In a dark room, in Sirzechs' palace in the city of Lilith, the Satan Lucifer sat at his desk, his face a mask of perfect concentration as he stared down at the diadem before him. His hands were placed on either side of it, wreathed in crimson destruction as he slowly breathed in and out, calming himself and reaching mentally inside the horcrux. When the issue of Harry's cursed, possessed scar was first brought to him, he knew that it would be a most exciting challenge, but even he underestimated it.

The Power of Destruction was a power like few others, and none in all of history had ever been as skilled at using it as Sirzechs Lucifer. From the moment he drew his first breaths, those around him knew that he was special. His mother, known to many as the Flaxen-haired Madame of Extinction, had recognized at once that he was the answer to ambitions she hadn't even realized that she had. It wasn't just that he possessed the Power of Destruction, being the first to ever do so not named Bael, but from the moment he first cried out for his mother's milk, he practically **was** the Power of Destruction, its living embodiment.

That overwhelming power made him a terrifying opponent, and the reason that he sat as one of the four rulers of the Underworld, despite how much younger he was than so many of the lords he ruled over, was because he was so strong. Strength and power didn't mean that he could just do whatever he liked, though, and few things had ever made that as clear as his attempt to remove a soul fragment from its host object. He could destroy horcruxes with ease, but the finesse required to reach inside it and snuff out the fragment of a soul within was far more challenging.

"There you are," Sirzechs murmured aloud as he finally felt the piece of Voldemort inside the diadem.

Every single other time that he'd tried this, he'd found what he believed to be the soul fragment, only to realize afterward that he hadn't properly isolated it. His failing was imagining horcruxes as fractions of a soul, as though each one was a piece of a pie, sliced out cleanly. That was how most seemed to describe the process, albeit without the metaphor, but, as he'd learned over the course of this exercise, the truth was simultaneously better and worse than he thought.

To create a horcrux was to rend one's very soul, cutting it open so that you could slice away a little piece of the whole to keep you tethered to the world in the case of your death. The pieces weren't very large, and though Voldemort would have very likely rendered his soul incapable of holding onto a body if he had made many more, even making seven of them did not chip away the majority of his soul. With Sirzechs imagining the soul fragment as larger than it was, each time he attempted this before, he ended up destroying more than it and thus atomizing the entire object.

Confident that this time he had actually focused in on the soul piece alone, he flared his energy, reaching out with his awesome and terrifying power to snuff it out of existence. The small fragment was powerless to resist him, and in mere moments, it was destroyed completely. When the powerful devil opened his eyes, he felt a level of giddiness that he hadn't felt since he was a child.

"Yes!" he exclaimed, laughing as he beheld the untainted but still whole diadem before him.

Picking it up, he examined it carefully, making sure that he had succeeded in removing the soul fragment completely, and grinned widely when he realized that he had.

“This will look nice on Rias,” he mused aloud, turning the enchanted object over in his hands a couple times before setting it back down on his desk. Taking a deep breath, he released it, feeling satisfaction at having finally managed to undo the Gordian knot that had been bothering him for months. “*I’ll have to let her know that the next time she brings Harry by, I’ll be able to rid him of his little problem. The only question now is whether or not doing so will allow the evil pieces to work for him.”*

*****

“Severus, where are your students?” McGonagall asked, looking over to the potions professor and finding his dark gaze locked onto the conspicuously empty bench.

She sat in Dumbledore’s chair at the high table, having taken her old mentor’s place while he was out of the castle as acting headmistress.

“I was just beginning to wonder that myself,” Snape replied, his brow furrowed in confusion when a sudden shock of pain in his left forearm took his breath away. *“What the…”*

No sooner had the thought popped into his head than the answer to it appeared, and he felt his blood go cold in his veins. Gasps and screams erupted at the sudden sight of Lord Voldemort, flanked by dozens of Death Eaters, and as the professors all went for their wands, the invaders struck, grabbing students at random and pressing the tips of their wands against their throats.

“Silence!” Voldemort hissed, his voice enhanced by magic, and the entire hall went instantly quiet. “Now now, my dear professors, we don’t want anyone to get hurt, do we? Put down your wands now.”

“How?” McGonagall breathed, her face white with terror.

“Y...you’re dead,” Aurora Sinistra stammered.

“I cannot die,” Voldemort declared, grinning around the room. “Now then, Harry Potter! Stand up.”

“Potter’s not here,” McGonagall thought to herself, her eyes darting to the spot where Harry had sat at the Gryffindor bench for years.

One of the masked men made his way across the high table, grabbing their wands as he went and putting them in a pocket of his black robes.

“Potter!” Voldemort hissed, looking around.

“He’s not here,” one of the masked Death Eaters said, and McGonagall felt her heart sink as she recognized his voice.

“Merlin, Mr. Malfoy, you’re starting even younger than your father,” she thought to herself as Voldemort snarled in rage.

“You three!” the Dark Lord muttered, “Find him!”

“Yes, my lord,” the three Death Eaters he’d pointed to said in unison, and McGonagall clenched her eyes shut as she recognized Bellatrix Lestrange’s voice.

“We’ve been invaded, and Albus isn’t here,” she thought to herself. *“What are we going to do?”*

*****

“We’ll have to visit the Rookery soon,” Luna smiled sadly as she walked with Harry and Hermione towards the Great Hall. “It’s…”

“Potter,” a cold, deep voice said gleefully, and Harry’s eyes widened in shock at the sight of a masked Death Eater turning the corner.

The man raised his wand, and Harry’s was in his hand in a moment, slicing through the air as he hissed, “*Sectumsempra.”*

The laceration curse, easily the most useful thing that they’d found in that old potions book, filled with notes from some pretentious douche who actually called himself the ‘half-blood prince,’ cut clean through the shield that the Death Eater hastily put up. He had clearly not been expecting such an instant, lethal response, and his shield was weak. Harry cut him to ribbons, taking off his wand arm and slicing him up so badly that he bled out through his lacerated throat before they had crossed the distance.

“Jugson,” he thought to himself as he pulled the man’s mask off while Hermione searched his pockets.

“Harry,” Hermione breathed, paling as she pulled out a number of wands. “I recognize this as Professor McGonagall’s wand.”

“That’s Professor Flitwick’s,” Luna added as she pointed at a slightly shorter wand.

“How is this…” Hermione went to ask as Harry pulled out his map.

“I solemnly swear that I am up to no good,” he said only to swear under his breath when he saw just how bad the situation was.

