The Seven Deathly Sins

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♦ Part I ♦

Harry Potter was performing his usual evening routine inside the master bedroom of number twelve, Grimmauld Place, pacing around with tight shoulders and palms pressed together in front of his lips as if in prayer. In his mind, the same litany repeated itself over and over again, Locket, Cup, Diadem, Nagini -- Locket, Cup, Diadem, Nagini -- Locket, Cup, Diadem, Nagini ... Just like it happened every day before supper, when Harry took a little time away from Ron and Hermione.

It had begun a few weeks back, when they had first come to number twelve. Reasoning that they would all go mad if they always stayed in the same room for as long as it took to complete their mission, Harry had decided to give both his friends -- and himself -- a few hours of reprieve.

If they chose to spend it together, it was up to them; Harry had his suspicions about what they were doing, and he honestly didn't think he would care to know about it.

On that particular day, Harry's meditation was cut short by a loud ruckus coming from the ground floor. Heart beating fast and adrenaline pumping in his veins, Harry crouched into a defensive position and exited his bedroom cautiously. The hallway was clear.

Keeping his back against the wall just like Moody had taught him in his fourth year, Harry

knocked gently on one of the bedrooms near the staircase and, moments later, Ron and Hermione came out, looking flushed and dishevelled, but already alert and armed.

Hermione had this wide-eyed, yet focused expression that told Harry that they both had heard the noise. "First floor," Ron mouthed, nodding at the staircase, "Can't tell which room."

Harry pointed at himself and then at the staircase. "I'll go first," he replied soundlessly, "Hermione next and you in the end." Both of them nodded once, and they made their way down the stairs, avoiding the creaking steps.

Harry paused on the first-floor level and tried to listen, but he heard nothing, which wasn't quite right if someone was breaking in. He looked back at his companions. "Dumbledore," Hermione told Ron and Harry and, as if to prove her right, they then heard the guttural voice of the Headmaster's shadow call for revenge. Whoever it was, knew about the jinx --

"I did not murder you." Harry drew himself upright with shock, not only at the voice that he would recognise after a million years' time if necessary, but also at the blatant lie. Severus Snape had killed Dumbledore indeed; he had seen so himself.

Something must have been wrong with Moody's spell, because the ghost-Dumbledore exploded in a cloud of dust that reached the gallery where they stood. The noise continued; it seemed that Snape was having difficulty in moving, if the sound of a heavy something being dragged across the floor was of any indication. "Injury?" Harry mouthed at Hermione, who was closer.

Hermione swallowed hard and shook her head, and they both looked at Ron, who shrugged.

"Nghn!" The three of them froze. Snape had someone else with him -- someone injured who had just whimpered pitifully. "Almost there," Snape encouraged, sounding breathless, "just a few more steps, Draco."

They stared at each other in shock for a moment, but Hermione snapped out of it quickly and drew her wand, casting a wordless charm around them; the sudden freezing feeling of her

magic made Ron and Harry jump in surprise. She shrugged and mouthed, "Notice-me-not." Which was, as always, good thinking -- it wouldn't do if Snape cast a spell to reveal human presence and their cover was blown.

The sound of shuffling and painful moaning kept coming from the drawing room downstairs. "Look," Harry started, "we need to move. They're going to notice that someone's been living here pretty soon."

"I say we catch them unaware. Snape seems pretty concerned about Malfoy; it'd be easy to bind them now," said Ron, his speech punctuated by Hermione's nodding. "We can call the Order afterwards -- or leave them here to rot, for all I care."

"Okay. I'll go first and disarm Snape. Hermione goes next and Stuns him, and you immobilise Malfoy however you want."

Ron's face stretched into an evilly pleased smirk, and he mock-saluted Harry. Hermione rolled her eyes, but they quickly stepped into the ground-level, each on one side of the door and Harry in the middle. "Okay, Harry," she said, placing her hand in the doorknob, "on three. One ... two ... three!"

They burst into the room. Harry saw surprise register in Snape's eyes, before shouting, "Expelliarmus!" and the wand was forcefully pulled from the teacher's hand. Harry stepped sideways as if they had practised the attack, as Hermione yelled, "Stupefy!", but Snape had cast a wandless Shield and dived behind the couch, pulling Malfoy with him.

Harry cursed under his breath, and he and Hermione jumped into opposite sides of the room and hid behind two similar tallboys. Harry could see her gesturing frantically in the direction of the doorway and guessed she was explaining the situation to Ron. He could see Snape frantically trying to stop Malfoy's bleeding on the glass of the expositor.

Ignoring Hermione's soundless protest, Harry ducked under the next rackety table, shielding himself from Snape, but getting a clear shot at him. He aimed, and Snape was shoved

backwards as Harry's Stunning Spell hit him straight in the chest. Malfoy screamed in pain.

Harry, Ron and Hermione moved right away, the latter two binding Snape, while Harry crouched near Malfoy, feeling oddly detached from the scene while taking in Malfoy's convulsing body as blood poured from an ugly gash just bellow his left ribs. Malfoy couldn't move and he watched Harry horrified, as if he thought Harry would kill him right then. Harry, wand still drawn, couldn't think of a reason not to.

"Locomotor Mortis," Hermione murmured, binding Malfoy's legs, as she knelt next to him. She took her jumper and pressed it against their nemesis' wound. A shade of disgust touched Malfoy's face momentarily and Harry felt once again compelled to hurt him. "Harry, go fetch me hot water and a bunch of towels." Just like that, the urge was gone, and Harry could breathe again.

"Ron?" Harry called, getting up and spotting his best friend near Snape, who was bound with heavy ropes and still unconscious. "You got him?"

Ron grinned. "You bet, mate. I finally have the git right where I want him."

Harry smiled back half-heartedly and went to do what Hermione had told him to. He returned to the room moments later. Hermione had Stunned Draco as well and, when Harry handed her the stuff she had asked for, she started to dress his wound the Muggle way. Malfoy wouldn't like that ... Well, too bloody bad, Harry thought.

As Hermione was finishing with Malfoy, Snape started to stir. Harry approached his old teacher, feeling Ron right behind him. Snape's eyes snapped open. It took him a moment to get his bearings in place, but then his eyes narrowed dangerously. Harry felt Ron shift nervously and bit back a smile. Unfortunately for Snape, the hatred coursing through Harry's veins put a considerable hamper on his fear ...

The last time he'd seen this man, he'd just killed Albus Dumbledore, Harry's last protector, his last haven. The thought made him flex his shoulders in an attempt to calm down. He looked

deep into Snape's eyes, as he said to Ron, "We need to call someone of the Order."

The last thing Harry knew, Ron was nodding energetically and saying something that Harry couldn't hear for the life of him, and then he was engulfed by the blackness of Snape's eyes.

Just like when one dreams of falling only to startle awake, Harry came to himself with a jump and found himself inside of memories that didn't belong to him.

After navigating through enough Pensieves, Harry could see the similarities and the differences, and somehow he knew that he was inside Snape's mind and was being shown something Snape wanted him to see. It was Dumbledore's office, and Dumbledore was sitting heavily on his chair as Snape incanted a healing spell into his darkened hand. They were arguing.

The more Harry listened, the heavier his heart got. Dumbledore's begging Snape on the top of the Astronomy Tower took a whole different meaning -- he had not begged for his life, but for his death.

More memories followed; memories that showed Harry a different Snape, a repentant one, slightly younger and less scary and far more scared. One he didn't know how to deal with. One that was as loyal to their cause as Dumbledore -- as Harry himself.

Harry felt ill, betrayed and manipulated; with an angry growl, he pulled away from Snape's memories, but the teacher only regarded him calmly, if smugly, obviously waiting for Harry to find his balance again, now that his dogmas had been torn asunder. "How do I know you're not lying?"

"I know you've seen tampered memories, Potter," Snape gritted out directly into Harry's mind, since his jaw was still spell-locked, looking every bit like the man Harry had learnt to fear. "Do not lose our time with nonsense. Although I suppose I understand your reluctance in accepting the grey shades of life. Shall I wait until you can reorganise your Gryffindoresque morals around the fact that not all Slytherins are evil?"

Harry clenched his jaw while reminding himself that, Gryffindor or not, he did not attack disarmed men fruitlessly. At least, one thing hadn't changed: Snape was still a bastard that hit you when you were down.

Hermione spoke up then, "Harry?" She was looking pale and confused, but her hand was firm around her wand. Ron looked sickly pale beside her. "You alright, Harry?"

Harry turned to them and opened his mouth to explain, but what to say? "We need to talk. Alone." He refused to look at Snape again, as he turned and left the room. Hermione took a moment to cast a few extra charms around their prisoners, mainly against Snape's wandless magic, and soon enough the three of them were sitting on the stairs, all attention on Harry.

"Snape might be on our side." Before any of them could protest -- which they would at any moment -- he told them what he had just been shown; Hermione even insisted in a detailed description of Slughorn's tampered memories and listening to Harry comparing them to Snape's.

By the time they had discussed all the possibilities, Hermione looked resolute and Ron was sulking. They agreed on hearing Snape's story and then making decisions. "Dumbledore trusted him until the end -- even with his death. That deserves at least the benefit of the doubt," she said.

Ron sighed. "Fine. Let's go talk to them."

They didn't go very far, because, the moment Hermione unsealed the door, it burst open and, with two flicks of his wrist, Snape had Harry, Hermione and Ron immobilised against the opposite wall. Harry's first thought was, 'Thank Merlin Malfoy's not here to see this.' Snape's face stretched into an unpleasant smirk. "Really, Potter, what would happen if I was really Voldemort's man?"

Harry lifted his chin. "I imagine we'd all be dead by now," he replied with a courage he didn't

feel, if the tightening in his chest of was of any indication. "Are you going to let us down, Snape?"

Quirking an amused eyebrow, Snape let them fall onto the floor in a painful heap of limbs. They straightened themselves, wands ready, even if they weren't impolite enough to attack Snape after the man had just let them down. "You three are going to stay very quiet as I attend to Mister Malfoy. Then, we can share tales. Understood?"

"Yes, sir," Hermione chirped, as Harry grunted and Ron just glared. Harry guessed that, no matter the situation, Snape would always be their teacher.

