bed for two, but they didn't need any space between them.

"Good," he said quickly. "Want you to touch me." Draco hesitated, so Harry caught his hand and moved it to where he wanted it.

"Just that?" Draco asked, stroking him.

"Yeah." It took Harry a moment to find the breath for more. "Do that."

"As you wish." Draco wrapped a leg over Harry's, pulling their lower bodies closer together. In a low, sexy voice, he began to detail exactly what he liked about Harry in bed, until Harry was made with arousal. He moaned and started sucking on Draco's neck, unable to find words of his own.

"Just like that," Draco murmured. "Love the way your control dissolves, and you thrust and moan...."

He didn't get to say more, because Harry's control went to nothing at that. He grabbed Draco's arse and pulled him tight into a motion he couldn't stop until he came, roaring, and everything slowed to a blissful overload. He dissolved down, still tangled with his lover.

For a moment, they just breathed.

Draco shifted to a slightly more comfortable cuddle and Harry moved to accommodate him.

"Mm," Draco commented.

"Happy?"

"Exceedingly."

"Me too." Harry squeezed him briefly. "If anyone had told me, last September, that the place I would feel safest was in this room, I would have thought they were raving." He kissed the most accessible part of Draco, which was somewhere near his shoulder. "And if they'd said in Draco Malfoy's arms...."

Draco's breath went pleasantly shaky at that. "Then?"

"Oh, protests that nothing but the foulest of Dark Arts....." Harry kissed again, a suddenly tightened muscle. "And it's something so simple as love," he whispered, and Draco melted against him.

"Harry."

"I love you."

"I love you too." Draco rolled towards him. "I'm so glad to be back here."

"Our place."

"Yes." Draco sighed. "But we'll have to bring others, this year, I suppose."

"We'll find somewhere else," Harry promised recklessly.

"No. If Weasley's going to do divination for you, for example, this is the only place I'd trust."

Harry sighed. "Can we blindfold him for the entrance?"

"I find that idea *entirely* agreeable." Draco frowned. "If we're going to discuss this, might we get out of bed?"

"We don't need to discuss it."

Sitting up, Draco shook his head. "No. We ought to. Let's get dressed and collect the rubbish, and then we can sit properly and strategize."

"If you insist," Harry answered, rolling his eyes, but he realized Draco was probably right.

Draco walked about incinerating bits of paper, and Harry collected empty bottles -- one cognac, a large number of butterbeer, and to his surprise, one of orange fizz. *When did I bring that in?* Draco dumped out their rubbish, which had another two cognac bottles and perhaps a dozen of butterbeer. "Those too," he said, as he magically separated the burnable items out from plastic. "Put all the clear ones on the table."

Curious now, Harry did as he was instructed. Draco came over to sit on the sofa. "Hm," he said. "That's quite a lot of glass. Let's see...."

Drawing his wand, he began to rotate it next to the bottles, which rose, spun, and melted together into a liquid blob. At a word from Draco, the blob stabilized in the air, and he used his wand to draw out a smaller ball of it. He lengthened that to a rod and expanded one end into a bubble, slowly pushing the space down. When he was finished, he had a glass mug that he settled on the table.

"Not crystal," he said smugly, "but not transfigured. It will be perfectly stable, even under a Reversion hex."

"That's brilliant!"

Draco flushed with pride. He made four clear glass mugs and a glass ewer, and then swirled the rest of the clear glass in with the brown and green to make four plates and a number of floating candle holders which he levitated over to the reflecting pool.

"You have plans to entertain?" Harry asked pointedly, and Draco lifted his nose into the air.

"One should always be prepared for company."

"Huhn." Absently, Harry reached under the table and pulled out a bottle. "Shall we--"

"Where did *that* come from?"

"Um." Harry blinked. "The usual place?" he tried.

"But...." Draco stared at the bottle. "How is there cognac here? We didn't leave the grounds after Easter, and we haven't been--"

Harry shrugged. "Not until the day of the Leaving Feast. What did you think I'd got drunk on?"

Draco's stare lifted and bored into him. "You went to the Muggle village? *Alone?* During the day?"

"Well, yeah."

"You IDIOT!"

"I was very careful, Draco. I used a disillusionment spell, *and* kept the cloak on--"

"So you stole that?"

"I left money."

"Why not do it in Hogsmeade, then?"

"I'd be much more likely to get caught--"

"But less likely to get *killed*!"

"Draco," Harry said soothingly. "It was months ago. I lived."

"Merlin!"

Harry lifted the bottle slightly. "Would you like some? It's not as good as usual, but it's not bad."

"Promise me you won't be that careless again."

Harry snorted. "*I* wouldn't even believe that!"

Draco's eyes narrowed. "To be more specific," he said clearly, "if you are going to leave the Hogwarts grounds, talk to me first."