Bellatrix Lestrange was lurking around on the floor above them while seemingly every living Death Eater there was stood in the Great Hall. Most of the Slytherin students were in the dungeons, he noticed, save for Malfoy, who was leaving them, trailed by Crabbe and Goyle.

“Dumbledore’s not here!” Hermione squeaked, her heart racing. “We…”

“We need to summon Rias and the others,” Luna interrupted.

“We need to get the students and staff away from the Death Eaters,” Harry countered, pulling out his cloak and handing it to them as he disillusioned himself and cast Muffliato around them. “The Great Hall is just around the corner and down the next hallway, while the Room is seven floors up. In the time it takes us to get there, goodness knows how many will die.”

“How, though?” Hermione asked, throwing the cloak around her and Luna, who huddled in close.

“I’m not sure,” Harry muttered.

“I...might have a solution, or part of one, anyway,” Luna replied. “There was a spell I found in one of those neat books that wraps a big hand around a person. If I cast it on all the Death Eaters, and you did that cool, dark fire spell, I could pull them through it.”

“How obvious is the spell?” Hermione asked.

“I can make it pretty subtle,” Luna replied. “I cast it on you a few spars ago, but Harry called it over just before I could try using it.”

“I didn’t notice,” Hermione smiled, as she thought to herself that they might have the beginnings of a plan.

“That won’t work,” Harry muttered, shaking his head. “Just because Hermione didn’t notice it doesn’t mean that the most competent Death Eaters wouldn’t, and Voldemort certainly would. If they noticed anything amiss, the killing curses would start flying immediately. Could you cast it on the students and staff?”

“That would be a lot of people,” Luna mused as she thought about it. “The Slytherins aren’t there, and thank goodness Beauxbatons and Durmstrang left earlier. I might be able to do it, but I’m going to be super tired afterward.”

“Alright then, there’s our plan,” Harry said. “Luna, you focus on pulling everyone through the main door; I’ll cast the dark fire charm as you do so, and Hermione, you flood the Great Hall with darkness to make things harder on them. We pull this off, we’ll have them trapped and their hostages freed.”

“How long do you think you could hold them off for, though?” Hermione asked.

“If they all started fighting me, not long, but I won’t have to,” Harry grimaced, knowing that neither of them would like what he had in mind.

“Harry...” Hermione went to say warningly.

“I have to fight him,” Harry argued. “It’s the only way to keep him in check while you two go summon Rias.”

“What if they all attack you, though?” Luna asked.

“They won’t,” Harry replied confidently. “One of Voldemort’s biggest weaknesses is his ego. The whole world thinks he was felled years ago by a baby, and he can’t let that stand. He’ll want to face me one-on-one, to prove to the whole world that what happened then was a fluke and that he is superior.”

“You’re sure?” Hermione asked.

“I’ve been dealing with the fucker in my head for months now,” Harry replied. “He’ll need to prove to all the world who has the biggest wrinklies, and that means that I can hold him off until help arrives. I don’t like this, but I can’t reach out to Rias mentally and ask her to send her brother or anything, so it’s our best bet.”

“Okay,” Hermione sighed, unable to come up with anything better. Reaching a hand out under the cloak, she felt around until she was cupping his cheek and said, “Come back to me.”

“I promise,” Harry replied, wrapping his arms around the two of them.

“Please keep that promise,” Luna begged, her voice small and terrified.

Harry sighed and tightened the hug before letting them go. He silenced their footsteps, and the three of them, invisible and quiet, closed the short distance between Jugson’s body and the Great Hall, and Harry nearly swore at the sight. Voldemort had ordered the professors to sit with the students, guarded by a multitude of Death Eaters, and he was sitting in Dumbledore’s chair, his crimson eyes glaring down at all of them.

“Fucking child,” he thought to himself, shaking his head at the sight. *“Muffliato.”*

Silenced once more, Luna got to work, casting the spell she had mentioned on student after student. He couldn’t see her and thus had no idea if she seemed visibly strained, but he felt the sheer amount of magic that she was using and grew concerned. She didn’t stop, though, didn’t waver in the slightest, and made no motion to get his attention as she continued her work. Peering inside, he noticed that no one seemed to notice that anything was happening at all, though Snape stiffened slightly from his place among the Death Eaters as Luna got to him, as did both Flitwick and McGonagall a moment later.

“Severus,” Voldemort hissed, glancing over at the potions professor. “You didn’t reply to any of my efforts to reach out to you.”

“I couldn’t, my lord,” Snape replied silkily, looking up at the serpentine man, “not until after the school year, anyway.”

“I bloody knew…” Ron went to mutter, only to be silenced by a glare from his head of house.

“Am I your lord, Severus?” Voldemort asked, hissing the S sounds in his name with a touch of parseltongue that unsettled nearly everyone in the room.

“You are my master, my lord,” Snape replied. “The old fool has ever been willing to believe that people can change as he wants them to. Earning my place here was not...difficult.”

“It’s done,” Luna panted, sounding exhausted.

“Alright, on three,” Harry replied.

“Dumbledore proved himself to be more foolish than any of us realized,” Voldemort laughed coldly.

“One, two,” Harry said slowly, placing a hand on the stone wall of the Great Hall and visualizing the large room’s borders. The spell he intended to use was generally cast in a circle around oneself, but it could also be used to create a deadly barrier in a room. It had been a variation of the spell that Snape had used in his contribution to the traps that hid the Philosopher’s Stone back in Harry’s first year, and it would be a similar variation that he used here. “Three!”

“*Tenebris nebula,”* Hermione cast.

“*Protego Diabolica,”* Harry cast, smirking as he saw bright blue flames engulf, not just the main doorway in and out of the Great Hall, but all of them.

“What!?” Voldemort snarled as he heard the sound of screaming people being yanked aside. Leaping to his feet and flying above the sudden thick dark smoke that filled the room, he aimed at the nearest thing he knew not to be a Death Eater and screamed, *“Avada Kedavra!”*

The rest of the Death Eaters were momentarily shocked by what happened so quickly, and many of them were knocked over as their hostages were pulled like rag dolls outward. Harry felt one of them get struck by Voldemort’s spell, his senses sufficiently strong by now to notice as those around him died, and he sighed as the sudden crash of screaming, groaning people filled the reception hall. A score of Death Eaters, wanting to recapture the people they hadn’t even gotten to torture yet, rushed towards the main door.