"To the kitchen, you three. Get something done for dinner, if you would," Snape offered, before disappearing into the drawing room with a dramatic billowing of his robes.

"I know I shouldn't, but I feel like we're finally aiming at something," Hermione whispered as they moved downstairs towards the basement. "I know it's just Snape, but it's still someone who obviously knows what they're doing."

Harry didn't say so, but he felt like that too -- as if they were finally going to get something done. There was only so much pacing one could do before recognising the hopelessness of the situation, and Harry had been way past that point. He just hadn't known where they could have got any help. Thankfully, Snape had solved that for them.

But before Harry could reply in some way, Ron snorted, "Yeah, while torturing us." Harry didn't doubt that either.

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"How's Malfoy?" Harry asked when Snape entered the kitchen, as he stirred the lamb stew he had made. Hermione approached him to taste it like she usually did, since Harry liked food

without much salt, and he took his place at the table.

Snape looked more interested in their exchange than in Harry's question, but he answered nonetheless, "He'll be joining us shortly, after cleaning up -- I beg your pardon, but why is Mister Potter cooking? Wasn't there a house-elf around?" He smiled nastily. "Or have you finally got rid of the thing?"

Harry glowered. "Kreacher is much better now," he snapped, as if Snape hadn't just said something Harry had thought dozens of times, "and he's on a mission for us -- which is none of your business, by the way."

Snape's eye twitched and he scowled murderously, but Hermione spoke first, "What happened to Malfoy, sir? And -- er, what about you? Harry said that you were on our side, but -- "

"But nothing, Miss Granger," Snape interrupted harshly. "You children need not to know about the affairs of the Order, and I assure you that a select group of people are very much aware of my role in this war."

"Who?" Harry demanded.

"I'm not obliged to tell you that, you idiotic boy, but I shall because I happen to need to discuss a few things with them. Kingsley, Lupin and Minerva know of the whole plan. I'd very much like if you could summon Kingsley here. Our means of communication have been ... compromised."

Harry frowned in confusion and he saw Ron glower darkly at Snape, which probably meant he didn't understand as well, but Hermione got it quickly. "Malfoy?" Snape nodded, a pleased glint in his eyes. "Malfoy's been working for the Order? Does his father know?"

Snape's expression was sombre. "Now, he does."

Hermione clapped a hand over her mouth in shock. "Did he -- ?"

Snape waved his hand dismissively. "No, he wouldn't hurt his son." He paused, jaw tight. "He also didn't stop Bellatrix." Harry could relate to Snape's hatred of Bellatrix -- and he needed to, if he wanted to convince himself that Snape could be a good person. Something jumped into the front of his mind at that. How he would kill Bellatrix if he got the chance, no questions asked.

Something stirred inside of him, the deep rumble of the hatred he had lived with the past few weeks.

"And his mother?" Hermione continued the conversation.

"Mother took the first curse for me," said Draco, appearing at the doorway, looking ashen and weak. "She's got bigger balls than many on your side."

Harry blinked at the crassness; he could hear Ron snorting and see the surprise on Hermione's face, but he had a hard time believing in Malfoy's words -- his mother had always come through as a spoiled, decorative wife, incapable of anything else than snub people off. Wisely, he chose not to remark on that, and he guessed both Hermione and Ron got the same reasoning.

"Do be careful with your language, Draco, lest I wash your mouth with soap. You won't speak like that in front of me," Snape warned coolly, brushing invisible lint from his robes.

"Yes, sir," Draco piped right away, flushing slightly.

The Gryffindor trio exchanged glances, but refrained from commenting and began setting the table as it was their habit. Snape and Malfoy remained silent and waited politely for Harry to point them to their places. He might not like Malfoy or Snape, but he would never deny food

to anyone, so, if they wanted to have supper with them, they would be welcome even if their company wouldn't.

It was Snape who broke the silence. "I know you have a certain task to perform," he began, taking a bite of lamb, "but I do not know of what nature or what it implies. I know it was what killed Albus, so I urge you to be careful." At their shocked stares, he elaborated, "It just won't do to have so many people's effort wasted because our illustrious Boy-Who-Lived didn't live enough to do what he's supposed to."

Harry clenched his jaw. It didn't settle well with him that Snape found himself with the right of telling him what he was and wasn't supposed to do. His life was his alone, and if he chose to send them all to hell, he would. "I'm not supposed to do anything. You people don't own me," Harry bit out, getting up, his appetite gone.

Suddenly, he found himself shoved against the wall, a large hand painfully constricting his throat and Snape's face hovering a few inches from his own, eyes alight with rage. "That" he growled, "that right there is why I hate you, you spoiled brat! Who do you think you are?! Who gives you the right to decide that your life is more important that anyone else's?"

"I gave more than any of them already!" Harry shouted back, struggling to get free. "I'm not their Boy-Who-Lived, or whatever -- I'm just Harry!"

"Well, Harry, sorry to disappoint you, but you're wrong. There are people who've suffered more than you, and some of them weren't even on our side. You have no idea how lucky you are, you stupid boy ... And you are going to do what people expect you to, even if I -- "

"I never said I wouldn't," Harry snarled in protest, heart thumping in his ears as rage pumped in his veins, "I never said that. I will, because there's people I want to protect, too. And I know I'm lucky -- I know it, because I have Ron, Hermione and all the others. I have people willing to die for me. But I don't want that." He sagged against the wall, running a hand through his hair. "Do you think I want to lose more friends?"

Snape's hand tightened around his throat. "Spare me the dramatics." Harry bit back a cry of

rage. "This war is not yours alone. You may need to deal the final blow, but there are wizards and witches a lot more qualified than you that are going to take you there."

He paused, and Harry looked up to see Snape faraway in his thoughts. "And those wizards and witches have made sacrifices not even you can begin to understand ..." His gaze pierced Harry, then. "Or maybe you could, but you make a conscious effort to not to and that shows how spoiled you are."

Harry glowered. "Maybe those wizards and witches should stop take out their frustrations on other people who just happen to be born luckier than them."

Snape was surprised enough to loosen his grip on Harry's throat, and Harry slipped away, not looking at Ron or even Hermione as he bolted out of the room, humiliated and feeling weaker and more hopeless than he had in a while. What had possessed him to think Snape might be the help they needed?

The man was as petty and mean as he had always been. He would probably let them lose the war just to prove how much of a failure Harry was. Not that he was wrong, but Harry was purposefully trying not to think about what lay ahead -- he needed himself sharp and with a fighting spirit, but Snape and Malfoy's visit was not helping one bit. Nothing could make him feel as inadequate as those two.

As he was leaving the kitchen, Harry heard the twin screeches of chairs being pushed back that was usually the universal sign that Ron and Hermione were ready to follow him, before a voice boomed into the hallway, "I think not, Miss Granger, Mister Weasley. If Potter wants to sulk, he's going to do it alone. You two finish your meal, and then you can join Draco and I in the drawing room to discuss sleeping arrangements."

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Harry sulked alright. He locked himself in Sirius's room for days and threw a few bibelots

against the wall, smashing them into a thousand tiny pieces on several different occasions, all the while damning Snape to hell and back. Who the hell did the man thought he was, acting all self-righteous?

His mind, unbidden, brought back the memories Snape had shared with him, of Snape begging Dumbledore's for help when he realised that his actions had condemned three innocents to death, even if they were people Snape hated; his desperation at realising his mistake and then giving up his sense of self and self-preservation to serve the Order and Dumbledore the best he could.

It mustn't have been easy to keep being faced with the mistakes of his youth and to have to interact with people he despised and to do things Snape certainly wouldn't be proud of. Harry found himself recalling Snape's grim expression when Harry told Dumbledore Voldemort had returned, and he wondered if he could relate the man in his house with the shadowy figure that had kept him from getting killed during his Hogwarts's years.

Because, loathe him as he might, Harry could tell that Snape was a good man -- proud, dependable, kind if he chose to be so, and braver than many Gryffindors. Snape never had once failed to protect his students, and he never once failed a mission to the Order. In his heart, Harry could tell they could trust Snape, and that was Harry's prerogative, right? Following his instincts to the point of sheer stupidity.

Snape was also the pettiest man Harry knew. He had belittled Harry and his friends at every chance he got, unfairly thwarting all the things they could be proud of -- Hermione's smartness, Harry's pride in his family; even in the way he snubbed Ron, as if pointing out at him how he would always be the second best.

None of it mattered if Snape could help them win this war, and if Snape's memories of Dumbledore were anything to go by, the late Headmaster had trusted Snape like he hadn't trusted many people in his life, Harry realised that now. Dumbledore hadn't trusted Harry, not completely, because he had left him in the dark with an impossible mission.

Harry groaned and threw himself onto the bed.

Just a few weeks ago, Harry had been miserable, yes, at Dumbledore's funeral and even at Bill's wedding, but at least he had known which way was up and down -- Voldemort, Snape and Malfoy were his enemies; Ron and Hermione were the only friends he could trust; Ginny was to be protected; Dumbledore was the greatest hero of them all.

None of it was true anymore -- well, maybe Voldemort's part was, and Ron and Hermione's would always be true -- but everything else was so messed up. Hermione thought he didn't know, but he'd seen the book she'd been hiding, and he had already finished it. The Life and Lies of Albus Dumbledore.

At first, it had irked him that she had thought him childish enough to let it affect him, but then he realised that it had and that he had slowly been losing his faith in his task, in his friends, in the Light and had been resolutely obsessing with the nature of the Horcruxes to avoid dealing with a lot of issues, Dumbledore's dubious morals at the top of that list.

It had taken Snape's yelling at him about how he was not evil -- although he disguised it well -- but Harry could put things under a bit of perspective now: if there's was something of which Harry was inherently aware, it was that Dumbledore was a good man and he had been trying to do a good thing by getting the world rid of Voldemort. He simply would have to focus on that.

The rest, which Harry longed to understand, didn't matter much as Dumbledore's last wishes. After all, it was our choices that made us who we were -- didn't Dumbledore used to say that?

It was almost midnight when Harry went downstairs, only to find Snape alone in the kitchen, with a cup of tea and Hermione's copy of Dumbledore's biography. Snape paid him no attention until Harry sat next to him, only to look at Harry expectantly afterwards.

"You're right." He didn't know who was more surprised -- Snape or himself -- but he didn't take it back.