Harry bit his lip. "If you can afford to be involved, okay. I'd rather. But that one *had* to be mine."

After a long, audible breath, Draco responded. "Because it wasn't your house that would benefit."

"Yes."

"That wouldn't matter to mine."

"Well it mattered to mine a great deal." Harry looked away. Carefully, he poured two small portions. "And I believe it mattered to the Hufflepuffs, as well. The ones that were civil to me last year are still." He extended a glass to Draco. "Drink?"

"Wait," Draco said, even as he took the glass. "Don't drink any yet."

"It wasn't poisoned, Draco. I sealed the room when we left."

"I know! Just ... we should have a toast. For the year."

"Oh!" Harry sat straighter. Draco closed his eyes for a moment, his brow furrowing in concentration.

"Here," he said finally. He took a deep breath and opened his eyes. "To our first year of adulthood and our last year of protection; to working and playing together; to victory."

Meeting his eyes, Harry smiled. Draco made a toast like he was casting a spell. "To us," he said simply, his glass meeting Draco's, and they both took a ritual sip of the amber liquid.

Draco's face scrunched up a little when he swallowed. "I'd forgotten," he said.

Harry laughed. "Snape didn't let you drink as much as your parents did?"

"Wine, often, but nothing distilled." Draco frowned. "And it's nowhere near as good."

Harry nodded apologetically. "It's the only time I bought something *just* to get drunk. I couldn't bring myself to get the cheapest thing available, but I also didn't want to drop what could be a week's rent on something I was going to waste a third of."

"We'll need to get something better in Hogsmeade."

"Oh, I have a lot of better stuff in my trunk; I'll bring some of it down."

Draco covered his face with one hand. "A lot of...."

"Not-- Just-- Look, some is for us, and some is for gifts, okay? I was out in Muggle London under polyjuice, and I went shopping."

Draco studied him. "I ... I don't mean to sound fussy," he apologized, "But I do want to know -- how much did you drink this summer?"

Harry frowned. "Just once, really. When I came home with this stuff, Fred and George were freaked out, so I gave them a bottle and we all had some. That's all. Nothing like before Easter."

"All right."

"Before Easter was because you *pushed* me, you know."

"I'm frighteningly aware of that. But in the steeple...."

"It wasn't that much either."

"Good, then." Draco took another sip. "Yes, you should bring something better down -- but I did mean it about finding more constructive things to do with at least *some* of our time, this year."

"Well, we have a list, don't we? Divination, war strategy, winning over our respective houses...."

Draco made a face. "*You* might have better luck with mine."

"Oh?"

"Well, it's not bad, really," Draco demurred. "The house is split, though."

"Over you?"

Draco gave him a look. "Over the Dark Lord, Potter. I'm just a symptom."

Harry grinned. "Ten minutes out of bed, and I'm 'Potter' again," he lamented.

"Only because you're being dense."

"So Slytherin is all either anti or pro-Voldemort?

Draco shrugged. "The upper years, at least." He thought. "Well, no. Pro or neutral, mostly. I can only think of a few who are genuinely opposed to him. Of course, Millicent seems to be firmly pro-you -- I'm just not convinced she's noticed the corollary. Her family is neutral." With a sigh, Draco turned slightly away from Harry, but only to settle back against him. "Do you know what's up with Hermione? She's ignoring me."

"Oh." Harry wondered how to explain.

"You're not surprised."

"No. Well, disappointed, maybe. Have you really tried speaking to her?"

"When we first got back. I said 'good morning' and she nodded and said it back like someone

was holding a wand to her throat."

"You may have to try a few times."

"Why? We were friends in June. I haven't done anything since then." Draco's voice grew sharp. "Did she expect letters?"

"No, it's-- She gets the *Prophet* at her parents' house--"

"And?"

"They read some of it. About the trial. And she had to say yeah, that was me, and I'd been in a lot of trouble, and yeah, you were the boy she'd talked about before...."

"Why would she talk about me?"

"Because you called her names? Because you wished awful things on her?"

"Oh." Draco went pink. "*That* before."

"Right. So you may need to remind her you actually have changed. She may have convinced herself that you were just using her, last spring."

"Well, I was using her," Draco pointed out, "but not *just*. I mean, I became fond of her during it."

"If it makes you feel any better, I'm having trouble with her too."

"Hm. Maybe I should bring her to see the quiris." Draco shot Harry a challenging look. "You too."

"I'd expected that earlier."

Draco nodded. "I couldn't. It was too disturbing for them when everyone returned."

"Yeah?"

Horsyr said they were like this with even small groups of wizards, at first. They get used to the energies -- She's managing to take Keeba and her daughter through city neighborhoods, now."

"Interesting. So do they become less sensitive to Dark Arts?"

"At a distance, yes, they learn to ignore some of the residue. But she doesn't think the time aspect changes."

