Storyid: 5428900
FanFiction.net
Name: Practicing Liars
Author: Lomonaaeren
Chapter 1 to 50

##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### #####
##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### #####
##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### #####

Chapter: 1

**Title:** Practicing Liars

**Disclaimer:** J. K. Rowling and associates own these characters. I am writing this story for fun and not profit.

**Summary:** AU of HBP. Harry found out that he was Snape's son two years ago, and he's carefully concealed it. But now Snape is his Defense teacher, and Draco Malfoy is up to something, and Dumbledore is dying, and the final battle is coming up, and everything is getting very, very complicated.

**Pairings:** Background Ron/Hermione and Ron/Lavender. Harry and Draco have a 'complicated friendship' which will become a preslash relationship. For obvious reasons, Snape/Lily is mentioned.

**Rating:** R

**Warnings:** Violence (lots of violence), profanity, angst, character death (not Snape, Harry, or Draco), slash and het hints.

**Author's Notes:** While I'm hoping to make this plot at least somewhat original, I know that I'm treading on well-covered ground. I don't know yet how long the story will be, except that it will be novel-length. *Practicing Liars* is being written for my dear soft2smooth2000, who has helped me wonderfully with keeping track of and linking to my fics on LJ.

**Practicing Liars**

*Chapter One—Awful News*

Harry lay on his back with his arms folded behind his head and stared at the ceiling of Dudley's

second bedroom. There was a crack in it. He had traced his eyes over every twist of that crack until he knew it better than he knew the way to Divination at Hogwarts.

That was awful.

He hadn't seen Sirius or his friends since the start of the summer, or heard from them. He had no idea how the war with Voldemort was going, or what might have happened since Voldemort took his blood in the graveyard and dueled with him. Was he growing stronger? Were people doing sensible things to fight him? Were they having exciting adventures without Harry, and did they miss him at all?

*That* was awful.

Since he had come back to Privet Drive, Harry didn't think there was a night when he didn't wake up straight out of a sound sleep, his skin soaked with sweat and his panting loud and harsh. Sometimes it was nightmares about Cedric, but it was almost worse when he found his mind filled with this heavy darkness and dreamed that he was dead or shut away from the world somewhere and the war and *real* life were happening in a place he couldn't reach.

*That* was *awful.*

But no matter how he listened, Harry couldn't discover anything about Voldemort's activities from the Muggle telly or the newspaper. He might have vanished off the face of the earth as far as the Dursleys and people like the Dursleys were concerned.

Harry had to hide in the house and do chores and go without food sometimes and pretend that it was yet another summer, that nothing was wrong, that he had just come back from a school year no more dangerous or exciting or frustrating than his first three.

That was the most awful thing of all.

*If I'm mad by the time I go back to Hogwarts,* Harry thought with a fierce frown as he turned over and buried his head in the pillow, *then it's no one's fault but theirs.*

Harry looked helplessly at the collection of papers, boxes, old books, and clothes that his aunt had just handed him. She had already gone to the front door, and he knew she would leave in a moment for the shops.

"But what am I supposed to *do* with this?" he asked, raising his voice so she couldn't pretend she hadn't heard him.

Aunt Petunia poked her head back through the door into the drawing room. She had on a hat that made her look like a horse without a mane. Harry bit his lip so hard he probably drew blood, but Aunt Petunia only frowned like usual and snapped, "Sort through them, of course. Anything valuable or relating to Dudders should go in one pile. Anything to throw out should go into

another pile."

Harry opened his mouth again to ask how he was supposed to judge that, but Aunt Petunia's head vanished, and then Harry heard the door snick open and shut.

Harry stared at the pile and shook his head. His uncle was at work, and Dudley was off God knew where, probably bragging to his friends. At least he wouldn't have people around to make the task harder, Harry thought glumly as he started to sort through things. That was about all that could be said for it.

The things Aunt Petunia had given him were coated with dust, which made him sneeze at least three times as he opened every box or envelope. They were crumpled and bent, and most of them were written in tiny print, so that Harry had to squint at them to find out what they were. And then most of them turned out to be letters from people he'd never heard of, old birthday cards, boxes of broken toys, or collections of pipes and tiny metal clips that Harry didn't recognize.

He was flinging everything but the most obvious candidates—like a cluster of forgotten bank notes or a photograph of Vernon and Dudley when Dudley was a baby—into the "rubbish" pile when one letter got away from him and slipped to the floor like his fingers were made of rubber. Harry grumbled and bent over to pick it up.

*For my son, Harry.*

Harry had never seen the delicate, looped writing that covered the outside of the envelope in emerald-green ink, but he had no doubt anyway. This was a letter from his mother.

Where had it come from? Harry sat down on the couch with the letter in his hands and stared at it. He couldn't imagine that his mum had sent the letter to Aunt Petunia while she was still alive, or that his aunt would have kept it if she had. Maybe it came with the Hogwarts letters? But no, most of this stuff was more than four years old.

There was another possibility, one that Harry hardly dared think about. Maybe this letter had come with him when he was left on the Dursleys' doorstep as a baby. Maybe it had been stuck in his blanket, or under it.

*But Aunt Petunia still would have thrown it away,* he thought.

And then he thought, *Not if magic hid it.*

He sat there for so long that he heard the front door open. Harry jumped and shoved the letter into the waistband of his jeans, then tugged his shirt over it. It felt thick, and he swallowed as he bent over and started sorting through the dusty things again, wondering if his mother had left him photographs or a diary.

He hoped so. He wanted to know more about her than what she looked like and the fact that she

married his dad and died for him.

"There's dust all over the floor, Potter," said Dudley's whiny voice. "I'm going to tell Dad on you!"

"I'll vacuum it up later," Harry muttered, and then bowed his head so that there was no chance for Dudley to catch his eye. The last thing he wanted right now was to get into a fight with his cousin. Dudley would probably find the letter and take it away. He *always* did the thing Harry least wanted right when he least wanted it.

Dudley started to say something else, but Piers Polkiss spoke up then. "Come on, Big D, you said that you had something up in your room that you wanted to show me!"

Harry hid his laughter at his cousin's new nickname and waited until he heard Dudley running up the stairs with Piers. Then he touched the corner of the letter and stroked the envelope. It felt smother than ordinary paper, with a raised ripple in the middle.

*I'll look at it later,* he decided. *When I'm in my room, and there's no chance that they can take it away.*

Finally it was evening, and Harry was locked up in his bedroom again, with his letter. The Dursleys had decided that he would go to bed without dinner again tonight. Uncle Vernon had said something about why, but Harry couldn't care enough to listen. He was too grateful that they were going to leave him alone for the rest of the evening.

His fingers shook so hard that he nearly ripped the envelope instead of opening it. Harry forced himself to relax and take a deep breath before he tried again.

There was a set of folded sheets of paper inside, and another, sealed letter. Harry looked at that one, but there was no name on it, just two words. *I'm sorry.*

Mystified, he unfolded the papers that were addressed to him and leaned back on his pillow to read them. His stomach grumbled, and Harry rubbed it so it would be quiet.

*My dear son:*

*I have something to tell you that I would have kept concealed forever if I could. But I'm uneasy. Everyone says that we're perfectly safe in Godric's Hollow. I don't think we are. I see shadows in my dreams, and a darkness that makes me think, sometimes, I won't live much longer.*

Harry swallowed. *Mum had dreams like me?* It was a long time before he could make himself look away from that first paragraph and keep reading the letter.

*If you survive and I don't—although I don't know how that would happen, but I think it might—you deserve to know who you really are and where you really came from. There are lots*

*of reasons for that. You might have a disease or a gift that can only be explained by knowing your heritage. It's not fair to you to keep this secret. If I'm dead, then I'm sure that James or Sirius or Remus or* one *of them has talked about me like I'm a saint, and you don't really know me at all. There's more than one person than you who should know the secret. (That's the person the other letter is addressed to).*

*But maybe at the bottom, I want to confess. The secret has haunted me at night, and there's no way that I can tell James.*

Harry clenched one hand down on his knee. What could she tell him and not his dad?

*I slept with someone else, Harry. I did it shortly after my marriage, because I was suffering from the stress of the war and I wanted to do one last wild, free thing before the Aurors made James and me retire from the field for our own good. And then, even though I denied it for as long as I could, I realized that you were the son of the man I slept with, and not James's son.*

Harry couldn't move. It was only after long moments that he realized he had stopped breathing, and started again with a cough.

He'd wanted to know more about his mum, he thought as he sat staring numbly at the paper. But not like this. He'd wanted to know what her favorite color was, and what her laugh sounded like, and if she broke any bones when she was a kid, and what spell she liked best when she was at Hogwarts. But not this.

For a minute, he was angry at her. How could she think he would ever *want* to know this? It wasn't the kind of thing that you told a kid!

Then he remembered that he didn't know when she'd planned to give him the letter. Maybe she would have waited until he was twenty, or thirty. Or maybe she would have told him herself and not in a letter if she'd survived.

Besides, he wasn't really a kid anymore, was he? And he would have hated it if he had found out on his own.

Harry spent a moment tracing a finger up and down his right arm. He could feel the scar of the knife where Wormtail had taken the blood out of him. He shivered and reluctantly forced himself to return to the letter.

But the next paragraph was worse than summer at the Dursleys'.

*Your father is a man James and I knew at school, named Severus Snape.*

"*No*," Harry said, but not loudly, because he couldn't get any breath behind the word.

*I'm sure he doesn't know. That's why I left a letter for him, too, because I know that he needs to*

*hear the truth from me in my own words. I don't want you to be left with the burden of explaining it to him.*

*I wish I had some better story to offer you, Harry. But the truth is that I left the house after an argument with James—we were always arguing then, because he thought I wasn't good enough at Defense to work as a field Auror and I thought he was too reckless—and went to a small establishment that only the Order of the Phoenix knew about. It was a place we could get drunk and not worry about danger. I only meant to get drunk, Harry, I swear. Not do—anything else.*

*But Severus was there. He was hidden under a glamour, but I recognized him. I've always been good at Charms. And I sat there staring at him, because I thought he must have killed Chambers—the Order member he was impersonating—and entered the safehouse to spy on us. The last thing I knew of him, he'd become a Death Eater and followed Voldemort as faithfully as anyone else.*

*Common sense rescued me, of course. Dumbledore would have known in an instant if Chambers was dead, and made sure to warn us and change the wards so that someone with Chambers's appearance couldn't enter. So something else must be going on. I went over to Severus, taking my courage in both hands. We'd parted under rather bad circumstances.*

*He hardly welcomed me, but he confirmed my guess. Yes, something else was going on. Yes, he knew things he couldn't tell me. Yes, he regretted the way we had parted.*

*It was the last which seemed the most important to me at the time, though later I figured out that Severus probably hadn't chosen a side yet and was wavering back and forth, playing both sides against the middle. He'd done it well enough to convince Dumbledore, though, so I felt safe to get drunk in his presence.*

*I won't tell you everything we said. It was the kind of conversation that only we would understand. But it ended with us sleeping together.*

*I woke up in the morning, horrified. This wasn't what I wanted to do with my life: deal with arguments with my husband by cheating on him. I used a Memory Charm on Severus, went back home, and made up with James. When I realized I was pregnant, I thought there was every chance that you were James's child.*

*But I knew the truth when I cast Paternity Charms as soon as you were born.*

Harry closed his eyes. He wanted to ask all sorts of questions. How could she do that? How could she talk about it so—so openly, just trusting that he would understand and forgive her? What was the Order of the Phoenix? What had Snape really been doing there?

How could she *do* that?

Maybe there was an explanation in the rest of the letter. Harry steeled himself to read on.

*I want you to know, Harry, that I never loved you any less. I regretted that I cheated on my husband, not that you came into existence. And the regret for that is lessened, because you're the child I know and love, not an imaginary child who would have been born instead if I had never slept with Severus.*

*I'm wrapping this letter in multiple charms and enchantments so that it will survive anything that might happen to me, and always stay close by you, migrating across the distance between you if necessary. You're the only one who can find and read it. The same isn't true of the letter I've included for Severus. I'll trust you to give it to him, Harry, because he* needs *to know the truth. I know you'll probably laugh at that, but I believe it nonetheless. I stole his memories from him, so he has no idea. At the least, he deserves those back.*

*I know that he may choose never to acknowledge you. I don't know in what capacity you know him, if at all. Maybe I should* hope *that you're strangers to each other, because think what a fracas it will cause between him and James when he finds out!*

Harry shuddered. "Dad died, too," he whispered to the letter. He felt odd a moment later, but he refused to care. James was still his dad, damn it. He was the one who had loved Harry and had died for him.

Snape…

Harry bent his head and wrapped his arms around it, rocking slightly back and forth. It was the way he used to comfort himself in his cupboard when Uncle Vernon had yelled at him or after the time that Aunt Petunia cut all his hair off.

Snape would hold this over his head. Or he would sneer and laugh. Or he would reveal it to all the Slytherins, standing in front of them and glaring implacably at Harry while they stared and snickered and called his mother names. And then he would torment him harder than ever all through school because that would give him another reason to hate Harry.

*He already hates me for what Dad did,* Harry thought bitterly, wiping at his forehead, *why not both parents?*

Whatever happened, it would be horrible. The one good thing about Snape was that at least he had no reason to seek Harry out *all the time* and try to torture him the way the Dursleys did. Harry knew the Dursleys hated him so much because they were forced to acknowledge that he was there, their cousin or their nephew, and they couldn't escape the blood tie. Snape would make Uncle Vernon look kind and reasonable if he had to think about Harry being related to him. Harry didn't want starvation and curses and neglect from a second "family," thank you very much. His family was the people who loved him, like Ron and Hermione and Sirius and the Weasleys, not the people who hated him.

Or if someone else, probably Dumbledore, forced Snape to say that Harry was his son and not

torture him, then he would go out of his way to do worse things. Harry had seen the way that he would subtly unnerve Neville long before Neville melted a cauldron or ruined a potion. He would do the same thing to Harry. Then he could look innocent when Harry snapped and say that it wasn't his fault, that Harry had brooded on this too much and driven himself mad.

There was no way that this didn't end in a disaster.

Harry finished reading the rest of the letter, an itching behind his eyes and in his hands.

*I love you, Harry. I wanted you to know what I was like at my worst as well as at my best. I hope that there'll never be a need for this letter, and that you'll grow up under my protection, and I can tell you the truth someday when I've prepared you carefully for it.*

*But I think that would be foolish, given my dreams.*

*I hope you can forgive me.*

*Your loving mother,*

*Lily Potter.*

Harry turned to the other letter that lay on the bed. The *I'm sorry* letter for Severus Snape. The longer he stared at it, the worse the itching in his hands became.

Then he grabbed the letter and ripped it to shreds.

It tore reluctantly. It was even thicker than the letter to Harry, and the paper was the same kind as the envelope that had enclosed *his* letter, so it was more resistant, and Harry hated the thought of destroying anything his mother had left behind. But he managed, and then he tore up the shreds, and then he folded the pieces that were left in half and crumbled them between his palms until they were fine, floating dust.

He smoothed the letter his mother left him with trembling hands and tucked it away in the space under the floor where he kept the food Mrs. Weasley sent. He was going to keep that one. It was even more precious than the photographs Hagrid had given him, in a way. This was directly from his mum. She'd *wanted* him to have it.

But he wasn't ever going to think about what the letter had said again, if he could help it.

He knew what Hermione would say to that. She would ask him if he was crazy. She would scold him. She would say that Snape had a right to know, and that Harry didn't *know* he would be like the Dursleys, not for certain, and what if he was missing out on something wonderful by giving this up?

But Hermione had lived with loving parents all her life. She had no idea what real life at Privet

Drive was like. She also still thought Snape was a good teacher, somehow, just because she got high marks in his classes. She didn't stop to think that they would have been even higher if Snape didn't unfairly favor the Slytherins and gave Hermione the marks she had actually *earned.*

Besides, it wasn't like Snape suspected and would grieve for his lost son. He didn't have any memories of it. He would hate to know. It was better to let him live out the remainder of his life in peace.

*Especially because that's the only way I'll get any peace.*

For once, Harry thought, he should get to make a decision that benefited him before other people, and since the secret could only matter to him, he wouldn't hurt anyone by doing so.

Slowly, his breathing calmed and his heartbeat slowed as he lay there. He made a number of promises to himself.

To think about this as little as possible.

To always think of James as his real dad, because that was what he had been.

To not hate his mother. She had left him the letter, and Harry had nothing else, and he would rather have the letter, awful news and all, than go on having nothing.

To practice his lies carefully so that he would be prepared if someone else thought he was acting strange or looking strange, or if someone ever suggested that James wasn't his father.

And to never let Snape know about this, whether or not something led him to suspect. Harry wasn't his *son*. He was just—just *there*, someone for Snape to hate and despise because he looked like his dad.

Something Harry couldn't control. And the Dursleys hated and despised him because of his magic, something he couldn't control, either.

Harry shut his eyes with a faint smile. It was his first sincere smile all summer, however bitter and twisted it was.

*It's not going to distress me that Snape's my father and hates me, because if anyone knows what it's like to have your relatives hate you, I do.*

##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### #####
##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### #####
##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### #####

Chapter: 2

Thank you for all the reviews!

*Chapter Two—Summer of Desperation*

Severus undid the bandages and tossed the smoking and ruined cloth aside. Then he poured the sticky green potion from the flask he held in his left hand over the wound and began counting under his breath.

*One, two, three—*

"I must say, Severus, you are taking excellent care of me," Albus said in a pleased voice.

Severus had expected the interruption, and it made no difference in his counting. He reached eleven without incident and applied the potion again. The cut made a spitting noise like a burning torch plunged into water, and Severus stepped back to get out of the way of the cloud of foul-smelling smoke that resulted, without releasing the hold that kept Albus's arm flat on the top and the wound turned upwards. Albus had said he would not pull away. Severus watched his muscles twitch and flex and permitted himself a small, bitter smile. Vows like that were as useless as vows not to flinch under the Cruciatus. The control that the mind could exercise over the body's automatic reflexes was so limited.

"Will it be well now?" Albus asked as he watched the smoke clear away. "Or will you need to apply more of the dragon's blood?"

Severus took a moment to study the wound. Albus waited instead of demanding a reply. In that respect, he was superior to many patients Severus had had. "Do you see the lines surrounding the edges of the cut?" Severus asked at last, tracing one finger along the crescent of scaly grey skin that pointed towards the elbow. "They should be smaller than they are. I'm afraid I will have to apply more of the solution of the stinging nettle."

Albus sighed and shook his head, reaching for a lemon drop with his free hand. He had insisted that Severus attempt to save his arm and his life in his office rather than the infirmary. Severus was beginning to suspect he had mostly done that so he could keep his favorite sweet near. "Well, what must be borne must be borne."

Severus raised an eyebrow. It was a better reaction than he had a right to expect when the solution of the stinging nettle hurt twice more than walking through the flowers did. But he turned and picked up the appropriate vial, which sat on a table cleared of Albus's silver instruments a short distance away. The paste inside was thick and an off-white that he had never liked looking at, though the smell was crisp and pleasant. Severus rolled the paste carefully between his fingers, then pressed it down onto both the grey lines of skin at once.

An indrawn breath was Albus's only reaction. A moment later, the crunching sound of his teeth on the lemon drop replaced that. Severus kept his gaze away from the other man's face, because

watching someone suffer who meant to him what Albus did was not conducive to his own concentration.

"What were you trying to do?" he murmured, adding another glob of the stinging nettle solution when he realized that the battle between poison and healing magic had almost boiled the paste away already. "I swear, Albus, if this was the result of yet another stupid attempt to prove to the world that there is a thirteenth use for dragon's blood after all—"

Albus laughed softly. "No, my boy," he said. "Unfortunately, Tom has powerful Dark artifacts at his disposal. I tried to destroy one of the most powerful of them without taking proper precautions." He would have moved his arm and undone some of Severus's careful work, but Severus luckily saw the twitch in time and kept the arm pinned. "The artifact concealed a trap. It lightly scratched my arm, and, well, this is the result." He peered at the wound curiously, as if he were interested in seeing exactly what had happened.

Severus bit his tongue and waited until he felt the unmistakable taste of blood before he spoke on. "You should have waited until you had the artifact at school and within the protection of the wards, Headmaster." Hogwarts could, if necessary, lend extra magical strength to her Headmasters which had served, in the past, for everything from setting up secure potions labs to defeating rampaging dragons.

"I had my reasons to fear what would happen if I brought this artifact back to Hogwarts," Albus said simply, and then fell silent, watching as Severus continued to smear the solution of stinging nettle.

It took two more hours, but at last Severus was satisfied that the poison would not spread up Albus's arm any more than it had. He would always bear a nasty scar, but that was no less than Severus had expected when he first saw the wound. He leaned back in his chair and drank the last vial standing ready, one of his own Refreshment Draughts, which combined the awakening qualities of a Pepperup Potion with the clarity of mind introduced by a Concentration Elixir. Energy surged and tingled down his limbs, and he felt ready to open his eyes and examine the Headmaster.

Albus had a look in his eyes that told Severus they had not finished speaking about the wound. It was the look Albus always wore when he intended to turn a weakness into an advantage.

"I might easily have died from this, my boy," he said. "I would have if you were not here."

Severus inclined his head and said nothing. That was the obvious. He saw no need to respond until Albus's plan had grown *beyond* the obvious.

"I think," Albus murmured, turning his wrist back and forth as if he were admiring the gaping, abscess-like scar he now carried, "that we will put it about that I am."

Severus stilled. "Excuse me, Headmaster?" he said, when he thought that he could speak instead

of croak.

Albus gave him a faint smile. Severus knew that smile, too, though he didn't know how many other people did. It was stripped-down and shining, in the way that a bared sword-blade would be. This was Albus the master of war, the man who would make whatever sacrifices were needed to keep the wizarding world safe. Not even in front of the Order of the Phoenix did he wear that persona.

"Tom has been too cautious so far for my liking," Albus said casually. "I know that he intends to move this year, my boy, but I intend to control that movement. We will put the tale about that I am dying, in the form of rumors. I have no faith that Tom will believe the story right at first, but we will ensure that he does, through continually staged 'weakening' and allowing some Slytherin students to see my spells misfiring."

Severus said nothing on the matter, because there was nothing on the matter to say, but he privately resented the fact that it was Slytherin students who would be expected to play the role of gossip-mongers, indicating that Albus thought their parents in service to the Dark Lord.

Severus particularly resented that because he knew it was true.

"I fail to see how the gain to our side would outweigh the loss," he said instead. "We would panic the Order and our allies if we did that. Some of them, the fence-sitters, might even desert us and join *him*."

Albus gave him the weariest smile that Severus had ever seen out of him. He was cradling his wounded hand against his chest now, his fingers smoothing lightly up and down the skin next to the injury.

"This is not a war that will be ended with a single final battle, my boy," he said, "or even a spectacular duel like the one that ended the contest between me and Grindelwald. It will require something—rather different. Putting about the story will give me the time I need to hunt out the Dark magical artifacts that Tom relies on. And it will give you an excuse to remain more often in the school. Tom will need someone to try and estimate the true extent of my weakness, and why not you, who are already so close?"

"What is to be the real reason for my remaining here?" Severus clasped his hands in front of him and regarded Albus evenly. He would do what he was told to do, of course. That had been the price of his service since he first fled from the Dark Lord. But he was not always adept at guessing what Albus's orders would be. In some ways, it was much easier to read the Dark Lord. Take a certain knowledge of his goals, mix insanity with it, set it to simmer over a fire of passion for revenge, and one could not go far wrong.

"You will become the Defense teacher for this year," said Albus, and gave him a smile that was probably meant to be comforting.

Severus did not smile back. "And you will hire Horace for Potions, I suppose," he said, making sure that his words had no emotion.

"I will," Albus said. "But more to the point, my boy, you can train the students who will need the skills you can impart to them before the end of this year." He paused, but Severus kept his face blank, because he saw no reason why he should make this easy for Albus. In the end, the Headmaster had to finish without the satisfaction of tricking Severus into speech. "Including Harry."

"It is not enough to be Potter's nursemaid, then," Severus said, his voice desperately bored. What would showing his rage accomplish? Little enough. It never did. "I must also be his mentor?"

"I will be working closely with Harry in that capacity," said Albus, with a sharp touch to his voice that Severus told himself he would think of and enjoy later. It was a human weakness that did not endanger their success in the war the way that Albus's other follies did, and therefore a rare treat. "No, instead I wish you to enhance his talent for Defense. Our professors in the past have given him an…irregular education at best."

"Have you forgotten my efforts at teaching Occlumency to him?" Severus asked. "I do not understand your fondness for repeating and preparing disasters to happen, Albus. One might think that enough happen on their own to satisfy you."

"The way you teach Defense must be different from the way you teach Occlumency." Albus rose to his feet, which was enough of a signal that the meeting was over for Severus to stand as well. "See that you change your methods in the future."

Severus bowed slightly and let himself out through the door that led to the moving staircase. His mind was already busy with the lies that he would need to construct so that he might convince the Dark Lord Albus was truly on the brink of perishing, and not reveal the destruction of the powerful Dark artifact, whatever it was.

After that would come the lies necessary for establishing a teaching relationship with Potter.

He would not allow his dislike for the imbecile or the fact that Potter was miserable in Potions to overpower him. After all, more than one member of the staff in the past had praised Potter's skill in Defense. Severus would bide his time and give Potter every chance to show that skill forth.

When it did not appear, then he would have more than enough evidence to destroy one more piece of precious Potter's undeserved reputation.

"If your mother was more loyal to me, Draco, this might not have happened."

Draco shivered and kept his eyes on the floor. The Dark Lord had many different tones to his voice, but Draco had already discovered that the one he hated most was the gentle, solicitous one, as though the Dark Lord was really grieved that he'd had to punish Draco's mother.

"Luckily," the Dark Lord said, and his shadow swayed and his voice dripped with satisfaction like venom, "your aunt *is* loyal."

Draco knew it would be wiser to go on staring at the floor, but he couldn't help himself. He glanced out of the corner of his eye at Aunt Bellatrix, who stood alongside the wall with her wand in her hand. Her eyes were wide and bright and fixed on the Dark Lord's face.

She could look at him without horror. Draco didn't understand her.

"So," the Dark Lord said, drawing the word out and making Draco pay attention to him again, "I have punished your mother and decided to give you a task. It was to be a *hard* task. Your father failed me." His voice turned to a strained screech, and Draco swallowed in relief. It was better when he wasn't trying to sound gentle. "You must do something to prove to me that your family can be trusted, especially after Narcissa's…indiscretion. Do you understand?"

"Yes, my lord," Draco whispered. He shivered as he felt the Dark Lord's immense magical power wrap around him like a strangling hand around his throat. He stood as still as he could, because he doubted that the Dark Lord would like it if he struggled.

"But news has come to me today that changes my perceptions of the usefulness of that first task," the Dark Lord went on, and rose to his feet, pacing back and forth. Nagini followed him like an adoring shadow. Draco continued to stand very still. He'd already seen that snake eat five people. "So you are to have a different, minor problem to solve. I want you to find a way to let my Death Eaters into the school, at any time they require. Do you understand *that*?"

Laughter followed the words. Draco knew there were a bunch of Death Eaters who thought he was stupid.

"Yes, sir," he whispered, and wished he could sound adoring like Aunt Bellatrix and Nagini. He put some eagerness into his voice, anyway. "What *was* my task to be, my lord?"

"It does not matter," the Dark Lord said, and Draco breathed again, as he had stopped doing a moment after he spoke the former words. The Dark Lord could have responded angrily, and then, his father's fate, surrounded by Dementors in Azkaban, might have looked kind. "What matters now is that you accomplish *this* little chore no sooner than the end of the school year."

"Yes, my lord," Draco said, and then he was allowed to bow himself out of the room that had once been the main drawing room of the Manor and into the entrance hall. He didn't stand there to admire himself in the wide mirrors on the walls, but immediately took the large staircase leading up.

His mother's room was on the second floor. Draco stood in the doorway for some time and watched her as she lay on the bed. The Dark Lord had not used the Cruciatus on her, but an experimental pain curse that made her nerves send flares of pain through her even though

nothing, outwardly, was hurt. She didn't have any wounds now, but she still shook, hours after it.

Draco closed his eyes. The lingering shadow behind the Dark Lord's words lay across his mind.

*Do this, or your parents will die.*

The Dark Lord hadn't said that. He didn't need to.

Draco clenched his hand into a fist and told himself that he was up to this task. There was no one else who would help his parents, and no one from Potter's side had come to help *him*. He didn't particularly want most of the students at Hogwarts to die, but he didn't want his family to die even more. He would bear with this because he had to.

And hope like fuck that he succeeded.

No, Harry thought, turning his head critically back and forth in front of the bathroom mirror. It wasn't an optical illusion or a trick of his eyes. His face had started looking more and more different in the past year, and now it was *really* different.

He gnawed his lip and studied himself again. Then he glanced back to the photograph in his left hand. Colin had taken it for him at the start of this last year, his fifth one, when Harry could still remember feeling something other than anger and pain and weariness.

When Sirius had still been alive.

Harry had thought and thought about that, though, and it seemed that no matter how much he did, he never had any new thoughts. He blamed himself and he resented Snape and he wished that Sirius was still alive and he'd learned Occlumency. The Dursleys preferred to ignore him this year rather than give him chores, so Harry had nothing to distract him from those thoughts, either.

He was bored of his own grief, and so he might as well look at his face and figure out what he could do about it.

The him in the photograph, who looked the way he was supposed to look, had a shorter nose than he did now, and less sharp facial features. Harry wrinkled his nose when he realized what that meant. He was getting *pointy*. He'd be looking like Draco bloody Malfoy next if he didn't watch out.

But studying the photos and the mirror carefully in the past few months had made him realize something else, too. He'd never looked as much like his dad as everyone had said he did. Harry had thought and thought about why people would say he did, and decided that it was mostly nostalgia. Everyone had thought it would a great thing if he looked like his father come back to life, and he *did* have messy hair and needed glasses, so they could start with some basics and go from there, imposing his dad's face on his. Harry had finally seen some pictures of his

grandparents, his mum's mother and father, in the past year, and his grandmother's hair was one big tangle and his grandfather had glasses. So those could have come from his mum's side of the family, too.

But now he was growing up and didn't look the same any longer. Harry didn't think someone was suddenly going to spin around in the corridor at Hogwarts, point at him, and declare him Snape-spawn, but pretty soon he was going to have people who peered at him and said that he looked different.

That was enough. He didn't *want* to look different.

He looked carefully at the photograph, staring until he was sure that he could see his old face floating behind his eyes when he closed them. Then he pointed his hand at his face—that was the best thing about this summer, practicing wandless magic to the point where he could use a little of it and he didn't think the Ministry would come after him since they tracked his wand—and whispered the illusion charm he'd made a point of looking up in the Hogwarts library.

"*Flecto orem meum*."

Lines of what looked like colored spiderwebs flowed across his face, and Harry wondered for a second if this would work. But he kept repeating the spell carefully, making sure his pronunciation was the same each time. Finally, the colors wavered and disappeared, and he was looking at a copy of his old face.

Harry sighed and reached up, exploring with his fingers while he watched in the mirror. There were probably a few differences between the way his cheeks bent and the way they seemed to bend with the charm, but not much. Someone would have to be standing really close to him and practically poking him in the eye to notice.

*Good*. Harry had kept his promises to himself not to think about his stupid parentage as much as possible, and he was glad that he could put this out of his mind now. He would have to renew the charm every week or so, but that didn't matter. It was a small price to pay to go on being *himself*, instead of some ugly stranger he didn't know.

He marched out of the bedroom and back to his room. He'd practically memorized his Defense Against the Dark Arts book by now, but it was the only book he'd been able to sneak out of the trunk before Uncle Vernon locked it up, and he wanted to study anyway. He wanted to do the very best he could this next year.

Everything was going to be different, because everything *had* to be different. The Ministry had finally admitted that Voldemort was back. Harry was growing up enough to take some part in the war, and the Order had to see that. Harry was sure that he wouldn't get high enough marks to be in NEWT Potions, so he wasn't going to have Snape to bother him anymore.

Sirius was dead.

Harry took a deep breath and closed his eyes. He still felt as though someone had punched him in the gut when he thought about that, but he'd finally determined that sitting around and feeling guilty about it all the time did nothing. It would be better if he could make up for it somehow. And the only way to do that was to win the war, because when the war was over, Voldemort and Bellatrix would be dead. Or in Azkaban, maybe, for Bellatrix.

Harry gave a small smile. Somehow, he couldn't see Voldemort going to Azkaban.

He picked up his book and flipped the pages open to reach the complicated shield charms. This time, though, he could only read a few sentences before his mind wandered away from the words it had already memorized and back to what he'd been thinking about a little while ago.

His face was changing so that it resembled Snape's. What if other things changed, too? His mum had said in the letter that he deserved to know in case he got some strange disease. What if he had a disease because he was a Snape, a disease that Potters didn't get? Or what if his magic changed? There was still so much he didn't know, and it made Harry worried that he might miss something that would reveal him and not defend against it.

Harry shook his head, then, and bit his lip so hard that it made him wince and hiss in pain. He'd already *come* up with plans to deal with this. He just had to be careful, that was all. He had to practice his lies. He knew he wasn't a good liar, but if he could tell them often enough, then he would sound natural if someone tried to confront him.

One of the lies was that he would just shrug and say that lots of people changed as they grew up. That was true enough.

He could also say that he didn't know a lot about his parents and look sad. Most people—unless they were Malfoy or Snape—would feel sorry for him that way and not ask any more questions.

If he got a disease, then he would go to a Healer at St. Mungo's. Madam Pomfrey had probably treated Snape when he was a student and knew more about his diseases. Harry couldn't take the chance that she would recognize his sickness and make some connection.

And if worst came to worst and someone did discover the truth, Harry thought he could fight to stay free. After all, he only had a year and a month until he was seventeen. Once he was an adult, no one could force him to stay under the care of a man he despised, or with the Dursleys, either. And he would leave Hogwarts only not long after that. Any time being tormented by Snape would be horrid, but nothing compared to ten years with the Dursleys. If he could survive one, then he could survive the other.

Of course, the *best* thing would be if no one else ever found out. Harry didn't intend to let them.

*And your mind's wandering again, the way it did when you tried to learn Occlumency.*

Harry shook his head and focused back on the book again. Yes, things were going to be different this year. For Sirius. He'd promised that.

He'd kept one set of difficult promises for a whole year. He could do it with another one.

##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### #####
##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### #####
##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### #####

Chapter: 3

Thank you again for all the reviews!

*Chapter Three—Snape's Revelation*

Severus absently rubbed his arm, where the Dark Mark had been burning as late as last night. Then he turned and took another dose of his Refreshment Draught, which he had needed more and more often lately. He made an absent note to experiment with some less addictive ingredients than the dragongrass that currently drove it. It would not be good to have his eyes suddenly break out into blood when he was in the middle of a class because he had gone too long without a dose.

So far, the Dark Lord appeared to accept the ridiculous rumors that Albus wanted to spread. He had smiled when Severus first explained the wound to him, and spent some time rubbing his fingers up and down his own arm as if he could feel the pain from a distance and rejoiced in the weakness of his enemy. Then he had abruptly ordered Severus back to the school so that he could speak in private with "other trusted followers."

*When the Dark Lord trusts someone,* Severus thought as he placed the empty vial with the others that the house-elves would clean that day, *it will be time to leave Britain as fast as I can, because it will mean he has gone mad and will try to blow up the world next.*

But the signs were good enough right now that he was cautiously optimistic.

On that front, at least. On the front of the other task that Albus had assigned him…

Severus shut his eyes and let his mouth work through a final, harsh grimace of distaste. He would not, of course, demonstrate these emotions in front of anyone else. Too many of the other professors were Potter's fans and thought his reasonable objections to the brat mere prejudice. Albus would peer at him through those half-glasses and speak a few devastating words. Severus Snape did not enjoy suffering, and he had long ago learned to choose the lesser pain of doing what Albus asked over the greater pain of insults from him.

He did not have to like the boy. He did not have to cherish him in the way that Minerva did and

which his colleagues thought him inexplicable for not eagerly employing. He simply had to train him.

In the training, Severus would break down Potter's bad habits and rebuild him as someone more obedient, a true student who would *do as he was told* and *follow directions.* Severus had no idea why such things were so hard for students, especially when the instructions for a potion were clearly written out on the board. Severus knew he had the clearest handwriting of any professor at Hogwarts. If the little imbeciles could reason out the sprawling tangle of Filius's hand, they should have little trouble with his.

He would build him, and bend him into the pattern that their survival of this war required.

Or he would break him, and show Albus the impossibility of building something worthwhile out of the chaos of shattered pieces that resulted.

Severus smiled tightly and turned to cast several cleaning charms on his robes. Tonight was the Sorting Feast, and he did not wish his newest Slytherins to see him with dust or drops and dibs of ingredients on him.

Tonight was also the point at which Albus would make the announcement that Horace was taking over the Potions classes and Severus succeeding to the Defense position. Severus could at least anticipate the students' immediate reactions with a faint smirk, if not the hard work that would follow during the year.

Potter's reaction in particular.

When Severus left his quarters and strode up to the Great Hall, no one from Albus to Minerva could have faulted the cold neutrality of his face or the swiftness of his stride.

Nor could any of them have fathomed the private, intense glee that he carried in his heart.

Draco leaned his chin on his hand as he sat at the Slytherin table and tried to relax. He knew how he was going to accomplish the task the Dark Lord had set him, though he didn't know how long it might take. He wouldn't allow himself to worry about that for right now. He deserved internal applause for his good idea.

Meanwhile, he could watch the new professor at the High Table. The fat, nodding, smiling professor who would probably squeal if you poked him and who hadn't bothered to invite Draco to the meeting of his "Slug Club," though he had invited Potter.

Draco smiled. He couldn't even be irritated about *that*, not when he remembered how he had stepped on Potter's face and broken his nose. He shot a glance across the Hall at the Gryffindor table and made out Potter just now stumbling in, under the guidance of Professor Vector, who'd apparently been assigned to watch for stragglers tonight—and fix broken noses. He laughed quietly, but shook his head when Blaise elbowed him. He would share his source of amusement

later, when he had decided whether he wanted to tell his friends that Potter had spied on a private conversation.

Potter gave him a single, hate-filled glance. Draco straightened his back, some of his worry washing away. There was the reason he had to succeed, right there. The "Light" side hated him and would never accept him. They were far worse than the Dark Lord, who would at least give Draco proper credit for his efforts.

Then Potter peered more closely at him, frowned, and shook his head. Draco had no idea what he had seen, but it made his shoulders stiffen. If Potter suspected the existence of the Dark Mark he now carried, then things would become worse than insupportable.

Luckily, Potter's friends pulled him down into his seat then, and Headmaster Dumbledore stood up and cleared his throat. Draco reluctantly turned to face the ancient idiot, and noticed that Professor Slughorn and Professor Snape were both standing up.

"May I introduce our new Potions professor," Dumbledore said, "Professor Horace Slughorn. Though perhaps *new* isn't quite the right adjective, as he has taught here before. Some of you might have parents whom he educated."

The fat man bobbed his head up and down, his mouth distended and his eyes so bright that Draco suddenly wanted to see what he would look like disappointed, just for the contrast. At least most of the Slytherin table seemed as disgusted as Draco did. The rest of the Great Hall looked relieved, of course. They probably dreamed that they had a chance at good Potions marks now. Draco sniffed. Professor Snape had performed a valuable service as long as he taught Potions. He kept people who had no business learning such a difficult subject from becoming Potions masters and killing someone.

"And Professor Snape will be serving as our new Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher."

Draco had suspected this, and managed to incline his head and look wise as gasps sounded from around him. Potter, meanwhile, was on his feet, his face red, his eyes bulging and fixed on Professor Snape.

Draco looked eagerly at his Head of House to see how he would respond.

Professor Snape simply inclined his head slowly so that it looked like the polite nod one duelist would give another, his eyes locked on Potter's. Potter shook his head furiously and slumped back into his chair, staring at his plate. Dumbledore spoke more words, probably patient and blindly hopeful, but Draco didn't listen, too busy drinking in Potter's pain.

*Let's see him earn those artificially inflated marks in Defense now, with a real and competent professor teaching the class.*

But thoughts of Potter could not occupy him long as his sleeve shifted and he felt the cloth

rubbing against the Dark Mark. Draco grimaced and reached for a glass of pumpkin juice that had just appeared. Perhaps he should approach Professor Snape for some help of his own. Not because he wanted to let the man in on his task, of course—the Dark Lord wouldn't like that—but because what Professor Snape knew about handling Dark magic might prove useful for Draco's repairing of the Vanishing Cabinet.

"Can you *believe* that we'll still have the greasy git for a teacher?"

Harry shook his head in disgust at Ron's remark. "Why couldn't Dumbledore hire Professor Lupin again, if he couldn't find anyone else?" he asked, and flopped back on the couch in the Gryffindor common room with his arm over his eyes.

He hated the feelings churning up and down in his gut. He'd counted on a year that was already going to be hard enough, because he had to make so many changes and live up to so many expectations and take care that his secrets didn't escape. And now Snape was going to teach the one class Harry had always been comfortable in and make his life that much more difficult.

"It's not the end of the world." Hermione sniffed as she sat on the couch beside them. "Professor Snape probably knows a lot more about Dark magic than Professor Lupin does, to be honest. He could be a brilliant teacher."

"*Could be,* but he *won't*," Ron said. He picked up a pillow and threw it across the room, nearly hitting a first-year. "He'll sabotage all our efforts and take points from Gryffindor, just you wait and see. And then we'll fall further behind in learning about Dark magic. And that could be disastrous because we need to fight You-Know-Who." He lowered his voice on those last words and glanced at Harry's scar. Harry rolled his eyes. He wondered idly what Ron would say if Harry told him he was less worried about the scar on his forehead than the lower parts of his face, the ones the glamour was covering.

"Oh, say the name, Ron, for God's sake." Hermione tapped her wand against her hand and glared at Ron.

Ron opened his mouth, and it seemed another argument was going to start, so Harry jumped in. "We'll have to make sure that he can't sabotage us too badly," he said. "What do you say to starting up Dumbledore's Army again? Unofficially, until we find out how rubbish Snape's teaching is." Harry didn't think he would mind seeing Luna and the other friends he'd made from other Houses at the meetings. Besides, it would give him more time to practice the spells that had been theory only all summer.

"That's a wonderful idea, mate!" Ron clapped him on the back. "But don't worry, his teaching *will* be rubbish, so we won't have to wait long."

Even Hermione was smiling, though she tried to hide it by hunting for dust on her already clean robes. "That is a good idea, Harry," she said. "I've done some reading about how Transfiguration can be used in battling the Dark Arts, and…"

Harry relaxed as she chattered on. He was going to survive this. It wasn't as terrible as it had looked at first.

*Like my stupid heritage. I hate it, but I got used to hiding it, and now it doesn't bother me as much as it did.*

Mostly, Harry wished his mum was alive so he could talk to her about the story of how she'd—slept with Snape. It made him blush to think about, but it had happened, and it seemed stupid to deny it.

*I can put up with it because no one knows about it. And I can put up with Snape teaching Defense because our real learning is going to happen outside the classroom.*

Not for the first time, Harry smiled at Ron and Hermione and thought how lucky he was to have such great friends.

Severus wore no smile as he watched his sixth-year students enter the classroom, but he had a hard time fighting one back when he saw the way Potter walked in: striding like a king, his lackeys on either side of him, his head tilted so far back that it was a wonder he could smell anything.

*As expected. His father down to the bones. Anything else is an illusion. Including that fabled skill at Defense.*

Potter took a seat towards the front of the classroom, all the while glaring at Severus without blinking. Severus took exquisite pleasure in returning the stare until such time as Potter finally shuddered and looked down at the desk. Even then, of course, the brat couldn't admit he'd been beaten and pretended he had only turned his glance away because he needed to find his book.

*Perhaps I shall teach him humility, if nothing else,* Severus decided. He looked swiftly over the class and concluded his count of the students. An unusually large number of them had managed to gain high marks on their Defense OWLS. Of course, that was because they hadn't had a proper teacher in years, and the exam proctors themselves could stand a thorough replacement.

*I shall break them soon enough,* he thought, as his gaze settled on Weasley and he watched the red-headed blunderer swallow uneasily.

"You will learn *true* spells in class this year," he announced. The persona he used when he wanted to demonstrate the nature of Potions to students was subtle, insinuating, intriguing; this one he had deliberately chosen to be blunt. He would scrape the withered dreams of several students from the sides of this classroom before the week was out, or know the reason why not. "The nature of Dark magic, and how to counteract it. The nature of Dark creatures, and how to hunt them. The minor hexes and jinxes that you have wielded so far will slide so far down the list of your priorities that you will wonder how you managed to exist knowing only them."

He curled his lip and glanced hard at Longbottom, who had managed to earn the necessary mark, perhaps through his grandmother's bribery of the proctors. At least he had the sense to look intimidated, unlike Potter.

"I have to remedy the effects of five years' neglect of this post," he said coldly, "and I have to do it beginning with you, who have gone through those five years and doubtless are used to thinking of this as a class without work. I would ask pity for my position if I imagined any of you capable of understanding me, and if I *needed* pity."

Longbottom now looked ready to faint. Weasley stared down at his desk, moving his quill back and forth. Granger looked half in awe. In truth, if Granger had not been in Gryffindor, Severus might not have found her so insufferable; he had dealt well enough with several Ravenclaws who expressed a proper admiration for his teaching ability.

Potter had returned to his glare.

*Why wait?* Severus thought suddenly. He had planned to hold off on his demonstration of superiority over Potter, to heighten the class's fear. But now he saw that that would be counterproductive. Potter had enough of a swagger already, because his previous professors' incompetence and the dazzled eyes of celebrity-worshippers had permitted him to get away with so much for so long. A delay would only increase his misplaced confidence.

"Mister Potter," he said. "You will asset me in a duel."

Potter's glare grew more intense. He rose to his feet without a word and drew his wand. Severus sent him to the far end of the room; the tables, unlike most of those in the Hogwarts classrooms, were arranged in a circle along the walls so as to give an open space suitable for dodging and darting. At least, they were *now*. Severus wondered in disgust how the others had taught with the classroom as crowded as it had been. He'd had a better opinion of Lupin's sense than that.

Severus held his wand high and studied the class slowly. In the middle of appearing as if he would say something to them, he whipped towards Potter and cast his first spell. "*Retinnio!*"

The curse whirled towards Potter like a blazing white arrowhead turning end over end. When it hit him, it would make his bones ring as if he were a gong struck with a heavy paddle. Severus knew well enough that none of the Defense books mentioned the counter to this one. He waited contentedly.

Potter stuck his wand out in front of him like the reaching fingers of a baby and cried, "*Protego!*"

Severus would have laughed aloud if his astonishment had permitted him to do so. To use the Shield Charm against the Resounding Curse when it would simply be shivered to shreds—

The familiar silvery shield appeared in front of Potter and the arrowhead crashed into it. A heavy

vibration traveled through the classroom, accompanied by a noise like three dozen cymbals that made Severus's back teeth ache. The shield dissolved like the still surface of a shaken glass of water.

But the Resounding Curse was gone, dealt with. And as Potter sprinted to the side and took aim again, Severus realized that that was all Potter had wanted. It didn't matter to him that he could not create a permanent shield to shelter behind when faced with a spell like that. In fact, perhaps he had even planned on it.

From a new position, half-crouched under a table where a terrified-looking Hufflepuff girl sat, Potter snarled, "*Compes!*"

Severus didn't see the little snake of light that ran along the floor towards him, so quickly did it move. He knew that was a trait of the spell and not the wizard who cast it, but it was still not *pleasant* to feel the suddenly conjured shackles appear between his ankles, the chain automatically shortening and jerking him from his feet.

He did not fall, of course. He could not do such a thing in front of his class and expect to retain any authority. He aimed his wand at the shackles as they formed and, after a non-verbal Balancing Charm that brought him abruptly back upright, cast "*Finite Incantatem*" aloud, so that he might show his contempt of Potter's supposed "mastery."

The shackles crumbled, but Potter had already scurried to another part of the room—Severus had never realized that he so enjoyed imitating an insect—and chanted another hex. Severus did not hear the incantation this time, but he recognized the effect as it boiled towards him, visible only as a heat shimmer. Potter meant to turn his breath against him, making it into steam that would blind Severus.

It was a charm that was in the Defense Against the Dark Arts books that had been chosen in the past. Severus knew that. Why he should have been so surprised that Potter had studied it already, he did not know.

Again, his quick *Finite* dismissed the hex, and then he moved back on the offensive with a Line of Fire Curse that made dancing flames race across the floor towards Potter. They would not hurt him badly even if they reached him—no more than the hotfoot that Granger had given him in these students' first year—but they would force him to move constantly and disrupt his concentration.

Potter yelled two words without pausing for breath. "*Aguamenti! Corycus!*"

A blow from an invisible fist hit Severus low in the middle of the back, staggering him. The Line of Fire Curse vanished. Potter ran to a new position, his eyes bright and his hair flapping around him. Severus had seen the same enthusiastic expression before, when Lily was staring into a complicated potion that she had managed to brew right.

He hated the sudden return of that memory as much as he did the reluctant acknowledgment rising up inside his mind.

*Potter is good at Defense after all.*

Of course, that revelation simply sparked another and more indignant one as he stepped back and said coldly aloud, "That will do for now, Mister Potter."

*If he can apply this brilliance in one area, then he could apply it in another. Learning complicated spells is not more difficult than following complicated potions instructions. He should have been doing much better in Potions than he did. That he did not implies that he did not wish to concentrate enough.*

Severus considered that a personal insult. It was one thing for Potter to simply be miserable at Potions; it was another thing for Lily Evans's son to have inherited her talent and refuse to exercise it because he was lazy or busy with other things he considered "more important." Suddenly Horace's excited comments the other night about Potter's performance in his class, which Severus had listened to with half an ear, had taken on a new significance.

*He could do it. He did not wish to.*

*He will pay for that*.

He turned away from Potter, because he did not trust his fragile hold on his temper if he had to confront the boy right now, and noticed that the other students were watching with their mouths open and their eyes round. Severus waved his wand, and the air shuddered with the sound of thunder. The watching students jumped and, in the case of Longbottom, squeaked.

"That was a true duel," Severus said coldly, "though less deadly than the kind you will fight if you ever deal with a Dark wizard. Now, who can tell me what spells I used in this display? You, Longbottom?"

*That* moron's cowering and spluttering were sweet honey to Severus's taste after Potter's confident spells and the flushed, defiant look that Potter threw him before he walked to his seat.

As was the tiny bit of flavor to be gleaned out of all of this, the fact that he would not have to mentor an utter incompetent. Severus told himself that he could live with his bitterness at having been mistaken because it would mean being spared the worse bitterness of long evenings in the company of someone he could *not* teach.

"Potter. Stay behind."

Harry lifted his head and waved to Ron and Hermione, who were lingering behind and giving him concerned looks, to go ahead. He knew that Snape was going to assign him a detention or take points for the duel earlier in the class. That was only obvious. Harry had done brilliantly

against him, had shown that he wasn't afraid of him, and that had made Snape's mouth twist up like he'd swallowed an earwax-flavored bean.

Snape stood next to his desk now, watching Harry approach. Harry stared at him coolly. It was kind of exhilarating to stand here like this in front of Snape, no matter how much he'd been looking forwards to getting away from him in Potions at last, and know that he was basking in the glow of a successful defeat and hiding an even bigger secret.

*He'd probably claim it's all down to his genes if he knew about it.*

That made Harry more determined than ever to keep the secret private. He didn't want to give Snape any *pleasure.*

Snape twisted his wand the moment the last student was out the door, and Harry heard the noises from the corridor diminish. He immediately knew it was a variation on a Silencing Charm and wanted to know how it worked, but Snape turned to him and Harry snapped his mouth shut. He was damned if he would ask.

"You may have heard by now," Snape said, picking his way through the words like they were shards of glass, "that the Headmaster has been wounded in the fight against the Dark Lord. He will not be able to complete some of the training in Defense that he had intended to complete with you." His voice grated on the last words and his eyes shifted away from Harry. *Probably hates to think about anyone being nice to me,* Harry thought cynically. *He'd get along great with Uncle Vernon. They could compare notes.* "He has asked me to take over that training."

Harry stared at him, and waited, and waited. When it became clear this wasn't a joke, he shook his head and snorted. "Because that worked *so* well with the Occlumency lessons."

"Are you saying that you disrespect the Headmaster's judgment?" Snape's voice was soft and eager.

"When it comes to you and me and you teaching me, Dumbledore doesn't know what he's talking about," Harry said.

It was the first thing that came to mind, and he knew he should have restrained himself when Snape's mouth curdled into a smug smile. "Detention tonight at eight-o'clock, Potter," he said. "Be sure that you bring your wand." And he turned to gather up papers as if that simple motion could dismiss Harry from existence.

Harry walked slowly out of the room, taking deep breaths so that he would subdue his inclination to shout and storm about the unfairness of it all.

*When I act on impulse, I get in trouble. It was true in the Department of Mysteries, and it's true this time. It's better to practice my lies and prepare for trouble, because that way, I can actually handle it.*

*So Snape wants to "train" me? So what? It'll take up some time, that's all. My* real *training is going to come with Dumbledore's Army. I know that. I'll make time for that. I'll work hard at that.*

Harry grinned, then, as a new thought struck him.

*And if he spends the detentions trying to train me instead of making me scrub cauldrons or write lines, I can* really *frustrate him by just not cooperating. I can show him that there's no way I'll accept him as a teacher, and there's not a bloody thing he can do about it.*

He practically bounced down the corridor to join Ron and Hermione, the thought of how much Snape was going to hate him making him chuckle with glee.

*There's another advantage, too. The more he hates me, the more he can't stand the sight of me, the less incentive he has to ask me questions or try and pry into my secrets.*

*I can't wait for tonight.*

##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### #####
##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### #####
##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### #####

Chapter: 4

Thank you again for all the reviews!

*Chapter Four—Instincts of Fire*

Draco carefully made sure that he had brushed all traces of dust from his cloak and hair before he knocked on the door of Professor Snape's office. The hidden room where he was trying to repair the Vanishing Cabinet was far dirtier than he would have thought it would be, for such a valuable place in Hogwarts.

On the other hand, that also proved that not many people knew about the room, and he had been smart to find it and think of completing his task there. Draco smirked as he knocked. The Dark Mark didn't seem to burn as much when he gloated.

"Enter."

Draco opened the door and strode confidently into the office. He was at home here as not many students were. Professor Snape recognized talent when he saw it, and it didn't *matter* that that insufferable idiot Slughorn seemed to prefer Potter to Draco. That couldn't destroy the special treatment Draco had got from his Head of House over the years, or the special Potions

knowledge that he carried in his head, or the conviction that real genius would always triumph over the shallow, flashy things that Potter did in class.

Professor Snape sat behind his desk, marking, as usual. Draco took a curious glance around, wondering if anything had changed now that Professor Snape taught Defense instead of Potions. Other than the addition of a few complicated diagrams that Draco thought depicted battlefields on the walls, nothing had. There were still ranks of potions, bookshelves, and sets of empty, clean vials all waiting in order.

Draco smiled. When he was eleven, he had thought paradise must look something like Professor Snape's Potions lab.

"What do you wish, Mr. Malfoy?" Professor Snape had lifted his head, and hadn't changed his neutral expression when he realized who it was. His hands lay folded on the desk in front of him as if nothing interested him less than a visit like this.

That didn't fool Draco. Professor Snape wasn't a demonstrative person. Draco was used to that, having grown up with his father. What mattered was that he wasn't sneering or yelling. That meant Draco had a chance to prove himself.

"I was wondering, sir…" he said, trailing off and lowering his eyes. He *was* genuinely nervous, but he also wanted to intrigue the professor enough to make him ask a few questions. Draco was low on people who were interested in his fate right now.

"Yes?" The professor's voice carried a sneer that made Draco speak quickly. He didn't want to irritate him. He wasn't Harry Potter, to think himself honored by someone casting Dark spells at him.

"You have a wide knowledge of Dark magic," Draco said. "More than we're ever going to learn here. I was wondering if you would be opposed to teaching me some of it. Only the spells that wouldn't bring the Ministry down on our heads, of course." He tacked an apologetic smile on his face before he looked up.

Professor Snape had an eyebrow raised and no ugly twisting of his lips. Good. That was the first step. Draco would have had to fight the urge to scurry for cover if he was smirking.

"All of this is true," Professor Snape said, tapping his fingertips together as if he had some caked substance on them that he wanted to get off. "But I wonder what should persuade me to help you rather than simply send you on your way with a Memory Charm."

Draco caught his breath, then shook his head. The professor didn't waste words. If he had intended to really do that to Draco, he would have cast the Memory Charm already.

"Because there are certain things that I need to know, sir," he said. "Certain people who would like to see me learn them, and whom I want to please." He moved a little to the left so that his

arm stuck out a bit, then pulled it back to his side as if that had been an accidental motion. "And others who wouldn't like me to learn it, and whom I'm committed to disappointing."

That was as close as he could come to telling the professor that he had made his choices and was an adult now. He stood still, holding the man's eyes, and waited.

Professor Snape sat still so long that Draco was sure he would be thrown out of the room with a Memory Charm after all. Then he stood and went to one of the bookshelves. Draco shut his eyes and tried not to sway on his feet with relief. He should have expected this. His father would have had more confidence.

"Here."

Draco opened his eyes in shock. He hadn't heard Professor Snape cross the floor back towards him.

The book he was holding out was a heavy, dark thing, the cover feeling less like leather when Draco took it and more like petrified wood. There was no title on the spine, but one embossed on the front in glittering silver letters when Draco turned it over. *Spells for the Strong of Heart.*

"Because of a shameless pretense that the Headmaster wishes me to indulge in," Professor Snape drawled, moving back towards the desk, "I cannot spare much time to tutor you. I must tutor Potter instead, and try to 'get along' with him." Those words were not much emphasized, but still, Draco had no doubt of the venom that dripped from them. "Heaven forbid that someone in the school show such aversion as I do towards Dumbledore's pet."

"I can learn by studying the book, sir," Draco said firmly, closing his hands around it. "Thank you."

Professor Snape flicked a finger. Draco took the signal, bowed to him, and then left, shrinking the book as he went and sliding it into a robe pocket. No need to make it easy for his enemies to catch him.

His heartbeat calmed down as he walked back towards Slytherin, and he began to smile for real as he reached the common room door. He could do this. It wouldn't be easy, but he could fulfill the Dark Lord's wishes and spare his parents torture.

In a way, the Dark Lord had even been *honoring* him, by giving Draco this task and assuming it was not beyond his abilities. He could easily have given it to someone else instead, someone who had much more time in his service than Draco did and would have been eager for the glory.

*Let me look at it in that light. It's a compliment. It must be.*

It did not take Albus long to come to the fireplace in his office, for which Severus was grateful. He despised talking by Floo. The soot got ground into one's robes and knees, and he had

assumed enough undignified postures in his younger days—and still must, whenever he went before the Dark Lord. He did not relish kneeling down to look into the fire.

"We have a serious problem, Headmaster," Severus said when he saw those sharp blue eyes looking back at him, and then described Draco's behavior and the way he was certain the boy had received the Dark Mark.

Albus was silent for some minutes, his fingers rubbing the scar on his arm that the Dark artifact had left. Severus examined it, since Albus was not looking up at the moment and would not catch him at it. To his satisfaction, he saw no sign of returning green or grey or any other colors that would indicate a problem. Albus's weakness would be contained only in rumors, not in reality.

Finally, the Headmaster looked up, by which time Severus had made his gaze blandly courteous again.

"I wish to spare the boy," Albus said quietly. "Because he is young and innocent, and carries something of a child's soul in him still. I am afraid I must ask you for another expenditure of your time, Severus."

"To watch over him and attempt to turn him, subtly?" Severus could have laughed when Albus blinked. At times it was pleasant to surprise the Headmaster by his intelligence.

Sourness would have followed the thought if he let it. He knew exactly why Albus was prone to underestimate his cleverness. One stupid mistake had left its mark on the Headmaster's mind even more than it had on Severus's.

But he would have to brood on that later, with Potter's detention in a few minutes and Albus nodding now. "Yes. I fear it must be subtle, because the boy seems unlikely to listen to common sense if presented to him." His voice was weary.

*Growing up with his particular parents, it would have been a miracle to expect him to.* Severus bowed his head and said, "I will keep an eye on him and report to you regularly on how this is going, along with my other—project."

"I wish you would not think of Harry as a mere project, Severus." Albus's voice was gently chiding.

"Given my current relationship to the brat, I can do naught else," Severus said, and then ended the Floo conversation. At least his careful choice of words had ensured that the last expression on Albus's face was a relaxed one. He was thinking that Severus would try to change the "current" relationship into a "new" one that would reflect Albus's wishes more closely.

Exactly five minutes late came a knock on his door. Severus could have told that knock from Draco's if his ears has been muffled in layers of cloth. Draco did not assume he was welcome; he

tapped cautiously and respectfully, always mindful that Severus might be doing something else. Potter knocked as though he wanted to know why Severus hadn't already opened the door.

Severus leaned back in his chair and almost hissed the words, "Come in." His hands were warm with excitement as he reached down to grip his wand. Oh, he *was* looking forwards to this.

Harry walked through the door with his shoulders slouching and his face sullen. It was the kind of look that would make Uncle Vernon yell at him. From the way that Snape's eyes narrowed, it had the same effect on him.

*Good.* Harry had come up with all sorts of plans for Dumbledore's Army in the last few hours, since Ron and Hermione had commented that they didn't know most of the spells he'd used in Defense Against the Dark Arts. The sooner Snape realized he couldn't train Harry like a performing dog, the sooner Harry could start his *real* learning.

"I'm here," he said as the door swung shut behind him. He shivered in spite of himself at the clang, but when he listened hard, he didn't hear the click of locking spells. That was all right, then. He could still get out.

Snape took his sweet time standing up from behind his desk and coming around it. Harry tilted back his head so that he could see all of him at once. He was irritated that, even after a small growth spurt, Snape was so much taller than him and always would be.

*So much for the idea that the father shows up in the son.* And Harry decided that he would do his best not to be irritated by his height again, because it was something that made him different from Snape, and that was something to be glad for.

"You will learn discipline," Snape said, as if they'd been talking when he saw Harry last and were continuing the conversation now. He started moving, circling around. Harry turned to face him each time. *He can't intimidate me. He thinks he can, but he can't.* "You will learn punctuality. You will learn to work with me as I struggle to make you into a fighter deserving of the Headmaster's confidence." He curled his lip. "An impossible task, doubtless, but one that I have agreed to take on, and, therefore, one that I will not fail at."

*Confident, aren't we?* Harry thought, and stuck out his lip, and stood still. Snape aimed his wand at him.

"Prepare to duel," he said.

It took all of Harry's self-control to keep from bringing his wand up in response. He had to defend himself, all his instincts shrieked. But then he reminded himself that that would mean Snape had won, and these stupid "training" sessions would continue. He stood still.

Snape's first spell hit him in the leg and hurled him to the floor. Harry landed with a wince, but he hadn't hit his head; his falling hands had caught him in time. He got up with a bruise and a

slight limp, and then stood there and looked up into Snape's angry face.

"What is this, Potter?" he hissed. "Have you lost your magic?"

"I'm sorry that I'm not any good at it," Harry said, and Snape looked like a vampire baring his teeth.

"You forget," he said, his voice deepening until Harry felt it in his bones more than he heard it. "I saw what you were capable of in the Defense classroom earlier today. Skill like that does not vanish between one class and another—unless the student wills it to do so. You *will* show me the right responses." He paused, then added, in a tone of disgust that sounded barely controlled, "I have no idea why you would wish to deny your talent in any case. One would think that the great Harry Potter would adore being fawned on by his teachers for something he did while he was an adolescent, rather than when he was a baby."

Harry gritted his teeth. That insult stung more than he wanted to, since he *did* often feel that many people thought his "defeat" of Voldemort when he was a baby was worth more than anything he'd done since. He might as well have stopped living when he was a year and a half old.

*You can't let Snape get to you,* he reminded himself, and then said, "Maybe I just got lucky, sir."

"No, you did not." Snape moved a pace or two nearer, and his voice and his face were both full of hatred. "You will *not* defy me, Potter. Your skill is important to this war, and it *will* be honed."

Harry sneered at him. "No, it won't. Not by you."

Severus could not remember the last time he had allowed himself to feel this much rage. It surrounded him in a swirling red vortex, so near to drowning him that his limbs trembled and his heart raced.

How *dare* the brat? Severus knew what he had seen. He had the orders from Albus to train Potter however he needed to in order to bring out those skills that would spell doom for the Dark Lord in the end. And the boy himself had cooperated in the Defense classroom, showing Severus that he would not be utterly wasting his time. How *dare* he try to inspire Severus to doubt the evidence of his senses?

He glanced down at the way Potter held his leg. He evidently preferred being wounded to cooperation.

That thought alone saved Severus from falling into his anger. He still could not comprehend the reasons that Potter would want to hide and subdue his skill, but he thought it probably had something to do with Potter's hatred of him. Potter would do anything rather than gratify a request from his Potions teacher.

*No. His Defense teacher, now.*

Severus did not think merely insulting the boy would work. Nor could he assign him detentions doing ordinary tasks; Potter's mulish expression said that he would take that over dueling. And while he could still take points, Potter probably had the support of others in his House, or he would not have begun to do this in the first place.

*So I must attack him from a direction that he will least expect, bearing the truth in my words.*

"It is a wonder to me," Severus said, drawing himself up to his full height and letting his voice drip with disdain, "why you wish to hide your obvious intelligence and talent."

Potter blinked and took a step backwards, as if he thought that Severus would charge at him in a minute. There was no denying that Severus would have liked to. But achieving his goals came before all else, and frightening Potter—if it could be done—would not contribute materially to them.

"What do you mean?" Potter asked, and his tone had changed from sulky to belligerent. Severus smiled. *Excellent. It is always easier to influence Potter when he is angry.* "I'm stupid. You always said so."

"But now I know better," Severus said, and gave a long-suffering sigh, moving past Potter and back to his desk. The boy watched him and blinked like an owl who had been offered a letter and then sent away without it. "Now I know that you could have done well in Potions, but you squashed your abilities. I hear from Professor Slughorn that you have been achieving remarkable successes in his classes."

For some reason, Potter flushed, but shook his head. "Don't say things like that," he said, "I know you don't believe them."

"And are not my lies more pleasant to listen to than my usual mode of speaking to you?" Severus murmured. The anger still lurked, waiting. Severus beat it back with stern hands. Becoming enraged would allow Potter to win.

When he thought of that, it was much easier to hold Potter's eyes and continue in a level, neutral tone without betraying any flicker of how distasteful it was to him to praise this shining example of student malfeasance. "You could do much better than you have. I saw it in the classroom this morning. You *blazed*. You will not convince me to believe again that you are simply incompetent."

Potter's eyes widened, and he stood still a moment. Then he laughed. Severus clenched his fingers into his palms, glad that his hands were inside his sleeves and Potter could not see them.

"I don't know what kind of trick you've decided to play now," Potter said, when his laughter died away and he was shaking his head in what looked like amused exasperation at Severus's

response. "But I think it's a stupid one. You're not going to make me believe that you want to teach me, no matter how you try. You've already said that it was Dumbledore's idea that we start working together again—"

"*Professor* Dumbledore," Severus corrected sharply, but Potter continued in the cheerful tone that said he was going to ignore every caution Severus could give him.

"Which means that you don't want to teach me. And I don't want to learn. And no matter how long you keep me here, that won't change." Potter folded his arms and gave Severus the most idiotic smirk he had ever seen, even counting the time that an eleven-year-old Draco had proudly told Severus about breaking the rules and assumed he would get away with it.

Severus trembled, though with the kind of faint shiver that would make no motion in his robe and which Potter would therefore never notice. His wand was still in his hand. He could lift it and cast a curse without trouble. It would be so *wonderful* to see Potter sprawled on the floor, gasping in shock as his legs were burned or—

Or nothing. Those were not the kinds of spells that Severus could use in school without consequences and notice, or else the Dark Lord would have demanded long ago that he assassinate Albus and there would have been no sane excuse for Severus to refuse.

Then the perfect plan came to him, settling on his mind like a blanket of soothing mist and cooling his anger. Of course. The proper way to settle this debate that should not be a debate was to use Potter's instincts against him, much as he had done in the Defense classroom without knowing it. Given what he realized about Potter's intent to defy him now, Severus thought Potter would not have responded with such brilliance if given the time to think about it rationally.

He opened his mouth as if he would reply. Potter leaned forwards.

Severus whipped his wand up and nonverbally incanted the Icehands Curse. The white spell that blazed at the tip of his wand and then struck straight for Potter like a beam of moonlight left him no time to respond.

Except by listening to his muscles and his mind, and raising a Fire Shield in front of himself. The fire crackled hungrily, spreading out in a circle crisscrossed by eight scarlet lines that eagerly swallowed the ice. Severus listened to the grinding shriek and clash of the magic fighting, and awaited the inevitable result. This time, he had paid more attention to the shifting power levels in the room as Potter cast, and he knew that the brat had some raw strength. The problem was that he did not have finesse.

Finesse was what Severus would teach him, no matter how long it took.

The fire condensed into a tiny ball of radiant yellow around the last of Severus's curse and vanished, taking the white with it. The only sound in the room was Potter's loud breathing. He looked as though someone had slapped him.

"Tell me, Potter," Severus said, as though they had all the time in the world, "do you know what curse that was?"

Potter promptly went back to obstinacy, hardening his eyes and grinding his teeth. "How could I? I never saw it before."

"And yet," Severus said, his voice soft and pleasant, "you chose the right defense. It was a curse based on ice. You chose fire to fight it."

"So what?" Potter's voice had the kind of ringing challenge that Severus frequently met with from students who assumed they were smarter than he was. "Anyone could have done that."

"Not *anyone*," Severus said. "I know seventh-year students who cannot manage the Fire Shield. I know trained Aurors who would not have been able to process the color of the curse and come to the right conclusions fast enough." *I have faced some of those Aurors on the battlefield.* "Instinctive knowledge or not, you have a talent." He moved forwards until he was mere inches from the boy and Potter had to crane his neck to look up and meet his eyes.

"*I will not see you squander it.*"

The blood drained from Potter's face. Severus knew why. He had put all the force of his conviction in his voice, because there was more than simple obedience to Albus driving him now. Potter *might* have the ability to free them from the Dark Lord, with proper training. Severus needed to encourage him to use it and not hide it so that he would survive as well as Potter and Potter's little friends.

This had also become a means of conquering Potter's pride. Severus now knew that it angered the brat to display his magic in front of Severus, though he still did not know exactly *why.* That was the kind of thing Severus could easily hold over his head. Better, he could use the very alertness that made Potter so capable of defeating threats against him and force him to assist in demonstrations in the classroom and private duels to speed up his training. Severus tasted victory merely thinking of the way Potter would fret, and fume, and complain, and yet end up working with him anyway.

And finally, though few would know this except students like Draco who possessed a natural talent in Potions, Severus *wished* to teach those who had gifts. It was the dunderheads who surrounded him, with no application and no ability, that he had less patience for. He had none at all for people who were good at things but didn't think to work at them to become even better. He had never previously thought that Potter could inhabit that category.

Now he knew. Now he refused to give the moron any peace—not because of Albus's orders, but because of his own deepest principles.

Potter gave him a stare of silent, conflicted hated.

"Detention over, Potter," Severus said, and watched in delight as Potter opened his mouth several times to say something, then turned his back and marched out without a word, as if he were an automaton.

*Struggle against me all you like, Potter. You will lose the battle.*

Harry swore softly and pressed his hands against his face as he stood in the corridor outside Snape's office.

*That could have gone better.*

Stupid reaction times. Stupid determination that wouldn't hold up. Stupid Snape, who would only torment him more and worse if he knew what Harry knew.

He paused when thoughts of that secret called up others, and he realized it had been at least a week since he applied his face-concealing charm. "Shite," he muttered, and started to aim his wand at his face.

Cold settled on his arms. Harry shivered and glanced doubtfully at Snape's door. Had he opened it again? Was it his presence Harry was feeling? But no, the door was firmly shut.

Then he felt a slicing fear that cut into his stomach, and he turned to stare down towards the end of the corridor. Dark, swirling shapes moved there, which could have been the shadows of someone walking away from the Slytherin common room.

But Harry wasn't dumb enough to think that, not when he had also felt the fear and the cold and the despair that was trying to numb his mind now.

*Dementors. Dementors got inside the school somehow.*

Harry took off running after the shadows, fiercely lashing his mind to find a happy memory.

##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### #####
##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### #####
##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### #####

Chapter: 5

Thank you again for all the reviews!

*Chapter Five—Details and Differences*

Draco was busy reading his book and safe behind the stone walls of the Slytherin common room,

but he still heard the shout. He probably could have been upstairs in the Prefect's bathroom and heard it there.

"*EXPECTO PATRONUM!*"

Draco stared at the wall. He remembered the spell; it was the same spell that Potter had used on him, Vince, and Greg when they played that harmless prank of dressing up like Dementors to scare him on the Quidditch field. He wondered why in the world someone would be using it in the Hogwarts dungeons.

No, why *Potter* would be using it in the Hogwarts dungeons, he decided after a moment of thought. He was sure that he had recognized that shout.

"What was that?" Vince asked. He had been deep in reading his Charms book, his forehead furrowed the way it always was when he read, and he kept a finger in place beneath the line he had reached when he looked up.

"I don't know," Blaise said. He looked as if he might stand up from his comfortable sprawled position on the floor, his Astronomy notes spread out in front of him.

"It was Potter, no doubt trying to play a prank," Draco said, rising swiftly to his feet. Blaise's eyes darted to him, and Draco looked warningly back. He had no idea whether Blaise was among the Death Eaters. He'd never seen him at the meetings, but he was kept out of so much that was important that that meant next to nothing.

Resentment stirred in Draco, because he had to prove that *he* was the one who was worthy of the Dark Lord's confidence. Besides, Blaise was always pushing, when he could, to take away Draco's prominence among the sixth-year Slytherins. Draco might have an important task and his parents' lives weighing on his mind at every waking moment, but he still had time for House politics. His father had always said that they mimicked the politics of the outer world that he would be involved in sooner or later, when he left Hogwarts and became important because he was a Malfoy.

"I'll go and see if it was," he continued, shaking his arm so that his wand sprang into his hand. Pansy gasped and looked impressed. Draco gave her a narrow smile and ignored the way Blaise rolled his eyes. What did it matter if Blaise was sick of his "pretensions," as he called them, already? So long as he fooled most of the people most of the time, Draco didn't care about the few stubborn personalities he couldn't influence.

He opened the Slytherin common room door and stepped out into the dark corridor, listening intently. For some reason, he had expected to see Potter right away, but the shout must have come from around a corner. Draco started walking to the right.

Then Potter bolted around the corner, his eyes so distended and his face so white that Draco stopped walking in sheer dread. Potter seized him and spun him into the wall, then leaned in

behind him and whispered harshly, "Stay *still*, Malfoy. And keep quiet if you can. I don't want the Dementors getting distracted."

*Dementors.* Draco shivered, frightened for more than one reason. What if the Dark Lord had got tired of waiting for Draco to find a way to let the Death Eaters in and ordered someone else in the school to have the Dementors clear the way? His parents would die, and Draco would never get the chance to prove himself.

He turned his head to the side in time to see Potter take up a guard position near the corner, his wand clutched tight in one trembling hand.

Harry peered ahead. He knew he was breathing too fast and that he might faint in a minute, but he couldn't help himself. The Dementors he had faced in the corridor were—different, somehow, even though they had still scattered from the Patronus. Larger, and more white then grey, and with long fingers that had reached out and left glittering red welts covered with silver dust on Harry's arms. Harry scrubbed them absently and hoped that Dementors couldn't Kiss you with their hands.

He wondered if Malfoy was creeping up behind him, and hoped that for once the git would have the sense to stay where he was.

And then.

The Dementors' fear washed over him, indicating that they were just on the other side of the corner. Harry stiffened his muscles to keep himself from running away or backing down. He had the Patronus Charm. Someone would come in a minute, because people would have heard his shout. He was in Hogwarts, and there were wards and professors around.

His imagination reminded him that the Dementors had managed to get inside Hogwarts *despite* all the wards and professors.

Harry saw the shadow of a reaching hand. He thrust his wand forwards and focused as hard as he could on the memory of Sirius saying that Harry could come to live with him.

"*Expecto Patronum!*" he shouted again, and his wand flared and the silvery stag bounded out.

But instead of rushing at the Dementors, it halted in the middle of the corridor and turned its head back and forth so that its antlers pointed at the walls. Harry watched it, open-mouthed. What was going on with it? Were these special kinds of Dementors able to come through the walls the way the basilisk had slithered through the pipes in them?

The stag stamped a hoof and glanced back at him. Then it turned to face him fully, ears twitching. It tilted its head back and forth, as if to say, *Show me the enemy and I'll charge it, but I don't see the enemy.*

Harry glanced down at the ground. The shadow of the Dementor's hand had gone, and he couldn't feel them now. But he knew he *had* felt it. He knew he'd seen them scatter from the charge of the first stag he'd conjured. And even Dementors shouldn't be able to just vanish out of Hogwarts like that.

"Well, go on, find them," he said, feeling more and more stupid as the stag just stood there and he could feel Malfoy's stare sharpening from behind him.

The stag tossed its head up and down and gave what looked like a disgusted snort, though of course it couldn't make any sound. Then it stood there considering him in a doubtful way.

Harry listened as hard as he could. Other than Malfoy's muffled snickering, though, he couldn't hear anything.

"Fine, go away," he said, and slashed his wand down to banish the stag. It went, and Harry stepped forwards and peered into the corridor. Yes, no Dementors. It was empty. Harry ran a hand over his face and cursed under his breath.

"Potter? What are you doing?"

Harry twisted around to glare at Malfoy. "What do you know about Dementors being in the school, Malfoy?" he demanded. "Is this another one of your stupid tricks?"

Malfoy sneered at him and yet managed to look innocent at the same time. "Yes, Potter, because I have nothing better to do than get you in trouble…" His voice trailed off and he leaned forwards to peer at Harry. His eyes were thoughtful, and Harry thought he was getting curious, even though he didn't know why.

Then he remembered that he hadn't finished casting the face-altering charm, and even though he couldn't be sure the glamour had worn away from when he'd cast it last week, it *probably* had.

*Shite!* Harry spun around to face the corner again. "Did you hear that?" he asked sharply.

"No," Malfoy snapped. "Hear what?" But Harry could hear him breathing faster and listening anyway, not quite able to dismiss Harry's reaction.

Harry fiercely whispered the incantation for the face-altering charm and relaxed as he felt it wash over his features in a tingling flood of cool magic. Then he turned back to Malfoy. *It's dim out here and he has other things to think about,* he told himself. *He's probably not going to notice, or remember what he noticed.*

"I thought I heard something," he said. "I want to know what you were doing out here, Malfoy. Most people don't walk *towards* the sound of battle—"

"Potter."

As Snape appeared from behind Malfoy, Harry fought the temptation to bury his head in his hands and groan. *I am so fucked.*

Severus might have had to rely on Legilimency to get the truth out of Potter—the moment the boy recognized him, he had tightened his jaw and acted as though rusty hooks could drag nothing from him—but Draco was in the corridor and more than willing to tell him what spell Potter had cast, and why.

Severus had crouched over the stone where Potter had claimed Dementors were and whispered a spell that would reveal traces of their passing as small silver marks. The light had not come. Severus cast the spell again to be sure; Potter was sensitive to Dementors, and not likely to mistake their presence.

Nothing.

That left three possibilities: that Potter had made up the whole thing to justify his insatiable desire to cause trouble; that the Dark Lord was sending visions to Potter again, though why he should wish to send a vision of Dementors Severus did not know; or the boy had finally gone mad and was going to bring all of them down in an apocalyptic crash because he did not have the manners or good sense to go quietly mad *after* the war was over.

Severus sent Draco back to his common room with a few sharp words. The boy bowed his head and went quietly enough, but the glance he darted at Potter was sharp with curiosity. Severus was glad that most people in the school would know of Potter's detention by now. At least Draco would not question why Potter was in the dungeons in the first place.

He might question any number of other things, though, and Severus told Potter several of them in a low hiss as he escorted (perhaps prodded would be a better word) the boy to the Headmaster's office.

"Do you want *Draco Malfoy* to begin spreading rumors that you are mad?" he asked Potter as they rode the moving staircase up. He would ordinarily have preserved a dignified silence, but the boy's locked jaw and refusal to look directly at him were provoking beyond endurance. *Five minutes out of my presence and he must be in trouble.* "What he knows, Lucius Malfoy will, and what Lucius Malfoy knows is the Dark Lord's."

Potter gave him a slight, sarcastic smile and then turned to study the wall sliding past them as if it were the most fascinating thing he had ever seen. Severus's fingers crooked, but he did not grip and shake the idiot's shoulder. *Nothing that will leave visible bruises. The one he has on his leg from the moment when he tried to resist and ignore me is bad enough.*

"You should not have lingered in the dungeons," Severus said.

The boy tensed at that, but still didn't reply, not even with the defense that Severus was sure he

would have come out with: that the Dementors had attacked before he could get far from Severus's office. And then they reached the top of the staircase and Severus had to knock on Albus's door, with no more private time for trying to fathom Potter's stubborn silence.

*I need not worry about a death from spying, that is certain*, Severus thought as he listened to Albus's cheery call to enter. *The boy will melt my brain with anxiety long before then.*

"An uncertain pleasure, but not an unexpected one," Albus said, when he saw them. He gave his head an admonishing shake and glanced at Potter. "My dear boy, could you not at least try to stay out of trouble until the *second* day of classes?"

Potter sighed and spent a moment fumbling with his fringe before he looked up. "I'm sorry, Headmaster," he said quietly.

Spite went through Severus like a wasp's sting. How was it that Albus could convince the boy to respond to him within a few seconds, and Severus had to hammer on his emotional shields for minutes before they fell? Even when he tried to offer him help that the boy would need to defeat the Dark Lord, it seemed that Potter refused to see the good in such an offer.

*Then perhaps you should change your tactics.*

That was not a voice Severus heard often anymore: the voice of his own mockery, turned back on him when he made a mistake. It had spoken often in his younger years, when he had required its advice, but for the last decade, he had taken only the most effective and necessary actions, and ceased to require its presence.

He had thought.

He grimaced and settled back into the corner to observe Potter's interaction with Albus, content that no one was paying him enough attention to notice such things as the grimace.

"What happened, Harry?"

Harry glanced up, measuring, but Dumbledore's face was nothing like the cold and distant expression he had worn last year. He leaned forwards and raised a hand slightly as if he would hold Snape back from charging forwards and wrenching Harry's arm. Not that Snape had tried to do anything like that yet, but Harry was sure that he *would*, if someone wasn't there to stop him. Uncle Vernon sure wouldn't hesitate.

"I saw Dementors in the school, sir," he said. "Ones in white cloaks, with longer hands than normal." He swallowed and glanced down at his arm. He would have said something about the marks they'd left on him, but he saw now that they'd vanished. He would have been stupid to mention it. "And I sent my Patronus after them, and they scattered. Then I went around the corner, and Malfoy was there. But when I cast the Patronus again, they'd vanished."

Dumbledore glanced over Harry's head at Snape. Snape must have mouthed something or rolled his eyes, because Dumbledore raised an eyebrow. Harry glared back at Snape. Snape simply sneered at him.

"I felt no Dementors break through the wards of the school," Dumbledore said gently. "And there is no trace of their presence in the dungeons for those who can detect such things. Is there *anything* else it may have been, Harry? Perhaps some Dark creature that looks similar to a Dementor?'

"There's no Dark creature that looks similar to a Dementor!" Dumbledore raised an eyebrow at him in turn, and Harry became abruptly aware that he was shouting and being rude. He coughed and tried to ignore the way his cheeks flushed. Snape was probably enjoying it, the bastard. "Sir," he added. "I don't think so."

"And did you react the way that you usually do when a Dementor is around?" Dumbledore asked calmly. "I am only asking these questions because I believe that your answers may help us to work out what happened," he added.

Harry thought about it. Then he sighed. "No, sir," he whispered. "I didn't hear my mother's scream or—or anything like that."

Dumbledore nodded. "Then this is something else, but that does not mean it is not powerful and dangerous in its own right," he said. "I would like you to begin Occlumency lessons again, Harry, at your own discretion. I believe that Voldemort may be reaching through your scar and trying to distract you or influence your perceptions."

Harry nodded. His scar didn't burn, but maybe Voldemort had learned how to get around that.

He wanted to say that he knew what he had seen, and that Dementors had really been in the school, but the more he thought about it, the stranger it seemed. Why would Voldemort bother sending Dementors who didn't Kiss anyone? Not enough people could cast the Patronus Charm to keep them all away if hundreds of them came into the school. And then more people would come after them, Death Eaters and probably Voldemort himself.

"I'll try, sir," he said. "I'm sure Hermione can help me find a book on Occlumency." He heard Snape snort, and gritted his teeth as he tried to ignore him. *Like I'm going to come to you again and beg you to teach me, arsehole.*

"Good." Dumbledore reached out to a bowl of yellow sweets on the desk, and his sleeve fell away from his arm. Harry stared when he realized that a thick scar encircled his skin towards the elbow, shiny pink lines that reflected the light of his fire.

Dumbledore followed his gaze and sighed gently. When he spoke, his voice was sad but firm. "We must all pay our tolls in this war, Harry," he said. "I fear that your burden is heavier than I would want anyone to carry, but I must ask you to bear it for a bit longer. I have already

destroyed one powerful Dark artifact that belonged to Voldemort, and this was the price. The next time I go after such a thing, I will take proper precautions."

He leaned forwards again, holding Harry's eyes with his. "I promise," he said, his voice so soft that it sounded like the words of a vow, "you will not have to bear that burden for much longer. And I will do what I can to lighten it, by taking away all the *chains* which might increase it."

Harry didn't think a deaf person could have missed his emphasis on "chains," and he looked to the side because Dumbledore was looking there, too. On a shelf among a few of Dumbledore's silver instruments was a heavy golden locket on a chain. Harry thought he could see an S on the front, but maybe that was wishful thinking; it was most of the room away, and his eyes were starting to squint, he was so tired.

As if he could sense that, Dumbledore leaned back in his chair and said, "Go back to your common room, Harry. I will trust you to keep me apprised of any future developments." He looked straight into Harry's eyes, and now he wasn't smiling. "And not to take chances, and in general to conduct yourself like a rational adult. If we are going to be comrades in this war, I must insist on it."

Harry felt his spine straighten. That was the best thing about Dumbledore: when he was paying attention to you and speaking about his confidence in you, then you felt as if you really could do anything.

"Yes, sir," he said firmly, and marched away and out of the room when Dumbledore nodded to him, ignoring Snape. He wasn't going back to the common room, of course; he had a meeting of the D.A. to attend. But at least he knew that Dumbledore trusted him again and didn't blame him for what had happened in the Ministry last year.

The moment the door shut behind Potter, Albus slumped in his chair and closed his eyes. A light sheen of sweat had broken out on his brow, and Severus moved immediately to his side, checking the scar around his arm.

The most powerful diagnostic charms he knew did not reveal anything amiss, however, and at last he took a step back and stared at Albus in perplexity. "What is wrong?" he asked. "I thought I had removed the poison."

"You did." Albus opened his eyes and gave Severus a grim smile. "It's my most recent battle that's weakened me, not that one." He glanced at the golden locket he had shown Potter.

Severus studied it warily. He could feel a residual tinge of Dark magic, the kind that might come from being stored with cursed books. "I did not realize the Dark Lord was clever enough to conceal strong weapons under weakness," he murmured.

Albus shook his head. "It's harmless now." Weariness coated every word. "It didn't wound me this time. But I had to contain and then drain the Dark magic from it, and it was…fatiguing."

"Yes, it would be," Severus said, speaking sharply to disguise his worry. "Headmaster, what *are* these artifacts?"

"That is knowledge that I'm afraid I don't trust outside my own head as yet, Severus." Albus spoke in the same tone he'd used to inform Severus that the Marauders would not be expelled from Hogwarts for what they'd done. Severus clenched his teeth. Albus added after a moment. "I wish you to concentrate on building your bond with young Harry for the present. Did you notice anything different about him?"

"Yes," Severus growled. "Over the summer he seems to have concentrated all his stubbornness in his ungrateful brain."

Albus studied him thoughtfully, a small smile playing on his lips. Then he said, "Well. Perhaps you are right."

Severus shifted uneasily. He had the feeling that Albus was hiding something from him, something far worse than the nature of the artifacts that the Dark Lord had accumulated, but he had no idea what.

"Harry! There you are!"

Harry grinned and waved to Hermione as he entered the Room of Requirement. Ron stood next to her, and Harry forced himself to say casually, "Hi, you lot," before he looked around the room to see how many people had come.

More than last year, Harry felt his heart rise as he counted sixteen Hufflepuffs and twelve Ravenclaws—and what looked like the whole of the Gryffindor sixth, seventh, and fifth years. He took a deep breath, Dumbledore's words running in his head. *I'll have to be strong for them. I'll have to be a leader for them. I can't afford to waste time worrying about my own stupid personal problems, like Snape being my bloody father.*

"Where were you?" Ron demanded, drawing his wand. "We expected you an hour ago."

"Sodding Snape," Harry said, and saw Ron nod understandingly. He turned to face the rest of the crowd. "Right," he said. "I think the first thing you need to know is how to do a proper Shield Charm." Obscurely, he felt as though he needed to show Snape that lots of people could do Defense right if they were just *taught* right, and that Harry's talent in Defense wasn't anything extraordinary.

"I don't know if I can do that," said one of the Ravenclaw girls, her eyes wide and frightened. She nibbled her lip and looked towards the door. "I mean, isn't it very advanced magic?"

"Everyone fourth year and above should be able to do it," Harry said. "Watch me." He took up a crouching stance, as though someone was trying to hurl a hex at him—because most of the time,

someone *would* be—and moved his wand through the right motions. "*Protego!*"

Several people gasped as the silvery shield popped up in front of him, and Harry thought they were watching the magic instead of his hand. But the Ravenclaw girl relaxed into a smile. "I think I can do that," she said.

"Good." Harry nodded to Hermione and Ron, both of whom had showed him last night that they knew how to do perfectly good Shield Charms. "Ron, take everyone standing over to the right. Hermione, take the ones in the middle, and I'll work with the people on the left."

Hermione, beaming, moved to take up her position. Ron strutted over to the group Harry had assigned to him. Harry saw Lavender Brown, who was in the group, blush and smile at Ron. Harry rolled his eyes.

*Some people just don't have enough to think about,* he decided, before he started showing the incantation and wand movements again to people who were probably never going to learn it in the Git with a Superiority Complex's class.

Draco lay awake in bed, frowning at the ceiling. His memories of the moments when Potter had pushed him into the wall and yelled at him, then stood facing imaginary Dementors, were fragmented and confused by adrenaline and fear. And then Professor Snape had come around the corner and yelled at him, which was enough to put anyone off being able to pull minute details up in front of their mind's eye.

But Draco was sure he had seen *something* different about Potter in the short time he'd been looking him in the face.

What, though? He still had two eyes—*more's the pity*—and that stupid scar and that shaggy hair that looked as if he never took care of it. So it couldn't be anything obvious. But anything small probably wasn't worth the time and mental effort that he was devoting to it.

Draco shut his eyes and told himself to go to sleep, so that he could find some way to snatch time for going to the Room of Hidden Things in the morning.

But the image of Potter's face chased him into his dreams, and the single, unanswered question that seemed to grow more urgent the more he ignored it.

*What was different?*

##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### #####
##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### #####
##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### #####

Chapter: 6

Thank you again for all the reviews!

*Chapter Six—A Change in Strategy*

"But I don't understand." Zacharias Smith had his upper lip stuck out. Harry managed not to roll his eyes, but it took a lot of effort. Smith was always pouting like that, and Harry had no idea how Hermione managed to stay patient with him. At least Harry didn't have to teach him. "Why can't we use the Shield Charm to deflect the Severing Curse? It's just like the Blasting Curse, and—"

"No, it isn't," Hermione said. Harry watched Ginny's horse Patronus gallop around the room, and traded smiles with her. The smile was partially for Hermione, though no one else needed to know that. Probably the reason his friend could work so well with Smith was the fact that she just talked over him when he tried to argue. "They have completely different incantations, and just because you heard one person mutter something that sounded like one of them once doesn't mean they're identical."

Harry glanced over his shoulder. Smith cowered in front of Hermione and then started practicing the Shield Charm again. Harry moved on to check the way that Neville was drilling three of the younger Ravenclaws in the Patronus Charm.

Neville grinned at him. He'd grown this year—Harry tried not to feel resentful that Neville was taller than he was, now—and there was sweat on his forehead and muscles along his arms. His wand moved with efficient quickness. He was one of the few other students that Harry would have trusted in battle with him. "Some of them want to know why they're practicing the Patronus Charm," he advised Harry in a whisper. "They complain that they want to learn something new."

Harry hesitated. He hadn't told anyone about the strange Dementors he'd thought he'd seen in the dungeons because—well, the more he thought about it, the more he couldn't believe they had been Dementors. But at the same time, he didn't want Dumbledore's Army to get out of practice in the Patronus Charm.

"It's a good indication of how much magic someone can focus," he said, which was true, but not the main reason. It sounded good, though, and Neville nodded seriously. "If they can do a corporal Patronus, then it's a sign they're strong," Harry added.

Neville shook his head. "You know no one other than you can do that consistently, Harry."

Harry felt a rush of warmth through his chest. He would remember that the next time he had to fight, he told himself, and make sure to take Neville along. "Well, some of them might if they practice enough," he said, and moved on to the next small group, this one under Ron's leadership, learning the Disarming Charm.

As Harry stepped up next to Ron, one of the fifth-year Hufflepuffs went sprawling to the ground

with the force of the charm that had hit him. Ron laughed, and the boy scrambled back to his feet with his face all red.

Harry gave his best friend an evil look, which Ron didn't notice because he'd already turned to shout encouragement to someone else. Harry shook his head and went up to the boy. "What's your name?" he whispered.

The boy hunched in on himself the way that some of them did when Harry came close. Harry had tried to figure out why and wasn't able to come up with a good answer. Was he that scary? They were going to have problems if they ever had to face Voldemort, then.

"Um," the boy finally said, when he realized that Harry wasn't going to go away. "Edgar Buttons."

"All right, Buttons," Harry said, using the brisk tone that he appreciated when a professor like McGonagall used it with him—especially when Harry had made a mistake in Transfiguration and didn't want everyone in the class thinking about it anymore than they already were. "You're going to practice *Expelliarmus* with me." He fell back a step and drew his wand. Buttons stared at him open-mouthed. He had wide blue eyes that watered when he blinked them.

"I don't—but you're really good," Buttons said, as though Harry's offer had been made to humiliate him. He kept hunching his shoulders and shooting Harry distrustful glances that suggested he believed exactly that. "It won't be much of a challenge for you."

"Believe me, I've got plenty of challenges," Harry said wryly, thinking about the way that Snape had behaved in Defense for the last fortnight. He kept turning towards Harry as if he would ask him to demonstrate something, and Harry would tense in response, but in the end Snape would always turn away and choose someone else. That person would usually get something wrong. Harry was holding his tongue with an effort, but he wondered how much longer he could stand to watch idiots act out their idiocy in front of the class. "I want to teach people, too. Just relax, yeah?"

Buttons gave a stiff nod. "My mum says you're not supposed to say 'yeah,'" he volunteered.

"Well, yes, then," Harry said, and tried not to picture Buttons's mother as looking something like Aunt Petunia. "Lift your wand—like that—and hold it as loosely as you can without dropping it, all right? I think part of your problem was that you were freezing up and your wand wouldn't move every way you wanted it to."

Buttons stared at him a moment, then arranged himself with a few shuffles and flappings of his robes. His face was brilliant red. Harry realized that most of the people in the Room of Requirement were watching them with interest.

He shrugged. Not much he could do about that. People would watch him with interest every day of his life, he was starting to think. The best he could do was make sure it was for the right

reasons.

"Now, on a count of three," Harry said. "One, two, three, *Expelliarmus!*"

The familiar burst of magic up his arm was answered by a pitiful flip from Buttons, which resulted in his wand flying across the room before Harry's spell caught it and pulled it back to his hand. Buttons was red for another reason now, and he came stomping across the room to get his wand when Harry held it out to him.

"I'm not any good, and I'm not ever going to be any good," he muttered.

"Well, no, you're not, not if you keep saying things like that," Harry answered frankly. Buttons stared at him. Harry grinned back. "Do you always give up after one try?"

Slowly, Buttons grinned in answer.

"Why'd you spend so much time helping that twit anyway, Harry?"

Harry rolled his eyes as he and Ron stepped out of the Room of Requirement. "Buttons isn't a twit, Ron. Did you notice that Lavender was having the same problems with the Disarming Charm? But you were a lot more patient with her than you were with Buttons." He glanced sideways at Ron, who had turned red enough to drown his freckles. "Why's that?"

"Shut up," Ron muttered.

"Does it have anything to do with the way Hermione ran out of the room like her arse was on fire?" Harry asked innocently.

"Shut *up*, I said." Ron was walking away from him now with a determined stride, and Harry laughed and hurried to catch up with him.

He was never sure what made him turn around and look back down the corridor. Maybe old habits left over from last year, when they had to be careful that Umbridge didn't catch them training with the D.A.

But anyway, that was why he saw Draco Malfoy dart out of a shadowed corner and hurry towards a door that had just appeared. Harry knew the door was the one to the Room of Requirement—it was in the right place—but it was much smaller than the one that led to their training room, made of dark wood with crisscrossed patterns on it. Harry watched with an open mouth as Malfoy pulled the door shut behind him and the wall sealed itself over it.

"Ron!" Harry whispered when he could get his breath back. Except, because he had to whisper it, Ron didn't hear him, and Harry had to run up the corridor and pull him back so that he could show him the spot where the door had disappeared, and by then, it didn't seem as exciting or important as it had when he actually watched the door disappear.

"Malfoy?" Ron put a hand over his mouth to conceal the yawn. Harry grimaced. He would have held the meetings of Dumbledore's Army earlier, but Hermione insisted that they had to finish all their homework first before they could go to them, and so it was almost midnight. "But what would he be doing up here? He's never tried to join us or interrupt us, and now he has no one to report us to, since Dumbledore knows about it."

"I don't know," Harry said doubtfully. The initial excitement had gone away. He gnawed his lip. Malfoy could easily get them in trouble with Snape if he wanted to, but he hadn't. And yet he obviously knew they were in there, because he had waited until everyone was gone before he ran in. That argued he'd been standing in the shadows and watching.

*Is he spying on us for Voldemort?* But that still didn't make sense, because the only thing Malfoy could have told Voldemort for sure was who was in the D.A. The Room would prevent him from seeing inside.

"It's weird, mate," Ron agreed with a shake of his head. "But he probably just goes in there to wank or something. Come on. The prefects are prowling around looking for us." He tugged Harry's shoulder.

Harry went along, though he kept looking over his shoulder at the door of the Room. And his dreams that night were of chasing Malfoy through a confused, twisting corridor between piles of what looked like books and wooden doors.

*At least the idiots are gone.* Draco touched his wand to the Vanishing Cabinet and spoke the spell that he'd got from the book Snape lent him, concentrating on the pulses of Dark energy he could feel working their way up his arm and into his wand core.

"*Adigo integritatem!*" It was an involuntary healing spell, used in the past to force the victims of torture to become whole and healthy so that they could be tortured again. If Draco had made the right calculations based on what the book said, then it *should* repair the damage to the cabinet and make it a perfect copy of the one he had seen in Borgin and Burke's.

The spell flowed over the cabinet in a dazzle of black and blue lightning. Draco stepped back, catching his breath. It was more beautiful than he had expected—and it had taken more out of him, too, so that he was panting as he stood there. He hoped that he wouldn't have to cast it more than once.

Then the lightning coiled into a tight ball above the Vanishing Cabinet. Draco frowned. The book hadn't described the spell acting like this.

The ball of lightning shot towards him, humming so hard that Draco could feel the hair stand up on the back of his neck.

Draco yelped and ducked. The ball soared over his head, luckily, and he heard it ignite

something in the background. A *puff*, and leather and paper, from the smell, began to burn. Draco hastily hopped back to his feet and put the source of the fire, one of the numerous books gathered in the Room of Hidden Things, out.

Then he turned back to the Vanishing Cabinet, shaking his head. He was exhausted. The effort of keeping up his marks in Potions and Defense—one a class that shouldn't have been challenging but was because Professor Slughorn didn't like him, the other challenging because Professor Snape was teaching it—was beginning to tell on him.

Along with trying to save his parents when no one else in the entire world cared about them.

Draco closed his eyes and took a composed, careful breath. He had to stop thinking like that. He had to stop remembering the owl his mother had sent him, reassuring him that everything was going fine at the Manor and that they could even hope to have his father out of prison sooner rather than later.

He had to stop thinking about the way the letters were shaky and ill-formed, how they straggled across the page.

His mother had always written neatly. In fact, she had insisted on teaching Draco how to handle a quill herself, because she had said that no one at Hogwarts or anywhere else would teach him how to do it properly.

Draco shivered and opened his eyes. Then he set his feet and faced the Vanishing Cabinet again.

He *would* fix this. He *would* do something that would make his parents proud of him and even make the Dark Lord proud of him.

No one else was ever going to help him, but what did that matter? Malfoys weren't supposed to need help from anyone anyway.

The more he watched Malfoy, the more Harry became certain he was doing something important and wrong.

It was hard to think how he hadn't noticed it before. He reckoned he'd just got out of the habit of looking at Malfoy, because Malfoy hadn't taunted him much this year except when he came out into the dungeons that night—but even that was strange, because Malfoy hadn't shown that kind of restraint the other years.

*Keep alert,* Harry scolded himself as he watched Malfoy's head droop over his Defense book. They were waiting for Snape to come in. Most of the class had already learned how important it was to get there early. Snape had a nasty habit of taking points off if you weren't there when *he* came through the door, no matter what the clock said. When students complained, he gave a nasty smile and asked them how they were going to deal with Dark wizards, if they couldn't deal with school hours.

Harry gritted his teeth. Thinking about Snape just made him impatient and angry—and worried about what Snape might have seen that night two weeks ago. Harry didn't think he had to be that concerned, because the glamour faded slowly most of the time, until the last few minutes of its duration when it vanished all at once. Malfoy might have seen something before Harry could restore his normal face, but not Snape.

*Think about Malfoy instead.*

Yeah, Malfoy was almost asleep—not at all normal or natural. He managed to be alert in class even when he hated the subject, like Care of Magical Creatures. And Harry thought he was paler than usual, and his cheekbones were more pointy.

*Good thing I have the spell on. I would look even more like him without it.*

Malfoy also had dark circles under his eyes, and his hands trembled where they were folded over each other. Harry cocked his head. Was he afraid? Or hungry? Sometimes his hands trembled that way at the Dursleys'.

Harry decided that he would have to keep an eye on Malfoy. He was the kind of person that some of the notes in that wonderful book he'd found to help him with Potions told him to watch out for: an enemy who looked harmless. Harry had already done something stupid by forgetting about him so far. He wouldn't make that mistake again.

Snape swept through the door then. The talking immediately stopped. But Malfoy didn't wake up, and in fact, Parkinson, who Harry thought must have cheated on the Defense exam, had to nudge him in the ribs. Malfoy lifted his head, gasping.

*Not normal at all.*

Harry frowned one more time and turned back to face the front, prepared for another day of tension when Snape looked at him—tension that would never turn into anything, because Snape seemed to have decided that the better part of valor was not calling on Harry.

He called on Parkinson instead, and she stood in front of the class and fumbled the *simplest* shield charm other than *Protego*, the Daylight Shield that would protect you by blinding your opponent. Snape made sneering comments, something he didn't usually do to his Slytherins. Parkinson got all flustered and tried to cast it again, but she must have messed something up in the Latin, because she ended up blinding *herself* and staggering in circles with a hand over her eyes.

Snape sneered. He said nothing, but he stood there, coldly studying Parkinson, and Harry knew that he would just let her go on stumbling until the spell wore off, which could be twenty minutes. No one else would dare do or say anything because they were afraid of Snape.

Harry ground his teeth. He shouldn't, he probably shouldn't, but he was sick and tired of wasting time and watching Snape allow people to suffer from their mistakes instead of teaching them how to correct those mistakes. And other people didn't learn anything, either, because they didn't know the proper incantation or what the wrong people had done wrong.

"Why don't you pick on someone who has the skill to challenge you, sir?" he asked, and didn't care how disrespectful he sounded as he stood up and drew his wand. What could Snape do to him? Put him in detention or take points? That was nothing compared to Voldemort, and maybe not even compared to whatever secret Malfoy was hiding.

Snape turned to face him at once, coming to rest in a deadly stillness that made his robes flutter away from him and then land like bats' wings around him. Harry sneered at him. He'd seen more complicated and scary things from the Death Eaters in the Department of Mysteries.

"And you believe that you do, Mr. Potter?" Snape's voice was cold and heavy. Harry knew, from the sound of it, that he hated the fact that Harry had stood up and challenged him. He was trying to intimidate him into sitting back down.

"Yes, I do," Harry said coolly. "I think you haven't called on me because you were afraid of looking like an idiot."

Someone in the audience let out a shocked titter. Snape didn't even look around for the source of it, which surprised Harry. He just drew his wand instead, his eyes never leaving Harry's face, and cast the *Finite* to make the spell blinding Parkinson vanish. She scurried back to her seat and stared at them both.

"Very well," Snape whispered, his words sharper than ever. Harry smiled. It didn't matter that Snape had wanted him to do this two weeks ago; he must have given up the notion of getting Harry to cooperate, because he would never have waited so long otherwise. And the personal insults couldn't make this pleasant for him. "Show me what you can—*do*, Potter."

Harry walked out into the middle of the floor and faced Snape. "The Daylight Shield goes like this," he said, using his wand to draw a quick cross in the air in front of him. "And the incantation is *Me adviglio luce*!"

He barely had time to shout out the last words before Snape was sending a swarm of brilliant red ants at him. Harry took a neat step back and watched the yellow Daylight Shield flare into being between them, its light making Snape throw a hand in front of his eyes. Harry knew he wasn't incapacitated, but it would take a little while for him to look again. Harry used the time to send the Cold Arrow spells at the ants that would freeze and kill them.

Snape dropped his hand sooner than Harry would have expected and began to circle as he spat out a complex series of spells. Harry consciously recognized only half of them—the Bone-Breaking Curse, the Blasting Curse, the Wand Transfiguration Charm, the Coward's Heart Jinx, the Summoning of Elder Wounds, the Curse of Tithonus—but it didn't matter. His own

hands were flying in response, lifting shields, casting the countercharm, or creating a dazzling nuisance that Snape had to stop and deal with before he could continue to cast his own spells.

Faster, and faster, and faster, and the air between them was a blur of power and light.

Harry's breath was coming in rapid, shallow pants. He didn't care. Sweat was running into his eyes from his forehead, and some blood, because the edge of the Summoning of Elder Wounds had nipped through his defenses and torn open a shallow cut near his scar that he had received years ago. He didn't care. Snape was chanting spells now that Harry barely remembered studying, spells tucked in the very back of the Defense book he'd spent all summer reading.

He didn't care.

This was what he was *born* to do. It was like flying, like Quidditch, except that he'd never had to study to ride a broom; it had been natural from the first time he did it. This was the result of study, and the result of the promise he'd made that this year would be different in honor of Sirius, and he was *doing it.*

How could he ever have wanted to hide this?

Finally, Snape lowered his wand and passed it in front of his body in the motion that traditionally signaled the end of a formal duel which had reached a draw. Harry regarded him suspiciously, keeping his own wand up. He wouldn't put it past Snape to use the traditions for his own ends.

Snape gave him the smallest of smiles, and inclined his head at him. Harry stared at him in wonder. Just for that one moment—that moment Harry would have dismissed as a delusion like the white Dementors, except that he had learned to see spells that lasted for a shorter time—his smile wasn't a smirk, wasn't condescending. It showed genuine approval, respect and admiration for a talented opponent.

Then Snape turned around, stared at the rest of the class with a withering expression, and said, "Why have none of you done a *tenth* as well?"

Harry went back to his seat with his head bursting. He had new ideas for the next meeting of Dumbledore's Army—and new ideas for his own self-training—and new ideas for ways that he could keep track of Malfoy without Malfoy knowing that Harry was keeping track of him.

And a new thought, that Snape wasn't all *that* terrible and maybe he could help if Harry really *thought* about it. And took precautions to make sure that Snape didn't influence him too much and that he always had his glamour up around the man.

Harry tried to send the thought away. But it was like a bee that had got trapped in his room that summer, only this bee was trapped between the bones of his skull, and it buzzed, and it wouldn't go.

Severus had an urge he hadn't felt in years, to show his victorious smile to all concerned. It was a miracle that he managed to maintain a stern eye and disapproving face as he watched Potter walk back to his seat.

He had decided on his strategy two weeks ago. Ignore Potter, let the boy believe that he would be able to hide his talents for all Severus cared, and meanwhile pick on the rest of the class while Potter watched and grew more and more agitated with their lack of competence.

Eventually, Potter would *have* to interfere. He could deny his power all he liked—he probably thought he had to, with a Gryffindor's martyr complex—but it was Severus's experience that no one who was truly gifted could stand to see morons tackle his area of expertise for long. Potter would leap into the ring because he could not help himself, any more than he would have been able to watch someone abuse a fine broom without speaking up.

Besides, the experience of spying on Potter as he trained Dumbledore's Army had convinced Severus, if reluctantly, that the boy had the soul of a teacher. Teachers could not simply stand about with a smile while their students fumbled through problems they knew the answer to.

And now it had happened, and Severus had sent the second part of his plan into motion when he dueled the boy the way he would have dueled another Death Eater. Force Potter to exercise his talent; show him how good it felt.

And the third part, the part he had picked up from watching the boy meet with Albus: show him a bit of approval in the very moment when he would be flying high and be the most vulnerable to someone sharing his triumph.

The boy's eyes had sparked, and his grin had turned effulgent with exhilaration.

Severus had no doubt that Potter would cooperate with him in their training sessions now. Slowly, of course. Reluctantly, at first.

But it was a beginning.

##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### #####
##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### #####
##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### #####

Chapter: 7

Thank you again for all the reviews!

*Chapter Seven—Spying Missions Successful and Unsuccessful*

"*Expelliarmus!*"

Harry spun around in surprise. He'd been talking to Ginny and hadn't watched what was happening next to him. And sure, maybe he'd been holding onto his wand a little more loosely than usual, but if he couldn't relax in the middle of Dumbledore's Army with all his friends around him, where *could* he do it?

His wand flew away from him and into the middle of Edgar Buttons's hand. Buttons looked as shocked as anyone else that it had worked, but after a minute, he started grinning. He marched up to hand the wand back to Harry, his grin growing larger.

"I tried," he said happily. "I didn't think it would work, but I tried, just to see what would happen, and it worked!"

Harry could feel the eyes of the watchers fixed on him, wondering what would happen next. Ron was leaning forwards with a frown, as if he thought Harry should punish Buttons for doing something like that. Hermione had her hand to her mouth, covering up her smile. Ginny blinked a few times and then grinned back at Buttons.

They would take their cue from him, Harry knew. He cleared his throat and nodded to Buttons. "Good for you," he said. "And thanks for the reminder that I should really strap my wand to my wrist!" He took it back.

A few people laughed. Buttons bowed to him, the full formal duelist's bow that Harry had been trying to teach them for a while. Hermione was one of the people laughing, but Harry bowed back to Buttons and did his best to smile.

Severus drew in a soft, vast, irritated breath. How was Potter to become a competent duelist if he let a younger student steal his wand without a fight?

Severus stood under a Disillusionment Charm in the corner of the room nearest the door. It had been easy to slip in behind the younger students, who, Potter's teaching of constant vigilance or not, did not pay nearly enough attention to what was going on around them. Severus found it harder to forgive the older students, such as Potter himself, their lapse of concern.

He had watched many of the students spar, sneering to see that they made more of an effort here than they did in Defense, but also making note of their strengths. His new class stood in danger of becoming far more boring to teach than Potions. Potions required a certain level of awareness even when it was going well, because many recipes could change quickly and disastrously with the addition of a single wrong ingredient (and expecting his students to add only the *right* ingredients was like expecting Albus to stop offering people lemon drops). If Severus knew more about the way these students evidently liked to learn and what they were good at, then he could try to provoke the same responses from them in class.

But his eyes returned again and again to Potter, who was, after all, Severus's main reason for attending these training sessions in the first place. He watched the way he interacted with others,

the spells he chose to teach, the encouragement he offered, and the spells he cast. The more he watched, the more his disgust deepened. Potter could be doing better than he was on *every* level—not simply in the speed with which he hurled his magic, but in the force and finesse that he put behind it. It was evident that Potter's holding back had caused Severus to mistake his strength, as well.

But he could not help watching with wonder, too.

This little "army" had been good for more than simply teaching Potter how to teach. They had taught Potter speed and skill and fighting in company. Severus had recognized the tactics Potter used in the last duel against him in class, once he had time to watch a Pensieve memory of the fight and isolate the individual movements from one another. Potter fought as though several people were confronting him at once, a situation Severus had watched him training with in Dumbledore's Army several times now.

*That* was the source of his brilliance. Potter was training to take on multiple opponents without even thinking about it. Naturally, he appeared overwhelming and a genius against a single one.