Snape looked at him with piercing eyes for a moment before nodding once. "When I say you're spoiled, I do not mean it in the conventional sense of the word. I know you're not, which also explains your infuriation at my dismissal of your woes. I only mean that you were being indulged in your monochromatic vision of the world."

Harry snorted. "One to talk about it, wasn't he?" He hadn't meant to say that. He respected Dumbledore, he really did; it was just that everything sounded like one big fabricated lie.

Snape stared at him for a moment, before sighing and placing the book on the table. "Miss Skeeter has her facts right, but not everything is as it seems, Potter, I know this for sure. If you're that bothered, I might have a suggestion for someone with whom you can talk about it."

Harry's head snapped at Snape, who was looking highly uncomfortable in his own skin, quite a feat for a man so sure of himself. Then again, maybe he was not. "Who?"

"Aberforth Dumbledore, the Headmaster's brother; he's the owner of the Hog's Head."

"I didn't know that." Snape gave him a look. "I think I want to do that," Harry said cautiously.

"I'm sure Albus wanted you to." He sneered, but Harry got the feeling it was half-hearted. "You were always his precious Golden Boy."

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Over the next few days, things got exponentially better. Harry's world settled once again and, in this new order, Snape actually knew what he was doing and Malfoy was simply not there as far as Harry was concerned. The trio of Gryffindors didn't speak to him, and he didn't speak to them.

Ron and Hermione were also looking more hopeful and energised, and the three of them got tons of research done. There wasn't much information on Horcruxes per se, but Hermione's instinctive sniff for good books led them to the means to destroy the artefacts. As she had explained, they would have to kill them as if they were actually living creatures. Horcruxes were the opposite of human beings, apparently; the integrity of the soul was managed by the integrity of the body, thus why destroying the artefacts would mean the death of the piece of soul inside.

Snape didn't stay around much, since he had his own role in the war -- the most shocking of which was the nomination for the Headmaster position -- but he was fast in retrieving the sword of Gryffindor as soon as Hermione asked for it.

The sword was made of Goblin metal, which allowed it to retain certain properties, and long story dramatically shortened, it had been strengthened by Basilisk venom that turned out to be one of the few ways to effectively kill bits of evilly separated soul. It would be that or Fiendfyre, and none of them were too keen on summoning a living hell -- quite literally.

But, while they had all this research done and ready in case of need, the key-elements were still missing. 'Locket, Cup, Diadem, Nagini -- Locket, Cup, Diadem, Nagini.'

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It was on a Friday in the beginning of August that Kreacher returned with Mundungus Fletcher by hand, and they finally got the lead that took them to Dolores Umbridge of all people.

The house-elf had been way too proud of himself by being able to complete a mission for three people he had loathed not so long ago, but Harry would take this new helpful Kreacher, who cooked and cleaned and didn't get in their way, over the old one any day. Besides, he was kind of funny with his quirks and absent muttering, now much less offensive.

That night, Harry, Ron and Hermione waited anxiously for Snape in front of the kitchen's Floo, all but jumping off their seats when he finally stepped into the hearth. "We got a lead," Harry blurted as soon as he saw the teacher.

Snape blinked at the greeting, before engaging in soldier mode. "What have you found out?" While Snape didn't know the exact nature of their hunt, he knew enough to know what they were looking for.

"We found Slytherin's Locket. Umbridge confiscated it from Mundungus Fletcher."

"Why did Fletcher have it?" Snape asked in bewilderment.

Sometimes, Harry forgot what he had told whom and he hastened to explain, "Regulus Black, Sirius's brother, left the Death Eaters and tried to take Voldemort down in the process. I don't think he knew what the Locket was, except that it was important. Voldemort wouldn't exactly tell him, right?"

"Oh, he knew," Snape muttered, shutting Harry up. As if remembering who he was speaking to, Snape cleared his throat to compose himself. "Regulus and I were in Slytherin together, and since neither of us liked his brother much, we -- er, sympathised. He left the Death Eaters before I did, the year Potter married Lily, I think. He died shortly after." Snape smirked evilly. "The last thing he told me was that Voldemort was 'going to die, because something like that cannot be allowed in this world'."

Harry, Ron and Hermione exchanged worried glances. "Don't worry," Snape deadpanned, "I have no wish of finding out what he meant by that, but something that can only be killed by Basilisk venom or Fiendfyre cannot be good."

"Yeah, it's bad alright," Ron agreed quietly. He too seemed to be remembering the process of Horcrux creation; he looked the appropriate shade of green anyway.

"We were thinking about infiltrating the Ministry, sir," Hermione informed Snape, successfully

changing the subject. "We'll need to do some exploration of the place, but I think we could do it if ... we ... Sir?"

Snape had held up a hand to stop her tirade. "I appreciate your trust in me, Miss Granger, but I do not wish to protect more secrets than necessary. I'll leave you to it and I suggest you make use of Draco's knowledge. He can be trusted, I assure you."

Harry doubted it, but he simply nodded. He had never won an argument with Snape; he couldn't see why that time would be different.

After supper, Snape gathered them in the drawing room and said, "I won't be visiting for a while. You have the portrait of Phineas Nigellus, isn't that so? Use it to contact me and our password shall be 'I love lemon drops', which is a lie and purely inconceivable."

Harry cracked a smile at that, but it quickly left his face when Snape clapped a hand over his shoulder. "I have grown to have faith in you, Mister Potter. Do not disappoint me." Oddly enough, those were those words that gave Harry renewed strength to do what he was supposed to. Ron and Hermione also looked resolute and even Malfoy stood by, solemn and waiting.

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The break into the Ministry was both a success and a failure. They had got the locket, but lost their Headquarters and, if not thanks to Malfoy's quick thinking, they would have been left in a dingy dungeon waiting for death -- or worse, a kiss.

While they had entered the Ministry without problem, getting the locket had been a bit more complicated and getting out of there had been hell. They had managed to Apparate away, but Yaxley had been brought along, thus making Grimmauld Place visible to him. Malfoy had had everything ready when they got there, as if he had been expecting an emergency, and quickly Apparated with the three of them into a previously agreed location.

It took a while for their minds to stop reeling with everything they had learned at the Ministry -- Muggleborn wizards and witches being stripped from their rights, the enormous disrespect Umbridge showed by using Mad Eye Moody's eye for her benefit, the Dementors' effect in courtroom number ten with Umbridge sitting nearby -- but Malfoy took care of everything.

Then, a few weeks later, Ron left.

Harry and Hermione didn't understand why and she had cried a lot, while Harry simply clenched his jaw and began the research on the next Horcrux.

Malfoy, who never spoke much as if he felt he was an intruder -- which he was, Harry reminded himself -- said after Ron's departure, "You should not have left him with the locket. It liked him. He'll be back as soon as he thinks about it."

Harry didn't think that made much sense and he wasn't even sure Malfoy realised what he had said. "Malfoy," he called to ask for an explanation, but Malfoy just stood there, face grim as he pierced Harry with his gray eyes. Harry suddenly felt warm all over and he had to look away. He refused to think about it later, but he got very much aware of Malfoy after that. Just paranoia, he told himself.

Ron returned a couple of days later with a gloomy expression and a lot of apologies in his lips. Hermione had been elated; Harry, not so much.

It was already late in the night when they finally destroyed the locket, but at least that part of their journey was done. It was with a new mantra that Harry fell asleep that night, on the lower bunk he shared with Ron. 'Cup, Diadem, Nagini -- Cup, Diadem, Nagini.'

♦ Part II ♦

"Absolutely not!" Hermione hissed, trying -- and failing -- to keep her voice low. Malfoy's shoulders tensed, but as usual he refrained from taking the bait. "I only trust him as far as I can throw him. There's no way I'd let you -- "

"Hermione," Harry interrupted calmly -- there was no need to get enraged because he knew he would get his way, no matter how much she protested at first.

"Okay, I didn't mean to imply that you need my authorisation, but Harry," she said his name as if it were her greatest argument.

Harry took her arm and pulled her gently to the side, away from both Ron and Malfoy. "Look, I know you worry. I know that -- but Ron's left us alone in this before, and Malfoy still stayed. Who do you think is more trustworthy?" Hermione snapped her mouth shut. "We have no idea where the cup is, but the diadem might just be within our reach."

"But, Harry -- "

"We can't take the sword since Bellatrix thinks it's still in her vault, and it'll be safer at Hogwarts than walking around with us. Last week was a close call; we can't risk having Snatchers catching us with such incriminatory evidence." Hermione pressed her lips together disapprovingly. "And, once there, you two can research about the Hufflepuff's cup."

"You know that it's more likely that Ravenclaw was Scottish, don't you?" she deadpanned, crossing her arms with something akin to resignation.

"You said it was as likely that she was from Wales last night, so forgive me for not buying that."

Hermione cracked a smile at that. "Worth the try." They measured each other for a moment, trying to convey their beliefs to each other. "How are we going to communicate? The

portrait?" she asked at last, eyes boring into him as if saying that she hoped he knew what he was doing.

Harry nodded. "Yes. You can use Snape's, I'm sure."

"We're going to be locked up in the Room of Requirement, Harry. I doubt Snape is going to get more indulging than that," Hermione pointed out, motioning back towards the camping site. "You're taking Mister and Missus Weasley's tent instead?"

"Yeah, it's easier to maintain ... although I'm not sure how much I'll like to be confined into that tiny space with Malfoy for an undefined span of time."

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"Home sweet home," Harry sighed, as he entered the small tent they had just finished pulling up. It was surprising how easily he and Malfoy could work in harmony -- though Harry supposed that between speaking to one another and trying to guess each other's thoughts, they would take the latter any day; it made it easier to pretend he was alone and not with the bothersome, untrustworthy Slytherin.

Their new residence was equipped as any wizarding tent -- with kitchenette, bathroom and a mockery of living room with only a table and a couple of chairs -- but it was as small as a trailer and it only had one bedroom, tucked into the far side of the linen. They would have to share if they wanted to prevent one of them from freezing to death, which was what Harry had been aiming at -- make Malfoy as uncomfortable as possible, as revenge for being the only assistance available -- but Snape had given him the evil eye before they had set off to Wales and, besides, Harry was not that unfair.

