

Jigsaw by Jaxmari

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Author's Notes: This fic is old, canon-shafted, and is posted here for archiving purposes only. I am aware of its many flaws and take no pride in this story. I got very carried away and made quite a few mistakes, but it was a great learning experience, if nothing else.

Warning: Slash, post-OotP AU, OCs, minor featuring of religion, and AU for Sirius's fate. I also feature pairings outside of the main. I also feature an OFC as part of the secondary cast. You have been warned.

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Chapter 1: Jigsaw

Chapter One:

Alone

Harry Potter dreamed almost every night he spent at Number Four, Privet Drive. They were nightmares, really. Nightmares of watching Sirius die, over and over. It never seemed to end. And when it did, it got worse.

Aunt Petunia, Uncle Vernon, and Dudley seemed to notice there was something wrong with him. For the most part they left him alone, heeding the warning of Harry's friends. It was strange when, about three days after Harry arrived home, Aunt Petunia received a letter by owl post. She read it, stared at him, and then put it in the food processor before throwing it away. However, she acted a little different after that letter. When his cousin Dudley had been angry with him for breaking the remote control (even though he'd never touched it), Aunt Petunia had silenced Dudley and sent him to his room. If Harry had cared, he would have been pleased. Dudley had never been sent to his room for anything like that before. The last time his uncle had snapped at him for not paying attention, his aunt had hushed him. She offered Harry no visible comfort, but she constantly whispered around him, as though he was ill. A few times, Harry thought he caught her looking at him with sympathy, but then she would turn her face and Harry was positive he had imagined it.

After all, Aunt Petunia, her husband, and her son had been treating him like he was inconsequential his entire life, why should they stop now?

Harry felt empty most of the time and would sit around the house and stare at things. He never went outside, not even to visit Mrs. Figg--in fact, he studiously avoided her. He didn't want her sympathy and he didn't want her to understand him. He didn't want a reminder of a world that had given him something so precious, only to wrench it away. The only time Harry felt anything was when he had his nightmares.

Dudley kept playing a Muggle song from his stereo as loudly as could be. Over and over. Harry could sometimes hear it even when it wasn't playing. "I'm a firestarter, twisted firestarter," ran a constant refrain in his head whenever he was angry.

To avoid thinking about his nightmares and what caused them, Harry often lay in his bed at night, reading a book Lupin had sent for him to read while he was at the Dursleys'. "To help prepare you for sixth year Defense Against the Dark Arts," the note had read. The title read: Shadow Arts. The book described Shadow Arts as "the practice of magic not inherently evil, yet often misused." It was rather like magic that was too ambiguous to be Dark Arts, in Harry's opinion.

The Beheading Charm in "Chapter the Third" had vaguely interested Harry. He wondered if it had been cast on Nearly Headless Nick, but knew he could never ask the ghost without offending him. Harry noted that Legilimency and Occlumency were included in this book, since both had rather dubious uses. Unpleasant uses for spells Harry was familiar with--such as the Severing Charm--were described.

There was one small section near the beginning of the book about a form of magic that Harry had never heard of before. It was entitled: "Necromancy". Harry glanced at the entry, noting a picture of a dark-haired woman who was both beautiful and terrifying at the same time. The caption read: "Morgan Le Fay: The Most Legendary Necromancer Ever Born." He went on to read the entry below her.

Necromancy [Gr. nekros "death" and manteia "divination"] is a form of magic that can be translated as "Death-Divination". It is the branch of the Shadow Arts that is most closely affiliated with the Dark Arts. Necromancy is a branch of magic that specializes in death, spirit, and souls. Spells such as channelling the dead and speaking to the dead can be used by anyone. Preparing one's soul for becoming a ghost is considered Necromancy, although this has been disputed. In the past, Necromancy was a common branch of Divination--although it has become very unpopular in the modern era. A Necromancer, however, is different from those who simply practice Necromancy. They are defined as witches born with the power of Soulsight (the ability to see souls--a power not exclusive to Necromancers, but also found in other types of wizards such as Seers) and the ability to enter and exit the Netherworld. Little can be confirmed of other powers, and it is doubtful they possess any. Certain spells have been often confused with Necromancy, such as the Dark Arts spell to animate the dead. Necromancers have long been associated with death, disease, and torture. Many argue that Necromancy is part of the Dark Arts, as many Necromancers are Dark Wizards, but much like Parselmouths, the skills are not inherently Dark, only the wizards that cast them.

It was nice to know that not everyone in the wizarding world thought being a Parselmouth was inherently evil. Harry found himself going back to that entry over and over, wondering if a Necromancer could contact Sirius for him. At the thought of

Sirius, guilt would threaten to overwhelm him. Then anger. Then sorrow. And then Harry would go back to thinking about his nightmares.

They weren't the usual Voldemort nightmares, either. Harry's scar had stopped hurting just after Sirius's death. Voldemort was now blocking him from his mind, even if Harry couldn't do the same. No, the nightmares Harry had now were new.

They always began in the same way. They began with watching Sirius fall forever into nothingness, watching him fall past the Veil. It was agony, each and every time. A pain, a sorrow, a loss that went beyond words.

And then the wispy nothingness beyond the Veil would burst from the stone archway and surround Harry. Gray smoke would choke him and made him shiver in its icy grip.

"Honestly, I thought you were supposed to be some sort of legend. You're supposed to be the savior of the wizarding world? The only thing you ever did was delay the inevitable." He could never place the voice, but it belonged to a woman. A rich voice, full of harsh disappointment.

Then Harry would see a flash of a dark-haired woman flying across the room, her face viciously cut open and unrecognizable. Her body would then thump against a wall and slide to the floor. Then she would laugh madly, struggling to sit up, even as blood dripped down her blurred face.

"I have only ever done what I had to do, Mr. Potter." Snape's voice. Cold, but not as cold as Harry remembered it. His voice would bring up surges of hatred. Hatred for a man who Harry had spent the summer wishing had died, instead of Sirius. In his darkest fantasies, they would switch places.

Then there would be a flash of an angry youth, his face also blurred. He was pointing his wand at someone, roaring as fire and invisible force poured out of it. Harry would hear people screaming as the fiery power poured out of the boy's wand.

"How can you judge someone without walking a mile in their shoes? How can you say anything about them when you don't know where they come from?" Hermione's voice. She always sounded reproachful.

A flash of another blurry-faced man would come then. The man would throw himself in front of a blurry-faced boy, taking a jet of green light to the chest. His still body would fall to the ground before the boy.

"Don't you see, Harry? Don't you see what your power is? What you have that no one else does?" Sirius's voice. Hearing it always made the pain of losing him ever so much greater.

Then Voldemort would laugh at him. There was never anything blurry or undefined about him, which made his presence all the more chilling. Harry would scream in rage at him, but it never amounted to anything.

"Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy wand and thy staff they comfort me." It was his mother's voice. Harry would cry out to her, but she never answered.

A flash of a battle came last. The flaring lights and sudden explosions meant it could only be a wizarding battle. The ground would tremble beneath Harry's feet as he walked. All around him, death would try to claim the warriors locked in combat. And he would keep walking, walking towards his goal.

Harry would always wake up wet-faced after that, and find himself alone, on his bed. All the tears, all the anger, and all the frustration that was building up inside him did him no good. In the end, he was where he had started: alone.

People like Remus Lupin were prone to dark dreams and nightmares. But ever since Sirius had died, his dreams had only gotten worse.

He stared at the bottle of Wolfsbane Water, wondering how long it would take to kill him. It was one of the strongest drinks the wizarding world produced, stronger than Firewhiskey even. It was also very unpopular. One of its most well known properties was being poisonous to werewolves. It was a slow, mild poison--the equivalent of heroin to a Muggle. It could kill Remus eventually. He knew that.

Yet, he still brought the bottle to his lips and continued to drink. He didn't want to die. He just wanted to numb the pain. And Wolfsbane Water was the quickest and strongest method he knew of to achieve a blissful, dreamless state.

He'd been through this before, when his father had died when he was very young and when his mother had died of lung cancer when he was barely out of Hogwarts. He'd suffered through James's and Lily's death. He had spent twelve years thinking Peter

was dead and that Sirius had betrayed them all. Only it turned out Peter was alive and it was he who had betrayed them, not Sirius. Sirius had come back to him after twelve long years of Remus trying to hate him.

And now he was gone, too.

All those years that Remus had thought Sirius Black had betrayed his friends to their deaths, he could never muster the hate that he should have. There was a part of him that never truly believed that the handsome man full of jokes, smiles, and teasing that he had fallen in love with could possibly be a deranged madman. When he had seen Peter Pettigrew's name on the map he and his three friends had spent so long working on, he had known that Sirius was innocent. He had believed in Sirius, even though Sirius never truly believed in him.

Remus took another swallow of the Wolfsbane Water, staring blankly at the darkened kitchen. Sirius had chosen Peter, not Remus. He had believed the rumors about the LeStrange brothers being able to control werewolves. He had never stood up for Remus when he was accused of working with the Death Eaters. So Peter was made the Potters' Secret Keeper, not Remus.

Remus took another swallow, wondering if maybe he did want to die. After all, he had just lost his last friend. They had never been as close as Sirius was to James--not until Sirius came back from Azkaban, haunted by his own nightmares. Finally, Sirius had understood what it was like to be a social degenerate. He had known what it was like to be haunted by darkness and madness. A little nasty part of Remus was strangely satisfied by this and felt guilty for it.

No, Remus reflected, he didn't want to die. Sirius had meant everything to him, though Remus knew he had meant very little to Sirius. He loved Sirius as a brother, as a friend, and as a man. None of the other short-lived relationships he had had could compare to the simple platonic friendship they shared. Sirius was quite obviously the most heterosexual man Remus had ever met. Remus had contented himself with loving him from afar, keeping his secrets to himself. Sirius had never known that Remus had declined to go out on all those "blind dates" because no woman could compare to Sirius Black in his eyes. Neither could any man, though they had at least distracted Remus from the never-ending loneliness that seemed to define his life.

Remus took another swallow of the Wolfsbane Water, closing his eyes briefly to appreciate the acidic tang of the liquid sliding down his throat. He didn't want to die. But life felt so empty without Sirius. They had grown closer than ever when Remus moved into Number Twelve, Grimmauld Place at Sirius's insistence. When Sirius

would wake up in the middle of the night, disturbed by one of his nightmares, it was Remus who would make him a cup of tea. When Sirius would scream too loudly at night, it was Remus who went in and held him before he woke anyone else. It had been odd, at first, holding a grown man like he was just a small child frightened by his nightmares. It had been equally odd to hold another man in a bed and know there was nothing even remotely sexual about the way Sirius would cling to him until his breathing regained its normal pace.

Remus took another sip from the bottle, feeling a tear escape his eye. It was his fault. Not Harry's, not Dumbledore's, or even Sirius's fault that he died. It was Remus's fault. He had known that Sirius was going half mad in this house. He'd spent twelve years locked in Azkaban, and to have his newly-regained freedom yanked away and replaced with an only slightly less depressing prison had been driving him mad again. That was why the nightmares had started. That was why Sirius took to drinking on occasion. That was why when Sirius had seen a chance to get out and do something, he'd jumped at it--and Remus had let him. He'd done all he could to try and distract Sirius, but he wasn't interesting enough for him. It was his fault, because he hadn't stopped Sirius from joining them to go and save Harry in the Department of Mysteries.

Harry.

Remus paused with the bottle still touching his lips. He shakily set it back down on the table and realized what he was doing. He was wallowing. He was trying to drown his sorrows in poison. He'd never really drunk before James and Lily died, despite his mother being as Irish as Muggles came. He wasn't an alcoholic in the classic sense, but he had a tendency to drown his sorrows in the bottle. He'd picked up the habit from Sirius.

There was still Harry to consider. It was quite obvious whose job it was going to be to care for him and the other youngsters when they would begin to arrive over the next week. Remus lived here and he got along with all of them. Dumbledore and Molly would expect it of him. He pushed the bottle away from him, knowing he'd probably give in to temptation at another point. He was notorious for always giving in. But he wasn't going to give in tonight. He hadn't won the war, but he would win this particular battle, at least.

Remus got up and left the kitchen. He found Sirius's room, the same as it had been when he last left it. He lay down on the bed, clutching the pillow to his face. He could still smell Sirius. He had had that indefinable scent that had always had an undercurrent of dog to it. Remus laughed, remembering all the jokes he, James, and

Peter had often had at Sirius's expense about that fact.

And then he wept. He wept for Sirius, for James, for Lily, for his parents--and even for Peter. Peter Pettigrew had died, too. The nervous, devoted boy who had followed them everywhere they went and never let anything get in his way had died fifteen years ago. Remus couldn't hate him, either, no more than he could Sirius. He wept for Peter's loss as much as he did for the rest. He had been a good boy, once. The initial anger had faded and been replaced by sorrow.

Remus eventually fell asleep, clutching Sirius's pillow to him. He dreamt of days long past, when a wolf, a dog, a stag, and a rat would roam around the Forbidden Forest in their own strange little pack.

Eventually, the dreams would darken and Remus would find himself clutching Harry as Sirius fell past the Veil into the nothingness that awaited him. In the end, Sirius was gone, and he had left Remus back where he had started: alone.

He ignored the alarms when they went off in the house. They weren't his problem, after all.

"Draco! Wake up!"

Draco Malfoy moaned and rolled over, pulling the sheets tightly about his head. Why was his mother pestering him now? It was the middle of the bloody night! She needed to turn off the alarms and let him go back to sleep.

"Draco!"

There was real panic in her voice. Draco sat up and looked at the doorway. His mother stood there, her arms shaking and her face white. "The Aurors . . . they're coming for me. They've tripped the alarms. Someone betrayed us," she said. Her wand was in her hand and was the only thing not trembling. She was in a white dressing gown, her long, blonde hair streaming down her back.

"Wh-what do we do?" Draco asked, swallowing. He didn't know what exactly his mother had been up to since his father had been arrested, but he was sure it was connected to the Dark Lord. For the second time in his life since his father's arrest, he felt truly lost and confused. How could this happen?

"Aunt Narcissa?" called the sleepy voice of his cousin from behind his mother. "Why have all the detection spells on the grounds gone off? What's going on?"

"Get a few things together and take Draco out of here, Contessa," his mother said.

"Mother?" Draco asked. His cousin stepped into the room, her harsh face lined by shadows though her eyes registered surprise.

"I'm not going to go without a fight," his mother said, tossing her hair back proudly. "I'm going to burn this house down and they'll get nothing from Malfoy Manor."

"We've been betrayed, haven't we?" Contessa asked in tight voice.

"There's a spy in the Death Eaters. Now, go! Take the secret hallway out to the gardens!" Draco's mother ordered and moved to Draco as he stood up. She embraced him suddenly, crouching down slightly to stare at him in anxiety.

"Take care, Draco. I love you. Always remember how much your father and I love you," she whispered, kissing him and then striding out after nodding to Contessa.

"Take care of your cousin, Contessa. He is your responsibility now," his mother told her imperiously.

Draco stared at Contessa stupidly. She stared back just as stupidly. Then he heard his mother crying out, "Incendio!"

Almost as if on cue, Contessa summoned a trunk and began stuffing Draco's things into it. Draco scrambled around until he found his broom and threw on a robe. When they exited into the hallway, it was already burning. Draco looked down the long stairs to the main hall of Malfoy Manor. His mother stood there, in the midst of the flames, looking like an ice princess standing in the middle of a fiery inferno. She had her wand out. There was a pounding on the door in front of her.

Contessa ran to her own room, stuffing random things into a pack as quickly as she could and throwing on a black robe. She twisted up her long, black hair and dragged Draco out past the flames that were licking up the stairs and burning the paint off the walls. She found the broom cupboard Dobby used to sleep in and used her wand to tap the back wall seven times.

"We can't just leave Mother!" Draco cried, turning and looking down at the furnace

his home had turned into. He could hear his mother shouting spells, joined by a few other voices in the distance. What if they killed her?

"She can take care of herself, Draco. Let's go!" Contessa said, grabbing his arm and dragging him into the secret hallway.

"Why are they here? What do they want?" He was trying very hard not to cry in frustration. How could this happen? How could his whole life, his whole world fall apart so quickly? He was a Malfoy and things like this shouldn't happen to a Malfoy!

"Someone betrayed us. Someone told the Ministry what Aunt Narcissa was planning. They've no doubt come to arrest her," Contessa said tightly, tugging him along. It was getting hot and Draco could hear the fire, hear the shouting of spells in the distance. This wasn't right! It wasn't fair!

A wall began to crack and Draco heard noises that sounded suspiciously like his house collapsing. "She's really burning it down, isn't she?" he whispered fearfully as Contessa dragged him down a spiral staircase.

Contessa swallowed and watched as pieces of the ceiling began to cave in. "She's not going to let them have anything. What starts in the family--"

"--ends in the family," Draco said, finishing his father's old axiom dully.

Contessa had let him go and they were both running down the dirt tunnel that led out to Draco's grandmother's rose garden. There was a loud crash and they turned to watch the spiral staircase collapse on itself, pieces of the burning Malfoy Manor landing on top of it in a great crash. Draco froze, feeling terror build up inside of him. He didn't have a home anymore. They were arresting his mother. What was he going to do now?

"Let's go, Draco!" Contessa urged, her face marked with the same fear Draco felt.

They turned and ran, coming out into the rose garden itself. When Draco climbed out, he stared behind him and watched his ancestral home burn to the ground. In the distance, he saw a beautiful blond woman running down the drive. It took him a moment to realize it was his mother. He'd never seen her run before. She always strode, glided, or swayed. She never ran. Aurors chased after her, pelting hexes at her. She finally collapsed under the Stunners of two Aurors behind her and two who appeared in front of her.

"Mother!" Draco cried, trying to run to her, but Contessa had him by the arm.

"Don't! All you'll do is get yourself arrested!" Contessa cried, being dragged forward as he tried to struggle away from her.

"That's my mother! They could have killed her!" he screamed.

"She might as well be my mother, too! She's still alive!" Contessa said desperately. He stopped struggling. Contessa would know. She, like his mother, was a Necromancer. She would know if someone was dead or not, just like his mother always knew.

"What do we do?" Draco asked weakly, dropping to the ground.

Contessa bit her lip and stared off in the distance as the Aurors began to take Narcissa Malfoy away, bound up in strands of unicorn hair. Draco puffed up in anger. His mother was allergic to unicorns and the unicorn hair might leave a mark. Some of the Aurors began to fan out across the grounds. "We have to leave, or they'll find us," Contessa observed.

"But where do we go, Contessa?" Draco asked impatiently. She was so indecisive on her own. How could he get stuck with her? She was such a wet fish.

"Little Hangleton. I don't know where else to go," she said weakly.

"What's in Little Hangleton?"

"The Dark Lord."

Draco swallowed, realizing he was more scared now that he had been while watching his house burn down. Life had just taken a very nasty turn for him and he had a feeling it wasn't going to get better any time soon.

Despite having his cousin beside him as they ran into the nearby woods, Draco was feeling an emotion he'd never really experienced before. He was feeling very alone.

To be continued . . .

Chapter 2: Jigsaw

Chapter Two:
Tales from the Dark Side

Peter Pettigrew didn't sleep most nights.

He didn't expect a lot of sympathy and knew he didn't deserve it. That was the difference between him and most of the other Death Eaters. He knew what he was doing was wrong. The rest were under some mass delusion, he supposed. He didn't really understand how they thought, but somehow they managed to justify their actions in their own minds. He wished he could.

Oh, perhaps he could blame it on James and Sirius. After all, they'd never truly treated him as an equal. He was always slower than they were, more excitable, more pathetic. Always the butt end of their jokes. But that fell rather flat. How could you justify giving up your closest friends' secrets and leading a madman to murder them just because you had to tolerate some good-natured ridicule as a boy?

He couldn't justify it. He could try to say that when the Dark Lord had approached him with offers of family, love, and acceptance he'd been led astray. But even that was a weak excuse. There was nothing in the world that could ever justify what he had done. Yet, it didn't change the fact that he had done it and now had to live with it.

He had a lot of nightmares, when he did manage to sleep. Nightmares that usually consisted of watching James, Lily, and lately Sirius die. He hadn't witnessed any of their deaths, but he imagined he had it down to the tiniest, most minute detail, because they felt so real. They were terrible really. Dreams that wracked Peter with guilt and remorse beyond imagining. He expected no sympathy from his new "friends", so he never mentioned it. It would only get him killed, in any case.

There was, of course, always the matter of the throne.

Peter stared at his silver hand, flexing it very carefully. He hated it. He pulled up the sleeve of his robe and poked at the fresh bruises there. He caught Snape sneering at him, so dropped his sleeve back down. No doubt Snape knew what a throne was. No doubt he knew that Peter's guilt had manifested a creature much like a poltergeist to torment him at night. The creature had been haunting him for almost fifteen years

now. It never came when he was with someone--one reason he'd always taken to sleeping in a Weasley boy's pocket or bed as often as possible. But whenever he was alone at night, it came for him. Since he had his own room here at the Dark Lord's house, he spent many nights alone. And the throne was as cruel as ever. Every night he felt what it was like to have Killing Curse cast on him. Only he never actually died. And when the throne would leave him at sunrise, it left behind trails of unexplained bruises. Very few people had ever heard of a throne. But then, few wizards had ever felt as guilty as Peter Pettigrew.

They were all in the sitting room, watching Draco Malfoy get the Dark Mark. The boy was wincing and whimpering as the Dark Lord slowly traced the Mark upon the white flesh of his arm with the wand. The Dark Lord wore a hooded black robe, the hood pushed back to reveal his white, snake-like face. Draco wore the Death Eater's black robes as well, but unlike with the Dark Lord, they did not give him an air of menace. They only served to make him look washed out. Peter remembered getting his own Mark, long ago. He remembered how much it had stung. He looked around the room, gazing at his fellow Death Eaters.

The absence of Lucius Malfoy was quite a relief, as was the absence of his insufferable wife. She had never been a Death Eater, but ever since Lucius had been arrested, she had been very instrumental to the Dark Lord's plans. Few knew of the details, and Peter supposed he should feel privileged to know of what he wanted to do. But he didn't. It made him sick, in some ways.

The newly initiated, younger Death Eaters sat in their own crowd, whispering amongst each other. No doubt they were curious as to why the Dark Lord was letting a wizard who couldn't even Apparate yet into their ranks. They knew he would have his reasons, and none dared to ask. Peter knew, of course, but he was considered loyal and trusted. Ever since the Dark Lord had risen and so many other more capable Death Eaters--like Lucius Malfoy--had failed him, Peter had found himself getting closer and closer to him.

And this thought sickened and terrified him. Yet, there was nothing he could do. There was never anything he could do. He was one of the few Death Eaters who knew that the Dark Lord was a half-blood, but he knew to tell the rest would mean his certain and unpleasant death.

Peter sat on the Dark Lord's right side, staring over at the older crowd. Snape was there, still sneering at him. Lucius had worked very hard to get him back in last year, explaining to the Dark Lord how useful Snape was and that since he had been with Dumbledore at the time of the Dark Lord's resurrection, he could hardly leave without

arousing suspicion. The Dark Lord seemed to accept this, after properly punishing Snape of course, and he had been welcomed back into the group. Peter wondered if it was really all that easy. He mused on this while staring at Snape. He was close to Bellatrix, who was watching her nephew's initiation with great interest. Her husband and brother-in-law had been arrested, too, and Peter certainly didn't miss them. The LeStrange brothers had been mad before they even went to Azkaban, and the prison had certainly not helped matters. He only wished Bellatrix could have been arrested, too. He hated her, the mad, laughing bitch.

He hated all of them, really.

He glanced over at the younger crowd, and noticed Contessa LeStrange had her eyes closed as Draco was Marked. Contessa, like the other younger Death Eaters, had been initiated after the Dark Lord's "resurrection". She had joined just a few days after he had risen, and from what Peter remembered, Lucius hadn't seemed happy about it. She was quite close to the Malfoys from what Peter understood, having been raised by them since her natural parents, Bellatrix and Rodolphus, had been arrested so long ago. She looked a bit like her mother, only was far less attractive. She had arrived only a week ago with Draco, just after Narcissa's arrest. Both had been scared out of their wits. Now they were mortally terrified out of their wits.

Lucius had spent an awful lot of effort sheltering Draco from his business as a Death Eater. Peter wondered how he would react when he found out he was being Marked. Peter then wondered if that was part of the Dark Lord's plan. Not even he knew every piece of it. Peter rather doubted either Contessa or Draco had the stomach to be Death Eaters. They both seemed rather wet. Lucius and Narcissa had a tendency to spoil children.

"My Lord!"

Peter's thoughts were interrupted when Bastion Fort--one of the new recruits--walked in. "My Lord, forgive me for interrupting," Bastion said quickly, falling to his knees.

Voldemort lifted his wand and Peter watched with some amusement as Draco gasped and wiped the tears of pain off his cheeks. Voldemort slowly turned to face Bastion. "What is it, Fort?" he asked.

"The perimeter has been breached. Three homeless children. Desiree and Sean caught them. They're Muggles, but one's a Mudblood. She's the one who found the place," Bastion said quickly.

“I already knew that, Fort,” Voldemort said icily. “I trust you can handle exterminating the vermin?”

Bastion bowed his head. “I just thought we should clear it with you first, my Lord,” he said deferentially.

Voldemort considered him for a moment and then glanced at Draco, who was nursing his partially branded arm. “Hmm. I think it is time we test out our youngest member. Time to prove if you are as worthy as the Mark as your father, and his father before him, Master Malfoy,” he said, standing up.

Draco visibly swallowed, his gray eyes growing very wide. Peter took a moment to appreciate how young he looked at that moment.

“Come, let us entertain ourselves for the evening,” Voldemort said, striding out and motioning the others to follow.

They all faithfully plodded after the Dark Lord to the back entrance. Peter rather thought they must look like some ghoulish parade heading down the halls and out into the gardens.

Three pathetic looking children sat in a circle on the ground, huddled together. The oldest looked to be ten, the youngest perhaps six. Judging by the facial similarity, they were all no doubt related. The youngest girl was crying. The boy was sniffing, but the oldest girl was glaring defiantly at them all. Until she saw the Dark Lord, and then she quailed.

“A Mudblood and two Muggles. Homeless riffraff. How pathetic,” the Dark Lord sneered. “Out of respect to their youth, I will make this quick. Avada Kedavra!”

Peter flinched instinctively as the rushing green light burst from the Dark Lord’s wand and struck the small, sobbing little girl. She fell over, now quiet.

“NO!” screamed the oldest girl, trying to leap up. The rocks and pebbles around her suddenly flew up and pelted towards them as Sean Kilroy--another new recruit--cast a Binding Charm on her.

The Dark Lord held up his hand and the rocks and pebbles dropped the ground. He sneered nastily. “Definitely a witch,” he said.

The boy was now crying pathetically. Peter guessed him to be about seven or eight.

He turned his face as the Dark Lord cast another Killing Curse. The boy's body hit the ground near his sister. As Peter turned back, he noticed that Draco and Contessa looked very pale.

"Now, young Malfoy, it is your turn. Kill the Mudblood. Prove you are one of us," the Dark Lord said, stepping back and gesturing to the bound girl with his wand. She lay on the ground, whimpering in misery.

The Dark Lord's red eyes glinted with menace down at a cowering Draco Malfoy. Snape looked very cool and bland, though Bellatrix was grinning in cruel delight. It was odd to compare her expression to her daughter's, who was trembling and looked as sick as Peter felt.

Draco was holding his wand in his hand, shuddering as he walked towards the little Muggle-born girl. He seemed to study her for a long time. The girl's face was dirty and her dress was torn. She continued to whimper.

"Why haven't you killed her yet, young Malfoy?" the Dark Lord asked sinuously. "I have recklessly extended my generosity to you, allowing someone so young into my ranks. I have even extended my power to protect you from the Ministry's underage watchdogs when you cast magic around me. Have I wasted my efforts on you?"

Draco's hand was shaking and his gray eyes were really quite wide. He was so pale his face blended nicely with his white-blond hair. He looked even more terrified than the girl did. "I-I d-don't know. . . ." he stuttered.

"I've already killed her worthless Muggle siblings for you. In order to initiate you as one of us, you need to prove yourself. Your father would never shirk from the blood-letting of a filthy Mudblood. Kill her now, before she goes to Hogwarts and they teach her how to cast magic, the filthy beast," the Dark Lord said.

Draco stared at the girl and his face contorted in desperation and fear. The girl just lay there, staring up at him in abject terror. His hand trembled horribly as he raised his wand at her. The little girl closed her eyes, but Draco burst into tears and sank to his knees.

"I-I c-can't d-do it," he sobbed, dropping his wand on the ground and covering his face.

The Dark Lord pointed his wand at Draco. "Accio wand," he said calmly, as though this was quite expected--disappointing, but expected. Draco's wand neatly flew into

the Dark Lord's hand.

"If you're not going to act like a wizard, you might as well not bother to be one, young Malfoy. You know my rules. Do you honestly wish to give your life for this filthy Mudblood? Are you going to spare her life, so I can take yours? This is your last chance, only son of Lucius. Kill her and live. Spare her life and die. Give me the word and I will give you back your wand," he said.

Draco dropped his hands and went back to staring at the Muggle-born. She was very still now, staring at him in something like curiosity. Draco stared back at her. She smiled a bit at him. Draco just watched her with an expression Peter found surprising, given the boy's spoiled character. It was an expression of resolution. Draco trembled where he kneeled, wrapping his arms around himself.

"I see," the Dark Lord said after a long while. "Well, girl, I hope that you remember the name of Draco Malfoy, Mudblood-lover and blood traitor. Remember that he died for you. He's going to let himself die, so that you can grow up to pollute my world. It won't matter in the end. When I'm done, you and the rest of your kind will be extinct. But I'll let you have a few years of borrowed life at young Malfoy's expense."

Bellatrix began to scream in laughter. The Dark Lord smirked and pointed his wand at Draco. Peter watched in fascination as Contessa twitched and began to pull out her wand. She paused when the Dark Lord suddenly dropped his wand, staring at Draco almost curiously.

Draco's eyes were closed and he was obviously waiting for death. However, the Dark Lord wasn't delivering. Instead, he was twirling Draco's wand in his long, spindly fingers, looking thoughtful. "Perhaps you might be more useful to me alive . . ." he mused. Peter turned from the terrified face of Contessa to look at Snape, who was watching all of this very quietly and expressionlessly.

The Dark Lord was still looking thoughtful. "Yes, you could certainly have other uses, being a student in Potter's year--and your ties to those who might make the mistake of becoming my enemy," he said.

The Dark Lord was now studying Draco intently. "This was your grandfather's wand, wasn't it?" he asked, smirking viciously. Draco said nothing, but visibly shook.

The little girl whimpered again as the Dark Lord resolutely snapped Draco's wand in two. He then pointed his own wand back at Draco. "Crucio!" he cried. Draco's screams echoed into the distance. They mixed into Bellatrix's raucous laughter,

creating a sound that almost defined the situation. Contessa flinched, and Peter saw she was clutching her wand, silently mouthing something. Peter turned away. Brat or not, he didn't enjoy watching children suffer.

When Peter looked back, the Dark Lord had turned to Snape. "Your godson is something of a disappointment, Severus. I had high hopes that he could one day replace his father. Now, it seems he's gone the way of his dear, departed cousin, Regulus Black. Since young Malfoy's bought her life, take the little girl away. Do not harm her. Bella, take your nephew to the basement and then join me in my sitting room. Contessa, empty his room and deposit his remaining belongings in the basement with him. I think young Malfoy will certainly have many uses to me under the Imperius Curse. He and Potter are rivals, are they not? Wormtail, come with me. When you're done, Contessa, join us in my sitting room as well," the Dark Lord said dismissively as Bellatrix screamed in laughter again. Contessa swallowed nervously. Snape looked bland enough that Peter wondered if a Dementor had perhaps sucked out his soul.

Peter dutifully followed the Dark Lord back inside the house, watching Contessa scurry ahead of them. She disappeared into the room Draco had been given and came out after a moment with the boy's broom. Peter watched as she glanced down at the Dark Lord and scurried down the hall towards the basement that Bellatrix and Draco has just disappeared into.

"I'll be with you in a moment, my Lord," Peter murmured, staring curiously at the door, wondering what mother and daughter might say to each other. They rarely interacted. Contessa had always deferred to Lucius or Narcissa.

"Feeling curious, Wormtail?" he asked in amusement.

Peter dipped his head and since the Dark Lord was obviously not objecting, walked over to the basement door and pushed at it to peer down the stairs. He could hear Bellatrix and Contessa speaking to each other.

Contessa had laid the broom against the far wall and was staring up out the basement window thoughtfully. "You know, the Dark Lord has been far too easy on you. He has yet to have you bloody your hands," Bellatrix snarled at her.

Contessa turned to face her. "I was the one who delivered Bode's potted plant, remember? Besides, I've covered up all your sticky murders," she said quite coolly.

"Sweet baby Contessa. Think you can replace me, do you?" Bellatrix demanded,

shifting gears abruptly.

"Trust me when I say I have no desire to replace you in anything," Contessa replied.

Bellatrix turned back to Draco, who was sitting in the middle of the conjured bars, looking miserable. "Sometimes, I think your heart isn't in this. Yet, the Dark Lord is far kinder to you than he was to this worthless brat. It was stupid, to expect him to be ready to kill someone at sixteen. Almost as stupid as it was to think you'd be useful--you are the weakest Necromancer I've ever seen," Bellatrix said nastily.

"If you think his ideas are so stupid, why not mention it? I'm sure he'll be quite reasonable about it," Contessa said, just as nastily.

Bellatrix spun and glared at her and then suddenly smiled. It was not a kind smile. "Narcissa was a poor teacher, apparently. You can't even do half the things she can. You're not even half the witch I was at your age. You're almost as worthless as Sirius and Andromeda," she said.

Contessa seemed unable to say anything to that, but did glare back. Draco was staring at her until she looked at him. He then put his face in between his knees and curled up into a shaking ball of misery.

"You're pathetic," Bellatrix snarled.

"I hate you," Contessa spat, storming out. It wasn't the most clever retort Peter had ever heard. Contessa was heading up the stairs and glaring up at Peter. He stepped back and headed towards the sitting room. She followed.

Bellatrix came up after moment. Peter entered the sitting room and placed himself to the right of where the Dark Lord sat. Contessa stormed in angrily, but paused when she saw the Dark Lord watching her and Bellatrix enter the room. He seemed only mildly interested in either of them.

"Not getting along very well, are we?" he asked neutrally.

Contessa looked sullen, but Bellatrix tossed her head back indignantly. The Dark Lord smiled at them indulgently, as if they were errant children who amused him.

"Crucio!" he cried suddenly, sending Bellatrix to the floor, screaming in agony. Contessa whirled at this, as though she had expected to be attacked. Contessa pulled down her hood to reveal her face and smiled nastily at her mother.

The Dark Lord lifted his wand after a moment and watched Contessa curiously for a moment. "It is unfortunate that Narcissa is imprisoned. She's quite the Necromancer. However, since she's not here, you'll have to do--weak as you are."

Contessa didn't answer him, but paled. The Dark Lord smiled at her. It wasn't a friendly smile.

"Do I frighten you?" the Dark Lord asked after Bellatrix passed out. Contessa stared at her mother apathetically and didn't answer him.

"You could redeem yourself, if you do well," the Dark Lord continued.

Contessa slowly turned her head to face him, though she did not look at him. "What do you mean?" she asked carefully.

"This should be quite easy even for you, since the person I want you to find and allow to possess you is blood-related to you," the Dark Lord said calmly.

"What do you mean . . . my Lord?" Contessa asked, fear quite audible in her voice.

The Dark Lord smiled. "There are times, my sweet, when you remind me of Wormtail. Odd, isn't that? Such a weak little thing I can manipulate at will. Pathetic."

Contessa looked insulted. Peter glanced at the Dark Lord and then back at Contessa. He was used to being insulted, but not used to being compared to posh young women.

The Dark Lord tilted his head, looking almost dreamy. "I was most upset when your mother killed Sirius Black so soon--that is why I punished her. I wasn't even able to get all the information I needed from him. Harry Potter loved him, more than anyone else in the world. It's almost sad, isn't it, that he's been robbed of both parents and godfather, hmm?"

Contessa didn't appear to like where this was going anymore than Peter did.

The Dark Lord's red eyes seemed to glint more malevolently than ever. "I wish you to find your first cousin once removed for me, Contessa. I want you to channel Sirius Black, so that I may command his spirit and use him to have my revenge on Harry Potter."

"You can talk to Wormtail or Snape, so that you can get a clear idea of who you're

looking for. Having a picture in your mind of Black should help you find him much more easily," the Dark Lord told Contessa.

Contessa nodded and bowed, backing out of the room. At a jerk of the Dark Lord's head, Peter followed her out. She narrowed her eyes at him and then continued to head down the hallway. She was quite clearly going to seek Snape for information on Sirius.

Peter smiled vaguely after her. "You and me, we're just alike. That's interesting, isn't it?" he called.

Contessa paused a little way down the hallway, her back still to Peter. "Not really," she said. Peter simply watched her and sidled up closer.

Contessa knocked on a door down the hall. "Professor Snape?" she called.

"Enter," came Snape's voice.

Contessa walked in, working her jaw. Snape looked up at her from a book he was reading in what looked like a drawing room. He gave her a very neutral expression. "You've been out of Hogwarts for several years now. You might as well call me Severus," he said.

Contessa shrugged, still looking vaguely angry. "The Dark Lord sent me to ask you things about Sirius Black--to find out what he was like. I'd rather ask you than Peter," she said.

Snape looked up at her, running his thin fingers along his lips. He narrowed his eyes at Peter when he saw him in the doorway. "If I give you some cheese, will you go away?" Snape sneered.

Peter narrowed his eyes and scowled at him. Snape had always had a gift for sarcasm. Peter was getting quite immune to it.

Snape stood up. "I have no time for this," he said impatiently and locked the door with a flick of his wand. Then he cast an Imperturbable Charm on the door. Peter found this interesting. He wondered what they were going to talk about and also wondered if they were going to do anything more than talk. He allowed himself a snide smile at that last thought.

He waited by the door for several minutes, after which the door opened and Snape

scowled down at him. Contessa stood in the middle of the room and didn't look terribly thrilled. She was frowning noticeably. Snape left with a soft rustle of cloth after glaring at Peter for luck. Contessa watched him go with a strange expression. She then sank down on the chair Snape had been sitting on, burying her face in her hands.

Peter stared at her thoughtfully. "The Dark Lord would like to begin as soon as possibly," he said.

A brief look of terror crossed Contessa's face before she composed herself and got up to follow Peter back to the sitting room. Bellatrix was pacing in the room and paused to scowl at her daughter when she entered. Contessa walked past her. The Dark Lord stood in the center of the room and Peter moved to stand right beside him.

"Enjoy your tête-à-tête with Snape?" the Dark Lord asked coolly.

Contessa's face was as smooth and blank as her uncle's often was. "Very informative," she said without any sarcasm.

"Excellent. He's returning to Hogwarts before Dumbledore becomes suspicious. He left me a small gift, however," the Dark Lord said, holding out a vial of milky blue liquid.

"Draught of the Living Death," Contessa said in a dull voice.

The Dark Lord gestured for her to sit in his chair. "Untried though you are, I trust you know what to do with it," he said.

Contessa sat down, her hands trembling slightly. "To drink the Draught of the Living Death induces a Necromantic Trance in a Necromancer who drinks it--or it kills them," she said dully, as though quoting a textbook.

"Aww, is da poor widdle baby Contessa scared she might not wakey up?" Bellatrix asked in her mock baby voice. It set Peter's teeth on edge.

Contessa gave her mother a look of pure loathing. "Fuck you," she snarled ineloquently. It seemed her sarcasm was lost in her mother's presence.

The Dark Lord laughed, though Bellatrix narrowed her eyes. Peter managed to look only mildly amused as he took the vial of the Draught at the Dark Lord's bidding and handed it to Contessa, who stared at it thoughtfully and then back up at Bellatrix, who

was glowering at her.

"Not with her here. I won't be able to concentrate," she said smoothly.

"Very well. Bella, leave," the Dark Lord said airily, dismissing her with a wave. Bellatrix stormed out after giving her daughter one final hateful glare.

The Dark Lord moved so he was in front of Contessa. Peter moved to her side. Contessa uncorked the vial, staring up at the Dark Lord.

"Picture him. Picture Sirius Black in your head. Feel along your blood link to him. Call to him while you're in the Netherworld. One simple touch of his spirit should channel him directly, since you are his blood, regardless of his willingness. Go swiftly now. If you die, know that you die in service to me. You will be honored," the Dark Lord said softly, hissing in his excitement.

Contessa looked back the vial and glanced at Peter once. He tried not let any expression pass across his face. Then she closed her eyes and drank the whole vial down. She opened her eyes after a moment and stared at the Dark Lord, who was watching her eagerly. Peter watched her blandly. It was always best not to feel in situations like this. He'd gotten rather good at not feeling over the years.

Her eyes suddenly rolled back into her head as though she was having a seizure and she twitched briefly, finally slumping back into the chair after a few minutes. Peter checked her pulse.

"There's no pulse," Peter told the Dark Lord, who nodded his head once. This was standard, Peter has seen Narcissa do this a million times. She was one of the most skilled Necromancers in all of Britain. This girl was next to worthless and there was a very real chance that she might fail.

Time passed. Not much time, perhaps a few minutes. Her pulse had finally returned when Peter checked it again.

"There's a pulse! She came back!" Peter squealed, backing up a bit and standing by Contessa's side with wide-eyed anticipation. She shook where she sat, breathing heavily.

She was leaning forward, her thick hair hanging in front of her face and Peter continued to check her pulse. The Dark Lord stood before her, his wand out and an expression of greed on his face.

"Black? Sirius Black?" the Dark Lord asked.

Contessa nodded her head, all her hair still covering her face. Her breath was ragged and she flexed her fingers. She then lifted her hands and touched her face, her breasts, and her legs, as though trying to discover what sort of body she had. The Dark Lord smiled.

"Imperio!" he cried, grinning madly.

Contessa just sat there, breathing heavily and touching various parts of her own body, trying to ascertain things. The Dark Lord's smile faded.

"Something's not right," he growled, blinking his eyes. Contessa raised her head to look at him, her thick black hair sliding from her face like a parted curtain.

Her eyes were a bright emerald green. They were not her eyes, but Lily Potter's eyes. Harry's eyes. Peter would know those eyes anywhere. Her very bearing had completely changed. Lily-Potter-in-Contessa's-body smiled viciously. "Hello, Voldemort," she said in a voice that wasn't Contessa's as she ripped out her wand.

"Stupefy!" she screamed, just as the Dark Lord cried out, "Impedimenta!"

Lily dived out of the chair and towards Peter, missing the red beam of the Dark Lord's spell by mere inches while hers hit him square in the chest. As she dove, she spun and waved another spell.

"Incarcerous!" she screamed, binding the Dark Lord's slender body very tightly as he struggled to throw off the effects of her Stunner. Peter tried to move, but he wasn't fast enough. She fell on top of him before he could even get his wand out.

His wand rolled away and Lily twisted Contessa's body around and looked down at him with such a look of hate and anger that Peter was taken aback. "I've been wanting to do this for a long time, traitor," she hissed.

"Conjunctiva!" she cried, casting the Conjunctivitis Curse on him, causing Peter to grab his face as he went blind, howling in pain from the viciousness of Lily's spell. Few spells outside of the Cruciatus Curse had ever stung so badly. He tried to struggle, but Lily had always been a better fighter than he was. She punched him so hard his balding head banged on the floor and stars burst inside his skull.

He could hear her slamming the Dark Lord with a few more Stunners just as he broke free from her previous spell. He could move, but his sight was gone and his entire equilibrium had been knocked out.

Lily must have bolted out of the room, judging by the screams of the Dark Lord as he raged behind her, obviously struggling with the multiple spells she kept pelting at him, one after the other. Peter could hear her slam the door and scream, "Colloportus!"

He could hear shouting and spell slinging outside the door as the Dark Lord broke free. "Finite!" he cried and Peter's vision recovered.

"The traitorous whore! Kill her!" the Dark Lord spat, waving his wand and bursting open the magically sealed door. Peter lurched to his feet and dutifully headed out to the war zone that had once been a nice, quiet hallway in a dark house.

"Stupefy!" Lily screamed a second before Bellatrix could cast another spell. Peter watched in surprise as the woman fell back, skidding on the smooth floor. Other Death Eaters raced down the hall, firing off spells at Lily.

"Protego!" Lily cried, blocking the only spell that was aimed correctly and racing down the hallway at top speed. She slipped to avoid another spell, slamming into the basement door with a painful thud. She shook her head almost comically and then grabbed the door and fell inside. She closed the door just as another beam of light, now green, struck it.

"Kill the blood traitor!" the Dark Lord's high-pitched voice bellowed out. "KILL HER!"

Peter could hear Lily cry out another, "Colloportus!" from behind the door.

Several of the Death Eaters were trying to break in, but to no avail. Peter stumbled down the hallway, still feeling woozy. He rather thought Lily had broken his nose. He'd forgotten she hit harder than James or Sirius, despite being a girl.

"Out of the way!" Voldemort roared.

The Death Eaters parted like the Red Sea. He waved his wand at the door, and it began to cave. Peter was impressed. Whatever Lily had done to this door, she had done it so well that Voldemort had to slash his wand at the door several times before it cracked open.

The Death Eaters poured into the basement like water from a fountain. Peter was one of them, being pushed from behind the muscular Bastion Fort. He shoved hard, too. Peter could hear Lily shouting more incantations.

"Reducto!" she cried, causing the glass to blow outwards. She was on back of a broom behind Draco. With a sweeping motion of Contessa's wand over herself, Draco, and the broom, she cried, "Reducio!"

They shrank down to the size of a rat and Draco zoomed towards the window on the broom, just as Peter and the other Death Eaters streamed down the stairs. Just as they got outside, they returned to normal size with an audible pop from displaced air.

After a few of his fellows Disapparated, Peter followed suit, Apparating just outside of the building. A few of them were summoning brooms from the house. Peter had never been any good on a broom, so he watched as Draco flew upwards. His sharp ears could hear Contessa speaking, though he knew the others couldn't. But none of them were Animagi.

Draco was looking down at Peter as the other Death Eaters mounted brooms and began to give chase in the air. "Which direction?" he asked Lily.

"Point me," Lily told her wand, which spun like a compass in her hand. She then pointed north and very slightly to the west. "That way."

Draco zoomed off at top speed. Several others followed, but Peter knew they wouldn't be able to catch Lily Potter or Draco Malfoy on that new broom of his. He watched them fly off with something rather like a wistful smile on his face.

And an equally strange sense of satisfaction.

To be continued . . .

Chapter 3: Jigsaw

Chapter Three: Technicolor Dreams

Harry was having a very vivid dream. He tossed and turned, his scar burning off and on. he tried to wake up, but couldn't. What was strange was that he knew he was dreaming.

Hazy gray smoke swirled around and then away to reveal the crumbling stone archway that Sirius had fallen through. The tattered black curtain blew softly and an ugly little girl with thick black hair in pigtails appeared on the stone dais, staring at it with trepidation. Harry gave a low, strangled cry in his sleep at seeing it again.

The scene melted and shifted.

The ugly little girl walked down Diagon Alley in a too-small black dress. A healthy-looking Bellatrix walked far ahead on the arm of the thick-set Rodolphus Lestrangle. The little girl trailed behind, as though on purpose, until she lost sight of them. She stopped before Florean Fortescue's Ice Cream Parlor and stared inside. Looking disappointed, she backed away and walked through the street, kicking trash with her scuffed black shoes. She looked no older than six or seven.

"Are you lost, little girl?" asked a kind female voice.

The little girl looked up and Harry felt a warm sensation as he dreamed. It was his mother standing there, with a huge pregnant belly. Lily Potter looked at the girl with a concerned expression, her dark red hair swinging about her pretty face as she bent over a little to look more closely at the small child. Next to her was James Potter, who grinned and crouched down in front of the young girl.

"Would you like us to help you?" he asked.

The scene shifted and melted.

The turmoil of the hazy gray smoke returned. The shadowy, echoing voices of Lily and James could be heard over and over as the scene returned to the girl, standing before the archway that lead to Death in the Department of Mysteries.

"Are you lost, little girl?"

"Would you like us to help you?"

She began to walk towards the archway.

"Are you lost, little girl?"

"Would you like us to help you?"

The little girl touched the black veil gingerly, terror written on her face. Harry cried out to her not to go in, but she didn't hear him.

"Are you lost, little girl?"

"Would you like us to help you?"

She walked through the veil.

"Are you lost, little girl?"

"Would you like us to help you?"

Harry was somehow following her, running past the tattered curtain into hazy, gray smoke.

"Are you lost, little girl?"

"Would you like us to help you?"

The girl ran through the shadowy smoke that was beyond the veil, crying out frantically. "James Potter! James Potter, where are you? Please help me!" she screamed, looking around desperately for him. Harry followed her, wondering why she was calling for his father.

"Are you lost, little girl?"

"Would you like us to help you?"

"Potter! James Potter!"

"Are you lost, little girl?"

"Would you like us to help you?"

"Oh, God, please be here. Please, God, let me find him . . ."

"Are you lost, little girl?"

"Would you like us to help you?"

"POTTER!" she bellowed, crying in frustration.

"Are you lost, little girl?"

"Would you like us to help you?"

"Honestly, what is all that racket? It's enough to wake the dead."

"I think that was the idea, James."

"Potter? James Potter?" the little girl asked as the shadowy forms of Lily and James Potter emerged from the hazy gray smoke. Harry felt a strange jolt of joy watching them. He nearly forgot to breathe. Though smoky, and even more ghostly that he had last saw them climbing out of Voldemort's wand, they were there. His parents.

"In the flesh. Or not, as the case might be, with me being dead and all," he replied, looking bemused. He even wore smoky spectacles.

"I need your help! Oh, please, I need your help!" she sobbed.

"Can't do much for you, love. There's not a whole lot I can do for the living," he answered.

"This place is so cold, so dreary," the little girl whispered.

"Oh, no. It's quite beautiful for us, dear. It's a whole different place when you're dead," Lily said kindly.

"If you want my help, here it is: if you came here on your own power, go back. Leave. You don't belong here," James said.

"B-but I need you to come back with me!" she cried.

"Love, I don't know how else to explain this to you or how many times I must repeat myself. I'm dead. There's no going back. I'm not Lazarus and I certainly can't walk on water. Or rather, couldn't walk on water," James told her.

"Please! The Dark Lord wants me to bring back Sirius Black, so he can use him against your son. If I do that, we're all doomed. Please, if you came back instead, you could help me fight him. Snape said you would help me!" the little girl begged. Harry felt confused. None of this made any sense. But if it was a dream, wasn't it supposed to not make sense?

"Dark Lord? Voldemort? What's all this about?" James asked.

"She's a Death Eater. I can see her Dark Mark," Lily intoned, sounding menacing all of a sudden. Harry looked and the little girl had a Dark Mark that was glowing quite oddly in this strange smoky world past the veil. The Mark could be seen right through her billowy black sleeve.

"No, please! I want to escape! I don't want to be a Death Eater!" the little girl cried as the smoky forms of Lily and James swirled around her angrily. "It's not my fault!"

A third smoky form appeared and Harry gasped. It was Sirius. "Death Eater," he hissed. Harry felt another surge of joy at the sight of him, smoky ghost or not.

The girl fell to her knees, crying out in pain as the smoky forms of James and Lily swirled around her and through her, looking menacing and angry. "Please! I swear, I don't want to be a Death Eater anymore! It was a mistake, a huge mistake! Help me! Please help me escape from the Dark Lord! He'll kill me if I don't bring back Black! Me and my cousin, Draco! He's just a boy, he's only sixteen! Please, please believe me," she cried, half sobbing, half screaming. Just a boy? She was a child herself. Harry wondered why he was having a dream about Draco's cousin.

"She's telling the truth," Lily said, swirling away and becoming more solid-looking. James, too, formed up. Sirius formed beside him and the three all stared at the girl.

"She's blood," Sirius said in disgust. "I can feel it."

"Don't touch me, Black. Don't touch me, or I'll channel you whether I want to or not. Please, Mr. Potter, help me. Please. I can't fight the Dark Lord. I don't have that kind

of power," the little girl begged. She looked quite pathetic.

"I don't help Death Eaters," James spat.

The little girl sobbed. "Snape said you would help. He said you were brave. Please, please, please," she continued to beg, falling to her hands and knees weeping.

James looked impassive but Lily bent towards the child. "I'll help you," she said softly.

The little girl looked up at her in wonder. James spun on his wife. "Lily, no! She doesn't deserve it!" he cried.

Lily shook her head, smiling slightly. "I'll help you. I'll go back with you," she offered again. The girl stopped sobbing to stare at her.

"No, Lily!" James shouted.

Sirius stepped forward. "I should go," he said.

"No, that's just what the Dark Lord wants. He wants you, to use you against Harry Potter. He's prepared for you. He's not prepared for them," the little girl said.

Sirius looked angry, making a motion towards her, but she backed away. And then she stared at him in astonishment.

"You have a soul!" she said in wonder. Harry's heart skipped a beat.

"I'm dead. I am a soul," Sirius said in irritation.

"No, you would be a spirit, but you still possess a living soul as well as your spirit. You're dead in every way but spiritually." Harry's heart skipped two beats.

"What the bloody hell does all that mean?"

"I don't know," the little girl answered shortly.

"Then bring me back! Bring me back to life, back to Harry and Remus and--"

"You can't bring people back to life. You are dead for all intents and purposes. The closest I could do to bring you back would be to channel you. And the Dark Lord's

waiting for you. He wants to use you to kill Harry, to get his revenge," the girl said irritably. "You don't pick up on things very quickly, do you?"

Sirius's trembled in frustration. Harry trembled with him. His heart skipped three beats now. Sirius wasn't dead! Maybe he could save him! Maybe he could--

But it was all just a dream, wasn't it?

His father's voice brought Harry's attention back to what was happening. "Lily, I'm putting my foot down. You cannot go back--"

"James, you're dead, in case you've forgotten. You have no foot to put down. Do shut up," Lily said, in the same sort of irritable voice the little girl was using with Sirius.

"You'll help me?" the little girl asked, turning back to Lily.

"I will. Mostly to help your cousin, Draco. But also because I remember you. A lost little girl with parents who didn't care to pick you up until several hours after we found you. A little girl with a Death Eater mother who raged on about Mudbloods and blood traitors at us, not even thanking us for safe-keeping her child for an entire day," Lily said, smiling at her.

"What? That's her?" James said, spinning around to stare at the girl. "Why, it is that little girl!"

The girl stared at them, biting her lip. James was quiet for a long moment. "Fine, then I'll go," he offered.

"Too late," the girl said. "I accept your help, Mrs. Potter."

"Do call me Lily. I think you should be on first name basis with someone who's going to possess your body very shortly."

"But, Lily--"

"Oh, James, go run off and play with Sirius. I'm already dead. There's nothing left for me to fear," Lily said, smiling.

James smiled back, though a little reluctantly. "Just be careful. You still have a soul to worry about. Remember I love you," he said.

"I love you, too, James," Lily said.

"Oh, please," Sirius sighed, as though he'd had to hear those very same words on a constant basis. "Be careful, Lily. And you, whatever-your-name-is, tell Harry I love him. Tell him I'm sorry I screwed up so badly."

Harry felt a wave of sadness at these words. It wasn't Sirius's fault. It was his.

"Good luck. And you tell Harry I love him, too, whatever-your-name-is," James said.

The girl held out her hand to Lily. "Let's go. The Dark Lord awaits us," she said, glowing slightly as she held out her hand.

Lily smiled as she put her hand in the girl's. "Oh, have we got a surprise for him," she said smugly.

They glowed and faded back to the living world.

Harry was missing things in the dream, he just knew it. Flashes of Voldemort, of Draco writhing on the ground screaming, and his mother leaping at Peter Pettigrew flashed past him. But he could see his mother, running into a basement, and slamming a door shut before a green ray of light hit it. He watched her seal the door with a Colloportus. Why was he dreaming of his mother running into a basement?

Lily turned and practically flew down the stairs. When she reached the bottom, there was Draco Malfoy, standing up some sort of metal cage, staring at her in a mixture of curiosity and fear. The dream was getting weirder and more unrealistic. It didn't make any sense. And Harry didn't understand how he knew it was a dream.

"What's all that screaming and pounding about? Are you going to kill me already?" Draco asked Lily fearfully.

"You must be Draco, then. Alohomora!" she cried, but the cage door did not unlock. The pounding on the stair door was getting louder.

Draco backed up quickly, stopped only by the bars in the back of his prison. He said nothing, but the fear was written on his face.

"Bloody hell!" Lily screamed in frustration and turned and pointed her wand back up at the stairs. "Colloportus!" The door reinforced itself again with an even louder squelch.

"What are you doing?" Draco asked fearfully. "Why are your eyes green?"

Lily turned back to Draco. "Look here. My name is Lily. Lily Potter," Lily said brusquely. "We have no time to chat, so I'll sum it up quickly: I'm dead, your cousin's channeling me to rescue both of you, and if you want to be rescued, do stand back."

That really didn't serve to make the dream any more sensible to Harry.

Draco blinked at her, quite possibly because he was already as far from her as possible. Lily then cried, "Reducto!"

With a loud explosion the prison bars blew inward and Draco ducked just in time to avoid having a metal shard puncture his skull. Lily looked quite satisfied.

"You could have very well just used a Vanishing Spell," Draco said huffily.

Lily smirked. "But that was more fun. Now how are we supposed to get out of here? I can't very well Disapparate with you. You look like you're about twelve," she said.

Draco gave Lily a look of offense and walked out from the remains of his prison. He cast a nervous glance up the stairs, where the pounding was growing quite loud. Lily, however, was looking around the room and her eyes rested on Draco's broom, which was propped up against the wall for some reason. She grabbed it.

"I can't fly very well. Can you?" Lily asked Draco.

Draco turned to her, blinking for a moment before scowling. "I'm the Seeker for the Slytherin Quidditch Team," he said haughtily.

"Brilliant. Why don't you seek us a way the hell out of here?" she said sarcastically, throwing the broom to him.

Draco mounted it and then zoomed over to her, giving a slight disdainful sniff as she climbed on behind him. "Now what? We're trapped in the basement, in case you haven't noticed, Mudblood," he spat.

"Grateful little bastard, aren't you? I may have mud for blood, but not for brains," Lily said smugly, pointing her wand at a small window that led to outside. It was big enough for a cat, but little else.

"Reducto!" she cried, causing the glass to blow outwards. And then with a sweeping motion of her wand over herself, Draco, and the broom, she cried, "Reducio!"

They shrunk down to the size of a rat and Draco zoomed towards the window, just as Peter and the other Death Eaters streamed down the stairs. Just as they got outside, they returned to normal size with an audible pop from displaced air.

Lily frowned. "Pity that doesn't last too long when cast on humans. How fast does this bloody thing go?" she asked herself as Draco began to kick up the speed, his broom racing up into the air as Death Eaters began to Apparate outside the house.

Draco was looking down at Peter Pettigrew as the other Death Eaters mounted brooms and began to give chase in the air. "Which direction?" he asked Lily.

"Point me," Lily told her wand, which spun like a compass in her hand. She then pointed north and very slightly to the west. "That way."

Draco zoomed off at top speed, leaning down with effort to put all the speed he could onto his broom. They heard shouts far in the distance. Death Eaters on brooms, far behind them.

"At least none of them has a Nimbus 2001," Draco, his voice almost lost to the wind.

"Faster!" Lily cried. "Can't you go any faster?"

"This is a Nimbus 2001, not a Firebolt! We've already reached top speed!" Draco said, almost angrily.

"You've got an awful lot to learn, Draco. One, never underestimate a Muggle-born. Two, never tell me you've reached top speed," Lily said.

"Volatilis!" she cried, tapping the end of the broom with her wand.

With a large jolt and cry of surprise from Draco, his broom surged forward. Draco held on tightly, controlling his broom despite the speed. Harry had to admit Draco was quite the flyer. Lily was hanging on tightly to him, eyes shut. Draco turned smoothly as he went. Hair and cloaks flew straight back, whipping violently at their speed. Their faces were pulled tightly about their skulls.

They had outdistanced the Death Eaters miles ago, racing along so fast that Draco's broom was smoking. But he kept on, turning smoothly when need be, apparently

knowing where he was going now. Hogwarts could be seen off in the distance and Lily pointed at it excitedly.

But Draco's broom could no longer hold out and the tail burst into flame. It began to jerk beneath them violently. Draco raised himself up and held on, trying desperately to control the broom, gritting his teeth as they began to hurtle rapidly to ground.