Some of it was likely natural talent, as well; in the same way that the boy had inherited the ability to maneuver skillfully on a broom from his bloody father despite no prior training, he appeared to have inherited the ability to dodge and roll out of the way, and thus buy himself the time for his slower mind to put spells together and decide on the next defense. It was a talent of the body, not intelligence. But Severus thought most of it was due to that unconscious training.

And that meant that he needed to encourage Potter to make it *more* conscious. Doubtless Potter would slow down a bit at first; he would have to think more, and that would interfere with the blinding speed with which he could layer spells and evasive movements together. But Severus had watched Potions students progress through unconscious, unschooled raw talent to conscious and somewhat floundering skill to conscious and polished mastery, and he was confident that Potter could take the same route.

*Now. I am confident now.*

Observing the boy without Potter's knowing he was there had changed Severus's perception in astounding ways. When the brat was not insulting him, he had no temptation to think of insults that he could hurl in return. When Potter was not determined to show Severus up, Severus could think more rationally about what he *had* done and planned to do.

He did not like the thought, because it suggested some uncomfortable truths about the limitations of his own perceptions down the years, but he would rather face an uncomfortable truth than deny it.

*At least, once it has come to my attention.*

His gaze went back to Potter, and he frowned. Potter had moved away from Buttons the

wand-stealer and was standing still in the center of the room, his eyes fastened on the far wall. His breathing had become very fast, though Severus thought he was the only one who had noticed in the center of that room full of shouts and the loud *crack* of misfired spells. His wand rose once, then fell down to his side and hung there, wavering.

Severus followed the motion. There was nothing there. He whispered a small spell that would allow him to detect the Dark Arts, in case someone outside the room was attempting to use them and Potter had felt it. Nothing.

Potter shut his eyes and shivered. Then he pressed one hand to his scar and turned abruptly away from the wall as someone from a second group called his name.

Severus narrowed his eyes, knowing he must contrive a new meeting with Potter sometime in the next few days if the boy did not come to him.

Harry looked at the faces of the people opposite him, and tried not to think of the white Dementors he had *clearly* seen gliding across the room.

*Behind me now.*

His shoulders seized up as he thought of them sweeping through the room, seizing and eating people's souls, and how few students here would be able to stop them because not many people could actually produce a Patronus Charm—

Then Harry released a shaky breath and stepped back a few paces so he could hold a Shield Charm against the Blasting Curse that Sita Landers, a fifth-year Ravenclaw, was going to try and cast.

*I'm here. I held off a hundred Dementors with my Patronus once. I can do it again if they're really here and if they start hurting people.*

This time, though, the white Dementors had seemed more ghostly; Harry had seen them dip in and out of the walls. He had done his best to remember Dumbledore's suspicion that he was seeing something through his connection with Voldemort, and even though his scar hadn't burned when he touched it, he didn't see what else it could be, since no one else was reacting the way they would have to a ghost.

Turning his back on them was the hardest thing he'd ever done, but he managed to do it, and then he could even act and talk to people like he was normal. He wondered if he would have been able to do that if more people saw the white Dementors or if someone had asked him about them, but since they didn't—

"*Reducto!*"

Harry barely snapped himself out of his trance in time to lift the Shield Charm. More than one

person gasped or cheered as the Blasting Curse snapped back across the room, and some of them ducked. Harry smiled and glanced over his shoulder once. The white Dementors were gone.

And his scar *still* hadn't burned.

Harry swallowed. Maybe it was time to think about those Occlumency lessons that Dumbledore had recommended.

Draco shut his burning eyes and rubbed hard at them. No matter how long he spent on the various Dark Arts books that he had wrangled from other Slytherins, or the one he had got from Professor Snape, or the ones he had located in the library that talked about Dark Arts in a theoretical way, no solution offered itself.

The problem was the bloody Vanishing Cabinet. It just ate magic that Draco sent at it the way it seemed to eat people. It had rents and cracks and holes that ought to have been simple enough to repair, but instead the rents and cracks gobbled down his spells and then sat there silently laughing at him.

*Cabinets can't laugh, Draco.* His mother would have said that in her cool, soothing voice if she was here, Draco thought, rubbing harder at his eyes. *It is time to go to bed when you begin thinking that they do.*

"Mr. Malfoy."

Draco yelped and flopped back in his chair, then scrambled to cover up the title of the book he was reading. No, it wasn't a *very* evil book, and he hadn't got it from the Restricted Section, but if someone saw it and then started putting the pieces together…if someone had followed him when he went to the Room of Hidden Things…

The cold silence next to the table told him who it must be before he looked up. But he did look up, and tried to meet Professor Snape's gaze with some semblance of composure. If someone had to catch him, he would rather it be Snape, because the professor had given him that Dark Arts book in the first place and that gave Draco a tiny bit of power over him. "Sir," he said, gracefully inclining his head.

"What are you doing?" Professor Snape's eyes flicked from the book to his face, as if he could see the contents printed on Draco's cheeks. Draco had to stop himself from reaching up to make sure that that hadn't happened. He'd come close to falling asleep on the book a few times, though not tonight.

"Studying, sir." It didn't take much effort for Draco to add a sneer to his voice. "No matter how I study, Professor Slughorn still plays favorites and gives Potter higher marks than *I* get, even though I'm the better natural talent!" It was the kind of thing that Professor Snape would expect to hear him complaining about, so it was the strongest lie.

The professor sat down in the chair across from him. Draco kept himself from gaping, but it was hard. He looked down at his book and tried to pretend that he didn't feel that burning stare from less than two feet away.

"Draco." The professor's voice was heavy, soft, and slow, and he traced the grain of the wood in the table with one finger, as though he was finding a new Potions recipe by following it. "I want you to consider, *carefully*, where you should spend your effort. Some things are worth the striving, and other things are not." He leaned back in his chair and gave Draco the kind of cool, open stare that Draco remembered from long nights of brewing potions for extra practice in his private office.

Draco tugged at his collar. He felt as though his robes were stuck to him, and realized a moment later that he was sweating like a Muggle. He hoped Professor Snape hadn't noticed it, and then got rid of that hope. Of *course* Professor Snape had noticed it. He noticed everything like that, and there wasn't much that Draco could do about it.

"A-are you saying that I shouldn't spend as much time trying to pull up my Potions marks, sir?" His voice came out smaller and shakier than he would have liked. Draco looked down at the table and told himself that was only because it was so unexpected for Professor Snape not to care about Potions, but he knew better.

"Did I say anything about marks? No. Only about effort." Professor Snape's voice had become even heavier. "I depended on you for years to see where your *true* interest lies, Draco, and thus what efforts you should engage in to promote yourself. You cannot do everything. What would you choose, did you have to? What would bring you the most satisfaction, the most fulfillment of your ambitions, the most praise and adulation in after life?"

Draco stared up at him. He wanted to spill out the whole story, given the way that Professor Snape looked back at him. He wanted to cry, given the burning of his eyes—though he hastily told himself that that wasn't *really* true, it was just the way things felt, with everything so overwhelming right now.

He couldn't remember the last time someone had told him to consider what he wanted, instead of implying that he had to do everything because of loyalty to the Dark Lord or loyalty to his parents.

*Where does my own interest lie?*

But then he remembered why he couldn't exactly listen to Professor Snape's advice on this. He *had* to repair the Vanishing Cabinet and serve the Dark Lord to save the lives of his parents. Professor Snape wouldn't really understand that because he didn't have a family. He couldn't understand how important that was to someone who was raised to think of himself as a Malfoy first and his own good only second, if at all.

Professor Snape raised an eyebrow and walked away before he could reply. Draco swallowed

again and pressed the palms of his hands against his eyes. That was an acceptable gesture. Someone who saw him would just think that he was tired from studying.

*It's hard, I don't want to do it, but I have to go ahead. Because it's my family, and no one else is ever going to help me. Or us.*

Harry took several deep breaths. He could do this. He had to do this. He didn't need to feel as though someone was going to eat his skull off if he did it.

But for all that, he stood there, frozen, for ticking second after ticking second, until he finally forced himself to reach up and knock firmly on the door to Professor Snape's office.

It opened at once. Snape stood behind it, staring down at him with dark eyes that made Harry want to look away. But he took another deep breath and met them and said as politely as he could, "I was thinking that maybe I could train with you. If you still want to train with me. And Occlumency lessons, like Dumbledore asked." He paused, thinking that something was missing, and saw the way that Snape's mouth was a little tight, like Uncle Vernon's before he would start yelling, and realized what was missing. He added quickly, "Sir."

Snape stood there staring at him for so long that Harry was sure he was going to say no. He nodded and started to turn away, telling himself that he would just have to find a way to deal with the white Dementors on his own. Maybe they weren't even real, and if he could remember that and just ignore them when they tried to appear, then maybe he could—

"I did not dismiss you, Mr. Potter."

Harry stopped with a hiss. He *hated* when Snape did that. Here Harry was trying to do something good, something that Snape seemed to want him to do sometimes, and he was making a big *stupid* thing out of it. He turned his head around and scowled at Snape, not caring if it would get points taken off.

Snape continued watching him, and then asked, "Are you doing this because you wish to please the Headmaster, or are you doing this with the intention of becoming skilled in Occlumency and the other skills I can teach you?"

Harry blinked and turned to face him again. Snape had sounded almost—nice when he said that. Or, well, not as much like a bastard as he generally did, anyway.

"I'm doing it because he suggested it," Harry said. "And because I think that Voldemort—" Snape winced, but Harry just went on talking before he could say something about calling him the Dark Lord instead "—is sending me visions through my scar. I saw the white Dementors again today. I don't know *why* he wants me to see them, but that's the only thing I can figure out. And I want them to stop, and I want to get better at all those skills so that I can keep people safe."

Snape lowered his eyelids across half his eyes. Harry scowled at him. He didn't know what that

meant, but he hated it when Snape did it. And he seemed to do it all the time, so it probably meant something important. But Harry had never been that good at reading people's faces.

Finally Snape said, quietly, as if he was talking to someone else and Harry just happened to be listening in, "Have you considered bettering your skills so that you can become a better fighter, not simply a better fighter against the Dark Lord?"

"Well—yeah," Harry said, uncertain where Snape was going with this. "Of course, sir. I want to be an Auror eventually." *But I won't if you don't let me pass Defense,* he thought, but swallowed the words. He didn't want to start an argument about that with Snape right now. He *did* wonder what Snape would say if he knew that Harry was doing better in Potions because of the Half-Blood Prince's book, and not because he had some kind of natural talent for it. "Is that what you're talking about?"

"Not quite," breathed Snape. "What would you do if you became an Auror, Mister Potter?"

Harry narrowed his eyes. *What is this? He has to want to know this because he's going to use it against me somehow, but he's asking questions that are so weird that I don't understand how he's going to use them.*

Snape was starting to look impatient, so Harry rushed into his answer. "Protect people, and chase Dark wizards," he said. He was trying to think of other things Aurors did, because talking too much about the ones he knew personally would reveal information about the Order of the Phoenix, and there were probably Slytherins hiding in the dungeons and trying to listen for that. *See, Sirius? I am trying to do better so that other people don't die. I promise.* "And work for the Ministry," he added. "And train." Snape's face steadily darkened, and Harry said in some desperation, "What do you *want*, sir?"

"I want you to consider how your skills could matter to you," Snape said, his voice guttural, but not, Harry thought, with anger. "How they could serve to advance your goals and make you a better wizard."

Harry wanted to sneer. *All Slytherins think about is ambition, all the time.* But it probably wouldn't be smart to say that to someone he was hoping would teach him. He nodded slowly instead and pretended to have a lot of deep thoughts about it, the way he'd sometimes pretended to listen to the Dursleys when they lectured him about manners. "Yeah, sir. I haven't thought about that, but that could happen."

Snape gave him a thin smile. "Then I agree to teach you, Mister Potter, as long as you conduct yourself as a model of respectability, responsibility, and studious zeal by arriving on time, attending to my instructions, and completing the extra homework that I give you. Our sessions will be twice weekly at first, once on Tuesday evenings for Occlumency and once on Thursday evenings for Defense."

Harry wanted to groan. *Extra homework?* But Snape was just waiting for something like that, so

he nodded and said, "I understand, sir. Thank you," and then turned and hurried away up the corridor.

He had the feeling that Snape was standing there and watching him go, but he didn't want to glance over his shoulder and see. He had more important things to do, like starting his first spying mission on Malfoy.

Draco thought of something that would cheer him up before he began work on the Vanishing Cabinet that evening. Dumbledore had tried to cast a spell on his food at dinner that evening, and the spell had failed. That meant the rumors his Aunt Bellatrix had hinted at were true: the old barmy fool was losing his magic, and so their Lord's triumph couldn't be far away.

With a smile on his face, Draco lifted his wand and tried the first of the spells he had learned from his latest theoretical book in the library. It was a spell that was supposed to make an inanimate object "remember" what it was like when it was whole, and so bring it back to that state.

"*Tene memoriam!*"

Tiny white starbursts took their places on the outside of the Cabinet. Draco held his breath. That was what the book had said was supposed to happen! The spell was going to work!

Then the starbursts faded, and Draco was left staring at a Vanishing Cabinet that looked exactly the same as before. He wanted to howl in frustration, but he settled for kicking a stupid diadem that lay near his feet instead. It sailed into the rubbish, and Draco turned back to the Cabinet and prepared to try the second spell he'd picked up, though with less hope.

Then he cocked his head and narrowed his eyes. There was a rustling sound behind him—a sound that made him think…

Without giving himself time to *really* think about it, he whirled around and leaped on the rustling noise. It meant that he sprawled painfully across several stacks of books and broken furniture, but it was worth it, because his hands closed on something silky that suddenly became visible and a startled, squeaking person who tried to jab a wand into his throat.

Draco batted the hand and the wand away, because his was already drawn, and jammed his wand into the other person's throat instead. The person tried to hide his face underneath the cloth that Draco could clearly see was an Invisibility Cloak, but Draco twitched it aside and found himself staring into…

Potter's eyes.

Draco reacted without thinking again. He dug his wand in further and whispered in a tone he hoped was dangerous, "You have two seconds to tell me what you're doing here, Potter, and if I don't like it, you're going to end up as Dark toast."

Potter's eyes widened, and Draco felt a surge of vicious triumph. He was in control for the first time since he'd stepped on Potter's nose in the Hogwarts Express.

"I'm waiting," he whispered, and shoved the wand in until he thought he could almost feel Potter's windpipe crumple beneath it.

*He won't get away with this. I won't let him.*

Dizzy with joy, Draco wondered what the Dark Lord would give him if *he* was the one to destroy the Boy-Who-Lived. His parents might be safe after all.

##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### #####
##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### #####
##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### #####

Chapter: 8

Thank you again for all the reviews!

*Chapter Eight—Tentative Motions*

Harry stared into Malfoy's eyes and cursed himself for an idiotic wanker. He'd *known* that Malfoy didn't want anyone to see what he was doing in the Room of Requirement. And when he'd seen Malfoy cast a spell that he didn't know and then watch it with a pale face and trembling hands, Harry had known that this was even more serious than he thought. No matter how silly Malfoy seemed for casting spells on a cabinet, it had to be important in reality, or he wouldn't spend his time on it.

He'd known all that, and he'd *still* got too close and then got himself sensed and knocked down with a wand held to his throat.

Harry took a deep breath and met Malfoy's crazed eyes. He thought he could get to his wand with a quick twist and a dig of his elbow into Malfoy's ribs, but he wasn't *sure.* And in the meantime, Malfoy might lose his temper or his composure enough to hex him. He looked so wild that he might not care about the consequences.

His best chance was to calm Malfoy down enough to make him move off Harry, and then Stun him.

"Listen, Malfoy," he said. "It's not what you think."

Malfoy dug in the wand hard enough to make Harry choke and cough. "Isn't it?" Malfoy whispered. "It's not you spying on me and trying to get me in trouble, then? Because that's sure

as shite what it looks like to me." His wand dug again, and Harry's eyes crossed as he tried to keep breathing.

*I have to get free.* Harry thought that, his mind spinning dizzily, his panic rising higher and higher. His world seemed to fill with Malfoy's staring grey eyes, and he remembered the way Lucius Malfoy had looked in the Department of Mysteries. It was the same.

*I can't die here. I can't let him Memory Charm me. I said that I would do better, and I have to. For Sirius's sake, and Ron's, and Hermione's, and Neville's, and Luna's, and Ginny's.*

And then he realized that, as Malfoy leaned forwards to drive the wand deeper and deeper into Harry's throat, he'd taken his weight off his lower body to put it on his elbows, and that meant Harry's legs were mostly free of him.

Harry bucked up, a vicious jerk that sent Malfoy's wand arm snapping sideways. Malfoy gasped and tried to roll back into position, but Harry had already rolled over, bounded to his feet, and drawn his wand. By the time Malfoy was halfway up and starting to stand, Harry had *his* wand jammed into the back of the prat's skull, just under the hairline.

Malfoy was smarter than Harry would have thought. He froze and even seemed to make his breathing softer and shallower, as if he thought having it sound too loud would force Harry to strike. And maybe he was right, Harry thought, privately reveling in the feeling. Maybe he would have.

"Why don't *you* tell *me* what you're doing here?" Harry asked.

Draco bowed his head. The wand tip digging into his skin felt the way he imagined the Dark Lord's hand would feel as he slowly laid it over Draco's heart and prepared to tear it out of his chest with wandless magic after he had failed him.

His head swam. His knees trembled, even though he had one on the floor. His breath came short and fast. He would have liked to cry, except that Potter was there with him and so that was out of the question.

He had tried so *hard*. And all it got him was being at Potter's mercy. Potter would take him to the Headmaster and tell him about the cabinet, and the Headmaster would figure it out, or maybe just dose Draco with Veritaserum. Sure, that was supposed to be illegal, but Draco reckoned that Gryffindors had no problem breaking rules, so why not the laws?

It was so *unfair.*

And because it made no difference, because no matter what he did the situation was going to turn out the same, he put his arm over his face and just knelt there in silence, letting his shivers shake his body. Sooner or later Potter would figure out that he wasn't answering, and then he would probably nudge Draco with his wand some more and make more threats.

Threats that *still* wouldn't matter, because what Potter would do to him was nothing compared to what the Dark Lord was going to do to his parents when he found out Draco had been captured.

"Malfoy?" At least Potter's voice was wavering now, Draco noted with bitter pleasure. He seemed to have realized that not everything was going to go perfectly and people might have agendas that didn't include him. He stepped around Draco and prodded again at him from the side of his neck. "What are you doing? Hurry up and tell me why you're here."

Draco opened his eyes and snorted. Potter was staring at him with *concern* and at the same time trying to look large and impressive. Draco rolled his eyes. "You'll have to do better than that if you want to scare *me*," he told Potter. "Don't you think there are people here who can do a better job of that than you can?"

Potter sucked in a sharp breath. "Do you want me to get them?" he snapped, in what was such a pathetic attempt to back himself up with authority that Draco laughed. "Dumbledore? McGonagall?"

"Get them. I don't care." Draco closed his eyes. At least one comfort of despair was knowing that he didn't have to labor at this hopeless task anymore, he thought. And since his parents were doomed anyway, he might as well relax and give in. "You're the one who's going to be killing two innocent people no matter what happens."

The wand jabbed harder into the side of his neck, and Draco winced. When he looked up again, Potter was staring at him with a face so red that Draco rolled his eyes. *Did he pick up on that trick from Weasley, I wonder?*

"Ron and Hermione?" Potter demanded. "Where did you put them?"

Draco had the courage to turn and glare up at him then. "Oh, so they're the only people you think can be innocent, are they?" he asked. "As a matter of fact, I'm not talking about them. I'm talking about *my parents,* who I was trying to save. But there's not a chance of that now, with you catching me." He closed his eyes and tried to compose himself. The tears were threatening again.

"I have no idea what you're talking about."

Potter sounded haughty, and spoiled, and as if he'd never had anything bad happen to him in his life, so he couldn't imagine what bad could happen to Draco. Draco turned fully around this time. Potter immediately repositioned his wand so Draco couldn't grab it and drag it away from him, but that hadn't been what Draco wanted to do, anyway.

And this time, the words were going to spill out. *Something* had to, and Draco was opposed to spilling tears, and he wouldn't get the chance to spill blood.

"Of course you don't," he whispered. "Of course you don't. To you they're just Slytherins, they're

just *Malfoys*, they don't deserve a second chance because no one who's not a Gryffindor does. You would say that, you would believe that, and you're going to go on saying and believing that no matter what *I* say. But at least you'll hear that my perspective is different."

Potter's eyes widened, but he made no motion to cast a Silencing Charm. Draco thought he might have gone on saying it even if Potter had. His body was shaking, and his hands were clenching in front of him, and he had to speak or cut his tongue out.

"The Dark Lord threatened them. He *threatened* them. He said that he was going to kill my father instead of get him out of Azkaban, even though he was the one who broke other Death Eaters out of Azkaban. He tortured my mother. Her handwriting is shaky on her letters to me, and it never used to be. I saw her shaking from the pain spells he used. Not Cruciatus. Something worse, Darker. Something new.

"And he wanted me to do something impossible. How can *I* do it? I'm sixteen years old! I'm a Slytherin, but I'm not fully-trained yet, and I need more magic, and no one will help me, and everyone thinks I should obey him, but none of them know how *hard* it is, they're all fully-trained wizards who *chose* to serve him."

Draco heard his own words with shock. He hadn't realized before this, not really, how little choice he had about serving the Dark Lord. He would have said proudly, if someone asked him, that he had wanted to and had decided to of his own free will, but this was different again, to hear his voice trembling as he spoke.

"I can't save myself, and I can't save my parents, but I have to try, don't I? And I can't rely on anyone to help me. Who? *Dumbledore?* He would probably be just as glad that two of the Death Eaters can't hurt him or his followers anymore, since his magic is weakening. Snape? He's too intent on—something. I don't know what. I don't think that anyone really knows what game he's playing or who he's loyal to." He saw Potter's mouth open, but this wasn't the time for him to listen to Potter's speculations; this was the time for his own misery, and damn it, he was going to *take* it, as he hadn't got to take so much in the last few months. "You? Don't make me laugh. You're going to turn me over to Dumbledore in a few minutes, and he'll turn me over to the Aurors. This is the end of it. This is the end. I know."

He didn't mean the last words to sound quite so much like a wail, or his face to turn red, the way it did, with suppressed shame. He wrapped his arms around his head, so that he would at least be able to ignore Potter's expression of scorn.

Harry stared at the kneeling Malfoy and wished he knew how to respond. His mouth was open, but because it felt as though it had permanently fallen open, not because he had anything that he wanted to say.

He swallowed. He knew he should probably ignore all this blather—Malfoy was probably telling a story to get out of trouble, the way he did when he told the professors that he hadn't been breaking the rules—and he'd admitted he was working for Voldemort. Dumbledore should hear

about that. So should the Aurors. Maybe they could even get Malfoy to tell them where Voldemort *was*, and then the Order of the Phoenix, with Harry, could attack and finish the whole bloody war right there.

The vision held Harry. But then he looked at Malfoy, shaking, his shoulders heaving, and he imagined what would happen to him when the Aurors had him.

The Aurors would question him. Harry didn't think they would *torture* him, but they would make him talk about his parents, and reveal Voldemort, and then they'd probably throw him in Azkaban. And Voldemort would certainly kill Malfoy if he could catch him.

Harry watched Malfoy's shoulders trembling.

He knew that tremble. He'd trembled that way one day after school, when Dudley had driven away another student who'd tried to be friends with Harry and the teachers had scolded him for not doing his homework right and Uncle Vernon had yelled at him and Aunt Petunia had sent him to the cupboard without dinner and it seemed like the *last straw.* Harry had wished he didn't ever have to leave the cupboard again.

Malfoy had blurted everything out like that because he had no hope left.

Harry hesitated, then knelt down among the books and sliding cloth and broken things in front of Malfoy. He still kept his wand out, because he wasn't an idiot, whatever Snape thought. And he paused a minute to strengthen his glamour, because it had been almost a week again, and if Malfoy looked up and saw his face looking like Snape's—the way Harry thought he might have, that night in the dungeons with the white Dementors—then he would probably try to blackmail Harry.

Harry wanted to help him, but he was going to be cautious about it. When he wasn't cautious, people died.

He reached out and put a hand on Malfoy's shoulder, but Malfoy shrugged him off violently. Harry took a slow, deep breath. He couldn't be angry about this. Malfoy was acting like a prat because he thought his whole world was crumbling around him. Harry would try to be patient and show him that it wasn't, actually, that he could have help if he tried to find that help.

"Listen," he said. "I want to help you. And you're mistaken if you think that Dumbledore wouldn't want to help you just because of your parents, or because you're Slytherins and Malfoys. He wants to help *everyone.* You just have to ask."

Malfoy gave a deep sniffle that Harry knew meant he was probably trying not to cry; he recognized that sound, too. Then he whipped his arm away from his face and gave Harry a scornful look. But his lip was trembling, and his eyes were too wide, and Harry remembered that kind of defense from the times he'd used it himself.

"Oh, yes, because *that's* so easy," Malfoy said sarcastically. He raised his voice into a high-pitched one that he probably meant to mock Gryffindors, except Harry hadn't ever heard a Gryffindor sound like that. "Please, sir, would you, out of the goodness of your heart and nothing else because you have every reason to hate us, save my family?"

Harry hesitated so he could get himself under control. He had to make an impression on Malfoy, and yelling at him for being stupid wouldn't do it.

When he thought he could, he said with quiet force, "That wouldn't be Dumbledore's reaction. You don't know anything about him, Malfoy. He *could* help you. He'd give you sanctuary, so Voldemort wouldn't kill you for betraying him." Malfoy flinched so hard that Harry was sorry for a minute he'd mentioned Voldemort's name, but on the other hand, Malfoy would have to get used to it if he was with Dumbledore. "He could make sure that your parents were rescued."

Malfoy sneered at him. "I know that his magic is fading. He's getting weaker. You think that he could really protect us?" He shook his head stubbornly. "No. I won't do it."

Harry hissed in frustration and poked Malfoy's shoulder with his wand. "You want help, you *stupid* prat," he said. "And now it's here, and you won't take it?"

"Not from Dumbledore," Malfoy said. "Not from someone weak and who would probably want to turn me over to the Aurors anyway."

"He wouldn't—"

"How do you know that?" Malfoy asked bitterly. "You haven't watched things the way I have, Potter. You're not a Slytherin. You know the way that he changed the banners our first year and gave the House Cup to you, when it belonged to us? He doesn't *care* about us. Not the way Professor Snape cares. No. I won't trust him, and if you take me to him, then I'll just deny everything." His lips grew firm.

Harry glared at him some more. He could keep arguing that Dumbledore wasn't like that, but he recognized that stupid stubborn expression from the mirror. Malfoy felt the way about this that Harry felt about not telling Snape that he'd been the one to sleep with Harry's mum. So Harry didn't think he could persuade him out of this.

And one thing Malfoy said had made sense, and made him shift uneasily back and forth. Dumbledore *was* losing his magic. There was no reason for him to show it in public if it was some kind of plan, because he had to know that word about it would get back to Voldemort if the Slytherins could watch him. So Harry thought it was probably real, and Dumbledore hadn't expected it to happen so soon. Harry had noticed that he was careful not to use any spells in the Great Hall since that first one that'd failed.

But Dumbledore had to know.

And then Harry played Malfoy's words over in his head again, and felt stupid. There was a way that he could try to get help for Malfoy, with someone he would trust, and yet be sure that word would get back to Dumbledore. Harry would tell Dumbledore himself if all else failed.

"Then come with me," he said, and prodded Malfoy's shoulder until Malfoy rose to his feet, his eyes wide with suspicion. "Come with me, and we'll talk to Professor Snape."

Malfoy shuddered. "He'll betray me to the Dark Lord."

"You just said that you didn't know what side he was on, but that you trusted him to care about Slytherins," Harry pointed out. "Are you contradicting yourself?"

One thing Harry had noticed about Slytherins was that they liked to think they were logical, even when they weren't. So although Harry's words wouldn't have mattered to a Gryffindor (except maybe Hermione), they made Malfoy frown at the wall, because clearly the worst thing that you could do was contradict yourself.

He stared for so long that Harry thought he would change his mind, and got ready to Stun him. But finally Malfoy jerked his head down and said in a choked voice, "Oh, why the fuck not? It's not like I have anything else I can do now."

"Then start walking." Harry nodded towards the door from the Room of Requirement without taking his eyes or his wand off Malfoy. "But you better not draw your wand, or I'll just Stun you right there."

Malfoy sneered at him, but started walking. "Some comforter you are," he muttered.

Harry rolled his eyes, confident it wouldn't cause an argument since Malfoy had his back turned and couldn't see him. *You wouldn't want comfort even if I offered it. You barely accepted* this *kind of comfort, even though you needed it so much.*

He hoped that Snape could take this over, and even tell Dumbledore. Feeling so much sympathy for Malfoy made him feel as if his skin was covered with a faint film of slime.

Severus felt more wonder and confusion then he remembered feeling in many long years as he leaned back in his chair and looked from Draco's face to Potter's. Potter stood behind Draco and never took his eyes off him or his wand away from Draco's back. Severus supposed that he must commend the boy for that caution, at least, as much as he would have liked to speak privately with Draco.

For the boy to have intervened and then dragged Draco here…

Severus gave a tiny shake of his head. He had thought that he would speak to Draco carefully across a long period of time, gradually letting him know that he could trust Severus and thus persuading him to abandon his course of service to the Dark Lord. It had been an uncertain

gamble. Severus had assumed the choice would not be lasting unless Draco made it himself, and thus there was every possibility that he and Albus would lose in the end, because they could not force Draco to join them.

Potter's moral scruples were much less fine, and thus he had changed the nature of the game. Severus leaned forwards with his hands clasped in front of him and addressed Draco directly. Potter's part in this was more complicated and something he would have to consider at his leisure. "Are you yet willing to tell me what task the Dark Lord set you?"

Draco blinked a bit, then firmed his lips and shook his head. Potter frowned, but said nothing. Severus raised an incredulous eyebrow. *It seems that the boy has learned something of discretion after all. I wonder who taught him.*

"Very well," said Severus. "What I can do to shield you is limited. However, be assured that I *shall* do all in my power. As of the moment, I believe that your father is the safer one of your parents. The Dark Lord likely considers Azkaban his immediate punishment for the sin of his failure. That leaves your mother."

Draco nodded, his face gone so white that the shadows under his eyes looked like smudges of soot against his skin. Severus sighed. Perhaps it was for the best, after all, that Potter had intervened in his plans. Draco had obviously been close to cracking. Perhaps he would not have lasted long enough to make the informed decision that Severus wanted him to make.

"We must get her out of Malfoy Manor," Severus said, noting that the boy didn't dispute with him when he assumed Narcissa's location. *Interesting.* "I will begin work on that."

"Thank you, sir." The boy's voice was a ghostly whisper, and the way he looked down and away from Severus couldn't hide the flash of distrust in his eyes.

*Of course not.* The boy had hinted to Severus about his choice of allegiance, but there was a difference between that and actually trusting him with all the details of the Dark Lord's service. He probably assumed that Severus would still jump at the chance to turn him over to the Dark Lord or Dumbledore; Severus did not know if Draco had personally made up his mind about who, exactly, Severus served.

"For right now," Severus continued, "we cannot be sure that the Dark Lord does not have other spies in the school keeping a watch on you, Draco. You will therefore appear to continue your task for the moment."

This time, the look he got from the boy was distinctly startled. He was probably wondering whether Severus wanted the Dark Lord's task done in spite of all appearances to the contrary.

*No, foolish one,* Severus wanted to snap. *I am trying to protect you, and to give you the chance to make a permanent choice on your own. As of now, I do not trust you to be any more loyal to us than you were to the Dark Lord.*

Potter had opened his mouth, but he snapped it shut again and looked thoughtful. Severus narrowed his eyes. *I grow more and more intrigued by him. I want to know what has changed him.*

"In the meantime," Severus added, "you are to come to me for a detention tomorrow, Draco. Tell the others that I caught you out after curfew and that you were insolent to me."

"Yes, sir," Draco said, though with a wince, probably at what the other Slytherins would think of his being insolent to his Head of House. He knew a dismissal when he heard one, so he left the office.

Potter barely waited until the door shut before he snapped, "If you don't tell Dumbledore, I will."

"I am sure," Severus drawled. "You are right that he cannot long remain ignorant. Well, Potter, you need not be afraid. Go to him if you like, if you do not trust me. Now, leave me." He turned away and picked up the stack of essays he had been marking when the twin complications had intruded into his presence.

Potter blinked, obviously caught off-guard. Severus took the chance to whisper a spell that would detect any long-lasting magic on Potter's body. It was not out of the question that the boy had found a spell that would increase his intelligence, though all such that Severus knew of were Dark Arts.

A soft glow concentrated itself over Potter's face. Severus hid his frown. The spell revealed only that there *was* magic there, not of what kind it was. The face seemed an odd choice for Potter to cast anything on.

*I will have to ponder this more.*

"Dismissed," Severus added harshly, and watched with carefully casual eyes as his most troublesome—and, of late, most interesting—student left.

##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### #####
##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### #####
##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### #####

Chapter: 9

Thank you again for all the reviews!

*Chapter Nine—Reconsiderations*

Harry walked up to Gryffindor Tower with his head bowed, so deep in thought that he almost

stepped off the top of one of the moving staircases without noticing. He pulled his foot back just in time, but he scraped his elbow on the railing and stood there rubbing it while the staircase swung around.

Now he was on the opposite side of Gryffindor Tower from where he needed to be. Harry rolled his eyes and started down the new corridor. Sometimes he would have given a lot for Hogwarts to behave like an *ordinary* school. Not often, but sometimes.

He was trying to decide what to do about telling Dumbledore about Malfoy. And how he felt about Malfoy in general. And Snape, in general.

Snape had sounded cold and harsh to Harry when he talked to Malfoy. But if Harry took a few minutes to think about it, then everything actually did make sense. Malfoy couldn't stop working on his secret little project in case someone noticed. Of course there were spies in Slytherin. (That kind of impressed Harry, that Snape and Malfoy could both admit it instead of insisting all the spies were in Gryffindor). And the coldness seemed no worse than what Malfoy expected from Snape, so it didn't hurt his feelings.

Harry didn't like the discovery that his Defense professor could be reasonable and thoughtful some of the time. It made him have to consider decisions *he* had made and wonder if they were the wrong ones.

But then he remembered something else that made him relax. *Malfoy's a Slytherin. Of course Snape is going to take care of him. That's why we went to him in the first place, remember? But he would never take care of a Gryffindor. How many times did Neville need some extra help in Potions? He would have been a lot better if someone had just taken the time to build up his confidence. But no, instead Snape made nasty taunts that reduced him to a whimpering mess.*

Harry nodded, mouth set in a firm line. He'd made the right decision when he took Malfoy to Snape because he and Malfoy were different people. He had to remember that not everyone was like him. Snape didn't hate *everyone* in the entire world, and it was stupid to think he did. Harry was doing his best not to be stupid anymore, because he was fighting a bloody war.

But on the other hand, that made absolutely no difference in the way that Snape treated Harry. He would still hate it if he found out that he'd slept with Harry's mum. Harry rubbed his face and winced. Maybe Snape wouldn't try to starve him or shove him around like Uncle Vernon, but then, he didn't have to, did he? Snape had been a Death Eater, and he had to know curses that could do worse things than Uncle Vernon had ever dreamed of.

So Harry would trust Snape to take care of Malfoy, but not otherwise, which was why he turned aside to the Owlery after all and sent an owl to Dumbledore warning him about Malfoy.

He had to be sure, that was all. And trusting too blindly last year, in other people and his own abilities, had got Sirius killed.

Draco lay in his bed, attempting to take the same sort of soft, deep breaths that Theo and Blaise were taking. They were both calm sleepers. Draco had to be the same.

Someone would notice, otherwise.

But his mind *would* run riot, and after a while Draco gave up and lay staring at the faint lines of light from beneath his shut curtains (Greg always slept with a fairy light, since he was afraid of the dark). If someone asked later why he hadn't slept, he could always say he was "thinking" and give the asker a dark look.

He thought about Snape's words, and he thought about the humiliating way he'd broken down in the Room of Hidden Things, and he thought about that stupid cabinet and whether it would ever be repaired, and he thought about his mother—carefully, because his mind still flinched when he did that.

But most of all, he thought about Potter.

Draco had no idea what had got into Potter. The *sensible* thing to do would have been to walk away and leave Draco crawling in his own misery, or at least Stun him and hand him over to Dumbledore. Draco hadn't wanted that to happen, but he'd expected it.

*Of course, this is Potter,* he reminded himself, and smiled for the first time since Potter had forced the truth out of him. *The sensible thing is the last action he'll take.*

That left Draco to face up to the reality after his confession, which in some ways was worse. Potter had seen him at his absolute weakest. He hadn't taunted, he hadn't yelled, he hadn't decided Draco was a Dark wizard and deserved whatever the Aurors did to him. He'd tried to get Draco help instead.

*Why?*

Draco shook his head helplessly and passed his arm over his eyes. The Gryffindor was a mystery.

But a mystery Draco needed to watch, both because he *needed* to understand Potter and because he would feel much better if he could discover some secret of Potter's that would put them on an equal footing again. Some weakness he hid, something that would make his face look like Draco was certain his face had when he was about to cry.

*Then I can be the one to make the choice and have the power.*

"*Acclaro veneficium perducens.*"

Severus spoke the spell with barely a trace of breath behind it, but with a willpower that made the Great Hall briefly shimmer before his eyes as the magic traveled outwards from him. It struck Potter where he sat at the Gryffindor table, impudently trying to steal a piece of sausage

from his friend Weasley's plate.

The same glow as before brightened on his face—but nothing else whatever appeared. Severus hissed softly under his breath. He had been sure that his original spell hadn't revealed the magic Potter must have performed to make himself intelligent because that magic had been cast too long ago. But *this* one showed the continuing effects of any spell. Severus had expected the boy's head to turn bright like a crown.

No, only on the face. And as much as Severus would have liked to think that that *was* a sign of the particular Dark Arts he suspected, it simply embraced the boy's nose, cheekbones, and lines around his eyes, not the top or sides of his skull. There was no way that Potter could have influenced his brain from that position, even accidentally.

"Troubles, Severus?"

Severus turned sharply on Albus, then reminded himself that he was in the Great Hall during a meal, not kneeling in front of the Dark Lord during a spying mission. He inclined his head. "No, Headmaster. There are things about the Potter boy which puzzle me, however, and which I would figure out if I could."

"Ah." Albus smiled and asked Poppy, who sat on the other side of him, to pass the salt. Severus shook his head. Albus would have floated it over to himself only a few weeks ago. His commitment to this deception was extraordinary. But then, it would have to be, in order to fool the suspicious eyes of Severus's Slytherins. "I received an owl from Harry last night, you know. He told me about young Master Malfoy and the bargain you had offered him."

"Did he?" Severus kept his voice utterly cool, but mentally added a few cruel spells to the repertoire he planned to use on the boy that night.

"He also said," Albus went on, in that bland tone that could make you think him deaf to nuance if you were, "that he thought you had done the right thing, and that his contacting me like this was only a reassurance for himself, not a sign that he didn't trust you." He glanced at Severus, and of course his eyes were twinkling. "It seems that he repents of some of the misjudgments he has made down the years."

Severus grunted a little, letting himself absorb the shock as he would have a blow. No sign of intelligence-increasing magic on Potter, and yet he made declarations like these and seemed to mean them.

What had caused the change, then?

Severus hated curiosity this intense. It was like a snake devouring him from the inside, and it never eased until he had brewed the experimental potion or spoken to the person who caused it. His glance strayed towards Potter again. He was eating eggs with a hearty appetite now, pausing to flick bits of them at the back of Weasley's head.

*You would never know there was talent hiding inside a skull that seems that thick,* Severus thought. *And yet, perhaps such a disguise is also part of the cleverness.*

"Do you think he said those things in anticipation of your telling me about the message?" he asked suddenly.

Albus laughed. "Why, Severus, you know Harry isn't that subtle!" he exclaimed. "No, I think he said them because he knew I might hear the news twice, and he wanted to explain why he felt he had to contact me. And perhaps apologize a bit for his suspicions, but of course he *is* subtle enough to think he couldn't apologize directly."

Severus narrowed his eyes further. *He has changed his mind about me a bit, then. Was he ever going to bother to inform me? Did he think I would mock and belittle him for it, or is it simply not important to him, that I know what he thinks of me?*

Severus was not sure which possibility bothered him more.

"What are you making up for Divination?" It was their free period in the afternoon, and Ron was scribbling industriously away at the prediction, as usual. He and Harry had already agreed that each of them had to take turns selecting a horrid fate from a list of them they'd come up with at the Burrow, and the other person had to come up with one on their own that week. It was Ron's week to use the list.

"I came up with something *wonderful*," Harry said, propping his elbow on the floor so his hand could hold up his head. He and Ron were sprawled on the floor in the Gryffindor common room, right next to the fire. Hermione sat not far away on a chair, biting her lip and frowning. The air was deliciously warm, and he and Ron had bantered all afternoon, and Harry couldn't remember the last time he'd felt this happy. "You're going to be so jealous of it."

Ron sneaked him an interested glance, but he yawned the next instant and stared down at his paper. "No, I'm not."

"Yes, you are." Harry rolled on his back and stretched his arms in the air. Hermione glanced sternly at him, so he sat up again. "*So* jealous."

"Let's see it, then." Ron held his hand out for Harry's paper.

"You have to promise not to steal it." Harry cradled the parchment close until Ron reluctantly nodded, and then he gave it over. He watched Ron's lips move, but he didn't have to, since he already knew what the paper said by heart. *I had a dream about Lord Voldemort capturing me, taking my heart out, splitting it into seven pieces, making a pie from them, and feeding the pies to all my friends. Then he spitted my body on a pole and marched into battle with it as a flag.*

"That's *disgusting*," Ron said with awe as he handed Harry's paper back. "Trelawney's going to

love it."

"I know." Harry smiled and tucked his paper into his Divination book, then took out his just-started Potions essay and the Half-Blood Prince's book.

Hermione harrumphed. Harry raised his eyebrows at her. She had dropped several ominous warnings about the Potions book, but she hadn't said anything outright. If she hadn't, then he wasn't going to listen to her.

But apparently she was, because she put her book down on her lap, frowned at him, and said, "I don't think you should be tampering with that, Harry."

"Who's tampering?" Harry opened the book and turned the pages until he came to the latest shortcut. It seemed that blending a Calming Draught with silver oil gave you a powerful relaxation potion with the exact same effect as the tedious potion that Slughorn was trying to get them to brew. Harry started copying the instructions into his essay, changing words here and there so that it would look like he'd written it himself. "I'm just doing it the best way. A lot of the instructions *he* gives are safer than the ones we follow in class. I'd think you would want me to be safe." He shot Hermione a smile.

Hermione shook her head, her mouth pursed. "It's *cheating*, Harry."

"I offered to let you copy, too," Harry pointed out. He'd thought that was only fair, when Hermione had let him copy her notes so many times.

"That's not the *point*." Hermione folded her arms and stuck her lip out this time. "The point is that you don't really learn anything this way, Harry."

"I can remember the Prince's instructions for making Potions a fuck of a lot better than I can remember Slughorn's," Harry pointed out calmly, squinting at the page to make sure that the letter he thought looked like an "s" really was an "s." "And I never learned anything from Snape even after I had him in class for five years. At least this way I'm picking up *something* about Potions. Just not everything. But I think you and Snape and Malfoy are the only people who know everything."

Hermione got out of the chair and knelt down on the floor beside him. Startled, Harry looked up into her eyes. They were bright and earnest. She put a hand on his arm.

"You aren't stupid," she whispered. "You could get good marks if you just *tried*, Harry."

Harry blinked and licked his lips. That was a vote of confidence in him that he hadn't expected to get from Hermione, especially because she had seemed jealous when he started getting higher marks than she was in Potions, and he *knew* (although mentioning it got her upset) that part of the reason she was so angry was her jealousy. He wanted to say something back, to be nice, to admit she was right and close the book.

But he couldn't. He wasn't good in Potions like he was good in Defense. He wasn't good in *most* things the way he was good in Defense. Hermione didn't understand, because she was brilliant and it was effortless for her. Harry just wasn't that smart.

"I'm sorry, Hermione," he said. "I like this book, and I don't think there's anything wrong with it. I'm not giving it up."

Hermione stood and turned away from him without a word. The next minute, Harry saw her stiffen, and then she ran up the stairs to the girls' rooms as fast as she could go. Harry frowned and looked past her. Had she seen someone mistreating a book? It was usually the only thing that got her so upset.

Ron was standing next to Lavender, talking so intently to her that Harry wondered if they were comparing Divination homework. It was one of the few classes, other than Charms, they still had together.

Lavender tilted her head back and smiled up at Ron with an edge to the smile. Ron gave her a soppy grin in return.

*I don't know why Hermione is so angry,* Harry thought as he turned a page. *Maybe they were discussing charms to burn up books.*

Because he couldn't think of any better way to test his hypothesis about Potter's secrets immediately, Draco waited until he saw the Mudblood and the Weasel walk past on the way to Defense, Potter trailing behind them. Then he dropped into line next to him, nodded, and said, "Morning, Potter."

Potter turned and gaped at him. Draco sneered. *It's no wonder that I didn't see any intelligence or compassion in him before this. He does a marvelous job of hiding it.*

Draco glanced swiftly ahead, because if anything could break up this little discussion too soon it was Granger noticing them. But Granger and Weasley were talking in sufficiently heated voices that Draco didn't think they would look back any time soon. They *did* ignore Potter too much for someone who was supposed to be their best friend and the Savior of the Wizarding World, Draco thought idly. Too bad Potter never seemed to notice.

"What do you want, Malfoy?" Potter's eyes were narrow and wary, his hand curled around his wand.

"To talk." Draco widened his eyes and made himself look as innocent as possible. "Isn't that what I'm doing?"

Potter glanced around several times, then ahead. When he seemed sure that his friends were all absorbed in each other, he turned back to Draco and hissed, "I haven't told anyone about you. I

won't. There's no need for you to come over and—*socialize* like this." He spat the word "socialize" the way that Draco would say "Mudblood."

Draco grinned before he thought about it. Potter reared his head back, his nostrils flaring. "Something funny, Malfoy?"

"Merlin, you're sensitive," Draco murmured. He probably would have walked away then, except that Potter hadn't raised his voice enough to bring the rescue force running, and he easily could have. He wanted this talk to continue, then. Well, so did Draco. "Only this, Potter. I want to know why you spared me."

"I wasn't going to kill you, you prick." Potter had the gall to sound hurt by that, as though Draco had some good opinion of him which must be preserved in amber. Draco rolled his eyes. *The papers shouldn't have decided to call him the Chosen One. That bit's gone to his head, even if nothing else has.*

"I didn't mean that," Draco said. Another look ahead, but apparently Granger and Weasley had decided to shout at each other in the middle of the corridor, so all Draco and Potter had to do was stop walking. Of course, the shouting would attract attention in a moment, so Draco knew he had to be quick. "I meant, why did you keep my secret and try to help me instead of humiliating me in front of the school?"

"That's more your style." Potter's eyes were bright with fury.

"Oh, come *off* it, Potter," Draco snapped, oddly insulted, and not in the way that Potter had meant him to be. He'd expected Potter to be brighter than this. "You know what I mean. You saw me broken and weak. Why would you pass up a chance to display me like that to half the people we know?"

Potter kept silent. Maybe he'd picked up on the undertone of actual curiosity in Draco's voice, maybe not, but either way, it seemed to have given him something to chew over. Draco watched Weasley gesturing wildly and wondered if Potter would actually answer before his friends turned around and looked for him.

"Because you reminded me of me," Potter said lowly. "And I've had enough of that kind of humiliation."

He strode away from Draco then, his back so stiff that Draco expected him to fall over and shatter. Then he got between his arguing friends, and said something that made Granger gasp and run towards the Defense classroom. Probably a reference to the time, Draco noted, and began to walk a bit faster himself.

At least he had confirmation for his belief that there was something different about Potter now. The boy who had attacked him on the Quidditch Pitch last year would never have been able to see himself in an enemy.

Now Draco only had to find out what had caused him to begin having clearer eyesight.

"I'm here, sir."

Severus leaned back behind his desk and examined Potter in a leisurely way, wondering what his reaction would be. Potter's nostrils flared and his head gave an impatient little twitch, but he folded his hands behind his back and tried to bear Severus's scrutiny with composure. He didn't succeed.

*That is another thing I will have to teach him,* Severus decided as he rose to his feet and drew his wand.

"We will duel first," he said. "At the end of the evening, I will test your current level of Occlumency, and I will give you a book that I fully expect you to have read in a week's time. Do you understand, Potter?"

The boy's eyes flashed. "Of course, sir. None of those are huge words."

While the brat was distracted by his anger, Severus whispered a third confirmatory spell. Again the magic shone only on Potter's face, not above or below or behind it. That fixed Severus's suspicions. The boy was wearing a glamour.

Why? His face looked the same as it ever had, James Potter's to the life, so Severus could only suppose that it had changed in some way that Potter found necessary to conceal.

*Why?*

He must try to break the glamour during their session this evening and see what resulted.

"Then let us begin," he said, and launched his first spell, a non-verbal Breaking Curse, before he had finished speaking.

Potter yelped and ducked to the floor, letting the spell go overhead. Severus smiled and waited. The Breaking Curse worked only on flesh, not stone or glass or any other material. When it encountered the wall, it turned around and came back at Potter from behind. Would he notice, especially when he had not heard Severus pronounce the spell?

It seemed he did. He glanced over his shoulder instinctively, probably to gauge the damage the spell had done, and then rolled again, this time raising a Shield Charm followed by a concentric, spinning shield of light whose name Severus had to strain his mind to recall. He knew it better when the Breaking Curse went past the *Protego* shield, as it was designed to do, and the concentric light grew bright teeth that transfixed the curse and stopped it. Cadmus's Defense.

The boy sprang back to his feet, weaving other shields about himself, on the defensive for the

moment. It was the best opportunity that Severus would have, if the record of their other fights held true and Potter caught him up in a flurry of spells—though now that he knew more about how Potter fought, Severus could hope the result would be different.

He aimed his powerful *Finite* for a gap between the shields, though it was difficult, with Potter whirling in every direction and covering the gaps with more and extra and smaller shields. Severus's first charm vanished, consumed in Cadmus's Defense, but his second got through, and hit at the perfect moment, just as Potter finished and turned to face him.

His face rippled like a pool of water with a stone cast into it, and reformed as higher and sharper next to the cheekbones, his nose slightly longer, his eyes set a bit further back into his face. But his eyes were still green, and his skin was still the same color, and his nose was not the bulbous, squat ugliness that Severus had secretly hoped for, and his hair was still tangled and messy—though having seen how precisely the glamour was laid, Severus had known that Potter's hair had not changed.

Severus blinked. *He is so proud of his resemblance to his bully of a father that he cannot endure even a slight change?*

The next instant, he was flying through the hair, caught by Potter's combined Blasting Curse and Disorientation Charm, so that there was nothing he could do to control or halt his flight before he hit the far wall.

"Yes!" Potter crowed in triumph.

Severus dragged himself back to his feet, growling in disgust. *First* he would chastise the brat by winning the duel, and *next* he would find out why such a slight change that did not even alter the face was worthy of so much protection.

##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### #####
##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### #####
##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### #####

Chapter: 10

Thank you again for all the reviews!

*Chapter Ten—Angry Answers*

Harry knew that Snape would be angry when he got back to his feet, and so he took no chances. He'd already built up the shields around him into a spinning wall that wouldn't be easily crossed. So he could concentrate now on casting spells that would keep Snape too off-balance to really hurt him.

Maybe it wouldn't work with other Death Eaters, but Harry *knew* Snape. He knew what angered him, what made him nod at people—if you were Slytherin—and what made him smile because he was anticipating detention.

And he knew what irritated him.

Harry cast the same spell that Hermione had used in their first year and gave Snape a hotfoot. Snape was still hopping up and down from it in his first, startled reaction when Harry launched a modified curse from the back of his Defense book. The book's author had been scornful of it. It was a weak spell, he said, and why would you want to use that when you were trying to incapacitate your enemy?

The author hadn't thought carefully about other ways of incapacitating someone, Harry thought. Or else he'd never known Snape.

The spell was supposed to take the skin off someone's scalp. Harry put a little less power behind it than it was supposed to have, and it shaved off some of Snape's hair instead. He might not be sure of what had happened, since he couldn't see himself in a mirror, but he certainly *felt* it, and saw the strands of hair drifting to the floor.

In the utter silence that followed. Snape's face darkened. Harry knew a lot of people who would have run for cover then, or thrown themselves on the floor and begged for a merciful death.

Harry, safe behind his shields, cocked his head and gave Snape a bright grin of the kind that he could imagine his father using when James had just humiliated Snape at some school prank.

Snape attacked.

The first thing Harry knew about it was a blast of power that made several of his shields wither and crumple up like parchment placed into flames. He gasped and hurried to replace them, but the same devastating force swept through the other way, and then shields were gone from the other side, and the center, and right above him. He knew that he couldn't stay there, that he would have to move.

The only question was which direction.

Snape was stalking towards him with his wand aimed, and Harry had to make a choice that might not be the right one. He let his muscles relax for one crucial moment, his eyes study Snape, and his mind tumble into that instinctive state that he used when he was trying to anticipate whether or not he would be sent to bed without food.

Then Snape's hand snapped right, and Harry dodged left in the same instant. He'd guessed correctly, he reassured himself as he rolled and came to his feet with his back against the wall. He had.

But he was still in the same room with Snape, who looked more furious than ever that Harry had run away from him. He spun towards him with his teeth bared and his hand tight where he clutched the wand.

And a large patch of hair missing from the center of his head, as though he had suddenly decided to become a Muggle monk.

Harry felt his lips quiver. Snape seemed to understand, because for a moment, a truly *dreadful* smile answered Harry.

Then he attacked again, pushing the non-verbal magic ahead of him like a gale.

Harry knew he couldn't stand against it. His only defense was that he was smaller and faster than Snape—well, he was pretty sure he was faster—and he could move around while Snape was still trying to aim for him. Also, it probably helped that Snape wouldn't kill him.

Well.

Harry *thought* Snape wouldn't kill him.

For a moment, he stood still, braced against the magic as if he was going to resist it, and then he sprang straight up, using a Lightening Charm on himself to get a bit of a boost. He managed to jump over most of Snape's spells and land on the floor to the side and behind him. Snape started to turn again.

Harry whispered a charm that Transfigured Snape's neat boots into ratty trainers like the ones he was wearing.

Snape stumbled and fell over his dangling laces. Harry didn't stay to laugh, because that would be stupid. He jumped to the side again and shot an *Incarcerous* at Snape. The ropes curled towards Snape, but *he* was rolling now, and they only managed to curl around one arm. Snape shrugged off the ones that had been meant to bind his legs, his eyes hot with fury.

Harry crowed in his head. His plan to distract Snape with anger was working! He started to aim at Snape's nose. He would grow it so big that the man couldn't see around it, and then he would probably be even more angry—

"What would your father say," Snape whispered, "if he knew that you no longer look like him?"

Harry froze and lifted a frantic hand to touch his face. Was his charm gone? He hadn't felt it if Snape had taken it off, and he had to feel it. Right?

Well, maybe not when he was so busy casting and the magic that touched him might have felt like one of the spells he was using or just the general ambient power in the room increasing as more and more spells got added to it.

Something coiled around him and flung him into the wall. Harry grunted as he found himself pinned several feet above the floor, small silky ropes sliding around his wrists and ankles to keep them in place. Another rope wrapped his neck and jerked his head back until his eyes watered with pain. Snape stepped towards him, a tiny, genuine smile lifting his lips.

*Oh, fuck, I am so dead,* Harry thought in a panic, especially when he tried to thrash and found no give in the ropes at all.

Severus had been more *disturbed* by what had happened in the last five minutes than he could remember being for a long time.

To have his shoes Transfigured, to fall, to have his hair cut and show himself undignified—

He had long been proud to think that he could control his reactions to Potter. He might snap and snarl, yes, but that snapping and snarling came about because of his own choice. He did not show the true emotions bubbling far beneath the surface.

But Potter had pulled Severus further in the direction of expressing those emotions than he had been since the brat had come to school. Not even the moment when he had found Potter peering into his Pensieve last year could compare, because that had been Potter witnessing his humiliation.

This was him *causing* it.

Severus paused briefly to fix his shoes and hair, then let his displeasure show as he came towards the boy with slow stalking steps, and was gratified when Potter sucked in a breath and shivered. But his hand was wriggling in the grip of the ropes as if he would lift his wand towards his face, not towards Severus.

The sight infuriated Severus anew. How *dare* the boy be thinking about concealing a slight change to his face at the moment more than he was thinking about the punishment he would inevitably suffer?

"*Listen* to me," he said.

Potter's eyes snapped back to him, and the boy seemed to stop breathing for an instant. Then he shrank in on himself and bowed his head. Severus paused. He had seen the same posture before, but he could not immediately remember where. He did not think it was from Potter.

In the next moment, he discarded the notion as unimportant. What was important was making Potter suffer as he had suffered.

"How *dare* you do such a thing," he said, and knew from the way Potter flinched that the quiet, flat words had made more of an impact on the boy than if he had shouted. "Striving to shame me

the way your father did, because you hate me the way he did—"

"I was trying to make you angry." Potter spoke so fast that Severus would never have understood him if not for his years of deciphering student mumbles. "I was trying to make it so that you couldn't concentrate on the spells that you were planning to throw at me. That was the best tactic I could think of to win the duel."

Severus narrowed his eyes. That almost made Potter's behavior sound reasonable, and of course that was not so. Petty hatred and jealousy and revenge had much more to do with the boy's actions than reason. "Who told you to use such tactics?" he asked harshly. "Someone must have told you."

Potter flinched and hunched his shoulders. Severus did not understand. The body language was sullen and not sullen at the same time. He was not sure how he could read the second emotion from Potter—how could he be sure, when he did not even know what that second emotion *was*?—but he was certain it was there. "I'm sorry, sir," Potter said quickly. "I just thought—that you're so dignified so much of the time that I thought losing your dignity would get you angry."

Severus wanted to ignore the words and continue with his anger. Indeed, the words should have made the anger even worse. Potter had as good as admitted the intent to humiliate Severus. He wanted to imitate his father in every way possible, it seemed.

But one change in Potter, on the frontier of talent, had predisposed him to admit that other changes might be able to exist. He had to consider that the boy had done as he had exactly for the reason he said he had.

That was a good tactic. It was one that Severus had used himself against Death Eaters, when someone in the Dark Lord's ranks had taken exception to his favoritism and tried to kill Severus. Severus would have used it more often with his students, except that few of them—Potter excepted—could be angered into fighting back. He had intimidated them too thoroughly.

He hated being made to rethink old perceptions. He changed tactics, because no matter how mock-reasonable Potter's actions in the duel might have seemed, there were others outside that which must fall under the childish category. "Why did you seek to cover your face with a glamour? It has not changed *that* much."

Harry felt as though his heart had turned over in his chest and then dropped to the soles of his feet.

*Oh shite! He did it on purpose! He noticed! I thought that maybe it just got ripped off by one of the other spells, but he did it on purpose and—*

Then Harry forced himself to stop panicking with a jerk. There was a big difference between noticing and *knowing*, he thought. If Snape knew, he would have said something already. Instead, the suspicion of Harry being his son would be far away from his wildest dreams.

And what had Harry practiced his lies for, if not a moment like this? He was going to slip out of it.

Besides, though Snape didn't know it and Harry wasn't sure how he'd done it, he'd already escaped Snape finding out once. Snape had had to use Legilimency on him last year when they were trying to have the first round of Occlumency lessons. Harry had concentrated as hard as he could on hiding the memories of the Dursleys' abuse and the moment when he learned that Snape slept with his mum and not thinking about them. And Snape had never found those memories. Harry knew that because he'd never seen them, and Snape could hardly have resisted the urge to taunt Harry about sleeping in a cupboard or going without food if he'd known.

All he had to do now was remember that no one knew the secret other than him and *not panic*.

And use what he knew about Snape against him, just the way he had in the duel.

He scowled at Snape and looked down at the floor. He wished his feet were free so he could scuff one, but the way he flexed his hands and looked sullen would have to do. "I saw my face was changing," he muttered. "I saw it was changing to look like *Malfoy's.* I didn't want to look like that." He let his voice be wistful for just a minute. He wouldn't be able to do this without practice, but he *had* practiced, so he ought to be able to do it. "Everyone always says that I look just like my dad." *And he'll always be my dad, you bastard, even if you find out somehow.* "I want to keep that. I don't have much else of him."

He lowered his head and sniffled pathetically.

*There.* That had to do it, didn't it? Snape thought he was spoiled. He would immediately decide that Harry had plenty that would remind him of his parents, and then he would start thinking about Harry's dad and how much he hated him, and he *had* to decide that Harry was just being stubborn and spoiled again.

Harry wasn't sure what he would do if Snape didn't decide that.

Severus remained silent for some moments. The longer he looked at the brat's face, the more he wondered.

Yes, the changes to cheekbones and nose, line of eyes and bend of forehead, were minor. But Severus had to admit that, added together, they became something that could change Potter's face remarkably in the eyes of those who had always known him.

He would never look like Draco Malfoy, of course. He would never have that grace and elegance of line that Narcissa had given her son. But Severus could see how the boy staring into a mirror in dismay and biting his lip might well think so.

So far as that went, his tale was true. Or sounded true, which Severus knew from numerous

encounters with the Dark Lord were often the same thing.

But again an extra, nagging echo was playing in his mind. Just as he had seen another emotion in Potter beyond his sullenness earlier, just as he had seen something familiar in his posture when he realized that he was bound in the ropes and couldn't escape, there was a whisper in Severus's brain now telling him not to accept this story so quickly.

Yet, why should he not? The boy had offered a childish, predictable, irrational, but entirely Potter-like reason. And hiding his face with a glamour was only stupid, not a crime, as hiding his talent was. There was no reason for Severus to care about it. He was tired of caring about Potter as much as he had been forced to this year.

Severus might have told the boy that his resemblance to Lily was increased this way, and that he should not give up so quickly on looking like his mother, if he only knew what kind of woman she was.

But there were reasons that he did not permit thoughts of Lily *Potter* to occupy his mind when her son was in the room, so he switched tactics. "Being so concerned about what your face looks like may make you weak in battle," he told Potter. "What happens if a Death Eater breaks the glamour? Will you stop to repair it?"

The boy's head dropped forwards. Severus hoped he was considering his options for a reply well, and seeing how truly stupid he had been.

*He bought it! He bought it!*

Harry looked down to hide the relief and joy in his eyes, and decided to mutter. Snape liked it when he muttered. Well, not liked it, exactly, but expected it from him. And just like the humiliating spells during the duel, it would distract him from what Harry didn't want him to find out. "I wouldn't care about a Death Eater breaking the charm if I was fighting for my life. I wouldn't care about most people doing it. But just having it happen in a fight and not knowing it…" He swallowed. "What if I walked out that door looking like Malfoy, sir?"

Snape laughed cruelly and moved back. "I assure you that you will never look like Draco Malfoy," he said, with a tone in his voice that implied the contrast was to Harry's disadvantage.

*I don't care. I don't care. What matters is that he* believes me.

When Snape had first stepped towards him, Harry had braced himself, because he was thinking of all the things that Uncle Vernon could have done to him when he was tied up like this and unable to even roll up in a ball and protect his head. But Snape hadn't done that, and he accepted the lie. Now he knew about the thing that was most damning, Harry's face, and anything else that happened or showed up would be less important and less likely to convince him.

Harry was still dazed to know that he was free and the moment when Snape could have

recognized him was past.

The ropes snapped away from his wrists and ankles suddenly, and Harry fell to the floor. He rubbed his wrists and gave Snape a resentful glance that was not even a lie. Snape curled his lip at him, but his eyes were dark.

"You will not do such a thing again," he said. "You will treat me seriously as an enemy, one who might kill you, because that is what we practice here to defeat. You would not use those spells against a Death Eater, and therefore you will concentrate on serious curses and defenses."

Harry wanted to argue that he *could* use spells like that against a Death Eater, especially Voldemort, because they would all get angry about being humiliated, but he glared and nodded instead. Snape turned away with a flare of his cloak.

"We will begin again. And then I will test your Occlumency."

*It's all right,* Harry reassured himself as he moved into position across from Snape. *I'll just do—whatever I did last time—that hides those memories. And why should he look into them, anyway? He has no reason to be interested in my glamour anymore.*

Harry did stop to cast the charm that hid his face again before he started dueling Snape. Snape was the most dangerous one, and Harry didn't have to worry about him anymore, but there were still other people he didn't want seeing him like that.

Besides, his *real* face was the one that looked like his dad's, the dad who had died for him when Voldemort came to the house when Harry was a baby, and Harry wanted to keep it.

Severus pulled back, his head shaking in disgust. How could he have imagined that Potter's mind would be different simply because he turned out to have hidden talents? It was the same mindless chatter and chaos of the year before, so many memories that it was hard to focus on one. The only added difference was the memory that dominated it, the memory of Black falling through the Veil in the Department of Mysteries. That one cast its shadow on all the others and made Severus fall so deep in guilt and self-pity that he longed for a shower.

Potter sagged to his knees in the center of the office. His face was waxen. Oddly, Severus, staring at the skillful charm that replaced the appearance Potter no longer possessed, found himself wondering what expression the features beneath the charm wore.

Then he shook his head. The face was still Potter's. The *mind* was still Potter's. He had no reason to wonder more than that. The hint of Lily he almost thought he had seen in her son earlier was a reminisced nonsense.

"Get out," he said. "You are to study Occlumency until you can master it. You will start by attempting to clear your mind."

"I told you," Potter said behind him, angry and defeated and very far from the smug idiot he'd been earlier in the evening. That was the only productive result of this session, Severus thought, since during their training duel earlier Potter had fought him stubbornly, refusing to give in and admit Severus's superior strength. "I can't do that."

"You will learn," Severus said. "Or you will suffer. Imagine the headache that no doubt you feel now and increase it. Or imagine what will happen if someone else dies because of your lack of self-control."

He thought he heard Potter catch his breath. But the boy said nothing. When Severus glanced over his shoulder again, he was gone, and the office door shut.

Severus had planned to go to the shower in his private rooms, or perhaps to the Hufflepuff first-year essays awaiting him on his desk like sacrifices. Instead, he found himself Levitating a cauldron from one of the shelves to the floor and then conjuring water to fill it. A charm transformed the water until it was as clear and smooth as a window, and Severus stepped up and looked within it.

By another charm, the face of Lily Potter, as he remembered it, floated on the surface.

Severus tried to force himself to study it dispassionately, to quiet the ringing of the troublesome echo in his mind by seeing the resemblance of Lily to her son. Yes, the nose was something like Potter's new face. The turn of the skin at the corners of the eyes might be identical. The eyes themselves, of course, had always been the same. And—

And he could do it no longer. Severus's hand spasmed as he banished the memory. That left only his own reflection floating in the water. He stared at it while the echo in his head rang and nagged and made no sense.

He had relied on echoes like that when he was a spy. They had saved his life on several occasions, once by making him check a third time on a ward he had established around his potions lab and thus revealing the presence of a Death Eater who had been intent on sabotaging his work and reducing his position and power in the Dark Lord's eyes. He did not ignore such stirrings, although he might have to wait some time to learn what they meant.

This time, he did not know why he had one about Potter. The boy's concealing his face with a glamour was *nothing*. What did it matter to the war, which was the only context in which Potter could be of interest to him?

And then there was the second stirring echo, apparently connected to the thing Potter had said when he was drowning in desperation at his own incompetence.

*I told you. I can't do that.*

This second echo made no more sense than the first.

Severus gave his own face one last moody look before he banished the water and sent the cauldron floating back to its place.

Draco hesitated and leaned around the corner. He really shouldn't be lingering here. He'd been to see about the stupid cabinet earlier, and then he was supposed to have come straight back to the Slytherin common room. But he'd stayed in the corridors instead, striding busily past when someone came near, and otherwise watching Professor Snape's office door with too much attention. He knew Potter had a detention tonight, and he wanted to see if it was possible to talk to him when he came out of it.

But he would be in trouble with Professor Snape if he found out. And Potter might figure it out and be quiet just to be stubborn.

Besides, it seemed it would be a *long* detention, and Draco had homework he really should finish. So he'd started to turn away at last.

But now he'd heard a slight sound. A whimper, no more than that, but—

He looked.

Potter knelt on the floor under one of the torches, his arms around his head. The arms were covered with strange red welts.

By the way his shoulders shook, he was weeping.

Draco tasted a sweet flavor of triumph. *Here* was the secret he had been seeking, the one that would make Potter as weak and vulnerable as he'd been himself and mean that he could ensure Potter would never reveal Draco's secret.

That triumph gave him the security to walk up, shake Potter, and say roughly, "What's wrong?"

Potter dropped his arms from around his head. Draco recoiled. His eyes were glassy, and sweat covered his forehead, and his face—something was *wrong* with his face. It was bright red and there were pustules on his forehead and cheeks.

"The Dementors," Potter moaned, and collapsed.

##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### #####
##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### #####
##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### #####

Chapter: 11

Thank you again for all the reviews!

*Chapter Eleven—Bloodlines*

Harry knew his head was swimming, and he knew his arms were breaking out in welts, and he knew that his hands stung.

He knew he had seen the white Dementors just before everything began to hurt so badly that he thought it might be worthwhile to cut his hands off.

But he didn't know where he was now, or what might happen next. His body was shaking and his sight was blurring and he couldn't stand up. He reached towards the one solid body that seemed to have come near him, whispering his desire for help.

A voice he recognized but didn't *know* said in an unnerved tone, "All right, Potter, I'll—I'll go to Snape. He's the closest. He should know how to deal with this in *some* form or other." The person sounded as if he was trying to convince himself.

Harry blinked several times, but still the swimming haze across his eyes didn't clear. He shivered, but he didn't think that was the cold from the Dementors. He thought he was simply suffering, and the suffering had to go somewhere to express itself.

"Please hurry," he said.

"Yeah, Potter, I will." The voice sounded half-panicked now, although Harry wished it wouldn't, because if it was panicked then it probably couldn't help him. "Shite." And Harry heard feet pounding down the corridor.

Harry curled up on the floor and closed his eyes. The welts along his arms seemed to be getting worse, at least if the pops and the liquid sounds he heard were any sign, but he couldn't see them anyway, so why should he look for them?

Draco pounded on Professor Snape's private door, glancing uneasily over his shoulder. He didn't know if he should have left Potter lying on the dungeon floor where any Slytherin could come along and see him, but on the other hand, what else could he have done? Dragging him here was out of the question. Potter was too heavy.

Professor Snape opened the door so suddenly that Draco nearly knocked on *him*. He froze at once, vaguely glad that he had enough of a sense of self-preservation not to do that.

"What is it?" the professor asked curtly, looking over Draco's shoulder as if he expected the Dark Lord to be right behind him.

Draco swallowed. He didn't know what to *do*, he wanted to wail. Maybe he was going to get in trouble for making this big fuss over Potter when Professor Snape would just sneer and shut the

door on him.

On the other hand, Potter had helped Draco by bringing him to Professor Snape, and Draco knew his Head of House had always said that Slytherins should pay their debts. So Draco took courage by the horns and said, "It's Potter, sir. He's moaning about Dementors and breaking out, wounds everywhere—"

That was all he got out before Professor Snape's eyes narrowed and he strode past Draco. Draco took a breath of relief which felt as though it sent cool air traveling to every part of his body and hurried after Snape.

The professor was already kneeling over Potter when Draco came up on them. He was making pass after pass with his wand and whispering incantations that Draco didn't know. He suspected they were healing spells, and he hadn't studied healing that closely except when he was trying to find spells that would work on the Vanishing Cabinet. He did his best to stand by and look helpful, such as by glaring away a Slytherin second-year who stopped and tried to see what was going on. The girl squeaked and ran off.

"I can do nothing here," Snape said abruptly, making Draco leap. His own thoughts had absorbed him. "And this is far too public a place. We must take him to Madam Pomfrey. Come." He waved his wand again, whispering a spell Draco did recognize, and a stretcher materialized next to him. Then a Lightening Charm and a Levitation Charm ensured that Potter floated into it. Professor Snape set off with his robe flapping behind him and the stretcher bobbing at his back.

Draco blinked. Was he *really* supposed to accompany them? Couldn't that make one of the spies suspicious that he wasn't working for the Dark Lord?

Then he reminded himself that Professor Snape had probably considered that, and had still said he should come. And besides, he was curious as to what was happening with Potter. If he went back to the common room and tried to answer questions coolly, he would only think of Potter and falter anyway.

He hurried after the tail end of Professor Snape's swishing robes, noting absently that he wanted to learn how to walk like that, incredibly fast without breaking into a run.

"Goodness, Severus! What happened?"

Severus had never liked the matron's manner of expressing herself. She could, on occasion, choose a stronger word. The sight of Harry Potter covered in welts and pus-filled boils that were making their way over more and more of his body, if Severus felt their magic correctly, was appropriate for the expression of stronger sentiments if any time was.

But then he reminded himself that there was more at stake here than whether one woman said "Goodness" or not, and returned his attention to Potter. The boy was curled in on himself, shivering so hard that the stretcher vibrated. Severus's spells had picked up no trace of a fever,

but then again, his spells had picked up no trace of any normal illness or curse, so that didn't necessarily mean anything.

"I do not know," he answered. "Potter was complaining of seeing white Dementors, which he had done once before. At the time, we dismissed it as a hallucination brought on by stress." He would say nothing to Poppy about Albus's suspicion that the boy was receiving impressions from the Dark Lord unless he had to. "This evening, this happened to him, not long after I released him from detention."

Poppy clucked and moved forwards, her wand darting in several intricate patterns that Severus recognized as the basic diagnostic spells. She puckered her brow when nothing happened. "No symptoms that you recognize?" she asked, tapping her sleeves with her wand to move them up her elbows and fasten them there. Then she Summoned several topical potions from her supply cupboard and began to rub them over Potter's welts. "Could he have ingested any potions or poisons from the time that you saw him to the time he was found? Who found him? Have you given him any potions?"

"No, perhaps, Mister Malfoy, and no," Severus responded, taking a petty delight in the way she scowled at him for his abbreviated answers. He nodded at Draco to come up to his side so that Poppy could question him if needed. Draco clenched his fists and did so. He did not seem to know, still, what his place was here. To tell the truth, Severus was not sure himself.

"Hmmm," Poppy said, and then leaned back to examine the effects of the potions she had used on Potter's skin. Severus narrowed his eyes when he saw the skin heaving beneath one of the pastes, as if it would erupt like a miniature volcano. He started to step forwards to observe the reaction better. If he needed to brew an antidote to Potter's strange malady—as Albus would not doubt command if it did not improve on its own, because Potter was destined to take up so much of his time this term—he had best know what stages the reaction passed through when it was no longer new.

And then—

Then the pustules vanished. Severus was looking at Potter's face, his glamoured and false face, out of the corner of his eye only, but he had no doubt of what he saw. The oozing, red sore on his chin simply folded in on itself, dwindled to a speck, and was gone. At the same moment, Poppy gasped and wiped away a patch of a blue potion she had put in place on Potter's arm. The welt that had been beneath it was gone, as well.

Severus transferred his gaze to the boy's hands. Clear, now, and they looked as if they had never been wounded. At the same moment, Potter uncurled and seemed to drop straight from his feverish shivering into calm, normal sleep.

"Well," said Poppy, shaking her head. She looked wary, but excited at the same time. Severus wondered if anyone besides himself knew how *fascinating* she found magical diseases. "That settles the question of whether it can be anything natural. Only a curse or a potion could cause a

change that abrupt." She drew her wand without taking her eyes off Potter. "I shall have to make some tests."

"A Transfiguration is an obvious second choice," Severus noted. "Would you like me to ask Minerva to come by?"

"Please." Poppy gave him a quick smile and then murmured what Severus thought would be the first of many charms she would use on Potter. This one surrounded him with a yellow glow and apparently made nothing happen. Poppy wasn't discouraged, if the way she immediately scrambled for parchment and quill to take notes was any indication.

"Will she need to talk to me?" Draco whispered uncertainly.

Severus glanced down at him. His eyes were wide, his face solemn and pale. There was a spark in his expression of what Severus had been looking for all along: maturity, the sign that he was considering the ways his actions could influence the world instead of simply the way they were influencing his future and his parents' future.

"I think not," Severus said. "Keep me informed, Poppy," he added, to which the matron nodded without looking up. He turned back to Draco. "But I require a moment of your time. There are things we should speak of."

Draco tilted his head up. His solemn expression turned cautious again. But Severus knew what he had seen, and he was not one to distrust his perceptions. Draco was ready for the kind of discussion that Severus would gradually and subtly have drawn him into if Potter had not moved too fast in confronting him.

"All right," he said.

Severus did give one final glance at Potter as he left the infirmary to inform Minerva, but the boy didn't move, and the echoes in Severus's head had reported no miraculously new information. The mysteries that surrounded the brat would have to wait for their solution.

Harry came slowly back to consciousness. It felt as though someone had lowered a rope to him through an ocean and he clutched at it and climbed it until his head broke the surface.

He knew right away that he was in the hospital wing. No other beds in Hogwarts had sheets that crisp and cool. He turned his head cautiously from side to side, but didn't hear many voices. He was probably alone, then, or else his best friends had come, visited, and gone.

But there was one voice. Harry opened his eyes halfway and saw Madam Pomfrey standing with her back turned to him, leafing through a book. She was talking to herself. Harry rolled his eyes around the room to satisfy himself that there really wasn't anyone else there before he started listening to what she was saying.

"*Thought* I recognized something," Pomfrey muttered, and flipped another page. "Wouldn't have known it myself, and I daresay that not one mediwitch in a hundred would have." She chuckled. Harry thought it sounded arrogant. He'd never thought of Madam Pomfrey as an arrogant person.

Then he thought of the way she always made him stay in bed when he felt perfectly fine and thought she knew what was best for him when *he* was the one who did, and grimaced. *Oh, wait, yes, she is.*

"It was neglected so long," Pomfrey murmured, and turned towards Harry, still cradling the book. Harry shut his eyes quickly most of the way, so that he could watch her without her knowing he was awake. She would probably just put him back to sleep if she knew, and he was curious. What *had* happened after the white Dementors appeared to him? "Not a Transfiguration—Minerva had no idea—not a potion. But a curse. Yes. An old curse." She ran her fingers over the page and then actually did a little dance in place, which made Harry have to muffle his snort. "A bloodline curse."

Harry found himself holding still, or at least more still than he was already. He could hear his heart pounding in his ears, speeding up faster and faster. His breathing wanted to speed up, too, but he knew he would hyperventilate, and that would make Madam Pomfrey pay attention to him, and right now that was the last thing he wanted.

His mother's letter, which he'd read so many times that he knew it by heart, was singing in his head now.

*She said something about me getting some kind of disease from being part greasy git.*

"One of the bloodline curses," Pomfrey said, apparently reading from the page in front of her, with great satisfaction. "Yes. 'When there was warfare between pure-bloods in the seventeenth century, one of the most-used weapons was the bloodline curse. Many wizards and witches who knew they would lose a particular battle cast such curses to punish not their enemies, but what mattered most to their enemies: continuation of that particular pure-blood line. Most curses would take effect just before the children in question came of age at seventeen, in other words when the young wizards and witches had survived the trials of adolescence and their parents were just beginning to be most proud of them.'" Pomfrey nodded to Harry as if she knew he was awake and listening. "Someone must have cast a certain bloodline curse on your Potter ancestors, my lad, probably one that skipped generations. They do that sometimes, and I don't remember James having anything like this. I just need to figure out which one it was." She began to turn pages again, murmuring something about "hallucinations" under her breath.

Harry froze. He was sure that even his breathing and heartbeat stopped, because his panic was that deep and complete.

Madam Pomfrey would find out that there were no bloodline curses like that on the Potters. But she would probably look further into the book, and find out that there was some curse like the one Harry was suffering on the *Snapes*. Or Snape's ancestors, or whoever had been his

great-grandfather or whatever.

She would *know*.

And because she was an adult, and adults seemed to have that kind of mindset, she would tell Snape instead of letting Harry keep it a secret.

Snape would *know*.

The horror of that moment was so overwhelming that it took Harry a full minute to decide what he would do. But of course there was obviously only one thing he *could* do, since Madam Pomfrey wouldn't listen to his arguments. No adults ever *listened* to him, or not in time.

Harry grabbed his wand, which was lying on the table next to his bed, with his glasses, and pointed it straight at Madam Pomfrey. She was looking up from the book with her mouth open and her eyes blinking slowly, not trying to defend herself against him because she had no idea that he would attack.

Harry's voice sounded very small and desperate to him. "*Obliviate!*"

The Memory Charm hit Madam Pomfrey so fast that at first he wasn't sure it had worked. She reeled backwards and lifted a hand to her forehead, as though she'd hit her head on something. The book fell from her hands to the floor, and she looked down at it in wonder.

"What was I doing?" she muttered.

Harry distracted her as quickly as he could by moaning. Madam Pomfrey looked up at him and exclaimed softly, hurrying over to the bed. "Harry! Are you all right? Do you require anything?"

"No," Harry said. He rubbed at his forehead dramatically. This wouldn't be the first time that his scar had got him out of trouble, even though it happened a lot less often than Snape and Malfoy thought it did. "I feel great. As though nothing happened at all." He gave her an appealing glance, widening his eyes. "I know that Ron and Hermione will be worried. Can I please go back to Gryffindor Tower, ma'am?"

Pomfrey hesitated, blinking. It was obvious that she didn't remember much of what had brought him into the hospital wing, but didn't want to say so. "I don't know," she said, wavering. "You seemed in bad condition. I don't know if you should be walking around again so soon."

"I'll go really slowly," Harry said, with an earnest tone that he knew wouldn't have worked on Snape or McGonagall. "But I don't have anything wrong now, and I really want to sleep in my own bed. I think I'll sleep best there," he added, with another touch to his scar and another pathetic look.

Pomfrey waited some more, biting her lip and frowning. She kept reaching after that memory

Harry had blocked, Harry thought, and it just wasn't coming to her. He hoped that it wouldn't. He was sorry he'd had to use a Memory Charm on her, since he knew from Lockhart how easily those could go wrong, but there wasn't any other choice.

*I should be able to choose who I live with. I should be able to choose the people I think of as my parents, and I know I won't if Snape knows. He wouldn't want me as a son—how could he? I don't matter to him—but he would use it as an extra excuse to torture me. I don't want that to happen.*

"All right, Harry," Madam Pomfrey said at last. "But I really think it's best if you don't linger on the way."

"Thanks, ma'am!" Harry shoved his glasses on his face, hopped out of bed, and then Summoned the book to him. "And should I take this back to the library for you? Or is it one of yours?" He held his breath as she glanced down at the cover of the book, but he couldn't just leave it on the floor. The chance was even better that she would recognize it and remember what she was doing with it if he did.

Madam Pomfrey frowned and tapped her lips, then nodded. "I took it from the library. Do return it, Harry. I'm sure that Madam Pince would be upset with me if I kept it out too long." She smiled at him.

Harry gave her a little salute and then went trotting out of the infirmary, making sure to walk slowly. He didn't want to fall down the stairs in case he *was* still shaky after the attack of the white Dementors, or whatever they were.

And he wasn't taking this book to the library right away. He was taking it to the Room of Requirement, the room with all the broken things where Malfoy's mysterious cabinet was hidden. He wanted to come back and look at it later. Maybe what he was suffering really did come from a bloodline curse that someone had cast on the Snapes a long time ago.

But if that was the case, then *he* was the one who was going to find out about it and how to cure it. Not Madam Pomfrey, because he couldn't trust her. Not Snape, because then Harry would never live a peaceful life again. Not Hermione, because Harry knew that she would insist on him at least talking to Snape.

There were just some things that he had to do alone.

Draco lay down thoughtfully in bed that night, feeling far more confident than he had since the day the Dark Lord gave him the Mark.

Professor Snape had spoken to him like he was an adult. He had explained, delicately, without really explaining, that he had the beginnings of a plan to rescue Draco's mother. It depended on something he wasn't sure existed. He admitted that he had heard of the circumstances that seemed to dictate its existence, but that that object, even so, belonged to another person, who

might be averse to sharing it.

Draco didn't care. What mattered most of all to him was the way Professor Snape's eyes had studied him all through the talk, depending on Draco to accept what he said and respond to it in an intelligent way, and how he had avoided referring at all to the fact that Dumbledore probably knew what Draco was up to.

He was letting Draco have a choice. He wasn't making him pick sides right now, which Draco didn't think he could do.

That was more than anyone had done for Draco in so long that he was dazzled and humbled. He would have gone to his Head of House for help weeks ago if he had known it would be like this.

Granted, the thing that probably did exist but even if it existed belonged to someone else worried Draco mildly. It could all be a lie. But he didn't think so.

Even if it was, the respect in Professor Snape's eyes wasn't a lie. He had let Draco know something about his plans. He had paused for Draco to interject information into their talk, even though Draco had mostly just nodded and let the words flow past him. He had *listened.*

If Draco had known more about whether he had discovered a disturbing secret of Potter's or not, the evening would have been perfect.

Severus sat upright in his bed, breathing slowly and calmly while his Legilimency probed through his own mind, seeking out the confusions and unexpected tangles in his thoughts that could be the result of someone interfering with him. He would not put it past Albus to have repressed certain memories or given him orders that must lie dormant for the time being. Albus was a generous and warm-hearted man, but he was also ruthlessly practical. And Severus would not necessarily want to undo his actions. He simply preferred to know about them.

Of course, the greater concern was that the Dark Lord might have implanted something in Severus's mind, which would indicate he had managed to slide past Severus's Occlumency shields but was cunning enough not to reveal it immediately.

Perhaps it was the disturbing revelations of the evening that made him go deeper than usual. Perhaps it was the nagging echoes in his mind. Perhaps it was the fact that he hadn't encountered anything that baffled him as thoroughly as Potter's "white Dementors" in years, and so he was half-consciously searching his memories for some indication of where he might have heard of them before.

Whatever the reason, he brushed, for the first time in his searching that he could remember, a wall. A smooth black wall, built of compacted bricks of magic and will, one that had been in place a long time.

The sort of wall created by a Memory Charm.

Severus's eyes snapped open, and he held still. The age of the wall indicated that it could not have been a recent "present" from Albus, nor from the Dark Lord. If either of them had seen fit to make Severus forget something from more than a decade ago, they did not seem to have had a recent need to reinforce that block.

Severus felt a growl travel up his throat as he sent his Legilimency whisking around the wall to learn the shape and size of it. Whoever had done this was good. It was small, but that didn't matter. It still surrounded a specific set of his memories, and Severus had no idea what they might be, and he wanted to know.

On the other hand, what had waited this long would keep. More to the point, he needed preparation before breaking a wall that ancient if he did not want to end up a drooling wreck like that fool Lockhart.

Cold strength pouring through him, Severus lay down in his bed and shut his eyes. Sheer willpower sent him to sleep. He had been a soldier of sorts for so long that he knew not to neglect his rest.

The image of Lily's face in the water followed him, blazing, into the darkness.

##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### #####
##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### #####
##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### #####

Chapter: 12

Thank you again for all the reviews!

*Chapter Twelve—Unexpected Tangles*

"Ah, thank you, Severus."

Severus did not look at Albus's face, because, if he did, then he was likely to say something he would regret. He continued wrapping the potion-soaked bandages around the Headmaster's swollen fingers instead, making sure to touch every bit of skin. Albus let his head fall forwards when Severus finished, exhaling in a way that made it clear how much of his breath and pain he'd held in during the operation.

Severus could bear it no longer. He leaned forwards and spoke with the quiet intensity that had persuaded Albus when he could persuade Albus at all. "Why must you do this alone? Tell me which Dark artifacts you are hunting, and I can come up with potions that would neutralize them, or at least make the hunting easier."

Albus looked up at him with a misty smile. Severus was not impressed, as he never was by the act that made Albus look like a doting grandfather. He knew there was steel beneath that surface, and the sword-smile would flash out when he least expected it, as long as they were alone. "Ah, my boy, I know you would help if you could," he said, in the same soft tone that Severus had used. "But it is not to be expected." He flexed his wrapped hand gingerly. "The Dark magic in these artifacts is not amenable to potions. It is hardly amenable to anything except outright destruction."

Severus looked askance at the cracked cup that rested on the desk beside Albus. It did not look dangerous to him. Of course, when he let his other senses than sight extend towards it, such as the sensitivity to blood magic that he had developed in the Dark Lord's service, then he could feel the aura of evil leaking from it. He shuddered and turned his attention back to Albus's hand.

"Is it truly weakening your magic?" he asked.

Albus laughed and extended his unwounded hand in front of him. A fountain of red and gold sparks rose from his palm. It would have been a simple trick to perform with a wand, but Albus wasn't holding one.

Severus nodded in reluctant satisfaction. Wandless magic weakened first, if it weakened at all. "I still wish you would let me help," he said, simply to get the point across, as he began to clean up the empty vials and spare bandages he had brought to the office.

"There is not much remaining for you to help with." Albus sat back in his chair and reached for one of the lemon drops. Severus rolled his eyes. Someday he was going to design a potion that did not work with lemon drops in the body, merely to see Albus's expression when he had to stop taking them. "Now comes the time for research. I believe I know where Tom is hiding another of these artifacts, but not the last two." A flash of sadness passed over his face for no reason that Severus could understand. "Yes, it would be two," he said, so softly that Severus would not have heard him if he wasn't straining his ears.

Since he would get no clarity from Albus on that subject, Severus changed it to a different one. "I didn't know that you had seen fit to block memories from the time when I first came to you and offered to change my allegiance," he said casually.

He received no more than a quick hawk-look before Albus smiled genially, and even that could have been a lie—but he did not *think* it was, and that was enough for him. He had estimated the age of the wall blocking his memories off to be at least sixteen years, probably closer to seventeen. If Albus had reached out to impinge his memory, that was the first chance he would have had during that year to do so.

*Then the Dark Lord is the most likely culprit.* Severus might have thought someone else was to blame—perhaps a fellow Death Eater—except that few people had ever taken him by surprise when it came to the mental arts, and fewer still would have the power to build a wall like that. It had to be one of his masters.

"You and your suspicions," Albus said, with an airy little wave. He crunched his way contentedly into another sweet, and then spoke with his mouth full, a habit that annoyed Severus to no end because he was forever having to train it out of his Slytherins. "How are you getting on with young Harry?"

"Better than I was," said Severus. "I have learned that he wears a glamour for no discernible reason, and that the Dementors that were appearing to him are real enough to cause certain physical effects." He described the state of Potter when he had transported him to the hospital wing the other night.

"Do keep an eye on him, Severus." Albus's voice had turned quiet again, but without the force he had used to convince Severus that he could not help. He stared at his wounded hand as if he was estimating when the bandages would come off. "I will try to aid him—my aid will need to start very soon—but he needs more help than I can give."

"I do not understand why you want me to do this," Severus said, giving voice to one of the questions that had haunted his mind since Albus's first order. "If he needs to build a bond of trust and confidence with a professor, surely Minerva would be better."

"If that were the only thing, I would indeed ask her to do it." Albus glanced up at him. "But you know that we need to defeat Voldemort, and after Harry himself, you are the one who comes closest to realizing the boy's importance to the war. I fear Minerva would indulge him too much."

"Does that mean that I can do the opposite of indulge him?" Severus smirked at Albus.

"*Severus*." The Headmaster looked half-amused even so. "You know that you achieve surer results with compassion and understanding."

"I know I can use understanding to destroy my enemies," Severus retorted. He had not truly expected Albus to give him permission to mentally scar the boy, but it was good, sometimes, to remind Albus that Severus was more than just his tame Potions master. "I will bring you a potion for your hand tomorrow."

"Good night, my boy."

Albus was already opening a book as Severus turned towards the door to the moving staircase. Severus bowed his head a moment in homage, though the Headmaster didn't glance up to receive it. Severus himself sometimes tired of the double life he had to lead and the risks he had to take, but he did not think the Headmaster knew what weariness meant.

Draco narrowed his eyes when he saw Potter come happy and chattering into Defense with his friends beside him. He looked as though he'd never been covered in welts and boils the other night. Draco had gone to the infirmary and asked Madam Pomfrey about Potter, but she had told him briskly that he had no right to know private information about another student and bundled

him out the door.

Draco was irritated at that. Like it or not, his survival was tied to Potter's now. Potter knew that Draco *had* a mission, if not what it was, and Draco wanted to keep him close to make sure that he didn't tell anyone else. And if Draco ended up coming to Dumbledore's side, Potter was one of the people he would have to work most closely with, like it or not.

It could be even more than that. Potter was the only person on Dumbledore's side that Draco thought he understood at the moment, the only one he *knew* was near his own age, the only one he could speak to about something other than the war. And he hadn't betrayed Draco to the Aurors when he had the chance, even though it would have a perfectly reasonable thing to do. Draco wanted to know more about why.

He waited until Potter was sitting down and then gave a quick glance at the door. Professor Snape hadn't come in yet. Draco drew his wand and aimed at Weasley under the desk.

"*Confundus*," he whispered.

He couldn't see Weasley's face, but he knew his eyes would be growing glazed. The next moment, Weasley said, in a voice even more mindless than usual, "Lavender is a really good kisser. I never knew that."

Other than several shocked gasps and giggles, you could have whispered in the classroom and been heard. Then Granger said in a voice that made Draco wince, "*What*?"

Draco smiled smugly. He'd seen Weasley snogging the Brown bint in the corridors. It figured that that thought would be at the top of his mind and come out first thing if he wasn't carefully preventing it. Of course, if it hadn't, something else equally astounding would have. Weasley's mind was a chaos like that.

It served his purpose, distracting Potter's best friends. Potter leaned back in his chair and watched them with slowly blinking eyes as they fought. Draco quickly scribbled a note on a spare piece of parchment, folded it into a small dragon, and tapped it with his wand so that its wings would beat and carry it over to Potter's chair.

The dragon landed in front of him. Potter's hand shot over and crushed it as if it was an insect. Draco sniffed. He'd better not throw it away or crumple it up without looking at it. Draco was proud of his ability to send notes shaped that way.

But Potter cradled the dragon in his hands instead and lifted it to his face without taking his eyes from his best friends. Then he spread the note out and read it. Draco smiled at the back of his head. He didn't need to see Potter's face to know the bewildered expressions that would be passing over it.

*How are you feeling?*

It was the last thing Potter would be expecting from a rival, someone who hated him. And though Draco hoped Potter would eventually come to recognize that their relationship to each other had changed, the *most* important thing for the moment was keeping him off-balance and slow to respond.

Potter turned the flattened dragon over and wrote something on the back. Then he rolled it up and tossed it into the air as though throwing it away. You would have had to be quick of eye—and not watching Granger and Weasley—to notice the tiny wind charm that caught it and sent it scudding back to Draco. Potter even sent it under the table, so it was less noticeable.

*Impressive,* Draco thought, as he looked down to read it. Potter had improved over the summer in magic as well as in wits.

*And looks.*

Draco rolled his eyes. He hated it when he had stray, irrelevant thoughts like that. In the past, he'd tended to have them about Quidditch, wondering what the effects of certain plays would be, and about Hufflepuff House, wondering why the Slytherins hadn't got together and massacred them long ago. The last thing he needed was to have thoughts like that about *Potter*.

*You don't fucking care, Malfoy, and don't try to pretend you do,* Potter's note said.

Draco's lip curled. He reached for his quill, knowing exactly what he would write. *Such vulgar language to use to someone who's only interested in your well-being.*

But Professor Snape entered the room then, and Draco didn't dare pass notes in front of him. Even Granger and Weasley had the sense to shut up when they saw their professor, though they scowled at each other.

Draco satisfied himself with glaring at the back of Potter's head as Snape began the lecture. *Don't think that you're getting away with this. You interfered in my life, and that gives me permission to interfere in yours.*

Harry turned another page in the book he'd stolen from Madam Pomfrey and sighed, rubbing at his eyes with one fist. There was so *much* information about the bloodline curses that could be cast on various lines, and so much of it was written in a dry and dusty way, as dry as the textbook that Umbridge had wanted them to use in Defense last year. He didn't know how he was supposed to do this on his own.

Then he sat up and straightened his back, wincing as a broken bookcase that stood near the center of this version of the Room of Requirement poked him in the spine.

*The only alternative to telling Hermione, or whoever I want to help me, about Snape. And that's not an option at all.*

Harry turned another page, and the word "Potter" caught his eye. He bent down and read.

*The most common Potter bloodline curse, like many, does not surface in every generation, but only once every two or three. It involves a grand feeling of power, and the victim's self-confidence sometimes strengthens their magic for a short time, supporting the delusion. In the end, many Potters are injured or do damage to their magical cores while attempting to accomplish feats beyond their strength. They survive to pass their curse to the next generation, but they will miss out on the glory that could have been theirs.*

Harry let a gusty sigh go and flipped more pages. It was all like that. It seemed that most of the bloodline curses had been designed to let people survive and go on having children, or the families themselves would have died out, but they hurt people and their power and prestige.

The one thing Harry was sure of after reading this book was that the ancient pure-bloods were a bunch of bloody-minded bastards, and that it was no wonder Voldemort wanted to imitate them.

No matter how he looked, though, he couldn't find a reference to Snape. Harry growled and slammed the book shut. It would be just his luck if Snape was descended from someone who had married into another family and changed their name, but if that was the case, Harry didn't know how he was going to find out.

*I can hardly say, "Hullo, sir, mind giving me the names of your ancestors back to the sixteenth century? All of them?"*

Harry rubbed his eyes again and shoved the book carefully back into its hiding place, beneath a curtain that draped over the edge of a table. There was more than one reason to keep the book hidden, even if it didn't tell him anything useful. If someone read that part about the Potter bloodline curses, they would know that he wasn't a Potter. And since his mother was a Muggleborn…

Harry grimaced and shook his head as he stepped out of the Room of Requirement and watched the door fade into the stone. It was all complicated and confusing and *stupid*. He wished this hadn't happened and that he'd never known. It sounded like the bloodline curse wouldn't kill him. If he didn't know the truth, then he could just suffer through it and it would go away and he would be left none the worse for wear, like with so much else in his life.

He turned around.

Only to find Snape right behind him, staring at him down the length of a lighted wand with an expression that could have made Dudley stop beating up little kids.

Harry flinched for a minute. Then he remembered. Snape was like Uncle Vernon, and bullies attacked when you showed fear. Harry hadn't done anything wrong. It was still before curfew, and this wasn't a night when he and Snape had lessons. Harry lifted his head and matched Snape

glare for glare. "Sir?" he asked coolly.

"You are to tell me," Snape said, every word delicate and careful, "this instant, why you used a Memory Charm on Madam Pomfrey."

Until Potter's face darkened with guilt, Severus had not been truly certain. The evidence pointed that way, especially when the matron babbled that she *knew* Potter was fine, she was just a bit fuzzy about what he had come to the hospital wing for and couldn't remember any of the symptoms but she knew…

But there was the guilt.

Severus stepped forwards and cast a Sticking Charm to bind Potter's feet to the floor. The boy gave him a shocked and betrayed look when he tried to run away and couldn't. Then he hunched his shoulders and bowed his head in the same odd posture he'd used when Severus bound him to the wall of his office.

At some point Severus would have to figure out why that particular posture was so familiar. But it would have to be a point when anger didn't fill his head like a white flame burning behind his eyes.

"You *idiot* boy." He couldn't even raise his voice. Luckily, Potter looked as if the lowered tones would be as effective in frightening him as a yell would be. *Good.* "Do you have the slightest idea of what you were doing? You have *no* expertise in the arts of the mind. You could have ensured that she went as mad as Lockhart with one misplaced syllable. What were you *thinking*? Is it so important to you to look invincible that you must try to hurt someone who was doing you only good?"

Behind the anger was shock—he truly had not thought Potter would do something like this, however morally corrupt the boy was in other dimensions—and more anger, at himself. He had not anticipated this, but he should have. He should have remained with the matron until she could discern what Potter was afflicted with and speak to him about it.

*But then you would not have spoken with Draco, as also needed to be done.*

It was easy to turn the anger into rage into Potter. It would have been counterproductive to turn it against himself. He leaned forwards and held his silence, waiting for the boy's answer, but allowing his face to turn harder and harder as each minute passed.

Panic as white as the strange Dementors tried to consume Harry. He couldn't imagine—he didn't know—he'd never been good at lying when put on the spot, and if he didn't lie, who knew what would happen—

And then he realized that he had an advantage. Snape would never ever believe something like him sleeping with Harry's mum without prompting. Never in a million years. He'd already come

up with his own reason for why Harry had done this. All Harry had to do was build on it.

He put on his most stubborn expression, the one that would have got him a cuff to the back of his head from Uncle Vernon, and said between gritted teeth, "I thought you would approve of me for not showing weakness, *sir*. You always seem disgusted when I can't do or a spell or I can't do Occlumency. And we don't *know* about Madam Pomfrey, do we? I mean, not for certain? What would happen if she told the wrong person about my weakness, on accident or on purpose? I *know* that Voldemort is watching me all the time." He really enjoyed watching Snape flinch away from the name this time. "I can't take the chance."

Snape's nostrils pinched in until Harry wondered how he could breathe out of them. And he was watching Harry like a hawk, and his hand was twitching on his wand, and Harry braced in anticipation of the spell to come.

He didn't know if he would fool Snape. But it had to work. That was what Snape thought. He had no reason to think anything else. Harry was just a stupid fool, someone he could yell at but didn't have to care about at all.

*Come on,* Harry thought urgently. *Believe it the way I want you to.*

Severus stared at Potter with the boy's comebacks ringing in his ears. Stronger still was the pounding of his own heart in his anger.

But strongest of all were the ringing echoes that he had got from the boy's behavior and the sight of Lily's face in the water last time they had a confrontation.

Something was *wrong*. Of course Potter had acted stupidly; he did that all the time. Most of the time, however, Severus could understand why it had happened. This time, he could not.

Potter's action smacked of desperation. It could be, as he had said, that he had some idea of the real stakes and a lack of trust, both of which Severus would find it hard to condemn him for. He had taken an irresponsible, foolish action because of it, but in that case Severus should teach him better, instead of attempting to change the principles on which he had acted.

Yet…

Severus could not think the boy had changed that quickly and completely over the course of one summer. He would not use a Memory Charm in such a cause. He might use it to defend a stronger, deeper secret.

But what that secret could be, Severus had no idea as yet.

Severus stepped smoothly back and released the Sticking Charm that tied Potter's feet to the floor. Potter leaped away at once, his eyes bright and wary and his wand in his hand. Severus restrained a growl. Yes, Potter should stay cautious and not trust anyone in sight, but that should

not include *him*.

"Fifty points from Gryffindor for an action that could severely have hurt an innocent," Severus said. "Ten for defying me. And five for wasting my time." He turned and strode away towards his lab.

The nagging thoughts in his head that he could not quite identify and his uncertainty had made him determine to begin breaking down the memory block tonight. If he could not be completely in control of what was happening in the world around him, he could at least be in control of his own mind.

Harry leaned against the wall and shut his eyes. He had waited until Snape was around the corner and then run most of the way up to Gryffindor Tower, because after all his talk about weakness it would probably look bloody suspicious if he broke down in front of the man.

Besides, he never wanted to show more weakness to Snape if he could help it.

*God, that was…*

Harry wiped at his forehead and his throat, where the sweat seemed to have collected, and straightened. He wasn't going to think about it. The point was, it was *done*, and Harry would certainly remember the lie he'd told, so he didn't have to worry about tripping up if he talked to Snape about it later.

He was just around the corner from the Fat Lady. He stepped forwards.

The air seemed to stir, and there was Malfoy, coming out from under a Disillusionment Charm and staring at him with a stony, determined look. Harry bit back a groan.

"Madam Pomfrey's been Obliviated," Malfoy said. "Was it you?" Then he rolled his eyes and snorted. "What am I talking about? Of course it was you." He leaned towards Harry. "I want to know why."

"I don't care if you tell Snape," Harry said, deciding to take a risk. "He already knows, and he doesn't care."

Malfoy gave him the kind of smile Harry thought he would see on Mrs. Norris's face, if she could smile. "You should be more worried about who *else* I would tell."

Harry glared at him. Malfoy raised an eyebrow and smirked. Harry glanced around, remembering then that someone would probably be along at any minute and they would be more than curious when they saw him talking to Malfoy.

"*Fine*," he muttered. "Come on." He whirled around and started in the direction of Umbridge's old office, which no one was occupying this year.

Malfoy followed him with what sounded like a chuckle, but Harry didn't look over his shoulder because he didn't want to get in a duel. He gritted his teeth and walked on.

*Bloody Slytherins. Why can't they leave me alone?*

But beneath his irritation was bewilderment.

*Why* aren't *they leaving me alone? Snape shouldn't care this much. If Malfoy wanted revenge, this is a weird way to do it.*

*I don't understand them.*

##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### #####
##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### #####
##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### #####

Chapter: 13

Thank you again for all the reviews!

*Chapter Thirteen—A Dance of Deceptions*

Draco grinned at the back of Potter's head as Potter shut the door behind them. He had been clever enough to realize that there was a certain type of lie that should work with Madam Pomfrey. She thought that everyone was as naturally concerned about people as she was, being a Healer, so Draco had gone to her and confessed in a shy voice, looking over his shoulder every few seconds, that he was *really* worried about "Harry" and wanted to know what kind of condition he'd come in with the other night.

Pomfrey had still pretended loftily that she couldn't tell him, but this time, with the way she frowned and stared at the floor and hemmed over basic details like Potter's welts, Draco recognized the symptoms of a Memory Charm. He'd seen them used often enough in the Dark Lord's ranks by now, mostly on Muggles.

Draco grimaced and rubbed the Dark Mark on his arm, then froze as Potter turned around again. He didn't want to think about the Dark Lord and his incomplete task right now. He wanted to pry the truth out of Potter. He could do that because he'd been so clever.

*I wonder if that's why I want to know about him so badly,* Draco thought as he eyed Potter in expectation. *It gives me something else to think about than my doom and takes me out of my own head.*

"Well?" Draco prompted, when it seemed Potter had chosen the sensible but limited course of

staying silent.

Potter lifted his head and stared at Draco. His fingers clenched in his sleeves. Then he sighed. "All right," he said. "But it's not my fault if you don't believe me."

Draco smiled. This sounded good.

"I woke up, and Madam Pomfrey was standing over me with this…expression." Potter shuddered and looked away from Draco, his eyes wide and haunted. "I recognized it. I never wanted to see it again, but I recognized it."

"What *was* it, Potter, for God's sake?" Draco burst out. A moment later, he blushed. Both his father and Professor Snape would have been ashamed of him for speaking like that, showing his emotions to someone whom he should convince of his indifference.

Potter didn't seem to have noticed. *That's because he's bloody stupid,* Draco thought in satisfaction. *I never knew there was something good about dealing with Gryffindors.*

"It was the expression that someone wears who's under the Imperius Curse," Potter whispered.

Draco became aware his mouth was hanging open, and shut it. He knew what *that* expression looked like, too—intimately. He'd had to perform the lesser two Unforgivables before the Dark Lord would let him take the Mark. And Potter was right, those slightly glazed eyes and relaxed, listening expression didn't look like anything else.

"Who could have put her under Imperius?" he whispered.

Potter drew himself up and gave him an impatient glance. "Well, really, Malfoy, who do you *think*?"

Draco shook his head. "The Dark Lord wouldn't bother with someone like her. If he comes too close to the Hogwarts wards, I think Dumbledore would detect him."

Potter sighed. "Yes, but what if someone is in the school with a mission to put Imperius on people? Someone else like you, a Death Eater? Madam Pomfrey would be a great one to get like that. She knows a lot about the students, and Voldemort—"

Draco hissed. The name seemed to make the scar on his arm burn hotter. But Potter, beyond a faint smirk, just went on.

"—must know that I'm in and out of the hospital wing all the time. So all he had to do was wait until I came in with some sickness or injury and have her hurt me. And I couldn't chance that word about the things I'm seeing and feeling would get back to him. *I* don't even know what those things are. I don't want *him* finding out."

Draco shivered, trying to think how he would feel if he was the one with a weakness exposed to the Dark Lord's probing eyes. Yes, anything could be excused as an attempt to defend against *that*.

*He bought it.*

Harry hadn't been sure that particular lie would work, although it was one he'd thought of over the summer if he had to explain why he was hiding things. Everyone was afraid of the Imperius Curse, and there were plenty of people in the first war who had been cursed or claimed they had, like Lucius Malfoy. Why shouldn't someone use it now in order to put people on Voldemort's side?

He didn't think he could have come up with it immediately. But now Malfoy was watching him with shadowed eyes and nodding slightly. He didn't look the way Hermione or Ron did when they didn't believe Harry's lies.

"I have to defend myself," Harry finished. "I didn't want to do it, but it was better than some other things I could have done."

Malfoy started smiling, for some reason. Harry reached down and gripped his wand. If Malfoy was about to show him what other things he needed to do and why, then Harry would have to cast a spell quickly.

"Now that I know one of your secrets," Malfoy said thoughtfully, "and you know one of mine, we're even."

"Good," Harry said, and nodded, and started for the door.

"Why are you leaving?" Malfoy had the gall to sound surprised.

Harry turned around and stared at him. "Because we're even, like you said," was all he could think of to mutter. "I won't betray your secret to anyone, you won't tell anyone about me Obliviating Madam Pomfrey, and everything's fine. What else could we have to say to one another?"

Malfoy lowered his eyelids over his eyes in a way that he probably thought made him look wise and mysterious. "I thought we could talk about the experiences we have that no one else in the school does, Potter," he drawled.

"There's whoever put Madam Pomfrey under the Imperius Curse," Harry pointed out hastily. Malfoy's words were probably a trick; Harry was supposed to agree, and then Malfoy would accuse him of forgetting about the mysterious other person in Hogwarts who was also on a mission for Voldemort.

Malfoy leaned forwards and stared at him. "Sometimes you seem so smart, and then you act

*stupid*," he said. "That other spy is hardly someone we can talk to."

Harry flushed. Yeah, he should have known that. If Malfoy bought his lie, he wouldn't go around questioning it so soon, and if he hadn't bought it, then Harry should have tried harder in the first place. He cleared his throat awkwardly. "All right, but why would you *want* to talk to me? I mean, you have Snape."

Malfoy said nothing, but gave him a slow smile and a shake of his head. Harry blinked. Malfoy looked so—*human* was the only thing Harry could think of to say, which was ridiculous, because he'd always been human.

Maybe *open* and *warm* and *relaxed* were better choices.

Harry's chest tightened in an odd way, as if he was holding his breath. He deliberately exhaled and shifted towards Malfoy, because he thought shifting towards the door would have been a bad idea right now, in front of someone who had reasons to suspect him.

"I want someone my own age to speak to." Malfoy sounded almost wistful. "All of my friends are cut off from me now, because I can't tell any of them the details. And if your friends understand what it's like to be close to the Dark Lord the way you are, I'll eat my hand." His eyes gleamed, inviting Harry to share in the joke.

Harry did the impossible, something he would never have dreamed of, something it would have given Ron a heart attack to see.

He smiled back.

Three of the bricks were out of the wall.

This was delicate, Legilimency on oneself, attacking a memory wall that had stood there so long it had practically become part of his mind. Severus already knew that he would not finish tonight. His hands were shaking and his legs trembled as though someone was shocking the muscles in them with Muggle electricity. He would have fallen long ago, except that he had had the foresight to seat himself on his bed so that he would not suffer such a loss of dignity.

But he remained determined to destroy it nonetheless. As the wall began to tumble, fragments of light and color and sound came through. Severus could not yet tell what the memory was about, but he could tell what *surrounded* it.

It had taken place in a pub, from the sounds, or some of it had. That only strengthened Severus's curiosity. He would have expected screams, if Albus had blocked his memory of a raid. Or there might have been the deep and deadly silence that tended to cover him when he was brewing experimental potions. Perhaps Albus had wanted him to forget that he had created a particularly deadly poison. He had not always approved of Severus's research.

*He likes to pretend that research can exist in isolation, that it is not done for a purpose,* Severus thought with a sneer as he drew back for another rush at the wall. *It disturbs him when other people will not let him pretend that.*

He charged.

It was not like a punch or a blow, the way that some books recommended destroying Memory Charms and which Severus considered responsible for pitiable cases like Lockhart's. This was a wind, a faint breeze that whispered along the wall, around it, and through the cracks in the mortar.

It might seem like nothing to someone who wasn't deeply acquainted with Legilimency. But the same people were liable to forget that it was wind that could wear down mountains and turn buildings into sand.

Another brick shivered, eroded, and fell. Severus could feel a face hovering there, waiting for him, the face of someone important to the memory. He "rose" slightly so that he could see through the gap.

Lily's face stared back.

Severus paused in shock, and the break in concentration knocked him back to the surface of his mind. He opened his eyes and found himself panting as though he had run a long race, his throat scorchingly dry. He reached for the water he had had standing ready on a table and sipped carefully, eyes shut.

Lily would have been alive at that time, of course. But she had already married Potter—Severus had been able to pinpoint the age of the wall more precisely as his destruction of it commenced—and had turned away from him. She would have had no reason to be with him, no reason to be on a raid, no reason to try and sneak into the Dark Lord's hiding places. Her face, and her *husband's,* were too well-known for them to play spy, and without Severus, the Order had not had a competent brewer who could make Polyjuice.

And yet, she was associated with the memory.

Severus ground his teeth. If he were younger and stupider, he would have gone back to destroying the wall, frantic to have the truth tonight.