“No, wait!” Voldemort shouted, but he was too late, and the dying screams of nearly two dozen of his followers filled the air as they were burned to cinders.

Luna collapsed next to Hermione and she had to cancel her spell to catch the exhausted blonde.

“What the hell happened?” Ron muttered.

“Anthony!” Padma screamed. “No!”

The tangled mass of students and professors scrambled away from each other and to their feet, with many gasping or screaming as they noticed what Padma had. Anthony Goldstein, a Ravenclaw in their year and one of the brightest among them, had been hit by Voldemort’s curse.

“Merlin,” Flitwick muttered, closing empty, brown eyes as Harry undid his disillusionment charm.

“Potter!” Voldemort shouted.

“Be with you in a moment, Tom,” Harry replied, earning an angry roar from the psychopath. Looking at Hagrid, he handed him the wands he’d taken from Jugson corpse and said, “Could you hand these out for me?”

“What in the world?” McGonagall asked, turning her attention from the fallen student to the barrier of blue flames protecting them.

It had begun to flutter under the weight of the mass of curses that were being cast at it, but Harry was powerful enough to hold them off for the time being.

“Protego Diabolica?” Snape asked, his eyebrows shooting towards his greasy hairline. “That is a remarkably dark piece of magic you’re using there, Potter.”

“It’s also half of what just saved so many of your lives,” Harry drawled.

“We heard you in the hall, Snape,” Ron snarled, pointing his wand at his professor. “We know you’re with him.”

“No, Mr. Weasley, he isn’t,” McGonagall replied, gently pushing his wand down. “If he was, he’d be dead, as the Death Eaters who pursued us are. Where in the world did you learn that spell?”

“You wouldn’t believe me if I told you,” Harry muttered. Turning to Ron, he explained, “Protego Diabolica is a dark charm that shields the caster and protects those loyal to them while burning their enemies to ashes.”

“But Snape didn’t burn,” Ron blurted out, his brow furrowed in confusion.

“You’ll find, Mr. Weasley, that I have been burned,” Snape drawled, knowing that Voldemort would know for absolute certain where his loyalties lay now.

“We have to get out of here!” Lavender cried, rushing towards the main gate.

“Stop!” Harry shouted. “If you go there, you’re dead. Voldemort wouldn’t have invaded like this without surrounding the castle with all manner of horrors. At minimum, I’d expect the Dementors to be out there.”

“Potter’s right,” Snape replied. “We can’t escape that way, but we do have one option.”

“The headmaster’s floo,” Flitwick nodded. “Unless they managed to wrest control of the wards away from Albus, it will still work.”

“If they had, we’d be in much more trouble,” Sprout replied.

“How long do you think you’ll be able to hold them off, Potter?” Snape asked.

“Long enough,” Harry replied, “especially since they’re about to stop attacking the shield.”

“What do you…” McGonagall went to ask, only for her eyes to widen as Harry took a step back. “No!”

“Get them out of here, Professor, and be aware, Bellatrix Lestrange is on the loose,” Harry said, leaping back and closing the doors all around him as he batted the handful of curses coming his way aside. Looking at Voldemort’s glaring form, he grinned and said, “Hello.”

“Harry!” Ron shouted, rushing towards the door, joined by Dean, Seamus, and Neville. He went to grab the door handle, only for it to shock him, making him jolt backward.

“Professor?” Neville asked, looking at his head of house, who was staring at the closed door in horror.

“Professor McGonagall, we have te…” Hagrid went to say only to go silent and pale at the sheer heartbreak in her eyes.

Faced with the choice of trying to chase after one student, likely dooming the rest of them in the process, or working to evacuate the school and hoping that Harry Potter could hold out against Voldemort and the others, she knew that she only had one option.

“Come along,” she said reluctantly. “We need Professor Dumbledore and or the aurors, and we need to evacuate you all.”

“But Harry…” Ginny went to argue.

“Mr. Potter has proven himself bizarrely powerful this year,” McGonagall replied. “He has bought us time, and we need to hope that he can hold out until help arrives.”

“I need to find my students,” Snape grumbled, shaking his head and looking back at the Great Hall once more before taking off towards the dungeons.

*****

It was with extreme reluctance that Hermione left Harry alone to fight Voldemort, but she knew very well just how powerful he was at this point and believed that he was up to the fight. She rushed along under the invisibility cloak, her lit wand in her mouth and the map in one hand as she wrapped her arm around a stumbling Luna.

“Just a little further, Lu,” she muttered.

She had needed to cast enervate on her to get her on her feet and knew there wasn’t much more that could be done until the blonde rested. Generally speaking, witches and wizards could cast magic as they liked without risking exhaustion like this, but Luna had pushed herself more than was likely wise and found herself drained as a result.

“More stairs,” Luna grumbled as she helped her up the flight that would take her to the seventh floor.

“The last ones, I promise,” Hermione said softly, helping her hobble up the final staircase.

Looking at the map, she saw that Harry and Voldemort were leaping around the Great Hall while the other Death Eaters surrounded them, seemingly watching. The professors were leading the students towards the headmaster's office, save for Snape, who was in the dungeons, while Bellatrix Lestrange lurked on the fifth floor. The only other people out of place were Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle, who were waiting outside the Gryffindor common room, as though they expected Harry to pop up there at some point. Their common room was near the corridor that hid the entrance to the Room, and she renewed the silencing charm on hers and Luna's feet, not wanting to alert the Slytherins as they drew close.

"Where are they?!" Malfoy shouted in frustration.

"Maybe he ran?" Crabbe suggested. "Maybe he saw us coming somehow?"

"How?" Malfoy demanded. "Our plan was foolproof. Potter's barely paid attention to us in months, ever since the little monster murdered my father."

"Maybe he went with Dumbledore," Goyle suggested.

"Why would Dumbledore take him to Austria?" Malfoy asked incredulously. "Bah, never mind. I swear when I get my hands on his whores, I'm going to make them wish that they'd died with their filthy parents. I should have waited until the summer to tell the Dark Lord where the mudblood's family lived. He'd have taken her too then."

"What?!" Hermione hissed, rage such as she'd never known blooming hot in her chest.

Before they could even turn around, she'd stunned Crabbe and Goyle and seized their wands, which flew towards her outstretched hand as she stepped out of the invisibility cloak.

"Granger?!" Malfoy shouted, only to scream as she hit him between the legs with a stinging hex.

"What did you say?" Hermione growled down at him as he crumpled to the floor, cupping his crotch and screaming in pain.