"The lake, Draco, the lake!" Lily screamed as the broom jerked violently, the back end burning horribly.

Draco turned the broom with skill Harry begrudgingly admired, heading for the lake. "Hang on!" he screamed at his passenger.

Lily cried out when her cloak had caught fire. She threw it off, but the broom jerked again. Her wand whipped away in the air. Lily surged forward after it, but slipped off the broom as her wand hurtled out of reach. She fell towards the glittering black surface of the lake. Draco tried to catch her, but the broom was jerking too violently to let him.

Hagrid's huge form could be seen running towards the lake. He looked up, just in time to see a wand coming straight for him. He had just enough time to say, "Bugger," before it struck him on the forehead with a pop and a small flash of light. Hagrid's eyes crossed and he passed out. The wand hit the dirt, broken in two.

Lily tumbled in mid-air and dove into the lake quite gracefully. Draco was spiraling towards the other end. The broom was spinning and spiraling out of control now. Draco pitched forward and slipped off his broom. It continued to spin violently and sailed past him, cracking him on his temple. Blood gushed. The burning broom crashed into the lake with a loud splash, its flame finally extinguished. Draco slammed awkwardly into the water after it, sinking like a stone.

"Draco!" Lily cried, having only reached the surface a moment before. She dove back in, and the murky, dark underwater world of the lake filled the memory scene. Draco's sinking body was off in the distance. Lily swam frantically after him. She caught him quickly and swam back up and to the shore.

Snape was running towards them, his black robes whipping behind him. Lily dragged Draco's limp body to the shore, dumping him down and inspecting him. He was bleeding badly from his temple and wasn't breathing.

Lily pinched his nose and tilted back his head, breathing hard into his mouth. His

chest rose, only once. She sat up, but Draco was as limp before. Snape slowed as he approached them his greasy black hair tossed back from his face.

"No," he said softly, his eyes growing wide at what he surely thought to be Draco's dead body. Harry did not want to see the look of pain on Snape's face, even in a dream.

Lily glanced up at him and then back at Draco. She pinched the boy's nose again, breathing into his mouth. His chest rose again, but only once. Lily tilted her head over his nose, trying to see if there was any intake of air.

"Breathe, dammit," Lily said angrily, sitting up and pumping Draco's chest with her hands. She then pinched his pointed nose again and breathed into his mouth.

This time, when Draco's chest rose, it continued to do so. Then he began to vomit up water, dinner, and blood. Lily helped him up so he wouldn't choke on his own vomit. Draco sputtered when he was finished, Lily and Snape hovering over him. Nearby, Hagrid still lay unconscious on the lakeshore.

Draco's eyes fluttered open and he stared up at Lily, swallowing and then grimacing, no doubt tasting unpleasant things. Lily smiled at him.

"That's called CPR. It's a Muggle trick. And it just saved your life, Draco Malfoy. I know you're a Malfoy. You look just like your father," she said gently.

Draco didn't say anything, but tears trickled down his face, mingling with his blood. Snape stood over him, his expression returned to its normal neutrality.

"You were very brave tonight. You fly very well. I have to go now, though. I've fulfilled my purpose. But will you do me a favor, Draco?" she asked.

Draco was still silent, but nodded.

Tears began to slide down her face. "I have a son, right around your age now, I expect. His name is Harry. Harry Potter. Do you know him?" she said, her voice breaking a little. Harry felt a lump in his throat.

Draco nodded silently. His gray eyes were very wide now.

"Tell him--tell him that his father and I love him so much. Tell him for me. Tell him how proud we are of him. Tell him we watch him every day and we're so happy he's

our son. Tell him he's very brave and noble, that's he's an even greater wizard than his father was. Tell him that if I had the chance to choose whether or not to die, I would die for him again. Tell him that Sirius loves him, too. You tell him he's not alone, even when he thinks he is. Can you tell him this for me, please?" Lily said desperately, clutching Draco's shoulders. Harry felt strangely saddened and comforted by this all at the same time.

"Lily Evans!" Snape said softly in surprise.

Lily looked up at him, smiling a bit. "Lily Potter. I'm a married woman, after all, Severus," she said gently.

Snape just stared at her. Lily turned back to Draco, who was trembling. It was hard to tell if it was because he was cold, wet, injured, or just emotional. She placed a kiss on his cheek, which seemed to startle him.

"You won't turn out so bad, I think, given time. Once you realize we're all on the same side," Lily said and then her green eyes faded to gray.

In her place was a dark-haired woman who blinked, looking quite dazed. "I feel a bit peaky," she said vaguely and then promptly slumped to the ground.

The scene began to look as though they were all peering down a tunnel. Snape was coming very close, reaching out to her. And then it all went dark.

Harry woke up wet-faced, feeling very oddly about his dream. The oddest sensation he had about it was how real it seemed. . . .

To be continued . . .

Chapter 4: Jigsaw

Chapter Four:

Return to Number Twelve, Grimmauld Place

Harry was not entirely happy to be back at Number Twelve, Grimmauld Place. He used to possess a strange sort of attachment to this house when his godfather, Sirius, was alive. Now, stepping in this house felt not only weird, but depressing.

Mad-Eye Moody ushered him in, gesturing towards the kitchen. He had brought Harry back by a Portkey after spending exactly a month with his aunt and uncle. Harry hadn't told them good-bye, but that was just as well. They didn't care. Mad-Eye gruffly bid him farewell, quickly Disapparating to go attend his duties for the Order of the Phoenix. Harry walked into the kitchen of his godfather's house and found Mrs. Weasley, his best friend's mother, cooking dinner.

Harry's two best friends, Ron and Hermione, leapt from their seats at the dinner table at his arrival. Harry flashed them a smile he didn't mean as Hermione hugged him and Ron clapped him on the back. Mrs. Weasley left the saucepot stirring itself so she could hug Harry properly as well. When they separated, Harry saw Ginny grinning at him enthusiastically from the table she was setting. Everyone began talking at once.

"Good to see you, Harry!" Ron cried.

"Oh, Harry, I'm so glad you're here!" Hermione said.

"Have you been eating properly this past month?" Mrs. Weasley asked worriedly.

"Hi, Harry!" Ginny called.

"Hello, everyone," Harry said as happily as he could. He looked around the kitchen, remembering the meals he shared with his godfather there. Everyone seemed to guess what he was feeling, because they all quickly withdrew from him, looking uncomfortable.

"You came just in time for dinner, Harry," Mrs. Weasley said gently. "I have to leave in just a bit, so it will be just you children for dinner."

"Mum, honestly, we're all over fifteen," Ron sighed.

Mrs. Weasley ignored him, giving Harry another squeeze before going back to the saucepot. It looked like she was making some sort of stew. Harry sat down at the table and then realized there were five plates set. There were only four of them.

"Who else is coming for dinner?" Harry asked, staring at the fifth plate curiously.

Hermione and Ron exchanged a look while Ginny stared determinedly at the napkins she was folding. Harry's brows creased.

"What is it?"

"Well, that should do it," Mrs. Weasley said distractedly, grabbing her bag and cloak. "Help yourselves. There's enough for all of you to have large plates. Make sure you leave enough for Draco."

"Draco?" Harry cried, leaping to his feet. "As in Draco Malfoy?"

"Yes, Harry," Mrs. Weasley said sadly. "Draco Malfoy."

"What the is he doing here?" Harry asked incredulously. Something crashed upstairs and Mrs. Black began screaming in the distance. This made no sense. How on earth could the person he hated most of anyone in his year be staying at the headquarters of the Order of the Phoenix?

"Harry, don't look like that. There's a perfectly reasonable explanation. Far-fetched, but reasonable," Hermione said. Hermione had suffered as much as he had due to Draco's cruel school antics, yet she seemed perfectly all right with Draco staying here.

"What's he doing here?" Harry repeated. Ron was looking at Hermione sourly and Mrs. Weasley looked rather concerned. Ginny sat down at the table, not looking at Harry.

"Well, he has no other place to go. No real safe place, anyway," Hermione explained helpfully.

"I'll leave you to it, Hermione. I'll be gone until the meeting tomorrow, but I think Remus is coming back tomorrow morning. I trust you to make sure Harry and Ron don't kill that boy," Mrs. Weasley said brusquely, kissing her children and Harry good-bye. Harry softened a bit at the affection and gave her a brief smile on the way

out.

The moment she was gone, Harry displayed one of his most magnificent scowls ever. "Malfoy? Here? What the bloody hell is going on?" Harry demanded.

Hermione sighed. "Let's talk over dinner. He won't come down here while we're here, anyway. He's scared of Ron," she said, moving to fill plates with stew.

"Why's he scared of you?" Harry asked, looking over at his best friend. Ron was taller than ever. Quite a few of his freckles had faded away and he seemed to look more like his father than ever before.

Ron shrugged, looking pleased with himself. "He lost his wand on the way here, which was helpful. He made a comment about Mum, to her face and everything. So I beat him to a pulp. Mum was so shocked, she didn't even get mad at me until she had to patch him back together. Snape had a right fit, though, when he found out. Tried to punish me, until Mum stepped in and told him to go soak his head. She was annoyed with me too, but wasn't going to let Snape have a go at me. I never loved her more than at that moment. But honestly, you'd think she'd understand after the things he said--and what he did to Hermione!"

"What'd he do to Hermione?" Harry asked. He and Ron had sat down at the table and Hermione was setting plates before them. She sighed.

"He switched her shampoo with some foul concoction he invented called Medusa's Poison. Her hair turned into a mass of snakes. And they kept biting her until Snape found an antidote. Mum was furious. She chased him around the house for an hour, bellowing at the top of her lungs. Caught him, too," Ginny offered with an impish grin as she sat down with her own plate. "You could hear him screaming down the street. You know how melodramatic he is. Mum only whacked him once on the bum with her broomstick and she doesn't hit that hard."

"It was still our mum's greatest moment," Ron said proudly.

"How long has he been here?"

"Two weeks," Hermione said. "Ever since Snape brought him. We don't know the full details."

"Why is he here?"

Hermione cast a glance at Ron and then looked back at Harry. "Well, his mother was arrested a week after school let out. Apparently, the fight between her and the Aurors was something of an adventure, you see."

"Yeah, Malfoy's house burnt to the ground when they arrested his mum. Tonks said it took four Aurors to take her out. By that time, Malfoy Manor and all their things had burnt to the ground. Along with his mum's plan to break his dad out of prison. What's even better is that the Ministry's confiscated the Malfoys' gold--well, at least the gold they could find--and are donating it to charity. They froze all of the Malfoys' assets, too," Ron said, grinning nastily.

"Draco doesn't have anything right now. He didn't have any spare clothes or anything," Hermione said, nodding.

"Well okay, but it's been three weeks since then. Two of them he spent here, which I still don't understand, but what about that week between his mum being arrested and him coming here?" Harry asked, grudgingly impressed by Narcissa Malfoy.

"Well, he went to stay with Snape. After all, he is Draco's godfather," Hermione explained.

Harry blanched. "Snape is Malfoy's godfather?" he asked, feeling inexplicably hurt by this fact. How was it fair that Draco got a living godfather and he didn't?

"Of course. Didn't you know?" Hermione asked, looking surprised.

"I didn't know, Hermione," Ron said, sounding exasperated.

"Oh, well, I overheard Snape and Draco talking about their Christmas holiday plans during our first year. I rather got the impression Snape wasn't invited over to Malfoy Manor very often, so it was important. I think that was before Halloween, before we became friends. I thought I told you," Hermione mused.

"Why would Draco have a godfather?" Harry asked.

"Well, I think the Malfoys are Catholics. The old pureblood families usually tend to be Catholic, from what I understand. I don't think they took too kindly to a Muggle king outlawing the religion just so he could have a divorce."

"I knew my parents were Anglicans, but I didn't think anyone else was religious. Isn't it a bit weird? You know 'thou shalt not suffer a witch to live' and all that."

"Religion and magic are two separate things, Harry. Muggles tried to introduce their fear of magic into religion. Wizards have all the same religions as Muggles do with pretty much the same percentage of the population in each, though they do have their own churches, temples, mosques, etc. The Christian wizards have wizarding bibles that read slightly differently from the Muggle ones," Hermione said, absently swirling her stew around on her plate. "All that stuff about magic and witches being evil is replaced with text like 'thou shalt not suffer a Dark Wizard to live' and things like that. Certain other things are also different, like wands are mentioned in the text. The differences are really quite fascinating. Instead of the King James version of the Holy Bible, wizards read the Merlin version."

"I would have thought the Malfoys wouldn't be into religion," Harry said darkly, taking another bite of his stew. He didn't believe in God, and had expected the wizarding world to be as atheistic as he was. Then again, he never paid much attention to things like religion. It wasn't exactly a popular Hogwarts dinner conversation.

"Well, the Malfoys began as the Lucians--descendants of the Roman Emperor, Lucius, that King Arthur defeated--but they were chased out of Britain well over a thousand years ago by Arthurian supporters. They went to France and changed their last name. They came back a few hundred years ago, escaping some war or another in France," Hermione said, taking a bite of her stew and pausing to chew for a moment. Ron was rolling his eyes by now, huddled over his bowl so he could hide that fact. Ginny was staring at Hermione in something like wonder. "The Malfoys have historically changed religions like some people change hats, but they've never worshipped Satan. Their name means 'bad faith', which might explain why religion doesn't seem to matter to any of them. Obviously, Draco's father didn't take that bit about not suffering Dark Wizards to live very seriously."

"You have way too much spare time on your hands, Hermione. I'll bet even Malfoy himself doesn't know that much about his family history," Ron mused, staring at her.

"Why's Malfoy here now, in any case? Can't he go back and stay with Snape?" Harry asked, gritting his teeth and changing the subject.

"Well, no, he can't. Not now. Apparently, he was getting initiated to be a Death Eater when he and another Death Eater escaped from Voldemort--do shut up, Ron--with Snape's help. He's a wanted man, now. Voldemort will have his head on a pike if he catches him," Hermione said between delicate bites of stew. Ron had slopped stew all over his face and Ginny was giggling at him.

Harry had hardly touched his food. "I thought Malfoy would have loved to take his father's position as a Death Eater," he said slowly, reminded of his strange dream. It couldn't have been real, could it?

Ginny spoke up. "He chickened out when he was supposed to kill some Muggle or another from what I overheard. He's a nasty little prat, but at least he's not a murderer," she said.

"I, for one, think it's an excellent opportunity to make friends with a Slytherin. The original Slytherin and Gryffindor used to be best friends, before their disagreement. We need to improve inter-House relations, Dumbledore said so himself. If we're nice to Draco, maybe he'll come around to our side. After all, Snape did," Hermione said, beaming as though this was good news.

"I'd rather dunk his head in a toilet," Ron said after a brief moment of silence.

Harry looked at him as Ginny giggled. He kept wondering about his dream. In his dream, his mother had helped Draco escape from the Death Eaters. It had felt real, just like when he dreamt about the snake biting Mr. Weasley. But his mother was dead and couldn't save anyone. Even if she was alive, why would she save Draco of all people? It had to be a dream, it just had to. The last time he had dreamt something so real, it had been because of Voldemort. But this dream didn't feel anything like the dreams he had before. His scar hadn't hurt once. Harry had felt a connection, somehow, to his mother in the dream.

Hermione sighed. "Look, so he's tormented us our whole school lives . . . and made a few comments about our heritage . . . and switched my shampoo with poison . . . and tried to jinx us every chance he got . . . and ratted on us every opportunity . . . and tried to get good teachers sacked . . . and--okay, so he's a rotten, nasty little bastard, but honestly, Harry, he's never killed anyone. I mean, if you were raised by a Death Eater, watch how wonderful you'd have turned out. If Sirius had only been nice to Kreacher--"

"Don't you dare blame Sirius for Kreacher. He was a fucking sneak and Sirius didn't do anything wrong," Harry said dangerously, balling up his fists and glaring angrily at Hermione. He had heard this before from Dumbledore, and he didn't want to hear it again.

Hermione licked her lips and swallowed, looking down at the table instead of Harry. "I didn't mean it like that, Harry. You know that. We all loved Sirius. You're not the only one who lost him," she said quietly. Ron was glaring at Harry reproachfully. As

much as he looked like his father, the look on Ron's face reminded Harry of Mrs. Weasley.

"He was all I had," Harry said stubbornly.

"He was all Professor Lupin had, too. You should talk to him when he comes tomorrow. You might be having tantrums, but he's in a bad way. He sits by the fire and drinks most nights he's not working. Wolfsbane Water, no less. It has a right numbing effect, but eventually it will kill him if he keeps it up. I mean Wolfsbane Water the drink, not the potion Snape makes up for him," Ginny said slowly.

Harry looked away from everyone and stared at the opposite wall. He noticed the little cupboard in the corner of the kitchen and realized the door was open. That was Kreacher's cupboard. Harry realized Kreacher's cupboard was completely clean and there was only an unlit candle on the floor. He looked back at Hermione, who had been following his gaze.

"Where is he?" Harry asked, his voice filled with hate.

Hermione bit her lip. "He killed himself the night Sirius died. He hung himself from the attic rafters. I think he did it so he could be with Mrs. Black," she said very softly.

Harry had no sympathy for the venomous creature and wondered if he should have.

The rest of dinner was filled with silence.

Harry watched Hermione sniff the contents of her shampoo warily, prodding it with her wand before putting it back. Harry sat with Ron in her room, slightly bemused by this. She repeated the process with all her grooming items, even her toothbrush.

"I thought we were supposed to be nice to the little git?" Harry asked her sardonically.

Hermione fixed him with a steady glare. "I said be nice to him. I didn't say trust him," she snorted, carefully inspecting the rest of her belongings.

"Why are you here, anyway? Why aren't you with your parents?" Harry asked.

"My parents had an important business trip that came up and I couldn't go. They'll be

picking me up in a week or two to finish out the holiday. I've been here since Malfoy got here. At least I'll be here for your birthday in a couple days, Harry."

"That'll be nice," Harry said distractedly, noticing that Ron was staring at Hermione quite intensely. And he was strangely quiet.

"Reparo," Hermione muttered over a broken candlestick she found. Harry blinked at this.

"I thought we couldn't cast magic outside of Hogwarts? What are you doing?" he demanded.

Hermione blinked at him and then smiled. "Harry, this house is now Dumbledore's headquarters. Ever since Fudge and he patched things up, Fudge named Sirius's property an extension of the school to allow Dumbledore to retain it until Sirius's heir can legally take it. And since this is like school property, we can cast spells," she explained.

"Sirius's heir? Who's that?"

Hermione rolled her eyes. "Honestly, Harry, what a stupid question. You are, of course. You just can't claim it until you're seventeen."

Harry thought about this for a good, long while. This was his house, then. Or rather, would be when he turned seventeen. Instead of making him happy or angry, he just felt empty now.

"All right, I've checked everything, so you two can run off to bed now," Hermione said.

Harry nodded and stood up, stretching a bit. Ron was now staring at Hermione's feet with a strange expression. "Coming, Ron?" he asked.

"What . . . ? Oh, yes! G'night, Hermione," Ron said fervently, giving her a strange smile as he stood up and followed Harry out of the room. Hermione smiled at him indulgently for a moment.

"Good night, Ron," she said simply.

Ron backed down the landing to the stair. Harry came out of the room and Hermione stood at the doorway. "I'm going to go get a snack," Ron said, smiling oddly at

Hermione. Very oddly. But Ron wasn't paying attention to where he was going and stepped back on thin air when he reached the end of the landing. And then he promptly slipped backwards and tumbled down the stairs with a look of confusion on his face.

Hermione and Harry cried out at the same time as Ron fell. Harry's heart clenched. They both ran downstairs to pick Ron up. He looked quite dazed, but he had looked like that before he fell, too. He didn't look seriously injured, other than a bump on his head. Harry breathed a sigh of relief.

"I'm all right, just a bruise," Ron said vaguely, trying to take a step and falling forward as his knees buckled.

"Ron! You could've killed yourself!" Hermione cried out in a voice Harry had never heard her use before. She was helping Ron up, with an expression he'd never seen her have before, either. She'd met up with Harry numerous times after life threatening situations and had still never looked at him like that.

"I'm fine, I only hit my head seventeen times--give or take a few," Ron murmured, grinning sheepishly.

"Harry, go get him some ice, will you? I'll take him to bed and sort out what I can," Hermione clucked, helping Ron up the stairs, fussing over him like a mother. Or something else.

"Right," Harry said, raising an eyebrow as they walked away from them. Ginny had poked her head out from her room to see what the racket was and went to help Hermione with Ron.

Harry trudged to the kitchen to grab some ice, wondering what Ron's problem was. He sighed greatly when he entered the kitchen and flicked his wand to light the lantern, since magic was allowed here.

Harry started when he realized Draco Malfoy was there, sitting on the floor by the stove, eating his dinner. He had paused when Harry entered and lit the room, the fork still stuck between his pursed lips. Draco's gray eyes were very wide and looked very frightened for just a moment before he narrowed them to a glare.

Harry's wand was still out and he held it rigidly at his side as Draco slowly rose to his feet, setting aside his plate. They stood there for a long moment, considering the other. While Harry had grown to quite a decent height over the past few years, Draco didn't

seem to have grown quite as much and was almost a head shorter than Harry now. His face had become very pointed and even more delicate looking than Hermione's. His pale white-blond hair remained the same light shade it had been when they met six years before. Draco usually dressed rather well, but he was wearing a t-shirt and pair of jeans that Harry recognized as belonging to Ron a couple of years ago. He had dark circles under his eyes and with only a t-shirt on, Harry could see the faded outline of an incomplete Dark Mark on Draco's forearm. It was only the skull, as someone seemed to have stopped before the snake-tongue had been added. Draco noticed Harry staring at it so shifted his arm to cover it. He looked rather sad and pathetic.

"So," Harry said evenly. For once, it was Draco who was poor, homeless, orphaned, and hunted by Voldemort. It was ironic. A part of Harry wondered if Draco was some sort of spy for Voldemort, but then reflected that Voldemort could have certainly picked someone smarter and more subtle for the job than Draco Malfoy, Brat Prince of the wizarding world. A variety of feelings could be passing through Draco's head: resentment, jealousy, resentment, jealousy, resentment, and possibly even more jealousy. Harry rather thought Draco--much like Hermione said of Ron--had the emotional range of a teaspoon.

Draco raised his fists shakily, though his eyes remained steady and narrowed even further. "Well, Potter? Do your worst. I'll get you back, don't worry," he hissed.

Harry flicked his wand and Draco shut his eyes tightly, flinching. "Accio towel! Accio ice!" he called. A magically-cold cupboard opened and ice zoomed towards him, along with a kitchen towel. Harry wrapped the ice in the towel calmly, enjoying the look of surprise on Draco's face when he opened his eyes and realized he hadn't been jinxed.

"What's the matter, Potter? Scared that fat hag mother of Weasley's is going to smack your bottom if you--"

"Silencio!" Harry said neutrally, ending Draco's sentence. Draco made an obscene gesture when he realized he could no longer make a sound.

Harry, feeling remarkably cool and calm, not to mention very pleased with himself for silencing a human being before starting sixth year classes, turned on his heel and walked from the kitchen, ice and towel in hand.

The next day, Harry woke before lunch and took a shower, after carefully inspecting his bathing items. He went down to the kitchen and was pleasantly surprised to find Remus Lupin was making them all sandwiches, and to Harry's surprise, had bought crisps.

"Hello, Professor Lupin," Harry grinned. "Where'd you get the crisps?"

Lupin turned around and smiled at him. His eyes looked half-dead, even though he wore a smile. "Hello, Harry. I thought you might like these. I remembered you mentioning something about liking them last summer," he said, making a partial motion to Harry and then going still.

"Thank you, Professor," Harry smiled. Hermione was right. Lupin looked like hell. He hadn't shaved properly and his face was even more careworn than usual.

Lupin smiled weakly, turning back to adding ham to the sandwiches. "You shouldn't call me Professor, Harry. I'm not a Professor anymore. Just call me Remus, okay?" he said.

"What ever you say, Pro-er, Remus," Harry said, sitting down at the table. "Have you seen that little jumped-up Slytherin, Malfoy?"

"He was slinking through here for some food earlier. I gave him a packet of extra crisps I had. I also removed a rather impressive Silencing Charm on him. He didn't even thank me," Lupin said with something of a smile.

Harry suppressed a smirk. "Wonder who did that to him?" he asked dully.

"He didn't say, but I'd guess it'd have to be a rather impressive student entering their sixth year," Lupin said casually.

"Who would've thought Hermione had it in her?" Harry said in a bemused tone.

Lupin cast him a sidelong glance and there was definitely a smile on his lips now. "She's a regular rogue Bludger, eh?" he asked.

Harry shrugged, unable to suppress a grin any longer.

Everyone came downstairs for lunch, except for Draco, who was nowhere to be seen. The others kept up a stream of light chitchat that Harry and Lupin only participated in occasionally. After lunch, everyone dispersed and Hermione gave Harry a meaningful

look before leaving him in the kitchen with Lupin, who was starting to wash up. He had set aside a plate full of crisps and a large sandwich for Draco. A glass of juice stood beside the plate.

"How are you, er, Remus?"

"I'm fine," Lupin said, staring intently at a glass he was washing out.

"I mean, I know Sirius was your best friend. He was my godfather, but you've known him longer," Harry offered.

"Don't worry about me. I'm holding up as well as you are."

"I haven't taken up drinking, at least."

Lupin stopped washing dishes and turned around. The dishrag continued to wash the plates without him. He smiled very thinly, so thinly it could have been a grimace.

"Told you, have they?" he asked in a tired voice.

"Wolfsbane Water? That's crazy. At least drink Ogden's Old Firewhiskey or something more mundane, like vodka," Harry said.

Lupin sank back down at the table, watching Harry with a very sober expression. "I miss him so much, Harry. He was the only friend I had left. You can't understand," he said softly, almost whispering.

"Course I can, er, Remus. He was my godfather. And I know it must be like what'd I'd feel like if Ron turned up dead or something," Harry said carefully, feeling odd to be the one comforting someone else.

"It was a little different between us, a little more intense than what sort of friendship you and Ron have," Lupin said, looking wistful. "I half expect him to walk in any moment, complaining about Kreacher or not being able to go outside."

Harry felt his mood darken. "I know what you mean," he said shortly.

Lupin reached out and squeezed Harry's arm. "I know it must hurt so much, Harry. But you still have friends and we can be your family," he said gently.

Harry smiled a bit. "Same goes for you, er, Remus," he said.

Lupin smiled back, but then his smile faltered a bit as he looked up at the doorway. Harry turned around and saw Dumbledore standing there, looking at them with a bittersweet expression.

"Forgive me for interrupting, but I wanted to tell you both I have called a meeting tonight for certain members of the Order of Phoenix. And Harry, Hermione, and Ron are welcome to come for this single meeting--due to the circumstances. You have earned your place, as has Mr. Longbottom," Dumbledore said heavily.

"Really?" Harry asked in surprise. Lupin was standing as well, frowning slightly.

"Yes. You're all old enough to know the truth. Besides, given the circumstances and the fact that I need young Master Malfoy there, it would be unfair to leave out the rest of you," Dumbledore said.

Lupin's frown deepened. "So you're going to question her, then?" he asked seriously.

Dumbledore returned his gaze. "We are holding a full inquiry to decide upon her fate," he answered. He then looked straight at Harry.

"Harry, I know--I know things have been rough for you," Dumbledore said, faltering a bit. "But I need you to control yourself tonight. I need you to listen. I need you not to jump to conclusions and assumptions. Do you understand?"

Feeling too elated that he was included in an Order meeting to question Dumbledore, Harry settled for nodding his head in response. Dumbledore smiled at him and then turned back to Lupin.

"Remus, please bring the other chil--excuse me, young wizards and witches down here to clean the sitting room. It will be more comfortable there. Harry, I'll see you later. And do, please, try to get along with Mr. Malfoy while cleaning," Dumbledore said, bowing his head slightly and walking towards the stairs.

Harry couldn't care less if he had to clean the sitting room with a hundred Dracos. Dumbledore was finally trusting him with something.

Draco hadn't come down at all when Harry, Ginny, Ron, and Hermione were cleaning the sitting room. This suited Harry just fine. The less he saw of Draco, the more he

could tolerate his presence in Sirius's house. It didn't matter what the will might say, Harry would always think of this place as Sirius's.

Harry, Ron, and Hermione had run upstairs to shower and dress after cleaning. Ginny was not pleased that she hadn't been invited, but she accepted it with surprising good grace. Harry suspected she would simply wrangle it out of Ron or Hermione later, in any case. Harry put on a nice red shirt that Mrs. Weasley had sewn a Gryffindor House sigil on and found a nice pair of trousers. When Ron and Hermione knocked on his door, he found they had also taken cares with their clothing. Hermione was beaming.

"So you're going to be able to finally sit in on a meeting, eh? I'll bet you're all chuffed about that," Fred asked, strolling up with George and Ginny in tow. All three looked smug. The twins must have arrived while Harry was in the shower. Harry turned to them, wondering why they were so smug-looking.

"Malfoy was trying to sneak downstairs for lunch and I cast a Trip Jinx on him. He fell all the way down the stairs. George followed him, so he ran right back up to his room. Poor dear didn't even get lunch," Fred said with wicked grin. Both George and Ginny were snickering maliciously over this. Something about all this felt wrong to Harry.

Ron laughed heartily, but Hermione looked mortified. "Fred! George! How could you? We have to be nice to him," she admonished. Harry furrowed his brows, having a sudden vision of his father laughing over tormenting Snape. All of this felt very much to him like what he saw in Snape's memories in the Pensieve. He didn't like the comparison.

George raised an eyebrow. "After all the things he's done and you want to listen to that cock-and-bull story? He's rotten. You can't fix rotten," he said stubbornly while his twin and Ginny nodded in agreement.

"Sometimes, if you cut the rotten piece out, the rest is fine," Hermione said.

"Brilliant! I'll go get the knife, Ginny'll hex him, Fred and George'll hold him down, and Harry'll get to cut," Ron said.

Hermione glared at him. "You're incorrigible, Ronald Weasley," she said huffily.

"Let's just go downstairs," Harry said neutrally, not enjoying the conversation much. In fact, he hadn't enjoyed any of it. He walked out of his room and ushered the others

downstairs. He cast a look back down the landing and could have sworn he saw Draco peeking out of his door at them with wide gray eyes; but, the door quickly shut.

They passed Lupin on the stairway. He was carrying Draco's plate and juice. Harry opened his mouth, but Lupin gave all six of them a withering look and went right up to Draco's door, knocking on it softly.

"Draco, I'm leaving your lunch by the door. Hurry up and eat so you can come downstairs," Lupin said and then walked away. As he came to the stairs, he was still glaring at the five of them.

"Why didn't he eat?" he asked.

Fred and George looked at each other a little sheepishly. Lupin glared at them and Fred came clean. "It was our fault, Professor. I cast a Trip Jinx on him--"

"--and I scared him away from the kitchen," George admitted.

Lupin sighed, closing and opening his eyes. "I'm not a Professor anymore, and neither of you are children anymore. Just call me Remus. And why did you do that?" he asked seriously, crossing his arms, though his glare softened.

"Because he's a complete git who's done nothing but torment our family," Fred said.

"You should have heard some of the things he's said about our mother," George added.

"Be that as it may, he's still a person. A person with feelings. A person who's lost both his parents and everything he ever cared about. A person who was raised by a Death Eater, raised to not even know the difference between right and wrong. And yet, despite all this, he refused to turn into a true Death Eater and kill anyone. He may have tormented you all your lives, but if you only knew what Voldemort did to him when he refused to kill that Muggle . . ." here Lupin took a breath before speaking again, "Give him a chance. Be nice to him. If you really want to act like you're better than he is, then stop stooping to his level. Show him right from wrong."

Fred and George were looking a bit guilty by now. Lupin had a unique ability to call anyone to task. Ginny hung her head, and even Ron looked shamefaced. Harry even felt a twinge of guilt himself. Hermione was giving them all a reproving look, nodding in agreement with Lupin. With one final sad shake of his head, Lupin walked down the stairs. Harry and the rest followed him.

Lupin walked over to the sitting room, passing by a two people looking at one of the paintings in the hallway with interest. The man turned and looked at Lupin with an expression of great dislike as he passed. Lupin ignored him.

Harry noticed, after a moment, when the man had turned back to admiring the painting that it was Professor Severus Snape. This realization did not please Harry in the least. He was the last person Harry wanted to see today.

"Hello, Professor," Hermione said.

Snape turned at this, scowling slightly. The woman next to him turned as well. She was wearing a black, hooded cloak that covered most of her face.

"Granger. Potter. Weasleys. I trust you received your O.W.L.s?" Snape asked coolly. Nothing seemed to have changed about him. He was as tall, greasy-haired, intimidating, and hook-nosed as ever. Hermione nodded. Ron only repressed a scowl. Ginny looked very neutral.

Harry felt his anger and hatred of Snape surging up inside of him. Once again that inescapable feeling of wishing Snape had died instead of Sirius bubbled up inside of him. Snape met his eyes for only a moment, returning the glare until he looked away.

"You are Harry Potter," the woman said. It wasn't a question. Her voice was a rich contralto, though sort of clipped.

Harry nodded, casting her a quick glance before returning to glare at Snape. Her lips were thick and covered in a dark lipstick. What little he could see of her skin was quite pale.

"You have your mother's eyes," she said suddenly. Harry blinked at her. Most people commented on how much he looked like his father before getting to the part about his mother's eyes.

"Right," Harry said, wondering if she had known his mother.

"She was quite the witch, Mud- er, Muggle-born or not," the woman said, quickly correcting herself mid-insult. Harry's eyes narrowed.

"You knew my mother?" Harry asked coolly, wondering if he should be insulted or not.

"We're acquainted. I owe her my life, I must admit," the woman said.

"Guess even Mudbloods have their uses, eh?" Harry asked even more coolly.

"She said to tell you that she loves you and she's very proud of everything you've done to fight the Dark Lord. She says you're a greater wizard than even your father was. He sends his love, too, of course. As does Sirius," the woman said in a rush, as if she just wanted to say that had have it over with.

Harry blinked, his mouth opening slightly. Sadness and anger surged up inside of him at her callous words, but he shoved it away. Harry felt so numb, he couldn't even form a response. Instead, he found himself staring at the painting on the wall, too. It was a family portrait that Sirius had never been able to un-stick from the wall and had previously been covered with a cloth. There was Mrs. Black, looking quite imperious. There was a haughty woman near her--probably Sirius's aunt--glaring hatefully out of the picture. A little lower was Narcissa Malfoy standing next to Lucius Malfoy, holding an infant Draco, who was crying. There was also a smug-looking Bellatrix Lestrangle standing next to her husband, Rodolphus. Standing by them was a little girl Harry didn't recognize with long black hair who kept trying to sneak away towards the Malfoys, but Bellatrix kept grabbing her by the arm before she could leave.

An incredible sadness and anger bubbled up inside of Harry as he stared at Bellatrix's hateful image. Bellatrix Lestrangle, the woman who killed Sirius. Harry shoved away the sadness, letting the anger consume him. Beautiful, white-hot anger. Anger so hot it could numb all the other pain inside you. Harry didn't even realize he had slung a spell at the portrait until he saw Snape and the hooded woman duck and the portrait catch fire. The hooded woman stood up, looking between Harry and the burning picture, black hair escaping from out of her hood. Her dark lips had tightened.

Snape's nostrils flared. "Potter, how--"

Harry cut him off. "Shut up! Sirius left me this house and if I want--"

"Watch who you are speaking to, boy," Snape hissed, taking a step towards Harry with his eyes flashing.

Harry wasn't a little boy anymore and Snape didn't scare him any longer. Snape was nothing next to the things he'd gone through over the past year. He felt all his anger and hatred for Snape surge up inside of him, but Snape still had power over him. Harry took his anger and frustration and spun on the woman, who quickly shrunk

back. "YOU! DON'T YOU EVER TALK ABOUT MY PARENTS LIKE THEY'RE ALIVE AGAIN!"

Lupin came out at the sound of Harry shouting. Mrs. and Mrs. Weasley were just behind him. Lupin went over and put an arm around Harry. "It's okay, Harry. Calm down," he said soothingly. Lupin glared at Snape and then ushered Harry inside, sitting him down on a cushy sofa that hadn't been there when Harry was cleaning. He sat beside Harry, an arm around him until Harry stopped shaking. It took several minutes for him to return to his comfortably numb state.

A tall man with very long, black hair walked up after a while, looking at Lupin. Harry looked up at him as Lupin patted his back. Mr. and Mrs. Weasley sat near Harry, giving him sympathetic looks.

"Ah, Remus, I would like to discuss some things with you tomorrow evening. I have certain questions for you about your former position at Hogwarts. Care to join me for dinner?" the man asked. He was very handsome, despite the fact that he was extraordinarily pale and was wearing a black robe. In fact, he was the one of the best-looking men Harry had ever seen.

"Certainly. Oh, Harry, this is a friend of mine. His name is Victor Morpheus, but he likes to go by his surname. Morpheus, this is Harry Potter," Lupin said, introducing them.

Morpheus inclined his head and held out his hand. Harry took his hand, wondering if he should know him. Morpheus smiled slightly. "I'm sure we'll be meeting again," he said. Harry blinked at him, feeling himself blush for no apparent reason.

"Oh," was Harry could think to say. He really was quite good-looking. Harry wondered why he found that so distracting. Morpheus nodded to him and then went and sat near Bill Weasley. Bill was sitting by a few people Harry knew to be Aurors. Tonks waved at Harry merrily. There was a girlish-looking boy with wild red hair talking to Kingsley Shacklebolt who caught Harry's attention simply because he had to be wearing the most outlandish robe Harry had ever seen. Harry didn't know you could fit that many colors on one robe. Mad-Eye Moody was scowling at the redhead for some reason, but nodded congenially to Harry. The twins went and sat by their brother and began an animated conversation with the redhead.

Harry looked around and saw that Dumbledore had indeed only invited a few members of the Order. He imagined no one in a sensitive position had been invited. Professor McGonagall gave Harry a congenial nod and Hagrid walked over and gave

him a bone-cracking hug. Hagrid tried to talk to him, but Harry made short work of any conversation. He didn't want to talk about how he was feeling. Hagrid looked a little hurt, but left Harry alone.

"You're Harry Potter, right?"

Harry looked up and realized the girlish redhead was standing near him, looking excited. "Oh, wow! So nice to meet you," the young man exclaimed, beaming and pumping Harry's hand enthusiastically.

"Er, nice to meet you, too," Harry said awkwardly, forcing himself to smile.

"I'm Rufus."

At this point, the twins had walked over and George put an arm around the redhead's shoulder, grinning wickedly. "Don't be shy. Tell him your real name. Harry, this is Rufinus Quirinus Tiberius IX," George said.

"For the love of Merlin, why did you have to use my full name?" Rufus said with a sad sigh.

"We just enjoy hearing your full name. It cheers us up when we're feeling down," Fred said slyly, causing most of the people around them to laugh. Tonks had come up as well, grinning at Harry.

"Wotcher, Harry!" Tonks said brightly. "See you've met Rufus. Me and Kingsley convinced him to join last month. He works with us as an Auror."

Harry gaped at him. Rufus couldn't be any taller than Hermione and looked like a good Stinging Hex would send him to St. Mungo's for life. Harry tried to picture Rufus taking on a Death Eater and envisioned the only way he could defeat one was by the Death Eater falling over in fits of laughter from being threatened by someone so harmless looking.

"Settle down, the meeting's about to start," Mrs. Weasley called. The group dutifully broke up and returned to their seats.

"Please, we keep this Order alive, Mum," George grinned at her as he sat down. "All you old codgers would be bored to death listening to Snape's dreadful reports every meeting if we weren't here to provide alternate entertainment."

Snape and the hooded woman came in with Draco in tow after a moment. The three of them sat together in a darkened corner after. Crumbs of Lupin's sandwich were still on Draco's mouth and he refused to look at Harry or anyone else there.

Dumbledore then came in, with Neville Longbottom and his grandmother beside him. What Harry found very strange was that when Neville walked in the room, the hooded woman stood straight up to get a better look, watching him sit down with obvious interest or at least her hooded face followed him to his seat. Neville stared at her with trepidation, so distracted by her attention that he didn't even notice Harry or the others waving at him. His grandmother strode over to a couch that Dumbledore produced for her and sat down. Neville dutifully sat beside her.

"Now that young Master Longbottom is here, we could have him defeat a boggart for us. According to Remus, that's quite entertaining," Bill said, giving Snape a wicked grin.

Harry saw Lupin repressing a smile even as Neville's eyes flew wide when Snape glared at Bill as though he could disintegrate her with a look. The hooded woman turned to Snape, but Draco was laughing, which caused Snape to whirl and glare at him, too. Mrs. Longbottom raised an eyebrow and glanced at her grandson, who was blushing.

"All right, behave yourselves now. The lot of you are worse than schoolchildren," Mrs. Weasley sighed. The laughing subsided to occasional titters. During this whole banter, Harry had found he couldn't muster more than a weak smile. His thoughts kept turning back to Bellatrix's portrait. He wished he could burn the real thing.

Dumbledore sat down in a high-backed chair and then waved his wand, creating a comfortable chintz chair across from him in the middle of the room. He stared at the hooded woman expectantly, clearing his throat once. This had the effect of causing everyone to go silent.

"Calling to order the Order of the Phoenix, two thousand six-hundred ninety-seventh meeting since inception. This meeting's information will be disclosed to all members, but I have chosen not to invite everyone for safety's sake. This meeting is open to a few of our future members--and of course, Mrs. Longbottom. Order business shall not be discussed today," Dumbledore said. Several of the adults smiled indulgently at Harry and his friends.

"Now," Dumbledore continued, "this meeting has been called to order to have a further inquiry of a former Death Eater."

Dumbledore turned a very serious gaze upon the hooded woman. The occasional titters stopped and even Bill's crowd was watching her intently. Dumbledore waved to the empty chair he had produced. "Young lady, if you would be so kind?"

The hooded woman sighed heavily and moved to the chair, sitting on it gingerly. Everyone seemed to be leaning forward in interest. Harry wondered who she really was. No new Death Eaters had been arrested according to the Daily Prophet. Nothing that mattered to Harry had been done. Voldemort and Bellatrix were still alive and free. The woman looked young, so she couldn't possibly be privy to the inner workings of the Death Eaters.

What story did this woman have to tell that was so important that Dumbledore wanted him, Ron, Hermione, and Neville here?

To be continued . . .

Chapter 5: Jigsaw

Chapter Five:

The Inquiry of the Death Eater

Dumbledore studied the woman intently. "Please state your first and last name for the record," he said.

The hooded woman sighed heavily, glancing at the group around Bill for a long moment before speaking. "My name is Contessa Lestrangle," she admitted.

Bill's group seemed to explode in a furor and were all whispering furiously to each other. Out of all the people around Bill, only Morpheus remained calm, staring at Contessa shrewdly.

Harry's mind whirled to the Black Family Tree he had seen last year, to something he had not even really paid much attention to. Between Bellatrix Black and Rodolphus Lestrangle had been a line leading down to the name of Contessa Lestrangle.

Contessa pulled her hood back and turned to Harry, who had stood up and was pointing his wand at her. He didn't remember pulling it out. Lupin was grabbing his other arm, but Harry ignored it. He only had eyes for Contessa, for the daughter of the woman who killed his godfather. The anger that he had allowed to surge up inside of him for Bellatrix returned full force. The sadness was just behind it and he tried to shove it back down, but it stubbornly refused.

Contessa looked a lot like her mother, yet didn't. There were certainly prettier girls than her in the room. Her face was rather harsh and devoid of any friendliness. She had her mother's long, black hair and pale skin. Her eyes were gray, but shaped differently than her mother's. Instead of the cruel smiles Bellatrix would have given him, though, Contessa instead looked at Harry quite neutrally.

"Either use it or put it away," she finally said.

Harry slowly lowered his wand. He sank back down next to Lupin, trembling. His emotions had fled him again and he felt his anger and grief as though they were a million miles away from him. Most of him felt numb again. Dumbledore was watching him sadly before he turned back to Contessa.

"--lying little bitch--" Harry heard Rufus saying to the others near him, his bird's voice carrying over to where Harry sat. He heard snatches of their muttering while Dumbledore spoke. Something about undiluted Bobotuber pus exchanged for lotion and sabotage of their tests while in school.

"You work for St. Mungo's, don't you?" Dumbledore asked her.

Contessa nodded. "Not anymore," she said shortly, turning away from Harry to stare at her hands. Bill, Rufus, and Tonks were watching her very intently. Harry reckoned they felt about her like he felt about Draco.

"Well, Miss LeStrange, I wish to have the truth out of you. I have not had a chance to fully question you and there are details even Professor Snape is unaware of. He rescued you and young Master Malfoy from the shores of the lake near Hogwarts. Please explain how you got there."

Contessa worked her jaw for a moment before speaking. "Well, we ran away, didn't we? From the Dark Lord. It was Lily Potter, really, who did it all. She saved our lives. If hadn't been for her, we'd be dead or worse. What does it matter how we got here? We're just here."

Dumbledore frowned. "I'm afraid, Miss LeStrange, that it does matter. And we're all quite keen to hear your explanation of things. Particularly why you attribute your salvation to a dead woman," he said.

Harry twitched reflexively and felt Lupin's arm around him tighten, restraining him if necessary. Harry still felt numb, but very much wanted Contessa LeStrange to implode.

Contessa turned and looked at Snape imploringly. He tightened his lips, but otherwise looked impassive. Contessa turned from him and went back to staring at her hands. She seemed to be studiously avoiding Dumbledore's gaze. "I am a Necromancer," she said simply. Harry sucked in his breath, his mind reeling back to the book he had been reading the past month.

"I recall," Dumbledore said evenly, not sounding impressed at all.

"Well, it made me useful, since Narcissa was incarcerated."

"I imagine it did."

"Anyway, where do you want me to start?" Contessa asked, staring up at the ceiling now.

"The beginning is always good."

"Well, on the first day, God said, 'Let there be light'--"

"You know fully well what I mean, Miss LeStrange," Dumbledore said in a dangerous tone.

Contessa sighed, looking irritated. "Well," Contessa began, "it all started when my mother forced me to join the Death Eaters. She showed up just after she escaped Azkaban."

"You can stop there, Miss LeStrange. I said I wished to know the truth," Dumbledore said darkly.

"What do you mean?" she asked, feigning innocence.

Dumbledore smiled at her thinly. "My sources have informed me you joined the Death Eaters sometime last year and that you joined of your own volition," he said quite coolly. Harry watched with interest as Contessa shot Snape a hateful look and snarled.

"Fine," she hissed, despite the lack of sibilants in the word. Something about the way she said it. "I had made contact with the Death Eaters through some family members. I thought it was a good idea at the time."

Dumbledore nodded. "Name the family members," he said.

Contessa actually looked up from her skirts to glare at him. "You don't get that," she said.

Dumbledore actually smiled. "Miss LeStrange, it would be to your advantage to cooperate with us. Loyalty to your family and 'friends' will do you no good now. I already know who most of the Death Eaters are. My support of you in the trial of Mr. Bode's death is all dependent on your ability to be cooperative and honest with me," he said in a tone that Harry had only ever heard him use with Fudge.

Contessa shot another glare at Snape and then went back to glaring at Dumbledore.

She crossed her arms and sulked for a few moments before speaking again.

"My aunt, Narcissa Malfoy, and my uncle, Lucius Malfoy. I heard from Lucius out of the clear blue sky one day and--"

Dumbledore cleared his throat and glared at her. Contessa was looking very irritated by now. Harry felt satisfied by this. "I've lived with my aunt and uncle since I was seven," she said a little hotly, "but I joined on the suggestion of my old schoolmates: Desiree Beauregard, Sean Kilroy, and Bastion Fort.

"Bastion Fort was a Gryffindor!" Rufus shouted angrily as Bill's group exploded in a furor again.

"And you're a bigger idiot than I thought, Tiberius, if you think that Gryffindors can't be Death Eaters. And I think you're a pretty big idiot," Contessa said coldly, not even bothering to look at him. "There's Pettigrew, for one. Being a Gryffindor doesn't make you good. It just makes you overly excitable, in my opinion."

"And yet, my sources informed me that you had no contact with any of your schoolmates until they, too, joined the Death Eaters--after you," Dumbledore said coolly. He did not look happy.

Contessa said nothing, and only glared at him hatefully. Most of Bill's group seemed to take exception to her comments on Gryffindors. Harry noted that out of all of them, only Morpheus didn't look angry with her. Lupin had gone rigid when Contessa brought up Pettigrew, but Moody had started twitching when she brought up Barty Crouch.

"So you joined of your own volition?" Dumbledore asked.

"Yes-s-s," Contessa said slowly.

Dumbledore nodded, steepling his fingers. "I have it under good authority that you did some work at St. Mungo's for the Death Eaters. You were a Corpse Keeper, correct?"

Contessa looked even more irritated at this for some reason. "The Dark Lord seemed to think I was useful, because I was a Corpse-Keeper. Being a Corpse-Keeper for St. Mungo's gives me free leave in any ward. I do assistant Healing on the rougher patients no one else wants."

"How did you get involved with the death of Broderick Bode?" Dumbledore asked

impatiently.

Contessa licked her lips. "Avery wanted to give this patient named Bode an anonymous Christmas present. Said he knew the bloke, but wanted me to deliver it on account of him being so busy. I didn't think anything of it. What he gave me was in a box. I swear I never knew what it was. You have to believe me. I was just as surprised as the rest of you when I found out through the Daily Prophet that it was Devil's Snare. I'm sorry he died, really I am," she said in a pleading voice.

Dumbledore did not look particularly convinced. "Elaborate on how useful you were to Voldemort," he said. Harry leaned over to Hermione.

"What's a Corpse-Keeper?" Harry whispered.

"Sort of a magical forensic examiner and mortician rolled up into one. Not a respectable job, really," Hermione whispered back.

Contessa winced at the mention of Voldemort's name. "He said I was in an unique position to make sure certain deaths weren't noticed. They were killing a few Muggles here and there, I knew they were, but the Ministry didn't seem to care. There were at least five Mudbloods and three half-blood deaths I attributed to 'natural causes' to cover up for them, too. I had no choice.

"I was so scared. You have to believe that. The Dark Lord was angry and sometimes he would just punish someone for no reason. The Dark Lord left me alone most of the time, though he was planning something with Aunt Narcissa. She normally didn't get involved with Death Eater business, but he needed her powers as a Necromancer. But when she was arrested, it became quite obvious that I was going to have to take her place. "

Contessa stopped there. She had an almost angry expression. She had fidgeted so bad with the hem of her skirt, it was slightly torn. Draco, too, was staring angrily at his feet. Snape looked so bland you'd almost have thought a Dementor sucked out his soul. Harry finally turned his attention back to the fidgeting, sniffing Contessa. He didn't want to equate this sniveling, lying mess of a girl before him as a human being.

Dumbledore let Contessa be silent for a few moments. Bill's group was whispering furiously amongst themselves again. Lupin seemed to be watching Contessa with something like curiosity now. Almost everyone else watched her warily. Ron and most of the Weasleys were looking at her with the same fearful expression one would watch a mad dragon that was chained up in the backyard. Hermione seemed quite

curious about her. Neville's expression was unreadable, though his grandmother's was full of virulent distaste.

"I think this is the part where showing us what happened will be so much easier than telling us," Dumbledore said almost gently.

Contessa looked up and stared at him, wiping her face. "What do you mean?" she asked cautiously.

"I want to know exactly what happened from the night Draco was disgraced to the moment you two arrived at Hogwarts. I want to know every detail," Dumbledore answered.

Contessa waited for him to explain. She didn't have to wait long until Dumbledore waved his wand delicately and the Pensieve appeared, spinning on the floor in the middle of the room, its murky liquid shimmering a bit. She stared at it and then back at Dumbledore.

Dumbledore stared at her expectantly. She cast a glance back at Snape and Draco. Snape nodded at her, but Draco looked confused. In fact, most people looked confused. Contessa turned back and sighed, pointing her wand at her own temple. After a moment, she pulled away sticky strands of her thoughts and dropped them into the Pensieve. She pulled out a few more thought strands and placed them in the bowl as well. She then walked back over to Snape and sat down beside him, pulling her hood back up to cover her face.

Hermione was practically bouncing in her seat with excitement. No doubt she knew what a Pensieve did. Lupin looked quite curious, as did Morpheus. Everyone else was watching Dumbledore expectantly as he cast a quick spell and Contessa's memories began to form, rising up from the Pensieve as Bertha Jorkins once had. However, Dumbledore flicked his wand again, and created an almost three-dimensional movie-like scene that filled the middle of the room, rising from the bowl into mid-air. It was filled with color and the rest of the room darkened as Contessa's memory brightened, bringing out the details of it. Harry stared at it in angry fascination while most of the rest of the room shuddered in fear.

Voldemort stood before them. A jumble of painful emotions began to swirl around in Harry's stomach and it took him a moment to push them back where they came from. Lupin's hand was on his shoulder in comfort, but it only irritated Harry, so he shrugged him off. Lupin looked slightly hurt, much like Hagrid had, but turned back to Contessa's memory.

Her memory seemed to be on pause, for Voldemort wasn't doing anything but standing there in all his horrid glory, in midst of tapping his wand onto the palm of his hand. Harry glared at Voldemort, finally seeing him without his scar searing in pain. He shoved every emotion that threatened to rip into him deep down, wanting to be completely numb while he found out why Contessa spoke of his mother like she had risen from the dead.

And then sound filled the room and things began to move, as though Dumbledore pressed a play button. Harry watched it all in morbid fascination, unable to look away as he watched it all. He lived through every painful moment, from watching Draco tortured under the Cruciatus Curse, to Contessa channeling his mother, to his mother escaping with Draco to Hogwarts. Harry jumped when he saw pieces of her memory. He had dreamt of many parts of that! But it hadn't been a dream at all. It had been reality. His mother really did save Draco's life. Contessa really had gone into the Netherworld and met his parents and Sirius.

Sirius had a living soul. Harry wondered what that meant, exactly.

Neville had to look away at some parts and Harry had to force himself not to jump up and scream. But when it was over, it was Harry's mother's voice that stayed with him. Her words echoed in his head and his heart, making him feel inexplicably happy and sad at the same time.

Tell him--tell him that his father and I love him so much. You tell him he's not alone, even when he thinks he is.

The scene coalesced back down to the Pensieve as Contessa obviously passed out on the shores of the Hogwarts' lake in her memory. The Pensieve darkened and Dumbledore walked over to it. The rest of the room had fallen quite silent.

Dumbledore held out the Pensieve to Contessa, silently allowing her to collect her memories with her wand. It must be a new wand. Dumbledore then sat back down on his chair and considered Contessa thoughtfully for a long while. No one else spoke. Harry imagined it was for the same reason he wasn't saying anything. He couldn't think of anything that quite expressed himself well enough. He took the opportunity to try and sort out his emotions. It didn't work, so he just shoved them aside for later.

"You seemed quite ready to take credit for Bode's death," Dumbledore finally said, his voice strangely loud in the silence.

Contessa's face was still hooded. "At the time, I was still trying to convince my mother I was a loyal Death Eater," she responded.

"And Lily?" Dumbledore asked.

"Returned to the Netherworld."

"How can Sirius have a living soul?" Dumbledore asked. Harry was listening quite keenly now.

"I don't know. He's dead, but not strictly. When you die, you lose your living soul. The manner of his death must not have stripped him of it. He's not strictly dead, but certainly not alive. He passed straight to the Netherworld without that minor technicality. It's as effective as being dead, and technically, he is dead. Yet he still possesses a living soul. I should know."

"Can he be restored then?"

"Sure. All you have to do is build him a body that would attract his spirit, retrieve his incorporeal spirit from the Netherworld without possession, and coax him into this new body. After you do all that, you then have to pray the new body will live and not reject its new soul and die anyway. Which would then make Black's condition quite official then, I should think. I should also go on to mention that the only person I know who can build himself new bodies is the Dark Lord and that retrieving a spirit from the Netherworld by indirect channel is impossible. So if you can figure out a way to do the impossible and convince the Dark Lord to give you his body-building recipe, then let me know."

"Regular optimist, isn't she?" Ron snorted. But the wheels in Harry's head had already begun to turn.

After all, Contessa was a Necromancer--not the most skilled Necromancer, but she still had certain abilities and had managed to successfully channel his mother. And Harry had seen Voldemort rising in his new body. He couldn't be the only one with that knowledge.

"Very well," Dumbledore said heavily.

"So? What are you going to do with me?" Contessa asked irritably.

Dumbledore studied her intently while Bill's crowd began to mutter darkly. "Your

record is hardly spotless. Your trial has been pushed back almost a year since the Ministry has far more pressing things to deal with than you. I will let the Wizengamot decide the proper course of action for you in regards to the death of Broderick Bode and your service as a Death Eater--I'm not entirely convinced by your story. The Minister of Magic has left the decision of what to do with you until the trial up to me--as long as you're kept under close watch," Dumbledore paused for a moment, looking thoughtful.

Until such time as your trial is held, you will be held on probation in this house," he continued. "I do not feel comfortable placing you in Azkaban, since the other Death Eaters may try to kill you. Consider yourself under house arrest--you may only leave with permission. I will place some small trust in you since you have asked me for asylum. I need not say how badly I will react if I am betrayed."

Contessa said nothing to this, though Harry thought he saw her dark lips tug into a frown. Mrs. Weasley's brows were coming together and Moody was scowling.

"You and Draco will both reside in this house, at least for the summer. You shall earn your keep by maintaining the upkeep of our headquarters. I expect you to have this place cleaned, restored to Harry's liking, and that you prepare meals thrice daily to those who dwell here and any member of the Order who wishes to eat here as well. In return, you will have room, board, and a small stipend that will be provided to you buy your own personal items and that of your cousin. Since you have some Healing skills, when any member of the Order of the Phoenix is injured and wishes healing, you will provide it to them free of charge," Dumbledore said, letting this sink in for a moment before continuing. "You are not to leave without permission and a guard. A permanent Anti-Disapparition Jinx will be placed upon this house. I have also taken other steps to prevent your departure."

"Like what?" Moody asked darkly. "We need safety precautions."

Dumbledore gave him a tight smile. "Necromancers are weak against unicorns and their byproducts, Alastor. Her kind cannot pass through unicorn hair-lined exits or break free from bonds made of unicorn hair--in fact, as I told the Aurors who went to apprehend Mrs. Malfoy, Necromancers are powerless when bound by unicorn hair. Miss Lestranger's magic cannot extend past the unicorn hair lining any better than she can. All the windows and exits of this house have been lined with unicorn hair, naturally," Dumbledore said neutrally. "She will also be placed under Remus Lupin's charge."

Moody nodded in satisfaction. Draco stiffened and then glared hatefully at

Dumbledore. Contessa was positively scowling by the end of Dumbledore's statement.

Dumbledore turned back to Contessa. "Well?" he prompted.

"Very well, since I have no other choice," she said stiffly.

"You have a choice. You could always wait for your trial in Cell Block Seven with the other Death Eaters in Azkaban."

"Fine, I accept," Contessa snarled.

"I am satisfied with the answers you have provided, at least for the moment. Does anyone else have any other thoughts?" Dumbledore asked pointedly, looking at Bill's group. They were all looking mutinous, except for Morpheus, who was watching Contessa shrewdly.

"She's just going to keep her wand?" Lupin asked.

"For the moment, unless she proves she is untrustworthy. Her magic is useless against the unicorn hair in any case. And since I know you have a unicorn hair core in your wand, you should have no problems with her, should she provide any," Dumbledore answered. Lupin nodded in understanding.

"You are surely not suggesting she be left with the care of my children while I'm out?" Mrs. Weasley said angrily. "I won't have it!"

Dumbledore turned to her. "Remus is in charge, but as an adult, there may be times when she shall have to care for them. I doubt she will harm them, Molly--it would be a foolish thing to do, and whatever else she may be, she is not foolish. Besides, the young ones have all proved they can take care of themselves quite admirably," he said.

"Can you guarantee me she won't hurt my children?" Mrs. Weasley asked, raising her voice.

"I cannot guarantee another person, Molly. She must guarantee herself," Dumbledore said. "Remus does live here, and though he is free to come and go as he pleases, he does spend a lot of time in this house. He will be watching over everyone as well. And I have no doubt that you and Arthur will be in and out as time allows."

Everyone looked expectantly at Contessa. After a moment, she scowled. "You have

my word as a witch and Healer that I will not harm anyone here. Though if they vex me, I'm certainly not going to sit back and take it. I'll even cook the brats their meals and promise not to poison them."