But his skull already felt like a thin iron barrier around jostling, splashing jelly, and he stood a chance of *transforming* his brain into jelly if he kept at it. No, he would hurt himself if he tried again tonight. And it would take too much time to achieve the delicate trance that would let him use Legilimency on himself a second time if he was to wake for classes tomorrow.

He lay down and forced himself to shut his eyes. His heart wouldn't cease its excited gallop for long minutes, but that was as well. Sleep would come.

It did, but it brought with it odd dreams full of Lily's face, and Potter's, and his own.

And, over all the images, the maddened ringing of a bell that sounded like one of his nagging echoes of thought translated into audible form.

The next few days were some of the most confusing that Harry could remember.

Ron and Hermione were together, and fighting. Or fighting because they weren't together. Harry couldn't entirely make it out. He had known, in a vague sort of way, that Ron and Hermione liked each other, but he had also assumed that shyness would keep them from speaking about it until they were all sixty or seventy, so he hadn't thought their row was about that at first. And now it was, and Ron was *also* dating Lavender at the same time, or he wasn't and was just snogging her to make Hermione jealous.

Hermione told Harry that one evening when she seemed more in control of herself. They were sitting in front of the fire in the Gryffindor common room just after practice with Dumbledore's Army and she had her arms wrapped around herself, eyes big as she stared into the flames.

"It can't be real," she whispered. "Because why would he get involved with a bint like her otherwise?"

Harry opened his mouth to say that Lavender was pretty and he'd always heard she was a good kisser; apparently Seamus had briefly dated her last year.

Then he took a close, careful look at Hermione's face and shut his mouth again.

"But I don't understand why he keeps on with it," Hermione said. "Because he has to see by now that it isn't working."

"Er…right," Harry muttered, looking at Hermione's red cheeks, and then bent over his Potions homework again. The only bad thing about doing it now that Snape wasn't teaching the class anymore was that he kept wanting to look at the spells scribbled in the margins of the Half-Blood Prince's book instead of at the actual instructions. There was a spell labeled *For enemies* that Harry half-hoped Voldemort wouldn't know about. The Prince seemed to know lots of strange things, why not unusual spells?

"I'll go and tell him so," Hermione said, and got up and wandered out of the room.

Harry counted to ten under his breath. Shouting erupted before he got there.

So his friends were occupied, and sometimes they wanted to talk to Harry about it and sometimes they wanted to brood, but either way, neither of them seemed to notice the other confusing thing about the past few days: the attention Malfoy was paying him.

Malfoy had apparently meant it when he said the other night that they should talk to each other. He nodded to Harry every morning at breakfast, even if it was with a sneer, and usually tried to bump shoulders with him when they were walking to Potions or Defense. There hadn't been time for conversation, really, but Malfoy passed flying dragon notes constantly to him in front of Slughorn, who could be counted on not to notice when he had his head down a cauldron.

Mostly, the notes said things like *Blaise is a prat. He thinks it's an honor to be chosen to go on a mission for the Dark Lord and he has no idea what it really means*, or *I can't believe that Pansy gets uglier every day. She must have some sort of special cream she applies.*

Harry responded cautiously, with the kinds of ordinary words that seemed appropriate. He tried to keep the conversation focused on Malfoy instead of himself (which, since Malfoy was so self-absorbed he made Dudley look outgoing, wasn't difficult). He also tried to keep the doubts about the wisdom of this from the front of his mind.

After all, it really seemed that Malfoy *did* just need someone to talk to about things that troubled him, not someone to plot with.

And it kept Harry from thinking about things like why Snape watched him with a burning, brooding gaze now. He seemed to spend a lot of time in particular staring into Harry's eyes.

Draco grinned as he leaned against the wall outside the Great Hall. It had become a tradition to surprise Potter in the last few days. He always showed up in at least one place and during one time that the prat thought he wouldn't, and then walked and talked with him until Potter relaxed and stopped acting like Draco was about to cut his scar open.

Tonight it would be after dinner. Potter's friends hadn't even come to dinner, probably because Granger was sulking and Weasel was trying to recover from the spell she'd performed on him that stuck his tongue down his throat, backwards. So Potter strolled out alone, and it was the most natural thing in the world for Draco to fall into step beside him.

Potter started and then glared. Draco glanced over his shoulder just to make sure that no one had followed, but it was unusually early. He judged that they could get outside the castle, which was safer than staying inside, without being seen.

"Miss me?" he asked, and pursed his lips in a mock pout when Potter's glare sharpened.

"How can I miss you when I saw you not two hours ago?" Potter retorted, and shoved his shoulder.

Draco shoved back, and then Potter slammed an elbow, hard, into the skin under his ribs, and Draco had to punch back, and they ended up struggling together for several moments until they broke apart, panting. Potter had the odd ability to look good when hair was hanging in his eyes and his cheeks were flushed, Draco thought with some admiration. In fact, it was practically natural for him to look that way. Draco pictured the way he'd looked dressed up in fancy robes

for the Yule Ball two years ago, and snickered.

Potter scowled. "What are you laughing at?"

Draco shook his head. "It doesn't matter. Come on." And he turned and dashed down the corridor, knowing that Potter's instincts would inevitably compel him to follow.

They burst out through the doors onto the grounds and made for the Quidditch pitch. They had to avoid Hagrid, who was calling "Spot!"—undoubtedly the name of some creature of gigantic size and ferocious temperament—and two Hufflepuffs who seemed to think that tonight was the perfect night to come outside and snog. Finally they were in the Ravenclaw stands, and Draco flopped down on one of the seats. Potter hesitated, turned to look back at the castle and then up into the air as if just now realizing that he was alone with a Slytherin, and then shrugged and sat down next to Draco.

"I didn't bring you here to ambush you." Draco cocked his head at Potter. He knew he wasn't grinning like an idiot, because his mother had taught him better than that, but there was a shadow of a smile around his lips that he couldn't seem to get rid of.

"You never know," Potter muttered, but leaned forwards with his arms around his knees. "Why *did* we come out here?"

Draco took a deep breath. He knew what he wanted to discuss; he just wasn't sure that Potter would want to hold up his end of the conversation. But he'd been to the Room of Hidden Things again that afternoon for another hopeless try at fixing the stupid cabinet, and he'd received a letter from his mother with several blurred words, and trying to act calm and collected in front of the Slytherins, who knew nothing about it, was just too much.

*I'm only doing what's sensible,* Draco told himself defensively. *Father always said that you should find an outlet for your passions before they overwhelm you. He finds his in sneering at people like the Weasleys. Potter can be mine.*

"It's hard, working for him," he said slowly.

Potter snorted and pushed up his fringe. Draco thought that his scar looked redder than it normally did. "Try being *connected* to the bloody bastard."

"I am." Draco slapped his left arm and glared at Potter before he could think better of it.

Potter's eyes widened, and he let out a small breath, nibbling his lip. "Oh. I didn't think about that." He hunched his shoulders and looked down at his feet as if he was somehow counting his toes through his shoes, then looked back up. "Why did you agree to?"

"You really think I had a *choice*?" Draco shuddered and closed his eyes as he thought of that night. He didn't, often. The darkness was one thing, but the heat and the hatred and the nearness

of the Dark Lord as the Mark had burned into his arm was something else again. "Unless I wanted to die, but not everyone's a noble Gryffindor who would choose death before dishonor."

"I'm not sure I would, either." Potter shifted towards him. Draco heard him, but he didn't open his eyes and look. He wanted to be alone with his memories right now. Potter touched his shoulder, gingerly, as if he thought Draco might be hot. "Did—I mean, did your parents think it was for the best? Or did they try to stop you?"

"I think my mother was going to," Draco whispered. "She had some plan. But Aunt Bellatrix found out about it and betrayed her, and now the Dark Lord spends his time torturing her."

"Bellatrix," Potter whispered. "I have reason to hate her, too." His hand tightened, and he leaned closer. Draco looked up to see his eyes wide and intent behind his glasses.

"I'm sorry," Potter said.

"For putting my father in Azkaban?" Draco asked. He was in a mood to be nasty. He rubbed at his eyes and looked away. "Or for not *really* getting rid of him when you were a baby, so that he could come back and torture me and my parents?"

Potter flinched. Then he licked his lips with a loud smacking sound and said, "I'm just sorry. That's all." He hesitated, and then leaned nearer so that his shoulder touched Draco's the way it did when they were walking to Defense.

They sat there and watched the moon rise. Sometimes Potter shivered. The third time he did, Draco took out his wand and cast a Warming Charm. Potter gave a little gasp when it settled around him, then turned his head and eyed Draco.

"You always seem to forget that you're a wizard," Draco said flatly. "I don't."

Potter muttered something that sounded like "…try living until you're eleven years old…"

"What?"

Potter shook his head. "Nothing important. Not like what you said was important." He squeezed Draco's shoulder again, and fell silent.

Draco found that he was content for it to be so.

The last brick of the memory wall fell.

Severus saw what was to be seen, and heard what was to be heard.

Alcohol in his throat, and Lily's voice in his ears, offering apologies and accusations and demands for explanations.

The sheets beneath them, and the way Lily had cried out when she reached her climax, in what seemed to be surprise.

The way it had felt for *him*, the way it had never felt with anyone else.

How Lily had turned around in the morning, hair full of light and eyes full of guilt, and lifted her wand, and whispered, "This isn't the way I want to live. I'm sorry, Severus. *Obliviate*."

And the way the memories trembled and vanished at once behind the solid black wall of the charm, shutting away the very last sight he would ever have of Lily, and something he would never have wished to forget.

Severus opened his eyes and felt for sleep in the corners. But this was no dream.

##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### #####
##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### #####
##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### #####

Chapter: 14

Thank you again for all the reviews!

*Chapter Fourteen—Practice Makes Perfect*

"But I don't know what I should do," Ron said, for the seventeenth time in three minutes, or at least it felt like that to Harry. He sighed and stared into the fire, folding his hands beneath his chin. He was sprawled on the floor, and Harry thought he should have been relaxed, but instead he looked as though someone had told him he wasn't getting anything for Christmas. "Hermione or Lavender? It's a hard choice."

Harry contemplated tearing his hair out, and then decided there was a high chance that Ron wouldn't even notice. In the end, he took a deep breath and sat down near Ron, instead of going up to their room to study the spells from his Potions book the way he'd been planning to. "Look, mate," he said, and tried very, very hard to sound patient. "Which one do you really *like*? I didn't think you liked Lavender. I thought you were only trying to make Hermione jealous."

"Hmmm?" Ron looked over at him, blinking tragically. "I changed my mind."

Harry grimaced. He'd always thought Lavender giggled too much, and if Ron dated her for a long time, it would be hard to put up with her. But he didn't know exactly *why* Ron had changed his mind. Maybe it was a good reason. "Why?" he asked warily.

"She's a good kisser," Ron said. "*Loads* better than Hermione."

Harry stared at him. "Have you ever kissed Hermione?"

"No," Ron said. He stared at the fire again and sighed. Harry would have thought he'd be angry about this, but Ron had spent a lot of time angry in the last few weeks. Maybe he was enjoying the melancholy as a break from his hard work of fury.

Harry waited, but Ron didn't look at him or speak again. Harry was the one who had to say, carefully, "And you don't see the contradiction here?"

Ron groaned and put his hands over his ears. "Don't use big words on me, Harry. Hermione does that all the time, and it's annoying."

Harry rolled his eyes and rose to his feet. "I hope you figure it out, mate," he said, making for the stairs. *Not least because it will enable the rest of us to have some peace.*

Neville looked up when Harry stepped into their room; he was curled up on the bed with his Defense book, studying feverishly. "Did Ron tell you why he looks like that?" Neville asked.

Harry said, "Better not to ask." He dug out his Potions book and leaned against the pillow. "I wouldn't worry as much about that," he added, nodding to Neville's book. "You've already done half the spells that Snape's tried to teach us in the last week in the D.A, and you did them better than Snape could teach them."

"I know," Neville said, which surprised and pleased Harry. Neville would have denied the praise last year. "But I know that Snape's looking for any excuse to fail me, so I thought I should know about the theory, too." He paused thoughtfully, and then lowered his voice and went on. "And sometimes—sometimes I think it would be a good thing *to* surprise him and force him to compliment me, you know? He hates so many people that getting a sign of approval from him would be like getting a hundred points from McGonagall."

Harry raised his eyebrows. "I don't think that's going to happen, though, no matter how long we spend studying and training," he had to point out. "We're still Gryffindors."

Neville smiled. "I know. It's a silly fantasy. But I have to have those sometimes." He turned back to his book.

Harry thought about it as he opened the Half-Blood Prince's book. What would he do with Snape's approval if he had it? Would he really be that thrilled to get a single glance that had something like pride in it?

Then he pulled his thoughts up short and snorted so loudly Neville looked over briefly. *Right.* Snape's approval would mean something different to him, because Harry would have to think about what he would say if he knew that he'd slept with Harry's mum to conceive Harry. It was different. He would be horrified, and then he would think up ways to blame Harry for existing in

a whole different style than he thought up ways to blame Harry for existing right now.

Harry shook his head. There would always be hatred no matter what happened, so why should he hope for the same thing that Neville did?

In fact, that made it all the more imperative that he keep the secret, because his life would change into a living hell at Hogwarts as well as at Privet Drive if Snape learned it.

Determinedly, he started studying the spells that the Prince had scribbled in the margins again.

It seemed incredible that he had to get up, and teach class, and eat breakfast at the High Table with Albus and colleagues he despised, in a world that was so different from what it had been when he went to his rooms last night.

And yet, for it to be otherwise would mean that others knew about the memory, and his secret, and his rage.

And his pleasure.

Severus had never endured such conflicting emotions, and the conflict, not the strength of his passions, was what made it difficult to hold his face immobile when he was sitting in the Great Hall or teaching Defense classes full of incompetents. He had held back his anger and fear kneeling at the Dark Lord's feet before. He had managed to rein in his irritation with Potter for five years. He had endured the Marauders' taunting and still emerged on the other side, while two of them were dead now.

But he had never suffered such a maelstrom all at once, and what he would have *preferred* to do was sit at his desk and stare at the far wall until they subsided into a single pool that he could examine at his leisure.

Shock was the strongest. That it had happened, that he had never suspected it, that Lily would have come to him and slept with him even though they had both been drunk…

She had been there. She had shared a bed with him.

She had reached out to him.

That day when he had insulted her and thought he had severed their friendship forever was not the end, after all.

Severus had pictured his life before with a dramatic crack in the middle of it. There was his childhood, redeemed from blight into a narrow garden by Lily's presence, and there was the chasm, and on the other side of it his adulthood was barren and stony atonement. He had never known there was a bridge across the chasm, that Lily had inhabited both parts of his existence.

He had examined the memory carefully, and, drunk though they had been, he did not believe there was any angle from which he could accuse himself of rape. That had been the first conclusion. How could he not suspect himself, when he had been a Death Eater at the time?

But things had been different.

Things had always been different than he had thought. Because the memory had been blocked did not mean that it had not existed.

Students stumbled and flailed in front of him, were unable to block simple spells and (if they were Potter) did not practice Occlumency as well as they should, and still Severus was unable to come to the end of his shock.

But rage was not far beneath the surface of that emotion, and it was the rage that extended a hairline crack across his newly discovered bridge.

She had come to him. She had slept with him.

How dare she take herself, and the memory, from him?

She had done it because of James Potter. Severus knew that as well as he knew his own name. It was there in the way she had told him that she couldn't live like this just before she used the Memory Charm. She couldn't live with him because she was living with her husband. She couldn't sleep with him because she had decided that she should share James's bed, and James's bed only.

And the rage went deeper than that, extending poisonous black roots into the depths of his being.

He had been happy when he could think of Lily as virtuous, after her death, and himself as someone evil who needed to make up for hurting her. This did not lessen his guilt, but it did destroy that perfect image that had sustained him for so long.

How *dare* she do that?

Severus's idol had been smashed in front of his eyes, and he did not know what to do about it or where to turn next. At times he thought that he would have liked to preserve the memory of Lily unaltered, but then, it was through the actions of Lily herself that he had possessed that saintly image for so long.

There was no way to turn. There was no way out of the trap that he was scrambling in, no way to resist the changes that the memory inflicted on his life.

And mixed with the rage, flavoring it as surely as sugar could flavor a poison, was pleasure.

She had come to him, at least once. She had come *with* him, at least once. Severus knew what he

knew about human bodies from long observation of faces and muscles and the minutest expressions, and he knew what he had seen in Lily's eyes as she shuddered beneath him.

Had James still been alive, had Lily been alive, Severus never could have looked at her without remembering that. And he could not now look at his memories of her without adding that emotion silently to them.

All was changed. Severus felt as if he had spent most of his life in a box and had it break away from him suddenly in a rush and roar of glory and destruction.

He did not know how to deal with it, but he knew one thing was true. He could not speak of it to anyone else until he calmed his emotions and *decided* how to deal with it. Confession had worked for him only once in his life, when he first went to Albus and began to atone, and he would not change or challenge that record now.

"Potter! Wait up."

Potter turned around in front of Draco, his face pale, the corners of his mouth tucked down. Draco had already learnt that that meant he was feeling harassed.

He wondered if he should be noticing such things, and then reminded himself how transparent and on the surface Potter was. Draco would have seen things like this long ago if he had only looked.

"Where did you think you were going?" Draco asked, halting to walk beside him and not bothering to remove the accusatory tone from his voice. He knew Potter was vulnerable to it. It worked as well as ever; Potter's eyes softened and he turned his head away.

"I have a—meeting," he said. "I was supposed to be there five minutes ago, but I lost track of the time because I was reading." He rubbed his forehead and glanced sideways at Draco, as if those obviously incomplete and partial statements should make him back off.

"*You*," Draco said, stressing the word with a slow drawl because it fully deserved that, "have a meeting. At seven-o'clock at night. In a corridor on the seventh floor." He glanced around, ostentatiously pretending to examine the corners for people hiding in them. In reality, he knew they were in the corridor where the Room of Hidden Things was, but he was curious how closely Potter's lie and that circumstance were connected.

"*Fine*," Potter said, with a huff that Draco thought unnecessary. "It's the same group that we ran last year, when Umbridge wouldn't let us learn anything in Defense. I'm training a bunch of the students in different things, and some of the others are helping me. Ron and Hermione and Neville are quite good at it."

Draco reached up and clasped his head. "My brain is about to fall out of my ears with all the contradictions that you're handing me, Potter," he said. "*Longbottom* a good teacher? And you're

keeping up this group even though we finally have a competent Defense teacher who lets us learn things?"

"Most of the students don't learn anything in Snape's class," Potter said. His voice was so vicious that Draco looked up again in surprise, to find his face twisted. "Oh, sure, he teaches us the names of spells and the gestures, but he doesn't spend nearly enough time on individual curses and countercurses. He just assumes that everyone can learn as fast as he can and goes on. It's Potions all over again, except this time there are less instructions to follow."

Draco blinked. "But…you're good at Defense."

"What does that have to do with anything?" Potter gave him a sharp, exasperated look.

Draco shook his head. "Why are you so concerned about how the other students learn? You know that you're getting a good mark no matter what."

Potter made a faint gurgling sound in the back of his throat. Then he said, "Maybe my best friends aren't much fun right now, as obsessed with their love lives as they are, but they're a sight better than *you*." And he turned and passed quickly up and down the corridor, then seized the handle of the door that appeared and stepped into the room. Draco made a rush after him, but Potter shut the door behind him again, and it vanished.

Draco was left standing there with his hands hanging by his sides. Slowly, they curled into fists, and he turned away.

He'd *tried.* He'd been understanding of Potter's strangeness and talked to him about things that he never would have heard of otherwise and hadn't exposed his secret to anyone else, even though he could have got Potter in *legal* trouble for using a Memory Charm on Madam Pomfrey. And then Potter walked away from him with an expression of disgust and wouldn't even tell him what he'd done wrong.

*I should have known better than to try and be friends with a Gryffindor.*

Except that Draco had begun to know himself a little better—a very little—after all the lies he'd told about how he didn't want help or someone to confide in when his mission for the Dark Lord was a secret, and he recognized this for another lie. He would go back to Potter, because he needed a friend and because Potter was the best outlet he had and because he still wanted to be with him.

It was painful, and as hard as the stone under his feet as he walked slowly up the corridor in the direction of the stairs. But it was true.

"What's the matter with you, Harry? I've never seen you as distracted as you are tonight."

Harry glanced up with a faint smile as Ginny sat down next to him. He'd stepped back from the

mock duels the D.A. was holding because he'd almost hit Neville with a curse that had way too much power behind it, and he'd spent the last few minutes sitting in a corner and breathing slowly. He hadn't known Ginny would come over and talk to him about it, but then, Ron and Hermione were still occupied in hissing at each other and trying to cast spells on each other that the other one couldn't attribute to them.

"Tired," Harry said. "The professors all seem to think that *this* is our N.E.W.T. year."

"Bollocks," Ginny said.

Harry stared at her with his mouth open. Ginny rolled her eyes. "You don't look tired," she said. "You look upset. You look the way you get when you think you need to rescue someone and you don't know what to do. You had—" She seemed to decide better on whatever she was going to say, and Harry was grateful, because he thought it would have been a reference to Sirius, and he couldn't stand that. "I mean, I know that you're not just exhausted with studying. Who are you trying to save? I think my brother and Hermione will just have to go rushing down the slope until they hit the tree at the bottom."

Harry chuckled weakly, more concerned with the idea that Ginny could read him so well. He hadn't known that, and he disliked it. If she was paying that much attention to him, what else would she notice? That his face underwent small changes from time to time when the glamour began fading, for instance?

The thought provoked an immediate, intense surge of panic, worse than it had been near the beginning of the year. Harry swallowed.

*I can never let anyone know. Too many people have come close.*

Harry wrenched his mind away from that thought and focused it on the current problem. Just because he was obsessed with the fact that James Potter hadn't given him life (although he was still Harry's dad in all the ways that mattered) didn't mean everyone was.

But he couldn't exactly tell Ginny about the current problem, either. Not without betraying Malfoy and what Harry had learned about him.

*And why does this bother you? You heard what he said before you came in here. He still acts as though everything's fine as long as nothing happens to* him*, personally. He's still as much of a cold-blooded heartless bastard as he ever was. I don't know why I keep listening to him and expecting something different.*

Harry sighed. He felt as if he were drowning, sometimes, and needed someone to throw him a rope. But his own decisions had made that impossible.

He glanced up and realized that Ginny was still watching him with a worried frown. He smiled as broadly as he could, considering everything else preying on his mind. "I can't tell you right

now," he said quietly, "because of a promise I made to Dumbledore." The lie walked off his tongue easily. It was the only name he could think of that would get Ginny to back off. "When I *can*, I promise I will."

Ginny relaxed. "Well, if Dumbledore knows about it, then I'm sure he can give you good advice," she said, and patted his arm before going to duel with a younger Hufflepuff girl who didn't have a partner.

Harry rubbed his forehead. He'd practiced his lies for so long because he had been sure that someone would confront him otherwise and he'd have no option but silence, blurting out the truth, or saying something profoundly stupid and unbelievable. But he hadn't practiced for this situation, and it had still worked.

*Maybe practicing you some lies makes you better at others.*

For a minute, he worried about that. Where would he stop, if he became really good at it? Would he start lying the way Minister Fudge and Umbridge had lied despite all the evidence they had last year that Voldemort was back?

He shrugged and stood up. The problem was that he would just have to keep asking those questions in his head and hoping that he found an answer somewhere, because he had no one else to ask.

The world had changed. But Severus, when he began to climb at last out of the pit of revelations into which his restored memory had cast him, began to realize that not everything around him had.

His students were still idiots, and had noticed no change in his manner. Albus was still researching into Dark artifacts and refusing to confess the whole of his plan to Severus. Draco still needed help, and a plan to rescue his mother from the Dark Lord.

Potter was still unexpectedly strong and talented.

Severus watched him now, when they dueled and when they practiced Occlumency—and Potter had managed to subdue a little, a very little, of the ceaseless chatter of his mind—and when they were in class together. Potter had more of Lily than her eyes. He had her chin, Severus realized, and her stubborn way of looking at a book or a new spell as if she was about to dive into it. Seeing Lily in his head, even though he remembered the way her face looked perfectly well, seemed to have startled Severus into a new awareness. Yes, there was something of Lily in her son.

*Including a propensity to using Memory Charms,* Severus thought, but since the boy had finally showed some signs, with that, of developing the paranoid instincts that he needed to have, Severus was not disposed to interfere.

He did notice that things had changed between Potter and Draco, settling into a frozen coolness. A bit of careful Legilimency revealed the cause of the quarrel, and he could have laughed aloud, as nothing since the crumbling of the memory wall had made him laugh. Draco had acted like Draco, and Potter had been offended.

That was a good thing, the realization that Potter was still his father's son in every way that mattered. Lily's stubbornness in him was twisted and melted and reforged as insolent Gryffindor pride that could not tolerate the slightest ambiguity in phrasing or morals, or even the slip of a tongue.

But the row, for whatever reason, was making Draco miserable, and he might make slips in his melancholy. Potter was also looking a bit too obviously at Draco in class, his nostrils pinched, and he would make a scene soon that would collect suspicious eyes.

It was for these reasons, and others, that Severus decided he would begin to lay out his plan to rescue Narcissa. He himself could use the distraction. He needed to think about something other than shuddering pleasure and a sunlit bed and Lily's voice whispering an apology.

It was the simplest thing in the world to give both boys detention in a single class. Draco's lack of attention to anything but his own affairs and determined *in*attention to Potter made him slip up quickly. Potter was still arrogant and would raise mocking eyes to Severus's face after the successful completion of a spell; if Severus chose to assign a detention rather than take points for disrespect, then that was his prerogative.

Potter hesitated when he stepped through Severus's office door for what he doubtless thought was a regular Occlumency lesson and found Draco there. "Sir?" he asked, his hand on his wand in his robe pocket. "Is something the matter?"

Severus spoke in a brisk and business-like tone. Too much indulgence of emotion was not what he needed right now, after the week he had had. "I have collected my thoughts, and I mean to begin the rescue of Narcissa Malfoy from the Dark Lord's hold this weekend."

Draco immediately looked more hopeful, of course, and Potter straightened his shoulders and threw his head back. Mention of a rescue would do that to him.

*It was the way Lily looked when—*

Severus turned his thoughts deftly aside. It had been easy enough to pass years without connecting Lily and her son together in his mind. He would learn to do it again.

"Tell me, Potter," he said, "is it true that Peter Pettigrew owes you a life-debt?"

##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### #####
##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### #####
##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### #####

Chapter: 15

Thank you again for all the reviews!

*Chapter Fifteen—Plans Made to Be Broken*

Harry could feel his eyes widen and the spit dry in his throat. He blinked for several moments at Snape without being able to think of anything he could say.

"Such a shame that the Pride of Gryffindor cannot make them proud with speeches as well." Snape folded his arms and raised an eyebrow. "It was a simple question, Potter. If you falter on this, I cannot imagine how we are supposed to let you be part of the rescue."

Clashing thoughts rebounded in Harry's head.

*They want me to be part of it?*

*This is exactly why I would never be able to trust Snape. He can't praise me honestly. He can't praise anyone honestly who isn't a Slytherin. He would hate and despise me even more if he knew that I'd managed to lie to him and his supremacy was no longer complete.*

Strangely, the mere thought of how horrible Snape's reaction to him could be, the even *worse* things Snape could do and say to him that he'd feared for so long, helped steady Harry. He found himself sitting up and giving Snape a nasty smile.

"I do have that life-debt, sir," he said. "The question is, why should I let you have it?"

Snape and Malfoy exchanged a glance. Harry didn't try to understand it. He surmised it was another "Gryffindors are such fools" glances, and he'd already had enough of them to last a lifetime. He folded his arms and waited.

"I believe," said Snape at last, with such caution that you'd have thought he was confessing a state secret to somebody, "that only such a strong compulsion as a life-debt would permit us to force one of the Death Eaters to let us pass the enchanted boundaries of the Dark Lord's safehouses."

Harry knew better than to look intimidated, though he did wonder how Snape could speak in such long sentences without pausing to rest his breath. "Why can't you simply get us inside, sir? I know you have ways." He wasn't sure how much Malfoy knew about Snape and the Death Eaters, so he kept that quiet.

"Those ways are no longer widely available to me," Snape said, even more carefully. He gave Harry another baleful glare. Harry raised his eyebrow and sat there being unimpressed until

Snape glanced away. "I would prefer to have the surety of someone who must sacrifice his life for us if he wishes to be free of the claim on his magic."

"And I wouldn't," Harry retorted. "Wormtail's a coward, sir, plain and simple. What's to keep him from getting so afraid that he betrays us to Voldemort?"

Malfoy caught his breath. Harry couldn't believe he'd been quiet so long, and shot him a curious look. Snape glared at him and covered his left arm with one hand, as if the Dark Mark was a living thing that could know they were talking about it.

"I will not have you speak that name as we make our plans, Potter," he says.

Harry just shrugged, and had some satisfaction in seeing Snape's eyes get even darker with anger.

"I will have your promise of that before I permit you to be involved in this rescue," Snape said in a voice that he probably imagined made him sound like a deadly snake and really only made him sound like he had a bad cough.

Harry hesitated. On the one hand, he didn't want to give up saying Voldemort's name. What if Snape never let him start again? That would be just like him.

On the other hand, he did want to be involved in this. It was the only way he could think of to show Malfoy that he still felt sorry for him and wanted to help without looking like he thought Malfoy's opinions about blood traitors and Muggleborns were all right.

He nodded.

"Speak the promise," Snape told him.

*God, he would be an awful father. Always making sure there are no loopholes that you can wriggle out of.* Harry knew that he couldn't have that. The Dursleys always left him some leeway because they simply didn't care enough about him to restrict everything he could do.

*Thanks for keeping it from him, Mum.*

He met Snape's eyes and said, "All right, I promise I'll call him something else." Snape nodded shallowly, and Harry glanced over at Malfoy to see how he would take it. He was surprised to find that the other boy's eyes were wide with what looked like relief.

*I don't understand. It's just a name. If Voldemort could hear you when you said it or something, then Dumbledore would have told me.*

"Now we must consider how we are to enter Malfoy Manor," Snape said. "Since Lucius is in prison and the Dark Lord shows no signs of breaking him out, and since Narcissa is manifestly unable to help us, that leaves only one candidate." He turned and looked at Malfoy.

Draco lifted his head. He hoped that he appeared calm and composed and adult, and he knew that he probably looked none of those things.

*But you're the one who's going to rescue your mother. And it's not as though this is a test about something you don't know. How many times has Father shown you the secret doors and passages?*

Draco winced when he thought that Lucius might have shown the Dark Lord those doors and passages, too. But he would have to hope that hadn't happened. He said quietly, "I know a way to get us across the grounds and into the house, sir. But the Dark Lord has wards around the walls that would detect us if we Apparated in."

"I do not propose to Apparate the entire way," Professor Snape said, with all the coolness of tone that Draco lacked and wished he had. "I wish to make sure what options we do *not* have, but I never expected Apparition to be one of them. I assume that all Floo connections are closed and monitored?"

Draco nodded. "Grandfather Abraxas came up with a spell that links all the fireplaces together and puts them under control of the Lord of the manor, and my father gave that control to the Dark Lord before he went to prison." *He probably thought it was a good idea at the time,* he thought bitterly. On the other hand, if his father hadn't done that, the only other option would have been to pass it to Draco, and then the Dark Lord would just have forced him to give it up anyway. Lucius had chosen the option that left him and his family with some dignity.

"No Flooing." Professor Snape drew his fingers carefully together. "How well-watched are the Manor's grounds and the land immediately around it? How well-watched are the skies?"

Draco blinked. *Does he mean to go in on brooms? I thought he didn't fly well.* "There are Death Eaters who watch all of them," he said obediently. "At least two for each quadrant of the Manor grounds, or there were at the beginning of summer. The Dark Lord could have changed that now."

Professor Snape nodded to him, as if commending his good sense. Draco sat up straighter and couldn't help giving Potter a proud little glance. *See? Someone respects me. You can, too.*

Potter could have looked at him. He was watching Snape instead, with his forehead so wrinkled that Draco almost lost the scar among all the folds.

He snorted quietly and faced Professor Snape. "There were a few guards beyond the walls, but not many. There are some Muggles who travel past, and the Dark Lord didn't want to attract their attention. You know that most of the Death Eaters can't be trusted on their own, sir," he added.

Professor Snape nodded. "And watching the skies?"

"I only saw some of them fly up sometimes," Draco said. "Never very regularly. But maybe he's changed that, too, since I've been home." He had to blink and swallow when he thought about that. *Home*, but it no longer felt that way. Now it was the house where the Dark Lord lived and his mother was tortured.

"Then I propose to Apparate as close as we can, before we fly," said Professor Snape. "It is the best way to approach unobserved. We will have contacted Pettigrew before this time and arranged to have him meet us outside the wards. He will conduct us inside—and he will forfeit more than his life if he betrays us, Potter," he added. He must have seen Potter's mouth open out of the corner of his eyes, just the way Draco had.

Potter shook his head, a stubborn light in his eyes. "He betrayed my parents because he was more afraid of Volde—of the Bastard Who Won't Die than he was of betraying his friends, sir. How can we be sure that he won't do that again? Especially if *he's* there?"

Draco blinked. *What? I thought it was Sirius Black who betrayed his parents.* He'd heard rumors to the contrary, but he'd never believed them. Pettigrew's rat Animagus form seemed to be the sole reason he was in the Death Eaters' ranks.

"I have the means to make sure that he does not," Professor Snape said, and a ghastly smile broke across his face. Draco, who knew it was meant for their enemies, smiled back. Potter seemed less sure and stared for a few minutes before he slowly nodded.

"All right," he said. "And will he tell us how to get Mrs. Malfoy out, too? Or will we have to do something else to convince her to come with us?" He glanced at Draco.

"*Mister* Malfoy will do the convincing," Professor Snape said. "She cares for his life more than her own. She will come with us."

Potter looked as if he thought that no Slytherin could ever care for someone's life before their own, but he nodded again.

Then he asked a question Draco had not expected. He supposed it was good to be reminded that Gryffindors were capable of the startling once in a while, but that didn't make up for the surprise that raced through him like a flicker of fire.

"Are you going to tell Professor Dumbledore about this, sir?"

Professor Snape gave another smile, or at least Draco could have called it that if he was feeling generous. Draco thought it was more like just parting his lips and happening to show his teeth.

"He has his means of learning about such endeavors," Professor Snape said coolly. "I think we will leave him to use those means."

Draco smiled again. Potter gulped as if wondering what he'd got himself into, but nodded yet

again.

*I wish he would nod at me like that,* Draco thought suddenly. *He doesn't respect Snape, so he can't be listening just because he's a teacher. If he can accept the words of someone who's the Head of Slytherin and keeps torturing him, why can't he believe someone who hurts him a little bit sometimes?*

Draco frowned. He would have an answer to that question, and soon.

"It will take perhaps a week for me to contact Pettigrew and arrange matters so that we can depart the school without attracting suspicion," Professor Snape was saying. "Have your brooms always ready to leave at a moment's notice."

"Yes, sir," Draco and Potter said, both at once. Potter gave Draco a suspicious glance, as if he thought echoing his words was such a grand treat that Draco had done it on purpose.

Draco decided that he would do something different, though. He smiled.

Potter jolted back in his chair and turned his head carefully away. When Professor Snape dismissed him, he practically ran down the corridor and wouldn't wait even though Draco risked a low call after him.

*Gryffindors,* Draco thought in disgust as he trekked back to the Slytherin common room. *Who can understand them?*

Severus's letter to Peter was a masterpiece. Full of soft, vague, threatening hints about what would happen if the life-debt was not fulfilled, and yet never saying those words in such a manner that Peter could *confirm* what would happen, it made Severus feel better than anything had done since he discovered Lily's complicity in torturing him. He watched the owl wing away with the parchment, and a deep relaxation settled into him.

He had made it even more believable by telling Peter that he was willing to help Potter with this because he was Lily's son.

*Lily's son.*

It was an impossible observation to escape since uncovering the memory had brought her back to the surface of his mind. Potter had some of her expressions, her impulsiveness, her ability to hold grudges. Severus sometimes watched him in the Great Hall during the evening and even saw her in the way that the boy picked up a fork or flicked a piece of egg at the back of his friends' heads.

*That was going too far. Lily would not have done something like that.*

But then he remembered times she had participated in food fights with the rest of Gryffindor House and he had watched her with uneasy fascination from the Slytherin table, wondering why

she would do something so undignified, something so different from the playfulness they shared when they were children. It was one thing to have fun and another to have fun in a way that was so *meaningless.* Food fights could not hone her magic, they could not make her stronger or faster, and they earned her annoyance that might come out in pranks later, resulting in the loss of her dignity. Why should she do such a thing?

He had suppressed those memories, and with the help of no outside force, no Memory Charm. They had happened. But he had pretended to himself that they did not, and learned to see Lily as perfect.

He had needed that, perhaps, in the first years after the war, when he could not stand to think that of his actions in other terms than pure guilt. He had condemned someone beautiful and blameless to death, and that her son had survived her was not enough. He had never seen the boy, then. How could he think that a self-sacrificial death—which he had no doubt it was—or a squalling baby was any proper memento of her?

It had seemed that only building a shrine to her in his soul would be. And so he had done, though without any consciousness that he was idealizing her. He would have said, if anyone had the temerity to ask him and the importance to him not to be blown to pieces on the instant, that he had remembered her as she was, as the others would not whose tongues and heads were full of James.

No matter how carefully he walked, no matter what direction his thoughts turned, he stepped on pieces of his own shattered idols.

He told himself to pluck the only good fruit of his speculations, the fact that he noticed more about Potter than he used to now, and give up the rest. It was barren and bitter.

He had wandered in a wasteland for the last fifteen years. Why should he not be able to bear that? Why should he care that his one spring of sweet water had been poisoned? If he were truly strong, he would long since have become accustomed to going without.

Harry leaned over the Prince's book and moved his lips silently as he repeated the incantation. The problem was that he couldn't *test* it, because he had no idea what it would do except that it was a spell for enemies, and so there was no one here that he would actually want to use it on.

*Even Malfoy?*

Harry sighed and slammed the book shut. He knew the incantation well enough by now to have memorized it, and he really wanted the time to think about Malfoy undisturbed.

Miraculously, it looked as though he'd have it. Neville was out of the room for the night, watching a special Herbology project that Professor Sprout wanted him to supervise in one of the greenhouses. Seamus had vanished as he tended to do lately—Harry thought he had a girlfriend in one of the other Houses—and Dean was out with Ginny.

Harry hadn't seen Ron since dinner, and that had been a brief glimpse. He'd rushed past Harry with green tentacles growing down over his ears in place of hair. He'd been headed for the hospital wing.

Harry rolled his eyes as he turned over on his back to stare up at the canopy. He didn't know what to do about Hermione and Ron. Probably just wait until they got their jealousy out of their systems and finally got together.

His mind wandered back to Malfoy. The idiot. The suffering idiot. Harry didn't know what he would do if his mother was alive and a prisoner of Voldemort.

*I would have probably gone to rescue her immediately.*

But Malfoy didn't have experience in acting alone on a dangerous mission. (He'd done a horrible job of keeping up with his secret mission in the Room of Requirement, in Harry's opinion). He wasn't brave. He was talented in Defense, reasonably, but he didn't have the command of spells that Harry was beginning to realize he did. What could he have done?

A weird warm, sloshy feeling began in Harry's stomach. He poked the muscles there for a moment and wondered if he'd eaten too much pudding after dinner.

Was he feeling *protective* of Malfoy?

But no matter how long he lay there telling himself it was ridiculous, he knew what he felt. Yes, he was protective of Malfoy. He was such a *git*. He didn't know the right way to do anything when it came to fighting Voldemort. But he had to do it because he had to rescue his mum. Harry could just picture him screwing up his eyes and charging into battle, hoping it all worked out somehow.

Harry shook his head. Of course it wouldn't work out. So he would come along and make sure Malfoy and his mum got out of the Manor safely. Snape would be there, too, but somehow Harry thought the real work would fall to him. Probably because Snape would be too busy lying to Death Eaters and intimidating Pettigrew, and Harry couldn't imagine Malfoy doing anything when he was so worried about his mother.

*There. That's why I feel protective. I have to be or the rescue mission won't go right.*

Maybe it was more than that, but Harry didn't intend to think about it anymore. Malfoy had occupied more than his fair share of Harry's thoughts this evening. He flipped around and picked his book up again. There were other incantations he wanted to memorize before they left.

Potter was being *nice* to him.

Draco couldn't believe it at first. But Potter lingered after Defense. Draco thought he simply

wanted to speak to Professor Snape—it made sense that they would coordinate the spells they would use on the journey—but instead Potter fell into step beside *him* when he came out.

Draco glanced down the corridor nervously, but he couldn't see any other hiding, giggling Gryffindors. Then he looked up, but Peeves wasn't waiting ready to dump a water balloon on him, either.

He glared at Potter.

"Can't someone apologize without you looking as if you wanted a wall to fall on them?" Potter muttered out of the side of his mouth.

Draco hated the undignified way his mouth fell open, but he dared any Slytherin not to react that way when Harry Pottered said that to *them.*

"I don't like everything about you," Potter said. "But I like enough that I should have been less hasty when I judged you."

Draco peered into his eyes, trying to see if his pupils were dilated. He knew some potions that would make people react like this.

Potter blinked, ruining Draco's view of his pupils. "What are you doing?"

He sounded offended. Draco didn't want him to feel like that and turn away again. He hastily dipped his head and muttered, "I accept your apology." He hesitated, then realized that Potter might turn away thinking that had been enough and it was up to him to make sure Potter stayed around. "Are you—do you want to talk after dinner? Can you get away?" Potter's little friends hadn't been noticing much of what he did lately, but that could change at any time.

Potter smiled slightly. "Yeah. Where should we meet?"

Draco thought about that, while simultaneously checking over his shoulder to make sure no one was watching them from the Defense classroom. "What about the room where you told me about Pomfrey? There doesn't seem to be anyone there most of the time. And it's a little cold to meet on the Quidditch pitch."

"Have you forgotten that you're a wizard?" Potter teased him, the way Draco had when he hadn't cast a Warming Charm. "I'll see you there at six."

He left before Draco could object about the time. But Draco was smiling as he went back to the Slytherin common room.

*You shouldn't let your desire for his trust control you,* his father's voice warned gravely in his head. *When you start to value your outlet more than the situation that occasions the need for that outlet, then you are becoming its slave.*

Draco shook his head and sat down on his bed when he got into the room, closing his eyes. He'd had a headache on the way to Defense, but it was gone now, as if Potter's words were a potion.

*I won't become a slave to it. If it ever turns out that it would be to my advantage to betray Potter, then I'll do it.*

*But the advantage would have to be enormous. I like this. I like talking to him.*

*I like it.*

Severus took the letter from the owl that had flown to him at the Head Table. He recognized the scrawl on the outside of the envelope, though not the bird; the Death Eaters were not so stupid as to use owls with unusual size or markings to deliver messages.

*At least, they are not so stupid after several of the Dark Lord's admonitions,* Severus thought as he tucked the letter into his pocket. Pettigrew had taken the bait. Severus would have to wait to examine the message until after dinner, and thus to tell Potter and Draco whether they should be ready to move or not.

"A letter from an admirer, Severus?" asked Trelawney, hiccupping gently. The abominable woman appeared to be drunk again. "You *must* let us see it."

Severus quelled her with no more than a glance, but stood up and left the table soon after. He had eaten enough—he never ate much; that presented less opportunity for someone to slip a poison or potion into his food—and he wished to be sure of Pettigrew.

He was glad he had not waited when he saw the words at the top of the parchment.

*It must be tonight.*

Severus turned swiftly to summon Potter and Draco.

##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### #####
##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### #####
##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### #####

Chapter: 16

Thank you again for all the reviews!

*Chapter Sixteen—Closing In*

"Take hold of my arm."

That was the only warning Harry had before the world vanished around them. His skin crawled as he was compressed through a tube and his breath seemed to freeze in his lungs. Then he was out in the open again and wheezing gratefully.

*I hate Side-Along Apparition,* he thought, as he looked quickly around. They stood in some dark place with absolute blackness to either side and pale grey above. Harry thought the black was hills and the grey the night sky. There was springy grass underfoot that pressed back when he pressed on it. When he turned back, he saw that Snape had drawn his wand and cast *Lumos*, so Harry could make out the three brooms the professor pulled out and resized.

And Malfoy, who was so pale that he looked as if he would faint.

Harry gave him a reassuring smile. They hadn't got to meet before Snape burst in and told them they had to be ready to go to Malfoy Manor. Harry wished they had. Perhaps Malfoy would have some more confidence then.

Malfoy straightened up and took a deep breath when he saw Harry looking at him. Harry nodded encouragingly, then quickly snapped a hand up to take the Firebolt that Snape tossed at him. Harry swung a leg over it and stood waiting. He would have flown up immediately, but he didn't know what direction they were going or how far away Malfoy Manor was.

"Be as quiet as you can." Snape spat the words like spikes as he handed Malfoy his Nimbus, his head turning so that his eyes fixed on Harry. "I will Disillusion us. In addition, I have spells that will tell us if Muggle technology has managed to detect us despite the Disillusionment. If you see a green light blaze from my wand, you are to dive *at once* and find a hiding place in the nearest group of trees. Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir," Malfoy whispered. His voice squeaked.

Harry nodded. He could wish Snape had sounded a little less authoritarian; Harry had been on these kinds of expeditions before and knew what to do. But Malfoy would probably have been angry if he caught Snape treating him differently than Harry.

"Fly."

Just that single command, and Snape jerked ahead into the darkness. Harry flew up beside him, then hovered a moment to make sure Malfoy got off the ground safely. Malfoy gave him a dirty look, which Harry met with a smile.

And then they were soaring through the clouds, navigating by the dull light Snape kept on his wand, flying high so that they wouldn't have to dodge tree branches and the tops of buildings. Harry shivered absently. Then he remembered what Malfoy had said to him that night they met on the Quidditch pitch and smiled. He cast a Warming Charm, and after that flew in comfort through the clinging mist and the whistling wind that followed them at this height.

By the moon, Harry thought they flew southwest for about ten minutes. Then Snape said, "Down," and they began to swoop.

Harry leaned forwards on his broom and looked out keenly, trying to use the same senses that let him feel the Bludgers coming in a match before he could actually see them. There might be Death Eaters guarding their Lord's stronghold from the skies.

But whether because Wormtail had got the guards out of the way or for some other reason, they landed safely on the ground without encountering anyone. Snape swung off his broom in a single smooth motion and strode forwards. Harry hastily shrank his broom and trotted after him. He could hear Malfoy grunting and cursing as he did the same thing. Harry rolled his eyes over the amount of noise.

Sure, he tripped a few times over holes in the grass as he got to the place where Snape was waiting, but that was nothing compared to how Malfoy moaned and groaned. Harry would have to remember to tell him that when they were back at school.

"Snape?"

The voice set Harry's teeth on edge, and it came out of the darkness just ahead. He made himself stand still instead of bolting ahead to set Wormtail on fire and blame him for Sirius's time in Azkaban the way he wanted to. He hoped Wormtail could feel his glare, though.

"Pettigrew." Snape sounded the way he did when he was looking at a cauldron Neville had blown up. Harry reckoned it was also his Death Eater voice. "*Adigo veneficium tuum debitoni.*"

Wormtail screamed. His voice soared to a high, thin noise that went through Harry's head like a drill. He swayed, holding his temples. Someone supported him from the side, and Harry leaned on the arm without thought, knowing it must be Malfoy, because Snape would never do something like that.

"Now you will not betray us," Snape continued in an inexorable voice that made Uncle Vernon's orders look weak, "or the life-debt will turn your own magic against you as punishment. Show us the way into the Manor."

"I would—I would—" Wormtail sounded as if he was panting. Harry couldn't blame him. "I would have shown you the way without it, Snape," he whispered at last.

"Forgive me for not trusting one who made his name by treachery," Snape sneered.

Silence for a minute. Harry was just afraid that Wormtail had decided he wasn't going to do it when he hissed, "Come," and Harry saw a shadow move in the light of Snape's wand as Wormtail scuttled ahead of them.

Snape led the way again. Harry went after him, shuddering and trying to tell himself that people had to do painful things to other people in war.

Malfoy walked right beside him, shoulder leaning against shoulder.

Draco had to shut his eyes when they passed through the wards that surrounded the Manor—Pettigrew doing something that made them blink out for a few seconds and then return—and across the grounds.

He knew those bushes, quiet and sullen now but blooming with brilliant red flowers in the summer. He knew those pools, serene and silver under the moonlight. He even knew the peacocks that saw them coming and fled with a startled squawk, their white feathers looking greenish-yellow in the light of the *Lumos* charm that guided them.

This was his home.

*It* was *your home.*

He was grateful in ways that words could never explain for how Potter kept in lockstep with him, shoulder solidly planted against his, though he knew in the back of his brain that Potter was probably just as frightened as he was and just as needy. The gratitude let him, by the time they reached the wall of the Manor and Professor Snape turned around to look at him with expectant eyes, calm down and fight off the panic attack that had been building ever since Professor Snape found them and herded them beyond the Hogwarts grounds so he could Apparate.

"The door, Draco?" the professor prompted him, as if he might not remember.

Draco stepped forwards. He hated revealing the door to Pettigrew, but it wasn't as though he could use it; it responded to those of Malfoy blood only. Draco traced his finger along the carving of a rose in a section of wall that abounded in roses, and the rock reached out a small silver needle and tasted his blood through his fingertip. He hoped he hid his wince. It was too small a pain to make him comfortable showing weakness in front of his audience.

The needle sank into the wall again, and the door groaned open. Draco nodded to Professor Snape. "The tunnel comes out at the top of a staircase that leads down to the ground floor," he muttered.

"Good." Professor Snape turned and looked at Pettigrew, who kept giving him looks of mixed fear and hatred. Draco didn't mind that as long as the fear stayed more powerful than the hatred. "Where are they keeping the boy's mother, Pettigrew?"

Draco stiffened, but reminded himself that they might be in trouble if Pettigrew thought Professor Snape cared about his mother in any way. Referring to her that way instead of by name or even as "Mrs. Malfoy" seemed to distance him.

"This way," Pettigrew whispered. In the light of the Manor, he looked even shabbier and dirtier than Draco remembered, though part of that might be the facts he knew about him now. Pettigrew scuttled into the tunnel, and Professor Snape followed. Potter practically hovered at Draco's shoulder as they walked in Snape's wake.

*He doesn't need to do that,* Draco thought in irritation. *I can take care of myself.* But a small warm glow lingered in his chest anyway.

They easily avoided the few Death Eaters they saw in the main part of the house. When Snape asked Pettigrew why, in a voice that promised consequences if he didn't answer, Pettigrew whimpered and whispered, "Raid night. They're all out on raids."

Potter's step faltered next to him. Draco bumped Potter's shoulder with his, though he didn't dare look around. The less they gave Pettigrew to notice and remember, the better.

He could still hear Potter grinding his teeth, though. Draco rolled his eyes. *Honestly, the chances of the Weasleys being attacked are small, since they're a pure-blood family. And Potter doesn't know many other people. Why does he care what the Death Eaters do, as long as people he loves don't die?*

Draco was afraid at first that Pettigrew was guiding them to the dungeons, but Pettigrew led them through the most elaborate dining room, his father's study, two small rooms that were kept mostly to show off portraits of ancestors, a long corridor that had been built for no reason Draco could discern, and then two bedrooms kept for company before he halted in front of a smooth, polished wooden door. Draco knew it led to a room usually used for exotic pets when the Malfoys had them, and his stomach churned. But Professor Snape turned to him with a perfectly calm expression.

"Mr. Malfoy, if you would confirm?"

Draco stepped forwards and laid a hand on the door, concentrating fiercely on the spell Professor Snape had suggested he should look up in anticipation of this night. He stumbled over the incantation the first time and had to pause and think about it again.

Though he would never admit it, Potter's warm, brief touch to the small of his back helped enormously.

Draco whispered the spell again and felt a breath of warm air travel past his ear. It blew through the door and returned a moment later, striking his skull. When Draco shut his eyes, he got a clear picture of the room beyond the door. It would only work for someone related by blood to a prisoner, but was useful if you could master it, Professor Snape had said.

His mother lay on a bed, her arms wrapped around herself as if she had lost weight and needed the warmth. Her face was skull-like, her hair thin and unwashed. Her eyes were closed, and the way she shivered made Draco think of someone who had been kicked over and over again until

they never stopped expecting blows.

Draco swallowed his outrage—Pettigrew probably wasn't the one who had tortured her, and taking his anger out on him wouldn't help anything—and then opened his eyes and nodded to Professor Snape. The professor nodded back and turned to Pettigrew.

"Undo the protections on the door," he said.

Pettigrew whimpered, but at least didn't say anything about not knowing what they were. Professor Snape moved a step back when he drew his wand, supposedly to let him have more room. Draco wasn't surprised when the professor's wand lowered to rib height, though. If Pettigrew did something wrong, Snape could strike him through the heart.

Ward after ward fell with a faint clicking noise; sparks of light leaped from the door and faded away in midair. Now Draco could hear strangled breath from inside the room if he concentrated. His grip on his wand tightened, and Potter touched his shoulder.

"It'll be all right," he whispered.

"Not exactly, babies," said a high-pitched voice from behind them.

Draco recognized both his aunt's voice and the malevolent hiss that followed.

Severus kept himself calm as he turned. He could fight Bellatrix. While she knew powerful Dark Arts and was fanatically devoted to the Dark Lord, enough to keep fighting long after she should have fallen, she was not his match in strength or stability of temper. Goad her and she would begin fighting without care. Someone who did that against an opponent of Severus's skill would lose.

He was more concerned about the great snake that coiled alongside her, watching them while her hiss built like steam escaping from a kettle. Though Severus had dosed himself regularly with antivenin since he returned to spying, he had never been sure what magical touches from the Dark Lord himself Nagini's poison might have.

"Potter, Malfoy, stay back," he said clearly. "Pettigrew, you will die if you betray us. *Absumo!*"

The spell struck Nagini as she began to move forwards, and she gave a screeching hiss as it blackened and destroyed several of her scales. She writhed in silent pain for a moment while Bellatrix turned to try and save her Lord's pet, and that gave Severus the time he needed, since everyone else was standing about in shock.

He wove a powerful shield around Draco and pushed him hard at the door. As he had expected, the traps Pettigrew had not disarmed flared to life and burst against the shield, but Severus's magic held true and they could not break it. Of more concern were the alarms that began to ring, but since Bellatrix and Nagini had already found them, Severus cared less about that than he

would have otherwise.

"Potter, to me," he snapped, and spun a shield around the boy's throat and wrists, the vulnerable places Bellatrix liked to strike. He would have done more, but he knew Potter would insist on being part of the battle and Severus could not use a spell that would interfere with his casting magic.

The boy stepped up to his side at once, eyes alight. Severus nodded to him. "I will take Nagini," he said. "You take her. Our spells must not cross each other and we must not interfere. Do you understand?"

"Yes," Potter breathed.

Severus narrowed his eyes at the ecstatic expression on his face, but shook his head and turned back to the snake. The curse had harmed her less than he had thought it would. He prepared a more powerful one, never taking his eyes from her fangs or her coils.

Only when he heard Potter begin to cast did he remember that Bellatrix had caused Black's death, and so of course Potter would be eager for vengeance on her. He grimaced, but they had chosen their targets and he could not change them now.

"*Rota camini*," he whispered, and a wheel of fire appeared in front of him, rotating faster and faster, red and gold glowing at the edges of the spokes. Severus narrowed his eyes and awaited the snake's response.

Nagini attacked.

Draco was unprepared for the sudden push at his back, but since he would have frozen with fright at the spells that assaulted him from every direction, blinding and dazzling him, he reckoned that was a good thing. At least the door popped open and he stumbled through, dazed but unhurt.

"Draco?"

Draco had never been so glad to hear his mother's voice. He would have thrown himself into her arms if he could have, but since they were in this particular situation, he stood up, cleared his throat, nodded to her with dignity, and said, "Mother. I think we should leave."

Her eyes darted towards the door. Draco winced as he heard the crack and boom of spells and then someone's scream. But at least his mother got quickly to her feet, despite her shaking, and nodded regally back to him. "Let us go, Draco," she said, as if it were entirely her choice. Not a trace of relief or any other indignity showed on her face.

Draco took her hand, and they stepped out into the battle.

Snape was apparently trying to kill Nagini with fire. Harry knew that because he couldn't help seeing the flames from the corner of his eye. But he was rather occupied with Bellatrix at the moment, and the pure, trembling joy that flooded him when he thought of killing her.

The problem was that he wanted to make her suffer, and she kept deflecting his spells and making him defend himself instead.

He didn't like that.

Bellatrix watched him with narrowed eyes and crooned out a litany of words that Harry didn't bother listening to. They would be taunts about him and Sirius and demands that he submit to Voldemort. Nothing about Bellatrix was attractive, and that included her loyalties.

Snape dodged against him, jostling Harry just as he let one of his curses go. Harry hissed and leaned to the side. Yes, apparently Nagini had tried to bite Snape and Snape was right to dodge, but couldn't he do it somewhere *else*?

"Poor little baby," Bellatrix whispered. "You still don't want to *hurt* other people. I told you that at the Ministry." She dropped her hands, including her wand hand, down to her side, and stood there smiling at him.

"Does the widdle baby need a strike with no defenses to make it fair?" she asked, in a singsong voice that made Harry grind his teeth together. "Aunt Bella will give him one." She nodded and winked at Harry. "But baby must act fast, in case Aunt Bella changes her mind." She raised her eyebrows.

Harry stared at her, his veins swarming with hatred. He was vaguely aware that Snape had used a kind of fire that looked like leaping animals and demons, and that Nagini was finally, finally, shrieking and thrashing in a way that sounded like her death throes. Understanding Parseltongue was an advantage when it came to telling when snakes were about to die.

But then those things faded away, and he was entirely focused on Bellatrix, her waving arms and her dark evil eyes and her smile.

It was the same smile Sirius had seen right before he fell through the veil. Harry remembered it. He thought he would always remember it.

Unless he could create another memory that would replace that one.

He would have liked to use an Unforgivable Curse. But he still wasn't certain he could manage one, and if he did and managed to kill Bellatrix, then Snape would still make sure he got expelled from Hogwarts. Harry had done a lot of thinking over the summer after Sirius died, and he knew that he needed to think in the long term instead of the short term.

The long term was that he would have to fight Voldemort, and he would need the shelter and the

support of the school to do that. And maybe even some of the things his professors could teach him, as unlikely as that seemed.

His thoughts raced through his mind, which felt absolutely clear as he raised his wand.

He knew what spell to use. But he needed to make sure that he threw all his magic behind it, so it could still hurt Bellatrix even if it wasn't designed to hurt *enough*.

He took a deep breath, and, as he took it, he pulled on his power. His left arm felt weak—not his right arm, because the directed surge of magic held it up—and his head spun and his vision darkened at the corners and his knees literally knocked against each other as he ruthlessly drained his magical core.

There was a bit of power that wouldn't come with the rest, that was stuck to his magical core like a spiderweb. Harry pulled on it, yanking three times before it came loose and clapped together into the whole. He heard a distant roar in his ears, and thought it was the tide of his magic, gathered and held, pulsing.

It must be used. Harry knew the time had come when he had to cast the spell or die.

He whispered the word. It didn't need to be yelled, not when the thunder he was hearing made up for that.

"*Sectumsempra.*"

The magic washed over his hand like a wave of burning heat and then out through his wand, which vibrated so hard that Harry almost dropped it.

Bellatrix's chest exploded in a fountain of blood. Then her arms exploded. Then Harry saw something raw and juicy under the surface of her chest, which was probably her heart, explode.

Then her head exploded.

Harry fell to the ground in the wake of the magic's passing, whimpering in exhaustion. He felt someone shake him, but it came from a distance and couldn't be important.

The memory of Bellatrix's death had seared out the sight of Sirius's.

*I did it, Sirius. You're avenged.*

Severus controlled things. It had always been his role as a spy, though there he might control no more than himself and, on occasion, the flow of information. He could control his classrooms, and he could control his anger about the past when he looked at Potter, and he could control his impatience in conversations with Albus.

So he controlled the Fiendfyre that had destroyed Nagini, the only spell he could think of with sufficient power to do so, and his shock on hearing the spell Potter had spoken.

*We must have a talk, you and I,* he decided as he stooped over the boy. A single shake was enough to convince him that Potter wasn't coming back to consciousness any time soon, so he conjured a stretcher and then turned to glance over his shoulder. Draco and Narcissa, both very white, stood in the doorway. Severus appraised Narcissa's slenderness and shakiness and conjured a second stretcher.

"We are leaving, *now*," he said.

Narcissa nodded and climbed onto the stretcher. Draco, though he had to glance hastily away from Bellatrix's remains, nodded and assisted Severus with Potter.

And it was back along the corridors, dodging by means of the doors that Draco knew and now had no reason for concealing, because the few other Death Eaters in the building were hunting them by now. When necessary, Severus spun and launched curses behind him. That was enough to dissuade the pursuit, never very determined in the first place. Severus knew something about the breed of Death Eaters left behind when the rest were out on raids.

The worst thing that might have happened was someone summoning the Dark Lord, and, perhaps because they knew they would be blamed for their failure, no one did so.

Then it was out into the clean air again and up on the brooms, and Severus hitched the stretchers to the brooms.

Straight up they went, over the borders of Malfoy Manor's grounds and back towards the edge of the wards. Severus counted softly under his breath; he had felt where the anti-Apparition spells began as they flew in, and he no longer saw the need to wait until they were far beyond that, given the Manor's thorough rousing.

There was the place. Severus reached out and clamped one hand on Potter's arm. With the other he held Draco's, and Draco in turn was touching his mother.

Severus had not often Apparated with this many people, never mind the brooms or the stretchers. But he did not hesitate. He knew when to take risks. It was not *never*, as the Gryffindors sometimes thought was the code of Slytherins; it was when one would lose a great gain if one did not. In this case, their lives.

He Apparated, Hogwarts held firmly in his mind, and they appeared hovering on the edge of Hogsmeade.

After that, Severus operated largely from moment to moment: dismissing the stretchers, shrinking the brooms, Disillusioning them, determining that Narcissa could walk, Lightening Potter and scooping him up, and making for the hospital wing. When he glanced over his

shoulder, he could see the faint shimmer that was Narcissa leaning on Draco, and he decided they would be fine—Draco would not let his mother go without treatment—and sped up.

*Potter, you stupid, stupid…*

Severus hovered nearby as Poppy laid Potter on a bed and began tapping her wand on his shoulder. She suspected it was nothing worse than magical exhaustion, which Severus could understand if true. The spell Potter had cast had never been designed to be that powerful.

Severus should know, since he had designed it.

Finally, when Narcissa came into the hospital wing with Draco supporting her, and Poppy turned to bid them a surprised but cordial welcome, Severus could let himself relax from emergency mode and begin noticing details again.

Potter had held off one of the most powerful and crazed Death Eaters. He had killed her. Severus had not known, until that day, if the boy was capable of truly lethal violence, despite his strength with curses. After all, he had never cast one to kill, and had rarely cast one in battle. He had sometimes wondered if they would lose the war due to Gryffindor ethics.

Potter had fought at Severus's side in close quarters; he had concentrated on Bellatrix, as asked; he had not interfered with Severus's own fight.

Though Severus still had questions about where Potter had found that spell—and sudden suspicions about how well he had been doing in Potions—he had to admit a grudging admiration for the boy. James Potter could never have done such a thing. His fighting was flashy, and he wanted to be personally involved in the defeat of every opponent.

*More of Lily in you than I ever suspected, and something of your own.*

Severus glanced at Poppy. She was fussing softly about Narcissa now, probably because the woman had been the victim of multiple pain spells that affected her nerves, and wasn't about to chase him away from Potter's sickbed on the suspicion that he was harming the boy. Severus stepped closer and bent down to study him.

Potter moaned and rolled his face towards him, eyes fluttering as he struggled to open them. Severus shook his head, the reluctant admiration surfacing again. Only Potter would recover from magical exhaustion that fast.

He began to run his eyes over Potter's features again, looking for traces of Lily in what had become a habit by now, and paused.

Potter's glamour was gone. That was understandable; with as much magic as he had hurled against Bellatrix, he must have drawn on every bit of his own power. Severus had seen warriors who had healed their own wounds open them again doing the same thing.

But now…

But now.

Severus *stared*. The reawakened memory of Lily in his head spun about and linked together like a puzzle piece with the fact of the boy's changed features and the fact of his changed behavior and the fact that Severus had been wrong about how talented he was and made a new whole.

It was impossible. But Severus, who had designed new spells and potions in his time, considered "impossible" only a term that could be redefined with accumulations of the possible.

The echo in his head rang like a bell, and ceased to be an echo, as Potter opened his eyes.

Harry looked up fuzzily. He ached all over, and he was sure that he would start throwing up in a moment.

Then the nausea retreated, and he found himself staring up at Snape's face as the man opened his mouth.

"You are my son."

##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### #####
##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### #####
##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### #####

Chapter: 17

Thank you again for all the reviews!

*Chapter Seventeen—A Talk*

Harry froze, his eyes so wide and his muscles so tight that they hurt. Contradictory impulses clanged and dashed through his head. He had never imagined this happening, that Snape would be able to find out the truth when Harry was in a position when he couldn't do anything about it.

*Obliviate him!*

But Harry knew that he couldn't get away with that in the hospital wing, and Snape would probably see the motion of his hand towards his wand and guess what was going to happen, and, and, and…

Then Harry reminded himself about his plans from the summer. He'd made plans for every situation he could think of. Why not this one? They just needed to be adapted a bit.

*It's a wild idea. No one will ever believe it unless they're forced to. It's mad. It's new.*

*You can still destroy Snape's belief in it. All you have to do is deny it.*

Severus had never seen such a pure expression of panic. His eyes narrowed. It was what he might well expect Potter to feel on having the truth proven to him beyond a doubt, but why should he be feeling it now? Shock, anger, denial he would have anticipated on the first suggestion, but not this.

For some reason, in the intense silence that hung between him and Pott—the boy as he struggled with Severus's statement, the most pressing sound was the low-voiced discussion about Narcissa's health behind them. At least it reminded Severus that others might hear this. He took up his wand and cast a privacy bubble, in the meantime looking over his shoulder to make sure they had not attracted his attention. He saw no startled looks, no stares.

When he turned back, the boy wore a carefully crafted mask of bewilderment.

"Your *son*, sir?" he asked in a flat voice. "How can—that doesn't make sense. Did someone tell you this?" He glared up at Severus. "I don't know why you decided to believe them, but it was pretty stupid of you."

Severus felt the familiar stirring of anger and had to take a deep breath against it. His hand might have clenched and snapped the wand, but he told himself he'd been prepared for denial and anger.

"No one told me," he said, "except the evidence of your own features. They look much more like your mother's blended with mine than I could ever have known if I had not seen the glamour removed."

The panic that flared in the boy's eyes this time made his previous panic look small. He snatched up his wand. Severus tensed, but Potter—

(*How hard it will be not to think of him by that name)*.

—aimed it at his own face instead of Severus. When he started to whisper desperate words, Severus had a notion of what he was doing. He reached out and gently but firmly closed his fingers around the boy's wrist, shaking it slightly when Potter struggled against him.

"No, I think not," Severus said. He could not help the sneer that crept into his voice. He could not *help* it. He felt as much shock as though he'd been dropped from a great height. How was anyone supposed to deal with the sudden discovery of a—a child, and the child of the woman he had loved? "You are much better-looking with your natural face, do you not agree?"

The boy glared at him again. Severus marveled. It seemed impossible to him that he could have

seen this face once before and not marked the resemblance of sharper cheekbones and longer jaw, but the passage of a short time or his own knowledge had changed things. The boy's expression in anger was exactly like his.

Part of the shock passed away, and he unconsciously tightened his grip around the boy's wrist.

*Like me. Mine.*

"No, I *don't* agree," said Potter, with a vicious sneer that Severus thought his mouth formed for. "I want to look like my *dad*. And James Potter was my *dad.* He died for me! He loved me, which is more than you'll ever do!" He lunged forwards as if he was going to escape Severus's grip, but that was firm enough that all he ended up doing was pulling their faces closer together.

"I hate you," Potter whispered. "I'll always hate you. I don't *want* you for a father, and I don't care what *you* want."

Harry wanted to cower when he saw the way Snape's jaw clenched and felt how the hand holding him tightened, but he'd expected Snape to hurt him, hadn't he? Voldemort hurt him more. He could put up with having his wrist crushed, especially since they were in the hospital wing and Madam Pomfrey could heal him as soon as Snape left.

The *real* thing, the most *important* thing, was to hurt Snape, to make him so angry that he would walk away and want nothing to do with Harry. Harry didn't know how Snape thought about blood relatives, but he knew that Snape liked to torture him, and why should that change just because Harry was a drunken mistake between his mum and Snape? Harry had to make him go away. Then he could go on living with the Dursleys, which wasn't ideal but was much better than bloody *Snape.* At least the Dursleys couldn't use the Cruciatus Curse on him.

*And there's probably some wizarding law that wizards can use the Cruciatus Curse on their children if they're Death Eaters or something,* Harry thought, leaning forwards even more so that his eyes were an inch away from Snape's. He'd never dared do this before, but he would take weeks of detention over being forced to live with Snape. Detention *ended. It's just the sort of bloody stupid law that the Wizengamot would pass.*

"James Potter was not your father," Snape said, his voice whipping out like a scorpion's tail. "Do you understand that? It does not matter how much he loved you. *I* am the one who sired you."

"Oh, yeah," Harry said, rolling his eyes. *I have to make him go away!* "I should be grateful for that, then? Because you and my mum had a drunken moment and I'm here, I should fall groveling at your feet?"

Snape's face changed terribly. Harry found himself shrinking away, but he immediately set his shoulders and bowed his head a little so that any blow wouldn't break his face, the way he did with Dudley. No matter what happened, he would deal with it. He didn't *think* Snape could kill him before Madam Pomfrey saw him and interfered, even if Snape had cast a privacy spell

around them.

"A drunken moment?" Snape whispered. "How did you know *that*?"

*Oh, shit! Shit, shit, shit!*

"Because only someone who was drunk would sleep with you," Harry snapped back, but he had lost and he knew it.

He flinched as Snape bent towards him again, and lifted his free arm to shield his face. Even though Dudley had just beaten him up and left him there, Snape would probably leave him for dead.

The brat knew.

He had *known.*

He had known that his mother and Severus were intimate, and he had left that knowledge lying in the dark.

He had known, and he had not told Severus.

Severus had to take several deep breaths before he could recover enough to think rationally. And it was absolutely necessary that he think rationally. Too much harm had been done already by relying on what people *should* have done.

There was no way that Potter could have accessed Severus's own buried memories; whatever unexpected talents the boy might have, Severus was sure that he was not that good a Legilimens. Severus was also confident that Albus, strange as he might be, would not have told the boy before he told Severus himself. He would probably have revealed it to them both at the same time, in fact, with a chuckle in his throat and a twinkle in his eye, hoping to "reconcile" them to each other.

That left Potter learning some other way. Perhaps Black had known—though Severus could not imagine that he would have been so cordial to the boy if he had. Perhaps the werewolf—

"You will tell me," he whispered, and tightened his grip on the brat again when he tried to pull away, "how you learned this, and how long you have known it, and why you thought it right to keep *my son* from me."

Potter tensed, his face whitening. Severus listened and heard his teeth grinding. *Good. He deserves to feel at least one half of the anger I do.*

Severus's rage was increasing as he sat there, burning up the shock, burning up his uncertainty about what he was going to do with the boy now that he had him and knew he had beaten James

Potter forever. How *dare* they do that? Lily had taken a choice of remembering away from him, and now *his son* had taken a choice of action and recognition away from him.

Was there to be no end to the way that other people chose to deceive and use him? What had he ever done, that he should be subject to such lies from those who *should* care about him most?

"That's why I didn't tell you," Potter said, voice ugly and so low that Severus was not sure of what he was hearing at first. "Because you don't want *me*. What *the fuck* would we do with each other?" Severus opened his mouth to reprimand the boy for his language, but that rush of tumbling words went on like a stream, and he couldn't interrupt. He thought Potter might never speak again if he did. "Your *son* is some imaginary person who spent his entire life with you. I'm not *that*. You would spend time peering into my face and trying to see someone who isn't there if I agreed with you. You would have hurt me if you knew about me, because you would be so disappointed that I was your son and not some perfect Slytherin who followed Daddy into serving Voldemort.

"There's no reason for us to connect with each other. There's no reason that we should let this change anything, except that you'll hate me more than you used to. Fine. Hogwarts is only for another year and a half. And in a few months, I'll be of age and you don't have to worry about me being a *child* anymore. Fine. Nothing has to change. Nothing should change. What does blood mean, anyway? One more reason to hate people."

The boy fell silent except for his rapid breathing, his eyes locked on Severus's face. Severus, for his part, could only sit motionless and stare back at him.

Potter was transparent now. His eyes were like great windows of green glass leading inwards to his soul, and Severus could see the slightest moods and motions turning and shuffling there.

Everything he had said was true—for him. He hated Severus. He thought Severus would treat him badly. He saw no reason that the ties of blood need connect them at all.

*And truly,* Severus thought, his thoughts moving far more slowly than the boy's spate of words had, *is he not correct?*

There was no way that he could speak the truth in front of most of the school. Claiming a public triumph over James Potter was impossible. It would have necessitated a confession about the circumstances of the boy's conception, and then someone would certainly have accused him of rape or needing to make a woman drunk in order to seduce her. Severus never meant to be a victim of schoolboy taunts again.

The blood connection did not change the fact that the boy was a Gryffindor and a spoiled prince. He was probably glad to grow up without parents, for they would have forever been telling him what to do. At the very least, Severus could avow that no son of his would have behaved as Pott—this boy had done for the last six years.

And he was the Chosen One. Severus had no place in a life so glamorized, so filled with the attention the boy loved.

He *felt* as though the discovery should change things, but why? Old, outdated, sentimental notions of blood being thicker than water? He was growing as bad as Lucius Malfoy, who brooded constantly on the future of his family and could talk of little else.

He released the boy's wrist. Immediately, Potter curled up into the blankets at the head of the bed, eyes wide and watchful, wrist cradled in his other hand as though Severus had actually hurt it.

Severus sneered and stood, breaking the privacy bubble to stride out of the hospital wing. No, this spoiled, puling brat was as far from the perfect child as he could imagine having.

It was only when he was opening the door of his private quarters that something occurred to him, something that made him stand quite still for a moment.

Potter had managed to avoid telling Severus how he had known the truth, and for how long.

*He used my anger against me. He—manipulated me.*

Severus closed the door of his quarters very slowly behind him. All the objections against acknowledging the blood connection were still present. One insight could not so easily dismiss them.

But the insight did give him many things to think about, and others to reevaluate.

*He went away. Good.*

Harry lay with his eyes shut and his mind whirling around so busily that he thought he could hear it clattering. Madam Pomfrey had taken one glance at him and insisted that he lie down and sleep. She had wanted him to take a potion, but Harry had put on a pathetic expression and assured her that he was so tired he didn't need one. She had only been satisfied when he closed his eyes and faked some snores, of course.

But Harry couldn't sleep. He needed the time to think.

And to rub his wrist. Snape had pressed tendon and bone together, so that Harry had a hard time keeping from crying out. But he wasn't going to cry out in front of *Snape.*

Nothing had changed. The man was still the greasy git of the dungeons, the Head of Slytherin House, the Defense teacher Harry wished he'd never had. Everything Harry hated and feared and didn't want. The way he'd held Harry's wrist proved that he could hurt him and not even notice.

In some ways, Harry thought cautiously, it wasn't quite as bad as he'd thought it would be. Snape

was angry about the truth being kept from him. As long as he didn't actually use the Cruciatus Curse, Harry decided, he could survive this. Snape would brood over it and snarl and hurl insults, but so what? He did that all the time anyway. This was another sin to add to the list of Harry's sins that he spent so much time imagining. In the end, nothing would change.

Harry had to depend on that. Nothing would change because it couldn't. He would rather go back to the Dursleys a hundred times over than spend time with someone who had looked at him the way Snape looked at him just now.

And really, when he thought about it, weren't all the things he'd said to enrage Snape true? James Potter was the father who had loved him and died for him. Snape happened to conceive him, but he would never want or care for Harry (and Harry didn't want him to). Even if he hadn't known anything about Harry and tried the experiment of adopting him, he would be disappointed because Harry wasn't clever or ambitious or good at potions.

Harry had spent years of his life trying to make the Dursleys love him, sure that if he just cleaned a bit better or went without food for another day or smiled at his aunt and uncle often enough, they would turn around and hug him. Love had conditions, for him. He understood that. He only had to make them see him as something other than a freak.

But then he'd come to Hogwarts, and met Ron and Hermione, and started understanding things differently. There were people who could like him for *him*, because they did things *together,* instead of hating him because he couldn't meet an impossible standard.

He wasn't going to go back to the impossible standards bit and slave away to try and make Snape love him. It was the sort of thing the bastard would like.

*Nothing has to change,* Harry reassured himself as he fell slowly asleep. *I was silly to fear it would.*

What could one do?

No matter how much he thought about it, Severus could reach no conclusion. It was as though he had stepped out over an abyss and discovered that he could not fall into it, but had no way to reach the other side, either. Confusion did not change things. Nor did anger, or spite, or blustering, or fear.

For the next few days, though he tried not to watch Pott—the boy more intently than usual, he was aware that he did not succeed. He might as well have, however. The boy seemed to notice no difference. He had restored the glamour and once again looked like James Potter's spawn. He kept his head down in class and avoided Severus's eyes even in the practice duels in Defense. He came to Occlumency lessons and private duels and acted no differently than before, except that the ignorance of the things Severus wanted him to learn was a *determined* ignorance, as if he wanted to show how little he wished to learn from someone he hated.

But he was picking up his books to scuttle out of class two days after the night in the hospital wing, and Severus saw the ragged sleeve slide away from a mark on his left wrist. He stepped closer, staring. The mark was all too clearly shadowy blue bruises made by fingers.

*Did I do that?*

From the way the boy's spine stiffened, he felt Severus's nearness and his gaze, but he simply scooped his books up and strode away. His spine was very straight, and his head canted on his neck as if he thought it would fall off if he didn't concentrate on holding it up.

Looking after that very different posture, Severus suddenly found himself remembering the way Potter had hunched when he first confronted him about the broken glamour and again in the hospital wing. As if he was hunching himself to resist blows, but couldn't quite subdue the instinct that made him outface his tormentor.

It was the way Severus had seen a few abused children in Slytherin react, particularly those from pure-blood families who had risen to fear mad relatives who might use the Unforgivable Curses on them. It was the way that Severus himself had hunched in front of his father, though Tobias Snape used far more insults than blows.

The boy saw him in the same light.

Another question followed that first one, dancing and sparking like a bead of light along a spiderweb.

*Where did he learn such a posture?*

There seemed to be no chance of finding out from the boy himself, who kept his eyes averted from Severus so much of the time, who had made such a pointed effort at cutting Severus out of his world. Severus cast eavesdropping charms that would let him hear what the boy was saying from across the Great Hall, and found him talking with his friends as though nothing had happened. He went to Quidditch practice and did his classwork and visited Narcissa Malfoy—who was wearing a glamour that made her look related to Poppy, to prevent the news from spreading—in the hospital wing as though nothing had happened.

Nothing had truly changed for him.

Of course, why should Severus suspect that anything would? By his own admission, the boy had known the truth for some time and had failed to inform Severus.

That remembrance enraged him again, until he thought of what would have happened had the boy come to him the instant he knew. He would have said something about Severus being his father, and Severus would have laughed, sneered, and told him to leave. He would have thought him foolish and sentimental even after he learned the truth.

If the boy wished to avoid his sneers, he had done exactly what he should have. And since it was a dangerous secret given the war, Severus might have been inclined to praise him for keeping quiet.

Everything the boy did that cut him off from Severus also made him closer to Severus's image of an ideal son. Not that Potter would ever match that, because he could not, as he himself had said. "The son of Severus Snape" and "Harry Potter"—with or without his false last name—were separate people and always would be.

But those thoughts only returned Severus to where he had been, floating above the abyss with no way forwards.

Snape left him alone.

It was all that Harry could expect, and so he did his best to ignore the eyes that followed him and the hard stares he regularly received. So what? Snape had always stared at him hard. He had always thought that Harry wasn't working up to his potential, that he wasn't the warrior he should be, that he was unfairly the Chosen One.

Where Harry had feared that hatred, he now relied on it. It was the strongest protection he had against Snape trying to interfere in his life, now that the shield of secrecy was torn away.

The more time went by, the more Harry relaxed. He had felt exposed at first. He realized that was silly now.

*Nothing will change.*

Still, his effort to ignore Snape needed objects of distraction, so he practiced harder at Quidditch and with the D.A. than ever, and he did his best to look interested when Ron and Hermione squabbled about Lavender. He was mildly amazed their row had gone on for so long.

*Is that what I would be like if I didn't have Voldemort to distract me? Fighting about girls and worrying about who I should snog?*

When Harry thought about it that way, he could be almost grateful for He Who Lived to Kiss Snakes.

And, of course, there was Draco and his mother.

Dumbledore had heard the news without surprise, according to Madam Pomfrey, and had only ordered that Mrs. Malfoy be well taken care of. So Harry visited her in the hospital wing every day, and listened to her talk. It seemed she needed to talk about what had happened to her in Malfoy Manor, and Malfoy—Draco—wasn't enough audience.

"The spells made my nerves feel like columns of ants marching down my arms," Mrs. Malfoy

said one afternoon, her stare fixed on the far wall. "That was before they began to burn, of course."

Or: "My fingers trembled so badly I could not grip the blanket to shift it."

Or: "I could feel my heart knocking so hard that it felt as though it would explode past my ribs and burst into flight, like a dove."

Harry listened. These were the kinds of things that happened to people in war. He *could* hear them. And Mrs. Malfoy seemed to think it was natural he should listen. Maybe she thought he had already experienced a lot of torture.

Besides, it made Draco look at something besides his mother and leave the hospital wing at points so he could eat and get his homework done. When he was there, he gripped Harry's arm, hard.

Harry said nothing. He thought he could understand.

Once, Draco started to say something about Bellatrix. Harry shook his head and said, "I know she was your aunt. But I'm not going to say I'm sorry."

Draco gave him a shocked look and said, "I wouldn't expect *that*. She was one of the ones who tortured Mother." His voice hardened. "I'm glad she's dead."

"Good." Harry took Draco's arm and gripped it hard in return.

He could not feel sorry about Bellatrix. He knew that people were supposed to feel shaky after their first kill, and guilty, and haunted by the face of the dead person. They were supposed to cry and confess and share things because otherwise the pain would kill them.

But when he sought out his feelings, there was only a hard, bright seed of gladness in him, and no guilt at all.

It was another reason to listen instead of talk, because it hid how much about him was strange.

Draco had waited, and waited. He thought it was obvious and that Potter was only waiting because he didn't know how to bring it up.

But Potter never said anything. So, one evening after his mother was asleep and they were the only ones sitting in the hospital wing, watching her, with the lights low and Madam Pomfrey busy somewhere else, Draco spoke about what he had overheard more than a week ago.

"So, you're Snape's son," he said.

Potter turned to him with a white face, and bent close. Draco flinched. His breath was harsh and

hissing and hot. "Who have you told?" he demanded.

"N-no one." Draco swallowed. This was the Potter who had killed his aunt. "I heard, but then I didn't hear anything else because Professor Snape put the privacy spell up, a-and—"

"And you won't *tell* anyone, either?"

Draco stared at Potter—or did he have a different name now?—in silence for a few minutes. He looked as though he could kill. He looked as though he could tear Draco apart.

"No," Draco said quietly. "I won't tell anyone. Who would believe me?" he added.

And that seemed to be the reassurance Potter needed, because he relaxed and started talking about Charms class as though nothing had happened. He never mentioned Defense any more, Draco thought. It was the only sign that something had changed.

Draco put his chin on his hand and watched Potter. He was normal, if you looked at him this way. Happy. Chatting. Strong. Protective.

But Draco, from his experience of trying to ignore the way the Dark Lord affected him, didn't think anyone could possibly be that normal when they were ignoring *who they were.*

*If he needs me, I'll be here to help.*

##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### #####
##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### #####
##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### #####

Chapter: 18

Thank you again for all the reviews!

*Chapter Eighteen—The Gravity of the Situation*

"As if I would want to date *you* in the first place!"

"Why were you so angry when you saw me snogging Lavender, then?"

"I don't have to justify myself to *you*."

"That still doesn't tell me why you were angry."

An angry shout, a swiftly chanted incantation that sounded like doom coming nearer and nearer, and then the noise of boxes falling over on someone. A moment later, Hermione came hurrying

down the stairs, her face pink with satisfaction, and ducked out the door of the common room, slamming it behind her as if she assumed someone would chase her.

*Not a bad assumption,* Harry thought in resignation as he watched Ron pound down the stairs in turn, face red and large bruises on his legs and hands.

Neville, who was lying on the floor doing homework, buried his head in his arms. Dean rolled over and looked the other way, staring into his Charms book as if his life depended on it. The other Gryffindors in the common room, mostly fifth-years, looked torn between laughter and embarrassment.

Then Ron got a leg caught in the portrait hole trying to get out, and the embarrassment increased to the point that Harry thought he could have felt it in another room.

*That's really quite enough, isn't it?* Harry thought suddenly, and raised his wand. He'd been trying to keep out of Ron and Hermione's rows, because he thought it wasn't his place to interfere. But at this point they were making everyone *else* miserable and acting like idiots. There was no reason that he couldn't do something about that.

"*Levicorpus!*" he called, using a spell from the Half-Blood Prince's book.

Ron flew away from the portrait hole and hung suspended upside-down in mid-air. Neville stared up, and even Dean turned away from his book and raised his eyebrows in surprise. Ron immediately started spluttering something about Hermione. From what Harry could make out, he thought this spell was a booby-trap that Hermione had left behind her.

"It's me, Ron," Harry said, with a calm voice that at least shut him up, though he twisted around to scowl at Harry. "And I think your stupid arguments with Hermione have gone on quite long enough."

"Stupid arguments—" Ron said, and then went purple in the face and fell silent. Harry glanced around, wondering if someone had cast a Silencing Charm on him, then looked back and realized it was Ron's outrage that wouldn't let him talk. He rolled his eyes, not even caring about keeping that concealed from his friend.

"Yes, stupid arguments," Harry said, in a slow, patronizing way that he hoped would make Ron listen. "I don't care who snogged who or who's dating who or why you don't just break down and admit that you like her more than Lavender. But I care when you dash out into the middle of the corridors and make sixth-year Gryffindors look like a bunch of children. Hermione isn't studying any more, have you noticed that? It's stupid and irresponsible. I want you to stop it right now."

Ron shook his head, and the purple color faded back to something like normal. He was speaking in a *superior* tone, Harry slowly realized, and then he heard the words Ron was actually saying and felt like striking him.

"You don't understand because you've never dated anyone, Harry. It's a whole different environment, a different and a special one. I have to make a choice between Lavender and Hermione. It's important. Hermione is jealous and doesn't think I need to make a choice at all, which is what we're fighting about. *Deep* things, things you don't understand—"

Harry cast a spell that flipped Ron right-side up and stuffed his mouth with cotton. More snickers from the fifth-years, and from a few people who had come down to sit on the stairs and watch the show.

"I understand well enough," Harry said. "There might not be many ways to get you to stop sounding like a total arse, but I've found one." There was a spell from the Prince's book that hadn't looked deadly and which he had tried out on Crabbe and Goyle without their even noticing. Ron would notice, though. "*Scabies perquam.*"

Ron yelped and looked around as though he thought the spell would begin immediately. Neville stared at Harry with wide eyes. Harry grinned back, wondering if he knew what the Latin meant.

"Now," Harry said, as he lowered Ron to the floor and undid the cotton in his mouth, "you won't feel any effects from that—unless you start rowing with Hermione again. Then you'll start itching and won't be able to stop itching for ten minutes. I think it's excruciating, but, then, I wouldn't know." He shrugged and turned back to his book.

"You," said Ron. "You."

"Yes?" Harry glanced up with an innocent expression, watching in interest as Ron's face turned yet another shade of red.

"I thought you were my friend," Ron said, in a lowered, trembling voice that would have made Harry feel bad, except that he thought he knew what Ron was going to say. "My friend would never have done that to me."

"My friend would never have ignored me for a month because he was so obsessed with his girlfriend that he couldn't see anything else," Harry snapped, standing up. Ron was probably going to make the common room too uncomfortable him to study, but that was all right; Harry would just go to the library. "When was the last time you noticed what I was doing or saying or thinking or feeling? We haven't studied together or traded answers in Divination in *weeks.* All you care about is Hermione and Lavender, Hermione and Lavender, Hermione and Lavender. Well, at least you care about something else now."

He turned around and walked to the portrait hole in a silence that seemed to spread through the common room, easily dodging the first hex Ron threw at him.

*Maybe I wouldn't have told them about my problems with Snape,* Harry thought wistfully as he wandered through the castle towards the library. *But it would have been nice to have the option.*

A large tawny owl swooped down towards Draco that evening, carrying a package in its talons. Draco watched it come with cautious eyes. Now that his mother was here with him at the school, and the Dark Lord surely knew Draco and Professor Snape had betrayed him—though so far he had been quiet—there was no one who could be sending him a package.

At least, no one who he wanted to think about.

Still, the detection spells that Draco cast on it found no curses, no hexes, and no trace of Dark magic on the box. That didn't mean something still couldn't be inside it. He motioned the rest of his yearmates to stand back—though they had already started that when they realized how many spells he was casting on the box—and cautiously lifted the lid.

A wash of dark red light from the box made the room look as if it was underground, bathed in fires. Draco stared, falling back in alarm as something soared out of the box and hovered in front of him like a grotesque Howler.

It was his father's severed head.

Its lips opened, and the Dark Lord's voice spoke through them.

"Draco," it said, in a tone so horrible that Draco was shivering even before he recognized the voice. "This is your payment for your contempt of my will. Your orders are stripped from you, your importance, your consequence, everything that was to have made you one of my followers. And your father, of course, though I imagine you care less about him than some of the other things."

An eerie chuckle followed. Draco stared at the way his father's long pale hair hung suspended around the head like a sunburst, at how hollow his eyes were, and lost track of time. It might have been a moment or an hour later that the voice spoke again, loud enough for Draco to hear it above the screams erupting all around him.

"Understand the fate of traitors. From this moment every one of my followers' hands is lifted against you. Anyone may kill you and receive only reward and praise. And as for what you had the *daring* to claim belonged to you by right…" The voice descended into a hiss. "*Cedo cicatricem*."

Draco shrieked as his left arm seemed to endure a thousand stab wounds all at once. He clawed at his sleeve, even though he already knew what was happening. The Dark Mark was responding to the will of the one who had put it there, and changing or melting or killing him, it didn't matter, not when it hurt this much.

He heard the faint thump of the head falling to the floor, its message finished, and then the red light faded and the shrieks of the professors and the students took over. And the pain.

Harry was on his feet the moment he heard the first words from the floating head. He didn't

know for sure who it was, but he could see the hair from the back and he knew who Malfoy had been afraid for. He thought it was probably Lucius Malfoy.

He fought his way grimly across the room, dodging people who backed away from the Slytherin table screaming and people who hid their eyes and turned their backs as if that would keep reality from happening. Harry sneered at them and didn't hesitate to use his elbows when he encountered people frozen from fear.

Didn't any of them see that was useless? Didn't any of them realize there was someone here who needed help?

Harry leaped over one boy who, for some reason, *crouched* and screamed, and then vaulted across the Slytherin table. Someone shrieked as he knocked a plate down. Harry ignored them. Instead, he landed beside Malfoy and wrapped his arms around him, casting a shield at the same time so that anyone staring would suddenly find themselves confronting a grey shimmer and nothing else. Malfoy would want privacy.

At least, Harry thought he would want that. When he pulled back enough to see his face, he wondered if Malfoy could think coherently anymore.

Malfoy was crying with muffled sobs, his hand over his mouth, as if he thought Voldemort was in the room and would kill him if he made a sound. He was scraping his left arm against the leg of the table over and over. He seemed to think he could get the Dark Mark off by doing that.

*He'll hurt himself,* Harry thought as he watched blood drip down Malfoy's arm. He reached out and caught Malfoy's wrist gently in his hand.

A glittering blaze rose up around the Dark Mark, red-black like the light that had first streamed from the box. Harry felt a corresponding burn in his scar. His mouth fell open, but he gritted his teeth. He had suffered worse pain than this in fourth year when Voldemort came back and stood close to him in the graveyard, and by God, he would endure it again. Malfoy was the one who needed help right now, not Harry.

The Dark Mark shuddered on Malfoy's arm, and then melted away like rain. A rain of tar, and Harry's insides squirmed as it ran over his fingers. But it was gone, and Malfoy's skin looked pink, as if it was scorched but healing.

At the same time, Harry's scar stopped burning.

*What was that all about?* But Harry didn't have time to consider, because Malfoy flung himself at Harry and hugged him as if he would never let go, so Harry had to hold him and raise his wand when he realized someone was breaking his shield.

It was Snape.

He stared down at Harry and Malfoy and shifted his wand slightly. Harry glared at him and mouthed a threat that he didn't remember later. He thought it included *If you touch him,* though. He wasn't going to be taken away now, not when he thought Malfoy needed him so thoroughly.

Then he realized that people were peering through the broken shield, and gestured at it while trying to kill Snape with his eyes. "Don't you think he would prefer that people not see him like this?" he whispered.

Snape instantly replaced the broken shield with a portable version that would float alongside them, and nodded to Malfoy. "Get him to the hospital wing. Even if the Mark is—gone—" his voice shook, and Harry knew he was probably imagining how much it would have hurt "—Madam Pomfrey should look at him."

Harry nodded shortly. *And his mother will want to see him, too.* He cast a Lightening Charm and set off at a trot, the portable shield curling around them both like mist. He could have conjured a stretcher, but he thought Malfoy would have objected to being set down.

And who knew? Harry might have objected to letting him go.

Severus had wondered at first why the Dark Lord was delaying his vengeance. His usual method was to punish suspect Death Eaters as quickly and brutally as possible, because some of his followers were stupid enough that the consequences of such misdeeds would fade from their minds otherwise.

Now he knew. It would have taken some time to get past the spells into Azkaban and rescue Lucius in such a way that the guards could not sense it, let alone prepare the Dark spells that would have caused the head to float and speak—and be undetectable as Dark magic from outside the box.

He stooped and picked up Lucius's head, turning it around in his hands. The magic had faded now, of course. There was no way that even the Dark Lord could have maintained it for long. Such feats were legendary precisely because the strength needed to cast the spells in the first place was rare.

"Ah, Severus."

Albus was beside him already, his eyes wary but his smile calm. Severus nodded as he met his mentor's gaze. He knew what had to be done, in part because Albus could not do it himself without ruining the deception that his magic was weakening. Severus tossed the head into the air, where it renewed the screams of panic that had begun to fade. Then he held up his wand. He didn't know how many people were watching him and would notice, but there was no way that they could mistake the direction his voice was coming from.

"*Incendio!*"

The bolt of fire sprang away from him and consumed Lucius's head to ashes and then less than ashes. No one would know that the fire was so bright and clear because of the contrast between the Dark magic recently used on the head and the living flames. They would think that it was Severus's power. Already he received a few awed looks, and some people stopped screaming to stare. Severus found their hanging jaws a small improvement over their witless voices, but at least it was more silent.

"One of our students has suffered a great loss," Albus had already begun to say, his voice tempered with sadness and bravery. "He dared to work for what he thought was right, and in the process was scorned by someone who is the enemy of everyone in this room." He glanced over his shoulder, and his eyes pinned a few of the Slytherin students Severus himself was inclined to suspect of sympathy with the Dark Lord. "Even though it might not seem so right now," Albus added softly, "be assured that the Dark Lord's desires are inimical to life itself, and thus to everyone who is alive."

Severus, attention called away from him, spent a moment ensuring that the ashes would spread as far as possible on a conjured wind. There was little that he could do for Lucius—often a competitor and rival, but also the parent of a student he felt responsible for—but this.

*Good-bye. You backed the wrong master.*

Then Severus was able to turn and follow what had been the desire of his heart since he had seen Potter crouching there with his arms wrapped around Draco: follow them to the hospital wing.

"Don't touch him. She just put him to sleep."

If anyone had told Harry a month ago that he would have been challenging Snape in some situation that had nothing to do with a practice duel, he would have laughed and told them they were mad. He would have been *sure* of that if anyone had told him that the challenge would come over Draco Malfoy's privacy.

Yet here he was, bristling and with his wand out, in between Snape and the bed Draco slept on. Madam Pomfrey had barely managed to force a Calming Draught down Draco's throat; he hadn't wanted to let go of Harry. He had whispered frantic, desperate words, imploring Harry not to leave him. And Harry had promised that he wouldn't. He intended to make good on that promise.

Narcissa Malfoy was watching from the next bed, her eyes as large as moons. Her fingers plucked at the blankets, and Harry reckoned that she probably wanted to come over and embrace Draco. Madam Pomfrey hadn't shut the infirmary off yet, though, the way she thought she would have to if the sample of skin she'd taken from Draco's arm proved that he had something really wrong with him. So people were still coming in and out, and people would wonder why the stranger Mrs. Malfoy looked like was standing over Draco.

Harry had every right to be there, though, and he lifted his head and stared at Snape so the bastard would know Harry was asserting the right.

Snape paused and looked at him for long moments. Then he shook his head. "I did not come to touch him," he said. "I came to see what happened, what Madam Pomfrey said."

Harry put away his wand slowly, watching Snape all the while. Draco turned over and cried out in his sleep. Harry put a hand on his arm, and he immediately calmed down. Harry crowded back towards him.

"She hasn't said anything yet," Harry said. He was reluctant to share this much with Snape, but Snape had helped them down in the Great Hall with the portable shield. Besides, Madam Pomfrey would probably just say the same thing to him when she came out. "No immediate danger, and the Dark Mark is gone, but maybe there's some buried poison in his body. She took a sample of his skin."

Snape nodded and took a step around the bed. Harry tensed.

Snape turned to stare at him again. Harry didn't know why. Then again, there was nothing he understood about the bastard, including the way Snape had treated him lately, so he stayed still.

"Do you really think I would harm him after what I went through to rescue his mother?" Snape whispered.

"I think you might hurt him because you think you're doing good," Harry said. "You seem to do that a lot."

He meant a lot of vague things by that, and he was puzzled as to why Snape looked at his wrist.

This was the strangest thing Snape had ever seen. A Gryffindor, someone whose blood might be Slytherin but whose nature was most assuredly not, crouching over Draco Malfoy as if he meant to sell his life dearly defending him.

And the boy spoke like an adult, and, at least at the moment, looked like an adult, like someone who understood what it *meant* that someone else's life depended on him, instead of simply leaping recklessly into danger.

"Why are you protecting him?" Severus asked. It was the most burning question to answer at the moment, and so it would be asked. "He is not your brother, not your son, not even your friend or a member of your House. Nor is he vital to the war. Why shelter him from the public notice he would hate or stay with him now?" He knew that the boy's healing of the Dark Mark had been involuntary, so that was not a question he would tax him with.

Pott—the boy stared at him with surprise deepening in his green eyes until his resemblance to Lily was almost impossible to escape, glamour or no glamour. Then scorn poured into the eyes after the shock.

"What do you mean, *why*?" Potter asked, sounding genuinely baffled that there might be a second option.

In that question, Severus heard the incomprehension Albus had reacted with when Severus had asked him why he had broken both rules and laws to allow a werewolf a fair chance to become a student and a professor. Because there was no choice. Because it was the right thing to do, and all the other choices wrong.

Severus closed his eyes. He understood the sterling quality Albus exhibited, though he did not agree with the results. One of the things he had always most resented about the Headmaster was that he would extend that protection more readily to Gryffindor students than to Slytherins.

This *boy* had decided to protect a Slytherin student with all the force of his magic and all the honor due to standards that were important to Draco—including his pride and dignity—even though he didn't share them.

There was no possible response except to admire Pott—the boy, however reluctantly, the same way Severus had admired him for going along on the rescue mission and killing Bellatrix without pause or hesitation or regret. And without regret since, at least that Severus had noticed.

He had done the same thing here, to better and stronger effect yet, because Draco needed this kind of protection from vulgar curiosity more than he had needed Bellatrix dead.

Severus opened his eyes again and stared at the boy, who regarded him warily, from James Potter's face.

*But with nothing of James Potter's soul in him. This is my son.*

He would probably not understand why Severus inclined his head to him in a deep nod that was nearly a bow and then turned away to explain the situation to Narcissa.

But someday very soon, Severus intended him to understand.

This had shown him, at last, the way forwards, and the worth of the victory that would wait at the end of the road, the worth of the person he would come to know, no matter how hard that road was .

Draco woke with a cry, his father's words—no, they were the Dark Lord's words, but his father's lips—echoing in his ears. He blinked vaguely at the infirmary's lights and turned his head to the side.

*My father is dead.*

The grief barely had time to cut him before Potter was beside him, speaking calmly but firmly. "It's all right. No one else is here. You can mourn in private. Do you need anything? Do you want

me to go?"

Draco shook his head frantically and reached out with trembling hands to grip Potter's arm. "Stay with me," he whispered.

Potter dragged his chair up beside the bed in answer and sat where he could easily reach Draco—and where Draco could reach him, which was rather more to the point. "I'm here," he said. "Never elsewhere. I promise."

Draco spent some time looking at him before his eyelids began to droop. Potter's gaze back never varied. Still strong, still clear, still protective.

Draco's thoughts were vague and jumbled as he started to fall asleep again, but they repeated variations on a single pattern.

*He's mine. I can't let him go. I need him.*

##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### #####
##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### #####
##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### #####

Chapter: 19

Thank you again for all the reviews!

*Chapter Nineteen—Discussions, Rows, Quarrels, and Confrontations*

"My husband is dead."

It took Harry a long, slow period of time to realize what he was listening to. He'd been lost in a hazy calculation of how long it had been since he slept. He'd thought he might have fallen asleep briefly during the night when he was watching over Draco, but he didn't think so now.

And yet, he didn't feel tired. He didn't want to do anything except sit next to Draco, watch over him, and occasionally check the door to make sure nothing was coming through that could hurt him.

*This is why I want to be an Auror.* Exhilaration rushed through him, so thick and deep that it felt as if he was walking on syrup. *I don't care how hard I have to work. It would be worth it to save people.*

Now, though, Draco was sleeping soundly, and Mrs. Malfoy was speaking. After a lot of blinking, Harry managed to focus. She was staring at the far wall like usual.

"Yes?" he asked, as encouragingly as he could. He'd never liked Lucius, but he was dead, and he had died in a horrible way, and there was no one else here who could listen right now. It was the least Harry could do.

"I never knew," Narcissa whispered, crossing her arms over each other. She looked pale even with the glamour, as if a moon was shining from inside her, or as if she'd been dipped in milk. Harry mentally shook his head at himself. He had no idea what he was thinking. Maybe his mind was tired even though his body wasn't. He hoped not, though. He would need his mind and his body to defend Draco against threats. "I never knew that he was in danger. I didn't have a chance to save him."

"Of course you didn't," Harry said, startled. It sounded as though she was blaming herself, which he didn't understand. "If you didn't know, how could you save him?"

Narcissa turned her head and fixed him with mournful eyes. The glamour she wore gave her green eyes instead of blue, but that didn't matter. Harry would have understood the grief in those eyes no matter what they looked like. "I should have realized that the Dark Lord would target him next," she said. "I should have told Severus to do whatever he could to get him out of Azkaban."

Harry grimaced. He hated it when people talked about Snape with affection or respect. Perhaps nothing was worse than Dumbledore trying to get him to say *Professor* Snape, but this was a close second.

It wasn't his place to object, though. He was here to listen. That was the point. He kept silent and did it.

"I don't know what he could have done," Narcissa said. She rocked herself, her eyes shut and her face a mask of suffering. "But he came in and rescued me when I would have said that could not be done. I should have said something. This is my fault."

"No, it isn't," Harry said firmly. "There's no point picking up unnecessary guilt. It'll only go on piling up and then you won't get anything *done.* What you should do is blame yourself for the things that are your fault and then work to atone." He stroked Draco's hair. Draco had moaned and shifted uneasily. Now he straightened out again and started breathing softly. Harry smiled down at him.

*He probably thinks that I would despise him for being weak, if he could see me now. Nothing's further from the truth. He needs help, and I can give it to him.*

Narcissa was staring at him when he looked up again.

"Is that something you did?" she asked.

Harry winced as he thought of Sirius and the way he hadn't moved to save Cedric at all. "Yes,"

he said. "In fact, you could say that it's my fault your husband's dead, too, if you really wanted to. You could say I should have anticipated that, because I probably understand Voldemort better than anyone else." He kept himself from touching his scar, but it was hard. He didn't want Mrs. Malfoy to suspect the connection between him and Voldemort, though. "But I'd rather comfort the people your husband died trying to protect than blame myself for it and not do anything."

Narcissa leaned back against the pillows and looked up at the ceiling. She didn't say anything else right now, and Harry was glad, because it let him give more attention to Draco. He didn't really know what to make of Malfoy's mother. Half the time he thought she was just talking to him because he was there and she needed to talk to someone, and half the time he thought she couldn't ever be that unguarded.

Draco could.

Harry smiled at him again. *He* wasn't weak. He might think he was, but he'd survived the pain of having the Dark Mark burn and the pain of seeing his father's severed head speak to him without immediately going mad. Harry thought it was more than he could have done if he'd seen one of his parents murdered in front of him.

Then he remembered that he had, technically. He could hear his mother scream every time a Dementor came near.

Harry shrugged irritably and shifted sideways in the chair to get a little more comfortable. So what? He'd been so young, and for the longest time, he hadn't even known what the memory meant. That wasn't the same thing as losing a parent that you were close to, that you'd known all your life.

*You could, perhaps, still see a parent die.*

Harry snorted loudly enough that Narcissa glanced over at him for a minute and Draco stirred again. Yes, of course. It sometimes seemed as though he'd told Hermione the truth about Snape and his mum sleeping together after all. His mind offered him enough unsolicited advice on the subject.

*He's not my father. Not in any of the ways that matter. I would be sorry to see him die for the same reasons I would be sorry to see anyone else die. But I don't like him, he doesn't like me, and it's not going to happen.*

He paused, but his mind didn't snap back at him this time. Harry shrugged and burrowed deeper into the chair. Sometimes, it depressed him, how different he was from other people. He would have liked to be normal.

Other times, like now, he was grateful. If he was normal, he wouldn't have known what to do to help Draco, or rescue Mrs. Malfoy, or kill Bellatrix.

If he was normal, he couldn't do what he needed to do.

Draco woke to a heated argument that he had the feeling people were trying to conduct in whispers. If they were trying to avoid waking him up—which was a proper ambition—then he could only blame them. He'd woken up anyway.

"But *why*? It's just—it doesn't make sense, Harry." That was a female voice, and Draco only knew one of those that would sound so earnest and would call Potter "Harry" at the same time. "When did it happen? We were right here, and we never realized that you were paying more attention to Malfoy now."

"Right here," Potter drawled, with a skepticism that did him credit, Draco thought. "Of course. In the parallel dimension where your own rows about snogging were more important than anything I was doing."

"But we would have noticed you being *friends* with the git, mate!" Weasley, of course. Draco was accustomed to thinking of Weasley and Granger as twin symptoms of a disease; one could not plague you without the other. "Don't pretend that we were ignoring you that badly. I—"

"You were."

In the short silence that followed, Draco managed to slide his head sideways far enough that he thought opening his eyes wouldn't be immediately noticed, and peek out from beneath his lowered lids.

Potter was standing between him and the other people in the room, to his annoyance. But he could see from the tight set of his shoulders that Potter probably had his arms folded, and his hands were in front of him. If he was holding his wand on his best friends, then Draco regretted more than ever that he couldn't see it.

By shifting a bit, Draco could see a part of Granger's face. Her expression was sad and hopeless. Draco mentally sneered at her. *I fought for my parents. Can't she even fight for her best friend? Or does she assume that being friends with a Slytherin automatically means that he's not good for anything else ever again?*

"We were wrong," Granger said. "But something happened to you, Harry. Something big. Didn't it? I wish you'd come to us and tried to talk about it anyway."

Potter's shoulders grew less tense. "Yeah, well," he said, swiping a hand through his hair. "I probably should have. But I got exasperated with the way you were behaving." He paused, and then added in a thick voice, "Would you be here now if you hadn't seen the way I ran across the Great Hall to protect Draco? Did it take something that big to shatter the barriers and get through to you?"

"*Mate*," Weasley said, and Draco thought he was going to reach forwards and grip Potter and

they would all collapse into a soppy Gryffindor hug. Draco was beginning to regret that he'd woken up. Instead, Weasley continued, "You call him Draco?"

"That's what you focus on." Potter's voice was very flat, and so the words didn't come out like a question. "Yes, I do. We've become close enough that he deserves that from me."

*That's not all I deserve from you,* Draco thought, and then blinked. The thought wasn't exactly new to him. The hunger in it was.

He started to remember what Potter had been protecting him from, why he'd needed Potter's help in the first place, and his breathing sped up and his eyes tried to shut. He managed to force down the grief far enough to fix his attention on the conversation again, and for now that was all he wanted.

Yes, he needed Potter still. But he would distract Potter from an argument with his best friends if he interrupted now. And Draco had been waiting to hear that argument for a long time.

"I just don't understand how this happened," Granger whispered. The distress in her voice made Draco grin. For a little know-it-all like Granger, *not* knowing something had to be the greatest punishment.

"I don't, either, all the time." Potter sounded weary. But luckily, he wasn't moving from between Draco and his friends. "I still want to be friends with you. I just want you to bloody pay attention to something besides your love lives once in a while, all right?"

"You call him Draco," Weasley said, sounding as dazed as though someone had hit him over the head with a Blasting Curse.

"*Yes*." Perhaps Potter would use a Blasting Curse in the next second, Draco thought hopefully. He sounded angry enough to do it. "I'm friends with him, and I'm friends with you, and I'm friends with just about everybody who isn't a Death Eater, all right? I'm friends with the rest of Dumbledore's Army, and a lot of Gryffindors, and maybe I could even be friends with more Slytherins if I thought they needed my help and if they would stop being stubborn and stupid and talk to me. I'm not going to stop being friends with other people just because you think I should."

Draco grimaced. *I don't want him to be friends with other people exactly the way he's friends with me. I want to be special to him.*

Maybe he'd moved. He must have, because Potter turned around suddenly and smiled at him. "Draco!" he said, hurrying over to the bed with gratifying speed. "How are you feeling?"

Draco saw no reason why he should pass up such a prime opportunity to make the Gryffindors uncomfortable. He sighed and turned large eyes up at Potter. "I still want peace and quiet," he whispered. "Can I have that?"

Potter studied him with a narrowed gaze for a minute, even as Weasley spluttered something about how he was lying and Granger said, "We weren't disturbing him! We all thought he was asleep until now!"

Then Potter put his hand on Draco's shoulder and squeezed. "I think we can arrange that," he said. "Your—I mean, the other person in the hospital wing's asleep right now, and Madam Pomfrey said that she would only disturb you if she needs to bring you food or potions. And I can leave."

"No!" Draco snapped, grabbing Potter's wrist and squeezing so hard that Potter winced. Draco wondered what that would look like to the smug Gryffindors and tried to release his hold a bit. It was hard. "You promised that you would stay with me, and I want you to do that."

"He *does* still have to attend class," Granger pointed out, in a tone of calm reason that Draco had always hated when his father used it with him.

*Father.* He had to shut his eyes and turn away, because suddenly his throat was tight and his eyes stung, and the argument seemed as silly and stupid as it was next to the fact that his father was dead.

"Fine, go away," he said thickly, releasing Potter's wrist. "If you want to so badly. I need to think." He needed to curl up and think about this wound, was what he meant, and how he was going to live the rest of his life. There would be no more calm, stern voice telling him that he had done something wrong. There would be no more quick squeeze on the shoulder when he had got something right. And he would hear the Dark Lord's voice through his father's lips forever. How could he do anything else?

"Go away," Potter said to his friends, in a flat voice that Draco would have enjoyed, except that he couldn't imagine taking pleasure in anything right now. "I'll talk to you later."

"But Harry—" A Weasley whinge if there ever was one, Draco thought, but the thought was distant and unimportant. He was concentrating far harder on the fact that the bed bent in where Potter leaned against it and that the hand was back on his shoulder.

"I'll talk to you *later*," Potter said forcefully. "We're still friends. We'll discuss it. But *later*."

Granger had more sense than Weasley, not that that was a surprise. Draco heard her urge Weasley out of the hospital wing. He took a shaky breath and leaned back towards Potter, offering a tentative hand.

Potter gripped it and used it to tug Draco closer to him. "I won't go, if you really need me," he said. "I just thought you might prefer to be alone with your mother."

"Later," Draco said, and would have smiled to think that he was sounding so much like Potter, except that he felt like he would never smile again right now. "I need—I need you." He rolled

over and grabbed Potter's shoulders and waist and hair. His hand seemed to land everywhere except someplace that would let him have a solid grip.

Potter grabbed Draco's arm and adjusted it around his waist. "It's all right," he said, voice so deep and soothing that Draco could have sunk into it like a blanket. "I promised to stay with you. I'll keep that promise."

*Yes, you will,* Draco thought, and wondered if Potter knew what it meant that he tightened his grip again.