As Hermione hit both Crabbe and Goyle with binding charms, tying their hands and feet together behind their backs and hanging them from the ceiling by their limbs, Luna stumbled towards the Room of Requirement, knowing that they desperately needed Rias and that her very angry friend was unlikely to remember that soon.

*****

"If you wanted to speak that badly, you could have written to me," Harry chuckled as he stepped into the room, looking around at the various Death Eaters who spread out to form a semicircle around him. Just as he'd figured, not a single one tried to attack him without permission.

"Harry Potter," Voldemort hissed, grinning wickedly at him. "Whatever would Dumbledore say if he knew you were using such dark magic?"

“We’ll find out when he gets back,” Harry shrugged, beyond caring at that point. Though very, very dark, the spell he’d used wasn’t as illegal as one of the unforgivables, and if he managed to take Voldemort’s head today, there was no way that ministry would dare make much of a stink about it. “How did you manage to get him out of here, anyway? I assume the fact that you arrived only after he’d left wasn’t a coincidence.”

“I’m not here to answer your questions, Potter,” Voldemort grinned. “You’re alone, with no Dumbledore to save you, and the very wards designed to keep you all safe are going to be your doom. Baraqiel won’t be able to get here in time.”

“Who?” Harry asked, confused, and he must have seemed genuine, because Voldemort looked truly perplexed for a moment before raising his wand.

“Your mother made use of exceptionally old magic back on the Halloween night, sacrificing herself to stop me,” the Dark Lord said. “It was a good effort, I must admit, but she underestimated me. I am Lord Voldemort, I am immortal, and I…”

“Fucking hell, do you ever tire of the sound of your own voice?” Harry muttered, cutting him off. “Look, you’re here to kill me, so can we just hurry this along?”

“Are you so eager to die?” Voldemort asked.

“I’m eager to kill you,” Harry replied darkly, earning a chorus of laughter from the Death Eaters. “So how are we doing this? A proper duel, or do you need your followers here to help?”

“Crucio,” Voldemort snarled, and Harry smirked as he leapt aside easily.

“Avis,” he cast, conjuring a flock of doves, one of whom caught his next torture curse.

The flock flew towards Voldemort, the razor-sharp teeth they shouldn’t have had ready to tear into his flesh, and he slashed his wand across them, a wall of fire engulfing the lot and blocking his view for just a moment.

“Avada Kedavra!” Harry hissed, and more than a few exclamations of shock erupted from crowd, as their master was forced to hurl a nearby chair in the path of the green curse.

Casting an unforgivable in front of witnesses was generally a bad idea, but knowing what backup was coming, Harry didn’t plan to let any of those witnesses escape here alive.

*****

“This isn’t right,” Ron grumbled mentally as he dragged his feet, following along as the professors led the terrified crowd of students towards Dumbledore’s office. *“We left him to die. Even if he can do weird dark magic, and Merlin knows when the bloody hell he learned that, he’s still no match for that monster alone.”*

“This isn’t right,” he muttered under his breath, looking to Dean and Seamus.

“I agree, but what can we do?” Neville asked quietly, having overheard him. “We’re just fourth years.”

“So’s he,” Dean countered, slowing down enough to get closer to the others. “We could distract them, maybe lure some of them through that dark fire thing.”

“How’s he even learn to do dark magic anyway?” Seamus asked, furrowing his brow. “Is that spell even legal?”

“Keep moving,” McGonagall ordered. “Once we get to Professor Dumbledore’s office, each of you will pick up a handful of floo powder and clearly say ‘The Ministry of Magic Atrium’ as you walk into the fire.”

“Aye,” Hagrid muttered, holding Anthony’s body in his arms. “Then we’ll be able to get Professor Dumbledore back. Ruddy cowards will regret this when he gets here.”

They had reached the second floor and were closing in on the gargoyle that would let them into Dumbledore’s office. Ron knew that the moment he entered that tower, it would be too late to do anything, and, realizing that he was surrounded by people taller than himself, having fallen back to where the seventh years were, he thought that he might actually be able to slip away unnoticed.

As they passed by one of the multiple portraits of Basil Fronsac in the school, he noticed that the door to one of the classrooms had been left open and, hoping it would work, he slipped inside, going still as soon as he was out of sight. His heart hammering in his chest, he nearly screamed when Neville, Dean, and Seamus joined him. The four of them just stared at each other in silent shock, as though each one couldn’t believe that they’d done what they just did, much less seemingly gotten away with it.

“Are you nuts?” Seamus hissed under his breath as the last of the crowd passed them.

“Apparently we all are,” Dean muttered.

“I’m not leaving Harry alone here!” Ron hissed, guilty tears stinging his eyes. “I was a shite friend to him when he needed me. The least I owe him is trying to save his arse now.”

“And how exactly are we to do that?” Seamus muttered. “We can’t fight Death Eaters.”

“Maybe we can do what Dean suggested and try to lure them through the fire,” Neville said. “They’re psychos, all of them, and if we insult them, at least the dumbest ones might rush in.”

“Well, whatever we’re doing, we’re going to need to figure it out quickly, because we’re alone now,” Seamus groaned as he poked his head out and saw that the crowd had moved on.

“Maybe the ghosts could help somehow,” Ron mused. “We’re not far from Myrtle’s bathroom, and she’s always had a thing for Harry. Goodness knows she owes Voldemort one.”

“Huh?” Dean asked as the four of them left the classroom and made their way towards the notoriously angry ghost’s bathroom.

“He killed her back in the forties and…” Ron went to reply as he turned the corner, only to halt in his tracks at what he saw.

“Well, well, what have we here?” Bellatrix cackled.

“Oh, shit!” Neville exclaimed.

*****

“Rias...Gremory,” Luna panted as she sat down on a chair the room was nice enough to conjure for her, the summoning paper held firmly in her hand.

A crimson ritual circle appeared in front of her, and a moment later, Rias appeared, wearing nothing but a film of bubbles, having clearly just been in a bath.

“Luna, I said I’d be availab...what’s wrong?!” Rias asked, growing concerned as she saw just how out of it Luna looked.

“Voldemort’s in the castle,” Luna replied.

“What?!” Rias exclaimed.

“AHH!” Malfoy screamed as he crawled into the room, a collar around his neck connected to a leash that a furious Hermione was holding and shocking him through.

“Keep crawling!” the brunette growled.

“Voldemort’s here?” Rias asked.

“He is,” Hermione replied. “Harry’s holding him off, but he needs help.”