Harry nodded. That was interesting, but not useful. He sipped his drink. Draco sighed, and

leaned back, relaxing against him again.

"All right," he said. "Special projects. Do we have time?"

"Bleh. It depends how seriously I take Hermione's study schedule."

"Hm. Perhaps we should ask her advice on projects. It might kill two birds with one stone. "

"Then she's with us."

"Yes, but we can be alone here. And if we do a project with McGonagall, that might be three birds. I'm sure she'd soften a bit if she saw me working with Hermione."

"True, but a project with Snape -- without her -- might give us time to consult with him without it being questioned."

Draco waved the thought off. "You forget, he's my spellfather. We can go to his rooms."

"Professor McGonagall won't approve if I start visiting there."

"Ah." Draco tilted his head. "Hm. Can we do one with each? Perhaps the one with Severus could be largely fictitious."

"He won't allow that."

"Oh, all right. Conceded. But he would agree to something easy, if he understood the purpose."

"Maybe." Harry laughed at his own doubt. "I suppose you'd know better than I would. We shouldn't meet more than once a week, I think."

"If that. Very well. Let's both think about it and discuss it again on Tuesday."

"Tuesday?"

"I had thought every other day, again?"

"All right. But it will have to be after my Quidditch practice, so we'll miss dinner."

"I'll bring food," Draco said promptly. "Next item -- Weasley. When?"

Harry groaned. "Give me at least a week or two."

"Your relationship is still tenuous?"

"Yeah. Better than last June, but ... shaky." Harry smiled wryly. "At least they've changed the

damn match rotation. Gryffindor's up against Ravenclaw first. Worst case, I should be fine with him after that."

"Early October?"

"Yeah." Harry wrapped an arm around Draco's chest and pulled him close. "But I mean that about 'worst case.' I really think a week or two should do it, if I don't do anything he hates."

"We'll need at least that to complete research on the first potions, and I suspect at least a weekend to make them."

"Oh, right -- what do you have for that?"

They discussed the divination potions until Draco noticed that it was time for lunch, and then raced upstairs, pausing only as needed -- for Harry to seal the chamber behind them, and once for Draco to set a monitoring charm in front of their new entrance to the passage and close it, and for Harry to blow the dust around to hide their tracks. They walked into the Great Hall late and together.

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Chapter: 16

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16 -- Reaching Out

"Where have you been?" Hermione asked, as Harry squeezed in beside her. Seamus edged over to give him more room. "You've been gone all morning!"

Harry shrugged, and reached for a ham sandwich. He had forgotten it *was* morning. He supposed he associated the Chamber with late nights. "Out with Draco," he said. *Hell. I had half a glass of cognac for breakfast. No wonder it was making me queasy. That must have been a couple of hours ago, now, though. No one should be able to tell.*

"All night?" Seamus suggested. "Your bed was already empty at dawn."

"Why were you looking in my bed at dawn?" Harry asked indignantly.

"I just noticed, that's all. Had to use the loo."

"I must have just left," Harry countered quickly, scooping up some mustard. "We'd been meaning to go to breakfast; we just forgot."

"Distracted by your pretty boy?"

"*Yes*, if you must know."

"More to the point," Hermione interrupted. "Why were you up at dawn?" Her expression gentled. "Couldn't you sleep?"

That was, Harry supposed, his usual reason for getting up early. He smiled at her. "Nah. We wanted to explore, and we decided Filch wouldn't be skulking around that early." He yawned. "Though now it feels like evening, and I haven't done any schoolwork."

"That's all right," Ron said. "I haven't started mine, either. Of course, I just got up."

"Yeah," Harry agreed, slumping.

"Until he came down, I assumed you were sleeping in," Hermione added.

"She was all set to mount a hunt," Ron said cheerfully, taking an egg mayonnaise sandwich from a platter. "But I said this was the most likely place to find you."

"Though I was starting to worry," Hermione said reproachfully.

Ron laughed. "Don't believe her, mate. She's been worried for an hour."

"Sorry," Harry said.

"You missed announcements, you know. Next Saturday is blocked for Quidditch tryouts. You need to settle our slot with Hooch."

Harry nodded. Zoe and Damian were gone, leaving him with a Chaser spot and a Beater spot to fill.

"Are you trying out?" Neville, who had kept his head down during the interrogation, asked the question innocently. Ron tensed.

"I'm not that great a Chaser," he said. He glanced down the table, to where his sister was talking with one of her friends, and Harry could see him evaluating his chances and finding them lacking. "Probably not."

"Oh." Neville blushed. "Well, you look brilliant to me, but I don't know, I suppose." Seemingly

aware that he was digging himself in deeper, he made an uncharacteristic grab for an orange, and busied himself with peeling it.