"Enter." Severus lifted his head from the stack of essays he had been marking— managing to mark only because it was such an old chore. In reality, his attention had been fixed beyond that door, on the boy who entered now.

"Sir."

Potter's eyes were wide and wary, and he watched every movement Severus made in rising up from the desk and casting locking charms on the door. He couldn't keep from giving a small, nervous twitch of his head when the charm flew past his ear. Severus promised himself that he would remember that movement, and stepped closer.

The silence wore on the boy's nerves, as Severus had suspected it would. "Are we going to practice Occlumency first, sir?" he asked, drawing his wand. "You said that this session would be different. Are we going to combine Occlumency and practicing dueling?"

Severus shook his head. "It is different," he said. "It is not exactly a session."

The boy's head snapped up, and he hunched his shoulders in that blow-absorbing posture. Severus paused. He wanted, badly, to know the origin of that movement, but he suspected it would be best pursued when some more obvious barriers had been broken through first.

"Sir?" The boy's voice was high now, but with anger, not nervousness, at least if Severus was a judge of adolescent students.

"We should have discussed long since," Severus said, his voice layered with calm, "what certain things that lie between us mean."

"They don't mean anything, *sir*." The boy's voice sank, and those eyes were hard with a contempt that Severus knew was all inherited from him. It certainly had never haunted Lily's eyes. Lily, for all the darkness she had seen and lived through, had never known bitterness so pure. "We've established that."

"I would like a chance to change the definitions." Severus inclined his head in what he hoped the boy would see as a friendly nod, a gesture to an equal. It only earned him a hostile stare. He decided that he had no choice but to speak directly. "You are more than I thought you. I would

like a chance to have a say in your future."

"Yeah," Potter breathed, "I'll bet you would. Having power over me makes you *happy*. Well, you don't get this kind of power."

Severus grimaced. He could have phrased his request better. Yet he could not say that he wished to be a father to the boy. Not only did he not know if that was possible at the moment, but he was not sure it was consonant with his own desires. To be closer, yes; to claim the boy's time and attention in some way, yes. But more than that? He did not know.

"You mistake me," he said. "It is connection I seek, and not power."

"We're connected," Potter said stubbornly. "You're a teacher, and I'm a student."

"You know it is more than that," Severus said. "My blood flows in your veins." It was the first time he had ever said something similar, and he stood there, blinking in the strangeness of the phrase.

He wished later he had not, as it had given Potter the chance to hurtle ahead and try to change their contest.

"And I *don't care* about that," Potter whispered. "Don't you understand? It means *nothing* to me. If I were a kid, sure. If I'd had lots of fantasies about parents coming to rescue me, sure. But I'm almost of age, and I gave up those fantasies before I was eight years old, thanks."

Severus noted silently that Potter apparently had needed fantasies of rescue for some reason. That fit in with the hunching posture to make him wonder more about the life Potter had experienced before he had come to Hogwarts. "I did not wish to rescue you, or imply that you were weak," he said. "I meant that I wish a closer connection."

Potter stubbornly shook his head, his dark hair whipping around his face. Severus found his eyes lingering there, as they never had. He had always seen that defiant hair as simply another facet of inheritance from James Potter. Now he was reluctantly fascinated. What combination of his blood and Lily's had produced it?

"I don't want one," Potter said.

"And you believe that your own desires are the only ones that matter here?" Severus felt his anger rising to match his—his son's, and he glided a step forwards. That made Potter bare his teeth and lift his wand at once, but at least it commanded his attention. "You believe that it is not important if I wish to have a claim to your time? To you?"

Potter clenched his fists and lifted his shoulders even more into that posture that so intrigued Severus. "You don't have a claim," he said, voice low and ugly, and in it again Severus heard the harmonics of his heritage. "None at all. You didn't know about me. And now it's the same as if

you only knew about me after I died."

Severus stared at him, baffled. He had expected the anger and the hatred, but not the particular form this anger and hatred had taken. Not when he had seen Potter's longing glances at the Weasley parents and Black in Grimmauld Place, not when he had believed that Potter yearned for a home with someone who was related to him. "It is not," he said slowly. "I am not yet certain of the *form* this connection should take, but it is undeniable."

"Why?" Potter demanded. "Why does blood matter so much? Just because you're pure-blood—"

"I am not, in fact," Severus said. He would normally never have shared this with a student, but he thought it…right—for certain definitions of that word—for his son to know about their heritage. "My father was a Muggle."

Potter stared at him with a slightly open mouth. Then he slammed it shut and shook his head. "It still doesn't matter," he said. "In fact, I don't know why you keep insisting on this. Blood can't be that important. Why does it change everything? Why is it undeniable? Why can't we simply keep going the way we were before?"

"We cannot," Severus said. Once again, the unexpected direction of Potter's emotions made him slow to respond. "I cannot forget, and neither can you. You are the son of a woman who was my friend. And *my* son. You are not the son of the man I hated most. That means that many things I have thought about you are not true."

"*None* of the things you think about me are true," Potter said with quick force. He had not picked up on the hint about Lily, to Severus's disappointment. "It doesn't matter. It doesn't change anything. And anyway, I do have people related to me by blood who take care of me and are my guardians. So you can't offer me anything new there." He stood up straight and looked mockingly into Snape's eyes. "You thought I was spoiled. Well, I am. My aunt and uncle would do anything for me."

*Too swift, too blunt, too honest, which renders it unnatural.* Severus had begun to see that Potter was good at concealing secrets. That made the truth he did willingly show off all the more suspect.

And there was the evidence of Potter's behavior, and the fact that he had so easily, so quickly, expected nothing but hatred and neglect from Severus.

"I do not think," Severus murmured, watching Potter's face so that he would have a chance to catch every flicker of expression, "that that is true at all."

Potter's eyes widened while his face drained of color. Then he swung around, and Severus's locking charm dissolved with a single sweep of his wand.

Severus moved forwards, but he wasn't fast enough. Potter opened the door and tore out of the

office, the sound of his footsteps quickly fading.

Harry lowered his head and *ran*. He didn't care where he was going. He just wanted to get away from everyone.

He had thought it was safe, to finally leave Draco alone in the hospital wing and start attending classes and practice sessions with Snape again. He knew Draco was past the worst of his grief, and there was no danger from the Dark Mark, but he wanted to stay hidden from the rest of the school, and Harry couldn't blame him.

Snape was safe. He was safe because he was ignoring everything, and that meant he was going to let it not matter. Harry *needed* that.

But instead, Snape had to say…

Harry shuddered and ran faster.

He slammed into something warm and solid, and sat down on the floor with a grunt. Someone trilled, and someone else said, "Oh, dear. I *am* sorry, Harry. I didn't mean to be in the way."

Harry blinked and looked up. Dumbledore stood over him, with Fawkes on his shoulder. The phoenix cocked his head and trilled again. Harry hoped he wasn't laughing at him.

Dumbledore held out his hand to help Harry up. "But this is a fortunate meeting," he added softly. "There is something I have been wanting to talk to you about, Harry, for a…very long time." His eyes flickered to the scar on Harry's forehead.

##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### #####
##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### #####
##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### #####

Chapter: 20

Thank you again for all the reviews!

*Chapter Twenty—Information Gathered, Information Given*

"Would you like a sweet, Harry?"

*That's different,* Harry thought, rubbing his eyes, *to have a choice instead of just lemon drops.* But he ended up shaking his head. He was still in a half-daze of panic about what Snape had found out that hadn't ended when he rode the staircase up to Dumbledore's office.

*He can't—he can't know.* That was the only comfort Harry had. *He suspects, maybe, but he*

*doesn't know for certain. He would have said something if he did.*

Gradually, Harry managed to wrestle his breathing and heartbeat back under control. He took several deep swallows. Snape had taken a chance on reaching out like that, and he would probably be offended that Harry wanted nothing to do with him. Harry thought he would back off and probably never speak of it again.

*But what if he doesn't?*

Harry clenched his hands into fists. He had to come up with a plan to *make* Snape back off, if he didn't do it of his own free will. But since Snape didn't seem like he would listen to lies anymore, what should Harry do?

"Are you quite well, Harry?"

Dumbledore had been watching him all this time and waiting for him to pay attention. Harry blushed in mortification and dropped his gaze to the floor. "I'm all right, sir," he said quietly. He tried to put aside the problems that had preoccupied him for too many months. Snape was no one and nothing to him. A man who couldn't be his father, because he didn't love Harry, who only wanted to "connect" with him because he wanted a new way to torment him. In the end, Harry would ignore him and outwait him, and that would be enough.

*Yes, why shouldn't it be?* Harry suddenly thought, with a surge of excitement that made the problem look smaller. *He doesn't have any proof that I'm his son, since I tore up that letter from Mum. It would take him months and months to try and get custody of me, if he even tried. And by the time that the Wizengamot or someone else decided, then I'd be of age, and free. He can't do anything to me then, even if everyone accepts that we're related.*

Harry began to breathe more easily. He leaned back in his chair and looked expectantly at Dumbledore, head cocked. Yes, everything was going to be all right. He could think about something else now.

"Yes," he said more firmly, because Dumbledore was watching him with a concerned expression. "I'm fine, sir. What did you want to tell me?"

Dumbledore sighed and spun a corner of his beard. Fawkes, who had flown from his shoulder to a perch when they came in, flew back and nestled his head under Dumbledore's chin. The Headmaster scratched his back and regarded Harry with a dark gaze that made him feel very adult. He sat up and tried to look that way.

"I can endure it, sir," he said.

A faint smile crossed Dumbledore's face, making him look at once sadder and wiser. "That is not what I fear, my boy," he said. "Think back. Do you remember the artifact that you saw briefly, the locket I had destroyed?"

Harry nodded and shivered. He didn't think he would ever forget how malevolent the stupid thing had looked. The only thing he'd ever seen that compared to it was Tom Riddle's diary, as least once he knew what it was.

"The artifact is one of a series of powerful objects that are most important to Voldemort," Dumbledore said quietly. "They are called Horcruxes, and they are a rare and Dark means of gaining immortality."

Harry froze. When he could speak, he felt as though someone had just carried him up on a broom to a dizzying height and shown him how small his problems with Snape were in the general scheme of things. "Do you mean that he really *can't* die, sir?" he croaked. "That the prophecy has to end with me dying?"

Dumbledore closed his eyes. "The Horcruxes can be destroyed," he said, with a helpless gesture of one hand. Harry thought he would have gestured with his wand once, and remembered that his magic was weakened. "Once they are all gone, then Voldemort can die. Five are gone now—five of the seven he made. He split his soul, Harry, into many pieces, and embedded the pieces into objects. But destroying the object destroys that piece of soul. It is difficult, but I assure you that it *can* happen, Harry."

His voice was quiet and determined. Harry took a deep breath and tried to calm down. "Five, sir?"

"Yes." Dumbledore opened his eyes and gave him the ghost of a smile. "The diary that you destroyed in second year was the first. It was the existence of the diary that made me suspect what Voldemort might have done. I destroyed another, a ring, this summer, and then a locket and cup since. Though Professor Snape does not know it, he rid the world of the fifth Horcrux when he slew Nagini." His face turned solemn, and he held up his right hand to show the thick scar on his wrist that Harry had seen before. "Never forget that the cost is high, Harry. Destroying the Horcruxes is a hard and dreadful quest, not a merry adventure."

Harry nodded, though he could feel the excitement growing in his chest. The Horcruxes might make Voldemort hard to defeat, but they were a *way* to do it, and before, Harry had thought that he would never learn how to. "I understand, sir. What are the other two Horcruxes? Where are they? Do you know?"

"One I suspect is the tiara that belonged to Rowena Ravenclaw," Dumbledore said. "Voldemort prizes artifacts associated with the founders of Hogwarts. The locket was Salazar Slytherin's, for example, and the cup belonged to Helga Hufflepuff." He smiled slightly. "I have not, so far, encountered any evidence that Voldemort has graced an artifact of Godric Gryffindor with his attentions."

"But you don't know where to look for the tiara?" Harry asked, even though he suspected Dumbledore would have said if he had.

Dumbledore slowly shook his head. "I must identify it before too long. The chances increase with each day that Voldemort will discover some of his Horcruxes are missing and decide to make new ones. He will hide these better and there would be no chance for us to destroy all of them in time." He paused.

Harry waited, but the silence just went on filling up the office, and at last he decided that Dumbledore wanted to be asked about the last Horcrux. He leaned forwards. "Where is the seventh one, sir? And do you know what it is?"

"Right in front of me," Dumbledore said. Harry thought he was admitting that he didn't know where it was except somewhere in Hogwarts until Dumbledore added, "It is you, Harry."

Harry just stared at him, not understanding.

"My boy," Dumbledore whispered, "I am so sorry."

Harry sat back with his arms folded around his chest, blinking hard. He felt the same way he thought he might have felt if Uncle Vernon had decided to beat him really badly: more stunned and disbelieving than upset. He swallowed and licked his lips, but didn't think he could get any words out.

"What happened when Voldemort confronted you as a baby," Dumbledore said somberly, "was a complex magical event, the implications of which I did not fully understand until much later. You are an *accidental* Horcrux, Harry. He did not mean to lodge a piece of his soul in you. But from what I understand of the magical theory, though the Horcruxes helped him survive the reflected Killing Curse—reflected by the power of your mother's love and sacrifice for you, Harry—he could not survive *intact.*" Dumbledore closed his eyes. "I am so sorry," he repeated.

Harry unlocked his jaw at last and suppressed the impulse to rock back and forth. It would be soothing, the way it had been several times at the Dursleys', but it would look weak, too, and Harry was desperate to avoid looking weak. Dumbledore had trusted him with this information, trusted him to take it like an adult. Harry would do that.

"Does that mean I have to die, too, sir?" he asked in a whisper.

Dumbledore gave him a look so tender that Harry thought he could have been happy for days just because of that—if only the look hadn't been connected to the other things he'd just told Harry.

"That is the only way to be certain of destroying the Horcrux," Dumbledore whispered. "His soul is entwined around your soul, Harry. As long as you survive, Voldemort cannot die."

Harry swallowed again. He closed his eyes, but the knowledge followed him into the darkness behind his eyelids, which had always been his last refuge, and wouldn't leave him alone.

*Well, at least this means I really* won't *have to deal with Snape ever again,* he thought, and barely kept in a hysterical giggle.

"But who will kill him after I die, sir?" he asked, clinging to calmness and sanity and practical decisions with his fingernails. He'd become used to practical decisions after he got his mum's letter. The fact of Snape sleeping with his mum wouldn't go away, so he had to deal with it. He had to deal with this the same way. "If I die, then *I* can't be the one to kill him, no matter what anyone says."

"Your sacrifice will still kill him, Harry," Dumbledore said, very gently, so gently that Harry wanted to cry again. He locked his teeth against the urge. "You are the hero of this war, never doubt it. It is the only way you can be." His voice turned low and cold, and Harry would have run out of the room if he was Voldemort. "I will kill him. I promise you that."

"But—but your magic is failing," Harry said, staring at him. He *had* to stare, even though tears were prickling along the corners of his eyes and would probably fall out if he looked, because there was no other way he could express his incredulity.

Dumbledore gave him a small smile. "I think I can trust you with this knowledge now," he said, "though Professor Snape will not like it."

That gave Harry a little warmth. He leaned forwards.

"My magic is not truly weakened," Dumbledore said. "That is a rumor we spread about to make Voldemort more arrogant, more likely to act impulsively and in the full sway of misplaced confidence. In truth, a less powerful wizard than I could kill him once the last Horcrux is removed—"

*Once I'm dead,* Harry thought. *Because that's what it means.* He didn't think he had any choice but to hammer himself with the words, again and again, until they became real and he could start accepting them instead of denying them.

"But there are few who could survive the assault of his magic long enough to get close and defend themselves against him." Dumbledore touched his chest with one hand, his face anguished and yet serene. He looked like *he* was the one who'd accepted the reality of his own death. "I promise you, Harry, I can do that."

Harry thought of the way Dumbledore had dueled Voldemort in the Atrium of the Ministry, and nodded. Yes, he believed it.

It was a bit of a comfort.

And that was what had started the process of acceptance, he suddenly realized. He closed his eyes and sat there.

"I must ask that you tell no one about this," Dumbledore said. "I am afraid, to tell you the truth, of how your friends would take it. And that includes Mr. Malfoy."

Harry opened his eyes and nodded. There was no *fucking* way he was going to tell anyone about this. Ron would storm and protest and decide to do something stupid like tie Harry up to keep him from going out and doing what he needed to do. Hermione would fling herself into a frenzy of researching different solutions, and she would get more and more upset when she found out there was no other way.

And Draco…

Harry bowed his head. That was another responsibility before he died.

*I'll have to get Draco used to the idea that I'm leaving him.*

"I understand, sir," he said.

"I think you do." Dumbledore's face and voice were both weary. He shook his head as though someone was pressing on his eyelids and making him do it. Harry knew that kind of heaviness. He wished there was something he could do in return that would take away the weight. "Please, Harry, come to me with questions if you have them, or to ask for support if you need it."

Harry hid a bitter smile as he stood, but he thought he could do that only because Dumbledore wasn't looking. The Headmaster would have seen the smile and demanded to know if there was anything he could do for Harry.

*But it's not about that, is it?* Harry thought as he rode the moving staircase down to the bottom. *It never is. It's about what I can do for other people.*

He had to struggle with a thick, salty bitterness in his throat, as though he'd choked on seawater. Finally he could open his eyes and stand up straighter, and he even felt marginally better.

*I knew it would be like this. I think some part of me always knew it. And maybe—maybe it's better this way. I mean, my parents are dead. Sirius is dead. They would try to protect me from dying, but this way, I'm just rejoining them.*

*Ron and Hermione and Draco will be hurt. I can't do anything about that.*

He breathed in and out, all the way from Dumbledore's office back to Gryffindor Tower. Just get used to it. That was what he would have to do.

*I wonder if I'll be used to it by the time I have to die?*

Harry shook his head and decided to think about places where the Ravenclaw tiara could be

hidden instead.

Something had happened to the boy.

Severus knew that as surely as if someone had taken him aside and whispered the secret into his ear, or he had pulled it from the boy's head with Legilimency.

Potter still went about his duties. Now that Draco had left the hospital wing, Potter accompanied him to their shared classes and defended him against the attacks of the curious. He spoke with his best friends, though they gave him uneasy looks and didn't always look eager to initiate a conversation. Severus had heard him asking Albus whether Draco would be safe in the Slytherin dungeons.

But the glow in his eyes was dulled, and it seemed as though his head had turned to iron and he carried it upright only with an enormous effort.

He avoided Severus, too. He had never failed to attend their Occlumency sessions and private duels before. But Severus waited for him impatiently on the next evening after their abortive confrontation that he should have appeared, and had to accept that he wasn't coming a half-hour later.

Severus engaged him all the more fiercely in class. The boy battled with a grim demeanor, still skillfully but without the animated brilliance that was his birthright. And several of Severus's spells slipped through his shields, which had never happened before.

One day, as he was snatching his books up, Severus heard Granger exclaim something. Potter snapped back a response in a low voice. Granger looked near tears, but ran out of the room, leaving Weasley to bring her satchel. The girl *must* be distressed, Severus thought. He could not remember seeing her demonstrate so little regard for schoolbooks before.

Potter tried to melt away when he saw Severus coming, but Severus seized his right arm and shook his head in warning. "Stay," he whispered.

The boy stood oddly still. Severus glanced downwards and realized that Potter's face was white and he swayed on his feet. Severus shifted Potter's arm to the side, and felt the warmth of blood beneath his exploring fingers.

In an instant, even though Potter stubbornly fought him, Severus had pulled the sleeve back and was staring down at a thin, jagged cut across Potter's forearm. Severus knew the origin of that wound the moment he looked at it. The Vein-Cutting Hex he had used had struck after all; he'd thought Potter had deflected it. And though it had not sliced the vein it was targeted at, Potter's arm was slimed with blood and he was in obvious pain, shifting back and forth and gritting his teeth. The hex had properties that prevented the blood from clotting or the pain from easing.

"Little fool," Severus whispered. He lowered his wand so that he could touch the spell and heal

it. He was not a mediwizard by training, but he had learned to take care of injuries such as this one on the battlefield.

The boy whipped his arm free and backed away from him. Severus opened his mouth to snap at him about not being an idiot, and then stopped. The boy's eyes were full of distrust and hatred, nothing unusual.

The fear was.

Then the fear was gone and his wand was in his hand and he looked grimly accepting of a duel.

"Little fool," Severus said again, but this time his voice was weakened by his disbelief and he knew it. "I would not have hurt you."

Potter glanced down at the blood that covered his arm. His smile was perfect. He didn't need to say a word.

"I would never have used such a spell if I had not thought you were in the condition to defend yourself," Severus snapped, and cast the healing charm, though it was not as effective from a distance. Potter gasped in surprise as the cut tugged itself shut. Severus thought it would have been best to turn away and say no more, but the impatient words spilled out of him. "What *happened?* You have not been yourself in the last fortnight."

Potter tossed him a scornful glance that Severus would have said was pure James Potter before, and knew was purely himself now. "As if you know enough about me to realize when I'm acting normally."

"You have denied me the chance to know you better," Severus said. He had held back the memories of what had occurred when he confronted his son, because they were useless and would only make his temper worse, but he allowed them to flood his mind now as he gazed at the boy—*the* boy, who should have been *his* boy. Perhaps it was sentimental, but he had to think of Potter differently on finding out that he shared Lily's blood and none of James's. How differently, he was not yet certain. "I told you I would like to."

Potter snorted and folded his arms. He winced when the newly-healed skin on the right one pulled, and Severus opened his mouth to tell him he would need to be careful of the wound for a time. Potter bulled ahead, however, interrupting him. "You can't even decide what you feel about me or what you want. Meanwhile, I *know* that you'd hurt me if I was stupid enough to let you close." He cocked his head, and his eyes glinted. "I've got harder things to face than not having your approval."

Severus would have liked to snap. He wanted to so badly. But that had availed him nothing in the recent past, and he had an objection to gratifying the boy's poor opinion of him by pursuing another failing strategy.

"Perhaps," he said in a low, controlled voice. "But you do not know how your life might change for the better if you have my approval. And my help."

Potter rolled his eyes. "I can't brew potions," he said, as if reciting from a list. "I'm not Slytherin. I'm not perfect. So your approval is impossible, and not something that I miss at this point. I get plenty of approval from my relatives."

"Do you?" Severus advanced a step. "I have been thinking, you see. Your wound put me in mind of it. When you broke your arm in your second year, you did not cry out."

Potter stared at him. "Are you mental?"

"And you did your best not to show your pain just now." Severus nodded to his arm.

"Because you would have given me so much love and sympathy if I had," Potter snarled, backing up a step.

"Such a high level of pain tolerance is unusual in one so young," Severus continued. "Yes, it can be learned, but I am aware that you have received no training of that kind. So it must originate in something else, and, combined with the other signs that I have noted, I began to wonder—"

"No one's *paying* you to wonder."

Potter's eyes were almost black with hatred. Severus met them calmly.

"Do you know," he asked, "what I would do, when I grew old enough to be dangerous with a wand, and my father tried to lift his hand to my mother?"

"I don't care," Potter said. "I don't *care*, all right? They're your past and your slimy, greasy, pure-blood—"

"I told you I was not a pure-blood," Severus murmured, almost hypnotized by the desperation and pain in Potter's face. Yes, those were the same emotions that had looked out of his mother's eyes when his father was drunk. Tobias had usually screamed at her and slapped her, rather than anything worse, but that was enough for a woman as emotionally fragile as his mother had been, worn down by long years of the same thing.

A slow, deep anger began to rise from within him, like the gathering of a tsunami that would take long minutes to reach the shore.

"And this is the story of your grandparents," he continued. "Are you not interested?"

Potter backed further away, eyes squinting, his left hand pressed to his right arm. The cut had come open again, Severus noticed.

It took more strength than he had thought it would to refrain from tending to that immediately, but he knew the more important thing at the moment was to bind Potter to him with certain promises.

"I threatened him," Severus said. "I rarely had to cast a spell. The image of what I could do was enough. Those who have limited and narrow imaginations in other respects usually understand pain, because it is what they inflict on those around them." His voice lowered into a whisper. "I have not felt the need for that rage since my father's death, and I assumed I never would again. That is only one of many mistakes I have made."

"Shut the fuck up!" Potter screamed, his voice cracking. "You don't know what you're talking about! My relatives *love* me!"

"Love to use you for their own benefit, perhaps." Severus drew nearer, step by delicate step. If he could only involve the boy in his emotions and make him forget that Severus was there, except as a voice prodding him to confront his own demons… "You deserve to have a life independent of them. You deserve to have—"

He stopped, not because Potter had interrupted, but because he had simply drawn himself up and was giving Severus a steady, unsmiling, grave look. Once again, it took all the life out of his green eyes, but this time, Severus saw acceptance there rather than unconsciousness of what was passing around him.

"Life," Potter said quietly. "Right. You have no idea."

And he turned and walked out of the classroom.

Severus gazed after him with narrowed eyes. He knew that he had lost again, but he was not certain why.

*I will find out. And the third time shall be the end.*

Draco didn't have to wait as long as he'd thought he might. Potter emerged from the classroom white as salt, and Draco was on him in an instant, shoving him into the wall.

He nearly hesitated when he realized that Potter's right arm was all over blood, but since Potter was already twisting and trying to get away, Draco decided to ignore it and take a firmer grip.

"I'm sick to death of being kept out of everything important," he said, while Potter stared at him in surprise. "Something's happened to change you. You need help. So *talk*."

##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### #####
##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### #####
##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### #####

Chapter: 21

Thank you again for all the reviews!

*Chapter Twenty-One—Dodging, Ducking, Weaving*

Harry felt as though every nerve in his body had frozen for an instant with panic and self-loathing and frantic hatred for the whole situation.

Why was this so *hard*? He should have been able to keep the secret that Dumbledore had entrusted to him with no trouble. He'd kept the secret of his parentage for so much longer, hadn't he? He had kept the secret of what it was really like to live with the Dursleys. He'd hidden his feelings and his wounds and his scar, when he could, and the terror of facing Voldemort and his nightmares. He could hide things so well—

Except when it really counted.

But he would have to try again. Yes, sometimes his secrets were found out, but other times he could put people off. He had managed to do that when Snape and Draco had found out about the Memory Charm he'd used on Madam Pomfrey.

At the least, he could make Draco rethink things and get him looking elsewhere. And Harry knew exactly how he would do it.

He shifted in Draco's grip and whispered, "You're hurting me."

Draco glanced over at the perfect time, as a large drop of blood rolled down Harry's arm from the wound that had opened again. His mouth fell open and he blurted out, "What happened? I know that you defended yourself against the spells Professor Snape cast at you."

"Not that well," Harry said wryly, lowering his arm so that he could cradle it against his side and trying to look more injured that he really was. It wasn't easy. Snape had accused him of having a high pain threshold, but so what? The wound stung a bit, that was all. Harry couldn't help it if he had a weird reaction to some things. "I'm distracted. I let one through." He sighed and stared at the injury. It was annoying, he had to admit, and he would be glad to have it healed. "He tried to heal it, but it tore open again."

"See," Draco said softly as he pushed back Harry's sleeve and touched his wand to Harry's arm, "that proves that he really does care about you after all. He wouldn't have done that for any other student. Most of us would earn a shove through the Floo to Madam Pomfrey."

Harry kept himself from staring incredulously at Draco, but only just. Why should he care about what Snape wanted or cared for? He was never going to be Harry's father no matter what happened, and he should just stop trying.

Draco wouldn't want to hear that. Harry thought he was becoming a pretty good judge of what a Slytherin would want to hear. He bit his tongue hard and said, "Well, if you say so."

Draco murmured a healing charm. Harry wondered idly if he'd learned it while he was pranking people, or being pranked, in the Slytherin common room.

"Has anyone tried to hurt you?" he asked suddenly. "I know no one *has* so far, but you wouldn't necessarily have told me if someone tried and didn't manage it."

Draco looked up at him. His eyes were so steady and cool that Harry flinched. He had thought only Snape could look like that.

"You mean," Draco said, every word as measured as the fall of a drop of water into a pool, "the way that you won't tell me about what's bothering you?"

Harry blinked. He'd had words a minute ago. They were around here somewhere.

"You won't let anyone near you," Draco said, as his hands worked up and down Harry's arm, stroking and caressing in a strange way. Perhaps that was part of the movement he had to make to close Harry's wound. Harry didn't know. He should have checked, but he couldn't look away from Draco's eyes. "I don't know why, but that's the way it is, it seems. The great Harry Potter, on his great and heroic lonesome." A trace of bitterness crept into his voice, a familiar emotion but one that Harry had thought he'd heard the last of.

"I don't know what you're talking about," Harry objected, managing to find his tongue. "Of *course* I let people near me. Why wouldn't I? I mean, when don't I do it? I train people, and I protect you, and I let you hold me in the hospital wing, and I guard people with my life, and I'm letting you heal me, and I let Madam Pomfrey heal me, and—"

"You float alone through all of us." Draco stepped back, spinning his wand once as if he was contemplating a deed well done, but his eyes stayed, intent, on Harry's face, and his hand rested, heavy, on Harry's arm. "You might not show it to many people, but you do. You never even *considered* telling people about—"

"Oi, Harry!"

That was Ron's voice. Harry was infinitely glad that he'd chosen to come back then and not a minute later, when Draco might have said everything about Snape's relationship to Harry into the open air. Harry had been too hypnotized by his strange manner to be able to stop him.

Draco stiffened at once, and his hand fell from Harry's arm as if pushed away. Harry tried to apologize with his eyes, but he turned towards Ron as if towards his own savior and nodded.

"I was coming along," he said. "Snape got me with a hex after all. Draco was healing it for me."

He saw no reason not to tell *that* part of the truth. It would be rather hard to hide, with his robe sleeve soaked with blood, and Draco should get the credit for doing what Snape couldn't.

"The bastard," Ron said, and though Harry knew he meant the words for Snape, he glared at Draco as he moved closer, in a way that said he was willing to spread the blame around.

Draco didn't bother retorting. He just put his head up and started to walk haughtily off down the corridor.

"He's not a bastard," Harry said, so Draco could hear. He moved down the corridor so that he was standing between one friend and the other. He did pause until he was sure Draco was turning around, or at least looking over his shoulder, and then faced Ron again. "He was *healing* me, not hurting me." He felt more confident now. At least he had conducted arguments between his friends before, so he knew how they were supposed to go. Draco putting him in such an awkward place, the way he had a few moments before, was strange and stupid and new and Harry didn't like it.

This he could handle.

"I hate the way you're defending him," Ron said, flushing so red that it looked as if his ears would emit steam any minute. "Why can't you realize that I hate him and I've always hated him? It doesn't matter if *you* like him."

"It ought to," Harry said. "After all, it matters to me if you like Hermione or Neville or anyone else."

Ron blinked at him in silence. Then he said, as if trying out the taste of a new idea, "Why?"

"Because you're my friend, and I care about you," Harry said simply.

Ron flushed more deeply and muttered something. Harry picked out the words "strange" and "didn't know."

"I know that," Harry said, more gently. "I ignored you, too, when I shouldn't have, and I'm sorry." He heard Draco shift restlessly behind him, and he cast a smile over his shoulder, hoping to reassure him. Draco frowned but stayed where he was.

Harry turned back to Ron. He was determined not to let this become a breach in their friendship. He wanted Ron beside him, and he *was* sorry for how he'd been acting. He just wasn't going to reject Draco by way of apology.

*Yes, you want him beside you,* said a cynical, snickering voice in the back of his head. *Until you die. Then won't he wonder why you never told him?*

Harry pressed his teeth down in the back of his mouth until he thought he had crushed that little

voice. He had no *time* for that. He would drift into self-pity if he thought too much about what Dumbledore had told him. Or he would start uselessly thinking of escapes so that he could get away. He knew there was no escape. If there was, Dumbledore would have mentioned it. Harry was confident the Headmaster cared for him enough to do that. He wouldn't sacrifice Harry's life unless he thought there was no choice.

He'd thought about it too much, that was clear, if both Snape and Draco had noticed something. From now on, until he had to stop, Harry intended to fling himself into making his friends' lives happier. That was something he knew how to do.

"I want to know how you're doing," Harry continued slowly. "I just got so bored of your conversation when it revolved around Hermione and Lavender, and nothing *but* them. And then you said I didn't understand because I hadn't seriously dated anyone, and it got me angry. But you're past that now. I know you're past it. So I should be too." He met Ron's eye and held his hand out. "Mates?"

Ron took Harry's wrist and nodded. He looked slightly dazed. Well, that wasn't the worst result, Harry thought. Dazed, he was less likely to insult Draco.

He turned around and faced Draco.

Draco was slowly clenching his fists as he watched Potter and Weasley. It was as though nothing had changed between them, as if Potter had never become special to *him*, as if Potter was the perfect little Gryffindor he'd always acted like and he wasn't Professor Snape's son or Draco's protector or someone who would rescue Slytherins.

Then Potter turned around and smiled at him, and Draco realized he hadn't changed so much after all. The main problem was, somehow he was both Gryffindor and Slytherin, both Weasley's friend and Draco's friend.

And things he denied, too.

Draco wondered why so many contradictions weren't tearing Potter apart.

"I'm sorry I got you angry, too," Potter said. "But sometimes it becomes too much for me, you know? Knowing that Voldemort is out there and threatening me." He shut his eyes and shivered. "And—the other things that are overwhelming me, they hurt." He opened one eye and squinted hard at Draco, as if to remind him to keep silent about his being Professor Snape's son in front of the Weasel.

*As if I need telling,* Draco thought scornfully, but most of him was occupied in an intense study of Potter's face. He almost believed him. After all, being the special target of the Dark Lord's wrath was overwhelming.

Draco, who saw his father's face like a vision between him and most of Hogwarts wherever he

looked, knew that.

But he couldn't quite arrive at belief. Potter had put up with that burden before. And he'd put up with knowing that he was Professor Snape's son for weeks, if not months and years, before that. Something had happened to change him.

Draco was determined that Potter wouldn't get away with concealing this.

"I accept your apology," he replied smoothly. "But that discussion we were having? About Potions? We can defer it, but not for long. I want to meet with you at eight in the library so we can speak about it."

Potter's face twisted, and he glared at Draco. Draco looked coolly back.

*You're not going to get away with keeping everything to yourself.*

Potter flicked his eyes to the side and nodded. Draco wasn't sure what had changed his mind, guilt or desire not to reveal the truth in front of Weasley or something else, but he accepted it as an ally. He nodded back and departed down the corridor with great dignity. After all, it was time for his next class.

Behind him, he heard Weasley ask a skeptical question and Potter reply in a tone that shut debate down. Draco smiled grimly.

*At least there's that.*

Severus stood silently in a corner of the library under a Disillusionment Charm. He had heard the conversation between Potter, Weasley, and Draco outside his classroom earlier; he could hardly help hearing it, with the way their voices yelped and chattered. He had also heard the appointment that Draco had reminded Potter of, or, more likely, invented on the spot and got Potter to agree to.

It was the kind of tactic that Severus himself would have used—*had* used in the years when he wanted to meet Lily and she seemed too distracted by her Gryffindor friends to pay attention to him.

*Lily, who bore your son.*

Severus took a slow, deep breath, silent enough that no one would notice the sound in the quiet of the library, and shook his head. He was still getting used to that knowledge. He did not know if it would ever settle completely in his head.

*It cannot, if my son continues to deny me the minimum of contact with him.*

Before Severus could brood on that too long and grow angry, he heard a stir at the door of the

library. Potter stood there, his brow furrowed and his eyes searching the room for Draco. He seemed to see him long after Severus thought he should have, but then, he had never been near-sighted himself. Potter picked his way between the shelves as gingerly as though the books might bite him and sat down at the table.

Draco finished reading the page in his book before he put it down. He leaned forwards and spoke so softly to Potter that Severus was glad he had not stood further off. Casting an eavesdropping spell at the moment might be noticeable. "Thanks for coming."

"You didn't give me much choice." Potter folded his arms and glared. Severus studied the way he moved his right arm and had to admit that Draco seemed to have healed the wound well enough that it no longer restricted Potter's range of motion.

"Yes, I know." Draco offered no apology. "You *have* changed. I want to know why."

Potter bit his lip, looking down. Severus's eyes narrowed.

*He will lie. Every word that emerges from his mouth will be a lie.*

A course of action occurred to him, and he began to shift slowly to the side. From where he stood, it would be risky, as he could see only part of Potter's profile, not his whole face.

*It is too important that we know the truth brewing in his mind, so that we may help him.*

"I know," Potter whispered. "But—since you know about my mum sleeping with someone else anyway—"

*He would rather say that than admit I am his father.* Severus discovered he was clenching his hands into fists and forced himself to stop with a small hiss. Potter glanced over his shoulder as if he had heard something, and Severus froze, but Potter turned back to Draco again. Severus decided it had simply been an incidental check for listeners, and began to move once more.

"You'll understand." Potter gave a helpless little shrug. "It's getting harder and harder to bear. I'm looking at myself in the mirror now, wondering if something will change about me that I can't hide. I perform a spell or say something sarcastic and wonder if it's what I've inherited from him coming out. I have to second-guess myself every moment. I live under his shadow, even though I won't let him acknowledge me. *That's* what's getting to me."

"Yeah, I can see that." Draco sounded compassionate. "But there's a simple way to deal with it."

"There is?" Potter sounded eager. Severus raised an eyebrow as he shifted forwards again. *While I hardly think that the revelation of his parentage alone is troubling him, it is doing so enough that he will grasp at any solution.*

"Stop denying who you are," Draco said simply. "I spent a few days when I was younger

pretending I wasn't my father's son, and I hated it. No wonder the burden weighs on you. It's always contradicted by the truth sitting in the back of your mind. Start accepting that you *are* Professor Snape's son and you can't change that. Ask him for help. Look at him and learn his traits, so you can know what's you and what's him in your behavior. Ask about your mother. He must have known her better than you thought."

Potter gave a stiff, wary little jerk of his head, and Severus wondered if he was remembering the mention of Lily Severus had slipped into their conversation. He maneuvered to the side again. He was nearly in the perfect position for what he wished to do.

"I don't want to be a Snape," Potter hissed. "I don't want him as a father. I'm perfectly happy the way I am."

Draco had the wits to frown at that, at least. "What the fuck, Potter?" he said, low and precise, and Severus had to bite his tongue to still the automatic reprimand about language. "You're *happy* to have this changing your behavior when you just admitted you were miserable?"

Potter closed his eyes, and for long moments it seemed to Severus that he fought against a burden greater than Severus himself had guessed.

*There is something wrong with him, something deep. I will know what it is. I deserve to know. He is my son.*

The words were no more than what he'd whispered to himself a myriad of times since learning the truth, but they seemed to sink deeper this time, to weigh more. Perhaps it was the evidence of Gryffindors and Draco knowing his son better than he did. Perhaps it was the undeniable fact that Potter had acted strangely in his classroom that afternoon.

Perhaps it was the simple sight of those green eyes when they flicked open again, weary and desperate.

"I don't expect—" Potter said, and then shrugged and seemed to decide that he might as well speak openly, or with partial openness. "I don't expect anything from Snape. I know that he'll probably take great delight in torturing me if I ever listen to him or talk about wanting something from him." He laughed, a sound that had a crack straight down the middle. "Imagine how much pleasure he'd take in denying me something only *he* could give me. It's one thing to give me detentions or take points, but he's not the only professor who can do that. This would be unique. He's probably drooling on himself waiting for me to ask, the bastard." Potter drove a hand through his shaggy hair.

Severus paused, breathing quietly. He could understand how such a mistaken impression might persist in Potter's head at first, but why would it *still* be there? He had made efforts to reach out. *He* had taken the initiative.

Unless Potter no longer believed that, and was merely lying for the sake of Draco, who looked

properly shocked. But Severus did not think that was the case. There was a heaviness about Potter's eyes and a dustiness in his voice that said he was convinced he was telling the truth.

*I will give you what you ask for,* Severus thought at his son with heaviness of his own, *if you ever ask me for anything.*

"He's not like that," Draco said, in a soft voice, after enough time had passed that he probably felt he had respected Potter's reservations. "You don't really know him. Towards us, he does his duty."

"I know all about *duty*," Potter said, and his fingers drove into the table nearly hard enough to make a scratch in the surface.

"You don't really know him," Draco repeated, reaching out and taking Potter's hand. "You should ask him for him to talk to you. Perhaps you won't get along immediately or at all, but at least it would ease some of the strain you're under. I want to ease that strain." His voice deepened, and his free hand wavered up and then down to the table again. Severus thought he might have caressed Potter's cheek if not for the presence of other people in the library.

"Why?" Potter asked, blinking at Draco.

"You helped me," Draco said, his voice lower than it had been before. He leaned forwards again. Potter stared at him dumbly and didn't seem to understand what the movement meant, though Severus did. He fought the urge to close his eyes.

*It would be like Lucius Malfoy's son to want someone marked for death,* he thought. *It would be like Draco to decide that Potter was worthy of his attentions when he had learned about his close, unwanted connection with Slytherin House.*

"Yes, but that doesn't mean you have to help me *back*."

Potter's voice was wary, puzzled—defensive. In front of an audience he knew was present, Severus would have said that he was projecting false modesty in hopes of being reassured that of course other people loved him and wanted to help him.

As Potter thought he was alone, Potter wondered again what sort of life this boy had led, to make him so utterly certain those other people wouldn't feel they owed him, to reject claims that they eagerly made.

"I *want* to."

Severus wouldn't have thought that even Potter could be blind to what emotion shone in Draco's face, but he simply wrinkled up his forehead and eyed him sideways.

Severus seized the chance. He thought Potter distracted sufficiently.

*Legilimens*, he intoned to himself, focusing a great deal of his power as he made the small motion with his wand. This was not an easy spell for even him to perform nonverbally.

It worked. Potter's Occlumency barriers had grown stronger of late, but only when he knew an assault was coming. Unsuspected, Severus whispered past the barriers and into the boy's mind, driving at once towards the swirling center of darkness he sensed there.

The thoughts were clear enough, dominating the way Potter thought and felt completely.

*I have to die. I know that it's to save everyone else and it's the only way to get rid of this piece of Voldemort's soul in me, but I don't want to die.*

Severus opened his eyes, shocked back into himself by the discovered information, and found out that Potter could at least tell when Legilimency had been used on him, if not resist it. He was on his feet, pulling to try and force Draco to release the grasp on his hand, his eyes darting wildly from side to side.

Severus raised a privacy charm of his own devising immediately. Should any students glance in this direction, they would see Potter and Draco peacefully immersed in books. He dropped the Disillusionment Charm when that was done and reached out to clasp his son's shoulder. Draco, in the meantime, had risen to his feet and come around the table so that he could hold Potter more effectively. He concealed his shock at Severus's appearance manfully.

"You are planning to die," Severus told Potter. "You need not. We will find another way." He bore down when Potter started struggling instinctively against him. "I will *make* another way. I wish to. You are my son." This time, he felt the strength of the claim. He thought the rightness would come in time.

Potter twisted again like a hooked fish, his eyes wide and panicked. "Dumbledore said that I wasn't supposed to tell anyone," he said, and then covered his mouth with one hand and tried to spring away from Severus.

Severus pinned Potter's arms to his sides with his own hands, driving Draco to relinquish his grip, and reached into his pocket for a Calming Draught. As he fought Potter to make him swallow it, he concentrated on the actions he would take next, on how he would bring Potter from the library back to his quarters and force him to speak.

Concentrating on such things had kept him from murder in the past. It would keep him from storming into the Headmaster's office now and demanding to know what he had been about, commanding Potter to keep such a dangerous and devastating secret to himself.

Harry locked his lips against the Calming Draught, hating it, hating *both* of them at the moment, but Snape more, because he had stolen secrets from Harry's mind that he had no right to steal.

Even when the Draught flowed down his throat and he had to relax despite himself, he locked his eyes grimly on Snape's face and ignored Draco's attempts to get his attention.

*I don't care. I don't* care *what he saw. I'll make him drop it.*

*Having his help is worse than nothing.*

And, just to confirm all his foresight, Snape's hand on his shoulder hurt him as he steered Harry out of the library, and the wound on his arm felt as if it had torn open again.

*All he does is cause me pain. Why the fuck would I want him to notice me?*

##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### #####
##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### #####
##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### #####

Chapter: 22

Thank you again for all the reviews!

*Chapter Twenty-Two—A Conversation Harry Does Not Want to Have*

Harry kept his head bowed as Snape pushed him into his office, but looking meek was another way to throw them off-guard. He *had* to get away. He would worry about using Memory Charms on them—well, at least on Snape, to make him forget what he'd seen—later. For now, he needed to be free.

Snape lifted his hand from Harry's shoulder so that he could turn and lock the door. Harry thought he heard him putting up silencing charms, too. *Probably so that no one can hear me screaming when he rapes my mind.*

Harry spun around and launched his wand straight into his grip with a hasty movement of his arm. "*Impedimenta!*" he shouted.

The hex went wide, but it distracted Snape, who ducked instinctively. Harry sprang past him, his mind working. He had to undo the locking and silencing charms, but he had practiced on those before, he could do them in his sleep, he wouldn't have to pause for long—

Someone grabbed his arm, and Harry tried to strike backwards with his elbow, thinking it was Snape. With luck he would hit the bastard in the groin.

But an anguished voice said, "*Potter*," and Harry paused. Draco was looking at him with wide, pained eyes.

That distracted Harry long enough that, by the time he remembered and turned around to face the door, Snape was on his feet again. His face was utterly smooth and cold, and Harry did his best to brace himself. Uncle Vernon had only looked like that once or twice. When he had, Harry had wound up with no food for three days and bruises when his uncle shoved him hard into the cupboard.

The voice of experience tried to tell him that he had seen Snape look like that before and it had never resulted in something similar. But Harry reminded the voice of experience that Snape hadn't known he was related to Harry before this. He seemed to think he had some kind of special *right* just because he knew about something that had happened more than sixteen years ago.

*Almost seventeen. Why couldn't he not have found out about this until I was seventeen? Then I'd be free of him.*

"There will be no running from this, Mr. Potter," Snape said softly. He hesitated, then added, "If that continues to be your name."

"It will," Harry countered immediately and furiously. He had to stand still for the moment because Draco was holding onto him, but he'd already identified the way he was going to move when they relaxed again. He *had* to get out of here. "James Potter was my father. Not you. I don't care about sperm or blood or however you're going to talk about it. A father is someone who would love you and die protecting you, and that's what he did. Don't pretend you're anywhere *near* that."

There was a dark flare in Snape's eyes. Harry tried not to hold his breath, because that would show Snape he was acting expectant. *Good. Just let your anger control you. That's all I'm asking for.*

"Of course he's your father," Draco said impatiently. "He's *part* of you. You can't deny that. But I'm more interested in what you discovered in the library, sir. What did you mean when you said that he was planning to die?"

Harry clenched his fists. He hadn't meant it to happen like this. Now the revelation would hurt Draco, and Harry hadn't done any work yet to prepare him for the news of Harry's death or the fact that he would have to stand on his own two feet.

Though he knew it wouldn't do any good, Harry looked at Snape and tried to make his gaze speak for him. *Spare him this. Lie, for his sake. Hurt and punish me all you like, because you probably think I deserve it, but don't tell him the truth when he can't do anything about it anyway.*

Severus didn't need Legilimency to understand the desperation in the boy's eyes. And he didn't need all the intelligence he possessed to know how the boy would react when Severus refused to respond.

But things had accelerated to a point that Severus no longer believed matters would improve if simply left alone. He met the boy's gaze, shook his head once, and then turned to Draco, who seemed much further along the road to acceptance of Severus's role in Potter's life than Potter himself did.

"It seems that Mr. Potter is convinced he has to die to save everyone else," Severus murmured, "because he carries a piece of the Dark Lord's soul within him. I have heard of such artifacts, called Horcruxes, but I did not know that the Dark Lord had made them or that he could make one out of a living being."

Draco's eyes widened to the point where Severus wondered if he would need another Calming Draught. But Draco instead shivered, stood up straight, and faced Potter, intensifying his grip until Potter winced.

"Why didn't you tell me?" Draco whispered.

Potter hunched his shoulders and snapped, "Because Dumbledore told me not to. And because it's not something I can just announce, is it? 'Oh, sorry, Draco, but I'm going to die soon, and while it's for a great cause, to save the world and all, I'm afraid that means we won't be able to be friends?'" He dropped the ridiculously high-pitched voice he'd been using and snorted. "Yeah, that would have gone over well."

He bit his lip when he finished, as if afraid that he would say something he didn't mean to say if he went on, and shot Severus another glare. He was shivering, though the tremor was so fine Severus would not have been surprised if Draco hadn't yet noticed it. Potter's eyes opened and closed several times, and he was hanging onto his sanity by a series of shaky breaths, it seemed. The Calming Draught's effect had already ceased.

*That should not happen save in the face of deep and severe panic,* Severus thought, *or bottled emotions emerging after too long and savage a bottling. Albus, you have much to answer for.*

The anger within him gathered more strength, drawing it up from deep within him, from sources untouched for all the years since his mother had died. But he was not in front of Albus at the moment, and he had to deal with both Potter and with Draco's reaction to Potter's news.

"You—believed him?" Draco demanded. "Without proof?"

Potter gave Draco a horribly twisted smile. Severus cocked his head. *Have his expressions had that tinge of me, and of Slytherin House, about them all along, or am I exaggerating what is there in the service of claiming him?*

"What reason would he have to lie?" Potter asked simply. "He cares for me. I know that. He made it abundantly clear last year." He shut his eyes and said nothing for a moment. Severus thought he was endeavoring to regain his strength. Potter always seemed to believe that he

should be strong. "Yes, I'm certain. And I know that he had to destroy the other Horcruxes—and I had to destroy one of them—to reduce the threat of Voldemort. Why should I be the exception? I'll have to be destroyed like the others, and the only way to destroy a living being is to kill it."

*Not the only way,* Severus thought idly, memories of what he had done as a Death Eater rushing back to him, but Draco was speaking and, from the tone of his voice, Severus might need to step in soon to prevent violence.

"You obeyed him. You kept this a secret." Draco was digging his nails into Potter's arm now, and seemed oblivious of Potter's sharp hisses and attempts to pull free. "Even when you knew that you'd have to die, and that the burden of keeping the secret would probably kill you before then."

"It would not fucking kill me," Potter said flatly, hauling on his arm as though he wanted to get away from Draco. Severus could not blame him. He had seen some of what Lucius and Narcissa Malfoy had done when they wore expressions half as upset as Draco wore now. "You're being melodramatic."

"*I'm* being melodramatic," Draco said, and his voice lowered and quivered.

Severus moved before Potter could think to, raising a Shield Charm between the two boys. Draco's irritated growl and sudden lunge were enough to make it crack and quiver but not break. Potter started and looked over his shoulder at Severus, then changed his drop-jawed, wide-eyed expression to a sneer when he realized who he had to thank for his safety. He turned back to Draco as if nothing had happened.

"Yes, you are," Potter said doggedly. "It made my life difficult, but it wasn't *killing* me. For all I know, I have to die in some special way to make sure that the piece of Voldemort's soul in me is gone. Do you think I'd do something that would kill me before then? Willingly?"

Draco shook his head. His grey eyes were wide and nearly blind with fury. Severus paused, then stepped back, although he left the Shield Charm up. He thought it best to retreat at the moment and let Draco have the chance to convince Potter. He looked like the one who would make the best use of it.

"And that's all you care about, is it?" Draco asked. "Dying so that you can play your final part as a martyr and a heroic sacrifice? Because of course what Dumbledore says must be true. There can't be another way around this, another way that we can destroy *him* without ending *your* life. You just gave in and listened to him, in a way that you *never* listen to *any* of the professors." He shook his head again, hands clenched so hard that Severus wondered if he would have to patch up thatbloody wound in a short time as well.

"I know why you did it," Draco continued, in a voice that made Potter wince as if he stood under a winter wind. "Because it gave you glory in a way that working to find a way around your 'fate' wouldn't. Because you wanted the glamour of playing the martyr. Because someone can ask you to die and you're all for it, but Merlin forbid that you should have to choose life."

"That's not true!" Potter said hotly, and he could still meet Draco's eyes without looking down in shame, so Severus supposed that Draco's scolding was not as effective as he had hoped. "It's just the way things have to be! I'd have thought you'd be pleased, if anything, because I'm not denying reality the way you like to accuse me of doing with regard to *him*." He gave his head a little toss at Severus, apparently too offended to speak of him directly.

"Pleased," Draco whispered, in a tone so hollow that not even Potter could have failed to notice what his words had done to the other boy. Draco turned away and bowed his head, rubbing one hand across his forehead as though he, like Potter, might feel headaches induced by the Dark Lord.

"I'm not—I didn't mean it that way." Potter stared at Draco, but didn't touch him. Perhaps even he, blind fool that he was, could tell that that would bring on an explosion. "I just meant that I've done stupid things so often. This is the one time that I'm trying to live up to being an adult. I've tried to act better and more adult ever since Sirius died." His voice sharpened into something that Severus recognized as yearning rather than anger, though to uneducated ears they might sound the same. "I've studied Defense more closely and mastered spells that I thought I couldn't do yet. I've taught other people to defend themselves more effectively than they could do last year. And I was willing to die. That's enough, isn't it? What else do I have to *do* to show that I take my burdens seriously?"

"Be my friend," Draco said, with the directness that Severus could not have mustered no matter how much he might want to have a connection to Potter. "Stay alive and be with me."

Potter sighed and touched his scar. It looked like an unconscious gesture, and Severus only wondered that he had never seen the boy using it before. "I wish it was that simple," he whispered. "I don't want to die." There was that yearning again. "But no one can do anything to help. If there was a way around this, then I'm sure Dumbledore would have mentioned it. He's a powerful wizard, and he's more than a hundred years old, and he knows all about spells and magical theory and Horcruxes. If he doesn't think there's a way, or even the possibility of one, then how can there be one?"

Potter bowed his head a little, and Draco looked at him in what seemed like the silence of dismay. Severus allowed himself a moment to respect the tableau before he broke it.

"There speaks the glory of the martyr again, Potter," he said crisply. "There are many things that not even the Headmaster knows. He does not have my depth and knowledge of Potions, because he never attained his own mastery. If you want to live, then you must ask for help, from those best-suited to help you."

Draco, who had been feeling as though all the tears he hadn't shed when his father died—all the tears he would ever shed in his life—would rise up and overwhelm him any minute, found himself exhaling hard in relief.

*Of course. I should have thought of that. Professor Snape is brilliant. If Potter resists looking for a way himself, other people will just have to do it for him.*

He looked back at Potter in time to see him fling a burning glance at Professor Snape. His teeth were clenched and his hair straggling around his head, making him look deranged. Draco reached out and smoothed a lock of that black hair flat before he could stop it.

Potter jerked and then turned to look at him. Draco frowned. He didn't like the hostility in Potter's eyes. He was used to getting gentle and protective expressions from him lately, and he wanted them back.

"Listen to him," Draco said gently. "Even if you hate him, that doesn't mean he's wrong. He could help us, and you could live. The way you want to," he added, because Potter seemed like he might have forgotten that in his sheer hatred.

"I'm not," Potter said, and he was practically chewing the words as he spoke, "going to listen to *him*."

"Why?" Draco demanded, thoroughly exasperated. He hated the fact that Potter had wanted to die, that was the important thing, but the fact that Potter was denying his heritage could still infuriate him. "Does it matter who helps you to survive as long as someone does?"

"*Yes*," Potter said, and then pivoted to face Snape. "You only want to have power over me, to make me grateful so that you can reject me when it would hurt most. I know how people like you work. I know what you want from me, and I don't see why I should give it to you."

Draco found himself cowering instinctively. He never would have defied Professor Snape, but more to the point, he was imagining what would have happened if he talked to his father like that. Lucius would not have cursed him—such things only happened to the unluckier people in Slytherin House—but he would have had a terrible, cool glare and silence that made Draco feel like a Muggle for days afterwards.

Professor Snape had probably anticipated Potter's reaction and decided to control himself, because there was no sign of his anger other than a slight twitch of his hand towards his wand. His voice was deeper than Draco was used to hearing, but that might simply be because he was showing more emotion. "People like me, Potter. What does that mean? I know full well that none of the other professors in the school treat you as I—have treated you in the past."

"Oh, like you're going to *stop*," Potter snarled, stepping forwards.

Even Draco, inexperienced as he was compared to Professor Snape in the way that people moved and worked, saw that for the deflection it was. Potter's eyes had widened in a panic as the professor spoke. He wanted attention on something, anything, other than the answer to the question Snape had just asked.

"What do you mean by people like him?" Draco asked, and tried to keep his voice as calm and interested as possible, rather than displaying the stronger emotions that he felt. He thought Potter would back off faster than Draco could control if he heard Draco's real tone.

It didn't work, or at least not the way Draco wanted it to. Potter twisted around to face him. "No," he said. "Nothing more. You've made me tell you what Dumbledore told me not to tell *anyone*. Fine. I've betrayed that, and there's nothing I can do about it now, thanks to *his* prying arse." The loathing in the look he turned on Professor Snape was terrifying. "But I don't have to give you any of my other secrets."

"Ah, it is a secret then," Professor Snape said, in a hunter's tone, stepping closer. "Would this have something to do, as well, with why you continue to think that I will hurt you no matter what happens, no matter what the nature of our connection to one another? Could the people that you see my reflection in be your family?"

Draco had never seen anyone move so fast as Potter did then.

Harry felt as though his heart was going to explode through his chest, as though his lungs would never draw breath again but only pain, as though his eyes were bleeding fire.

But where his body was shaking on the edge of beakdown and exhaustion, his mind was blessedly clear.

*Silence Snape. It doesn't matter how.*

He drew his wand and pointed it at Snape, shouting the only spell he could think of that would shut him up forever. "*Sectumsempra!*"

Draco's gasp was the loudest thing in the room after his shout. Snape lifted his wand and deflected the spell with a shield which Harry had never seen before, a spinning white wheel that materialized out of nowhere just before the magic would have hit him, and then faded again.

And his eyes were full, at last, of the rage that Harry had been trying to provoke.

*Good.* Harry fell back, his eyes fixed on Snape's movements, his mind racing into battle-mode. He could do this. He could *do* this. It would probably be his last real battle, since he had to defeat Voldemort by dying, but that was all right. It stopped Snape from asking questions about *things he had no right to be asking about,* and that was all right.

*Come on, you bastard.*

Snape flung an *Incarcerous.* Harry incinerated the ropes before they could touch him. Snape tried to lock his legs together. Harry laughed, the countercharm rolling off his tongue before Snape had finished speaking.

*Is that all he has? Binding spells of one sort or another? He would probably say that he doesn't want to hurt me. How* sweet.

For one, for fucking *once,* Harry had the right to fight back against his tormentors. And *he* wasn't about to muck around using stupid silly spells that no real Death Eater would use.

"*Conflagro*," he whispered, and fire started to fall from the air on Snape.

Snape spun, his wand creating a dazzling pattern of defensive maneuvers that held back all the flame. Harry hoped that it would at least fly to the sides and rid the world of some of his precious collection of potions, but apparently the shield was strong enough to swallow the fire completely, instead of deflecting it. Harry growled and started thinking of what spell he could use next.

Someone grabbed his arm.

Harry turned around, raising his left arm to slam the person in the face, glad to think that at least *someone* would suffer for backing him into a corner and ripping pieces of his soul from him—

And saw Draco.

"Are you going to hurt me, too?" Draco asked, looking desperately young and desperately afraid.

Of *him*.

Harry dropped his wand to the floor. The clatter of it was followed a moment later by the thump of him dropping to his knees and putting his head in his hands.

He didn't cry. He felt too exhausted to do it.

*I just wanted my own life, my own secrets. And I hurt people. I would have killed Snape like I killed Bellatrix. I would have been sorry about it afterwards, like I wasn't for Bellatrix, but what good would that do? What would it change?*

*I could have hurt Draco.*

The guilt dug into him and created its own wound, as great as the pain that came from the thought of being under Snape's control and having Snape, instead of just the Dursleys, hurt him.

But no greater.

Severus waited until some moments had passed and he no longer thought the boy—his son—would surge to his feet and attack again. Then he came nearer, though he could not make himself lower his wand. He cleared his throat, and could not make himself speak, either.

Thoughts indeed filled his head, but they were no thoughts that Potter would have rejoiced to

hear.

*This is proof that he was abused if nothing else is.*

"We have to *help* him," Draco whispered before Severus could decide what to say, "not hurt him." He pointed, and Severus, looking down, realized that the fight had opened Potter's wound again and that blood was dripping from his arm onto the floor.

He sighed and nodded to Draco to heal it. He would have tried, but he did not think Potter would accept even something as simple as a healing spell from him right now.

Draco bent and slowly spoke a few words to Potter, low enough that Severus did not try to hear them. Potter raised his head with a jerk, looked down again, and then nodded, a slow, dreamy motion.

*He is in shock, I think,* Severus thought, and his chest tightened and ached. *Damn it. This has gone as badly as it could have.*

He knew that forcing Potter to acknowledge the weight of the secrets he bore before they killed him had been necessary, but he should have chosen a different way—if he could have.

And yet, there was the fact that Potter probably would have died, sacrificing himself mindlessly in the pursuit of the Dark Lord's defeat, if Severus had not used his Legilimency.

Severus wanted to lie down on his bed and sleep. He felt immensely tired, and he had only made clear his undeniable connection to his son and how close he wished to be for an hour. How could he stand an entire lifetime of this?

*The same way you have withstood spying,* he answered himself, brutally. *Do what you are good at, and leave the rest up to others until you have figured out a strategy that will let you accomplish it.*

"Take him to the hospital wing, Draco," he said. "Remain near him. Madam Pomfrey should see the wound, but do not let her ask him questions."

"Afraid I'm going to commit suicide, now?" Potter's voice sounded much like Severus's, full of fatigue. "I wouldn't do that."

"I do not wish you troubled by questions you do not want to answer," Severus said quietly.

Potter twitched his head around, though he wasn't looking up enough that Severus could see his eyes through his fringe. "A bit late for *that* consideration, isn't it?" he muttered bitterly.

Severus shook his head and reminded himself not to snap. "I will not do that again," he said. "Any confession that you make now must come of your own free will."

"I don't believe you."

Severus dipped his head. "Take him, Draco. Stay with him." He turned for the door.

"What are you going to do, sir?" Draco's voice was nervous. Of course, unlike Potter, who was probably too involved in his own emotions, he might have picked up on the abruptness of Severus's movements.

"I am going to talk to the Headmaster," Severus answered, and opened the door.

*Do what you are good at.*

And he was good, as Potter would probably agree, at pain and intimidation.

*But I am willing to learn to be good at other things, for his sake.*

*If he even wishes it.*

"Come on," Draco whispered to Potter when he was sure Professor Snape was gone. "Let's go."

Potter didn't even argue, which showed how tired he was. He just nodded and stood up, leaning his shoulder heavily on Draco's for a moment.

He straightened again, but Draco's heart raced with pride. He wasn't going to forget that gesture and what it meant.

*He can need me, sometimes,* he thought, as he wrapped an arm around Potter's waist. *And he'll have what he needs.*

*I'm not going to leave him.*

##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### #####
##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### #####
##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### #####

Chapter: 23

Thank you again for all the reviews!

*Chapter Twenty-Three—Resistance*

Draco had foreseen how it would be. Madam Pomfrey bustled and clucked around them and smeared some kind of paste over the cut on Potter's arm that smelled awful but finally made the

bleeding stop. Then she stood there, looking at him and shaking her head slightly. Potter gave her a sheepish smile and curled himself further into the blankets.

Draco narrowed his eyes. Madam Pomfrey probably thought that looked cute, but he wasn't so sure. From his vantage point, it looked as though Potter was getting in a position where he felt ready to defend himself.

"What are we going to do with you, Mr. Potter?" Madam Pomfrey asked, but without malice. "I've lost count of the number of times that you injure yourself each year."

"It wasn't my fault this time!"

Draco blinked. He could have sworn, when he dragged Potter out of the dungeon, that he was either going to start crying or fall apart any minute. But now his face was bright, his expression half-defiant, and he even wrapped his arms around his knees and looked pleadingly at Pomfrey, as if he knew he deserved a punishment but didn't want one.

It was a far more complete transformation than Draco had been prepared to witness. It was one thing to know that Potter lied a lot and another thing to see *how* he did it.

*Maybe I only noticed because I wasn't the one he was showing the lies off to, for once,* Draco thought slowly. He could see his mother watching from the bed across the room—he always knew when she was awake by the way her eyelids twitched and fluttered, though at the moment she was pretending to be asleep—and that kept him from asking questions the way he would have truly liked to. Maybe Potter's lies were obvious enough now, if Draco was seeing them all over the place, that Madam Pomfrey would also notice.

But she just shook her head and clucked her tongue again and said, "Well, I reckon that at least it wasn't a Quidditch accident this time."

Potter grinned at her. "I provide variety, don't I?"

And Pomfrey laughed and agreed and acted as though this was all a fine joke, while Potter played along, expertly manipulating her into telling him that his injury wasn't important. It was one of the most skillful games of that Draco had ever seen, heightened by the fact that he didn't think Potter *knew* it was a manipulation. He'd probably said the same things for so long, things designed to make people look the other way when he came in with an injury, that they were second nature to him by now.

Draco could feel his eyes narrowing more and more the longer he thought about that.

*Well, he'll find that things have changed.*

Potter glanced at him then, and his smile vanished. He stared for a minute, looking queasy, before he deliberately faced Madam Pomfrey again and continued talking. But the way he kept

craning his neck around to stare at Draco, almost against his will, showed that he was uneasy.

Draco waited until Madam Pomfrey had advised Harry to rest for a few hours and stepped into the other room. He took the chance to walk over to his mother's bed. She opened her eyes when she saw him coming and regarded him soberly. Draco recognized her curiosity and her concern for him even through the mask of her glamour.

He shook his head. "I'm going to try something I think will work," he whispered. "Please don't interfere. Roll over and go back to sleep. Or leave the room if Potter insists on that."

His mother studied his face for so long that Draco thought she might not agree. Then she nodded and turned on her side. Draco lingered a minute, trying to make it look as if he was watching her in concern, and then faced Potter.

Potter had closed his eyes and curled up with a perfectly angelic expression on his face.

Draco stared, while reluctant admiration rose up in him. *The bastard. Of course he probably wants the protection of Madam Pomfrey, and if I try to 'wake him up' and make him discuss things, she'll come out and scold me for harassing a patient. It's the best defense he could have against a conversation right now.*

But Draco hadn't been in Slytherin for six years without learning something. He stepped up to Potter's bed and bent down to whisper to him.

"You know that we have to talk. I can understand *why* you don't want to talk about it. But that won't make the problems go away. They'll only build up until the next time that you lash out and almost hurt me."

Potter's shoulders tensed. Draco nodded in satisfaction. He didn't like having to remind Potter of that, any more, he thought, than Potter had liked lashing out. But it was necessary to do *something* to show him that Draco wouldn't simply forget about it and march away into the distance, and, especially, that Professor Snape wasn't going to forget about it.

"I'm not going to try to shame you into this by talking about Gryffindor courage," Draco continued quietly. *Of course not. I'll shame you by appealing to your conscience instead.* "Consider, though, what happened to you. The weight of the lies bore you down until you almost killed someone. Is that the kind of person you want to be? Are any secrets worth protection like that?"

Potter's breathing had sped up, but he didn't lift his head or look at Draco. Draco didn't mind. He would leave the words to brew in Potter's thoughts. Sometimes, the best potions were those left untended for a short time.

"Farewell," he murmured, and let himself touch Potter's fringe, his fingers skimming along lightly above the scar. Potter shuddered and twitched.

*Good. Let him.* One of the things they hadn't talked about was how Potter had somehow melted Draco's Dark Mark from his skin. Draco didn't think it was urgent compared to the way that Potter was resigned to dying or was ignoring the fact that he was Professor Snape's son, but he would like to see it addressed.

He left the hospital wing then, his back very straight, nodding to his mother as he passed.

"Enter, my dear boy."

The words proved to Severus that Albus knew who it was before he opened the door, but that meant nothing. Of course he would. Severus did not think anyone had ever truly managed to ride up the moving staircase unobserved while Dumbledore was Headmaster.

Certain plans for how he would do so tried to emerge in Severus's mind. He laid them firmly aside. Perhaps someday he would need to know how to approach Albus quietly and without notice.

*Perhaps someday soon.*

But today, he had come on a mission in which the sight of his face and the sound of his words would be all-important.

"Why," he asked as he let the door fall shut behind him, "did you compel Potter to promise that he would not tell the secret of the Horcruxes to anyone else? Specifically, the secret of his being one? Did you not realize what that would do to him?"

Albus's face changed. Severus had overcome most of his fear regarding werewolves some time ago, or he would have lashed out. It was as close to a transformation from one being into another as he had seen from someone who did grow four legs at the full moon.

Albus leaned back in his chair and apparently attempted to regain command of himself. Severus had never seen him fail so badly at that, either. After several moments of opening and closing his eyes, Albus could find nothing more profound to say than, "He told you?"

Severus clenched his hands together. *Calm. Control. He will be all the more hurt if you can hold onto your own temper and wield your words as a whip to lash him with.*

"Under extreme duress," he said. "You can be proud of him for that." He paused, then added, "Even if you cannot be proud of him for the mindless obedience that so nearly led to his death."

Albus lowered his head and shook it. "Ah, Severus," he whispered, in the voice of a bleeding man. "Do you truly believe that I would have condemned Harry to death if I had found another solution? I love the boy." He fastened his eyes on Severus's face, pleading for compassion.

*Too bad for him that I have so little to give.* Severus folded his arms and sneered at Albus. "There are other ways," he said. "You could have come to me and asked about potions that could have purged a piece of one wizard's soul from another's body."

"I have *looked!*" Albus sat upright and slammed one arm into the desk. Severus wondered if it was supposed to impress him. "Among potions, among curses, among the Dark Arts, among the ancient spells that so few living now remember. If there are a few ways to destroy Horcruxes—basilisk venom and Fiendfyre are the only reliable ones—still, they have their vulnerabilities. I thought, surely, that there must be a way to rescue someone from having to stay one until he was dead." He closed his eyes. "There is none."

"You cannot have read every book in the world," Severus said. "There is another solution. I know that. I will find it. My potions can do wondrous things, Dumbledore, things you have hardly dreamed of."

"There *is* no other way, and I have been investigating for nearly a year, since I first began to suspect, "Albus snapped. "And the cost—oh, my dear boy, the cost of our thinking that we have destroyed the Horcrux when it is not so—" He shut his mouth tight and shook his head, his face lined with anguish.

Severus sneered. "Like the cost," he asked, "of choosing to trust someone who most of your protégés would have assumed was unable to repent?"

"It might have hurt us, if I had been wrong about you," Albus whispered. He refused to open his eyes. "It would not have destroyed us. It would destroy the world if we are wrong about Harry. For the sake of everyone, Severus, I dare not let him live." He opened his eyes, and a sheen of tears moistened them. "For the greater good."

Severus stood in silence until he was sure that Albus would say no more. Then he said, "I will deny you your applause."

Albus sat up straight again, his face wary and puzzled. "I would hardly expect applause from anyone for this sad necessity," he began.

"You have managed the lives of others like a play," Severus said quietly. "Here an enemy, there a supporter. Here the misguided fool who will learn better in time. I have played that role, and I suspect that you think Fudge destined for it as well. Here, the heroic sacrifice." He prowled closer, though he halted a good distance from the desk. Albus was still a powerful wizard. Severus had to hurt him more than he angered him, so that he would not think of striking back. "And yourself as the genuinely good mentor, the war leader, making the hard choices, the choices no one else can make, covering yourself with dark glory."

"Do you think," Albus breathed, "that I would not sacrifice my heroic reputation in an instant, if it would enable Harry to live?"

"You do not *need* to act for the greater good," Severus said softly. "That is a pretense you turn to when you feel overwhelmed or troubled in a way that you think there is no way out of. If you truly followed the philosophy that you now offer me as an excuse for butchering Potter, you would never have let Lupin into the school, because of the danger he could pose to other students. But you did. And you sacrificed me to your precious pet Gryffindors. I have never forgotten that, Albus. You neither enforced the rules fairly nor showed that you valued individualism. Instead, you value individuals over *other* individuals. You have your preferences like anyone. You act according to them. And *that*," he said, slowing his speech deliberately, though he was glad to find that he had not exploded into the hurried, angry breaths that his voice sounded as if it had taken on in his head, "is the reason that you cannot hold the objective position you pretend to have achieved."

Albus had a condescending smile on his face now. "I must admit that I am glad you are finally seeing the similarities between yourself and Harry, Severus," he said. "But," and, as Severus had known he would, he altered his smile to a stern one, "I must ask that you leave your personal situation behind, and stop making inappropriate comparisons. What I did was wrong, but it was done long ago, and that wrong is irretrievable. If you continue to let your anger over the matter cloud your judgment, then I fear that I can no longer trust you, either." He looked at Severus in a way that Severus knew was meant to make him flinch and slink to the other side of the room like a kicked dog.

Severus waited to let the bile build in his belly. Albus narrowed his eyes slightly as the moments passed and Severus did not speak.

*Good. Let me disconcert him.*

"I am good at seeing similarities between us now," he said. *You will not know, at the moment, how good.* He had decided that if he told Albus that Potter was his son, it was possible Albus would not only lose some of his interest in rescuing him—if Potter wasn't the son of his precious pet Gryffindor—but also accuse Severus of being too involved with the fate of his son to see clearly. And with that line of argument, Albus stood a good chance of turning Potter against Severus completely. "I know that you do not care about either of us enough to really fight for us."

Albus's face went grey. "What would you have had me do?" he whispered. "I told you, Severus, I acknowledge that I was wrong, but that was years ago."

Severus leaned forwards. "But you were not much younger then than you are now," he responded, making sure every word hit like a hammer blow. "You were wise. You could have seen some other way out of the situation than to hush it up completely and remind me—as I stood shaking before your desk, having nearly died—that I owed a life-debt to James Potter and should be grateful I had escaped with as much as I had."

"We are not talking about you," Albus said, making an obvious effort to bridle and saddle the conversation again. "We were talking about Harry."

"Yes," Severs said. "Whom you have told the truth to. Whom you have convinced that he must die, that there is no other solution for him, no other way to survive and live. The boy is a *hero*, Albus, through and through, trained to be that way." *And raised that way,* he thought, but he had no intention of sharing Potter's upbringing with Albus until it was time to, either. He found himself more and more greedy of secrets about his son. *He* would decide who else he told, and at the moment, Albus was not on the list. "You knew what his reaction would be. Just as you knew what mine would be when you manipulated me into hating James Potter more fervently rather than questioning you about why you couldn't discipline Black."

"I did not want Harry to become suicidal," Albus said harshly, propping himself up on his desk with one elbow. "That you accuse me of such things is worse than dishonest, Severus."

"But you knew what his reaction would be," Severus repeated, softly. "You claim a position of wisdom that will allow you to be sure that there is no way to destroy the Horcrux embedded in the boy, but you are not wise enough to know how much he would take your words to heart? Why tell him now, if not because you wanted him resigned to the thought of dying and willing to go through with it for the sake of the world?"

"I had tried everything I could." Albus's voice cracked, finally. "I had sought and sought a way out that would not involve killing Harry, and I could find *nothing.* I thought the boy deserved to know the truth, rather than be led like a lamb to the slaughter, with no choice. At least this way, he understands how important it is, and he goes consenting."

"He goes *hopeless!*" Severus allowed his voice to rise this time, and took a step closer to Albus's desk. "Why is consent so important to you, Albus, if not because it makes *you* feel better, less of a monster? You value noble resignation so much that you must inspire it where it does not exist. It is as I said. You have designated roles for each of us, and because you thought that Potter was not playing his sufficiently, you told him about this."

"You know nothing of my motives, Severus," Albus said, with a gentleness more dangerous than open anger. "Do not presume that you can tell why I might have done something."

"I act on your own words," Severus retorted. "You said that you told him because you couldn't think of another solution. But there are still options, in that case. One is to *keep searching.* Another is to tell him the truth but to bolster him, to admit that you have no solution yet but you may find one, and involve him in the search. Teach him to defend and value his own life, and you stand a better chance of not having to sacrifice anyone at all. And yet, it seems that you would rather the boy march to his death with his head held high than feed him on a bit of hope."

"It would be *false* hope," Albus snapped. "There is nothing that can change his fate."

"Again, you do not know that," Severus said. "I already know that you are fallible, that there are lapses in your wisdom which make it arrogant for you to set yourself up like this. And in the interests of compassion, could you not lie? Why is truth more important than Potter's mental

health?"

Albus closed his eyes and put a hand over his face. Severus waited, feeling the stillness and coldness of a tombstone invade him. It was when he felt like that that he did his best work in hurting others.

"Because," Albus whispered at last, "I did not wish to see the look in his eyes when he realized that I had been lying to him and that no hope remained."

Severus knew he need say no more. Albus would be torn apart by the realization of his own weakness—he had sacrificed, or would have sacrificed, Potter for his peace of mind and no higher goal—and nothing Severus could say was likely to reach him more strongly. He bowed his head and took his leave.

His footsteps turned towards the hospital wing. He hesitated on the way there, wondering if he truly wanted to look Potter in the eye at the moment.

*Yes,* he decided, and began walking once more. *I have forced his secrets from him, and he nearly killed me. Those are issues that must be addressed.*

No matter how long he lay there, sleep wouldn't come.

Harry rolled over on his back and stared up at the ceiling. His eyes felt dry, and burned. He rubbed them absently.

He had almost killed Snape.

He…couldn't deal with that.

He had to do *something* to make up for it, to show that he knew it was wrong. But it had to be something that would make Snape stay away from him at the same time, and not cause him to start hoping that they would be father and son someday.

*If he even wants that. He must hate me for nearly killing him.*

*But he didn't speak as if he hated me.*

Harry shivered. The blankets felt too thin, even though he knew from experience in the hospital wing that they were perfectly fine. His brain was unsettled, jumping and cavorting around his head. He couldn't get *warm*.

He hated himself badly enough that he wished he could go to sleep and never wake up.

*But that probably wouldn't destroy the Horcrux,* he thought, and rubbed fiercely at his scar for a minute before he made himself stop.

Slowly, his thoughts stopped jumping, and he had to consider the thing he hated most: the fact that Snape and Draco might have a point about his secrets making him crazy if he had tried to kill one person and hurt another.

Harry closed his eyes. His pain about those two things was going to eat him alive, he was sure of it. It hadn't even hurt this much when he thought that he was responsible for Sirius's death.

*I don't want to be the kind of person who does that.*

But he didn't want to be the kind of person who lay back and let Snape hurt him just because he felt guilty, either. If his uncle and his aunt and his cousin had done it, then why would Snape, who was also related to him by blood, be any different?

*He said—he said that he wouldn't. But how can I trust him? He also went into my mind and made me reveal my secrets to Draco.*

But now that Draco knew about it, wouldn't he help Harry stop Snape if Snape tried to hurt him? And Harry wouldn't feel he had to hide that the way he'd hidden his past with the Dursleys. Snape was a more powerful wizard than he was and older, so that meant it wouldn't look like weakness if Harry suffered because of him, the way it would look like weakness if he suffered because of Muggles.

A sound in the doorway of the hospital wing made him open his eyes and turn his head.

Snape stood there, his face so pale and uncertain that Harry gained a little bit of confidence back.

*I thought he knew everything and had everything under control, but maybe he doesn't. Maybe parts of this are as new to him as they are to me. I wanted to think that, but I didn't dare.*

Harry still didn't think he could trust Snape, not completely. But he had gone as far as he could in the direction of running away from him and keeping secrets, and nothing but the worst had happened.

Perhaps it was time to try trusting him. Just for a little while. Just about some things.

Just in a way that meant he could still easily retreat if it turned out Snape was Uncle Vernon over again.

Snape came forwards, his robes billowing around him, and halted five feet away, looking at Harry. He didn't try to come closer, for which Harry was grateful.

"I am going to find a method," Snape said softly, "whether that be potion or otherwise, that will allow you to survive the defeat of the Dark Lord."

Harry swallowed. He didn't know what to think. The words were delivered in that iron tone that always meant Snape was making a promise.

*To me? Why does he want to?*

But it seemed he wanted to, or was awfully good at pretending he did, and Harry decided that, perhaps, he could go along with this even if he didn't understand Snape's reasons. After all, he had never fully understood why his relatives hated him, either.

"All right," he whispered.

Snape conjured a chair and placed it behind him. He could probably see the way Harry tensed whenever he tried to come closer. Then he turned around and sat down in it, facing the door of the hospital wing with his wand resting across his lap.

Harry swallowed. He knew Snape had protected him in the past, but it was one thing to hear about it second-hand from someone else and another to see it happening.

"Sir?" he whispered.

Snape turned his head slightly, but otherwise made no sign that he'd heard. That made Harry oddly comfortable. At least Snape wasn't trying to press in on him and hug him and do all sorts of other stupid things.

"I'm sorry," Harry said.

His throat closed up on him, so he couldn't specify what he meant, but it seemed Snape didn't need him to. He nodded and turned around again to face the door, as if it didn't matter to him.

*Or*, Harry thought, slowly wrestling his thoughts into more charitable shapes, *as if he knows that this is a first step and I'll make up for it more later.*

With Snape there, he would have thought he'd lie awake, tense, for the rest of the night, or at least until Madam Pomfrey came back.

Instead, he didn't even remember when he fell asleep.

##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### #####
##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### #####
##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### #####

Chapter: 24

Thank you again for all the reviews!

*Chapter Twenty-Four—Demands Answered*

"Well? Have you thought about it?"

Draco didn't understand the calm face that Potter turned to confront him, or the way he sat up in the hospital bed as if he had all the time in the world. Draco hadn't expected him to be still in the hospital wing, if he was honest with himself. It was like Potter to sneak off to Gryffindor Tower and never admit that he was hurt if he could help it.

"I have," Potter said. "And I've decided that, although you know something about most of my secrets and so it would be stupid to think that I can keep them forever, I don't have to tell you everything right away."

Draco blinked at him. He thought he would have been able to object if Potter had whinged or protested too hard or turned red in the face. But he just looked grim and calm, as if he believed that he could survive the darkness in him after all, and that held Draco's tongue still.

"I *am* sorry for what I almost did to you," Potter added, his voice gentled now. "There was no excuse for that. There are certain things that I can't do if I want to pretend to myself that I'm acting the right way at all, and that's one of them." He pushed himself up the pillow and extended his hand to Draco.

Draco came forwards to take the hand, having no idea what else he should do. Potter used it to pull him closer than Draco would have thought he'd be allowed.

*But then, I think this is Potter's day for doing the unexpected,* he thought, pleasantly breathless.

Potter smoothed the hair out of his eyes and stared deeply into them for a minute. Then he whispered, "You stood up to me when I was doing something wrong. Not many of my friends would have had the courage to, because they think that I'm doing right all the time. Thank you."

Draco nodded, dazed. Then he blinked and fought to gain control of himself. It didn't matter how deep and swimming Potter's eyes were from this close, he thought. There was still a certain grave, cold dignity that Malfoys needed to have, or they were nothing. He would show Potter that he still possessed it.

"Does my opposition make a difference to you, then?" he demanded in a whisper. "Are you going to actually try to relate to Professor Snape and do something to survive?"

"The first part I don't think is any of your business," Potter said, with coolness that more than answered Draco's. "The second part—yes." He tilted his head to the side, and suddenly his face looked more human because he was wearing a wistful smile. "Yes, you've convinced me."

Draco nodded. He could accept that Professor Snape would probably want to keep whatever

relationship he and Potter established strictly between them; Draco was kind of surprised he hadn't been Oblivated to force the secret from his mind yet. As long as he knew that Potter wasn't lying back and staring at the sky like a Muggle martyr on a cross he'd heard stories about, then he was content.

"When will you get out of here?" he asked, to change the subject, and stepped back so that the dangerous intimacy and intensity between them would lessen. Potter blinked his eyes and released a slow breath, as if he was surprised at how much less the air seemed to burn when Draco was a short distance from him.

"A few hours, probably," Potter said. "I was sleeping too deeply most of the night to realize how I felt—" for some reason, he blushed when he said that "—and then Madam Pomfrey was awake and wanted to check my wounds."

He *did* sound as if he was grumbling when he said that, the way Draco had expected. It was enough that Draco looked at him sternly. "It's no sin for other people to care about you and want to help you, you know."

"I know that," Potter snapped, so defensively that Draco was sure he hadn't thought about it. "But there's a point where it gets smothering, and I'm not used to that—" He bit his lip and fell silent again.

Draco looked at him knowingly. He *wanted* to say something about how this related to the way Potter had been raised by his Muggle relatives. He could feel the taste of the words in his mouth, how they would sound and feel, how they would make his tongue tap against his teeth.

But he thought about the way Potter had stood by him when the Dark Lord sent his father's head, and how he had come in and helped Draco rescue his mother without lots of gloating or sneering. That was part of the reason he thought of Potter as a friend now, instead of a Gryffindor do-gooder who just did those things because they were "right" and he wanted to show off how "righteous" he was. Draco thought he could do the same thing himself and hold back instead of constantly getting on Potter's nerves about his secrets.

"All right," Draco said, and forced himself to swallow the other words. "As long as you know that." He walked towards the door of the hospital wing, and enjoyed the feeling of Potter staring after him in astonishment. It was nearly as good as having Potter gape at him because Draco had confronted him and forced him to admit his mistakes.

Draco did pause near the door to glance back and add, "I hope that whatever you decide to do makes you happy."

He shut the door quietly.

"Why were you in the hospital wing, mate?"

Harry grimaced as he slid into a seat at the Gryffindor table. Of course, by the time Madam Pomfrey could release him, it was lunch and the rumor of where he'd been had run all over the school. At least it was Saturday, so he hadn't missed any classes. But now he had to deal with Ron staring at him in open concern and Hermione peeking from beyond Ron's head, as if she wanted to show she was worried but wasn't sure that he would welcome it.

*And is that so bad?* he thought. Harry wasn't so sure that he knew his thoughts anymore. They seemed to have changed and grown harder, as if the person in his head who thought had grown up, while the person who felt hadn't. *You have people who worry about you. That's more than you ever had when you lived with the Dursleys. You don't have to push them away because they'll get hurt. They would get hurt anyway, if Voldemort gets his way. And you don't have to push them away because they'll hurt you. You know that being left alone would hurt worse.*

Harry gave a tiny nod and then faced his friends. "I'm sorry," he said.

Ron blinked at him, mouth nearly falling open around a piece of treacle tart. Hermione poked him in the back, and he shut it. "What for?" Ron asked finally, and Hermione nodded. Harry had to work hard to avoid staring at her. It was so strange to see Hermione allowing someone else to talk for her.

"Because I've ignored you lately," Harry said. "I've acted like I'm staring at my own death, and that's not true." *I have to believe that. Maybe I can't trust Snape completely, but I can trust that he'll like the challenge of trying to help me survive. He won't give up easily. It would be a reflection on his abilities as a Potions master. I'm allowed to have* some *hope.* "And I've been irritated at you because you were acting stupid, but I never allowed you any time to explain that or apologize for it."

Hermione flushed. "We *were* acting stupid," she muttered. "I can't believe I cared about some of the things that I cared about."

Ron gave her a quick glare, but seemed more interested in the conversation than in bickering, thankfully. "Well, good, mate," he said, and smiled at Harry. "Apology accepted." He held out his hand.

Harry clasped it and smiled at him.

Then he looked at Hermione. He'd talked to her less often, except about Draco. She flushed and clutched her book as if she was going to hold it up in front of her like a shield.

"I'm sorry, too," Harry told her. "Friends?"

She immediately launched herself from her seat at Harry, despite Ron being in the way, which made their hands tangle with spoons and ended up tipping over a platter of sandwiches. Hermione didn't seem to notice. She clung to him and murmured words over and over that Harry gradually made out were, "Oh, Harry, *always*."

Harry hugged her and shut his eyes. He had thought that making up with his friends would be hard, but he ought to have remembered that they were still his friends, and they hadn't changed into different people even if they drifted away from him.

He felt a gaze on him, clear and strong and uncompromising, and he knew what it meant without opening his eyes. It was one thing to make up with Draco and with his friends, or rather to hold Draco at a certain distance he didn't have the right to cross and to try and bring his friends closer.

It was a different thing altogether to try and get close to Snape.

But Harry was going to try. He had promised that to himself, and he was trying to keep those promises.

Severus thought he would have known the timid knock on the door of his office if he was presented with a thousand knocks at once.

"Enter," he said, and didn't raise his eyes from the potions recipe he was studying. Somehow, Slughorn had complained, one of his first-year classes had all followed the directions and *all* failed to achieve a passable potion. Severus was attempting to find the source of the mistake, no easy thing in Horace's tangled thicket of writing.

The boy stepped into the room and shut the door behind him. Severus kept his eyes down. It might be easy if the boy wasn't confronted with a gaze that he had to meet, and, with them, silent expectations that he would have to answer.

It seemed that the boy didn't agree.

"Sir?"

Severus raised his eyebrows, and then his eyes. The boy stood in front of his desk with his hands behind his back, as if he didn't want to be suspected of touching anything. His jaw was set, and he kept swallowing, as if he assumed that would somehow make things easier.

Severus was struck with a memory so powerful it stole his breath: the way he had felt right before he finally decided to approach the young, red-haired witch he'd been watching for days. He'd swallowed, too, and played with the edge of his shirt, wondering if she would laugh and despise him.

*In this case, the boy knows that I have already despised him in the past.*

"Mr. Potter," he said, and put the recipe aside. "You have come for a continuation of your lessons? Or for something else?" He would do his part to make their mutual goals achievable. But he had no wish, even now, to coddle. Helping was not the same as coddling. He would make the boy name his goals.

"For help in learning how to survive—this." The boy gestured at the scar on his forehead and then clenched his hand into a fist, as if he knew that the gesture had looked wild and half-mad. Severus once would not have credited him with such perception, but then, what he thought he knew about the boy had changed much in the last few days.

"Then we will begin," Severus said, rising to his feet. "I have identified several potions already that may be candidates." He strode to the other side of his office and rapped his wand against a cauldron in a special rhythm he'd invented. The shelves glowed as five vials launched themselves into the air and hovered above the cauldron.

He finally became aware that the boy hadn't moved, and glanced over his shoulder, wondering if he should hide his irritation or not. "What is the matter, Mr. Potter?"

"I have another request," the boy said, in such an absurdly formal tone that he must have practiced repeating those words. Severus had no animus against such things, in moderation. He simply awaited the conclusion of the speech.

They had been in the same room for three minutes without snapping at or trying to kill each other. He thought it an improvement.

"I don't like the way you say my name," the boy continued, speaking faster now, as if he hated the words and wanted to hurry through them. "You still sneer—my dad's name. I don't like it."

Severus restrained his immediate wrath. After all, on the one hand it was disgusting to think of James Potter as the boy's father; on the other, Severus had a sense of what he was about to say.

"Call me Harry, instead," the boy finished, and stared at him in quiet defiance. Severus wouldn't have known how fragile the balance between defiance and fear was if not for the way that the boy's clenched fists trembled.

Severus regarded him in silence. Then he said, "And would you have me do this in front of the Defense class? Or in front of other students who may be serving detention? I assure you that your secret would not stay a secret for very long, if you do."

"Damn it, *no*!" The boy took a step forwards, and his eyes shone with fury so sudden that Severus caught his breath—and not only because of the boy's resemblance to Lily Evans.

The boy caught himself a moment later and took a huffing breath. "You're making this harder," he muttered. "No, just when we're alone, because you sneer the name 'Potter' harder when you don't have an audience. That's what I want. Call me Potter the rest of the time, I don't care." He put his chin up in that way that would have convinced Severus before that he truly *didn't* care, and which he now knew was one of the boy's countless ways of hiding insecurity and fragility.

Severus gave a short nod. Yes, he had been making things more difficult than they needed to be

by deliberately misunderstanding the boy's request.

"Very well," he said. He paused, because he had never spoken *this* name without hatred or disdain, either, and yet it was different—from now on, it must be different. "Harry."

The boy blinked hard, and said to himself in such a soft tone that Severus suspected he hadn't been meant to hear, "That wasn't so bad." Then he looked at the potions vials. "How can these help?"

"They are Purging Potions," Severus said harshly, as glad as—Harry—could be to change the subject. "They are meant to fasten to poisons in the body and bear them quickly out of the bloodstream, a swift antivenin. I believe that they could be of help in removing the piece of the Dark Lord's soul that you carry from your body." He glanced at the boy, but encountered only an expression of fierce concentration, which was at least more hopeful than the bewilderment he would have expected beforehand. "However," Severus added, "since you have carried that piece for so long, we cannot expect these to work without still more experimentation than would be necessary to adapt them from the body to the soul."

*Harry* nodded. "And is there anything else that you can use?"

Severus sneered at him. "Afraid of a bit of purging?"

Harry's eyes darted up to him, and there was anger in them that looked fresh and raw and young. As irritated as Severus felt at the moment, he could not but approve that. It meant the boy was beginning to recover from the grey despair that had aged him prematurely.

"I was thinking of what we should use in case these particular potions don't work, *sir*," he said, his teeth grinding so hard on the words that Severus could almost hear him biting off pieces of them. "You know, demonstrating that intelligence and foresight you keep telling us we should possess?"

Severus leaned one arm on the cauldron. His mind wavered back and forth between interest and irritation, and for long moments, he did not know which emotion would win. Then the interest welled through like sunlight through clouds, and he nodded. "It is good to see that you can address an audience with some other emotion than noble resignation," he said.

"I never asked for most of what I've suffered in my life," *Harry* said, with a starkness of speech that Severus could not help but admire. "I just have to put up with it. I'm trying to."

Severus examined him in silence for some minutes, then nodded. "You are not attractive as a martyr," he said. "Try to make sure that your pleasure in it does not return. Keeping off such an emotion depends on finding other things more to your taste." He took up one of the vials and held it out to the boy. "This one, for instance."

"I don't think studying Potions will ever be to my taste," *Harry* muttered, but he picked up the

vial and studied it obediently.

Severus waited for some time until he thought the boy should have made elementary observations, and then asked, "What do you notice about the potion?"

"That it's red, and there's some stuff on the bottom of the vial," the boy muttered, squinting as if he assumed that would make the glass more transparent than it was.

"That *stuff* is sediment," Severus said. Perhaps his son would never be talented in Potions the way he could have been had Severus been allowed to raise him from an infant, but that did not mean he would be allowed to continue in total ignorance. "It comes from ingredients mixed together improperly." He held out his hand.

"Doesn't that affect the functioning of the potion, sir?" The boy seemed more than glad to hand the vial back.

"In most cases," Severus said. "Not this one. It is called the Blood-Washer, and some Potions masters believe that the heaviness of the sediment contributes to its ability to cling to poisons in the bloodstream." He removed the cork and poured the potion into the cauldron.

"But you don't believe that?"

Severus darted a glance at the boy. He had noted the exception to Severus's general statement without having to be coached. "You are better at noticing small implications than I thought you were," he murmured.

*Harry* surprised him by flashing him a dark smile. "You'd be amazed what you can pick up when you know that that might make the difference between you eating that night and not eating," he said.

Severus's hands tightened for a moment, but he knew from experience that it took greater pressure than that to either to dent a cauldron rim or shatter a glass vial. He laid the empty vial beside the cauldron and cast a powerful *Lumos* charm on his wand that had the effect of producing light without heat. Heat would trigger the Blood-Washer's effects, and he had no intention of doing that yet. "The amount of food you could eat depended on your observations of others' moods?" he asked, simply to clarify the truth that he had already suspected. He had not known for certain that starvation was part of the harsh treatment Potter had reason to expect from blood relatives, but he had suspected, given the state of his ribs and wrists, and the lack of the height that Severus would have expected at this age no matter who his father was.

But Potter simply looked at him with blank eyes and no smile, apparently committed to giving him no information for free, and picked up the empty vial. "What do you expect to do with this potion, sir?"

Severus restrained his wrath with the ease of long experience—both Albus and the Dark Lord

exasperated him continually, and at far greater depths than the boy had so far managed—and studied the boy's face. He thought he understood. There was a warring pressure to confession in his soul, there must be now that he was among people who suspected his secrets, but it was held back by the same pride that had kept him silent for so long.

And there was something else, Severus guessed from the presence of that dark smile. The boy had a grim delight in teasing, in throwing out hints and seeing what his auditors would infer from them.

It was a game that Severus had often played himself.

"I expect to modify the potion so that it can serve as a test case," Severus remembered to say. *Harry's* lip had curled with extra delight when he saw Severus staring at him, and Severus thought continuing longer with the stare would be coddling. "It is not the most powerful of the purging potions available, but it is peculiarly flexible, a product of its ingredients. They interact together in large, loose patterns. It is harder to ruin the Blood-Washer potion when making it, and that looseness also suggests gaps that I may place new ingredients into."

He glanced at the boy, suddenly realizing that he had been speaking as he might have before Draco and regretting it. But though the scarred brow was furrowed, the boy was nodding with comprehension that Severus did not think was entirely feigned.

"Do you understand this?" Severus demanded.

"Not completely," the boy said, with a frankness that Severus knew the other professors saw as charming, "but I think I can make a good effort at it."

Severus frowned at him. "Why did you not exhibit this intelligence in Potions class before? Why were you so determined to deny its existence when the year began and I was learning the extent of your talents?"

The boy curled his lip again and looked away. "Why should I have?" he asked. "If I had, then you would have only been sure that I was stealing the knowledge from somewhere, or copying from Hermione." His voice grew thick with bitterness. "I think you would have thought I was good at Legilimency before you would think that I understood potions the way you wanted me to."

Severus turned to face him. "And what of the attempt at truce that we agreed upon last night?" he asked.

"You're the adult, *sir*." The boy stepped away from him. "Don't you think you should be making more of an effort?"

Severus caught himself again, and nodded shortly. Yes, he should, when so many reasons for his hatred of the boy were gone. And now that he understood, or had some glimpses of what kind of

childhood had produced his son, he also understood more about the belligerence he had despised.

"Very well," he said. "Watch the ingredients I place in contact with the Blood-Washer. Depending on the potion's response, we will place them in contact with others or discard them from the list…"

And as the boy leaned closer, Severus suffered a sudden, dizzying revelation: he was leaning over a potions cauldron and instructing a son of his blood.

It was so powerful and so distracting that he put it aside and concentrated on the present moment.

But he could feel the thought lying in the back of his mind, having presence and weight, as so few of his thoughts did.

##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### #####
##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### #####
##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### #####

Chapter: 25

Thank you again for all the reviews!

*Chapter Twenty-Five—Compulsion*

Harry made sure that he'd cast locking and silencing charms on the door before he turned around and surveyed his friends.

Ron and Hermione sat close together on the floor of Umbridge's old office, staring at him with nervous excitement. Draco stood on the other side of the room, his arms folded and his sneer embedded on his face as if it never left. Harry rolled his eyes at the distance between them and tried to choose exactly the middle point to stand, so he could see all of them at once.

"I've finally decided to tell you the truth," he said to Ron and Hermione, "because I need your help to defeat Voldemort."

Ron gave a nervous little squeak that he promptly tried to pretend was a deep, manly cough. Hermione leaned forwards and nodded calmly, though Harry could see the way her hand had gone white where she gripped Ron's hand. "All right, Harry. But I thought *you* were the one who was supposed to defeat him?"

Harry shuddered, and tried not to think about the Horcrux fastened to his soul. He was trying, because he had to and life was better than death, but he still couldn't see any way around the death sentence that Dumbledore had said he bore. If someone could destroy the soul in a Horcrux without destroying the physical object that contained it, wouldn't Dumbledore have figured that

out when he was researching them in the first place?

For now, though, it was enough to know he and Snape were working on it, and he could work on it with Draco if Draco wanted to. He was going to tell Ron and Hermione just enough that they would know what the problem was. He didn't want to tell them about him being a Horcrux yet, because then Hermione would start crying and Ron would start protesting and giving Draco suspicious glances, and Harry just didn't want to deal with that right now.

*I'm so tired,* he thought absently. *Trying to live is more exhausting than just drifting along, resigned to death.*

"Yes, I am," he said, when he realized that some time had gone by in silence and Hermione's stare had got sharper. "But Voldemort has created some powerful Dark artifacts that help to sustain his life. We're going to have to find and destroy the last one before I can kill him."

Draco cleared his throat. Harry glared at him. He hoped that his friends would take it as anger at the interruption, but *Draco* should take it the way it was meant: no, Harry wouldn't tell his friends about the true last Horcrux right now.

Draco nodded and said, "What are these artifacts? How easy is it to destroy them?"

Harry relaxed, and couldn't help smiling at Draco. Draco stared back at him, his cheeks flushing a bit. Harry raised a curious eyebrow as he faced Ron and Hermione again. *Is it that unusual for me to smile at him since we started being friends? I didn't realize.*

"They're called Horcruxes," Harry said. "Dumbledore told me that," he added, because he could see Hermione's mouth opening to ask the question. "Voldemort makes them by attaching part of his soul to an object. Dumbledore's destroyed most of them so far, and I destroyed one of them back in second year."

"The diary!" Hermione exclaimed, clapping her hands.

Ron nodded, but he looked considerably less excited by the revelation. "Are you sure that we can do this, mate?" he asked. "After all, the diary needed a basilisk fang to get rid of."

Harry nodded. "I know," he said. "But right now, I mostly need your help in finding the last one." Once again, he could feel Draco's glare stabbing into the back of his neck, but he didn't turn around. "Dumbledore can't locate it. He's sure it's the tiara that belonged to Rowena Ravenclaw, though. Or at least mostly sure," he added. The more he thought back on his conversation with Dumbledore, the less he was sure he could trust all the Headmaster's words and expressions. "Voldemort likes artifacts that belonged to the Founders, and Dumbledore's already destroyed the Slytherin and Hufflepuff ones."

"And he wouldn't bother touching an artifact of Gryffindor, of course," Hermione said with a thoughtful nod.

Harry shot her a wistful smile. *She grasps it right away. She does this so well. I wonder why Fate or Voldemort or whoever chose me as the one to fight him instead of her?*

"And the tiara is the most famous artifact of Rowena Ravenclaw, though there are others," Draco said. His tone was a copy of Hermione's, which Harry appreciated. Harry still avoided looking at him, though. "I think the Dark Lord has no objection to fame."

"If you don't serve him anymore," Ron said suddenly, "why can't you call him by his name?"

Harry glanced at Draco, afraid that he would be upset. But Draco just raised his eyebrow and cocked his head to the side. "You first, Weasel," he said.

Harry glared, but let the insult pass. Ron was the one who had decided to question Draco's loyalty out of the blue.

Ron sat straight up and licked his lips. "V-Vol—" he said, and stopped.

Draco cupped a hand around his ear and leaned forwards politely. "Yes?"

"Oh, *fine*," Ron said. "You-Know-Who. I can't say it, all right? You can gloat now." He turned around and folded his arms. Hermione hugged him, mouthing at Harry *You need to make this all right.*

"Neither can Draco," Harry said. Draco tapped him hard on the shoulder. Harry ignored that. "And remember how long it took Hermione? I mostly said it when I was eleven because I didn't know better. I hadn't grown up with it. But you and Draco did. I don't blame you for being afraid."

Both Ron and Draco looked simultaneously soothed and ruffled by his words. Harry rubbed his eyes. *Please, let us not kill each other before we find the tiara.*

Severus was on his way out of the Great Hall when he heard excited chatter from behind the nearest pillar. He would have ignored it ordinarily—excited chatter was common at this time of the year, when the Ravenclaws began on their final projects in all their classes—but then he heard the word "Horcrux."

Severus stopped, wishing he could Disillusion himself without notice, and managed to lean enough towards the pillar to identify the voices.

"I have a list of places that we should look," Granger's bossy voice was saying. "I mean, assuming it's in Hogwarts. But I've checked the supposed sightings of the tiara outside the school, and all of them are either centuries old or were proven conclusively to be fakes later on by disinterested observers. Whereas the tiara was seen here twice in the years before V-Voldemort was a student."

"That doesn't prove anything," the voice of the second-youngest Weasley muttered. "After all, what if it was hidden somewhere and then You-Know-Who went searching and found it?"

"The school is where we can search right now," Granger responded. "And I don't think Dumbledore would have told Harry about the tiara with such particular emphasis if it was hidden somewhere really far away, somewhere we couldn't reach. It would make more sense for him to go and find it himself, wouldn't it?"

"Sometimes I worry about Dumbledore," Weasley said.

*That is the only thing we agree on,* Severus thought, tensing his muscles against the impulse to swoop around the pillar and pounce on them for talking about such matters in public, where anyone could overhear them. Then he would have to reveal how he knew about Horcruxes and what he knew, and he was not yet willing to do that. It was *possible* that Granger and Weasley did not realize how powerful and dangerous the knowledge they possessed was. Encouraging them to believe otherwise would probably get them into more scrapes.

Instead, Severus withdrew into a shadowed corner and waited until he saw Potter leave the Great Hall. Then he fell into step beside him, so smoothly that the boy never had a chance to rejoin his friends.

"My office, now," he breathed.

Startled, his son looked up at him. Severus's heart clenched painfully. *Ah, those eyes.*

"I didn't do anything wrong," Harry said, falling back in front of him and looking around as if he wanted to find a group of Gryffindors he could bolt to for safety. "I was just walking here!"

Severus gave him a long, slow look of the kind that he had perfected when examining living bodies which would become Potions ingredients. As expected, it worked this time, too. The boy had been through many Dark and scarring experiences, but that hadn't dulled his perception of more ordinary dangers. He put down his head and trudged after Severus to his office.

Severus made sure the door was triple-warded with locking and silencing charms before he turned around. The boy stood in the center of the floor, fists folded before him in the way that students adopted when they intended to fight him, his teeth gnawing his lip fiercely.

"I want to know what I did wrong, first," Harry said, putting such haughtiness in his voice that Severus's skin stung. He could remember sounding like that when he stood before a professor in his own student days, facing a punishment that he thought was undeserved.

*And they were undeserved most of the time,* Severus thought, before he shook the clinging fog of the resemblance away. He could not be allowed to let it interfere with the punishment of his son.

"You told your friends about Horcruxes," Severus hissed. "Without thinking about the danger it could cause, and apparently without telling them that they should not discuss it *in the open.*"

Harry's face turned pale, but he said, "I'll warn them to put up silencing charms in the future, then."

Severus prowled a step closer, not quite able to understand what he was seeing. In the past, the boy had displayed a better grasp of imminent danger than this. "Your crime was telling them about it at all," he whispered, "without a discussion as to whether doing so would put you in more danger."

Harry stared at him, mouth slightly open, and then shook his head. "I'm already in danger," he said irritably. "When you mentioned that it could hurt them, I thought you meant *them*. Why should their knowing about Horcruxes make my situation more dangerous than it is with Voldemort hunting me and half the wizarding world depending on me to save them?"

Severus shook his head. "Because if someone learned about this, and made the connection that you are one—"

"I didn't tell them that part," Harry interrupted. "Just about the existence of Horcruxes in general, so they could help me find Ravenclaw's tiara."

"That was bad enough," Severus said, ruthlessly crushing the tiny bit of relief that Harry's chattering best friends didn't know the worst secret. "Why did you not discuss this with me beforehand?"

Harry stared at him with his mouth open again. Then he said, "Why *should* I?"

Severus paused, his teeth clenching together. Yes, why should Harry have done so? Harry had proven before now that the ties of blood meant little to him and that he did not consider Severus's mere existence as giving Severus any authority over him.

"In fact," Harry went on, seeming to grow bolder from his silence, "why shouldn't I talk to Dumbledore instead? He's the one who gave me this information. He should probably have some say in who knows about it. But I notice that you didn't send me off to consult with *him*." He gave Severus another of those dark smiles and then pushed past him, aiming for the door.

Severus's hand shot out as if it was a separate part of him and grabbed the boy's shoulder. His voice said, as if also separate from him, "This conversation is done when I say it is done."

Harry gasped once and then stood still. The dark smile didn't seem to have faded from his face at all when he tilted his head back and met Severus's eyes.

"I told you," he breathed.

"Told me what?" Severus stepped closer to the boy, compulsions warring and clashing in him. There was the compulsion to discipline, the one to save and protect, the one to prove Harry wrong and show him that his actions were dangerous, and the one that made him want to strive until he saw Harry's eyes soften and his head bow in agreement. The agreement would be a triumph, because it would mean he had been right, but it would also mean that Harry had decided to listen to and consult him in the future, and *that* would be a sweetness.

"I told you you would hurt me." Harry glanced archly at the hand on his shoulder. "Because blood relatives always do."

Severus had control of his hand again. It snapped sideways as if burned. Then he swallowed and said, "Did I hurt you?"

"Oh, I'm sure you didn't mean to," Harry said, his voice smooth and his eyes mercilessly brilliant. He pushed up the sleeve so that the bare skin of his shoulder showed. There was a bruise there, Severus saw, though the glance also let him know that it would not be nearly so lasting as the one he had inflicted on Harry's wrist when he first learned the boy was his son. "I'm sure it's that my skin bruises easily," Harry continued, and now his tone was very bright. "Or that you don't know your own strength. Or that I wouldn't *deserve* it if I wasn't such a little *freak*."

Severus shuddered. "Stop echoing their justifications," he whispered.

"Then stop echoing their actions," Harry retorted, and slipped out the door.

Severus grimaced and shut his eyes, shaking his head. Sometimes he wondered if this whole endeavor to become a father was doomed to be failure.

The only scrap of comfort he had was that Harry had not told his friends about his being a Horcrux. At least that was something.

"Draco? Can I talk to you for a minute?"

Draco glanced up. He'd been talking with his mother for several hours now, letting his voice wander quietly through memories of his father. Narcissa had let him take her hand, which had been rare even when they were in the privacy of their home. She withdrew it now, but Draco could have sworn he felt it turn cold before it left his.

"Harry?" he asked, easing back from his mother's bed, though aware of the way she watched him, with her eyes darting from Harry's face to his and then back again. "Of course. What did you want to talk about?"

Harry swallowed and glanced sideways at Narcissa. Draco cocked his head. He couldn't think of anything that Harry would be shy to talk about in front of his mother. Well, maybe the Horcruxes, but if he wanted to talk about that, he wouldn't have sought Draco out in the hospital wing, where he must know that Draco would be visiting with his mother.

*Unless his need was just too great,* Draco thought suddenly, and warmth shot from his throat to his heart like the mulled wine that his father had sometimes let him taste. *Unless he couldn't help himself and he* had *to come find me.*

Draco liked the thought of that kind of helpless need. He knew his voice was softer when he spoke again, and he thought his eyes were brighter, though he didn't see how he could help that. Harry really had no idea what the mere *thought* of possessing his friendship did to Draco. "What is it?"

Harry turned back to face him, and then stared, caught a moment. But he shook his head and plunged past that with one of his sudden fearless dashes that Draco loved.

"Did you ever *hate* your father?" Harry blurted. "I mean—what did you do if you really hoped for something and then he took it away or wouldn't get it for you? Did it ever really *hurt*? Because I can't—I want—" He bit his lip and looked at Narcissa again. "I just learned something about my father," he whispered, "about what kind of person he was when he was *alive*. And I'm feeling like I don't like him much anymore."

Draco wanted to roll his eyes, though he wasn't sure if it was because of the way Harry still insisted on keeping Professor Snape a secret or because of the way he was speaking now, as if his feelings weren't perfectly normal.

*To him, they aren't,* Draco had to remind himself then. *He didn't grow up with them. He probably grew up dreaming and hoping about his parents, but didn't expect ever to see them again.*

And that let Draco understand, a little, the shock it must have been to Harry when he realized that one of those parents was still alive.

"I felt that kind of thing towards my own mother," Narcissa remarked.

Draco stared at her. He had never known her to venture a personal comment in front of a stranger before. Usually, it took months of begging from him before she would share a personal memory from her childhood.

He might have felt jealous, but he was too hopeful about what it might mean that she had chosen Harry to share this memory with. He tried to fade into the background, except for the supportive hand that he laid on Harry's shoulder.

"Did you?" Harry whispered. "Why? What did you do?"

Narcissa smiled, and Draco thought it was like and unlike the cold and lovely smiles he was used to from her. It made her look more like the portrait of a woman he had seen in his mother's bedroom once, a miniature portrait with a scratch on the frame from being hidden away. His mother had said only that it was his Aunt Andromeda, who had run off with a Muggle, and

Draco must never ask about her.

"I wished for a Kneazle kitten," Narcissa answered. "A small white one with blue eyes, which would be elegant enough for a house such as ours." Harry flinched a bit, as if he wanted to disagree that the Black family had been elegant, but he didn't say anything, and Draco was grateful for his forbearance. "My mother feared the shedding of hair. But a cousin gave me one as a present for my birthday, and I had something else to love for three days."

"Why only three days?" Harry asked. Draco had already decided that he knew the end of the story, though he'd never heard it before, and he drew near Harry. He doubted that the ending would make Harry happy.

"I came home and found that my mother had strangled it with one of my curtain cords," his mother said, so calm, so steady, that Draco would have thought she no longer cared if not for the cold flicker in her eyes. "She held the body up before me and told me that the same thing would happen to me the moment I thought of rebelling against her again, by accepting a gift that she would have sent away, and which she expected her daughters to send away if they were at all worthy of their upbringing and family name. She forced me to tell my cousin that I had carelessly left the door open and the kitten had run away."

The silence seemed far more intense to Draco than it would have ordinarily, because he had heard those sorts of stories from his mother before. Harry held his breath, then shouted, "But that wasn't fair!"