Harry dumped his rucksack on the bed, checking the pouch around his waist as it had become his habit. It had the same charm as Hermione's purse, and it was just as filled with books, medical aids, potions and other stuff they might need.

"So, what's the plan, Potter?" Malfoy asked, as he gracefully placed his own backpack in a corner. It had been a while since Harry had heard Malfoy's voice and it seemed it had also been a while since Malfoy had spoken at length, if the newfound roughness was of any indication. At this oddity, Harry finally stopped and took a look at the man he would depend on for the next few weeks.

It felt as if he was watching Draco Malfoy for the first time and he saw a tired-looking young man, with perfectly groomed hair, yet somehow lacking the usually glow it used to have at Hogwarts; his eyes were dull, with deep bags under them. His posture was still perfect, of course, but had a tension it was obviously not meant to be there.

Harry felt a surge of sympathy course through him, but he immediately squashed it under a great deal of smugness for Malfoy's punishment. He deserved it for being an arrogant, prejudiced bastard.

His conscience, however, didn't agree and was more than happy to point it out to him. Malfoy had no one else but himself to blame for his situation, sure, but he also had no one but himself to thank for taking himself out of it. Harry couldn't help it -- he'd always admired bravery, no matter in what form it came; facing your friends or your enemies, the strength required was roughly the same.

"Potter, did you listen to me? I'd appreciate the consideration of responding to me when I speak," Malfoy drawled, both very much himself and nothing like it at the same time.

Just because it wouldn't do to let Malfoy win the round, Harry scowled. "I've a lot on my mind, in case you haven't noticed, and I really don't want to pay you more attention than strictly necessary." Malfoy's jaw tightened, but he nodded once and proceeded to make himself acquainted with the surroundings, leaving Harry to wonder who had just been the bigger man there.

It wasn't until hours later, during which both teens avoided acknowledging each other and Harry had a very interesting conversation with Hermione via Phineas Nigellus, that they finally addressed an issue that needed to be addressed. "Okay, so let's regroup," Harry began, sitting

down at the living room's rickety table, legs stretched in front of him. "Hermione told me that -- are you reading Hogwarts, a History?" he asked abruptly, voice bubbling with laughter.

Malfoy scowled. "What of it?" he asked defensively, shielding the book from view by crossing his arms in front of it.

Harry smothered his grin; it wouldn't do to laugh with Malfoy. "Nothing. So, why are you reading it?"

"What do you think, Potter?" Malfoy snapped. "I'm trying to find stuff to help you with. I didn't come for the pleasure of your company, you know?"

Harry couldn't tell why, but that sentence didn't sound entirely truthful. He raised his hands in surrender. "Yeah, whatever. It's not like I care, anyway." Malfoy's eyes flashed. "So, Hermione tells me that Sir Cadogan says that Ravenclaw was Welsh -- and that he fancied her, but that's beside the point. You won't believe who Ravenclaw daughter was."

Draco gave him a condescending look. "The Grey Lady, Potter. Her name was Helena. She was killed by the Bloody Baron." At Harry's glower, he smirked smugly. "Want to know why?"

"Hermione already told me why. 'Cause he's a possessive bastard. Must be a Slytherin trait."

Malfoy got this faraway look in his eyes. "Can't deny that." Harry shifted uncomfortably.

The silence that followed was very much as awkward as they came, and Harry was painfully aware that they must have crossed some line, because suddenly being stuck with Malfoy in such a tiny space got a whole lot of new meanings, none of which had to do with the war or House rivalry -- or maybe it had, regarding the latter. The tension was definitely there.

"Yeah, well, back to the point," Harry stammered after a moment, "Hermione was asking the

portrait of Rowena Ravenclaw about it -- "

"Her portrait never speaks -- none of the Founders do."

"Yeah, too many secrets, Dumbledore said. But Sir Cadogan was drooling over her as usual -- at least, according to the Fat Lady -- and heard Hermione and Ron. He's very talkative." Malfoy snorted, and Harry huffed a laugh but continued, "So, he went on and on about the two Ravenclaws -- Hermione has the patience of a saint sometimes -- and, listen to this, he told her about this place in Wales where Rowena lived with this man."

Harry took a breath. "Apparently, Helena Ravenclaw also liked the bloke and that's why she was jealous of her mother. It seems that, once, when Rowena was at Hogwarts, Sir Cadogan helped Helena escape and go to her mother's lover. The man told her to bugger off. You know that saying about scorned women? The man died just after Helena left with the diadem and Sir Cadogan -- full of remorse, I might add -- thinks it was Helena who offed him."

"You think that Helena left it there?" Draco asked, placing his book on the table with a soft thud.

"Well, the diadem was never found. If Helena did it, she might not have meant it and then freaked. The problem is, afterwards, she ran for Albania -- that's where the Bloody Baron found her and that's also where Voldemort hid for many years. Even if she took it there, it might already be here again. Voldemort has nothing if not admiration for certain types of magic. He'd love the poesy of burying the diadem on Rowena's old house."

"Or at Hogwarts," Malfoy pointed out, "since that's where the story actually happened."

"That's what I told Hermione," Harry declared triumphantly. "She says she'll ask around."

"It could still be anywhere else," Malfoy said.

"Yeah, but you see, the ring -- that's the first one -- was hidden in its owners' descendants' house, which also happened to be Voldemort's ancestors; I don't know where the cup is, so I can't say if it fits, and the diary -- the diary was with your father. Why?"

"The Dark Lord gave it to Father to protect," Malfoy explained coolly, "I think it was during the first war. I don't believe Father knew what it was. What are they, anyway?"

Harry tensed and stared at Malfoy cautiously. "I can't tell you that and you know it."

Malfoy pursed his lips. "Whatever, Potter."

While Malfoy's tone indicated that the conversation was finished, Harry still wanted to know a few things, "Do you reckon Voldemort may have given other stuff to his followers to protect?"

Malfoy, who had been getting up in a snit, spared him a withering glance and sat down again. "Of course, Potter. Aunt Bellatrix had the sword, didn't she? I don't know if he ever gave anything else to the others, but Professor Snape may know. You could ask him using the portrait."

Harry clapped his hands, encouraged. "So, tomorrow we'll Apparate to Cilcain, and see what we can find. Then, I'll call Snape."

"We'll have to be Polyjuiced, Potter. I'm afraid I'm as much on the Dark Lord's killing list as you are."

Harry scoffed at the understatement. "Welcome to the club, Malfoy. I'd give you a badge, but they're with Hermione."

Malfoy's lips twitched and he spared Harry a deadpan look. "Whatever. I'm going to bed."

Harry flushed. "Yeah, about that," he began reluctantly, "how's this going to work?"

Malfoy quirked an eyebrow. "I expect you'll sleep on your side of the bed, I'll sleep on mine and we'll both pretend there's no else around."

Harry nodded, happy that he hadn't been the one to say that aloud. "Okay, but don't touch me." Malfoy's eyebrow went higher. "I'm not used to sleeping with people, so keep yourself on your side."

"You're not one of those freaks that kill people in their sleep thinking they're their enemies, are you?" Malfoy demanded, sounding a bit more worried than Harry deemed acceptable for a joke. He didn't even deign that with a reply, let alone a polite one.

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Three weeks. Three damned weeks of polite talking with the villagers about the wonders of camping in the damned winter and no sign of whatever could have been Ravenclaw's house. People told them that Miranda might be able to help them, but apparently the witch was on an assignment in a nearby town. Malfoy had snorted at that and Harry could only agree.

Harry and Malfoy were posing as brothers, although they didn't exactly tell anyone that. "It's none of their business, Potter. If we go announcing it from the rooftops, it'll only be suspicious," Malfoy had said and Harry, grumbling a lot under his breath, agreed.

They had visited the old part of the village, but there were wards keeping them out of the far end of the old road. A good sign, sure, but it was still frustrating.

"Hermione says she can't think of anything to help us," Harry told Malfoy as he slid under the covers, his back to the Slytherin as always. Sometimes, they talked in bed, but only for the sake of the hunt. Anything else would have been too weird and Harry's mind was already playing tricks on him as it was.

Besides, he saw no point in giving more importance than necessary to the fact that he had been waking up, more often than not, curled around Malfoy.

"I figured as much, Potter," sighed Malfoy, closer than Harry expected since he could feel the other's breathe on his neck; or maybe Malfoy was just lying on his side for once. Either way, that didn't help Harry with the diadem. "Maybe tomorrow we can go see that witch the coffee lady told us about."

Too exasperated, Harry turned to face Malfoy. "You know it's not a real witch, right?"

Malfoy quirked an eyebrow at him and, as close as Harry was, he could see a slight flush on Malfoy's cheeks and a wickedly amused glint in his eyes. "Really? I hadn't thought about that," Malfoy deadpanned. "It still doesn't mean she's not a Seer or a Squib, you know ..."

Harry was not listening. How could he, when he was lying in bed next to his boyhood rival who happened to be lying closer than he should? Harry found himself just a tiny bit attracted to Malfoy in that moment.

He watched the way the flawless skin stretched over all those pointy angles, yet it looked so soft; Malfoy's hair was tousled -- as it had been for a while due to the lack of proper care -- and Harry wanted to run his fingers through it and to get a hug.

Harry wanted a hug. He needed one, for comfort and encouragement, and that was one of the reasons he missed Hermione so. He couldn't be so far off that he was considering demanding one from Malfoy. It just wasn't acceptable, so Harry turned his back on Malfoy and punched his pillow a couple of times -- maybe with more strength than necessary -- to make himself

comfortable.

He almost died a premature death when he felt a hand rest cautiously on his hip. "What are you doing?" he demanded harshly, motioning to pull away -- getting himself precariously close to the edge f the bed.

Malfoy pulled him back briskly. "Just keep your mouth shut, and we'll never talk about this again."

Harry could have hexed him into next week, but he didn't really wanted to and then both of Malfoy's arms curled around his waist demandingly, forehead resting between Harry's shoulders, and Harry found himself pressed against Malfoy in a snug embrace. Unbidden, Harry's body fully relaxed into the hold and he rested his arms over Malfoy's.

It didn't take long before both of them were asleep.