Harry managed to catch most of his teammates as they were leaving lunch. From the way that Jason's attention stayed on Lindsey, even while he answered Harry's question about schedules, Harry thought the younger boy might have taken to a fancy to her. She didn't seem to mind, but Harry resolved to keep an eye on the matter. It wouldn't do to have it interfere with their relationship in the air. It wasn't until he was looking around for Ryan that Harry realized Ron had slipped away. Hermione was still lingering by the door. Harry waved her on and went back to his search.

"Hi," Harry said, slipping onto the end of the sofa nearest Ron's chair. His friend was staring at a Charms text, but didn't appear to be reading it. From the facing chair, Hermione watched anxiously. Ron responded with a neutral grunt.

"Look, about tryouts...."

Angrily, Ron looked up. "Drop it, Harry," he said sharply. "I know my limits. I'm not the best you've got. Ginny's been faster on her broom for at least a year. I'll just have to settle for being the second Weasley not to make the house team." He grimaced down at his book. "Me and Percy. Ugh."

"But I wanted to tell you," Harry said urgently, "Cornelia wants the Beater slot. Keeper's position is open now."

Ron looked up, astonishment wide on his face. "Keeper?" Slowly, he began to smile. "I might have a shot at that."

"Right." Harry cleared his throat. "Someone could do better at trials, of course. I mean, I need to choose the candidate who's best for the team. But you should get in some practice."

"Right." Ron closed his book with a snap, tossing it to the table as he surged to his feet. Harry saw Hermione wince and hold her mouth shut tight. Ron didn't notice; he was calling for Ginny as he crossed the room. With a grin, Harry patted the cushion beside him, and Hermione scooped up her schoolbag and came over to join him on the sofa.

"He should study," she said faintly, ducking her head.

"True," Harry allowed, watching Ron's animated explanation to his sister, over by the windows, "but he wasn't, really."

"It will take up so much time."

"Hush. He'll be fine."

"He doesn't do nearly as well as he could!"

"He does well enough," Harry soothed. "If you wanted ambitious, you're looking in the wrong house."

She laughed at that, and settled. Ginny and Ron had parted quickly, in good cheer. Harry suspected they were off to get hats and gloves.

"Did you want ambitious?" she asked.

"Not really, but it seems to be what I've got." He thought about Millicent. "Though there seem to be all sorts of ambition."

"Oh? What makes you say that?"

Harry waved nebulously at the air. He would need to keep this vague. "Just ... I know a few more of the Slytherins, now. What they want isn't always so simple as money or power."

"Recognition?" she guessed.

"Or independence. Or...." he shrugged. "Other things like that."

"Abstractions."

"Sometimes."

She sighed. "I don't really like you spending time with Slytherins, Harry. I can't forget that one of those abstractions is pureblood dominance."

He shrugged again, trying to keep his shoulders loose. "Well, there's no danger I'll be spending too much time with that sort of Slytherin. I'm not really their type, if you'll recall."

Her mouth tightened. "Draco was that sort. I'm not sure he still isn't, under other ambitions."

Harry snorted. "He could find a pureblood lover, I'm sure. No, Draco was already questioning that when we became friends. If he hadn't been, it wouldn't have lasted long." He shifted to face her. "He misses you, by the way. He asked me why you were snubbing him."

"I am not snubbing him!"

"He feels like you are." Harry bit his lip. "You have to be careful with Slytherins. Sometimes they're too subtle -- too used to subtle. They interpret things."

Hermione sat back with a huff, but she looked like she was thinking.

"Keep it in mind, anyway."

"Oh, all right." She sighed. "You really should start your schoolwork, Harry."

"I suppose." He would rather have followed the Weasleys out to the pitch and watched them practice. "Keep my place; I need to get my books."

Harry was on his way to Tuesday's practice when he spotted Rob, Sammy, and Jeremy over by the windows playing Exploding Snap. He detoured over to the game.

"Harry!" Jeremy exclaimed, seeing him approach. Rob waved a hello, and Sammy looked nervously at the Firebolt resting against Harry's shoulder.

"Hi," Harry said. "Want to come watch a Quidditch practice? We'll talk for a while, since it's the first one, but I plan to start with a little warm-up." He grinned at Sammy. "You can see some good flying."

Rob was already scrambling to his feet. "Could we?" he asked excitedly, apparently unable to believe his good fortune.

"Of course. Go and get cloaks, now; it will get chilly."

Rob dashed off, with Jeremy close behind. Sammy stood more slowly. "Rob showed me some magazines," he advanced.

"All right." Harry leaned back against an upholstered chair so he didn't have to look down so far. "Are you interested in the real thing?"

Sammy chewed on his lower lip. Harry wondered if he still thought this was all some elaborate joke. Eventually, the boy shrugged. "I guess I'll take a look," he said.

"Great. Cloak, now."

With a last look at the broom, Sammy nodded and left for his dormitory.