"Of course not," Narcissa said. "And for long days, I hated her. I do not think I ever completely forgave her," she added, in a musing tone. "Later, there were other things, better things, to resent her for. But I could not break the ties of blood. I still had to live with her. I still had to obey her. I still had to subdue my resentment and pretend that I could smile."

Harry swallowed. "So, did you ever start feeling that you loved her? Or was that something you only felt until she strangled the kitten?"

"There were moments," Narcissa said, her voice barely audible. "Moments when she touched my shoulder or admired my gowns, or told me that I was certainly the prettiest and cleverest of her daughters." She touched her shoulder now as if she could feel the echoes of that long-ago caress. "Of course, with such competition as Bellatrix and Andromeda, the compliment was not as great as it would have been in some other families."

Draco hid a smile. He knew his mother, and he knew that she valued her mother's words more than she would show.

"But you felt that way sometimes," Harry said. "And you managed to live with her even though you hated her most of the time."

Narcissa nodded to him. "That is correct."

"Then maybe I can live with this," Harry muttered, wrapping his arms around himself. He did it as if he had never had anyone to hug him and never expected to have anyone.

Draco stepped forwards impulsively and embraced Harry. He made a startled sound and tried to jump away, but Draco's grip was too firm for that. Harry sighed after a minute and rested his head on Draco's shoulder. "I'm only doing this because you won't let me go," he whispered.

Draco shivered because of the way Harry's breath touched his ear. "Of course," he whispered back.

Harry stood there and let Draco hold him for five minutes before pushing at his shoulders. Draco let him go reluctantly. His arms seemed to have been made to fit the shapes of Harry's shoulders, his hands meant to rest along his ribs and stroke back and forth. The only thing better would have been if he was touching bare skin.

The shock of the thought made Draco pause. But moments later, it no longer seemed strange, and he could mumble a response to Harry's farewell and watch him in only a slight daze as he left the hospital wing.

*Well, so now I know what I want. I think most of me knew it before. I just hadn't put it in those words.*

He stirred and looked back at his mother, who was watching him with a small, knowing smile. Draco coughed and hoped he wasn't blushing. "Why did you tell him about that?" he asked, to distract himself, and, he hoped, her. "You've never even told *me* that story, and you said once that you didn't share memories of the family outside the family, because it could make them look bad."

"He saved my life," his mother said quietly, lying back. "And he was connected to my cousin Sirius and he killed my sister, so he is entitled to know something about the Blacks." Draco blinked; for some reason, that sounded strange, even though it wouldn't ordinarily. *I'm still kind of hearing with Harry's ears, I think.* "And I can see what's right in front of my eyes," Narcissa continued. "He came to you for reassurance, not his friends. He allowed you to hug him, far longer than he has ever allowed his little friends to do so that I have seen. He protects you. He values you. I know where this will end."

Draco *knew* he flushed this time, but he decided that he could be mature and acknowledge reality, since his mother had. He leaned in with some dignity to kiss her cheek. "Thank you," he murmured.

Narcissa's hand closed on his. Draco looked at her in surprise and saw that her eyes were bright. It was the closest she had come to tears since her rescue.

"Your father was never happy enough," she whispered. "He took much of his pleasure in

tormenting others. He relied on them too much, for relief and satisfaction and adoration and fear. Try to have your happiness in yourself, Draco. I want you to be happy."

Draco didn't know any words that could respond to a wish like that, so he simply squeezed her hand back.

And if he thought about Harry with a little more complacency and smugness and yearning after that, well, it was only natural.

##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### #####
##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### #####
##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### #####

Chapter: 26

Thank you again for all the reviews!

*Chapter Twenty-Six—The Downfall*

Harry had such trouble falling asleep that night that he wondered for a minute if Voldemort was back haunting his dreams. But he hadn't had dreams like that for a long time, and he didn't think Voldemort would want to show him false visions again. What out there could be important enough, like the prophecy, to try and lure Harry to him?

*Well, he might want to kill you.*

Harry shifted uneasily. He hated it when his mind had a reasonable response to his efforts to defend himself.

Well, *other* than that, why would Voldemort have an interest in sending him false visions like last year?

This time Harry couldn't think of an answer, and nodded in satisfaction. He smiled and rolled on his back, spreading his arms lazily around his head so that they almost covered the pillow.

But the satisfaction faded instantly when he remembered that, if Voldemort wasn't trying to get into his mind, then he had to come up with another reason he had such trouble falling asleep.

This time, the answer was swift and brutal, and Harry sighed and dragged one arm over his eyes, as if that could block out the real reason.

*If what Mrs. Malfoy and Draco said was true, then maybe you just have to live with the way that Snape is always going to be. Maybe he didn't mean to hurt you, or not all the time.* Harry grimaced as he thought of his first day in Potions class, when Snape had struck unprovoked.

*Maybe there are times when he really just wants to keep you safe, and he's thinking you make it difficult.*

But his mind slammed against the same barrier he had always raised before, the question that no one could answer for him. Why was Snape going to be so *different* from his other blood relatives? Except for his parents, one of whom Harry couldn't say was a blood relative anymore, all of them had always treated him nastily. So why should he trust Snape now?

Draco seemed to think there was something special about the fact that Snape was his father. So did Snape. And that was what made the whole thing a tangled mess in Harry's head. People seemed to think there was something specially important and wonderful about blood relatives, and Harry thought they shouldn't get any more consideration than anyone else unless they actually treated you with respect. Ron had a wonderful family, but Harry knew other people didn't. Why should you *have* to love someone just because he was your father? If your sister tried to murder you, did you not defend yourself because she was your sister and just lie there protesting that this was probably because you should have loved her more?

Harry shook his head. He already knew these wouldn't sound like reasonable questions to anyone else. Hermione would urge him to make up with Snape if she knew. Ron wouldn't, but he would be revolted in a way that said even *he* thought there was something special and important about blood connections. And Harry already knew what Snape and Draco thought.

Then Harry paused, and his eyes narrowed in thought.

*When did Snape and Draco become important enough for me to put them in the same thoughts with my friends?*

Harry opened his eyes and sat up, casting a weak *Lumos* that he hoped wouldn't disturb the other boys in the room. He wasn't getting to sleep anyway, and his thoughts were going around in circles. He should do something productive and decide which spells he was going to teach at the next session of the D.A. Some of the spells Snape had taught him were appropriate, but others definitely weren't.

Harry had only made a list of two spells when he saw a flicker out of the corner of his eyes. He looked up, thinking that Ron had opened the curtains to check on him. A reassuring lie was already on his tongue.

But the flicker came back, and he realized he saw a white Dementor drifting across the curtains.

Harry's heart briefly became so still he could *feel* the wash of coldness in his chest. Then it beat again, and he swallowed and sat up. He understood this now, which meant he didn't have to be afraid of it. So he saw white Dementors. He knew it was the bloodline curse, and so far that hadn't hurt him, if you didn't count welts and wounds that went away after a little while.

*There's no reason to scream and wake anyone up.*

The white Dementor he'd seen at first multiplied, until a whole crowd of them surrounded the bed, slowly circling it. Harry could feel their eyes on him, though he couldn't see those eyes, just like with ordinary Dementors.

He forced himself to look away from them and back at the parchment he'd pulled from beneath the bed. *Spells,* he told himself firmly. *Think of the names of spells.*

Then the first white Dementor appeared on the parchment.

Harry flinched and threw it away from him before he thought. It drifted to the floor beside the bed, he knew that, but the way he *saw* it was that it swirled up and became part of the robe of one of the Dementors. That Dementor joined the others in their stately circling, but closer to the bed, so now there were two rings of them.

The inner ring was almost close enough to touch him.

Harry gritted his teeth. Part of him wanted to call out for help, but what could anyone in Gryffindor Tower do? They weren't Snapes and didn't have this stupid fucking bloodline curse on them. The only thing he could really do was go to Madam Pomfrey—which he didn't want to do unless he was actually suffering from things, because since he had Obliviated her she wouldn't know what to do anyway—or to Snape.

And Harry didn't want to go to Snape. The bruise on his shoulder was a reminder of what happened when he did. Maybe Snape hadn't meant to do it, but Harry was still going to give it a few days before he ventured within touching distance of the bastard again. He could listen to Snape and try to act like they were related and he could tolerate him without getting close enough to touch.

He lay down, canceled the charm on his wand, and closed his eyes.

When the first cold touch ran down his arm and he felt his skin pucker and then break, Harry gritted his teeth and said nothing. He'd had worse.

Something was wrong with Harry.

Draco was certain of it. When he looked at him, Harry didn't look back. When he spoke to him, Harry took a minute to answer. When his friends were around him, chattering, Harry stared at the wall instead of listening to their chatter the way he always used to do.

That last reaction was only right and rational, but not right for Harry, because his brain was apparently meant to *like* mindless chatter from Weasley and Granger.

But when Draco tried to take it up with Harry, he only got strange looks and deliberate turns of the conversation. And Harry kept shying away from him when Draco tried to touch his shoulder

or his arm, then acting offended and as if he didn't know what Draco was talking about when Draco tried to mention *that*.

Right now, they were having another meeting to talk about the Horcrux hunt, and Harry was cautioning Weasley and Granger not to mention the word "Horcrux" in front of anyone. Granger had looked guilty and shaken her head. "I'm sorry, Harry," she said. "I thought for sure that I'd set silencing charms."

Harry smiled. "Don't worry about it. But it might be best if we only talk about it in secure rooms like this." They were meeting in Umbridge's old office again, and once more Draco sat on one side of the room and Weasley and Granger on the other, with Harry on his feet between them. They had adopted that arrangement without discussion, as if it was natural.

What *wasn't* natural was the way Harry was swaying slightly back and forth. Draco could see it clearly. As much as it would irritate Harry, he opened his mouth to ask about it. Granger would immediately become concerned, even if Weasley didn't, and the pressure of two or three friends ought to be enough to force the truth from Harry where one wouldn't do it.

Then Draco hesitated again, thinking of how irritated Harry had been when Professor Snape and Draco had pulled that trick on him in the past.

*But what if it's a secret that really hurts him? Is that different from the secrets about the Horcruxes or his family?*

Draco bit his lip hard. It wasn't, was it? Those secrets had hurt Harry, too, to the point where they affected his physical and mental health, but Harry had still defended them fiercely and insisted he was fine. What made Draco think that this time would be different, or that Harry was privately yearning for someone to ask and make him better?

*What makes me think I have the right?*

Draco shut his mouth. No one had really noticed that he opened it, though Weasley gave him a warning look, probably on general principles. Harry and Granger were talking about two places where the Horcrux definitely was not—Gryffindor Tower and the library—and about a spell that Granger thought she could develop to force the Horcruxes to reveal themselves.

"Why did you look in Gryffindor Tower at all?" Draco asked, so that he would look as if he were thinking about the search instead of other things. "After all, the Dark Lord hates your lot, so he wouldn't be likely to hide a precious artifact there."

Granger shook her head and sat upright, looking very calm and adult and, to Draco's horror, a bit like his mother. "I don't think we know enough about the Dark Lord's psychology to say that," she began in a lecture-like tone. "After all, on the one hand, he *does* hate us. He considers himself the Heir of Slytherin, and that seems to mean fulfilling all of Slytherin's old prejudices. There's no denying that. But he also knows that his enemies know that fact. So he might have

tried hiding it in Gryffindor Tower because he knew that was the one place his enemies would never suspect."

Draco shivered. "I don't think the Dark Lord is that complicated," he said absently, thinking about his meetings with him during the summer. "He prides himself on his prejudices, yes, but he's also mad. And he has no empathy at all. That limits his ability to think like other people do. He thinks like himself, instead, and he's bloody proud of it."

"That's useful to know, Malfoy," Weasley said, sitting up in turn and staring at him. "Why did you never tell us that before?" His voice deepened, and his hand strayed towards his wand.

"Because I didn't think of it," Draco snapped. "And because we were talking about the Dark Lord's magic before this, not his mind." He found himself looking at Harry in appeal, and wondered if he should. But there was no one else in the room who was on his side.

He was just in time to catch Harry shoving his sleeve back down over his arm, part of which was a brilliant red. Draco narrowed his eyes. *Did he scald himself? Or did someone cast a curse on him that he feels like he ought to hide? But most of the time, he's not going to hesitate to get someone in trouble for doing something so stupid. I don't understand...*

"Yes, we were," Harry said. Whatever his private concerns, it appeared that he could still follow the conversation effortlessly. "Ron, you can't blame Draco for not mentioning every piece of knowledge he had about Voldemort right away, unless you're also going to blame me for not telling you about the Horcruxes right away." He moved so that he was more firmly between them than before, and it wasn't even subtle.

Weasley grumbled something that Draco didn't bother to pay attention to. He watched the way that Harry folded his arms and tilted his head and wondered if he was really doing it to keep his balance, the way it seemed.

*I wish I knew what to do, how I could help him without losing his trust,* Draco thought wistfully.

"Good," Harry said. "So, I think the next place we should look is the Slytherin common room. Voldemort spent more time there than anywhere else when he was a student, I should think." He turned around, and Draco suddenly found himself the focus of attention from three pairs of eyes. "Draco, can you do that for us?"

"I can teach you the spell that I'm developing to detect the presence of Dark magic in the Horcruxes," Granger offered eagerly.

Draco looked down so that he wouldn't show his astonishment at Granger being eager about *anything* that involved him. He looked mainly at Harry, and the pleading in his eyes, mingled with exhaustion. It looked as if he hadn't been getting enough sleep, but even if Draco only mentioned that and nothing else, he would probably seem like he was too concerned. Weasley would laugh and say that he wasn't Harry's mother.

*Harry doesn't have a mum, but he does have a father.*

Draco clenched one fist against the temptation to run out the door immediately in search of Professor Snape. He would be more than interested to hear about this. He was one of the few people who could stand up to Harry in stubbornness and who would do it consistently (Draco knew Granger was stubborn, too, but it seemed that she yielded to Harry far too often). And Draco had already involved him, a bit, by talking about Harry's secrets where he could hear them.

But if he ran to Professor Snape now, Draco knew he would lose every bit of Harry's trust he had.

He couldn't bear that. Besides, what if he was wrong and Harry was only tired and a bit sick and hiding those things out of pride? Then Draco would have forced himself away from Harry's side for nothing, and in the meantime, when Harry really *was* in danger, he wouldn't be near to protect Harry from himself.

Draco swallowed most of what he wanted to say and nodded. "All right," he said. "But I can't say how long the search might take."

"Because there's so much Dark magic in Slytherin that we can't be sure which bit comes from the Horcrux?" muttered Weasley.

Among all the worries and frustrations plaguing Draco at the moment, it was at least pleasant to be able to nod to Weasley, say, "Exactly," and watch the way his mouth fell open.

"That's all we ask, that you try," Harry said, and his smile warmed Draco's soul and soothed a few of his fears—if only a few—about not saying something right away.

"The purging potions don't work," Harry said as he watched Severus's latest attempt turn to sludge on the bottom of the cauldron. "What else are we going to try?"

Severus waited a moment so that he could listen to his son's tone and analyze it. No, it was not hostile. It was simply blank, as if Harry wanted to be sure that disappointment and gloating alike were kept back.

Severus looked at him. As he had done since he came in the door of the office for their session that night, however, Harry avoided his gaze. He had cast a spell to grow his fringe, Severus thought with slowly mounting annoyance, or else it was being more obnoxious than he usually found it. It worked perfectly to shield the boy's eyes as well as his scar. Severus wondered when the day would come that the boy realized hiding his scar did nothing to hide who he was and he should look the world in the face.

"I will begin with an Entwining Potion," Severus answered. "If we cannot purge the Horcrux

from your soul, perhaps we can *pull* it out."

"What does the Entwining Potion do?" Harry's head rose, but only slightly. Severus set his back teeth together with a quiet click. Once, he would have thought his dearest desire was to see the boy's head bowed with some semblance of humility. But not only was it boring to see it so, it was worrisome. He wanted defiance and a direct gaze. Even that dark smile and the blame he had seen the other day when he bruised his shoulder would have been welcome, as a kind of life.

"It tangles together the essences of objects, and makes one into a magnet for the other," Severus said, letting himself fall into lecture mode as he summoned the necessary potions from the shelves. It seemed safest. "Observe." He decanted the simplest of the Entwining Potions, the Metallic, and conjured pewter and gold filings on the table before dripping the potion onto one of the particles of gold.

It glittered and briefly became covered with what looked like a transparent umbrella as the potion analyzed the nearest metal to the gold. Severus smiled grimly. He had once been so unwise as to use this potion without conjuring another kind of metal that the gold could safely attract, and it had simply reached for the nearest one in the immediate area, which was iron. Nails had come flying out of the doors in a deadly hail, and Severus's cauldrons had disordered themselves so badly that he had been all day about placing them back in their proper positions. While it was a useful property to know in case he ever figured out a way to use it on an enemy, it was not an ability he was anxious to demonstrate while showing the potion to his son.

He looked again at Harry, but he had leaned forwards over the table. Nothing as interesting as gold and pewter had ever existed, apparently.

Severus glanced back at the gold filing, to look at something that would keep to its normal course and enable him, in turn, to keep his patience. The umbrella had settled back into the particle, and Severus nodded and picked it up. "Observe," he murmured, as he moved it above the table.

The pewter filings sprang into motion, the first one connecting to the gold and the others connecting either to it or to the other gold filings on the table. The boy leaned forwards with his mouth open. Severus could see that much before he picked up his jaw and obviously tried to look controlled and mature. Severus permitted himself a smug smile. It was a minor potion, an obvious show compared to the many subtle and wonderful things that his art could do, but at least it impressed his son.

And it allowed Severus to be in the same room with him with no chance of hurting him.

He grimaced and shook his head, forcing himself to move past the lingering hurt for now. He had seen too much of his own pain to find it interesting anymore. "So the essences of gold and pewter are entwined," he murmured, stirring the chain in several directions to show the boy that the metals remained faithful to each other. "The joining can be disrupted with a spell or another potion, but one must shape either carefully. There are many different kinds of Entwining Potions,

and what works to part gold and pewter—" he uncorked the vial of a grey liquid and scattered a few drops on the chain he held, to show the boy how they clicked and fell apart "—will not work at all on a joining of stones, or potions, or living flesh."

"Or souls," the boy breathed. He was gripping the edge of the table by now, and he stared at the gold and pewter filings that still clung to each other as if they were his salvation. "Can you really do that, though?" He blinked and looked up for the first time. "And what two things would you be mingling the essence of, anyway?"

It took Severus an inexcusably long moment to answer. The green eyes were filled with pain, dull with fatigue. He did not understand how he could have gone so long without seeing this. Though it had been a few cautious days before Harry returned to him after their last altercation, he had seen him in class and the corridors since, and no signs of pain had revealed themselves.

Harry began to draw back from him, shaking his fringe into place and lowering his face again, and Severus hurried to respond.

"Ideally, we would be mingling the essence of the Horcrux and a common object that we would only need to pass down your body," Severus said. "Then the piece of the Dark Lord's soul would fly free and join to that object, which could be destroyed in the same way that the Headmaster destroyed the other Horcruxes he found." He hoped that he kept his voice sufficiently neutral when he spoke of Albus. On the other hand, the boy appeared so involved in his own emotions at the moment that it might not have mattered.

"But it's already entwined in *my* soul," Harry said, sinking his fingers into his arms as if his firm grip would keep him in place. It did not escape Severus's eye that the boy shuddered and flinched in the next instant and pulled his hands back hastily. "How are you going to pull his soul away from my soul?"

"That is the question," Severus admitted, mildly impressed by the boy's intelligence in spite of himself. "It might be that we will need two Entwining Potions. And there are other options," he added. "If this does not work, we will find something else that does."

Harry just shut his eyes and shook his head. Severus did not think it was denial of his words, but it did not express belief in them, either.

Harry moved then, and his left sleeve fell heavily away from his arm. Harry gasped, and his face went white.

Had it been anyone else, Severus would have feared that the motion meant a new Dark Mark. But in this case, there was no chance of that, and he was also quick enough to see that the sleeve was soaked in blood and what looked like white powder.

"*Luceo*," he said sharply.

Harry whipped around towards him, mouth open in denial, but the spell had already worked to conjure a special sort of light for Severus's eyes that made the cloth of Harry's sleeves transparent.

His arms were soaked with blood from large welts that took up more space, from his wrist to his shoulder, than regular skin did. The welts resembled the ones Severus had seen when the boy claimed to have seen the white Dementors, but these were worse. Far worse.

And, from the look of them, the boy had been concealing them for days at least. Perhaps weeks.

He looked up in time to meet Harry's eyes, so furious that Severus actually froze. And that was enough time for Harry to hiss, "How many times are you going to spy on me?" and take off through the door of the office.

Harry pounded along, his steps frantic, his breath whistling in his ears, his eyes seeing the world as a ghost through a thick crowd of white Dementors that kept perfect pace with him, his brain a whirl of betrayal.

*Why can't they just understand that I don't want to talk about it? Why can't the bastard just leave me* alone?

The white Dementors never left him alone now. His arms hadn't stopped bleeding for days. Harry knew that was bad, but he also just wanted to be left *alone*, and how could he tell Ron and Hermione without explaining, and how he could he tell Snape or Draco without admitting they were right and he was wrong to keep his secrets? He was so *tired* of being wrong.

Grass hissed beneath his feet. He was beyond the school's wards, he knew vaguely, and a sharp root that made him stumble told him he was in the Forbidden Forest. He kept running anyway. He wanted a private place, a place where no one could find him.

Then the grass did more than hiss at him. It gave way beneath him.

Harry dropped heavily into darkness that did not seem to end, but even there, the white Dementors followed him, and his arms ached and burned.

##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### #####
##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### #####
##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### #####

Chapter: 27

Thank you again for all the reviews!

*Chapter Twenty-Seven—Break the Circle*

Severus snarled under his breath as he raced after the foolish boy. He ran faster than Severus would have believed possible, especially with as much blood as he seemed to have lost through the welts on his arms.

*If I find that he has been consuming illegal potions in order to move more quickly when he runs or plays Quidditch, there will be* consequences.

But Severus did not think that was truly the case, especially given the other times when the welts had appeared.

He cast a tracking spell, concentrating carefully on the way that Harry's arm had felt beneath his, and the way his sleeve had swung, and the sight of the spray of warm blood on the stone floor. This was a Dark spell, because it depended on memories rather than the "safer" method of tracking by hair or skin or fingernail, and Severus would not ordinarily have used it so close to colleagues who might pick up on the difference, but at the moment, he had no choice.

*He simply runs* too fast.

For a moment, Severus imagined the boy racing away from those who had taught him how to run, his Muggle relatives, and his eyes narrowed as he contemplated the folly of someone other than his son. He *would* meet them someday, and if he had to wait…well, he was as good at delaying his revenge as he was at seeking it immediately.

Then he drove the dream from his head with a single shake and bent to the task of his tracking. The images flickered in his mind, impatient to reunite with their real counterparts, and tugged him like a leash to the side. He curved away from the Quidditch pitch, which surprised him. He had naturally supposed the boy might run to it as a sanctuary in times of distress.

Instead, it appeared that he was heading for the Forbidden Forest.

Severus hissed in impatience and lengthened his stride. *Trust the boy to find the one place in Hogwarts that is full of worse monsters than the ones he thinks he is leaving behind.*

The initial path was clear enough, since Harry had trampled the grass without a care for covering his tracks, but then he got onto stones and it was harder. Severus slowed his pace, which he hated to do. He had, however, to listen intently, and to follow the slightest tug that the spell might make on him. It was hard to be sure now that he was beyond Hogwarts's wards. Delicate spells like this were much affected by the atmosphere in which they were cast, and an alteration in the ambient magic would make them weaker. It was another reason, beyond being Dark, that this particular tracking spell was not often used.

A noise ahead had Severus dropping to one knee and drawing his wand before he thought. He knew that noise. It was that of grass scraping against legs. Because he doubted that Harry was up to much sneaking at the moment, he knew that it must be someone else in the Forest.

And they were beyond the wards.

*Of course,* Severus thought, his mind becoming calmer and clearer as his heart and spirit took more of the blow. *If I were the Dark Lord, I would have a close watch kept on the outskirts of the wards, so that I might track who emerged from them and seize him if he was a useful prize.*

The black cloak and white mask that showed through the undergrowth a moment later confirmed his suspicions.

Severus watched carefully as the Death Eater probed through the thickets with what looked like a cane, and which Severus realized a moment later was a lengthened wand. He curled his lip, but kept himself carefully from a snort, which might be heard. The man was an imbecile to use his wand in such a way, when he might want it at any moment as a weapon.

*Then again, I know well that most of the Dark Lord's followers are not to be relied on for their intellect.*

Where had Harry gone? Severus could no longer hear the sounds of his wild rush, and the trembling images in his mind had subsided into nothing more than sullen, muddy flickers. Had he had the wit to hide? Unfortunately, at the moment, Severus did not know how rational Harry was. He wanted to say that his son would never venture into the Forest in a rational mood, but there were plenty of examples to contradict him. He shook his head, thinking of some of the escapades he had seen in the Occlumency lessons both last year and this.

Suddenly the Death Eater stopped and laughed. Then he bent down and waved his wand in an elaborate pattern over something in the grass.

From the way the ground seemed to waver and part, Severus knew he was looking at a pit trap. Simple, but effective, he admitted grudgingly as he watched Harry's body float into the air. Something that would not be beyond the power of most of the Death Eaters he knew, and which could be tended and checked for anyone who had escaped the wards—though from the Death Eater's continuing, delighted chuckles, he hadn't expected to so neatly capture the Boy-Who-Lived.

The Death Eater floated Harry into the air and started to sling him over one shoulder. Then he turned with a motion of his cloak that Severus knew well. He was preparing to Apparate.

And that was what brought him to his feet and forwards.

He had waited because he was not sure if the man had companions or other intentions, but this he could not bear, to watch his son be stolen from him.

The Death Eater began to bring his arm up, with a clumsy motion that told Severus this was likely Vincent Crabbe's father, as the laugh had already hinted. His magic was very good at basic

curses, but he had nothing of the finesse that Severus brought to his duels, and he knew it.

"*Incarcerous*," Severus hissed, and the ropes blew from midair, snaring Crabbe's arms and legs and flipping him upside-down. A gag that Severus had added to his personal version of the spell plugged the man's mouth a moment later. Severus reached out and caught Harry, bracing himself for the weight as he admired the way that Crabbe struggled frantically, unable to escape.

He looked down at Harry then, and shook his head. Harry's face was as pale as salt, his head lolling limply, his arms rolling with blood. Severus stroked his face and held him close, then glanced swiftly at Crabbe. But, luckily, Crabbe did not seem to have observed the tender gesture. Of course, his never being a good observer, combined with being upside-down at the moment, likely helped.

"Come along, then," Severus said in a bored drawl, and placed Harry in a carrying position that would look careless while supporting his weight—which was far too fragile—as much as possible. Another flick of his wand brought Crabbe floating along beside him. Severus sighed as he paced towards the castle. He would much have preferred to simply send Crabbe to the Aurors, but he could not Apparate a person such a distance without accompanying him. He would take Crabbe to Dumbledore and let the Headmaster decide what to do with him.

*For such a task, I believe Albus is still competent.*

Harry came back to consciousness slowly. When he heard voices, he blinked and turned his head, but the ghosts of white Dementors were all over his eyesight now, and he could only see their circles.

He began to breathe faster, even though he didn't want anyone to know he was awake. He wanted to *see*. He'd still been able to see the potions Snape was showing him that afternoon, though he'd had to concentrate hard. Was he really going to be blind for the rest of his life?

"Just a moment, Mr. Potter."

That was Madam Pomfrey's voice. That let Harry relax a little, because at least he wasn't alone with Voldemort, or Snape, or whoever had made him fall down. He felt her wand circle above his body, and then she murmured a long spell that had a little rising intonation at the end.

The white Dementors cleared away from his eyes in what looked like a flash of lightning. Harry blinked and gasped. The world beyond looked fresh and new. He thought it was the first time he'd seen it properly in several days.

Snape was standing over him, staring down. His eyes were bright and deep in a way that Harry hadn't seen before, and his hand clutched Harry's shoulder as if he meant to pry the joint apart. Harry put his chin up and stared back at him defiantly. *I'm not afraid of him, whatever he thinks.*

"You stupid boy," Snape murmured, barely moving his lips. "Do you know what could have

happened to you?"

"*Severus*!" Madam Pomfrey said, giving the scolding that Harry couldn't have dared to give right now. "I hardly think this is the appropriate time to denigrate Harry's intelligence." She turned to Harry with a soft, motherly smile. "Now, dear, you're suffering from a bloodline curse. I don't know exactly what it is, because I never saw your poor father come in with it. Sometimes the curse skips generations. But there are ways to counteract all of them. Most people survive it, after all. Just lie still and relax. I'll be researching this as soon as I can, and in the meantime, there are potions that can mitigate the obvious effects."

Harry froze. He couldn't even nod to Madam Pomfrey, though she bustled away so quickly Harry didn't think she'd noticed. He had to lie there, his eyes fixed on Snape's, and watch the awful knowledge slowly cross his face.

One thing happened that Harry didn't expect. Snape's hand did not tighten on his shoulder and give him another bruise.

Severus stood still. He could hardly do anything else, when Poppy had handed the answer to him as comfortably as she might hand a plate across the Head Table in the Great Hall.

*A bloodline curse.*

And though Poppy did not realize it, everything she had said was true, sans the implication that Harry bore the curse because of his link to James Potter.

The curse had certainly skipped a generation; Severus himself had never suffered from it, or from anything comparable. The curse could not have come through Lily's bloodline, because, even if her distant ancestors had been pure-bloods or Squibs, such curses vanished when they were passed through a family line where the members had no magic. And there was a way to counteract them.

Severus remembered a story, then, that his mother had told him, of hallucinations she had suffered when she was Harry's age. She had seen visions of werewolves, because they were the magical creature she feared most. These werewolves were silent, invisible to others, and capable of transforming into her best friends. Eileen had become convinced that they *were* her best friends, that she had never had such companionship in Slytherin House as she imagined, and that they were laughing silently at her for falling for such a deception.

The curse had broken after a savage fever that had caused Eileen to flee madly into the dungeon corridors. One of the prefects had found her and taken her to the hospital wing, where potions had managed to lower her fever enough to enable her to survive. When she opened her eyes, the visions of werewolves were gone. Eileen was inclined to say that she must have had a dangerous brain fever for a long time, and the visions of werewolves had been the one symptom of it. Sometimes fevers acted strangely on bodies that contained magic.

She had not connected it to a bloodline curse that Severus had heard. He knew for certain that her grandfather had been dead before she was born. If he had been the last ones to suffer the Prince curse, then she would have had no reason to have heard of it.

From the operation of the curse on his mother and his son, Severus believed he knew what it was meant to do. It enhanced the victim's fears and drove them to irrational conclusions. The occurrence of death after that must be frequent. Someone tormented by fear might rush off a cliff or stab themselves to death under the conviction that only opening their skin could save their lives. On the other hand, it was equally as likely that they might survive, though hurt and more paranoid than before, and pass the curse on. That would satisfy whoever had cast the spell in the first place.

*It is no wonder he fled from me,* Severus thought, as he conjured a chair and sat down beside Harry's bed, never taking his hand from his shoulder. *I would have seemed more of an ogre to him than usual. And he fears so being found out and having his privacy taken from him. The curse would have increased his anguish to the point that he literally could not tell anyone.*

"Harry," he said.

"Yes, I know, I could have died," Harry said, turning his head away and setting his jaw. Severus couldn't help casting a glance over his shoulder, but Poppy was still busy among her potions. *Good.* Severus didn't know how anyone looking at Harry in that moment could have escaped the conclusion that he was Severus's son. Their faces darkened with anger in exactly the same way. "You can gloat about it if you like. God knows that you do often enough."

"I do not wish to gloat," Severus said, keeping his words as simple and direct as possible so that it would be harder for Harry's fears to twist them. He did not know how long they had before the curse returned. "I wish to help you."

"At a price." Harry was lying still under his touch now, but it was the kind of stillness a statue might have, or a steel rod. Severus did not like it, and not only because he was sure it meant Harry wasn't listening. "There's always a price," Harry continued, half-rambling, as if he assumed that Severus was reading his mind at the moment and would understand everything he said. "Someone wants me to give up my magic, or my identity, or my past, or my *parents*." He stabbed Severus with a glance that made Severus breathless with pain. "Always something. And there's no way that I can reach the relief they promise, most of the time, because I don't want to pay the price."

"I wish you to live," Severus said, "whether or not you ever acknowledge me publicly as your father."

Harry stared at him again. Then he asked, "But if you helped me do that, and then I didn't do anything for you, wouldn't you feel cheated?"

Severus lowered his eyelids so that Harry could not see how vivid his frustration was. In part, he

was the one who had taught the boy to have this perception of Slytherins. He could hardly complain that Harry had learned his lessons too well, not when he would have sneered at him a month ago for being too trusting. "I wish to have a claim to you, of course," he replied carefully. "I have told you that. I wish for your presence in my rooms because you like to be there, not because you are forced to be or because someone else would think that a son of my blood *should* be. I wish to know many things about you, and to help you recover from some of those you have suffered. I wish to help you recover from this curse, and to understand something about your history, the past of our family, if you wish it."

Harry blinked at him, and said nothing.

"But none of that constitutes force," Severus finished, with an iron tone in his voice he knew might undo some of the value of what he was saying. He could hardly speak otherwise, however. He desired Harry to *understand.* "A wish does not mean you must obey me."

"But you want me to," Harry said, his voice so soft that Severus would not have heard it if he was not straining his ears for it. Harry rolled away, crossing his arms. Severus kept a sharp eye on them, but Poppy's first incantation had done that much good; the welts didn't break open and bleed again.

"Of course I do," Severus said. "I believe that a son should obey his father, unless his father is actually abusive."

Harry stiffened, but said nothing.

"But I no longer intend to—demand obedience." The words were difficult for Severus to pronounce. He glanced over his shoulder to check on Poppy's presence, and found her holding up a potions vial to the light with a smile of triumph. He would not have much more opportunity to say what he needed to say. "I intend to offer, and it will be up to you if you accept." He dipped his head to the boy slightly and then leaned back in his chair.

"I don't know if I can trust you." Harry was hissing at him, his eyes wide, as if being offered a gift was more frightening than being compelled into accepting it. *Of course, compulsion is what the boy knows best,* Severus thought idly as he watched him. "How am I supposed to know?"

"You do not know that you can trust the sun to rise in the morning," Severus responded, standing as Poppy drew closer. "You must simply accept it, if it seems to you worth the risk." He stepped aside and made his way towards the door of the hospital wing. From what Poppy was saying, and what he remembered of his mother's story of the bloodline curse, the outburst was almost over. Poppy could manage to control the dangerous symptoms, including the welts and the tendency Harry had displayed to flee as if the white Dementors had the power to hurt him.

Besides, he thought Harry had had enough of his concern.

*For the moment.*

It was hard to know how to step, when the dance was not one of spying or dueling or brewing or correcting the mistakes of the dunderheaded.

Harry stared after Snape, not knowing what he should feel. He didn't trust the promise that Snape had made, not for one moment. How could he? Too many times, he had wanted to believe something like that, and then Snape had invaded his privacy again, or grabbed him, or discovered a secret that Harry would have preferred he leave alone.

But this time…

Harry swallowed. Snape had never willingly backed off before. He had never said exactly those words, that he wished to have a claim on Harry but understood if Harry didn't want to give him one.

"Madam Pomfrey?" he asked then, turning his head away from Snape so that he could look at someone who actually smiled. She glanced up and nodded to him, her eyes and mouth soft, so Harry knew she wasn't too displeased with him and could perhaps be persuaded to answer some questions. "How did I get here? The last thing I remember is falling down, um, somewhere in the Forbidden Forest." He blushed, because he saw her frown, but he didn't think that she would refuse to answer him, because her mouth still stayed soft.

"According to Professor Snape, you ran beyond the wards and fell into a sort of pit trap," said Madam Pomfrey. "And then—" She lowered her voice. Harry wondered who she was afraid of, but her next words told him. "A Death Eater came. Professor Snape said they set the trap and waited until they felt someone come out of the wards. He saved you from a much worse fate than you would have had without him, Mr. Potter."

"Where's the Death Eater now?" Harry demanded. He couldn't believe that he had missed that much.

"I don't know, I'm sure," Madam Pomfrey said, puffing up like a pigeon. Harry winced. He'd offended her, and he didn't think that she would tell him anything more. "You ought to go to sleep," the mediwitch continued, and Harry realized he was right. "The bloodline curse is focused on fear. This potion will help you sleep and help you clear your mind of the visions you're seeing." She leaned towards him and studied him with large, serious eyes. "But, Harry, I need you to be truthful with me if you start seeing them again."

Harry lowered his eyes and nodded. His decision to keep everything to himself seemed sort of silly now. He could at least have told Draco, who knew something about the white Dementors already and who wouldn't have mocked him.

But it had seemed so important that he have one secret that no one could take away, the way they'd taken all his others, he thought, as he opened his mouth and let Madam Pomfrey pour the potion in. Was that so hard to understand?

*Well, maybe it is, when it leads to you nearly dying.*

Harry lay back on the pillow and closed his eyes. His arms didn't hurt now—the first time that had been true in two days. He tried to remember what he'd been thinking when they *had* hurt, how he'd dealt with the pain and why he'd convinced himself not to go to anyone, but it was like trying to think about the way he acted at the Dursleys'. Afterwards, it didn't seem quite real, and the most important thing about it was trying to keep it hidden. While he was there, he just knew that he had to endure from moment to moment, and he wasn't really *thinking*; he was *surviving.*

*I think the bloodline curse did the same thing to me,* he thought. *Whoever cast the curse probably made it so that the person who had it would be afraid of other people for some reason, and afraid to ask for help.*

*I could have died.*

Harry swallowed. He had thought he would be all right because the Dementors hadn't hurt him that much before or lasted that long, but he had known something was different by the second morning, when he still had the welts and could barely see anything else past the circling white shapes.

*I could have died if Voldemort grabbed me. I could have died if I fell into that pit trap and just lay there and no one found me. I could have died if the welts went on bleeding and I couldn't make enough blood to keep myself alive.*

Harry rolled on his side and tucked his legs close to his chest. He didn't know what had changed. After all, a short time ago he'd been ready enough to die if that was the way he had to get the Horcrux out of him and defeat Voldemort. And he had thought that he changed his mind about living only because Snape forced him to.

But now…

It was…

*I think things changed back again. I don't want to die.*

That didn't mean he had to accept Snape's offer, Harry hastily reassured himself. He could come to Madam Pomfrey if he was hurt, or Draco. But he would try to go. And maybe, sometimes, he could tell secrets. He didn't think Madam Pomfrey or Draco would really betray him.

*And even Snape didn't betray me to anyone except Draco.*

It was a weird thought, an odd one, and Harry was relieved when a sharp voice spoke next to his ear and took him away from thinking about it. The voice was Draco's, and he apparently thought that Harry was asleep, or he wouldn't have spoken the way he did.

"If you ever do that again, I swear, I'm going to tie you to a bed and just *keep* you there. The house-elves can help you go to the loo. I'm going to feed you myself. And I'll help the elves change your clothes, and someone will always be there to watch you if I can't. You need *something* like that."

Harry reached out, caught Draco's hand, and squeezed it. Draco caught his breath in surprise, and Harry opened his eyes to smile at him. It was hard. The potion was finally working, and his mind felt heavy.

"I don't need something like that," he whispered. "Not anymore. I'm going to try to care about myself and not think I don't deserve that care from other people."

Draco's eyes were very wide. He said something, but the words blurred in Harry's ears and became part of the darkness of sleep.

For the first time in what felt like months, his dreams were pleasant.

##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### #####
##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### #####
##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### #####

Chapter: 28

Thank you again for all the reviews!

*Chapter Twenty-Eight—Self-Control*

Draco was waiting for the moment when Harry woke up. Madam Pomfrey had tried to get him to leave last night, hinting more or less gently that Harry needed his rest, but Draco had refused to give up his place.

Professor Snape had told him what had happened, in a guarded tone, but with enough information that Draco knew Harry had almost died. *Again*. Because he cared so little about his own life that he tried to keep secrets he shouldn't keep and thought he should bear them in heroic silence. *Again*.

Draco didn't plan to stand for that this time. He was going to show Harry that he had a place in Harry's life, and not one from which he could be shoved aside any bloody time that Harry decided he could be.

Harry's eyes fluttered and he groaned, brow wrinkling as if he was surprised to find himself in a hospital bed and comfortable instead of lying in leaves or mud somewhere, inches away from death. He raised one hand and brushed at his hair, and then the space above that.

Draco didn't know what he thought he would find that way, and he didn't care. He caught Harry's wrist in a crushing grip instead. Harry gasped and glared at him. The glare wasn't impressive, given the sleep that still clung around his eyes and his general dazed expression. Draco looked forwards to telling him that, once Harry was awake enough to listen and absorb the sense of his words. Right now, Draco had other plans to use this soft confusion that followed waking.

Leaning close, Draco whispered, "I don't think you heard most of what I said to you last night. Did you?"

Harry shook his head and then cleared his throat. He was about to make some announcement, Draco deduced. Perhaps a demand that Draco let go of his hand. Perhaps a complaint. Perhaps even an apology.

But it could bloody well *wait*, and Draco squeezed Harry's wrist again to make him shut up, glad that Madam Pomfrey was busy helping his mother with exercises meant to restore the sensitivity to nerves deadened by Cruciatus and couldn't notice his "assault" on her patient. Harry gasped in pain, and Draco leaped into the gap.

"No, I knew you didn't. What I said, Harry, was that I'm tired of being shoved aside and ignored. You saved my life, and after that you tried to treat me like a puppy that needed to be left inside for its own good. Oh, sure, you've included me in the Horcrux hunt. But you haven't talked to me *at all* about the progress that you and Professor Snape are making in trying to get that piece of soul out of you. And you didn't talk to me about this disease you suffered from, and even when you seem about to explode from fear or frustration, you don't talk to me about that. I'm not going to stand for that anymore."

Harry shook his head. "I never meant to hurt you, Draco. I wasn't letting anyone in, not even Ron or Hermione, so why should I let you in?"

Draco leaned nearer. He had been content to wait on this head for some time since his first realization, but he thought now that he should have pressed the matter earlier. "Because I have a special claim."

Harry frowned at him. "Are you going to tell me that we're related, too?"

"Only in the same way that most pure-bloods are related, through intermarriages between the Malfoys and the Blacks and the Potters generations back," Draco said automatically. Then he drove notions of family blood from his mind. Harry had a way of dragging Draco into his preoccupations and making Draco think about them even when he shouldn't. He was going to keep *on topic* this time. "No. *Listen*. Why did you keep coming and talking to me and my mother in the hospital wing? Why did you try to protect me from the other Slytherins? Why did you leap the tables in the Great Hall the way you did when the Dark Lord sent me my father's head?" His voice still caught on the words, and he looked down, ashamed.

Harry seized his hand, and Draco looked up to find him looking at him with an indescribably tender expression. *Perhaps he doesn't know he's doing that,* Draco thought. *It would explain some things.* "You don't need to worry about your reaction," Harry whispered. "Who else in this school has suffered what you have? Who else has risked so much and lost so much?"

Draco fought the temptation to simply sink into Harry's comforting grasp and remain there. That was part of what had caused the problem in the first place: Harry was too good at reflecting concern back on the people giving it and pretending that their problems were much bigger than his. "You," he whispered.

Harry's smile froze. "What?"

"You've suffered the way I have," Draco said. "You've lost your parents because the Dark Lord murdered them. You've risked your life over and over for a wizarding world that seems to forget that until the next time they need you to save them, when they scream for help." He reached up and traced his fingers along Harry's cheek. It felt strange and new. He hadn't touched Harry as intimately or as much as Harry had touched him. "I'm not going to let you ignore that, either."

Harry shifted uneasily in the bed. "I don't know what we're really talking about here, Draco. I didn't *want* to leave you behind. I won't do it anymore." He tried for a smile that seemed less than convincing, though Draco didn't know if it really was or if it was his own doubts that made it seem so. "I wanted to apologize, in fact. Something Snape said last night really resonated. I'll try to include you in more of my decisions from now on, and to tell you if I have problems."

Draco narrowed his eyes at him. "I seem to recall you making promises like that before."

"But this is different, because I mean it, this time." Harry ducked his head at the expression on Draco's face, and sighed. "I know," he told the bed. "But before, I was more angry at you and Snape for forcing the secret out of me than anything else. I didn't intend to keep the promises I made. This time is different, because, I actually *know* what it could cost me. I was resigned to dying before. This time, I don't want to."

Draco shut his eyes tight and breathed carefully. One thing he had already learned about Harry was that it wasn't a good idea to believe him unconditionally.

*So am I stupid for thinking that his voice is more sincere now? How would you measure that, anyway?*

"I want to live," Harry whispered. His hand squeezed Draco's again. "And I want to live with you, and with my friends, and even with Snape—sort of. I'm still not going to run up and embrace him and call him Dad," he added in a harsher tone, as if he thought Draco would try to convince him to.

Draco opened his eyes and nodded. "All right," he said. "I accept your apology. I believe you. But I *will* hunt you down and bind you to the bed if you show any sign of trying to run off

without me or break your promise."

Harry smiled at him. "Thank you."

"And now," Draco said, "I asked you to consider what it meant that you were risking so much for me, more than you did for your other friends."

Harry stared at him, the smile gradually sliding off his face. "Because you needed my help more," he said. He thought a minute, then added, "And because I was angry at Ron and Hermione when I wasn't angry at you. That's not very noble, but it's part of it."

Draco sighed. He didn't know if Harry wasn't thinking about this because he'd had no *time* to concentrate on romance or if he was really that dim. But it was clear he needed some help.

On the other hand, he would never forgive Draco if he forced Harry into the realization the way he had forced him to reveal his secrets. Harry simply didn't respond well to force, and that was why Draco had let him know that he would use it only if he *had* to, not as a first option.

Draco reached up and traced his fingers around the curve of Harry's forehead, across his scar—with a special, lingering stroke there—and then around the lines of his eyes and nose. Harry took a sharp breath, and then didn't seem to breathe at all. Draco sat back with a smile at the end of the tracing and found that Harry's eyes were shut.

"Think about what you feel when I touch you like that," Draco whispered into Harry's ear. Harry shivered, and Draco shivered in response, in delight. "Think about it very carefully."

Harry opened his eyes and stared at him in bewilderment. Draco smiled, touched his shoulder, and then turned and left the hospital wing. Madam Pomfrey was bustling over with an expression that said he wasn't long for his visiting chair in any case.

*Let Harry meditate on that until he finds an answer that satisfies him. And I bet that he won't be able to, and he'll have to come to me and talk about it.*

*And I will be more than happy to answer his questions.*

Harry smiled and shook hands with Ron. "Forgiven, then? Best mates again?"

"Yes," Ron said, growling as he leaned closer. "As long as you don't, oh, *almost die* again instead of telling us about it. We would have helped you, mate. Whatever it is, I think we could have figured it out." Behind him, Hermione gave him a firm nod and then a watery smile.

Harry hoped that his expression stayed sincere and transparent, or at least as transparent as he was going to allow it to get. He was thinking about the difference between Ron's growl and Draco's, and thinking about the fact that Draco knew this was a bloodline curse, because he knew the truth of Harry's parentage, while Ron and Hermione still had no idea and Harry had had to

fob them off with a weak story about a curse that Voldemort must have figured out how to send from a distance.

*That's different, though. Draco overheard what Snape said to you about being your father by accident. It's not as though you made the choice to tell him.*

*But you didn't make a choice to use a Memory Charm on him, either, the way you did with Madam Pomfrey.*

Harry swallowed and attemped to listen to Hermione's chattering about how she had seen similar welts with some magical conditions, and she could research them, she remembered right where the books were, maybe Madam Pomfrey could even use her help! But his mind was wandering back, obsessively, to the topic it had never managed to leave alone for long since Draco had touched him in the hospital wing yesterday. Exactly why had he treated Draco so differently from his friends when he had known them longer and had more reason to trust them? And why had he gone *on* with that different treatment even when Draco's immediate danger had passed and he didn't need Harry's help more than everyone else?

And the way his skin had quivered and his breath had become short beneath Draco's fingers, as though he had some guilty secret to hide.

*Well. More guilty secrets to hide than usual, anyway.*

There was one explanation that kept shoving itself into his mind, but it made no *sense*. After all, he'd had a crush on Cho last year. He knew what a crush felt like. And he knew that he had them on girls, not on boys.

Well. At least he'd had them on girls *so far*.

But he put the notion aside for right now, because it would need a lot more thinking about before he decided what he should do, and Ron was speaking again. "Does Madam Pomfrey think she can cure this?"

"She's done a good job so far," Harry said, and put on a brave smile. "And she thinks that she can find out what's causing it soon, and so solve the problem at the root." *She already knows what's going on,* he thought as guilt danced through his stomach and Hermione smiled at him. *But I can't tell you, because I still don't know how you'll take it that Snape's my father*.

And then he had something to think about again, because that was the first time he had ever thought of Snape being his father in the *real* way, without adding something like "just because he slept with my mum" even in his thoughts.

*James is still my real dad. He was the one who loved me and died for me.*

Harry relaxed. He had never been more sure that that was true, and it made him feel better. Just

giving Snape a chance hadn't deprived James of the position that he should always have.

*Who knows? Maybe we'll never be father and son. We hated each other for too long, I think.*

*How is Snape going to react if he can't have the claim to me that he wants?*

And then Harry grinned, both because Hermione was talking about other things that the bloodline curse could be and because he felt a rush of daring that he hadn't felt for too many months—a risk he could take that wasn't going to get him in immediate trouble or didn't have to be taken to save someone else.

*Let's see, shall we?*

"Harry." Severus made certain that his voice was calm and polished. Yes, he could not welcome the boy to his office without emotion—he could not see him walking about, alive, without emotion—but he suspected that showing how deeply he felt would make both of them uncomfortable. That was not a strategy he wanted to pursue with Harry, not now and perhaps never again.

*Unless he has been in trouble and will not make a confession of his own free will.*

"Sir." Harry hesitated, holding the door open behind him as if he thought it would irritate Severus if he shut it. Severus made an impatient little gesture, and Harry let it fall and strode forwards. Severus studied him closely. He had an arrogant little tilt of his head that Severus had once associated with James Potter and his hands in his robe pockets, but the gleam in his eyes was nervous.

*What does he play at?* Severus leaned forwards. "Did Madam Pomfrey say that you could leave the hospital wing?"

Harry blinked, then said, "Oh, yes, sir, hours ago." The naturalness of his reaction convinced Severus he was not lying, but left him uncertain of what prank Harry might have decided to play.

Harry took a deep breath and stared at the ground for a minute. Then he looked up and said, "I'm sorry."

Severus acted swiftly to conceal his own surprise—surprise would do more harm than good at the moment, he thought, because it would be too unflattering—and arched his eyebrow. "For?"

"For endangering my life," Harry said. "For keeping a secret that endangered it. I'm not sorry for keeping secrets altogether," he added, and then stared at Severus defiantly.

"That would be like rain apologizing for being wet," Severus said.

Harry peered at him from the corner of one eye, as if he didn't know if that was a joke or a

serious statement. Severus gave him no help in identifying it. It paid to keep his son a bit off-balance, he had found.

In truth, he was more impressed by the apology than he wished to demonstrate. He had hoped for something like this, but not expected it, and certainly not so soon after the incident that had prompted it. He had thought Harry would need more time to think about it and come to terms with the fact that he had almost died, as well as what that near-death *meant*.

"Are you going to accept the apology, sir?" Harry suddenly asked, his voice smaller than it had been.

*On the other hand, there may be such a thing as too far off-balance.* Severus inclined his head. "Yes," he said. "As long as you tell me what makes such a difference to you. You did seem willing to die when we first spoke of the Horcrux in you. Have you changed your mind?"

"Yes." Harry ran a hand through his hair, which Severus was beginning to recognize as a nervous habit rather than a desire to increase the messiness of his mane and, with it, his resemblance to Severus's tormentor. "I just—I don't know why, but I did. I don't want to die, but the bloodline curse kept me from thinking about that. I wanted to keep the secret even more, and it wouldn't let me think that keeping it would kill me."

"The bloodline curse played its part," Severus said. He felt an odd exaltation welling through him, and paused to analyze it. It seemed to come from the boy's openly acknowledging their relation, which was such an odd thought that he dissolved it into the brew of his thoughts immediately. "But I would like to understand more of you than that. What makes you so reluctant to tell others when you are in trouble? Why were you content to die at first? Though you were in shock following the Headmaster's announcement, you cannot blame the bloodline curse."

Fire rose in Harry's eyes, fire Severus had seen multiple times when he made a higher mark than Lily had in Potions. "I don't *have* to tell you that."

"No." Severus spread his hands. "I *could* compel you to—"

Harry's breathing stopped.

"But I no longer wish to." Severus leaned back in his chair and waited for the full impact of that statement to strike Harry. He could not deny his power, since he had already used Legilimency on Harry many times. He simply wanted to emphasize, and thought it would make for a healthier relationship between them if he did, that he was holding back, that he would no longer use that superior strength to force Harry to do his bidding.

It seemed to have worked. At least, Harry was giving him a long, slow look that Severus had never seen before.

"But maybe I'll never give you what you want," Harry said at last, words so quiet Severus had to hold his own breath to hear them. "Maybe I'll never say that you're my father or relax when you're around."

"That is all right," Severus said. "I will still not force you."

Harry stared at the floor. "But lots of people say that," he said. "And then they change their minds later and decide to make you do what they want." He wrapped his arms around himself and shivered.

"Will you tell me about times that happened?" Severus tried to match the boy's voice in softness and tone, so that it would keep him relaxed. At the moment, Harry seemed to *want* to tell him the truth, but old distrust could so easily overwhelm the new confidence existing between them.

Harry started to answer on what at first seemed a different tangent instead, but as he listened, Severus began to see how it could connect back to what he had already said.

"I couldn't control so much," Harry mumbled. "I didn't know when I'd get to eat, or when I'd get shoved away in the cupboard and locked up there for hours, or when they'd laugh at me and call my parents and me names." Severus held his peace on the matter of "parents." He was, he thought, at last learning to master his own ego when it came to his son. "I'd try to fight back, and that made it worse. I tried to be good and get them to love me, and that made it worse."

He lifted his head, and Severus was sure that, no matter how direct his eyes seemed, he was no longer in the office, or the present moment.

"So I couldn't control it," Harry whispered. "What I *could* control was so much more important. I needed to be quiet. At least I could keep secrets, even if I couldn't control the way they didn't feed me. At least I had magic, when I came to Hogwarts, and I could figure out what was going on with Ron and Hermione and stop Voldemort even when the professors ignored us. We tried to tell them sometimes," he added. "We tried to take Lockhart with us second year, even, because we thought he could do something against the basilisk. But it didn't work. We had to go on alone in the end, and then it happened again and again."

He lifted his head, his eyes defiant again, his arms no longer hugging himself but crossed in a barrier to keep other people out.

"You took that control away from me," he said. "My secrets were *mine* to control. What could be more private and important than my magic, or my body, or the blood running through my veins? And you took it away." There was a flash of hatred, or something stronger, in his eyes now.

Severus could not have spoken in that moment if someone had promised to free him from his bondage to the Dark Lord. He understood what Harry was talking about, at levels ten times deeper than Harry could have known existed in his soul.

The amount of powerlessness and helplessness in one's life, the desire for control where one could have it, and the temptation to exercise that control even to the detriment of others or oneself…yes, Severus knew that well. He had turned to inventing spells and to mastering Potions because he *could*, because when he controlled them he felt as if he were controlling himself. He had cast the Dark Arts spells in his youth because they were powerful and forbidden and they would make other people afraid of him, and if other people were afraid of him, they would think twice before they tried to hurt him.

He had asserted his strength in a humiliating situation the only way he could, by insulting his rescuer, and that assertion had cost him Lily's friendship.

His son had grown up like him, even through all their separation in time and space and condition and fame. Severus had wanted a link deeper than blood, because Harry so obviously did not understand the importance that others placed on a blood relationship, and now he had it.

He leaned forwards until Harry shifted as if he would back away, and then said, in the most sincere tone he could muster after a life of lies, "I understand."

Harry stared at him, his mouth parting, and Severus saw the way his eyes changed before he bowed his head and hid them.

Silence hovered between them for so long that Severus wondered if this would turn into another moment of misunderstanding, or at least retreat, after all.

Then Harry whispered, "Thank you."

And the world reoriented itself, and Severus's heart began to beat again.

##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### #####
##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### #####
##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### #####

Chapter: 29

Thank you again for all the reviews!

*Chapter Twenty-Nine—Finding the Tiara*

Draco crouched under the largest bed in the first-year Slytherin girls' room and tried not to sneeze as the smell of some sweet that one of them had stored in her trunk filtered into his nostrils. He tried not to be loud as he whispered the spell that would allow him to detect Horcruxes, either. No one was here yet, but someone might notice something strange if they came in, and Draco had already had to use a difficult combination of spells to allow him past the protections that normally kept Slytherin boys out of the girls' spaces.

The spell purred away into the darkness. Draco waited for some indication of the result. Five minutes passed in silence.

Draco let out a gentle breath and fought the temptation to put his hand over his eyes. After all, there was no reason to believe that the Horcrux would be here. He had increasingly come to the conclusion that it was stored nowhere in Slytherin at all, despite the seeming naturalness of the belief that it would be.

Now he only had to get himself out of here without running into anyone else.

Creeping out from under the bed was easy as long as there was no one to see him, because he had mastered the Disillusionment Charm. Then he stepped out the door and performed the Lightening Charm, the Movement Charm, and the Hurtling Hex that would get him over the staircase's defenses.

The magic made his body feel odd and too soft, the way it did when he was exhausted, but at least he flew rapidly over the staircase and to the floor of the Slytherin common room without triggering any alarms or meeting anyone coming up on the way. Then he could settle into the back of a deep couch, cancel the charms, and pretend that anyone who hadn't seen him before simply hadn't been looking hard enough, while he considered what to do next.

The tiara had to be *somewhere* in the school. Draco had gradually adopted Granger's faith that it was, simply because anything else was so unthinkable. He could affect so little about Harry's fate; let him be able to affect this.

But if it was not in Slytherin and not in the dungeons—Granger had checked there—and not in the other reasonable places that they had thought of, where could it be?

Then Draco paused, and sat up slowly, fighting the urge to close his eyes and bang his head against his hands.

*What idiots we are. Where else would someone hide something in the school? Where else did I go when I still thought I was going to complete the task for the Dark Lord and didn't want to be disturbed?*

*The Room of Hidden Things, of course.*

He stood up and made his way to the door. It wasn't late, and if he hurried, he could catch Harry and Granger and explain things to them. After what he'd heard about the Horcrux, he didn't want to hunt it alone.

Harry sighed and held out his arms so that Madam Pomfrey could run her wand over them. The welts hadn't reappeared since the last time the bloodline curse had hit him, and Harry didn't think there was any way to predict whether they would again, though everyone else seemed to think

so. After all, the bloodline curse had left him alone for weeks at one point, but hit within a few days the other times, once without giving him any welts at all. Who could tell?

Madam Pomfrey, though, wouldn't listen to him when he tried to argue. Instead, she listened frowningly to some result of her spell that Harry couldn't hear, and then shook her head. "I don't like this," she said. "I'm sure that the bloodline curse is based on fear, given what you told me, Mr. Potter, and yet the physical wounds are inconsistent with that kind of curse. Can you tell me what happened to you one more time?"

Harry sighed again and did. This time, he mined his memory for the tiniest details, because they seemed to be what Madam Pomfrey wanted from him, and maybe they would convince her that he was telling the truth and really *couldn't* remember anything else.

"Ah," she breathed suddenly, and smiled, and reached out to put her hand on his shoulder. "You say that the welts resulted when the Dementors touched you?"

"When they seemed to touch me," Harry corrected her. "I know that they aren't real." He wasn't going to be suspected of thinking that they were real, not when Draco and Snape and Ron and Hermione had told him over and over again that they weren't, as if they thought he didn't know that.

"That's it, then," Madam Pomfrey said with great satisfaction. "Your fear of Dementors is so extreme that you expected some result from their touching you, whether or not they were real. It's not the Kiss, of course, and thank Merlin it wasn't! But the welts are injuries that could be within the scope of what your body would do to itself."

Harry stared at her. "I was so afraid that my mind affected my body?"

Madam Pomfrey nodded.

*That's disgusting,* Harry thought. *It makes me seem like I'm a coward, a little baby who wets the bed.* "But why welts?" he asked aloud, hoping Madam Pomfrey would come up with something that would prove her wrong.

"I don't know that, not for certain," Madam Pomfrey said, giving him a gentle smile. "Probably no one except a Mind-Healer would. The connections between our bodies and minds are intricate, Mr. Potter, and often we don't properly understand them in the way that we should do."

*I understand I'm a coward,* Harry thought, and scowled down at his arms. "Is there any way I can keep it from happening again?"

"Come to me if you see the visions of Dementors again," Madam Pomfrey answered briskly. "In the meantime, Professor Snape can brew a few of the potions that act against curses based on fear." She leaned down and whispered to Harry, as if she thought this information was more important than the rest she'd given. "I think the worst crisis is past, though. The curses generally

build up to some point where people die or recover from them. You came very near dying. It will probably happen again, but it won't be as bad."

Harry nodded dismally and left the hospital wing when she told him to. He couldn't believe this was something he had done to *himself.* How afraid of Dementors could he be? He'd stood up to them in his third year, and now he was three years older! He ought to be able to do something about this stupid emotion.

He needed something to cheer him up, and so he was happy to meet Draco hurrying up the corridor, his cheeks as bright as if he'd been outside in the snow, his hands reaching out and catching Harry's and squeezing so tight that Harry wondered for a moment if something had happened to his mum. Madam Pomfrey had finally said that Mrs. Malfoy could leave the hospital wing, but Harry didn't know where she'd gone. Draco had looked embarrassed when Harry asked, and Harry reckoned that it was a house under Fidelius.

*I'm just glad Draco didn't go with her,* Harry thought.

The force of that thought made him cough, and he almost missed the whisper Draco made into his ear. "I think I know where the tiara is."

Harry squeezed Draco's hands so tight back that Draco winced, and Harry had to shake his head and say, "Sorry. But you really do?"

Draco nodded. "And it's so *stupid*, because I should have thought about it immediately. It's in the Room of Hidden Things. It must be. Where else would you put something that you wanted to be safe? And I think I even kicked a tiara aside once, during one of those times I was frustrated with the Vanishing Cabinet."

Harry grinned. "It's not stupid that you didn't think of it before. It's smart that you thought of it now." He paused a minute to watch the way Draco beamed and flushed and didn't seem to know what to do with himself, and then shook away the thoughts that wanted to strike him because of that. "Let's go tell Ron and Hermione, and then we can come up with a way we should deal with it."

*Harry and Draco mean to do something.*

Severus didn't have to look at them to tell that. They stood together a moment too long in the corridor outside his Defense classroom; they gave each other meaningful nods and looks. If most of his students weren't dolts, Severus thought, then they would have been able to see it, too.

Of course, some of his students included spies for the Dark Lord. Perhaps he should be grateful for their shortsightedness.

From the way Harry looked and winked and nodded, his Gryffindor friends were involved in it, as well. Perhaps that should have reassured Severus, but it did not. He knew how often Harry had

persuaded Granger to go against the rules, and the girl had a tendency to get overexcited and forget what she had learned if she was under great stress. Some of the exams Severus had given the Defense and Potions classes made her turn green as if she were going to be ill.

Now the only thing for him to determine was if it would be dangerous or not, and whether he should say something if it was.

But he never managed to catch Granger and Weasley whispering to themselves again as he had the one time. It seemed that Granger had taken Harry's caution to heart, and no longer discussed their private business anywhere in the open. Severus waited for them to pass notes to each other in class, but they didn't do that, either. And if they had a secret meeting place, they seemed to inhabit it during times when Severus was teaching other classes or busy with other duties.

That should have pleased him. At least, if his son must engage in dangerous maneuvers, he would have companions who might be able to hold him back or prevent him from risking his life.

But Severus could see well enough that the position Harry held among his companions was not akin to the one Severus had held among the other Slytherins when he was a student. He wasn't someone who was grudgingly tolerated for the sake of his skills (and Severus had begun to accept that the boy had no great wish to be skilled in Potions, though he still hoped to inspire some thoughtfulness on the matter). He was the leader, the rush of bright and shining water that would sweep others off their feet and bear them along, perhaps even against their better judgment. So Severus had still to worry.

He woke one morning with the worry on his mind, his first thought, and the second one was, *Shall I ever shed this?*

He did not know, and sat for some time contemplating whether his mother had ever shed her worry over him, even long after he had become more capable of defending himself than she was.

Severus held his peace, and thought, and worked on the Entwining Potions as the best choice to remove the Horcrux from Harry's body. What he discovered in those studies was hopeful, but did not please him.

He spent more time thinking about the danger that Harry might be entering into now than about the Entwining Potions.

And, dangerous as it might be, secretive as it undoubtedly was, in the end he held his temper and his peace. He had spied and interfered in Harry's life; Harry had made that clear enough, that it was the standpoint from which he saw Severus's actions. Severus would rather have incurred any amount of hatred than have seen Harry die. He had done that without tremor when the boy was only the Boy-Who-Lived to him, after all, and his survival necessary so that the Dark Lord might fall.

But now, he wondered what he would do if there was no real chance of Harry dying, but he was

still tempted to interfere anyway. Once, it would have seemed pardonable to him—indeed, he would not have cared if the boy *had* pardoned him or not, because he was alive, and what else mattered?

Now things had changed.

Severus could not truly name how they had changed, because any name might be a lie to the way that Harry felt, and he was the one who must determine their relation. Severus could give him no control of his parentage, no control of the potions that must remove the Horcrux from his body—he could try to let him understand the theory, but so far Harry had shown little interest in that—and no control of his fate in being sought by a madman. He could give him control in this.

So, in the end, though with a feeling as though he was wrapped in the meshes of a net that might cut him to slices fit for a Skinning Potion even if he held still, he sat still and said nothing on the evening that all four of them vanished together from the Great Hall, after swallowing not enough dinner to feed a Jarvey.

He sat still, and did nothing, and hated the way that he felt as if he were holding up his unguarded mind to the Dark Lord, without moving to change it.

Draco glanced over his shoulder. Harry was the one immediately behind him—for which he was grateful, because he still didn't really trust Granger and Weasley to protect him if something went wrong—and then came Granger, holding a large basin of pure water that she thought might protect them from the Horcrux. Weasley brought up the rear, gingerly holding a basilisk fang. Draco shivered. He had gone down into the Chamber of Secrets with Harry to retrieve that, and though they'd seen the great snake lying rotting and dead, he still couldn't help imagining what had happened there four years ago.

"Ready?" Harry whispered.

Draco straightened up and nodded. Yes, he was. He had needed Harry's words to let him know it, but that wasn't a surprise. He always needed Harry's words for something or other.

*I think I need him a lot more than he needs me,* Draco thought, and tried his best to think of that without resentment.

He reached out and grasped the handle of the door he'd conjured by thinking very hard about the Room of Hidden Things and what he needed to find in it. The door was plain and wooden, with a silver handle, unlike most of the ones that Draco had called up when he was working on the Vanishing Cabinet. But when it swung open, they were looking in at the same clutter of objects. Draco nodded and swallowed and tried not to breathe in the dust as he edged into the room. He didn't think anyone had been inside since Harry had confronted him here.

Granger cast the Horcrux-finding spell the moment the door closed behind them. Draco tensed, wondering what he would do if he was wrong and the Horcrux wasn't here after all. Weasley

would never let him hear the end of it.

But a sullen glow began to well from behind a rack of moldering robes, and Granger whispered, "There. That's it. I can feel the Dark magic from it on my arms. It's…" She gulped a little. "Cold. Cold and slimy."

"Like a snake," Weasley whispered.

Draco didn't turn around and glare over his shoulder, even though he really wanted to. He held out his wand and carefully lifted the rack of robes into the air, so that they could see what was behind it.

The tiara lay on the floor as though someone had kicked it there, and Draco thought probably someone had. There were shadows squirming around it, or so Draco thought at first when he looked. Then he looked again, and they were gone, but the *sense* of shadows slithering and writhing around it was still present. Draco had sometimes had the same sensation when he was near Dark artifacts that his father had preserved in the dungeons of Malfoy Manor, but never so strong.

"We need to be careful," Granger said, her voice a squeak. "There could be traps around it. We don't know what they are." Draco heard her shifting the vat of water in her arms, and wondered if she really thought that that would protect her. Yes, sometimes water protected against Dark creatures, like vampires, but for the most part, it had to be running.

"Yeah, we do," Harry said, speaking for the first time since they'd stepped into the room. "But we can't be too cautious, or we'll never get the tiara out of here." He glanced at Draco and squeezed his shoulder. "Are there any spells that you know to disarm Dark artifacts? We could use them now."

Draco would probably have tried to say with someone else that he didn't know if those spells would work on something as powerful as a Horcrux. But there was something about the way Harry treated him, as if he thought Draco should have the same confidence in himself that Harry had in him, that calmed his nerves. He could only try. He nodded and raised his wand.

The first one, which was meant to remove any wards, whispered over the Horcrux without affecting it. The second one stilled Draco's sense of the shadows circling around it, but he wasn't sure that was much better. The Horcrux seemed to be paying more attention to them now, as much as something without eyes could pay attention.

Draco tried a few more spells, but nothing else happened. He finally shook his head and lowered his wand. "I don't know," he said. "I don't think there's any way to be sure about what traps the Dark Lord could have set. Probably things that we've never heard of."

Harry nodded, and then pointed his wand at the tiara and paused as if he was gathering up his strength. Draco blinked and looked back at Granger and Weasley to see if they knew what this

was about, but they seemed as baffled as he did. Weasley looked even uglier than usual with that blank expression, Draco noticed for his private edification.

"*Defendo mundum*," Harry said.

Draco knew the spell, but it wasn't one that he'd thought a student could cast. He was just opening his mouth to protest, and worry about whether Harry could handle the magic, when the spell took effect.

A silvery wash lit the area around them, as if they stood in the middle of an immense river that had been invisible until then. The walls of the Room of Hidden Things trembled, and Draco thought he saw some of the older and more fragile objects stored in it dissolve into dust and air. Then the silvery light sent a beam towards the Horcrux.

Draco tensed, ready to move.

The Horcrux, or more precisely the ground and air around the Horcrux, began to spit with fat black sparks, and Draco dived to the floor. He heard Granger and Weasley crying out and falling, too. He reached up to try and tug Harry flat, but Harry might as well have been a statue. He was standing motionless, breathless, staring at the black fire building around the Horcrux.

Draco remembered, then, that you had to stand upright or the spell wouldn't work. He lay there, hoping for the best. He would have closed his eyes, but that would have felt like abandoning Harry.

The black fire whirled upwards, spinning in place but looking less and less like a whirlwind and more and more like a human. Draco winced. This spell was one that gathered up all the evil from a Dark artifact or a cursed place or wizard and forced it into a single form, one that the spellcaster could fight.

But the spell didn't guarantee that the person who cast it would survive the fight. And since the spellcaster would have to act alone, imprisoned as well as defended by the silver light around him, Draco didn't like the odds.

The figure finally stood there, looking like the Dark Lord would look if he had dead stars for eyes. He opened his mouth, but what came out was in Parseltongue, not English. Harry responded in the same language, and Draco thought the figure hesitated for a moment, but that might be his own wishful thinking.

Harry raised a shield in front of him just as the figure threw a clashing, jangling spell that made Draco's teeth hurt. The shield held, and then Harry spun forwards from behind it, throwing a curse Draco was surprised he knew. The figure absorbed it, but shrank a little in doing so.

*If he can do that well all through the battle, he might win,* Draco remembered thinking.

After that, though, he honestly lost track of how well Harry was doing. The dark figure and Harry were both intertwined with racing spirals of light, and geysers of yellow dust that leaped up and then fell back again, and with distortions of the floor and walls inside the spell that made Draco feel as if he were trying to concentrate on a mirage when he had a sick headache. The figure used magic Draco didn't know—or was that Harry? The power flowed so thickly between them that trying to determine its origin was impossible. The smell of burned sugar flowed into his nostrils, and almonds, and rotting fruit, and vanilla. He tasted blood on his tongue, but he thought that was because he'd bitten down in sheer fear.

The battle swelled and surged, fell and broke back in a storm of petals and fathers that Draco could have thought was harmless if he didn't know better. Harry and the figure seemed almost to transform, but Draco knew Harry wasn't an Animagus, and in the end he had to attribute the shapeshifting to the way that his eyes saw things. Harry was waist-deep in snakes at one point; the figure lost its legs into a melting puddle and attacked like a bird standing upright in a pool of water.

Granger tried to fling the pure water at the barrier of the spell. It splashed back again, soaking uselessly into the floorboards of the Room.

Weasley tried a few defensive spells. They vanished as if they'd never existed, and then his wand flew out of his hand and hit the far wall. After that, he lay still with a whimper.

Draco was the only one who knew for certain that they couldn't interfere. In the end, the incantation was "I defend the world" for a reason. The person who cast it was agreeing to take all the burden of defense and forcing back the Dark magic on himself. There was simply no way around it.

Draco tried to resign himself to his lack of control over the situation, and gasped nevertheless when the silver wall dissolved. It swept up the dark figure almost casually as it went, and when it was gone, so was he.

Harry stood there, swaying, smiling at them.

"There's still part of Voldemort's soul in the Horcrux," he said, "but it's small and deep and can't hurt us anymore. That was all the traps and all the wards." He sat down heavily, and Draco stared at him for wounds, but he just looked exhausted. "I'll be all right after I have some rest," he added, catching Draco's gaze.

Granger was immediately on him in a flurry of scolding, and Weasley was growling threats. But, though there was part of Draco that wanted to do the same thing—why hadn't Harry *told* them he was planning on doing something that stupid and dangerous?—he didn't think that was what Harry needed right now.

He just reached out, and took Harry's hand, and smiled helplessly at him.

And felt his soul warm when Harry smiled back.

##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### #####
##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### #####
##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### #####

Chapter: 30

Thank you again for all the reviews!

*Chapter Thirty—Making Sense*

"Do we still have to stab it with the basilisk fang?"

Reluctantly, Draco stirred from staring at Harry and came back to the present. When he glanced over his shoulder at Weasley, he saw him holding the basilisk fang at a distance from his body, staring at it in revulsion. Draco sneered. *He probably hopes that Harry's sacrifice gets rid of any need to even touch the thing.*

"Yes," Granger said firmly. "Harry only really got rid of the traps around it and the wards that Voldemort set up to warn people away. Didn't you, Harry?"

"Right." Draco turned back in time to see Harry reluctantly looking at his friends, as if he would have preferred to go on gazing at Draco. That made Draco bite his lip to hide a smile. *He's learning. He feels what's happening between us, even if he doesn't have a name for it yet.* "The piece of Voldemort's soul is still in there. I think a basilisk fang is the only way to get it out. Unless we want to try that spell Snape used on Nagini, and I don't," he added with a shudder.

"The Fiendfyre? No." Draco shook his head, glad that they thought he was their resident Dark magic expert for once. "It gets out of control too easily. But I think you should do the honors, Weasley," he added, and stepped smoothly aside so that Weasley had a clear path to the tiara.

It was grand entertainment to watch Weasley flush and approach the tiara with slow steps, fang held out in front of him as if he thought it would twist suddenly around in his hand and attack him. Then again, Draco decided, his giggles dying in his throat, the Dark Lord's artifacts were extremely treacherous. Perhaps it was for the best that Weasley stayed so cautious.

In the end, Weasley seemed to decide the best way to get things over with was a charge. He raised the fang above his head, took a deep breath, and rushed forwards, yelling. Draco jumped out of the way—not that he was stupid enough to be in it, but he didn't want to be so much as scratched by that fang—and Harry reached out as if he thought he needed to stop and catch Weasley somehow. Granger gasped.

But the fang safely stabbed down and into the middle of the tiara. Draco heard a high, thin squeal

that sounded like a pig being cornered and slaughtered, and a dark mist rose from the tiara. For a moment, Draco thought it tried to form a gape-mouthed snake, lunging towards Weasley. He fell over, face white with panic, and the dark mist slid above his head. It faded as it flew, though, and Draco's sense of circling shadows was gone altogether.

"Is that it?" Granger asked a few minutes later, when they'd been staring at the tiara as if they expected it to perform some sort of trick. Draco realized he was included in the staring, and shook his head, trying to stand upright and look calm so that they wouldn't realize how scared he'd been.

Harry's sharp glance said Draco hadn't fooled him, but the point wasn't to fool *Harry.*

"Yes, I think so. I can't feel that evil anymore. And you were right; I couldn't have destroyed the soul. I don't think anything except basilisk venom or Fiendfyre could do that." He rubbed his scar as if he expected to hurt, but dropped his hand when he realized Draco was watching him. "Well done, Ron!"

Weasley looked bashful, but nodded and then brandished the basilisk fang. "What are we going to do with this?" His flush was already turning into a stupid triumphant grin. Draco shook his head. He would have liked him better if he could have kept the former expression longer.

*Then again, I don't think he can help it,* Draco thought as he followed the line of Weasley's eyesight to Harry. Harry was looking at his friend with such pride that Weasley would have been dead if he didn't respond. *He makes us all think about ourselves in different ways, and feel that we can rise above ourselves and he'll do nothing but approve. That we'll do anything for that smile.*

It was a profoundly dangerous gift, one that Draco knew his father would have liked to have had. He paused in silent tribute to Lucius Malfoy. He thought he'd tell his mother about it later; she'd like to hear such a thought.

But, on the other hand, Draco knew his father would have used the gift more often to punish his enemies and serve the Dark Lord than to do anything else. And to lower people rather than lift them up. On the whole, it was better that Harry had it.

"Come on, let's get out of here," Harry said. He waved his wand, and the tiara flew into the air, hovering in front of him. Draco held his breath apprehensively, but Harry made no move to touch it, much to his relief. He turned towards the door instead. "I think we should take the tiara to Dumbledore and let him confirm that the Horcrux inside it is destroyed. He's destroyed more of them than anyone else."

Draco caught his breath and stared at Harry's friends, but neither of them reacted. They were smiling and bobbing their heads as though this was a fine plan.

*Well, sometimes you just have to disobey that influence, even if you don't want to.* Draco

increased his pace until he caught up with Harry and could seize his sleeve. Harry looked at him with a little frown, giving Draco an excellent opportunity to shove him with one hand. "Are you mad?" he asked, keeping his voice low. He didn't know how much Harry might have told his friends about Dumbledore. Probably nothing, since he still hadn't told them he was the last Horcrux. "You shouldn't go and speak to the Headmaster again after what he did to you!"

"He didn't do anything to me," Harry said quietly. "He gave me news, something I needed to know. It was my own fault I took it the way I did. I don't think he meant me to lose hope and just lie down and cry."

Draco shook his head, wondering how in the world he could show Harry that Dumbledore was wise enough to have foreseen exactly that result, and had perhaps even intended it. He could *say* that, of course, but Harry would deny it, and that would involve them in a useless argument that Draco didn't want to have in front of Harry's friends. They were already looking curiously at Draco, as if they wondered how anyone could deny that the tiara needed to go to Dumbledore immediately.

"Then let me take the tiara, at least," Draco said. "Or one of them." He couldn't bring himself to look at Granger or Weasley right now; he couldn't take his eyes off Harry. He had the strange conviction that Harry would run off if he looked away. "There's no reason that you need to take it to Dumbledore personally. He doesn't deserve that much time or attention from you."

"And how would you explain it to Hermione or Ron, that I can't take the tiara?" Harry shook his head. "No, I'm going to have to speak to Dumbledore sooner or later. We can't just ignore each other when Voldemort comes to the school." Draco flinched, and Harry reached out and touched his shoulder with a protective glance. "It's all right, Draco," he murmured. "I won't let anything harm you."

"I'm coming with you to his office," Draco said, and gave Harry a stare that dared him to disagree.

Harry stared back. Then he said, "Only if you can control yourself. I won't have you raging at Dumbledore."

"And make them stay here," Draco said, deciding to press his advantage as long as he had it. "I want you to be able to talk freely to the Headmaster about what he intended. You can't if they're with you."

Harry frowned for the first time. "I already feel bad enough about keeping secrets from them. I'm not sure that I should—"

"Is this the way you want them to find out?" Draco breathed. Weasley was pressing closer now, his brow knitted in a scowl, and Draco wouldn't even chance saying the words "last Horcrux" aloud. "We don't have much choice here. Either we invite them along, which will be agreeing to tell them everything, or we delay the revelation a while and leave them out."

"You're pushy," Harry said under his breath, but there was a shadow on his face that Draco recognized. He'd looked much the same way when he assumed that no one knew about Professor Snape being his father. He hesitated, then said aloud, "Ron, Hermione, there's something I need to speak to Dumbledore about that's mostly private. Do you mind if Draco and I go alone?"

"If it's private, why is Malfoy invited along?" Weasley snapped at once. Draco thought he could grow to dislike him again.

"Because he found out about the secret *accidentally*," Harry said. "I was in a frame of mind where I didn't want to tell anyone." A sidelong glance that made Draco have an intense need to study his shoes. "And it's not that I don't trust you," he continued, before Weasley or Granger could say something to that effect. "It's that I want to control the way this secret spreads, and for right now, this is the best way to do it. Do you mind? Can I leave you here?"

Granger sighed in a way that seemed to suggest she, and not Harry, was carrying the weight of the world on her shoulders. "All right," she said, and reached out to put one of her hands on Harry's arms and give him one of her heavy concerned looks. "As long as you know that you can *always* come and talk to us, no matter what's happened or what you've done."

*That's like her, to assume Harry's secret is some crime he's committed rather than something he's suffered,* Draco thought scornfully.

But Harry seemed to appreciate it, if the way he hugged her with one arm and smiled at her was any indication. "Thanks, Hermione," he said. "Come on, Draco." And he started walking down the corridor that would lead to the Headmaster's office, leaving Draco to scramble after him.

The only thing that made Draco feel better about the confrontation they were on their way to was that Weasley's permission hadn't even been asked, Harry assuming he would abide by the decision Granger had made.

*He's firmly under her control,* Draco thought, lifting his head as he trotted after Harry around corners and down stairs and up to the gargoyles. *Not independent, like me.*

Dumbledore bent over the tiara, which he had placed in the center of his desk, using a special eyeglass to examine it. Harry held his breath, but more and more minutes passed, and Dumbledore didn't lurch away from the desk or gasp and drop dead. Indeed, after a moment he leaned back and nodded with satisfaction, his eyes twinkling in a way that Harry hadn't seen in weeks. He had occasionally seen Dumbledore looking at him from across the Great Hall, but his eyes had always been somber, and he had averted them as soon as Harry had caught his gaze.

"Well done, my boy," he said. "The tiara is useless to Voldemort now. The basilisk poison was fatal to the soul, and your spell was fatal to its protections."

Harry found himself smiling back and sitting up straighter. It didn't matter how hopeless he had

been the last time he was in this office: Dumbledore's praise always had the result of making him feel stronger and prouder than before.

Then Draco's elbow dug into his side, and Harry remembered that it did matter, how hopeless he'd been before. He sighed. "Sir, what did you plan to do originally once the tiara had been found and destroyed? About the Horcrux in me, I mean?"

Dumbledore touched his glasses and remained silent for so long that Harry wondered if he was going to answer his question. Then he looked up, and his eyes were quiet and sad and stern.

"I was going to ensure that you died," he said. "And that the piece of soul that Voldemort left in you died. As long as a scrap of him survived, we would never be able to kill him, and the world would never be safe. Leaving you alive was a risk that I could not take."

Harry shut his eyes. He felt as if someone had punched him in the solar plexus, and he just had to sit still.

Dumbledore had said that he would ensure Harry died, not that he would kill him, but Harry could hear the echoes of those words anyway. He wondered for a moment how Dumbledore would have done it. A painless potion? A spell that drew all the darkness in him out of him, the way Harry had done with the tiara, and then a knife across the throat? A gentle explanation that he was going to join his parents and Sirius, and then a Killing Curse to the heart?

*He wouldn't have been cruel. I don't think the way he cares about me would have let him be cruel.*

But it was still a fuck of a revelation to bear.

Harry felt an arm curl around his shoulders, and realized how wise Draco had been to insist on coming, how right he was. He turned his head and nuzzled his face into Draco's shoulder, sighing softly as he did so. Draco embraced him more firmly than ever and snarled at Dumbledore.

"You were just going to do that without ever trying to help him. You were going to sacrifice his life for the rest of the world. What kind of future is that for anyone? What kind of *fate*? Why couldn't you choose yourself? Why not take the piece of soul out of Harry and put it in you? You're old, you've lived a full life, you're going to die soon anyway. Don't tell me that you didn't at least consider it. Or, wait, of course you didn't consider it. Because as soon as you heard it was in Harry, you assumed that he would be happy to die for the wizarding world, didn't you? And you're always asking Harry to do things that you wouldn't or can't do yourself."

Harry heard Dumbledore's slow, pained breath. And that was what gave him the strength, or courage, or both, to interfere. Because, while he loved Draco for defending him, spreading around more pain and suffering wouldn't do anything to solve the problem they were here to address. He touched Draco gently on the knee and shook his head.

Draco turned to him at once, breath hot on his ear. "What is it, Harry?" he whispered. "What do you need?"

"For you to stop saying things like that," Harry answered, and opened his eyes. He stared at Dumbledore. "I know he loves me. He told me as much last year. He tried to keep the knowledge of the prophecy that says I'm supposed to defeat Voldemort from me for so long because he wanted me to have a normal childhood. He went too far in the *other* direction at first, because he should have been preparing me for the possibility I could die from the beginning, and he didn't. He sacrificed other people to me. I suspect that it was partially guilt over that that made him go too far this time. Wasn't it, sir? You wanted to make sure the world was safe, and you thought you had been trying to give me too much. So, this time, you decided it was better to give me too little."

Dumbledore nodded, his eyes shining with tears. "Yes," he whispered. "That is the truth, Harry, and you have seen to the heart of it more clearly than Severus ever did. I am sorry. But I began to think that it was better for you to die than for the world to be at risk. And if there was the slightest *chance* that the Horcrux might survive—and all the methods I found that seemed to promise its removal couldn't guarantee that some of the taint wouldn't remain—then it would be disastrous. Guilt and love drove me too far once; guilt and love have driven me too far again. Forgive me."

"I—I think I can do that when I have some more time," Harry said. His throat felt thick. He blinked and licked his lips. Then he coughed and said, "Just knowing you wanted to kill me is…overwhelming, sir."

"I know it is," Dumbledore said. "I know." He wiped his eyes and lowered his hand to the desk, blinking rapidly. "I will wait for your forgiveness, Harry. And in the meantime, if you like, I will tell you the plan that I have to lure Voldemort into battle once you have removed the Horcrux from your soul."

"Not right now," Harry said. "I can't stand to hear anymore right now." He lurched upright.

Draco stood up with him. "I don't understand," he said, voice full of fury that Harry thought he didn't know how to direct. "How can you even *consider* forgiving him, Harry? He wanted you to die for everyone else."

"But everyone did that," Harry said simply, "except maybe for Ron and Hermione and you, and a few of the other people who knew me personally." As he spoke, a huge vision seemed to spread out in front of him, and he thought he could see the perspective Dumbledore had taken. "It's not—Draco, I know you're angry at him, but will you listen to me?"

Draco stopped yanking on his arm and looked at him sullenly.

"I *do* have a part of me that could die for everyone else, and be all right with it," Harry said quietly. "I don't want to, because I want to live. But you must have done things because you

knew you had to do them, no matter how much you didn't want to. This is one of them. As long as other people don't suffer, I can bear it." He looked at Dumbledore, and Dumbledore looked back at him with understanding in his eyes that Harry thought would forever shut Draco and Snape outside of it. *There are just some things that some people understand. Maybe it's because we're Gryffindors and they're Slytherins. I don't think so, because House difference is so superficial and I have some Slytherin in me, but I don't know any other way to explain it.*

"It's not fair, or just," Draco argued, leaning against Harry and staring at him with, Harry knew, large, hot eyes that he couldn't meet.

"The world is so much bigger than I am," Harry said softly. "All those people living their lives, raising their children, doing their jobs, laughing with each other, getting wounded, dying in hospital, eating. It isn't fair or just to ask them to die because one person won't sacrifice himself, either, Draco. You're thinking of a way the world can go on and so can I, but if there really was no other choice, I know which one I'd like to see end first."

Draco stared at him. His face was very pale, and felt cold when Harry touched it. Harry wondered if he understood and just didn't want to admit that in case that would encourage Harry to kill himself for the war.

"But someone else could die as easily as you could," Draco said stubbornly at last. His eyes flicked to Dumbledore, and though he said nothing, Harry was sure of what he was thinking.

"Not in this case," Harry said gently, "not when I have the Horcrux in me. The other person who died would still have to find a way to get rid of that."

"You said you didn't want to die." Draco pushed him in the chest, making Harry stagger. He still felt weaker than usual from Dumbledore's revelation.

Harry caught Draco's wrists and shook his head at him. "I don't. I can just see why I might have to if there wasn't any other choice, that's all. But there do seem to be other choices."

"It's horrible to think of that, though." Draco's eyes narrowed. "And if you think about something long enough, then you tend to *do* it. I've seen that happen before."

Harry blinked in surprise, and Dumbledore chuckled from the other side of the desk. "I'm afraid he is right, Harry," he said. "I am glad, at least, that you have a defender who is worthy of you."

Draco shot the Headmaster a fierce glance. "You didn't do enough to defend him," he said. "So other people had to take up the burden."

"I do acknowledge that," Dumbledore said quietly, but this time he didn't look down at his desk. Harry wondered if that was because he could bear Draco's accusation better than Harry's. "I am glad they exist."

After more glaring, Draco couldn't seem to find anything wrong with this, so he turned to Harry. "I think we should go concentrate on *productive* things," he said. "Like telling Professor Snape the next Horcrux is destroyed so we can think about how to get that piece of soul out of you. I know you said you couldn't understand the potions theory, but I can help you. Are you coming?"

"Just a minute," Harry said. "I do want to talk to Dumbledore privately."

"Not a chance," Draco drawled, folding his arms.

Harry smiled at him, and touched his cheek the way Draco had touched his the other day. Draco's eyelashes fluttered, and he looked confused. Harry swallowed. At the moment, he thought he might know the name for the emotion Draco had inspired in him, and he was a little less uncomfortable about accepting it.

A *little* less.

"Draco," he said gently, "I promise that I'm not going to come out of here and go fling myself off the Astronomy Tower. But there are some things I need to say on my own. Please?" As Draco still hesitated, he added, "And you can go tell Professor Snape that I'm coming, and sweeten him up."

Draco stared into his eyes for so long that Harry had to wonder why he was still staring. Surely he had seen every thought in Harry's head by this time. And Harry knew that he didn't possess one thought that was worthy of that kind of sustained scrutiny.

"Fine," Draco said. "But you only have twenty minutes." He marched out of Dumbledore's office.

Harry turned to Dumbledore. The Headmaster, sure enough, glanced away from him when Harry's eyes were the ones he had to face.

"I understand what you did," Harry said. "I think I might be the only one in the school who would. But understanding isn't the same as forgiveness." He felt a deep, heavy, golden sadness moving through him as he spoke, the same sort of emotion he felt when he looked up at autumn leaves. "Don't—don't try to talk to me too soon again. And maybe I'm not going to forgive you before one of us dies."

Dumbledore nodded. "I would have grieved," he said. "If I had had to ensure your death, Harry, I would have grieved for the rest of my life."

*But you would still have done it,* Harry thought, and he at once appreciated and hated that fact.

He didn't think Ron or Hermione or Draco or Snape would have approved of that mixture of emotions. But his emotions were *his*, his to control and not talk about if he didn't want to, and they always had to be, and he was going to feel them anyway.

"Good-bye, sir," he said.

Dumbledore glanced up with a small smile. "Good-bye, Harry."

Harry set off to the dungeons, bracing himself for the encounter with Snape as he hadn't had to when it was only Dumbledore. He understood the Headmaster's motivations at bottom, because they looked at the world in the same way.

He didn't think he and Snape ever would.

*But maybe we can become a little more alike. I'm going to try.*

##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### #####
##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### #####
##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### #####

Chapter: 31

Thank you again for all the reviews!

*Chapter Thirty-One—Following a Theory*

Severus had listened in silence to the recitation Draco made to him. It was short on some details, and Severus suspected they were left out for reasons of diplomacy as much as time. But he had heard enough to confirm his former feeling that Harry had been planning something dangerous.

He had to wait in silence for some moments before he could bring his feelings back under subjection and make sure that he would not burst forth into a torrent of invective on either the messenger or the message. The silence was useful; Draco shifted from foot to foot in terror, never suspecting that Severus was struggling to control himself.

"He isn't hurt," Draco thought it wise to say at last. "Although perhaps he will be after you see him," he added, in a whisper that Severus knew he wasn't meant to hear.

Severus could not let that pass. He leaned forwards and lowered his voice to its deepest and most impressive register. "Do you truly think that I would hurt my son, Mr. Malfoy?" he asked.

Draco turned paler than normal, but also gave Severus a thoughtful look Severus would have believed him too crushed to muster. "I've never heard you call him your son before," he muttered.

"He is that," Severus said. "You have been aware of our blood relationship from the moment I discovered it myself. Do you think, as he did for a time, that I could continue hating him after

that?"

Draco met his eyes and didn't flinch. Severus wondered where this new strength in the boy had come from; it was certainly not something that Lucius would have trained into him. "Hatred isn't always rational, sir," he said. "I didn't think you'd hate him for exactly the same reasons, but you could have loathed him for keeping the secret from you and decided that you didn't want anything to do with him because he didn't want anything to do with you."

Severus stared at him. That was a sentiment he could not have imagined hearing from the mouth of any student, except perhaps Harry, once he had allowed his mind to bask some months under Severus's tutelage. Oh, a few of his elder Slytherins might have thought it, but they would have lacked the courage to *say* it. Only a Gryffindor with a streak of Slytherin in his nature, one that Severus fully intended to nurture, would have the right qualities to form the words with both mind and tongue.

*Or a Slytherin with a streak of Gryffindor in his nature,* he decided, eyeing Draco with new appreciation, *one perhaps nourished by contact with a young man who has deeply attracted him.*

"I do not," Severus said. "And I will not hurt him."

Draco turned a little paler this time, his breathing faster, the respect in his voice more fragile, but he still spoke the words. "Intentionally or unintentionally, sir?"

Severus folded his fingers on the desk in a bid for patience. "No one can guard against unintentional hurt forever," he said. "My dearest friends could not do so." Again he saw the moment when Lily had saved him from James, and, all unwitting, had humiliated him worse than his bitterest rival could have. "I will do my best to guard against hurting him intentionally."

Draco examined him minutely, then nodded. Severus moved the attack to ground where he felt more comfortable. "Why are you questioning me about such things?" he added smoothly. "I would have expected such an interrogation from one of his little friends, not from you."

Draco flushed. "I know," he said. "But none of them *know*, so they can't come and talk to you like this."

Severus nodded. "And has he decided when to tell them?" Since Harry seemed so fond of surprising him, he would prefer to have a little advance knowledge if he was suddenly to find his office filled with Gryffindors.

"I don't know," Draco said. He was beginning to look stubborn in the way that Lucius used to—cheekbones so pointed they looked as if they would explode through his skin, eyes too steady—and Severus fathomed that Draco might think he was being asked to betray Harry's secrets.

"Very well," Severus said, and turned to face the door as he heard the sound of footsteps drawing

near. There was a knock a moment later, but the door opened before he could call permission to come in.

*My son does things like this,* Severus thought, and he could not have said whether the thought was proud or exasperated or wondering or neutral.

Harry stood there with his shoulders so straight that Severus thought again of Lily, this time of the way she had scolded him about his posture when he slumped in his chair in Potions. He had obviously come prepared for confrontation. He moved into the room and shut the door behind him, never taking his gaze from Severus's face.

"So Draco told you about destroying the Horcrux and leaving me alone with Dumbledore," he said.

"Yes," Severus said. That, and no more. Giving vent to more would mean breaking his promise to himself about scolding Harry.

Harry cocked his head and studied him as if he didn't know how to deal with a Severus who was not storming or scowling at him. Severus rather liked the sensation, and held still, waiting to see what would happen next.

Draco, as it turned out.

"He didn't hurt you, did he?" Draco stepped closer to Harry, peering at his face, and then at his hands, and especially his arms. Severus could not be surprised, seeing the way that Harry tended to hide his wounds from them, especially the welts that the Dementors had inflicted.

"Of course not," Harry said. "Dumbledore isn't someone who hurts with spells—not most of the time," he added with a faraway look in his eyes, and Severus wondered if he was thinking of the one time he had seen Dumbledore in battle, with the Dark Lord in the Atrium of the Ministry. "He uses words. And he wanted my forgiveness, so I was the one with the power to hurt him instead of the other way around."

Severus raised his eyebrows, but stayed silent for the moment. He would not have expected such perception of his son, either—or not until he had had the training of him for several months. Now he began to wonder if Harry had those perceptions, but simply did not choose to exercise them all the time, instead leaping precipitously into the adventures that his friends or his own soul required of him.

Then he was forced to smooth those thoughts back into the general mass of them, because Harry was turning to face him, and seemed to have something to say.

Harry wished he could relax his shoulders. But he had stood this way when he was confronting Uncle Vernon, too, the rare times he had dared to, and when he had blown up Aunt Marge. It just seemed to be his "talking to people I don't like that much and fear a little bit" stance.

*Which is better than the "I hate you" way I stand when I face Voldemort,* he had to acknowledge to himself.

"You probably don't like me confronting the Horcrux with the Universal Defense Spell, or going up to talk to Dumbledore about what he said to me," he told Snape.

"No," Snape said, in a deeper voice and with a smothered sound that Harry had never heard before. "I do not."

Harry paused thoughtfully and looked at him. He was trying to understand everybody, it sometimes seemed to him. At the least, he had *understood* what Dumbledore was going to do to him, even if he couldn't forgive it. Maybe he could try to understand why it seemed so utterly important to Snape that they were related, why the knowledge of him sleeping with Harry's mother changed things.

"Well," he said, "thanks for not yelling at me, anyway. But—can you explain one more time *why* this matters so much? I'm not really changed from the boy you knew for years. I don't look any different."

Snape glanced expressively at his face, and Harry was sure he was thinking of his glamour. Harry glared. He didn't want Draco to notice it. He would probably feel that Harry had been lying to him, and Harry only wanted two emotionally draining confrontations today—three, if you counted the one with the tiara. This tiny thing could bloody well wait.

"My mother is still who you thought she was," Harry said. "I still behaved in the way you hated. I'm still in Gryffindor. I'm still Sirius's godson. I'm still arrogant and disrespectful to you and reckless. I still have to defeat someone whose *name* you flinch at. What is there in all of that to make you care more about me than you used to?"

Snape shot a sideways glance at Draco, but Harry just waited. Draco might as well be here to hear this, since he knew everything Harry was talking about.

*Except the glamour. But that really can wait. It's so small compared to the other things.*

Snape tapped his fingers together, and then decided that he should answer. His voice was very low, the words faltering, and Harry forgot some of his resentment against the man as he listened.

"From the time I was a child, I knew there was one person in the world to protect and care for me, one person in the world I could protect and care for. That was my mother, whose name was Eileen Prince."

*My grandmother,* Harry thought in wonder, and then wanted to scowl at himself. *Now I'm doing it, acting like blood family is more important than other people.*

"She impressed on me the importance of blood," Snape said, in a way that made Harry sure he'd remembered that later when he decided to join the Death Eaters. "There was only one person I differed with her on." He looked at Harry, in the way he had sometimes, as if he was trying to find something in his eyes and the lines around his mouth that wasn't there. "Your mother. She was only a friend, and my mother was displeased that I liked her so much. I do not think she would have been displeased if she had known what the ultimate result of that would be."

Harry was blushing. He didn't know why, but he was. He stood there, eyes locked on Snape's, and didn't move, though, because it would have been weak.

*But maybe he only wants me to look like my mother,* Harry reminded himself. That made it a little easier to bear Snape's eyes.

"Since she was the only one in my world for so long," Snape continued quietly, "the only one who cared if I lived or died, I came to value her word." Harry noticed that he didn't say anything about his father, but he was wise enough not to ask. The tone Snape was talking in, or at least the look on his face, was the same one that Harry used when he was avoiding talking about the Dursleys. "I had not thought, when she died, that there would ever be anyone else. She was the only child of an only child, and her parents were dead before she married my father. I had not planned to have children.

"Now I discover that there is someone else." Snape stood up and came around the desk, with movements so soft and quick that he was a few inches away before Harry could blink. Harry tensed and prevented himself from backing up. "Someone who existed under my nose and whom I did not know about for sixteen years. I am *sick* at the waste of time. I could have known about you and cared whether you lived or died for other reasons than your importance to the wizarding world. I could have raised you. I could have tried to do for you what my mother did for me." His voice went even lower, became even more forceful. "And you wonder that I care?"

Harry blinked. He wanted to step away now, but for different reasons. The way that Snape's eyes burned—

*No one ought to look at me that way. No one has. I don't think even Mum and Dad did, because they knew about me and—and James thought I was his blood, and they planned to raise me.*

*I don't think I can be that important to someone without breaking.*

"I don't wonder about it, now," Harry finally managed to say. He was grateful that his voice remained smooth and under his control, though it was quieter and more strained than he'd like. "Thanks for telling me."

Snape should have backed away and let him go then, at least according to all the rules Harry knew. He shouldn't have stepped closer, staring at him as though he thought being closer to him would allow him to see every thought in Harry's head. *He can already do that,* Harry thought, his breathing rattling as he stared up at Snape. *It's called Legilimency. Has he forgotten about it?*

"Do you think you *could* be my son?" Snape asked, and his voice was so soft that Harry saw Draco edging forwards to listen out of the corner of his eye. "Could you acknowledge our blood relationship to other people?"

*He's asking whether I could,* Harry reminded himself when the first negative impulse almost made him open his mouth. *Not whether I will. I said that I would try to understand.*

And really, wasn't it easier than understanding why Dumbledore had had to promise to kill him?

Harry wanted to hide his face, or turn away, or laugh. *No, it's really not. It's easier for me to understand why someone would think I had to die to save the world than why someone would value me as his son.*

But just because it was hard was no reason not to do it. Harry had learned that years ago, the first time he went after Voldemort (and what he thought was Snape) when he was eleven years old. So he lifted his eyes to Snape's face now, and gave a little nod. "When I get more used to it," he added.

Snape relaxed, and stepped away from him. "And do you understand why I might want to keep you safe from danger?" he asked in a less intense voice that made Harry relax in turn. "Why I might be…irritated that you had sought to confront a Horcrux on your own, and then the Headmaster?"

"Yes," Harry said. "I can." *If someone mattered that much to me, I wouldn't want to see them die.*

But he couldn't just back down and do everything Snape wanted him to, because Harry thought Snape probably wanted him to sit in a dark room all day with a wand in one hand and a mug of sleeping potion in the other and his body wrapped in thick blankets. So he added, "And do you understand why I had to go and do those things anyway? And why I didn't tell you?"

Draco had wanted to roll his eyes when Harry started asking those questions about blood again. He knew Harry wasn't stupid, and the answers were perfectly obvious to him, to anyone who had a parent—

*Oh*.

Draco felt kind of stupid then, and looked at the floor so he wouldn't have to see Professor Snape's eyes as he answered Harry's latest question.

"I understand," Professor Snape said, "but I think it due to an excess of care on your part. There are other people who can handle the fate of the world. The Headmaster has not hesitated to do so." Draco winced at the amount of venom in his voice. Just being in the same *room* as that was uncomfortable. "Someone else could have cast the needed spells on the Horcrux."

"But not as fast," Harry said eagerly. "Don't you see, sir? There are other spells that could have identified the traps and pulled out that evil, but not as fast. And if we're going to defeat *him*, then I think we have to move as fast as we can, before he finds out that we've been destroying Horcruxes and makes some new ones."

Draco shuddered. He hadn't even *thought* of that.

"That argument does carry a certain weight," said Professor Snape, and Draco thought he was choosing his words carefully, perhaps because he didn't want to annoy Harry. "But is there anything in the knowledge you possess, of Horcruxes or of the Dark Lord, to tell you that no one else could have done that as well as you?"

"Not as *well*, I don't think," Harry said. "You know that I'm good at casting spells like that."

"You mistook my words," Professor Snape said, and lowered his voice again. "Could someone else not have performed that spell *in addition* to you?"

Harry frowned. "I don't know," he said. "I didn't think about that."

"Well, do it next time," Draco said, who had got over feeling awkward and who felt they had ignored him and had conversations that should have been private for long enough. "You said that you wanted me to explain the Potions theory that you didn't understand to you?"

Harry gave him a startled look, and Professor Snape gave him the one that he usually gave Gryffindors right before he assigned them detention. Draco gulped. But in the end, the professor only wheeled away and said, "I will not scold you. What is done is done. And you will need my help to get rid of the last Horcrux."

Harry relaxed, but he still eyed the professor's back with a wonder that made Draco want to scoff and touch his shoulder in reassurance both at once. *He still can't really conceive that Snape would want to help him with this, or be glad that Harry has to go through him.*

"The Entwining Potions will work," Professor Snape continued, in such a firm and flat voice that Draco didn't realize what he was saying at first. Then all the breath went out of him at once, and he leaned forwards and had to brace one fist on Professor Snape's desk.

The professor glanced back at him with a spark of contempt in his eyes, but Draco didn't care. This was *enormous* news, and the professor could despise him all he liked for not standing there like a perfect statue, the way his father would have done. Draco wasn't his father.

"To take the Horcrux out of my soul?" Harry's voice croaked. He audibly cleared his throat and tried again. "But there's a catch, isn't there? You would have told me about it immediately if there wasn't one."

Professor Snape turned and looked at Harry again, and Draco thought he discerned a relaxation

in some of the lines in his face. *Of course he would like a son who realizes the truth about something that he tried to keep to himself,* Draco thought. *He's like that.* "Yes," he said. "The removal will cause a great deal of pain."

A pause, while Harry's face grew puzzled and wary. "That's it?" he asked at last. "Don't you think I'm used to suffering by now?" There was a harsh pride in his voice that made Draco roll his eyes. *He would be better off without that. All it does is make him sound like he's* aspiring *to be a martyr.*

"I know you are," Professor Snape answered. "But you said you did not wish to receive more suffering at my hands."

Harry folded his arms and seemed about to say something, but stopped himself several times. Draco watched him in interest. He'd never seen Harry struggle so hard between doubt and forthrightness; in general, he seemed to believe that he had a perfect right to blurt whatever came into his head.

"I think I can distinguish between different kinds of suffering," Harry said at last. "There was the kind that you did to me on purpose, and the kind that you did to me because you just weren't *thinking*—" a little flash from Harry's eyes made Draco think that second kind was less acceptable to him than the first "—and the kind that you did because you had no choice. I think this is that third kind. And I'll endure what I have to. I don't want to die."

Professor Snape closed his eyes once, and then nodded sharply and whirled back to his desk, where several vials stood ready. Draco stepped towards Harry and pressed his shoulder briefly against his, hoping Harry would sense his approval.

*He really is trying. And that will make Professor Snape try harder. Or,* Draco amended, remembering what he knew about Professor Snape's sense of, and opinion of, fairness, *I hope it will.*

Harry leaned on the desk and listened as Professor Snape explained the theory of the Entwining Potions, and why it would hurt so much to have the piece of Voldemort's soul removed from his, and why Snape had discovered one potion that would work when he hadn't had any idea before.

As he had expected, Snape forgot that Harry didn't understand anything about Potions and started talking in terms of theories and "resonances" and "affinities" that Harry didn't understand. When the explanation was finished, he nodded, said, "Thank you, sir," and then turned to Draco.

Draco flushed a little, but Harry thought it was more from pleasure than from embarrassment. "Listen, Harry," he said, leaning forwards and winding his fingers together, "you know that you can't separate your fingers from your hand without causing pain, right?"

Harry nodded sharply, trying not to remember the one time when Dudley had tried that. He saw Snape watching from the corner of his eye, and gave him a weak smile. *Will he be offended that*

*Draco has to be the one to explain this to me?* he wondered for the first time. *Or just that I didn't understand it?*

"The piece of soul that the Dark Lord left in you is the same way," Draco continued earnestly. "It's joined to yours like my fingers are joined to my hand." He gave a tug on his fingers as he spoke, and winced. "I think the Entwining Potion that Professor Snape discovered is specifically meant to separate things that are mingled like this, and he just has to adapt it so that it can affect a non-physical thing like a soul. Right, sir?" He glanced confidingly up at Professor Snape.

Harry looked up, too, but Snape only nodded once, and then leaned back with his eyes fixed on them. Or mainly on *him*, Harry decided. He looked away, still uncomfortable with being that important to anyone who hadn't chosen to become his friend.

"That's it, really," Draco said, and separated his hands with a sharp jerk. "Before, Professor Snape didn't know how closely the soul pieces were joined, because the only other living Horcrux was Nagini, and of course he didn't get a chance to examine her before he destroyed her."

Harry nodded. "When can we start, sir?" he asked Snape.

Snape looked at him without answering for a moment, and Harry wondered if he had done something else stupid. He always felt so *stupid* with his father around, not understanding what he said, and stammering, and not speaking the right way.

*But*, he reminded himself, *you said that you were going to try to understand him. Unless he actually says that you're stupid, or hurts you again, you can try.*

*And if he doesn't start trying back, that will only prove that he really doesn't like or want me after all, and then I can stop acting this way. So either I'll be able to relax in a while, or I'll have a father.*

That thought still made Harry tense his shoulders, but he held motionless and waited for his father to respond.

"I must prepare the potion," Snape said at last, "and that will take another fortnight. Then we must test it. Another week. Three weeks at least."

Harry concealed his irritation at being told the number—*he must not think I'm any good at maths, either*—and nodded. "All right, sir. Thank you."

And Snape's face softened, for just an instant, a moment so fast Harry would have missed it if he'd been blinking. And then Snape looked just as usual, and started to talk about brewing the potion in a way that Harry knew meant he would need Draco to translate for him again.

But that look made him hopeful. And he was sure Snape wouldn't have worn it a month ago.

*I can trust them both,* he thought, leaning against Draco's shoulder. *I think I can.*

##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### #####
##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### #####
##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### #####

Chapter: 32

Thank you again for all the reviews!

*Chapter Thirty-Two—Scenes of Strength*

Draco eyed Harry's back suspiciously. He was Slytherin enough to recognize a plan when he saw one. Harry had told Draco to meet him in the old classroom where they and Harry's friends had met several times to talk about the Horcruxes, but he and Harry had been here alone for almost twenty minutes now, and Weasley and Granger hadn't shown up.

Harry cast a *Tempus* Charm and sighed theatrically. Then he turned towards Draco. "I don't think Ron and Hermione are going to come," he said. "They probably had a snogging session or something."

Draco shuddered, as he knew Harry would expect him to, but inwardly he was thinking, *Lucky bastards. Wish I could imitate them.*

"So that means that you and I can talk about things that we couldn't talk about with them around," Harry said, and sat down on the floor in front of Draco. Draco blinked, thinking something was strange about that, and then realized that Harry usually stood between him and the Terrible Two, as if anxious to show that he liked them both equally. It was new to have him so close.

And it made Draco's heart begin to beat faster. He just hoped that stupid, stupid blush wasn't mounting to his cheeks.

"Snape is working on the Entwining Potion," Harry continued. "He told me that today. I think he means to have it done even sooner than the fortnight he promised me, if he can." He worked his fingers back and forth through each other, and the expression on his face was distracted.

Draco cleared his throat and tried to concentrate on the subject at hand. "Well, he might be able to. Professor Snape really is a genius at Potions, you know," he added, a little reproachfully, because he thought Harry didn't appreciate the way Professor Snape could brew because he knew nothing about potions. "On the other hand, he'll be careful to maintain the efficacy of the potion, and he won't brew it fast if he can't do that."

"I know," Harry said. "I just…I wish this was over, you know?"

"Of course." Draco leaned nearer to him, just for the pleasure of breathing in the scent of his sweat and having a natural excuse to touch him on the shoulder. Harry seemed more thoughtful lately, not as talkative, but Draco didn't mind. If anything, that made him even more attractive, because it made Draco want to know what he was thinking about. "I wish you were just an ordinary person, too, without being a Horcrux. Then you could think about other things."

Harry lifted his head and stared at him. "That was just what I was going to say," he whispered. "That I could think about other things."

Draco swallowed and told himself not to gape at Harry like a child. He had to look as mature and calm and composed as possible, or he thought that Harry probably wouldn't want to be with him. "Like talking with your friends," he said, "and living for yourself, and renewing your relationship with your father."

"And other relationships," Harry said then, his voice so deep that Draco thought he could feel it vibrate in the floor under their feet, and leaned forwards.

Draco didn't have time to catch his breath before Harry was kissing him—delicately, as if he didn't know if the taste of a boy's mouth would appeal to him, his hand locked behind Draco's neck, his fingers rubbing gently up and down the skin there. His other hand cupped Draco's jaw, then slid up to his cheek and into his hair.

Draco made a muffled sound, but let his eyes fall closed a moment later, and kissed back nearly hard enough to knock Harry from his vulnerable perch on his heels.

Harry rocked, but gave a little push of his own, and then Draco was lying on his back with Harry crouched over him. Draco froze. Harry continued kissing him, eyes still shut, pressing closer and running his tongue over Draco's lips now in a motion that was far less tentative than the ones he'd begun with.