"She's telling the truth, Molly," Dumbledore said evenly.

Contessa shrugged. "At least someone picked it up," Hermione said softly, giving Harry a reproving look. He ignored her. He had other things to think about.

"Make one wrong move, Missie, and I'll have that dark head of yours mounted over my fireplace," Moody growled. Contessa paled.

"Anyone else?" Dumbledore said, looking around the room. Bill's crowd muttered darkly amongst themselves, but none of them added anything. Tonks half stood up, but Kingsley sat her down with a tug on her shirt.

"Very well. Meeting adjourned," Dumbledore said, nodding. Everyone stood up and milled out, many saying good-bye to Dumbledore as he walked out with Lupin and the Weasleys. Ron and Ginny stayed with Harry. Most everyone else left, leaving only Morpheus and the Aurors behind.

Contessa was standing in the middle of the room now, very close to Harry, her hood pulled back. She looked very unhappy and was surveying Harry, Hermione, Ron, and Ginny with a frown. She didn't look entirely hostile, but certainly didn't look friendly, either. Draco peered at them from just behind her. He had an obvious look of distaste on his face.

Harry wondered how he could use her to help him bring back Sirius. He wondered if she knew anything and was hiding it. He wondered if she was an enemy or a friend.

Morpheus approached Contessa, looking hesitant. "Contessa, I--"

"Don't," she said sharply, cutting him off quickly.

Morpheus hung his head for some odd reason. "You're still vexed at me for not going out with you on that Valentine's Day, aren't you?" he asked. "I was very young and foolish. I thought popularity mattered."

Contessa jerked her head to the door. "Bill's leaving. You'd better go run and catch him, otherwise you'll lose him," she said with a hint of sarcasm and irony that Harry didn't understand.

Morpheus smiled sadly. "Why are you still angry at me? It was a long time ago," he said softly.

"That would indicate I cared. And I don't," Contessa said, shrugging in indifference. Morpheus nodded as though he understood something and then turned and left. Harry watched him go, finding him rather distracting.

Tonks and Rufus were apparently leaving with Kingsley and Moody. Tonks paused by Contessa as well, though Rufus walked past her without even looking at her. His pointed nose was in the air.

Tonks studied Contessa and Draco quite intently. None of them said anything to each other. Harry suddenly realized they were all blood cousins. All of their mothers were sisters. Harry took the opportunity to appreciate how little they all looked like each other. Tonks's hair was a bright pink, which probably wasn't natural, but was short and spiky. She was fairly tall, around Contessa's size. Her eyes were gray today, which was strange because it was the only thing the three cousins had in common. Contessa was pale and dark with her long, black hair, while Draco had a pale, almost bloodless look to him with his smooth, white-blond hair. Contessa was the one who looked the most like Sirius, but for a moment, Harry thought he could see a bit of Sirius in all three's gray eyes.

"Is there something I can help you with, Nymphadora?" Contessa asked in a dangerously sweet voice.

"Is that any way to treat your cousin? I just found out my mother was a Black last year, when I met Sirius," Tonks said, ignoring Contessa's bait.

"Trust me, nothing pains me more," Contessa said nastily.

"Why, to be related to a half-blood?" Tonks asked heatedly.

"No, to be related to a Gryffindor. Positively shameful."

Draco was gaping at Tonks with a look of disbelief. "I'm related to that?" he asked.

Tonks smirked at him for a moment. She screwed up her face and after a moment she turned herself into a female version of Draco, along with his white-blond hair, gray eyes, and pale, pointed face. Draco took a startled step back. Tonks swung back to glare at Contessa.

Contessa scowled. "Stop showing off," she said.

"She's a Metamorphmagus," Draco said in wonder. "You're a Necromancer and I'm a--"

"It doesn't matter," Contessa said briskly, cutting him off and smirking at Tonks. "Talent runs in the family. Sirius Black was an Animagus at fifteen. My mother is You-Know-Who's most powerful supporter. Your mother took on four Aurors and almost won--not to mention being a superb Necromancer. Her mother was the weakest of the Black sisters. It's probably why she married a Mudblood."

"You take that back!" Harry roared, ripping out his wand. Contessa took a step back and Draco's laughter was cut off before it began. His eyes went very wide as Harry pointed his wand at Contessa's face. Contessa swallowed reflexively, going very white. After all his mother and Dumbledore had done for her, how could she say something like that? Anger and resentment surged up in him--and not all of it was directed at Contessa, either.

"How dare you!" Ginny cried, while Hermione bristled.

Ron was infuriated. "You little--"

Then Harry felt Tonks's hand on his shoulder squeezing it. With her other hand, she lowered his wand. He looked up at her and she gave him a smile. "It's all right, Harry," she said. "They're just words. She can't hurt anyone with words, though she'll try."

Tonks then turned to Contessa and her expression became quite cold. "We're not in school anymore, Contessa. I'm not going to let you push my buttons," she said quietly, frowning. "Especially since you've been officially labeled a blood traitor. You're scum now, worse than me."

Contessa scowled, but said nothing. She kept glancing nervously at Harry, who drew back, glaring at her hatefully. After a few moments of silence, everyone seemed to relax.

"You went to school together?" Hermione asked, obviously trying to break the tension as anything else.

Tonks turned to him. "Me, Charlie, and Contessa were all in the same year. Bill,

Rufus, and Morph were a couple years ahead of us. Kingsley was a few years ahead of Bill. He actually attended first year while your parents, Sirius, and Snape were in their seventh year," she explained, giving Harry a look of gratitude.

That was interesting news to Harry. It explained why Kingsley seemed to know his father.

"Well, I better get going," Tonks said stiffly, glancing back to Contessa.

Contessa grimaced and made a noise of disgust. Draco had his arms crossed. Tonks left after flashing a grin at Harry. Harry watched her go and then turned back to glare at Contessa.

Mrs. Weasley appeared in the doorway. "I'm going to make dinner. Those of you that are hungry may come down. And Miss Lestrange, I'll have a list for you on what sorts of meals I expect my children to eat," Mrs. Weasley said airily, and then left again.

Contessa's nostrils were flared as she glared after Mrs. Weasley, making her seem more like the ugly little girl she had once been. "I'm a Healer. I happen to be fully aware of what meals to feed children, on top of many other--Lupin!" she cried, interrupting herself as he walked in.

Lupin sighed and stopped by the couch he and Harry had been sitting on, picking up a notebook he had left there. He looked up at the ceiling as though pleading for divine intervention for a moment before turning his attention to Contessa. "Yes?" he asked politely.

"Still have a liver left? Or have you drank it all away?" Contessa asked him imperiously.

Lupin sighed heavily. "This is neither the time nor the place, Contessa."

Harry was surprised they were on a first name basis. Or Lupin was in any case. "You two know each other?" Harry asked.

Lupin shrugged. "There are really only a couple Healers that St. Mungo's has that are willing to treat Werewolves when they come in. Ironically, one of them is a Corpse-Keeper who is more often than not called upstairs to do the dirty work. Particularly close to the full moon. She's really one of the few people qualified enough to brew Wolfsbane Potion, having been taught by Professor Snape himself," he said.

"You look like absolute rubbish," Contessa remarked.

Lupin sighed again. "You always brighten my day with your sweet words, Contessa. And no doubt since you will be attending to my meals, you'll make sure I'm on some disgusting diet. I can't wait," Lupin said in a tone that indicated otherwise.

"Observe, Draco, the complete dissolution of a Gryffindor in the final stages of one of their three great weaknesses. These three weaknesses, of course, are that Gryffindors are overly excitable, self-destructive, and in general, irritating," Contessa said to her cousin.

"I'm guessing his would be 'self-destructive'. And 'irritating'," Draco said, smirking.

"They're all irritating, Draco, I assure you," Contessa said, smirking nastily at Lupin.

"I'm going downstairs," Lupin said coolly. He left the room rather stiffly.

"Well, I'm going to see that all my belongings were brought in," Contessa said, sweeping off without saying a word to Harry at all. Draco followed her out rather quickly, trying desperately not to look at Harry.

Harry followed them out after a moment of exchanging looks with the others. Hermione, Ron, and Ginny followed him. Ron and Ginny were still grumbling to each other about Contessa's nerve. Harry passed by Dumbledore, who was talking to Lupin in the hallway.

Dumbledore smiled at him. "Keep an eye on them both, Harry. They are lost, but they may yet find themselves again," he said. "I'm trusting that you and your friends will be able to take care of yourselves."

And then he turned back to Lupin, speaking quietly. Harry felt sort of vindicated. Finally, Dumbledore was trusting him.

"How do you feel?" Hermione asked Harry carefully as they walked away. Ron was watching him expectantly. Everyone acted like he was a fragile piece of china that was going to break anytime someone mentioned Sirius's name.

"I'm fine. Absolutely fine," he said, walking faster towards the kitchen. He didn't feel like talking to them at this moment. He wasn't really fine.

But he would be when he found a way to bring back Sirius.

To be continued . . .

Chapter 6: Jigsaw

Chapter Six: Birthday Surprise

Everyone had just sat down to dinner when Contessa and Draco decided to enter the room. There weren't that many people that had stayed, those being Mr. and Mrs. Weasley, Ron, Ginny, Hermione, Lupin, Dumbledore, and of course, Harry. Mrs. Weasley had made a rather traditional Sunday dinner, consisting of excellent Yorkshire puddings, roast beef and potatoes, and tender green beans with gravy.

Dumbledore leapt to his feet and beamed at them. Contessa looked imperious and Draco just scowled. "How wonderful! I was hoping you'd join us for dinner," Dumbledore said, adding length and two chairs to the table with a flick of his wand.

Draco stalked over to his seat. Contessa paused by Lupin, staring at his drink. It was the same pumpkin juice they were all drinking. Contessa gave him a magnificent scowl and then with no warning, she tapped his glass with her wand and said, "Evanesco."

Lupin sighed heavily as Contessa frowned on him. "I've told you repeatedly that you need to watch your diet. Pumpkin juice has too much sugar in it. I'm sure you've also been stuffing your face with chocolate," she said in a tone that reminded Harry very strongly of Madame Pomfrey.

"I'm a grown man," Lupin said, working his jaw.

"I did not spend countless months patching you back together after your monthly escapades or brewing large quantities of Wolfsbane Potion--which is quite tedious by the way--for you to ignore my medical advice," Contessa said.

"It's not as though you care whether I live or die," Lupin said coolly, not looking at her.

"I'm a Healer, not to mention a Necromancer, Lupin. I care about whether anyone lives or dies. I just don't like you much. Mostly because you are a mopey, wishy-washy little man. Don't confuse the issue," Contessa said evenly and then tapped Lupin's glass again with her wand. A yellow liquid filled it, with a bit of ice and a piece of lemon. "This is lemonade. Lemons are good for lycanthrope constitutions." And with that, Contessa swept off to sit beside Draco.

"You should listen to her," Mrs. Weasley told Lupin severely. "Because all of the rest of us here not only care whether you live or die, but happen to like you."

Draco snorted and muttered something that sounded suspiciously like, "Speak for yourself."

Lupin sighed and began to drink the lemonade resolutely. He said nothing. As they began to eat, the room filled mostly with only the sounds of chewing and swallowing. After several minutes of this, Dumbledore cast a small smile at Harry and then looked at Contessa.

"Harry's birthday is in two days," Dumbledore told her.

Contessa paused in the middle of bringing a fork full of potatoes to her mouth. "So?" she asked.

"We're going to have a birthday party for him," Dumbledore said. Harry turned to him in surprise as everyone else beamed at him. Everyone except Draco, who wore a scowl.

"So?" Contessa repeated.

"It would be a nice gesture on your part to take the responsibility to decorate, coordinate, and of course, prepare the meals. As I recall, you learned how to cook from Narcissa Malfoy. She's quite the epicure. Didn't your grandmother teach her?" Dumbledore said as though he was giving Contessa a Christmas present.

Contessa sighed, closing, and then re-opening her eyes. "I don't even know him," she said through gritted teeth.

"Well, just ask him what he likes," Dumbledore suggested, casting a glance at Harry and winking at him. Draco's face was twisted up in dislike.

Harry frowned. Contessa slowly turned her head towards him, looking mildly

revolted. "Well? I have rather short notice of things. Tell me what sorts of things you like. And while you're at it, if I'm going to be redecorating your bloody house, you'd better give me an idea of how to do it," she said brusquely, waving her hand and producing a notepad and a black crow feather quill.

Harry cast a glance at Dumbledore, who nodded in encouragement. "Er, I like Quidditch," he said slowly.

Contessa rolled her eyes as she scribbled that down. "Imagine that. A teenage boy who likes Quidditch," she said darkly.

"Spoken by someone who obviously has no athletic aptitude whatsoever," Draco retorted, looking offended.

"I'm quite good at croquet, thank you very much. I just don't like anything that involves being more than five feet off the ground. Now do be quiet," Contessa told him and then turned to Harry with a cold expression. "What are your favorite colors?"

Harry shrugged, never having giving it much thought before. "Red, I suppose. And gold. Blue and yellow are okay. Black's not too bad, either. Green's all right, as long as it hasn't anything to do with Slytherin," he added, glaring at Draco. Draco glared back.

Contessa nodded, writing this all down. "What sort of animals do you like?" she asked, though her tone indicated she couldn't care less.

"I've heard he was fond of great three-headed dogs. Buy him one for his birthday. Or maybe a raging Hungarian Horntail?" Draco suggested in a tone that made Harry want to hit him.

"Or how about someone transfigured into a white ferret? I can even tell you who I'd like transfigured," Harry retorted, meeting Draco's cold glare with a rather heated one. Ron guffawed, Ginny giggled, and Hermione tried to not look amused. The adults had the decency to not react.

"Animals?" Contessa asked, looking like she was sucking on a lemon.

"I like phoenixes," Harry said, looking away from Draco as Contessa rolled her eyes again. "Dragons are sort of interesting in moderation, I suppose. I really like stags, too. And dogs. And lions. And hippogriffs. And wolves."

Lupin smiled a bit at the last one.

Contessa was now staring at him. "Aren't you a Parselmouth? Don't you like snakes?" she asked.

Harry blinked at her and scowled. "No, I hate them," he said, though that wasn't entirely true. He had rather liked the first snake he had set free in a zoo a few years ago.

"Why? You have a gift to talk to them. How can you not like them?" Contessa asked curiously.

"I don't like anything that's evil," Harry said a bit more heatedly than he meant to.

"Snakes aren't evil. They're animals. It's only their masters that are evil."

"They're associated with the Dark Arts, aren't they?"

"So are Parselmouths. As long as you're not planning to go into the Dark Arts, any snake you had wouldn't be associated with it, either," Contessa said, sounding as though the subject actually mattered to her.

"I don't want any snakes in Sirius's bloody house, all right?" Harry said angrily, his voice raising.

Contessa shrugged, though she was scowling now. "Fine. Any other requests?" she asked shortly.

"I don't want any paintings or pictures of the Black family in my house--except for the ones we need, like Phineas Nigellus. And I want those house elf heads off the wall. I just want photographs of Sirius, my parents, my friends, and Prof-er, Remus. Pictures of any member of the Order of the Phoenix are fine, too," he said firmly.

Contessa said nothing, but scribbled everything down very quickly. "Food?"

"I like chocolate," Harry shrugged. "I like most food."

"Very well. That should be enough to be going on with," she said, putting away the notepad and quill and then turning back to her food.

"I'll send out the invitations," Mrs. Weasley said, giving Contessa an odd look.

"Since you'll need to go shopping tomorrow, Miss Lestrangle, I'll provide you with a purse and more details. You have my permission to leave the house tomorrow only. You'll need a guard, even if you are going straight to Diagon Alley and back," Dumbledore said.

"I'll go," Lupin said wearily.

"Wonderful. I can look forward to an entire day of listening to the sound of a bottle being drained. Do try not to get so drunk I have to carry you home," Contessa said scathingly. Lupin scowled, but did not argue.

"I want to go," Draco whined. "I want to get out of here. I need new clothes and a wand."

"You're not going anywhere," Contessa said firmly. "And I'll bring you back what I can afford, which will be some material to make your school robes with. Don't expect anything fancy. I have limited funds, Draco. I'll get you a new wand when your school lists have arrived."

Draco visibly pouted, but didn't argue.

"Want to play snooker tomorrow, Harry?" Ron asked. "Hermione taught me to play."

"Sure," Harry shrugged. He'd never had a birthday party before. He had doubts about Contessa being in charge of it, but he couldn't complain too much.

"I was thinking we could look through some books and read up on our upcoming year. We should start preparing for the N.E.W.T.s," Hermione suggested.

"You do that. Harry and I are going to play snooker," Ron said firmly, while Ginny giggled.

Harry suppressed a grin and enjoyed his dinner.

Later that night, Hermione and Ron showed up at the door of Harry's room. He let them in and shut the door behind them.

"Harry! Sirius isn't dead--well, sort of," Ron said excitedly. "Can you believe that?"

"Oh, Ron, I told you not to get Harry's hopes up for nothing. Contessa said as much that it all amounted to the same thing," Hermione said, entering with a frown.

"Listen, I've got an idea," Harry said even more excitedly, ignoring Hermione. "I saw Voldemort use that potion to resurrect himself. If we could just get a hold of the recipe, we could get together Sirius a new body."

"Harry, that's Dark Arts magic. We can't do that and Sirius wouldn't want us to," Hermione said, throwing the wet blanket on Harry and Ron rather quickly.

Harry sighed and frowned. "Maybe there's a variation of it that isn't Dark Arts?" he asked hopefully.

"I don't know, Harry," Hermione said, shaking her head. "It could take ages to find it, even if it exists."

"What about Snape? He's really good with potions," Ron suggested.

"I'm not asking Snape for anything," Harry said darkly.

"Well, if Malfoy is really a genius potion-brewer like Contessa said, maybe he knows. We could beat it out of him. When I say 'we', I mean me," Ron suggested with a wicked grin.

"That's ridiculous. A sixteen-year-old boy is not going to know the secret of making bodies. I don't care how gifted he is," Hermione snorted.

"He's almost seventeen, isn't he?" Ron asked vaguely. "His birthday's in November, isn't it? He gets a giant pile of presents in front of him every year around that time."

"Look, we need to bring Sirius back and I don't care how we do it. Sirius is all that matters. I think we can use Contessa. If her powers are based on death, then she's bound to have some sort of power that'd bring Sirius back. We could use her to work on Snape about finding that recipe, since they seem to know each other. She could be dead useful, I think. We just have to figure out how to use her properly. I don't care if we have to cast the Imperius Curse on her to do it. And I don't care if the potion is dodgy, we just have to get Sirius back. That's all that matters," Harry said excitedly. He felt energized, fervent.

There was dead silence in the room. Ron looked a little disconcerted. Hermione looked horrified.

"What's wrong?" Harry asked, looking at Hermione's expression. She looked very uncomfortable for a moment before speaking.

"Harry, you sound just like . . . well, like Voldemort--don't look like that, Ron. I'm sorry, Harry, but that's how it is. Talking about using the Dark Arts, just so you can get what you want. Using people for this and that. You can't do that with people," Hermione said severely.

That stung. Harry was so taken aback that he sat down, staring at Hermione in a mixture of anger and resentment. She stared back at him reprovably. Ron was very quiet. How could she say that to him? How could she be that cruel?

Didn't she realize bringing back Sirius was the only thing that mattered?

"Fine, we'll find a potion variation. I guess, we could ask her to help us," Harry said weakly. He wasn't going to let this go. He wasn't going to let Sirius rot in the Netherworld if there was a chance, no matter how impossible, of bringing him back.

"We could do that. She doesn't seem to be an entirely bad sort. We could make friends with both her and Draco. And then we could ask her to help us, and him too," Hermione said.

"Why don't we just go ask You-Know-Who for the recipe directly while we're at it? Send him an owl or something. I'm sure Hedwig won't mind," Ron said sarcastically.

Hermione sighed. "If we don't try to--"

"Give it up, Hermione. Malfoy's not going to be our friend, even if we decided to wait on him hand and foot. That Contessa girl should help us anyway, if she's trying so hard to get away from being a Death Eater. She owes it to me," Harry said hotly.

"Why does she owe you anything, Harry?" Hermione asked, brows furrowing.

Harry blanked, his mind not formulating a proper answer. He felt Contessa owed him something, but he couldn't say why. "Because--because her mother killed Sirius. She owes me and she owes Neville," he said lamely.

"Oh, really?" Hermione asked coolly. "And I suppose you think she owes you because

it was your mother who saved her life?"

"Exactly," Harry nodded in agreement.

"Harry! How could you even say that? I can't believe you! Contessa's not responsible for her parents' actions, anymore than you are. She doesn't owe you anything! Honestly, you are being so selfish lately!" Hermione said angrily. She then swiftly stalked out of the room, her nose upturned.

"I'm--I'm not being selfish . . . am I?" Harry asked Ron.

Ron was staring after Hermione with an expression of surprise. "Maybe a little bit," he said vaguely. Harry glared at him.

"Why don't you just run after her then, if she's so much more important to you than me? Agree with everything she says. Whipped, that's what you are," Harry said nastily.

Ron scowled at this. "You really are being selfish, Harry," he said, stiffly following Hermione out of the room.

Harry slammed the door after him, knocking pictures off the wall and causing Mrs. Black's portrait to start screaming. She had been very quiet since he came here, but whatever had kept her silent had apparently worn off. He couldn't wait to have her portrait toasted, just like the one with Bellatrix in it. He wasn't selfish. He wasn't selfish at all. After all, this was to save Sirius. Bringing him back couldn't be selfish, could it?

Harry spent the rest of the night trying to fight off the suspicion that Hermione and Ron were right.

Harry and Ron didn't play snooker the next day.

Ron and Hermione were poring through books for next year, ignoring Harry. Ron looked less than thrilled by this, however. It had been interesting to watch Contessa use a charmed bauble that Dumbledore had made for her just so she could walk through the unicorn-hair lined doorway without bursting into flame. Lupin took it back the moment she passed the threshold and then they walked down the street to

presumably Disapparate in a private area. Since everyone was out shopping, even Mrs. Weasley and Ginny, the only two people not doing anything in particular were Harry and Draco.

Harry found himself in the drawing room, sitting before the Black family tree, staring at it glumly. He was glaring at the burn mark that used to be Sirius's name. He felt so alone. None of them understood how he felt. None of them kept losing people like he did.

He spent a long time trying not think about how lonely and lost he'd been since Sirius died. As a result, he couldn't think of anything else. It hurt. Why did it have to hurt so much? His parents had been dead ever since he could remember, but Sirius had been alive. He had laughed with Harry, cried with Harry, talked with Harry, comforted Harry. He had been real.

And now he was gone.

Harry heard a soft, "Oh," and turned to see Draco Malfoy standing in the doorway, his arms filled with bottles, decanters, and a cloth bag. Harry wiped at his face to make sure no evidence of his emotions remained, staring at him hostilely. Draco's eyes widened for a moment before he narrowed them back to his usual glare.

"What are you doing here?" Draco hissed.

"I live here. Or rather, I will by next year. What are you doing here?" Harry asked, surveying Draco's items with suspicion. "Brewing Medusa's Potion for my birthday party?"

"Aww, is widdle Potty Potter scared I'm going to poison his birthday cake?" Draco asked maliciously.

Harry was incensed--mostly because Draco's voice suddenly reminded him of Bellatrix--but he managed to control his anger enough for a nasty riposte. "So, tell me, Malfoy, how did your mother react when she found out that my Mudblood mother had saved your worthless life? Or does she even acknowledge your existence now?" he asked hotly.

Draco flushed pink. "Don't you start on my mother, Potter. Or I'll start on yours and you won't like where I take it," he said dangerously.

"So, you're still going to stick up for some bloody Death Eater bitch?" Harry asked

nastily. He was feeling very angry now and he knew there wasn't any good reason for it. Other than he was hurting and wanted Draco to hurt like he did. Draco still had a godfather. It wasn't fair.

"You shut up, Potter! My mother's not a Death Eater!"

"Jealous because maybe my dead mother still loves me while your living one is cursing your existence for being too chicken to kill anyone?" It was nasty and Harry knew it. He regretted saying it the moment it came out of his mouth.

"What do you know about my mother, Potter? You don't know one bloody thing about me! Don't you dare talk about my mother like that! At least mine wasn't some filthy Mudblood bitch, who went and got herself killed!" Draco spat.

Harry lunged at Draco, bottles and decanters flying out of Draco's hands as he landed on top of Draco. Draco was struggling underneath him like a wildcat. The sudden pain of being punched under the chin burst like a balloon as Draco's fist made connection and Harry fell back for a moment. Draco took the opportunity to stand up. Harry punched back, once, as hard as he could, connecting to Draco's face. Draco flew backwards and then came to his feet, tossing a bottle off Harry's head. Harry yelped at the sudden pain and grabbed his head, launching himself at Draco. Every painful, frustrating, and angry emotion Draco had ever caused Harry to feel came surging up at once.

They rolled on the ground wildly; each trying to get in the one nasty kick, punch, or bite that would end the fight. Harry had Draco on the ground, pinned beneath his weight, and was taking great relish in punching him in the stomach as hard as he could. It felt good.

"Whenever you two are quite finished, lunch is ready."

Harry paused before his next blow, realizing he was holding Draco down. Draco rolled his torso to the side, whimpering and coughing. Harry let his arms go and Draco held his stomach. Harry looked up at the speaker, finding himself being glared at by a frowning Mrs. Weasley. She and Ginny had apparently returned. Ginny looked appalled. Harry quickly leapt off Draco, standing up and wiping the blood from his nose. He felt sore all over.

"You'll both be wanting to see Contessa for those bruises. Do try not to kill each other before she returns," Mrs. Weasley said coldly and left them standing there. She looked too angry with both of them to do it herself.

Draco started to collect his things. Various plants and potion ingredients had fallen out of his bag. Harry glared at him.

"You are trying to brew more of your bloody poisons!" Harry cried.

Draco scowled. "It's none of your business what I do or don't do," he hissed.

Harry bunched up his fists. Draco tensed. He had obviously come off the loser in the fight, with two spectacular bruises on his face and a bloody lip, not mention that he was not able to stand up straight. He crouched near the ground, clutching his bottles and decanters to his stomach, glaring up at Harry as though to dare him to do something about it.

There was something about the defiance and passion in Draco's normally cold gray eyes that made Harry feel like a giant prat. Wasn't this the sort of nonsense his father and Snape had fought over? Stupid, petty things that didn't matter in the end? There was just something about that pale, pointed face looking at him in trembling anger and even a little fear that stirred something deep and dark within Harry. Harry let his fists unclench and looked down at Draco, seeing him finally for what he was: a lost, scared little boy with no one left to love him; a lost, scared little boy just like Harry.

That was a lie, Harry told himself. He and Draco were nothing alike. Draco's parents were still alive. Draco's godfather was still alive. Draco deserved what misery he got. Didn't he?

Draco seemed to sense the change in Harry's mood and stood up, considering him petulantly.

"We're the same now, aren't we?" Harry asked, surprising himself with the question as much as Draco. Draco recovered from the surprise quicker than Harry did, however.

"No, we're not," Draco spat. "You're still Saint Potter. Everyone just loves you. You're perfect. No matter what you do, that's all okay, isn't it? Breaking every rule there ever was and getting rewarded for it, joining Tournaments you had no business being in . . . You'll always be perfect, no matter what you do, won't you?"

And with that, Draco ran from the room, abandoning his bottles and decanters. Harry watched him go with an unwanted surge of an emotion he hadn't felt since the last time he saw Luna Lovegood.

Pity.

Contessa returned later in the day and patched up both boys with a brusque manner. She said not a word to either. She was quite a good Healer, even if Harry thought she didn't have to be so rough with her potion applications.

Snape had dropped by later in the evening to give Contessa something and he was less than thrilled with the revelation of Harry and Draco's fight. He had a quiet conversation with Draco, and then Contessa. Harry couldn't hear what they said, as neither raised their voice. Apparently Contessa said something Snape didn't care for, because he promptly stormed out after talking to her. Harry watched him go. Contessa walked down the hallway after him, stopping at the doorway and glaring at the glistening unicorn hair lining it. He watched with fascination as she tried put a hand through the open doorway and her hand stopped in mid-air, like she was touching a solid wall. It was obvious she was pushing, but it wouldn't let her past. Lupin coughed pointedly behind her and she dropped her hand, glaring at him before turning away. Lupin left soon after that to have dinner with Morpheus. Draco refused even to look at Harry, instead opting to sulk while staring out of the window.

Hermione was frowning again at Harry after finding out about his fight with Draco. Harry ignored her. Ron showed signs of wanting to talk again, but Harry walked away from him. He caught Draco looking at him, but the pale boy turned his face the moment Harry looked back at him and he returned to glaring out the window. Contessa had made them all stay downstairs to eat. Lupin had brought a takeaway dinner from an Indian restaurant consisting of curry and chicken tikka masala. Contessa was too busy cooking for Harry's party to bother with cooking anything for dinner that night.

She was extraordinarily quiet and didn't engage in much conversation with anyone but Draco. She seemed quite reserved around Harry, Ron, Hermione, and Ginny. He had thought her quite haughty and imperious, but she seemed to only effect that attitude whenever an adult was in the room with her. She immediately stiffened up around certain members of the Order of the Phoenix, like the Aurors and her old schoolmates. Harry recognized the attitude. It was as though she expected to be attacked. He couldn't blame her, really. A few of her old schoolmates eyed her the same way Ron eyed Draco.

Snape didn't return that evening, though Harry thought Contessa might be looking for

him. She kept going to the window and pulling apart the curtains to look at the darkened street outside. She had set aside a plate for him from the takeaway, but it grew cold and she eventually threw it out with a sour expression. Harry wondered at their relationship.

Long after Harry and the others went to bed for the evening, he could hear her downstairs cooking, cleaning, and decorating for his party. When he went out in the middle of the night to use the toilet, he caught Contessa standing by the window again, presumably looking out for Snape's return. She looked quite sad. Her black lipstick and eyeliner had been washed off, and there were more traces of the ugly little girl in her.

Harry went to bed with the deepest suspicion that to try and guilt her into helping him to save Sirius would make him little better than Voldemort. He had trouble sleeping that night.

"Happy Birthday, Harry! Make a wish and blow out your candles!" Mrs. Weasley said, beaming.

They had just finished singing to him. Harry grinned sheepishly. He'd never had a party before for his birthday and he felt quite embarrassed and pleased all at once. He closed his eyes, silently wished for Sirius to come back to life, and blew out all his candles with one breath. Everyone cheered and clapped.

Hermione and Ron had made up with him the morning before, when he apologized to them. Hermione had hugged him and Ron had clapped him on the back and told him not to worry about it. Hermione stood to his left, beaming at him, and Ron to his right, grinning.

Harry cut the cake at everyone's urging, slicing off a large piece for himself. It was a nice, soft chocolate cake with white icing decorated with golden snitches and the obligatory red birthday message. It was really quite good. He wasn't too sure about the birthday dinner, though. Most of the guests didn't seem to know what to do with it. Contessa had made a very fancy French dinner. The drinks consisted of a fine Champagne for adults and homemade lemonade for Lupin and the children. The appetizers had been canapés, crabsticks, and cucumber slices with a rich homemade dip. She had then moved to a cheese soufflé entrée fresh from the oven. After that came a burgundy beef fondue with lettuce and three different sauces that Harry

couldn't identify. There was also a cheese board and some sautéed potatoes with unusual garnish on them. Harry would have to remember to tell Contessa that while he liked most foods, he did prefer the ones that he recognized. She was more over-the-top about her meals than Aunt Petunia.

Mrs. Weasley cut the rest of the cake, making sure everyone had a piece. Most of the Order of the Phoenix that Harry was close to had shown up. Draco was there, sulking in the corner. Of all the guests, only they and Dumbledore seemed to know what to do with Contessa's fancy dinner. Contessa stood in the corner by Draco for the most part, interacting little and affecting that stiff, imperious manner Harry associated with Narcissa Malfoy.

Harry lifted up the ridiculous fedora with a giant red feather in it to scratch his head. Ron and Hermione had forced him to wear it. The party had moved to the drawing room. The Black family tree was covered with curtains and the whole place had been done in red, gold, and a bit of blue and green. Little tiny models of golden snitches held up the various curtains and banners. The place looked rather festive.

Harry quickly was dragged over to the present table after everyone had consumed the cake. He had fun ripping open all his presents, having received so many this year. He got an assortment of clothes, books, pictures, and various magical items he couldn't even identify. He thanked everyone, hoping to sort out later who'd given him what.

The party dragged on for a while, and eventually many of the guests left after giving Harry their best wishes. There were only the people who had dinner the night after Contessa's inquiry that remained. Lupin and Dumbledore were having a quiet conversation, while Mrs. Weasley tried to convince Ginny it was her bedtime, and Mr. Weasley happily examined the torch the Dursleys had sent him so he "could find his way out of the house without having to cast magic when his friends came to get him". Mr. Weasley was having fun pushing the on and off buttons.

At this point, Contessa finally approached him, holding a large box wrapped in red with a large golden bow. It thumped strangely and had air holes in it. She placed it on the table before him, pushing it over.

"Happy Birthday, Harry," she said quietly, not looking at him.

Most everyone had turned to see what the thumping in the box was. Harry mumbled a thanks and began to unwrap it. He opened the box and heard a very strange, "Oh good! I can get out now!"

Harry closed the box immediately, angrily glaring at Contessa, who had tossed her head back proudly. "I told you I hate snakes," he said.

"You are a Parselmouth. This does not make you evil, anymore than that snake. He's a fine Red Spitting Cobra from Tanzania. Give him a chance. He seemed quite nice," Contessa said. There was a pleading quality to her voice. Harry wondered why she would care.

"Hello! Can I come out now?" the Red Spitting Cobra asked, thumping the box a bit more with his tail.

Harry opened the top and stared down at him. He was really quite pretty, with a deep, jeweled red-orange hue and a cobalt blue throat band. He looked to be a little over four feet long. He rose up in the box, poking his head out and looking around curiously. "I'm at a birthday party, then? The female who bought me kept telling me I was going to make a nice present. I suppose you're my new master, then?" the cobra asked.

Harry swallowed and nodded. He opened his mouth, knowing everyone would hear him speak Parseltongue and hated himself for it. "Look, you don't want to stay here. I'll just tell her to put you in the wild or something," he told it.

The snake slumped back down into the box. "Oh. You don't want me then. Fine, I'll go back. Don't put me in the wild, though. I hate being alone," he said miserably. Harry had never seen a snake look depressed before.

Harry felt instantly guilty and looked around. Most everyone looked either curious or concerned. Contessa looked eager. Harry sighed after a long moment. The snake really did look quite pathetic. "Okay, fine, you can stay. You'll have to behave yourself, though. Do you have a name?" Harry asked.

The cobra perked up immediately, poking its head back out of its box. "Not yet," he said.

"Well, how about, er," Harry said, thinking fast, "Er, how about Godric?"

The snake blinked its strange eyes at Harry. "Sound good enough to me," he replied.

Everyone was looking expectantly at Harry as he picked Godric up, allowing him to slither up him and rest on his shoulders. "Er, his name's Godric," Harry explained.

"Godric? You named a snake Godric?" Draco asked incredulously, speaking directly to Harry for the first time since their wrestling match. His voice dripped with scorn.

Harry glared at him. "He liked it well enough," he said.

"Who'sss that titchy fellow there? Lookssss dodgy," Godric said, looking at Draco as though he was a strange and new animal.

Harry burst out into laughter, liking Godric despite himself. Hermione raised an eyebrow at him. Harry calmed himself. "Sorry, he, ah, well, he's a got a good sense of humor," Harry said.

"This goes along with your birthday present," Contessa said, holding out a small tank full of little mice, all climbing over each other. "They're for Godric."

"Oh, good, dinner. I'm ssstarved," Godric said, eying the cage with obvious interest.

"Thank you," Harry said politely. Harry reached in and pulled out a struggling white mouse, which Godric promptly ate in a swipe so fast Harry nearly lost his fingers.

"Draco?" Contessa said imperiously. Draco scowled magnificently. He got up and threw a package at Harry sulkily. Harry deftly caught it, watching Draco stalk back to his chair in the corner quite curiously.

"Pleasssant sssort, isssn't he? Want me to ssspit venom at him?" Godric asked.

"Maybe not today. Ask again tomorrow," Harry grinned, opening the package an arm's length away after carefully inspecting it. Inside was a book on the care of Red Spitting Cobras.

"Thank you," Harry said shortly, mostly in response to Mrs. Weasley's prompting glare after a few moments of thumbing through the book. Draco continued to sulk.

After a bit, everyone either left or went to bed. Contessa made to sweep out, but Harry stopped her. Draco continued out, trying to pretend Harry didn't exist.

"Why'd you do that? Why'd you give me a snake? Why does this matter to you?"

Contessa gave him a cold glance at first, but it softened for just a moment. Then she shook her head and the cold look was back. She didn't answer his question and instead

swept out after Draco, leaving Harry to his thoughts.

To be continued . . .

Chapter 7: Jigsaw

Author's Notes: Lycaon and his speech patterns are based a bit off Wolf from The Tenth Kingdom.

Chapter Seven:

Dealing With Werewolves

Godric and Hedwig didn't get along too well.

Eventually they just agreed to disagree. Hedwig would hoot and peck at him if he got too close and he'd hiss and spit venom at her if she got too close. Harry was impressed by Hedwig's grace and agility. She dodged every shot until Harry explained to Godric in no uncertain terms that if he spit venom at Hedwig again, someone was going to get a homemade snakeskin belt for Christmas.

Godric tried to eat Pigwidgeon, but Ron had a fit and sent Godric flying with a well-placed spell. After that, no one had to tell him to leave Pig alone. He figured that out all by himself. He also watched Ron very carefully.

Strangely, Godric never once messed with Crookshanks. Conversely, Crookshanks left him alone as well. They seemed to have an agreement to ignore the other. Harry wondered why, but Godric never told him. However, the fact that Crookshanks let Godric be was something of a comfort to Harry, given Crookshanks's reaction to Scabbers. Godric also seemed to like Hermione. He'd follow her around and nip at her ankles to make her scream. Harry tried not to laugh at this and often failed.

Except for Draco and Contessa, everyone usually kept far away from Godric. Lupin would stiffen every time he saw him slithering about or dangling off Harry's shoulders. Hermione and Ron seemed positively terrified of him and after Ginny's experience with the Basilisk, she was less than warm to Godric. Draco seemed to find

him fascinating and kept trying to grab him, but Godric neatly dodged all Draco's attempts at capture. He didn't trust Draco farther than he could throw him--and Godric had no arms. What Draco apparently didn't realize was that Godric kept asking if Harry was sure Draco wasn't for eating. It caused no end to Harry's amusement every time Godric asked. Contessa only silently watched Harry and Godric very intently with those cold gray eyes of hers.

The next few days after Harry's birthday party were relatively peaceful. Contessa had begun brewing up large quantities of the Wolfsbane Potion for Lupin, since it was the week before the full moon. Mrs. Weasley had tried to collect the children, but since Harry, Ron, and Hermione had all agreed to research potions for Sirius and doubted they could do much research at the Burrow, they forwent leaving. Mrs. Weasley did take Ginny for a couple days, promising her they would go shopping and have "girl time". Ginny had never looked more miserable and murderous than when she left.

Hermione and Ron were back on Harry's side. It made him feel intensely better when Hermione turned her formidable researching skills onto finding an alternate potion and alternate ways to rescue Sirius's soul. Maybe they would find a way to do it the "right" way. Harry had a feeling if he did it the "wrong" way, things worse than Sirius's death would happen to him.

Having Ron and Hermione back on his side made Harry feel loads better. He felt almost normal, armed with the knowledge that there was a possibility that Sirius could be brought back. And having his friends support him made everything seem like they were back at Hogwarts, trying to research something important. Sirius wouldn't be there, of course, but he was waiting. Waiting for Harry to save him.

Harry tried not to think too much about how his "saving people thing" had lead to Sirius's death. Except at night, when he couldn't avoid it.

A couple nights after Harry's birthday party, everyone was wiling their time away in the sitting room. Contessa had redone much of the hallway already. She scrubbed and cleaned everything as obsessively as Aunt Petunia. She couldn't get the elf heads off the wall better than anyone else, but when she tossed her wand down in frustration, Draco picked it up and unstuck them all in little under three hours. He boasted that was with an incompatible wand, since Contessa had a phoenix feather as her wand core, and Draco's old wand had, unsurprisingly, a dragon's heartstring. Harry was impressed, but sure as hell wasn't going to tell Draco so.

Ron and Harry decided to play wizard's chess for the night after wearing out snooker throughout the day. Ron was actually losing, but mostly because he kept getting

distracted while watching Hermione read. She had dragged every book she could find downstairs and was poring over them, trying to find a potion that might help them. Apparently, Ron found everything Hermione did intensely fascinating, from the way Hermione was brushing her hair out of her eyes, breathing, or mumbling to herself on occasion. Harry didn't get it.

Draco was sitting in the corner listening to the Witching Hour on the Wizarding Wireless Network and sulking at Harry and Ron. He was still wearing Ron's hand-me-downs, and Harry thought he recognized an old t-shirt that had once been his in third year. Since most of Harry's clothing came from Dudley, it amused Harry to think that Draco was wearing a Muggle's shirt. If Harry didn't know better, Draco even looked like he'd like nothing better than to join them in a game. No one invited him. Contessa, however, was hand-stitching one of Draco's new outfits based off a pattern she had floating in front of her. Apparently, she had only bought Draco material and patterns for clothes. Contessa wasn't a very good seamstress, but was nothing if not a perfectionist. She kept stitching and unstitching things until she got it right. She had only gotten as far as part of a sleeve. Harry cast her a glance, but she was not paying much attention to him. Ever since Contessa gave Harry Godric, he got a nauseous, guilty feeling in his stomach when he thought about trying to get her to help with Sirius.

The door slammed open and everyone stared at the open entrance way with a sort of sleepy surprise. Moody was there, holding the top end of a bleeding man. Lupin was holding the back end. Contessa stood up immediately, letting her sewing slip to the ground.

"It's Lycaon. Dumbledore told us to bring him here for you to fix up. We found some Death Eaters trying to get into a church and Lycaon got involved. He got hurt in a fire with that Death Eater friend of yours, Bastion Fort," Moody growled. He and Lupin moved over to the couch, which Ron and Harry immediately jumped off, taking the chessboard with them.

The man they laid out was only half-conscious and seemed to be whimpering, rather like a wounded animal. He had nasty burns and lacerations all over his torso. Moody hadn't exaggerated about a "firefight". Contessa moved over to him quickly. The man turned a bleeding face to her, blinking and grinning. He would have been quite handsome if it weren't for his wounds. He had shaggy dark brown hair and swarthy skin. His teeth were very white and rather sharp looking.

"Well, huff-puff! If it isn't the nurse lady! Naughty nurse with a nasty attitude," he said vaguely, although happily. "Could you tell the salamander to get off my chest?"

Smarts, it does."

"He's delirious," Lupin said helpfully.

Contessa gave him a withering glare. Harry wasn't sure, but he thought he might have seen paint peel around Lupin. "If you would be so kind as to leave the medical diagnosis to someone who knows what they're doing, thank you," she said shortly and then turned to Draco. "He's delirious. Please boil one part each of ginger, pippali, black pepper, honey, lemon, Echinacea root, licorice root, barberry bark, marshmallow, comfrey root, belladonna, dittany, and aloe vera in a gallon of water and five teabags of Earl Grey. Add a pinch of monkshood mid-boil." Lupin rolled his eyes and Harry heard air escape his lips. Contessa had a gift for pissing people off.

Draco nodded while Contessa spoke and then blinked. "Monkshood? Only a werewolf could drink that and not . . . oh," he said as Contessa glared at him before she pulled Lycaon's shirt off. Draco gave him a terrified glance as the stranger thrashed in pain and then he scampered off to the kitchen.

"What a creamy little girl. I'll bet she tastes so sweet, with just a hint of tart," Lycaon said deliriously, licking his lips hungrily after Draco, apparently forgetting his agony. And then he went back to whimpering. Ron gave a nervous sort of giggle at the stranger's misidentification of Draco's gender.

Contessa turned to Harry, Ron, and Hermione. "I need my Healer's bag--which is the blue bag with the St. Mungo's emblem on it on my nightstand--clean sheets, pillows, towels, and a cauldron filled with boiling water," she commanded.

"I'll leave you to it, Lestrangle," Moody said. "I'll check back with you in the morning."

As Harry followed Ron up the stairs for the linen and Hermione went to the kitchen to boil some water in a cauldron, he saw Contessa turn to Lupin. "Hold him down," she ordered. Lupin did so and Harry winced as she put her wand to Lycaon. The man began to scream in pain as though the Cruciatus Curse was being cast on him.

Harry hoped Contessa knew what she was doing.

The screaming only got louder as the night wore on. Lupin was working up a real

sweat holding Lycaon down and Contessa was working up her sweat just trying to keep him alive. Lycaon had apparently suffered intense injury. He had been stripped naked, and there wasn't a single part of him below the neck that hadn't been burned. Contessa kept feeding him the draught she had Draco make up and smearing some sort of cream that she had found in her Healer's bag. It melted and dribbled off him almost immediately, so she kept having to re-apply it.

Draco spent most of the time in the kitchen, making the draughts Contessa demanded of him. Most of them Harry had never heard of, which meant nothing since Potions was hardly Harry's best subject. Harry stood by the kitchen door, watching Draco brew three potions at once, as well as some tea. Draco kept rubbing his face and Harry noticed he was sweating, too. Eventually, Draco realized Harry was staring at him and looked up from one of the cauldrons, giving Harry his best glare. Harry withdrew.

Ron was lurking the hallway, too frightened to enter the sitting room. Hermione was in and out, constantly bringing new cauldrons filled with fresh water. Harry just kept moving. When things seemed to turn for the better, Harry entered the sitting room.

Lupin's shirt was smeared with Lycaon's blood. He crouched on top of a chair, staring at Lycaon with an open look of hostility. Contessa was on the couch, putting a cool towel on Lycaon's forehead. She looked exhausted. She always wore a black dress so Harry couldn't tell if her clothes were smeared with blood as well, but something about the dried blood on her face led Harry to believe they were. Her normally well-kept hair was mussed and tied back in a hasty and messy bun. Her black-lacquered nails were chipped, and she was very pale, even by her standards. Harry tried not to look at how Lycaon was holding up. There was blood all over the couch he lay on and smeared across small piles of sheets. There were also other things there that Harry didn't want to think about.

Contessa was beyond shooing anyone out so Harry moved further into the room. He had a vague idea that whatever the Death Eater had done to Lycaon, it was not a mercy he hadn't been killed. Harry moved over to Lupin, who was crouched in an almost animal-like position on the chair. Lupin looked as though he were biting his lips to prevent from growling at Lycaon. Harry had never seen him like this.

"Pro-I mean, Remus, are you okay?" Harry asked tentatively. Lupin turned to him slowly, sniffing the air oddly. He glanced at Harry disdainfully and then turned back to glaring at Lycaon. Harry was slightly hurt by that.

Contessa seemed to pick up on that as she spoke. "You didn't know they're territorial so close to the full moon?" Contessa asked in a tired voice.

Harry blinked and turned to her. She was bent over her knees, escaped strands of her hair covering her face. "Huh?" he asked.

"Werewolves. We're territorial," Lupin said in a voice that had a slight growl behind it.

Contessa looked up at Harry. "They're very territorial. Lupin's willy is twitching to piss all over the fireplace to mark his territory as we speak. If Lycaon wasn't delirious, he'd probably have sprayed the couch already," she said with a ghost of a smile.

Harry choked back a laugh, glancing at Lupin, who was scowling most impressively at Contessa. "Did it ever occur to you I just might not like him?" he growled. That was definitely a growl.

Contessa looked at him with a sour expression. "You don't like Snape, but you treat him civilly," she said. "And you actually sit on a chair in his presence, rather than crouch on it like an animal."

Lupin dropped his legs down and sat properly in the chair, looking highly annoyed. He visibly composed himself before speaking. "I don't dislike Snape, nor do I particularly like him. You seem to like him a lot, though," he responded shortly.

Contessa scowled magnificently. "Snape is my mentor and my teacher. Nothing more. Why does everyone assume that there's something more to it than that? I respect him as a wizard--nothing more," she said harshly, turning rather quickly to Lycaon, checking on the cream she had put on him. Almost as if on cue, Draco came waddling in with some sort of greenish goop in a cauldron. It smelled horrible.

Lupin shrugged.

Draco fled back to the kitchen with another fearful look at Lycaon. Hermione came in with clean towels and left with armfuls of dirty ones. Harry followed her out so he could lurk in the hallway with Ron. He stayed within earshot, however.

Lycaon yelped suddenly, and Harry imagined it was because Contessa might be spreading that goop on him a bit roughly.

"You seemed pretty upset when Snape stormed out after your argument over Harry and Draco's fight," Lupin suddenly said. Harry moved a bit closer so he could hear better.

"I'm not going to get involved in Draco and Harry's little rivalry. The best way for them to work it out is on their own, without any of us being involved. I'm not taking sides, you understand. Draco is my cousin and I love him dearly--brat though he is--but I had Harry's mother running around in my body. I saw some of her memories while she possessed me and felt some of her emotions," Contessa snorted. That startled Harry a bit.

"So that's why you called him Snivellus," Lupin mused, with a bit of satisfaction to his normally mild voice. That certainly explained why Snape had been infuriated with her.

"You were listening to my private conversations, then?" Contessa asked him coldly.

"I have good hearing," Lupin answered in a very mild voice.

"Snide. You didn't used to be snide. What is your problem? You were always rather mopey and wishy-washy, but you're quite irritating now. More than normal."

"I recently lost my closest friend. He was like my brother," Lupin said in a very tight voice.

"Boo-hoo. People die every day."

"No wonder you're still single. You know, I may not be the most engaging of fellows, but I do have a physical affliction. A disease. What's your excuse for being a sour-faced, anti-social, heartless spinster?" Lupin asked acidly. Harry had never, ever heard Lupin say something so nasty to anyone before. Harry had a feeling Contessa had struck a nerve.

Contessa was apparently rendered speechless by this retort. Harry heard her start to say something, but then cut herself off.

"I'm going to bed," Lupin said.

"Good."

As Lupin stalked past Harry, looking highly irritated, it finally occurred to Harry what his problem really was. Lupin had lost his closest remaining friend. A person who had practically turned the world upside down to support him, werewolf or not. One of the few people who wasn't scared of him and liked him, just the way he was.

In some ways, Harry reflected, Lupin had lost more than Harry. Mr. and Mrs. Weasley were happy to fill his parents' shoes if necessary, and Harry still had Lupin to take care of him. No one took care of Lupin.

Harry went back to the sitting room and peered at Contessa. She had covered Lycaon in the goop and he actually looked better. He was even sleeping for once. Contessa was covering him with a sheet. She looked up at Harry and frowned before turning her head away from him.

Harry studied her for a long moment. "I wish I could have met her--my mother, I mean" Harry said suddenly. The words just tumbled out of his mouth before he could stop them.

Contessa studied him back for a while before answering. "It doesn't work like that," she said.

"I know."

She was silent for a bit, fussing over Lycaon, before she turned to Harry with a reproving expression. "Speaking of mothers, don't pick on Draco about his. I know you don't like each other, but he loves his mother as much as you do. She has her faults, but she was never a Death Eater. She was arrested for trying to break her husband out of jail. A husband she truly loves and who loves her. She loves Draco as much as your mother loves you. You hurt his feelings--whether you care or not--when you called her names. His family is still his family. He still loves them. And they still love him--yes, even his Death Eater father. I don't expect you to understand," she said suddenly, as if this had been bothering her for a while.

Hermione appeared, bringing in a fresh cauldron of water. Harry followed her out, working his jaw. He needed a moment to breathe, to avoid shouting at Contessa. How dare she preach to him or tell him how to treat Draco? Hermione looked at him, pulling him to the side and speaking softly. "What's wrong?" she asked.

Harry bunched his fists. "Malfoy's a rotten, slimy git. Where does someone like her get off telling me how to behave?" he asked hotly.

Hermione frowned. "On the contrary, Harry, you don't know him like she does. You don't talk to him or know anything about him personally. You can't judge him--none of us can. He's changed a lot this past month, you know. A lot around him has changed. His world has been turned upside down, and everything he was raised to

believe has been challenged. Try thickening up your skin and have a real conversation with him. You might be surprised how things turn out," she said seriously. Harry's anger began to fade as quickly as it came

Harry couldn't think of anything to say to that, but was rescued by Godric who had slithered past with a lump in his middle from something he must have eaten recently. Harry followed him back into the sitting room, leaving Hermione to bustle about. He watched the cobra as he rose up to inspect Lycaon. He lowered himself, looking disgusted, if Harry was any judge of serpentine expressions.

"Poor bassstard," Godric said without a trace of sympathy.

Godric's presence caused Contessa to sit down by Lycaon's side and lower the sheet to spread more goop on him. Some of his flesh had begun to heal already. Harry picked Godric up, letting him slither about his shoulders.

"What about Snape?" Harry said after a long time.

Contessa paused. "Professor Snape. He's got his heart in the wrong place, but he's a good man," she said.

"Yeah, right."

"If he was such a bad person, he wouldn't be spying on the Dark Lord for Dumbledore. If he's caught, the Dark Lord won't play games. After he was done torturing him, I expect he'd have Snape's soul sucked out by a Dementor."

"You know, I don't get you all. You, Snape, the Malfoys, your parents, any of you Death Eaters who say you hate Muggles and whatnot. Why do all of you follow Voldemort around like that? Don't you realize he's a half-blood? He's such a hypocrite, you know. He hates Muggles and all that, but his dad was one. Didn't any of you realize he's been lying to you?" Harry asked fiercely, still scowling.

Contessa's eyes went wide and she opened and closed her mouth aimlessly. "How?" she finally asked. Unlike Bellatrix, who had reacted in disbelief and rage, Contessa was leaning forward with her eyes narrowed.

"Tom Riddle is Voldemort's father. He was a Muggle. That's why he left Voldemort's mum, you know. When he found out she was a witch."

"Legilimens!" Contessa suddenly cried, peering at Harry.

Harry didn't have time or the skill to block her. A whirl of memories surged up inside him. One moment he saw himself watching a young Tom Riddle speak to Headmaster Dippet in his own memory, the next he was speaking to the memory of Tom Riddle standing over Ginny. Voldemort's voice echoed in his head, over and over until it faded away into nothingness.

"You think I was going to use my filthy Muggle father's name forever?"

Harry stumbled back, shaking. He knew he should be angry at Contessa for casting a spell on him like that, but he couldn't find the anger. Not with the look on her face. It was indescribable. It was something between anger, betrayal, righteousness, and satisfaction.

"You were telling the truth," she said in wonder. "I suppose I should count myself lucky you're such a horrible Occlumens."

"You--you cast a spell on me," Harry said, realizing he was breathing heavily. He still couldn't find the anger. She hadn't dug into anything personal, not like Snape had.

"I had to be sure, Harry. Very sure. This changes everything, don't you see?"

"Changes what?"

Contessa turned her face. "Never mind. Now go to bed. It's almost morning," she said, almost gently.

Harry slunk to the door, but paused there. The question burned in him and he couldn't keep it in. "I was wondering. Is there any possible way you could bring Sirius back, if we make him a new body? Any way at all?" he asked her.

Contessa snapped her head up and studied him for a long time. Harry was about to give up and go up to bed when she spoke again.

"Maybe. I'll try, if you want," she said.

Harry smiled at her and went up to bed. He went to sleep and swore he could almost hear Sirius's barking laugh in the distance.

"Why can't I eat the little creamy one there? He looks dodgy. You couldn't possibly miss him," Lycaon pouted two days later. He was wide awake and sitting up on the bed. His appetite had recovered, which was unfortunate for Draco. Harry wondered if Godric had recommended Draco as dinner to Lycaon.

Draco shivered as Lycaon looked at him hungrily.

"He's my cousin, Lycaon, and if you eat him, I'll be very cross," Contessa said firmly, changing his bandages. Harry was helping Hermione carry in fresh sheets and Ron was gathering the dirty ones. Lycaon had almost stopped bleeding and there were only a few raw burnt spots left. In some places on his body he was completely healed.

Lycaon visibly pouted. He eyed Ginny with a different sort of gleam in his eye when she came in. She had come back only the night before and had been rather put out that she'd missed all the excitement. Consequently, she kept visiting Lycaon out of fascination.

"And with strawberry topping, no less," Harry heard him mutter as his eyes roved Ginny's young body with an interest that didn't sit well with Harry at all.

Draco sat down the plate full of roast beef for Lycaon with shaking hands. Lycaon beamed at him. "If I can't eat you for dinner, it's the next best thing," he said before grabbing the whole roast and taking a huge bite of it. Contessa seemed unperturbed about all this and cast a couple of anti-pain spells on Lycaon before stowing away her wand.

Draco fled from the room. Harry rather thought it was safe to say Draco was frightened of him. Harry, Ron, Ginny, and Hermione all left Contessa to her treatment. They went downstairs to the sitting room, finding Lupin there, sitting in front of the fireplace, drinking. He looked quite pale and drawn.

"The full moon's in a few days," Hermione muttered.

Harry approached him and stared at the bottle of Wolfsbane Water. He suddenly felt angry, staring at Lupin. Lupin ignored all of them, staring distantly into the fire. The feeling of loss, that giant gaping, bleeding hole in his heart that Sirius had left behind began to ache. Harry's temper began to rise. How could Lupin do this? Didn't he realize he was all Harry had left? The only friend of his parents left that hadn't betrayed him or died? The only connection Harry had left to his parents? Didn't he care if he died and broke Harry's heart again?

"Reducto!" Harry cried, shattering the bottle in Lupin's hand so he held only the unbroken neck. Liquid and glass covered his front and lap. He turned bleary eyes on Harry, not even jumping.

"Now, what did you do that for?" Lupin sighed.

Harry opened his mouth to tell Lupin off but was saved by Mrs. Weasley's screams. She had apparently just arrived back in.

"LUPIN! I KNOW YOU WEREN'T JUST DROWNING YOURSELF IN MORE WOLFSBANE WATER, WERE YOU?" she screeched, reminding Harry of the Hungarian Horntail he'd once challenged.

Lupin did jump this time, half-turning to see an enraged Molly Weasley, holding a whole bottle of Wolfsbane Water in her hand that she had found. She broke it over the arm of a chair, looking infuriated. Harry jumped back. Ron looked shocked and Hermione had a hand over her mouth. Ginny's eyes were very wide.

"Molly, I--"

"DO YOU NOT GIVE A DAMN ABOUT ANYONE ELSE? DO YOU NOT CARE IF HARRY HAS NO ONE LEFT TO TAKE CARE OF HIM BUT YOU AND US? DO YOU NOT CARE IF ALL YOUR FRIENDS--AND YES, YOU HAVE FRIENDS--WOULD BE HEARTBROKEN IF YOU DRINK YOURSELF TO DEATH?" she roared, her face purpling.

Lupin said nothing, shrinking back into his chair. Mrs. Weasley was shaking in anger. He hadn't seen anyone go into a fit like that since Professor Umbridge. Only this time Mrs. Weasley was saying everything he wanted to say to Lupin, only louder.

"DO YOU NOT CARE ABOUT ANYONE BUT YOURSELF? YOU SELFISH BASTARD! YOU ARE NOT THE ONLY PERSON WHO'S EVER LOST ANYONE! YOU ARE NOT THE ONLY PERSON WITH PROBLEMS! BUT DO YOU SEE ME DRINKING MYSELF TO DEATH? HARRY? ARTHUR? SNAPE? DUMBLEDORE? NO! IT'S ONLY YOU WHO'S BOUND AND DETERMINED TO KILL YOURSELF!" she screamed, advancing on him.

Lupin smiled, brushing glass off himself and looking sheepish. "You're getting very worked up about me drinking lemonade, Molly," he said mildly.

"WHAT?" Mrs. Weasley roared, blinking.

Harry leaned over and sniffed the spilled liquid on Lupin's chair. It smelled like lemons. He looked up at Lupin, who winked at him. "It is lemonade!" he cried in wonder.

"I filled some in my old bottles of Wolfsbane Water," he said matter-of-factly, looking rather smug for some reason.

"Why you--how could you--making people think you were drinking again!" she sputtered.

"I'm sorry, Molly. I really am. I didn't think anything of it. They were just bottles after all. I thought I'd taken the labels off," he said mildly.

"I'm going to go make dinner. I don't trust that Lestrage girl to do a proper Sunday dinner," she said, stalking from the room, practically knocking over Draco, who had come to investigate. Draco peered at Lupin, a curious expression on his face.