The three boys maintained their moods for the walk down: Sammy cautious and distant, Jeremy moderately pleased, and Rob bouncing with excitement -- except for occasional puzzled looks back at Sammy. From outside the stands, Harry could hear other players, but no one was high enough to be visible over the walls. He led the kids up to the seats. Being the tallest, and in front,

he was the first to come in sight of the players -- Jason and Lindsey were in the air, and Cornelia on the ground, pinwheeling her arm in a warm-up exercise. As the boys emerged into the open air, Harry looked back at Sammy. His eyes widened, and his mouth fell open, and he came to the present moment in an instant.

"Wow!" He darted forward to the rail, leaning out to watch. "That's brilliant!"

"I *showed* you my magazines," Rob said reproachfully. Harry laughed.

"Muggles have lots of ways to create pictures of things that aren't real," he explained. "It's not like wizards. *We* just change what's real and then photograph it."

Sammy's head whipped around, and after a second, he gave Harry a tentative smile. "Was it like this for you?"

Harry nodded. "Yeah, mostly. Except I was really ready to believe it."

"Oh." Shoulders tightening, Sammy looked away.

Harry joined him at the rail. "No offense intended. Just ... is there someone who usually lies to you?"

The shoulders came down a little as Sammy nodded. "M'brothers."

"That's too bad," Harry said sympathetically.

"And everyone believes *them*," Sammy continued indignantly. "Just because I said I'd got Wolverine down from the tree."

"Wolverine?" Harry asked.

"A kitten. And I *did* get him down."

"Ah." Harry nodded. "Yeah. I remember how far I got trying to explain that I had *no idea* how I'd ended up on the shed roof."

"But wouldn't they--" Rob stopped. His eyes widened. "Oh. Muggles."

"Right. I think it happens to a lot of kids with Muggle families." Harry shook off the thought and the memories that came with it. The Dursleys had hated him before any of that. "Anyway, you can all watch from here for as long as you like, and you can go back to the castle when you're bored. No going into the changing rooms, though, and no stepping out onto the pitch, got it?"

"Yes, *sir*!" Rob chirped, and Jeremy and Sammy both nodded. Harry mounted his broom and kicked off from the spot, hopping the rail and joining his teammates in the air. The boys cheered.

Afterwards, while everyone else was at dinner, he told Draco about it.

"First years?" Draco asked dubiously. He had brought down roast beef, sliced thick and set between hearty slices of bread, and for after, covered bowls of apple pudding. Harry opened his sandwich and spooned some horseradish onto his beef.

"Look," he said, "I'm fine with the seventh years, because they know me, and the sixth-year girls -- two of the five are on the team, and a third is Ginny, so that's okay. And at least two of the sixth-year boys think I'm okay. But the younger kids are a little wary of me. If I start with the first years, they have the least bias. They didn't go through all the fighting and distrust and such of last year, or the rumors that I was crazy the year before that, or Cedric dying with only my word on how the year before that." The last still hurt to mention. Harry had to stop to steady his breath. He took a bite of his sandwich.

"True, but they're not very useful."

Swallowing, Harry shook his head. "It makes me look more dependable, I think."

"Not like you're corrupting them?"

"No one seems anxious," Harry countered. "Amused, maybe. Parvati claims I'm trying to look taller."

Draco laughed. "Tell her Seekers are supposed to be compact."

"She wasn't serious! So, how have your efforts been going?"

Draco shrugged and took a moment to chew and swallow. "Linnet is definitely interested in speaking to you about current events, but she's never been a real partisan. Blaise came to me privately to say that he intended to stay neutral as long as possible, but that he no longer discounted your potential in the upcoming conflict."

"Upcoming?" Harry repeated incredulously. "Wasn't he *here* last spring?"

Draco dismissed the criticism with a graceful shrug. "My housemates tend to think of that imbroglio as a family matter that overflowed. Typical Malfoy extravagance.

Harry decided not to ask what *imbroglio* meant. He expected it didn't usually include people dying and buildings being destroyed. "I spoke to Hermione."

Draco lifted an eyebrow. "And?"

"I think a project with her would be worthwhile. You two need to spend some time together."

Exhaling sharply, Draco nodded. "I've been wondering.... Might she think we're using her for cover?"

Harry frowned. "I hope not. Maybe."

"Well, then. Perhaps we should arrange things with Professor McGonagall first, and *then* invite Hermione."

Harry considered that. He didn't think Hermione mattered much to their chances. "Okay."

"That would be my preference. Also, I spoke to Severus, and he responded positively to the idea of a simple project for the purpose of maintaining discreet contact, but he would like to consult with you privately first. He will keep you after Potions on Thursday or Friday."

Harry nodded. "Got it."

Accordingly, they stayed after their Transfiguration lesson the next day. They had a free period before Cursebreaking, but Professor McGonagall did not; Harry knew the sixth-year students would be arriving soon. The professor frowned slightly as the two of them approached her desk.