What could Draco do but open his mouth in response? He didn't think there was anyone who could have blamed him for that.

This time, it was Harry's turn to freeze. With his hands on Harry's face, Draco could feel him gulp as well as hear it. But the next moment, he was kissing Draco hard and furiously, his tongue curling around Draco's as if he wanted to make up for lost time with speed.

Draco gasped and writhed and spread his legs wide, not because he was thinking of anything distinctly—his head was spinning too much for that—but because it seemed right. Harry fell down between them, and finally lost the balance that had kept him poised above Draco for so long. He tried to brace himself with one hand, and couldn't, and ended up resting on Draco's chest, still kissing.

Draco ignored the pressure to breathe as long as he could, but finally he had no choice. He gently caught Harry's chin and forced his face backwards, gulping in one deep breath of air. It wasn't as deep as it should have been, because Harry's weight was forcing his chest flat. But on the other hand, Draco couldn't imagine a better reason to have difficulty breathing than that.

Harry resisted when Draco tried to draw him back into the kiss, and Draco shut his eyes in nervousness. But then he realized Harry wasn't standing and pushing him back and declaring this had been a mistake, either. He curled up with his head on Draco's chest instead and, when Draco looked, had shut his own eyes, with an expression of deep peace on his face.

"What brought that on?" Draco asked finally, when he thought he had enough breath back to do it. He was glad, at least, that his voice was so soft there was no way Harry could have mistaken it for a bark of indignation. He stroked Harry's hair just to drive home the point that he was pleased, and not angry.

"I was thinking," Harry began.

"That's always dangerous," Draco couldn't resist saying, and got an elbow in the ribs and an annoyed glance for his trouble. After that, he decided that he should lie still and listen instead of interrupt.

"I've always thought of myself, from the moment I learned about Voldemort, as not living a very long life," Harry said. "I thought I would either die fighting him or because someone who wanted to get his favor or was afraid of *me* would kill me."

"Afraid of you?" Draco repeated, truly baffled. "What do you mean?"

Harry gave him a dark glance. "Don't tell me you've forgotten last year, when everyone thought I was crazy, or four years ago, when everyone thought I was the Heir of Slytherin. I really thought someone might kill me because they were worried about their little Savior going evil."

Draco shook his head, not able to say anything. He thought Harry's fear of the Death Eaters was real, but he couldn't possibly think that any of the Hogwarts students had hated him enough to kill him, could he?

Then he thought of what he suspected about Harry's life with his Muggle family, and the fact that he had almost died when he was a baby and then again in several years since, and what Dumbledore had been prepared to do. He winced, and was silent.

"Anyway," Harry went on, "I thought I had to concentrate on fighting because of that. If I was going to die, then at least I had to be the best at Defense spells I possibly could, so I would take some of my enemies with me when I fell. And then I was going to have to kill Voldemort, too. I got more and more convinced of that, and I couldn't do it the way I did when I was a baby. So I had to learn more spells, and I had to deal with things that came up along the way like the Triwizard Tournament, and I had to do the best I could, all the time. If I thought about living,

then something always came along and reminded me how easily I could die."

He shivered, and Draco wished he knew what those specific memories were, so that he could soothe them away. He did the best he could by trailing his hands up and down Harry's shoulders and spine, and listening.

"And I had to do the best in other things," Harry whispered. "I had to *not* think all the time, because that would mean thinking about things that didn't have anything to do with being a hero. I couldn't think too much about Slytherins and whether I could ever possibly like them. I couldn't think about whether other people suffered from things *other* than Voldemort, things I could have done something about. I was being a hero; wasn't that enough? I got in petty fights with my friends because I wasn't thinking about them all the time. I couldn't, because that would mean not thinking about the people trying to kill me. All these thoughts, all these *deeds*, Draco, they were just about being a hero, just about doing one thing. I made a list the other night of all the things I'd ignored and all the questions I hadn't asked, and the only thing they all had in common was that they were off the path people told me I had to walk when I came into the wizarding world, so I didn't seek them out or ask them."

Draco found his tongue at last. "I think you're being too hard on yourself," he said. "Did anyone from Slytherin approach you, either? Did anyone ever ask your help with something specific you could have done that wasn't fighting Voldemort? I can't blame you for not being friendly to everyone in the world. I wasn't exactly going around making friends out of Gryffindors, either."

He could feel Harry smile against his cheek. "Yeah," Harry said. "I figured that was part of it. I can see more clearly now how I was ignoring Snape and how easily I could have ignored you and left you to suffer through the task Voldemort assigned you, and that makes me see the things I used to do in a different, harsher light."

Draco patted his back in relief.

"But, on the other hand," Harry went on, lifting himself on his elbows and looking solemnly down at Draco, "*you* weren't the one who was setting yourself up as a hero and saying you were the epitome of all good, Draco. I was. Or at least I was being told that I could be, and I believed it. But I ignored lots of things. I didn't do lots of things that a real hero would. I didn't even work hard at other subjects that probably could have given me spells to fight Voldemort, and I didn't do as well as I could have in Defense."

"Well, be fair," Draco said. "Most of our Defense professors were bloody awful."

Harry smiled, but didn't laugh. "And last night," he said, "I started thinking. If all that was wrong, if I couldn't be the shining hero they wanted me to be *anyway* and I'd never been, why shouldn't I start living better? Doing things I wanted to, not because they would make me into a better fighter? And one of those things was figuring out what I felt for you."

Draco shut his eyes. He didn't think life held anything better than the way Harry bent over him a

moment later and kissed him again.

No, he was *sure* it didn't.

"Sir? Can I speak to you a moment?"

Severus looked up. He had been so deep in the haze of brewing the Entwining Potion that he hoped would remove the Horcrux from Harry's soul that he hadn't heard the knock that must have come, or the permission he had given to enter. The echo of the words lingered in his mouth, or he would have been at a loss to know why his son was standing there in his office.

"Of course," Severus said at last, when the haze receded. He automatically corked the vial of ingredients he held and cast a Stasis Spell on the liquid in the cauldron. "What is it?"

Harry stood by the door, with eyes so large that Severus at once wondered if he had had another encounter with Albus, or if one of his friends had wounded him. Then Harry shook his head, looking irritated with himself, and came closer. He actually came up beside Severus, which he had never done before—it had not escaped Severus's notice that he always kept enough distance between them that Severus couldn't easily touch him—and propped his chin up on the edge of the desk, folding his arms beneath it. His eyes were large and serious and something else that Severus could not immediately define, but which made him think of Lily.

"What's—" Harry said, and then paused and chewed his lip so hard that Severus wondered whether there would be any more words at all that night. An impatient impulse stirred in him; if Harry would say nothing, then he might as well go back to his brewing. It was not his way to waste time.

But he had the impression, or the silent impulse, that that would be one of the worst things he could say right now. So he kept his arms folded in his sleeves, and Harry finally nodded and burst out with the question that must have been bubbling inside him for days.

"What's our family like?"

Severus delicately put one hand on the desk so that it would seem as if he was merely shifting his weight to the side. He would not let Harry see that he needed the support. Harry's question opened a new prospect, but Severus knew that his son did not regard weakness well, most of the time, and had a particular shyness of the way that Severus might approach this subject. In fact, he had already jumped and looked half-sorry that he had spoken.

"The Princes, you mean?" Severus said at last, when he was in a new position that would allow him to speak calmly and rationally.

Harry shrugged uneasily. "Yeah. And the Snapes, if you know anything about them. And I want to know what you and my mum were like as friends," he added rapidly, because he seemed to decide that, having spoken about one touchy subject, he should speak about all of them at once.

Severus's immediate impulse was to say that he would not reveal such things unless Harry would tell him about his Muggle family.

Then he looked into Harry's face, and saw the half-nervous, half-defiant look he was getting, and knew that such a request would be worse than useless. This was not a matter on which he could bargain, unless he wanted to drive his son away. For Harry, the question was the concession he was making. In fact, admitting that he was curious about his family in the first place, that Severus's family instead of the Potter line was part of his inheritance, meant that he had come further than he perhaps intended.

His face was clouding now, and he cast an uneasy glance over his shoulder at the door. "I'm sorry I came like this, sir," he said. "I mean, you were busy. I mean, I could go—" He started easing backwards.

"No," Severus said, and so accepted that courage was needed in this matter rather than cunning. He stood up straighter. "I will tell you about the Princes, and about your mother. About the parts of your heritage that we both have to be proud of." He was sure Harry would not fail to notice that he had omitted the Snapes, but from the slow, considering look he got, he was also sure Harry would not ask about that, not right now.

Harry nodded and settled back, further away than he had been. Severus tried not to mind that, and wondered that he should have to make an effort not to do so.

"My mother was proud of her family," Severus said quietly. "They are very old, and they had, once, as great a fortune as the Malfoys do now. Their boast was that they had never married someone with the slightest trace of Muggle blood."

Harry stared at him, started to say something, and choked it back down. Severus narrowed his eyes. "Speak."

"I mean—well, I don't think that's something to be proud of," Harry said.

"I know," Severus said. "But those were the stories she told me, and she made their homes sound wonderful, decorated with marble and onyx. Always marble and onyx. White and black were the only proper colors for the Prince family. Their seal used to be a black swan, wings spread, in the middle of a field of purest white."

Harry was relaxing now, regarding him with something of the same expression Severus was sure he had worn when he sat at his mother's feet. "And someone cursed them with the bloodline curse?" he asked.

Severus nodded. *Of course that part of the story would be important to him.* "Like other pure-blood families, they were involved in the petty little wars that once plagued our kind, when we were numerous enough not to have to hide from the Muggles. And they cast their share of

curses in their time, as well."

Harry licked his lips. "I don't know what to say about that."

But Severus understood his emotions better than he did himself, simply from reading his countenance. Fascinated, but repelled. This would be different from what he had grown up with, the way it had been different from the shabby little house Severus had grown up in and the constant noise of Muggles, and that would be enough to partially recommend it. But to hear that one's ancestors had been involved in war and Dark magic would hardly fit the ideas Harry had acquired since coming into the wizarding world.

"My mother was different from the other members of her family," Severus went on. He could see her face as well as if he were looking at it now. She had bent above him so many times, whispering stories of magic and murder to him as she sewed or cooked or did some other mundane chore. "She was prouder. She wanted their heritage, but she also wanted to distinguish herself, to mark herself out as different somehow. She was a champion Gobstones player, but that was a schoolgirl triumph, not the magnificent one she wanted."

"She wanted to make people pay more attention," Harry whispered. "Sometimes it wouldn't matter what kind of attention, as long as she got it."

Severus stared at him. "That is correct," he said slowly. "How did you know?"

"Because I've felt that way, sometimes." Harry wrapped his arms around himself and closed his eyes. "And then I came into the wizarding world and had all the attention I could ever want, and discovered that it wasn't all that it was meant to be. I think that cured me of wanting to stand out forever."

Severus continued speaking after a few minutes, during which his son stood there silently and didn't seem disposed to reveal anything else, whether startling or not. "She grew wilder and wilder when she left Hogwarts, and was impatient and angry when she figured out that her world was full of young pure-bloods, all striving to stand out, and still there was no one to notice her. She didn't have beauty. She didn't have money anymore; the Princes had lost their fortune. She didn't have a talent that mattered at anything except Gobstones. She wasn't powerful with magic, or that clever, except when it came to seizing her own advantage. There seemed to be no road open for her, and she despaired and chose the hardest one possible."

Harry blinked at him. "It's strange to hear you talk that way about your mother," he said. "I mean, after what you said about blood the other day."

"Because I would have done anything for her did not prevent me from seeing her faults," Severus said. "I learned them early, so that no one else—not my father, not those who might have known her family, if I ever encountered them—could use them to sting me."

Harry stared up at him again, and then nodded. Severus went on.

"She married a Muggle. Of course that was a means to punish herself as well as her family. And it was a Muggle who gave her no reason to be proud." That was the closest Severus could bring himself to come to talking about his father today. "And then she had me, and she spent all her time telling me about the glory that she fled from.

"When I met your mother, my mother was horrified. She protested that I had a responsibility to the Prince blood to choose my friends from among those who had no trace of the Muggle taint. I said there were no other wizards or witches in town, and she told me that I had better stay home with her, then.

"I disobeyed."

Harry nodded again. "And you were friends?" he asked.

"Until the time that you have seen in my Pensieve," Severus said, and hurried past the memory that darkened both their faces to a happier one. "I explained what Lily's magic was to her first, and about Hogwarts. Her sister Petunia was jealous, but she hardly cared. Petunia had always needed her more than the other way around, and this was a new world. I taught her basic spells. I taught her what she knew about Potions before she came to Hogwarts. Even when we were placed in separate Houses, she maintained the friendship, and you know how hard that is to do in a place like this."

Harry closed his eyes and stood there as if he could see the images that haunted Severus's mind from those few words alone. Severus hoped he could. His throat had closed, and he could talk no more that day. He turned and stared down into the cauldron until thoughts of the future had come to replace those of the past.

"Sir?"

Severus glanced over his shoulder. "Yes?"

Harry stood very straight, the way he usually did if condemned to detention. He cleared his throat several times before he could speak. Severus was familiar with that. It was the way he had spoken, or not-spoken, to Lily after the day when their friendship had cracked.

"When I came here," Harry said, "I still wanted to have a lot of attention and make something of myself. I was starting to think that it wouldn't be as great as I used to think, and I'd met Ron on the train, and he was the first friend I ever had, and I didn't want to be separated from him. But I still partially wanted people to notice me and smile at me."

"Yes?" Severus asked blankly, not sure where this story was going.

"The Sorting Hat sensed that," Harry said quietly. "It offered to put me in Slytherin. It probably would have except that I begged for Gryffindor, because I wanted to be with Ron, and I'd met

Draco and he was horrible—at the time," he added quickly, as if his own thoughts of the future had intruded. "But Slytherin was an option."

He hesitated some more. Severus, too stunned to move, stared at him, and then Harry said, in a rush so great Severus had trouble separating the words, "We're not that different, you know."

He left immediately. Severus sat down behind his desk and shut his eyes.

There were too many emotions whirling through his head, too many. It shouldn't be possible to *feel* this much.

Harry, leaning against the wall beside the door of Snape's office, found himself breathing like a long-distance runner.

But he'd survived talking to both Snape and Draco, and he knew he'd been right to do it.

He'd wanted to.

##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### #####
##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### #####
##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### #####

Chapter: 33

Thank you again for all the reviews!

*Chapter Thirty-Three—Trust Among Gryffindors*

"What's this about, mate?"

"Yes, Harry," Hermione said, her voice softer and touched with a gentleness that Harry didn't hear in Ron's, but her gaze as intense. "You said you had something to tell us. What is it?"

Harry licked his lips and leaned his back briefly against the door of Umbridge's old office. This was harder than he had thought it would be.

*They're still your friends,* he argued to himself. *It's all right. They'll be happy for you once you tell them that you're on the way to getting rid of the Horcrux.*

But he doubted that would change their anger about finding out that he'd kept this from them in the first place, and their anger was what had made him hesitate for so long. Now that he was here, he didn't know if he could go through with the confession he'd planned on.

*Oh, nonsense,* he thought to himself, with a voice that he knew sounded like Snape's. *These are*

*your friends, your oldest friends. They've shared all sorts of dangers with you, all sorts of adventures—more than Draco and Snape have. And you told Draco and Snape the truth, no matter how hard it was. Why would this be any harder? You just have to muster up your courage and tackle their anger the way you tackled Draco's reluctance to leave you alone and Snape's reluctance to give you your freedom.*

"I have something to tell you," he said, taking refuge for the moment in what Hermione had already repeated. He paused, licked his lips again, and then decided to just plunge forwards and say it. Ron's face was so red that Harry was afraid he would die of curiosity before Harry could communicate it, otherwise. "There's one more Horcrux. Dumbledore told me. Voldemort accidentally gave me part of his soul when he tried to kill me, and so I'm a living Horcrux."

Hermione's face turned pale. Ron's mouth fell open. And then he was on his feet and rushing across the room, patting clumsily at Harry's shoulders, murmuring, "I'm sorry, mate, I'm sorry, why didn't you tell us sooner? We could have helped you handle this, we could have *done* something—"

"Oh, *Harry!*" Hermione sounded as if she was about to cry, and she hugged Harry from the other side. "No wonder you've been so strange and distant! You were figuring out the best way to live with this or die, weren't you?"

Harry stroked her hair, sorry now that he'd kept the secret so long. He had thought they would be angry and hurt, but for some reason, he'd never thought once about how it would make them feel sad and helpless.

"I'm sorry," he whispered. "But we *did* come up with a plan. There's a potion that can take the Horcrux out of me, and then it'll be gone, and that's that."

Hermione's arms closed around him with what felt like a spasm of relief, and Ron whispered, "That's *wonderful*, mate." Then he paused.

Harry went on stroking Hermione's hair, and thinking in resignation about what would come next.

"Who made the plan?" Ron demanded. "Who brewed the potion? Why did you share this with other people and not us?" Already the hurt was gathering in his voice like a stormcloud in the sky, and Harry winced when he thought of how much worse it would get in a little while.

"Well, Snape and Draco knew about me being a Horcrux," Harry answered. "And Dumbledore, since he told me." He added quickly, before the storm in Ron's voice and face could release all its rain, "But Snape and Draco found out on their own, because Snape used Legilimency on me and then mentioned it in front of Draco. I never would have told them about it if I had a choice."

*At least not then,* he admitted to himself. *It would have taken some time until I felt comfortable enough with them to admit that.*

"I see," Ron said, in a voice that was almost shrill, breaking away from Harry. "So they could know, but *we* weren't allowed to. I see." He turned to stare at the wall, his arms folded so tightly that his shoulders hunched.

"*No*," Harry said. "I didn't tell you at first because I wasn't telling anyone, and then because Draco and Snape found out and I resented the idea of sharing anything else with anybody. I promise, Ron." He realized he was almost shouting, and made an effort to soften his voice. "I would have told you eventually. But every time I thought about it, it just seemed too hard, and I put it off until the next day."

"You should have told us," Hermione said, leaning away from him even though she was still embracing him. "Why are you telling us now? Did someone say you had to?"

Harry shook his head. "No, I decided it was time. And that I wanted to say I was sorry for cutting you out of so much of my life." He took a deep breath and spoke the only part of this speech he'd rehearsed, because he had to make his feelings clear without hurting theirs. "I felt that you were ignoring me earlier in the year. It wasn't entirely fair of me to feel that way, because I knew why it happened, and because I was keeping secrets of my own. But I did. So maybe hiding this from you was revenge, in a way."

"So you chose to tell us on your own because it was the right thing to do?" Hermione examined him with big, solemn eyes.

Harry nodded.

Hermione looked thoughtfully at Ron, and then stepped away from Harry to put a hand on Ron's shoulder. Harry swallowed a little to see how much at ease they looked, how close and how confident.

*Will I ever look like that with Draco someday? Or is our relationship going to remain difficult and conflicted?*

Then Hermione and Ron came back to him, and they both nodded. Ron still looked resentful, but he didn't open his mouth to snap insults that Harry couldn't have answered, and Harry would take that at the moment.

"We still love you, Harry," Hermione said. Ron started to open his mouth, maybe to object to the word "love," and Hermione hit him in the side with her elbow. Ron closed his mouth and stared at the floor. "But it's getting awfully hard to trust you," Hermione went on. "How do we know that we can trust you this time?"

"Go talk to Professor Snape," Harry said at once. "He'll tell you about the Entwining Potion he's been brewing that's supposed to tug the Horcrux out of me." He had prepared Snape as much as he could for having questions like that asked, the last time they were in his office together, and

Harry thought Snape, from a few narrow-eyed glances and remarks he'd made about Gryffindor loudmouths, had understood.

"I will," Hermione said, with a firm little nod, though Ron looked as if he wanted to believe Harry rather than go through *that*. "And what about Dumbledore? Does this have something to do with why you went and talked to him, on that day after you defeated the tiara?"

"And Malfoy could go with you," Ron said, in the tone of someone having a revelation, "but you wouldn't let us come."

"Yes," Harry said. "We talked about the Horcruxes, and about me being a Horcrux." He hesitated, but the thought of his friends going to Dumbledore and asking questions, and Dumbledore maybe twisting things, made him go on. "Dumbledore knew about it for longer than I did. And he was the one who told me that I would have to die, there was no way around it. Snape was the one who refused to believe that and started brewing the potion."

Hermione shut her eyes. Ron stared at him, then whispered, "I can't believe that. Not Dumbledore."

"He's a good leader," Harry said. "I believe that. But that means that he doesn't think as much about individuals as he could. He said that he would hate to sacrifice me, that it was horrible to think about, but he would have done it if there was no other choice."

Ron shut his eyes in turn. Hermione finally said, in a high, thin voice, "And you can still bear being in the school with him?"

"Yes," Harry said. "Because I understand why he did it. I told you, he's a good leader. I can't really *forgive* him, not yet, but I can understand. If it had to be me or the world, I would rather it be me. Wouldn't you feel the same way?" he asked, addressing Ron more than Hermione, because he was more purely Gryffindor. "Wouldn't you rather die to save the world than have the world die to save you?"

Ron's face cleared. He put a hand on Hermione's shoulder and said, "It's all right, Hermione. If Harry can bear it, we should be able to."

Hermione actually faced Ron and stomped her foot. *So much for no conflict in their relationship,* Harry thought wryly. "How can you say that? Why would you—oh, it's too horrid to think about!" She spun around and faced Harry again, her hands reaching out as if she wanted to take his and pull him to a safe place. "Dumbledore was the one person I thought we could count on to keep you safe," she said tearfully. "He always seemed to care so much before. And then I find out that we can't trust him at *all*!"

"He wouldn't just kill me," Harry said quietly. "He told me about it first, and risked me running away or babbling the secret all over school just to find some way to survive, because he thought I would be mature enough to see the necessity. And really, I was."

"Stop, Hermione," Ron said, not loudly, but firmly enough to make her forget whatever she was about to say and look at him. "I think we can trust Harry. He's acting the way he used to, explaining things in a clear way."

"Do you think that's *clear*?" Hermione muttered, but she slowed down and listened to Ron for the minute, and Harry smiled gratefully at his best friend.

"Harry's thinking like a Gryffindor," Ron said, never taking his eyes away from Harry, who felt compelled to stand straighter and taller. He thought Ron had never looked so much like his father. "He's thinking that it would be better for him to die than other people. And he's being honest, even if it is a little late." He eyed Harry sternly with that line. Harry nodded, aware that he flushed. "That's why I think that Snape and Malfoy haven't managed to corrupt him or anything like that, and neither has Dumbledore. Besides, did you listen? Harry found a way to keep from having to die. He even found a way to make *Snape* help him. I think that matters. It's horrible news, but at least Harry considered the options and got help. Even if it wasn't from us," he added, a little gloomily. Then he leaned forwards and stared intently at Harry. "Does Voldemort know about this, mate?"

"I don't think so," Harry replied. "I haven't really had any dreams that show me the inside of his head this year, but Dumbledore thought he didn't know. Otherwise, why would he have tried to kill me?"

Ron nodded, satisfied. Then he paused, gave Harry a keen glance, and added, "That's not all your secrets, is it?"

Harry tried to clear his throat, but it was unexpectedly difficult. "What do you mean?"

"I mean," Ron said, "that you haven't told us what made you start calling Malfoy Draco yet, and you haven't told us why Snape wanted to help you so much. I could see him helping you some of the time, but not with this, unless Dumbledore ordered him. And Dumbledore wouldn't have ordered him to do it if he thought your survival was hopeless. So what kind of secrets tie you to them?"

"You can tell us, Harry," Hermione said, wiping tears away and staring at him. "I promise. We aren't going to laugh or yell or get upset."

"I think you will," Harry said, looking at Ron and thinking about what he would say when he learned that Harry was Snape's son.

"Will not," Ron said automatically, and then grinned at him. Harry wished he could smile back as easily.

"I promise we won't," Hermione said, and clasped Ron's hand as if she had the ability to make that true for him as well as for herself. "Now, tell us." She looked fretful already, as if Harry had

hinted about the secret to them and then refused to reveal it fully even when they asked.

Harry swallowed. "The problem is that it's not just my secret," he said. "It belongs to them, too. And Professor Snape doesn't trust you the way I do."

"Well, he *should*," said Ron, and folded his arms mutinously.

"But he doesn't," Harry said, and then sighed when two stubborn faces confronted him. "Look, I'll ask Snape and Draco, all right? The worst they can say is no. And someday you'll know them, when everyone knows them. But I don't know when that will be."

Hermione frowned at him. "You're being very mysterious. What kind of secret can you share with everyone but not just your two best friends?"

"Maybe I can, with permission," Harry said, evasively. He was disturbed by what he had just said, and wanted them to go away so he could think about it in peace. "Can I—look, I'll go and ask them. Please?"

Hermione took one long look in his face, then nodded and said to Ron, "Of course we should leave him alone for a little while. Come on."

Ron clapped Harry on the shoulder before he followed Hermione. "Good to have you back, mate," he said, with a wink.

Harry leaned against the wall when he was alone and exhaled a sharp breath. He wasn't disturbed, at least not really, by the thought of telling everyone about his relationship with Draco when the war with Voldemort was over. The two people who would most disapprove, Voldemort and Lucius Malfoy, would both be dead, and Harry was happy with Draco and wanted to demonstrate that.

But telling everyone about his relationship with Snape…

When had he decided *that* would be a good idea?

When he thought about it in more detail, Harry had to admit, and ran a hand over his face, shaking his head. It would gratify Snape, he thought now—as long as it was done on his own time. He had made it clear that he wanted Harry as his son, though even now Harry was not sure that he understood *all* the reasons behind that. And Harry would be grateful that he no longer had to keep it a secret from Ron and Hermione.

But there was a big difference between telling Ron and Hermione and telling everyone in the world. What had possessed him to say that?

Harry shoved the thought into the depths of his mind, where it could live or die as it pleased. Really, the most important point now was to find Snape and see what he had to say about this.

"Sir?"

Severus kept his head bowed over the cauldron for a moment after Harry spoke, because his son would misunderstand any displeasure he displayed. He had begun to tire of the name "sir" that so many students offered him, and which Harry said to him as much when they were alone as when they were in class. He wanted some more unique name to flow from his son's mouth. He wanted Harry to acknowledge that there was a bond between them that did not exist between Severus and his other students.

But he did not know how to ask for such a gift, and he did not know which name he would have preferred.

"Yes, Harry?" he said at last, when he thought he had overcome his displeasure and could speak normally.

"I told Ron and Hermione the truth about me being a Horcrux, and I was wondering—"

That was as far as he got before Severus wheeled around and pinned him with a stare that he knew was darker than the situation warranted. Harry swallowed and flinched, the way he often did when Severus made a sudden movement, but he didn't back up. That was progress, at least. He lifted his head and stared at Severus instead, with a haughty little motion of his chin that Severus thought he had inherited equally from both him and Lily.

"You told your friends such an important and dark secret?" Severus asked softly. Harry shuddered; at least he knew that softness was more to be feared than the tone he might have used when discussing ordinary matters.

"Yes," Harry said. "It was time, and they needed to know the one secret that was solely mine to tell them."

The defiant tone of those last words told Severus what his son would probably ask of him, but he was more interested in something else just now.

"These are the friends who have spoken openly of Horcruxes once before," he said, and introduced an ominous reverberation into his voice that made Harry look at him thoughtfully, as if he was wondering more about how that trick was done than why Severus was upset. "What makes you think that they can keep the secret safely this time?"

"Because they know that it's more important," Harry said simply. "I'm sure they know that, from the way that I looked. And Hermione did learn from that one incident, sir. She won't do it again, I'm sure."

Severus growled in frustration. "But you didn't ask them to," he said.

Harry looked at him with a strange expression that Severus could not read even when he had studied it for a minute, or when Harry had said, "I didn't have to."

Severus turned away at last, and said, "What were you going to ask when I interrupted?" He went back to the cauldron. The Entwining Potion was nearly finished. He would complete it in two days, in fact, and he thought now that he would need less than a week for the testing on rats and other small animals. But he was not sure he should tell Harry that. On the one hand, surely he would be eager to be free from the Horcrux and any unknown influence that it might exert on his soul.

On the other hand, it would mean that he was facing extreme pain more quickly than he would have thought he had to.

"I want you to let me tell Ron and Hermione that you're my father," Harry said, in a breathless rush, as if the words hurt to speak and he wanted to have the ordeal over all at once.

Severus froze, eyes locked on the potion, which was red now and exploding with slow, lazy bubbles that worked their way to the surface as if they could make their lives better by getting there.

The request had been the one he had foreseen. And now that the moment was here, he had no idea how to deal with it, caught as he was between pride and pain.

The pride was easy enough to explain. Harry was willing to reveal their relationship to his friends. He had accepted Severus enough into his life to ensure that.

But the pain was more complex. It had to do with the speed Harry had used to utter the words, and the contempt Severus was sure he would see in Granger's and Weasley's faces the morning after Harry's revelation, and the way that Harry sounded as if he was half-afraid of Severus even now.

*Can you blame him if, even now, he finds the thought of having a father who once tormented him distasteful?*

He could not. And that added to the pain.

He turned around at last, and fixed his eyes on Harry. Harry had his arms folded by now, and his face held a sulky expression that Severus would have liked to make vanish. On the other hand, when had Harry ever been confident enough before to show him a sulky expression?

And then it was as if the words Harry had used before finally caught up with a brain, or ears, that were slow or hard of hearing.

*When has he called me father?*

But Harry had. He had said the word casually, as if it were not a matter of forethought, or at least not a matter of more forethought than the sentiment that had led him to ask for permission in the first place.

"How exactly would you explain it?' Severus asked. "How much of the story do you expect to tell them?"

Harry eyed him sideways and straightened up a little, seeming calmer now that he thought Severus wasn't going to lash out at him, either with fists or words. Severus lowered his eyelids to shield his anger, the anger he always felt when he saw the edges to Harry's reactions that should not have been there.

"As much as I can," Harry said. "The whole thing, with your permission."

Severus tilted his head. "They will say hurtful things to you," he said. "Weasley may well never accept you again, if he learns that you are my son."

He had spoken those exact words on purpose, so that he could see if Harry flinched from such a blunt acknowledgment of the truth, but the only thing he got in return was a level stare. "I know that," Harry said. "But I think I'll be able to talk him around eventually. And besides, I'm tired of living with this many secrets. This is the one I've kept longest." He paused, nibbling his lip. "I reckon," he said at last, "that I would rather chance Ron never being my friend again than I would him and Hermione finding out about this someday, and feeling betrayed."

Severus nodded. A reasonable response, one based on the friendship that he knew existed between the three young Gryffindors, and one that he should have expected.

"Besides," Harry added abruptly, his eyes locked on Severus as if he expected to encounter defiance from that direction, "I *want* people to know about this. I want them to know about—you. I want them to know that I have a father."

He shrank back again after that, as if he thought that Severus would bark at him for speaking the words.

Severus had heard of incantations that could turn people into statues while preserving the appearance of flesh. The living would grieve around the enchanted person and bury them, while the person died slowly inside the coffin, alive but unable to move or speak or even breathe, imprisoned by wood and their own bodies.

He felt as if he had been hit by one of those incantations.

*When my son decides to move, he moves quickly.*

"Sir?" Harry asked, his forehead wrinkled, as if he didn't know why Severus would simply stand there and stare at him.

The name did not grate so much this time. Severus had won more than he expected, and the minor matter of a name could wait.

He nodded. "Yes," he said. "You may tell them everything, as long as they promise not to speak of it to others. I do not have your trust in them."

Harry smiled at him. "Thanks, sir," he said. "I wouldn't expect you to." And he burst out of the office, running away, probably, to his little friends.

That smile remained with Severus as he turned back to the brewing.

##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### #####
##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### #####
##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### #####

Chapter: 34

Thank you again for all the reviews!

*Chapter Thirty-Four—The Stretched String Snaps*

Harry hurried out of the dungeons and paused only a moment to look around before he darted off towards the library. This time of night, Draco was likely to be in there, studying, especially since they had a Potions exam the next day.

*I should probably study, too,* Harry thought as he watched for any professors who would yell at him for running. *But then, I have the Half-Blood Prince's book, so I really don't have to.*

He winced under a small spasm of guilt. Sometimes he felt bad about not revealing how much the book was responsible for his improvement in Potions. He wasn't fooling Hermione, but Slughorn continued to praise him and assume he had a natural talent just like his mother, and Harry hadn't missed the incredulous looks Draco sometimes gave him.

Even more, it felt like concealing something from Snape.

*But Snape and Draco would understand,* Harry argued to himself as he dodged around a corner and leaped the gap between the corridor he'd come out into and the last step of a staircase just beginning to move. *After all, they're both Slytherins, and they know that sometimes you just need an advantage in a subject you're not very good at. Besides, if I hadn't read the book, I wouldn't have been able to save my life with* Sectumsempra.

Those were good arguments. Solid, even. Harry could almost picture Draco nodding in approval.

Strangely, it was a lot harder to picture it for Snape.

Harry blamed his preoccupation with that idea for not letting him look where he was going. He scrambled off the end of the moving staircase and straight into someone tall and solid. Harry let out an *oof* and grabbed the nearest wall so he wouldn't fall back onto the staircase.

*Good old survival instincts,* he thought as he looked up.

Dumbledore peered down at him with gently twinkling eyes. It was the most normal Harry had seen him look since the start of the school year. "Hello, Harry," he said, in the gentle, grandfatherly voice Harry remembered from last year when he'd explained the prophecy. "I was coming to seek you. There is something important you need to know."

Harry could feel himself flushing as he straightened. The emotions twisting his heart when he looked at Dumbledore were all uncomfortable: resentment, curiosity, uncertainty…

And pity. A lot of that.

"What can I do for you?" he asked, and then added, "Sir." He wasn't sure he *felt* like adding it, but he didn't think he felt like being rude, either.

"Listen closely," said Dumbledore, and suddenly his voice was deeper, his eyes so bright and strong that Harry wouldn't have been surprised if flame had flashed from them. "You need to *listen* to me, now. When the time comes, you must remember these words and trust to them, no matter what else happens."

Harry stared up at him, mystified. Then he nodded slowly and said, "All right, sir. What are the words?"

Dumbledore bent closer, looking around suspiciously in the meantime, as if he thought someone was lurking in the shadows to take the words away. His voice was a whisper so faint Harry wouldn't have heard it if he hadn't been listening as closely as Dumbledore told him to.

"*It is not gone,"* Dumbledore said. "*But it is fading. And better a fading thing fight the ultimate darkness than a bright, strong light that would burn out when it tried.*"

He was gone in the next moment, though Harry never knew how. It ought to have been easy to look around and see those bright blue robes, decorated with silver stars and moons, billowing up the corridor. But Harry stared into the shadows of the torches, and around the next corner, and back down the moving staircase, and didn't see them.

He hesitated for two seconds. Then he was running to the library again, briskly rubbing the inside of his arms to try and soothe the gooseflesh.

"Draco."

Draco lifted his head lazily. Harry had come and dragged him out of the library, saying he had something important to tell him. Draco had been more than willing to go along with that, since Harry's face was strange and pale. But once they got to Umbridge's abandoned office, all Harry had done was snog him, until they were lying entwined on the floor and Draco felt almost too warm and smug to move.

"What?" he asked.

"I wanted to tell Ron and Hermione about us," Harry said, in such a rush that Draco lost half the words and had to put them in afterwards. It didn't help that Harry had his head buried in Draco's shoulder and so a tendency to drip his words down Draco's robe. "I didn't tell them yet, because it's your secret too and I didn't have your permission, but I want them to know. They won't betray it, I promise. I'll ask them not to. But Ron won't be happy, and he might hurt you, and I don't even want to *think* about that, and I wonder if it's a good idea after all, and—"

"*Hush*," Draco said firmly, and pressed down on the back of Harry's neck until he stopped talking. Then he lay there, blinking at the wall and trying to deal with everything he'd just heard.

Harry wanted to tell his friends about them. Well. That was good, right? That was a sign that he didn't intend to abandon Draco the moment things got hard, and he was putting Draco before Weasley and Granger, or at least putting them side-by-side.

But Draco winced at the thought of what would happen once they knew. The Weasel would probably be lying in ambush around every corner, waiting for him, and he couldn't see them keeping this a secret, whatever they promised Harry. The Slytherins still left Draco alone because Professor Snape had not-so-subtly informed them that Draco was under his protection, but knowing that he was dating a Gryffindor might make someone bold enough to try something. Draco's life could become more miserable than any he'd ever lived.

*Isn't it worth it, for Harry?*

Draco smiled to himself. His mother and father would say that love was very sweet, and then caution him not to lose himself to it. Or his mother would. His father would—perhaps have said different things. Draco would never know.

He caught his breath in loss for a minute and lay there with his eyes shut. He felt Harry kiss his ear and heard him whisper, "Draco?"

"Why did you decide to tell your friends?" Draco murmured to him. "It seems—sudden. You just realized your feelings yourself. Why now?"

"Does that mean you don't want me to do it?" Harry sounded half-disappointed, half-relieved. "Because we can wait, if you want—"

"No," Draco said, lifting himself on his elbow and squirming around until he could see Harry. It meant disrupting the comfortable position they were lying in, for which he was sorry, but he *had* to see Harry now. "I just want to know *why*." He ran his fingers through Harry's hair, which made his eyes flutter shut, and then poked him in the shoulder until he looked again.

Harry ducked his head, blushing. Draco smirked, but decided that the immediate reason for the blush that came to *his* mind wasn't the one for Harry's decision. After all, he would hardly tell his friends about any…interesting dreams he might have had of Draco.

"I was thinking about myself," Harry said, in a voice so small Draco could have lost it in his cupped hands. "I told you part of that. How I thought about what I'd done in the past, and how hard I actually tried to learn when I was in school, and decided that I hadn't learned much because I was so insistent on stopping Voldemort." He paused and sucked nervously at the inside of his cheek.

"Yes," Draco murmured, careful to keep his voice cheerful and not accusatory, "you said that." He dragged Harry back down and curled up on his chest again.

"I decided that I'd kept enough secrets, too," Harry said. His voice was swirling dark and bitter now, reminding Draco of an underground river. "I had to keep the secret from everyone at primary school about how the Dursleys treated me. I kept that when I came here, too. And I couldn't tell anyone about my nightmares and what I suffered when I *did* fight Voldemort, because it might be dangerous. I kept things that happened to me in my first and second year, things Dumbledore told me, hidden." He hesitated, and Draco could have sworn he felt Harry's smile before he heard it. "I didn't tell you that the Sorting Hat wanted to put me in Slytherin, did I?"

"And you *rejected* it?" Draco blurted before he could stop himself. "Are you *mad*?"

"Not mad," Harry said dryly. "Just overly influenced by you, even then. I didn't want to be in the House you were in."

Draco lay there trying to decide if he should be insulted or not. On the one hand, Harry had been so determined to avoid him that he had gone into *Gryffindor,* and made friends with a bunch of people as uptight as Granger or as appalling as Weasley. And Draco couldn't help wistfully imagining what might have happened, a lot earlier than this, if he and Harry had been in the same House.

On the other hand, Harry had been so determined to avoid *him* that he had gone into Gryffindor.

That was a lot of power for someone to wield over the Boy-Who-Lived when he was only eleven years old. Even though Draco had never suspected he had it, he couldn't help calming down and preening a bit as he considered the matter.

"And there are other secrets, too," Harry went on. "You know some of them. I was thinking of

how Ron and Hermione had ignored me for their own private love affair, and resenting it, and then the revelation burst on me: how could I accuse them of that when *I'd* ignored *them* in favor of my own private secrets for so long? Even when I was with them more often and told them a lot, it still wasn't everything."

"You don't owe them that much consideration," Draco couldn't help saying sulkily. It seemed to him that Harry didn't owe them any, but he knew he couldn't really change a Gryffindor friendship. What he had to do was influence how much time Harry spent with them.

"Yes, I do," Harry said, and with the frosty tone in his voice that told Draco not to press further. "Anyway. I changed my mind, and I want to tell them about us because it's the best secret in my life."

Draco found himself caught without a response. He cleared his throat, and blinked, and cleared it, and blinked some more. Then he said, "Well, all right. But only because you said that, you know."

"I wouldn't say it if it wasn't true," Harry said, and then caught Draco around the neck and kissed him so soundly that all his other thoughts drifted away on a river of warmth.

"Are you all right, Harry?"

*Trust Hermione to be observant,* Harry thought, and jerked his eyes away from the spot on the floor where he and Draco had been lying the last time he was in this room. "Fine, fine," he said hurriedly. "But I did call you here to explain other things to you." He faced Ron and Hermione and took a deep breath.

Hermione nodded. She'd conjured three comfortable chairs for them, or, for all Harry knew, Transfigured them from dust motes, and formed them into a triangle. She was the only one sitting down. Harry was standing indecisively near the door, and Ron seemed determined not to sit down until Harry did.

Putting this off wouldn't make things any better, Harry thought, and finally resigned himself to what he had to do. "I have two secrets to tell you," he said. "I got permission from both of the other people who were concerned in them, so it's not betraying a confidence or anything."

Ron snorted. "You're sounding formal," he explained when Harry looked at him. "You always sound more formal when you're about to say something we won't like." He paused and studied Harry critically. "In fact, you almost sound like Snape."

Harry must have jumped, because Hermione said, "I *knew* it had something to do with Snape."

"There's no easy way to say this," Harry said. "So I might as well stop trying to *almost* spit it out and actually do it." He tried to smile, but his lips were dry and his heartbeat shrill with terror. "Snape's my father."

"Don't joke," Ron said.

"He is," Harry insisted. "I found out a few summers ago. There was a letter from my mum among these old papers at my aunt's house, and she told me in it that she—she slept with Snape and figured out he was my dad after I was born." He knew he was blushing, but really, was there any easy way to talk about your parents having sex? "There was a letter to him, too, but I never knew what that one said."

Hermione sat as if she'd been turned to stone, staring at him. Ron was shaking his head over and over, the way Harry had seen him do last summer when he was trying to shake off a bee. "No," he said. "That doesn't make any sense."

"I didn't think it did when I first heard about it," Harry said, trying to cling to his calm and remember the startled, wondering look in Snape's eyes the last few times they'd spoken. *Your friends are important, but so is he. If they get angry at you, Draco and him will still be there. Remember that. And you can talk them back around. This isn't your only chance.* "But I can't think of why my mum would write me a lie like that, either. I mean, why? Even if she got angry at my dad—James—writing a letter that she didn't know he'd live to see isn't the best revenge she could have. And she didn't write this to any of the Death Eaters or Voldemort's enemies, either, so it's not like she was trying to use it as a weapon or a defense for me."

Ron went on shaking his head. Hermione leaned forwards and said, "But do you actually have any *proof* of this, Harry?"

Harry nodded. "That disease I had, where I was seeing the white Dementors." *Please let them believe me about this. Please don't make me remove the glamour.* "It's not really a disease. It's a bloodline curse. Snape's mother's family was cursed with it a long time ago." He decided not to say that Snape wasn't a pure-blood; that was a secret he hadn't asked for permission to reveal. "There would be no reason for me to get it if I wasn't part of his family."

"But what about it being a *Potter* bloodline curse?" Ron asked, so breathlessly that he sounded as if he'd snatched the idea from a race it was losing. "It could be that, couldn't it? And that would explain everything!"

Harry shook his head. "It isn't," he said. "I looked it up in a book about bloodline curses when I first started suspecting what it was. The Potter bloodline curses were all different. I didn't see it listed under Snape's family, either," he added, when he saw Ron's mouth opening, "but I was looking under the wrong last name."

Ron drooped. Hermione spoke quietly. "Does Professor Snape know, Harry? I noticed that he'd been paying more attention to you lately."

Harry nodded. "He figured it out when he put certain facts together." No need to mention right away what those facts had been, either. When he'd first decided to tell these secrets, Harry had

imagined that he would want to get rid of everything he'd hidden at once, but that was proving to be impossible. "He confronted me with the truth, and I didn't deny it fast enough to satisfy him. Since then, we've been kind of trying to figure out what we should do." He shrugged helplessly, while Hermione stood up and walked towards him and Ron avoided looking at him altogether. "I mean, it's not every day that you learn you have a father when you've already been alive for sixteen years, right?"

"I don't believe it," Ron said. His voice was soft and quiet and heartbroken. Harry took a step towards him, but Ron moved away a step, and Harry stopped. "You're making it up. You're playing a joke. You're lying. I *know* you are."

"I don't think he is," Hermione said. She had a hand on Harry's elbow now, and he started; he hadn't even really noticed her coming closer. Her eyes were very kind and looked enormous. "It's like he said. Just like his mum would have no reason to lie to him about Professor Snape being his father, he would have no reason to tell us this if it wasn't true." She squeezed Harry's arm. "And that's why he's brewing the potion that will get rid of the Horcrux in your head. Or part of it."

Harry nodded. "Maybe he would have done that anyway, but yeah. He was furious when he found out that Dumbledore didn't know any way to get the Horcrux out of me and was just going to kill me." Hermione's eyes darkened with anger, but Harry spoke hastily. If she started talking about Dumbledore now, he thought she would never stop. "He decided that he could find some way to take care of it. So he did."

"You're a stranger," Ron said, and again his voice was so soft it hurt. "I don't know you at all."

"I'm still me," Harry said as steadily as he could when he wanted to scream. "I promise, Ron. I haven't done anything that should make you hate me or turn on me."

"I don't hate you," Ron said, his voice drearily precise. "I just don't know you."

Harry wanted to walk out of the room, but he had promised himself that he would see this through. And he could always talk Ron around later, he thought again.

He was almost sure.

He feared.

He hoped.

He was more determined than ever not to remove the glamour if he didn't have to. That would make Ron all the more certain he was a stranger, and it would be another secret for Hermione to chide him for having kept from them.

*I reckon there are limits to my courage, after all,* he thought, and turned back to face Hermione.

He didn't want to look at Ron while he recited this particular, second truth.

"The other secret is that I'm dating Draco Malfoy," he said. "He gave me permission to tell you, too."

Ron made a terrible sound. Hermione didn't, but she didn't look much better, either.

"Draco Malfoy?" she asked. "Has he apologized for insulting me and telling me I should die and not attend Hogwarts? Is he going to make you like him?"

"Yes, no, and no," Harry said. He clenched his fists. This was hard, this was too hard. He almost wished he had told Draco to come with him, but his presence would have made this even worse, if that was possible. "He hasn't tried to change me, and I haven't tried to change him. You can't change people you're dating, Hermione. You ought to know that." He glanced swiftly at Ron, hoping she would pick up on what he meant.

"I think there's a difference between trying to break someone of the habit of talking with his mouth full and trying to make someone a decent person!" Hermione's voice rose. "I can't believe you would *do* something like this, Harry!"

"I can't help who I like!" Harry threw his hands in the air. "Do you think I would have chosen to have a crush on Cho, when first she ignored me and then she cried on me? I would have chosen a crush on someone nice and safe, someone Voldemort would always ignore and who wouldn't mind that I was in danger. And Snape's son," he added, looking at Ron. Ron had turned his head a little earlier, but he had his back solidly to Harry by this point. "And anyway, he's helped me deal with these stupid secrets and explained the theory of the potion Snape is brewing to me when I didn't understand it." He wanted to talk about the other things that Draco had done for him, but the words tangled around his tongue, and he thought Hermione wouldn't understand anyway, from her hostile expression.

"It's—it's the way it is," he said at last. "I didn't know what was happening for a long time, and now that I do, I can't give him up. It would be unfair for both of us if you tried to *make* me give him up, too," he added, just so that Hermione didn't get any ideas.

"But what if he starts insulting me?" Hermione's voice was dangerously low, dangerously sweet, dangerously everything. "Will you take my side or his? Will you tell him to stop, or give me that same speech about how we can't change people?"

"I would tell him to stop," Harry said. "And if you started scolding him out of the blue, or if Ron tried to hex him for being a Slytherin, then I would tell *you* to stop, too."

Hermione shivered. Harry expected another tirade, but instead she said, with unexpected pity popping up in her voice like a bubble, "Oh, *Harry.* It can't be easy, balancing between all of us like this."

"No," Harry said, glad that someone else had at least acknowledged that. "It isn't."

"So why don't you stop?" Hermione was plucking at his sleeve and looking up into his face with earnest eyes that Harry found it hard to turn away from. "Harry, we're your oldest friends. I just—I can't understand why you would want to date Malfoy. I *can't*. You have nothing in common."

"I do have some things in common," Harry said. "Keeping a secret. A dead parent—or at least one dead parent," he added. "And—it's hard to explain, Hermione. But they're there."

Hermione looked heavily at the ground. Harry could picture her looking that way if she'd received news that Voldemort had attacked her house and tortured her parents to death.

"I can't understand it," she whispered.

"Then don't try it," Harry said, tension wearing his nerves thin until he had no choice but to snap. "Just accept it."

Hermione looked up at him with burning eyes. Then she walked across the room and started to open the door.

"You won't tell anyone about this, will you?" Harry asked. He'd been so caught up in what he was feeling that he'd nearly forgotten to ask them for that promise.

"Like anyone would believe us," Ron muttered bitterly, and followed Hermione.

Hermione looked back, sounded as if she were taking a deep breath, and said, "No, Harry. Not if you don't want us to. And I'm—honored—that you decided to tell us." She gave Harry a smile like a blow. "Even if I don't feel that way."

Then they were gone.

Harry, feeling as if he'd barely escaped a fall from a cliff, stood there shivering for a minute. It wasn't as awful as it could have been, he reminded himself. There was still the chance that he could talk them around. There were no insults, nothing they'd said that he couldn't forgive, just denials.

But he still had to leave that room and find Draco as soon as possible.

##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### #####
##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### #####
##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### #####

Chapter: 35

Thank you again for all the reviews!

*Chapter Thirty-Five—The Pain Begins*

"Did they insult you?" Draco's hand was light and steady in Harry's hair, and Harry pressed close to him, although he'd been standing here getting his hair stroked for at least six minutes. That ought to be long enough for any person who wasn't weak, he thought.

Then he remembered that sometimes he had held Draco and stroked his hair for longer than that, and got confused, because he didn't think Draco was weak.

"Harry?" Draco's voice had a strange, gentle sharpness to it, as if he wanted to make sure that Harry didn't forget about eating a piece of treacle tart left on his plate. "Did they insult you? What did they say?"

Harry took a deep breath and lifted his head. He had come to Draco in the library with no words, but a face that had made Draco immediately take him deep into the dungeons, to an alcove where apparently no one came. And since then, they'd been standing here while Draco soothed him and asked questions that Harry hadn't answered. Draco probably thought that the meeting with Ron and Hermione had gone a lot worse than it had.

*That isn't fair,* Harry thought, wiping at his face, although he still hadn't cried. *Not fair to Draco, to make him worry that much, and not fair to Ron and Hermione. They weren't that bad.*

*So why do I still feel like I did when I found out that Dad—James—acted like Dudley in school?*

"No matter what it is," Draco said, his voice so soft and deep it seemed to come out of the earth, "you can tell me what happened."

"I know," Harry said. He decided to just talk, without trying to choose his words, unless Draco started reacting badly and thinking things about Ron and Hermione that weren't true. Harry still wanted to be fair to everyone, if he could. "It wasn't *awful.* That's the strange thing. Ron told me that he thought I was a stranger now, and that hurt. Hermione didn't want me to date you because you called her a Mudblood. She wanted me to break up with you. Ron thought it was horrible that Snape was my father. But neither of them called me a traitor or hexed me or told me they wouldn't be my friend. So I don't know why I feel this bad."

"I do," Draco said, again in that low voice. "How *dare* Weasley think that you were a stranger to him because Professor Snape was your father? What did he think you were going to do, suddenly grow a Slytherin tie and a talent for potions? Or start looking like him? If you haven't by now, you probably won't."

Harry shifted uneasily in place, but he still wasn't ready to tell anyone about the glamour, so he didn't mention it now. "I reckon he thought that because family's important to him," he

whispered. "He wants to be different from his brothers, but he would be lonely if he wasn't also *like* them. And he thought of me as the son of heroes. Now I'm the son of a hero and a Death Eater. He isn't going to deal well with that."

"How ridiculous," Draco said, scorn dripping from every word. "As if the way you were *born* matters, when Professor Snape didn't raise you."

Harry paused and blinked, then stepped back enough so he could stare into Draco's eyes. "Why are *you* saying that? You've always thought blood was important, too. You didn't want Hermione in school because of her blood. You despise Ron because of *his* blood. So why are you saying that it doesn't matter who my father is? Of all the people I know, I'd think it would matter to you the most."

Draco sighed. He had hoped that he wouldn't have to talk about this with anyone until he had the right words to understand it for himself.

But he had some of the thoughts, and that would have to be enough.

"I've been thinking," he said, slowly and painfully. The image of his father's head hovering in front of him and speaking those words, the Dark Lord's words, still hung before his eyes like a mist if he concentrated too much on it. "I'm not completely what my father raised me to be. I'm not completely like my mother, either. I've been visiting her since she went into the safehouse, and writing to her, and she thinks *differently* than I do. I didn't realize how differently."

Harry's hand cupped the back of his head, and stroked as gently through his hair as Draco had been stroking his a minute ago. Draco leaned against him and closed his eyes with a sigh. *He's so good at comforting. Does he know that? But he probably does, since he takes to it so naturally.*

Draco reminded himself not to get too deep in the comfort even as he reveled in it for being there. He didn't want to forget what Harry's friends had said, or that Harry was suffering and needed him, too.

"What do you mean?" Harry asked.

"She talks about vengeance," Draco whispered. "For what was done to her. For what was done to Father. For Father serving the Dark Lord in the first place, even though he chose that. And I—I talk about living. I'm sorry that Father died, and I hope that you kill the Dark Lord, but I think more about missing him and the ways he would disapprove of what I'm doing now, and I think about you and Horcruxes and Professor Snape and what I'm going to do if I survive the school year. That kind of thing."

He took a deep breath and licked his lips. These weren't the right words. The right words would be eloquent and warm and make Harry see the truth and be able to reconcile the past and the present. But they were the words he had.

"So," he said, "if blood isn't the only thing that made *me*, and I can be different from my parents, and I'm separate from the rest of the family, then that can happen to other people, too. You can be separate from your family. Weasley can be separate from his—but I don't think he is," he added quickly, before Harry could use those words to try and force him and the Weasel into some kind of reconciliation. "And Granger can be separate from hers, even. Weasley should at least let you have some time to prove that you act like Professor Snape or that you don't before he decides that you're your blood and nothing more."

Harry drew Draco's head back. Draco squeaked. Had he said something wrong? He'd thought it had been going so well, but Harry was pulling on his hair like he was angry—

Then Draco discovered that Harry had only been getting his head into position so that he could kiss him.

Extremely thoroughly. Hard and passionately and leaning in so much that Draco thought they were going to fall over any minute. With lots of tongue—not that Draco objected to that when he was able to breathe around it—but it was noticeable because, um, Harry had never used *this* much before.

Then they did fall, and Draco had the breath driven out of him when they landed on the hard stone floor. Harry laughed happily above him and dragged him up to his knees, then dropped down to *his* knees in front of Draco and held his shoulders, staring searchingly into his eyes.

"I just—I *love* you," Harry said. "You know that, don't you?"

Draco blinked and stared at him. His chest hurt.

Harry laughed aloud and kissed him again, bearing him down to the floor with his body. Draco felt his hair brush stone, and knew they had to be close to one of the alcove's walls, but he hardly cared. Oh, his knees ached and his head ached and his lungs ached but he didn't *care*, because Harry's words were in his brain like fireworks in his eyes.

Harry's tongue slipped deeper. His hands clenched on Draco's sides, and he whispered into Draco's mouth, during one of the brief times that he pulled back to breathe or at least do something other than kiss, "You made me feel better, and I'm not sure how you did that, but maybe it was just because your words were more real than Ron's. Thank you." Then he was kissing Draco again.

Draco knew he would cherish that private triumph over the Weasel forever.

But he would cherish the way Harry was kissing him and licking him and almost slobbering into his mouth for longer.

Severus narrowed his eyes. No one else would have noticed it, because no one else would have looked. Everyone was used to seeing Granger and Weasley sitting tightly beside Harry, linked to

him by invisible threads that nothing could break. And, indeed, they were still sitting beside Harry during dinner and other meals in the Great Hall.

But now, there was a slight but definite distance between them.

The three still sat together in his Defense classroom. They still spoke together. They still acted as though no one in the world was important but the three of them—an attitude that Severus thought was responsible for his son not having more friends. But the distance was there, in the way Granger's and Weasley's voices would suddenly break off in the middle of a word or how they shifted when Harry sat down.

None of that told Severus how well the confrontation had gone. Draco was glaring at Granger and Weasley, but he did that often in any case when he wanted a glance from Harry and they were dominating his attention. Severus did not know if he was unusually angry.

He tried to rely on the signals from Granger and Weasley towards *him,* wondering if that would tell him something. Weasley refused to look him in the eye, but that had been true since last year; Severus thought it was because Weasley had discovered he was a Legilimens. Granger perhaps had a bit more of frozen politeness and less eagerness to answer questions in her manner than usual.

Perhaps.

By the time Harry came to him, Draco walking at his side like a golden shadow, one evening, Severus was nearly mad with impatience.

"Well?" he asked at last, when Harry was examining the vial of Entwining Potion on his desk. His voice snapped. He did not mean to make it do that. But it had happened before he could stop it, and at least it made Harry look up at him with an expression of honest surprise instead of the careful mask of normality that he seemed to wear when around Granger and Weasley.

"Well, what?" Harry asked.

"You spoke of me to your friends," Severus said. "How did they take it?"

"Not well," said Harry. His face started to close again, but Draco put his hand on the small of Harry's back, and Harry relaxed. Severus felt a fierce ache of jealousy, like a bee-sting on the roof of his mouth. He wanted to touch his son that casually, and for Harry to allow it instead of flinching when he lifted his hand. "Not Ron, at least. I think Hermione can live with it. But Ron thinks it makes me into a stranger."

Severus could not entirely argue with that perception. After all, learning the truth had been the reason that he was able to see Harry differently from James Potter. Of course, he was adult enough to know that one's own perceptions, ideals, and preconceptions colored what one saw, and he did not think Weasley was. To Weasley, if he began encountering strangeness in Harry, it

would be something that had always been there, but was "concealed" by "heroic blood."

*It is not. He is* my *son.*

Severus shook his head to rid himself of the agonizingly possessive thought; it was not one that it would do any good to express to Harry at the moment. He said, "You are only a stranger to your friends if you wish to be."

Harry glared at him as if he *had* said something about how Weasley was a fool for ever thinking of Harry as Potter's son. "That's easy to say," he said. "But I can't actually choose how they react, and I can't choose how their reactions affect me."

Severus opened his mouth to argue against that—after all, he could have chosen to become a pathetic weakling before the bullying of James Potter or he could have chosen to fight back, as he had—but Draco interrupted, perhaps feeling Harry's tension through the hand still on his back. "Shouldn't we talk about the Entwining Potion, Professor Snape? You said that you'd tested it, and that it worked at all times."

"It did," Severus said, grateful to Draco for the distraction and irritated that he had let himself almost get into a row with Harry over something as small as a matter of wording. He turned towards the vial and lifted it. The finished potion had a shifting, red-gold glow, like light reflecting off the scales of a Chinese Fireball. "I have two vials of this. We will test this one first. Then we will begin with the second when we make sure that this has worked."

Harry stared at him. "How are we going to *test* it? After all, if the first vial pulls the piece of his soul out of me, then that means we've solved the problem."

Severus shook his head. "It still requires testing. Because it works on a rat does not mean it will work on a human; it only means that I feel no disastrous consequences will occur if it is fed to one."

"Oh, thanks," Harry muttered, sticking his hands in his robe pockets. "That makes me feel *worlds* better."

Severus could not help himself this time. He moved near so rapidly that Harry did not have time to retreat, and bent down to his eye level. "Do you still distrust me this much?" he asked quietly. "Trust to my brewing skill if not to my—perception of you." He thought Harry would laugh if he mentioned the words "relationship" or "compassion." "I would not offer you this potion unless I thought it was perfectly safe."

Harry glared at him. "People do things all the time that won't kill me," he said, lips barely parted, so that the words hissed out. "But they *hurt* me. It's bad enough to know that I'm going to have to suffer through having this Horcrux torn out of my body. But that something else could happen, too, which might not kill me but could make me wish I hadn't got out of bed this morning? Yeah, I'm not looking forwards to that."

Severus narrowed his eyes. *See what you have wrought, Albus. He can trust someone enough to undergo an ordeal of torture, but not to believe in their words.*

"I won't let that happen," Draco whispered to him. He looked up at Severus. "Won't you test the potion on me first, Professor Snape? That way, Harry can see there's nothing to be afraid of." His hand on Harry's back began to rub soothing circles.

Noble as Draco was—and for the first time, Severus acknowledged that he deserved that adjective—he had misjudged Harry. Harry gave him a stiff glance. "I won't let you get hurt because of me," he said. From his expression, Severus thought he hadn't liked the crack about being afraid, either.

"No," Severus said. Draco's expression began to become unyielding, but Severus had reasons for his denial, reasons that Draco would listen to because of his knowledge of Potions, and he spoke them. "You have no Horcrux within you. The potion would have nothing to fasten to, and we would not know if it worked or not."

He turned to Harry. "There are other reasons to test the potion. It may contain ingredients to which you are allergic, in which case I will need to design it again. And if there is suffering it causes that can be mitigated without sacrificing the potion's effect, this dose will tell me, so that I may modify the next draught before you take it to banish the Horcrux."

Harry had hunched his shoulders, and his eyes flickered back and forth between Severus and the vial in his hand. "It's not as powerful as the second one will be?" he asked.

"No," Severus said. "Or the third, if it turns out that I need to redesign the potion and so the second dose becomes the true test."

Harry stared at the potion with silent eyes, and a silent face. It was one of the few times Severus truly had not been able to tell what he was thinking. All those times, he realized suddenly, had occurred either after he had learned Harry was his son or shortly before. Harry was different from the boy he had been when he was younger, and part of that difference was learning to mask some of his emotions.

*Talk to me,* Severus thought, but he was not foolish enough to make the demand aloud.

Harry finally inclined his head, shivered a bit as though he was considering jumping off a cliff, and then said, "All right. I'll take it."

As Severus settled Harry into the chair he had prepared and put Draco beside him to watch his face closely and tell him if there was any immediate allergic reaction to the potion, he tried to catch Harry's eye, to see what he was thinking. He wanted to know the reason behind Harry's final decision.

Harry didn't look at him, and Severus resigned himself at last to his own advice. *As he must learn to trust me without demanding a complete explanation for everything I do, I must learn the same.*

That did not make the experience less bitter, or his rage against Dumbledore and the Muggles who had raised Harry less deep.

Harry shut his eyes when he felt the glass of the potion vial against his lips. His hands were clenched at his sides, and he wished he had asked Snape for more details, even though it would have made him lie awake at night worrying about them. He wished he knew *how* much this was going to hurt. At least being in his cupboard and even fighting Voldemort were all experiences he'd got used to.

But this was entirely new.

He really thought he might have flown out of the chair if not for Draco's calm—well, mostly calm—presence at his side.

In the end, it was that that did the most good. He thought, *Draco will panic if he sees you panicking,* and the reminder that someone else depended on him, that his reactions didn't affect only him, made him concentrate on the present instead of the future.

Then the pain began, and the future *became* the present.

The pain lit a fire in his belly. Then it seemed to be chewing holes in his feet. Then his jaw ached as though it was broken. Then a thin wire seemed to pass in through one ear and out through the other.

Harry could feel the tears leaking through the corners of his eyes. But he didn't want to scream, so he kept quiet as long as he could. When he did have to release the pain, it was in a series of low whimpers at first, which began building up as he forgot more and more about Draco and concentrated more and more on what he was feeling.

"Sir, I think something's really wrong," he heard Draco's voice say from a distance. He thought it was alarmed, but he seemed to have lost all possibility of distinguishing people's emotions other than his own.

The pain filled the world.

"Has he—" Snape.

"No. None of the things you mentioned. But he's—*look* at his face, sir." Draco.

"I cannot believe that he could endure that much without screaming."

"Come closer and look at his expression, and you might see that screaming isn't the only way to

show pain."

Harry lost track of who was speaking first, and then of the voices. The pain in his gut was so severe that it felt as if his stomach had burst open. There were acids in the stomach, weren't there? And they could be inflicted on other organs, that would melt, and maybe it would feel something like this.

He felt a hand on his. Something about it, maybe the length of the fingers and the nails, made him pay attention to it even in the midst of his agony. He forced open his hazy eyes and looked to see who was holding his hand.

Snape.

Harry stared at him wordlessly. That Snape would hold his hand, to try to comfort him or anything else, was absurd, so that meant it wasn't happening. His brain had probably made this up and it was a delusion.

"It hurts," Snape said. "I know that." His voice was soft and urgent, and *why* could Harry hear it so clearly? His own screams ought to be louder than that. "But it hurts because it is parting your soul from another's soul, and it is touching the familiar and unfamiliar parts both at once. Can you bear it? You will need to bear it when the second potion comes."

*I'll have to do this again.*

Harry flinched, a whole-body flinch of the kind that he would have tried to hide from Snape if he could, and pulled his hand away. He couldn't escape the pain, he knew, but he wanted to curl up and hide. That would be for the best.

Someone was holding his shoulder—*Draco* —and Snape caught his hand again. "I am sorry for this," he said.

*Yeah, well, that didn't keep you from doing it.* Harry gritted his teeth, and then screamed, because it felt as though they were all being ripped from his head.

"Only a few moments now," Snape murmured. He didn't sound upset that Harry had pulled away from him, though Harry would have expected him to be if his motives were genuine. "I am sorry for this," he repeated.

Harry stared at him, blinking stupidly. *What he says can't be true.*

Then the pain was gone. Harry exhaled and stretched his arms out to either side, feeling for it. But no, it was really gone.

He would have sobbed with relief, but he was remembering some things now, like the way he had cried in front of Snape. He tried to duck his head and shield his face with his arm, or shove

himself back in the chair—he couldn't get out of it since Draco was on one side and Snape was in front of him—or do *something* that would shield him and let all of them pretend that this had never happened.

Then Snape hauled him forwards.

Harry flinched, but by that time, Snape had him firmly in his arms, holding his body still as he extended one arm. Harry felt something soft and cool rubbed into it, probably a potion. The ache still in his muscles subsided.

After that, he held out his other limbs willingly, especially when Draco came to help hold him, but he ducked his head and shook it wildly when Snape tried to press another potions vial between his lips.

"This is a Dreamless Sleep Potion," Snape said, voice absolutely calm. "Nothing more than that."

It was the calmness that made Harry open his mouth and allow the potion in. Kindness would have been too much, and he would have done anything rather than endure the mockery he'd thought Snape would aim at him.

The potion was thick and cold, half-sweet and blessedly familiar from the times that Madam Pomfrey had used it on him in the hospital wing. Harry sighed and went limp.

Two thoughts accompanied him into the darkness.

The first one was: *He said he was sorry. Twice, even.*

The second one was: *The next time is going to be worse.*

##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### #####
##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### #####
##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### #####

Chapter: 36

Thank you again for all the reviews!

*Chapter Thirty-Six—Private Wars*

Harry seemed to come awake all at once, surging out of the chair in his private quarters that Severus had placed him in and staring around as if he didn't remember how he got there. Severus narrowed his eyes and stood up. He would have to intervene if that were so. The potion was not supposed to affect the memory.

But Harry swallowed a large gasp of air and sank back in the chair, shaking his head. "That wasn't a dream," he whispered, scratching at his scalp as if he were a dog. Severus controlled the temptation to tell him to take his hand out of his hair. "Not even a nightmare."

"Harry?" Draco, who'd been asleep on the couch, opened his eyes and sat up anxiously. "Are you all right?"

"Yeah, Draco, I'm fine." Harry turned his head and smiled gently. Severus blinked, a bit startled by how quickly he seemed to recover. At one moment he was still trying to reassure himself; in the next, he had made the transition to helping someone else.

*I wonder whether it being Draco makes any difference for him, or if he would reassure anyone who needed it.*

*I wonder if he lets anyone comfort him.*

As if Harry had heard the silent question, or felt the pressure of his eyes, he turned his head and briefly glanced at Severus. The next moment, he lowered his eyes and swallowed awkwardly. "Thank you for trying to help me, sir." His words were stiff and rushed, and he looked at the floor the way that students did when Severus assigned them detention in Potions for spilling one of their wretched concoctions.

"The test was successful," Severus said, because he thought Harry would take information from him more readily than he would take anything else. "You are allergic to nothing in the potion, and it disturbed the position of the Horcrux in your soul. That means that we can hope for good results when I use the second dose of the potion, and perhaps for the Dark Lord's taint to be removed from you altogether."

Harry lifted his head and blinked at him, perhaps uncertain of what he was hearing. Severus waited for him to ask how he could tell that the Horcrux had shifted position in his soul, or anything else.

But his son was not naturally gifted with curiosity, or at least not with the temptation to exercise it. He bowed his head, exhaled noisily, and said, "Thank you. I wanted—I mean, I'm glad that we won't have to go through a third test."

"So am I," Severus said.

Harry looked at him quickly, but it wasn't the expression of total incomprehension that would have inspired Severus to ask whether Harry thought he had not suffered from the potion, too. Harry hopped out of the chair then and came over to Draco, murmuring something into his ear. Draco pulled back and stared at Harry.

Severus tensed, wondering if something was wrong, and Harry wanted Draco to communicate it to him. But then Draco nodded, said, "Well. If you're sure," and sauntered into Severus's

bathroom and shut the door behind him.

That, Severus realized as Harry turned to him, effectively left them alone. Perhaps Draco would be listening at the door, but Severus didn't think so. Not if Harry had asked him not to—and Harry probably would have done so. He rarely seemed to forget that these were Slytherins he was dealing with.

Harry faced Severus as if they were going to duel again. His hands were clasped in front of him, and his pulse beat wildly at the base of his throat. But his voice was steady, if a bit dry, when he said, "I wanted to tell you that—thanks for the potion. It'll help I didn't want to go through the pain, but it was the only way." He sighed and shut his eyes. "I'm just so *tired* of it being the only way."

"Someday, it will not be," Severus said, hardly daring to move his own lips in case he should frighten the boy away. "After the Dark Lord dies, there will be other choices."

Harry opened his eyes and stared straight at him. Then he said, "What if Dumbledore says there aren't? What if he wants us to keep this secret, or if he wants me to go back to the Dursleys' again?"

Severus felt a sharp prickling at the back of his neck, as if a blade was laid there. He had waited for a direct kind of challenge or acknowledgment from his son, though he had not suspected it would come this way. After all, Harry had barely admitted the truth about his Muggle family at all. Severus had thought the question of where he would live in the future, or at least after the Dark Lord died, would wait until he could say that his relatives abused him.

*But I am up to the challenge.*

"I will make other choices," Severus said calmly. "That is what parents do for their children."

Harry shook his head. "But you never knew about me. Never wanted me. Never would have known, if you hadn't—if you hadn't known about Mum."

"Would you have kept it from me forever, then?" Severus hissed the words. With any luck, Harry would think the sharpness came from irritation rather than hurt.

"I don't know." Harry looked much younger than he was at the moment, eyes solemn and large. "I probably would have tried."

"Have you thought about what I would have wanted?" Severus demanded. "To know my son, even if I had not known at the time—"

"But it was *me*," Harry said. "I mean, yeah, a son in general, I can see that, after everything you said about blood. But what about *me*? You hated me. You know you did," he said, rushing past Severus's instinctive attempt to defend himself. "That's why I didn't want to come forwards. Even

now, I need to know—is this about having a son? Or do you really want *me*, even though I look like James Potter?" He seemed to have forgotten the glamour.

This was not the moment to fight a private war with himself, but that was what Severus found himself doing.

He could tell the truth, and alienate Harry. He could lie, and alienate him further when he found out. (And that he would find out, Severus had no doubt; he seemed good at putting together perceptions and overheard words into a whole, at least when it concerned him, if not Potions). He could tell half the truth and risk muddling things so much that he would not remember which half he had told later, when he might feel comfortable enough with Harry to speak more freely. Or he could spend hours trying to choose which half was least harmful.

There was no one to tell him what was right or wrong, no one to tell him what was just or fair. Once, Albus would have fulfilled that role for him, and Severus was surprised, now, to find how sharply he missed him.

He had to make his own decisions.

He looked up and into Harry's eyes. Luckily, Harry didn't seem to be one of those people to whom a less-than-immediate answer indicated less than perfect honesty. He simply waited, his eyes once again large, his hands clenched in front of him as if he wanted to be able to seize his wand or turn in any direction on the instant.

*Perhaps he is preparing to run,* Severus thought, and chose the riskiest course. It was the only one where the risk existed solely in the present and not the future.

"When I first realized that you were my son," he said, "I resented the fact. I wanted a son, yes, but I did not want the boy I thought you were—the Gryffindor I had sculpted from memories and dreams. James Potter's son."

"I didn't have his blood," Harry said. He had the same careful tone in his voice that Severus did, and that gratified part of Severus's ambition and vanity even as he steeled himself to listen to the words. "And I know that was what you *based* your hatred on, but later on you hated me for other reasons, didn't you?"

Severus struggled to keep his eyes from turning away. Some mistakes had to be looked in the face, no matter how hard it might be.

"Yes," he said. "I thought you arrogant mostly based on your bloodline, but your recklessness and your refusal to use your brain I have seen for myself."

"Of course a teacher cares when a student fails to use his brain," Harry said, with a grim smile that made Severus wonder who *hadn't* cared for him to think, the Dursleys or Albus. "And the thing is, I can't believe that that's gone away. You can say that you're changing your mind about

me, but not that it's changed. It's still mostly for my blood that you want me, and because I'm my mum's son."

Severus wanted so strongly to snap something and end this line of inquiry that he almost did. His anger rose in self-defense. He *wanted* to change things, yes, but he knew that it would be hard. He could have an easier road if he ended this now and made it clear that there were some things Harry was simply not permitted to ask. After all, there were areas of the boy's life that he was not supposed to pry into, weren't there? If Harry possessed secrets he didn't want to voice, why couldn't Severus get away with the same thing?

*You sound like a child. More, a Gryffindor child, who thinks that each treatment of others should always be fair.*

It was hard to tame himself, yes, but that reminder helped. Severus brought his head slowly down and said, "I am in the process of changing my mind. I believe it is more than that, now, that I want to help you and protect you for other reasons than your blood, but I cannot tell what you may have seen in my behavior to convince you otherwise."

Harry watched him quietly. Only when he gulped did Severus realize that his son might be as nervous as he was himself, as at war with old habits, as much caught in a struggle to understand what were his preconceptions and what were reality.

"I just—I don't understand," Harry said. "You helped me with the potion, and you didn't have to. You—you *touched* me while I was suffering under that potion." He made it sound as though Severus had picked up a thrashing adder who might bite instead of touching a child's hand. "Those seem like—well, they're like something, but I know you couldn't have changed your mind that quickly."

"Then say that they are part of the process of changing my mind," Severus said, "and leave it at that."

"I *can't*." Harry's voice was angry now, and soaring on wings of that anger, to what destination Severus didn't know. "I have to know. Are they real? I mean, are they gestures that you make because you really feel something, or because you want me to *think* you feel something?"

"They are gestures that I am taking to inspire the growth of the feelings within myself." Severus spoke swiftly, before the truth could choke him with its sheer immensity. "I have not completely changed my mind yet, but things like this help me to do so. Why does it matter so much if they are real or not?"

"Because I *want* them to be," Harry said. "So much."

Then he stopped and clenched his fists as if he'd said something he didn't mean to. The next minute, he ducked across the room and knocked on the door of Severus's bathroom. Draco came out, a question on his face, and Harry ducked past him and out the door of Severus's rooms as if

he were being hunted.

Leaving Severus with a pounding heart and a changing mind.

"What did you say to him?" Draco asked, sounding mildly perplexed instead of angry. "He told me to stay out of the room so he could talk to you privately and find out a few things. Did he?"

"I think he learned enough," Severus said. "I would like you to leave now, Draco. Go after him and comfort him if you can."

Draco gave him a scornful look that was softer than Lucius Malfoy's would have been, but not by much. "As if I was going to do anything else," he muttered, and then shot out into the corridor, shutting the door behind him.

Severus took one of the chairs he'd used to watch Harry sleep during most of the night and shut his eyes.

He wished he knew whether he should feel hopeful or not, and whether he had harmed his son more than he had helped him.

He wished he knew whether he had won the war.

Draco had only stayed behind in Professor Snape's quarters a short time, but that seemed to be enough time for Harry to get an uncomfortable distance ahead. He hurried around corners, following the sound of pounding feet. Harry was already out of the dungeons. Draco thought he was going outside for a minute, but instead he ran across the entrance hall and towards the stairs.

*Probably heading for Gryffindor Tower,* Draco thought, and grimaced, trying to wring more speed out of his legs even though they were already trembling. *I definitely want to catch him before he gets there.*

As it turned out, he had to wait for one of the moving staircases Harry had taken to swing back around, until he decided it wouldn't move and leaped the gap of empty air between him and the steps. When he caught up with Harry again on the third floor, someone else had found him, too.

The whine of Weasley's voice was unmistakable. "Did someone hurt you, Harry? Where are you going so fast?"

Draco held onto the wall, trying not to move so that the torch sconce wouldn't throw his shadow out into the open, and peered cautiously around the corner. Weasley and Granger were both standing in front of Harry, Weasley with his arms spread as if he'd prevented Harry from running further. Harry's face was red with exertion and something Draco thought was close to tears. He hoped not. He would hate to see Harry cry in front of his worthless friends.

Granger stood on the other side of Harry, and she had one hand raised as if to touch his arm, but

her hand was just hanging there uselessly, not doing anything else. "What's wrong?" she whispered. "Can we help?"

Harry closed his eyes, and Draco could see the way he fought himself back under control. Draco wished he hadn't had to, that he could have gone to an unused classroom or the Tower or wherever he was going to cry and swear and hex the furniture in peace.

"I don't think so," Harry said at last, with a desperate attempt at calmness that just made Granger and Weasley look at him with sharper stares. "I just—it's something to do with what I told you the other day, and I don't want to discuss that with you. So let me by." He took an assured step forwards, as if he thought Weasley would get out of the way.

Wesley hunched his shoulders and spread his arms further, apparently assuming his good deed for the day would be keeping Harry here. "You're too upset, mate," he said. "I want to know why."

Harry stopped walking, but Draco could see the cold look he gave Weasley, and he knew what was behind it. Harry would spill everything out if Weasley kept pushing, in sheer anger or because the tension had to go *somewhere.*

And Draco didn't want that to happen. Harry should be able to choose whom he told his secrets to.

"Excuse me," he said, stepping around the corner and smiling brightly. "But has it occurred to you that maybe he doesn't want to tell you because you haven't cared that he's upset in the last week?"

Granger acted like someone in Defense, turning around and raising her wand right away. A Shield Charm spread over her. Draco kept his snort to himself as much as possible. He was trying to be a distraction, but not get cursed. The Shield Charm had a flaw, though, right down near the bottom, that someone could get through. *Granger spends too much time on theory and not enough on the practicals.*

"Shove off, Malfoy," Weasley said, and turned red enough that he would probably die of asphyxiation and blame it on Draco. "No one has to listen to a word you say."

"Yes, you do," Harry said. He sounded better—more, Draco realized with a little blink, like Professor Snape. He walked back down the corridor until he was standing next to Draco, and Weasley just stood there and let him do it. Harry put his arm around Draco's shoulders and said, "Look, are you ready to talk about this?"

"I don't see what we can talk about," Granger said, lowering the Shield Charm but speaking with that marble tone in her voice that Draco had seen hurt Harry in the middle of every class he had with the both of them. "You're still *dating* someone who wishes I was dead, Harry. That's a bit hard to get over." She gave Draco a glance so hard that he could have bounced diamonds off it.

Harry opened his mouth, but Draco touched his cheek and shook his head. Harry looked at him. Draco nodded, trying to silently tell Harry that he'd prefer to be the one who spoke up and told them that he'd changed.

Among other things, that would let him decide how honest he wanted to be about it.

"I don't wish you were dead anymore," he told Granger. "Not because I think you're a great and shining example of a person, but because your death would hurt Harry."

Granger looked at him hard. Draco looked back, having no need to make his face innocent. He had said what he really felt, and it was up to her if she liked it or not.

"That's like you, Malfoy," she said at last. "You're only doing it because you care about Harry, not because—" And then she stopped, and the most ridiculous expression of consternation came over her face.

Draco laughed at her. "Yes, that's a little hard to despise me for when you think that I care about Harry, isn't it?" he asked her.

Granger shook her head, apparently unable to speak for the moment, but Weasley soon supplied her deficiency. "I don't think you do," he said, eyes squinted so much that it was impossible to see them. "What have you done for the past five years but hurt us? You were part of the *Inquisitorial* Squad last year, Malfoy. There's nothing you could have done more clearly to say that you were evil, and that was the end of it."

Draco winced. It would have been easier, in some ways, if Weasley had yelled insults about his parents and in other ways made himself look rude. Draco would have known how to answer that. It was harder to answer these cruel but clear words.

*Which is undoubtedly the reason that Weasley made his accusations in this way.*

"I *was*," he said. "That's the key word. That was last year. I did change, and Harry was a big part of that change." Granger was leaning forwards now, staring at him in disbelief. Draco tried to ignore the way that it made him feel like a captive specimen in one of Professor Snape's jars. "If he's going to date me, I know that I can't be that way anymore. And I was thinking about blood, and how it didn't matter to me as much as it used to. When Harry rescued me, he wasn't doing it because he was my cousin, or because he was my brother, or because he'd been raised with me and felt some kind of obligation. It was just because he cared. If I'm not defined by blood, well, maybe some other people aren't, either." He wasn't going to talk about his parents to Weasley and Granger the way he had to Harry; there was a limit to how much self-exposure he was willing to do.

"You can't have changed your mind that way," Weasley said. "Not so quickly."

*The way that Professor Snape couldn't have accepted his son or Harry couldn't have fallen in love with me?* Draco wanted to snap, but he knew that Harry would be hurt if he did that. So he did his best to take a deep breath and answer honestly instead of angrily.

"Why not? Haven't you changed your mind fairly fast sometimes? But in this case, Harry also helped rescue my mother and helped me when my father died. That makes a difference. I've been *thinking,* that's all. I might not like you. But I won't go out of my way to hex you, or insult you, or wish that you were dead. Take that for what you will." He was proud of the way he finished. He sounded very calm and mature.

Granger and Weasley stood there like statues, as if his refusal to play the game the way they wanted—and the way, Draco had to admit, that he'd wanted to—had turned them to stone. Then Granger stirred and shook her head. "I don't believe you," she said, but her voice was small and shocked and Draco knew that his speaking like this had made a difference to her. "I don't have to listen to you."

"Then I don't have to listen to you, either," Draco said, losing his temper in a sudden rush. *I tried, and this is the way they decided to answer me.* "If you tell me that you're a better person and that you're Harry's best friend and that he should stop dating me, I don't have to believe you."

Granger clenched her fists down. "You thought I should die," she said. "You despise people like me."

Draco looked at her steadily. He'd always thought that Granger was smarter than Weasley, but it appeared that she was just as good at being oblivious when she didn't like the words she was hearing. "I'm learning not to."

Granger shut her eyes. Her mouth was trembling.

"I don't like you," Weasley said. "I don't trust you." He leaned forwards, as if he could get around Draco somehow and see Harry alone. Since Harry and Draco were standing exactly side-by-side, that didn't work, but he acted as if it did.

"Harry," he whispered, "remember the time he dressed up as a Dementor and tried to scare you?"

"Remember the times we rowed," Harry said, his voice flat and emotionless, "and you decided to act like I wasn't your best friend anymore?"

Weasley frowned. "But I said I was sorry."

"Draco said the same." Harry shook his head when Weasley tried to speak. "You don't *have* to believe him right now. That's fine. It'll take time. I can't blame you for taking the time when we are, too." Draco felt a flare of excitement at the word *we* and the casual squeeze that Harry gave his shoulder, as if he took their standing together almost for granted. "But you won't be able to separate us. So stop trying to convince me that he's evil. It's insulting, and it wastes your time

and mine."

He turned and walked away down the corridor. Draco followed him, glancing over his shoulder. Granger stood deep in thought, staring at the floor. Weasley was talking to her, or maybe himself, shaking his head, but Draco couldn't hear what he was saying.

"Thank you."

Draco looked back at Harry, and smiled. Harry still looked too pale and exhausted, but less upset than he had. "Are you all right?"

"Not yet," Harry said. "Better." Then he leaned in and kissed Draco until he was panting and breathless, and he might have done more if someone hadn't cleared his throat gently behind them.

Draco would have given a great deal if, when he turned around, almost anyone except Dumbledore had been standing there.

##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### #####
##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### #####
##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### #####

Chapter: 37

Thank you again for all the reviews!

*Chapter Thirty-Seven—Cryptic Words and Open Ones*

Harry found himself flushing from the knowledge that Dumbledore had probably seen him and Draco kissing, but he stepped slowly away from Draco, and kept his left hand in place on the back of Draco's neck. He wasn't going to act embarrassed, he thought. He wasn't ashamed of Draco, and Dumbledore always seemed to know everything, so he had probably already known about this.

"Yes, sir?" he asked. "Was there something you wanted?" He moved carefully closer to Draco while Dumbledore stood there as if waiting for something more. He had to look calm and collected.

A sudden hatred of that exploded in his chest like a firework. *Why* should he have to do that all the time? What was the point? Events went on happening around him in spite of that, events he couldn't affect. And he was so *tired*, and he could never *relax*. Just when he thought he could, he had to fasten on another mask.

But betraying the hatred would be against what he was trying to do here, so he just breathed and

stroked Draco's hair and waited for Dumbledore to say something.

Finally, Dumbledore removed his glasses and began to clean them on his robes. His voice was soft. "I have something to speak to you about, Harry. Tactics. Or is it strategy? I can never remember the difference between them." He paused, and when Harry and Draco stood there looking at him, he added delicately, "I need to speak to you *alone*."

"No," Harry said at once. "Why? I trust Draco. He can hear everything that gets said between us."

Draco leaned against him. Harry thought he would probably lose it, in either laughter or some kind of confession, if he looked down at the smug expression on Draco's face right now, so he kept his eyes on Dumbledore as he stroked Draco's hair, again, and waited, again.

The Headmaster stroked his beard. "That is an unexpected problem," he said. "While I am sure that you have good reasons for trusting the young Malfoy—" his voice said that he knew what all those reasons were "—I do not. So I would like him to leave while I tell you this, and then you can pass the secrets on to him if you wish to."

"If you know that I'm only going to tell him anyway," Harry snapped, annoyed beyond measure by how *stupid* this was, "then why try to make him leave?" He eyed Dumbledore with contempt that he didn't bother hiding. Yes, he could understand the motives that had made Dumbledore decide he should be sacrificed. But he would never understand most of his secrecy, or the little rituals that he seemed to think were necessary before he would hand over necessary information.

Dumbledore sighed once. Then he said, "I hope you will not regret this." Before Harry could retort that *he* was the one more likely to regret it, considering how much he seemed to hate Draco, Dumbledore was continuing. "I have been keeping a close eye on Voldemort's movements. He at last believes the rumors he has been hearing, and trusts that neither Severus nor young Mr. Malfoy are going to come out of the school to confront him. He has had his Death Eaters searching for Narcissa Malfoy, but has been unable to locate her. Therefore, he has decided to attack the school, as the place where all his enemies are gathered." He stopped and looked at Harry expectantly.

Harry felt his heartbeat speed up. Draco was here, and Ron and Hermione, and even Snape. Not to mention a whole bunch of innocent students who wouldn't be able to defend themselves against Death Eaters. Harry didn't think he'd trust to the luck they had in the Department of Mysteries again.

But Dumbledore was smiling.

"Is that—is that what you *wanted* to happen, sir?" Harry finally managed to ask. It seemed incredible, but then, as he had learned after most of the times he fought Voldemort, Dumbledore's plans often did to someone who was standing outside them.

"It is," Dumbledore admitted. "Something will happen when he comes here that he does not expect." He leaned forwards, and Harry almost forgot Draco was there in the intensity of the bright gaze he was getting. Almost, but not quite, because Draco leaned heavily on his shoulder to make sure that he didn't forget. "I want to be sure that you remember the words I gave you earlier," Dumbledore whispered, "a short time ago."

Harry frowned. He had barely bothered to remember those words, because he thought they were useless without knowing what they meant. "Something about light," he said. "And fading light? Or something like that."

Dumbledore sighed, and looked disappointed. That was when Harry learned that Dumbledore's disappointment still had the power to cut him, even though it should have lost that power long ago. He tensed himself against the impulse to flee. *Another mask. When will I be able to do as I like, talk as I like?*

"You might just *tell* us," Draco said irritably. "It doesn't sound like you would have told Harry even if I wasn't here, because you want to use riddles and the like. That's what you really want, isn't it?" he added, voice sharp with something that might have been scorn and might have just been more anger. "An excuse to act like there's not a war happening and you're still the jolly old grandfather who sets riddles and tasks. Sometimes I think you treat this whole thing like a game."

Harry gripped Draco's shoulder as Dumbledore's eyes grew cold, and then stepped between them when Dumbledore went on staring in a way he didn't like. "Listen," he said. "As far as I can tell, Draco's right. I might be on the brink of forgiving you for—some things, but not others. It'd help if you could just tell the bloody truth for once and then be done with it." He finished that with a sharper bite off the words than he'd intended to give, but Dumbledore's whole ridiculous routine was driving him just as mad as it sounded like it was driving Draco.

The Headmaster stood watching them for some time. Then he nodded, and sighed, and smiled, and he looked as he always had when Harry still believed in him implicitly.

"All right," he said. "I cannot risk the truth yet, but I trust that you will remember what I have said, and make your own preparations for the moment when Voldemort attacks. I give you permission to tell Professor Snape," he added. "I myself will inform Professor McGonagall and the other teachers. What we choose to tell the students must wait on our mutual decision." And he turned and walked back off down the corridor as if that was all he'd come to say.

Harry let out a breath that was more like a grunt than he wanted it to be, and buried his nose in Draco's shoulder. Draco caressed him, fingers sliding through his hair and down his neck until Harry wanted to give up and stand there forever.

"It's over," Draco whispered to him. "That's the end of it for right now, and we can go back to Professor Snape's quarters. Would you like that?"

A sharp shiver ran through Harry, and he reluctantly pulled himself away from Draco. "No," he said, thinking about the confrontation he'd had with Snape before he went running out and slammed into Ron and Hermione. His weariness and wariness came surging back up as he thought about it. There were just so *many* of these damn emotions, and he didn't have the time to sort them out, let alone deal with them all. "I don't—Draco, I can't face him right now."

Draco looked at him with a frown, but he seemed to decide that it wasn't worthwhile to question Harry, which Harry was grateful for. He nodded instead and smoothed his hands gently up Harry's sides. "Do you want to go to Umbridge's old room, then? I would say to Gryffindor Tower, but they wouldn't let me in," he added.

Harry smiled, grateful that Draco wanted to stay with him. "But maybe that would be the best idea," he said. "Draco, I need to be alone. I need to think about things and rest, and I can't—I can't do that if someone's with me."

Draco shook his head. "I won't talk to you if you don't want me to, but I'm not going to leave you alone. What you need is *support*, Harry," he added, overriding the protest that Harry tried to make. "Someone who doesn't make you do something for them at every turn. And I can offer that. I know you might think I can't, since I talk so much."

"That's not it at all." Harry touched his forehead, even though his scar didn't hurt, trying to find some way to make Draco realize the truth. "I—I've never had someone with me when I sorted through things like this. I don't know *how*."

"Then I think you should learn," Draco said. Harry gave him a glare of frustration. Draco rolled his eyes. "I'd leave you alone if I thought that was truly what you needed," he said. "But I don't think it is, and so I'm coming with you."

Harry tried a harder glare. "What if I don't *want* you there?"

"I told you," Draco said calmly, though his face was a bit pale. "I wouldn't come if you didn't need it. But what you need is more important to me than what you want." He suddenly smiled and stepped towards Harry. "Besides," he added, "this is good training for all the comforting *I'll* expect to get in the future, when you take to pampering me."

Harry shook his head helplessly and held out his hand. Part of him *did* feel warm to have Draco coming with him; he just wasn't sure how it would work. "Come on, then."

In the end, they went to a small room that Draco knew of in the dungeons, rather than back to the old classroom they'd used so often. Harry curled up in one corner of the room as Draco conjured a fire in the fireplace and then cushions from fallen bits of rock that had come out of the wall. Draco was sure that Harry could at least have done the fire, but he looked as though he simply wanted to curl up and rest, and Draco wanted to give him that.

Harry lay down on one of the cushions, then grumbled and got up when he realized it wasn't big

enough to hold him. Draco fetched a second and braced it under his feet. Harry blinked at him, and Draco shook his head. "Shhh," he said. Actually saying that he didn't want Harry to stir might sound condescending, so he didn't say it. He arranged the second cushion under Harry's back, and then took Harry's head into his lap and stroked his hair the way that Harry was fond of doing to him.

Harry caught his breath and shut his eyes. Draco traced the outline of his scar, and Harry shuddered, but didn't move away. Draco decided that meant it was a success, and did it again.

That went on until Harry stopped flinching each time he was touched, but he did shake his head and mutter, "This is weird."

"Yes?" Draco forbade himself to feel hurt about that. Harry hadn't acted hurt when Draco had sometimes wanted to be alone after his father died, or when he talked to his mother about private things. He kept his voice calmly interested. "Why's that?"

"I mean—I just don't *have* people around me when I'm feeling like this," Harry muttered, and rubbed the corner of his mouth with the inside of his arm. He didn't move to get up, which was good, because Draco didn't want to restrain him. What he had hoped would happen was happening, and Harry was talking freely since someone was with him. "I just got over my mourning for Sirius and my mourning for Cedric on my own. And I kept the secret that Snape was my father to myself. So this is weird."

Draco shut his eyes for a few minutes, and quietly considered what he should say. That experience was alien to anything he'd done or felt. Sometimes his parents were angry with him when he got upset, if it was a childish tantrum about almost nothing, but they never ignored him. He would be scolded and sometimes threatened with the loss of cherished privileges if he didn't calm down and think about his emotions. Being left alone was also not something that happened to Draco, even if he got upset when his parents weren't home. There were always house-elves, and, at school, people who watched him to see if they could gain some sort of advantage.

He had been irritated by that plenty of times. But it was better than indifference.

"You're not the one who's weird," he said finally. "It's your family who is, and anyone else who mistreated you." That let Harry pretend that there was someone else other than the Muggles, which stilled the ripple of discomfort Draco had clearly felt traveling through his muscles.

Harry lay back with his head in Draco's lap once more, and said, "But that's why I wanted to be by myself."

"Would you have wanted help?" Draco asked, digging his fingers into Harry's neck and being rewarded with a soft groan. Draco had to concentrate hard so that he wouldn't get too distracted by that. "If someone had been available to give it to you?"

"Well, *yeah*," Harry said, opening one eye and looking at Draco as if he was the strange one. "I'd

like that."

"Then you're not weird," Draco said. "You were just prevented, that's all. And now, no matter what else happens, you have two people who will give you what you need. Companionship in your grief. Someone to tell your secrets to, when you want to. People you can rely on."

Harry rolled his head against Draco's leg, the line of his throat oddly tight, at least when viewed from above. "You're talking about Snape," he said. "Not Ron and Hermione, or you would have said three people, you and then."

"Yes," Draco said. "Do you really distrust him that much?" That was as close as he'd come to asking about the conversation that Harry had sent him into the bathroom to wait out, no matter how curious he was.

"I don't know," Harry said at last, voice as slow as honey. "That's strange, too, and it's stranger than all the rest, because I can't really remember my parents. I got used to having people around who cared some of the time, like Ron and Hermione. I never thought I'd have a dad."

Draco smiled. "You're not the only one who doesn't have a choice in that," he said. "Professor Snape isn't going to let you go so easily."

"Do you think—" Harry asked, and stopped abruptly.

"Do I think what?" This was less hard than Draco had thought it would be, which was good, because everything else so far had been incredibly hard. He waved his wand to conjure a wooden wall behind him, and then floated one of the cushions up behind him so that he could lean his head against it as it covered the wall.

"Do you think that Snape really wants me for *me*," Harry asked, "the way you do? Or would any son do? Would he have welcomed anyone he found out he'd sired the way he sired me?"

Draco hesitated. On the one hand, he wanted to say what would make Harry happy. On the other hand, saying that would probably cause Harry to disbelieve it, and the last thing Draco wanted to do was damage his mood.

So he went with the truth, which he seemed to do a lot around Harry, as the best choice.

"I think that he would have been frantic to acknowledge any son," he said carefully. "But your relationship with him was—difficult."

Harry snorted, which made his head bounce on Draco's lap, which was another distraction that Draco just had to put aside for now. "That's one way of putting it."

"Quiet, I'm trying to choose the right words," Draco said with dignity. "What I'm trying to say is that I think he'll value your relationship more in the end, because he has to work harder for it.

Professor Snape isn't averse to hard work, you know."

"Certainly not to making other people do it," Harry muttered.

"I think it'll make your connection more valuable," Draco said doggedly. He was going to get the words out no matter how many interruptions Harry made. He was probably interrupting because he was so nervous, come to that. "So, in the end, he'll care for you more than he would care for some random child that he found out about in some random manner."

Harry shut his eyes, and a sharp line cut across the scar on his forehead. "I wish I could be sure of that."

"Yes, well, nothing's ever sure," Draco said, and then winced, because that sounded a bit insensitive. *My father would laugh and laugh to see how tenderly I'm considering Harry's feelings.* Draco had never thought he would need to do this, because he had never imagined having a lover so different from him that his every feeling needed to be carefully considered and gone over. "Can you live with that?"

Harry lay there in silence. The loudest sound was the crackling of the fire, and Draco's breathing. Draco grimaced in embarrassment and tried to stop sounding like he'd swallowed smoke.

Finally, Harry murmured, "Yes, I think I can." He reached up with one hand and clasped Draco's arm. "As long as you're here."

Draco sat still, his body humming in happiness, not daring to move.

His happiness only grew stronger when he realized that Harry had drifted off to sleep.

Severus lifted his glass and considered the contents by the light of the fire. It was brandy, which he had once loathed drinking and then come to consider a special treat. He was not sure when his opinion had shifted, but Albus must have had something to do with it.

*Albus.*

Severus half-shut his eyes and sipped.

Draco had told him what Dumbledore had said, but he hadn't been able to recount the conversation word for word. When Severus had asked for permission to Legilimize him and look at the memories that way, Draco had hesitated for so long that it wasn't a surprise when he finally shook his head.

"You could do it, sir, for all of me," he said quietly. "But there are things in there that you could see, and…" He swallowed. "Harry wouldn't like it."

It should not surprise Severus that Harry shared things with Draco he would not share with his

father. He had seen how the matter stood for himself when Draco comforted Harry during his ordeal by potion. But to be confronted with it like this was a harsher blow than he had expected.

*At least he sent Draco away when we had a private conversation of our own,* Severus thought, and took another swallow. *At least there is that.*

He would have to wait for more.

Someone knocked on his door. Severus stared at it. It was late enough at night that no student should have dared to disturb him. Alarms would have let him know if something had happened in the dungeons or the Slytherin common room that would require his intervention, and he had no detentions to supervise.

Then Harry's voice shouted, "Snape! Something's wrong with Draco! Open the bloody door!"

Severus was on his feet and moving across the room so swiftly that he nearly forgot to notice Harry's language.

He opened the door, and Harry promptly staggered across the threshold, carrying Draco in his arms. Severus shook his head as he shut the door again. He would have thought that Harry couldn't do that, since he was so thin, but worry gave him strength.

Harry laid Draco down on the couch where he'd slept that night Harry was recovering from the potion and whirled around. "Can you do anything for him?" he demanded.

Severus moved forwards, studying Draco's face from several different angles. "I must learn what is wrong, first," he murmured. "What happened to him?"

"We met up for a discussion about what Voldemort was going to do next," Harry said. His breathing was so fast that Severus determined to keep an eye on him to make sure he didn't hyperventilate. He was pacing in circles around the couch, never taking his eyes from Draco. "Ron and Hermione and Draco and me. Draco was talking about whether Voldemort would use any of the Death Eaters he knew when he stopped, and coughed, and then just fell on the floor."

"How long after dinner was this?" Severus murmured, and cast several quick spells. None of the most common poisons appeared on the first scan. That did not reassure him. It only meant that it was likely to be a less common poison.

"Just now," Harry said, giving him a savage look, as if to ask whether Severus thought he would delay in bringing Draco to him. "So about three hours."

Severus nodded and cast another spell. Potions that restricted breathing were not in Draco's blood, though given the slowness of his breath, he had thought that likely. He frowned and studied the pasty, pale color of his face more closely. There were shadows of grey in the curve of Draco's cheekbones and under his eyes. Severus sucked in a breath.

"What is it?" Harry asked.

"The Dark Lord must have sent one of his student Death Eaters to take revenge for Draco's betrayal," Severus murmured, and then stood up and moved in the direction of his lab. "The poison is called Acromantula's Bite. Hard to obtain, but not impossible. It will disable him slowly, and then kill him after a period of months."

"So we have time," Harry said, focusing on the most hopeful thing in that sentence, to Severus's surprise. He would have thought the boy liable to panic when his lover was in danger. "Do you have the antidote?"

"No," Severus said. "I must brew it." He hesitated, but necessity compelled him to speak on. Draco would still live if Severus made the potion across several hours instead of in one, but he would probably lose at least his voice. "And I will need help."

Harry's eyes turned bright and piercing. Then he lowered his head and nodded. "All right, sir. Hermione wasn't far behind me. I'll go find her."

Severus stared at him, which was long enough for Harry to get halfway across the room. "Hold! What makes you think that I did not mean for *you* to help?"

Harry stared back at him. "Because I'm pants at Potions," he said. "I *know* that. And I'd rather have Draco safe than save him myself just because it would make me feel better to be a—a bloody hero or something."

Severus had never wished so much that he had not discouraged Harry in Potions. Lowering his voice, he said, "You are not 'pants' at it, or you could not have obtained a mark high enough to persuade Slughorn to let you into his class. For this, you will need to help with the brewing only. I think Miss Granger would do worse than you would, for she is easily distracted from the topic at hand when she is nervous. If you can follow instructions and will *listen* to me, then that is all I will require."

Harry shut his eyes and shivered. Then he opened his eyes and said, as calmly as if they did this every day, "All right. What do I need to do?"

##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### #####
##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### #####
##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### #####

Chapter: 38

Thank you again for all the reviews!

*Chapter Thirty-Eight—Closer to the End*

Harry didn't let himself think, because he would panic if he thought. He'd panicked enough when he saw Draco choking and then realized that he could barely breathe. When he went into Snape's private lab, he listened for instructions, and when he received those instructions, he followed them.

There were weeds that had to be cut. Or maybe they were roots. Harry hadn't learned the differences between every kind of them there were, and he didn't have the Half-Blood Prince's book with him to explain those differences right now. He chopped and cut and sliced and listened to instructions that Snape rephrased when he realized that Harry wasn't good at measuring "a cut of three-eighths of an inch" with his eye. A simple spell put a purple mark on most of the roots, so Harry knew exactly where to cut.

*He's being nice,* was one of the few thoughts that managed to wriggle through Harry's determined façade of general numbness.

*Of course he is,* was the next thought, as Harry hovered next to the cauldron and handed Snape pairs of the chopped roots as he asked for them (unless they were weeds). *He cares about Draco too.*

Harry felt some part of him relax. He'd been worrying and wondering that he'd made the wrong decision. Maybe he should have taken Draco to the hospital wing instead, to let Madam Pomfrey treat him. In fact, he'd wondered why he hadn't. Once it would have been automatic for him to go there when someone he cared about was hurt.

But Snape cared about Draco as a person. He was good in Potions and a Slytherin. He was probably a lot more like a son to Snape than Harry would ever be.

Harry drew in a harsh breath and used it to suppress the emotions that were crowding his mind and probably trying to force him to make a mistake. He would deal with this. He would worry about being the son that Snape wanted later. For right now, the *important* thing was helping Draco.

*If he loses his voice, or his arms, or his life…*

But he wouldn't think about that, either, because Snape had given him a bunch of snails that had to be crushed and boiled, and Harry was concentrating on doing it exactly right, and not flinching as the clear, slimy guts tumbled across his hands.

He placed the crushed snails in a cauldron with a fire lit beneath it. Snape was working over a bigger cauldron, now stirring, now pausing to chant spells, working with such perfect speed and force and concentration that Harry was awed and humbled. He would never be able to do that with Potions, not if he worked on them for a thousand years.

*Again. Don't worry about that. Concentrate on what you can do to help, not whether it's the same as what someone else is doing, or more important.*

Maybe that was part of his problem, Harry thought as he placed the snails in the boiling water of his smaller cauldron and then concentrated on the size of his bubbles. Snape had said that he was to watch until the bubbles got bigger and the water turned from milky to clear. That would mean that the guts of the snails were as boiled as they were going to get, and it was time to add the animals to the rest of the potion.

Harry put his thought on hold, and sometimes his breath, as he watched the boiling water, which resulted in loud wheezing gasps later. Snape never looked at him, but Harry was sure that he saw his spine stiffen with irritation. He tried to be extra careful and extra prompt as he cooled the water—on a sharp word from Snape—before he plunged his hands into the cauldron and brought out the snails to hand over.

Maybe that was part of the problem, the thought resumed when Harry was on the other side of the room with lavender petals to powder. Everyone thought he was humble and polite—well, everyone who wasn't Slytherin—but Harry really wanted to do important things. He *wanted* to help and save people. Individual steps in Potions weren't important, and the finished products often wouldn't help or save anyone. So he had treated it as uninteresting, and he had never got good at it.

If he had, then he could have helped Snape better now. He could have felt like he was more than just a pair of hands and a brain filled with restless, useless thoughts. Snape could have explained the potion to him, and he would have understood.

But Snape didn't need someone to understand, Harry concluded wisely as he filled one vial with the powder and carried it across the room to Snape. He needed someone who could help in other ways. That was the reason it would have taken him forever to brew the potion on his own: he would have had to stop to powder or boil or chop, and that would have meant putting the potion under a Stasis Charm, and who knew when he would have come out with it?

Harry had just settled that to his own satisfaction in his mind when Snape began to speak. It was a low voice he used, and he never took his eyes away from the cauldron or lost his fixed expression that seemed to suggest he had nothing to think about, but the words were there, and they were addressed to Harry.

"The Acromantula's Bite is not truly the venom of an Acromantula. It uses the venom as an ingredient, and causes some effects that are rather like it, but Acromantulas have no use for killing their victims across a period of months. Thus, the potion that is the antidote must partake of some characteristics of the Acromantula, without necessarily involving anything directly from them."

"Yes, sir?" Harry murmured obediently.

"Thus the roots," Snape said, and poured some more of them into the cauldron. Harry blinked. He had thought Snape had already used all of them. That made him worry. *What else have I missed?* But thinking too much was a way to let the panic come back, so he concentrated and kept Snape's words in mind instead. "The roots have a trace of sharpness, and spiders often use them to construct webs on. The similarity is enough to make them a valuable addition, without making them poisonous." He gave Harry a single swift glance, while his hands worked easily to chop and slice and shred further. Harry wondered if he had really needed help after all. "Do you understand?"

Harry smiled in spite of himself at the inquiring tone in Snape's voice. It was kind of strange that he was worrying about whether Harry understood Potions *now*, but it was nice, too. Few people ever worried about whether he understood. Dumbledore seemed to prefer it when he didn't. "Not really, sir."

"You need instruction in Potions theory," Snape muttered, and dropped in another vial full of powdered lavender petals. "Slughorn can manage little of that in his classes. I will see to it."

Harry stared at him, glad when he didn't notice because he was too deeply involved in the brewing. Snape was promising *what?* It was one thing to get upset when he got in danger—Harry accepted that parents did that—but helping him with his homework?

He looked at the ground and blinked and swallowed hard, because tears were *not* part of the plan.

"Scrape the flakes of mica out of this." Snape handed him a small, brightly-glittering stone and a tiny pick.

Harry accepted them gratefully and retreated to the far side of the room. Sometimes he thought he came close to comprehending Snape, but even the things that made him feel most like the son of a father could hurt.

*The potion will be ready in time.*

The assurance came to Severus from deep in his mind, calm and deep as the ringing of a great bell. He felt the tension simmering in the back of his neck flee, and he could concentrate on more than the half-hatched thoughts about the potion, Draco, and Harry he'd been having in the past thirty minutes.

He turned around to watch Harry scraping at the flakes of mica. He had several of them out already and was digging at the next, his teeth clamped down on his tongue so that it stuck out like a small pink animal escaping from its cage. His hair fell down around his forehead, half-obscuring the scar. His eyes behind the glasses were focused and intent.

Severus suffered a sudden, disorienting wave of longing that Harry would remove his glamour, and allow Severus to see his face the way it *should* look.

He snorted the impulse away and checked the cauldron once more. Now he would almost have welcomed the frantic pace of the first brewing portion. It would have given him something else to think about.

*I thought you wanted freedom to think?*

Severus curled his fingers around the lip of the cauldron. It was the only harmless way he could express his frustration at the moment, without disrupting the potion or disturbing Harry from his task.

His explanation of the potion's nature hadn't reached Harry. Very well. That was understandable. Harry was worried about Draco, and he probably couldn't understand the connections between various Potions ingredients without having them explained. Severus had grasped them right away, and so had Lily, but Severus was slowly coming to accept that not every child could inherit his parents' talent.

But after this, he must see to Harry's education. He had taught him poorly. He would teach him better. If he had made a mistake, he should be the one to set it right. And he knew Harry had *some* talent; it simply wanted encouragement to come out.

He would have laughed aloud at the direction of his thoughts a moment later, if he could have done it without making Harry think he was mocking him. *How can I think about such a thing when Draco might be dying?*

But the answer was simple. He was now confident that the potion would work, and would be ready in time. He had no reason to distrust himself, so his mind moved on to the next available topic.

It was all right to think of the future. He would protect his son, and take care of him, all the things that Harry had a right to expect of his parents and no one had done for him, except for James and Lily during the first year of his life. But Severus could do more than that. He could share his knowledge, and ensure that Harry knew enough about Potions to survive the brewing of them and do whatever else he wanted to do, no matter if he ever became interested in them for their own sake or not. Too many students had limited careers because they were never able to master Potions. Harry would not be one of them.

Severus became aware, as he stood there and watched Harry pry out the last few flakes of mica, that his warm, fierce possessiveness for Harry had changed its nature. He wanted the boy to like him and be his, yes, but he also wanted the privilege of doing things for him. No matter if Harry was ever grateful or not.

But it was Harry, and so he would be. And Severus had to admit that the attraction of giving gifts, including knowledge, to his son was much enhanced by the knowledge that he would value them.

Harry turned around with the rock clutched in one hand and the flakes of mica spread on the palm of the other, and gave a slight start when he saw Severus watching him. But he extended his hand and said, "Here they are, sir."

"Excellent," Severus said, making sure to make his voice as warm and casual as it could be without scaring Harry off. "Why don't you put them in the cauldron?"

Harry stared at him. "Sorry, sir? You want *me* to do that?"

"Yes," Severus said, and stepped out of the way so that there would be no chance of Harry misunderstanding him.

Harry approached the cauldron, watching him all the while, and looking more and more bewildered the longer the moment stretched. "But what if I do something wrong?" he asked, as he paused with the flakes of mica above the cauldron's brim.

"There is very little to get wrong." It was an effort to speak those words without sarcasm, and from the way Harry's eyes darkened, Severus was sure he knew it. But he just jerked his head a little, as though he was tossing away a collar Severus had tried to place around his neck, and then turned back and opened his fingers.

Despite himself, Severus watched closely. The flakes drifted down as they were supposed to, however, and dissolved into the general brew in the cauldron. Severus nodded in satisfaction and stood up to come closer.

"Why did you want me to help you?" Harry suddenly demanded.

"Because you were close, and had the concentration on Draco that was necessary to make the potion instead of asking endless questions, the way that Granger would," Severus said, as he picked up the ladle that he would need to beat some of the thick, forming bubbles back into the side of the cauldron. "And because it would give you some part to play in the saving of Draco, which I know is important to you."

Harry frowned, apparently trying to decide if he should be mortified or impressed that he was so transparent.

"And because you are my son," Severus said, bending his head down so that he would not have to watch Harry's expression while he spoke the words, "and I want you close to me in everything that you do."

There was no response but a sharply caught breath, as though Harry was having to think about what that meant.

*Or as if he was satisfied,* Severus thought, and settled into the final stages of brewing the potion.

Draco opened his eyes slowly. His throat burned as though he'd swallowed acid. He reached up and massaged it with a grimace, then turned his head to the side and locked his eyes on Harry.

Harry's face was on a level with his own, even though Draco knew he was lying back. He had just barely recognized that that meant Harry was kneeling on the floor when Harry said, "Thank *Merlin*," and flung his arms around Draco's neck.

Draco patted him on the back, while his mind slowly came back to itself and he remembered the last moments before he'd fallen unconscious. "Poison," he said, and looked up at Professor Snape, who was hovering over them (though Draco doubted Harry would think of the way he was standing in that fashion). "What poison was it, sir? Is it going to have aftereffects?"

"The Acromantula's Bite," Professor Snape said, voice as sharp as it would have been if Draco had got a bad mark on an essay in Potions. "We brewed the antidote inside an hour, and that means no lingering aftereffects."