"Pro-Remus?" Harry asked.

Lupin turned from smiling after Mrs. Weasley to looking at Harry. "Yes, Harry?"

"You did that on purpose, didn't you?"

Lupin looked like innocence itself. "Of course not, Harry. Do I look like someone who's that sneaky?"

Harry gave Lupin a doubtful look. "I suppose you asked that before you helped my Dad and Sirius make the Marauder's Map, didn't you . . . Moony?" he asked, grinning slowly.

Lupin grinned back. "Honestly, I didn't think the lot of you would get so upset. It was only supposed to be a joke. The joke was actually on Contessa, not all of you. She has kittens every time she sees me drinking," he admitted.

"You know, I've always wondered how one goes about being 'solemnly up to no good'. Now I know."

"It takes skill. Well, I'm going to go take a shower," he said, walking out of the sitting room, brushing past Draco.

Draco gaped after him and then cast a glance back at Harry and the others. "Moony? Marauder's Map? What's he going on about?" he asked suspiciously.

Ron grinned. "Like we'd tell you, Malfoy," he said.

"Right," Draco said, rolling his eyes. "I'll figure it out eventually. You'll be in trouble, then, too."

"Sod off, Malfoy," Harry said without any real malice. Draco was so pathetic now, like a ghost of his former self.

Draco smirked at him, but it also lacked his usual malice. "How's Chang coming along anyway, Potter? I heard she was dating Michael Corner now," he said breezily.

Harry's face burned, though when anyone else mentioned Cho recently it never bothered him. For some reason, when Draco said it, it made him feel--well, it made him feel something, but he couldn't describe it. "Well, at least I wasn't dating Pansy Parkinson. Though I suppose if you must date Slytherin, she's an improvement over Millicent Bulstrode," he retorted.

"Pansy? You think I was dating Pansy? For one, her face is like a pug! For another--well never you mind, that's none of your bleeding business, Potter," Draco said coldly and then walked out.

"Well done, Harry! That was certainly an improvement!" Hermione beamed.

Harry stared at her. "An improvement? We were arguing," he said.

"Yes, but you didn't fight. See, it's an improvement," Hermione said sagaciously. Ron was rolling his eyes behind her while Ginny giggled.

"Right," Harry said, rolling his eyes as well. Maybe it was an improvement. In any case, Draco talking about Cho still gave him a funny feeling.

If only he could identify it.

A couple days passed, and the full moon was tomorrow night.

Contessa was feeding the Wolfsbane Potion to Lupin and Lycaon every day. Mrs. Weasley had gone off on another "mission" for the Order. Lycaon was up and about, sniffing around the house curiously. He kept trying on the remnants of the Black family clothes. He looked ridiculous in Mrs. Black's bonnet.

"Out of curiosity, why has Mrs. Black's portrait been so quiet? I've only heard her scream once or twice the whole time I've been here," Harry asked Hermione and Ron that afternoon. They were in the very limited library of the Black family household, poring through the books. Most of the books were about Dark Arts and dodgy magic, but none of them seemed to have what he was looking for.

Hermione cast Harry a nervous glance. "She's been very subdued since . . . well, since Sirius died. Phineas told her what happened that very night. After that, Lupin said she cried for days and she only screams once in a while now. And she doesn't scream for nearly as long as she used to. Or as loudly. She may not have liked Sirius much, but she was still his mother. I think she's mourning him," she said.

Harry was quiet for a long time before he said, "Sirius isn't dead."

Hermione nodded once and went back to the books, still casting him nervous glances. That annoyed him. Harry went back to the potions book he was looking through, staring glumly at a recipe for better and longer-lasting orgasms and reflecting that this book had potential, but not for bringing Sirius back to life.

Harry turned the page and began to examine an illustration of the potion's effects when a girlish scream caused him to look up. Hermione and Ron also looked up from their books. "What was that?" Harry asked.

The girlish scream repeated itself. It sounded like a cry for help. It also sounded like Ginny.

Harry, Hermione, and Ron were out of the library and down the hall in a flash. Ron was running past them, a look of fear on his face. They followed Ginny's screaming to the sitting room.

"The door's locked," Ron said in a panicked voice, trying the knob to no effect. It sounded like Ginny was struggling with someone. Draco was leaning over the landing, staring at them with wide eyes.

"Alohomora!" Hermione cried. The door clicked open and the three of them ran in,

wands out.

Lycaon was straddling a struggling and screaming Ginny. He had been in the middle of ripping her shirt open. He scowled darkly at the trio when they entered.

Ron's spell bounced off Lycaon like a rubber ball, smashing into a vase on the mantle. Harry and Hermione's spells similarly rebounded off him. Harry had never seen anyone bounce off spells like that before. It was not a comforting sight.

Lycaon stood up slowly, as though he wasn't being threatened by three wands. He looked entirely unconcerned. "Well, huff-puff. I didn't think sound carried so well in this house," he drawled lazily. There was a keen, predatory look to his dark eyes.

Ginny screamed again and tried to punch him, but he grabbed her wrists, trapping them easily in his large hand. He looked back over at the trio. "I guess little kiddies like you can't scare up a good enough spell to hex me, eh?" he asked viciously.

"You fucking bastard! You let my sister go right now!" Ron screamed, raising his fists.

"You'll have your tasty little sister back when I'm done with her, pup," Lycaon grinned nastily. Ginny screamed at him, but she was so enraged Harry couldn't understand what she was saying.

"Repellus Lupus!"

Lycaon flew back and hit the mantle place, knocking over a vase. Harry turned to see Lupin in the door way, holding out his wand. Harry had no idea what that spell was, but it looked pretty advanced. If he'd been in wolf form, his hackles would have been raised and he would have been growling. His eyes glinted in a way Harry never saw before. Lupin was quite angry. Just behind him stood Contessa, holding her wand and looking shaken.

"Our spells bounced off of him!" Harry told her.

Lycaon's eyes narrowed and he growled back at Lupin, leaping forward and grabbing Ginny. Ron was slowly advancing towards him. Hermione and Harry held their ground, wands out.

"Of course they did," Contessa said evenly. "Only very powerful spells work on a werewolf so close to the full moon."

"She's mine. I've marked her," Lycaon growled at Lupin.

"I'll consider myself lucky that you aren't a wizard, Lycaon. However, I am. And I'm not afraid to use that spell again. I know other spells, too. I was very, very good at Defense Against the Dark Arts you see. Let the girl go," Lupin ordered, his light brown eyes like steel.

Lycaon turned to Contessa. "C'mon, Countess, help me out. You're well-known to be a friend of werewolves. I wasn't going to eat the tasty little treat. I was only going to break her in. Someone has to do it. She's such a pretty little strawberry," Lycaon said, his voice taking on a bit of a wheedle.

"If I knew you had a thing for little girls, I'd have let you die, Marcus Lycaon. Let her go and live. Keep hanging onto her and I drop you," Lupin said severely. His face was contorted and Harry almost thought he could see the wolf behind Lupin's eyes.

"Fine, keep her, the teasing little slut. Didn't mind a little kissey-kiss, but gets all bent out of shape when a man tries to have his fun," he said, throwing Ginny at Ron. Ron staggered, but caught his sister. She clutched him, sobbing heavily. Ron held her tightly, giving Lycaon a look that should have killed him.

Contessa grabbed Lupin's wand arm. "Just let him leave," she said. "He didn't actually get a chance to do anything." She almost looked like she was protecting Lycaon. Harry scowled at her. That didn't sit well with him at all.

"Nicey little nurse-nurse. Huff-puff, Countess, you try to act like such a bitch, but you're really such a soft touch. If you were only a bit prettier, though. That and the fact that you used to smell like corpses was something of a turn-off. I'll admit I like my tasty little treats a lot sweeter than you," Lycaon grinned nastily.

Contessa glared at him. "Younger too, I'd wager. Now get out. Show your face around here again and I'll let Lupin hex you into oblivion," she hissed.

Lycaon breezed out, as though the whole thing was going according to plan. "Careful with her, boys, she's dodgy. She might rot your willy off, the nasty cunt," he laughed cruelly, sauntering out.

Contessa was turning a bit red in the face, looking rather angry. Lupin dropped his wand the moment Lycaon walked out the door and onto the street. Hermione was patting Ginny on the back as Ron held her. She was still crying. Draco came out from

under the stairs, where he'd been hiding. Harry stared at everyone awkwardly, catching Draco's eye for just a moment before they both looked away. Harry had the same sensation he had while they were waiting for word on Mr. Weasley's health before last Christmas. The feeling of an outsider who couldn't possibly understand Ginny's pain or Ron's horror. He couldn't even identify with Ginny like Hermione could.

Harry wondered if that's how everyone felt around him when Sirius was brought up.

"Ginny! Are you okay?" Ron cried, trying to examine her.

Contessa's worked her jaw. "I'll get a message sent to her parents," Contessa said, walking away.

Lupin sat down by the doorway, as though guarding it from Lycaon's return. He looked quite disturbed.

Harry sat with Hermione, Ron, and Ginny, waiting for her parents to come and get her. She cried for a long time.

To be continued . . .

Chapter 8: Jigsaw

Chapter Eight: The Full Moon Rises

"This is all your fault!"

Harry didn't think that was quite fair of Mrs. Weasley to accuse Contessa, but if Ginny had been his daughter, he'd imagine he'd fly into a rage as well. At the same time, Harry wasn't entirely thrilled with her just letting Lycaon go. He should have gone to prison, because the only thing that stopped him was them. However, Hermione brought up a good point.

"If they arrested him for something like this, Harry, how long do you think it would be before there's an outcry against werewolves and Lupin gets arrested for saying hello to someone? He didn't actually do anything. And do you think Ginny wants to be dragged through a trial like that?" she had asked him. "Besides, Lupin said he talked to the Aurors and they're going to keep an eye out for him. They'll try to get him arrested for something else."

Mr. and Mrs. Weasley had Apparated in as soon as possible. Lupin calmly explained the situation and the Weasleys seemed less than inclined to want to put their daughter through a trial and seemed to echo Hermione's sentiments. Lupin made no comment about this. Ginny was still crying when they came, being held by Ron. Mr. Weasley covered her with a blanket and picked her up. He was tight-lipped and had never seemed so sad. Mrs. Weasley had gasped in horror at her daughter's state, but then spun on Contessa in anger.

Contessa just stood to the side, staring at the floor and saying nothing. Her long hair was covering most of her face.

"You were set here to watch over things and look what that monster did to my daughter!" she cried.

"Molly, calm down," Lupin said gently. "You can't possibly blame her for what Lycaon did. She had no way of knowing or preventing him."

"She was supposed to keep an eye on the children!" Mrs. Weasley cried, tears in her

eyes.

"You can't watch children all the time, Molly. You know that," Lupin said again, very gently.

"How can you defend her, Lupin? She is responsible for everything that happens in this house now! You can't trust people like her! I knew it from the moment I saw her!"

"Can't trust people like what, Molly?" Lupin asked coolly, his light brown eyes growing very cold. "People with powers they can't control? Like Necromancers, Parselmouths, or werewolves?"

Mrs. Weasley was quiet for a moment. "Remus, I wasn't suggesting--"

"I was here, too, Molly. I'm supposed to be in charge, remember? I also failed to notice what Lycaon did until I heard Ginny screaming. You should be blaming me, not her," Lupin said heavily.

"It's not your fault, Remus, but I'm taking these children home with me, where they belong. Could you imagine how Hermione's parents would have reacted if it had been her?" she cried, spinning to look at Harry, Ron, and Hermione.

"We can't go, Mum. There're things we have to do here," Ron said, looking at Ginny with a worried expression.

"What things? You need to come home where it's safe! I only agreed to let you stay here while I was on a mission for a few days!" Mrs. Weasley said fiercely.

"We can't go, Mum. We need to stay here. It's safe now. Lycaon's gone," Ron said firmly. Harry had never seen him act so firm around his mother.

"Let them be, Molly. Let's take Ginny home. They'll be fine," Mr. Weasley said gently, cradling his only daughter.

Mrs. Weasley nodded her head sharply, giving Harry, Ron, and Hermione each a hug before setting off with Mr. Weasley. Ginny had calmed down now that she was with her parents.

"She'll be fine. She just needs time to digest what happened," Lupin said to all their unspoken questions.

Contessa still stood by the doorway, her head hanging down. She'd been like that since Lycaon left. "I'm going to my room," she said in a weak voice.

Contessa shook once and then left the room. Draco had been lurking in the hallway and followed her up the stairs after casting a glance back at the room. His and Harry's eyes met again for a brief moment.

"I'll be leaving, before the evening comes. If you need something tomorrow night, just ask Contessa. I'll be back the next day, and there's an Order meeting scheduled for that morning in case I'm not," Lupin said vaguely, before heading down into the kitchen. Everyone silently left the room, it was still early evening, but everyone seemed ready for bed. Ron and Hermione walked up together. Hermione had an arm around Ron. He looked quite shaken. Harry waited in the hallway, watching them go up the stairs with that inexplicable feeling of loneliness again. Ron and Hermione shared something which Harry wasn't and would never be part. Lupin and Contessa had to deal with their own separate adult lives and issues. That left Harry and Draco all alone.

Now that didn't sound right.

Harry shook himself from that strange thought, stopping by the kitchen door and peering inside. Lupin was sitting at the table, drinking from a bottle of champagne that had been left over from Harry's birthday party. He looked over at Harry with an almost challenging expression, but Harry withdrew from him. He didn't feel like conversation right now and he had a feeling neither did Lupin. If Lupin wanted to drink, well this was as good a time as any. At least it wasn't Wolfsbane Water.

Harry slowly went up the stairs to bed, missing Sirius more than ever.

Harry woke up in time for a late breakfast, mostly due to Mrs. Black's screaming. She seemed quite angry today, yelling specifically at Draco. Harry ignored this and went downstairs for breakfast. Contessa had it ready for them. She had made eggs, bacon, sausage, and toast. When Harry entered the kitchen, she also had a cauldron full of the last of the Wolfsbane Potion brewed and ready for Lupin. Tonight was the full moon.

Harry sat down and silently began to eat, noticing the dustbin had two empty champagne bottles in it. Lupin was nowhere to be seen. Hermione and Ron also joined him after a few minutes. Ron still had a distant, angry look on his face, but smiled at

Harry. His knees were a little dirty, as though he'd been kneeling by the fireplace.

"Ginny's doing much better, Mum said. I talked to her just now. She'll need some time alone, Mum says, but she's going to be all right," he said.

Harry smiled. "That's wonderful," he said. Contessa seemed to relax a little at this. In truth, so did Harry.

Draco came in as well, holding Contessa's wand in his hand. He was looking irritated. He sat down as far from Harry and the others as possible, gobbling up his food greedily. Contessa gave him a glance as she sat down for her breakfast.

"It's no good. Blasted bitch won't come off."

Well, that explained Mrs. Black's raging. Contessa frowned. "I want her off. I can't stand all that screeching she does," she said.

Draco shrugged, handing her back her wand. "I'm not going to be able to do it with an incompatible wand. She's good and well stuck on there," he said.

"Do any of you have a dragon's heartstring core in your wand?" Contessa asked. "I don't know about the lot of you, but that portrait is driving me mad. The Order of the Phoenix is having a meeting here tomorrow morning and I was hoping to have her off by then."

"Sorry, unicorn hair," Ron said.

"Phoenix feather," Harry said.

"I have a dragon's heartstring core," Hermione said. Harry and Ron stared at her. She didn't seem like the type, but then again, she did.

"Excellent. Do you mind loaning it to Draco? He's quite good with Unsticking Charms, obviously," Contessa said.

Hermione looked hesitant, staring at Draco with a dubious expression. He likewise had a rather sour expression. "Well, I suppose," she said slowly, holding it out to him.

Draco looked at it and then Hermione. Contessa got up and added more monkshood to the Wolfsbane Potion. She didn't seem to think anything of it. Harry and Ron watched Draco and Hermione intensely. Hermione continued to hold out her wand as though it

was a peace offering.

After a long moment, Draco took it. He made as though to wipe it off, but the look on Hermione's face actually caused him simply to put it on the table while he finished his breakfast. Hermione smiled very briefly and looked at Ron and Harry as though to prove a point, which Harry supposed she had.

After breakfast, Contessa put them all to work. She wanted the place cleaned from top to bottom before the meeting tomorrow. Most of the lower floor had been redecorated already. The wood flooring and trim now seemed less like ebony and more like red mahogany. The walls had been redone in reds and golds. Most of the unsavory decorations and paintings were gone. There weren't many decorations left, since Contessa told Harry she'd leave that to him. However, Lupin had taken a large photo he had of himself, Harry's parents, Sirius, and unfortunately Peter Pettigrew taken just after they graduated from Hogwarts, framed it, and hung it over the mantle in the sitting room.

Contessa seemed to stare at Lily's image for the longest time.

Draco began to work on removing Mrs. Black's portrait, which was apparently slow going. It also seemed to take a lot out of him. Harry doubted Draco had ever worked this hard in his life. Mrs. Black screamed the entire time. Harry, Ron, Hermione, and Contessa cleaned in the meanwhile. They all started working upstairs, cleaning out their rooms.

Lupin came downstairs sometime before lunch, and went straight down to the kitchen. "Lunch will be ready in a moment! And remember to drink your potion! I made extra, in case you need it!" Contessa called after him.

When lunchtime rolled around, everyone eagerly piled in the kitchen for it. Contessa had made tomato soup and grilled cheese. Hermione thumbed absently through one of the books she had borrowed from Tonks, munching on her grilled cheese all through lunch. Ron was slurping down the tomato soup, dribbling a bit on his chin. Harry's thoughts drifted to Sirius while he automatically ate his lunch. They all returned to cleaning the upstairs and eventually moved downstairs to the sitting room.

Contessa began to repair an old wizarding wireless that Lupin had bought a couple days ago. This was apparently quite difficult for her, so Lupin had to take over because she kept making it pop, fizzle, dance around the room, and a fuse once exploded in her face. That was rather amusing--to everyone except Contessa. She went red in the face and stormed out, not returning for an hour. Lupin finished

repairing the wireless, but had made more of a mess.

It was late afternoon when Harry let Godric out to hunt for the night. It never ceased to amaze Harry that Red Spitting Cobras were nocturnal, unlike most snakes. Godric seemed quite excited about this and told Harry to expect him some time the next day. Harry imagined he had cabin fever. Since it was the summer, Harry expected Godric would be fine. At their hooting insistence, Hedwig and Pigwidgeon were also let out for the night. Even Crookshanks had cleared out and Hermione had vaguely mentioned he had been gone since before Lycaon had shown up. She didn't seem worried about it, so Harry didn't concern himself. Crookshanks might have found himself a girlfriend.

Draco eventually came over to the sitting room very close to dinner time. He had numerous scratches on his neck and arms, as though someone had been at him with their fingernails. Mrs. Black was quite worked up. Contessa stood from scrubbing the fireplace, looking at him in concern.

"I'm going to need your help. I can't do it on my own. Even with the stepladder, I'm too sh--well, I can't keep at it. I need someone to pull on the portrait for me," he said, glancing at Harry and Ron with a look that dared them to make a comment about his height.

Contessa nodded, stowing her wand. "All right. I'll help you. You three can take a break. We're just about done, I think," she said. "I'll start on dinner once we get that bloody portrait off the wall."

Harry and Ron threw themselves on the couch, while Hermione sat down on a chintz chair that Dumbledore seemed to have left behind. She pulled out her book and began to read. Cleaning was hard work. Especially since Contessa demanded they do it mostly without magic. She said magic wasn't clean enough. Harry thought she was a bit mad, quite like Aunt Petunia. She scrubbed at things obsessively.

The screaming got even louder as Mrs. Black hurled insults at both Contessa and Draco now. Harry couldn't wait until the old bitch got torn off the wall. Harry closed his eyes, ignoring the sound of Mrs. Black and tried to catch a short nap.

"Oh no!"

Hermione's gasp caused Harry to open his eyes. Ron was reading over her shoulder, looking rather troubled. "What is it?" he asked.

Hermione held out the book. She looked quite mortified. The book was entitled: Natural Powers. It was an old book. Harry took it and began to read the page she pointed to.

Chapter the Thirteenth - Necromancers

These Dark Witches born on Samhein are greatly feared by the living and dead alike. The most famous of all Necromancers in Europe was the Crow Animagus, Morgan Le Fay, half-sister of King Arthur. Ironically, Morgan was one of the greatest Healers ever born, and even healed Arthur himself when brought to Avalon. She affected many events during the time of Arthur's Court, including many troubles between Arthur and Guinevere. Her only son was Sir Mordred, who seized the throne temporarily after Arthur's death until defeated by Merlin. He fathered what later became known as the Lestrangle and the Black lines. Some Necromancers have become true legends of horror such as the Blair Witch in North America and the Japanese demonesses called Hisa-Me. It was said the Black Plague was created by a Necromancer. The best defense against a Necromancer is holy water, fire spells, and wands made from unicorn hair. Always bind a Necromancer with unicorn hair and burn them at the stake whenever possible. Unicorns hate Necromancers and will seek to slay them on sight and possess many abilities to counter their dark powers. Since Necromancy is a power witches are born with, it is advisable to slay them before they are of age. Many of their powers have remained a mystery, but almost all are evil. What powers they possess that are known are listed below:

- Necromantic Trances: This ability allows their consciousness to pass into the afterworld with aid of the Draught of the Living Death.
- Channeling the Dead: This ability allows them to channel the dead or allow shades to possess them so they can use their powers.
- Raising the Dead: This truly foul ability allows them to cause corpses to rise from their grave and obey their commands. These corpses are soulless undead, but have animation and a foul will given to them by the Necromancer.
- Poison Kiss: Necromancers can poison suitors with a kiss at will.
- Diseased Touch: The Necromancers can spread the Black Plague and many other horrid, rotting diseases by touch.
- Lycanthropic Control: One of the most feared abilities of a Necromancer is their power to control Werewolves. Some say Necromancers created Werewolves to serve

them. Necromancers can cause anyone infected with lycanthropy to transform into the wolf at will, regardless of lunar phase. If it is the full moon, the Werewolf's vicious strength and speed double under their influence.

Necromancers are one of the foulest types of Dark Wizards, along with Parselmouths, and can be--

Harry set the book down, trying not to think about the last bit on the Necromancer's powers too much. Hermione and Ron looked terrified. "What?" he asked. "It's all rubbish, isn't it? Honestly, Lupin hasn't been transformed, now has he? And she makes our food all the time, and none of us have any diseases. She touched Draco and me before to heal us, and Lycaon, too. Those last three are rubbish. I read another book last month that said none of their powers can be confirmed."

Hermione was wringing her hands. "Harry, this book has been very accurate on everything else," she said slowly.

"So? Have you got to the part about Parselmouths? I suppose they say I'm supposed to be a mad Dark Wizard hell-bent on conquering the world or whatnot, right?"

"Harry, all those Necromancers they talked about, they were all a bit mad. They live to spread misery and death. In the Muggle version of Arthurian legend, they say Morgan Le Fay seduced King Arthur to give birth to Sir Mordred! Her own brother!"

Harry was very quiet. Was Contessa shamming? Was everything they saw an act?

"She can't be like those other Necromancers. And I'm not like those other Parselmouths! I'm nothing like Voldemort!" Harry yelled. He was getting mad, and he knew it. But, this anger was different; this anger was fueled by fear.

Was he like Voldemort? He was willing to do anything to bring back Sirius and he knew it. Only Ron and Hermione were keeping him in line. Did Contessa really have all those powers? Could she really do all those horrible things? If Contessa was evil, would he be, too? Could Harry do all those horrible things that Voldemort could?

"Harry, be reasonable, we're not suggesting that you--" Hermione said, but Harry cut her off.

"But you are. You accused me of being just like him less than a week ago. Now because you read up on it in a book, you think Contessa's going to go mad on us and start poisoning us all? If you read in a book that all Parselmouths were evil, would

you believe that, too?"

"Harry, we just need to be careful," Ron said.

"None of us asked to have any of these powers, did we?" Harry asked dangerously. His fists were clenched.

"What's going on here?"

Harry, Ron, and Hermione all gaped at Lupin. He was holding a half-empty glass filled with Wolfsbane Potion. He drank the rest of it with a gulp, looking at all of them with something like consternation.

"I just came to tell you all good night and let you know I'm leaving, but I heard you shouting," Lupin said, frowning.

Harry turned to Lupin for help, grabbing the book and tossing him at it. "You tell them, Remus. You tell them how stupid they're acting. It's rubbish, isn't it? Contessa can't do those things, right?" he asked.

Lupin scanned the page, getting to the bottom and obviously paling. "I don't know, Harry. I don't know much about her powers at all," he said softly.

Harry felt like someone had let all of the air out of him.

"It's suspicious, isn't it? Her being such a good friend to werewolves? Maybe it's because she wants to know who she can control. Maybe she wants to keep you healthy so she can control you, Professor, er, Remus," Ron said in the same sort of voice that he used when he spoke of Snape.

"Oh, Harry, I didn't want to say anything before, but when I went into her room to get her Healing bag for her when Lycaon was injured, I found a bunch of potions. They all had monkshood in them. She has dozens of potions made for werewolves. Some of them do horrible things, like cause them to transform permanently into wolves. I looked through all of them later that night," Hermione said heavily.

Lupin licked his lips nervously and looked like he was going to say something, but Harry spoke first.

"What are you doing snooping around her things? Who asked you to? How do you know what those are for?" Harry demanded.

"Well, I thought she was experimenting at first. Maybe she is. But with this book entry . . ." Hermione said, her sentence trailing away.

It couldn't be true, because if it was, Harry was frightened he'd be evil, too. It would mean Harry was as bad and rotten as Voldemort was. It was all a lie. Contessa couldn't--wouldn't--do anything like that, would she?

And Harry wouldn't do anything to bring back Sirius, would he?

"She's not the nicest person, either," Ron said.

"Look, this is pointless, we shouldn't jump to--" Lupin was cut off by Contessa's bloodcurdling scream.

The four of them ran out and down the hallway. Contessa was wrestling Mrs. Black's portrait, holding it down while Draco had at the back, Hermione's wand sparkling like a small blowtorch in his hand. Harry could see the picture visibly scratching at Contessa's legs and stomach. She was bleeding in various places, which was why she had screamed as far as Harry could tell.

"Just a little more! Pull just a little more! I almost have her!" Draco said triumphantly. He was sweating profusely.

Contessa tugged at the portrait and Harry joined her, pulling the portrait down as much as they could. With an audible crack, the portrait finally fell on top of them as Draco unstuck it. Contessa was the main one being scratched, but Harry felt some of it as well. With Lupin's help, they pushed the painting off themselves and Harry happily burnt the portrait.

Mrs. Black screamed until all her paint melted off.

"How did she do that? I didn't know paintings could scratch people like that," Harry said, looking at his scratches, Draco's, and Contessa's. Hermione, Ron, and Lupin were just behind them.

"The time. I forgot about the time," Lupin said vaguely, but Harry didn't register that comment as he stared at Draco.

"Honestly, Potter, can you even read? Certain paintings can--" Draco began haughtily, but stopped mid-sentence and stared behind Harry in fear.

"What is it, Draco?" Contessa asked, turning around. Harry turned as well.

Hermione let out a scream. Ron was dragging her up the stairs. And Lupin . . . and Lupin was changing.

Harry looked out one of the windows and saw the full, bright moon had risen, shining through rather ominously.

"Oh dear," Contessa said lamely.

Lupin's eyes were turning yellow. His legs were changing in bone structure and his nails were turning into vicious claws. Hair was starting sprout on his hands and feet. He was smiling, a predatory smile full of sharp teeth.

There was no Sirius here to save them now.

"Did he take his potion?" Contessa screeched.

"He did, I saw him do it!" Harry said. His voice sounded hysterical, and coincidentally, he felt fairly hysterical. This shouldn't be happening.

"Well, this is an unpleasant turn of events," Contessa said conversationally, pointing her wand at Lupin. Lupin roared and began to launch himself at them, but Contessa screamed, "Repellus Lupus!"

Lupin skidded away from them violently, but quickly stood up and growled. Saliva hung from his jowls. Contessa couldn't quite muster the power Lupin himself could on that spell.

Contessa turned to the stunned teenagers. "Upstairs, get upstairs! Seal the doors!" she screamed before casting another spell, "Reducto!"

She missed and the door to cellar kitchen was blown open. Lupin launched himself at Contessa, snarling in fury. He was all wolf now.

"Repellus Lupus!" Harry cried. Though Harry had never cast the spell before, it had the effect of knocking Lupin off his feet and down into the kitchen. He felt strangely pleased that it had worked--and so well, too.

Ron and Hermione ran into the first room they found--Hermione's--and Harry heard

Ron shout, "Colloportus!"

Contessa was hot on their heels, her high heels clattering up the steps. Harry ran to the stairs, dashing past the kitchen door where he could hear Lupin growl. Harry had just reached the first step when Lupin jumped out of the kitchen, landing on the stairs between Harry and Contessa in a graceful spring. He was howling now and looking at Harry like he was a rather tasty pork chop.

Contessa whistled and Lupin turned. She was standing on the landing, holding out her hand, covered in the blood from the scratches Mrs. Black had given her. Lupin gave a low guttural growl, his eyes flashing. He slowly climbed the stairs, tail twitching, claws scratching the wood. Contessa climbed onto the banister, still holding out her blood-covered hand.

"Draco! Get Draco, Harry!" she said, just as Lupin sprang on her.

Harry cast a glance down the stairs and saw Draco hadn't moved from beside the burnt portrait. He was as white as a ghost and trembling. He hadn't uttered a single sound since Lupin changed.

Contessa had dodged Lupin's spring, which caused him to crash to the ground floor. Harry slammed another Repellus Lupus on him, sending him skidding back into the kitchen. She and Harry ran back down the stairs. Lupin was growling and Harry could tell he was preparing for another spring.

"Get Draco! I'll hold Lupin off!" she cried.

Harry had his doubts about being able to hold anyone off, but dodged past her and ran towards Draco. Contessa disappeared into the kitchen. Harry heard her cast another Repellus Lupus on Lupin, which caused him to roar.

Draco was still dead silent when Harry got to him. He wouldn't move.

"C'mon, Malfoy! You're going to get us all killed!" Harry screamed at the boy.

But Draco would still not move; his wide gray eyes instead focused on where he had last seen Lupin. Harry grabbed Draco's arm, dragging him down the hallway to get to the stairs. As they passed the gaping door where Contessa and Lupin had disappeared into the kitchen, Harry heard Contessa scream.

"We're going to die. We're all going to die," Draco suddenly whispered.

There was a loud crash and what sounded like Contessa screaming, "NO!" Harry let go of Draco and was about to go into the cellar when Lupin appeared in the doorway, saliva dripping from his jowls and blood from his claws. Draco began to cry like a small child.

Harry grabbed him and he threw himself and Draco towards the stairs just as Lupin leapt from the cellar doorway. They rolled like a sack of potatoes, limbs flying everywhere. Lupin was hurtling straight for them. Harry picked himself up and screamed, "Repellus Lupus!"

Lupin made a canine yelp of pain as he was slammed into the wall. Harry tried not to think about what Lupin had done to Contessa. He disentangled himself from Draco, who was still crying, lying there like a limp doll. Harry grabbed him around the middle and used all his strength to pull him upwards. He ran up the stairs as Lupin shook his head and leapt off the ground. Lupin was bounding up the stairs with speed like Harry had never seen.

Harry saw an open door down the landing, the door to Lupin's room. He ran for that as fast he could, half-carrying, half-dragging Draco. He could hear Lupin behind him--almost feel his breath.

"Reducto!" Contessa screamed. The landing gave way beneath Lupin and he fell to the ground floor. "Run, Harry! Hide!"

Harry ran for the door, pushing Draco's body inside and then following him in. He tried to shut the door behind him, but felt like a traitor. Harry stepped out and looked down. Contessa was lying halfway out of the doorway to the kitchen, bleeding and holding her wand tightly. Lupin loped towards her, drooling and growling.

"Repellus Lupus!" Harry screamed, tossing Lupin into the wall again. Contessa looked up at him.

"Get in the kitchen! Get in the kitchen!" he screamed.

Contessa didn't argue, quite possibly because she was terrified out of her mind. She slid back down the stairs. Harry waved his wand at the blasted shards of the cellar door.

"Reparo!" he cried. The door pieced itself back together and jumped back on its hinges.

"Colloportus!" Contessa cried, sealing the door just as Lupin banged into it. He spun and looked up at Harry, who was leaning over the banister. He howled, as though he knew Harry had taken away his prey.

Harry backed up, tripping over his own feet as Lupin leapt up. His wand rolled away, into the room where Draco was crouched, staring at him in terror. He shut his eyes, expecting to feel teeth and claws rend into his body at any moment.

He felt hands grab him and drag him inside the room. Draco let him go and shut the door just as Lupin landed gracefully onto the remains of the landing. Draco was still sobbing.

"Colloportus!" Harry cried as he grabbed his wand, just as it looked like the door might give way beneath Lupin's bulk.

He took a deep breath. Draco was curled up by the door, sobbing like a baby. Harry crawled over to him, dragging him away. Lupin was throwing himself at the sealed door, snarling and howling furiously. Harry pushed Draco under the bed and curled up beside him, covering them both with blankets. It might not be much of a defense, but it felt safer.

They could die. That spell might not hold. Harry prayed it would. Draco shook like a leaf. Harry curled himself around Draco, not caring if they had spent the entire past five years hating each other. He just held onto the terrified boy and prayed they would live through the night. Draco clung back, apparently not caring either.

Things quieted down after a few hours. Harry could still hear Lupin outside, prowling the house and howling on occasion. He also heard the painful yelps that meant Lupin was scratching and biting at himself.

Draco was still curled against him, still trembling. Harry felt very odd, being so physically close to him. Very odd, indeed.

"Calm down, Malfoy. He can't get in," Harry whispered.

Draco gulped, apparently trying to control himself unsuccessfully. "Y-you don't understand," he stammered.

"Understand what?"

"My bo-boggart--my boggart is a werewolf," Draco whispered.

Harry nodded. Given Draco's reaction to the Forbidden Forest in their first year and his reaction to Lycaon and Lupin, it explained a lot.

"Thanks," Harry said, "For saving my life."

"Yeah."

"This is the part where you're supposed to say, 'Thank you, Harry, for risking your life and saving me, too. You're a great guy. You could have left me there, crying like a little girl so I could become Lupin's scooby snack.'"

Draco managed to glare at him. Harry grinned.

"We're in a life or death situation and you're grinning at me!" Draco growled.

"I've been in plenty before. This is nothing. I can deal with this. I'm a Gryffindor. We're overly excitable, self-destructive, and in general, irritating, but we're pretty good in life or death situations."

"You're insufferable."

"Says the guy who's holding onto me like I was a life raft in the middle of the ocean."

"You're holding onto me, too, Potter."

"I was trying to be comforting, since you were having a nervous breakdown and everything."

"It's a bit gay, isn't it?"

"Only in cases where mad werewolves aren't prowling outside the door."

Draco didn't say anything to that, so Harry decided to be quiet, too. Strangely, both boys still hung onto each other very tightly. Harry held Draco a little bit tighter, appreciating how warm and soft he was.

That definitely didn't sound right.

Harry sighed. Draco might be clinging to him in mortal dread, but Harry knew he wasn't that scared. He'd never really snuggled up to another human being before. It was quite a nice feeling, even if it was with a sneak like Draco Malfoy.

This was revolting. What was wrong with him? Not only was Draco a boy, but he was a Slytherin, a miserable bully, and a royal pain in the ass. This could not be good for either of their reputations.

"Potter?" Draco whispered.

"Yeah?" Harry whispered back, trying to force his fingers to stop absently stroking the skin on Draco's arm.

"If you ever tell anyone about this, I'll suffocate you in your sleep," Draco threatened.

"Don't worry, if I ever tell anyone about this, I'll kill myself before you get the chance."

Harry fell asleep with Draco in his arms, still absently stroking the soft skin on Draco's arm. Draco didn't seem to mind.

To be continued . . .

Chapter 9: Jigsaw

Chapter Nine: Facing the Music

It was the commotion downstairs that awoke Harry.

He disentangled himself quickly from Draco, who was slowly awakening. Harry tried to think less about Draco's warm body pressed against him and more about climbing out from under the bed.

Harry banged his head on the bed, causing him to yelp in pain. He swung his hand out to grab his head and accidentally hit Draco in the face. Draco yelped and tried to sit up as well, banging his own head on the bottom of the bed. Harry tried to climb over him, but they only wound up getting tangled in the blankets and rolled out from under the bed.

The door was burst open by Severus Snape. Ron and Hermione were behind him, looking like they hadn't slept a wink. Harry wasn't sure if the Colloportus spell had worn off or what Snape did to dispel it, but he fervently wished Snape could have waited two minutes to burst in.

Harry and Draco had tumbled out from under the bed, twisted up in blankets and each other. Draco was lying on the floor, holding his head. Harry was practically straddling him, wishing there was a hole he could crawl into and die. His face was red, he could just feel it.

Snape's sharp eyes scanned Harry and Draco, his upper lip curling with disgust. Ron looked confused and Hermione surprised.

"This isn't what it looks like. I swear. We were just trying to get out from under the bed," Harry said quickly, getting off Draco like he was burned.

"Ow, ow, ow, ow," Draco moaned, sitting up and holding his head.

Snape sneered at Harry. "What have you done, Potter?" he asked sharply, snapping his eyes to Draco as he stood up.

"I saved his life is what I did," Harry said. "And then he saved mine. We were hiding under the bed."

"We're fine," Draco said, glaring at Harry and then looking at Snape. "It was like he said. We were just trying to get out from under the bed."

"Yeah, well, me and Hermione were hiding under the bed, too, only we--" Ron started to say before Hermione elbowed him in the ribs and shot him a dangerous look.

"Remus! Contessa! Are they okay?" Harry cried, the weight of last night's events crashing down on him as his initial embarrassment faded.

Snape frowned, his expression darkening and his sneer became a scowl. "They're both alive," he said.

"Oh, good," Harry said, breathing a sigh of relief.

Snape gave him an odd look. "Do you think so? They think Contessa fed Lupin a bad potion. She's probably going to be sent to Azkaban for this one," he said darkly.

"WHAT?" Harry cried. He flew out of the room with Draco hot on his heels. Ron and Hermione followed as well. Snape strode out after them, looking carefully neutral.

The landing had been repaired so Harry was able to run down the stairs. He could see people standing in the sitting room. He ran in, practically knocking over Mr. and Mrs. Weasley, who had just entered the room.

"Harry, Ron, Hermione! Oh, thank goodness you're all not hurt! Oh, and it's good you're okay, too, Draco," Mrs. Weasley exclaimed tearfully, adding the last bit as an afterthought. She swept up Ron, Harry, and Hermione in her arms. Harry struggled free, running to the middle of the room, shoving members of the Order of the Phoenix aside.

Lupin was lying on a couch, looking much the worse for wear. There was more gray in his hair and he looked exhausted. He had freshly healed wounds all over his body and his clothes were tattered. There was a blanket thoughtfully put over him. He weakly turned to look at Harry. His eyes looked very sad. Beside him sat Contessa, mopping his brow with a cool towel. Her black dress was torn in several places and she had been scratched at quite deeply. She was bruised and her hair was a mess. Her make-up had been smeared. She had a very cold expression on her face. For all her wounds, she didn't look bitten.

"If you didn't give him a bad Wolfsbane Potion, then explain these, LeStrange!" Moody growled, spilling vials and bottles on the floor from a blue St. Mungo's bag. "Potions specifically designed for lycanthropes! One of these could make the wolf a permanent condition!"

Lupin tried to say something, but all he managed was a weak gasp.

"I'm not going to bother explaining anything to you, half-blood. You wouldn't believe me anyway, no matter what I say," she said in a scathing voice. She continued to mop at Lupin's brow, her jaw working. She looked like something out of a bad horror film, with her smeared make-up.

"The ancient punishment for people like you is burning at the stake. I don't think the Ministry will argue too much about it," Moody growled. "Four children could have died last night!"

Harry spun on Hermione. "You told them?" he asked her.

"No, I didn't," Hermione hissed back. "When Ron and I got out, we called everyone here immediately. Moody searched her room immediately. I didn't say anything. I didn't have to."

Draco ran to Contessa's side, crossing his arms and glaring defiantly at Moody. "She was as in much danger as us! She was attacked, too! How can you think she gave him a bad potion! He ripped her open, look at her wounds! She could have been bitten!" Draco cried. Moody looked quite startled by this. Rufus and Kingsley were standing by Contessa, and they had long strands of unicorn hair in their hands. Tonks stood to the side, looking uncomfortable.

"She wasn't bitten. That, in of itself, is suspicious," Moody growled. Harry recalled that the only way to contract lycanthropy was through the bite of the werewolf. He imagined it was something in the saliva. He also wondered how Contessa avoided it, but chalked it up to dumb luck.

Lupin tried to say something again, but fell back, too weak to talk.

"Why are we listening to you? You'd think finding a hair in your potion was a dire plot by the Dark Lord to destroy all civilization," Draco said scornfully.

"You little shit, when I'm done hexing you, your father's going to wake up in his cell

with his balls hurting from the back shock," Moody growled, towering over Draco. Apparently the words hair and potion used in the same sentence had touched a sensitive spot. Draco looked like he was regretting his words already. He was trembling and had gone rather white.

"Where's Dumbledore?" Harry asked. Hermione and Ron stood by him, both looking highly uncomfortable.

"I'm right here. What is going on?" Dumbledore asked, setting aside his traveling cloak. He had just walked into the room and was looking very severe. Moody took a step away from Draco. Harry noticed Draco was gasping as though he had forgotten to breathe while Moody was intimidating him.

"She's feeding Lupin bad potions all week. He turned into a werewolf last night. Almost killed Harry and the others. And we found all these lycanthropic potions in her room. Some of them are very dangerous. One of them can make the wolf stage permanent," Moody said, waving his hand at the potion bottles.

"She didn't do it!" Draco cried, apparently recovering enough to speak again. Oddly, as hard as Draco was trying to defend her, Contessa looked like she could care less.

Dumbledore bent over and picked up a potion bottle, looking at it and then Contessa. Dumbledore was looking at her curiously, as was most everyone else. The room fell silent as Dumbledore approached Contessa, holding up the bottle.

"What is this, Miss Lestranger?" he asked

Contessa finished mopping Lupin's brow, bringing the blanket up to tuck him in better. "My mad attempt to conquer the world with an army of werewolves, of course. What else would it be?" she said scathingly.

"Mmm. Sarcasm appears to be something Professor Snape taught you as well as he did Potions. Again, why did you make these?"

"I was thirsty."

"Try again."

"Ask Hippocrates Smethwyck. I was making it for him," she glowered.

"Right, and I'm the Queen of China," said Rufus scathingly.

"China doesn't have a queen. Do shut up, Rufus," Morpheus told him sternly.

"Why are we even listening to this shite?" Anastasia Bidazel demanded. "Why don't you just truss her up in the unicorn hair and be on with it?"

Dumbledore's eyes had widened when Contessa said Smethwyck's name. He then nodded in understanding and looked down at Lupin, who nodded as well. "I see, well that solves that mystery," he said.

"It doesn't solve it for me," Moody growled.

"What she just told me is sufficient enough, Alastor. Miss Lestrange was making the potions for Hippocrates Smethwyck. I have an idea of what their purpose is, and I do recall him recently telling me had someone helping him on a project of his. Or are you trying to cast aspersions upon Hippocrates, of all people?" Dumbledore asked.

Moody backed off, but he didn't look happy about it.

Contessa fell silent, her expression like stone. Dumbledore placed the bottle back in the pile, looking at them all thoughtfully.

"Tell me what happened last night. Leave nothing out," Dumbledore said neutrally.

Contessa told him everything that had happened. No one had to correct her, because for once, she was honest. When she described how Lupin forgot to leave on time, Lupin turned his face in shame. The entire time, her hair covered her face like a curtain.

"So you brewed the Wolfsbane Potion to best of your abilities?" Dumbledore asked.

"Yes," Contessa said shortly.

Dumbledore nodded and then turned to Hermione. "Bring back the monkshood she used."

Hermione pelted into the kitchen and then returned after a moment with a small brown jar. Dumbledore examined the contents. He waved his wand over it and the monkshood shriveled and morphed, resembling gray blades of grass.

"Dopplegrass. Who could have switched it with the monkshood? It only grows in

Greece, and I know Contessa couldn't have got hold of it. It's very expensive," Dumbledore asked.

Lupin made a croaking noise. Mrs. Weasley bent over him, nodding her head and looking angry as he whispered into her ear. She stood up. "It was Lycaon. Lupin thinks it was Lycaon. And after what that monster tried to do to my daughter, I wouldn't put anything past him," she said, trembling in anger.

"A reasonable assumption. You'll be happy to note, Miss Lestrangle, that I already cleared your name with the Ministry regarding Bode. No trial necessary. Now, if you excuse me, I have other things to attend to. And I presume, so do most of you. We'll have our meeting in two hours," Dumbledore said and began to walk out. "Harry, a word if you please."

Most of the room was clearing out now. They didn't really seem to know how to react to Contessa. Moody didn't say anything to her, but did give her a nod, his magical eye twitching badly. Draco flung himself at her. Even Ron, Hermione, Tonks, and Mr. and Mrs. Weasley gathered around. Snape, too, remained. She was grimacing under all the people around her.

"Clear away so I can treat her wounds," Snape said sharply to the group surrounding her as Harry left. He saw Mrs. Weasley beaming at Contessa. Whatever doubts she had seemed to have been put to rest by Dumbledore's assurance.

Harry followed Dumbledore out into the hallway. Dumbledore led him into the kitchen, repairing things as he found them.

Harry sat down at the kitchen table at Dumbledore's gesture. He waved two cups of tea into existence and shoved one over at Harry. Harry took it, but did not drink it at first. Instead he stared at Dumbledore.

Dumbledore didn't speak at first, so neither did Harry. He simply sipped his tea, staring at Harry with those intense blue eyes of his. Harry gave up and sipped his tea as well, wondering if Dumbledore just called him down here to have tea.

"I know what you're thinking, Harry. I don't have to cast Legilimency for this. You're thinking she's a Necromancer and you're a Parselmouth. You're thinking you're both the same. But you're not the same at all, Harry. Her curse is not yours. When Miss Lestrangle sat beneath the Sorting Hat, she made the wrong choice. Have faith in people, but do not have so much faith you become blind. Your gifts and curses are your own. Whatever choices you make will determine whether you are good or evil.

And whatever choices she makes will determine whether she is good or evil,"
Dumbledore said after a long while.

Harry stared at the table very intently, wondering how that should make him feel.

"I'm very proud of you, Harry. You saved both Miss Lestrange's and Draco's life back there, nearly at the expense of your own. Several times over. If it weren't for you, they would both be dead or worse."

"What was the deal with those potions?"

"It is a private matter between her and Healer Smethwyck. I will not speak of it."

"Oh," Harry said, frowning. It annoyed him not to know, but didn't anger him. For once.

"Parselmouth, Necromancer, werewolf, Muggle-born . . . there is no difference. A person's worth has nothing to do with the gifts or curses that were inflicted on them or the circumstances of their birth. A person's worth should be measured by their actions and ethics. A Parselmouth or a Necromancer is only as evil as the next witch or wizard. If you become evil, Harry, it will not be because you are a Parselmouth. It will be because something inside of you failed."

Harry nodded, unable to find anything to say.

Dumbledore was quiet for a long time before he spoke again. "Harry, I know that many things must have run through your mind when you found out Sirius wasn't entirely dead. I want to impress upon you that he is not alive, either. Any task you undertake will be very dangerous and very demanding. You cannot force people to help you, Harry, and you cannot sink to any measure to make it happen. You know what will happen to you if you do. Only a labor of love can bring Sirius back. And even then, there is a great chance it will simply fail. You must be willing to accept his death should you not succeed," he said heavily.

Harry blinked at him, but nodded, wondering--and not for the first time--if
Dumbledore could read minds without the other person knowing.

Dumbledore smiled. "I thought about this long and hard over the past week. I think this is the best way. That being said, I wish you the best of luck," he said gently and handed Harry a very old, very tattered book. And then he strode out quietly.

Harry picked up the book and opened it. The pages fluttered magically and opened to a very old and ancient potion recipe. It was entitled: Clone Concoction: To Make a New Body from Old Things.

Harry cried, he was so happy.

Due to the circumstances, Contessa allowed everyone to clean up the mess with magic. They were done in an hour. The Order held their meeting afterwards, though Harry, Ron, Hermione, and Draco were not allowed in.

Contessa's wounds were bandaged up and she assured everyone she was fine. She had Lupin transported up to his room prior to the meeting, and attended to his wounds as well. Apparently, he had suffered the worst wounds. Harry wondered guiltily if it was because of all those Repellus Lupus spells they had cast on him. Harry, Ron, and Hermione went about fixing things that had been looked over. Draco sulked in the kitchen most of the day, put out because he wasn't allowed into the meeting. Mr. and Mrs. Weasley stayed for dinner and they brought Ginny by Floo powder to sit with them. She was much more subdued than normal, more like the shy girl Harry recalled from a few years past. However, he knew it wouldn't be long before she was back to her usual self, judging by the peals of laughter that she gave when Ron told her the story of how Draco and Harry got tangled up with each other this past morning.

Harry never blushed so much in his life. Draco, however, looked positively murderous.

Lupin was sleeping the day away. Mrs. Weasley cooked them up a rather heavy lunch since no one had eaten breakfast. Ron and Hermione were quite involved with catching up with Ginny. Draco spent most of his time sulking at everyone else while sitting near Contessa, who was very quiet.

Harry sat by himself, reading the potion recipe. He ate lunch when it was ready and withdrew to his room when everyone moved to the drawing room. He kept scanning the recipe over and over. The beginning was more of a poem, really.

Clone Concoction

In cauldron full of pure water from darkest well,
Boil contents from Samhein until rings the Yule bell,

Begin with three hairs from the body you desire,
Add three tears of one who arose the body's ire,
Mix with three drops of blood from each of body's living kin,
And, last but not least, stir the love of body's heir in.

When doth the Yule moon rise,
So, too, will body's clone arise.
But only with a soul can clone truly live,
So pray that God's mercy will give.

It didn't entirely make sense to Harry, but that was all right. It was a chance, a hope, a dream.

A dream that Sirius would come back.

The book slipped from Harry's fingers and he covered his face. Why was he crying? Why now, when he finally had a real chance of bringing Sirius back?

But what if didn't work? What if he bungled this somehow and every dream and hope he ever had fell flat, ruined. What if Contessa failed, or the potion went wrong? What if Sirius just simply didn't come back? What if Sirius died for real? What if somehow Harry did something so irrevocably wrong that he turned into Voldemort?

The chance to make it all real also made it all so final.

Harry got up and searched for the only person who would understand how he felt.

Lupin was lying on his bed, looking freshly bathed and well tended to. He had been dressed in clean pajamas and someone had thoughtfully covered him in clean sheets. He stirred when Harry opened the door, blinking his warm brown eyes at Harry. There was automatic sympathy there.

Without saying a word about why he was a blubbering mess, Harry simply flung himself at the only remnant of his father he had left. And without a single question as to what was wrong, Lupin sat up and held Harry for a very long time, letting him finally, truly mourn the death of the man who had come closest to his father in all Harry's life.

Harry cried for a long time, even when he ran out of tears.

The door slowly opened, letting light spill into the darkened room. Harry sat up and blinked his eyes. He grabbed his glasses from the bedside table and sat up, realizing he must have fallen asleep on Lupin's bed. Lupin was also sitting up, blinking blearily. He apparently had fallen asleep as well.

Contessa walked in, carrying a tray full of food. She still had a slight limp. She looked startled to find Harry sitting there, next to Lupin. She cast Lupin a glance and then peered quite intently at Harry.

"You missed dinner. I called for you, but you didn't come. I sent Draco to look for you, but he said you were sleeping," Contessa said, frowning. "I didn't know you were sleeping in here. You should go to your own room. Lupin is injured and needs to recuperate."

"It's all right, Contessa. He didn't disturb me," Lupin said gently.

Contessa placed the dinner tray in front of Lupin, but spoke to Harry. "I made chicken marsala and pasta. I saved a plate for you. The stuffed mushrooms I made are all gone and so is the salad, but I think there's a bit of tiramisu left. You should have come down when I called you," she said sourly.

Harry didn't look at her, standing up. He crossed his arms in answer. He felt drained and empty after crying himself to sleep. He didn't want to have to deal with Contessa right now. She was trying enough when a person was emotionally stable.

Contessa looked at Lupin and he looked back. They seemed to be speaking some sort of silent language, because after a few moment, she turned back to Harry. "There's a special program on the wireless coming on the Witching Hour. Some European singer who calls herself Imadra. It's a ridiculous name, and you should see the scandalous robes--or lack of robes--she wears. She's only popular because she's pretty," she told him with no little irritation in her voice.

Harry blinked at her and Lupin looked like he was repressing a smirk.

"Mrs. Weasley has some fudge baking now, if you want to come and listen," she said in a bored voice.

Harry shrugged. "Why not?" he asked.

"I'll come back and check on you in a couple hours, Lupin. The blue cup has your potion in it. Drink it and go back to sleep," Contessa said stiffly, turning to leave.

Harry could see Lupin roll his eyes at her. "Friendly, isn't she?" he asked rhetorically, shaking his head.

"Are you going to be okay?" Harry asked.

Lupin raised an eyebrow. "I'll be fine. And you, Harry? Are you going to be okay?" he asked seriously, setting down his fork.

Harry looked down at the book Dumbledore gave him. "Yeah. I think I will be. Either way, I think I can live with what happens," he answered slowly.

"The worst part about death is living with it, you know."

"Yeah, I know."

Lupin studied him for a long moment and then nodded to himself. "Enjoy the program, Harry. Save me some fudge," he said.

"I will," Harry said distantly and then drifted down to the sitting room.

Mrs. Weasley had supplied bits of fudge for everyone. Mr. and Mrs. Weasley sat on a couch with Ginny. Ron and Hermione sat together on another loveseat. They, however, sat very close and kept whispering to each other. Their arms and hands touched a lot. Harry felt betrayed.

Draco was stretched out on the floor with a bunch of pillows and Harry sat in a leftover chintz chair. Harry found himself watching Draco and hardly paying attention to the program at all. The songs all sounded the same and when Imadra spoke, she sounded rather like a giggly idiot who kept thanking everyone for her newfound popularity. And it was hard to tell, but he thought he caught Draco looking at him more than once.

The program ended after a while. Ron was thumbing through a magazine eagerly and Hermione was staring at him in disgust.

"She's quite fit," Ron murmured appreciatively.

"Who?" Mr. Weasley asked vaguely, as a commercial came on for Gladrags.

"Imadra."

"She's barely wearing any clothes," Hermione pointed out in disgust.

"She doesn't need clothes, with a figure like that. Harry, come look at her."

Harry walked over and peered at the magazine. On the pages were pictures of an incredibly beautiful witch with nut brown skin, white-blond hair, and a rather curvy figure. She wore incredibly revealing robes, and a few of the pictures had her barely covering certain bits with nothing but a small cloak. There were a lot of pictures of her and Ron seemed to like them all.

Draco had also come to look at the pictures. "Well, she might not be much for conversation, but she fills out that robe rather well. If her clothes got any tighter they'd have to magically spray her robes on," he commented appreciatively.

"You are all such pigs," Hermione said.

"Wonder if they're real?" Ron asked, staring at a certain part of Imadra's anatomy.

"Doubt it, but who cares?" Draco said. It was the first time they had even stood so close or even exchanged words without fighting. All this over some scantily clad female with no discernible talent or intelligence.

"Easy on the eyes, isn't she?" Mr. Weasley said wistfully, peering over to look at the magazine with Ron and Draco. Harry couldn't have been more bored.

Contessa was scowling, but Mr. Weasley, Draco, and Ron, seemed quite entranced by the magazine. Hermione did not look pleased at all.

"Throw away that smut right now! A perfectly good magazine ruined by that . . . scarlet woman!" Mrs. Weasley cried, looking indignantly at them all. Hermione took the opportunity to pluck the magazine from Ron's hands and throw it in the dustbin. Mr. Weasley smiled and tried to look innocent. Draco and Ron both looked slightly disappointed. Hermione and Contessa looked very smug.

Harry wondered why he, too, wasn't drooling over Imadra. Dudley had posters of the Spice Girls on his walls. Ron was always talking about some witch or another he saw in a magazine. They were all quite pretty; prettier than Cho even. But instead of looking at the pictures of Imadra, his eyes kept drifting over to Draco.

There was definitely something wrong with this picture.

Harry bid everyone good night, collected some leftover fudge, and headed upstairs. Draco seemed to watch him go. The rest of them hardly noticed. Harry knocked softly on Lupin's door when he got upstairs.

"Come in," came Lupin's soft voice.

Harry walked in. Lupin was pushing himself up from the bed, looking a bit drowsy. Harry handed him the fudge. "It's quite good," Harry said.

Lupin smiled and took a bit, nodding in approval. "Molly makes an excellent fudge," he said approvingly.

"I don't like Imadra. What's wrong with me?" Harry blurted.

Lupin blinked, pausing mid-chew. He looked quite thoroughly confused. "Er, who?" he asked.

"Imadra. Some European singing witch who is really good-looking and wears next to nothing. And I don't like her. Why?"

Lupin set aside the fudge, looking confused but seeming to sense that Harry felt this was important. "Perhaps she's not the type of girl you prefer. Maybe you like smarter girls?" he asked.

"I like Hermione just fine. As a friend. I've never thought of her as anything else. If she doesn't qualify as smart, I don't know who does."

"Well, what sort of girls do you like, Harry?"

"I thought I liked Cho. But I don't think I really did. I mean, she was fit and quite smart, and I thought I liked her. But once she acted like she liked me back, I didn't like her."

"Is there anyone you like at all, then? Really like?"

Harry was silent. "Do you mean like in a physical sort of way?"

"Well, that's always a start, particularly at your age," Lupin said with a small smile,

drinking from a glass of water that was on his bedside table.

He had to talk with someone about the way he was feeling. Lupin was the only one he could talk to. He supposed he might as well get the hard part over with. "Draco," Harry admitted.

Lupin sprayed Harry with the water he was drinking. Harry blinked, taking off his glasses to clean them off and blushing furiously. Lupin was holding the now half-empty glass, staring at Harry in something like shock.

"You're not joking," Lupin finally said.

Harry shook his head, but was too embarrassed to say anything.

Lupin set aside the glass, looking like he was thinking very hard. "Are you quite sure, Harry?" he asked slowly.

"Sort of. I mean, I just . . . he's not bad-looking."

"He's a good-looking boy. Sort of pretty, I suppose, if you like his type. Which I guess you do," Lupin said, looking at Harry in concern.

Harry said nothing, continuing to clean his glasses, though they were already clean.

"You know, there's a stage that boys go through where they--" Lupin trailed off and sighed when Harry looked at him. "Er, guess you're rather past that age, then?"

Harry nodded slowly, putting his glasses back on.

"How long?"

"Very recently. Well, not that recently. Recently enough."

"Since you came here?"

"Yeah."

"Since he wasn't such a proxy brat that you wanted to drown him in a loo?"

"Still do, on occasion."

"I suppose last night, sort of, well, helped?"

"Yeah."

"Listen, Harry, life-endangering situations have been known to create strange feelings between people. Plenty of people think they like someone after that, when they really don't."

"I hope that's the case."

"You're still young. Just because you don't find girls all that interesting right now doesn't really mean anything. Next year may be different, who knows?"

"Right," Harry said doubtfully.

"Have there been any other--well, any other boys you liked?" Lupin asked.

Harry winced at the question. "Honestly? Not really. Well, sort of. I mean, I really haven't had much time to give it any thought," he said.

"Well, like in magazines and pictures and things?"

"A couple guys, I guess. Quidditch and football players, mostly," Harry sighed.

Lupin studied Harry very intently. "If that's really what you feel, Harry, don't be ashamed. There's nothing wrong with it. It's all right to be different. Just be careful in your choices," he said very seriously.

"Look, I didn't say I liked liked Draco. I'm not going to run off and go trying to snog him or anything. He's a rotten git and I'd bet he'd just love to run off and tell all Hogwarts that I'm--well, that I don't like girls," Harry finished lamely, avoiding any actual labels. Labels were so final.

"Harry, whatever you decide you like, whomever you decide you like, that's not going to change how anyone feels about you. Your parents only wanted you to be happy."

Harry nodded.