"May I help you gentlemen?"

Draco shifted back, leaving Harry to answer. He supposed Draco might find the Gryffindor head of house intimidating.

"We were wondering," he said, "about possibly doing a special project."

She frowned. "It is your N.E.W.T. year, Mr. Potter, and you are already taking a full schedule. Your energies might be better spent in revision."

He nodded. "Yes, but I don't think this will be too intensive. We were both interested in learning more about transfiguration of form only."

Her face lengthened as her eyebrows came up. "Shaping? It is a minor branch of study -- hardly of any use beyond art."

Harry felt his face heat, but it was as much with indignation as with embarrassment. He didn't want her putting down Draco like that, even if she didn't intend to. He was sure Draco must be humiliated. "It's useful often enough that we both end up doing it," he retorted.

"Do you really?" She looked intrigued. "For what, if I may ask?"

Stepping forward, Draco pulled one of the candle-holders out of his bag. "Things like this," he

said.

McGonagall nodded. "Ah," she said, nodding. "Yes, art."

Draco raised his chin haughtily, and Harry intervened. "I don't think the table is art. Show her, Draco."

After a momentary look of confusion, Draco nodded and drew his wand. With slow, angled stokes, he pulled stone from the wall, shaping a small shelf with an ornamented wedge of supporting stone below it. Harry looked over at McGonagall, and saw her jaw drop. When the shelf was finished, Draco set the candleholder on it and stepped back.

McGonagall straightened. "Well!" she said. She cleared her throat. "Yes, I see. Shaping stone is quite difficult. You do seem to have a talent for that, Mr. Malfoy." She glanced at Harry. "And you?"

He shrugged. "I'm not particularly good at it. I made him a brooch, once, but that was out of gold."

The corner of her mouth quirked, and then settled. "Yes. Soft metals are much easier to work." Her piercing gaze fixed him to the spot. "If it is *his* talent, Mr. Potter, why do you wish to do it?"

"I just think it's cool," Harry answered baldly. "And we want to do something together."

"Ah." She steepled her hands for a moment. "Well," she said, inclining her head. "If what you want is to do something together, I have a suggestion that should suit nicely, but stretch you both a bit more." Afraid she was going to tell them to go do their homework, Harry managed only a slight nod, but she smiled thinly and continued.

"You may have seen me working with Professor Dumbledore during the rebuilding last spring. Combining forces for Transfiguration is a difficult matter ... but easier if the people involved have an affinity for each other. Rather than attempting to imitate Mr. Malfoy's talent, then, I suggest you balance it. *He* can work on changing the form of your base material, while you change some other aspect. For example, he might spin broken glass into a window, and as he forms it, you color segments of it. Or he might make a screen of wood, and you turn some panels of it to glass. If you wish to do shaping as well, there is the shaping of two things around each other, which is how some of the highest quality tools are made."

Harry and Draco looked at each other. "That sounds brilliant, actually," Harry said, even though he knew they could not include Hermione.

Draco's nod was hesitant, but his smile unmistakable. "Yes," he said. "Entirely."

McGonagall nodded briskly. "We have other things to discuss, such as scheduling and workload, but I have a class arriving. Devise a more detailed proposal, please, including a schedule that will

not hamper your other activities, and bring it to me during my regular office hours."

Harry nodded readily. "Right. We will."

They spent their free time until Cursebreaking discussing possibilities, trying to dream up a project that was difficult enough, but not too time consuming. They both liked the stained glass idea, but Harry wondered if they could do something as elaborate as a display case with stained glass doors. After a tangent on the design of wooden hinges, they speculated about whether this sort of combined spell casting would make other kinds -- perhaps in combat -- easier. Draco said the principle was probably the same, and Harry nodded thoughtfully. That might explain why Professor McGonagall wanted him to learn it.

"Do you have plans?" Draco asked, as they left the room after Cursebreaking. Harry looked up the stairs to the bobbing spot of red hair that showed Ron taking the stairs two at a time.

"I might go out to the pitch."

"Ah." Draco sighed. "It's the library for me, I'm afraid -- at least until practice."

Harry was about to say that he would join him when he spotted someone else -- a flight down, Millicent Bulstrode was just turning on to the stairs.

"Well, catch you later, then," he said, and set off after Millicent.

He tried to catch up to her discreetly, but she was taller, and moving with an open stride, and two flights down, he was barely closer to her than he had been.

"Mill!" he called, as she crossed in front of the doors to the Great Hall. "*Millicent!*" Millicent turned.

"Whatever--"

"You move *fast,*" he complained, hurrying up to her.

"Oh. Uh, I was in a hurry...."

"Is this a bad time?"

"Nah." She shook her head. "I was moving away, more than toward. What's up, Potter?"