*We?* Draco thought, and mouthed over Harry's head as he took him in his arms. Harry seemed intent on making sure that Draco's arms were still attached and his shoulders still made of flesh and bone, which caused Draco to wonder exactly what Snape had told him about the effects of the poison.

Professor Snape simply inclined his head in answer to Draco's silent question, and his eyes glittered. Draco decided he would have to get Harry to tell him the story of *that* brewing when he was more coherent.

"One of the student Death Eaters must have poisoned you," Harry was saying. He shook, but Draco thought it was relief instead of fear. "We don't know who, and we don't know when." He pulled back and looked Draco in the eye. Draco had to clear his throat and look away when he realized how intense the emotions in Harry's eyes were. "But we're going to find out."

"*Why* ought to be easier than either of those," Draco said, putting a protective hand on the back of Harry's neck and using his grip on his shoulder to help himself sit up. "If there are students in the school loyal to the Dark Lord, why would they attack me now instead of right after I betrayed him?"

"If what you told me was correct and the Dark Lord has been lured or coerced into attacking the school," Professor Snape said calmly, "then I would imagine that he wishes to try and reduce the number of his enemies before the battle begins. It would also seem likely that he is aware of the closeness between you and Harry, and aware of what losing you would do to Harry."

Harry stiffened, but said nothing. Draco nodded. "So they've just been waiting for a command to attack. Is there any way that we can eliminate some of the suspects?" Talking about his own possible death this way, as a matter of battle strategy, was the best way he knew to control his emotions about it for right now. He could weep and tremble in shock later. But it hadn't been *personal.* Maybe the person who had poisoned him hated him, but it had happened because it

was part of the Dark Lord's attempt to isolate Harry. Draco didn't want to think it was anything more than that.

*I would hate to be Harry, because it's personal for him, and everyone expects him to be this great big hero without even much support.*

"Yes," Professor Snape said, and the glitter in his eyes made Draco shudder. "I highly doubt that most of the student Death Eaters are trained in Occlumency. I will read their thoughts and bring in the likely suspect by this time tomorrow."

"But—" said Harry, and then stood there as if he'd forgotten everything in the world but the need to embrace Draco.

"Yes?" Professor Snape asked, and he might have been asking someone he knew perfectly well wouldn't be able to answer whether you should add a bit of phoenix feather to a Warming Potion.

Harry took a deep breath and plunged on. Draco rested his hand a little harder on the back of Harry's neck and wondered if he was the only one who realized what courage it took for Harry to face up to his father. "I don't think you should do that. What if they can recognize that they've been touched by Legilimency? Or what if Dumbledore catches you doing it? He might not like it."

"I will use a Memory Charm on anyone whom I can tell is alerted by my use of the magic," Snape said, with an indifferent chill that Draco thought would have been appropriate to a glacier. "And I have ceased to care what Dumbledore thinks of me."

Harry twisted around in Draco's arms. "You can't know that you'll catch them all," he said. "Maybe Dumbledore can even tell what you're doing from a distance."

Snape leaned forwards. Draco could tell that he was intensely interested in the answer to the question he asked. "Why are you so set on my not doing this? I would have thought you would understand the necessity of protecting Draco."

"I *do* understand that," Harry said, and his arms squeezed tight around Draco again. He gave him an apologetic glance. "I don't want you to ever feel unsafe."

"Find the poisoner, and I won't," Draco said, smiling in spite of himself at the way Harry seemed to think even this was his fault.

Harry turned back to the professor. "But I don't think it's right to do a wrong thing in order to keep another wrong thing from happening."

"Would you prefer the use of Veritaserum instead?" The professor's voice would have sounded polite to most people, but Draco swallowed.

"That's not the same," Harry said. "And anyway, no, I wouldn't, not if you're planning to drag in people and give them Veritaserum one by one until you find who tried to murder Draco." His arms tightened again. He looked wretched, but he was still fighting. *He'll always fight,* Draco thought, leaning his chin on Harry's shoulder. *That's why it was so awful to see him when he thought that he had to die to get rid of the Horcrux in him. He'd given up.*

"I assure you, I shall be considerably more subtle than that." Professor Snape's voice was less polite, but softer. Draco wished there was a way to sink into the couch.

"But what if you alert someone you don't mean to?" Harry shook his head stubbornly. "What if you hurt an innocent person? I just don't think you should do it."

Professor Snape said, "I have been a spy and playing mind games with the Dark Lord himself for years. I will know how to manage this so as to leave no traces behind. And in the end, I will give the Death Eaters I find over to the Aurors. I did not intend to keep them and use them for Potions experiments."

"But—" Harry began again.

"No." Professor Snape rose and took a quick step towards them, and Draco hoped he was the only one who felt Harry's flinch. Maybe the professor saw it, though, because he stopped, and his voice was genuinely soft this time, instead of soft because he wanted to frighten people. "I do not wish to hurt your feelings, Harry. But I *will* protect the both of you, and I no longer trust Dumbledore to make the best use of this knowledge even if I bring it to him. So I shall do it in my own way."

Harry stared at the floor, twisting his fingers through each other. Draco didn't know exactly what was going through his head. Did he think he was unworthy to be protected? Did he want things to be done right and in the open even when he knew there was someone hiding in the school who wouldn't hesitate to use poison again? Was he just morally revolted by Legilimency no matter what happened?

Harry finally looked up again and said, "You're going to do this even if I ask you not to, aren't you?"

"Yes," Professor Snape said. "In some matters, I will not be dictated to."

"In *some*?" Harry asked, but he was relaxing against Draco, and Snape could probably see the same thing. Harry sighed and turned around to rub Draco's shoulder. "I don't think it's right," he muttered. "But I want the Death Eater caught, and I don't see any other way."

"Thank you for your permission," Professor Snape said, which got him another scowl from Harry, and then swept out of the room. He did pause on the threshold of the Potions lab to add, "You will stay here tonight, the both of you."

Draco waited until the professor had shut the door before he reached out and touched Harry's cheek so he'd look at him. "Harry," he said gently. "Are you really all right with this?"

Harry shook his head. "It's—complicated," he said. "I've done similar things in the past, to Slytherins, so that I could get information." The unspoken words hung between them, which were *I've done things to you,* but Draco had no problem ignoring unspoken words when speaking them would make both of them uncomfortable. "I want you safe. But it kind of feels like I'm inflicting him on people. He wouldn't do this if not for me. So I'm responsible for any of the wrong things he does, any of the pain he causes."

"You already have a better sense of responsibility than Dumbledore does," Draco murmured, which made Harry smile. "But I think he would have done this anyway, because I'm the one who was attacked. In fact, it'll probably be better that he knows you don't like it. He'll be gentler, that way."

"I hope so," Harry said.

It took a lot of tossing and fidgeting and tangling of limbs, but in the end they both managed to squirm onto the couch. Draco didn't think until they were curled up together what Snape would say if he came back and saw them like this. Then he shrugged and decided he didn't care.

He could feel Harry's hair under his cheek and his arms around his chest. That was more than enough to stave off any nightmares, any fear that he might not be alive.

##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### #####
##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### #####
##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### #####

Chapter: 39

Thank you again for all the reviews!

*Chapter Thirty-Nine—The Hunt Begins*

Severus began his hunt among the Slytherins. As much as he favored his own House, he knew that he was more likely to find his culprit there than he was among the others. Besides, if Draco had been poisoned at dinner, as Severus thought likely, a Slytherin would have had the least trouble placing the Acromantula's Bite in Draco's drink or food.

There was also the fact that most of his Slytherins were more advanced in Potions talent than the other Houses—no small thanks to his extra lessons and favoritism—and might have thought of poison before a Gryffindor or Hufflepuff would have. They would also have the skills to brew it themselves, if need be.

Severus started with observation alone on the first day. Well, observation and a simple spell. He murmured an incantation that made a slight sting appear in the left forearm of the person he was looking at. Then he watched to see who merely scratched, who looked suspicious that it was a prank, and who looked panicked.

Five of them had expressions he considered panicked: Blaise Zabini, Daphne Greengrass, Pansy Parkinson, a seventh-year called Monica Cravens, and a fifth-year, Joseph Napier. Severus nodded slightly. He had expected that the predominance of suspects would come from the upper years. Not even the Dark Lord thought that fourth-years and younger would make good soldiers. They could be indoctrinated, but they could not be trusted to keep secrets; Severus had first learned about the Dark Lord as a third-year from a student in the year above him who simply could not stop himself from bragging about his newfound knowledge.

There might still be others, of course. Or they might all be Death Eaters, and yet none of them might be the one who had poisoned Draco. Severus had to accept that the failure rate of his mission would be high at first.

However, it gave him a smaller number of suspects to use Legilimency on, which meant that there were fewer people who might learn what he was doing, and fewer minds to need Memory Charms.

Severus glanced at his son, and was sorry that the nature of his mission meant that he could not be open about what he was doing. He would have liked to receive a green-eyed glance of approval.

"But what *happened* to Malfoy?"

Draco bristled. Harry, after a day of being plagued unmercifully by his friends as to what had happened after he had run away to Professor Snape with Draco in his arms, had begged Draco to let him tell Weasley and Granger the truth. It was the only thing that would make them leave him alone, he said.

Draco had agreed. *Anything for Harry.* It was the thought that had come to him when he woke up the other morning, cradling Harry and meeting Professor Snape's steady glare, and realized, again, that he might have died if not for Harry's quick action.

But he hadn't expected them to ignore the fact that he was present and keep talking to Harry alone.

"I'm right here," Draco said. He'd held his tongue so far, because peace on his part would make it easier for Harry to reconcile with his friends. But there was such a thing as too much leniency. "You could talk to me instead of *about* me."

Granger turned on him, looking so exasperated and angry that her hair almost stood on end. "All right," she snarled. "What happened?"

Harry stepped back and let Draco move forwards. Draco nodded to him and took his place. "Harry suspected that I'd been poisoned," he said. "Rightly. He took me to Professor Snape, and they brewed the antidote for me. That's all." He waited to see how Granger would twist his words, because she would find a means for him to corrupt Harry in the most innocent tone of voice.

"Why didn't you go to Madam Pomfrey?" Granger demanded, looking back and forth between them. "She could have helped a lot sooner than Snape could have. How long did it take to brew the antidote?"

"An hour," Harry said. "Maybe a little less. I was just doing what Snape told me to. I didn't count the time." He looked down at Draco, and if the tenderness in his eyes wasn't visible to Granger and Weasley, they were fools, or simply not looking. "I was too worried to do that, and just wanted Draco to get well."

Draco squeezed his hand back and moved a step closer to him, then faced Weasley, who was starting to splutter in the way that meant he was winding up his mouth. "But that doesn't explain why you didn't go to Madam Pomfrey," he said stubbornly. "How did you know that you could trust *Snape*, mate?"

"Because—" Harry began.

"You ran a lot farther to him than you would have had to go to get to the hospital wing," Granger said.

Harry frowned at her. "I was worried about Draco, not counting my steps," he snapped. "Besides, I was going to say that—"

"And you could have waited so we could catch you up," Weasley said. "You were running so fast that we lost you before you got to the dungeons."

Harry nodded. His face was flushed, and his tongue got tangled behind his teeth when he started to speak. "But I was thinking about saving Draco, and that meant I—"

"Why Snape?" Weasley asked again.

"Because he's my *father*," Harry snapped. "Would you let me get a word in *fucking* edgewise? That's it! Snape is my father, and I trust him to make potions, and I trust him to take care of Draco, and that's why I went to him and not to Madam Pomfrey, and that's why I didn't wait for you. I was in a hurry, and I didn't want to listen to what you would say about Snape or Draco or both! I left you out on accident, but I would have done it on purpose if I'd been thinking, because you *talk* so much!"

There was a period of silence that Draco gloried in, because it was a period during which

Granger and Weasley looked steadily redder and Harry only a little more pale. Then Harry coughed and said, "Anyway. I don't want to leave you out all the time." He looked so tired that Draco was reminded of the night when Harry had gone to sleep in his lap and talked unhappily about being weary. Draco rested a hand on the back of his neck. Harry sighed, and his eyes shut for a moment before he continued in a stronger voice. "I really don't. I know it must seem like it. But I can't let you into things that involve Draco and Snape unless you try to behave better."

"You haven't given us a chance." Granger looked like she wanted to *cry*, of all the manipulative tactics. Weasley stood stiffly next to her, sometimes looking at Harry's face, sometimes looking at the floor. Granger sniffled and continued. "We do want to be your friends, Harry, but you're always shutting us out."

"I talked to you openly about dating Draco and Snape being my father," Harry said steadily. "And you didn't want to listen."

"We were startled," Weasley muttered, scuffing one foot over the floor and then staring even more intently at it. They were once again in Umbridge's old office. Draco thought he remembered Weasley during the same thing the last time they were here. Maybe he was trying to polish a section of the floor as practice for the household cleaning charms that he would always have to cast, Draco thought. It wasn't as though his girlfriend would ever let him own a house-elf even if they were rich enough to afford them. "You can't blame us for that."

"And now?" Harry asked harshly. "Now that you've had time to think about it, what do you think?"

"I still find it hard to accept," Granger said, and looked at Draco with a distinctly unfriendly expression. "How do you know he won't turn around and insult us tomorrow?"

"How do I know *you* won't do that?" Harry snapped. "I'm trying to give you chances, Hermione, but you're making it really difficult."

"We've been your friends for longer," Weasley said stubbornly. "That means that *we* should have a chance, and you should be harsher with Draco and Snape."

Harry sighed and pressed down on Draco's shoulder, cutting off the words that he desperately wanted to say before they could emerge. *He knows me so well,* Draco thought, as he closed his mouth and tried to look stern instead of reprimanded. "Yes, but you haven't shared these last few experiences with me," Harry said in an exhausted voice. "Draco and Snape have. And things have changed."

"We just need more time," Granger said.

Harry walked out without answering. Draco lingered a moment to look at Granger and Weasley, shaking his head. "You don't realize how lucky you are to have him," he said. "He doesn't have to put up with this, you know."

"It's too much of a change," Weasley said. "It's not *like* him."

Draco raised an eyebrow. "Maybe you should think more about the new person Harry's becoming than the old person he was."

He could have said a lot more, but he sauntered out, because Harry needed him and because he was more like an adult than Granger and Weasley were.

And because staying and arguing would have meant a chance that he wouldn't get the last word.

"I didn't do anything *wrong.*"

Severus looked up. "What was that, Miss Parkinson?"

Pansy looked sullenly back at him, then focused on the cauldron in front of her. "Nothing, sir," she muttered.

As it happened, Severus agreed with her. Pansy had done something that Severus had ignored at other times: running through the corridors because she was late to Charms. This time, it had given him a convenient excuse to tell her off for breaking the rules of the House and the school, including the ones that demanded decorum, dignity, and waking up on time so that one wouldn't *have* to run.

He had set her to detention with him, and she had sulked and grumbled and moaned so much that Severus was tempted to take points from Slytherin. Had his Snakes really become so undisciplined while he was occupied with Draco, Harry, and winning his freedom from the Dark Lord? It seemed so.

Severus decided that he would have to look at them more carefully, and keep a particularly sharp watch out for any recruitment attempts on the part of the Dark Lord. He had become Harry's father, but that didn't mean that he had stopped being Head of Slytherin.

Pansy finally straightened up, working the tension out of her back, and then went to put the cauldrons away. Severus waited until she turned around again, her head bent and her eyes directed towards the floor in a scowl.

It was a perfect moment. She was looking down, but not completely, and against a mind he expected to be undefended, that was all the eye contact Severus needed for the spell.

"*Legilimens*," he whispered.

Yes, he passed into her mind through no sort of shields. Severus held his contempt back, because Miss Parkinson might still be sensitive even if shieldless, and began to explore her recent memories of Draco.

There was fear that Draco's father dying meant that Pansy herself (because she had once been Draco's friend) would be noticed by the Dark Lord, wonder that he could continue getting good marks in his classes despite his stress, curiosity about what had happened to his mother, and suspicion as to the nature of his relationship with Harry Potter. But no matter how deeply Severus pressed or how thoroughly he searched, he could uncover no evidence that she was involved in the poisoning.

And she bore no Dark Mark. She had probably grabbed her arm simply because she was startled by the sting that the incantation had caused her.

Severus pulled carefully out of her mind, watching her face all the while so that he might see if she suspected something. But though Parkinson blinked and touched her forehead, he saw no anger on her face. She even looked at him and said, "Did I fall asleep, sir?"

"You look half-asleep on your feet," Severus said. "Back to your common room, Miss Parkinson. And this time, make sure that you get enough sleep that you don't need to run in the corridor."

Pansy flushed, said, "Sir," and left.

Severus leaned back in his chair and smiled thinly. As disappointing as it had been not to find the poisoner in his first effort, the evening had not been without result. It had given him the excuse that he would use to investigate the rest of his Snakes.

Harry sighed when Ron and Hermione sat down on either side of him at breakfast. It wasn't that he hated to see them, he thought, staring at his plate while he pushed around the remains of the single piece of soggy toast he'd had for breakfast. But they'd avoided him for the last few days, talking furiously to each other at the opposite end of the table, and he wondered if they'd come up to him simply to scold and complain.

Hermione touched his arm. Harry looked up and tried to put on his most patient expression. Maybe he could do this. If he tried really hard.

*It's easier with Draco and Snape,* he thought, and then paused in astonishment, because that was the first time he had ever included the words "Snape" and "easier" in the same sentence.

"We've thought about it," Hermione said. "We want to know whether Malfoy's changed his mind."

"How couldn't he?" Harry asked. He kept his voice low, because while they were discussing things Ron and Hermione already knew about Draco, he hardly thought Draco would like his private business plastered all over creation. "You saw what the Dark Lord did to his father."

Ron and Hermione exchanged hard looks. Then Ron leaned forwards and said, "No offense, mate, but that doesn't mean he's changed his mind. For all we know, he might have decided that

he'd like to stick by his ideals because it would be a way of honoring his dad."

Harry smiled in spite of himself. That objection sounded much more reasonable than some of the ones they'd raised so far, and didn't rely so much on Draco's past behavior.

"Well," he said, and lowered his voice further, so that they had to lean in to hear him, "Draco also told me that he's changed his mind about blood. If you want to know more than that, you'll have to talk to him. I'm already sort of violating his confidence by telling you this much."

Hermione ran her finger through her hair, unwinding one curl and letting it spring back. "He doesn't think I should die anymore?"

Harry shook his head.

"He probably still thinks of my family as poor and nothing else," Ron muttered.

"I don't know," Harry said stubbornly. "I wouldn't listen to what he said about you and not defend you, either, but I'd invite you in so you could speak up for yourselves. You'll have to listen to him."

"All right," Hermione said. "I can't do it today because I have too many essays to write, and I have to keep to my NEWT schedule." Harry refrained from rolling his eyes by a heroic effort. Hermione had gone around to every teacher at the beginning of the term and got a schedule from them of how many essays they were likely to assign this year, then divided the two years until NEWTs up into certain amounts of time for each task. She knew what she was doing every day from now until the start of the exams. "But can you have him meet us tomorrow so we can start?"

"As long as you promise to listen to him," Harry said. "And let him talk," he added, because he hadn't forgotten his frustration with trying to explain about Draco and Snape while they kept interrupting him.

Ron coughed. His face was red enough to hide his freckles, as if he was remembering the way he'd acted and disliking it. Harry hoped so. That had been the most annoying conversation he'd ever had with them. "We promise."

Hermione nodded. She hesitated, then added, "And Harry—if you can accept Snape as your father, so can we. Right, Ron?" She nudged him in the ribs.

Ron leaned forwards, one hand raised as if he wanted to shield his words from any lip-readers who might be sitting around the Great Hall. "He doesn't hurt you, right, mate?" he asked. "I mean—I've heard that sometimes, people with—families that aren't the best—seek out other parents and friends who aren't—the best." He was flushing even more heavily by the time he'd finished, obviously trying to hint that he knew something about the Dursleys without saying outright that he did.

Harry did his best to relax the tense hunch his shoulders had automatically taken on. Ron knew more about the Dursleys than Draco and Snape did, since he had seen the bars on the window the summer that he came to rescue Harry from his bedroom. It was all right for him to talk about it like that, as long as he never *talked* about it. That would be more than all right, in some ways. Harry could have some sympathy, and it was a bond between him and his best friends that wasn't threatened by Draco or Snape.

*It will be if you ever tell them more about it.*

Harry ignored that thought and nodded. "I know that. But he really does treat me all right. I've learned too much about families who aren't *right*." He smiled grimly. "And families that are, by watching you with your Dad and Mum." He nodded to Ron, who seemed to be flushing with pride this time. "I wouldn't stand for that kind of thing."

He decided that, for right now, he wouldn't tell them that he'd avoided telling Snape he was his father because he'd been afraid of exactly that kind of thing. It was enough if they knew that Harry accepted Snape *now*. Harry thought Snape was probably even more private than Draco and wouldn't like them knowing how long it had been before he learned the truth.

*More stupid secrets.* But he didn't resent them as much when he was keeping them for someone else instead of himself. The number he'd carried earlier in the year had soured him on having his own.

"Good," Ron said, and relaxed. "We'll see you and Malfoy tomorrow then, right?"

Harry nodded, and watched as they left the table, Hermione talking animatedly to Ron about nothing in particular. When Harry looked up, Draco was watching him with sharp eyes from the Slytherin table. Harry smiled at him, which seemed to reassure him enough to let him eat the rest of breakfast.

Harry reached for the plate of eggs, suddenly hungry himself.

"I have been remiss in my responsibilities."

In most Houses, Severus knew, if the Head said something like that, there would be a murmur of denial as students who liked the Head spoke up for him or her. But he didn't tolerate murmurs, so all his Slytherins simply watched him with becoming gravity as he paced back and forth in front of them. They were assembled in the common room. Severus had allowed no exceptions, either for study or for any other reasons. He had persuaded Minerva and Filch to release several from detention for an hour, as long as they promised to return immediately after the meeting.

That meant the group included Draco. He sat still on the couch between Zabini and Parkinson, his eyes wide with wonder and innocence, as if he couldn't imagine more than any of the others why Professor Snape would be blaming himself. Severus had to avoid looking directly at him.

"I have not spent enough time with you of late, or attended to my duties as a Head of House." Severus paused in front of them and swept them with a grim gaze. "I could give as my excuse my concern with magical matters and the new classes, but those are not enough to remove all duty from my shoulders."

His Snakes looked wise. By "magical matters" they would know that he was talking about the rumors of Dumbledore's power weakening, and the new classes were a convenient excuse for any number of things. Severus knew some of them suspected that he was a traitor to the Dark Lord, others knew, and still others lived in ignorance but had an idea that something important had happened. The morass of silence and sly hints in Slytherin House meant that one could never be sure of the state of general knowledge at any single time.

"You may come to me still with your concerns, your questions, your problems," Severus said. "In fact, I insist on it. I will be conducting a series of random meetings in the next week, so that I may make sure you are not falling behind in your classes or letting your personal life interfere with your responsibility as I let it interfere with mine."

There was a tiny groan from the back of the group sitting on the couches, which Severus understood perfectly well: *Great, he's upset with himself so he's taking it out on us.* He raised an eyebrow, and the groan ceased.

Severus consulted a piece of parchment in his hand, frowning as if he were choosing names from it. In reality, it was blank; he had memorized the names he would call, the suspected Death Eaters mingled with others added for concealment purposes. He had learned long ago never to create permanent documents about his students, at least not if he wished to store them in the dungeons.

"Mr. Zabini," he said, "Miss Cravens, Miss Keller, Miss Greengrass, Mr. Goyle, Mr. Todd, Mr. Napier, Miss Marks." He paused and stared directly at Draco, letting his voice become slow. "Mr. Malfoy."

"Sir?" Draco sounded not at all worried, which in reality he had no reason to be. He and Severus had already spoken about this and established the necessity of the deception. He sat up with a bright helpful face that Severus would have found irritating in an ordinary situation. *He is overacting.*

"You have had more problems than most of the others," Severus said, and lowered his voice in the way he did when he was looking to impress, perhaps frighten, but under no circumstances let off. "You will make sure that you come to me before the others do, and that you stay longer. A detention might not be out of order."

Draco folded his arms and glared. "Most of those problems weren't my fault, sir," he insisted.

"Nevertheless," Severus said, "you have let them interfere with your schoolwork and your

personal life, and that is enough for me to be concerned about you." He took a moment to study the other Slytherins skeptically, and then turned his back. "Dismissed."

He could feel Draco pouting at his back, and had to hold back a dark smile. This deception would make it seem as if Draco were removed from his protection, or at least potentially so, and perhaps encourage the poisoner to strike again. It was dangerous, but in this case, Severus intended to provide Draco with a bezoar. If his Legilimency did not identify the culprit first, a careless mistake could.

Then, too, it was entirely possible that the candidates Severus had identified were not the only Death Eaters in his students' ranks. He would welcome a double-baited trap, a safeguard to be sure that he had not left Draco too dangerously exposed.

*In that way, I am different from my son,* he thought as he strode back to his office. *For he will not think twice about taking risks, whereas I move to ensure that no risks are necessary.*

Then he remembered what his life was currently like, especially when he tried to get Harry to speak openly about his emotions, and grimaced.

*At least, that no risks are necessary which do not simply assert themselves as part of the laws of the universe.*

##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### #####
##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### #####
##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### #####

Chapter: 40

Thank you again for all the reviews!

*Chapter Forty—The Hunt Ends*

"You're here." Granger folded her arms and glared at Draco as though he had done something to her personally by falling in love with Harry. "Talk to us. Harry said that you had a case to make."

Draco lifted his head and tried to look as noble and pathetic as he possibly could. Gryffindors fell for that sort of thing all the time. He knew that Harry wouldn't, but he considered Harry practically an honorary Slytherin since he'd spent so much time around Professor Snape and Draco himself. It ought to be an easy thing to trick his friends.

"I've changed my mind about blood," Draco whispered. "I don't think that it determines who you are. I'm not exactly the same as my mother or father, though they would probably want to think I was. That means that I have to reconsider whether other people are defined by their blood. And I've decided that they aren't."

It wasn't as raw as the words that he had given Harry, but he thought it was more eloquent, which meant no one could possibly disapprove of it. Harry gave him a sweet smile as though confirming that thought.

Granger, of course, wasn't impressed. She put her hands on her hips and stared at Draco. "Do you think I should die?" she asked.

"I told you, I've changed my mind about blood," Draco said, annoyed to find that his words made less impression than he'd hoped. Of course, he should have remembered that another trait of Gryffindors was their indifference to or suspicion against Slytherin words. "And you're Harry's friend. I wouldn't want you to die because your death would hurt him."

Harry squeezed his shoulder in approval, but Weasley said, with the air of someone pouncing on a traitorous word, "So you don't care about her as a person. You just care because she's Harry's friend!"

*Idiot. There's a simple counterargument to that.* Draco turned his head. Granger had ventured nearer to him than Weasley had. The Weasel seemed content to stand in the back of the room and stare at him as if he were doing something wrong just by breathing.

"Do you care about me at all?" Draco asked. "As a person? Or do you only care because Harry's dating me? Would you have given a thought to me otherwise, or cared when the Dark Lord killed my father?"

Weasley scowled. "You could call him by his name, you know, instead of the Dark Lord. It's not like you should still be bloody loyal to him, with everyone he's done to you."

Draco turned away without speaking and fastened his attention on Granger. "Well? Do you care about me as an individual?"

"No," Granger said, and had the sense to look uncomfortable and embarrassed about it, given Weasley's argument. "But I still think you should realize that, if you're really Harry's boyfriend—"

"He really is," Harry said, in a tone that brooked no argument.

"Then you should realize we care about each other deeply," Granger finished. "And you'll have to do the same thing."

"Of course," Draco said. "You first."

Granger frowned. "I'm willing to do that. But you can't expect me to start caring about you all at once, given our past."

"Then you can't expect the same thing out of me, either," Draco said.

"Harry, do you *have* to date him?" Weasley asked suddenly, leaning forwards and speaking in a hoarse whisper as if he assumed that Draco would have to stop listening if he wanted him to. "I mean, there are plenty of other people you could have. Even other boys, if you're really bent."

Draco ground his teeth so that he wouldn't say something unfortunate, and Harry answered in the gap. "Draco is the one I want," he said. "The one I'm in love with. I know that you don't like him, Ron, but at least you're making the effort to get along with him, and I'm happy that you are."

Draco would have sniffed in incredulity, but he kept silent, because he saw the way Weasley's face lit up, and he understood. Harry was using a very Slytherin tactic, praising Weasley for something he hadn't actually done yet, and making him more likely to continue the pleasing behavior as a result. It worked, too. Draco's father had used it on him when he was a child, until he learned to recognize it. Given Weasley's level of mental development, it was a trick that would probably always work on him.

"All right, mate," Weasley said. "If you're sure."

Granger still looked dubiously back and forth between them. "I don't know," she said. "Are you *sure*, Harry?"

Draco felt a tremor of irritation run through Harry, who seemed to think that Granger should accept Draco if her best friend and boyfriend had already accepted him, but he just nodded and smiled. "Yes, Hermione."

Granger uttered a long-suffering sigh, then nodded at Draco and marched out of the room. Weasley followed her, with one apologetic glance at Harry and an ostentatious ignoring of Draco. Draco snorted as the door closed behind them. "You're willing to take very little from them," he said.

"They've been my friends for a long time," Harry said. "And I did treat them badly earlier this year, when I practically ignored them because you were more interesting and training in Defense was more interesting, and I was trying to figure out how to hide the secrets about the bloodline curse and my heritage." He sighed and leaned against the wall. "It's not a lot, but then, I don't think we can just begin with a lot. If we could, they would have been more accepting of you in the first place."

Draco nodded reluctant concession to that, and then leaned in and kissed Harry. Harry became interested at once, and wrapped an arm around Draco's shoulders, turning his head to the side so that he could control the kiss more easily.

Draco grinned, smug in the knowledge that he could command, and get, a lot more from Harry than his friends could.

"I haven't been having problems, Professor."

Zabini spoke with an almost charming eagerness in his voice, as though he wanted to spare Severus the burden of having to worry about him. Severus simply nodded, said, "I will be the judge of that," and held out his hand expectantly.

Zabini placed his most recent essay for Transfiguration in it, with a slight scowl. It had always been his poorest subject. Severus read over it, frowning when he noticed several misspelled words and infelicitous sentences that he would have taken off points for. *Minerva is too kind even to the Slytherin students. She will not scold them when they make mistakes, and then she has only herself to blame for the results.*

"It seems to me as though you have problems here," he remarked, and looked up sternly over the edge of the parchment into the boy's eyes. "Do you call this a good essay, Mr. Zabini, in all seriousness?"

Zabini shifted back in his chair and looked defensive. In the meantime, Severus went smoothly into his head, voicing *Legilimens* mentally. Zabini was one of the few whom he had been worried about discovering his Legilimency, but with his mind focused on something else, he was less likely to sense it.

He discovered in two seconds that the boy had a Dark Mark, in imitation of his father—or the man he believed his father to have been, a minor Death Eater who had disappeared during the first war. Zabini believed he had died heroically. Severus himself was never sure if Hannibal Zabini had deserted, died on a raid, or been killed by his wife. He was not the sort of man that one spent much time noticing.

He also discovered that Zabini would as soon have thought of cutting the moon out of the sky as of hurting Draco.

Severus withdrew thoughtfully from the boy's mind. Draco might have a more loyal friend in this one Slytherin than he had known existed, and the Dark Lord a less loyal soldier. *I shall have to plant some doubts in Zabini's mind and see if they sprout. Whether he realizes it or not, the living have more influence over him than the dead.*

"Sir?" Zabini demanded. Severus knew that the boy had not said something or he would have heard the echoes of the words in his ears, but he appeared to think that the long silence, during which Severus peered at him, was still damning.

"I have asked your opinion," Severus said, and held up the essay. "Is this a well-written piece of work?"

Zabini shifted, gripped the edges of his chair, and ended up scowling at the floor instead of answering. Severus was pleased to see that one of his students, at least, recognized when it was useless to lie.

*Another strike against his having been the one who injured Draco.*

"No, sir," Zabini said at last. "But I don't do well in Transfiguration, and McGonagall isn't going to help me." He lifted his head, peered at Severus, and then sat up further, seeming to understand from Severus's neutral expression that he wasn't going to get into trouble for criticizing another professor. "I asked, sir. I did. I went to her office and talked to her about it, and she said that she couldn't do anything about a lack of natural talent."

Severus fought to keep his lips from twitching. He could hear the very tone in which Minerva would pronounce the words. And she had not meant it maliciously—she had said the same thing to others when Severus was a student at Hogwarts, mostly those who had wanted careers that involved Transfiguration in some capacity—but it could be heard that way by those who expected praise.

"You may not do well in Transfiguration," said Severus. "Helping you with the practical work is beyond my purview." Zabini nodded, his mouth tight, as if he had already guessed that but didn't like to hear it confirmed. "But that is no reason to write less than perfect essays. I know that you can write, having had you in my classes. You will do Slytherin House proud with your performance in the parts of the classes that you can master, do you understand me?"

Zabini bowed his head and muttered something, but from the tone of his voice, Severus was sure it was agreement and not defiance.

He let the boy slide down from his chair and get almost to the door before he added, "And Mr. Zabini?"

Zabini turned back and looked at him. Severus gave him a look that would have many undertones when Zabini thought about it later, though what undertones he found most prominent and which ones he didn't would depend on his individual preferences.

"Consider carefully," Severus said, "whether you want to live all your life in the shadow of others' accomplishments, or make your own. While you might do poorly at the practical work in Transfiguration, I know you have a talent for Charms."

He paused, and when Zabini lingered to stare at him, he added, "Dismissed."

Zabini swallowed, nodded, and went, his eyes large and dazed. Severus sincerely hoped it would at least give him an option to think about.

While he hadn't yet found the poisoner, a rate of progress that displeased him, he had at least begun to reconnect with his House.

Harry stared at the piece of parchment that had come to him *in* his food, a part of the crust of the bread. He'd been damn lucky he hadn't swallowed it, or choked when he was pulling it out of his

mouth.

Or, for that matter, that he hadn't attracted Hermione's attention. She would have wanted to know what was written on the paper whether or not she'd seen the way it arrived; writing always fascinated her like that. Luckily, she was interrogating Ron down at the other end of the table and didn't appear to notice.

Harry laid the square of paper on his knee and waited until he was *sure* that Hermione was deep in the midst of scolding Ron for chewing with his mouth open. Then he unfolded it.

Despite the spots of moisture from his mouth and a few traces of food, the words on the parchment were clear enough.

*Harry, I would appreciate it if you would come to my office alone this evening. I have many things to say to you.*

*Albus Dumbledore.*

Harry shivered and felt sweat break out on his palms. He kept from looking up at Dumbledore as he folded the piece of parchment with a few hard presses of his hands. *Then* he looked up at him. He found Dumbledore smiling and nodding, one hand stroking his beard as though he assumed Harry's answer would be yes.

Harry bowed his head back to his plate and kept eating. The food didn't taste that good, but the Dursleys had taught him not to waste it when he did get it. If he was really upset, he just avoided meals altogether.

When he stood, he kept his eyes carefully away from the high table and headed to his classes with a ringing head and a sore heart. How was he supposed to know what was best? Maybe Dumbledore did have information that was vital to the war, and Harry was being stupid and childish by not going to him. It seemed like that, sometimes.

But then Harry's spine straightened, and he found himself remembering what Dumbledore had done to him, and almost done, and kept from him, and consented to.

*No. If it was really important, then he would tell me straight out, and he wouldn't say that I had to come alone. He's already admitted that he knows I would tell everything to Draco, or at least my friends, so why does he have to put up this pretense of secrecy?*

By the time he got to Defense, Harry had made his decision. He wasn't going to Dumbledore.

And when he could, he would go to Snape and tell him about the note.

He would tell Draco, too, but at the moment he wanted an adult who would tell him whether *he* was acting childish, or whether it was Dumbledore. He knew Draco was on his side no matter

what, but he trusted Snape to give him the truth.

Severus sighed and motioned Monica Cravens to take a seat in front of him. So far, his investigations had produced nothing except the possible chance to influence other minds like those of Blaise Zabini. He had found other Death Eaters among those he had not thought were Marked, but no one who had been ordered to poison Draco. He was beginning to wonder if he must look for the poisoner among the teachers, who would also have the skills necessary to prepare the Acromantula's Bite, or perhaps in a Ravenclaw who was jealous of Draco's Potions skills.

Miss Cravens took a chair in front of him and peered at him once before shyly ducking her head. Severus kept from rolling his eyes with a monumental effort. He had long thought that Miss Cravens should have been Sorted into Hufflepuff instead. She had her share of cunning and ambition, but they were both low—the sort of cunning required to get out from under a teacher's scolding, but unlikely to help her succeed later in life.

"I haven't been able to bring any essays with poor marks the way you asked me to, Professor," she said timidly. "I don't have any with poor marks. All my professors say I'm doing extremely well."

And perhaps she was, Severus thought. At least Cravens was able to memorize information when she knew it was vital, as for an exam—thought she often let it sift out again afterwards. "Then why not decide what you wish to tell me about your recent performance in class," he suggested, while he picked up one of the papers that lay in front of him, "while I mark these essays by students less gifted than yourself."

Cravens didn't seem to notice the sarcasm. She smiled at him, and then bit her lip and stared vaguely at the far wall, thinking.

"Well, let's see," she murmured, and her fingers moved over each other as if she had to count off the days on which exciting things had happened to her.

Severus muffled his snort and drew his wand under his desk. A non-verbal *Legilimens*, and he was moving into the depths of Miss Cravens's mind.

Nothing, nothing, and nothing, again. It seemed the girl never thought of anything from one end of the day to the other but dress robes, marks, her giggling friends, and whether she would be married two or three years after she left Hogwarts. Severus started to draw back in disgust.

Something sizzled past his shoulder.

Long years of being in battle situations, or being likely to be in a battle situation at any moment, made Severus react the right way. He dropped to the floor, behind the shelter of the desk, and locked the door so that Cravens could not retreat. Then he assessed his wound. It amounted to nothing in the end but a singe along his shoulder, which his robes had mostly protected him

from.

Then he understood what had happened. Cravens had been maintaining Occlumency walls against him, and they were good enough that the casual probe that was all Severus dared risk would have found nothing. But she had also sensed his Legilimency, and she had reacted with panic. Severus might never have known anything if she had managed to cling to her temper and common sense.

He rose from behind the desk and saw Cravens standing in the center of the room, staring at him with frank appraisal. That made her look very different from the mindless, giggling little girl he had thought her.

"I didn't think you would find out," Cravens said simply, and then lashed her arm forwards and said two short, low words that he didn't recognize, moving so fast he couldn't think of a counter.

The room turned inside-out. Patches of black and golden light swam in front of Severus's eyes, and he felt himself tumble away from his feet. He thought he had lost his grip on his wand, but he didn't know that for certain because he could no longer feel his hand. Sick pain ran through his body, and he choked, his arms striking out uselessly at the air.

Cravens laughed. He could still hear that sound, though the rest of his senses were entirely consumed by the strange vision she had thrown him into. "I hope you have fun," she said. "The spell lasts for several hours, and then all I'll need to tell anyone is that I found you like this." Severus heard the sound of her footsteps as she turned towards the door.

*Fool.* Severus had been confident he could handle any threat. He had never once considered what would happen if the Dark Lord had entrusted his young Death Eaters with the knowledge of Dark Arts spells that Severus did not possess and did not know how to counter.

He heard Cravens struggling with the locking spells on the door, but he doubted that they would delay her for long. He tried to orient himself by the sounds, focusing on the shelves where he kept potions that might, possibly, counter spells like this one.

Then he heard a knock from the outside, and froze. No one was supposed to intrude on him for at least another hour, the amount of time that he was giving to these interviews with his students.

He did the only thing he could, the only thing that might help him, taking advantage of Cravens's small pause as she had taken advantage of his, and cried out a warning.

Harry knocked again on Snape's door, impatient. He should at least have said something, even if it was just a warning to leave because he was engaged in a detention or intense marking. Keeping the door shut like this almost made Harry wonder if he was asleep.

Then Snape shouted. Harry thought the word was "Danger!" but it didn't really matter. He had already stepped back from the door and had his wand in his hand.

Part of the door turned bright golden in a circle, and then lashed out at him in a thin line of fire. Harry squeaked and ducked. He thought his hair was on fire, but he rolled on the stone floor, and the flames went out.

"For Merlin's sake," said someone through the hole that now occupied the center of the door, and Harry saw a wand realigning itself to point at him.

He didn't think that would be Snape, unless Snape had been possessed by Voldemort or something like that. Harry surged back to his feet, pointed his own wand, and shouted, "*Condocefacio!*"

The wand vanished. Harry heard the snap of ropes, or at least what should be ropes if the spell was working the right way, before someone began to yelp.

*Good. She's at least distracted.* Harry charged the door and rammed his shoulder into it, casting a few *Finites* at the same time. The door popped open.

In the center of the room was a girl in Slytherin robes whom he didn't know, her arms and her ankles tied together in the middle of her back, her wand lying on the floor next to her. Harry smiled grimly. He'd found the Learning by Example spell in an old Defense textbook in the Hogwarts library, one not used any longer. The idea was to tie someone in such complicated knots that they couldn't be undone by cutting and to take their wand away at the same time, until they learned by sheer necessity to use wandless magic to free themselves.

Snape was stumbling around near the girl.

Harry stepped up next to him and said, "*Finite Incantatem*." Snape didn't stop stumbling, so Harry knew the spell he was under must be worse than usual. He told himself not to panic and said, "What do you need, sir?"

Snape stiffened a moment, as if he hated that it was Harry who had come to rescue him instead of someone else, and then reached out a trembling hand. Harry took it and placed it firmly on his shoulder, then led him towards a shelf and put a certain potion in his hand at Snape's whispered instructions. He probably didn't want the student who'd hurt him to hear, Harry thought.

Or maybe he was just humiliated. Harry made sure to be looking away when Snape swallowed the potion and came back to normal, just in case having someone meet his eyes would embarrass him even more.

Snape coughed several times, then intoned a sleeping spell. Harry saw the girl in Slytherin robes slump down and start snoring. He sighed and looked up at his father (it made his insides squirm sometimes to think about that name, but he thought it all the same). "Are you all right, sir?"

Snape nodded with a grunt. He was still staring at the girl, and there was an expression on his

face that made Harry shudder. He'd thought Snape got angry at *him*, but clearly, that was nothing but practice.

Then Snape said, "I have found, at the very least, a Death Eater in the school, and from her desperation to protect her secrets, she may be the one who poisoned Draco as well." He looked at Harry, and the hand that he still had on his shoulder, which he'd been using for support so far, tightened. "Why did you happen to be here just at this time?"

"Because I had something I wanted to talk to you about," Harry said. He kept his voice low, like Snape's. Someone could come along the corridor and listen at the door. "And this happened to me because things like this happen to me. That's just how it *is*," he added, a bit defensively, when Snape went on looking at him.

Snape finally shut his eyes, nodded, and said, "As long as you were not hurt."

"No," Harry said, and helped Snape sit down and then went to firecall Professor McGonagall on his instructions, trying not to think about how hard Snape had held him for a moment.

Or the way his arms had twitched, as if he wanted to hug Harry close to him, but didn't quite dare.

##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### #####
##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### #####
##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### #####

Chapter: 41

Thank you again for all the reviews!

*Chapter Forty-One—Driving Purpose*

"We should take her to Dumbledore."

Minerva stood in the center of Severus's chambers, her hands on her hips, her face hard and cold with less compassion than Severus would have thought she would possess for any student. Of course, the moment Miss Cravens had attacked him, she had crossed the line from being a student to being an enemy. Perhaps that was the way Minerva saw the matter as well.

Severus sipped from the glass of brandy Minerva had insisted he have and watched Harry face his Head of House down.

"No," Harry said. "I don't trust him anymore." He shook his head when Minerva gave him a stern glance. "And no, Professor McGonagall, I can't tell you why. But I think it would probably come out that she was a Slytherin before anything else, and then things would be worse for the other

Slytherin students. She has to be taken away, I know that. But I want to control the way everyone finds out."

That was entirely Harry's strategy. There were words in that speech which made Severus wince. He would have spoken a bit more softly, and he would have given a few convincing half-hints which would make Minerva less likely to question his suspicions of the Headmaster.

On the other hand, Minerva had a fondness for Harry that was on his side in any argument he might have with the old lioness. Though she was fairer to Severus than most of his colleagues, Severus could not fool himself into thinking that Minerva *liked* him. She sighed now, and softened, and she would never have done that for a Slytherin.

"You're sure, Harry?" she asked, with one more distrustful glance at Severus, as if she suspected him of influencing the boy against the Headmaster. Severus sneered at her and nodded to Harry, bidding her look where her eyes would be most useful.

"Yes, ma'am," Harry said, perhaps wanting to show that he could respect adults who did something to *deserve* that respect. "I've thought about it. Can you contact the Aurors, please? Tell them that a professor was attacked, but he managed to stop the student responsible. And then the other details can come out slowly."

"That leaves out anything about you," Minerva said slowly.

"Yes," Harry replied. His face was stubborn, those green eyes squinted in a way Severus knew well. "The papers would just want to report *that* if they heard about me. I don't care to have my story take over a page that should be about Death Eaters in the school and someone arrested because she tried to hurt someone else. So I want to stay out of it."

"Permanently?" Minerva asked, peering over her glasses as if she were trying to tell who this child was and what he had done with Harry Potter.

*Not that his name is Potter, if you knew the truth.* Severus contented himself with another sip of brandy rather than speaking, though. Harry would hardly thank him if he did.

"Yeah," Harry said. "Like I said, I thought about it. I don't want everyone to fuss over me. I wasn't hurt."

Minerva sighed, but the sound was proud rather than incredulous. For a moment, she let her hand drop on Harry's shoulder, and then she turned and nodded to Severus. "I will contact the Aurors," she said. Monica Cravens was already drifting in the air in front of her, still bound in the ropes that Harry had conjured, and still thoroughly asleep. "If they want to contact you, what should I say?"

"That I am resting," Severus said, having thought about what part he would play in this deception already. "If they need me to make a statement, I will. But I imagine they will be little interested,"

he added. "I have dealt with the Aurors before, and they were not much interested then." He sneered.

"That situation was different," Minerva said.

"Aurors have long memories, and so do I," Severus said coldly.

Harry looked thoughtfully at him for some moments. Minerva rolled her eyes and appeared to give in, though Severus suspected that had only happened because Harry had specifically asked. "As you will. If you change your mind, tell me." She hesitated, then added, "And I still think that Albus should hear of this. He probably will anyway, you realize. He has ways of learning what goes on in this school."

"You sound desperately like someone trying to warn us of an evil Dark Lord's powers," Severus drawled. "Go away, will you?"

That was enough to make Minerva depart through the Floo connection, and Cravens went with her. Severus was just as pleased to see the last of the girl. He was curious about the spell she had cast on him, but he would as soon research that on his own, rather than ask her questions. The idea that she would tell the truth was preposterous in any case, and he already knew that Legilimency was difficult when employed against her.

"Do you mind?"

Severus turned and stared at Harry. He had been so deep in his thoughts that he owned he might have accidentally ignored a question, but he had not thought there was any reason for Harry to use that tone.

Then he realized that Harry's eyes were anxious, along with his voice, and not annoyed. Severus shook his head, certain he had missed something. "Do I mind what?"

"Do you mind that I'm probably going to be an Auror?" Harry watched him, measuring slight movements and sounds and other metrics invisible to Severus. While he had been a wary child and served a master who repaid cautious attention, he still did not know exactly what abuse Harry had endured. "Since you hate them, and everything."

Severus met his son's eyes and sat there for a moment until the shock of finding himself in this position wore off. He sometimes had to lie awake in bed for several minutes each morning before he remembered that it was not a dream that he had a son. "Of course not."

Harry frowned at him. "Why not?"

"Because you are my son," Severus said. He wondered how he was to explain anything to that uncomprehending stare. Harry had never learned that people might make differences and exceptions to their usual prejudices because he was family. Because he was the Boy-Who-Lived,

yes, but Severus hoped that he knew better than to compare the two situations. "Because I know that you will not resemble the other Aurors. If I had been tortured by a Potions master, and was not one myself, I would still accept it if you desired to become one. Your ambitions do not align you with them in my mind."

Harry nodded slowly, peering at him all the while, as if he thought Severus would change his mind in a few minutes and he didn't want to miss it when it happened. Then he shook his head and said, "There was another reason I didn't want McGonagall to contact Dumbledore." He reached into a pocket and pulled out a crumpled-looking bit of paper, which he held out to Severus.

Severus read the note quietly, and then looked up at Harry. His face must have held something he would have preferred to subdue, because Harry flinched and took a step back. Severus shook his head at himself in irritation and kept his voice as quiet as possible. "How did you get this? Did you show it to anyone else?"

"It came in my food," Harry said. "Part of a piece of bread. And I brought it to you because I thought Draco would probably tell me I was right no matter what, but you would tell me whether it was stupid not to go to Dumbledore's office." He was twisting his hands together, and Severus had a sudden strong flash of what he would have looked like when he was younger and made the same gesture. "I mean—he does have valuable information. Maybe I'm resenting what he did too much."

"No," Severus said, and at least he thought his voice was not a bark, because it produced no flinch in Harry this time. "You did exactly right."

Harry took a deep breath, and a flush colored his cheeks. Severus also did not think it was his imagination that Harry stood a little taller.

*Are compliments that rare in his world?* Severus thought, and then answered himself out of the knowledge he possessed of his son, which was still far too scanty. *Sincere ones are.*

"Good," Harry said. "But—well, I don't know if I trust anything he says, but he seemed pretty serious about luring Voldemort in to attack the school. That means that we have to be ready to face him when he comes." He hesitated again, bracing his shoulders as if to push against an immovable wall, and then said in almost a whisper, "That means we have to finish the Entwining Potion, sir, doesn't it?"

"Yes," Severus said, and if Harry frowned at him curiously, Severus himself knew the emotions weighing his voice down were affection and grief. He set the glass of brandy aside and leaned forwards. "Choose the time."

Harry half-shut his eyes, a gesture that made Severus wonder if he would have preferred to have the time fixed for him. But control over the date was the only control Severus could offer him in this situation. He waited, and Harry finally whispered, "Saturday. Saturday evening. No one will

notice if I look sleepy during the evening and say I'm going up to my room after I get out of—out of it."

"Very well," Severus said, simultaneously proud and saddened. "It will be your privilege to choose who is in attendance. I believe you will wish Draco, but what about Weasley and Granger?"

Harry swallowed. "I'd like them to, but if you think they'd interfere—"

"I will put them behind a barrier, if necessary," Severus said. "I think you need their presence."

Harry nodded, and then put his head in his arms. Severus hesitated, wondering if he needed the touch of a friendly hand. There was no doubt that Draco would embrace him if he was here.

But Severus was not Draco, and Draco was not his son. Before he had made up his mind about touching Harry, Harry had lifted his head, nodded to him, and gone to the door. His steps were a little unsteady, but they became firmer as Severus watched him, and he opened the door and shut it quietly behind him.

Severus shut his eyes tightly and leaned his head against the back of the chair. There were many things he could do. He could check on the dose of the Entwining Potion that would *have* to work, because Severus couldn't stand to put Harry through the pain a third time. He could read up on spells similar to the one that Cravens had used on him and try to figure out which it had been. He could take a pain potion and go to bed, which perhaps would be the most sensible course.

Instead, he sat there, unmoving.

Harry curled up. He was in a little room off the main second floor corridor, which he thought one of the caretakers who was better than Filch must have kept cleaning supplies in once. There was still a faint smell of something strong and acid.

He concentrated on that, or tried to, and not on the fate he would be walking down to the dungeons on Saturday to meet.

Of course, his mind looped right back to the subject he most wanted to discourage it from thinking of.

Harry uttered a breathless whimper, and then told himself he was being an idiot. Why should he be *so* afraid of this? It wasn't as though he would die. He would come out on the other side of the pain, and then the Horcrux would be gone, and he could finally fight Voldemort with a clear conscience and have a chance of winning.

Everything was going to be wonderful.

*After Saturday.*

Harry tried to slow his breathing. If he couldn't think about something else, at least he could face this without panicking. What kind of hero would he be if he panicked? Or what kind of person, he amended, remembering that he had decided he wanted to do more than play the hero now. There were plenty of people who had to go through worse things every day. Dumbledore had probably felt worse when he thought that he would have to kill Harry.

Then Harry laughed in spite of himself. He knew by the violent resentment that flared to life in his heart like an ember in open air that he still wasn't ready to forgive Dumbledore for that, or even joke about it.

"I'm glad to hear you laugh. But I would have felt better if I could have found you earlier."

Harry looked up with a start. Draco stood in front of him, shaking his head. His eyes were bright, and so was his smile, in the same way a steel trap was bright. Harry cleared his throat and shifted uneasily.

"Sorry," he said. "But something happened."

"I know that," Draco said, stepping up to Harry with a quick motion, as if he was afraid that Harry would vanish again, and wrapping his arms around him. "Something *always* happens to you when I'm not around to watch you. What was it this time?"

Harry leaned his head on Draco's shoulder and told him about Monica Cravens and Dumbledore's note and the way that he'd had to help save Snape. As he spoke, the fear and the pain seemed to run out of him as if he'd dumped a heavy cup of water he was holding. When he finished, he blinked in wonder. "I feel a lot better now," he said.

"Of course you do," Draco said, voice tight with something that might have been fury or exasperation. His arms closed around Harry even harder, until Harry squeaked and pushed at them so he could breathe, and his voice was harsh. "You should have told me all your troubles in the first place, instead of waiting."

"I didn't know where you were." Harry sniffed the back of Draco's neck and then licked it.

Draco squeaked in turn. "Harry, we are trying to have a *serious* conversation," he said. "Don't do things like that."

"But I already know everything you're going to say," Harry said innocently, lifting Draco's hair out of the way so he could reach his skin better. "And I'll agree and look at you with a mournful expression. But really, it's much better to let me feel how happy I am now that I've told you the truth instead of making me feel bitter because you gave me a scolding. Don't you agree?" he added, and tried another lick.

"Someone has to be the adult here," Draco said, struggling to keep his eyes open and his voice

stern. Since he broke into a moan on the last word, that didn't sound as mature and stern as he probably meant to be.

"This is very adult," Harry said, and licked again.

They didn't get much done that night, unless Harry going back to Gryffindor Tower and sleeping several restful hours, unbroken by nightmares, counted as "doing something." But he enjoyed it all the same.

"What's *Malfoy* doing here?"

Draco kept a distrustful eye on Weasley and Granger as they walked into Professor Snape's office, but he said nothing. It would make him look like the better person if he didn't, and anyway, Harry was already snapping, his voice husky with irritation. Irritation might keep his mind off what was coming.

"He's here because I'm dating him, and I love him, and I trust him," Harry said. "Really, I don't know why this is so hard for you to grasp."

Granger put a hand on Weasley's arm, but Draco knew her expression. She was about to try her own "reasonable" form of argument and see if it made a dent in Harry's determination. Draco didn't know if he would be able to keep silent under words that he found more lacerating because they weren't emerging from someone so obviously inferior as a Weasley.

Luckily, Professor Snape interfered by that point.

"I will have no quarreling," he snapped, as he pointed his wand at a chair and Transfigured several of its cushion into thicker and softer ones. "Anyone who wishes can leave. Anyone who wishes to support my son can stay." He whirled around and stared at Granger and Weasley with a hostility that left Draco breathless.

Granger switched her gaze to him instead, and looked the way Draco had sometimes seen her look when she was intently reading a book about a subject new to her. Most likely, she was trying to envision the professor as Harry's father. Weasley opened his mouth, closed it again, and muttered something sullen. That left Harry and Draco able to get further into the office and Draco to take up the best position next to the chair.

Harry stood in front of the chair for long moments. He was staring steadily at it, and to see him from the back, you would think he wasn't afraid at all. But Draco could see the pale sheen to his skin and the glazed expression in his eyes.

"It's all right," Draco said, under his breath, leaning forwards until his eyes were an inch from Harry's. He let his breath travel across Harry's lips in a reminder of kisses they couldn't share in front of other people. "I'm right here."

Harry reached out and squeezed his wrist tightly enough to make Draco wince. But at least his eyes were sane again. He climbed into the chair and settled himself with his arms resting on the chair's arms. He almost looked as if he would have preferred to be chained down, but he sat still.

Weasley and Granger came towards them. Granger bit her lip and looked back and forth between Harry and the vial that Professor Snape held. Weasley was trying to push his chin into the air, but he wasn't very successful. Draco hoped for the sake of the entire wizarding world that Weasley wouldn't become an Auror the way he seemed to plan on; Aurors occasionally had to be able to lie.

"You'll be fine, mate," Weasley said quietly. Draco was surprised and impressed in spite of himself. He hadn't thought Weasley would be able to lay his prejudice against Slytherins aside long enough to encourage Harry.

"I hope so," Harry said, and then turned to Snape as if he had forgotten the rest of them existed. Draco took his hand again. Harry squeezed back and opened his mouth to swallow the potion. Draco wondered why Professor Snape was pouring it into his mouth instead of giving Harry the vial, but then thought about the temptation for Harry to smash the vial on the ground, and decided that Snape was probably wise.

Harry stiffened and shut his eyes. A low whine worked its way out of his throat. Draco swallowed and tried to remain calm.

"What does the potion do?" Granger asked.

Draco shot her an angry glance, but didn't say anything when he realized that her fingers were locked in the sleeves of her robe. Asking for information was one way for her to survive stressful situations, he supposed.

"It removes the shard of soul that makes him a Horcrux from his soul," Snape said. His voice was low and calm. Draco could only tell what he felt from the fixed way that his eyes stayed on Harry. "I have tested it once, and the first dose shifted the Horcrux slightly and proved that Harry had no specific allergies to the ingredients of the potion. Now the second dose will close on the piece of the Dark Lord's soul and move it further to the side and out, helped by the way the first dose functioned."

*It isn't only Granger who gets comfort from talking about facts and potions,* Draco thought, with a quick flash of amusement.

Harry howled.

That was what it reminded Draco of: not a scream of pain, but the howl a werewolf would make as it went through its transformation. He had once heard that the pain of the change was so intense that werewolves survived it only because it was condensed into a single moment, not spread out over several.

But from the sounds Harry was making, this pain was continuous. Draco thought Harry would break his wrist from the way he was pressing down. That was almost the only movement Harry made, though. He sat still in the chair, not even turning his head from side to side. Draco looked into his eyes, which were open, and then away again.

Professor Snape dropped to one knee and began to murmur something. Draco had no idea if it was comforting words or some spell that was meant to ease the pain, if it could be eased; the professor kept his voice too low for Draco to hear.

A startling, unnatural light flared around Harry's body. Draco caught his breath and stared at Professor Snape. "That didn't happen the first time," he said. "Did it?" He had to admit, the time with the first Entwining Potion was filled with so many wishes that Harry's torment would *stop* that he couldn't be sure he remembered it accurately.

"No," Snape said, his voice strained. "Harry's magic is fighting the assault on his soul that the potion makes."

"The assault on his *soul*?" Weasley snapped, and started to draw his wand with an unfortunately heroic movement. "What did you *do* to him?"

Granger moved in front of him, tears so brilliant in her eyes that they never seemed to actually fall. "It's the only way, Ron!" she shouted, over the sound of Harry's screams. "This *has* to work, or else Harry will never be able to face Voldemort!"

In the midst of everything, Draco found room for a spark of hilarity that the name made Weasley, and Professor Snape, and Draco himself, flinch.

Harry's voice died into a high, shrill sob of despair. Draco heard something pop in his arm where Harry held it, but he didn't feel it. His attention was split between the way Harry sat stiff and quiet in the chair and the expression on Professor Snape's face, as though he were watching all his Potions books being destroyed before his eyes.

Then a black mist obscured Harry's head.

Draco flinched back in revulsion at the vision he saw, which he never knew the source of, or even whether or not it was real. He saw a red-golden snake wrapped around a black one, eating it alive. The black snake tried frantically to escape, but the red-golden one swallowed it relentlessly, shining like fire all the while. When the tail of the black one vanished, the red-golden one shone in the air for a moment before it melted.

Harry opened his mouth and vomited up a sticky, emerald-green mass of potion. Snape snatched him up and held him close, not minding the shining stain on his robe at all. He closed his eyes, and Draco had to turn away from the expression of profound relief on his face.

Granger surged forwards and did what she could to hug Harry's foot around Snape's body. Weasley came up behind her, pale and solemn. Draco rearranged himself so that he could reach one of Harry's dangling arms.

Professor Snape turned away from them all, sheltering Harry with his body. Granger and Weasley recoiled from what they saw in his face; Draco didn't, but he did put his hands behind his back. He thought touching Harry might not be a good idea right now.

"The Horcrux is gone," Professor Snape said. Draco thought he would add something about how they could defeat the Dark Lord now, but instead his words were little different from a snarl when he continued, "And *he* is hurt. I am taking him with me."

He opened the office door and disappeared down the corridor in what Draco knew would be the direction of his private quarters. Weasley and Granger showed more sense than he'd dreamed they had and didn't try to follow. Instead, they looked at each other, and then Granger leaned on Weasley and Weasley put his arm around her.

"He really is Harry's dad," Weasley muttered.

Any moment, Draco told himself, he would laugh at Weasley's tone of disbelief.

Any moment now.

Really.

*Maybe when I can forget what Harry looked like as he suffered.*

##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### #####
##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### #####
##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### #####

Chapter: 42

Thank you again for all the reviews!

*Chapter Forty-Two—The Revelation of Emotions*

Harry opened his eyes slowly. He was lying on a bed, he knew that from the softness beneath him, but he couldn't hear the familiar grumbling and sighing he should have been able to hear from his roommates. That told him he couldn't be in Gryffindor Tower.

*Unless I slept late and everyone else is in the Great Hall already,* Harry thought, and gave a long, deep yawn as he sat up in bed and reached for his glasses.

"Are you well?"

Startled, Harry turned towards the sound, blinking all the while. His sight was so furry without his glasses that it took him a minute to connect the sight of a black blob with the voice. Snape was right next to him, and he seemed to be the one who had brought Harry to this place. Looking around, Harry could see enough stone to know this really wasn't his room at Gryffindor Tower, which looked more cheerful.

"Er, I think so?" Harry stretched out his arm sand felt lingering twinges. He wondered what he'd been doing to make him feel like that, and why Snape was concerned instead of scolding him for taking chances with his life.

Then he remembered what he had been through.

Harry clamped his teeth together to keep from whimpering. The memory of the pain was nearly as bad as the pain had been. He really thought he would be ripped apart that time, with no reprieve.

But he hadn't been. Which meant he should stop shaking and acting as though he hadn't survived.

"I'll be fine," he said.

Snape held something out. Harry felt the round edges of his glasses and took them gratefully, sliding them onto his face. That brought the room into focus, and he realized he was in a single bed with pillows so thick that he didn't know how he hadn't drowned in them and sleek dark sheets. The walls were all stone, except for the torch sconces. Apparently, Snape didn't think that he should hang tapestries on the walls to soften them.

And apparently Snape didn't want to leave him to look at his surroundings in peace.

"What do you remember?" he insisted, and extended a Potions vial. Harry took it reluctantly, trying to ignore the temptation to hold his nose as he gulped it down. It was a blue potion he didn't recognize, and it stopped the twinges in his muscles. He nodded his thanks to Snape before he tried to answer his question.

"The pain." The words stuck in Harry's throat, and he coughed. *You're getting over it. And the Horcrux is gone—I think.* "Did the potion work?" he demanded suddenly, shuddering when he thought of what might happen if the answer was "no."

Snape put a hand on his shoulder. Harry wondered where he could want to guide Harry when he was in bed, and then realized that Snape was practically stroking him, his palm flat, the motion soothing. Harry blinked and stared at him. If he stretched his imagination, he supposed he could imagine that Snape was capable of such gestures, but he wouldn't have been able to imagine that Snape would *want* to make them.

"It did," Snape said, and his voice was deep and, in its own way, as soothing as the stroke of his hand. "I would have told you right away if it had not."

Harry closed his eyes and nodded. He had expected to feel a sense of enormous freedom when his burden was gone, but he didn't. Maybe that would have to wait until he had more time to absorb the news of the potion's actually working.

"Thank you, sir," he said. He started to swing his legs towards the edge of the bed. He should probably go back to Gryffindor Tower and reassure Ron and Hermione, he thought, since there was no way Snape would have permitted them to come into his private quarters. And where was Draco? If anyone would have accompanied him besides Snape, surely it would be Draco.

Snape immediately pressed him backwards into the pillows again, hand acting in a much more familiar way, and scowled at him. "Where are you going?"

Harry blinked at him. "Back to Gryffindor Tower. Or to wherever Draco is right now. Camped outside the door, maybe?" he added, cocking his head so that he could look towards the place where the door must be. "My friends must be worried about me."

Snape leaned so close that Harry had no choice but to become acquainted with every line of his scowl. "And have you not thought that *I* must be worried about you?" he snapped.

"Er," Harry said, and blinked, caught off-guard and trying to decide exactly what Snape meant. "Of course. But you took care of me, and I seem to be all right, with no aftereffects from the potion, so what's the matter?"

Snape closed his eyes and sat there for a minute, not doing anything but breathing, as if that would help him summon up patience to deal with a problem. Harry watched him, feeling his irritation build by the second. He'd been polite to Snape, and he'd asked him for help lately, and he might even have saved his life when Cravens was trying to escape. Harry didn't know what else Snape *wanted*.

"You were in pain," Snape said at last, looking at Harry again. "Such pain as it is not easy to contemplate, and which I expect to haunt your nightmares."

Harry rolled his eyes. "Like *that* hasn't happened before," he said. "Voldemort gives me nightmares all the time."

"This is different," Snape said, and both his hands were on Harry's shoulders now. "This is pain that I myself inflicted on you—"

"Because I asked for it." Harry stared at him. "You're not blaming yourself for *that*, are you? That's stupid! It's just what we had to do to get rid of the Horcrux."

"Nonetheless," Snape said, and his eyes had a peculiar gleam that made Harry suspect he'd better

tread carefully, "I still hurt *my child,* and I would like you to remain in bed until I am absolutely *certain* nothing is wrong with you."

Harry blinked again. The conviction in Snape's voice was firm enough, but Harry still didn't quite see the reason behind it.

"You gave me that potion that cleared up the lingering pain," he said slowly, studying Snape and hoping that he would nod and lean back and do things that made sense. "So nothing hurts now. And I told you, I'm used to the nightmares. So what's the matter? Did something else happen while I was fighting the Entwining Potion that you haven't told me about? Something that affected you?"

Snape closed his eyes and said nothing for long moments. His hands remained in place, though, so Harry decided it would be rude to shrug them off and go away.

Besides, he was curious.

"The aches will return," Snape said softly. "That potion is only temporary, and you should be watched over until we are *sure* that you will not suffer seizures or severe headaches later." He opened his eyes, and Harry winced. There was blended anger and pain in Snape's gaze, and he didn't think it fair that Snape should have to suffer all that over *him*.

"And I had to watch you," Snape said, "writhing in that chair while trying to control that writhing, screaming as though there was a rack in the room that only you could see and feel. I tried to speak soothing words to you, explain what was happening and how sorry I was for it, but of course you couldn't hear me. That—struck me, damaged me, in a way that I cannot explain. I only knew that I had to take you away after that and put you in a room where I could watch over you and be sure that no more harm would come to you."

Harry could envision what Snape said, all too well. He reached up and hesitantly squeezed one of Snape's hands where it held his shoulder.

"Is this another part of you valuing blood family?" he asked. "It doesn't matter that I agreed to take the potion and that there was no other way to get rid of the Horcrux, because you still had to watch me suffer?"

"Yes," Snape said, with a shrill breath of relief that told Harry how relieved Snape was that he understood. "I could watch you undergo torture for the good of the world, torture that you had chosen, and I would still be distressed. I have had the experience already of watching you fight down your pain and smile because it was what others would expect to see, and that hurt me." His voice stuck on the last words, but Harry understood. He knew how hard it would have been for him to say that to someone himself. "You have been a symbol and a slave and a pawn for the wizarding world and the Headmaster." His words chilled then, and his fingers bit into Harry's shoulders until Harry shifted uneasily. Snape at once loosened his grip and nodded as though Harry had made his protest aloud. "That angered me. I would fight for your freedom for pain,

your freedom to make your own decisions, and even your freedom to conceal your secrets. I would have fought for your right to undergo torture by the Entwining Potion, if someone else had opposed it."

He stared into Harry's eyes. "But it is still hard to watch this happen to you."

"Because I've endured so much," Harry said carefully, to make sure he understood, "and you don't want me to endure more."

"Because I care for you," Snape said fiercely, "and no one should be forced to watch someone he cares for suffer, whether that suffering is freely chosen or not."

Harry wanted to flinch and cower against the wall. It would have been easier to do that than to deal with the emotion in Snape's words, and Snape would probably have let him go, apologized for hurting him, and left him to think it over. And then Harry could bury what he had felt just now deep and pretend that it had never happened.

Snape would probably do even that for him, if Harry wanted him to.

And because that was different, because he'd never had an adult who sincerely cared about not hurting him and letting him do what he wanted so close before, Harry decided that he wouldn't force Snape to do that. He *could* have. He had the option. That was reason enough not to.

He carefully lifted his head and studied Snape's face. "All right," he said. "I—can understand that." He paused, then added, "And I don't want you to suffer either. So don't get captured by Voldemort, all right? Because he would probably make me watch while he tortured you. If he knew about the link between us."

Snape's face worked. Harry didn't know if he was trying to say something or just struggling with his emotions. Then he flattened out his hands and went back to stroking Harry's shoulders once more.

"You shall not regret this," he said, so fervently that Harry almost winced again. That sounded like an oath, and he didn't want to think Snape was binding himself to a promise, for Harry's sake, that he wouldn't be able to keep. "This is a change for me, but it will be a change that endures."

Harry nodded. "All right," he said again. He stared at his own hands, and realized that he didn't have the slightest idea of what was supposed to happen next. He sneaked a glance at Snape, but Snape just went on watching him fiercely. "D'you want me to stay in bed, then?" Harry mumbled. "Are you going to treat me the way Aunt Petunia treated Dudley when he was sick?" It was the only standard he had for how you were supposed to act after you'd gone through something an adult considered horrific. Madam Pomfrey had always made him stay in bed in the hospital wing, too, but at least she let him leave when she decided he was fine.

"Certainly not," said Snape, curling his lip. "From what I know of her, she would have treated him as if he was incapable of doing anything for himself, and I shall certainly expect you to feed yourself and get to the bathroom on your own."

Harry gave him an odd look; he knew it was odd, and he couldn't help it. "But what about doing homework?" he asked. "I mean, what should I be doing when I'm in bed?"

"Resting," said Snape, with the kind of finality that made Harry think of some fantasies he'd had of what a bad parent Snape would be. "Eating when I bring you food. Drinking potions when I tell you to." He raised one hand, though Harry hadn't mustered any protest except a single glance of outrage. "Nothing more than that. You are to recover your strength, and excessive activity will not permit you to do that. I will carry any message to your friends that you wish me to in the meantime."

"But…" Harry let his voice trail off when he saw the way Snape stared at him. "It's just that I usually do something when I'm in the hospital wing," he tried to explain. "Homework or reading—" he wondered if Hermione would tell Snape about how little he read, except books on Quidditch "—or, or something like that. It feels lazy not to do anything."

"Rest," said Snape, with that same finality, and swept to the door.

"Won't it look strange if someone finds out that I'm in the dungeons?" Harry called after him, in a last-ditch effort to make this make sense.

"I will tell those who are curious that you injured yourself in detention with me," Snape said, and shut the door.

Harry blinked and lay down.

The pillows were comfortable, he had to admit. It wasn't as though he couldn't sleep.

But the restlessness gnawed the back of his mind, urging him to get up and *move,* to do something to relieve the boredom that would come any minute, and telling him that he didn't have to listen to Snape.

*Except I kind of promised to, when I said that I understood and I cared about him,* Harry decided, and shut his eyes.

The restlessness faded as he thought about it. He had Snape's *permission* to laze around and go to sleep. How often was that going to happen? He would probably keep Harry busy the rest of the school year after he killed Voldemort, making him scrub cauldrons and answer difficult questions in Defense because he didn't want to seem as though he was favoring Harry.

And if he could rest…if he could *really* do whatever he wanted and not feel guilty about it because he should be doing something else…

It felt wonderful.

Harry's breathing evened out, and that was the last thing he remembered.

Severus could not remember when he had last felt so triumphant. Perhaps when he had completed an experimental potion.

He had admitted to Harry the truth of what he felt, and he was still alive. He had won Harry's admission back, and he no longer had to fear that his son hated him.

Harry had survived the Entwining Potion with none of the serious, debilitating side-effects that Severus had almost expected to see.

Someone was knocking at his door. Severus still waited before he went to answer it, because the joy was relentless and personal, and he had to put it somewhere out of sight before he was fit to face someone who would not understand.

The three of them were clustered at the door, of course. Draco was in the lead, but Granger and Weasley pushed against his back as if they assumed it would give way like a barrier of mist and allow them to slip through and into Severus's quarters. Severus arranged his face in his best sneer, and Draco had the sense to step back, which crowded Weasley and Granger to a pleasant further distance.

"We wanted to see him, sir," Draco said, and his voice grew softer when he saw Severus's face. Severus did not think he had seen more than he should have. This was the softness of respect. "That is, if you'll let us."

"You *have* to let us see him," Granger said, proving that she had learned nothing from watching Draco. "It's our right as his friends, and we have to know how he's doing."

"Do you?" Severus asked, and at least the tone of his voice made her calm down and take a good look at him. Weasley blanched.

"Can we please see him, sir?" Granger asked, with more politeness this time, but still a thrust-forwards chin and an anxious tone in the back of her voice. "I just want to make sure that he survived all right."

"He will be fine," Severus said, "with more time, and rest, and several potions that are meant to keep pain away from him and calm the residual aches in his muscles. For the moment, I am sure he would tell you not to worry." He paused, because one of the monitoring charms he had cast in Harry's room had let him know that Harry had slipped into sleep. *Good*. That was both faster and more easily than Severus had expected him to sleep, considering what had happened to him.

"Residual aches?" Weasley spoke as if he didn't know exactly what the words meant, but found

them an excuse for worry all the same. "Then why can't we see him? Madam Pomfrey lets us in to see him in the hospital wing all the time."

"He is *my son*," Severus said, glad that Weasley and Granger both fell back before the force of his voice. "He has agreed that I have a right to protect him. *I* will say when you can see him."

Weasley turned red. Draco opened his mouth, took a careful look at Severus's face, and then closed it again. He had been doing a good deal more observing lately than talking, Severus thought approvingly. At least he had learned to control his immediate impulse to speak, which could only do him good.

Granger said, gently, as if she was talking to someone who spoke a language other than English, "Harry's never had parents. I don't think he would agree to let you take over his life like this." She stepped forwards as though she thought that her words ought to make Severus melt away like ice.

Severus looked at her, and into her. He doubted that the girl meant harm, but she could cause a lot of annoyance without meaning to. And she halted and stared at him as if she found it surprising that she wasn't being allowed access to Harry.

"Come on, Hermione," Weasley whispered, tugging on her arm. "I've seen that look when Mum didn't want us to bother one of my siblings before."

"My parents never tried to keep anyone away from me." Granger pursed her lips and studied Severus.

"Your upbringing was undoubtedly different," Severus said. It was an effort to keep his voice neutral instead of scornful, as he wanted it to be, but he thought Harry would thank him for his restraint later. Draco had told him how resistant Harry's Gryffindor friends were to the thought of Slytherins intruding into his life at all. If Severus could prove that any conflict was their fault, he would hold his ground in Harry's eyes, and perhaps gain more of it. "That does not mean that you have the right to interfere in the way I raise my son."

"He's practically raised already," Granger said, and her suspicious look grew deeper. "He's almost of age."

"*Hermione*," Weasley moaned, perhaps because he better read the expression on Severus's face. "Leave it alone. I'm satisfied he's not hurting Harry. We can see him later. Come on." He tugged at her arm again, and this time managed to move her a few inches before she planted her feet.

"We ignored Harry earlier in the year," she told Severus. "I don't want to do that again. Let me talk to him for one minute, just to be sure that this is really what he wants, and then we'll leave."

"He's asleep," Severus said, and had to admit that he took a mean satisfaction in denying this petty, pushing girl what she wanted. "You can speak to him later. By morning he should be well

enough for visitors."

"But—" Granger began.

"Why would he lie about something like this, Granger?" Draco asked in a bored tone. "After all, all you'll have to do is ask Harry tomorrow if he's telling the truth, and if he isn't, then Harry will distrust Professor Snape for ages. Just leave now. Let's all leave now," he added, as if he had seen the objection forming in Granger's face about being sent away while he stayed behind. "It's enough to know that he's fine." He nodded to Severus and began walking down the corridor.

Weasley sighed in what seemed like relief and started following him. Granger folded her arms and studied Severus.

"Harry has never had anybody to look after him," she said quietly, "except us. If you hurt him…"

Severus felt like laughing. Granger was addressing him as if he were a new boyfriend instead of Harry's father.

"I plan to look after him better than you can ever imagine," he said.

Finally, Granger nodded and began to move slowly down the corridor. Perhaps she looked over her shoulder and made the look threatening, but Severus did not see it, because he had already shut the door and gone back to his wounded son.

Draco sighed as he turned towards the Slytherin common room. He had thought for a minute that Granger and Professor Snape would come to blows.

*Well, considering that, I'm not happy that I have to wait to see Harry, either. But I'm not stupid enough to insult his father about it.*

"Oi, Malfoy!"

Draco turned, automatically drawing his wand. Weasley was behind him, and that was never good news for anyone who didn't have a Gryffindor tie.

But Weasley held up his hands in token of peace—or at least dirty tricks later—and said, "I wanted to say that I believe *him*, and thanks for walking away when you did."

Draco blinked slowly. "You're thanking *me*?" he asked at last, to try and clarify all the emotions swimming in his head.

"Yes." Weasley flushed when Draco stared at him, but continued gamely instead of backing away, which Draco thought would have been his first instinct when confronted with anything this difficult. "Look, Hermione wasn't raised in the wizarding world. She doesn't know what it's like here, why parents have so much control over their kids' lives. Her parents largely let her do what

she wants, and she's more powerful than them, since she has magic. So that's why she was acting that way."

Draco nodded slowly. He could see it as a cultural difference and not a difference of blood, after his talk with Harry. Still… "She's never challenged a professor like that before."

Weasley gave him a wry smile. "No one's ever tried to keep her from seeing Harry before, except Madam Pomfrey, and she accepts that that's a mediwitch's job. But Snape is different. He's never acted like Harry's parent, and she decided that he really wasn't if he couldn't defend himself. Now she understands. All right?"

Draco still thought it was suicidal to challenge Professor Snape on his own ground, but he nodded his acceptance. Weasley nodded back, and then turned and walked away hurriedly, as if he thought trapdoors would open in the walls and let out beasts that would eat him.

Draco spoke the password to open the common room door, shaking his head as he went. *Who would have thought I would see the day that Weasley would explain Granger to me?*

Then he smiled. *Or the day that Professor Snape would act like Harry Potter's father?*

##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### #####
##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### #####
##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### #####

Chapter: 43

Thank you again for all the reviews!

*Chapter Forty-Three—Being a Father*

Harry stared at the tray of food that Snape had balanced on his knees, and shook his head.

"What is it?" Snape was stirring a bowl of something thick that looked like sauce, or mash, or maybe soup. Harry didn't know, because he'd never seen anything that brown-orange color before. It smelled good, though.

"I don't need all of this." Harry swept his hand along the tray. It took a while to make the sweep. There was sauce, and the maybe-sauce, and soup, and bread, and a bowl of sliced pears, and pumpkin juice, and a plate of meat in slices so small they were almost transparent, and stewed (or something) carrots. Then Harry came up with a theory that made sense and would keep him from feeling baffled and ungrateful. He darted a look at Snape. "Are you eating with me, sir?"

"Of course." Snape nodded to another tray that sat on the table next to the bed.

*Well, so much for that idea.* Harry shook his head. "Then you don't need to give me this much, sir," he said. "There's no way that I would be able to eat all of it." He looked at Snape to see how he would react to common sense. Probably not well, if the past was any indication.

Snape gave him a level look. "And what happens if you don't eat all of it?" he asked in a calmly interested tone.

"Er," Harry said, and took a wild guess. "You yell at me because you want me to eat all of it?"

Snape shook his head, and went on with the level look, as though Harry were a small child who had done something amusing. Harry shifted. He often felt like a small child around Snape these last few days, and it was maddening, because Snape didn't treat him like one in the way that Dumbledore or Sirius had last year. It was just a combination of the looks he gave Harry and the quietly arbitrary way that he would tell him he'd had too much excitement for the present and had to rest. It wasn't something that could be fought, because Harry had trouble defining it. But it was there.

"I would not," Snape said. "But all this food is nourishing and necessary for someone who has suffered the pain you have. If you do not finish some of it, then it will be returned to the kitchens."

Harry frowned. "But that's wasteful, isn't it?"

"Why?" Snape raised his eyebrows. "The house-elves will either use this food in the preparation of more food or eat it themselves. It will not be thrown away, as seems to be your fear." Brusqueness crept into the edges of his voice, which was something Harry didn't want to see happen.

"Er, all right," Harry said, and picked up the cup of pumpkin juice to gulp from it. If he could only make Snape happy by eating this meal, then he should do it. After all, Snape had absolute control over him right now.

Snape's hand closed on his wrist. Harry jumped in spite of himself. Snape hadn't touched him much in the last few days, as if he liked looking at Harry but was worried about what would happen if his hand glanced him. Or maybe he was worried about how Harry would react.

"Harry," Snape said gently. Harry wasn't used to hearing him be so gentle, and he stared at the tray. "Look at me, please."

It would have been easy to refuse if only he hadn't said *please*, Harry thought in some confusion and resentment, raising his eyes. Snape leaned forwards and held his gaze. And that wasn't fair, either, because it made it harder for Harry to pretend he'd seen something interesting on the other side of the room and look away.

"This is a source of confusion and fear for you, isn't it?" Snape asked. "Why? You need not fear

that I will punish you for eating or not eating, unless you resort to such childish tricks as smearing your food on the walls."

Harry had to smile in spite of himself, because he could just picture Snape's expression if he came into the room and Harry had covered the walls with butter. "It's all right," he said. "It's just—I don't eat this much food, that's all. Even if I've been sick." *Especially then.*

"Ah." Snape paused reflectively. Harry watched him and wondered what he was going to say next. He seemed to have lost his power to predict Snape once the most likely words out of the man's mouth were no longer insults. Then Snape looked at Harry and asked, "By choice, or by necessity?"

"What do you mean?" Harry asked casually, though his heart was speeding up.

"I think you know what I mean." Snape leaned closer, and his dark eyes were the whole world. Harry squirmed uncomfortably, and Snape backed off a bit, but he didn't release Harry's hand or change the softness and intensity of his voice. "Do you not eat much food because you are never hungry, because it is your choice? Or because you were *prevented* from eating that much food?"

Harry stared down again. Suddenly Snape's eyes weren't so hypnotic after all. And his heart was speeding up again and his face was flushing and he had to bite his lip because there was a *stupid* prickling in the corners of his eyes.

*Why should this upset you so much?* Harry asked himself in scorn. *Baby. It's only the bloody Dursleys, and you can talk about them if you want. They're behind you. They don't matter. Snape will never let you go back to them, you don't have to worry about them, you shouldn't cry like a stupid* baby.

"Harry." Snape didn't make the word a question. He simply said the name so that Harry would know he was there if Harry needed him.

Finally, Harry swallowed, and looked Snape in the eye, which was the bravest thing he thought he'd ever done, and said, "Necessity," and then reached out and picked up one of the sliced pears to eat.

Snape released his wrist and sat back. Harry gave him a glance that he knew was probably too hopeful, but which he couldn't help. Was he going to stop talking about this now? Was the confession that the Dursleys had starved Harry enough to put him off? Harry bit into a pear and decided that maybe Snape would think the same thing he did: now that it was over, they didn't need to think about it anymore. Snape might be angry, but he would give up worrying about the Dursleys and just think about the future.

Snape cleared his throat, and Harry looked at him and realized that that would never happen. Snape's eyes were burning with fury, although his face was calm enough that Harry thought most people would have mistaken the fury for something else.

"Forgive me," Snape said. "But I must know more. This has affected far more than your immediate behavior." He nodded at the tray, as if it was supposed to be some sort of evidence in and of itself. "You hesitated when you saw the amount of food here. You appeared to believe that I wouldn't allow you to eat all of it, or that I had given you too much. Did you really believe I would do that?"

Harry hesitated. Then he swallowed the bite of pear in his mouth and picked up the glass of juice. "No," he said, and swallowed a gulp of juice.

"Explain to me what you were thinking," Snape said, a gentle demand, if there was such a thing.

"I don't," Harry said, which wasn't a cut-off sentence but a sentence in itself, and then picked up a piece of bread and bit into it.

"Do you believe I would hurt you?" Snape was sitting up straight in his chair, voice tight and dry. "As I understand it, one of the reasons you put off revealing our blood relationship to me for so long was the fear that I would abuse you."

Harry still flinched at the word "abuse." *Let's not talk about it,* he wanted to say, but he knew that would only—at best—make Snape put it off until some other time, and at worst, Snape would get angry. This had to be faced, just like Voldemort did.

"No," he said. "Not when you've taken care of me like this and you haven't bruised me in a long time. And I know that the Entwining Potion *wasn't your fault,*" he added forcefully, because he hoped Snape would stop blaming himself for that if Harry just said it often enough. "My ideas about food are stupid."

"Not stupid if they belong to you and trouble you," Snape said. "Tell me."

Harry looked up at him and wanted to make a joke. *Isn't it strange that we're sitting here and talking like this? Remember a few months ago when you hated me and this never could have happened?*

But that would probably get Snape upset, too, so Harry nodded gloomily and said, "Yeah, I didn't think there should be that much food. I mean, I'd never eat that much. And the Dur—I mean, I wasn't allowed to eat a lot of food at a time. When I did get some, I had to make sure that I didn't waste *any* of it."

"Because you never knew when you would get to eat again," Snape said. "Am I correct?"

"It wasn't *like* that," Harry said. He would have liked to fold himself into a ball and curl up against the pillow, but the tray was in the way. He settled for scowling at Snape, who let out a soft sigh of—relief? Sometimes Harry thought he would never understand him.

"Then tell me what it was like." Snape didn't sound hard or mocking, the way that some of Harry's primary school teachers had when he tried to explain about food. He simply sat beside Harry's bed and looked into his eyes and seemed content to do that all day, if that was what he had to do.

"I got to eat if I did all my chores," Harry said. "And did them well. And if they weren't too angry—I mean, if I hadn't done something wrong that day." He knew he probably sounded more than a little pathetic, trying to pretend the Dursleys didn't have anything to do with his stupid food issues, but he needed to do it. And Snape nodded as if he accepted the story Harry was telling instead of the one he was listening for.

"How much food would you get to eat in a typical day?" he asked.

"There *were* no typical days," Harry said, irritated by how much ignorance that question displayed. "Sometimes I finished all my chores to their satisfactions, and sometimes I didn't. Sometimes I cooked dinner, and I could snatch a few extra handfuls, or I burned bits of the food and they gave me those. Sometimes I dug through the rubbish." He could feel his cheeks heating, and he turned his head away.

Snape remained silent for some time. Harry wondered if he was struggling to find the words, or struggling to control his own anger, which did seem stronger than Harry would have thought it could be. Finally, he said, "But you did not think I would take this food away from you. You thought, instead, that you did not deserve that much food."

"I wondered what I was going to do with all of it," Harry said, and ate one of the transparent slices of meat. "That's all."

"Why not what I said?" Snape asked.

Harry paused and looked at him suspiciously, but Snape sounded only mildly interested, the way he would be if someone had finished a potion in a way that wasn't in the textbook, so Harry could answer. "Because I don't like people to talk about *deserving*," he said. "I know where that goes. All those horrid conversations that adults have with kids about whether they think they deserved what was happening to them. I'm not *that* stupid. I hate the Dursleys. I don't defend them."

A small twitch of Snape's lip seemed to suggest he was about to disagree, but instead he said, "Very well. But if you need more food over the holidays, I wish you to feel comfortable asking for it."

Harry blinked, caught off-guard. "Over the holidays? What do you mean?"

"The Christmas holidays, of course." Snape was looking at him now as if he assumed that not eating some food when he was a child had hurt Harry's brain. "When you stay with me, I want you to be reassured that you will have all the food you want."

"But over the Christmas holidays, I usually just stay at Hogwarts," Harry said, feeling numb and confused and excited. He wanted to shove the tray away so that he could pull his knees up towards his chest, but there was nowhere for it to go—at least, not without spilling food all over the sheets. "Don't you, too?"

"You will stay close to me," Snape said, as if they'd spent years discussing it and it was all settled. "While I remain at Hogwarts, you will be staying with me, and not in Gryffindor Tower."

"But that means that everyone will have to know we're father and son," Harry said. "And no one's going to take that well. The newspapers will shriek, and some people will call for you to be put in Azkaban. And what if Voldemort's not dead yet?"

"Then we will keep it quiet," Snape said, with a fluid little shrug of his shoulders that seemed to suggest he didn't see any problems. "It will be easier than usual, because there will not be as many students around to discover secrets." He arched a challenging eyebrow at Harry. Maybe he wanted him to remember that he was one of those students.

Harry opened his mouth to make another objection—

And then looked into Snape's eyes.

There was hope there, and anger, and something that Harry decided it would be painful to try and name. But what was there, most of all, was some kind of desperate need to accept, and have Harry accept, what he was trying to say.

*It doesn't matter to him that much if we can stay together over the holidays,* Harry thought, feeling incredibly slow for not seeing that earlier. *What matters is that he wants to make plans like that, and he wants me to agree with them. He wants to know that I want him as a father.*

That was a dizzying number of wants, and Harry had to pause before he said, "Yes. All right. We can try."

Snape shut his eyes. Harry was the one who turned politely away this time, and continued eating his food.

"This is good," he added, because he thought Snape ought to know that.

Snape gave him another look that was hard to describe and made the stupid flush start up in his cheeks again.

Being a father was like nothing else Severus had experienced. Or rather, *knowing* that he was a father was like nothing else Severus had experienced. Before he knew, Harry could have lived and died and had children before he died, and Severus would only have known or cared if the world forced the Boy-Who-Lived on his notice.

But now, it was as though he had a continually open wound, one that could be torn wide open at any moment. If something happened to Harry, if he was injured, if he still suffered from the abuse his Muggle relatives had inflicted upon him, then Severus knew he would feel that pain, too. And no matter what happened, there was no way to heal the wound or make the chance of pain less, except for courses—such as blocking his memory of his relationship with Harry—that Severus refused to undergo.

The most he could do was to try and make sure that Harry was safer. And that was what had led him to create the lie that not only had Harry been injured in his detention, but the potion he had been making had exploded in a spectacular mess that had sealed them inside Severus's office for the past few days. An auditory glamour cast on the office had created the sounds of moans, groans, and curses for those curious ones who might want to listen. The rest of the Hogwarts staff said they were "working on it," but the students didn't know that Harry and Severus were comfortably ensconced in his private quarters.

Severus had to Disillusion himself when he wished to move about the corridors, but he was used to doing that during his patrols when he stalked snogging students, so that didn't matter. He used the Disillusionment to visit Minerva and learn what the Aurors had extracted from Cravens.

"She became a Death Eater shortly after You-Know-Who's return," Minerva told him, holding a cup of the ridiculously strong tea she had always favored and sipping slowly from it. Severus had *known* that no one could simply drink that tea without consequences. "She apparently hoped to obtain protection during the war and knowledge of powerful new spells from it. And yes, she was the one who poisoned Mr. Malfoy."

Severus closed his eyes and exhaled. That was one less worry. He worried for Draco, but more for Harry, and if Draco's poisoner was safely gone from the school, then Harry would not be hurt by Draco's injury. "Good," he said. "Anything else? Why did she do it?"

"As revenge for the way that Mr. Malfoy betrayed You-Know-Who, and his mother escaped," Minerva said. She was one of the few professors in the school, excluding Albus, who knew the whole story of the venture into Malfoy Manor. "She did not know of any other motive," she added, watching his face closely.

"What other motive would there be?" Severus asked, giving her a bland look. "I merely asked because it seemed a strange time to strike, several weeks after the escape."

"Perhaps You-Know-Who wanted to wait until he discerned that he could not find Mrs. Malfoy and make her pay personally," Minerva said, with a slight shrug. "As for the other reason, Severus, please do not assume that because my sight is poor, I am blind in all the things that matter. I know that Mr. Malfoy and Mr. Potter are starting a relationship."

Severus blinked and stared at her despite himself. The Gryffindor Head of House rarely appeared to pay much attention to the Slytherins. He had expected her to miss the signs completely.

"I have taught for decades, Severus," Minerva said tolerantly. "I assure you, every generation of students thinks they've invented some new way to keep their passions secret, and I refuse to disappoint them by pointing out how many times I've seen those particular deceptions before." She shook her head. "James Potter's father also tried to pretend that he'd just 'happened' to start liking and protecting a Slytherin. How these things do run, from father to son."

Severus clenched his teeth against his immediate response, which was to bark jealously that Harry was his son and not James's. The secret had done something strange to his normal methods for concealing himself. When it came to matters related to his Slytherins or the war, it was easy to hold back his emotions. When it came to Harry, it was not. He knew of no logical reason for the difference; he only knew that it was so.

"Very well," he said. "Then you know why it is more important than ever that we not allow Draco to be hurt again."

Minerva gave him a harsh look. "I might dislike a student's parents or his politics, Severus, but I would not let that deter me from defending him."

Severus inclined his head in apology, and continued, "Apparently Albus told Mr. Potter that there was a certain time You-Know-Who would attack the school." He watched Minerva sit up in her chair and wondered if he ought not to have told her before this. He had assumed without thinking that the Head of Gryffindor would be loyal to the Headmaster, but perhaps not. "He has not confirmed a date, however, merely hinting that Mr. Potter should come speak to him in private if he wants to know more. For various reasons, it is desirable that Mr. Potter not be alone with Albus right now. Do you think you could ask Albus for the date and wrench it from him with none of his silly riddles or delays?"

"Why would he delay information like this?" Minerva murmured, her eyes on the fire. Then her face seemed to cloud over, and she sighed. "Because he likes to control the flow of information so much," she answered her own question. "Of course. Yes. Well. I will try to speak to him, Severus, though I cannot guarantee results."

Severus nodded, more than satisfied to accept that response. Minerva had resources of personality and connection to Albus that he did not, and would cling tenaciously to Albus past his vague responses now that she knew what to look for.

Besides, it was past time that he get back to his son.

Draco stepped cautiously into Professor Snape's bedroom, which had become Harry's bedroom. He had visited before, but only in short snatches, with the professor hovering nearby the entire time and Granger and Weasley behind him. He could hardly tell Harry about everything he needed to say when he had an audience.

But now, Professor Snape seemed to have decided that Harry was well enough to receive

visitors, and Draco was alone, and Harry was sitting up in bed and holding out a hand with a sweet smile.

Draco came up to him and wrapped his arms around him. Harry lifted his head for a kiss.

Draco lost track of time during the kiss, and even place. When he became conscious again, he was sitting in bed with Harry, half-sprawled across his lap, and Harry was playing with his hair and sighing into his ear.

"God, I missed you," Harry whispered.

Draco forgot his resentments about having no private time with Harry for three whole days. He hugged him back, and murmured meaningless nonsense, and just sat there in dazed happiness for a little while.

"How's your mother?" Harry asked.

Draco looked up at him in silence for a minute. Harry didn't appear to be concerned, and just traced the lobe and shell of Draco's ear as he waited for him to speak.

*My father would say that I'm weak, needing someone so much. Mother would smile, but also caution me. Does he care for me as much as I do for him? How do I know that? Am I too vulnerable to him, too open? Should I spend more time holding back from him and making him pursue me? Do I know that he'll hang onto me the way I want him to, or defend me from his friends? Do I know anything except my own intense happiness, and is that a bad thing? She would think so.*

Before, Draco had decided that the answers to those questions were ones that would satisfy both himself and his parents. But looking at Harry like this, he decided that the answers could be the "wrong" ones and he still wouldn't care. He would be vulnerable and open to Harry all his life, and maybe he would care for Harry more, and Harry could ignore him sometimes, and Draco would still come back.

That would have been pathetic—except that Draco had no doubt at all that Harry cared for him back, and would show it, even if his method of showing it wouldn't fall exactly within the Malfoy standards. And there would be times when Draco would ignore Harry, and row with him, and despise his stupid friends. That was just the way their lives were.

A warm glow in both his mind and his belly, Draco folded his legs up beneath him and started to talk.

##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### #####
##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### #####
##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### #####

Chapter: 44

Thank you again for all the reviews!

*Chapter Forty-Four—Pinning Dumbledore Down*

"Was it awful, mate?" Seamus asked the question with a sympathetic look in his eyes, as if he knew that his imagination couldn't create a reality one half as horrid as what Harry had experienced.

Dean snorted and lobbed an apple at Seamus's head. They were in the Great Hall for dinner, the first meal Harry had attended with his friends in five days. Snape hadn't thought he was safe to come out until then. "Don't be stupid, Seamus. Of course it was awful, and we don't need to ask questions if Harry doesn't want to answer them." He nodded to Harry and patted him on the shoulder. "I'm sure he's heard enough insults to last him ten lifetimes."

"Thanks," Harry mumbled, meanwhile trying to identify why his stomach was churning and why he felt unable to meet anyone's eyes. Then he knew. He felt bad for Snape. He wanted to say that it hadn't been that bad, defend Snape, but his friends would never believe that—except if Harry told them the secret that would get back to Voldemort if it was released into the whole of the school. There might even be Death Eaters in Gryffindor, for all Harry knew. Peter Pettigrew had been like that, so it wasn't impossible.

He hadn't known it would be this hard, to go from Snape's care to his friends. When he was in bed, especially when he was bored or when Snape was telling him to sleep for the sixtieth time that day, Harry had been lonely and longed to see them again.

Now he would have liked to shut the door of Snape's quarters and listen to yet another reminder about how he should rest or not strain his eyes when he read or drop crumbs everywhere.

*Can you get addicted to having a parent?* he thought wistfully as he bit into an apple of his own and felt the juice trickle down his chin. There wasn't anyone to scold him about that, since Hermione was busy with Ron. *And with such a short exposure, too?*

He caught Draco watching from across the room, and nodded to him when he thought no one was looking. A nod might be safe. A nod could say *We'll settle this later* or *Remember we have that private duel that the professors don't know about.* A blown kiss or a wink or a smile didn't carry those meanings.

Draco looked as sullen as Harry felt—or maybe he was just trying to play his part extra well—before he turned back to his food. Harry took a deep breath.

*I want everything settled. I want Voldemort gone and the Death Eaters under arrest so that I can be with my boyfriend and my dad and things can be normal.*

Then Harry blinked, because that state of things was hardly "normal." Just a month ago, he would have thought normal was having Ron and Hermione talking to him every minute of the day, and wondering about Voldemort, and obsessively studying his Defense spellbooks, and trying to keep his secret.

He hadn't known, then.

*Yes, it's addictive.*

"Harry, can we talk to you?"

Harry glanced up. Hermione had finished scolding Ron, and she seemed to understand that Harry wasn't about to finish his meal in any real fashion. She smiled sympathetically at him, but there was a kind of steel behind his smile that made Harry decide it would be good to agree.

"Yeah," he said, and stood up and wandered away from the table with her, Ron coming right behind them. At least there was nothing unusual in that.

*Even if I kill Voldemort, then people still aren't going to take it well. And I'd have a year and a half here at Hogwarts to hear nasty taunts and get the stares and have people mutter about how the Slytherins are corrupting me. Do I want that?*

The answer was no more than a breath away, and Harry didn't have to search for it.

*Yes, as long as they're all right with it. I want them both.*

Hermione took them almost all the way up to Gryffindor Tower, probably because she thought no one would venture that far while dinner was going on. Then she faced him and cast a diagnostic charm. Harry blinked at her, wondering if she thought he had some kind of sickness from his stay in Snape's rooms. He never knew what Hermione would think of next.

"Good," Hermione said, relaxing. "You don't have any mind-controlling potions in your system or any curses on you that should prevent free action, including the Imperius Curse."

"Is *that* what you thought?" Harry didn't bother controlling the fury in his voice, because he thought Hermione should have got past this by now. Draco had told him about the things Snape had said to Hermione, and the things she'd said back. "I stayed with him of my own free will. I needed a holiday."

"I know, Harry." Hermione raised one hand, and she really did look sorry, which was the only thing that kept Harry from trying to continue the row. "But if I didn't test, I wouldn't be *sure*, and there would always be a nagging little doubt in the back of my head that kept me from believing you. This way, I'm sure." She looked at the floor. "And I'm sorry."

Harry calmed down, and made himself remember that these were his best friends, and that he *had* kept secrets from them for an awfully long time. Maybe the secret hadn't been as personal for them as it was with Snape, but it was still a kind of betrayal of trust. He nodded. "All right. Now, did something happen that you wanted to talk to me about?"

Hermione smiled at him wistfully. Ron stepped forwards and took Harry's wrist, squeezing almost hard enough to hurt.

"We just missed you, mate," he said. "We wanted to spend time with you. Isn't that all right?"

"Of course," Harry said, relaxing. That *did* sound wonderful. He'd missed his friends, and if there was no one trying to kill him at the moment, then he wouldn't have to be constantly ready to fight.

In the end, they went out to the Quidditch Pitch and flew. Well, Ron and Harry flew, while Hermione hovered nervously a few inches off the ground and tried to lecture them on the time that the Headmaster of Hogwarts banned Quidditch because it was too dangerous. That turned out to be the one part of *Hogwarts, a History* Ron had actually read, and he and Hermione bickered comfortably about whether it was a stupid idea, Hermione maintaining that it wasn't because it was a matter of principle, and Ron maintaining it was because of how messily that Headmaster's students had killed him.

Harry listened, and was happy.

"It's no good, Severus. He insists on speaking to either you or Mr. Potter." Minerva sipped from her tea again and gave him a direct look. "Are you sure you won't tell me why Harry prefers to avoid him right now?"

Severus grimaced. He was once again sitting in Minerva's office, but he was less confident this time around. He didn't know how hard Minerva had pushed the old man. What if she had done less than was necessary, simply because she didn't know the stakes? On the other hand, explaining the truth would take too long, and she would probably need multiple explanations and demonstrations, perhaps even Veritaserum, before she would believe it.

And then another person would know the secret. Severus was already uneasy with how far the truth had spread. He would prefer that no one else knew until the Dark Lord's death had made secrecy less important. Even then, he would only speak because there was no other way that Harry would be able to live with him.

*An edited version of the truth would be best,* he decided, and met Minerva's eyes at last. She considered him with quiet seriousness, and he suddenly realized that she had left him alone for a much longer time than he would have thought. Perhaps she at least suspected there was something serious behind this, rather than simply the reluctance of a small boy or a sour professor.

"Mr. Potter learned that Dumbledore had kept something from him," Severus said. "Something concerning the events of last year." That was similar enough to the truth that he could speak it with a sincere voice, and yet far enough away that Minerva should look in the wrong direction if she decided to do her own investigations. "More, he learned that he might have been able to—use this information if he had it." *There.* Now Minerva should assume that it had something to do with Black's death, and perhaps with the idea, mentioned by several members of the Order, that Black could have remained alive behind the Veil for a short time. "He has not forgiven Albus for holding that back. I have spoken with Albus to try and determine his motives for this secrecy, and while he has confessed them, they do not satisfy me." It was not at all hard to growl those words. "And now Albus is trying to use this information about the Dark Lord to seek a reconciliation with Harry without offering an apology. I do not think he should be allowed to get away with that."

Minerva cocked her head backwards. "Well," she said. "I never thought I would see the day when Severus Snape cared so much for Harry Potter."

"I care so little for Albus Dumbledore," Severus said, his tone full of disdain. He paused, and then added, as if persuaded against his will, "Though I must admit the boy's Defense skills are considerably greater than I thought they were."

Minerva gave him a smug look. Again, she seemed to accept his words as the truth, and there was an additional motive for her to do so here, since she had been informed of the way that Harry had rescued Severus from Cravens. She would think that Severus felt the force of his life-debt to Harry but didn't want to acknowledge it.

"I tried with Albus," she said. "I *did*," she added, when Severus snorted despite himself. "He would not give up the information. He said it was something he could allow only Harry to hear, and no one before then, because they would not agree with the timing of the battle. I'm afraid there may be no alternative but for Harry to meet with him."

Severus shut his eyes. They needed the exact date of the battle so that they could decide on a battle plan—one that would not be under Dumbledore's control. And while he did not want Harry to spend any time with Dumbledore ever again, he was prudent enough to acknowledge that the Headmaster was less dangerous than the Dark Lord.

"Would you ask if he will see us both together?" he asked. "Mr. Potter and I."

Silence. When he looked to see the cause of it, Minerva was staring at him in astonishment. She shook her head slightly, eyes wide and questioning. "You are doing more for Mr. Potter than seems—strictly necessary," she said.

"There is a reason for that," Severus said, gambling. "One that has to do with how he saved my life and the time we spent in private. But I cannot reveal it to you without his permission."

Though Minerva continued to look mystified, she nodded again. "I will ask Albus," she said.

Then she sighed. "It is so *hard* to know whether he is keeping this information from us for good reasons or because of his own love of mystery. He's older and wiser than anyone of us."

"Older, I will grant you," Severus said.

Minerva raised an eyebrow at him. "I thought you had your own faith in his wisdom, once upon a time."

"Last summer, I still did," Severus said.

Minerva waited until she seemed sure he would say no more, then nodded in what looked like resignation. "As you will, Severus. I will ask him."

Harry watched Professor McGonagall sit next to Snape at dinner and whisper to him with uneasiness. He didn't know why. Maybe it was because he rarely saw those two particular professors talking together, even though he knew they did, since it was McGonagall Snape had told him to summon after that confrontation with Cravens.

Maybe it was the way they both looked at him after McGonagall gave whatever bit of news she had to Snape.

Harry wondered if he should glare, or look accepting, or nod back. In the end, he did nothing except turn back to his dinner and pick at it. Even though he was free now to eat all the desserts that Snape had forbidden him while he was "recovering," they didn't look appetizing.

"Mate?"

Harry looked up with a weak smile. Ron and Hermione were both watching him, and Ron looked up at the high table as if he thought Snape was to blame for Harry's loss of appetite. Harry shook his head, muttered something about not being hungry, and pushed his plate away, hurrying out of the Great Hall.

He walked around corners and up staircases almost at random, until he was on the third floor, and leaned against the wall not far from a bathroom. When he shut his eyes, he could see the glittering Entwining Potion in its vial, and his muscles twinged with what felt like a distant echo of its pain.

*There's something else I have to do, I think, and I won't like it.*

"Harry?"

It was Draco's voice. Harry didn't pause to think about whether they were in a sufficiently hidden place, or whether Draco had been noticed when he followed Harry from the Great Hall. The only thing that mattered was that Draco wouldn't have called him by his first name if there was anyone around to overhear.

He stuck out his arm, grabbed Draco's robes, and dragged him into his embrace. Draco made a muffled sound, then hugged him back and sighed into the side of his neck.

"What's wrong?" he whispered.

Harry had to laugh at that, because his answer would sound so stupid. "Nothing, yet," he said, and hugged Draco until he could feel Draco gasping. Then he loosened his hold and finally opened his eyes. Draco peered back at him from so close that Harry had to blink and squint to see his expression of concern. "Just the way Snape and McGonagall looked at me a few minutes ago. I think he sent her to find something out, and she did, and now I'll have to do something else unpleasant."

Draco was silent for some time, looking so thoughtful that Harry wondered if he already knew what the awful thing was and was trying to spare Harry's feelings. Harry was quite ready to wait until someone was up to telling him. He let his hand rest on the back of Draco's head instead, and watched his throat. He wanted to bite it, but they weren't in a private enough place—especially since he could already feel himself hardening against Draco's groin. He shifted in embarrassment.

Draco grinned at him and surged forwards a little. Harry gasped, which gave Draco a chance to kiss him. Harry responded eagerly, dragging his hands up so that strands of Draco's hair fell through his fingers. Fuck privacy, then. He nipped Draco's neck, the way he'd wanted to, and started to drag off his shirt.

"Wait, wait," Draco panted, and drew back just as things were starting to get interesting. Harry whined at him, and Draco looked extraordinarily smug, but he didn't back down. "No, Harry, I know it's hard, but *listen* to me."

"It's hard in more than one way," Harry muttered sulkily, and fell silent, waiting to hear this all-important pronouncement.

Draco snickered at him, and gasped to catch his breath before he could continue. At least Harry could take pride in his pink cheeks and the way his hands were tight on Harry's shoulders, letting go and then closing down to massage again, as though he could hardly bear not to be touching Harry.

"Snape said something the other day that makes me think I know what this is about," Draco said.

Harry frowned. "Why didn't I hear this?"

"You were asleep," Draco said, giving him what Harry had come to recognize over the past week as his *you invalid* look.

Harry rolled his eyes. "Go on."

"He said that he'd gone to McGonagall for help because he didn't know who else to trust," Draco said, and, as Harry felt his eyebrows rise, "Yeah, I don't know why he can trust the old cat, either, but apparently he can. He said that it was about 'the old man.' There aren't many candidates for who that can be."

"He didn't make you promise not to tell me, did he?" Harry asked. The last thing he wanted was for Draco to get in trouble with Snape. It didn't matter how helpful Snape had been about the Entwining Potion or how well he'd taken care of Harry; he would still give our dreadful punishments if he thought he had to.

Draco shook his head. "He was muttering to himself, and he didn't know I'd overheard. I was helping him with a potion. It was unusual. I've never heard him talk to himself like that before."

"Oh." Harry stood there, now that his worry about Draco was assuaged, absorbing the content of the message.

"Harry," Draco said gently, "you're hurting me."

Harry started and released Draco's shoulder. "Sorry," he mumbled. He thought about it for a little more, then volunteered, "I *really* don't want to see Dumbledore again."

"I know," Draco said. "But he has knowledge we need, and at this point, I don't think we'll convince him to just write us a nice letter where he sets out everything we need."

Harry laughed in spite of himself at the thought of that, it was so far from anything he could imagine Dumbledore doing.

"There." Draco smoothed the hair away from his scar, giving him a tender smile. "I missed hearing that sound."

"Would you like to show me what other sounds you missed?" Harry murmured, and Draco's smile evaporated in a grunt. Harry moved his leg back into position and leaned forwards to kiss Draco.

"Ahem."

Harry promptly felt as if he would burn up in embarrassment. He *knew* that voice, and it was one that he didn't want to imagine anywhere near him and Draco while they were snogging. He shut his eyes, drew gently back from Draco, dropped his foot to the ground, and rotated to face the direction the voice had come from. Only then did he open his eyes.

McGonagall stood in front of Snape, who was watching Draco with a thunderous frown. Harry wanted to laugh at that. Snape looked as if he thought that Draco had been taking advantage of Harry's virtue or something. If anything, it was the other way around.

Harry resolved to say that to Snape, assuming he could think of a non-embarrassing way to say it. Or assuming that this blush didn't kill him.

"Mr. Potter, Mr. Malfoy," McGonagall said with biting gentleness, "I think you are both old enough to understand the rule about snogging in the corridors."

"Don't do it," Draco said, and gave her an innocent look. "But now we aren't snogging, Professor."

Harry blinked at him. He couldn't believe Draco was acting this brave in front of the Head of Gryffindor, someone whom he had once confessed to Harry terrified him. But Draco gave him a bright glance, and Harry understood. *I make him brave.*

McGonagall cleared her throat and said, "As that may be," but her eyes said *I won't forget this.* "The Headmaster has asked to see you, Mr. Potter."

Harry swallowed, and hoped that the fluttering pulse at his throat wasn't visible to anyone else.

"But," McGonagall added, and her voice had softened, "he has said that Professor Snape may come with you."

Harry shot Snape a quick glance. *Does she know?* he tried to ask with his face.

Snape returned a reassuring look, the exact message of which Harry couldn't quite make out, but which was enough to do its intended task. He took a deep breath and straightened.

"I'll go, then," he said. "As long as Professor Snape comes with me."

"What about me?" Draco asked. "Are you leaving me here?" His voice was unpleasant with something Harry hoped was indignation rather than fear or relief.

Harry put his hand on Draco's arm and glanced at McGonagall. She raised her eyebrows. "I have only secured permission for one companion," she said. "I do not know that the Headmaster would see you if you came with two." Her voice conveyed her own disgust at that, and Harry was a little bit cheered to know that, no matter what she knew, McGonagall was on their side.

Harry gave Draco's arm a comforting rub and said, "Stay here for now. Please," he added, when Draco opened his mouth.

Draco nodded sulkily and leaned against the wall. "But I'm going to count the minutes," he whispered to Harry. "If you aren't out of there in one hour, then I'll come in."

Harry hugged him quickly, irrespective of professors watching them, and then slipped out into the corridor. Behind his back, where McGonagall couldn't see, Snape gave him a quick, fierce

touch on the shoulder.

That made Harry ready to go as nothing else could have done.

Albus stood alone in the center of his office when the moving staircase admitted them. He was reading a book and smiling gently. The smile startled Severus. He had not seen Albus look like that in quite some time.