"It's normal. Uncommon, but normal. Plenty of people feel like you, so please don't be ashamed," Lupin pleaded. "I just want you to be sure. It's a hard choice and certainly not a popular choice."

"I'm not feeling like it's much of a 'choice', really. I mean, did you choose to like girls?"

Lupin smiled very thinly. "I'm the wrong person to talk to about that."

"What do you mean?"

"Never mind."

"Well, if I can tell you how I feel, why can't you? You shouldn't tease people with comments like that. What do you mean?"

Lupin stared down at Harry's feet. "I rather liked Sirius, actually."

It was Harry's turn to sputter. "Si-Sirius? You and Sirius? Are you serious?" he asked.

Lupin's eyes widened. "Oh, no, don't think that! I never told him! Ever! I'd have died if he knew!" he said quickly.

Harry stared at Lupin. He hadn't expected an answer like that. Lupin smiled a bit, seeming to know what Harry was thinking.

"That's why I want you to be sure, Harry. It's very lonely, feeling things for someone you're too frightened to tell how you feel because you know you'd be rejected. Very lonely. As I said, it's a hard choice, even if it's not a choice," Lupin told him gently.

There was a soft knock and Contessa walked in, holding another glass. "Lupin needs his sleep," she said fiercely, handing Lupin a glass and collecting his plate and old glass.

"Sorry, I was just giving him some of Mrs. Weasley's fudge," Harry said, greatly annoyed she had chosen now to check up on Lupin.

"It was very good, as was the meal. Thank you," Lupin said.

Contessa didn't answer him, which Harry thought was rude. "Come along, Harry. Off to bed. Let Lupin rest," Contessa said, ushering Harry out. She sounded a lot like Madame Pomfrey.

"Yeah, yeah," Harry said, leaving the room and heading for his own room. Contessa

headed downstairs with Lupin's dishes.

Harry crawled into bed, digesting his conversation with Lupin. Apparently, Lupin understood how he felt about more things than Harry had ever dreamed. It was a little disheartening, though. Would Harry, too, spend his life never telling anyone how he felt and never finding anyone to share happiness with? Provided Voldemort didn't kill him in the end, of course.

One problem at a time, he thought. Tomorrow he would share the potion recipe with Hermione and Ron. It was more important to dwell on bringing back Sirius than worrying about a future he might not ever live to see.

To be continued ...

Chapter 10: Jigsaw

Chapter Ten:

The Trouble with Draco

Harry woke up the next morning to Godric nuzzling his ear. The snake had apparently returned. Harry told him all about what had happened. Godric was completely unsympathetic and only seemed disappointed Lupin hadn't eaten Draco.

Harry shook his head and listened to the delightful sounds of Hermione and Ron bickering as they came up the stairs. Now, that was more like it.

There was a knock on his door. "Harry! Harry, wake up! Breakfast is almost ready!" Hermione called loudly.

Harry let her knock and call him again before opening the door. He was frowning. "What?" he asked shortly.

"Breakfast, Harry. Aren't you hungry?" Hermione asked.

Harry shrugged. "I'll be down in a few," he said, shutting the door on her.

He managed to calm himself down when he put his hands on the book that had the Clone Concoction in it. He walked downstairs and into the basement kitchen. Snape was sitting there to Harry's surprise, looking as sour as ever. He didn't look up when Harry entered the room. Contessa was standing over the stove, finishing up a pile of French toast. She also had made fat sausages and coffee, which was very jarring to Harry. He wasn't used to people making coffee instead of tea. Lupin was sitting at the opposite end of the table from Snape, looking a little unhappy.

Draco sat by Snape, drawing something on a piece of parchment, snickering. Snape's mouth twitched a bit in cruel amusement. Harry had a feeling it had something to do with him and his face burned. Hermione and Ron sat together near Lupin, bickering about something. As usual, Hermione was winning.

"Why are you here again?" Harry found himself asking Snape. His tone was not friendly.

Snape looked up, his eyebrow twitching up. "I can come and go as I please, Potter," he said dangerously.

"Professor Snape is here because Dumbledore asked him, Harry," Lupin said neutrally. "He's here to help you with some sort of potion."

Harry froze. Snape? Help him bring back Sirius? "No thanks," he said, "Ron and Hermione will do just fine."

"Well, Harry, we'll be happy to help you out until late afternoon," Hermione said, sounding like she was carefully choosing her words. "But then we have to get ready to go somewhere. If this is the potion I think it is, then Professor Snape should be able to help you out a lot. And Draco and Contessa, of course."

"Where are you going?" Harry asked, already having a sinking feeling that he would not be wanted on their outing.

"Er, well, we're going out," Hermione said. Ron was blushing. Draco looked disgusted.

"Out? As in a date?" Harry asked coolly.

Hermione nodded, looking almost apologetic. Ron was fidgeting with his plate.

"I see," Harry said stiffly, sitting down beside Lupin.

"Well, breakfast is done," Contessa said, piling everyone's plates full of food. "What is this potion that's so important?"

Harry sighed and put the book on the table, opening it to the page that had the Clone Concoction. "It's for Sirius. It's for making him a body, to help bring him back," he explained.

Snape snatched the book up, scanning the page with a look of disgust. "Dumbledore wants me to help bring back Black?" he asked, apparently as astounded by this as Harry.

"Bring back Sirius?" Lupin repeated slowly, looking somewhere between shocked and elated.

Contessa had gone rather stiff. "What is it?" she asked.

"Clone Concoction. I had no idea Dumbledore even had this. It's not even suppose to exist," Snape answered, apparently re-reading the page.

"Well, it would be a challenge, wouldn't it, Severus?" Lupin asked carefully. He looked very eager.

Contessa took the book from Snape and studied it. She looked paler than ever. She then handed it to Draco, who gaped at it. She looked very studiously at Harry, but said nothing.

Snape was snarling. "I am not going to devote my time to resurrecting Sirius Black. Dumbledore is much mistaken if he thinks I--"

"You're free to go back to the rock you crawled out from under, then," Harry told Snape almost cheerfully, even though his blood was boiling.

Snape slowly turned his head to Harry just as Lupin exclaimed, "Harry!" in a reproving tone. Ron looked torn between laughing and looking horrified. He had his mouth covered. Hermione had her mouth covered as well, but she looked properly horrified.

"I see," Snape said slowly and deliberately, "that you somehow think that three nosy, indiscriminate children are going to concoct the most difficult potion ever invented. You are as stupid as you are arrogant. Comes from poor breeding, I suspect."

"You greasy bastard! You take that back!" Harry yelled, standing up. Lupin had turned from giving Harry a reproving look to glaring hotly at Snape, visibly scowling.

Snape's expression was very nasty. "Did I hit a nerve?" he asked silkily.

"I don't want your bleeding help. I don't want one sodding thing you have to offer," Harry hissed, not caring anymore what Snape did to him.

Snape remained seated, and said nothing, watching Harry through narrowed eyes. There was a hint of a cruel smile around his lips. Contessa gave him a look and whispered something to Snape that Harry couldn't hear. Snape ignored her and continued to glare at Harry hatefully.

Draco was smirking. Harry resisted the urge to hex him. Lupin was working his jaw, giving Snape a remarkably dark look. Hermione recovered and took the opportunity to

snatch the book out of Draco's hands while he smirked. Ron looked over her shoulder as she read the recipe, frowning. Snape finally spoke, his beady black eyes glittering malevolently.

"I'm going to help you bring back your beloved godfather, Potter. Far be it from me to go against Dumbledore's wishes," Snape smiled. He was showing his yellowing teeth as he spoke. "Besides, I'd be frightened of what sort of body you'd concoct for Black, given your disgraceful blundering of every potion you touch."

Harry opened his mouth to retort, but Hermione interrupted him. "Professor Snape, I don't entirely understand the recipe meaning. It's rather obscure," Hermione said neutrally. Lupin was looking over her shoulder, mouthing the words as he read them.

"All the old potion recipes are like that, Miss Granger. The whole book looks like it was written well over a millennia ago," Snape answered, turning from glaring at Harry to give Hermione a disdainful look. "Let me see it again."

Hermione handed it over and he began to study it again. Contessa and Draco looked over his shoulder. Harry seethed.

"Life After Death. This book was written by Morgan Le Fay herself," Snape remarked. "This whole book is devoted to Necromancy and spells and potions related to healing, death, and the dead."

"Isn't that your ancestor, Contessa?" Hermione asked her politely.

Contessa snorted. "Mine and every other pureblood wizard's. The Black and Lestrangle lines are directly descended from Sir Mordred, her son, but they've intermarried constantly with just about every other old wizarding family. You couldn't help but intermarry, given how few of us there really are. The Malfoys, the Snapes, the Tiberiuses, the Morpheuses, the Melfluas, the Rosiers, the Mulcibers, everyone . . . even the Weasleys," she snorted. "If I recall properly, isn't your father a distant cousin of mine, Ron?"

Ron nodded. "Yeah, I think so," he said, sounding sort of uncomfortable.

"What about the Potters?" Harry asked. He knew next to nothing about his father's side of the family.

Snape scowled, but Contessa continued to speak. "We're all interrelated, some more distantly than others. Keeping the blood pure also means a bit of inbreeding, I

suppose. Draco's my blood cousin on my mother's side, but Lucius is actually my first cousin once removed on my father's side, so maybe Draco's even more closely related to me," she said.

"How are the Potters related, though?" Harry asked.

"Oh, pretty distantly. The Potters weren't nearly as old as the other families, sort of like the Prewetts, the Macnairs, the Averys, the Longbottoms, and the like. You can almost tell how old a wizarding family is by their last name. The more common it is in the Muggle families, the newer it is to the wizarding world. There are some exceptions--usually matrilineal--like the Black line, which began as the Lestrangle line long ago. The Lestrangle line began as the Le Fay line."

"How do you know all that?" Ron asked breathlessly. "My dad can hardly remember his grandparents' names."

Contessa shrugged. "The Dark Lord keeps all these things on record and he used to have me and a few others do research on the other Death Eaters, to make sure they were pure enough. I actually know a lot about wizarding genealogy. I doubt there's a pureblooded wizard alive that I couldn't trace his roots. Professor Snape is actually first cousin once removed to Sirius Black. Their mothers were blood cousins," Contessa said.

"And why is this important?" Snape asked her coldly, stiffening up. Harry grimaced, trying to digest that fact like a jagged pill. He tried to recall if he ever saw Snape's name on the Black family tree, and then realized there was a burn mark on the spot that joined up to a one Sorrow Meliflua, and a burn mark on the line leading beneath her. Sorrow had been blood cousin to a one Capella Black, mother of Sirius and Regulus. It stood out in his memory as he recalled Sirius pointing to Araminta Meliflua, who was his mother's cousin.

"It says, 'Mix with three drops of blood from each of body's living kin'," Contessa said darkly. "I do believe that refers to every single living kinsman Sirius has. You, me, Draco, Tonks, Andromeda, Narcissa, my mother, all the Weasleys, most of the Melifluas, any Snapes that qualify. . . . We'll have to refer to the Black family tree for any others. I'm not sure if the Lestranges count, as distantly related as they are, but we should probably get my father's and uncle's blood, too."

Harry moaned. This was going to be harder than he thought. "How are we going to get Bellatrix or Narcissa's blood?" he asked.

"Narcissa is easy. We'll arrange for Draco to visit her in Azkaban and ask. She never denied him anything before, why start now? He needs to visit his mother in any case," Contessa said, still appearing to be talking to Snape. "As for my father and uncle, they're both incarcerated, so it shouldn't be too difficult. Snape, you'll have to work on the Melfluas since they're your relatives. You'll also have to find some way of getting my mother's blood."

"This isn't going to be that hard," Snape said disdainfully. "It says 'living kin'. That means those Black would consider to be related to, his actual kinsmen. Distant relations don't mean anything. Otherwise we'd have to get blood from half of wizarding Britain. I think it's quite safe to assume that the Lestranges would not be considered kin. They completely branched off from the Black family over a thousand years ago. Anything past second cousin once removed isn't considered kin by most people's way of thought. You can bank on that probably being Morgan Le Fay's way of thinking as well. Everyone only thought of kinsmen as close relatives back in those days."

Contessa sniffed, not looking too pleased to be shown up. "Fine. That narrows it down to Arthur Weasley, me, Draco, Tonks, my mother, Narcissa, Andromeda, you, and any Snapes or Melfluas that qualify."

"There is only one Melflua left alive--my grandfather, Mycroft. And I'm the only Snape left."

"Thank God," Ron muttered under his breath. "I don't think we could handle anymore."

"Where are we going to get Sirius's hair?" Hermione said, taking the book back.

"I have some of his things in my room," Lupin said softly. "I think there's a hairbrush in there. I can check."

"Well, that solves that problem, but how are we going to find this person who 'arose body's ire' for their tears?" Harry asked.

"Oh, that's easy. Ire in this sense no doubt means someone who angered Sirius, but there was never any serious mortal rivalry involved. It probably means someone he hated, but not enough to wish them dead," Hermione said.

Everyone was looking at Snape. Snape crossed his arms. "I have never, and will never, shed a tear over that sanctimonious, reckless--"

"Stop there, before someone has to hurt you," Lupin said warningly, narrowing his eyes. Snape glared back at him. Harry had never heard Lupin speak like that to Snape before. But then again, it was probably a sensitive subject for Lupin. Harry knew it was for himself.

"I'm sure we could figure something out," Contessa said smoothly.

"What is this 'darkest well' they're referring to?" Hermione asked Snape.

Snape was looking disdainful again. "It refers to a place called 'The Cave of Cruachan'. It's a place deep in the Earth, where there's a spring filled with water. You can find it somewhere in Ireland," he said.

"Beneath the hills of Tara," Contessa said dreamily. "It's said to be the doorway to the Otherworld, where the Faerie dwell. All the Sidhe disappeared into it shortly after Morgan Le Fay died."

"Sidhe?" Hermione asked.

Contessa seemed to snap back to reality and her face darkened. "The Sidhe, the ancient rulers of the Faerie race. They lived in the Hollow Hills of Ireland, which are all empty now. Some old legends say they blessed certain members of humanity or interbred with them, which is what created wizards and witches. No one really knows, but it has been disproved by the amounts of witches and wizards in the ancient kingdoms like Egypt, Syria, Babylon, and so forth. What we do know is that they raised Morgan Le Fay, and after she passed, they mourned her death by passing back to the Otherworld they came from. House elves are their very distant cousins."

"I hadn't heard about any of that," Hermione said doubtfully.

"It wouldn't be in any of the books you read, Hermione. It's all myth and mythology," Lupin said, scoffing. "No one really believes in that rubbish."

Contessa gave Lupin a look nastier than any Snape had ever given him and Harry had seen Snape give Lupin some nasty looks. She got up and began to clear the dishes. She ripped Lupin's plate away, even though he wasn't done eating.

"All right," Harry said. "We've got all the beginning parts worked out. What about this business about stirring in love from Sirius's heir?"

"Well, that's where you come in, I expect," Hermione said. "I don't understand how you're suppose to stir in your love, though. It's a metaphor for something, I know I've seen it before . . ."

Draco was making funny noises and Harry quickly realized it was because he was choking on his own laughter. Snape looked disgusted. Hermione suddenly stifled a giggle as well. Contessa began to smirk.

"What is so bloody funny?" Harry asked.

"Oh, Harry, I just realized what this meant. It's the same as some of those ancient love potions--the ones that are illegal now. It's just worded a little nicer, that's all," Hermione said, gasping as she tried to control her laughter.

Harry, Ron, and Lupin exchanged a confused glance.

"You tell him, Granger. I'm going to die laughing," Draco gasped, his face pink and full of vicious mirth.

"What?"

Hermione visibly tried to compose herself and took a breath that ended in a giggle. "It means, well it means, er, think about the result of love," she said, tittering.

Lupin began to laugh as well, though he looked a little horrified at the same time.

"What is it?" Harry demanded. This was really annoying.

"Honestly, Potter, you're almost as thick as Crabbe and Goyle. It means your cum," Draco said ineloquently.

Harry turned beet red. "My--my WHAT?" he asked, dumbfounded. Ron burst into laughter as well, his face redder than his hair.

Draco was looking very impish. "Jizz. Semen. Sperm. Wad. Gooley white stuff that you--"

"That's enough, Draco," Snape said in dangerous tone. He looked quite thoroughly revolted.

"That is so gross! I'm suppose to--to put my--my--well, you know, in a potion to bring

back Sirius?" Harry cried. He'd never been this mortified in his life. "That's disgusting!"

Everyone else was laughing, except for Contessa, who only smirked, and Snape, who still looked disgusted. "You can say the name of the most powerful and terrifying wizard ever born, but you can't call your semen by name?" Draco asked with a grin so impish it should have been illegal. Everyone laughed harder.

"This is not funny!" Harry cried, though he was trying desperately not to laugh. His face was beet red, he was sure of it.

"If it works, you shouldn't care if we have to put in your bogeys, Potter. Suck it up, will you? Or not, as the case might be," Draco continued, sending the room into another raucous round of laughter.

Harry finally dissolved into laughter at his own expense. What Draco said was true. If it brought back Sirius, he would add in any bodily fluid demanded of him.

"Why'd it have to be something so disgusting?" Harry asked, still slightly disgruntled. Morgan Le Fay was a right old pervert, in his opinion.

"I reckon it has something to do with the fact that heirs are usually the body's children. If Sirius had any children it would make sense to use their sexual fluids, since the theory would be that it was his sexual fluid that created them. It's sort of like you carry the essence of your parents in your own fluids. We're lucky it said 'heir' and not children. I guess the theory is really more spiritual, since you are Sirius's spiritual child and you spiritually carry his essence inside you. I think that's what it amounts to, any way. Either that or Morgan Le Fay was a pervert," Hermione said, wincing every time Contessa ground at her cuticles. That made no sense to Harry, but he decided to leave it alone.

Contessa was resolutely doing Hermione's nails, having just finished shellacking her hair with Sleekeasy's Hair Potion. Since Hermione was just finishing with the rest of her strange, feminine ritual of preparing for a date, Harry had come to watch. He still had no idea how Hermione convinced Contessa to help her. She had pulled Hermione's hair several times while doing it and was quite vicious about putting on her make-up. Harry rather thought it looked like she was tweezing Hermione's eyebrows for malicious fun. Harry was quite grateful he was male and was not

required to suffer through any of this for a date. He also hoped for the sake of all females Contessa never became a beautician. She applied the same rigorous obsessive compulsion to grooming that she did cleaning, along with her insistence magic never did it right. Harry wondered if she just couldn't get her magic to do it right. Either that, or she was mad.

Ginny walked in with various shoes and purses, trying to match them to different dresses for Hermione to choose. Mr. and Mrs. Weasley had come around lunchtime, bringing Ginny with them. Mr. Weasley had gone straight to entertaining himself with Quidditch magazines and when Mrs. Weasley saw the slow, excruciating work Contessa was doing on Draco's clothes, she took pity and began to work on them herself.

"How's Ron coming along?"

"He's waiting downstairs, in the sitting room with Mr. Weasley and Malfoy. He's been dressed for over an hour."

Hermione frowned, but that could have been from pain.

"Why are you doing this?"

"Well, it's my first date with Ron. I want to look perfect for the first date," Hermione answered fervently.

"What does it matter? Ron seems to like you okay when you're dressed normal," Harry said. He tried to keep the bitterness out of his voice and succeeded for the most part. Ginny giggled at this and sat down on the bed.

Hermione breathed a sigh of relief when Contessa left her cuticles alone to add some sort of pink paint to her nails. The flesh around them was raw and sore looking. The skin around Hermione's eyebrows was an inflamed pink. The things women did for what they perceived to be beauty amazed Harry. "Professor Snape's supposed to be working on that potion. Is he still downstairs?" she said, ignoring his previous statement with typical feminine blitheness.

"He's in the library. He's been in there most of the day."

Contessa brought out a clear polish to top off Hermione's nails. Harry realized that he was standing in a room where Hermione was getting groomed for a date and had chosen to do that rather than ogle the magazines filled with pretty girls that Ron and

Draco had been poring over all day long. As if his conversation last night wasn't a clincher, this only went on to convince him there was no hope for him to start liking girls by next year.

"I hope Ron is suitable. If he doesn't look as good as you after all the effort I've put in, I'm going to be very cross," Contessa told Hermione.

Harry shrugged and went downstairs as Hermione prepared to dress. He entered the living room, finding Mr. Weasley and Ron involved in a wizard's chess game while Draco pretended he wasn't watching. It was quite amusing, watching Draco pretend he was reading a book even though his eyes flicked over every move the Weasleys made against each other. Draco looked up and realized Harry was standing in the doorway, staring at him. Draco scowled and went back to reading his book. The Weasleys did not notice his entrance.

"Arthur Weasley! I thought you were supposed to be helping Lupin repair that cursed toilet! You left him to do it alone, didn't you?" Mrs. Weasley bellowed, coming in with an outfit draped over her arm. She had a measuring tape around her neck and spools of thread hanging out of her apron pockets. Ginny had tried to use the old toilet in the spare bedroom and it turned out it was cursed and had tried to eat her. Lupin had been working on it most of the day.

"Molly! Oh, dear, look at the time! I'll go warm up the oven for dinner, so as to make it easier for you!" Mr. Weasley said very quickly, turning off the film and rushing past his wife to get into the kitchen. She glared at him darkly as he left.

"Draco, I finished your outfit," Mrs. Weasley said. "I'll work on the others tomorrow. Try it on and if it needs adjustments, let me know.

"Ron, dear, I'm very happy that you finally asked Hermione out tonight, but please remember to behave yourself. Remember I raised you to be a gentleman. Open the door for her, pull out her chair, and offer her your arm. Now, I'm going to go make sure your father doesn't blow up the kitchen while 'warming up the oven'," Mrs. Weasley clucked, fussing over Ron. She made him look more like Percy before leaving.

Draco looked down at the outfit Mrs. Weasley had given him with distaste after she left. Ron was watching him very intently, bunching up his fists. Snape, who had just walked in during Mrs. Weasley's speech to Ron, took the outfit and held it up for inspection. "It will do," Snape said, which was practically a glowing compliment coming from him. The robe looked very well made. Ron relaxed.

"Shame Contessa didn't pick up the skill," Draco said.

"Contessa has other skills," Snape said neutrally, handing Draco back his robe.

"Does she now? Good with her hands, is she?" Draco asked slyly, raising an eyebrow. Snape ignored him.

"Good Lord," Lupin said, walking in with a book in his hand and giving Ron a strange look. "You let your mother fix your hair, didn't you?"

"Er, well, yes. . . ." Ron said.

"Draco, I'm sure you know all the current fashions. Help him out," Lupin suggested.

"You're not joking," Draco said after a moment, looking disgusted. Lupin held out his wand.

"It would be a nice gesture on your part," Lupin urged.

Draco took his wand after a moment and then rolled his eyes and sighed, turning to Ron. Draco waved the wand a few times, improving Ron's look with each wave. Ron's hair was styled artfully, his shirt changed from maroon to a subdued green, his shoelaces tied, his shoes shined, and his belt morphed to look a little more stylish. The resemblance to Percy had faded and was replaced by a resemblance to Bill when Draco was done. Draco handed Lupin back his wand.

Ron looked down at himself, fingering the new shape to his belt. "Nice," he mumbled.

"She's ready. Do you have flowers or candy, or anything to greet with her with?" Contessa demanded, appearing in the door and stalking inside to get a better look at Ron. She picked at his hairstyle and nodded to Draco. "You did that, I can tell."

"I only did it because they deserve each other," Draco said, rolling his eyes.

"Er, no. Was I supposed to?" Ron answered Contessa's question nervously.

"What are you going to do tonight, in any case?" Lupin asked, looking curious.

"Er, I hadn't decided yet. I don't, er, really have much--" Ron began and then cut himself off to glare at Snape and Draco.

Lupin frowned sympathetically. "Why don't you take her to a Muggle restaurant?" he suggested.

"And pay with Muggle money? That's a great idea! My dad gave me the extra after the Quidditch World Cup and I never had anything to spend it on before!" Ron said brightly, concentrating for a moment and bringing out a fistful of pound notes from his pocket.

"Ron, you've got a small fortune there!" Harry said.

"What?" Ron asked, blinking his eyes in surprise.

"You could take her to a nice restaurant, take her dancing, and still buy her a gift," Harry said in wonder, staring at the pound notes.

"You can buy things with those little bits of paper?" Draco asked incredulously.

"Amazing," Snape said.

"Here," Lupin said. "Orchideous."

Lupin handed Ron a bouquet of flowers that sprouted from her wand. "That's for starters. I recommend Macau; it's in Camden Town, which is in walking distance for the pair of you. 43 Platt Street. It's a nice Portuguese restaurant, very good for dates," he said.

"Oh, you took someone on date there, then?" Ron asked, surprised.

Lupin smiled, but did not answer.

"Ron?" Hermione asked, appearing in the doorway. She looked quite pretty in a simple, pale green dress.

"Her-Hermione!" Ron stammered. "We can go to Camden Town for dinner! I have Muggle money!"

"Muggle money? How did you manage that?" asked Hermione, blinking.

"Oh, my dad had some extra after the Quidditch World Cup. You know, some Muggle gave him a bunch after he fixed her house last year. Some batty old lady had actually

walked up to him in the street, insisting he was a repairman. You know my dad; he couldn't resist a chance to get inside a Muggle's house. She insisted on paying him, even though he told her to keep it. Stuffed it in his pockets as he left. Dad didn't feel right turning it into real money after the World Cup, so he gave it to me," Ron said.

Draco opened his mouth to make a comment but Contessa stepped on his foot with the heel of her boot and he instead hopped away, mewling in pain. Contessa's lips twitched a bit, but she had no other reaction. Snape was grimacing so badly it looked like it hurt him to not say anything in response Ron's little story. Lupin, however, looked impressed.

Lupin, Harry, Ron, and Hermione walked out: Ron and Hermione because they were leaving and Harry in order to avoid hexing the Slytherins. Lupin was apparently heading to the kitchen.

"Have fun, Ron and Hermione," Lupin said congenially as he passed by them. Harry noticed he still had a slight limp, but otherwise looked much better.

"Behave, Ron. Hermione, dear, you look lovely. Enjoy your night," Mrs. Weasley said from the kitchen door, looking somewhere between proud and heartbroken. She was wiping her eyes with a corner of her apron.

"Have a good time," Mr. Weasley beamed from behind her.

"Shall we?" Ron asked, blushing as he looked at Hermione.

"We shall," Hermione smiled, taking his arm. "See you later, Harry. Don't wait up."

"Later, Harry," Ron said as they turned their backs on him and walked out the door.

Harry had never felt more alone.

After dinner, Harry ran upstairs to avoid the argument that Mrs. Weasley and Contessa were having over what to do for the evening's entertainment. Snape had finally gone home and Lupin sat in the sitting room, waiting for the argument to be over. Draco looked bored and for some reason refused to side with Contessa against Mrs. Weasley. Mr. Weasley kept trying to break it up, but Mrs. Weasley kept demanding he support her. If Harry was Contessa and Mrs. Weasley was looking at

him like that, he'd play whatever game she wanted, even if it was boring.

For some reason, Harry found himself in the Drawing Room, sitting by the Black family tree. Not even Draco had been able to take it off the wall, but then, Harry hadn't really seen him try. Harry found his thoughts drifting towards Draco, and he realized that he had never really thought about Draco before. Ever.

What did Harry really know about him? His dreams and disillusionments? His likes and dislikes? His wants and needs? Harry had never truly ever considered Draco as a person before. He had been too busy hating him.

Harry sat down before the Black family tree, staring at the melted part that used to be Draco's name. Why did he all of a sudden find Draco attractive? Draco had repelled him since the moment they first met. Though to be fair, it was Draco's attitude that repelled him, not his looks.

Draco was good-looking in that aristocratic sort of way that Sirius had before he was sent to Azkaban. There was a certain sort of delicacy to his features that caused him to be described as pretty, rather than handsome, but he possessed a sort of sly masculinity to his features and mannerisms that prevented him from being effeminate. His hair was smooth, he was stylish, and he moved much more gracefully than most boys his age. There were no awkward movements such as those from which Harry or Ron suffered. Poised would probably be a good word to describe him. He was everything Harry wished he could be in some ways. Good-looking, poised, fashionable, popular, and "cool" in every sense of the word. Harry had never put this much thought into someone, not even Cho. Then again, Harry didn't have to psychologically dissect that attraction. Cho was easy to like. Draco was a pain in the ass. Draco was cruel, he was malicious, he was vindictive, he was jealous, he was selfish, he was greedy, he was arrogant, he was bigoted, he was cowardly, he was--

--insecure. He was lost and alone. He had everything he thought brought meaning to his life torn from him violently and irrevocably. He had made a decision--a hard, painful decision--that no one in his immediate family had made before. He had refused to kill another human being, no matter how much he hated that human being. He had certainly suffered for it, almost died for it even.

Was that why Harry suddenly found Draco attractive? Because the most repellant aspects of his nature--those that most closely identified him with Dudley--were removed or somehow dampened by this new development that made his situation painfully close to Harry's? Harry didn't like girls, that much was painfully obvious, which left him with one alternative if he wished for a relationship. And if that was his

choice, why did Draco have to be the first person he truly felt physically attracted to? Harry still didn't like Draco much, but somehow the things that used to infuriate Harry only annoyed him now. It was as though Draco's maliciousness had become transparent, an easy cover to hide his insecurities and confusion.

Somehow, from the moment Harry last left Draco's hex-riddled body in a luggage rack to ooze on the Hogwarts Express to the moment Harry found him sitting on the kitchen floor eating his food in the dark, Draco had undergone a dramatic transformation. Or perhaps not so much a transformation, but a cleansing. He certainly was not nearly as malicious as he once was and perhaps his prejudices had even fallen to shambles after Harry's mother--Harry's dead, Muggle-born mother--saved his life, but little else had changed. He was still selfish, greedy, whiny, arrogant, vindictive, and impish, among other things.

Then again, having one's parents arrested, joining a death cult, escaping said death cult in fear of one's life for not having the guts to kill someone, and almost drowning to death would change anyone's perspective on life, Harry supposed. Harry didn't understand Draco anymore than he had before this summer. So many of the things he did mystified Harry. One moment he seemed like he almost wanted to try and be Harry's friend--like he had offered five years ago--the next he seemed to hate Harry as much as he ever had. Draco was an enigma to him.

Harry's head hurt from all the thinking he was doing. It was suddenly very important that he understood why his eyes lingered on Draco more than normal or while he felt very warm whenever Draco looked at him. Or why his fingers itched to stroke that soft skin again. Harry supposed it all boiled down to the fact that he had developed a sympathy for Draco--an unwanted sympathy, but a sympathy all the same. And now that he was sympathetic, Draco's faults were cast in a much softer light and his good points were suddenly in sharper focus.

Things like his sly smile. Like his bottomless gray eyes. Like his pointed nose. Like his smooth, soft hair and skin. Like his--oh, this was ridiculous. Harry was a masochist, simple as that. There was no other identifiable explanation. He liked Draco and he'd just better learn to live with it or try to make it go away as soon as possible. Did all people have to sit and think for an hour about why they liked someone? And did they, too, come up with the conclusion that you can't always control who you like?

Why? Why now? He didn't have time for this. He had to bring back Sirius. Sixth year was about to start. He still had to sort out how he felt about Ron and Hermione forming a pair within their trio. He had to deal with Snape. He had to keep an eye on Contessa. He had to deal with Sirius's death and the knowledge that he might not

come back, after all. He had to make sure Lupin didn't drink himself to death. He had to try and survive whatever plot Voldemort was certainly hatching for him at the moment. He just plain didn't have time for this at all.

"Are you constipated, Potter?"

Harry looked up to find--oh, joy--the object of his hormonal infatuation standing over him, smirking. Draco really did think he was funnier than he actually was. There were moments where his wit was merely cruel and not amusing at all. And then there were moments where he was both cruel and amusing--such as with the "Weasley Is Our King" song. Not that he'd ever tell Ron that. Harry frowned.

"You had your face all screwed up. Are you constipated? Or are you having trouble jump-starting those last few brain cells you've managed not to burn away doing heroic whatnots?" Draco asked, his tone unusually snotty. He had thrown himself onto a couch that was a bit away from where Harry sat. He was giving Harry one of those smug, challenging looks he gave when trying to start a fight. Lucky for him, Harry wasn't in the mood. Not only that, but given the result of Harry's prior conversation with himself, Harry was afraid wrestling with Draco might be too much to deal with.

"Why aren't you downstairs with the others?" Harry asked cautiously.

Draco rolled his eyes. "Weasley's mother won. They're playing wizard's bridge," he paused to sneer at this. "It's exceedingly boring."

Harry shrugged, knowing nothing about wizard's bridge. "So why are you here?" he asked, wondering why Draco had chosen to come in here, with him.

Draco rolled his eyes. "Well, Potter, this place isn't exactly exciting--well, currently anyway. Weasley and Granger are no doubt making eyes at each other over some disgusting Muggle drink. Even Contessa got roped into playing wizard's bridge with Lupin and the Weasleys. And Père's probably back at Hogwarts, obsessing over that potion. Père found out there are three other potions you have to use as a base for it. As usual, they're arguing about where to get everything."

"Père?" Harry asked, nearly unable to contain himself.

"Professor Snape to you, Potter."

Harry stared at him, but Draco didn't seem to be joking. He was stretched out on the couch, looking well and truly bored. "So you think I'm going to entertain you?" Harry

asked in disbelief.

"Sure. Dance, sing, defeat mad wizards with dumb luck, do something," Draco said arrogantly, waving his arm airily.

"You are unbelievable," Harry said in disgust.

"Too good to be true, I know."

"You're such a smarmy little prat, Malfoy."

"You make love to me with your words, Potter. Do keep it up, I'm almost not bored," Draco said in a tone that suggested otherwise.

Harry felt a blush rise up in his face at Draco's offhand comment. He clamped his mouth tightly shut before he said something unbelievably stupid--and incriminating.

"Oh, dear, did I say something wrong?" Draco asked in a mock sweet voice, raising an eyebrow, his expression near unbearable as he misread Harry's own expression.

"Bloody bastard," Harry swore, unable to formulate any other response.

"You're such a wanker, Potter. Is that the best you can do?" Draco asked, rolling his eyes.

That word put images in Harry's head that he promptly tried to shut out. He didn't have time for this. He'd never had time for any of this. When was a marked man such as him supposed to find time for anything other than trying to survive and not getting expelled from school? He liked Draco. Fine, but he wasn't going to say for what. He couldn't say for what. He couldn't even think of for what. He didn't even want to think about the comfortable, sticky end to the fantasies he never let get past the first touch of smooth, pale skin.

"Are you just going to sit there? What happened to that temper of yours? You almost became interesting last year. Don't stop flying off the handle now," Draco said with cruel amusement. He was smirking again.

"Do you get some sort of sick enjoyment off arguing?" Harry demanded.

"What? Did you think I wanted to be your bloody friend, or something?" Draco asked, laughing cruelly.

Harry didn't entirely recall how he wound up launching himself at Draco, or why. It was like something snapped. He saw red. Maybe if he beat Draco to a pulp, this masochistic fascination he'd developed for him would go away. And maybe his comments wouldn't hurt anymore.

Draco was quick and he moved off the couch, trying to dive for the door. He looked surprised when Harry tackled him. Harry grabbed him by the belt and dragged him back, but Draco was twisting free.

Somehow, they wound up in another tangle as they wrestled madly. Draco was on his stomach, pushed onto the floor, with Harry on top of him, straddling his thighs and pushing Draco's face into the floor as he struggled beneath him. Draco's shirt--which had formerly been Ron's three years ago--had ridden up, revealing the smooth white flesh of Draco's back. Harry felt alive like he never had before, like he was electrified. Every movement of Draco's slender body burned into him.

Bloody hell.

Harry had never really touched anyone for the sheer joy of touching them before. He found himself letting Draco's head go to rest his hand on Draco's bare back, sliding his Quidditch-callused fingers along the smooth, creamy line of Draco's back. Draco shuddered, breathing heavily as he fell still. Harry was breathing hard, too. Draco wasn't resisting. He was conquered. He was just lying there, on the floor, letting Harry touch him.

Harry was fascinated. He felt very warm all over, just from touching Draco's bare skin. He'd never felt this rush of warmth, these sudden, rather delicious urges to push the boundaries. Draco was lying there beneath him, a willing victim to whatever Harry wanted to do. The power play, in of itself, was intoxicating.

Harry splayed his bare hand on the bare skin of Draco's back. Warm urgings somewhere inside Harry made him want to explore other regions of Draco's body. He ignored them for the moment and put pressure on Draco's back.

"Aren't you suppose to fight back, Malfoy?" Harry asked, leaning forward to whisper into Draco's ear. The other boy's face was now willingly pressed against the area rug.

"I thought you were a Gryffindor, Potter. Is rubbing my back the extent of your boldness?" Draco whispered back. His tone was challenging. Harry put both his hands on Draco's smooth back, sliding down to the waistband of his jeans.

Draco began to struggle. His body bucked under Harry, which only made those deep, warm urges deep in Harry more demanding. He wanted more than ever to slide his bare skin against Draco's bare skin. Flashes of urges and desires that Harry had never sorted through flashed into his mind as his pants grew very tight. He struggled with Draco, trying to capture him, all sense abandoning him for the moment.

And then they heard footsteps. Both boys sprang apart like a fire had started. Harry was already back by the desk, his legs crossed. Draco was slowly standing up. They froze when Lupin walked in. He was holding a Quidditch magazine, turning to Harry and opening his mouth. And then he froze as well, apparently picking something up from the heated embarrassment that was surely written across Harry's face or the cool, imperious gaze he received from Draco as the boy suddenly remembered to pull down his shirt.

It was like someone had poured a bucket of ice water on Harry. His face had to be showing the brightest beemer in the history of man. Why had he been trying to molest Draco Malfoy?

Well, he knew why, but he didn't want to. This couldn't be happening. This was so stupid. Harry should know better. Draco was just the type to feign interest long enough to incriminate Harry and humiliate him publicly. Harry had to stop this right now, before things went any farther. If Lupin hadn't walked in, there was no telling how far they would have gotten before Harry regained his senses.

"Am I, er, interrupting something?" Lupin asked delicately, looking mostly at Harry but casting curious glances at Draco.

"Not at all," Draco said quickly and then fled the room. If Harry didn't know better, he looked mortified. Pink had stained his pale cheeks.

Now, that was an interesting reaction.

To be continued . . .

Chapter 11: Jigsaw

Chapter Eleven:
Out and About

Godric was very curious about Harry and Draco's encounter. He seemed to think that Harry wanted to eat Draco for dinner and was surprised that hadn't been the point. When he seemed to figure out it had something to do with sex, he became confused and thought Harry was trying to mate with Draco. When Harry tried to explain that wasn't exactly the idea either, since Draco was male and Draco could definitely not lay eggs, Godric gave up trying to understand and simply suggested that Harry simply eat him and get it over with.

Harry wondered if there was some sort of double entendre hidden in that. Then again, he thought it rather safe to ignore the romantic advice of a cold-blooded reptile.

Hermione had went home with her parents after a few days, leaving behind a rather mopey Ron. Their date had been a success and they had gone out every night for the next few days before her parents came to collect her. They said they were going out walking, but Harry suspected their walks involved snogging on a park bench or under a tree somewhere. Especially since Ron always returned with a dopey smile and Hermione's lip gloss on his mouth.

Mrs. Weasley promptly seized this opportunity to take Ron and Harry back to the Burrow. Ron seemed pretty eager to return home, but Harry was rather reluctant, even though he loved the Burrow. His whole purpose for staying had been eliminated with the discovery of the Clone Concoction. Yet, to go would leave behind Lupin. And Draco. No, he was definitely staying behind to be supportive of Lupin. After all, leaving him in a house filled with Slytherins couldn't be good for his morale. And Mrs. Weasley was definitely not fond of the idea of Godric slithering around her house.

Harry declined to go. Mr. and Mrs. Weasley looked a little hurt, but let it alone.

So it was Lupin and Harry alone in a house full of Slytherins. Mrs. Weasley had managed to make Draco all his school robes before taking Ron. Snape came almost every night, and even stayed for dinner--usually because he'd have studied too long and Contessa would bring it to him--while making lists of ingredients for the Clone

Concoction and the base potions. He and Contessa seemed to be working very closely on it. As much as Harry hated him, he had to admit Snape was efficient, clever, and resourceful. Snape and Contessa had gathered a lot of what they needed already. Harry and Snape, however, rarely spoke to each other. And Harry was positive that if Contessa wasn't on house arrest, he wouldn't come at all.

Snape showed up one night, limping into the sitting room bleeding and bruised, clutching a box full of wet canteens. He looked quite smug. Harry turned away from trying to ignore the depressing tragedy that involved far too much suicide that Contessa was listening to on the wireless, feeling almost relieved. Even Snape was better than that rubbish. Lupin woke from where he'd been sleeping in his chair and Draco sat up from where he'd been lying on the couch, looking as bored as Harry.

"The griffin guarding the Cave of Cruachan attacked me," he told Contessa when she rushed to his side, forcing him to sit down so she could look at his wounds. The box was set aside. He looked like someone had tossed him against sharp rocks and then ground him into them. His right shoulder and arm, in particular, had been quite thoroughly injured. His left hand was trembling, but when Snape noticed Harry was staring at it, he clenched it into a fist to make it stop and gave Harry a fierce glare.

"Why were you fighting with the griffin? It won't attack you unless you're taking the treasure at the bottom of the cave," Contessa demanded, ripping his sleeve open to glare at his wounded shoulder.

"My Patronus scared it."

"Excuse me?"

"I arrived at Tara to get the water down at the Cave of Cruachan," Snape said wearily. "I opened the invisible gates and placated the griffin with food and my word I had only come for the water. I was--of course--attacked by the merrows down by the pool. I was prepared for that. I was not prepared for the Dementor on the way back up."

"Why did a Dementor attack you? What was it doing there?" Contessa asked sharply, sending Draco out to fetch her medical bag and healing potions.

"They're not all under the Dark Lord's control. I expect this one was returning to infest the ancient tomb just beyond the gates. They used to live there until the Ministry rounded them up."

"What did you do?"

"What was I going to do? Ask it to afternoon tea?" Snape said impatiently. "I cast a Patronus Charm on it, of course. It was sufficient enough to scare it off. Unfortunately, the blasted spell went scuttling off towards the griffin after the Dementor fled."

"Scuttling?" Contessa demanded.

"My Patronus is a large tarantula," Snape said with a shrug. Harry fervently hoped Snape wasn't ever attacked by Dementors around Ron.

"And?" Contessa prompted as Draco returned, handing her the medical bag.

"And the griffin was not pleased--to say the least. I fought him off and left," Snape said airily and then winced as Contessa put some Astringing Potion on him.

"So this is the water we need for the Clone Concoction?" Harry asked eagerly, eyeing the box full of wet canteens.

"You are as thick as a troll, Potter. Did I not just say I was at the Cave of Cruachan?" Snape snapped.

"You should have asked me to come," Lupin said, cutting Harry off before he could speak. "If it was going to be such a problem."

"This is the least of my problems. Now I have to find a way to get Bellatrix Lestrange's blood without arousing suspicion, which is no mean feat. She doesn't exactly bleed on command."

"No, but she bleeds once a month, like every other woman," Contessa said, daubing at Snape's wounds.

Snape's lips curled in distaste. "Surely, you are not suggesting that I--"

"If you've got a better idea, use it," Contessa said smugly. "Now, we're going to have to put you up for the night so you can heal properly. You need to find a spare room and strip when you get up there."

"Excuse me?" Snape said defensively, moving away from her in a sudden jerking movement. His eyes had widened.

"You're bleeding all over. And your seven layers of robes are getting in my way to heal you. Don't worry, Professor Snape, I'm not going to molest you. In fact, I'm going to go brew up a potion for you, and then let Lupin molest you. He's the one who's going to finish applying on the Astringing Potion and applying the healing creams. When he's done, I'll cast a few spells, feed you another potion, and you should be better by tomorrow or the day after. It's all very complicated, you see," Contessa said airily.

"I'm going to have to spread cream and whatnot on him?" Lupin asked, eyeing Snape with distaste.

"You are," she said firmly, handing Snape some tablets to chew from her medical bag.

"He is not," Snape spat, eyeing Lupin with even more distaste. He chewed on the tablets and then looked positively ready to vomit. Harry wondered if it was from the taste of the tablets or the thought of Lupin touching his naked body.

"He is so," Contessa said even more firmly, handing the Astringing Potion and a bag of cotton balls to Lupin.

"I'd rather you do it," Snape said quickly.

"Oh, I'm sure you would prefer a girl that's fourteen years your junior to smear cream on your naked body," Lupin said drolly, staring at the cotton balls distastefully and then Snape.

Snape paled and his nostrils flared. Contessa shot Lupin a glare before stalking to the kitchen. "Look, let's just get this over with. You're dripping blood on the sofa," Lupin sighed. "I'm not going to enjoy this anymore than you will."

Snape gnashed his teeth, but swept upstairs with as much dignity as his pronounced limp would let him, muttering darkly. Lupin gave Harry a long-suffering look before heading upstairs after him, eyeing the cotton balls as though they were tiny ticking time bombs.

Harry and Draco were left alone. Harry tried to avoid looking at him directly. They had managed not to be left alone or even to speak to one another since their encounter. Harry was already blushing, but when he looked up, Draco had disappeared.

Harry felt rather disappointed.

"Your breakfast is downstairs waiting for you, Professor Snape," Contessa said calmly, pulling on a pair of black gloves.

"I've told you to call me Severus," Snape said stiffly. "I am not your teacher."

Harry stood by the fireplace, trying not to look at Draco, who was standing by the fireplace as well. Contessa and Lupin were taking them shopping at Diagon Alley and had received permission from Dumbledore to leave. School started in a week and they already had their lists. Contessa had also made mention of going to St. Mungo's to take care of unfinished business, since she said her resignation probably hadn't been processed yet and she would be able to Floo in. Harry found it amusing that even a magical hospital suffered from the paperwork overload that any Muggle hospital did. Contessa had a box full of potion bottles and vials lying on the floor next to her. They appeared to be the same ones Mad-Eye Moody had accused her of brewing to control werewolves. Lupin seemed to ignore their presence. When Contessa was done putting on her gloves, she shoved the box up one of her billowed sleeves.

Lupin was wearing a shabby brown robe with patches on it. He looked very uncomfortable. Draco was wearing a faded green robe that looked like it might have been Harry's dress robe that he had worn to the Yule Ball two years ago. Harry was wearing a pair of jeans and an orange shirt that had been Dudley's two years ago. Contessa wore black. And accented it with black. Every day seemed to be Halloween as far as she was concerned. While Lupin, Harry, and Draco looked rather normal, Contessa, much like her cousin Tonks, was bound to stand out in a crowd. Harry found this comparison rather amusing.

Snape, however, was standing at the foot of the stairs, wearing a shabby blue dressing robe Lupin had loaned him. His clothes had been ruined by the griffin and he initially refused to wear anything Lupin gave him. However, when Draco found a bright fuchsia dressing robe that had once belonged to Mrs. Black and offered it to him, he decided Lupin's clothing wasn't so bad. He was still looking ill, and Contessa had forbade him from Disapparating home until tomorrow.

"Your lunch is in the icebox and we'll be home in time to bring you a late dinner. If not, there's a bit of chicken and mash from last night left in the icebox. If you're still feeling poorly, I can arrange for Lupin to give you a sponge bath tonight," Contessa said smoothly. Harry couldn't tell through her black lipstick, but she might have been smirking.

Lupin and Snape blanched at the same time. "No, thank you, I can manage," Snape said hastily. Lupin never looked so relieved.

"Make sure you get plenty of rest," Contessa said, grabbing the box of potions by the handle.

Snape scowled and limped to the kitchen. "Be careful," he muttered.

"He looksss sssick. If he diesss while you're gone, can I eat him?" Godric asked as he slithered past Snape. Snape eyed him warily.

"Sure," Harry told him, grinning. He was glad no one else spoke Parselmouth.

"Diagon Alley, first," Contessa ordered, turning to Lupin. He had brought out the Floo powder, which he kept hidden from Contessa. He handed it to her.

"Yes, we could buy you some common courtesy while we're there," Lupin remarked, causing Harry and even Draco to laugh loudly.

"And perhaps we'll buy you a personality, since we'll be in the same store," she retorted, holding out the jar of Floo powder to him.

Lupin grabbed a handful of powder and threw it into the fire. It turned green and he stepped through after shouting "Diagon Alley". He was rolling his eyes in irritation.

"Can't we split up, Contessa? I can't be seen with him!" Draco cried, jerking his head at Harry.

"Out of the question. Now suck it up and go through."

Draco scowled and went through the fire. Harry scowled after him. Contessa held out the jar to Harry. "Hurry along," she ordered.

Harry grabbed a handful of powder and went through as well. He slid into an open fireplace in one of the alleys. Lupin was there waiting for him and Draco was muttering to himself, brushing off ash and looking around furtively. After a moment, Contessa joined them.

"List?" Contessa commanded, brushing some stray ash off her hooded cloak. Draco handed her his school list and she studied it, frowning. "The Times of Troubles: A

History of Dark Witches and Wizards? The Rise and Fall of Dark Wizards of the Twentieth Century? The Dark Mark: An Examination of the Dark Lord's Reign of Terror? These are the text books he picked out?"

"He seems quite organized," Lupin told her. "He asked me for all my notes on all the students. He doesn't really want to go by Crouch's notes, even though he was quite a good teacher, whatever else can be said of him. He's thrown away all of Umbridge's notes, which I applaud."

"These are rather harsh books for children," Contessa said sharply. She sounded just like Mrs. Weasley for a moment.

"Dumbledore wants them to all be informed. He may be taking that and running with it, but there's nothing wrong with that. These are sixth year textbooks, after all. It's not like he's inflicting this on the first years. He gave me the list of books to see what I thought."

"I'm sure he did," Contessa said shortly.

"Who are you guys talking about?" Harry asked.

"Your new Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher," Contessa said darkly.

"Let's just get to shopping. Harry, you've grown. We need to get you new robes. Let's stop by Madame Malkin's after we take you to Gringotts," Lupin said.

When they got to Gringotts, Harry tried to shield the view of his vault from Draco, but Draco saw in any case. Draco had practically turned green, glaring at Harry hatefully as though it was his fault Draco no longer had money. Contessa scraped together her savings to buy Draco his books and supplies. Though he had his school robes, he was stuck with hand-me-downs from Harry and Ron for regular clothing. He sulked the entire time Harry was in Madame Malkin's. Contessa walked around, examining some of the more burlesque robes. Lupin stood around, eyeing the new clothes with a sour expression. Harry opened his mouth to offer to buy Lupin a new robe, but then tightly clamped his mouth shut. Lupin's feelings would be hurt if Harry did, he was sure. Harry resolved to buy him some clothes for Christmas.

They picked up most of their books from Flourish & Blotts, though they had to get a couple of the new Defense Against the Dark Arts books from Obscurus Books. They picked up quills, ink, and parchment at Scribbulus Everchanging Inks. Draco had to buy a new cauldron. The entire time, Draco kept moving to hide behind someone

when one of their schoolmates walked by. When Harry met Dean Thomas and his parents in the Apothecary, Draco hid behind a rack of dried boomslang skins. Harry thought it was rather annoying. They had lunch at Florean Fortescue's Ice Cream Parlor and Draco hid in the corner, ducking under the table when someone he knew entered. Draco looked torn between fascination and disdain when they entered Weasley's Wizard Wheezes to say hello to Fred and George. Fred and George took turns showing Harry a variety of items to use on Draco and making smart comments about him.

Draco's mood, however, improved when they arrived at Quality Quidditch supplies. Contessa looked extremely bored, but agreed to go inside. "I need a new broom, you know," Draco told her excitedly. "I'm the new Captain of the Slytherin Quidditch Team, after all."

Harry frowned at this, since he had been made Captain of the Gryffindor Quidditch team. That meant he and Draco would be squaring off against each other even more than they usually did. He looked at a new pair of racing gloves, trying to decide if he needed them or not.

"Yes, Snape already gave me an allowance for your new broom," she said, rolling her eyes.

Draco was no longer trying to hide, but was dashing all over the store, looking at all the new things. Harry dashed with him, excitedly looking through the magazines that listed all the Quidditch events and up-to-date news. Draco was poring over brooms so intently he didn't even notice the Creevey brothers come in and gape at him and Harry before their parents ushered them out. Draco was fondly holding a Firebolt, though to his credit, he didn't ask. He already knew that was out of the budget.

"Look, Draco, I found a Nimbus 2000 on sale. We should be able to afford this," Contessa said, picking one up.

Draco frowned. "I can't get a Nimbus 2001?" he asked darkly.

Contessa glanced at a rack of them. "Out of the question," she answered after looking at the price tag.

Draco glowered, but snatched the Nimbus 2000. He looked ready to spit nails.

"It's quite a good broom," Harry said defensively, still remembering his old Nimbus 2000 fondly. Draco turned a dark look on him, but didn't retort.

They bought the Nimbus 2000, and Draco's spirits did rise a bit as he tested it out in front of the shop. He did an impressive cartwheel in the air and swooped down on some old witch, who nearly passed out in fright. Contessa screamed at him to get down immediately and he did so, smirking impishly. The old witch began tossing curses at Draco as soon as she recovered from clutching her chest and they all ran off, Draco and Harry laughing while they did so. Lupin was grinning, but Contessa looked rather cross. She glowered dangerously at Draco.

"You are every bit the pain in the arse James and Sirius were at your age, Draco," Lupin said fondly, chuckling softly. Harry was startled by this comment, and apparently so was Draco.

"Let's go get your wand, and then we can leave," Contessa said crossly, heading off to Ollivander's. Draco and Lupin followed her.

Harry trailed behind, thinking very hard on Lupin's statement. Was that it? Did he like Draco because he reminded him of his father? He had heard some guys liked women that were like their mothers--hence Ron's attraction to Hermione--but would someone who wasn't interested in girls be attracted to someone who was like their father? Draco was arrogant, just like James Potter. Draco was mischievous, like James. Draco was a bully and so was James in his youth. Draco liked to pick on people for no good reason and often went too far, and so had James. They both had wicked senses of humor and a love of pranks. Both were popular and traveled in gangs. There were some notable differences, but also some rather disturbing similarities.

Harry smacked himself on the forehead, hoping he'd wake up from the nightmare. It brought to mind many psychological ironies that were best left to people like Hermione to sort out. It wasn't just his feelings that struck him as strange, but Snape's. Did Snape even realize that the godson he adored was just like his hated school rival?

"Good afternoon," Mr. Ollivander said neutrally when the quartet walked in.

"We need a wand," Contessa said brusquely.

"Ah, yes, I remember you, Miss Lestrage. Mr. Snape brought you in here while you were in disguise a few weeks ago, did he not? Broke the new one already?" Mr. Ollivander asked.

"How did you know?" Contessa asked, stiffening.

"You are a Lestrangle. You may be a Malfoy in Lestrangle's clothing, but you are a Lestrangle, nonetheless. A leopard cannot change its spots, a lion cannot lie down with the sheep. Do not pretend otherwise," Mr. Ollivander said evenly, coming out from behind his counter, walking over to Harry as his watery eyes glittered at him.

"How dare you--" Contessa began before Mr. Ollivander cut her off.

"Your first wand was yew, nine inches, phoenix feather. Rather bendy. Good wand for the Dark Arts. The phoenix was a fine old male and about to flame when I took the feather. Your new wand is elder wood, thirteen inches, phoenix feather. Supple. Good wand for healing. This phoenix was young and had just laid her first clutch of eggs," Mr. Ollivander said. "Did you break it?"

"No," Contessa said, swallowing. Somehow, Mr. Ollivander's comments on her wands seemed to have removed her indignation. Mr. Ollivander studied Harry while he spoke to her.

"Holly, eleven inches, phoenix feather. Supple. Good wand for Defending Against the Dark Arts. Well, Master Potter? Did you break your wand?" he asked imperiously, frowning.

"N-no," Harry said, feeling the unexplainable fear that he always had around Mr. Ollivander.

"Excellent. I doubt Fawkes would donate another feather. And you, Mr. Lupin? Did you break yours?"

"You remember," Lupin smiled, touching his wand inside his coat.

"I remember every wand I ever sold, Mr. Lupin. Rowan, twelve inches, unicorn hair. Very firm. Excellent wand for advanced magic. It was a lovely unicorn mare that supplied the hair in your wand, bathing in the moonlight when I found her."

Lupin fell silent. Mr. Ollivander turned to Draco. "Then it must be you, the young Malfoy. You, I do not remember selling a wand to, though I do recall your mother buying you one. I highly disapproved of her doing so without allowing me to measure you," he said.

"It was a rubbish wand. I've been using my grandfather's wand. The one from here never worked properly," Draco said haughtily, scowling at Mr. Ollivander.

"Most likely because the one from here was not suited to you. This should be interesting. I sold your grandfather, Aurelius, his wand when he was a boy. Rowan, thirteen inches, dragon's heartstring core. Very rigid. Excellent wand for Arithmancy. He was a tall, good-looking chap, wasn't he? Blond hair, blue eyes? Rather thought the sun should rise and set at his command?" Mr. Ollivander asked.

"I don't remember him. He left when I was a baby."

Mr. Ollivander nodded sharply and brought out a tape measure. "Wand arm?"

Draco held out his right arm, allowing himself to be measured. Mr. Ollivander then went into the back and began rifling through wands. "You need a wand for Arithmancy?" Harry asked. "I thought it was all charts and mathematics."

Lupin shook his head. "It is, but it also a sort of meta-magic. Magic that effects other magic. You can use it to be more precise with other spells--particularly Charms. For example, by using Arithmancy, you could levitate five out of seven feathers piled together, rather than the whole lot. It's a very difficult branch of magic to master," he explained.

"My grandfather was a master Arithmancer," Draco said, sniffing disdainfully. He waited impatiently until Mr. Ollivander came back with a small pile of wands. Mr. Ollivander handed him one. Draco waved it; nothing happened.

"I do best with dragon's heartstring cores," Draco said.

"I'd already determined that, Master Malfoy. It's a family trait. I don't think there was a Malfoy born who used anything else in their wand's core," Mr. Ollivander said sharply, handing him another box. Draco waved that as well, but nothing happened. Mr. Ollivander snatched the wand back.

They went through about five more wands. Harry was getting bored. Mr. Ollivander looked at Draco shrewdly and then smiled. He went into the back and returned with a dusty box. Harry noticed he came back from the same area where Harry's wand had come from. Mr. Ollivander held the wand out to Draco.

Draco waved it and accidentally shattered a vase. Draco looked pleased. So did Mr. Ollivander.

"I thought I'd never get rid of that thing," he said.

"Excuse me?" Draco asked defensively.

"Birch, nine and three-quarters inches, dragon's heartstring. Nice and pliable. The heartstring was from the dragon that St. George killed long ago. We've been trying to give that wand away for hundreds of years, but it's never worked for anyone else."

Draco looked at it and then Mr. Ollivander. "I think it's quite nice," he said plaintively.

"Hand-me-down wands," Mr. Ollivander muttered to himself as he turned away without even saying good-bye. "When will these pureblood parents learn you can't expect good wizards and witches if they're using hand-me-down wands?"

"My grandfather's wand was an heirloom, not a hand-me-down!" Draco called after him, looking offended.

"Right. So I guess Ron's and my clothes are heirlooms, then?" Harry sniggered.

Draco shot him a look of pure loathing. "Think you're so clever, Potter, do you? Just because you have a special wand core just like the Dark Lord? All the Death Eaters know about that--he told us--and they're just waiting for a chance to break your stupid wand, too," he shot nastily.

"Well, not all of us can get rubbish wands that no one else can use."

"Rubbish? It's special! I got it to work and no one else could!"

"You're special all right, Malfoy. No one will argue that you're special," Harry said, inflicting as much sarcasm as he could into the word "special".

Draco's face turned pink. "Filthy little half-blood prick," he spat, apparently running out of retorts.

"You never to measure up, do you? Your wand seems a bit smaller than mine," Harry continued, venting his frustrations.

Draco opened his mouth but Lupin shoved a giant piece of chocolate in it. He had pulled it out of his pocket and was pulling out another piece for himself. "Have some chocolate, Draco," he said as Draco struggled with the huge slab in his mouth.

"If you two would be so kind as to save the foreplay for later, we need to go,"

Contessa said with something like amusement in her voice. Harry turned beet red. Draco glowered at her, spitting chocolate out as they got outside.

"I hate chocolate," Draco muttered darkly.

Contessa bought a packet of Floo powder and they went back to the fireplace in the alley. "St. Mungo's Hospital for Magical Maladies and Injuries, Office Corridor," she said clearly and then stepped into the fire.