Rias, after drying and dressing herself with a wave of her hand, pulled out more summoning papers and exclaimed, “Akeno Himejima, Koneko Toujou, and Kiba Yuuto!”

Her peerage appeared before her quickly, and they all looked in shock at the scene that greeted them.

“What’s wrong?” Kiba asked, seeing Rias look more scared than she could ever remember seeing her.

“Who’s he?” Akeno asked, her eyes drawn to the oddly familiar-looking blonde boy who Hermione had leashed.

“Voldemort’s managed to get into the castle and is fighting Harry,” Rias replied, and Akeno’s eyes darted right to her.

“This piece of shit seems to have helped him,” Hermione replied, “and he also claims to have fed Voldemort the information about how to find my parents.”

“It might be worth...questioning him,” Akeno suggested, looking down at him malevolently.

“If we’re quick,” Rias muttered.

“Fuck...you,” Malfoy spat. “Who the hell are you people?”

“Hell is right,” Akeno glared, “and don’t tempt me. I have a horsecock strap-on that I don’t think you’d like much, at least at first.”

Before Malfoy could even begin to respond to that, bat-like wings sprung from the raven-haired girl’s back, and she sent a torrent of lightning at his prone form. He screamed in agony as pain worse than anything he’d ever imagined, much less felt in his life, assaulted his entire body. The electrical shocks that Granger managed to send to him through the leash she’d conjured seemed like a pleasant caress by comparison, and the second it began, he knew that he’d do anything to make it stop.

The pain went on for seconds, though it felt like hours, and the moment the devil torturing him eased up, he spilled his guts, telling them everything he knew. He told them about how Voldemort said that Harry killed his father and promised him his head if he helped him. He told them about the vanishing cabinet and how its pair was in his family’s manor, and he even told them about the strange, large snake he’d seen there with his aunt and mother the last time he visited.

“Nagini,” Hermione breathed. “That has to be her.”

“We need to get to the Great Hall,” Rias declared. “Luna, are you okay?”

“So tired,” Luna replied, sounding like she was moments from nodding off.

“She overtaxed herself,” Hermione explained.

Rias nodded and called forth her familiar. “Take her to my room in Kuoh and tuck her in. Hermione, you should go with them. Let us handle the Death Eaters.”

“No,” Hermione replied.

“This fight is beyond you,” Akeno insisted.

“I don’t doubt that, but that’s not why I can’t go,” Hermione replied. “Nagini is the one horcrux we couldn’t reach before, and now we have a good idea where she is. If I deal with her while you go to the Great Hall, then all we’ll have to do once you’ve dealt with Voldemort is take Harry back to the Underworld, and that will be that. I have the dagger Harry gave me, and you know that will do the job.”

“That is way too dangerous,” Rias muttered. “How would you even get close enough to stab her without getting bitten?”

“I wouldn’t,” Hermione replied coldly, looking down at Malfoy’s still-twitching form. She had vanished the leash and collar just before Akeno started torturing him, but she had a far more powerful leash in mind just then. Pointing her wand at him, she cast, *“Imperio.”*

“Oh, that would work,” Rias chuckled.

“With the map and cloak, I can avoid everyone else and sneak into his dorm room,” Hermione explained. “Just save Harry.”

“He said his aunt was also sent to look for Harry,” Akeno pointed out.

“Yes,” Hermione replied, looking down at the map only to freeze in horror at what she saw. “Oh no. She’s on the second floor, but she isn’t alone. They...”

“I’ll save them,” Koneko offered, sniffing Malfoy. “She’ll smell enough like him for me to find her even if she’d moved.”

“Memorize the map and meet us down in the Great Hall once she’s dead,” Rias commanded. “Now, let’s go save Harry.”

The devils flew off, leaving Hermione alone with Malfoy. Luna had already gone, which meant that control of the room slipped to her, and as the brunette glared down at the boy who had gotten her parents and her friend’s father killed, she found herself wishing that she had a faster way down to the dungeons. She wasn’t particularly looking forward to the long, winding trek through seven floors of stairs that she was in for, and as that thought popped into her head, a door appeared next to her.

“Oh, right,” Hermione thought to herself, having forgotten that the Room could actually conjure doors to other parts of the castle.

It was something that they had done only once before, when they needed to grab Harry’s cloak to hide Rias as they checked on him in the hospital wing after his fight with Crouch. In the months since, they hadn’t had any reason to, and she had actually forgotten that the Room could do it. Opening the door, she found a simple yet ornately decorated room with a comfortable single bed fitted with green sheets, an expensive-looking trunk, and a very distinct cabinet.

“Dobby?” Hermione called.

“Harry Potter’s Hermione is calling Dobby?” Dobby asked. “Why is bad master’s son here?”

“Not important,” Hermione replied. “I need you to grab my things, as well as Luna’s and Harry’s, and bring them to Grimmauld Place. Do the same with Crookshanks and our owls too while you’re at it. We’re likely going to need to move quickly soon enough. Once you’re done with that, please return here and have the room reopen this door. I’m going to need it.”

“Is something wrong?” Dobby asked.

“Let’s just say that time is of the essence,” Hermione replied. “Harry needs our help.”

“Okay, then Dobby can do it,” Dobby replied before disappearing.

Steeling herself, Hermione forced Malfoy to walk through the door and carefully fished her basilisk venom-imbued dagger out of her mokeskin pouch before joining him.

*****

If they were alone, Voldemort didn’t think that he’d have been able to resist the urge to demand that his prophesied nemesis tell him how he’d become so powerful. He couldn’t show such weakness in front of his followers, but the question burned in his mind as he strafed aside in the air, dodging the organ-rupturing curse that Harry had sent at him. He sent a pair of bone-breakers at him, only for Harry to do the same, because of course he could bloody fly too.

“The sniveling brat whom I met back in ninety-one didn’t show the faintest hint of this kind of potential,” he grumbled mentally, slashing his wand across the sky and sending a wave of cursed, purple fire his way, a creation of Dolohov’s that he found particularly fun to use, given how good it was for melting people’s organs.

Harry dispelled the curse with a wave of his wand and began slashing back and forth through the air as he hissed, “*Sectumsempra*.”

Voldemort flew out of the way and sent another killing curse at him, which he blocked with a conjured metal shield. It exploded, and Potter sent the shards flying at him, forcing him to vanish them. The two of them circled each other in the air, and Voldemort would have laughed at the sheer destruction that had been rained down on the Great Hall if his foe wasn’t still breathing. His followers were still crowded around on the ground, unable to get through Potter’s barrier, and stuck defending themselves from the odd stray curse.