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Looking back on it, Harry could safely say that that night had been the turning point -- born from the need for comfort and reassurance, sure, but it had been like a floodgate had opened. So many things started to make sense, as if the pieces were sliding into their places and Harry began noticing little things, aware as he was of Malfoy.

There was the way the inside of the tent was always pristine, although Harry had only ever cooked and done the dishes, and even those chores were shared with Malfoy; or the way Malfoy disappeared into the bathroom for an hour each seven days and came back looking slightly cheered -- Harry knew it was the only time Malfoy allowed himself to bother with skin care and other stuff like that.

Then, there was the way Malfoy kept up with Harry's quick thinking and train of ideas on how

to get the Horcruxes. Sometimes, they even finished each other's sentences, which had been slightly disturbing, yes, but also a bit comforting. Malfoy had even smiled at him once -- not a smirk or anything, but a full bloomed smile.

It might have had something to do with Malfoy's being distracted, thus not as self-conscious as usually, but Harry had taken it to his heart anyway. He'd even wondered if Malfoy ever let his guard down like that with his friends. Harry didn't think so because, even with his head in Pansy's lap on the train in the beginning of Sixth Year, Draco had been posing.

The trip to the famous Cilcain 'witch' had taken a couple of days, since the lady only received people with a previously made appointment -- to which Malfoy had simply quirked an eyebrow at the receptionist, making the teenage girl flush bright red.

As it turned out, the 'witch' was neither a witch, a Seer nor a Squib, but the sister of a Muggleborn wizard and her brother -- a know-it-all Ravenclaw bearing a strong resemblance to Percy Weasley -- had been very excited about coming from the village of the great Rowena herself and had annoyed the entire family with his incessant stories on the topic.

Miranda had taken a liking to some of the stories and arts and had been making a living out of reading cards and whatnot between shifts on the Call Centre.

Still, thanks to her brother's fastidiousness, Miranda was able to tell them that, if Rowena had actually lived in the town, it would have been further down the forest because that was where the old part of town -- the wizarding part -- was located. They had known as much, but they thought that part of the village had been Unplottable. Instead, the outsiders couldn't see it, Miranda had explained, because the old patron of the town -- Ravenclaw herself -- had cast wards to protect it.

They made plans to visit the next day with Miranda and returned to the clearing where they had been camping for the past month. They set the tent again and, half-hour later, Harry was sitting at the entrance with the portrait of Phineas Nigellus leaning against the linen of the tent, sharing his findings with Hermione, Ron and Snape, while Malfoy made dinner.

Once they said their goodbyes, Harry didn't return inside right away and stayed in the cold breeze of February for a while, watching Malfoy in the kitchen through the entrance of the tent, which was blowing with the wind.

Hermione assumed that Malfoy was being an outright prat about everything, but that wasn't anywhere near the truth. Malfoy hadn't complained even once, and he was more than entitled too. He hadn't signed up for this when he switched sides -- and Harry would never have asked this much of his best friends, let alone Malfoy. And, yet, Malfoy had been more than up to the challenge.

"Potter, dinner's ready." Harry startled, realising he hadn't seen Malfoy approach him, even though he had been looking, and motion to him to get up.

Malfoy had this odd look on his face, part confusion and part caution. Harry didn't get why and the rest of the evening was spent in silence. Malfoy still pressed himself against Harry when the lights finally went out.

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"What the hell is a revealing ritual, Malfoy?" Harry asked, as they looked at the ruins of what seemed to have once been a single street framed by stone houses; in the end of the dirt path, there was a granite cottage with the ceiling long gone. They could feel the magic around them, urging them on.

A statue of Rowena Ravenclaw erupted from the middle of the house and reached as high as the smaller trees, which was saying something. Malfoy was looking giddy with excitement, not even bothering to hide it. "This is it. Rowena Ravenclaw's home."

Miranda chuckled at the Slytherin's awed tone and even Harry cracked a smile. "Malfoy, the ritual," Harry reminded him of his earlier question and watched Malfoy flush at having been caught so unaware.

"Yes, Potter, forgive me if I have a bit of respect for the founders of our school," he drawled, obviously piqued. "It's just a spell to reveal the enchantments around a certain place."

That sent warning bells ringing in Harry's mind. "What if they're hidden?"

Malfoy gave him a look. "You can't hide magic, Potter. What might happen is that we misunderstand its intentions." He stopped, looking absent for a moment. "There's probably a trigger on misguided attempts, though."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"That you only get one shot at getting whatever you want out of there," Miranda replied, as if reminding them of her presence. She did look annoyed, now that Harry thought about it. "What is it that you want?"

"Just a family heirloom," Malfoy lied smoothly, "but it's been lost." It was rather fortunate that Miranda wasn't aware of what was going on the wizarding world, otherwise they might not have got this far. "Now, back away, you two," Malfoy ordered and drew his wand, before starting to sing the incantation under his breath.

The statue began glowing -- red, blue, a rather nasty green and a particularly foreboding black -- but then the magic settled and the statute's colour changed into eerie silver. Malfoy flicked his wrist, finishing the ritual. "It's what you could expect from the Dark Lord, callous and brutal."

"Is it possible to break the wards?" Harry asked, knowing that sometimes wards were unbreakable -- like Hogwarts's -- and the only way around was to give them payment in exchange for entrance. Voldemort would never be able to break into the castle because of that; because the demand was purity of purpose. Though using Quirrell's innocence had been a rather smart move.

"No," Malfoy replied, "and they're demanding ... something I can't quite fathom."

"It's a kiss." Harry and Malfoy turned to Miranda, who was watching the statue as if transfixed. "The demand is an unwilling kiss."

"How do you know that?"

"It's an old legend. The patron of the forest lost her love to hatred and only love can bring the lovers together again." Harry could tell that Malfoy was very close to snorting in the woman's face. "But that's not what she wants anymore. Now she wants to get what was taken from her love once -- an unwilling kiss." She paused. "It's like a black pit of despair."

Harry and Malfoy exchanged glances. "It couldn't be Helena," Harry pointed out, flushing with embarrassment at the topic of discussion. "Her place is at Hogwarts."

Malfoy glanced at Miranda, face shuttered into blankness. "That's it? An unwilling kiss?" he asked her, and she just nodded, eyes still glued to the statue and a slight frown marring her features, as she fidgeted with the hem of her shirt.

It confused Harry, but when he opened his mouth to ask, he found himself whirled around against Malfoy's chest and, before he knew it, Malfoy had smashed their lips together, forcing Harry's to part and plundering inside as if drowning. His arms wound around Harry's shoulders and waist, keeping him in place as Harry struggled, shocked speechless as he tried to process what was happening, or why.

It shouldn't happen this way, Harry thought; it was as if Malfoy was biding his time until Harry pushed him away. It was a kiss born from desperation and vengeance, and it wasn't right. Harry pushed him away but, the more he fought, the weaker he got, and the kiss unveiled until the thrusts of Malfoy's tongue slowed down into a sensual caress and Harry began wanting it, too.

Miranda screeched as if she was on fire.

Harry and Malfoy pulled away in alarm and took in their surroundings. Miranda was being pulled towards the statue like a magnet, but her body wasn't moving. She screamed a scream from the bottoms of hell as she fell to her knees, eyes and nose pouring blood, as her energy was drained from her body.

"It wants -- magic -- good magic," she gasped, "but I have none!" Her voice morphed into a cry of pain, just before everything went quiet. Eerily quiet.

The silence stretched before Harry. He imagined he looked as horrified as Malfoy, as they noticed the dead birds falling from the trees. Miranda still hadn't moved. Malfoy was shaking as he approached Miranda and checked her pulse; Harry knew what he would say. "She's dead."

Nothing had made him feel as dirty as that two-word sentence.

Harry gasped, breath shortening and becoming laboured and his vision blurred around the edges and his chest tightened and -- "tter! Potter! Potter, take a breath!" Malfoy was shouting in his ear, his knuckles white where they grabbed Harry by the shoulders. Then, Harry could breathe again. "We need to find Ravenclaw's diadem, Potter."

It was in Rowena' hands as if it had always been there, waiting for them.

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They had no choice but to leave Miranda's corpse just outside the village, abandoned like a common victim. Malfoy closed her eyes and they Apparated away into the forests surrounding

Hogwarts. They hadn't spoken in what felt like forever. A lifetime away, actually, before they had committed murder -- involuntary, but murder nonetheless.

They showered, had dinner and went to bed, leaving the diadem on top of the living room's table, its metal glowing in the dark, like it was trying to remind them of what they had done -- the innocent life lost because they had been careless. Harry began feeling his chest tighten again.

And, just then, he felt Malfoy press his body against his like he had done for the past few weeks, arms tightly wrapped around his chest, and face pressed against the middle of Harry's back.

That night, however, something was spurring them on. It might have been grief or guilt -- all-encompassing, either way -- but, regardless of the reason, Harry found himself breaking the embrace and turning, lying on his side to face Malfoy.

They didn't spoke. It felt wrong to break the quiet with words that would mean nothing. The silence was filled with rustling noises as they took off each other's clothes, their breathing getting more and more laboured as skin met skin. It was arousing and momentous, and, once their naked bodies were fully pressed against each other, Harry looked deep into Malfoy's eyes and pressed their lips together.

The kiss, gentle and cautious at first, heated up and lips parted to give way to the sensual caress of tongues. It didn't take long for their cocks to lengthen and harden, but their lips didn't break the contact and the demanding hands didn't stop from feeling each other's bodies.

Harry spread his legs and curled his knees around Malfoy's hips, arms tight around his shoulders, as Malfoy thrust against his crotch with increasing speed, hard cocks sliding together, sending jolts of pleasure through them. Malfoy's firm body felt so good against Harry's, hot and demanding and exactly what Harry had been looking for, although he hadn't known it.

Their faces were pressed together to hide the bewilderment, longing, sweat and tears. "Harry, Harry," Malfoy moaned quietly, closing his lips around the skin of Harry's shoulder.

Harry hugged him tighter and Malfoy held him down in return, as their orgasms were wrenched from their bodies like a silent prayer. They kissed languidly, before Malfoy laid his head on Harry's pillow and they both drifted off.

In the peace of the night, the Horcrux glowed red.