"I just thought we should talk," he said casually. This clearly wasn't the place. Slytherins and Hufflepuffs were passing by, and some of both scoping out the encounter in passing. Harry

wondered if Millicent had used his last name out of habit or to establish distance. "Come for a walk with me?" he suggested.

In another context, that could have been flirtatious, he realized belatedly, as Millicent smirked, but did not laugh.

"All right," she said, resettling her bag on her shoulder. "Let's go."

With a nod, he set off down the corridor, to the back staircase up to the classrooms. As it was less convenient to the main staircase down from the ground floor, it was not in heavy use. The greatest risk there was that they would disturb a couple snogging in the shadows, but it was still too public for discussing potions. Harry racked his brain for something he could say.

"So," he advanced finally, as they started up the stairs. "Thank you for your protection the other night."

She snorted. "I wasn't sure you'd noticed."

"Oh, I knew the risk I was taking. I was keeping a close eye on who was where."

"Really?" Her heavy eyebrows rose as she looked sidelong at him. "You did a good job of looking like it was nothing."

He shrugged. "If I look nervous, what's the point?"

"What was the point without?"

"Seeing who did what. Seeing if I might risk it again."

She frowned, slowing as they climbed. A rustle of noise at the first landing was what Harry had expected. He didn't look, but had the impression Finch-Fletchley had been one of the pair. "Again," she said plainly, "why?"

"Ah." He hadn't thought of her question that way. The answer to this one had been honed by Hermione's challenge on the train. "Because I think I need to spend time with the Slytherins -- well, with anyone who might consider supporting Voldemort, but doesn't entirely yet. I need to show people who are wavering that his opposition isn't everything they're afraid it is."

She considered that. They were passing the third floor now. The sound of distant chatter bounced down the corridor to them, fading as they continued up. Harry motioned to the side as they neared the fourth floor. "This way."

There was no one in sight, but she still walked close enough to him to speak quietly. "That might be worth the trouble. You're certainly not what I expected. Still, it's a dangerous place for you."

"I know that," he said, turning the corner into a narrower corridor. Two figures twenty feet away, even expected, disturbed him, and Millicent jumped.

"Oh," she said, staring at the shadowy forms and lifting an arm experimentally, "a mirror." Her mouth twisted into a scowl. Harry shrugged and led her between two doors to side rooms, and straight up to the glass.

"What's this for?" she asked suspiciously, but Harry already had his wand out. He tapped the glass, and reached through it to a door latch.

"Come on," he said.

Safely behind the re-solidified glass, she cast wand light to examine the space they had entered. With a grin, Harry set his wand to a barely visible line at waist height on the passage wall, activating a phosphorescent glow that stretched down the corridor on that side.

"Brilliant," Millicent breathed. "Where does it go?"

"Oh, there's a cave-in further on," Harry said, starting down the passage, "but a good wide area before you get there."

"Is this the place for brewing?"

"No, I'm afraid the fumes might be noticeable. I have another spot for that." Around a curve, the glow faltered. Harry reached forward to tap past the gap, and another section came on. That light circled two-thirds of the way around a wide space. The low illumination made tumbled rocks seem larger, and turned the collapsed section beyond into a rising wall of spiked shadows. "No, I want this for the Uncommon Room -- for mixed-house social space. I was hoping you might help me clean it."

"You're going to tell everyone about it?" she asked scornfully.

"Well, not everyone," he replied. "Just people I trust not to tell."

She crossed her arms over her chest. "And when will we start my brewing? Did you buy what you said you would or not?"

"Of course!" he replied indignantly. "Well, except for the mountain crab shell. We might not have everything to start this weekend, but we definitely will for the next."

"Where are you going to get a pound of mountain crab shell in a week?" she snarled.

"Fred and George! I'm telling them I'm starting a dueling club!"

She pulled her head back like a startled cat. "Oh."

"That will make sense, right? I mean, if it's a secret, we'll need regular healing potions, so I can order from them regularly. And they have a business, so they can buy large quantities of things. And they'll approve."

Her good humor restored, she snorted with amusement. "Gryffindors."

"Right," he said stonily. "So you can *trust* me, right? I'm not about to go back on my word."

"Did I offend you?"

"Yes."

She studied him for a moment. "Oh. Well, sorry, then." Uncomfortably, she looked around the space. "So we should pick up the rocks?"

"And stabilize the fall," he responded, going along with the change of subject. "And then we can worry about cleaning, and I'll probably get Draco to try to help me fix the line that doesn't glow anymore."

"There's another one?" she asked, stepping over to the wall.

"Yeah. It should be both sides of the passage, and then they each loop through this section, so there should be more than twice as much light here."

She examined the glowing stripe on the wall, running one thick finger along the unlit grey line below it, and then glanced to where the light arched over what had been the other door. "I see." She shrugged. "Well, I'm no Merlin with charms, but I can move rocks." With a grin, she picked up a head-sized stone and hefted it in one hand.