Harry, Draco, and Lupin followed her. They arrived on the first floor. They weren't in the welcome area Harry had come in through the last time he was here, but seemed to have come out at the end of a long, white hallway full of doors.

A tired-looking witch walking down the hallway looked startled at their appearance. "Contessa Counts?" she asked. She was very plump and had long brown hair piled on top of her head. She peered at all of them curiously behind her gold-rimmed glasses.

"Cassandra Cassius. Is Smethwyck in?" Contessa asked coolly.

"He's in his office," she said, her eyes resting on Harry and widening.

Contessa began to walk by her but Cassandra grabbed her arm. "Why did you resign?" she asked.

"None of your business. Let me go," Contessa said harshly.

"Are you in some kind of trouble?" Cassandra asked. "There's been some of your old housemates here looking for you. They didn't look friendly."

"Like who?" Contessa asked, visibly paling.

"It was strange; most of them were in my year, not yours. You were a couple years behind me, weren't you?"

"Who?" Contessa pressed.

"Well, all the Slytherins in my year and a few in yours. And Bastion Fort. He was a Gryffindor, I think."

"Bloody hell," Contessa swore, storming down the hallway. Harry, Draco, and Lupin hurried after her. Cassandra watched them all go with a curious expression.

"She went to school with Bill?" Harry asked as he caught up to Contessa.

"She was a Ravenclaw prefect and Head Girl of his year. She's quite a good Healer," Contessa spat viciously. Harry was taken aback by the vehemence of her words. He'd never heard anyone speak highly of someone and make it sound like an insult before.

Contessa stopped by one of the white doors and pounded on it. There was a glittering brass sign on the door that said: Hippocrates Smethwyck, Healer-in-Charge of "Dangerous" Dai Llewellyn Ward: Serious Bites, Employed for Thirty-Two Years. Harry suddenly remembered he was the head Healer in charge of the ward Mr. Weasley had been put in last year.

After a moment, an older man opened the door. He stared at the quartet, blinking his watery blue eyes. He was bald on top and had a fringe of white hair crowning his head. He also had a very bushy and large white mustache hanging from beneath his large, flabby nose. He hunched over a bit as he stood, but looked to be a rather small, skinny man. He looked older than Dumbledore.

"Clementine!" he squeaked in a very high-pitched voice, almost boyish. "How lovely to see you, my dear! Did you get married and have children and not tell me?"

Harry blinked as Smethwyck surveyed the group, his blue eyes resting on Lupin and grinning broadly.

"Smethwyck, you senile old idiot," Contessa said without her usual nastiness, "My name's Contessa. And how could these two be my sons? For one thing, I'd had to have given birth to them when I was seven. Two, I've only been gone a few weeks. That's hardly enough time to get married and start running around with adolescent children. Three, neither of them look a thing like me."

"Well," Smethwyck said, not put off by her insult, "they could have been your stepchildren."

"Imbecile, I'm not married and I'm certainly not married to Remus Lupin. And these two aren't his children, either. One's my cousin, Draco Malfoy, and the other is Harry Potter, my ward for the summer." Contessa indicated each of them with a gesture.

"Oh, well pleasure to meet you all," Smethwyck said, smiling vaguely and not reacting to Harry's name.

"You know, Harry Potter. The Boy Who Lived. He who defeated You-Know-Who," Contessa continued, waiting for him to react. Draco was scowling.

"Harry who? And who do I know, now?" Smethwyck asked, looking confused.

"You-Know-Who."

"Do I really? If I know him, why can't I remember him?"

Contessa sighed and Draco giggled. Lupin looked vaguely amused and Harry was grinning. He wondered if Smethwyck was making fun of her. "Never mind. I brought your potions," Contessa said, pulling the box from inside her sleeve.

"What potions? I don't remember losing any. Then again, if I lost them, I probably wouldn't remember them."

"The ones you asked me to make, you barmy old codger."

"I don't remember asking you to make any potions."

"You probably don't remember what you had for breakfast."

"Of course, I remember! I had, I had--well, I know I had breakfast. I think," Smethwyck said vaguely, looking like he was concentrating very hard as he randomly muttered food items.

"Senile fool. Aren't you going to invite us in your office?" Contessa demanded. Harry wondered if he was pretending, or if he was as confused as he acted.

"Why are you all standing out here? Come in, come in!" Smethwyck suddenly said in a bright voice, as though he hadn't heard Contessa. He moved in and beckoned them all to comfortable plush blue chairs in front of a very large desk. He then went to his desk and began to fold handkerchiefs for some reason. He kept calling Contessa "Clementine". Harry wondered why.

Harry sat down and looked around, noting that he'd never seen a stranger office. The large desk was painted a garish green that clashed with the comfortable blue chairs. The walls were a horrid yellow and all the shelves were of different colors. There were dozens of pictures on the wall. Many of them were of Smethwyck and his family. There was a picture of him in his youth standing by a cheery, plump little woman and three very plump, cheerful-looking children. The pictures of his children,

however, did not extend past early childhood. The plump wife did not age past her early thirties in any of the photos. The photos with Smethwyck and his family together did not have him age past his thirties, either.

There were also various pictures of Smethwyck and other witches and wizards. There was one with him in his youth wearing a Head Boy badge and Ravenclaw robes. Dumbledore was in the photo as well, with graying auburn hair. The picture had been taken at Hogwarts and the Head Girl was in the photo, but Harry didn't recognize her even though she looked familiar. Achingly familiar. She was a pretty Gryffindor with long, orange-red hair and a wide smile. Harry suddenly gasped and realized he was looking at a seventeen-year-old Mrs. Weasley. Harry wondered why Smethwyck looked older than Dumbledore when he was clearly less than half his age.

"You know, I almost got arrested for making these. The least you could do is show a little bloody interest," Contessa said severely.

Smethwyck turned to her as Harry studied what seemed like hundreds of other photos of witches and wizards. "What are they?" Smethwyck asked as he brought out the potions and sniffed at each one. Lupin had no expression, which Harry thought was odd. Those were all the werewolf potions she had made.

"You told me you wanted me to keep working on the formula you invented for Wolfsbane Potion, to improve it. Well, none of these turned out right. I'm still working on it, of course. Draco's been helping me; he's quite good with potions. All these potions seem to make it worse. This one can make the wolf form permanent," Contessa said, waving at one of the bottles. Harry felt vindicated. Contessa hadn't been trying to poison Lupin after all.

"That's right, I did ask you to continue on that formula. Such a bright girl. Did they promote you to Healer yet? I recommended you to the Hospital Board," Smethwyck smiled.

"I resigned," Contessa said sourly.

"I'll try to get you assigned to my ward," Smethwyck continued excitedly, as though he hadn't heard her.

"I'll keep working on the formula some more. After the next batch, I'll deliver them to you," Contessa said, ignoring his last comment.

"How are you testing them?" Smethwyck asked, looking at another potion bottle.

Contessa cast a glance back at Lupin, whose face was very neutral. "I know a werewolf or two who've been donating their blood so I can see how it works," she said.

"Excellent, excellent, Clementine. I'm so happy at least one of my children is following in my footsteps," Smethwyck smiled.

"I'm not Clementine and I'm not your daughter. I'm Contessa LeStrange," Contessa said, her voice sounding tired.

Harry noticed a photo where Smethwyck was standing by Harry's parents, Sirius Black, and Peter Pettigrew. Lupin was not in the picture, and it looked like Lily Potter was sitting in bed, holding a newborn. Harry realized this picture had been taken right after he was born. Lily looked very tired, but happy, and James looked so proud his chest was going to explode at any moment. Sirius was grinning and holding up a champagne bottle. Peter looked rather guilty in the photo and was fidgeting with his robes.

"You--you knew my parents! You were the Healer who delivered me!" Harry cried, taking the photo off the wall and showing it to Smethwyck.

Smethwyck smiled. "Ah yes, James and Lily Potter. So you must be their son, eh? What was your name again?"

"Harry, I'm Harry Potter! I can't believe you knew my parents!" Harry cried excitedly. Draco was looking at him curiously.

"Lovely couple! How are they doing?" Smethwyck asked, flashing him a very bright smile.

Everyone in the room froze. Harry felt a lump in his throat. "They're dead. Voldemort killed them," Harry said in a choked voice.

"I'm sure they're doing wonderfully. Your father's a brilliant wizard and I'm sure you'll turn out just as well. Did Sirius ever settle down? Such a scamp, that one," Smethwyck continued, apparently not hearing Harry. "Did you ever have any brothers or sisters? I was so sad when I had to leave the maternity ward and couldn't see all the new babies being born."

It was all Harry could do not to cry. He just stood there, trembling. How could this

man not know James and Lily Potter were dead? How could he not know Sirius Black was imprisoned wrongfully for killing thirteen Muggles and then consequently murdered before he could even clear his name? Harry felt a hateful surge of anger. Did this man not know how much his words hurt?

Lupin moved over to Harry, touching him on the shoulder gently. "Harry, it's okay," he whispered.

"Are you coming home for dinner tonight, Clementine? Your mother missed you last night. And what about Davie and Nancy, eh? You three should come visit your parents once in a while!" Smethwyck said, scolding Contessa gently.

Contessa's face was very blank when she looked up at Smethwyck. "They're dead, Hippocrates. They're all dead. Your wife, your children, James and Lily Potter, and Sirius Black. The Dark Lord, by one way or the other, killed them all. You've been a widower for twenty years," she said in a hoarse voice.

"I'll tell Tilly to make your favorite. Cherry cobbler," Smethwyck said, smiling. He seemed not to be part of the conversation or even have heard what Contessa just told him.

"Right. I have to leave now, but I'll come back with the next batch of potions in a few weeks," Contessa said in a defeated voice. Smethwyck reached out to her and hugged her like a father and then beamed over at Harry.

"You can keep the photo if you like, young man. I have dozens. You tell your parents and Sirius hello for me. Tell them not to be strangers, okay?" Smethwyck beamed. "Tilly still makes the best roast and mash in all Britain and you lot are welcome to dinner any night. Just owl ahead."

Harry was crying and he couldn't stop it. He was crying for himself and he was crying for Smethwyck. He didn't care if Lupin or Draco or anyone else saw. His heart was breaking. Why did this have to happen to people? What was wrong with the world?

"Right, I'll tell them," Harry said shakily as Lupin embraced him, leading him to the door. Draco was very quiet as he followed Contessa out.

"And bring your young man to dinner, Clementine. It will do your mother good to see you're dating. We'd like some grandchildren before we die, you know. See you later, love," Smethwyck said, winking at Lupin and then waving good-bye before closing his door.

Harry was gasping for breath, trying to control himself. Lupin held him until he calmed down. He hadn't felt such a sudden surge of pure grief since the night after receiving the Clone Concoction. Draco stood at the end of the hall, not looking at Harry and looking highly uncomfortable. Contessa had pulled her hood up over her face and seemed to be looking at Harry, even though her face was now effectively hidden.

"Why--why did Voldemort kill his family?" Harry asked, wiping his face and standing up, letting Lupin go. He shoved away the sadness as best he could, but it lingered inside him.

"His wife was a Muggle. His children were all half-bloods. They were one of the first families to be killed by the Dark Lord and his Death Eaters. Smethwyck only just barely survived, but was forced to watch them torture and murder his family. He aged fifty years that night," Contessa said softly.

Harry stared at the closed door to Smethwyck's office.

"He was the only Healer who ever treated me fairly. He was the one who called me upstairs from the Morgue to help with the werewolf patients. He was the one who thought I was good enough to help him work on his potions. He invented the Wolfsbane Potion, you know. He's a genius. That's why they keep him around. You put a patient or a problem in front of him and you won't find a sharper wizard," Contessa said, also staring at the door. "Most days he's fairly lucid, though he always thinks his family's still alive. This was a very bad day for him."

Harry opened his mouth to ask her another question, but she spun away, swiftly heading to a set of service stairs. The others followed her. Harry thought he saw Draco looking at him curiously, but every time he went to look back, Draco was looking forward.

They walked up to the fourth floor and came out to the Janus Thickey Ward. Harry instantly recognized it as the ward where Professor Lockhart and the Longbottoms were staying. It was also the ward where Broderick Bode had died, strangled to death by the potted plant that Contessa had delivered to him.

Contessa walked in, heading straight for a screened-in area, walking past Professor Lockhart, who was too busy practicing his "joined-up" writing to notice the visitors. Contessa turned to the other three, pulling out a book from inside her cloak and pulling back her hood. "You lot can wait in the Tearoom upstairs or come in. They

won't notice you, in any case," she said and then walked inside.

Harry followed her in, as did Draco and Lupin. He gaped when he saw what was inside. Neville's mother, Alice Longbottom, was arranging gum wrappers very carefully on a table. Nearby, what had to be Frank Longbottom stared out a window, occasionally tugging on his earlobe. Draco went very pale at the sight of them. Lupin gave a small gasp. Contessa sat down on one of the chairs, as calm and collected as ever.

"Good afternoon, Mr. and Mrs. Longbottom. I apologize for not visiting you the past month. I'm afraid I got distracted. I'll try to visit when I can," Contessa said in a voice Harry had never, ever heard her use before. It was a congenial, almost friendly voice.

"You . . ." Lupin began and then trailed off.

"So this is where you went every other Sunday?" Draco asked her.

"How are you feeling today, Mrs. Longbottom?" Contessa asked her, ignoring Draco. Harry sank into a chair, Lupin sitting down next to him. Draco went and sat by Contessa, staring at the Longbottoms with something like sullen fascination.

Mrs. Longbottom didn't answer, but she did give Contessa a gum wrapper from her pile. Contessa smiled. It was the only genuine smile Harry had ever seen on her face. "Thank you, Mrs. Longbottom. That was very kind," she said, pocketing the gum wrapper and turning to Mr. Longbottom. He was still tugging his earlobe and mouthing nonsense silently. But instead of staring out the window, he stared at Harry, rather like he was an abstract painting he was trying to figure out. His hair was as mussed as Harry's and his face more gaunt than Sirius's had ever been.

"Excellent. You look very well, today," Contessa said smoothly as though he had answered her. She brought out her book.

"This is a book called *A Wrinkle in Time* by Madeline L'engle. I picked it up at a Muggle bookstore a few weeks ago and rather thought you two would like it," Contessa said, and began to read the first page.

"'It was a dark and stormy night'," she began to read in a patient voice. Harry had never read the book before, and obviously, neither had Lupin or Draco. All three listened to the story intently, enraptured by its prose and beauty. Contessa affected a very good storytelling voice.

Harry almost thought the Longbottoms were listening, too.

To be continued . . .

Chapter 12: Jigsaw

Chapter Twelve: The Prisoners of Azkaban

Hogwarts was going to start in just a couple days. Harry wondered how much different this year would be. He stared forlornly at his appearance. He still had the same bright green eyes and permanently tousled black hair, but his face was so ordinary. He was tall, but too thin, though he had filled out a bit this past month--mostly due to Contessa's and Mrs. Weasley's cooking. Then he realized he was wondering what Draco thought of his looks and stepped away from the mirror. He trudged downstairs, wondering what was for breakfast. To his surprise, he found Contessa standing by the door getting ready to leave, not in the kitchen making breakfast.

Contessa was wearing a simple black dress and modest black make-up. By her standards, she looked like she was dressing for church. Harry wondered what the occasion was.

Draco was standing by the door as well. His hair had been painstakingly combed and styled. He was wearing a button-down white school shirt that looked like it had been inherited from Harry and thusly Dudley. He had on a green tie and green trousers that were definitely pieced together from one of Dudley's old school uniforms and colored to suit his purposes. Harry wondered how Mrs. Weasley had managed to find so many old and discarded clothing items that belonged to Harry.

"Where are you two going?" Harry asked, absently trying to smooth his ruffled hair while staring at Draco's knees, since that seemed like a nice, neutral sort of place to stare. Contessa was pulling on her black gloves.

"We're going to Azkaban. We have to take a Portkey since they have Anti-Apparition and Anti-Disapparition wards for a mile around the entire island," Lupin said gloomily, walking down the stairs to join Draco and Contessa. He was wearing a long, brown London Fog coat that looked like it had been in the family for six generations. He had on a shabby blue vest over a white shirt and faded, patched brown trousers. It was one of the nicest outfits Harry had ever seen him, which wasn't saying much.

Harry stared at him. "Why? And why are you all wearing Muggle clothing?"

Draco scowled and Contessa frowned. Lupin looked at Harry in mild surprise. "So Draco can visit his parents, why else? And we have to walk through Muggle areas to get to the Portkey, so we have to dress in Muggle clothing," he answered.

"Your parents? You want to visit your parents?" Harry asked Draco incredulously.

Draco's gray eyes were narrowed. "They want me to visit them, half-blood," he hissed.

Harry ignored the insult, for once, mostly because he didn't consider it an insult. "I thought your parents would have disowned you," he said instead.

"You shouldn't think too much, Potter. Gryffindors have a history of being very bad at it."

"Never mind. We need to leave. We have a Portkey to find," Contessa said, cutting Harry off before he could retort.

"Why are you going?" Harry demanded of her, confused.

"To accompany Draco," Contessa said smoothly.

Harry spun on Lupin. "And you?" he asked.

"They can't leave this house without a guard. I'm supposed to keep them alive and make sure Contessa doesn't escape," Lupin said, shrugging.

"Can we go now?" Contessa asked Lupin.

"So you were just going to leave me alone and not tell me?" Harry asked, feeling very cross. He was being abandoned, even if it was only for a day.

"Actually, I was just coming to see if you wanted to come with us and keep me company in the waiting room. Dumbledore only just gave us permission to go this morning," Lupin said. Contessa's face darkened but she said nothing. Draco looked very sour.

"Oh," Harry said, blinking and feeling a little foolish.

"Hurry. We have to get to the Portkey in less than an hour. Go comb your hair and

change shirts, at least. Visitors to Azkaban are expected to dress smartly," Lupin urged.

Harry ran upstairs and took off the old shirt he had on and replaced it with a nice red one he had been given for his birthday. His trousers were nice enough looking and he ran a comb through his hair to no avail. He wondered why you had to dress up to visit convicts, but shrugged and chalked it up to another wizarding idiosyncrasy.

Lupin handed Contessa the charmed bauble Dumbledore had made and she used it walk through the doorway, after which Lupin took the bauble back and stuffed it in his pocket. Harry was surprised to find that Rufus was walking up to them. He was wearing a bright fuchsia top and extremely baggy green trousers that dragged around on the ground. He had on a bright yellow belt that clashed horribly. Apparently, Rufus wasn't terribly good with Muggle clothing. He grinned at Harry and Lupin as he approached.

"All right, Harry? Lupin?" Rufus said, pointedly ignoring Contessa and Draco. Harry noticed with some mild surprise that Rufus had one blue and one green eye. He was noticeably odd-looking, especially in his ridiculous Muggle outfit.

"Hello, Rufus," Lupin said, smiling a bit at Rufus's outfit.

"Well, we best be on, then. Tonks is waiting by the Portkey, in case anyone gets any funny ideas. She's supposed to scare the Ministry worker off, which shouldn't be a problem for her. She really needs to marry me," Rufus said, grinning and beckoning them to follow. "Kingsley's running around somewhere, but I'll be buggered if I know where. For a guy who's well over six foot, bald, black, and wears an earring, he's remarkably sneaky. We probably won't see him."

"Was he a Slytherin?" Harry asked, frowning. He naturally attributed sneakiness as a quality of Slytherins. Kingsley was certainly sneaky, given his quick and subtle actions in Dumbledore's office when the Ministry confronted him.

"Are you joking?" Rufus asked, blinking his odd eyes. "He was a Gryffindor. Head Boy and everything. Kingsley's got the biggest set of brass balls you ever did see. He's just subtle, is all."

"I'll bet he was good at Potions, then," Harry muttered darkly.

"Yes, he is good at Potions. So's Mad-Eye. I was never much good at it, though. I always wanted to see what would happen if I did it differently, you know. Snape was

never much fond of me experimenting. I was always losing points for Gryffindor. He gave me detention thirty-seven times in my sixth year," Rufus said darkly. Harry blinked. Not even he got detention that many times from Snape.

"Mostly because you were an idiot. He doesn't mind experimentation if you know what you're doing. You just randomly throw things in a cauldron and stir at it to see what it'll do," Contessa sniffed.

"He hated Bill more than me, though," Rufus said, ignoring Contessa.

"Why's that?" Harry asked vaguely, scratching his head to hide the fact that he was staring at Draco very intently.

"Because Bill did perfect in Potions. He got an O almost every day," Rufus said. "He's good with things like Potions and Arithmancy, see."

"Well, working for Gringotts, I'd expect he'd have to be, wouldn't he?" Harry asked.

"Oh, yes."

"If you were so horrible in Potions, how did you manage to get the O on your O.W.L.s to get into Snape's sixth and seventh year?"

"Oh, well, when I bother to read and follow the directions, I'm not so bad at it. If Professor McGonagall hadn't tutored me, I don't think I'd have passed, though. I still can't believe I scraped up an E on my N.E.W.T.s."

"What were your best and worst classes, then?" Harry asked.

"Transfiguration and Defense Against the Dark Arts were my best. My weakest were Potions and History of Magic. Binns used to put me into a coma. If it wasn't for Morph, all of us would have failed his class, even Bill," Rufus grinned.

Harry snickered. "Yeah, Hermione's the only thing that keeps me and Ron from failing, too," he said.

"Harry!" Lupin said, sounding scandalized.

"Who kept you going through History of Magic?" Harry asked, grinning.

Lupin sighed and rolled his eyes. "It was me who kept your father and Sirius from

failing that class. They were brilliant wizards only when it came to something that interested them. Sirius used to make Goblin rebels' names up," Lupin said, shaking his head and smiling fondly.

Harry laughed. "So does Ron," he said. "What were your best and worst subjects, Remus?"

Lupin smiled. "Defense Against the Dark Arts and Astronomy were my best subjects," he demurred. "My worst classes were Potions and Herbology."

"You were terrible at Potions, too?" Harry asked.

"If I got an Acceptable, I considered that a good day. Professor Mulciber was the Potions Mistress in my day. If you think Snape's bad, you should have seen her. She was a right terror. She only ever liked her great-nephew, Mimas Mulciber, and he turned out to be a Death Eater, if that's any indication of what a nightmare she was. We all used to think she had hag blood in her."

"What about Snape? I'll bet he was her pet, then, if she was Potions Mistress," Harry said sourly.

Lupin gave Harry an odd look. "Professor Mulciber rode Snape harder than any of us. She was Head of Slytherin House in her day and Snape got top marks of all the Slytherins, but Rosier was made prefect, not him. Snape's brilliant with Potions. Brilliant. Yet she used to rap his knuckles every day with her wand, reciting the correct way to build a potion, even if he did it perfect. He was almost always serving detention for her. She had him scrub leech guts off the floor every week. She hated that he was so good at what he did. She hated him, I think. At the same time, she might be why he's so good at what he does, though," Lupin mused.

This was surprising news to Harry. It seemed to interest Draco and Rufus immensely.

"Why'd she hate him?" Harry asked.

"I don't know," Lupin shrugged.

"I do," Contessa said, looking forward. Draco looked at her curiously.

"Well, don't keep us in suspense," Lupin said drolly, looking at her curiously as well.

"He could have been a great Healer, you know," Contessa said, changing the subject.

"He had everything he needed. Perfect O.W.L.s, perfect N.E.W.T.s, everything. Everything except one thing, that is."

"What's that?" Lupin asked.

"You have to pay for your Apprenticeship as a Healer. He only got through Hogwarts on a loan to his father from Uncle Aurelius," Contessa said.

Lupin blinked. "Uncle . . . Aurelius? Aurelius Malfoy? Lucius's father?" he asked incredulously.

"You really don't know much about Snape, do you?" Contessa asked as she walked, looking smug.

"Why did Grandfather loan Père's father his tuition?" Draco asked, apparently just as curious as the rest of them.

"Are you telling me that Snape has no money? He has no cozy Snape Manor in a secluded area somewhere for him to boil up his nasty concoctions?" Rufus asked.

Contessa looked at him scornfully. "Castle Snape, actually. It's no longer in his family. If it was, don't you think he'd live there and not at Hogwarts?" she asked.

"Why doesn't Père have money? You know, don't you? Tell me!" Draco demanded.

"How do you know all this?" Lupin asked. "Snape was a right mystery to all us Gryffindors."

"I happened to have been in a privileged position. Uncle Lucius is Snape's closest friend, you know. If you want to call it 'friendship', of course. They grew up together, in any case," Contessa said airily.

"Doesn't he have family?" Rufus asked.

"They all died when he was a boy. He's the last Snape. And his mother's family won't have anything do with him."

"Why not?" Lupin asked.

"I'm surprised if you were such good friends with Black that he never told you."

"I didn't even know they were cousins until you said something. Sirius never mentioned it," Lupin said.

Contessa stopped and stared at him, her eyebrows furrowing. "Are you telling me that Black went to school with his own cousin and never once acknowledged him? He never once told his closest friends he was family? He treated Snape like a stranger?" she asked in scorn.

"That's what I'm telling you."

"What do you expect of some spoiled pureblood prince like Sirius Black? He may have broken away from his family, but apparently the only difference between him and the rest of the Blacks was that he tolerated Muggles and the impure," Contessa spat, grabbing Draco's hand and breaking away from Lupin, Harry, and Rufus at a fast rate of speed.

Harry was so shocked by her reaction that he wasn't even upset by her words. Sirius had freely admitted that he was a prat in his youth. Saying that he was just like the rest of his family, though, was a bit strong. But why did Sirius never acknowledge Snape as his cousin?

"Sirius never told me--" Harry began.

"He never told any of us, Harry. There's more to this than Contessa's sharing. I'm not sure if it's important, but there's still more to it. Why would Sirius do that? He would have had good reason to pretend Professor Snape was a stranger to him."

"How is Draco's grandfather her uncle?"

"Well she said once that Lucius was her first cousin, once removed. His father is probably her great-uncle. I imagine it would have been his sister that married whoever Rodolphus's father was. I'm sure she knows all the names," Lupin said with vague sarcasm.

"Don't get out of sight, Contessa!" Rufus called after her. She had stopped at the end of the block. She and Draco were talking to each other in furious whispers. Harry wished he could hear what they were saying. They had fallen silent and Contessa was glaring at the sidewalk by the time they got in earshot. Draco looked slightly disgruntled.

"It's through here," Rufus said, motioning them to follow him as he stepped into a

small wooded area off the side of the road. He brought his wand out the moment they got into the trees.

There was a quiet rustle in the trees and Harry looked up to find Kingsley Shacklebolt grinning down at him. He winked at Harry and then disappeared. Subtle, indeed. After a minute or two they found Tonks, standing between the trees and holding a crushed paper cup.

"Wotcher, everyone! Here it is," Tonks said. "Ten o'clock Portkey to Azkaban. I scared off the Ministry worker guarding it. It's almost ten now. You'd better touch it."

Contessa and Draco each held out a finger and touched the paper cup. So did Lupin, Rufus, and Harry. After just a few moments, Harry had the familiar feeling of someone hooking something just behind his navel and everything slid away until they found themselves on a small, rocky island. A large, dark building that radiated menace stood in front of him.

"That's Azkaban?" Harry asked in a small voice as Rufus tossed the paper cup into an old metal dustbin. Tonks stuffed her hands in her pockets, looking uneasy.

Azkaban Fortress was about three stories high but almost filled the small island. The sweep and architecture of the place was hard to pin down, but none of it had a pleasant effect. Harry thought he could see vultures perched on the battlements, glaring hungrily down at the lot of them. It looked like a building made of tangible nightmares and designed by a serial killer.

Contessa and Draco headed off towards it. Lupin started after them. After a moment of hesitation, Harry followed. Rufus and Tonks sat down on a bench outside. "We'll wait for you out here and arrange for the Portkey back," Tonks called out.

Harry swallowed, finding his sympathy for Sirius having to spend twelve years trapped here increase tenfold. Dementors or no Dementors, this was not a nice place.

"I see that they've made most of the guards and wards invisible now," Lupin observed neutrally, eyeing the place.

They reached the immense set of double brass doors. They had scenes of people under the Cruciatus Curse carved on it and in the center of each door were two tarnished gargoyle heads made of brass as well. Harry felt his blood run cold. Draco was very pale.

"Who built this place?" Harry asked, shivering.

"The Dark Wizard Azkaban," Contessa said scornfully. "He built it around the same time as Hogwarts. It took Slytherin, Gryffindor, Ravenclaw, and Hufflepuff combining their might to defeat him. In any case, once Azkaban was defeated, they commandeered his fortress and turned it into a prison for all his supporters. Honestly, haven't you ever read Hogwarts, A History?"

"No, 'Hermione', I haven't. But if I'd known there were wizard battles in it, I would have read it in my first year," Harry said sarcastically, rolling his eyes as Lupin grinned. "I suppose Azkaban is one of your ancestors, too?"

Contessa scowled and if Harry didn't know better, she looked offended. "Azkaban was Muggle-born and never had any children that I'm aware of. Why do you think Salazar Slytherin hated non-purebloods? He was convinced they were all as bad as Azkaban. Some say his magic did things to Slytherin's mind during their battle," she said sourly and then turned to the brass doors.

"I demand entrance," she cried.

"State your purpose," one of the gargoyle heads said, creaking while coming to life and scowling down at her. Its voice sounded like poorly oiled metal wheels.

"I wish to visit family," Contessa said.

"Name your blood."

"Malfoy, Lucius: uncle and first cousin once removed. Malfoy, Narcissa: aunt."

"Reason for visitation?" the second gargoyle head asked, also creaking to life. It sounded almost feminine.

"Personal," she said.

"Names of visitors?" the second gargoyle asked.

"Lestranger, Contessa Proxima. Malfoy, Draco Draconis. Potter, Harry James. Lupin, Remus John."

The large doors swung inward, creaking painfully. Contessa walked inside, with Draco just behind her. Harry and Lupin exchanged a look before following.

The inside was poorly lit and Harry saw no windows. There were only burning sconces along the walls, spaced very far out. Weak circles of light dotted the shining black hallways. A thin, bald man stood at a black marble counter, glaring at all of them. He wore a hooded black robe with the hood pushed back. His cold eyes roved the four as they approached him.

"Wands," he said, holding out a cup. Contessa and Draco stowed theirs in it.

Lupin waved at a dim waiting area filled with uncomfortable wooden chairs. "We'll wait here," he said, motioning Harry to follow him.

"Follow me," the bald man hissed at Contessa and Draco, pulling out a dim lantern and leading them down the black hallway. They disappeared through a door at the end.

Harry looked around. Black floor. Black walls. Black chairs. Black counters. He was sensing a theme. "It's cleaner than I thought it would be," he told Lupin.

"This is the visitors' area. It's cleaner than the actual prison," Lupin said, looking as uncomfortable as Harry and pulled out a deck of Exploding Snap cards. The bald man returned and went back to his counter, glaring occasionally at Lupin and Harry.

Harry and Lupin played Exploding Snap for what seemed like hours, but probably wasn't. After a short eternity, Contessa came back. Draco was not with her.

"Harry," she said, calling his attention away from the game. "Uncle Lucius would like a word. We're in Visitors' Room Seven."

She disappeared back down the hallway as Harry gaped after her. "Lucius . . . Malfoy . . . wants a word with me?" Harry asked incredulously.

"Do you want me to go with you?" Lupin asked, his brows furrowed in consternation.

"Yes," Harry said, standing up. Lupin quickly stowed his cards.

"Wands," the bald man said maliciously, rattling the cup that already had Contessa's and Draco's wands in it.

Harry and Lupin stowed their wands in the cup as well. "Down the hall, through the door. You'll want Cell Block Seven. At the end of the hall is the Visitors' Room.

Knock seven times and the door will open. Don't look at any of the prisoners. Don't speak to any of the prisoners. Don't touch any of the prisoners. If you break any of these rules, the staff of Azkaban accepts no responsibility for loss of mind, life, or limb," the man hissed.

Lupin walked first, with Harry following. When they reached the end of the hallway and the doorway, they walked into an even dimmer room with nine doors. Each door had a label on it proclaiming to which cell block it led. When Harry saw the number seven, he and Lupin headed towards it. Lupin opened it tentatively.

The door led to a long, dark gray hallway filled with cells. This place was definitely dirtier than the visitors' area and it seemed that there was a layer of grime on everything. The smell of decay hung in the air, as though someone had died in there.

Harry covered his nose with his t-shirt. "This place stinks," he tried to say cheerfully. Lupin gave him a tight smile and started down the long hallway.

Despite himself, Harry began to look into the cells. To his surprise, he saw a harsh-faced man with generous lips smirking at him from one of the cells. He looked familiar and then Harry suddenly recognized him as Rodolphus Lestrage, Contessa's father. He began to laugh, a raucous laugh that belonged more in a bar and less in a prison. Then he stopped and carefully considered Harry.

"Ipso bobble weave nanny?" he asked, a lopsided smirk forming across his harsh, once-handsome face. Like Bellatrix and Sirius, it was quite obvious that Azkaban had leeched him of his good looks. His short, black hair was tangled and unkempt. Once upon a time, he might have been described as tall, dark, and handsome, but no longer. He had the look of a man who had once been thick-set and muscular, but had lost a lot of weight in a short time.

Harry blinked at him. "Er, what?" he asked. Rodolphus looked rather mad and his violet eyes kept flicking about the hallway, never quite resting in one place. He seemed to be talking to Harry, though he didn't look at him longer than for a few seconds.

He began to laugh again, but Harry's attention was drawn to the next cell when its inhabitant began to scream angrily.

"Half-blood! Misbegotten seed of a blood traitor! Son of a Mudblood! Foul beast!" the man cried, throwing himself against the bars to his cell and it took Harry a moment to realize the man was screaming at him.

"You cannot kill the Dark Lord, diseased filth! He cannot die! You are a pretender, son of a Mudblood, and you shall never sit upon his throne! You shall never acquire his might! You are not fit to lick slime off his shoes, you filthy beast!" the man cried again. Judging by the physical similarities to Rodolphus, he had to be Rabastan Lestrangle, though it was quite obvious from his pointed features that he had strong Malfoy blood in him. Unlike his brother and sister-in-law, he had retained most of his good looks. It seemed like spending fourteen years surrounded by Dementors had not physically affected him as much as it had his brother. He had the same pale, pointed features as Lucius Malfoy, but far more harshly featured. He had large, true blue eyes that stared intently at Harry, as though trying to see into his skull. Had he not been utterly terrifying to Harry, he would have been quite attractive. If possible, he acted even more insane than Rodolphus.

Rabastan moved back to his bed, looking away from Harry and Lupin, muttering darkly under his breath. He began to rock himself back and forth, his long, tangled black hair sweeping in front of his harsh, pointed face. He was acting so much like Kreacher that Harry wondered if Kreacher might have known him. Rabastan began to moan as though he was in pain. Rodolphus's laughing grew louder, part-screaming, part-guffawing. It reminded Harry of a rabid hyena. He was rattling his bars angrily, even as he laughed.

"Suffering! There will be suffering for you, Harry Potter!" Rabastan suddenly screamed, rushing back to his cell door and banging his head into the bars, causing blood to trickle down his face.

Harry was frozen in morbid fascination. Lupin recovered from his own shock and grabbed Harry by the arm, tugging him away from the Lestrangle brothers. "Poisons. The Ministry's been befuddling all the prisoners with poisons in their food since the Dementors left. They've gone mad, Harry. Don't listen to them," he said, leading him to the end of the hallway.

"Not all of us, Lupin. Those of us with strong wills can resist those poisons," said a sinuous voice, oozing out from a darkened cell. Lupin and Harry stopped as they saw a movement on the bed and Augustus Rookwood sat up, his beady eyes studying them from his pockmarked face. "The Lestranges were already mad before they got here. The poisons just make them louder about it. The Lestranges have always been historically mad, though I think the girl is the sanest of all of them."

"Rookwood!" Lupin said warily. He took a step back from Harry, moving his hand to his coat for his wand, but of course, it wasn't there.

Rookwood smirked and then set his eyes on Harry. "Of course, it would be Lucius's influence on her that makes her the sanest, I think," he went on.

Harry blinked at him. "What are you talking about?" he asked very slowly.

"You don't know? How priceless. The Malfoys raised her after her parents were incarcerated. Hell, they already were practically raising her when the Lestranges were still free. Bella was never exactly what I'd call the maternal type. She got pregnant in her seventh year at Hogwarts, you know, the whore. Got married right after graduation and we all knew why. She had Contessa only a few months later. Never took care of her, really. Her mother-in-law, Julia Lestrangle, did it all until she took ill.

"Funny, really, how the Lestranges affect their wives with some sort of madness or disease. Julia Lestrangle had some sort of disease that they tried to hide, but I knew all about it. That was my job, as an Unspeakable. To know things like that. Parkinson's, I think the disease was. I suppose they call Bella's madness the longest lasting postpartum depression there ever was. It was a hard birth, see. I think she went crazy right after Contessa was born.

"Aurelius Malfoy came and rescued Contessa and her ailing grandmother--his beloved sister, Julia. Plucked them right out of Castle Lestrangle one day. So off Contessa and Julia went to Malfoy Manor. Contessa was about seven, I think. Pity Julia died just a couple years later and Aurelius disappeared after that. So, it was at Uncle Lucius's knee that she learned the art of deception. It was Aunt Narcissa's arms she ran to when she had a nightmare."

Harry felt like the floor had dropped out from under him. He knew Contessa had been raised by the Malfoys, but now he wondered how close she really was to them.

Rookwood began to laugh, but his laugh was cruel and lacked the madness of Rodolphus's. "I never really understood why Lucius kept his son so ignorant of his plots and plans at first. He didn't seem entirely thrilled when Contessa joined. Now I wondered why Lucius practically hid his son from the rest of us. And then I realized Lucius did not intend the boy to be a Death Eater. He groomed them both to the roles he thought best, but kept that boy hidden away. He withheld something from the Dark Lord. After all, being a Death Eater is dangerous and Lucius wasn't about to let the little prince do something that might endanger his life. Selfish. Lucius serves no one but himself and Contessa serves him. Make no mistake that she is working for Lucius even now. You'd do well to remember that, Potter, when you speak to him," Rookwood said conversationally and then dropped back down into the shadows of his

bed.

"Liar! You're a bloody liar!" Harry cried. Was it true? Was Contessa lying to them? How could she? Was she serving Lucius Malfoy in some duplicitous plot even now?

It all made too much sense for Harry to disregard it out of turn. "Let's go, Harry," Lupin said, dragging Harry over to the door at the end of the hall. He made a point of sweeping past all the cells before Harry could stop and chat with them, too.

He knocked seven times on the door. It swung open, into the only brightly lit room in the whole prison that Harry had seen. He blinked his eyes painfully as he followed Lupin in, closing the door behind him.

Contessa and Draco sat by Lucius and Narcissa. They fell silent as Harry and Lupin entered the room. Draco wouldn't meet Harry's eyes. Lucius Malfoy stood up, as imperious as ever. Contessa sat by her aunt, looking at Harry rather soberly.

Harry scowled at him. Even though Lucius wore the same tattered, gray prison suit that other prisoners wore, he made it look like resplendent robes of the finest silk. His long, white-blond hair was loose, but he wore it proudly. There were a few new lines of pain on his pointed, pale face, but Harry was unsympathetic. There was a pride and unbowed strength to Lucius's stance as he studied Harry coldly. Whatever poisons the Ministry fed the prisoners, they had little effect on Lucius Malfoy. He looked as though he was standing in the middle of Malfoy Manor, greeting unwelcome guests. His eyes flicked disdainfully off Lupin and then went back to Harry, growing very cold.

Since Lucius was standing near his son, Harry took the opportunity to appreciate how much Draco looked like Lucius at first glance. However, on the second glance, there was a different sort of cast to Draco's features that Lucius didn't have. He was much smaller and more compact than his father, but ever so much fiercer in expressions and movements. Everything about Lucius was elegant, sophisticated, careful, and calculated for effect. But in Draco, there was a bit of his mother's prettiness, and his gray eyes were more like his mother's and less like his father's. If Lucius was ice, Draco was fire.

Narcissa Malfoy had the same look of disgust on her face that she had the only other time Harry had seen her. She was looking at him and Lupin both, her arms around her son. Like her husband, the poisons had not affected her and the tattered prison suit didn't look so miserable on her. Her long, blonde hair hung in ripples down her back and her gray eyes were like daggers. She still looked like the perfect, prim princess

she looked like before. "If you hit my son again, filthy half-blood, you will regret it," she told Harry dangerously. Lucius put a hand out and she fell silent, glaring hatefully at Harry.

"Harry saved his life, too," Lupin said, looking at Narcissa unhappily. Narcissa turned her glare to Lupin.

"From you, half-breed monster," she said very coldly.

"Poor little Remus Lupin. How miserable it must be to be you. You were born a filthy half-blood, contracted lycanthropy, your friends were all killed, incarcerated, or they betrayed you, and you couldn't even find a decent job. Once you finally found one, you had to quit when they found out what a monster you really are. Oh yes, and then my sister-in-law killed your little dog, too," Lucius said, smirking viciously at Lupin.

Harry moved to hit him, seeing red. But Lupin got there first, his hand bunched up into a fist, pausing right before Lucius. He was growling at Lucius. Lucius didn't even flinch, looking at Lupin curiously instead.

"Well, are you going to hit me? Do get it over with. The suspense is killing me," Lucius said drolly, his cold gray eyes meeting Lupin's normally warm brown ones.

"What do you want with Harry?" Lupin growled.

"If you're not going to hit me, take a step back. Your stink is overwhelming," Lucius said neutrally, turning his eyes back on Harry. Harry glared at him hatefully while Lupin backed away, lowering his fist.

"What do you want?" Harry demanded.

Lucius raised a white-blond eyebrow and smirked ever so slightly. "Now, I've asked you here in a civil manner. Don't they teach you manners at Hogwarts?" he asked neutrally.

"Why should I be civil to you? You gave Ginny that bloody diary. You threatened to kill Neville. You tried to get Dumbledore and Hagrid sacked. You terrorized the school governors. It's your fault Sirius died!"

"My fault? Potter, if you had cooperated and my sister-in-law had not lost her head, no one would have had to die. Not even your precious godfather. You'll note that I'm incarcerated while Bellatrix Lestrange is running around, as free as a bird," Lucius

hissed. He spoke Bellatrix's name quite hatefully.

"Yeah, right, if I had given you that prophecy, you'd have just killed all of us," Harry spat.

"That is neither here nor there, and this argument brings us nowhere, Potter. I assure you that I dislike you as much as you dislike me."

"Then what do you want?" Harry asked.

Lucius cast a glance at Contessa. "My niece has informed me that you have some very interesting information about the Dark Lord," he said coolly.

"What?" Harry asked, taken aback.

"You mentioned he was a half-blood in the Department of Mysteries. I did not have a chance to question you given the circumstances. Contessa has provided me with some interesting evidence that supports this theory. However, I would like to confirm it for myself."

Harry froze and then exchanged a look with Lupin. "Why?" he finally asked.

Lucius bristled for a moment at the audacity of Harry's question, but he relaxed after a moment, considering his answer. "Because I wish to know if the man I've been serving since I was eighteen has lied to me the whole time," Lucius said slowly, moistening his lips with his tongue.

"Well, how could you tell? You don't even have a wand," Harry said scornfully.

"Skilled Legilimens don't need one to tell if someone is telling the truth. I am a skilled Legilimens. And from what Contessa tells me, you are a very poor Occlumens. All I have to do is maintain eye contact," Lucius said smoothly.

"Fine," Harry said, marching closer to glare directly into Lucius Malfoy's eyes.

"Voldemort's a half-blood. His father was a Muggle named Tom Riddle and left his mum when he found out she was a witch. He changed his name from Tom Marvolo Riddle and used all the letters to say 'I am Lord Voldemort'. He hates Muggles because he had to grow up in an orphanage."

Lucius looked startled and turned to his family. "He's telling the truth," Lucius told his wife, sounding almost numb.

Narcissa's eyes widened and then narrowed. "That bastard," she hissed. Draco's mouth hung open and he stared at Harry. Lucius began to pace, looking disgusted. Harry had a feeling that when Lucius looked disgusted, he was angry. He looked pretty disgusted.

Harry took the opportunity to turn to Contessa. "Had a nice chat with Rookwood," Harry said coolly, tilting his head in Lucius's direction. "He says you're still working for him. Is it true?"

Contessa blanched. Lucius stopped pacing and looked between them. On the other side of the room, Lupin did the same. "Why would you believe a man like Rookwood?" she asked coolly, though Harry noticed her eyes nervously flicked over to Lucius.

"You're not trying to be a better person at all, are you?" Harry asked fiercely.

Contessa still stared at Lucius. "I suppose that all depends on your definition of better," she said.

"So why did you come here to talk to a Death Eater, then?" Harry asked.

"This is my family," Contessa said slowly.

Harry glared at her. There was something wrong about her, but he couldn't put his finger on it. He couldn't prove anything. The knowledge that she had an aunt and uncle that loved her, that treated her like a daughter, made Harry incredibly angry. She didn't deserve a loving family, she deserved to have grown up with the Dursleys, just like he had.

Contessa fell silent. Harry turned his face from her. She had lied to them, tricked them. She was as bad as Lucius Malfoy. Lupin, however, was looking rather thoughtful.

"Did you know," Lupin said conversationally as he turned to Lucius Malfoy, "that it was Harry's mother that Contessa channeled to save herself and your son? Did you know that it was a Muggle-born woman that your former master murdered that saved your child? It was her Muggle knowledge of CPR that saved Draco from drowning to death."

Lucius looked startled, his brows coming together as he looked between Contessa and

Draco. Neither looked him in the eye.

"Did you know that your niece visited the Longbottoms every Sunday while she worked at St. Mungo's? Did you know that she reads them a story every time she visits?" Lupin continued.

Lucius looked from Lupin back to Contessa. He looked shocked. She still did not speak.

Lupin turned from them and then put an arm around Harry. "We'll be waiting outside for you and Draco," he told Contessa.

Lupin led Harry out very firmly, shutting the door behind him. He led Harry out of the hallway without pausing or giving the prisoners a chance to do anything other than scream passing insults. He led Harry out of the dim, gloomy Azkaban Fortress--pausing only to pick up their wands--and out where Rufus and Tonks were waiting.

Harry looked over at Tonks, who smiled brightly. He felt calm now that he was out of that stifling building, away from Lucius Malfoy's cold gray eyes and judging stares. Lupin's hand was still on Harry's shoulder and he looked down at Harry in concern.

Harry stared at Tonks thoughtfully. He could see traces of her face that reminded him of Sirius. "You beat Lucius Malfoy, didn't you? It was you who put him in Azkaban, right?" Harry asked Tonks. He remembered her aiming a spell right at him in the Department of Mysteries.

She shrugged and smiled. "That was me," she said.

"You're his niece, too, but you're a half-blood, just like me," Harry said.

Tonks nodded. She had a curious look on her face, but didn't say anything. That made Harry feel a bit better. Blood purity really was all rot. Hermione was more brilliant than Narcissa Malfoy and Contessa LeStrange put together and Tonks had beaten Lucius Malfoy.

Contessa and Draco came out after a while. Contessa opened her mouth to say something to Harry, but turned away and closed her mouth when he looked at her. She instead opted to remain silent. Draco was giving Harry very guarded looks.

"Let's go home," Lupin said. Rufus came up with a broken piece of glass that was apparently their Portkey home.

Harry's eyes met with Draco's as they reached out to touch the broken glass. Harry wondered--and not for the first time--what Draco really thought of all this.

To be continued . . .

Chapter 13: Jigsaw

Author's Notes: The Earnshaw family line belongs to La Fée Verte, my pureblood family tree partner in crime. Used with permission.

Chapter Thirteen:

The Return to Hogwarts, Round Six

Harry had to wake up early the day he was supposed to go the Hogwarts Express. It was still dark and the clock had an ungodly hour displayed on it. He slumped out of his bed at Lupin's insistence, numbly showering, brushing his teeth, and combing his hair. He put on some clothes--he was too sleepy to pay attention to what--and stumbled downstairs.

"I don't want to wake up this early! It's inhuman! You are a cruel, cruel man!" Draco whined from up the stairs, in his room.

"I'm not leaving until you get up. Now hurry it up, I don't like being up this early anymore than you do," Lupin said, sounding stern.

Harry yawned and smiled a little. His smile faltered as he saw Contessa standing by a window, rolling up The Daily Prophet and some other papers and tying the package to the Malfoys' eagle owl's leg. Whatever she was sending was no doubt for Lucius and Narcissa. Harry wondered how the eagle owl knew how to find her.

She cast a glance for Harry when she was done. "Narcissa sent her three drops of blood. I gave them to Snape already. He stopped by to pick them up while you were in the shower," she said coolly. She had tried to act like everything was the same since their return from Azkaban, but Harry hadn't spoken to her at all.

Harry shrugged, looking away from her. She had been trying very hard to get him to talk to her for the past couple days. His initial anger with her had faded, but he realized he would probably never trust her again. He couldn't just swear her off, he still needed her to help him bring back Sirius. Mostly, he was just indifferent.

"Breakfast is ready. I made eggs benedict and some breakfast crêpes," she said conversationally. Harry stared at the pile of suitcases and bags that were by the door.

"She was willing to give her blood to help you bring back Sirius, you know. It's Narcissa's way of saying thank you for saving Draco. She wasn't too fond of Sirius, but she never really hated him or anything. He was still blood," Contessa continued, moistening her lips with her tongue.

Harry made a noncommittal noise and walked into the kitchen. There were three plates on the table: one piled very high with a tall glass of lemonade by it, one arranged artfully, and one arranged sensibly with plenty of food on it. At the fourth seat, there was only a cup of coffee. Harry sat by the sensibly filled plate and began to eat.

Lupin walked in, sitting by the plate piled high after pouring himself some coffee. Contessa seemed to have gotten him addicted to it. Either that or it was so early that he wanted some caffeine. Contessa came in and began to nurse her own cup of coffee, working her jaw.

"Your cousin is impossible, Contessa. I couldn't get him out of bed. I had to physically peel him off, unhook the pillows from his grasp, and dump him in the tub," Lupin said with some annoyance.

"Uncle Lucius would always just peel the sheets off him and then hose him down with water spells. Getting him to go to school before his first year at Hogwarts was a nightmare. Aunt Narcissa had levitated the bed and everything and he still wouldn't get off. Eventually, Uncle Lucius just had the house elf jump up and down on him until he got up. I don't think I'd ever seen the house elf have more fun. I wonder what happened to him. Such a masochistic little beast. I don't think he liked us much," Contessa said with a small smile. It took Harry a few moments to realize she was speaking of Dobby.

"How are we going to get to King's Cross Station? Knight Bus?" Harry asked Lupin, biting back a nasty comment to Contessa in favor of giving her the silent treatment again.

"Walking to King's Cross like you did last year. We've got trolleys for all our trunks," Lupin said, shaking his head between bites of eggs benedict. "Contessa had a fit when Dumbledore suggested the Knight Bus. That's why we have to wake up so early and walk. Rufus, Kingsley, and Tonks will be showing up any moment."

"Why are there so many trunks? Are you leaving, too?" Harry asked him.

Lupin nodded. "Dumbledore decided last night. We, er, had a long talk about certain things at the Order meeting," he said, casting a glance at Contessa, who was getting another cup of coffee.

"What did he say?" Harry asked coldly.

"Not much," Lupin said, shrugging. "But he's put me up in a small room at the Three Broomsticks in Hogsmeade. So, you can come see me any time you need me. I'll be keeping an eye out for things while I'm there."

Contessa sat back down, avoiding eye contact with anyone. "Contessa's going as well," Lupin added. "Dumbledore's going to close the house down and only use it for Order meetings while you're at school."

Harry frowned. "Why? I thought she was under house arrest until her trial?" he asked Lupin, not wanting to talk to Contessa directly.

"Dumbledore thought it safer for her stay at Hogwarts and concentrate our abilities on keeping you all safe in Hogwarts. She's technically not under arrest. So she'll be working in the dungeons, helping Professor Snape with the potion and probably assisting Filch," Lupin said. Contessa positively scowled at this.

"I can't find my bloody socks! Contessa! Where'd you put my things? I can't find anything!" Draco yelled from upstairs. Contessa rolled her eyes and went upstairs.

"What if she leaves Hogwarts grounds? What did Dumbledore say about what Rookwood said?" Harry asked Lupin fiercely the moment she left.

Lupin paused in the middle of shoving a crêpe in his mouth. He frowned slightly. "Where would she go, Harry? There's no real safe place for her to go other than here or Hogwarts. Dumbledore has already set extra wards on Hogwarts grounds to prevent her from leaving the property without permission in any case. Moody lost his mind about Rookwood's comments, but Dumbledore managed to calm him down. He says Rookwood can't be trusted, and he's right. He seems to think by extending her a measure of trust, we could win her over. In any case, Harry, she can't be any worse than Draco. And at least she can find her own socks," he said drolly as Draco began to whine loudly about not finding things again.

Harry wasn't convinced, but he let it go for the moment.

"I'll be Apparating to Hogsmeade once I get the lot of you loaded up on the train, but

my things will come on the Hogwarts Express. Hagrid agreed to bring them over to me. Contessa will be going with you on the train since she has to go to Hogwarts in any case to report for duty," Lupin went on to say.

After a bit, Draco and Contessa came back downstairs. Draco set on the final, artfully arranged plate. He was wearing Muggle hand-me-downs from Ron that he had done his best to try and make them look new. The clothes were so faded that they had only brightened in spots, which made it look worse. Draco had a very sour expression on his face. Harry realized he was going to enjoy seeing the looks on the other Slytherins' faces when they saw his current wardrobe.

"Your shirt's on backwards and inside out, Potter. Apparently being the wizarding world's youngest hero doesn't mean you can dress yourself," Draco sneered over his crêpe, eyeing Harry with disgust.

Harry blushed for no reason and flew upstairs to fix it. It stung when Draco looked at him so distastefully, but tried his best not to let it bother him too much. When he came downstairs, Lupin was loading up Draco's and Harry's trolleys, while Contessa and Draco watched him.

"Don't help or anything," Harry said sarcastically, glaring at them and then moving to help Lupin with the luggage. Hedwig's cage was put on last. Harry stared down at Godric, who stared up at him.

"What about Godric? We can't leave him here if you're all leaving and I can't bring a snake to school."

"He's, er, staying with me in Hogsmeade," Lupin said distastefully.

"I promissse not to eat him," Godric said brightly. "Unlessss, of coursse, if he diesss. No sssensse in wasssting a fressshly dead body."

"What'd he say?" Lupin asked.

"Er, Godric said that would be nice and that he likes you," Harry lied. "Keep him well fed, won't you?"

"Sure, I was planning on feeding him a few Slytherins who gave me trouble when I was teaching," Lupin said deadpan, eying Draco. Draco was sitting on his trolley, watching Godric with fascination.

"Promisssssss, promisssssss."

"Hey, you can understand English?" Harry asked, realizing that Godric understood what Lupin was saying.

If Godric could have, Harry would bet he would have smiled. He slithered past Contessa and nipped at her heel, causing her to yelp in surprise, before he slithered into the box Lupin had put down for him.

"I'll take good care of him, Harry," Lupin promised, carrying the box under his arms. Harry could hear Godric snickering from inside it, peering at him from one of the air holes.

"How can he understand English?" Harry asked, turning to Contessa, speaking to her for the first time since they visited Azkaban.

"I think his tank said he had distant Naga blood in him," she said vaguely, ushering Draco off the trolley loaded with their things so it could be pushed out the door.

"This would be so much easier if you'd let us take the Knight Bus," Lupin sighed as the doorbell rang.

"I am not riding that contraption! I rode it once and was violently ill! Or did you want me to vomit all over you, Lupin?" Contessa cried as Harry opened the door.

"Wotcher, Harry!" Tonks said brightly. Behind her were Rufus and Kingsley.

"We could always bring you a bucket, Contessa," Lupin said, his lips twitching a bit.

"Close the door, her hair is blinding me," Draco said darkly as he looked Tonks up and down with distaste. Today, Tonks's hair was a shocking neon green, and so were her eyes. She gave Draco an obscene gesture, which caused Harry to grin.

"I refuse to take one step on that contraption when it's staffed by those bloody maniacs!" Contessa hissed at Lupin. If Harry didn't know better, he would have thought Lupin was egging her on.

"Did Stanley Shunpike hit on you, too?" Tonks asked Contessa as she stood in the doorway, looking amused.

"Why would that bother her? She seems to like Snape and he redefines disgusting. He

makes that Shunpike kid look like Gilderoy Lockhart," Kingsley said with some amusement coloring his deep baritone.

"I am not riding on the bloody Knight Bus and that is final!"

Draco spoke up. "She really does get motion sickness, you know. Father hired someone to give her flying lessons when she was thirteen and she hardly got twenty feet off the ground before she threw up, passed out, fell off the broom, and then broke her leg. Mother was very cross with the flying instructor. She set the family bicorn on him while Father took Contessa to the hospital."

"Keeping bicorn is illegal," Rufus said with a frown.

"You try telling my mother that--I dare you," Draco said with dark amusement. "At least without three other Aurors."

Rufus fell silent, glaring at Draco while Tonks giggled.

"There's no sense in arguing with Mother. You'll just lose. Besides, you've already arrested her, haven't you?" Draco asked sourly.

"In any case, this is going to be a long walk with all this stuff," Lupin sighed.

"Then we'd better get moving," Contessa said brusquely and turned to Rufus. "Make yourself useful and push the trolley."

"I'm not your servant!" Rufus said, sounding insulted.

"Push the trolley, Rufus," Kingsley said as he turned to follow Contessa out while Lupin let her use the bauble to walk past the unicorn-lined doorway. Tonks followed Kingsley out while Lupin took back the bauble.

"Why do I have to push the trolley? It's her stuff!" Rufus cried, looking indignant. Harry and Draco walked out, too.

After a minute, Rufus went out as well, pushing the trolley and grumbling darkly. Lupin closed and locked the door with a flick of his wand and the house disappeared as it always did.

"How's Snape doing?" Tonks asked Contessa slyly as they headed down the street. "A little birdie told me that he comes to visit with you all almost every day."

Contessa narrowed her eyes and glared darkly at Lupin, who was pointedly mentioning to Harry how nice the weather was this morning. "Are you quite sure it wasn't a nasty little werewolf with a wagging tongue?" she hissed.

Tonks grinned. "You know, I think it's great. You're both anti-social, mean, touchy, little sexually-frustrated individuals. I've always said Snape needed nothing if not a good shag," she said, winking at Harry.

"HOW DARE YOU INSINUATE THAT I'M DATING SEVERUS SNAPE?!" Contessa roared. Harry stifled his laughter. It was rare Contessa got so upset.

"Oy, lady, I don't care if you're dating Prince Charles! Belt up about it!" called out a rumpled-looking Muggle from his bedroom window as they passed his house.

"Do you two plan on having children?" Tonks continued, as though Contessa hadn't just practically burst Harry's eardrums.

Contessa surged forward, stalking past Tonks with a hateful glare, apparently unable to retort. Tonks looked like she was enjoying herself. She cast a glance back at Rufus, who was having a hard time with the trolley. It was, after all, bigger than he was. Tonks sighed and went back to help him push.

"It'll be nice to see you on Hogsmeade weekends," Harry said to Lupin when he thought Contessa was done having her fit.

"It'll be great to see all of you. I must admit that that house has been very dreary since--well, since Sirius left us," Lupin said softly. "Though he thought it was dreary all the time, I didn't think it was as long as he was there."

Harry was rather of the same opinion, but he had a feeling Lupin meant it in a different way. He wondered if Sirius ever had a clue that Lupin liked him or if he just ran around utterly ignorant about Lupin's feelings. Harry wondered if Sirius ever thought about anyone else's feelings. He had been remarkably self-centered, but for all that Harry loved him.

"Yes, he was, wasn't he?" Lupin said fondly.

"Er, sorry, I didn't realize I was thinking out loud," Harry said, startling himself.

Lupin looked amused and then cast a glance up at Draco, who was trying to convince

the Aurors that since it was still dark he should be allowed to ride his broom. "How are things, er, going on your end?" he asked.

Harry blushed. "Er, well, see . . . they're not, really," he said. "Since I managed to get into Potions this year--don't ask me how, by the way--I'm considering putting some effort into finding something to get rid of pointless feelings," he said.

"It doesn't exist and if it does, make some for me," Lupin answered.

The walk seemed longer than last time, but maybe it was because they had more stuff. Lupin was right; this would have been so much easier if they had taken the Knight Bus. Draco kept pointing at things like sprinkler systems and demanding that Harry tell him what they did and how Muggles managed to do it without magic. He stared unabashedly at everything. He was like Mr. Weasley, only far more rude.