♦ Part III ♦

Draco was sitting in the drawing room of number twelve, Grimmauld Place, which was odd considering that he had been with Harry in a clearing in the middle of Scotland last thing he remembered, but he didn't make much of it. Next to him, on top of the table, was Slytherin's locket and Ravenclaw's diadem.

Harry and Granger usually weren't that careless, but, again, Draco didn't make much of it. They were really fine pieces, he thought, as he felt the power irradiating from them.

It was addictive and Draco wanted more of that power, but somewhere in back of his mind, he knew that something was not quite right; he felt powerful, invincible and the Founders' artefacts felt like they belonged to him, that he was their master and only he could make them happy. They were calling for him, demanding something deep-seated inside of his consciousness.

Granger entered the room, eyes glowing green, as she snatched the locket from his grip. "This does not belong to you!" she screeched. "You're unworthy of such power. You cannot control it." She smirked. "You can never be as good as me; not for Harry and not for everyone else. Envy is your sin."

Draco open his mouth to tell her to sod off and snatch the locket right back, but Harry came into the room in that moment, eyes alight with seduction, lithe body glowing with sweat and cheeks flushed with could only be arousal. Granger didn't seem to acknowledge Harry's state of undress.

"Hmm, Draco," Harry moaned, leaning forward on the table to gaze right at him, "this does not belong to you." Harry picked up the diadem. "It's mine, because you're mine. You've always been, haven't you? Staring at me from across the room, disguising arousal with insults. I've always known, though. That's why this belongs to me." He waved the Diadem. "Lust is your sin."

Draco forgot himself gazing into Harry's eyes -- red eyes of passion -- and leaned in, pressing his lips against Harry's, who coquettishly pulled back to make Draco follow him like the puppet he was. It didn't matter, though; he was willing. Forever willing to lose himself, as long as he got what he wanted.

"Draco!"

Forever wanton ...

"Draco, dammit!"

Forever ...

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Harry didn't sleep much that night, even though he was dead tired; the only thing he saw when he closed his eyes was Miranda. She had just been a random woman, but she had been nice, young and full of life, and then she was dead because he and Draco had been too busy snogging to pay attention to the world ... He wasn't really being fair -- it had been an

unwilling kiss, after all -- but that was it felt like, anyway.

Harry felt his face heat up at events of the past hours, when he thought about Draco. What had they been thinking? It felt so surreal, as if it hadn't really happen, but he had sticky stuff drying on his chest to prove him otherwise. It had felt really good, though, and Harry very much wanted to do it again if he had the chance -- with Malfoy, if he was willing.

As if Malfoy had heard his thoughts, the cock snugly pressed against his backside began to stir. Harry flushed, but pressed himself back. Malfoy groaned lowly, a sound that went straight to Harry's groin. But before he got too carried away, Malfoy whimpered and it wasn't the good kind of whimper.

Harry pushed himself onto his elbows and looked back at the other. Malfoy was frowning and thrashing, body aroused and needy, while he was obviously distressed.

Harry shook him gently, but Malfoy flinched away, and Harry began to worry. "Malfoy," he called quietly. Malfoy ran his hands down his body, obviously seeking pleasure. "Draco." Just thrashing. "Draco!" Still nothing. "Draco, dammit!"

Draco jerked awake, eyes wide as he looked around in panic. "Harry?"

Harry's stomach flipped at hearing his name said like that -- as if it were a plea. "It's okay. You were having a nightmare, I think," he explained, but Draco remained holding onto the covers anxiously. "Do you want to, uh -- talk about it or something? It helps later, I guess ..." He trailed off, seeing that he was getting no attention from the Slytherin.

Draco had his eyes trained on Ravenclaw's diadem, stare so intent he looked hypnotised; following his gaze, Harry saw the red reflex than shone in the silver of the Horcrux. That didn't seem right. "What are these things, Potter? What do they do?"

Harry didn't really wanted to reply, but he supposed Malfoy had earned the right. "They're

Horcruxes."

Draco blinked in confusion, finally turning from the diadem. "They're what?"

"Horcruxes; magical artefacts that can store a piece of a soul." It would have been funny in other circumstances, the way Draco's face twisted in shock, horror and then disgust. "Voldemort made them for himself. That's why he wasn't defeated before, 'cause he can't die. He's not really alive."

"So, that right there ... Is it a bit of him?"

Harry nodded. "That's why we have to destroy them all before killing the man. There were six of them, but now there are only two: Hufflepuff's cup and Nagini, but we have no idea where the cup is. Dumbledore taught me all of this last year and Ron, Hermione and I had already been trying to find them before you came to Grimmauld Place."

"How do you make them?" Draco asked, face ashen in the light of the breaking dawn.

"You kill someone. I can't tell you the process, but it has to be an act so horrible that'll fracture your soul. Using the Killing Curse does that; that's why it's an Unforgivable."

"So, every time he makes one of these ... Horcruxes?" Harry nodded. "So, every time he does it, he gives up a part of himself?"

"I guess you could say that," Harry replied, noticing the way Draco was eyeing the diadem calculatingly. "Why do you ask?"

"I don't know." Draco shrugged. "But, that diadem gives away a very odd energy. It bothers me."

"They're evil," Harry pointed out, eyes shifting towards the Horcrux.

"It's not only that," Draco said, "but I can't tell you exactly what right now. I think we'll need to speak to Granger about this. She's been reading about it, isn't that right?" Harry nodded. "Then, she might have noticed it, too."

"Noticed what?"

Draco ran his hands through his hair nervously. "I don't know."

"You're not making any sense," Harry told him. "It doesn't matter, anyway. We only have to kill it to defeat Voldemort. I couldn't care less about what it is or what it is not, as long as it's gone as soon as possible." Draco simply nodded.

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"Potter, Draco," Snape greeted as both teens exited Ariana Dumbledore's portrait after an afternoon with Dumbledore's brother, during which Harry made peace with a lot of his demons. "I trust you weren't seen?" he phrased it as a question, and they both shook their heads. "Aberforth knows better than that, I expect." Ron and Hermione smiled and waved from behind Snape, but neither was brave enough to interrupt his tirade. "Report?"

Harry removed Ravenclaw's diadem from his pouch. "We got it."

Ron whopped loudly and Hermione clapped her hands, and even Snape relaxed momentarily. "Where?"

"In Ravenclaw's old house," Harry replied tightly, guilt almost overwhelming. "We killed a girl." Silence met his words and he noticed that Draco took a few steps closer to him until the back of their hands were touching.

Finally, not being able to take anymore of the awkward silence, Harry looked up into Snape's eyes, searching for scorn and maybe reproach, but the only thing he saw was something warm and gentle that could almost be sympathy. "What happened?"

Harry and Draco took turns telling the tale. "You cleaned any evidence of your involvement, you say?" Snape asked afterwards and Harry felt sick at hearing it being put like that.

"We did, but I think we'll be implicated anyway, sir. Our Polyjuiced characters were the last ones to be seen with Miranda," Draco replied, voice cool and controlled, but Harry felt his hands shaking. "She was empathetic, I believe. She felt the magic in Ravenclaw's house and told us what to do."

"There was a sacrifice keyed on the wards, isn't that right?" Snape asked with academic interest. One might think he hadn't just learnt two of his students had committed involuntary murder. "The Dark Lord's has always been one to take trophies. What was it?"

Harry saw Malfoy's cheeks colour slightly and his own face lit up in embarrassment. "An unwilling kiss."

Snape blinked. "A kiss? That does not sound like the Dark Lord. If it had been some sort of violation, I would understand, but a forceful kiss?"

"What about Miranda?" Harry reminded him, feeling the familiar knee-jerk sensation took over. "She was sacrificed. Maybe her life was the real -- "

"No, I don't think that's it," Hermione intervened, "From what you've told us, it seems like a case of magical fusion. Ravenclaw was powerful enough to leave a strong eco behind her. It probably merged with the Horcrux's wards -- Light Magic and Dark Magic. You must have

activated Ravenclaw's jinx somehow; she died of a broken heart and she wanted retribution. She wanted someone to hurt.

She seemed thoughtful for a moment. "You must have done something wrong, I think," she said, "because you created a void between Light and Dark magic that needed to be filled. The Horcrux demanded sacrifice and Miranda just happened to be there."

"Like Cedric," Harry muttered, but everyone heard him and silence took over, a respectful tribute to the lives lost without a reason. It was Harry who broke the forlorn mood, "Besides, there was no jinx in that place -- why would there be?"

"Magic and souls are connected, Potter," Draco explained, "and Rowena suffered in that place. She might still be grounded to earth and she'll claim payment until she's freed. The magic of the Horcrux must have taken advantage of it. Her Light magic nullified the Dark Lord's Dark one, although I have no idea how we broke the balance."

"It's ... terrible," Harry said, trying to relate to the pain of waiting for revenge for a thousand years, but he couldn't. Death for him was the end of a journey and the start of a new one. Two were separated worlds.

"It is a terrible fate," Snape agreed. "That's something the Dark Lord cannot fathom. More fool him."

"About that," Draco said suddenly, flushing lightly when all the eyes in the room turned to him, "shouldn't we finish the thing off?"

"Yeah, we should," Harry agreed immediately, looking at him. "Would you do the honours?"

"Mate?" Ron called in confusion.

"We're all in this together. Hermione can take the cup and then all of us would have destroyed one." His eyes never left Draco. "He's earned the right to take this one down. Would you, Malfoy?"

"I'd -- " He stopped and visibly pulled himself together. "I'd be honoured."

Hermione handed him Gryffndor's sword, lips tightly pressed together and all of them, except Draco, took a few steps back. Snape placed the diadem on the floor and Draco lifted the sword above his middle to let it fall on the diadem, but it screeched and glowed dark red before dripping letters appeared in the air above it. "Are you willing to lose it?" it read.

Draco stopped abruptly as the words began morphing into a head -- Harry's upper body, painted in monochrome in the air, as if a genie summoned out of the bottle.

"Are you willing to lose this, Draco?" asked Horcrux-Harry, approaching Draco and running his hands through Draco's chest. "You won't get it back. It was I who gave you what you wanted. Never again will you know this sweet taste. Are you ready for such a lonely life, without love?" Horcrux-Harry ran his lips over Draco's ear. "Without me?"