When he saw them, the smile remained, but the Headmaster did set the book reverently aside on a table. Fawkes, on his perch and currently in the middle of his growth cycle, ruffled his feathers at them and crooned, then flew over to greet Harry. Severus could see that surprised his son. Harry raised a hand and hesitantly touched the phoenix's crest. Fawkes nuzzled his cheek before he soared back to his perch and twisted his head to watch Dumbledore with a bright eye.

"Thank you for coming, my dear boys." Albus's smile had vanished, but there was a dignity and nobility in his face that Severus had missed of late. "First of all, I apologize for keeping this information from you." He looked directly at Harry. "I did it for what I thought was a good reason—because if you heard the plan, Harry, you might refuse to let it go ahead. I hinted and hoped that you would figure it out on your own. In hindsight, that must have seemed infuriatingly mysterious rather than a mark of respect."

"It certainly was," Severus said, putting a hand on Harry's shoulder and holding him back slightly so that Harry wouldn't feel a need to respond. "Your good reasons have been mostly based on fear."

"Yes," Albus said, without an attempt at defending himself, which again caught Severus off-guard. That made him the more suspicious. *What is he playing at?* "I had to overcome my fear, of many things, before I could decide that it would be best to reveal the plan to you. And even then, I thought you might not believe me without evidence. So." His smile returned, sad this time. "The evidence."

He murmured what sounded like a countercharm, and a sharp smell filled the room. Severus stiffened. It was the smell of rotting flesh.

Albus pulled back the sleeve of his robe.

The skin around his wrist was dark and discolored, a black-green color that Severus had never seen before on skin in a natural state. It did not take him long to recognize the mark that the ring, the first Horcrux, had left on Albus—the mark Severus had been certain was healed.

"I have been wearing this glamour for months now," Albus said, turning his hand back and forth and looking at it with a certain amount of relief, as if he were glad to see it the way it should look rather than under illusion. "And, of course, I did not want to cancel it, because my magic is weakening and I was not sure I could restore it."

Severus was too much stunned to say anything, even though he knew the weakness was a pretense, but Harry spoke, his voice trembling with distress. "Professor, are you—"

"Yes." Albus looked at them calmly. "I am dying. Tom has his revenge for my decision to disturb his Horcruxes, after all. And it has grown worse with each one I destroyed." He smiled at Harry. "I have made my decision. I made it completely once I knew that the Horcrux was gone from you, Harry, but I think it was half-made before then, hence my hints. I am dying," he repeated. "And Voldemort grew as great as he did in the first place because of mistakes that I made you before either of you were born. It's only right that I should be the one to kill him."

##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### #####
##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### #####
##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### #####

Chapter: 45

Thank you again for all the reviews!

*Chapter Forty-Five—Epiphanies*

It took Harry a long minute to catch his breath; Dumbledore's announcement had surprised him so much. And there were a lot of things he had to react to. Dumbledore's wound. The idea that he was really weakening in his magic after all, and wouldn't get it back. Harry had assumed without thinking that the weakness wouldn't last, because it *couldn't* last. This was *Dumbledore.* He would pull off some last-minute miracle to ensure that he wouldn't have to lose his magic. That was the kind of thing he did.

And then that last announcement.

Snape's hand was pressing on his shoulder with such force that Harry knew it would start to hurt in a minute. He cleared his throat and moved away. Snape grabbed him and dragged him backwards again. Harry sighed, then reached up and squeezed Snape's hand in turn, something he had discovered would probably make him loosen his grip a bit. Sure enough, Snape relaxed and let Harry edge away.

Well, a few inches away, anyway.

"What do you mean?" Harry asked Dumbledore. "The prophecy says that I'm the one who has to kill him."

"But it does not say which weapons you must use," Dumbledore said, as quietly and gently as though they were discussing something reasonable.

"Well, no," Harry agreed slowly. Snape had resumed his grip again. Harry sighed and leaned

against him. It was probably the only thing that would calm him down right now.

"And your wand is useless against him because your wand and his are brothers." Dumbledore looked at Fawkes with a tender smile. Fawkes, who had been looking at Harry ever since they arrived, turned his head back and eyed Dumbledore again. His croon was soft and gentle, so warm that Harry thought he got a dim glimpse of the long bond that Fawkes and the Headmaster must have.

"Yeah," Harry said. "But that still doesn't mean you can defeat him."

"I do not believe that you can," Snape said, his voice crow-like, and Harry knew he would be trouble. "Lying again, Albus? *Now?* I would have thought the circumstances would have persuaded you to tell the truth. I should have realized—"

"Hush, Severus," Dumbledore said, and Harry thought Snape would shut up. Dumbledore's voice was gentle, but also smothering, as though he was tossing a heavy blanket over the top of a fire.

Harry had underestimated Snape. His tone just got lower and uglier, and by this point he was stooping over Harry, as though he was going to wrap him up in his robe and take him away. "I will *not.* We came here in good faith. You promised us answers. You knew beforehand that I would come with Harry. And then this happens. What do you mean? Tell us straight out, for once, with none of your dodging. Or is that something that you're incapable of, now?"

"I am *trying* to," Dumbledore said, with a dart of his eyes that was the first sign of irritation Harry had seen from him. A moment later, he was drawing in his breath carefully and releasing it with equal care. "Forgive me, my boys," he said. "I should have said this long ago."

"At least five minutes ago," Snape said, but Harry leaned against him, and he shut up out of surprise.

Harry was thinking. Dumbledore had talked about weapons, and he had said that Harry wouldn't be able to use his wand to defeat Voldemort, or at least not just his wand, which Harry already knew. But he had said that he would be the one to defeat Voldemort, which Harry knew couldn't be true, because of the prophecy.

Now he looked up and said, "Sir, are you going to give me your magic to defeat him?"

Snape went still. Dumbledore turned and looked at Harry with an enormous smile, full of relief and gratitude. Harry wondered suddenly how long it had been since anyone had made Dumbledore's life easier for him.

*That doesn't mean you need to,* he promptly reminded himself. *And a lot of the problems he brought on himself, like the way he wanted to sacrifice me.*

"That will not work," Snape said, and his voice was crow-like again. He would actually have

stepped in front of Harry, but Harry leaned harder against his legs, and Snape had to concentrate on keeping his balance. "If your magic is as weakened as you say it is, then how can you hope to make a difference? And the spells that would pass your magic on to another wizard are Dark Arts."

"Not all of them." Dumbledore was watching Harry with an even gentler smile now. It reminded Harry somewhat of the rare—very rare—times that he saw Aunt Petunia smiling at Dudley, and knew that she was remembering the way he had looked when he was a baby. "There is one that will give my power up to Harry with nothing darker on my part than a specific incantation. And while my magic is weakened, Severus, it is still greater than that of many other wizards."

"You *cannot* make him bear that," Snape said, his breath rustling and crackling and snapping in his lungs like cartilage. "You *cannot.*"

"Will everyone stop talking over my head and tell me what I'm supposed to be able to bear or not?" Harry demanded.

"Yes," Dumbledore said, with a slight scolding tone in his voice that Harry didn't like. It made him think Dumbledore was enjoying this too much. "We should tell the boy the truth, after all." He turned to Harry while Snape was probably still trying to find breath.

"I will cast a spell that involves a promise to surrender my magic," Dumbledore said. "All of it, every bit of my magical core. It is not a Dark spell because there is no way to compel someone to perform it. If the victim is under the slightest bit of coercion, the spell will fail."

Harry folded his arms. "And what happens when you give all those bits of magic to me, sir?"

Dumbledore didn't look away. "I die."

Harry shivered. He rubbed his arms and wondered why gooseflesh had suddenly started up on them.

"No," Snape said again. He didn't have much voice behind the word, but when he could hold someone the way he was currently holding Harry, he didn't necessarily have to have it.

"Just—let me think about this, all right?" Harry said. His voice was too quiet. He cleared his throat and tried to speak up more confidently. This was big and complicated, like forgiving Dumbledore for wanting him to die when he found out Harry was a Horcrux. He had to think carefully about it, or he was going to make a mistake, maybe one that he would regret for the rest of his life.

*Assuming that the rest of my life is long.*

"You should consider it, yes," Dumbledore said. "I would not wish to force anything on you against your will, Harry—"

Snape's bitter snort was everything Harry could have said about that subject, so he didn't say anything.

"But Voldemort should attack soon," Dumbledore said. "Therefore, you will not have much time to make your decision."

"He will not be making the decision *at all*," Snape said. "It should not lie on his shoulders, to have to choose whether other people live or die. That is a role that *you* have been more than eager to play." He had both hands on Harry's shoulders now, pressing down, drawing him close, clenching like claws. "To have made this offer is only another way of gaining control, not of making up for your mistakes."

"It is the only way I can think of," Dumbledore said, deep and gentle. He glanced at Harry. "I would offer you my wand, Harry, which is powerful and would enable you to escape the problem of your wand and Voldemort's being brothers, but it would require weeks of training before it would consent to serve you. And I am afraid that would still not allow you to match Voldemort's raw power."

Harry nodded. "Because that's what this is about, isn't it?" he said. "Life or death. Whether *I'm* going to live or die. I was training hard because I thought it was all about spells, but then I found out about the Horcruxes. And Voldemort still has all the advantages. He'll cheat. He'll use Dark Arts. I *know* he will. This is why you're making this decision to offer me your power, isn't it, sir?" He found it comforting when he could reason out things like that for himself. Not only did it reassure him that he was smart enough to understand the sometimes incomprehensible decisions that the adults around him made, but it meant he could consider the problems from other angles and see paths they might have missed.

"Yes, my dear boy," Dumbledore said. He looked at Harry with the same expression Harry knew he must have worn when Hagrid explained the wizarding world and his parents' deaths to him—the expression that said he was *seen*, finally, for what he was, and that it was a wonderful feeling. "That is the truth."

"No," Snape said.

He didn't speak it loudly, but there was a finality in his voice anyway, like a tomb door shutting, that told Harry they would have trouble with him. He sighed and turned to face his father.

Severus felt as if he were standing in the face of a tragedy happening right this moment. A child sacrifice, perhaps. That was the usual form that Dumbledore's tragedies took.

And Harry was agreeing that it was a good thing he should be tied down to the altar. He had a thoughtful look in his eyes, as though this was something that could be considered dispassionately, argued and agreed with. He glanced at Severus as if assuming that his agreement was inevitable.

"No," Severus said.

Harry turned towards him, that thoughtful look still in his eyes, and Severus knew at once that he should never have permitted Harry to come to Dumbledore's office, even if he, Draco, Weasley, Granger, and Rita Skeeter had been with him. Dumbledore carried a sickness in his rhetoric and ideas, an invisible illness that was prone to infect Gryffindors. Severus was safe from it himself, but he should have remembered what House his son was Sorted into.

"Will you listen to me?" Harry asked, his voice placating. "Just listen."

"I said no." It was the same voice Severus had used to such great effect when the boy was sick and had no choice but to obey him. And to the credit of Harry's inherited intelligence, he hesitated now. But he shook his head in the end.

"No," he said. "This is different. This isn't something that jeopardizes my safety. Is it?" he added, with a glance at Severus rather than Dumbledore that warmed the small unpanicked part of Severus, because it showed his son thought of *him* as an authority and a source of knowledge rather than the Headmaster.

"It has nothing to do with safety," Severus said. "It has to do with adulthood and the Headmaster's decision to treat you as a monstrous compendium of adult and child, rather than the person you are." He glared at Albus, and he must have put something in his expression that hadn't been there at other times, because Albus flinched and looked suddenly uncomfortable.

"That's an answer, then," Harry said. "The spell he casts will affect me positively, or not at all." He stood up a little taller and looked at his father with eyes that Severus wanted to reach out and shut, because they had no *business* looking like that.

"I'm not a normal person," Harry said, voice as soft as snowfall. "I know that. Having to fight Voldemort four times in five years isn't normal. Normal people aren't Horcruxes." He touched his scar. "And so that should have a good side as well as a bad one. Let me be trusted with my own decisions for once. I can do this."

"I do not *wish* you to make those decisions," Severus said. "He has no right to impose this burden on you."

"I don't think he wants to," Harry said, without so much as a glance at Dumbledore to try and extract the truth from him on that issue. "I think he just has to, because that's the way circumstances are."

Severus snarled; he absolutely could not help himself. "He will use such excuses to make you believe him without question," he said.

Harry smiled, and there was so much in the expression that reminded Severus of Lily that he had

to look away. "Do you really think this is me giving in to him without question?" Harry asked. "Because I don't think so."

"You are still a child," Severus said.

"Not really," Harry said. "Yes, in some ways. I don't have all the knowledge that you do, or all the experience. I haven't—" He cut himself off from whatever he was about to say. "But I've known how to make hard decisions for a while, and I've known what it's like to stand up to people around me for a while. I knew I would have to make a hard decision when I heard the prophecy—the choice to murder someone. So I'm kind of prepared for this. That makes things better, doesn't it?" He sounded as if he were pleading with Severus to agree.

Severus looked at him. Harry had a thick wrinkle across his forehead above the scar, the result of deep thinking that Severus didn't think had all been conducted in this one afternoon. As Harry had said, he would have had sleepless nights and slow evenings and a whole summer trapped alone and starving in the house of his Muggle relatives to consider what was going to happen. He wasn't coming to this blindly, no matter how much Severus might like to think he was.

But that did not change certain facts. "Too much has been asked of you already," Severus said. "Too many sacrifices. And now a man asks you to choose whether he lives or dies. That is yet another sacrifice, this time of your innocence."

Harry snorted. "*What* innocence?" But he shook his head when Severus tried to speak. "I know what you mean. I told you, I know that you have more experience than I do. But this really isn't one of those things. If Dumbledore had just performed the spell and given me the magic, that would be something I was angry about, because I wouldn't have a choice. But in this case, I can still refuse."

"He knows you won't," Severus said, backed against a wall but refusing to cease his efforts to make Harry understand. "That is simply the rhetoric he offers to make his manipulation of you seem less stark."

"Then it's rhetoric I choose to accept," Harry said. "It makes what I'm doing—accepting magic from a dying man—seem less objectionable." He turned around and nodded to Dumbledore. "I accept. When are you going to perform the spell?"

"In a week's time." Dumbledore's face was pale, but he had closed his eyes, and Severus was not sure if the pallor came from exhaustion, being brought face-to-face with the martyrdom he had sought, or something else. "Voldemort will either attack shortly or not at all, persuading himself to wait." He opened his eyes then, and any weakness he might have revealed was hidden behind the steely general's mask Severus knew so well. "And you will not be able to hang onto my magic for very long after you have it, Harry. There is another reason this spell is not often performed. The gift is meant to accomplish a specific task, the one the giver wills. After you defeat Tom, it will go away."

"Good," Harry responded with such immense relief that Severus could not think he was joking. "I don't want to be powerful."

Severus shook his head. Harry was the most powerful one in the room at this moment, the only one able to give Dumbledore license to cast that spell, the only one capable of overruling Severus's protests. Did he not realize that?

*Or perhaps the boy has simply been too crudely trained to recognize the different varieties of power. That is a deficiency in his education that I must see to, after the battle.*

"After the battle" was a paradise that Severus was growing increasingly certain would never come, and so he did not wish to consider it. Instead, he asked Dumbledore, not bothering to conceal his distrust, "How will we know when you perform the spell?"

"I will invite you into the room where I intend to die," Dumbledore said. "While I don't think that the spell will go astray, it would still be better if the magic didn't have a great distance to travel before it found Harry and became part of him." His eyes touched Harry's face, and shone. His voice descended to a whisper. "Have I told you how very, very proud I am of you, my boy?"

Harry darted a look at Severus. Severus understood. Harry felt the uneasy side of the fury that swept through Severus then. Dumbledore did not have the right to be proud. He had not raised the boy, and his guidance had been weak and wavering at best.

"We cannot know that will happen," Severus said.

"Take my word," Dumbledore said, and his face grew long and pale again, which Severus welcomed because it was the only sign that he was causing pain to someone he still considered an enemy. "I know that is hard for you to do," he added. "But I have considered my sins, including keeping information from you in the past, and this is the only way I can make up for them."

"And this is the only way he can earn my forgiveness for planning to kill me," Harry said.

Dumbledore gave Harry a swift, blinking look. He smoothed it over a moment later, of course, but Severus had seen, and he treasured the meaning of it. Harry had a harder, crueler side, and he was not above using it to ensure that Dumbledore kept both his promises.

"Quite so," said Dumbledore, though with a wounded quiver to his mouth that made Severus suspect he hated having to acknowledge such a thing. He tried to smile, and couldn't quite manage to do it. "Is there anything else that you wanted to say to me?"

Severus took great pleasure in turning his back and moving towards the door. Harry followed him, though he did say something to Dumbledore that Severus didn't try to listen to. He did not think his son foolish enough (anymore) to promise his life or his unconditional belief for the Headmaster's sake, and nothing else could worry him.

As they traveled down on the moving staircase, Harry said, not looking at him, "I know you're just trying to protect me."

Severus inclined his head and said nothing.

"And I appreciate it. But." Harry looked up at him, face so weary that Severus was tempted to order him back into bed, before he remembered that Harry was living out of the dungeons again and was not so immediately under his authority. "I don't think I can act like a normal child. I went without being parented for too long. So sometimes I'm going to resist and just not listen to you. Can you put up with that?"

Severus placed his hand on Harry's shoulder by way of an answer.

"So that's it," Harry finished, his fingers stroking the small of Draco's back as if it were the source he drew strength from. "Dumbledore's going to die. Of course, he was already dying, but this spell really will kill him, and he'll pass his magic on to me, and I'll use it to defeat Voldemort."

Draco reflexively flinched at the name, but so did Weasley, so he didn't mind. He was more interested in the sick helplessness in Harry's voice. He had made his decision, but he wasn't happy about it.

Draco would have said something, but they were with Harry's friends at the moment, in the old classroom where they had met several times, and Draco's words didn't need an audience.

"That's awful, Harry," Granger said, her face white. Draco thought she probably cared more about Dumbledore dying than she did about the effect on Harry, but he couldn't prove it, so he kept quiet about that, too. "But you trust him this time?"

Harry nodded. "As much as I can. There's still part of me that says he won't keep his word this time, because he's never kept it before. But I've been thinking about all those little hints and clues he was dropping—how he talked about an old light fading and dying while a new one shone, for example. I think that's what he meant. He was planning to sacrifice himself so that I could defeat Voldemort all along."

"I wish he'd told you before," Weasley said, watching Harry like a wise dog. Draco had started, reluctantly, a little, to begin to approve of Weasley. He was more sensitive to Harry's moods and in some ways more insightful than Granger, whose knowledge opened and shut with books. "A week isn't much time to get used to this."

"Maybe it was impossible for him to face up to it himself," Harry said. "Or maybe I'll have longer; he did seem to think that the time when Voldemort might attack was a little uncertain. But the decision's made now, and I just wish it was over with."

Draco knew he had to stay, then. Granger and Weasley talked to Harry more, but it was about unimportant things, as if they could affect the fate of the war now. They finally left, and Harry sighed and leaned against Draco.

"Do you know how much strength you give me?" he whispered to Draco. "I'm becoming friends with them again, but it's still awkward. You know more about me right now than they do." He was playing with Draco's fingers.

*Always,* Draco thought but didn't say; he didn't plan to give up his place as Harry's confidant, no matter how sensitive Granger and Weasley might seem sometimes. He raked his fingers through Harry's hair in answer, and said, "I wish you didn't have to do this."

Harry didn't respond.

"He had no right to make you face that decision," Draco continued. "You've been through too much already."

Harry shrugged his shoulder against Draco's. "I don't think I'm really real to him, sometimes," he said. "I'm someone he has to use and think about and maybe kill, but I'm not real." He laughed, and the sound was so bitter Draco turned his head to smother Harry's lips in a kiss. But Harry went on speaking when the kiss was done. "He claims he cares for me. I wonder what he would have done if he didn't care for me?"

Draco said nothing. He had wanted to speak the secret burning inside him earlier—it was the main reason he had wanted to wait until they were alone, in fact—but now he thought it would only hurt Harry to hear that he thought Dumbledore was getting what he deserved.

He snogged Harry instead, and sent him back to Gryffindor Tower full of smiles and at least resignation if not happiness, and then he went down to brew potions in the dungeon with Professor Snape. The professor had found him and given him the message earlier.

There were certain potions that could protect Harry if Dumbledore changed his mind and tried to kill him after all. Professor Snape planned to brew them all and had invited Draco to help him.

*Sorry, Harry,* Draco thought, as he nodded to the professor and began to chop up the leaves of wolfsbane. *I wish I could trust him as much as you do. But I'm not Gryffindor, and I'm not that forgiving.*

##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### #####
##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### #####
##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### #####

Chapter: 46

Thank you again for all the reviews!

*Chapter Forty-Six—Buildup to Battle*

It seemed to have gone so fast, when Harry tried to think about it.

Draco was yawning behind his hand when Harry next saw him, sliding into his usual seat in Snape's Defense class. Harry frowned at him, wondering if he'd had a late night because Harry had kept him too long and he'd had to scramble to study. But when he gave him a look of concern, Draco just waved it off with a smile and a little shake of his head.

Harry faced the front again, and noticed that Snape, who was stalking up and down in the aisle between the tables and eying them intently, seemed similarly tired. Harry tapped his fingers against his wand. *Were they coming up with some plan? Facing down some threat that I should have been there to handle? Talking to Dumbledore again? They seem to keep believing that I'm incapable of things like that, and they're wrong.*

"Potter."

Harry actually looked at Snape without acknowledgment for a minute, because it seemed so strange to hear that name coming from his mouth. Then he sat up and gave his father a grim little smile. He was going to show Snape and Draco that he could do his part and play the game as well as anyone. "Yes, sir?"

"On your feet." Snape was speaking in the quiet way that Harry had once dreaded, because he knew it meant he was about to get into the worst trouble. On the other hand, that had changed along with lots of other things since he and Snape had spent time in the dungeons together. Or Harry felt that it had changed.

*I hope he knows that,* Harry thought, as he rose to his feet and bowed without taking his eyes off Snape.

"We are going to give your classmates a small exhibition of *real* dueling," Snape said, his fingers curling around his long ebony wand. He returned the bow and then lifted the wand in a long sweep that Harry recognized without thinking about it. He had already dodged in a zigzag pattern, the better to confuse the bolt of light that came out of Snape's wand and was supposed to find and incinerate him.

The bolt of light came out anyway, of course, but it missed Harry and hit the wall. Snape was already casting again, and Harry had started the minute he was sure that first spell was going to miss him. You didn't dare hesitate when you were fighting someone as skilled as Snape.

"*Ignis!*" Harry cried.

Snape's spell was nonverbal, but Harry recognized the sharp curling motion of his fingers on the

last swirl of it. Snape had already taught him to watch for telltale signs like that; every wizard had them. Harry's, according to Snape, was wearing every emotion openly on his face.

*And Snape's is acting overly eager when he casts a spell that's meant to humiliate me,* Harry thought, holding his wand up even as he fell into a crouch and put his hands over his head.

His fire spell blazed up and cast a shimmering nimbus of red light around the Defense classroom before exploding like a firework. Harry heard students cry out in fear, but he had deliberately chosen a spell that wouldn't harm anyone except the target he was thinking of when he cast it. From the firework explosion, a single bolt hammered at Snape, compelled to hunt him no matter how he dodged.

By contrast, Snape's Stripping Spell touched Harry's hands only, and thus couldn't do the work it was supposed to—rendering Harry naked, confused, and easily distracted. Harry popped back up, shaking his head, and watched to see how Snape was coping with his own attack and what he should be doing next.

Snape cast a shield he had told Harry was called a Water Net, a shimmering series of bubbles with blue lines between them, specially made to deal with fire spells. Harry's magic tore through it without slowing down. Harry grinned. Shields like that were difficult to cast with the sheer power that Harry put behind his incantations, and Snape had been the one who taught him that.

Harry had no pity as he watched his father dodge and then swirl his cloak out, enchanting it into a trap that would capture, hold, and dissolve Harry's burst of fire. *He used a spell that would have humiliated me in front of more people than just him. And probably made Draco jealous, too. I know that he wants me to be ready for anything when I duel Voldemort, but he should be ready for anything, too.*

The stone under Harry's feet began to shake and crack. Harry didn't wait around and gape at it, though he hadn't seen Snape cast Calling the Earthquake at all. He just danced back, keeping his feet moving all the time so that the spell couldn't settle around him and create a deep pit, and turned Snape's robe to a devouring bat that spread its wings and settled around him, biting at the back of his neck with sharp fangs.

The earthquake spread to the foot of Hermione's table and stopped. Her eyes were very wide, and Harry briefly gave her a reassuring smile. None of the spells he and Snape used would harm the other students. They were either targeted to hit only the individual the caster was thinking about or would be stopped before then.

Snape finally threw off the bat, and blasted it to small smothering blue sparks with a negligent wave of his wand. Then he turned to face Harry. Harry put up his head, trying not to show how intensely he was panting. He ought to be in better shape than this.

"Very good, Mr. *Potter*," Snape said, and Harry, Draco, Ron, and Hermione would be the only ones who knew the meaning of the emphasis he put on the last word. "But do you think you will

always win?"

"No, sir." Harry shook his head, eyes fastened on his father's face. "I know that's one of the reasons we practice, so that my stronger enemies can't take me by surprise."

Snape sneered at him and turned around. But Harry had learned to watch his eyes rather than his face. Snape's mouth was a way of deceiving people, with all its sneering and all its smirking and all its harsh words. But his eyes gave away his real emotions more than Harry thought he really knew or would be comfortable with.

He had looked proud, for a fleeting moment. He had given the tiniest nod.

Harry took his seat again. He was panting and covered with sweat, and he didn't dare look at Draco, because he was sure he would see desire there. He put his head in his hands instead and stretched his arms out, acting as if he would sleep for the rest of the class. He felt as if he could.

A Stinging Hex hit him on the ear and made him jerk his head up.

"Pay attention, Mr. *Potter*."

Harry nodded to his father and set out to prove that he could do as he was requested to do.

Draco didn't want the day of the battle to come.

Whenever he looked at Harry, he thought of something else he wanted to tell him, an observation he wanted to share or some caution to offer. And though he usually caught up with Harry in the evening and managed to say something, it was never *enough*. Harry would hold him, snog him, or, one memorable evening, push Draco to the floor and rub against him and pant loudly enough to wake up half the school, but that was never enough, either.

Draco had wanted to stand beside Harry on the battlefield. He'd pictured it without entirely knowing what would happen next, but that one image was clear in his head: marching out to stand with Harry next to the lake in front of Hogwarts, or near the Forbidden Forest. Draco had wanted to see the Dark Lord's eyes widen when he realized that Draco didn't need to cower in the school, but could face him.

But Professor Snape had looked at him during one of their brewing sessions when he mentioned it, and said, "No."

Draco glared at him and closed his hand hard on the glass of the stirring rod, trying not to break it. "What do you mean, no?"

"The Dark Lord would only have to kill you," the professor said, his hands sorting among shells, stones, and flower petals with a skill Draco envied, "and Harry would break." He held up one petal in front of his eyes and frowned at it critically. Then he nodded, and it drifted onto the

potion forming in the cauldron. Meanwhile, except for when he evaluated the petal, Professor Snape never looked away from Draco. "You know that you are not skilled enough to defend yourself from him. Not yet."

Draco stared at the professor. Snape showed no sign of backing down, and Draco knew he was capable of casting a sleeping charm and a binding one and leaving Draco to lie in a closet somewhere while the battle took place. After all, they were brewing these potions behind Harry's back.

"But his friends are going to be with him," Draco tried. He hated the whining way his voice sounded, and he paused and cleared his throat until he was sure that he could speak with some dignity. "They're less skilled than I am. They know less about the Dark Arts than I do. If they're there, I should be."

"They may *imagine* that is what will happen," Professor Snape said, with a trace of contempt that never entirely left him when he spoke of Harry's friends. Draco comforted himself now by imagining what would happen if they could hear it. "It is not. They will do as they are told. They are even more children than you are."

"If age has anything to do with it," Draco said, refusing to look away from the black eyes that bored into him, "why does Harry have to do this?"

"There are bonds," Snape said, and glanced down, at his cauldron, which was the only reason that Draco knew he was just as upset about this battle as Draco, but had even fewer ways to show it. "Bonds that link him and the Dark Lord. If anyone could defeat the Dark Lord, then Dumbledore would simply have done it himself when he felt his magic fading. I doubt he would have passed up a last chance to be a hero." The professor's voice was choked by the time he spoke the last words, and Draco thought it was easier for him to be furious with the Headmaster than to think about what might happen to Harry.

"It's not fair that he has to," Draco muttered, his fingers scraping the rim of his cauldron as he reached for another scrap of swan skin.

"No," Professor Snape said, in the same tone he had once used to tell Draco that he could not be on the Slytherin Quidditch team during his first year, no matter what privileges Potter might get. "But it must be done."

"We should be on the battlefield, then," Draco said, deciding he had found the foolproof argument. "We should help him bear his burden."

For a moment, Professor Snape's fingers tightened on the rim of his cauldron, and his face was pale with a longing that made Draco lower his eyes. He didn't think he'd been meant to see that much private emotion, ever, from his Head of House. Witnessing it, however involuntarily, made him uncomfortable.

Then the professor was himself again, and he spoke in the same flat, cold voice. "We would be distractions for him. He would be thinking about how to keep us safe instead of how to fight the Dark Lord."

"How *can* he?" All of Draco's passionate fear burst out of him, and he stepped around his cauldron without even thinking about it and faced Snape, staring at him. He did manage to put his hands behind his back, because he couldn't open his fists, but he wasn't suicidal enough to make it look as if he was about to hit Snape. "How can you let him do this? You know that he's not going to win, no matter how good he is at Defense Against the Dark Arts and no matter how much power he has. The Dark Lord just *knows* more. He can use Dark spells that will have Harry tortured to death before Harry can even *act.*"

Snape stood looking at him for long enough that Draco felt slightly ridiculous. Then he lowered his head. Draco flinched back when he saw the spark burning in Snape's eyes.

"Never assume," the professor breathed, "that I am emotionless about this."

"No, sir," Draco said, backing away a step for safety's sake. "I didn't. It's just—I think you could make Harry stop. If he would listen to anyone about not doing this, it would be you."

Severus had to close his eyes against that intense temptation. It was a thought he had had before this night, during the week he had watched Harry walk about with his jaw clenched shut and his eyes blinking now and then as though he was staring into the sun.

*I could demand that he stay behind, that he not fight alone. At the very least, he should take me with him. I have training that would make me more valuable on the battlefield than any student, and less likely to panic.*

But though he had the power, he did not have the right. He knew that Harry would give in, but without grace, and then he might not possess his son's trust again even if they did both survive the battle.

Strange, that he had once contemplated the impossibility of ever ordering Harry Potter to go through a *true* ordeal or obey school rules. He would go through pain willingly, and he would obey the rules under duress. But Severus did not have the power to prevent him from saving the world, no matter how much he wished he did.

As Harry had said the other day, the sixteen years they had spent apart had left their mark. Harry would listen to him, care for him, perhaps respect him. But he was on the verge of adulthood and used to raising himself, and he would not always obey.

It hurt Severus to hold himself back, not to use the power that, for once, seemed to lie in his hand exactly when he needed it. But he could not, and he met Draco's eyes and shook his head in a sharp motion that made the boy turn away at last.

"Harry would not forgive me," he said. It was a piece of knowledge that would have been insufficient for Albus, perhaps even for Minerva, but Draco had the same kind of closeness to Harry to risk, and he nodded, shoulders slumping.

"We will stand ready to join the battle if we can and if it looks possible," Severus added, the only concession he could offer the disappointed boy. "We will not let him fall alone."

Draco gave him a pathetically grateful glance. Severus bit back the sneering words that he would have used automatically with many other Slytherins to get them to adopt a different expression. Draco was different from them, and he and Severus shared a deeper relationship than simply student and Head of House.

"Thanks," Draco whispered, before he frowned, checked his potion, and began to brew again.

Severus returned to his work as well, keeping one eye on Draco. The boy had not yet destroyed or damaged a potion, but the slight alertness the watching required kept Severus from thinking of what he longed to do for Harry, and could not.

"Harry."

*Of course he's going to do this. Of course.* Harry took a deep breath and turned around to face Dumbledore.

He'd been walking back from the Room of Requirement, where he'd spent one more evening training Dumbledore's Army as if nothing was wrong. Everyone watched him with strained eyes and tense smiles, but no one said anything. Harry was grateful for that. He'd had a quiet few hours that let him practice dueling and watch over other people who might need the skills he was teaching them to survive the battle. It wasn't as good as more practice duels with Snape, but Harry didn't think a hundred duels like that would really make him ready to face Voldemort.

He'd stayed behind to "make sure the Room was cleaned up," but in reality to stare at the walls and try to imagine the spells exploding around him for real in a few days. He didn't have to imagine Voldemort's face. He could see it every time he closed his eyes.

And now Dumbledore had come up to him as he was walking along the corridor nearest Gryffindor Tower. Harry cleared his throat and stood to face him, trying to keep his hand from twitching towards his wand. He didn't think Dumbledore was about to attack him.

Well, he *mostly* didn't think that.

"Sir?" he asked, and began listing the subjects that this conversation could be about in his own head: the spell that Dumbledore planned to use to give Harry his magic, a final apology or plea for forgiveness, or a reminder of battle strategy. It didn't *have* to be something that should make Harry afraid of being alone with Dumbledore.

"You must be wondering how I knew when Voldemort would attack."

Harry looked up and blinked. *See, an even more harmless subject than you anticipated,* he taunted himself, and managed a nod. "Well, sir, I did wonder. You seemed certain he was going to come, but I didn't know how you could be."

Dumbledore smiled sadly and touched the place on his arm where Harry knew the Horcrux-infected wound was, though he had a glamour that covered it again. "The bond that linked you and Voldemort came about because he managed to place a Horcrux in you," he said, "essentially behind your scar."

Harry nodded again, watching Dumbledore's hands constantly. He didn't know what the Headmaster's tells were, but he wanted to be alert anyway, just in case he moved—

Then he tried to get rid of his fear with a blast of irritation. *Dumbledore is not here to duel you.*

"It seems that sustaining a wound from a Horcrux does much the same thing," Dumbledore said calmly. "I began to have dreams of Voldemort and what he was doing." He gave Harry a guilty glance. "Unlike the disaster that was your Occlumency lessons—and I do apologize for inflicting those on you, Harry—I did not need extra training to control the connection. I have used the bond but little. I did, however, manage to implant some interesting dreams in Tom's head, and nudge them out of dangerous paths at times. I needed him to come to Hogwarts, but not until you had a certain amount of readiness that you did not have at the beginning of term."

"Until the Horcrux was gone," Harry said. His eyes narrowed as he looked at Dumbledore. "Sir, when did you give up on the idea of killing me and start thinking that the Horcrux could be removed instead?"

Dumbledore sighed. "Ah, Harry, do not ask me that."

"But I *am*," Harry said, his hands clenching into fists in spite of himself. He knew he would lose if he tried to duel with Dumbledore, even if his magic was really fading, but his confusion demanded an answer. "I mean—if you knew that I was going to have to die, you'd plan around *that*, not around when you thought I had some special kind of training, because I wouldn't be alive to use it."

Dumbledore studied his face as if he was looking for something. Then he waved his wand and murmured a *Finite.* Harry flinched reflexively, but nothing seemed to happen.

"I am not the only one wearing a glamour," Dumbledore said softly.

Harry's hand flew to his cheek. Yes, the soft buzz of magic that he got when he was wearing the spell to disguise his face was gone. He quickly cast it again and glared at Dumbledore, waiting for the explanation.

"When I saw you early in the term," Dumbledore said quietly, "after your first experience with the white Dementors of your bloodline curse, I recognized the features you were trying to hide. I hoped—I hoped for many things, Harry. But I was not certain. I began to hope that I need not kill you after all. I delayed and I pushed and I said certain things when they needed to be said, and what I hoped for came to pass."

Harry licked his lips. "You were hoping that Snape would volunteer to brew the potion that you thought you needed to take out the Horcrux, at least if he found out that he was my father."

Dumbledore nodded. "I could not brew it on my own, not once my magic began to fade. And perhaps I underestimated Severus, but after the bitterness of your fifth year, I was not sure that he would brew the potion and do it correctly merely because I asked him to. Not when it was for you."

"You *did* underestimate him," Harry said dully, trying to deal with the idea that Dumbledore had manipulated him and Snape into becoming closer. Or was it even manipulation? Harry was wondering if they ought to give the Headmaster credit for being that smart and controlling. Sometimes it seemed as though he simply let circumstances fall out and hoped that it would be favorably.

"Perhaps so." Dumbledore gave Harry a small smile. "Having seen the way that he tries to support and protect you, I think so."

Harry shook his head. "But you could have brewed the potion before that, before you learned about the—about what Snape is to me but after you learned about Horcruxes."

Dumbledore sighed. "The simple truth is that I did not think of it, Harry. I am not a Potions master. It might seem as though that matters little, since I have made some discoveries that contribute to general Potions knowledge. But while Severus immediately had ideas for what potions would work, I did not, because I am not accustomed to thinking in that direction. I began to research Transfiguration first, as that is my particular field of specialty, and found nothing there. And then I learned my magic was fading. And then I saw beneath your glamour." He looked at Harry again, a faint half-smile on his face. For the first time, Harry thought, it looked as if he was mocking himself and not someone else. "I should have thought matters through and asked Severus for help. I did not. I know that your friend Miss Granger thinks few wizards have logic. That certainly applies to me."

Harry stared at him, and said nothing. He felt there ought to have been a better explanation for that, a less *fallible* one.

But didn't he only feel that way because he'd been so accustomed to thinking of Dumbledore as infallible? He would have accepted this explanation from Snape or McGonagall or someone he didn't idealize so much.

And he'd just got through thinking that Dumbledore wasn't as smart and formidable as they'd all

given him credit for.

Harry swallowed and said, "I need to know that this is the absolute last lie you're going to tell me, sir. Or," he added quickly when he saw Dumbledore opening his mouth, "the absolute last *truth*."

"It is," Dumbledore said calmly. "I came to ask if you would like me to make an Unbreakable Vow to tell only the truth from this point forwards. I do not know if that would satisfy Severus. The Vow compels death if one breaks it, and he might feel that, because I am so close to death already, it would not matter to me. But you and I both know the importance of my surviving for a few days more so that I may transfer my magic to you."

Harry nodded slowly. As strange as it was, he was closer to Dumbledore than to Snape or Draco in some ways. They both understood self-sacrifice in a way Harry suspected was probably impossible for Slytherins.

Then Snape stepped out of the corridor behind him and clasped Harry about the shoulders. His wand was trained on Dumbledore. His face was pale and expressionless in a way that Harry didn't like, because he suspected it was what Snape looked like when he was playing a Death Eater.

"How did you know where I was?" Harry asked, trying to move. Snape's hand clamped down, and it was the tight kind of hold you shouldn't challenge, so he stood still.

"Locator Spell," Snape said, not taking his eyes from Dumbledore. "I heard what he said, and I will take him up on the Unbreakable Vow." He gestured to Dumbledore's wand with his own. "Harry will serve as our Binder."

It was a strange and awful thing, the little ritual they went through in the corridor, with Dumbledore swearing in a clear voice to tell the truth from now on, to transfer his magic to Harry without hesitation or holding back, and never to try and manipulate them again. Harry stared at the circle of fire around Dumbledore's wrist and wondered how he was ever expected to be *normal* after this.

But Snape's presence was like a steady fire, and Harry decided that he could depend on him, some of the time.

Then he caught sight of the way his father was looking at him as the Vow finished, and found himself smiling. *He probably won't let me* not *depend on him.*

##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### #####
##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### #####
##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### #####

Chapter: 47

Thank you again for all the reviews!

*Chapter Forty-Seven—Morning*

Harry had wondered when Dumbledore would warn him that Voldemort had come to the school, but it turned out that he didn't need much of a warning after all.

Three days after Dumbledore took the Unbreakable Vow, his scar began to burn at breakfast, and Harry's fingers trembled open as he let a piece of toast fall back on his plate. He pressed his hand to his forehead and moaned. Then he tried to sit back up, knowing how that would panic some of the people watching him, but the damage was done.

Hermione leaned towards him, putting one hand on his arm and speaking in a soft voice that Harry was nonetheless sure everyone at the Gryffindor table heard, because of how intently they were all listening. "Is it *him*, Harry?"

Harry nodded. It was the only thing he could say, the only gesture he could make. The scar sent keen lines of pain radiating down his cheeks and jaw, and he couldn't have opened his mouth to speak if Voldemort was standing in front of him right then.

People around him started to mutter, and the students at the other tables were leaning over to stare. Harry heard chairs being pushed back, voices rising, the clatter of spoons and forks and knives as people started dropping them. He wanted to yell for everyone to sit still, because their panic wouldn't help and they might get in his way, but he still couldn't speak. He turned his head towards the High Table instead, because he knew that there were two people there who would be necessary.

Dumbledore was already on his feet, his gaze stern and commanding, his wand in his hand. He nodded to Harry and turned towards the entrance from the Great Hall. Harry knew that he would have to follow him. Dumbledore had mentioned that this spell was too powerful to be performed in front of others, since they might try to interfere and the backlash would be extreme.

And Snape…

Snape was on his feet, too, though Harry knew he was going to stay in the school, because he had promised. His face was very still and his eyes were very dark, and he wore the expression Harry had seen on one occasion when Neville's cauldron came near to destroying the entire Potions classroom.

But he had been able to do something about that. He wouldn't be able to do anything about this. Harry knew that, and his heart reached out to his father. He even wanted to extend a hand, but he couldn't. There were still Death Eaters in the school, and if one of them saw Professor Snape's pain and the way that Harry Potter responded to that, that might mean they'd try to attack him

during the battle.

Harry settled for one glance, and gave the same to Draco, seated at the Slytherin table, as he followed Dumbledore. Draco looked as though he lacked the strength to rise to his feet. He simply shut his eyes.

Harry swept out of the Great Hall, and fell into step beside Dumbledore. The pain his scar had begun to ease. His heart was pounding, but he felt oddly distant from the crazy beat in his ears, as though he were listening to a horn blowing for someone else to come out and fight.

No, even more distant than that, he thought a minute later. At least he would care more if he was going to watch someone else go out and fight, and possibly die. He just felt light and floating now, as though nothing could hurt him or touch him. He wondered if it was a bad thing, then decided he couldn't do anything about it and looked up at Dumbledore.

"Where are we going, sir?" he asked.

"Down to a classroom in the dungeons that was warded up some years ago." Dumbledore's voice sounded slightly distracted, but it was otherwise as calm and cheerful as ever. "And he will—ah, yes, there he is."

Harry, thinking he meant Voldemort, looked up apprehensively, but instead a streak of fire moved through the air and Fawkes spiraled down to meet them. He landed on Dumbledore's shoulder and rubbed his head against his cheek. Dumbledore looked up and scratched his fingers through the phoenix's feathers, but never turned around or stopped walking. Harry hurried to catch up, shivering uncontrollably.

*It's finally happening. It's really happening, at last.*

The journey to the section of wall that contained the hidden classroom seemed short; Harry could have blinked and they would have reached it. Dumbledore reached out and placed his hand on the stone, his fingertips splayed out so that they formed a star-like pattern. The stone trembled, and groaned, and sank inwards.

Harry stepped into a room that still throbbed with what seemed barely contained energy. He stared around curiously at the dark splotches on the walls and wondered what had happened here.

But Dumbledore was turning around with his wand raised, and there was no more *time.* Harry moved away from the door and waited.

Dumbledore smiled wistfully at him. "Have you forgiven me, Harry, for the harm I meant to do to you?" he asked.

Harry bit back an impatient exclamation. Dumbledore was not stupid. He wouldn't have started talking like this if they really didn't have time for it. So Harry thought carefully about it for a

moment. Could he give Dumbledore the mercy he needed to go to a peaceful death? He wouldn't have asked if it wasn't important.

But in the end, Harry knew the answer. He met Dumbledore's eyes and shook his head. "I'm sorry, sir. I can't, not yet."

Dumbledore said nothing for so long that Harry was afraid he had forgotten about the spell, and Voldemort, and everything they had to do. Then he sighed, nodded, and said, "Perhaps I deserve that."

"It has nothing to do with deserving," Harry said, meeting his eyes and holding them until he was certain Dumbledore understood. "I just can't, yet."

And Dumbledore nodded again, and smiled this time, and Harry felt an ache in his heart. He swallowed. Dumbledore held up his wand and began to speak in soft Latin, punctuating the words with little swishes of his wrist. Fawkes edged down his shoulder to his arm and sat watching the wand with his head cocked on one side. Harry watched the phoenix and wondered what he thought about Dumbledore dying to give Harry his magic.

Fawkes spread his wings as Dumbledore's voice grew deeper. The walls of the room began to glow with red-gold light. Harry blinked at them and wondered whether he should be worried. After all, he hadn't asked Dumbledore to make another Unbreakable Vow before they came in here, and he hadn't asked what all the effects of the spell would be.

But such worries would have to be for someone else, like Snape or Draco, because the glow was spreading, and the walls were shuddering to the beat of a giant heart, and the magic was cresting around Dumbledore in a wave of light. Harry stood braced firmly for it, though when the wave began to dip down to meet him, he knew no one could ever be really ready for an experience like this.

His scar burst into a fiercer burning when the magic touched him. Harry wondered for a minute why his scar was burning if the Horcrux had been destroyed, but lost the question as the magic charged around his shoulders, circled his arms, and swept into his body by the elbow joints.

The magic was warm, and joyous, and Harry could feel it like breath down the back of his neck, like windy laughter. His body twitched when it began to absorb those sensations, and Harry held his breath. He hadn't even wondered how the power might join, or not, with his own magical core. It hadn't seemed like a necessary question to ask.

It wasn't, as it turned out. The blending was seamless, as much as Harry could feel it, which wasn't much. He felt a brief overlapping sensation, as though he was trying to see through his glasses and over them at once, and then the magic had stopped pouring into him and was still. Harry took a deep breath and opened his hands, wondering if he had the extra power after all.

Sparks fell from his palms. Harry felt the almost uncontrollable urge to touch his wand and cast a

spell, just to stop the pressure from building up inside. He had to bite down on his lip and close his throat against a shout. All this magic, and he would have to use it soon, if he wanted to defeat Voldemort.

Only then did he think to look up.

Dumbledore's body lay still on the floor. Fawkes was sitting on his back, rubbing his cheek very gently against the tumble of Dumbledore's beard. As Harry watched, he spread his wings and rose into the air, hovering above Dumbledore like a symbol on a banner, his wings fully extended, his voice traveling up and down in a continuous croon of harmonies that made Harry's eyes blur with tears.

Then light gathered around Fawkes, and he vanished in a twist of fire. Harry stared at the disappearing sparks, and had the strong impression that no one would ever see the Headmaster's phoenix again.

His scar burned, summoning him to the battle. But Harry knelt down and put his hand on Dumbledore's shoulder for a long minute.

Draco leaned against the couch in the Slytherin common room and closed his eyes.

The students had all been dismissed to their common rooms by their Heads of House the moment the Headmaster and Harry left the Great Hall. Draco had caught Professor Snape's eye and asked a silent question. Was he supposed to go, too? If there were still Death Eaters among the students, they might try to hurt him while everyone else was distracted.

Snape had nodded firmly, and so Draco had come back here.

*Here*, where he was uselessly far from the battle and could do nothing.

He hissed and clenched one hand into a fist on his knee. It wouldn't be noticed. Everyone around him was muttering or wringing their hands or sitting in one place with their arms folded across their chests. This was only another gesture, a mild one at that, to deal with the pressure the moment was putting on all of them.

Someone touched him on the shoulder. Draco opened his eyes and turned his head sharply, the hand that wasn't fisted already dipping into his robe pocket to touch his wand. If this was a Death Eater—

Blaise sat down beside him and gave him a long look from eyes that were almost painfully clear. Draco swallowed. He wondered if Blaise was about to say something he didn't want to hear, was about to say that Harry had died, and then decided that was ridiculous. There was no reason that Blaise would know before Draco himself did.

But it was so hard trying to be rational, when he was so *worried*.

"Draco," Blaise whispered, after a glance around the common room that seemed to say he wanted to remain unobserved as much as Draco did at the moment. "I know about your relationship with Potter."

Every muscle in Draco's body was iron. He whirled and brought the wand up to Blaise's throat in the kind of smooth move a machine would use, and he looked him straight in the eye, and he didn't blink, and he didn't flinch. He would hate killing Blaise, but he would hate it later, when Blaise was safely out of the way and couldn't be a threat to Harry.

A few of the Slytherins glanced over at them, but no one made any move to interfere, and wouldn't even if Draco cast on Blaise, he sensed. Private quarrels were a good way to work out the tension that thrummed through the room, the tension that all of them could feel and none of them could escape. None of the prefects would realize until too late that this duel was more deadly than some of the others they had seen in their time.

Blaise breathed lightly, not even trying to fight where the wand rested against his neck, never taking his eyes off Draco. "Wait," he whispered. "I don't mean that in the way you think I mean it."

"How do you mean it, then?" Draco's voice was flat and calm. His mind had charged ahead and taken up another possibility. It was possible that Blaise thought Draco and Harry were only friends, but knew something about Professor Snape being Harry's father. The same thing would happen, though. Either secret could be enough to endanger Harry, because Death Eaters in the school would try to strike at both the professor and Draco.

"I mean," Blaise said, his breathing still light and his eyes painfully direct, "that I know about it, and I won't betray it. It doesn't matter what the Dark Lord does. My ultimate loyalty is to you, and not him."

Draco blinked. He wanted to let the wand fall, but he knew that would be a mistake. This was the kind of thing that Blaise might say so that he could have an in with Draco, to make him react with shock and, in the meantime, drop his guard. Or maybe he thought that Harry would win the battle and wanted to prove his loyalty that way.

"I mean it," Blaise said, and he smiled a little, probably because he was saying the word "mean" so many times. He reached up and gripped Draco's wrist. Draco moved his other hand forwards and put it in a fist near Blaise's chest, near his ribs. Blaise nodded. All of the Slytherins knew the spell that one of their prefects had invented years ago, which would conjure a knife in the hand opposite the one holding the wand and drive it home in the same instant.

"I would never have told you if I really didn't mean it." Blaise tilted his head back, baring his throat. Draco kept his hand where it was, near Blaise's ribs, but he understood the gesture. Blaise wasn't trying to defend himself. His hands rested on his knees, both open. "I understand what you're going through, because it's the same thing that I felt when my mother told me that the

Dark Lord might kill you. I—I believe some of the same things he does, but not enough of them to kill a friend. Never."

Draco wanted to shut his eyes. The prefects were watching them now, because the confrontation had gone on too long. They would react if Blaise tried to hurt him. Draco wanted to believe his friend and believe that he was safe and that he would have someone to sit with him during the battle who knew how this felt, to comfort him if Harry fell.

But he couldn't. Not completely.

He kept his hand and his wand in place, and shook his head at Blaise. "If you're right, then I'll say sorry later," he murmured in a voice so scratchy it hurt his throat. "But I can't believe you right now."

"I know." Blaise's hand twitched as if he would reach out and squeeze Draco's wrist, but then he seemed to realize what a bad idea that would be and kept it still. He did give Draco a sympathetic look.

Draco treasured that look for what he could, and then they sat in place, one threatening, one sprawling defenseless, waiting for news.

Severus had known where Dumbledore would take Harry to give him the magic; there was only one place in the school with wards strong enough. He was waiting outside the door when Harry stumbled out and made as if to lean against the wall, shivering.

Severus moved, putting his hand on Harry's shoulder and shaking until Harry looked up at him. The question he asked then was a favor for himself—there was no escaping that—but it also gave Harry something else to concentrate on rather than the part he had just played in Albus's death.

"Will you not show me your real face one time, before you go to your battle?" he asked quietly.

Harry stared with such wide, mindless eyes that Severus was momentarily afraid the Headmaster has found a way to get around the Unbreakable Vow and cast a different spell after all, one that would possess Harry and give Albus a new life in his body. But then Harry straightened up with an expression of genuine shock—shock that anyone would care about such a thing where he was concerned—which relieved Severus's fears. Yes, this was his son.

"Remove the glamour?" Harry asked. "But that doesn't matter. Dumbledore is *dead.*"

"And in a short time, you may be," Severus said. *I should have remembered that bluntness works best with Gryffindors in the first place.* "Will you deny me the sight of my son?"

Harry shivered once, his face flushing deeply, as if he might think that he and Snape's son were two different people, still. Then he reached up and twitched his wand at his face. The glamour

snapped away like a sheet of lightning, so fast that Severus knew Dumbledore's extra magic must be affecting even Harry's simpler spells.

Severus knelt down in front of Harry and shuffled about to the side so that he could see better in the light of the torches shining from the walls. Harry's eyes were as wide and as green as ever, but the face about them was subtly different. None of the changes by themselves were large, and Severus understood why it had not been difficult for Harry to attach the glamour over his real face. But together, the tilt of the cheekbones, the angle of the nose, the wideness of the eye sockets, all added up.

The messy hair was still the same, perhaps a bit less tangled. Severus reckoned he had to accept that something in the mingled blood of his ancestors and Lily's resembled something in the blood of James Potter's. And that was not such a surprise when one considered that Lily's ancestors had probably been Squibs, and all pure-bloods were intermarried and related to each other in diverse ways.

Severus touched Harry's face with trembling fingers, and then embraced him once. He made it quick, so that he would not linger too long and be unable to let go, and he made it hard, so that Harry would carry the memory with him.

Harry gave Severus a look when he was untangling his arms from around Harry's chest that Severus didn't recognize, and didn't have time to interpret. But Harry reached out, hesitated, then patted his shoulder and said, "I didn't realize it meant so much to you. I've heard—I've heard people *say* I look like James Potter, but he wasn't there to look at me and show me that it was important. Or I don't remember if he did. So I'll—I'll go into battle like this, if you want. Because it matters to you."

Severus did not have words. He only had a squeeze of Harry's shoulder and a convulsive shake of his head that Harry seemed to understand without the explanation. The Dark Lord's eyes were too keen even in a moment of crisis. He might notice the difference, understand it, and then figure out a way to torment Severus, or to send a message to one of his Death Eaters within the wards.

Harry nodded, renewed the glamour, smiled at him, and departed.

Severus stood still.

When Harry stepped out of the castle, muted light was everywhere. The sky was grey, the sun glowing from around the clouds, their underbellies white sometimes. Harry stared up at them, and then lowered his head and faced across the battlefield when he thought he could.

Voldemort was waiting at the edge of the Forbidden Forest. The scar on Harry's forehead pointed the way like a signal fire.

Harry took a deep breath, and began to walk.

He wondered as he went what the plan was for keeping the Death Eaters away from the fight, something Dumbledore hadn't addressed, and then smiled. Voldemort's pride was so great that Harry probably only had to offer to duel with him and then dismiss any reluctance as fear, and he'd tackle Harry alone willingly, the way he had in the graveyard.

Or maybe it was the magic, whispering and humming in him so that it was like walking on a beating heart, all the way across the earth. Harry raised his wand and hoped that he could create a shield big enough to shut him and Voldemort away from the Death Eaters he could see stirring like maggots on the edge of the Forest.

Then a curl of scarlet caught his eye.

Fawkes dipped down from above, turning his head as he flew and giving Harry a single, lovely, sad trill, as if to say that he had thought about this and it was the best way to go on, as much as he missed Dumbledore. Then he opened his wings and tilted sideways, and a sheet of flame spread from under his body, raging up and down, speeding forwards, so that in instants Harry and Voldemort were enclosed in a ring of phoenix fire.

*Thank you, Fawkes,* Harry thought, and lifted a hand in soundless farewell as Fawkes turned again to the sky, forever this time. *I don't think anyone will get through that wall.*

Voldemort stood still, looking at him, and he was as horrible as ever, flat-faced and red-eyed and the man who had caused all of Harry's nightmares.

But, Harry realized as he came to a halt and held up his wand, this was the man who had also mattered to him least in the last few months. Harry had been far more concerned with Snape and Draco. He'd spared more thoughts for Dumbledore and Lucius Malfoy than for Voldemort.

He paused as much as in surprise as anything else, and that gave Voldemort a chance to speak above the almost musical crackle of the flames.

"Come to face me at last, boy?" He smiled, or did something that Harry supposed could be called a smile, and held out his wand eagerly. "Ready to duel?"

Harry nodded, but it was more his own thoughts than Voldemort that he was nodding to.

Voldemort had become insignificant, or at worst had seemed a lurking threat on the horizon, inevitable, like winter or a storm, but something that could be faced. Harry had been more frightened of what Snape would say when he found out that Harry was his son, more afraid for Draco when it had seemed as though he would suffer the loss of both his parents. He had cared more about the way Dumbledore had mucked about with his life and the way Ron and Hermione's bickering had isolated them from him.

So much else to care about that wasn't death. So much to worry about that didn't have anything to

do with the evil wizard who had killed his parents—well, his mother and one of his fathers—or had something to do with it only tangentially.

Voldemort *didn't matter.* Not next to the people Harry loved.

"Unable to speak, boy?" Voldemort stepped forwards and began to weave a spell, a nonverbal one, trying to use his words to distract Harry from it. "Unsurprising. Your father was mute when he died, too. I didn't give him enough time to scream."

Harry looked at Voldemort, and smiled.

Voldemort paused, his eyes narrowed in doubt.

And Harry decided it was time.

He could barely hold on to all the singing, dancing magic in him, a power greater than the world, a power greater than any one wizard should have. And he was a Gryffindor. He believed in brute strength, Snape would say, rather than subtlety. And he probably couldn't beat Voldemort in a one-on-one duel anyway, because he wasn't as ruthless and he didn't know as many spells and his extra strength would bleed away, as Dumbledore had warned him, the longer this took.

Harry reached for the extra power. He didn't know what he was doing, not exactly, but there was the strength, and it was joined to him but still different enough from his magical core for him to feel it, and he gathered it up and rolled it down to the end of his wand.

Voldemort stared at him.

Harry plunged deep inside himself, gathering up his memories of the people he loved. Draco was there, with his smile, and Snape, with his fussing over Harry lying in bed, and Hermione, with her need for logic, and Ron, with his understanding about the most surprising things, and the Weasleys, laughing, and even Dumbledore, Dumbledore at the last, giving of himself to save the world.

*The world is worth saving,* Harry thought, the first time he had ever put it into words. When he had thought it would be his duty to die and destroy the Horcrux, he had thought of the world as an abstraction, a shapeless mass of people that he would die to save because there was no other choice.

How stupid. One couldn't love a shapeless mass. The world was individuals, a small and selfish thing compared to the entirety, the people of whom one said, *My world would end without them.*

One of them was gone. Harry would make sure it was no more.

His love joined with his magic, and Harry did not speak an incantation, any more than his mother had when she died to save him and her will powered the sacrifice. He called to the power, and it

answered him in a conflagration of light, and out it shot from his wand, transformed by his love, and rolled around him, blazing brighter than a thousand phoenixes. Harry threw open his arms to welcome it. It felt like sunshine on his skin, sun just on the edge of being too hot.

Voldemort screamed—the way he had screamed when Quirrell's fingers had touched Harry's skin in their first year.

Harry gave, and willed, and looked, and loved. With his own magic, it might not have been enough, especially since his wand was brother to Voldemort's.

But Dumbledore's magic was with him, and the wand was no more than a conduit.

The light came.

When it was gone, Voldemort was, too, and the phoenix fires were dying, and Harry turned to the Death Eaters, cloaked in light, and they broke and fled.

Severus was the first one onto the battlefield. He had been watching from the battlements, of course, with the other professors, standing ready to defend the school if Harry failed, and McGonagall was racing beside him. But Severus outpaced them all, and knelt beside his son, who was lying on the ground, on pounded white ash all the way up to the border of the circle of flames that had swallowed him.

He was not injured. He was breathing. He was awake and aware. Severus gathered him in his arms and wished he believed in miracles, because then he might have had a name for this.

"I am sorry I could not be with you," he whispered.

Harry blinked at him and frowned a little. "But you were," he said. "Of course you were."

Then he fainted, and McGonagall came up and started arguing that *she* should take Harry to the hospital wing, as his Head of House, and the most delirious moments of Severus's life were past.

##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### #####
##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### #####
##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### #####

Chapter: 48

Thank you again for all the reviews! This story will end on Chapter 50.

*Chapter Forty-Eight—Awakening*

Severus settled on a chair beside Harry's bed in the hospital wing. He had a forbidding

expression, and he had also constructed a series of wards around the bed that were not visible to anyone else, but would warn him in an instant if anyone entered the corridor that led towards the door. He would have time to sit back from the bed and adopt an appropriate bored or frustrated look if it were one of his Slytherins.

He and Harry would have time to reveal their secret, but it could not be yet, not when the Death Eaters remained at large and would delight in Harry's having a family member that they could kill.

In the meantime, while he waited for the onslaught of people who would surely try to see Harry once they realized the danger was gone and the hero appropriately asleep and resting from his hard labor, Severus gazed into his son's face. Asleep, behind the glamour, Harry looked ordinary—not like someone who could have walked out from the walls of Hogwarts, extra magic or not, to fearlessly face the worst Dark Lord Britain had ever known.

"I do not understand you," Severus whispered. Habit and practice kept his voice in a whisper so soft that someone standing a meter away could not have heard it. "You came from me and from your mother. *She* demonstrated extraordinary courage, but only when her child was threatened. And I—I have never had that at all. What made you this way? I know that your upbringing was not of the kind to encourage compassion or the formation of a heroic character. And yet, here you are."

He fell silent as the first onlookers peeped in, classmates of Harry's from Gryffindor. Seamus Finnigan swallowed when he saw Severus and glanced uncertainly back at the others—Longbottom, Thomas, the Weasley girl. Then he cleared his throat and said boldly, "What are you doing here, sir?"

"Serving as a guardian for Mr. Potter," Severus said, in a voice that he hoped would make them shrink, and it did. Longbottom wobbled on his feet. "It seems that it is feared some of *my* students might attack him." He let his sneer emerge full-force, and Longbottom backed away with a whimper. "What are *you* doing here, Mr. Finnigan?"

"We heard You-Know-Who was dead and Harry was all right," Thomas said, perhaps a bit braver because Finnigan's body partially screened him from Severus's venomous glare. He gestured at the bed. "He doesn't look all right."

"He has just fought a battle," Severus said, and endeavored to keep down the scream he wanted to utter to a dry voice of the kind he would use to tell Longbottom why he had exploded his latest cauldron. "Would you expect him to be on his feet, singing and dancing the way he does after a Quidditch victory?"

"H-Harry doesn't sing and dance after a Quidditch victory," Longbottom put in, unexpectedly brave—and irritating. "Y-you don't really know him at all, P-professor Snape." The other Gryffindors nodded in agreement, and the Weasley girl pushed into the room, watching Harry with narrowed eyes as if she expected to find the marks of poison that Severus had slipped him

on his skin.

Severus's legs ground against one another, but he remained seated and calm. They did not know yet, and so they must not yet suspect. There was no reason for him to be angry at their saying that he did not know Harry.

But he could get angry at their insolence, and he did.

"Madam Pomfrey was stern," he said, lowering his voice so that it would have a greater impact. "She specifically said *no visitors.* What would you do here, in any case? Stand around the bed and attempt to awaken him with the power of your goggling?"

The Weasley girl clenched her fists and said, "I want to talk to him, sir. Maybe I can help bring him out of his sleep."

Severus rolled his eyes. He saw no reason to refrain when they would expect that from someone as unpleasant as Professor Snape. "He is not in a *coma,* Miss Weasley. He is simply asleep. He suffers from magical exhaustion, given the way that he had to confront the Dark Lord. Do go back to your common room now and wait for him to awaken. I am sure the news will be carried to you the instant he does." He felt his voice thicken with bitterness, and knew from the wondering glances the Gryffindor students gave him that none of them understood. Severus was thinking of the way that these people who had almost no connection to Harry could freely worry for him, while Severus was forced to disguise his own interest, and Draco, who was not supposed to care about anything but the way the ending of the war would affect his family's political position, would have to wait long hours before he was able to sneak in.

The youngest Weasley didn't seem inclined to stir yet, no matter how hard Severus glared at her. "I know that Ron and Hermione came by," she said. "They got to talk to him."

"And he tried to sit up so that he could talk to them better, and then flopped down in a dead faint," Severus snapped back. He was still seething over the stupidity of that gesture. Harry's friends could have talked to him just as well when he was flat on his back. "That was when Madam Pomfrey forbade visitors."

Weasley considered him for a few minutes more, then uttered a loud snort of disgust and turned away. "We should go," she told the others. "He isn't going to let us through, even though *Harry* would want us here." She gave Severus one more glance that he supposed was meant to make him feel ashamed, and then paraded out the door. The others followed her.

Severus waited until they had passed beyond the boundary of his ward, and then he reached out and put one hand on Harry's forehead, checking for fever. Despite Poppy's reassurances, he knew that magical exhaustion sometimes passed into fever, and he wanted to make sure that Harry did not acquire one. The time it would take to brew the appropriate potion to make the fever go down was time that Severus would not be able to spend by his son's bedside.

No excessive heat met his hand. Severus nodded and sat back. He had, of course, already ensured that Harry had drunk the potions he should have: the Strengthening Draught to make possible the swift return of his magic and the Relaxation Draught that would give him a comfortable sleep (and, incidentally, make his muscles limp to the point where he was unable to sneak out of bed before he should).

Harry had been in the hospital wing many times before. Severus knew that. It didn't stop him from planning to make sure that he received *real* care this time, not the care that Madam Pomfrey would distribute from hands and a mind occupied with many other things. Harry would rest, and he would not get up before Severus determined that it was time. Given the pretense of having to guard Harry from people in the school who might revenge for his killing of the Dark Lord, Severus could arrange to be constantly near his bed, constantly attending him in the way he needed and which Severus required to soothe his own battered heart.

Then one of his own thoughts caught up with him in a way it hadn't before and he bent over at the waist, catching his breath with a deep huff.

Harry had destroyed the Dark Lord.

The Mark on Severus's arm was now no more than a reminder of past mistakes. He could move away from the school, if he wished, once the remaining Death Eaters were captured. He had not had to do any of the more desperate things he had envisioned doing before the Dark Lord was destroyed, in part because of that venture into Malfoy Manor which had exposed his true loyalties.

He was free

And his son was the cause of his freedom.

Severus lifted his head and shook it, eyes fastened to Harry's face. This was no easier for him to understand than Harry's enormous courage was. How could one person have done this? How could Severus feel grateful, and resentful because of the gratitude—he should have been the one to defend and take care of Harry, not the other way around, and Dumbledore should never have put a child in this position—and determined to protect Harry from the consequences of his actions, all at the same time?

There were too many emotions in his mind, too much air in his lungs. Too much life being forced into his body.

Severus had almost forgotten what it felt like to breathe in freedom.

"So. He's gone."

Draco nodded. He didn't know what else to say, how else to react. He was sitting in one corner of the common room, curled up in a large chair, and staring at the wall. He had been doing that ever

since the news of the Dark Lord's death had filtered down to the Slytherins, because he wanted to hide his real feelings. It was understandable that he would feel a bit—abstracted—at the death of the wizard everyone knew Draco's father had served. Yes, he had been accounted a traitor by the Dark Lord in front of the whole school, but still, this would change the fortunes of everyone in Slytherin House, and Draco would need time to figure out what he should do.

Meanwhile, Draco burned to see Harry, and knew that he shouldn't betray that. So the stare and his arms folded in front of him.

At the sound of Blaise's voice, though, he still gripped his wand.

"What's going to happen now?" Blaise asked, and then answered himself with a soft laugh. "I don't think anyone knows. And that's what has them so worried."

Draco finally turned to face him. Blaise stood next to the chair with his arms folded. Draco thought he meant to look bold and commanding, but it looked as if he were hugging himself against the cold instead.

"Why?" Draco breathed.

"Why doesn't anyone know?" Blaise cocked his head at him with a touch of his old arrogance. "Don't tell me that you think *your* predictions will be better than anyone's about how the world's going to change."

Draco shook his head impatiently. "What you said to me before," he said. "I want to know why you stayed loyal to me. It would have been—I mean, you could have found a way to survive if the Dark Lord won." He was not yet sure that Blaise had borne the Mark, and he was not going to ask until he was in a setting where he felt more confident.

Blaise was silent, rubbing his chin. Then he said, "My mother was ambivalent about the Dark Lord for a long time. She's a pure-blood, she's always married pure-bloods, and she hates the thought of Mudbloods intruding into our world and taking away our culture, so you'd think she'd be all for him."

Draco waited, knowing there was more to come, and that he should restrain his impatience, because Blaise's rambling couldn't be as irrelevant as it seemed.

"But," Blaise said, still staring past Draco's shoulder, "she didn't like the *all-out* way he went about things. You couldn't be his ally or neutral in the war. You had to be his slave or his enemy. My mother was convinced that would take away her own freedom, in the end. She wanted what he promised without having to serve him."

Draco snorted softly. And so Slytherin selfishness and desire for independence had provided Blaise with another way to think about the Dark Lord, and had probably saved Draco's life.

*And given me a moment of comfort when I most needed it,* he thought, though it was still hard to think about. The whole battle was hard to think about, even though he hadn't participated in it.

Blaise's voice sharpened, perhaps because he'd heard Draco's snort and guessed what it signified. "She passed that ambivalence on to me. I wanted some of the things he promised, but then I learned about you, and…" He shrugged.

Draco spent some time studying him before he nodded his head in acceptance. He couldn't think what goal Blaise could gain that would be worth the vulnerability of exposing his emotions like this. Yes, he might still kill Draco, but there was no Dark Lord around to reward him now, which would rather tend to cut down on the motivation for that. "All right. And why didn't you report me when you learned what you did?" It was the most open way he was going to refer to his relationship with Harry when he knew that other people were listening.

Blaise gave him a narrow grin. "What? And potentially kill the friend I was going to so much trouble to keep alive?"

Finally, Draco allowed himself to return the smile. He still didn't more than half-believe Blaise, but circumstances seemed to indicate he was telling the truth, and that was enough for now.

It was more than enough, considering that Draco couldn't see Harry yet no matter what and Blaise had put himself at risk to give Draco this much comfort.

Draco jumped down from his position on the chair. "Do you want to play chess?" he asked.

Blaise smiled before he could stop himself. He was an excellent chess-player and most of Slytherin House refused to play with him now, knowing they would inevitably suffer the humiliation of a defeat. Draco's willingness to do this went a long way towards making up for the dangers Blaise had incurred by putting himself at risk.

"Let me get the board," Blaise answered.

Harry opened his eyes slowly. Then he remembered Dumbledore and Fawkes, and opened them the whole way and tried to sit up.

Someone held him down. Harry snarled and reached for his glasses with one hand and his wand with the other. No one was going to keep him from fighting the way he thought he needed to do.

"Be still," said a familiar voice, and Harry paused with his heart beating wildly and his memory slowly catching up with his actions. He sighed and lay down, but kept one eye on the hand in the center of his chest—not that he could see it that well without his glasses except as a huge fuzzy-edged blob.

Snape slipped his glasses onto his face and leaned in to examine him minutely, eye to eye. Harry swallowed in confusion and stared back at him, brow furrowing. He wasn't sure what he was

supposed to say or how he was supposed to respond, but he *did* know that Snape was making him nervous.

"You are awake," Snape said at last, "and there is no permanent damage to your mind or your magic." He leaned back in his chair and gave Harry a tiny nod. "Welcome back," he added, and it might have sounded like a sneer to anyone else—say, a student watching from the door of the hospital wing.

But Harry could feel the way that the hand in the center of his chest pressed down harder for a moment.

"He's—he's gone?" Harry's voice was hoarser than he would have thought it would be, considering he didn't think he'd been asleep for very long. He cleared his throat in irritation and looked up at Snape, trying to understand his expression. But Snape's expression seemed purely for him, and Harry couldn't tell from it what was going on in the wider world.

"He is," Snape confirmed. "And the news of Dumbledore's death is out by now, as well. McGonagall is dealing with the details." His voice turned dry. "Of course, a mob tried to surround you when we first brought you into the castle, but Madam Pomfrey rather quickly dismissed them. I have been here since."

"I just bet you have," Harry muttered, thinking about the way Snape had seemed to delight in having Harry all to himself when Harry was in the dungeons recovering from the Entwining Potion.

"What was that?"

"Nothing," Harry said hastily. "But if nothing is wrong with my mind and my magic, and everything's finally over, can I get out of this bed and go back to the Tower? Ron and Hermione will be worried about me." He lowered his voice. "And it will be harder for Draco to visit me here."

"Certainly not," Snape said. "You were exhausted, and you will stay here until I am certain you have fully recovered."

Harry sighed, having a good idea of what that meant. He lay back against the pillows again, while Snape watched him as if he assumed Voldemort had left some curse that would suddenly cause Harry to have problems breathing.

And then—he couldn't help it—Harry started to grin. He shook his head and rolled to the side to suppress it, but it was there and it wouldn't be fought, stretching across his face as he began to laugh softly.

"I suppose that you will tell me what is so amusing when it occurs to you to do so," Snape said idly.

"Sorry, sir," Harry murmured, snapping back into focus, but the grin stayed where it was. "It's just—I beat him. Well, Dumbledore helped me beat him," he added, throat thickening a little as he remembered the Headmaster's sacrifice. "And now he's gone, and I don't have to worry about him *ever again.*"

"There are still the Death Eaters," Snape said repressively, but the pressure of his hand on Harry's chest said that he understood the sentiment.

"I'm free," Harry told the ceiling, and closed his eyes. He thought that he might fall asleep; surely his mind would be tired of feeling things that were less total than freedom.

But he remained awake and lively, and while he liked knowing that Snape was close, he didn't like the hand on his chest so much. He opened his eyes and looked at Snape. "Can you take your hand away? It's not as though I'm going to run away with you right there."

Snape didn't smile, as Harry had thought he might. He leaned over Harry and examined his face closely. Then he said, "Will you feel comfortable removing the glamour when the truth about us can emerge?"

Harry blinked. "Uh, yes," he said. He had been high on adrenaline when Snape had asked him to remove the glamour last time, and not sure he would survive. It hadn't seemed like such a big request. But after that, he had pretty much known that he would need to wear his "real" face if he lived.

Snape's face darkened for some reason. "If you are willing to remove it," he asked, voice a bit sharp, "why did you wear it in the first place?"

Harry sighed. "Because I was in denial that you were my father first. Well, I mean, I *knew* you were—I didn't think the letter I had from Mum would lie to me—but I didn't want to consider it. And if I left my face the way it was, then I knew someone would eventually notice. It might not be you, but it would escape my control, and then I wouldn't have a choice about the way I lived and who I said my parents were."

Snape leaned over him like a hunting beast. Harry frowned up at him. *He's bloody lucky I'm used to him from having him as a professor. If he'd been a stranger and did things like this, I'd be scared out of my wits.*

"This letter from Lily," Snape said in a peculiarly quiet voice. "Do you still have it?"

And suddenly something Harry had assumed he would never have to confront was *right there.* He shut his eyes and winced, wishing he could do something about the shallow air that seemed to have invaded his lungs.

"Yeah," he said at last. "I do. But—" Fear and remorse clogged his throat, and he stopped

speaking and waited.

"But what?" Snape's voice had curved upwards, and Harry worried for a minute that someone standing near the door of the hospital wing would hear them. But knowing Snape, he had probably put up wards so they wouldn't be surprised, and Harry needn't fear being eavesdropped on.

And he couldn't hope that someone would come in and save him from having to say it.

"There was a letter to you, too," he whispered. "It didn't have your name on it, but Mum told me what it was in her letter to me. But even when I believed her, the thought of you finding that and finding out about me was too horrible."

Snape's hand pressed down more firmly again. Harry didn't dare to open his eyes, imagining that he would see his father looking ready to strangle him. He flinched from his own imagination and continued in a hurried whisper, because now that he had to say this, it was better to just do it and get it over with.

"I tore your letter up. I couldn't—I couldn't face it, and I didn't think I would ever be able to like you, and now it's gone. I'm sorry."

Silence, and it continued until Harry knew he would have to end it one way or the other. He opened his eyes.

Snape was staring at the far wall. His eyes were half-shut and his expression was tight, controlled. His hand hadn't moved away from Harry or pressed down any further, but Harry could read his tension in the line of his shoulders and the way his robe hung around him like the wings of a dead bird.

"I'm sorry," Harry whispered again.

Snape seemed to collect himself, and turned back. "You could not have known," he said in a voice as controlled as his face. "If I had known at the time you found out—" He paused. "When was this?"

"The summer before my fifth year," Harry muttered. "After Cedric died."

Snape nodded, but absently, as if the words weren't really important to him. "If I had known that," he said, "I do not know that it would have made much difference. I would have tried to claim you because of the importance of blood to me, but it might have been disastrous." He seemed to notice that he was pushing down too hard and reluctantly pulled his hand back from Harry's chest, flexing the fingers as he went.

"Still," he added in a musing voice, "I would have liked to have the letter."

Harry broke.

He reached up before he thought about it and grabbed Snape's hand, pulling it back to him and holding it so hard that he felt Snape wince. But he couldn't let go of it, and he couldn't stop the tears that were gathering around the edges of his eyes, pushing at his eyelashes and stinging because he couldn't let them fall.

"I'm sorry, so sorry," he babbled. "I didn't know, but I should have *tried.* It seems silly and selfish that I wanted to keep the secret. I would always have been thinking about it. I would always have had to renew the glamour. I couldn't really live a good life, because I'd always be looking at you and wondering what you were like as a father. And now I know, and you're a *good* one. At least to me. At least you try. I'm *sorry*."

Snape curved an arm around his shoulders, delicately, as though he thought Harry would break further. Or maybe because he didn't really want to touch a son who had hurt him like that, Harry thought guiltily, but he leaned against Snape and shut his eyes nonetheless.

"Hush, Harry," Snape whispered. "I know that you did not mean to cause me pain, and we cannot be responsible forever for the decisions that we make when we are idiot children." His fingers moved through Harry's hair, so gently that Harry went limp in relief, because he knew now that Snape wasn't angry enough to reject him. "And as I said, we cannot know what would have happened if I had known at once. Perhaps something worse than what we have now." He hesitated, and his voice was low when he continued. "You are happy now?"

"Of *course*," Harry muttered, and then hesitated. There was one thing he thought he could do to partially make up for his mistake.

And he wanted to do it. That was the amazing thing.

"I'm happy with you," he said, and felt as though the word was still an enormous risk, so big he couldn't look Snape in the face when he said it, "Dad."

Snape's arm tightened crushingly around him at once, and he bent closer, as if to shelter Harry from all the evils of the world.

That was how Harry knew the risk had been worth it.

##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### #####
##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### #####
##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### #####

Chapter: 49

Thank you again for all the reviews!

*Chapter Forty-Nine—A Will of Steel*

Draco stepped cautiously through the door of the hospital wing. It was the first time he had been in to see Harry since the battle, and he tried hard not to feel resentful about that. He knew it wasn't Harry's fault that the Death Eaters would be trying to find any way they could to hurt him, but at the same time, they'd been able to meet before this even though it was more dangerous. Why couldn't he go to Harry that first night after the battle, even if just for a few minutes?

Harry was leaning against two pillows when Draco came in, eating from a bowl of porridge with a resigned grimace on his face. When he saw Draco, he immediately grinned and put the bowl aside.

The grin relaxed muscles in Draco's chest and shoulders that he hadn't known were tense. He smiled at Harry and walked up, with only one more glance around for people who were watching things they shouldn't see, to take Harry's hand.

Not satisfied with that, Harry leaned over and kissed him.

Draco sighed and let himself melt into the kiss. If Harry was doing this, then it must be all right, and Harry wouldn't have to deal with scoldings from Madam Pomfrey later, or, worse, stares from Professor Snape.

"How are you?" Harry whispered to him as he pulled slowly back from the kiss, which was the softest and warmest Draco had ever received. "I can't believe they haven't let you visit before now." He snorted bitterly. "Or let me out of this bed. There's nothing *wrong* with me, but it's like they can't believe that, because if you fight and defeat a Dark Lord there must be something wrong with you or the battle's not real."

"They didn't exactly let me come this time," Draco said.

Harry frowned at him, and though Draco doubted Harry would be angry, he decided that he had to explain further. "Professor Snape didn't give me permission or anything like that," he added. "I just waited until he left and seemed like he would be gone a good while, and then I came in."

Harry blinked, then gave Draco a slow smile that thrilled him and made him uneasy at once. It was the smile Harry had been wearing when they walked towards the Room of Hidden Things to hunt for the Ravenclaw diadem. "Good for you," he said in a musing voice. "And why not? My friends can visit me, now that Madam Pomfrey allows it. Why the fuck can't *you*?"

"Because I'm afraid of your father," Draco said, with a half-smile of his own. "And because it's still too dangerous for us to date openly, with the Death Eaters around."

"Fuck *that*," Harry said, and rolled out of bed. Draco tensed, half-excited and half-nervous when he thought that he might see Harry without his clothes, but he realized quickly that Harry was

wearing loose hospital robes.

"What are you doing?" Draco looked around, thinking Madam Pomfrey would swoop out of hiding at any moment, or Professor Snape would telepathically learn what was going on and start storming out of the dungeons. Draco knew they oughtn't to be able to hear him up here, but the professor would find some way to make his displeasure known.

"Getting out of bed," Harry said, his tone substituting handily for the unspoken words *you idiot.*

"Madam Pomfrey said you should stay here," Draco murmured, but his heart had begun to pound, and his blood ran to his fingertips and toes carrying mild shocks along with it.

"And I told you, there's nothing wrong with me." Harry snorted and looked around impatiently, then picked up his wand from the bedside table and Summoned a set of school robes from around the corner. "Who should know that better than me? *I'm* the one in my body." He took off the hospital robes and started dressing in the school ones, apparently uncaring that Draco was standing right there and could see him.

Draco firmly swallowed his own drool and shook his head. "If you date me openly, then we could both be in danger."

"We'll be in danger no matter what." Harry's words were muffled because of the clutch of cloth around his face, but Draco could still hear them perfectly. Then he yanked the robe down to the level of his neck, and his face was flushed and sparkling with that dangerous smile. "It could take them years to catch all the Death Eaters. Fuck if I'm going to wait that long to live the life I want, with my boyfriend and my friends and my—father." Draco knew no one but himself and Professor Snape would have heard the slight hesitation before Harry spoke that word. Draco didn't think Harry was really reluctant to think about Professor Snape being his father anymore, but he was unused to applying the concept to himself.

"Are you sure?" Draco could feel his body throbbing with his desire to be with Harry, but he didn't want Harry to make a decision that he would regret later, especially since he cared so much about the safety of the people he loved.

Harry nodded firmly. "There's been too much hiding and sneaking around, and like I said, it might take them years to decide I was 'safe.' And then a Death Eater they didn't know about or didn't realize was missing could still come through the wards." He turned around and took Draco's hands in his. "If I'm just a little more cautious and try to make sure that I'm always keeping behind strong defenses, there's no reason that I can't have what I want."

Draco had to close his eyes so that he could deal with his own happiness. He'd been sitting in the Slytherin common room that morning, trying to picture how he would live through years of sneaking around and being with Harry only on the sly. It might sound exciting when you first thought about it, but he knew he would hate the reality.

"Mr. Potter! What are you doing out of bed?"

Draco could feel Harry's guilty jump through their connected hands, but Harry only turned around, shaking his head and smiling, when the mediwitch swept into the room.

"Sorry, Madam Pomfrey," he said. "I know that you're just trying to protect me. But I've been here for four days now, and you know there's nothing physically wrong with me. I want to walk and get some exercise."

"And what if someone jumps out at you from a dark corner and undoes all my good work?" Pomfrey folded her arms and glared at Harry. Draco didn't know how he kept upright under the force of that look. Draco himself would have climbed meekly back into bed under a glare a tenth as strong.

*On the other hand, I didn't defeat the Dark Lord,* Draco thought. Walking out of the school to a battle that half of you thought was certain death must be harder than resisting Madam Pomfrey.

"That could happen anywhere," Harry said calmly. "Someone could sneak into the infirmary and try the same thing." Madam Pomfrey promptly stared about as if daring any potential intruders to come out and face her wrath. Draco gnawed his lip to keep from bursting into snickers. "I don't want to live my life in fear. I'll be careful, but I'm not going to be paranoid."

Madam Pomfrey was about to say something else, but just then her glance fell on their joined hands. She caught her breath. Her eyes widened.

Draco braced himself for some negative comment. He would have to get used to that. Even if no one tried to kill him for dating Harry, people would hurl insults of all kinds—people who were disappointed they couldn't have Harry for their own, people who disapproved of Draco's family, and people who assumed that, as the shining hero of the light, Harry should have no ties to darkness whatsoever.

But the mediwitch only shook her head, muttered something to herself that could have been a complaint, and went on with her original argument as though nothing had happened. "There are some people who will have certain things to say about you being out of bed, young man," she told Harry sternly. "No matter how you might try to excuse it."

"I know that." Harry's smile was still on his lips. "And I don't expect them to excuse it. I expect them to listen to me and then make their decisions based on that, not just on what they *think* is best for me."

Madam Pomfrey did some more staring. Harry did some staring back, with no sign that he was ever uncomfortable.

"I *never*," Madam Pomfrey said at last, and went into the back of the hospital wing to mutter to herself some more. Draco wondered if she had never had anyone stand up to her before.

Considering how frightened everyone was of her disapproval, maybe she hadn't.

Draco shook his head, dazed, as Harry towed him into the corridor. Once they got there, Harry faced him, put his hands on Draco's shoulders, and smiled at him tenderly.

"It's up to you how we go about this," Harry said, "because it's going to affect your life more than it does mine. People who won't dare speak to me about it will think they can talk to you." His face darkened, and one of his hands dropped away from Draco's shoulder to grip his wand. "It *is* going to be my problem, but they don't know that yet. What kind of announcement do you favor?"

Draco's heart was going very fast. The corridor walls blurred around him and seemed unreal. It was the way he had felt right after the news had come that Harry had killed the Dark Lord. He had wanted this, hoped for this, so much that he didn't know how to deal with his vision coming true. He half-expected to close his eyes and open them again in bed, with the dream fading and tattering around him.

But assuming it was real, and Harry was really giving him his choice, he felt free to make a choice he would never have made otherwise.

"I—I want to go into the Great Hall, and let everyone know you're mine," he said.

Harry's hand squeezed him firmly, and Harry bent towards him, showing the daring smile that Draco had seen lurking behind his eyes all this time.

"Good," Harry said softly.

Harry couldn't feel the stone under his feet. If this was what "walking on air" felt like, then he never wanted to again. His lips hurt from his grin, and he paused outside the door of the Great Hall and exchanged half-crazed looks with Draco. Draco nodded.

Harry opened the door, and they stepped through it.

People's heads turned; it was the middle of dinner, which was one of the reasons that Draco had dared to come to the hospital wing and see him. It made Harry angry to think about the way Draco'd had to sneak around and not come into the infirmary when he had the most right to see Harry out of anybody, but then he calmed himself. There was not going to be any more of that. What they were doing right now would put a stop to it.

Some of the students started to cheer. McGonagall rose to her feet—she'd been sitting in Dumbledore's old chair—and peered at him, beaming, as if she thought that she should make a speech.

Then people caught sight of their clasped hands.

A low, ugly mutter traveled the length of the room. Harry ignored it outwardly, but he felt the way Draco's hand flinched in his, and took hold of his wand. He paraded towards the Gryffindor table as if he hadn't a care in the world, and compared to the time when Voldemort was alive, he didn't.

But all the time, he was watching and waiting for the first attack.

It came from among the Gryffindors, something that irritated Harry but didn't surprise him. One of the seventh-years stood up and confronted them, bristling with indignation. Harry didn't know him well, but he thought his name was Cormac McLaggen.

"What's this?" McLaggen was trying to make his voice sound menacing, but he only achieved loud. Harry tilted his head back and sneered at him. He almost wished he wasn't wearing the glamour, because that would make his sneer more like Snape's and more effective.

It seemed to be pretty effective anyway. McLaggen's confidence faltered; his jaw fell slack, and suddenly he was staring at Harry as though he had never seen him before. Harry took advantage of that and shoved past him even as he spoke, determinedly pulling Draco towards the Gryffindor table.

"What does it look like? Like I'm dating Draco Malfoy?" Harry turned to face Draco and let his love shine through his eyes and his smile. That would convince people who would try to put the evidence of their linked hands aside. "Well, it's true. I am."

There was a storm of protests and snickers and complaints then, mostly from the Gryffindor table. The Hufflepuffs sat blinking, as if unsure how to react. The Ravenclaws were either calling out in interest or joining the Gryffindors in jeering. The Slytherins were silent, but Harry knew that would make Draco more nervous than any amount of catcalling.

"Harry, mate," Seamus said, his voice louder than the rest in Harry's immediate area. "What are you *thinking*?"

"That I'm in love with Draco," Harry said, daring and giddy and feeling as though it was no trouble at all to say things he would have been embarrassed about four days ago. Voldemort was *gone*. If he could survive the battle with Lord Snake-face, then he could survive anything. "And that he's a bloody good kisser."

That made some people who were trying to decide how to jump laugh, and Harry could feel the mood of the table become a bit friendlier. Seamus paused and cocked his head as if he hadn't expected that answer and didn't know how to react.

Then someone else cleared his throat. Harry turned and looked up. He had wondered what Ron would do.

Ron was on his feet, and his face was bright red, but he was clutching the table and sticking out

his chest like someone determined to see this through to the end. "It's true," he said. "It's all true. Harry told me and Hermione a while ago. He's been dating Malfoy, and he's—he's not so bad for a Slytherin." He said those words in a way that told Harry he couldn't imagine the bitterness of them to someone like Ron, who had argued with Malfoy so many times.

"It's not the best thing in the world," Ron went on, eyes on the ground. "But Hermione and I both know that Malfoy's been true to him, and he's going to go on being true." He shot Draco a darting look that said he had *better* be true if he knew what was good for him. Draco sneered back and started heaping his plate with food, as if he hadn't a concern in creation. "And Harry deserves to be happy. He fought You-Know-Who for us. Who deserves to be happy more than him?" He took so deep a breath Harry was afraid he was going to faint, then turned and stuck his hand out to Draco.

Draco stared at it. Hermione, standing up behind Ron and leaning against his back with bright eyes, waited. So did most of the school, Harry thought, or at least all the school inside the Great Hall.

Draco reached out and shook Ron's hand.

Harry caught Ron's hand the minute Draco let it go and crushed it in a firm grip. He couldn't speak, but he made sure Ron got the full benefit of his look.

Ron blushed more fiercely and sat down, muttering something about how "it was just the right thing to do, honestly." Hermione hugged him and kissed the top of his head, which made him look as if he wanted to die on the spot.

For the rest of the meal, Harry and Draco managed to eat without any more insults, or any hexes, being sent their way. The rest of the Gryffindors kept giving them puzzled glances—and, in the case of McLaggen, annoyed ones—but for their first public appearance as a couple, Harry reckoned, it didn't go too badly.

"Explain your thinking to me." Severus kept his voice to a low, level tone, something he had discovered years ago inspired far more fear than yelling did.

Harry leaned against the door and looked up at him. He almost seemed amused, which irritated Severus more than anything else the brat had managed to do so far. This was *serious.* Did Harry realize that he should not have taken such a step without consulting Severus first? Severus was his father, the one primarily responsible for his safety, even if most people in the school did not realize that at the moment. If Harry had been too mad with freedom to think about the possibility that he would object to this, Draco at least should have summoned him the moment Harry came up with the idea.

Draco's blindness in this matter troubled Severus almost more than his son's.

"I was thinking that I've been doing what other people want my whole life," Harry said casually.

"I wanted to do something that would make *me* happy for a change. And acknowledging my relationship with Draco does that." He nodded to Severus. "And I'd like to do the same thing when it comes to my relationship with you, if you're agreeable."

*At least he did not announce it to the school already, perhaps by pointing at me and calling me "Dad" in public,* Severus thought, reeling. He would have liked to reach out and put a hand on the table next to him, but that would have been weakness.

"The Death Eaters—" he began.

"Fuck the Death Eaters!" Harry said.

Severus felt his face stiffen. Finally, for the first time since he had cornered his son and demanded to know what he was doing, Harry's smile faded. He shifted his feet and hunched his shoulders defensively.

Severus did not wish to put his son in fear. He knew Harry's childhood too well at this point, despite the lack of detail, ever to wish for that. But Harry *would* listen to him, and he might as well start learning now that part of a proper parent-child relationship was obedience.

"I will not tolerate such language," Severus said, biting off each word. "Nor do I believe that your Head of House would have, so do not give me her permissiveness as your excuse." He had thought briefly of referring to Harry's Muggle relatives and their likely tolerance, but only briefly. "Now. The Death Eaters remain a danger. You cannot deny that."

"But how long are they going to remain a danger?" Harry insisted. He took a step forwards, and his courage seemed fully returned now, with dismaying quickness. "It could be years before they capture and arrest them all. I don't know how many boltholes Voldemort had, but I bet it was a lot. I'm not going to put my life on hold until then. And besides, even if they didn't know about you and Draco, they could always try for Ron and Hermione. There's no reason for them not to. Yeah, you could say that you lot have the closer relationships to me, but I don't think people like Rabastan Lestrange would care about that."

Severus nodded reluctantly. Harry's words made sense, and they answered the desire of his own heart, which compelled his agreement.

"You still should not have made the revelation in so public a fashion," he said. He regretted, as he had regretted few things in his life, his decision to skip dinner that evening to catch up on his brewing. He had thought—foolishly, of course—that Harry was bound to stay in the hospital wing for at least another day and night.

"Why not?" Harry blinked and stared at him.

"I could have taught you how to manage it more diplomatically," Severus said through his teeth. Harry, he knew, really did not understand, but in some ways that honest ignorance was more

infuriating than all the play-pretend innocence in the world would have been. "And I should have been *informed*."

"With respect, sir," Harry said, standing up taller with his eyes flashing, "it wasn't your decision. It was my decision, and Draco's. If he agreed to it, then there's nothing you could have added, and he did. And I would have waited and kept it secret if Draco had wanted to. But he didn't." Harry halted and stared up at Severus expectantly.

*He said I could not expect him to behave like a normal child,* Severus reminded himself as he fought to control his temper. *Too stubborn, too independent, too used to raising himself. And I agreed to take up the challenge of raising him and relating to him in any case.*

When he thought he could speak in a dignified manner and would not choke on his rage, he shook his head and said, "It was still foolish."

"But why?" Harry folded his arms. "I could have told you, but I wouldn't have changed my mind because of what you said."

"So sure of that, are you?" Severus asked in the same low voice as before, with a sidelong glance.

Harry blinked. "Er," he said. "Yes?" At least he sounded a bit less certain now.

Severus stared at him while inwardly sighing. He would have to lay down some rules, but he could not expect Harry to know what they were beforehand. Harry did not appear to think this would endanger him greatly, and Severus knew he would risk life and limb for Draco without a thought, so he might not have obeyed even if Severus *had* made him aware of a rule to tell his father about all life-changing decisions beforehand.

*But in the future it will be different,* he promised himself.

"You never did answer me," Harry interrupted, before Severus could launch into a lecture. "Do you want our relationship to be public or not? This is *your* decision to make, this time," he added generously. "I won't do it without your say-so."

Severus shut his mouth and stared at the bright, beaming face, alight with hope. He knew the answer Harry wanted. It was the answer his own heart would give.

But could they risk it? Despite his intense maturity in a few aspects of life, Harry was still a child in important ways. He thought of the short-term consequences. It was up to his father to think of the long-term ones.

On the other hand, considered soberly, Harry was right. There was no guarantee of absolute safety. Harry might conceal everything not currently public and still lose his friends, or Draco. And to be denied Harry's bedside while he was dying because they had never let anyone know

that Severus had a right to be there was a vision to haunt Severus's nightmares.

He inclined his head, slowly. Harry's eyes widened.

"You mean it?" he asked.

"I do," Severus said, and swallowed to clear the blockage of his throat. "Mind, we will do it in a much more controlled fashion than you announced your—tie to Draco." He was still not sure what the most soothing word for that particular relationship would be.

Then he could not have spoken if he wished, because Harry was embracing him.

"Thank you," he muttered.

Only once, but it made Severus have to place one hand on Harry's back and shut his eyes.

##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### #####
##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### #####
##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### ##### #####

Chapter: 50

Thank you again for all the reviews! This is the very last chapter of *Practicing Liars,* though I will be writing a few epilogue fics. (No ideas on when these will be completed or posted). I hope you've had half as much fun following the story as I have writing it.

*Chapter Fifty—All Masks Gone*

Of course there were whispers, stares, sniggers, and claims of disbelief.

Of course there were newspaper stories, so many of them that Harry stopped reading the *Daily Prophet,* because they always had something to say about him, and it was either something he already knew or something distorted and false.

Of course it turned out to be a good thing that Harry was so good at Defense, because hexes came his way. Some of them were from Gryffindors, he thought, though since they hit him in the corridors, he was never sure.

Snape was. He performed spells on Harry's robes and, once when he limped into Defense with a swollen ankle dragging behind him, on his leg. He never said anything aloud. Harry thought he had learned from the way Harry had worried about the hunt for Draco's poisoner that it was a good thing if he didn't tell Harry all the details.

But certain students got detentions, or they had to perform more complicated spells in Defense

class, and Snape would stare at them or smirk or make a cutting remark when they failed. Harry heard the rumors even when he wasn't in those particular classes. Snape's remarks were carried from mouth to mouth so that people who hadn't been there could enjoy them in all their horrid glory.

Harry thought of protesting. But he also knew that Snape would say this was his own method of protecting his son, his blood, and he gave up the notion.

It was not a perfect life, but it was his.

Severus knew that Harry had told a few of his friends in Gryffindor House, and from there the tale would have spread around the school. He saw no reason to appear in the Great Hall and make an announcement as Harry and Draco had. That was their choice. Severus was more dignified.

But when he stepped into Harry's Defense class on Monday morning and everyone stared at him, he knew what it meant. He sneered and glided up the aisle between the tables, turning around at the front to stare back.

*That is the mistake so many of my colleagues make,* he thought with satisfaction as he watched the students begin to avoid his eyes. *They find them* intimidating, *as if the students and not the professors held authority at this school. That allows the little brats to feel as if they are in charge, and then it is no surprise that we lose control of them so easily or that they laugh at us in their sleeves.*

"We will begin with shields," he said, exactly as if this were a normal morning, no different from any of the others that had gone before it. "Now—"

"Is it true, sir?" asked someone from the middle of the classroom. Severus did not have to look very far to know it was Wells, a girl from Ravenclaw. She never *had* paid enough attention to her spells, Severus thought, but since she was always gossiping instead, that was not much of a surprise.

"That we are beginning with shields?" Severus focused on her and made her squirm in her seat within a few seconds. "Of course. I said so, and you may *trust* me." The stress he laid on the word made some of the students blanch and others just look more curious.

"I meant, is it true about you being Harry Potter's father, sir?" Wells asked, with more curiosity than good sense. Severus felt a faint surprise that the Sorting Hat had not placed her in Gryffindor. "It's just, it's so strange, and—"

She fell silent again as Severus looked at her, and he waited, this time, until the quietude in the classroom had become distinctly uncomfortable. Then he whispered, "Detention, Miss Wells, for interrupting a professor, and five points from Ravenclaw for assuming that I would permit such a rumor to spread and not contradict it if it were only a rumor."

Wells looked ready to faint. Severus did not think it was from the detention or the point loss. For some people, a confirmation of gossip from those involved in it was always more powerful than simply hearing it.

"But how?" someone asked.

"But *why*?" Longbottom was looking back and forth between Harry and Severus as if searching for some sign of the truth in their faces.

Severus turned and looked steadily at his son. He was not sure what Harry wished to do. The specifics were between them, still, and Harry's closest friends. He saw Draco leaning forwards from the table at the back of the room as if he didn't know what would happen next and was eager to do so.

Harry took a breath that sounded like the one Severus had sometimes drawn before plunging into water. Then he waved his wand and muttered something. Severus felt his muscles tensing; it was a reflex he had noticed lately, as if he had to be aware of all Harry's spells in case they went horribly wrong.

Harry's face shimmered, and then he looked like the boy Severus had seen only once before, in the corridor outside the heavily warded room where Dumbledore had died. Harry gave Severus a small smile and then turned around.

"Is this what you wanted to see?" he asked, with a passable imitation of a drawl. Draco must have been teaching him, Severus thought with approval. "Yeah, I'm his son. He's my father. My last name would have been Snape if they'd been married. What else do you want to know?"

Granger leaned over and laid a hand on his arm. Severus would have liked to do the same thing. Despite Harry's façade of confidence, his voice was rising towards the end of his words, in both volume and pitch.

People stared at him with their mouths hanging open. Severus readied himself to cast a ward, a shield, or a curse if it was necessary. Perhaps Harry had revealed himself a bit more dramatically than Severus would have liked, but he would not put up with others treating his son poorly because of that.

"Harry?" Granger whispered. "Are you all right?"

Harry didn't have time to answer before the voices of the other children in the room were piling into the conversation.

"It's not enough that he dates a Slytherin, but his *father* is a Slytherin, too?"

"Well, he can't help that," Longbottom said, though now he was staring between Harry's revealed

face and Severus's as though he hoped to find something in his search that would contradict the resemblance, or at least make it less marked. "I r-reckon." He sounded as though, if there was a spell that would allow one to go back into time and change one's birth parents, Harry should use it.

"He *looks* different," Wells said, and there was disgust in her stare. Severus's fingers crushed down on his wand.

"What other secrets is he keeping?" The Gryffindor, Finnigan, had shoved his chair back from the desk and was pointing an accusing finger at Harry. "Who knows? He could be keeping some secret that we don't even know about. Maybe he's You-Know-Who's grandson!"

"I don't want to be in the same class with him anymore," one of the Hufflepuff girls whimpered, and began to push her chair back.

Harry lowered his head and clenched one fist in front of him, and that was what eased Severus from half-amusement into anger.

"Sit down," he said, and he did not make his voice loud, because he did not have to. Years of learning under him had taught his students what would happen to them if they disobeyed an order such as that. "You will sit down and *be silent.*"

There was silence in the next instant, save for the squeaky sound of bottoms settling into chairs. Severus prowled out from behind his desk and along the aisle between the tables, turning his head alertly from side to side, watching faces that blanched and eyes that fell away from his.

"One thing you ought to consider," he said, and managed to keep his voice smooth and sweet and bland with an effort, "is what will happen now that I have a son in school."

Some of the eyes darted up to take a look at him. Harry, the only one who hadn't glanced away, appeared perplexed.

"I will know if any of you do not treat him with respect," Severus said. He planned to hand out detentions and take points if any of them harmed Harry. He didn't think there would be any trouble in finding a justification, as often as the little morons broke school rules under the impression that they could get away with it. "When I despised him, when I did not know he was my son, I often encouraged my Slytherins to despise him as well. That time is over. Can you imagine what will happen now?"

There were some sucked-in breaths among the Slytherins in the class, except for Draco, who looked up with a shining face. Severus nodded. He thought he could depend on most of his House to leave Harry alone, and, by extension, Harry's boyfriend alone. It was enough to know that their Head of House had changed his mind. Most of them would not ask for reasons, and collective scorn would silence those who tried.

But for the rest of the Houses—and especially for the Gryffindors, who would think that Harry was a "traitor" to the rivalry between Gryffindor and Slytherin—a stronger message was needed. Severus turned and prowled slowly up the aisle again. He knew he was smiling, and that the smile was vicious, and that McGonagall, who had taken over the post of Headmistress, would scold him violently when she heard about this. But she had never interfered in the relationships between a professor and more than one student, and even if she tried, Severus's power was too great.

"He is mine," Severus said. It was the strongest statement he could make, and it would, at the very least, make sense to the members of the other Houses who came from pure-blood families. "I will tolerate no interference with him."

Mulish looks answered him, and awed ones, and startled ones that would turn stubborn when they thought about it. Severus did not care. He knew there would be hexes, but few students outside Slytherin would try Dark Arts, and that was his major concern. He could deal with hexes. And eventually, they would learn. Harry would spend his last year and a half at Hogwarts in as much peace as Severus could muster for him.

After that, the news should be stale enough that Harry could go about his life in *some* peace. Severus would at least always make sure that he lived in a warded house, behind the very best defenses.

He turned back to Harry and met his eyes. Harry was blinking rapidly, as if he either wanted to deal with the information one piece at a time or still wasn't sure what happened.

He didn't protest. It was enough for Severus. He swept back to the front of the room and started the class.

Harry came up to him after it was over, and didn't try to hide that he was doing so, although some of the Gryffindors left with less than friendly mutters and stares. Severus studied his son's half-Transfigured features and was content.

"That wasn't fair," Harry said.

He didn't have to explain what he meant. So far, they understood each other. "No, it wasn't," Severus replied calmly. "But nothing is ever fair when a professor teaches his own child. Better to establish the footing that we will stand on and not allow them to establish it for us."

Harry hesitated for a long moment. Then he said, "Don't you think I'll get stared at and insulted more often now that they know you're standing up for me?"

"If they do," Severus said, "I will simply assign them more detentions and take more points. At some point, the cost will outweigh the satisfaction they get from insulting you. And if it does not, then I will increase the punishments."

Harry shook his head, looking stupefied. Severus leaned over his desk. "Speak," he said.

"I just—no one's ever looked out for me like that before." Harry stared into his eyes. "My aunt and uncle would get upset if something happened to my cousin at school, and they would go and yell at the teachers." He didn't appear to notice the shadow that Severus could feel moving into his eyes at the mere mention of Harry's Muggle relatives. "But no one's ever done that for me." He bit his lip, hastily gathered up his books, and left the classroom.

*That is not the only thing that might surprise you about having me for a father,* Severus thought as he watched his son depart.

Events fell out as he had foretold. Some of the other students attacked and insulted Harry, though none with the severe curses that Severus had frightened them out of using. And their Houses made them stop it as soon as the punishments became severe enough.

McGonagall called him in for a talk several times. But she did not put a stop to his activities, and considering that she had not put a stop to the attacks and insults either, Severus felt justified in pursuing his present course.

Draco lay beside the lake in a bubble of warmth, lazily watching the snow build up outside his enchantments. Harry was beside him, lying so that his thigh and shoulder rested against Draco's, and they were watching the reporters try to get onto Hogwarts grounds past the wards that McGonagall had put in place.

It was entertaining, Draco had to admit that. The wards were intricate and powerful, using five-minute Transfiguration into harmless animals as a punishment, and *still* the reporters kept trying.

A young man seemed to think he had got past successfully this time; he'd sneaked into Hogsmeade and then come strolling along the edge of the Forbidden Forest as if he were gathering Potions ingredients, down to the basket slung over his arm. Then he turned and walked towards the school, holding up his camera as he came. Draco had no idea what interest he thought he could stir with a picture of the school's towers, but the *Daily Prophet* in particular had a habit of illustrating their stories with something only mildly relevant if they couldn't get better than that.

One of the Headmistress's wards was trained to respond to the presence of cameras (which had caused that one annoying boy in Gryffindor, Colin something or other, a lot of anguish at first). It rose out of the grass like a snake, and struck the reporter's feet almost exactly like one. There was a flash of golden light.

The camera dropped into the snow. A rabbit hopped about where the reporter had been, staring in astonishment at its own paws.

Draco laughed. Harry laughed with him, a sound Draco hadn't heard enough of lately, and

nuzzled his nose into the side of Draco's neck. Draco raised a hand to clasp the back of Harry's head. They didn't do more than that, not when they were in a place as public as this, in case someone *did* manage to snap a picture.

Members of both Gryffindor and Hufflepuff were playing in the snow around the Quidditch pitch, not giving them much more than their share of baffled and envious glances. Draco made sure to catch the eyes of a girl who had been watching Harry more and more often lately and move closer to him. She glared.

"Draco," Harry murmured, not opening his eyes, "stop using me to make people jealous."

"I can't help it if I'm dating the best-looking bloke in school," Draco said, and settled his arm around Harry more firmly in place. The girl turned and threw a snowball at someone else. The other students had already tried to get through the enchantments surrounding Harry and Draco's hiding place and learned that they would get hit in the face with their own stones, hexes, snow, or anything else they threw, given the defensive spells Harry had worked into the shield.

"Going out with your reflection, then?" Harry opened one eye. "You know I'm not that good-looking, Draco. It's the scar they stare at."

Draco sighed and decided not to argue with him right now. If Harry wanted to pretend that he wasn't wonderful, at least that would allow Draco to stay with him and keep him all to himself. Draco wasn't against that at all.

"Is this what you thought life would be like after the Dark Lord was dead?" Draco asked, when a few more minutes had passed and the rabbit had turned back into a reporter and run off. Draco wondered if he should have warned McGonagall about Rita Skeeter, but decided that he would take the lack of detailed stories in the *Prophet* so far as a statement about the effectiveness of the wards.

"Not really," Harry said. "At the time, I didn't know that I would have a father and a boyfriend." His hand found Draco's and squeezed, tight. Draco squeezed back and sneaked a glance across the field. Yes, the bint was watching. "And I didn't think about it in any detail, you know? Not at all. I would promise myself sometimes that I would do this or that when I was free, but I couldn't picture myself doing it. And then things would change again and I would want to do something else with my freedom, or I'd become convinced that I would never survive against Voldemort." He glanced at Draco when he felt the flinch Draco couldn't suppress. "Oh, come on. You *know* he's dead."

Draco rolled his eyes. "Maybe you could change a lifelong fear just like that, but I can't."

"I keep forgetting," Harry muttered, and he did sound genuinely apologetic, even before he added, "I'm sorry."

"Forgiven," Draco said, and turned to kiss Harry, which made some of the students giggle, and

some look away, and the jealous bint look as if she was about to have a stroke. Draco considered prolonging the kiss in the hopes of giving her one, but Harry would probably figure out what he was doing and refuse to participate. Draco liked the kisses where Harry was participating best.

*So many things to get used to,* Draco thought, as he drew his head back and looked into Harry's "new" face—which wasn't really changed that much from the "old" one, but which was much handsomer. *Harry's face. My standing as boyfriend of the Savior of the Wizarding World. What my mother is going to say about our relationship being revealed like this.*

He had written to his mother, but hadn't received any reply yet. For a moment, Draco let himself worry about that.

Then Harry touched his shoulder, and Draco smiled. *He* had been able to picture what his life would be like when the Dark Lord was dead. It was much simpler, and there were reasons to be happy.

His wish was fulfilled.

Harry hesitated, then told himself he was being stupid and pulled the bathroom door open.

It was the middle of the day, and no one else was in the whole of Gryffindor Tower, it seemed. Harry was here because he had decided that finally facing what he'd been putting off was more important than sitting through yet another interminable Charms lecture.

Snape—or Father, maybe; Harry still wasn't used to that yet—would be angry when he found out, but Harry would deal with that later.

He strode across the bathroom, pretending to a confidence he didn't feel, and, for the first time since he'd removed the glamour in Defense, looked into a mirror.

He caught his breath. Then he felt silly for that, and checked over his shoulder to make sure that no one had come in, and then looked closer again.

Yes, his face was like Snape's. But it was like his mum's, too, or at least like the photographs he'd seen of her. Her eyes under a forehead and above a nose that was kind of like Snape's, but not bigger, thank Merlin, and there were a pair of cheeks that could have come from anywhere, and his hair had stayed tangled dark and wild.

*I could say there's a little bit of James in me if I wanted,* Harry thought, and snickered as he thought about the way Snape would explode if he said that.

He hadn't changed as much as he had thought he had, which was one of the reasons, maybe, that people hadn't spent as much time staring at his face and nudging each other as he thought they would. They *had* got a photograph of him into the *Prophet* before McGonagall banned cameras, but that was fine; that was just the way things were. And no one seemed to think he was

exceptionally ugly. They just did the same thing Harry was doing, scanning his face eagerly for resemblances to his parents'.

But there was that hair, and those cheekbones that might have come from anywhere.

And the lights and shadows in his eyes was all his own, Harry thought. His mum had grown up in a family that loved her. He was becoming increasingly convinced that his—his *dad* hadn't, but he had known about magic before he came to Hogwarts; that much, he had confirmed to Harry. And neither of them had fought a Dark Lord directly, even though they had lived under his shadow and his mum was responsible for saving Harry's life.

He was more than just the sum of his family. He was his own, Harry, no matter what his last name was.

He stepped slowly back, watching the stranger in the mirror whose face he was certain would become more and more familiar. It wasn't as though he had spent a lot of time looking at himself when he had the other face, either, except when he was memorizing his old features so he could cast the glamour. And he had years and years to live with this face.

And his family, and his friends, and his boyfriend. Any way he wanted, in any freedom he wanted. He wasn't going to let the Death Eaters still at large—the Aurors had already captured several of them—or the ridiculous reporters stop him.

He had adults on his side now. McGonagall had crushed the rumors that Harry might have killed Dumbledore the instant they started, and Snape had actually gone to the Ministry and sworn under Veritaserum that Dumbledore had planned to die. And there were the wards McGonagall had created and the promises Snape had made.

Harry felt a stupid stinging in his eyes. He lifted a hand and rubbed fiercely at them, and the stranger in the mirror did the same thing.

Everything was going to be different now.

He had lain in his cupboard at the Dursleys' when he was a kid, hoping and wishing and dreaming of that. But now, it really *was*. He had so much of what he'd wanted, and a bunch of things he hadn't known he was missing.

For a moment, his heart was tight in his chest, and it felt as if he was trying to breathe more air than existed in the world.

It took Harry far too much time to recognize the emotion.

He was happy.

It was hard, but he reminded himself that Snape was going to be angry enough already, and

Harry should probably go and prepare himself for that detention.

With one final glance in the mirror, Harry turned away and went to live his life.

***The End.***