“Snape will pay dearly for his treason once I’m done with you,” the Dark Lord promised.

“Snape?” Harry asked, cocking an eyebrow. “Go ahead. Given what the prick did all those years ago, it would almost be worth dying.”

Voldemort laughed at that, saying, “You hate the man and use his spell regardless?”

“Huh?” Harry asked, confused.

“*Sectumsempra*,” Voldemort hissed, trying to slash his foes apart, only to growl in frustration as Potter dodged it effortlessly.

“Avada Kedavra!” Harry bellowed, and Voldemort was forced to fly out of its way. “That was Snape’s? I found it in a book belonging to someone who called themselves the half-blood prince.”

“I hadn’t known of the moniker, but it makes sense, given that he was a half-blood,” Voldemort replied, already referring to the soon-to-be dead man in the past tense, “and his mother was of the Prince family.”

“You knew that and let him join your ranks anyway?” Harry asked.

“Snape isn’t a wizarding name, fool; of course I knew,” Voldemort scoffed. “He had his uses, though they’ve long since expired.”

“Well, at least he grew out of using his ridiculous school-age nickname,” Harry snarked, and Voldemort snarled, sending a volley of deadly spells his way that he either dodged or swatted.

*****

“*Well, this place isn’t gaudy at all,”* Hermione thought to herself as she forced Malfoy to walk through the halls of his family home.

She had disillusioned the blonde boy and silenced his feet, ensuring that he could walk about undetected. He was keyed into the wards, and she doubted that his mother had set up anything that might get in her way, but there was a chance that the older woman might be home or that they might have acquired some new, unfortunate house elf. She really hoped that his mother wasn’t home, not particularly wanting to get a look at the woman whose child she was likely puppeting to his death.

He had told his master what he overheard her parents say to Xenophilius when he reported that she and Luna were Harry’s best friends, knowing that they would almost certainly be harmed. Under torture, he revealed that that had actually been his hope and that he’d reveled in it until he realized that Harry had survived the trap. Draco Malfoy was a monster that she was going to put down, but he had a mother who was going to mourn him, and that was something that would be easier to put out of her mind if she didn’t see her.

As he walked through the large, ornate manor, Hermione noted that the black tiles of the floor and dark wood paneling gave it an almost gloomy look, something that she figured was his mother’s influence on it. It didn’t look quite as dour as Harry’s descriptions made Grimmauld Place sound, but there were certain similarities between what he’d spoken about, what she saw through her puppet’s eyes. Coming across the drawing room, she spotted the large, ornate fireplace at its center, with a high-backed chair that looked like it hadn’t been sat in in a while.

“A room fit for someone who wants everyone who visits to know just how rich and important he is,” she grumbled mentally as she looked around.

A house elf popped into the room as she stood there, and Malfoy froze; not even breathing as the small, pink creature began fretting over the fireplace.

“The mistress will want this lit for her return,” the female elf quavered, levitating new wood into the fireplace and setting it aflame with a wave of her hand. “Bad Milly for waiting so long.”

She reached towards the fire, and Hermione’s heart leapt into her throat, fearing that the elf might burn herself as punishment, but it turned out that she was just looking to direct

the fire further back into the fireplace, and she quickly popped out of the room once she was done. Malfoy took a breath, and Hermione realized, to her surprise, just how close he'd come to actually asphyxiating himself just then.

The Imperius Curse was a terrible thing, one far more dangerous than people usually realized. A thrall under one's command was under their total control. That didn't just mean that they would obey orders without question, but that they outright did whatever one wanted. An imperiused thrall would hold their hand on a hot stove until it sizzled without blinking, jump off a cliff without hesitation, or even just stop breathing if that was what the one controlling them wanted. Doing such things might provoke them to resist, but Malfoy seemed to have little to no willpower in that regard.

"Just another way in which he's inferior to Harry," she thought to herself.

She was just about to make him turn around and search another room when a hiss made her freeze again. Snakes were cold-blooded creatures and would seek out sources of warmth naturally. Malfoy Manor wasn't cold, and given that it was late June, that wasn't surprising at all, but apparently England in June wasn't sufficient for Nagini, who slithered into the room and made a beeline for the fireplace.

"Holy shit!" Hermione exclaimed in her mind.

She wasn't the basilisk, but Nagini was easily the second-largest snake Hermione had ever seen and thus the largest she'd ever seen live and in person. She was around twelve feet long, and the thickest parts of her were thicker than the brunette's thighs. Forest green, there was a beauty to her scales that Hermione thought would make a lovely pair of boots.

Malfoy stepped around her carefully, wanting to approach from behind and stab her in the tail with the dagger. Basilisk venom was the most dangerous substance in the world, and she knew that it would take only a single wound to not only kill the snake but destroy the horcrux within her. She was just about to reach for the dagger, carefully contained in a leather sheath Hermione had conjured and strapped to his belt, when Nagini's head jerked up and she hissed at the air.

"Oh, shit," Hermione sighed in her mind as she realized her mistake.

She had made Malfoy invisible and silenced his shoes, but she'd done nothing to hide his smell, and while he didn't stink or anything, a snake's sense of smell was incredible, and they could hunt with it alone. As Nagini pulled her tongue back in, tasting the air, she realized that she wasn't alone and whipped around, glaring right at her hidden assassin. Faster than she thought possible, the snake struck, opening her mouth wide and bringing her long, venomous fangs to bear. She could have likely dodged to the side, but she didn't, choosing instead to catch Nagini's bite with Malfoy's left arm.

Drawing the dagger, she pulled the snake in and plunged it down into her side. She screamed in pain, sounding oddly human, and it took a moment for Hermione to realize that she wasn't hearing the snake but the horcrux. Pulling the blade out as Nagini reared back, she stabbed her again, grinning victoriously as black mist began to spew from the

wounds. Nagini bit Malfoy twice more, on the bicep and the neck, before succumbing to her injuries and falling dead.

“What is...ahh!” Milly screamed. “Mistress!”

“Damn it,” Malfoy muttered, sheathing the blade and running past the elf, who disappeared to summon his mother.