Draco seemed frozen in shock, listening to Horcrux-Harry intently, but the real Harry wasn't any wiser. He couldn't even begin to understand what was happening.

Draco was twitching and weaving like he was being pulled in different directions. Harry began to worry, but just as he was about to shout in warning, the Slytherin growled lowly in his throat and, with a swift swish of the sword, hammered the diadem into the ground; it broke and silver began jarring from is blackened form, as a pitiful screech died away.

Draco was blushing and not meeting anyone's eyes. Harry couldn't look at anyone else other than the blushing teen in front of him. "I, uh -- I need a bath," Draco said, straightening his shoulders and looking up as if daring anyone to question him about what had just happened.

Snape, for once, said nothing and pointed at a door to the left. "It takes you to the old

Prefect's Bathroom. It's been warded and is fully stocked." He must have thought he was sounding too nice, because he added, "You could take the opportunity and get some laundry done, Mister Malfoy."

Draco fled the room without so much as a glance back, but he took Harry's bag too, Harry noticed with a fondness he didn't expect to feel. His cheeks felt too hot for him not to be blushing.

"It would seem that no one is above your charms, Mister Potter," Snape sneered, before turning and heading towards the exit, robes billowing behind him. "I shall hope this fact doesn't change the irreprehensible way in which you usually treat your fans."

Then, he was gone, leaving a bewildered Harry staring after him. "I think I was just praised by Snape."

Hermione chuckled. "And threatened, too."

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After a perfunctory meal, Draco retreated to the far side of the Room of Requirement, where four beds were placed, two against each wall, and proceeded to isolate himself inside the canopy. After the embarrassment came the aloofness, so Harry and the other two left him alone for the night, deciding to take care of a few things they needed to discuss. Like the Deathly Hallows.

Since Harry's vision about Voldemort's wanting the Elder Wand, Hermione had thought it would be smart of them to learn more about the artefacts; she and Ron had talked to Xenophilius Lovegood, the proud wearer of their symbol, about it. Aberforth had then explained them about his brother's quest and what it had meant to Grindelwald, too.

"So, the three brothers are in fact these Peverell brothers and -- you'll love this -- the youngest one is buried in Godric's Hollow according to Snape. Everything points to the fact that you're the rightful owner of the one true Invisibility Cloak, the third Hallow. Then, take a look at this," Hermione said, handing him an old photograph featuring the Gaunt family. On Marvolo's hand shone the Horcrux Ring.

"What of it?" he asked, confused.

"Look closer," she prompted and that was when he saw it. The Hallows's symbol, engraved on the stone. The Resurrection Stone. "Snape says he has no idea where the Ring is, but when he moved into Dumbledore's office, it wasn't there."

Harry had the answer to that, "The Snitch."

"What?" Ron asked, with a lost expression Harry bet hadn't just got there.

"Dumbledore hid the Ring inside this Snitch," he declared with absolute certainty and produced the Golden Snitch from his pouch, showing it at them. "We have two Hallows."

"You don't know that," Hermione rebuked, looking quite disbelieving, but before Harry could reply, she elaborated, "It doesn't matter anyway, Harry. The Hallows are of no use to us."

"They are if Voldemort gets the Elder Wand." Ron shrugged at Hermione's withering glance.

"How would he?" she demanded crossing her arms in front of her chest defensively. "We'd know if he broke into Dumbledore's tomb."

"I don't know, but you know what they say -- anything that can possibly go wrong, it does."

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That night, Harry didn't think twice before climbing into Draco's bed and curling himself around him. He knew Draco was awake, because he tensed slightly when Harry tightened his arms around his chest, but he soon relaxed, almost as if they were melting into each other. "You have your own bed, Potter," Draco muttered, even if he made no move to change their positions.

Harry snuggled closer, with an ease born from weeks of sleeping together. "Yeah, I do," was Harry's reply, even as he consciously refused to analyse his actions further. Even if he had no doubt Ron was getting the same sort of comfort from Hermione ...

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Snape had told them that Bellatrix was indeed guarding something other than the sword for Voldemort, but it was in her Gringotts vault and she had orders not to take it from there unless at Voldemort's prompting. After a lot of brainstorming, Harry and the other three had seen no way other than actually break into the bank.

So, roughly two months later, they had. It was only afterwards that it hit Harry what he had done and with whom. He had broken into the safest wizarding place, with the exception of Hogwarts, with Draco Malfoy of all people.

Things had gone horribly wrong -- specifically, the annoyingly bright goblin realising who they were not -- but they had made it, somewhat battered and badly bruised and a dragon richer, yet with one more Horcrux, Hufflepuff's cup. They set it on the dining table of the Room of Requirement.

It was after noon when they realised that something was not quite right.

Harry and Ron were playing Exploding Snap with their minds elsewhere, while Draco and Hermione were reading a book each -- or better yet, Hermione was pouring over them, unstoppable and ravenous. The Gryffindor boys exchanged a worried look but assumed that Hermione was just onto something, like she sometimes did.

In mid-afternoon, when Hermione opened her fifth book, Draco snapped his shut, jaw clenched, and pulled Hermione away from the table forcefully. Harry was at their side in a second, pulling her away too, but she kept fighting to get away from them, as if she was dying for her books. "No! Let me go! I'm not finished yet! There's still something I want to know. Not yet!"

"Blimey, Hermione, what's wrong with you?" Ron looked completely befuddled, but he tried to restrain his girlfriend as well. She bit him. "Ouch, woman! Stop that."

"It's the cup," Harry breathed, which got him a look from Draco that stated very well how obvious that was.

"Stupefy!" Hermione slumped against Ron, unconscious, and they all turned in the direction of the shout to see Snape in the doorway, wand drawn. "What's wrong with Miss Granger?" he demanded, in his no-nonsense voice, moving further into the room.

"It's the cup. It was making her hungry," Draco muttered, his gaze faraway, seeing something they didn't.

Ron carried his sleeping girlfriend to one of the beds, while Snape took a seat at the table and gestured for the teens to do the same. "Explain, Mister Malfoy," he ordered, crossing his long legs in front of him.

Draco ran his hands through his hair. "I think it's the Seven Deathly Sins -- "

"That's Muggle stuff," Harry interrupted.

Draco gave him a look. "Of course it isn't. The Seven Deathly Sins are the seven ways in which you can damage your magic. If you use it with wrong intentions, you may lose yourself. There are seven unforgivable intentions -- envy, lust, wrath, gluttony, greed, pride and sloth. If you use your magic to indulge these addictions, things always go wrong because your magic is not meant to do it."

"That makes no sense."

"What Draco means, Potter, is that our magic is the purest thing we have and it's intimately connected to our soul and to who we are; the seven addictions he mentioned are human doing, human nature and they interfere with our core," Snape intervened, using his classroom voice.

"Of course, this is not to say that a scorned schoolgirl is forever condemned after having hexed her unfaithful paramour or something similar," he continued, "but you must have noticed how, from a very young age, the Dark Lord has been unbalanced. He was never shown purity of intention and grew up knowing only human faults. I don't get how these artefacts are the sins, however, Draco."

"You know these are Horcruxes, right, sir?"

"They're what?" Snape exclaimed, looking from Harry to Draco completely appalled and slightly paler than usual. It would have been funny if not for the theme of the conversation.

Harry shrugged. "I'm sorry Dumbledore didn't tell you, Snape, but that's exactly what they are. You know about them?" Snape gave him a withering glance. "Right. Of course you do."

"Proceed, Draco."

"I think my mind has been trying to tell me this for a while, I just didn't get it." He looked tense. "You remember that Weasley bolted after we got the Locket. I believe that he might have seen something that made him want to do it ..."

"Hermione and Harry were acting as if they'd rather have you around," Ron said from the other side of the room, eyes never leaving Hermione's face. "Then we fought and I left. I regretted it the moment I was gone from the house. I felt really stupid for thinking that they didn't like me anymore."

Draco nodded. "It makes sense. It's envy. The diadem must be lust, and the cup gluttony." Neither Harry not Snape acknowledged the slight blush hat graced Draco's features. "It makes sense. By cutting his soul, the Dark Lord gave away the purity of his magic; only the bad things remained and his Horcruxes feed on those addictions."

"Tom Riddle's memory kept on bragging," Harry recalled, "the diary must have fed on pride." He didn't notice that Snape and Draco didn't understand his musings as they were not aware of most of the story. "Dumbledore couldn't help but to get the ring at the price of his own safety; the ring must have represented greed. I bet Nagini is sloth," he added nastily, but then something occurred to him and he glanced at Draco, anything else gone from his mind. "Then, after we got the diadem -- ?"

Draco looked down. "Maybe. Maybe it was feeding on something I already had."

Their eyes crossed and held. Harry allowed the small smile that had been playing in his lips. "Maybe."

When they looked up, Snape was pinching the bridge of his nose with a pained look on his face. "I swear I have no patience for teenage dramas and twenty years of them are really wearing thin." Harry thought best to look regretful and Draco must have thought the same, because he looked contrite too; Harry knew that expression well -- it was the one he used to use on McGonagall after she caught them fighting.

"Don't use that face on me, child. I invented it," Snape bit out, before he looked at Harry. "With your father, actually. Either way, you may have a point, Mister Malfoy," Snape continued, "but it's far more important to end this mission before the Dark Lord strikes and he will soon enough. I can tell."

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Snape's words became true earlier than they expected.

Voldemort had finally realised who was the boyish thief who had taken the wand from Gregorovic and it took him right to Dumbledore's grave. Harry witnessed everything during his visions and was properly warned when the time came. He just hoped things ended in time to save Luna and Mister Ollivander from Draco's house; he hoped there was still something to save, too.

Snape got the warning on the twenty-first of April and set things on motion. Harry would never forget the looks on the Weasleys and Remus's face when they saw Snape directing the -- hopefully -- last Order's meeting.

The second of May dawned too cloudy and rainy for a spring day, and the mood inside of the school mirrored Nature. Most of the students were terrified, some wanted to fight for the Light, and others had to be restrained in order not to hinder their efforts to protect the school.

Snape was unstoppable, giving orders while taking care of his Slytherins and, after a while, Harry finally realised Snape was getting ready to make the ultimate sacrifice for the Light. When Snape finally called Harry to his office, Harry was filled with dread, because he really didn't think he was ready to say goodbye to one more mentor. He took a breath and knocked on the door. "Come in."