Somehow, Harry and Draco wound up walking side-by-side. Contessa and Tonks were up ahead, arguing about which shortcut was shorter. Kingsley and Rufus looked determined to not get involved. Lupin kept gently trying to keep everyone moving. Harry was unsurprised when they walked past a petrol station and Draco gaped at the people filling their cars with petrol. Draco stared at some Muggle child playing with a Gameboy with greed.

"How do I get one of those beeping miniature moving-picture-box things?" Draco asked Harry arrogantly. "I could use one at school, so I have something to do while Binns prattles on."

"It wouldn't work when we get to Hogwarts," Harry told Draco with a shrug.

"Why not? Binns wouldn't notice if I showed up to class naked," Draco sniffed. Harry tried not to picture that, but a blush crept onto his face all the same.

"The magical concentration around Hogwarts doesn't allow complicated electronic devices to work around it," Harry said, quoting Hermione as best as he could.

"Honestly, haven't you ever read Hogwarts, A History?"

Draco rolled his eyes. "You sound like Father. Why would I read something if I don't have to?" he snorted.

"Actually, I was quoting Hermione," Harry said with some amusement.

"Trust me, if it weren't for the fact that she's a Mudblood, Father would think she was

the bee's knees. He likes studying, research, books, and all that boring rot. Why do you think Contessa's so dull? He spent all his time teaching her to be exactly like what he thought a witch should be," Draco said, rolling his eyes.

"Hermione's a Muggle-born, not a Mudblood. And she's smarter than any of us," Harry said neutrally.

"Whatever. Muggle-born or Mudblood, it doesn't matter. She's no fun and she's really not that pretty unless she shellacs her hair down--and even then. I'd only care if she was smart if I could copy her notes," Draco said, his tone getting particularly snotty.

Harry realized this was the closest thing they'd ever gotten to civilized conversation--which wasn't saying much. He decided to pursue it. "So, obviously smart girls aren't your thing. What sort of girls do you like, then?" he asked slowly.

For some reason, Draco's expression darkened, his eyes narrowed, and a pink tinge colored his pale cheeks. He turned his face from Harry. "Purebloods, of course," he said arrogantly, "Witches of good breeding. Quidditch players are a bonus and someone who knows how to have a good time. I like music, so they would have to like that as well." He sounded rather like he was quoting someone. His father, probably.

"Well, if Ginny and Dean break up, I'll recommend you to her," Harry offered. His voice was more bitter than he intended.

Draco looked alarmed. "A Weasley? Are you joking?" he scoffed.

"There's nothing wrong with the Weasleys," Harry said coolly.

Draco looked like he was about to argue and then closed his mouth. "It doesn't matter now. I'm a blood traitor. I might as well marry Granger," he said darkly.

"Over Ron's dead body, I'd imagine."

"That was sarcasm, Potter, in case you missed it. I wouldn't marry Granger if she was the last woman on Earth. How utterly dull."

Harry was quiet for a long time before he spoke. "I don't know if anyone ever told you, but what you did that night in Contessa's memory . . . it was very brave of you," he said.

Draco glanced at Harry and snarled. "I'm not brave, I'm not bold. I'm ambitious, clever, and determined. That's why I was sorted into Slytherin," he said.

Harry remembered something Sirius's great-great-grandfather, Phineas Nigellus, once said from his portrait. Harry pondered his words for a moment. "You know, Slytherins can be brave, too. They're just not reckless about it. They weigh their options before rushing into anything," Harry told him.

Draco looked startled and stared at Harry for a long time.

"Did you--did you weigh your options?" Harry asked.

Draco looked away. "Yes, I did," he said.

"Then why did you choose the way you did?" Harry asked.

"Because I didn't like the alternative," Draco said darkly.

"Then why'd you join the Death Eaters? Didn't you know what that was all about?" Harry pressed.

"Yes, I knew, Potter."

"Then why?"

"Because--because I wasn't the person I thought I was," Draco said, his voice getting softer with each word, trailing off into silence after the last word. Harry stared at him. Draco hurried forward to join Contessa, ignoring Harry.

They arrived at King's Cross Station at a decent time. Lupin helped push the trolley in and then told Harry goodbye, promising to meet up with him on the first Hogsmeade weekend before he Disapparated. Harry missed him and Godric immediately. Tonks, Rufus, and Kingsley surrounded them as they walked through the station. All three looked very tense. When a man who was wearing black and even more black make-up than Contessa moved towards her suddenly, Tonks knocked him over.

It turned out he was a Muggle into the Goth scene and had only wanted Contessa's number. Harry had to explain to Contessa, Rufus, Kingsley, and Draco that the Muggle meant her telephone number. Then he had to explain what a telephone was. Apparently, only Tonks knew what it was. Contessa looked very insulted.

"I don't see what the problem is. It's not like you get hit on regularly," Tonks told her as the Muggle walked off, looking more than a little intimidated. "Granted he wears more eyeliner than you do, but he's better looking than Snape."

"And it looked like he washed his hair regularly . . . and his teeth . . . and probably his underwear, too," Rufus added. "Snape's a bit of a minger, in case you hadn't noticed."

"He's a pureblood, at least. He could forget not to bathe for a decade and still not be as filthy as a Muggle," Contessa spat, striding towards the brick barrier and stepping into it. Harry spent a moment fighting off the urge to follow her and hex her for that comment.

"Such a pleasant young woman," Kingsley said sarcastically.

Harry and the others also entered the barriers in ones and twos, trying to be as innocuous as possible while doing so. Except for Draco. He just marched right in without caring.

Ron and Hermione ran up to Harry when he arrived on Platform 9 3/4. Hermione threw herself on Harry in greeting, hugging him enthusiastically. Ron quickly pulled her off, glaring at her and then Harry. "Hi, guys!" Harry said, grinning. He caught a glimpse of a sour-faced Draco walking past them.

"Draco!"

Harry looked up and away from Ron and Hermione, over to where Draco stood, a little ways from them. He looked like he was trying to slink off without being noticed. However, a group of Slytherins Harry only barely recognized were descending on Draco.

One was an extremely tall black girl with uncommonly smooth hair that Harry remembered terrorizing Neville at one time or another. She was as tall as Ron, if not taller. There was Blaise Zabini, a handsome black boy with a bright smile and a nasty snigger. Then a mousy brown-haired girl Harry only vaguely recalled having ever seen before. Pansy Parkinson was there, of course, along with Millicent Bulstrode and a few younger Slytherins Harry didn't recognize. Lurking in the background were Crabbe and Goyle. Both were glowering darkly at Draco. Leaning against a wall nearby was a stringy Slytherin whose name Harry didn't recall, but he was watching everyone very intently.

"Draco! Oh, Draco, you're all right!" Pansy sobbed dramatically, flinging herself on

Draco like a bad imitation of Hermione. He almost fell over as she was a bit bigger than he was.

"Malfoy! What happened to you?" demanded the tall black girl. "I heard your parents were both arrested and your house burned down!"

"I heard your mum put up a brilliant fight!" Zabini said enthusiastically.

"What happened to your clothes?" asked the mousy-looking girl, staring at Draco's hand-me-downs in wonder.

Before Draco could answer, the boy leaning against the wall spoke. He had a powerful sort of baritone--very smooth--which was at odds with his ungainly body. "Did it hurt much?" the boy asked.

Draco opened his mouth and then closed it, his eyes widening. Harry moved away from Ron and Hermione and towards Draco, feeling tense. Contessa was walking over to Draco and froze when she saw the stringy Slytherin boy that was speaking to Draco.

"Did it hurt much, when the Dark Lord cast the Cruciatus Curse on you for betraying him?" the boy asked coolly, explaining his previous question. Harry's blood froze in his veins. Crabbe and Goyle were flexing their muscles nearby, looking angrier by the moment.

"Theodore Nott," Contessa said softly. The stringy Slytherin turned and looked at her, his intense, yet blank expression never wavering.

"Is there a problem, here?" Kingsley asked, walking up when he saw the gang of Slytherins around Draco. He, Tonks, and Rufus had just finished checking out the train.

Nott shrugged as though he couldn't care less. "I'm not the one with the problem," he said mildly and moved towards the train without a glance back.

Kingsley turned to Crabbe and Goyle. Tonks and Rufus were already glaring at them. "Move along, boys," Kingsley intoned.

When Kingsley gave an order, apparently even Death Eaters' sons listened. Crabbe and Goyle walked onto the train, each glowering.

"Draco, what did happen to your clothes?" Pansy said, looking confused.

"You ride with us, Draco. We want to know what happened," Zabini said smoothly, grabbing Draco by the arm and tugging him onto the train. Draco cast a look back, his eyes meeting Harry's for a moment before turning back to Zabini. Harry felt an intense urge to yank Zabini off Draco, but instead he frowned as the Slytherins disappeared onto the train.

"Well, he's going to have to explain to them after the prefects' meeting. Harry, Ginny, save us some seats," Hermione said huffily as Ginny walked up, having detached herself from Dean.

"Oh, well I was going to tell you I was going to sit with Dean today," Ginny said quickly.

Ron scowled but Hermione smiled indulgently. "Of course. Well, Harry, Contessa, we'll see you in a bit," Hermione said, bustling off with Ron in tow. Harry repressed a scowl.

"They're actually very boring," Contessa suddenly said to him and Harry took a moment to realize she was talking about the prefects' meetings. Apparently, he hadn't repressed his scowl well enough.

"Right, well, I suppose I better find us somewhere to sit," Harry said darkly. There was no sense in ignoring her, she wasn't going to go anywhere. He needed her to bring back Sirius and he was just going to have to accept that, no matter how much he distrusted her. Contessa nodded and followed him onto the train. She received a few curious stares since she was too old to be a student, but looked too young to be a teacher.

Harry managed to find an empty compartment. He passed the Slytherins' compartment on the way to it, pausing and staring inside. Malfoy and Pansy weren't there, presumably at the prefects' meeting, but the rest of the Slytherins were having an animated conversation. Zabini looked up and caught Harry's eyes, a slow smile spreading across his face. It wasn't a friendly smile, so Harry kept going.

Contessa sat down very primly opposite of him, arranging the skirts of her black dress and staring out of the window. Harry glared at the carpet. Eventually, Neville came stumbling inside the compartment, looking terrified. He froze when he saw Contessa.

"What's wrong, Neville?" Harry asked.

"N-nothing. Just the usual," Neville mumbled, still staring at Contessa. She was staring back.

"Crabbe or Goyle?" Harry asked.

"Both actually. They seem sort of angry."

"I'll bet," Harry said darkly. "Have a seat. She won't bite when there are witnesses."

Contessa gave Harry a dark glare. Neville sat down as far from Contessa as he could manage, petting Trevor the toad absently as he did so. "How's your *Mimulus mimbletonia* coming along?" Harry asked politely.

"It was too big to bring. It's doing wonderfully," Neville said, staring at Contessa.

Harry nodded absently in response, and apparently Neville caught on that Harry wasn't really interested in his *Mimulus mimbletonia* and fell silent. Contessa, however, spoke.

"They're very rare. Where'd you get one?" she asked with some interest.

Neville stared at her a bit more before answering. "My uncle," he said timidly.

"Really?" Contessa said. She then slowly drew Neville into a conversation about *Mimulus mimbletonias* and then into what plants worked best for healing draughts and then into more about Herbology than Harry ever wanted to know. Even the movement of the train and the clatter of people finding last minute seats didn't distract them. Neville seemed to forget that he was speaking to the daughter of the people who had tortured his parents into insanity, and once drawn into the conversation, he began speaking in earnest. Harry wondered darkly if they'd ever get around to methods of torture and forms of insanity during the conversation.

It was mean and he knew it, and was very happy he never said anything aloud.

Ron and Hermione finally joined them after a bit, both seeming a little surprised to find Neville and Contessa, of all people, in a conversation. Now, Neville was sitting next to her, showing her a book he had gotten for his birthday on Oriental plants. Ron and Hermione gave them curious looks, but neither said anything about it when they sat down.

"It was great, Harry, you should have been there," Ron said brightly.

"What are you talking about?" Harry asked.

"For Pansy's reaction when she found out Malfoy doesn't have two knuts to rub together."

"How'd she find that out?"

"Ron told her while she was pestering Draco about his clothes," Hermione said darkly, glaring at Ron.

"How'd she react?" Harry asked, admittedly curious.

"She looked horrified. And she stopped clinging to Malfoy. She didn't seem interested in him anymore. She was flirting with Zabini when we passed the Slytherin compartment. Malfoy looked very put out."

Harry felt a certain sort of satisfaction about this and a rush of gratitude to Ron. Contessa was frowning.

Eventually, Harry got up to use the toilet. He watched all the compartments very carefully in case Crabbe, Goyle, or that Nott kid tried to jump him. He only met Draco coming out of the toilet as he walked up to it, wearing the school robes Mrs. Weasley had made him and scowling deeply. He glared at Harry.

"So you've been dumped, huh?" Harry asked coolly.

"You have to be dating someone to be dumped. And I wasn't dating anyone," Draco said hotly.

That was a change of pace. Usually it was Harry who was heated and Draco who was acting cool.

"Funny how less popular you are when your father's no longer rich and influential. This is a great insight into the inner workings of the Slytherin mindset."

"At least he's still alive," Draco said, the ice returning to his voice.

Harry's blood began to boil. "He may be dead, but at least my father wasn't a lying, snake-ridden Death Eater," he hissed, raising his fist.

Draco stared at him hatefully for a moment and then looked away. "This is pointless, Potter," Draco said, sounding tired all of a sudden.

Harry immediately cooled off, realizing that it was.

"You may think that my friends were only my friends because of my money, and maybe some of them were, but Blaise still likes me. Daphne doesn't care what happened, as long as I make her Keeper, and Tracey--well, Tracey doesn't talk much. So why don't you take your self-righteous judgments on my House and my family and shove them up your arse."

Something disturbed Harry to think Zabini still liked Draco. It gave him goose pimples. "Listen, something's not right about Zabini. Don't trust him," Harry suddenly said.

"Right, and I'm supposed to trust you?" Draco asked coolly.

"I'm not your enemy, Draco. Not anymore."

"Yeah, well, you're not my friend, either. Now get out of my way."

"Hey! Other people got to use the loo, here!" cried a second-year Hufflepuff, shifting from side to side in desperation to use the toilet.

Harry stood aside and let Draco through, wondering if Draco was as tired of being his enemy as he was. That thought kept him busy for the rest of the ride to Hogwarts.

When they went out to the thestral-pulled carriages, Draco apparently got quite a shock.

"What are those?" he screeched so loudly most of the students turned to stare at him. Harry suddenly realized that Malfoy had witnessed death and now saw the thestrals, just as he did.

"Thestrals, Malfoy," Harry said loudly. "Maybe you should pay more attention in Care of Magical Creatures."

Ron and Hermione grinned while Draco turned to glare at him. He had paused with Zabini, the tall black girl Harry supposed was Daphne, and the mousy Slytherin Harry would guess to be Tracey all right behind him.

"What's the matter, Malfoy? Scared?" Harry called, moving up to pet one of the thestrals on the back.

"It's all right, Draco. They're not going to hurt you," Contessa said, moving over to her cousin. "They're tame. Hagrid's bred and trained them."

Draco did not look comforted as Contessa ushered him into the carriage. She glared at Harry before closing the carriage door. Harry grinned and went inside his own carriage. Hermione was looking at him with disapproval now, but Ron was grinning. Neville looked unexplainably satisfied.

When they arrived at the castle, Harry watched Draco with interest as he quickly moved away from the thestral-pulled carriages, looking obviously frightened. Harry decided Draco scared far too easy. Harry watched him as they entered the Great Hall and he sat down with his Slytherin friends, looking shaken.

Harry was so busy watching Draco that he missed most of the Sorting Song and the Sorting itself. The Sorting Hat seemed to be re-iterating last year's thoughts, in any case. Draco pointedly ignored him most of the time, but looked up once and his and Harry's eyes met. Draco looked away after a minute.

"Welcome to another year at Hogwarts," Dumbledore intoned, standing up and causing everyone to fall silent.

"First, the necessities. I would like to mention to all the first years--and certain sixth-year Gryffindors--that the Forbidden Forest is off-limits," Dumbledore said, causing everyone to laugh. "Also, I believe Mr. Filch, the caretaker, has added some new things to the list of forbidden objects, which is found in his office. Please feel free to peruse it; you might be quizzed on it later."

It was hard to tell if Dumbledore was joking or not about the last part.

"Also, I would like to mention that anyone who would like to speak to me--or any of the other teachers--about anything having to do with Voldemort's return need only come seek one of us. We will be more than happy to address your concerns and you may rest assured you will remain anonymous."

"Most of all, I would like to say that Hogwarts is not about Gryffindor versus Slytherin, or about Ravenclaw versus Hufflepuff. It's not about who is Muggle-born, half-blood, or pureblood. It is about unity. It is about witches and wizards standing against evil, bigotry, and fear. We are to stand together, not apart, or we will not stand at all. You do not have to like the person standing beside you, but you do have a duty to protect and respect them."

Dumbledore let that sink in before speaking again. "I would like to introduce two new members of the Hogwarts staff. First, I would like to introduce your new Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher," he said, motioning to a hooded man sitting beside Professor Sinistra.

The hooded man stood up and pushed his hood back. Harry gaped at him. It was Victor Morpheus, one of Bill's friends and a new member of the Order of the Phoenix. "Professor Morpheus will be catching all of you up to speed," Dumbledore said neutrally. The students began to whisper.

As with the first time Harry had seen him, Morpheus was uncommonly handsome. He surveyed his new students with a small smile, made a small bow, and then sat back down. Some of the girls started to giggle and whisper to each other about how good-looking he was. He wasn't doing anything particularly interesting, so Harry found himself staring at Snape.

Snape was glaring hotly at the younger man, working his jaw virulently. After all, he had lost the position he desired again, and this time to a former student. Contessa sat next to Filch and she had a very guarded expression, but was staring at Professor Morpheus rather intently, too. Dumbledore motioned to her.

"We also have Miss Contessa Lestrage, who will be our caretaker's assistant. Though Miss Lestrage is not a teacher, I ask that you extend her the same courtesy and respect that you do Mr. Filch," Dumbledore said, his lips twitching a bit. "Now enjoy dinner."

The feast appeared, as sumptuous as ever. Everyone dug in greedily, piling their plates high. Harry noticed Contessa was glaring at Dumbledore hatefully. After all, she had just been reduced to a servant. Harry felt this to be quite satisfying. Dumbledore didn't even cast her a second glance. A few of the students began whispering about it.

"Did you know the Lestrages really are direct descendants of Sir Mordred and his mother, Morgan Le Fay?" Hermione asked excitedly, reading from a book. "Sir Mordred was actually a prince. His father was King Lot of Lothian, though Muggle

legend says it's Arthur. Sir Mordred had twin sons--Melehan and Melou--who continued his rebellion for a while and were eventually killed. Melehan's son, Le Loup, was the first Lestrangle, though Melou died before he could have children. Le Loup Lestrangle managed to keep a barony that still exists on the books today--bet the Muggles don't know that. Everything else was stripped from them by King Edward the Elder. The Black line broke off from the Lestrangle line several generations later, by way of the first--and one of few--female Lestranges, Erica. She called herself Erica Black--since black was the color of death and she was a Necromancer--and refused to take her husband's name. Instead, he took hers. I imagine this is why the Black family thinks of themselves as royalty. They were once. There's even a Castle Lestrangle somewhere."

Ron and Harry gaped at her as she calmly ate some of her roast potatoes while scanning the book. "Er, how do you know all that?" Ron asked.

"Because I'm reading--"

"Hogwarts, A History?"

"Of course not. King Arthur's court existed about five centuries before Hogwarts was ever founded. I'm reading A History of the Pureblood Families by Lady Wildweather. It's an excellent account of bits of wizarding history and has excellent theories on bloodlines. Did you know that Merlin founded the lines of Gryffindor, Slytherin, Hufflepuff, Ravenclaw, and Dumbledore? He had seven daughters by his wife Nimue; the other two sisters' lines are lost to time, but thought to have been married into other modern lines. Popular theory, Harry, is that one of them is the Potters and the other is the Prewetts. Of course, the four founders' lines have all died out or been married into other lines, as well."

Harry smiled and so did Ron, since his mother's maiden name was Prewett. Claiming to have Merlin for a distant ancestor was better than any other wizard in history. That might make him very distantly related to Dumbledore, which Harry found odd, but rather flattering. It would also make him distantly related to Voldemort, which Harry did not care to think about too much. Then again, the relation was very distant, which made Harry relax a bit.

"Sir Mordred, of course, founded the lines of Black and Lestrangle," Hermione continued. "This book also confirms the other one I read early in the summer that the Malfoy line is descended from the invading Roman Emperor and Dark Wizard, Lucius, who was killed by King Arthur in battle. So many witches and wizards of that age founded so many of the old wizarding families. It's fascinating really," Hermione

said.

"What about the Weasleys?" Ron asked excitedly.

"Your family was named after a Weasel Animagus from ancient Britain who was tutored by Queen Maeve in Ireland. He was said to have done her some 'great service'. Your family is actually older than most of the other wizarding lines. The only two lines that are as old as yours are the Snape and Earnshaw lines. The Earnshaws are an Anglo-Saxon wizarding family that ruled the north. They had a blood feud with the Lestranges dating back to just after Arthurian times. The Snapes are another old Anglo-Saxon family. They were ancient Druid leaders living near peat marshes. They used to make human sacrifices and were often said to contact the dead. Many of the ancient Necromancers came from their line. Their notoriety was so great there's three villages and a fell all over England named after them. There's even a Muggle Snape line that descended from a Snape Squib born some time in the eighteenth century."

That was more information than Harry ever needed to know.

"Ha, how would Malfoy like to know that? His ancestor was beaten by a Muggle with a magic sword, and mine was a powerful Animagus who served a beautiful Queen. How do you know this and I don't?" Ron demanded.

"I read, you don't."

"Well, if you spent less time with your nose in a book, maybe you--"

Harry had already tuned out Ron and Hermione's argument before Ron even finished his retort. He had turned back to watching Draco. He frowned, as Draco completely ignored him. He had thought Draco might have some small interest in him, but was he wrong?

He wondered if Draco was going to go back to the way he used to be, now that he was back with his Slytherin friends. And that thought made Harry's blood run cold.

To be continued . . .

Chapter 14: Jigsaw

Chapter Fourteen:

Professor Morpheus's Good Timing

Harry walked into his Monday afternoon double Defense Against the Dark Arts class with the same anticipation as the rest of the Gryffindors. Parvati and Lavender had primped all day for this class, even more than they had for Firenze. They giggled a lot to each other about him, too. It made Harry want to drop something heavy on their heads. If Morpheus did half the things they wanted him to do, he would have been sacked by the end of his first class and possibly arrested.

Morpheus was sitting at his desk, making notes and looking very neutral. Wearing all black robes made him look extraordinarily pale. Harry heard Dean ask Seamus if he was a vampire. Harry wondered himself.

When everyone had sat down, Morpheus stood up. "Good afternoon. I am Professor Victor Morpheus. If you will please bring out *The Times of Troubles: A History of Dark Witches and Wizards* and your wands," he said smoothly. That last bit caused most everyone to smile after the experience with Umbridge.

Harry was surprised to note that Neville Longbottom's hand was in the air. Morpheus raised an eyebrow and called on him.

"Yes, Mr. Longbottom, is it?" Morpheus asked.

"I-I'm very sorry if I'm being rude, but I--I want to know if you're a v-vampire. I heard a Slytherin telling people this at lunch, and see, after Professor Lupin turned out to be a werewolf; I just wanted to get this out of the way. We won't mind. We all liked Professor Lupin."

The rest of the class fell silent, staring at Neville and Morpheus curiously. Morpheus had a mildly surprised look on his face. "I can see why you're a Gryffindor, Mr. Longbottom. That was a brave question. The answer is no," Morpheus responded with a smile and then walked over to the window and held out his arm in the sunlight, pulling back his sleeve to bare his arm. "If I was, I could not do this without burning, I assure you. This is a common mistake ignorant people make about me based on my coloration because they know nothing about vampires. I will make sure all of you

leave this class without making that same mistake."

Neville looked relieved as Morpheus stepped away from the window and let his sleeve go. "Oh, good," he said. Dean looked disappointed.

"Now who was this tongue-wagging Slytherin? I would like to speak with him or her," Morpheus said coolly. "Write down the name and leave it on my desk before you leave, Mr. Longbottom. I assure you that I will be very cross if you don't."

Before anyone could dwell on that too much, Morpheus began to speak again. "We will begin by reviewing a quick history of Dark witches and wizards in history. History and knowledge of that which lies beyond these halls is imperative for your survival and protection. As we study, I will demonstrate many of their spells and their counter spells. Many of these spells are unpleasant, but in order to learn how to defend yourself, you need to realize they do indeed exist. We will spend the last part of class practicing every day, since you've had an entire year with this post filled by a complete idiot . . ." he said, then instructing them to turn to page four while most of the class snickered in appreciation.

He ignored Hermione's hand, forcing some of the other students to answer. Hermione looked a little put out. Ron was forced to answer some questions, and he lost Gryffindor five points for telling Morpheus that Morgan Le Fay was a pervert.

"But she was! You should see her potion recipes!" Ron complained loudly.

"Another five points from Gryffindor," Morpheus said, looking irritated. "I am not interested in the sexual habits of any Dark witch or wizard, and neither should you be. This is Defense Against the Dark Arts class, not Defense Against Sex Offenders."

He went through a few chapters, explaining some detail or another, stopping to practice or demonstrate a particular spell. He showed slides of a few of the Dark witches and wizards. His teaching style was somewhere between Lupin, Moody, Binns, and Snape. He alternately engaged, bored, and prattled on about things he knew. If Hermione was a teacher, Harry rather thought she would teach like he did. He told them to write two rolls of parchment about the ancient Greek Dark wizard, Herpo the Foul--the first known creator of the basilisk. He also wanted half of a roll devoted the basilisk itself. Harry wondered if he could ask for exemption since he already had fought one, but Morpheus seemed to be a rather tight teacher and Harry doubted he'd be pleased with the suggestion. Everyone groaned at their new assignment. Morpheus looked unmoved by this.

"I have to catch you up after an entire year of poor education. Once you're at the level I think you all should be, then you can complain about homework. Until then, I expect you all to be happy you're going to learn Defense Against the Dark Arts when it's obviously something that may save your life in the current environment," Morpheus said blithely. They all grudgingly copied down his demands on the structure of the essay. Harry had never had a teacher tell him how to write his essays before. Even Snape wasn't that anal retentive.

He then dismissed the class airily, returning to writing notes at his desk.

"Talk about being arsey. 'Paragraph one should include:' and all that. You'd think he'd cut at least you a bit of slack, Ron," Harry whispered as they walked out, craning his neck to watch as Neville nervously handed in the note to Morpheus. He wondered who the Slytherin was, and had a feeling it was Draco. "Your brother's his friend."

"Morph's always been a bit arsey. Him and Bill are best friends, but while Bill likes a good Quidditch game, Morph prefers a good history book. Mum likes him, though," Ron shrugged. "Don't expect him to cut anyone slack. He's dead fair, you'll see. Worse than McGonagall."

"I wouldn't call him 'Morph'. He'd probably deduct points from Gryffindor again," Harry said, grinning.

"Yeah, he's really going to be on my back this year, I just know it. He'll get on Ginny's back, too. He thinks we should be as clever as Bill. He'll be just like Mum," Ron said bitterly and Harry suppressed a smile to think that Ron loved his mother so much he was dating a girl just like her.

"Didn't even call on me once," Hermione grumbled from the other side of Ron. They were very brazen this year, walking down the hall with Ron's arm around her shoulders.

"Course not, Hermione. He's a prat like that. He knows you already know it. You and Harry he'll probably ignore most of the year. The rest of us average, ordinary kids are going to catch it."

"Well, that's a good thing, I suppose," Hermione said brightly. "He'll make you pay attention in class."

"Joy," Ron said, rolling his eyes so only Harry could see. Harry stifled a laugh.

Hermione and Harry split off from Ron to go down for Potions. Ron hadn't gotten the Outstanding he needed to go to sixth-year Potions, but wasn't concerned about it. Ron had to attend another course, but Harry forgot which one. Hermione, however, had gotten straight Outstandings, so she and Harry got to go to sixth-year Potions together.

"I still don't get how I managed an Outstanding in Potions," Harry sighed, shaking his head.

"Probably because you didn't have Professor Snape spitting acid down your neck the entire time. Don't worry about it. You need Potions to become an Auror. You'll just have to apply yourself to keep up your marks is all."

"Right," Harry sighed. "Why are we going there early, Hermione?"

"Because I want good seats. Potions is very important, especially in our sixth year. We learn Dark poisons and their antidotes."

Harry rolled his eyes as they headed down the Potions classroom. Snape was in his office when they arrived. The class was so small that all four Houses were in the same class for sixth year. Harry, Hermione, and Dean Thomas were the only Gryffindors in their year who qualified. There were a lot of Ravenclaws, and even a few Hufflepuffs like Ernie Macmillan, Justin Finch-Fletchley, and Susan Bones. And for the Slytherins were Draco Malfoy, Blaise Zabini, Tracey Davis, and Theodore Nott. Harry stared at Draco a bit as they sat down. Draco was having an animated conversation with Zabini. Zabini laughed a lot, flashing very white teeth that contrasted with his mocha-colored skin. Harry wanted to hit him.

Harry suddenly noticed that Hermione was staring at him curiously. She opened her mouth to say something when Snape's door banged open and he strode out, glaring at all of them hatefully.

"Potter, you forgot your textbook," he said, glaring hatefully at Harry.

"No, I didn't," Harry bristled. "It's in my bag, right here." Harry bent down and pulled out his book.

"Five points from Gryffindor for talking back. Open to page ten!" Snape snapped, stalking over to his own desk.

Harry was very irritated by now. He clamped his mouth tightly shut before he wound up with detention and opened his book. After a bit, a cute third-year Slytherin boy

skipped in, looking rather pleased with himself.

"Excuse me, Professor Snape, sir?" the boy asked.

"What?" Snape asked tersely.

"Professor Morpheus would like a word with Draco Malfoy. And he'd like you to give him a clove of garlic and some holy water before he leaves. To make a point, he said. Professor Morpheus also said Draco needs to get his things because he won't be coming back to class today."

Harry, Hermione, and Dean began to snicker while Draco looked a little alarmed. Snape worked his jaw for a full minute before speaking. "Mr. Malfoy, get a clove of garlic and a bottle of holy water. I trust you can read the labels. Then get out. Get notes from one of your friends," he hissed.

Draco grabbed his books, the bottle of holy water, and the clove of garlic, looking hatefully at the Gryffindors. "I'll get Longbottom for this, the sneak. I know it was him," Draco hissed at Harry as he walked out.

"That's rich, him calling someone else a sneak," Hermione whispered indignantly.

"Miss Granger are you whispering in my classroom? Ten points from Gryffindor!"

Hermione shut up for the rest of the class, looking a little put out with Snape herself. Harry managed not to generate too much attention from Snape. Snape seemed to be too distracted with other things to produce anything more than general malice today. Potions was their last class for the day, so Harry managed to detach himself from Hermione, promising to meet up with her for dinner. Hermione studied him for a long moment and then let him go.

Harry had a feeling she knew exactly what was going on his mind.

With forced casualness, he sidled past the Defense Against the Dark Arts classroom. He peered inside from a crack in the door, trying to look as inconspicuous as he could.

Draco was sitting in the middle of the room, holding an icepack to his nose. Morpheus was writing at his desk, looking remarkably satisfied with himself. The clove of garlic was nowhere to be seen, but the empty bottle of holy water was on his desk. "I really think those third years were getting the hang of the Disarming Spell, don't you, Mr. Malfoy?" Morpheus asked smugly.

Draco made a noise through his mouth that sounded remarkably like, "Fucking bastard."

"And if you ever make allusions to sully my heritage again, Mr. Malfoy, I'll have you as the test subject for my first year Gryffindor classes for a straight week," Morpheus continued, looking like he was repressing an evil grin.

Draco removed the icepack from his nose and glared hatefully at Morpheus. "You're only doing this because my father's in prison," he said hotly.

"On the contrary, Mr. Malfoy, I'm only getting away with it because he's in prison."

"This is cruel and unusual punishment!" Draco cried.

"By being the test subject for less than twenty third year students practicing their Disarming Spells? Hardly. If you hadn't jerked your head so, your wand wouldn't have hit your nose. If I wanted to be cruel and unusual, I would have consulted Professor Snape. I'm sure he could think of something, from what I recall of Rufus's many detentions."

"I can't stand this! This is driving me mad! All you people acting so smug! Everyone picking on me, treating me like I was some sort of--of Mudblood!"

"Language, Mr. Malfoy. Ten points from Slytherin."

"You can't do this! It's not fair! It's all not fair!" Draco cried.

"Quite the whinger, aren't you?"

"As if Potter wasn't bad enough, now I have to deal with you," Draco muttered loudly.

Morpheus raised a dark eyebrow and Harry leaned forward in interest. "Mr. Malfoy, if you think I am singling you out for some sort of grudge, then you have far too high an opinion of your importance in the world. I merely wish to stress how little I will tolerate gossip mongering and slander being passed around about myself. And if your classmates are making life difficult for you, I will attend to it. Mr. Potter included."

Draco stared at him, looking confused. "You--you mean that. You would punish the Boy Wonder if he was picking on me?" His question sounded incredulous, rather than arrogant. Harry tensed.

"He has no more or less value than any other human being. Furthermore, he is a student and juvenile who needs to be brought to task when he does something wrong, like any other juvenile."

"Your--your father was Rem Morpheus, right? He was a Slytherin Head Boy, right? He and my father were good friends, though your father was a bit older, I think."

Morpheus dropped his pen and looked up at Draco. "I don't know what this has to do with anything, but yes. My father was friends with Lucius Malfoy until the day he died. Despite the fact that he was an Auror or perhaps because of it. Do not think this will get you special treatment, Mr. Malfoy," he said harshly. "On the contrary, my father was killed by a rogue Death Eater years after Voldemort was defeated. My father believed in his cause and tried very hard to cure Death Eaters of their ways."

Draco was quiet. "I'm sorry," he said very softly.

"I am not uncompassionate to your situation, Mr. Malfoy, and realize that certain members of your House are going to be less than favorable to you now. Furthermore, I am also aware that Professor Snape can no longer protect you based on his own situation. If you need someone to talk to or look into a problem you cannot fix yourself, you may come to me if you so desire. I will carefully review the situation to determine the proper course of action. I realize you probably have no one you could speak to at the moment about your own problems, so I offer to bend my ear if that is what you require."

"Er, thanks," Draco said, looking taken aback. He also looked like he was trying to work out what Morpheus just said to its entirety. Harry wasn't quite sure if he understood all of it. Morpheus seemed to use a lot of words and had a pompous manner of speech that reminded Harry a bit of Mr. Crouch.

"You are welcome. You'll be late for dinner, so run along now. Please remember not to make baseless assumptions merely because of a person's coloration. And you may also rest assured that if someone receives any retaliation from you for revealing your indiscretion, I will make your next month very unpleasant, Mr. Malfoy."

Draco sulked, but moved to head out. Harry quickly moved down the hall and made it look like he was just heading towards dinner. He tried to look as casual as he could. Draco looked thoughtful as he walked, but froze and narrowed his eyes when he saw Harry, frowning.

"It wasn't Neville. I told him," Harry lied.

Draco shrugged as though it didn't matter. He tried to walk past Harry, but Harry grabbed his arm. "Leave Neville alone. Hasn't he suffered enough?" Harry said harshly. "Or are you such a cold-hearted bastard that you don't care about anyone but your own bloody self?"

"I'm not going to torment your little boyfriend, Potter. Let me go," Draco said evenly, meeting Harry's eyes.

"I don't have any little boyfriends, Malfoy," Harry said, though it didn't come out as nearly as witty as it had been in his head.

"Your lack of social skills is hardly my problem. Now let me go. Not only are you holding up my dinner, but you're cutting off my circulation," Draco said quite coolly.

"You seemed okay with me grabbing you a couple weeks ago," Harry hissed, leaning into Draco. Harry pushed him against the wall, preventing his escape by blocking him with his other arm.

Draco tried to struggle, but Harry was definitely bigger and Draco didn't do anything but twist himself more into Harry's grasp. It was sort of exciting, Harry found, to have Draco struggling against him, pressed against a cold stone wall, glaring at him hatefully. Draco stopped struggling abruptly, glaring hotly at Harry.

"You know, you were just starting to get interesting, Malfoy. Don't stop now," Harry said harshly, tossing Draco's own words back at him.

Draco licked his lips, still glaring at Harry. "Let me go, Potter," he hissed.

"Can't take care of yourself, can you? There's no one here to save you. Just you. And me."

"I'm warning you, Potter, if you don't let me go, I'll--"

"Do what exactly? Hex me? You're not that good or that fast. You might be able to poison me but don't think I haven't been checking my food ever since I found out what you did to Hermione."

"You know, you act all big and bad, Potter, but you don't have the balls to take it to the next level," Draco hissed. "What's the point of manhandling me if you're not going

to push the limits?"

"Why?" Harry asked, genuinely curious. Some part of him wanted to conquer this boy, to be able genuinely to say he had bested him in every way possible. A part of him that sounded like Hermione, however, asked if that was because he merely wanted revenge for five years of schoolboy torments. "Is that what you want, Malfoy? Do you want me to 'manhandle' you?"

Draco sneered. "Get off me," he said, struggling again. Heat rose in Harry and he realized he was enjoying this tussle with Malfoy. He enjoyed forcing him back against the wall, faces so close, lips almost touching, Draco's cold gray eyes dropping, his pouting lips so close that Harry could feel his hot breath on his own lips, almost there, the barest hint of their moist lips meeting and--

"What's going on here?" cried a sharp voice.

Harry jumped back so far he careened back into the opposite wall. He looked up and saw Morpheus staring at them in shock. He had just stepped out of his classroom and had a few books and several rolls of parchment in his arms. Draco was still pressed against the wall, pink tingeing his pale cheeks. He was breathing as heavily as Harry was. Harry's face felt like it was on fire.

Morpheus glanced at Draco, then at Harry, then back to Draco. "I'm going to dinner. You two should go to dinner as well. It's almost over," Morpheus said blandly.

"I'm not hungry," Draco said in a strange voice and then fled down one of the hallways. Harry licked his lips as Morpheus swept by, but he said nothing to Harry. Harry silently followed him to the Great Hall.

Snape was sitting at the staff table and his eyes instantly narrowed at the sight of Morpheus and Harry. Harry slipped past the slow walking Morpheus and sat next to Neville, who was sitting across from Ron and Hermione. Ron grinned at him as Morpheus swept by.

"Harry, what's with the beemer?" Ron asked. Neville looked at him curiously and Harry cursed himself. His blush had yet to fade.

Hermione, however, was watching him very carefully. She had a thoughtful, considerate expression. Harry shrugged and tried to hide his face behind a large plate of turkey and mash. He cast a glance back up at the staff table and saw Snape was still glaring at Morpheus, who had sat next to Contessa. Morpheus glanced at Harry once,

but his look was not hostile. It was almost curious.

Hermione kept looking at Harry, as though she knew every wicked thought in his head. Harry stuffed some green beans in his mouth, trying to ignore her. Ron shrugged and began to go back to talking to Hermione and Neville. Ron, Neville, and Hermione got up, having finished dinner already.

"See you later, Harry," Ron called, giving him a look. Harry nodded between gulps of pumpkin juice.

He slowed down once they were gone and then hurried out, hoping he could go out to the grounds and maybe sit and think alone for a while. However, Hermione was standing at the doors leading outside, waiting for him.

Harry scowled. "What do you want, Hermione?" he asked shortly.

"Don't snap at me, Harry Potter," she said coolly.

"Why don't you go upstairs and snog Ron or something?" Harry snapped. He wasn't in the mood for her.

Hermione looked taken aback. "What's wrong with you, Harry? Is it because of my relationship with Ron that you have this thing for Draco?" she asked.

"What do you care? I'm not important anymore, am I?" Harry found himself demanding of her, wondering where his resentment came from and realizing it had been there for a while.

"Of course you're important, Harry. You're my best friend. I'll always care about what you feel," Hermione said earnestly.

Harry turned his face to the side, not feeling particularly mollified.

"We . . . could talk outside, if you like," Hermione said almost hesitantly. It looked like it was hurting her to not force Harry into a corner and try to talk him down.

Harry nodded and headed out onto the grounds, heading towards the tree. Sirius, James, Lupin, and Pettigrew had all sat under one fine summer day. They had a couple hours before the sun set and they had to go back into the castle. Hermione followed him silently. Harry sat down under the tree expectantly, staring up at her. She waved her wand and created two cups of tea, much like Dumbledore once had.

She silently handed him one as she sat down beside him.

Harry sipped at the tea, staring morosely at Hagrid's hut. Hermione sipped at her tea as well, watching him intently. "You know, Harry, I love you like a brother, but I'm going to be very honest with you. Something's been going on with you this past summer, and it wasn't just Sirius's death," she said.

"Sirius isn't dead," Harry said angrily.

"Well, he's not here and he's just as good as dead for the moment. But we don't need to talk about Sirius, do we? I think Prof-er, Remus helped you with that. We need to talk about Draco," Hermione said.

Harry scowled. "I am not gay," he said defensively.

Hermione took another sip of tea. "You know, I'd never seen a boy become so quickly disinterested in a pretty girl the moment she returned his interest. At first, I thought it was her, but no girl has ever evoked any passion out of you with the possible exception of your mother. However, Draco seems to be very good at getting a rise out of you," she said neutrally.

Harry grimaced at the unintentional double entendre. "What are you saying?" he asked wearily.

"So do you like him?" she asked.

Harry glared at his tea. He didn't answer her.

"You do, I can see it on your face. You watch him all the time. You fight with him like Ron and I fight; only with you and him, it's a bit tenser, more violent. Is it a boy thing? Some sort of alpha male pecking order you're trying to establish?"

"I thought it was more because he might be a bit like my dad. A little bit, anyway," Harry sighed. It was hard to lie to Hermione.

Hermione nodded, taking another sip of her tea.

Harry turned to her. Lupin was understanding, but distant. There was a certain barrier he placed between himself and Harry, and he was decidedly embarrassed to speak of certain subjects with him. Hermione at least had some romantic experience with Ron. She was Harry's age. Maybe she could understand something, even if she was a girl.

"Nothing was there before. Nothing I could tell, at least. Is he different now? Is that why?" Harry asked her.

Hermione looked thoughtful. "Not really. Little about him has outwardly changed, but everything around him has changed. He had everything that ever meant anything to him ripped away. He almost died. He's learning that Muggles and Muggle-borns aren't what he was taught to believe. Inwardly, I think Draco's changed a lot. But then, none of us knows the real Draco. He hides that part of himself, doesn't he? He doesn't talk to many people, on an open basis at least. He hides all his true feelings, his inner self. No one knows the real Draco Malfoy, except for maybe Contessa or Snape. Maybe you sense something about that part of himself," she said thoughtfully.

"You know, I wasn't really getting a deep sense of his personality the last time we wrestled and I sprang a biggie," Harry said crassly. He almost enjoyed Hermione's look of shock.

"Of course," she said coolly after recovering, "it could always merely be a byproduct of hormones. He's quite fit, I suppose, in a pretty sort of way . . . if you like the type."

Harry visibly winced. "Which apparently, I do," he said sadly.

"You're blushing," Hermione said with amusement. Harry sighed and finished his tea. The cup faded as he drained the last drop.

"The question is what are you going to do about it?" Hermione asked.

"Well, just before dinner, I had him against the wall and--"

"I meant in general. I don't need the dirty details."

"--and then Professor Morpheus walked by."

"Well, that was good timing."

"Tell me about it. Malfoy ran off."

"Have you tried talking to him?"

"You mean, as in a conversation?"

"Yes, as in a bloody conversation. Other than exchanging insults, roughing him up,

and arguing."

"We almost had a conversation once. Then he started sulking."

"Try talking to him, Harry. He doesn't talk to anyone. Honestly, I don't think he even talks to the other Slytherins much. Try being his friend."

"I'm not sure I want to be."

"You're willing to have sex with him, but you don't want to be his friend?"

"I didn't say I was willing to do anything with him. If I woke up tomorrow and every feeling I have for him went away, I'd be well chuffed, trust me."

"Would you, really?"

Harry didn't answer and just stared at the grass he was sitting on.

"Harry, did it ever occur to you that he might like you back?"

Harry looked away. "Bollocks. He might like me roughing him up a bit, but he hates me, Hermione."

"He's jealous of you; madly jealousy of you. He probably does hate you; but, hate is passion, it's an emotion. Maybe if you were nice to him, or at least civil, that passion could be turned to something else. He doesn't know you very well, either, does he?"

"It's getting dark. We should go back before we get detention or something," Harry sighed.

Hermione stood up, dusting her backside off. "Harry, I don't want you to be unhappy. Not just because I love you like a brother, but because you're a right old prat when you're grumpy. If you're not even going to attempt to resolve this problem with Draco, then snog someone else. Anyone else. If what you like are boys, then just admit it and be done with it. Ron will have a heart attack, but he'll recover. And he won't think anything less of you, either."

"What about you, Hermione? What do you think of it?" Harry asked moodily.

Hermione tilted her head and stared at him. "I think I'm disappointed since I won't be able to be a godmother to your children. I think it's a little disgusting in the

mechanics, but it's horses for courses, I suppose. Other than that, Harry, I don't care. You're still my best friend and if what you like is boys, then I'll truss Draco up in a red bow and deliver him to you under your Christmas tree if that's what it takes to make you happy. I don't like seeing friends sad."

Harry laughed. "Really? You don't have any advice? You have advice on how to use the loo, Hermione."

Hermione bit her lip for a moment. "Well, as long as you realize that you have a greater chance to catch a sexually transmitted disease and take greater precautions, you'll be fine. You will be careful, won't you? I could find you books on the subject if it helps at all," she offered.

Harry laughed so hard he almost passed out. It was exactly what he'd thought she'd say. She stared at him in mild confusion.

"Let's go back, Hermione," Harry said, still chuckling. He hadn't laughed so hard in a long time. He stood up and offered his arm to be a gentleman. She beamed at him fondly and took his arm.

"And thanks, Hermione. Thanks for everything," Harry smiled.

"You are most welcome. Think about what I said about talking to him."

They walked back to the school, arm in arm. Ron was Harry's best friend, but Hermione was his confidant. She was the one he relied upon for moral strength and support. She was his anchor, the pillar he could cling to when things got rough. Girl or not, Harry suddenly realized that Hermione was very important to him. Most people would suppose they loved each other. They did, though not in the way people thought. Hermione loved him like a brother, and Harry realized he loved her like a sister. If she had confidence that everything was going to be okay and that maybe just talking to Draco would help, then she might just be right.

Harry resolved to try to talk to Draco when the next opportunity presented itself.

To be continued . . .

Chapter 15: Jigsaw

Chapter Fifteen:
Against the Wall

"Remus!" Harry called as he and the rest of the Gryffindors eagerly crowded around Lupin. It was their first Hogsmeade weekend and Remus was waiting for them, smiling happily. He was holding the largest, fattest spotted orange and white cat Harry had ever seen. The cat blinked green eyes at them, yawning to show he was unimpressed.

"Hello, everyone!" Lupin beamed as Colin Creevey began excitedly telling him stories about the dueling club Professor Narkalepsy was planning to start, Neville began to ask him if he could please come back, and Parvati asked whose cat he was holding.

"Pro-Professor Lupin?" asked one of the Slytherin girls, detaching herself from Pansy's gang and pushing her way through the Gryffindors. Harry stepped back and realized it was the mousy Slytherin, Tracey Davis. A golden crucifix around her neck swung violently from all the jostling she had just done.

"Tracey, there you are, love. I thought I might find you here. This is Jebediah. He's a Kneazle and I told him all about you. He agreed to look after you for me," Lupin said, turning from all the Gryffindors and lavishing the plain, brown-haired girl with a wide smile and bestowing the kneazle on her. Tracey took him in wonder.

"Oh, Professor Lupin, aren't you going to come back? I hate all the new Professors. Professor Moody was a Death Eater in disguise, Professor Umbridge was mean, and Professor Narkalepsy is scary!" Tracey sobbed, hugging him and squeezing the kneazle a bit. Harry was baffled. He had no idea a Slytherin even liked Professor Lupin, much less be so close that he had brought her a present and she would hug him.

"I'm sorry, love. But I'm here in Hogsmeade and if you need help with anything you can just send me an owl. And of course, visit me on the weekends."

"Davis!" cried Daphne Greengrass, glowering near Pansy Parkinson, her dark face twisted up in disgust.

Tracey looked back at the Slytherin girls, who were all frowning with disapproval. Lupin sighed and smiled at her. "We'll talk later, Tracey. Keep your chin up," Lupin said graciously. She smiled and hugged Jebediah, who was looking rather ruffled. Hermione was staring at Jebediah with fascination.

"Thank you, Professor Lupin. You're still my favorite teacher. You're even better than--than Professor Snape!" she said in hushed voice, as though she was saying something scandalous. Then she ran back to the other Slytherins, holding her new Kneazle. Jebediah hissed at Pansy and tried to bite her when she reached out to pet him.

Lupin made a few pleasantries and most of the Gryffindors soon ran off to have fun. Ron and Hermione had stayed, as well as Neville. Lupin motioned them over to take a walk with him.

"A Kneazle! Where did you get one, Remus?" Hermione asked, staring after Tracey Davis with fascination and entirely missing the fact that a Slytherin seemed to be Lupin's favorite student. Either that, or she didn't think it was as odd as Harry did.

"Godric brought him home one day. Or I should say, Jebediah brought Godric home. Godric apparently got into a fight with an acromantula in the Forbidden Forest. I think he won, but he was hurt. Jebediah helped drag him home," Lupin said.

Harry felt a sudden surge of fear. "Is he okay? Why didn't you send me an owl?" he asked.

Lupin shrugged. "He was fine by the next day, so it wasn't anything to worry you about. Hagrid fixed him right up. Speaking of the devil," Lupin said, turning as Hagrid walked up. Godric was coiled around him.

Harry grinned. "Godric!" he said, holding out his arms and Godric slithered off Hagrid and around his shoulders instead, peering at Neville, who looked terrified. Harry inspected him, but he seemed unhurt.

"He's just fine, Harry," Hagrid beamed. "Lovely snake. Best one I've ever met and mustard, too. He understands English!"

"He's got distant Naga blood," Harry said authoritatively.

"I like that giantisssh fellow. He'sss all right. Knowsss how to feed a sssnake properly.

Excccellent fudge. Hasss that dodgy fellow laid any eggsss for you yet? You know, the one you won't let me eat?"

"What'd he say, Harry?" Hagrid asked curiously.

Harry was blushing as Godric affectionately tickled his ear with his tongue. "Er, he said thank you. He likes you a lot, Hagrid. He likes your fudge," Harry explained, leaving certain parts out and telling Godric in Parseltongue, "He can't lay eggs, I told you that already."

"Then you ssshould let me eat him. Doesssn't sssound very usseful."

"A-acromantula? Why was he fighting those?" Ron asked nervously. He had paled at Lupin's mention of them. Lupin shrugged.

"A s-snake? You have a s-snake?" Neville asked in horror.

"He's quite nice," Harry said defensively. "Here, hold him."

Before Neville could argue, Harry put Godric around Neville's shoulders. Neville seemed close to passing out until Godric licked his ear. "Ssskittisssh issn't he?" Godric sniggered. Neville turned his head to stare at him with a curious expression. Godric stared back.

"He's a very handsome snake," Neville said slowly. "And he does seem nice."

"Not everything is what it seems," Lupin said with a smile. "He sleeps with me every night, curled up on my pillow like a cat. Gave me quite a fright the first morning, though. He nipped and spit venom at some, er, unpleasant types who were giving me a hard time at the Hog's Head a few days ago. Scared them off."

Harry smiled as he took Godric back. Neville almost seemed reluctant to hand him over. "Good job, Godric," Harry told him.

"It wasss nothing. I enjoy terrifying humansss. Your kind are all sssso sssqueamissh," Godric responded, resting his coils on Harry comfortably.

"What'd he say?" Hagrid asked. Neville, too, looked interested.

"Erm, he said that it was no problem," Harry lied.

"You know, there are times when I wonder if that's all he says," Lupin said shrewdly.

"Why'd he fight an acromantula?" Ron asked.

"They were trying to eat my baby rabbit."

"It was a food thing. Apparently the acromantulas were trying to eat his dinner."

"Lunch, actually."

"Oh," Ron said. "He killed one of them, then?"

"Three of them, to be exxxact. But then there wasss a whole ssswarm of them trying to eat me, sssso I cleared out."

"Three, actually, before the whole lot of them came after him."

"I knew I liked him for a reason," Ron said brightly. Though, to Harry's knowledge, Ron had never acted like he liked Godric before.

"Poor things," Hagrid said sadly.

"Anyone for lunch at the Three Broomsticks?" Lupin suggested brightly, changing the subject when it looked like Ron was going to tell Hagrid about what exactly he thought of those "poor things".

"Sure," Hermione said, grabbing Ron by the arm and leading him away from Hagrid.

"How's your Quidditch team, Harry? I heard your first game's next weekend," Lupin asked politely.

"Oh, excellent. Ginny's one of my new Chasers. I also picked Dean Thomas for the other one. In all our practices, we're working out great."

"Excellent choices, Harry. You'll do well this year."

"I don't know. Malfoy completely changed his line-up. He's even got girls on the team. His keeper is Daphne Greengrass--she's over six foot--and as mean as she is tall. Blaise Zabini is Chaser, and he's a prat, but seems to know his way around a broom. The rest of the team is a lot sleeker looking this year. They make me nervous, but I haven't been able to watch them practice yet."

"Interesting. Snape made a good choice when placing Draco as Captain. He obviously knows his game," Lupin said.

"Speaking of Slytherins, er, I was wondering about Tracey Davis."

"Tracey is a wonderful girl, Harry. You just don't know her. I had the fortune to be able to get to know her while I was a teacher. She needed someone to talk to badly and my biggest regret is that she's all alone again."

"She's a Slytherin."

"She's a devoted, ambitious young lady possessed of a great desire to do missionary work and help others in need. She's a devout Catholic and she doesn't think like some of the other Slytherins."

"I hardly noticed her until recently. Rather meek, isn't she? Shouldn't she be a Hufflepuff, or something?"

"It's not that simple, Harry. You'd understand better if you got to know her."

Harry let it drop, wondering how a Slytherin could get to be a "devoted, ambitious young lady" and a "wonderful person". He pondered that thought until they reached the Three Broomsticks. They went inside and since it was still early, they ordered lunch and sat in a quiet corner. Harry mostly stayed out of the conversation, listening to the others as they talked or snickering over Godric's comments. Neville wanted to hold Godric again, seemingly fascinated by him and since Godric didn't mind, Harry let him. Whatever fears Neville had were gone and he seemed to like Godric a lot.

After lunch, Harry grew restless, suddenly wanting to be apart from the others. He made an excuse that he had to buy Christmas presents and then cleared off as far from them as possible. At times, even his friends stifled him. He left Godric with Neville.

Harry did buy a few presents, stopping by Gladrags and buying a nice set of blue and white robes for Lupin. He paused by the check-out counter when he realized Draco was arguing with a clerk.

"What do you mean my account's been closed? My grandmother was Alice Gladrags! I am the bloody heir of this entire corporation!" Draco was saying.

"I'm sorry, Master Malfoy, but your father is the 'bloody heir' of this corporation and

all of his assets have been frozen. I can't sell you anything unless you have the gold," the elderly clerk said, looking delighted to be the one to break it to him.

"You wouldn't do this if my father were here!" Draco cried, looking quite angry.

"That's the whole source of your problems. Though, honestly, when it came to intimidation, your grandfather was much better at scaring me than your father," the old man said. "No one would think of dipping into the till box back then for fear he'd murder their firstborn child."

"How dare you talk about my family like that!"

"My dear child tyrant, I've taken your family's crap for fifty years. I was here when Aurelius Malfoy swept poor Alice off her feet and then gave her the cold shoulder once they were properly married and she was conveniently impregnated. I was here when he robbed her family of their riches and took control of the company. I was here when her parents turned up rather conveniently dead. I was here when people would just disappear for not doing their jobs right. I was here when a manager who turned out to be a half-blood was found dead on the counter. I watched Aurelius raise his little clone, your father, who's really just a pale ghost of the malice your grandfather produced. And I watched your father raise you to be the Brat Prince of the wizarding world. Now the rest of the world has caught on to what I knew decades ago: Your family's rotten to the core. Your grandfather's ran off, your father's in prison, and you're a pauper. I consider this divine justice. Now get out," the old man said stiffly, turning away to box the robe Harry had just bought Lupin.

Draco's mouth opened and closed. He apparently never had been spoken to like that before. Harry accepted his package and thanked the clerk, turning to look at Draco, who only just noticed that Harry was there. Draco's face was screwed up in anger and frustration and he just ran out of the store. Harry headed out after him.

Draco didn't seem to know where he was going. He headed to the seedier side of Hogsmeade, winding up near the Hog's Head. When he realized Harry was behind him, he kept running, eventually coming up to the Shrieking Shack. Upon turning and seeing Harry, he jumped the gate and ran towards the house. Harry followed him.

Draco pulled out his wand and made short work of the seals on the door, showing the adeptness at breaking into places that he had at un-sticking things. Fred and George would have been very jealous. He quickly slipped in and then tried to seal the door, but Harry got there before he could and Draco retreated inside the house. Harry went in after him.

Draco was standing in the middle of the sitting room when Harry found him, staring around the torn, clawed furniture in wonder. He didn't seem interested in running anymore. Harry came up behind him, setting down the package he had just bought.

"No ghost did this," Draco said slowly, coming to the same conclusion Harry had when first entering the house less than three years ago.

"It was built for Remus Lupin. When he was at school, he stayed here during the full moon," Harry explained.

Draco shivered, probably remembering his own experience with Lupin and the full moon. "Dumbledore makes an awful lot of accommodations for you Gryffindors," he spat after a moment.

"He's made accommodations for you, too. Otherwise, you wouldn't have stayed safely at Sirius's house. And Lupin wouldn't be here, listening and watching for Death Eaters that are looking for you and Contessa."

Draco worked his jaw for a moment, glaring at Harry. And then he abruptly turned, making his way to the hallway and staring at the stairwell with trepidation. Harry followed him.

"What do you want, Potter?" Draco suddenly exploded, wheeling on Harry. "Why don't you just leave me alone?"

"Maybe we could talk," Harry suggested.

Draco gave him a look somewhere between wonder and scorn. He walked farther down the hall, shaking his head and putting his back to Harry. "Talk? With you? About what? Want to gossip about if the Patil twins would be willing to do a threesome? Want to chat about how I caught Weasley and Granger snogging in the prefects' bathroom? We have so much in common, Potter, I'm sure we could prattle on for hours," he said acidly.

"I was thinking something more personal," Harry replied. "Like how does all this make you feel? What do you really think about this past summer?"

Draco spun around to glare at Harry again. "What the fuck do you care about how I feel, Potter? The only thing you're interested in is humiliating me to get your bloody revenge. I know you enjoy all this. You're just thrilled that the Malfoys have got their

comeuppance, like everyone else, aren't you?" he hissed.

Harry sat down at the bottom of the scratched and dusty steps. "Your father's in jail because he deserves to be. Your mother got caught up in it. Don't delude yourself that they should be anywhere else. Your family doesn't exactly try very hard to be well-liked, apparently. Unless it suits your purposes, of course."

Draco bunched up his fists, but his anger didn't seem directed at Harry specifically, more at the world in general. "You want to know how I feel? I tell you, Potter. I feel really fucking angry, is how I feel. I want to bloody well smash the Dark Lord's face in. He set us up. He set us all up. My father never wanted me to be a Death Eater. He told me so repeatedly. I was so jealous of Contessa, when he gave her private lessons when she was at school, when he taught her the 'Malfoy' way. When he brought her into the Death Eaters. When he'd look at my bloody exam results and go, 'Your cousin did ever so much better than you did, Draco. You even let some Mudblood beat you out.' I thought if I went ahead and accepted the Dark Lord's offer to be a Death Eater, maybe I could prove to him I was as clever and as Malfoy as Contessa. And then--and then . . ." he trailed off, looking down the hall and away from Harry with a distant, pained expression.