Hermione thought that she felt him begin to struggle, obeying her commands less readily, though she quickly realized that she was feeling his body weakening. It had been safe to assume that Nagini was venomous, as she doubted that Voldemort would have even considered having a pet snake that wasn’t, but it seemed like that venom was more potent than she had anticipated. Forcing Malfoy to run towards the vanishing cabinet, she could just barely hear his mother’s shocked exclamation by the time she reached the dead snake. He reached the cabinet quickly and jumped inside, falling on his face as he landed in his room.

“Bombarda,” Hermione cast once Malfoy was back in Hogwarts, destroying the cabinet.

A glance at the map showed that Snape had managed to get everyone out of the dungeons by that point, so she didn’t care about the noise. She watched the vanishing cabinet explode into a thousand tiny shards with satisfaction before turning to Malfoy and retrieving her dagger. Easing up on the imperius curse, she watched as the boy who had arranged her parents’ murder regained control of himself and immediately started shaking in pain from the venom working its way through his body.

“What did you...ahhh,” Malfoy cried, curling into a ball. “What did I…”

“Your master’s going to die tonight, for good this time,” Hermione replied. “We couldn’t have done it without you.”

“You fucking mudblood!” Malfoy snarled, trying to force his way to his feet, only to fall instead, too weak to do even that.

Hermione felt her stomach twist at the sight but swallowed down her discomfort. The blonde before her had seen too much to be allowed to live, but she couldn’t fool herself into thinking that her reasons were that pragmatic.

“He...help me,” Malfoy panted, sweating profusely as his condition worsened. “I’ll...I’ll give you whatever you want.”

“I want my parents back, you son of a bitch,” Hermione replied coldly, tears streaming down her face as she felt like the last hint of her innocence died.

She had watched enough James Bond movies to know that leaving an enemy to die alone, certain that there was no way he could possibly survive, was stupid, so she didn’t. Instead, she just sat there and watched as his breaths grew more and more ragged, and eventually the life left his grey eyes. It was the least she could do for Luna to be able to tell her the next time she saw her that the boy who had taken so much from them was dead. The door to the Room of Requirement appeared next to her just before Malfoy’s

death rattle ceased, and as she opened it, she was glad that Dobby hadn't checked on her.

*****

A crackling purple spell that he knew would set his whole body on fire if it hit him barreled towards Harry, and he flicked it aside with his wand almost carelessly, sending it shooting towards one of the Death Eaters, who didn't manage to block it in time and began screaming in agony as he caught fire. He ran around the room, chased by some of his comrade, who tried to put him out, and Harry chuckled at it. It wasn't so much the burning Death Eater who amused him, but the fact that, even with this not being the first one who had been caught in the crossfire now, they still had yet to try and join the fray. Voldemort had clearly commanded them to stay out of it before they arrived and they would sooner die than risk his wrath.

"These proud purebloods so utterly terrified of their master that they can't even bring themselves to fight for their lives," he thought to himself. Part of that probably was the fact that Harry had yet to outright target them, but it was still funny.

Across from him, Voldemort was breathing heavily, as was he at this point. The pair of them had been fighting for longer than he could say by now, and though they both had minor cuts or bruises from the shrapnel their attacks had caused to explode around them, neither had yet managed to hit the other directly. Given the kind of magic that they'd been lobbing at each other since the beginning of their fight, he was certain that one hit was all it was going to take.

The two of them flew around the room, their wands a blur as volleys of curses sprung from them. Harry swatted aside what he couldn't dodge and conjured stone shields to absorb what he couldn't afford to touch at all. Voldemort was an extremely aggressive opponent generally, preferring, as the horcrux had told him, to appear like a vengeful god to his enemies, showering them in so much destructive magic that it terrified them into making mistakes. For most opponents that worked, and only the likes of Dumbledore had ever managed to take him on alone and fare well, but Harry had been trained by him and knew well how to handle his onslaught.

Voldemort redirected his flesh-melting curse back him and let out an enraged snarl as he dispelled it with ease. His crimson eyes shining with fury, he hissed, *"Glacia Maxima!"*

He circled his wand around his shoulders, gathering the icy power of the spell together before unleashing it right at Harry, whose eyes widened as he felt the sheer power his foe had put into it. That spell, even cast at its absolute highest form, was generally dangerous, but not this bad, and he knew that if the icy wind hit him, he'd instantly end up with frostbite.

"Ignis Temptestas," he growled, putting as much power into the firestorm charm as he could.

A circle of fire engulfed him, making him sweat even as an antarctic gale came barreling towards him, and he directed it right at Voldemort's spell. Fire and ice collided in the air, and the entire room trembled at the sheer magical power the two combatants were

wielding. The Death Eaters once again sought cover, with Rabastan Lestrange transfiguring the shattered remnants of the tables and benches that had sat there before into a stone shield capable of saving them.

“Just die!” Voldemort shouted, sounding frustrated beyond measure.

“You first,” Harry grunted, his arm trembling under the weight of both his spell and Voldemort’s.

“As I said, I cannot die,” Voldemort cackled.

“Even the sun’s going to die someday, you blithering idiot,” Harry growled. “Fear it all you like, but its inevitable.”

Roaring in rage, Voldemort canceled his own spell and let Harry’s flames shoot past him, melting the windows behind him.

“You call that fire?” Voldemort grinned. “This is fire, boy. *Pestis Incendium.”*

Harry sighed, knowing what was coming, and reached into his mokeskin pouch, pulling out a vial of basilisk venom. Fiendfyre was one of the most dangerous spells ever invented, a cursed, dark fire that fed on magic the same way that normal fire fed on oxygen. It was one of the few spells in existence that actively fought the caster the entire time it was in use, seeking to consume them outright. There was a counter-curse to it, but to use it while it was actively being cast would have required him to be significantly more powerful than the caster, and while he had demonstrated pretty well that he was Voldemort’s equal, that wouldn’t be enough.

“Aquamenti,” Harry cast, summoning water that he swirled around his form in a large ring as Voldemort’s spell took the shape of a giant basilisk.

“Did Dumbledore not teach you about fiendfyre, Potter?” Voldemort laughed. “Water cannot put it out.”

“No, it can’t,” Harry thought to himself, carefully uncorking the vial.

Voldemort unleashed the fiendfyre on him, and he countered with his water charm, which he knew would slow it only for a moment. A moment was all he needed, though, as he carefully uncorked the vial and levitated it out in front of him. Fiendfyre fed on magic, but basilisk venom destroyed it. It was what made it capable of destroying horcruxes, as it ate through the enchantments that only the killing curse could otherwise.