Snape was sitting on the Headmaster's desk, with the infamous Pensieve that had marked most of Harry's life-changing moments on the desktop. Everything gave away the feeling that the end was near.

"Sir?" Harry called; Snape's eyes were haunted when he looked up. "You wanted to see me?" As if to prove his early thoughts, Harry felt this newfound respect and politeness towards Snape, clear signs of the apocalypse.

"When the Dark Lord comes, he's going to call for me. I shall go and I shall take down Nagini," Snape said with a firmness that left Harry no doubt he would accomplish the feat. It also told Harry that Snape didn't expect to survive. "The Dark Lord won't be happy. I've accepted it and I shall go with the certainty that I've redeemed myself -- "

"You did more than redeem yourself, Snape," Harry interrupted. "There's no need to do this. We can find another way and -- "

"Mister Potter," Snape snapped, but his eyes were less harsh than usual, if just as determinate. "Wait until you hear the rest." Harry swallowed thickly. That did not bode well for him. "There is something Albus asked me to tell you and I only very recently realised why ..." Snape looked so ashamed, Harry felt sorry for him. "There's a last Horcrux. An Horcrux not intended, but that it was made nonetheless."

Harry got it without further ado. He knew what would be required of him. He knew what it meant that 'One could not live while the other survived' and why he had been allowed to be a hero and to live as much as possible while in school. His journey ended there. "At least we won't be alone, sir."

"I'd rather I was, Mister Potter. Please believe as much." The rest of the morning passed by in silence.

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People were crying, sobbing their lost hope, but Harry heard only one person. "NO!" his heart shattered a bit at the scream coming from Draco's lips. He forced is body to stay still in Hagrid's arms, but he wondered how the half-giant didn't feel his increased heartbeat. "You fucking bastard! How could you?"

A flash of red light flew by Harry's skin and then all hell broke loose. Bella screamed; the Death Eaters scattered around, their boots heavy on the ground; Voldemort hissed, his fury almost palpable. Harry wasted no time and jumped from Hagrid's arms into the side of Light, McGonagall's statues creating a shield of red magic around the Hogwarts's protectors.

Voldemort's rage reached unbearable levels. "Harry Potter! How many times must I kill you?!"

Silence ensued, as people stared at him as if he were a ghost. A soul-wrenching sob racked Draco's body and Harry looked straight into his eyes, begging for forgiveness, but Draco just shook his head. No forgiveness was needed.

A high-pitched laughter sounded among the Death Eaters.

Harry looked up and saw Rabastan helping Bellatrix getting up, her right arm hanging at her side, blood pooling on the floor. Voldemort's cheek was marred by the spell that had by-passed him to hit Bellatrix. Rodolphus and Rabastan were laughing while looking at them and even Bella, murderous scowl in place, smirked.

"Just when I think you can't spread your legs further," Rodolphus jeered, "you prove me wrong, Draco. Does Lucius know?" Harry saw Draco's father narrow his eyes at his brother-in-law and his hand twitch for his wand. "I bet he taught you some things." Neither Narcissa -- whose courage allowed Harry to see her son one more time -- nor Lucius moved a muscle, but Harry saw the fire in his eyes.

Draco sneered. "At least I satisfy my lovers, Uncle dearest. My paramours have no need for -- uh," he paused, trying to look nonchalant, but Harry saw how pale he was and how his hands

were shaking. It hit Harry for the first time that Draco was a brave man. " -- defective Dark Lords."

Voldemort growled in rage. "Crucio!"

Draco fell onto one knee from the force of Voldemort's curse, but he regained his composure quickly, breath heavy with the effort and eyes alight with hatred.

Voldemort's curses didn't hold and Harry knew instinctively why. He stepped in front of the fighters. "I think you just messed up, Tom," he said with desperate courage. He had just died; worse than that it couldn't get. "You won't be able to hurt any of them anymore. They're under my sacrifice's protection." Voldemort's eyes flashed. "You'll never learn, will you?"

"You shall still perish, Harry Potter, and you shall do it tonight. Today's battle shall end between the two of us, no matter how many people die in between and I shall end up triumphant. I have something you do not."

Harry wasn't even aware of the madly excited expression that settled over his features; his thrill felt like a drug cursing through his veins with the electrifying adrenaline. He knew he was going to win. He knew it as surely as the day was to rise. He had too much to lose, too much at stake to contemplate anything else. Voldemort was going down and Harry was going to take him there. Even if it killed him. Again.

"What, Tom? A new wand?" he asked, waving the one he had borrowed from Draco. "Or maybe your Horcruxes?" Harry's voice easily reached Voldemort in the dead silence of the campus. "They are no more, Tom. I got rid of the diary; Ron destroyed the locket, Draco the diadem, Hermione the cup and Snape the snake. Your wand might be powerful, but you are no match for all these people and one of them will take you down, even if I die. You have no idea what loyalty and love means and you'll die without knowing why."

"You talk a lot, Harry Potter. Shall we test your theory? Shall we see who wins?" The Death Eaters laughed hysterically. Harry waited no more and aimed a Stupefy at Voldemort.

"Simply juvenile, Harry Potter," Voldemort said and aimed a few Dark curses at Harry, one of which cut through the skin of his thigh. Harry growled, but replied with some of the nastiest curses Snape had taught him. The warriors formed a circle around them, eager to fight, but respectful of the ancient magic of the duel. McGonagall had never let the shield drop.

Voldemort's curses felt weaker than they should and were marred with a reddish aura that Harry wasn't familiar with. And, each time Voldemort's curses failed their purpose, Harry's got stronger. Voldemort's step faltered as the hex he sent Harry's way rebounded in one of the armours. "You're feeding on me, Harry Potter," he gritted out. "It won't help you."

Harry didn't listen and shouted, "Expelliarmus!" at the same time Voldemort whirled around and whipped his wand, yelling, "Avada Kedavra!"

It was with poetic irony that the curses clashed in the middle and rebounded with a spectacular show of white light. Voldemort's wand screamed and exploded in his right hand, while the man himself fell to his knees, eyes wide with unexplained terror. "What did you do, Potter?" Harry froze in place as the light in the middle of the field began taking a woman's form.

Rowena Ravenclaw knelt besides Voldemort, her face kind, as she said, "Tom Riddle, you were warned years go. Why didn't you listen? You took advantage of my magic and my love even after I warned you. I cautioned you would lose if you did. Antioch Peverell is unforgiving."

She got up and turned to Harry, whose wand was still drawn and pointed right at Voldemort. "You, Harry Potter, freed me. You love so much and so beautifully. You broke my jinx by turning pain into joy. It was a pleasure to meet someone so strong before crossing over. Ignatus would be so proud of you. He was always my favourite brother-in-law."

"You're free from your rage and all the anger that fed on the tragedies of your life, pet" Rowena said kindly, nodding with her head at Voldemort. Harry understood what his Horcrux had been -- anger. "You don't need to finish this. It's not who you are." She looked down at the Dark Lord. "You don't know love, Tom Riddle, so you can never understand why my lover's

wand cannot defeat the man who freed us."

The light soared through the field, hot and all-consuming. Voldemort screamed a scream from the pits of hell and his body began to melt away; he looked right into Harry's eyes, jaw slack, and it was the last thing the great Voldemort saw in this world, the eyes of the man who loved too much.

The battle broke afterwards. The Death Eaters were fighting for their freedom, casting curse after curse in a desperate attempt to escape, but the Light had a renewed strength and they wanted blood for their fallen ones, for all the misery they had endured for a year of tyranny.

Harry's heart clenched painfully when he realised Snape was not among them. "Ron, Hermione," he shouted, "the Shrieking Shack!" Harry's best friends didn't let him down and they set to save one last person, one last time. Hopefully they would be on time.

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Harry sat at Snape's bedside, hoping to everything that was holy that the man would wake up. It would be too unfair if it happened otherwise and Harry really didn't need to add another victim to his extended list of dead mentors. Snape might not be jolly and kind like Dumbledore, or fun and comforting like Sirius, but he had cared and he had paid the ultimate price.

A hand on his shoulder brought him back from his gloomy thoughts. It was too big to be Hermione's and too soft to be Ron's. "Draco."

It was as if that answered whatever question Draco had wanted to ask, because he knelt on the floor and curled his arms around Harry's waist, leaning his blond head on Harry's chest. "I thought you were dead. I thought I'd die, too."

Harry's heart started to beat faster. "You almost did, by taking a swing at Voldemort like you did." Draco looked up to give him a deadpan look. Harry blushed. "Sorry." It was probably not the best time to joke. Then he noticed how tired Draco looked, with deep bags under his eyes and a haunted look. He had never looked more appealing than right then, wearing his sacrifices on his face, this man who had made so many of them for Harry without asking anything in return. Ironically, he got Harry's everything.

Harry buried his hands in Draco's hair and tilted his head up, before their lips met in a slow, gentle kiss. They parted right away, a flush covering their cheeks. "What happens now?" Harry asked, thumbs caressing Draco's flushed cheeks.

A slow smirk broke in his face. "Now, I take you to that bathroom over there." He got up to do just that. "I'll have my wicked way with you and then we'll see where you go from there. I expect I'll keep you."

"Thank heavens."

Harry and Draco whipped around at the sound of Snape's rough voice.

The man gave them a withering glance that had no right to be as effective as when Snape was in his full strength. "Go, you two. I'll call Poppy to sit at my deathbed. She owes me a few favours."

♦ Epilogue ♦

"Ready?" Draco asked, pulling Harry to a slow kiss, their hands clasped tightly as they waited for the druid's calling. "There's no going back after this."

"I'm pretty sure there hasn't been any going back since you showed up in my doorstep with all your stuff as my twenty-first birthday's gift. After my Auror Examination study marathon, I

might add." Harry smiled fondly. "Or since Heather and Brian."

"The banes of my existence."

"They're your children, Draco, buckle up."

"They're only my children when it suits you, otherwise they're yours." Harry laughed, and rested his head on Draco's shoulder, kissing the neck of his soon-to-be husband. "It doesn't matter, since you won't be leaving me after this. Ever." They shared the smile of lovers. "Oddly enough, I don't want you to, Potter."

THE END

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