"Wait!"

His warning was too late. She'd hurled the rock neatly into the rubble, where it hit with a thunderous crash, knocking loose several other stones which rumbled down to the floor.

They were both silent as the echoes died away. Some dust drifted down from the space above, but nothing more fell. Harry cleared his throat. "Maybe we should, um, stabilize the fall first?"

"And not throw them," she said glumly. "Got it."

"Well, that might be okay if I cast a cushioning charm first."

She perked up. "It would certainly be more fun."

In the end, Harry ended up casting a cushioning charm next to the pile, and a silencing charm on the room. Millicent tossed stones on the cushioned spot, and Harry levitated them out, one at a time, to chink into the pile. He felt like there ought to be something like Draco's glass spell for melting rock so he could bind them together. He should ask McGonagall, he decided, and then Flitwick, if she didn't know. Or maybe Draco could just do it.

"Harry," Millicent said, in between rocks.

"Yeah?"

"Where *are* you thinking of for brewing?

"Oh, there's another passage--"

"Deeper?"

"It goes all the way to Hogsmeade, and comes up in a house."

Her already small eyes narrowed. "An empty house?"

"Well, one that's supposed to be haunted. But it isn't, I promise."

She turned from the rocks and folded her arms over her chest. "Tell me you don't mean the Shrieking Shack."

"Lupin stayed there as a student," Harry said quickly. "On full moons. That's why there used to be noises."

She frowned. "There've been noises more recently."

"Other people have stayed there since," Harry said. "But live people, I swear. And Draco and Hermione and I spent a couple days brewing there last year. There's nothing worse than spiders -- normal spiders -- in that house."

She raised her head. "All right. But I'm bringing my bat."

They left at dinner time, talking about Quidditch. Harry had forgotten that was strange until they got to the ground floor. Most people were already in the Great Hall, but as he and Millicent came down the last few steps, a gaggle of young Slytherins came tearing up from the dungeons. Among them was the blond first-year girl, who stumbled to a stop as she saw Millicent and Harry. Millicent rolled her eyes.

"Maybe we'd better split up here, Potter. Wouldn't want to turn your house against you again."

He sighed. "They'll get over it. But go in with your lot, if you'd rather."

With a nod, she swaggered over towards the younger kids, who turned and hurried ahead of her into the Great Hall. Harry strolled after. When the blond girl looked back over her shoulder, he winked at her.

After dinner, the Gryffindors returned en masse to their common room. Harry spent a while with Ron and Hermione, chatted for a few minutes with Seamus and Parvati, said hello to Rob, Sammy, and Yolanda, and then headed up to his room. Neville was there, but studying quietly on his bed. After greeting him, Harry collected parchment and ink, and settled at the desk.
<quote>
Fred and George,

How are you doing? I'm settling in to school. The Cursebreaking professor is brilliant, and knows Bill. I think Ron enjoyed being the person recognized, for once.

You know how I said I might want to order things? Well, I'd like you to send me a few items. First, I need two ounces of fluxweed (don't ask!), a pound of powdered mountain crab shell, and an ounce of murtlap essence. I know those quantities sound ridiculous, but a few of us are starting a sort of an unofficial dueling club. If we're not going to get caught, we need our own customized healing potions. I also need a runespoor egg, or a runespoor dreamer head as part of that project we discussed before.

I hope business is going well! Send me a few harmless things, and I'll show them around.

Cheers,

Harry
</quote>
Afterwards, he sat, stroking his quill idly against his mouth and wondering what to say to Remus. Could he even call him that? Maybe "Mr. Lupin" would be better. He set quill to parchment, but then lifted it again. No. That was too formal. Just "Remus" seemed cheeky, though. "Uncle Remus"? No, definitely not. Sighing, he began the letter with "Dear Sir," regretting it immediately, but not enough to erase the words with a spell.
<quote>
Dear Sir,

I am safely back at school, and enjoying having people around again. Ron got a little annoyed about me talking to a couple of the Slytherins on the train, but it seems to have blown over. I'm sure you will be glad to know that as Hermione is Head Girl and Draco is Head Boy, I am receiving frequent reminders to study.

I was thinking about our first visit, this summer, and it occurred to me that I should warn you

that your old retreat may no longer be secure, in case you didn't realize. Hermione and Draco and I brewed the portkey Anchor potion there, so its the place where he portkeyed back to, so a number of Death Eaters were there, at least one of whom is related to kids here.

Tell your dog that I miss him, and I hope we can go for some long rambles in the summer.

Best wishes,

Harry </quote>
There, he thought, folding the letter carefully, and addressing it "Remus Lupin, Darkmoon Den". That would cover taking Millicent out there. Though now that he thought about it, the tunnel out of Greenhouse Four might be better, if it was reasonably spacious. The Shrieking Shack was a painful walk for him, and Millicent was a lot bigger than he was.