The strengthening charms on the vials only worked because, for reasons that still weren’t quite known to wizards and witches, such charms, when cast on glass, made them oddly resistant to it. Had any of Voldemort’s horcruxes been made of glass, he’d have needed the killing curse or the Power of Destruction to get rid of them.

The water slowed the gigantic, superheated basilisk of fire just long enough for Harry to reach out to it with his own magic and take hold. Had he tried to redirect the fire aside, Voldemort would have felt it and resisted, but as he was redirecting it front of him, his foe

thought that he was trying to shield against it and was happy to let him attempt something so clearly futile.

The basilisk-shaped fiendfyre was channeled into the open vial of basilisk venom and instantly destroyed as he filled it. Realizing his mistake, Voldemort tried to redirect it away, but it was too late. The burning hot flame was consumed by the venom, and Harry grinned at the frustrated rage on his enemy's face. He realized a moment later, however, that he had forgotten one thing. The vials were enchanted to hold the venom but not to be heat resistant, and he felt the class shatter under the spell, spilling the venom onto the ground below. He had but a moment to react and hurled the venom towards Voldemort with a slash of his wand, catching only the hem of the man's dark robes as he glided aside in fear.

"Ahh!" Voldemort screamed in rage, well aware of how close that had been. "*Crucio! Avada Kedavra!"*

He aimed the killing curse at Harry's feet and the torture curse at his chest, but Harry flattened his body in the air, gliding between them with the beginnings of a spell already on the tip of his wand.

"Fulmin Maxima!" he exclaimed, arcing a bolt of lightning powerful enough to shatter a tree right at Voldemort's chest.

He hastily shielded against it and stopped the spell, but the force behind it still sent him barreling towards the wall, which he crashed into.

"Master!" several of the Death Eaters shouted, ready to jump into the fray as Harry landed.

He sent a blasting curse at the stone shield they'd been hiding behind, blowing it up and sending many of them reeling before he took aim at Voldemort.

"Avada Kedavra!" he hissed just as Voldemort stood back up.

"Avada Kedavra!" Voldemort hissed in turn, and to both their shocks, the two beams collided in the air and held onto each other.

"What the hell?" Harry asked aloud, as the both of them stared in confusion at the magical phenomenon neither could pull free of.

"Do not interfere!" Voldemort snarled at his followers as he pushed against Harry's magic with all his might.

They were both more tired than they'd like to admit after their fight and fought each other with everything they had, knowing that whoever lost this particular contest would surely die.

*****

"Holy shit, that's Harry!" Akeno exclaimed as they reached the Great Hall. "He's been holding out on us."

“To be fair, neither side has actually been trying to kill the other in our spars,” Rias muttered, kneeling by the closed door and hovering her hand over it. “This barrier feels exceptionally dangerous.”

“It feels like Harry’s magic,” Akeno murmured as she examined the blue flame. “You’re not wrong, though. Is this a spell he’s mentioned to you before?”

“No,” Rias replied. “Given how lethal it feels, I’m going to have to break through it. The wards of this place won’t let us teleport around in here, and taking them down would likely make things worse, since I imagine Voldemort has reinforcements of some kind outside.”

She took a deep breath and summoned forth her power. The Power of Destruction, in the hands of a skilled wielder, could destroy almost anything. There were exceptions, such as that strange stone that let people speak to the dead, but most spells could be undone by it with ease. Rias reached out to the barrier spell and conjured a ball of crimson destruction in her palm, finding a point that would let her destroy both it and the door it was, strangely, leaving unharmed, just in case there were other protections that might slow her down. She unleashed her power and smiled in satisfaction as the barrier spell and the door were both destroyed completely, though as she looked inside, her face quickly fell.

*****

“What the hell even is this?” Harry wondered to himself as he continued to fight against Voldemort’s power.

The Dark Lord looked as confused as he was, but even if he hadn’t, Harry would have known that he had no idea what he was looking at either, because nothing the Horcrux had ever told him explained it, or so he thought until he recalled something else. His wand and Voldemort’s shared cores, each having a feather from the tail of Fawkes. That, he reasoned, could have triggered this, which would mean that they were dealing with Priori Incantatem, just in a form his nemesis had never heard of.

It was certainly dramatic, he had to admit, as their twin beams of emerald death clashed against each other between them, causing golden sparks to fly all around them, until it formed a cage of light surrounding them. The beams struggled against each other, with the point where they met moving back and forth rapidly, but neither managed to gain much ground. He and Voldemort were equals, and the evil prick had truly marked him as such, just as the prophecy had stated. He’d learned all that his Horcrux could teach him and put that knowledge to good use in this fight.

In a fight between such evenly matched foes, the outcome was always likely going to come down to a single mistake that the other could capitalize on. No strategy was ever truly perfect, and the two of them were inevitably going to mess up here or there, but that didn’t mean the other would be automatically able to take advantage of it. Voldemort had made the mistake of underestimating him, which had nearly cost him his life early on, but he’d managed to adjust quickly.

Harry in turn had made the mistake of trying to ensure that the Death Eaters couldn’t strike at him the second he put Voldemort down and should have taken the first shot at the

downed asshole that he could. If he had, perhaps his enemy would already be disembodied. That hadn't been the only mistake that Harry had made, though.

When Luna shared Dumbledore's diary and showed him the passage on protego diabolica, he found it fascinating and started practicing. It wasn't an offensive spell one would use in a duel and thus not a spell that he'd ever shown Rias or Akeno. If he had, they'd have known that they could have walked right through it, no matter how dangerous it felt, but he hadn't and they didn't know that.

The second he felt his spell unravel, it shocked him, and that momentary shock, that moment of distraction, was enough. He caught sight of his beautiful, crimson-haired lover through his peripheral vision; just as his control of his spell slipped and came undone, allowing Voldemort's curse to strike him. His vision was terrible, and he couldn't make out the horror written on her features, but he heard it in her voice as she screamed and everything went black.

And then white.

"What the hell?" he asked as he looked around what looked like King's Cross station, if it had been completely whitewashed. Everything was a perfect, spotless white, like a field of freshly fallen snow, and he looked around in confusion, wondering how exactly he'd gotten here.

"You did a hell of a lot better than I managed against that bastard," a deep voice said behind him. "I'm proud of you, son."

Whipping around, Harry's eyes widened in shock as he took in the sight of his mirror image. He had a slighter build, brown eyes, and looked a few years older, but there was no mistaking who this man was, and his jaw dropped as he realized it.

"D...Dad?" Harry stammered, feeling his heart lurch as he stared at his father.