"It's one thing to hate Mudbloods. It's one thing to hate you. It's one thing to wish you all dead. It's one thing laugh at you and say nasty things. It's one thing to believe you're all animals and less than human. But when you look into someone's eyes that you're supposed to kill and you see the same terror that would be in your eyes . . . when you realize that this girl is braver than you'd be in her shoes, when you realize that she is looking at you in terror, when you realize you have a choice. A choice to kill her and lose your soul or a choice to be killed and keep your soul. You don't know one sodding thing about me, Harry Potter. You don't know what's like to be always come up short. You don't what it's like when your cousin's better than you are when you're at home, because she's your father's little princess. Then you have to come to school and there's this fucking prat with a scar on his head who came to school with fame, power, and even fucking beats you in every Quidditch game, something you know you're good at. You don't even know what it's like to play second fiddle to anyone, do you?" Draco's face was screwed up, but it was less in anger and more in misery.

Harry suddenly realized that he had probably just heard more about Draco's personal feelings than any other human being. He looked at Draco, feeling that same pitiable feeling he had once before filling him for Draco.

"My aunt and uncle raised me. They hate me, you know. They treated my cousin,

Dudley, like a prince. Worse than you even. That's why I didn't like you right off. You reminded me of him, and sometimes you still do. Everything was, 'Dudley this,' or 'Dudley that,' and it made me want to puke. Him and his other little bully friends used to kick me around like a dog. In fact, dogs got treated better than I did. I lived in a cupboard until I was eleven. I have one of Dudley's bedrooms now, filled with all his broken toys. You don't know me any better than I know you, Draco. I grew up as second fiddle. At least your father loves you enough to want to keep you safe. And the sun rises and sets on you as far as your mother is concerned, obviously. Even the 'little princess' you're so jealous of loves you to pieces. No one ever loved me at my home."

Draco stared at him sullenly, looking a little surprised. Then he turned his face. "I can't believe I said any of that to you, Potter. If you tell anyone, I swear I'll smother you with a pillow while you sleep," he said angrily, though now he sounded angry with himself.

"Empty threats are worthless. My name's Harry. You can call me that . . . Draco."

Draco's jaw worked for a moment and then he went back to staring down the hallway. "You never wanted to be my friend before," he said in a quiet voice.

"Because you never really did, either."

Draco was silent. Harry stood up and walked over to him, and gently touched his shoulder. Draco jumped, pressing himself against the wall and staring at Harry with a guarded expression. Harry stepped in closer, his body mere inches away from Draco's. His heart was thumping very loudly in his chest.

The moments between that instant, standing there and staring into Draco's fathomless gray eyes and the moment that Harry's lips finally met Draco's, were a blur. It was almost as though he blinked an eye and there he was, moving his lips against Draco's very soft mouth. He felt Draco's chest bump into his, Draco's heart pounding just as loudly as Harry's. It wasn't a particularly skillful kiss, rather sloppy and quick, but it made Harry's entire body tingle in a way that Cho never did. It was a wet, heated exchange of lips and tongue, an awkward bumping of faces, and the single most exciting thing Harry had ever done. Their mouths broke apart and Harry turned his face to the side, not wanting to look at Draco's expression for fear that it might have scorn and disgust--or even worse, that insufferable smirk of his.

"This never happened, right?" Harry whispered.

"Right," Draco said, his breath hot as it tickled Harry's ear, his light, cool hands

reaching up to grab Harry's glasses and toss them to the side. Harry heard them break and didn't care. He'd fix them later.

Harry turned back, catching a quick glimpse of Draco's eyes, eyes that didn't seem nearly as cold as they had before. He bent down and kissed Draco again. The kiss lasted much longer this time, and Harry ventured his tongue inside Draco's mouth, tasting traces of a raspberry tart. Draco obligingly sucked at Harry's tongue, his hands moving up to grip the sleeves of Harry's robe. Harry wasn't sure what to do with his hands, so instead pushed Draco further against the wall, the energy of the movements of their lips building. Palpable heat generated from their bodies. This kiss was just as sloppy and had no real purpose behind it, but it was still the nicest feeling Harry had ever experienced.

And this time, no one interrupted their kiss.

"Where have you been?" Ron asked when Harry returned.

Harry ran his hands through his hair, smiling sheepishly. Draco had found Harry's glasses in some dusty corner and had even fixed them for him before they left. Draco had then separated from Harry to go meet up with the other Slytherins when they left the Shrieking Shack. Harry's mind was still filled on their afternoon of snogging. He expected it was very boring by most people's standards since their hands had only very briefly tried to explore the other, but it was more than interesting to Harry. The kissing was strange enough, and the groping had been painfully awkward. Neither boy had any clue what to do with their hands. So they settled for snogging.

"Harry, didn't you hear me?" Ron asked.

"What?" Harry asked stupidly, barely paying him any mind. Hermione was on the other side of Ron and giving Harry a curious look.

"Do you have a girlfriend or something?" Ron asked, shaking his head. "If so, stop hiding her. You're acting like a complete idiot."

"I don't have a girlfriend," Harry snapped, not even sure he even had a boyfriend. Snogging Draco certainly didn't mean they had a relationship beyond tongue wrestling.

"Ron, leave it alone," Hermione urged, noting the rising color in Harry's face. Ron gave her an odd look but dropped the subject.

Harry told Lupin and Godric good-bye. Hagrid had already headed back. Everyone was filtering back to Hogwarts, and Harry caught a glimpse of Draco off the distance. Harry flashed him a smile and he wasn't sure, but thought Draco might have returned it. Then Zabini got in his view and Harry couldn't see Draco anymore.

Ron was giving him a very odd look. Harry ignored him. He made a note to thank Hermione for her suggestions and have more conversations with Draco as soon as possible.

The wind was quite high on the first game of the season, Gryffindor versus Slytherin. Harry led his team proudly onto the field, confident he was going to win.

And then Draco Malfoy led his team onto the field. Behind him towered the Amazonian Daphne Greengrass, handsome Blaise Zabini, a lot of sleek Slytherins Harry didn't recognize, and the cute little Slytherin boy Harry remembered taking Draco out of Potions on their first day. He really was precious looking, with large, puppy brown eyes and short brown curls. It took Harry a moment a moment to realize that he was in the Seeker position. His name was Malcolm Baddock. To say that his new team was unusual for the Slytherins was putting it lightly.

Harry turned and Draco grinned ferociously at him. He was in Chaser position. Harry's jaw dropped. "What do you think you're doing?" Harry demanded.

Draco grinned devilishly. "Why, playing to my strengths, of course," he said smoothly.

"Captains, shake hands!" called Madam Hooch from off to the side.

Harry's and Draco's hands met the other. Draco was squeezing Harry's hand, so Harry squeezed back. Draco grimaced, but did not relent. "May the best man win," he said coolly.

"You tricky bastard, I'm going to get you for this," Harry hissed.

"Temper, Potter. Revenge is a dish best served by a Slytherin," Draco grinned.

"Mount your brooms!" Madam Hooch cried. Harry mounted his broom and looked around, catching a glimpse of Hagrid cheering him on, Snape scowling at him, Contessa hiding her face in the staff box, Lupin just arriving from Hogsmeade to find a seat, and Dumbledore looking on rather neutrally. Harry rose into the air as the Snitch zoomed out of sight and the Bludgers began to whiz past him.

Madam Hooch tossed the Quaffle in the air and in a flash, Draco caught it right from under Ginny's nose and raced toward Ron. He tossed the Quaffle at the middle hoop and Ron moved a second too late.

"Ten points to Slytherin!" boomed the enthusiastic voice of Dennis Creevey, the new commentator.

"Sly-ther-IN! Sly-ther-IN! Sly-ther-IN! Sly-ther-IN! Sly-ther-IN!" chanted the entire House, standing up and roaring. Harry had a sinking feeling this wasn't going to go so well. Baddock flew well and was quick.

And Draco . . . Draco was made to be a Chaser.

Ron blocked almost every Slytherins' score except Draco's. Draco was too quick for any of them. As good as Ginny was, she couldn't fly like he could. Scores mounted up on both sides and Harry desperately tried to find the Snitch.

"Gryff-in-DOR! Gryff-in-DOR! Gryff-in-DOR! Gryff-in-DOR! Gryff-in-DOR!" mounted the counter chant of the Gryffindor stands. It did Harry good to see Lupin joining in the general outcry. There were no taunting songs this time, just chants. The opposing houses stomped to the rhythm of their chants, and a sort of musical cadence filled the pitch in any case.

Draco kept scoring. So did Ginny. Dean got quite a few scores, as did Katie Bell. Greengrass was a decent Keeper and still managed to prevent Gryffindor getting too much of a lead over Slytherin. Zabini got several scores, but Ron was blocking the other new Slytherin Chaser, Keiko Kyoto, perfectly. He couldn't generate the speed he needed to counter Draco, however.

Harry realized he had better stop ignoring the game and get the Snitch. That was what was going to decide this rather close game. Baddock was all over the field, obviously looking for it. Harry crisscrossed him, his eyes flashing inevitably down at Draco.

The Snitch glittered near Draco as he zoomed towards Ron. Ron managed to block the

first shot of the entire game from Draco and looked dead chuffed about it, too. Draco scowled. Harry raced down, his eyes intent on the Snitch.

And then Draco saw the Snitch. He looked up and saw his Seeker racing towards it as well. Harry had a better broom and it was already clear who was going to get there first. Draco spun his Nimbus 2000 up and directly towards Harry. They were going to ram in mid-air. Harry swerved to avoid hitting him and just then half the crowd went wild and the other half booed.

"I don't believe it! Malcolm Baddock has caught the Snitch! He beat Harry Potter to it! One hundred and fifty points to Slytherin and Slytherin wins the game three hundred and seventy to two hundred and fifty!" Dennis cried out in indignation.

Malcolm Baddock was holding the struggling Snitch in his gloved hand, grinning up at Snape, who had stood up and was smirking viciously at Harry. Contessa had stopped hiding her face and was applauding. Baddock's teammates surrounded him, cheering so ecstatically that they hardly managed to get to the ground.

Harry landed, along with the other Gryffindor players. They were all stunned to silence. Harry had never lost them a game in which he wasn't injured. Ginny went to open her mouth and say something, but then she changed her mind when she saw the look on Harry's face.

He was smiling after the Slytherins and nodding in admiration.

Harry waited near the hall that led down to the Slytherin common room, waiting until Draco walked past. Half the Slytherin house was trying to walk with him. Harry just leaned against the wall casually and stared him down.

"You all go down. Yes, yes, I'll be there soon. I need to have a chat with Potter, here," Draco said arrogantly. The reveling Slytherins trooped down without him. Draco watched them go and it wasn't until the last person disappeared that he turned to Harry.

"What do you want, Potter?" he asked coldly.

"That was well played, Draco," Harry said.

"I know," Draco smirked.

Harry took a step closer to him. "Look, I was hoping we could talk about you and me-
_"

"There is no 'you and me'. A Malfoy doesn't associate with half-blood scum," Draco sneered.

Harry felt like someone had just ripped out his heart. "I see," he said vaguely, drawing back.

"You stay away from me. Away. From. Me. Do you hear me, Harry? Just leave me alone," Draco said hatefully, spinning away and hurrying down the hall.

It took Harry several painful minutes to realize Draco had called him by his first name. He wondered if it mattered and then realized that the cold look in Draco's eyes made it a moot point.

Feeling rather empty, Harry wandered out to sit by the lake and stare at the water for a while. Nothing good ever came of a Malfoy and Harry had been stupid to think that there was something between them beyond hormones.

He didn't cry. If he had, it probably wouldn't have hurt as much.

To be continued . . .

Chapter 16: Jigsaw

Author's Notes: Kaw is based off the crow of the same name found in The Prydain Chronicles by Lloyd Alexander.

Chapter Sixteen:
Samhain Night

Most of October was a blur to Harry. He woke up, he ate, he went to class, he ate, he went to class, he ate again, did some homework, avoided any conversations with his friends that might take more than five minutes, showered, and then went to bed. Rinse, wash, and repeat the next day.

He felt sort of numb. Numb from the shock that there was a point where he genuinely thought Draco liked him back. Numb from the fact that his appreciation for Draco's good looks had blossomed into an appreciation of Draco himself. And he constantly wondered why. Sometimes he came up with an answer or an excuse, other times he'd randomly bang his head on a nearby wall.

Ron and Hermione were worried about him, but Harry didn't care. Neville watched him sadly, but Harry didn't care. Ginny and Dean kept trying to raise his spirits, but Harry didn't care. Snape was still trying to get him expelled, but Harry didn't care. Morpheus was rumored to be dating half the Hogwarts staff, but Harry didn't care. Hagrid kept trying to find out what was wrong, but Harry didn't care. Lupin seemed distracted with some problem of his own, but Harry didn't care.

Draco was ignoring his existence, and that Harry did care about.

It was Halloween evening, right after dinner, and they would begin to brew Sirius's potion. Snape and Contessa were supposed to already begun most of it. Harry was standing in the hallways stared numbly at the class marks for the Defense Against the Dark Arts quarterly exam, hardly able to think of anything else. He had gotten the best mark, of course, but underneath his name where Hermione usually was, she wasn't. The second best mark in the class was officially awarded to Neville Longbottom. He had scored one point higher than Hermione Granger, who was number three.

"I don't believe it," Hermione said, looking a little taken aback. "I studied the whole week. I was reading the book in the toilet."

"You beat him on the essay, but he beat you on the practical. The practical was worth more points," Ron said.

"I note you're comfortably settled in the middle of the class, like you always are," Hermione said, glowering at him.

Ron shrugged. "I totally flubbed the essay. I drew a giant blank. All I could think on the question of, 'What was Morgan Le Fay most well known for?', was for being a pervert," he sighed.

"Neville! Congratulations, mate! You topped Hermione!" Ron said, grinning as Neville came up and gaped at the scores.

"You must have practiced very hard," Hermione said, smiling gently at him. The smile looked only partially forced.

Neville flashed them all a grin. Harry noticed that while he was still the same chubby, brown-haired boy he'd always been, he walked with more confidence than he ever had before. "Wait until I tell her! She'll be so excited!" he said and then paused. "Well, not excited, but chuffed, I would think. I don't think she does excited."

"Who are you talking about?" Harry asked.

"Oh, nothing! We better get going. We have to get to the evening Astronomy lesson on time!" Neville said rather quickly and clutched his books, running off. His face was rather pink.

Harry blinked. "Ike, we'd better get going," he said quickly, dashing off after Neville with Hermione and Ron just behind him.

Harry got there just in time, sliding next to Dean Thomas as Ron and Hermione sat together next to them. Dean flashed him a broad grin. "Congrats on your Defense scores, mate," he said.

"Thanks. You were number four, I noticed," Harry grinned. "Well done."

"Yeah, top four students in our year for Defense Against the Dark Arts are all Gryffindors. And did you see number two? Who'd've thought Neville had it in him?"

"Neville's turning out to be a real legend this year. I think it's because he doesn't have Potions anymore. He's been doing better in Charms, too; Professor Flitwick said so just the other day. Though, I think he got worse at Transfiguration. He was supposed to turn me into an owl yesterday, not an ostrich. It itched, too."

"Well, no one's going to knock it all down. I see you've been having trouble in Potions again," Dean said.

Harry scowled. "That rotten, slimy--"

He broke off when Draco and Blaise Zabini walked in, sniggering to each other. Theodore Nott was behind them, giving Draco dark looks. Since Astronomy was dropped by a lot of other students in sixth year, the Slytherins took Astronomy with the Gryffindors. Ever since the first Quidditch match, Draco had hardly looked in Harry's direction. Something between hurt and anger surged up in Harry, but he shoved it back down. He also resolved to do his best to smash the other two House teams and defeat the tricky bastard for once and for all as the new Captain.

"All right, class," said Professor Sinistra. She was a tall, dark-haired witch with a dusky complexion and classic features. She was a handsome woman, but the somber expression she always had on her face made her look older than she was. Her voice was raspy and Harry suspected she was a smoker.

"Today we are going to learn the importance of the astronomical signs of Halloween. On Pagan sabbats, such as today, the placement of the stars can have greater effect on rituals, potions, and even spells. Let us learn a little history before we turn to our telescopes. Many ancient potion recipes involve brewing potions on certain sabbats. Can anyone tell me what ancient sabbat Halloween represents?" Professor Sinistra asked.

To Harry's surprise, Neville slowly stuck up his hand. He was certainly getting bolder this year. Professor Sinistra called on him. "Er, Samhain, right?" Neville ventured.

"Excellent. Five points to Gryffindor. For another five, can you tell me what Samhain meant to the ancient Celts, Mr. Longbottom?"

Neville looked thoughtful and then nodded. "Er, it's the Celtic new year, isn't it?"

"Another five points to Gryffindor. Mr. Longbottom is correct, class. Samhain was the new year of the Celtic Druids. The Christian holiday of All Hallow's Eve has blended

with it to make what we now celebrate as Halloween. However, Samhain is not the ghoulish day of terror modern people think it was. Yes, it was a day to celebrate death--but in the best possible way. To the Celts, it was a day of rebirth, a day when mythological cycles changed for the better. Gods were mated and were born on Samhain. According to ancient legend, the Hollow Hills would open up and the Sidhe--the ancient Faerie--would walk around with humanity. It was a day for feasting and celebration, a day when great battles would begin and end. It was a day that order would be fought over and ultimately restored. It was a symbolic harvest festival, a signal that winter had come and the year had ended, yet would begin again.

"Yes, the Celts believed the veil thinned between our world and the Netherworld, but they also believed it did so at Beltane, which we'll discuss closer to May. And though I may be embarrassing a certain someone, I should also mention that I think it was no coincidence that a small baby boy defeated the greatest, darkest enemy our kind has faced in centuries on this day fifteen years ago."

Harry's face went red as the class stared at him. Draco was actually looking at him, scowling so deeply his face seemed a darker color. Zabini was glaring at him, but Nott was watching him almost curiously. Dean flashed him a broad white grin that stood out on his dark brown face.

"This is considered the Samhain Moon," Professor Sinistra said, showing a slide of a large, bright harvest moon. "Any Halloween that happens to have this moon shining over it is considered to be a day of great importance. This moon was indeed shining the night You-Know-Who fell."

Harry blushed again, but was utterly fascinated while Professor Sinistra went on to demonstrate other various important astronomical signs on Samhain. He took plenty of notes about Samhain, hoping he could help with making Sirius's potion now that he had this knowledge. He spent plenty of time looking through the telescope, making sure to write down the position of every planet and star he could find.

Harry was still making notes he thought might be helpful on Samhain even after class was over. Astronomy was almost always an evening class, so everyone cleared out for the night. He suddenly noticed his light was blocked and saw Draco standing over him, looking angry. His arms were crossed and was staring down at what Harry was writing.

"If you hurry along, you might be able to get Zabini to give you a quick blowjob before dinner," Harry said caustically, feeling his temper rise. After what Draco had said to him, Draco had no right to look at him like that.

Draco blinked, looking startled and then narrowed his eyes. "Professor Snape wants you down in his dungeons. He said to bring your love," he spat back.

Harry blinked, blushing despite himself. He turned back to his book, trying to ignore Draco now. The last thing he wanted to do was to hand Snape, of all people, a cup filled with his semen. He could already hear the snide remarks. And yet, if he wanted Sirius back, he had no choice.

"You're supposed to put it in this. And he said you might need this," Draco continued, reaching into his bag and placing a glass vial with a wide mouth on the desk, as well as a magazine.

Harry picked up the magazine despite himself and stared at what was obviously a porn magazine filled with moving pictures of pretty girls doing naughty things to each other. The title said Witches Gone Wild and the cover had a witch pulling open her robes to the flash the reader.

Harry laughed; he couldn't help it. "Where the hell did he get this?" Harry asked.

Draco was smirking, but the smirk had a repressed edge to corners of his mouth like he was doing it against his best wishes. "He's got collections of them, see. Keeps them in his room. Père's a closet wanker. I don't recommend shaking his hand, personally," Draco said, looking at the magazine with traces of the impish smile Harry had come to like over the summer.

Harry continued to laugh, unable to hold it back. It was too funny. Draco was laughing, too, looking like he didn't really want to, either. Harry shook his head, handing the magazine back to Draco. "No, thanks," he said.

Draco took it back and their fingers brushed. Harry felt a lurch in his stomach like he was on a broom doing the Wronski Feint. Draco paused, as did Harry. He felt like a stupid little boy, getting such a rush out of brushing fingers with someone. For a moment, Harry had forgotten about Draco ripping his heart out.

"You should use it. He needs it right after dinner, when you come down. He said a sixteen-year-old boy shouldn't have any trouble producing on such short notice," Draco said shortly, trying to hand him back the magazine.

Harry left his fingers over Draco's. "Trust me when I say there's nothing in that magazine that interests me," Harry told him.

Draco's jaw was working and his face was very pink. For some reason, he didn't make his usual cold and scathing rejoinder. Instead he shoved the magazine back in his bag without comment.

"What about you? Anything in that magazine that interested you?" Harry probed, trying to be as subtle as possible.

Draco opened his mouth and then closed it, seemingly speechless. His gray eyes were darting all over the room and it occurred to Harry that he looked confused. He was trembling a bit. Harry stood up, grabbing Draco's arms before he ran away again. If Harry could only just make Draco stay, maybe he could understand why one moment Draco seemed so different and the next he was back to his old, nasty self.

"Let me go," Draco said plaintively, finding his voice.

"How do you go from spending the better half of an afternoon snogging with someone to basically telling him to bugger off the next day?" Harry demanded in a quiet voice. The classroom door was open and anyone could walk in.

"Why can't you just let me hate you? Life was so much easier when you were the enemy!" Draco exploded. Harry staggered back as Draco threw him off with a force he didn't think Draco's compact little body could manage.

"Just let me hate you," Draco said angrily and then stalked out.

Harry growled in frustration. He wanted to hate Draco, too, but apparently, it was easier for Draco to hate him than the other way around. He turned back to his desk and his notes, his eyes resting on the vial he was supposed to fill. Giving his recent levels of sexual frustration, he doubted filling it would be a problem. He snatched his things up and stalked to the nearest boys' toilet to "fill the cup" as some might put it.

Angry, tender, violent visions of Draco filled his mind while he did so.

"It will be thrilling to see such a complicated, ancient potion in the making," Hermione said excitedly.

Harry sulked as he followed his friends down the hallways to the dungeons, his filled

vial in his pocket. They were armed with a permission slip from Snape. Harry scowled at Hermione. As important a friend as she was to him, she was quite trying at times. He opened his mouth to make a comment, but Ron beat him to it.

"'Thrilling' is not a word you're suppose to use for watching Snape toss some things in a cauldron, stir it, make some snide remarks, and then tell us to get the hell out of his dungeon, Hermione. 'Thrilling' is what you call a wild broomstick ride or great Quidditch game. Potion brewing is not exciting," Ron sighed.

"Well, if you--"

Harry returned to sulking, ignoring Ron and Hermione's new round of bickering. They already sounded like they were married. He tried to imagine what their children would be like and wound up imagining Percy. Harry shuddered.

He followed Ron and Hermione down into the dungeons, slouching as best as he could and trying to look as miserable as possible. When they got into the dungeons classroom, they found Draco carrying various items in a bag towards them. "Not here, idiots," Draco said harshly, pushing past Ron and walking back out into the hallway.

"One of these days, Malfoy, I'm going to--" Ron began before Hermione cut him off by following Draco curiously. Ron sighed and gave up, following her. Harry slouched after all of them.

They followed him to a door no one ever went into far down the hallway. It was an old wooden door and creaked when Draco opened it. They went down a long, winding set of stone stairs, the air getting colder and staler the farther down they went. Only sconces placed every few feet lit the stairwell.

They came out in a large, well-lit, but still dreary stone-walled room. A few empty chains and manacles hung on the walls and off the ceilings. Most were rusted shut. There was a large full-length mirror that stood to the side, and a table with various potion ingredients, books, and a few tools laid on it. In the center of the room was a huge cauldron, big enough for a man to sit in. Various contents were boiling in it, and Contessa was stirring it, her face taking on a markedly ghoulish cast from the slight green glow of the cauldron's contents.

"Here," Harry said, thrusting the vial he had filled at her. She looked at it and then made a slight noise, taking it with a sour expression. She held it very gingerly, as though it might explode. She put it on the table with a few other ingredients.

"You started it without us," Hermione said, looking disappointed.

"We had to start the base potions at midnight," Contessa said with a shrug. Draco emptied the bag onto the table as well.

"Do we have everything?" Harry asked her, feeling slightly guilty that he had left the gathering of ingredients and pretty much the whole job of potion brewing to Snape and Contessa. He didn't even know half the things they'd done to gather everything.

"Except for Snape's tears, yes. And I will be remedying that upon his return. Did you find the picture, Draco?" Contessa asked, turning to Draco.

"Yes. I had to sneak it out of McGonagall's office. She has so many locks and traps on her door. I nearly had to spend ten minutes taking them all off," Draco said, rolling his eyes.

Contessa paused. "You spent ten minutes removing every lock and trap on McGonagall's door?" she asked, incredulous.

"I could have taken half the time if she wasn't so paranoid. I think she's been hanging about Moody too much," Draco shrugged, handing Contessa a photograph.

"Bloody hell. When I was in school, it took me an hour to break in and when I did, I got caught by Filch. I would have been expelled if Snape hadn't intervened and settled for giving me detention for the rest of my sixth year."

There was a snort from the stairwell and everyone turned and found Snape standing at the foot of the stairs, sneering slightly. What looked like a large, covered cage was in his hand. Contessa stiffened, scowling magnificently.

"Tell your cousin that she might as well take him. I'd already bought him and he's only been driving me mad the past few weeks. I have no use for one," Snape told Draco, thrusting the covered cage at Contessa roughly and stalking over to inspect the items Draco had just brought in.

"Snape says, 'Happy Birthday, dearest'," Draco told her, smirking. Snape scowled, but otherwise pretended Draco hadn't spoke.

"Oh, it is your birthday, isn't it, Contessa? Happy Birthday!" Hermione said brightly.

Contessa looked mildly surprised, staring at the covered cage in her hands. She cast

Snape a guarded look and then took off the cover. Inside the cage was a handsome black crow, obviously trying to sleep.

"A crow!" she said, sounding surprised.

"His name is Kaw. I named him after his favorite thing to do while I'm trying to sleep," Snape said sourly, organizing things on the table and consulting the Life After Death book.

The crow lifted its head from under his wing and glared at Snape while Contessa let him out. He studied her for a moment before comfortably settling on her left shoulder. He began to preen, occasionally pausing to glare at Snape.

"Tell your godfather that I suppose I could keep him. Since he already had bought him," Contessa said stiffly.

"Contessa says, 'Thank you, my love'," Draco told Snape, grinning now. Harry pretended to cough so as not to reveal he was laughing. Contessa scowled and gave Draco the evil eye, but otherwise did not react to his interpretation.

"Contessa," Harry said, bringing out his notes from Astronomy, "I took these notes in class, they're all about how to make things more effective on a Pagan sabbat and--"

"I am well aware of how to brew an effective potion on the Pagan sabbats. I happen to know quite a bit about Samhain, thank you," Contessa said stiffly.

"Samhain!" cried Kaw, flying off her shoulder and landing on Harry's head to inspect his notes. Harry moved to brush him off, but Kaw pecked at his hand. It hurt, so Harry decided to let him be.

"He said a real word!" Harry said in wonder.

"Word! Potter! Prat!" Kaw cried.

"You can tell he's spent a lot of time in Professor Snape's care," Hermione mused quietly.

"How can Kaw speak English?" Harry asked about Kaw, cutting Ron off before he and Contessa began to argue.

"English!" Kaw cried proudly.

Contessa shrugged. "How does an owl understand what we say and know to deliver the mail? Crows are much smarter than Muggles think they are," she said dismissively.

Kaw decided he was bored with picking at Harry's hair and flew to the table Snape was working at, grabbing at what looked like Sirius's hair and flying over the room wildly.

Snape hissed in irritation, ripping out his wand and pointing it at Kaw.

"Hey! Don't take that, I need it!" Harry yelled, suddenly frightened that Sirius's potion would be ruined by this winged rascal.

"You leave my crow alone!" Contessa yelled, finally speaking directly to Snape and getting in front of his wand.

"Your crow loves to steal things," Snape retorted coolly, putting his wand away with a scowl. Kaw flew over the cauldron and dropped the hair in it. Draco quickly stirred it in, winking at Kaw. Harry might have been imagining it, but it almost looked like Kaw winked back. The crow settled comfortably on Draco's shoulder now, returning to preening his feathers.

"We need his tears," Contessa told Draco, handing him back the photograph. Draco sighed and took it. Harry caught a glimpse of it. It was of a young Sirius Black, perhaps about seventeen or eighteen, standing next to the rest of the Gryffindors in his class. There was a glimpse of Harry's parents, Lupin, and Pettigrew before the picture was turned towards Snape. Snape looked at it and instantly scowled.

"What exactly did you really think about Sirius Black, at any rate?" Draco asked. Contessa stood to the side, looking very expectant for some reason.

"I think he was a smarmy, arrogant prat filled with--OW!" Snape cried, his sneer replaced by a look of pain as Contessa kicked him in the shin with her high-heeled boot. She caught a few tears of pain--three to be exact--in a small vial and handed it to Draco.

"That should be sufficient. He was thinking of Black at the time he shed these," she said authoritatively.

"It was my idea," Draco told Snape, grinning. Snape was bent over, moaning softly

and holding his injured leg.

Contessa smirked and crossed her arms. Harry, Ron, and Hermione were trying to stifle their laughter. They were, for the most part, unsuccessful.

Snape stood up, favoring his leg, he glared hatefully at both Draco and Contessa. "You'll pay for that," he spat.

Harry turned to stare at the full-length mirror. Then he realized the mirror part was showing swirling, gray smoke much like what they had seen in the Netherworld. The frame looked sort of like a castle door frame, all gothic edges and swirls to it. "What's this?" Harry asked. Ron was watching Draco stir the cauldron as Snape added a few things without comment.

"A very old mirror. I found it in one of the storage rooms," Contessa said smoothly.

"What's with the smoky gray swirls?"

"It is the formlessness of death, the abstract vision that the living can perceive when attempting to pierce the veil between life and death. Beyond it lies a dimension that is not a dimension, a stage of existence that does not exist, a place that cannot touch what we perceive to be reality, but only whisper at it," Contessa said dreamily.

Harry blinked. "What's with the smoky gray swirls?" he repeated, having not understood anything past the word "formlessness".

"Honestly, Harry, were you even listening?" Hermione snorted. "She said it's a doorway into the Netherworld."

"Oh, that's what I thought she said. I was just making sure," Harry lied. Draco snorted and Harry caught his eye. Draco looked away, but there was a small smile on his face.

"What exactly is the Netherworld?" Ron asked her.

Hermione looked to Contessa, who answered instead. "It is . . . a place where the souls of the dead go. As living beings we only perceive it full of formlessness. To some of the dead--the morally deserving, I suppose--the Netherworld is Heaven: a place full of joy, harmony, beauty, and perfection. To others, the Netherworld is Hell: filled with pain, regret, sorrow, and terror. Heaven and Hell do exist, but not in the way you think. They are one place, defined by perception. And the place is not even a place," she explained. It made only a little more sense than her previous explanation.

"How'd you make a doorway into it then?" Harry asked.

"It's not a doorway; it's a window. It won't become a doorway until I enter it. I coated it with my blood. I used a very old, difficult Necromantic spell to make it. I found it in that book," Contessa said, pointing to *Life After Death*, which was in Hermione's hand. Harry suddenly noticed her right arm was bandaged from wrist to elbow.

Hermione flipped a few pages and then began to read aloud. "'To view the World-That-Isn't, a Necromancer of purest blood must spill her precious fluid upon the clear surface of a mirror most ancient. The seven ancient names of Morganna must be uttered and the Necromancer's spirit must be infused into the mirror to create a window. Only by joining soul to spirit may a door be opened. If the mirror is shattered before the spell is lifted, the Necromancer's soul is forfeit,'" she read and then stared at Contessa. "What does that mean, exactly? I can guess, but I'm afraid to."

Contessa shrugged. "I doubt that bit about purest blood really matters, it's just prose," she said blithely.

"I already knew that," Hermione said. "I meant about the soul and spirit bit."

"Well, the soul and spirit are two separate things--"

"I know that, too," Hermione interrupted. "A soul is the source of your eternal essence of being; basically, the source of life, the unexplainable energy that causes things to be alive. Spirit is the essence of your consciousness; basically, the source of oneself and individuality. When most people think of soul, they actually mean spirit."

"You really are brilliant," Contessa said in wonder. She had visible respect on her face for Hermione now.

"If you're so clever, Miss Granger, then explain the fundamental differences between soul and spirit," Snape said darkly, the disdain in his voice quite apparent.

"You can't live without a soul, but you can live without your spirit. Some people can even place their spirits within objects and function normally, though their lives become inexorably tied to the object. Souls are usually very similar to each other, mostly only distinguishable by the spirit attached to them. Spirits are always different. Spirit is you, your essence, your nature, and your personality. An easy way to think of it is that your soul would be a box, and your spirit would be the contents. If spirit was a fire, the soul would be its kindling."

"So you put your spirit in there?" Harry asked Contessa in wonder and horror, staring at the mirror. Snape was grumbling to himself about "insufferable know-it-alls".

"Temporarily. That was brilliant, Hermione. Twenty points to Gryffindor," Contessa said.

"If you join your soul to that, you'll die," Hermione said, ignoring the points she just received. She sounded genuinely concerned.

"I'm not separating my soul from my body, Hermione--even a Necromancer can't do that. The only person who I know that can is the Dark Lord. He has delved more into the powers of soul and spirit and muddled more with life and death than any known being in all history."

"That's why he didn't die, then?" Harry asked.

"Maybe. He doesn't exactly share his knowledge with the rest of us. He wants to conquer death," Contessa said darkly.

"Then how are you going to make the mirror a doorway if you're not putting your soul in there?" Hermione demanded.

"I have to walk through the mirror. It's really very simple, actually. Once I walk in, the window becomes a door and Harry can walk through to get Sirius's soul."

"Excuse me?" Harry demanded.

"It's the only way I can think of to get Black's soul back without channeling him. You'll have to fetch him yourself. I can't do it; I have to keep the doorway open so you can come out."

"And what about you? How are you going to get out?" Hermione demanded. It suddenly dawned on Harry exactly what this all meant.

"Wait, I don't want you to sacrifice your life for this," Harry said feebly, his stomach dropping out from the bottom. He was lying, and it terrified him. He wanted her to do it. If it meant her life for Sirius's, then it was worth it. He had never been more frightened of his emotions. His hands were trembling.

"If I have enough strength, then I should be able to come out, spirit and soul whole

and intact. I'm not going to waste my life. I know what I'm doing," Contessa snapped.

Harry relaxed only slightly.

"Tell your cousin, that if that's what she has to do, then it's entirely out of the question. I will not have anyone risk their life for this. I will stop this potion right this instant," Snape snapped.

Draco was staring at Contessa in concern. Hermione and Ron, too, looked worried. Contessa, however, looked entirely unconcerned. Draco didn't translate Snape's message, instead conveying his own. "Not a chance in hell, Contessa. End the spell right now. Father will have a conniption fit. Potter can go soak his head; I'm not letting you risk your life for some idiot we don't even know," Draco said.

"I can't end the spell just like that. The only way to end it is to finish it. It will be the greatest test of my abilities. If I'm really good, I'll survive. If I'm not, I'll die. It doesn't matter, really, does it? My funeral will be short and poorly attended."

"You stupid girl, don't you realize what you've done?" Snape asked in disgust.

"Tell your godfather that his concern is noted," she said stiffly, looking at Draco.

Snape spun away from her without comment, his black robes whirling as he did so. He looked rather disgusted and he was directing that disgust in a glare towards Harry. It was so heated that Harry checked his clothes to make sure he hadn't caught fire.

"I'm going to tell Father on you! He'll straighten you out! He taught you better than to do stupid things like this!" Draco cried, looking upset.

"He can't do anything right now but send me a Howler. And that was never his style, that was Aunt Narcissa's," Contessa retorted.

"We need to finish the potion," Snape said shortly, grabbing a few other things and adding them in, all in order according to the recipe. Last, he added the vial filled with Harry's semen, looking rather like a nuclear physicist holding an open container of plutonium. He made no comments, but the revolted look on his face said quite enough.

"Soul and spirit . . . is that how you could tell Sirius wasn't dead?" Harry asked Contessa suddenly.

Contessa turned and gave Harry a considering look. "Every living thing has a soul and spirit, even the lowliest flobberworm. I can feel the passing of every soul, even see them--all Necromancers, Seers, and a few others can. I can tell you if a spirit has no soul or if a soul has no spirit. Sirius Black retains both soul and spirit as he passed through the Veil alive. It stripped him of life in the sense we understand it, but not spiritually. He has no body to contain himself and no way to return, for nothing that is material can pass through the Veil and only a Necromancer can freely enter and exit the Netherworld. He is not truly dead only because he still possesses a living soul," she said carefully.

Everyone was silent for a while, digesting this information

"What was the point of us coming down here if we weren't going to do anything?" Ron asked, staring as Snape slowly stirred the potion.

"Potter had to bring his ingredient, nothing more. I invited you two simply because I knew you'd show up in any case. And now I have three witnesses who can attest I have done my part so when this inevitably fails and goes wrong, I cannot be blamed," Snape said sourly.

"You're not much of an optimist, are you?" Ron asked, rubbing his nose.

"Five points from Gryffindor for your unnecessary sarcasm," Snape said shortly. "I am a realist. Realistically, this has little chance of working."

"Then why are you doing this?" Harry asked testily.

"So that way I can try to minimize the damage, Potter. When this explodes in both your face and the face of a certain Necromancer with delusions of grandeur, I will be there to piece you both back together."

"And to say, 'I told you so,' I'm sure," Draco said, rolling his eyes. Snape gave him a dark look.

"I'm going to bed," Contessa said irritably, looking at Draco. "Tell your godfather that if he needs me for any part of the potion, to send along a message by way of Kaw."

"Snape! Send! Message!" Kaw crowed proudly.

Draco turned to Snape. "Contessa says, 'You've hurt my feelings, so I'm going to go sulk now. If you want to apologize for being a great prat to me, you'll have to find me

in the other end of the dungeons and don't forget to bring your kneepads so you can grovel properly."

Snape ignored Draco's translation. "Tell your idiot cousin that I do not need her assistance. I happen to have forgotten more potions than she knows how to make and will do quite nicely without her interference, so she can keep away from my laboratories," he said harshly.

Draco turned to Contessa. "Snape says, 'I'm really worried about you. I would be totally crushed if you died. It's not like women actually acknowledge my existence very often, you know. I'm too much of a great prat to apologize but want you to know that you have my deepest affection. Your anger makes me cry. On the inside, of course,'" Draco told her.

Contessa scowled. "Tell your godfather to stay away from my end of the dungeons and he can die of pneumonia in his frigid laboratories for all I care. With any luck, he'll die before Christmas and this bloody potion will be ever so much more pleasant to conclude," she said, sweeping out and affecting an incredible air of wounded dignity.

Draco turned back to Snape. "Contessa says--"

"Drop it, Draco," Snape said in a clearly warning tone.

"Honestly, the pair of you can't take a joke," Draco said, shrugging.

Ron and Hermione were stifling laughter as they exited and Harry followed them out. He paused on the top step, letting Ron and Hermione drift away from him, so busy talking to each other they didn't notice Harry wasn't behind them anymore.

Harry looked back and waited on the top step, watching until Draco came out of the room as well. Draco paused and looked up at Harry from the bottom step. His expression was hard to read, but it almost looked sad. He opened his mouth to say something to Harry.

But Harry turned his back on him and walked away before he got the chance.

To be continued . . .

Chapter 17: Jigsaw

Chapter Seventeen: Draco's Confession

Draco's seventeenth birthday had come and gone rather unnoticed. Draco's face inevitably fell on November the Twentieth. Slytherin had just lost a game to Hufflepuff, and none of his housemates were very thrilled with him at the moment. There was no fanfare this year. He only received a few things Contessa had managed to get him, a small book from Tracey Davis, and a couple letters--presumably from his parents. Other than Contessa, nobody seemed to notice it was his birthday except for Harry--and he and Draco weren't exactly on speaking terms.

Two days later was a bright Saturday, surprisingly sunny despite the snow. Harry decided to escape from watching Ron and Hermione sneaking kisses between turning pages in books by going outside. So he grabbed his immense pile of homework and trudged outside. It was another wintry November day, and Harry buttoned up a coat he "inherited" from Dudley and marched outside for some fresh air. It was very cold and wet, but Harry felt refreshed.

Harry walked to his favorite tree and found a girl there, sitting sublimely under it. Harry paused and realized it was Tracey Davis, the mousy Slytherin girl that Lupin seemed to like. She opened her eyes and peered at Harry, her face taking on a worried expression. She jumped up immediately.

"I'm sorry, I didn't realize anyone else would come out here when it was so cold," she demurred, backing away from him.

"Wait. You can stay. It's not like I own it or anything and I have it under good authority this tree's big enough for exactly four teenagers," Harry smiled.

"That's okay, I'll go back inside and warm up," she said quietly, trying to slip off.

"I'm Harry Potter, by the way," Harry said, taking a step towards her. He was admittedly curious. He'd never met a Slytherin like her before, so meek and mild.

Tracey blinked at him. "I know. I'm Tracey Davis," she said in a soft voice. She was the plainest, most ordinary girl Harry had ever seen, with limp brown hair and

common features, but there was something rather intense to her unremarkable eyes.

"Well, Tracey, now that we've introduced ourselves properly, we could both sit under here if you like. I don't bite, contrary to what the Daily Prophet might be saying about me now," Harry said.

"They make you out like some sort of saint, now," Tracey said, staring at him cautiously.

"Well, I suppose it's better than being a half-crazed idiot. Neither is true, of course, but it's an improvement," Harry said, sitting down and spreading out his books.

Tracey stared at him in fascination and sat down. Harry noted the book she reading. It was a Catholic Bible.

"I didn't realize Remus--er, Professor Lupin--was Catholic."

Tracey blinked in confusion. "I have no idea whether he is or isn't," she shrugged.

"Oh, well, he speaks highly of you. I thought that might be why," Harry said, nodding at her Bible.

Tracey looked at it again and then looked at him rather shrewdly. "Professor Lupin and I get along so well because he was the only teacher in this school who truly, honestly cared about the students and wasn't afraid to show it. He was the only teacher I ever had who noticed me," she said.

"He's a great guy," Harry said simply. "He and my dad were mates at school."

Tracey looked curious. "Really? He was a Gryffindor? I could have sworn he was a Ravenclaw, or maybe even a Hufflepuff," she asked.

"He was a Gryffindor prefect, no less."

"That, I can see."

"Why can't you see him as a Gryffindor?"

"Well--no offense--but he seemed much too polite to be one. And far too intelligent."

"That's what I was just thinking about you being a Slytherin."

The corners of Tracey's mouth quirked up. She never looked directly at Harry, but rather at his shoes. "Do you Believe?" she asked, thumping her Holy Bible, Merlin version. Harry could hear the capitalized "b" when she said the word "believe".

Harry looked down and found himself staring at her Kneazle, Jebediah, who had suddenly trotted into view and dropped down before Harry, staring at him intensely. Jebediah began to wash himself after a moment, making an obscene display before Harry.

"No."

"Oh. I would have thought someone like you would have," Tracey sighed.

"What do you mean?"

"Someone who was obviously chosen by God to be one of his warriors. Someone who was gifted by God with great powers. Someone who has so interested God that he keeps testing you, year after year. Someone who has seen and done more than most adults," Tracey said, her whole face coming alive and a fervent look entered her eyes.

"I haven't been chosen by God to do anything. God doesn't exist," Harry said more harshly than he intended. Somehow, the thought that there was someone who orchestrated his sad, miserable life made him rather angry.

Tracey's lips buttoned up and she looked at Harry reproachfully.

"Sorry. I didn't mean it like that. I mean, I meant it, but not like that," Harry said apologetically. He looked down at Jebediah again. Jebediah seemed wholly unimpressed that he was staring into the eyes of Harry Potter. There was something about Jebediah that reminded Harry of Crookshanks and he couldn't say why.

"So you believe in God?" Harry asked. He wondered how Tracey got to be so fervent. Most people never made an issue of it, and no one at Hogwarts ever really talked about religion--except her.

"Of course, I do," Tracey said softly.

"You know what the other Slytherins do. You know what they're like. If you believe in God and what's good and right, why do you just sit there while they hurt people, mock people, and conspire against people? If you're so righteous, where's your

indignation? Or is it okay because you're all pureblood Slytherins?" Harry asked her more vehemently than he intended.

"Because, Harry Potter, not all of us are brave like you. Everyone has their sins and mine is cowardice," Tracey said, sounding very sorrowful. "I'm sorry that they do the things they do, but what is one person like me going to do? What if they found out about me? Do you know what they'd do to Millicent and me? It terrifies me."

Harry was rather taken aback. "What about you and Millicent?" he asked.

"Well, well, what do we have here? Conspiring with the enemy, Davis?"

Harry and Tracey both turned to find a rather disdainful looking Blaise Zabini glowering down at him. On his left were Daphne Greengrass and Pansy Parkinson with twin nasty sneers on their faces. On his right was Draco Malfoy, who was looking at Harry and Tracey rather expressionlessly.

"B-BI-Blaise!" Tracey squeaked, standing up. Jebediah ran in front of her, obviously guarding her. He was hissing violently at Zabini.

"You didn't answer his question, Davis. What about you and Bulstrode?" Zabini asked rather coolly.

"N-nothing!" Tracey said. Harry stood up beside her, realizing how terrified she looked.

"N-nothing!" Pansy squeaked in a poor imitation of Tracey. Everyone laughed except for Harry and Tracey.

"I think we need to talk, Davis. Potter, why don't you run along now? We'll deal with you later," Zabini ordered. It was very obvious who was in charge now that Draco was disgraced.

"Not a chance in hell," Harry said fiercely, glaring at Zabini, surges of his jealousy of Draco's and Zabini's apparent friendship flaring.

"What did you have to speak about with the filthy little half-blood, Davis?" Zabini asked, turning from Harry back to Tracey. Draco was studying Tracey through narrowed eyes.

"W-we were only talking about religion, Blaise," Tracey said fearfully. Harry

desperately wanted her to grow a backbone.

"Clear off, Potter," Draco said coolly, still not looking at Harry.

"Nosy little snakes, aren't you?" Harry asked them all, resting his final glare on Draco. He had the distinct impression that if he left now, Tracey would be in a lot of trouble. And he wasn't going to leave her to the Slytherins to tear apart until they found out what she was hiding from them.

"Clear off, Potter, or you're going to get hurt. You're outnumbered. Or don't they teach you how to count in Gryffindor?" Daphne asked nastily, echoing a statement Harry had heard from Lucius Malfoy not but five months ago. It brought up bad memories

"So do all you Slytherins share one brain and pass it around day to day? Whose turn is it to have it today?" Harry asked her, swallowing reflexively when he realized she was bigger than he was. Much bigger.

"Clear off, or I'm going to rearrange your face, Potter," Draco said threateningly, stepping in, his gray eyes flashing. He was looking at Harry now.

"You're going to need a lot more Slytherins to do that, Malfoy."

Draco hexed him so fast, Harry was knocked off his feet in surprise. Zabini turned to Draco in surprise, looking irritated and surprised. So was Harry. He didn't expect Draco to act so brashly. Draco wasn't a brash person. He weighed his options before acting.

This was all in the back of Harry's mind as Draco's rather weak Stunner wore off. He slung his own Stunner back, which sent Daphne and Pansy diving for cover. Zabini had his wand out, looking indecisive. Part of a tree exploded and sent showers of splinters into the lake just behind Harry.

"I'M GOING TO RIP YOUR FACE OFF, POTTER!" Draco roared. Draco did not scream like that. He did not roar.

Harry couldn't spend a lot of time thinking about this startling change in Draco's personality as more Stunners were flying his way. He cast a Shield Spell and then ducked behind his tree. He saw Tracey running back to the school. Also running back to the school were Pansy and Daphne, with Jebediah hot on their heels. He was like a sheepdog, nipping and clawing at them if they diverged from their course.

"Draco, you're going to get us expelled!" Zabini cried as Draco slammed down a rather impressive Impediment Jinx on Harry. Harry brought up another Shield Spell in time, but felt it dissipate under Draco's magic. The two spells cancelled each other out.

"Expelliarmus!" Harry screamed as Draco cast a glance at Zabini. It tossed Malfoy's wand flying off into a patch of shrubbery. Harry spun and leveled his wand at Zabini, just as Zabini pointed his wand at Harry. He was licking his lips, looking very nervous. Not as though Harry frightened him, but more like the circumstances didn't suit him.

Draco suddenly tackled Harry, his small fists popping violently into Harry's jaw. Harry fell back, his wand slipping from his grasp as he tried to push Draco off him. Draco was still screaming, loudly and mostly unintelligibly. Harry only caught the words "half-blood" and "bastard". Harry punched back, too frustrated with Draco's behavior to enjoy the sensation of his body. They were wrestling, rolling into bushes as Harry tried to pin Draco's hands down.

The noise and the physical violence of Harry's and Draco's fight finally drove off Zabini as they heard someone approaching. Zabini fled, stowing his wand away furtively. As soon as Zabini was out of sight, Draco stopped struggling and began to smirk. He had a bloody lip and a small bruise forming on his cheek.

"Let me go unless you really did want to be expelled," Draco commanded coolly. Harry released him and sat back as Morpheus came into view. His wand was in his hand and he was looking around suspiciously, his eyes finally resting on Harry and Draco.

Harry wiped the blood from his nose and stretched his jaw. Draco sat beside him and offered Morpheus a rather bloody smile.

"I heard screaming," Morpheus said suspiciously.

"Potter sat on a bee. He's such a girl about things like that. He was having a right fit," Draco said smoothly. Harry stared at him, jaw slightly hanging open. What was Draco up to? Harry was quite thoroughly confused.

"What happened to your face, then?" Morpheus pressed.

"Tripped on a root. Wasn't looking where I was going," Draco said.

"And his face?"

"I think you hit your face on that tree when the bee was attacking you, right?" Draco said, gesturing to the splintered tree.

"Right," Harry said, nodding, trying not to look as confused as he felt.

"It's the beginning of winter. There are no bees," Morpheus said.

"Well, maybe it was an unusual bee. I'm not a bee expert. It was blue, though. Maybe it was one of those dratted pixies that Professor Lockhart set loose on us a few years back. I don't think they were all rounded up," Draco said with a shrug, not batting an eye.

"And what business do a Slytherin and a Gryffindor have together in the middle of a snowy day?" Morpheus pressed.

"Homework," Draco said patiently, pointing to Harry's books. "I help him with Potions, he helps me with Defense Against the Dark Arts. It was a deal we worked out for our mutual benefits."

Morpheus looked at the books suspiciously, then back at Harry and Draco. Then he sighed. "Ten points to Slytherin, Mr. Malfoy. And detention on Monday night," he said.

"Detention? Why?" Draco demanded, looking upset.

"For lying. I gave your House ten points for doing it so well while on the spot."

Morpheus turned and walked away. Harry waited a few minutes and then stared at Draco. "What the bloody hell was that all about?" he demanded.

Draco didn't speak for a long moment. "You know, as little as sixty years ago, the entire Slytherin House consisted of nothing but pureblood wizards. There are now so little of us, half-bloods have started filtering in from Tom Riddle on, at least that's what I think. Old Salazar is dead and the Sorting Hat has to keep our numbers up somehow. They're very rare, but the occasional half-blood that shows particular skill, determination, and--of course--ambition may be sorted into Slytherin."

Harry didn't make the connection until Draco spoke again.

"She's a half-blood, Potter. Zabini would have ripped her apart if I hadn't attacked you. Lucky for me, you're rather easy to provoke."

Harry stared at him. "What do you care?"

"Don't worry about what I do or don't care about, Potter. Just be content to know that our little rivalry proved very useful to me today," Draco said snottily. He then presently stood up, turned his pointed nose up in the air, and walked away.

Harry was still confused, but he smiled slightly as Draco walked away.

Harry slogged through the castle after dinner on Monday. He hadn't gotten hardly any homework done and now he had more. He'd have to get Hermione to help him tomorrow, if he could pry her lips off Ron's long enough.

Not that he was bitter or anything.

He slouched down one of the hallways, loosening his cloak as he did so. He stared glumly at the rows of classroom doors he passed, wishing someone would jump out and try to kill him or something. Anything to help excuse him from all the homework he had.

"That's not fair!"

Harry paused, realizing he was right by Professor Morpheus's classroom and Draco's voice was trailing out of it. The door was very slightly ajar. Draco really needed to learn how to close doors properly. Harry leaned forward, creeping to the slightly open door to listen.

"Life is not fair, Mr. Malfoy."

Harry pushed his face in a little closer, catching a glimpse of Draco's flushed face. He was standing in the middle of the room, bespattered with ink and carrying dozens of scrolls in his arms. Professor Morpheus was sitting Eastern style on a meditation rug. He had incense burning and was wearing some black Japanese kimono-looking robe.

"This is what you get paid for! Why do I have to grade the first years' papers?"

"It's called 'detention'. Wherein a student is punished for some wrongdoing by doing something they wouldn't want to do. It's a lovely invention from a teaching perspective. I get an evening off from grading papers."

"You've been breathing in too much incense," Draco remarked sourly.

"Probably. You'd better begin if you'd like to get to bed some time tonight."

Draco muttered something under his breath that sounded like "bloody bastard", but Harry couldn't be sure. He settled down on a pouf and went to work, muttering darkly as he did so. Morpheus continued to meditate. Harry looked around and confirmed no one was coming so went back to spying.

"It's very hard to compete with perfection, isn't it?"

Draco was startled by this sudden question from Morpheus. "What do you mean?" he asked darkly.

"There was many a time during my schooling at Hogwarts that I often became so frustrated with Bill Weasley that I wanted to boil him alive in my cauldron. It wasn't until the end of our third year we even became friends. We were always vying for top marks and he usually won. He had no weaknesses, it seemed. He was good at everything, except Herbology and History of Magic, and who cared about Herbology? It's not like I could top him; it wasn't my best subject, either. Ana carried us both through that subject. Even after we became friends, there were times I hated him for besting me at everything," Morpheus said. His eyes were still closed and he was still in a meditative position.

"Are you trying to draw some silly comparison with me and Potter to you and a Weasley?" Draco asked impatiently.

"You seem quite fascinated--and even at times obsessed--with Harry Potter. I would have merely chalked it up to simple schoolboy rivalry until I saw him nearly kiss you in the hallway after the first day of classes."

Draco made a small squeaking noise and flushed pink, his gray eyes widening. Harry felt his face burn, swallowing convulsively. Morpheus had seen what Harry hoped he hadn't.

"It must be very hard for you. Having to deal with the events of this past summer, with the sudden loss of your fortune, your clothes, your influence, your family--

everything that mattered to you. Having to deal with what you saw while being initiated into your father's world. Having to deal with new sympathies and emotions you never had before. I imagine that is what has been coloring your actions of late, particularly this morning."

Draco opened and closed his mouth. He stared very intently at the paper he was grading, but was not reading it. "Tracey's not like the rest of us. Her ambition is to do good. To help. She's not particularly loyal or hard working. She's not brave or bold. She's not witty or clever. She has this determination, this devotion to her faith. That's what makes her a Slytherin. I see her all the time, flitting about the common room, trying to preach from her Bible to us. Most of us don't care. I never paid her any attention until this year. I don't think I really believe in it, but I believe that she believes it, you know? She cares about people, really cares about them. I used to think she was weak, the way she'd shirk away from the things we did, the way she'd try and stop us before we'd scare her away. She's not really weak, just . . . scared. I wasn't going to let Blaise tear her down. She's been even nicer to me this year," he said.

Morpheus opened his eyes and stared at Draco intently. Draco kept speaking, as though this had been inside him, festering for months and he had to let it out now or go insane. Harry wondered how long he had been bottling it.

"I used to think it mattered. My father still thinks it does. Maybe it does, maybe it doesn't. Granger's brilliant and she's a Mud--Muggle-born. Dean Thomas is a Muggle-born and he's the most well-rounded student in the school. Potter's a bleeding half-blood and look at what he can do. I'm as pure as pureblood gets and I feel like nothing I do will ever matter unless I have a handful of galleons behind it. Money didn't stop my parents' from ending up in Azkaban. I love my father, but I don't want to be him. I thought I did. I don't know what's inside him that he could cold-bloodedly kill someone--and I know he has--but it's not in me. He talks about Muggles like they're animals, like they're not human. But that little girl, she . . . she was human," Draco choked out. For the first time that Harry had ever seen him, his face was etched in guilt and horror. He then sat so he could cover his face with his hands. He trembled and shook a little.

Morpheus moved over to Draco, sitting down cross-legged and gently touching his shoulder. "I still have nightmares about it," Draco moaned. "I just had one last night. I see that little girl's eyes. I can see the Dark Lord laughing at me, breaking my wand. I see him killing those Muggle kids with a smile. I see Potter's mother, looking at me like she actually cared whether I lived or died. I had done nothing but bring her son misery, but she--she cared about me. She wanted me to live. When she told me to tell Potter she loved him, I felt like I couldn't breathe. Would my mother do that? Would

she die for me like Potter's mother did for him? And be willing to do it again, no less?

"I can feel my Dark Mark burn at night, Professor Morpheus--half-Mark or not. I think the Dark Lord knew I wouldn't do it. I think he didn't want me to do it. He wanted me to do something wrong so he could drive me into the ground. It's like he's testing all of us, and we Malfoys have come up wanting.

"I want to know. You're a pureblood, just like me. Tell me, does it matter? Does it really, truly matter?"

Morpheus studied him for a long time. It would sound like such a stupid question coming from anyone else, but Draco meant it. He honestly didn't know.

"No, Draco, it doesn't. A wizard's blood doesn't matter, only his capacity to love and the purity of his soul. Power, blood, money, status . . . none of that really matters. Your father had all that. And what was it that made him happy?"

Draco looked up, wiping at his face. "Mother and I. And Contessa, too."

"Exactly. It was his love for his family that made him happy--not the purity of his blood, his money, his power, or his servitude to the Dark Lord. Why do you think that he didn't want you to become a Death Eater? Why he kept things from you?"

Draco stared at his hands. Morpheus let silence fall between them and moved back to his meditation rug. Draco went back to grading and Morpheus seemed to be preparing to leave. Harry was also getting ready to leave when Draco spoke again.

"We kissed, you know. For hours at the Shrieking Shack," Draco admitted, as though this had been bothering him for a while, too. "Potter and I. What am I supposed to do about that?"

Harry tried not to choke or make a noise, feeling like his stomach had just been kidnapped right out of his body. He also couldn't make his lungs work for a few moments. Morpheus, however, did not react.

"I assure you that an attraction to someone will not go away because you want it to, Draco. I know you already have a lot to sort out and that growing up is the least of your problems, but there is something between you and Harry that you need to resolve," Morpheus said very gently. Morpheus put out his incense with a wave of his wand and bundled it into his rug, which he rolled up and picked up. Harry swallowed nervously, trying not to breathe too loud.

Draco seemed unsatisfied with this answer and turned back to the papers.

"It is not my place to have as detailed a conversation with you about this subject as you need or I might like, Mr. Malfoy. As your teacher, I must remain apart from such . . . activities of my students. But I urge you to face them, rather than ignore them. I can tell you that feelings for people often have no basis on gender. If you have feelings for him, this may not be a bad thing. Ultimately, the best person to talk to about your feelings will be Harry Potter himself. Of course, I expect that the pair of you will conduct yourself like gentlemen and abide by the school rules. Good evening. Leave the graded papers on my desk," Morpheus said smoothly, his mouth twitching a bit at the part of Draco and Harry acting like gentlemen. He gave Draco a slight bow and exited the room.

Harry was already coolly walking down the hallway, trying to pretend he was passing by, when Morpheus caught up to him. Morpheus gave him a shrewd look.

"I trust you shall keep your tongue in your head about what you overheard?" Morpheus asked coolly.

Harry stopped short. "How did you know?"

"I have my ways, Mr. Potter. Ten points from Gryffindor for being nosy. I'll expect you in my office tomorrow for your detention after dinner. Good evening."

Harry licked his lips and watched as Morpheus turned a corner, smirking. He stood there, staring after him like an idiot. Then he went to the Gryffindor common room and spent the rest of the night thinking about Draco.

November and December went by in a blur. There was so much studying to do, Harry hardly had a chance to remember to eat. The teachers were piling more homework than ever on them; even Ron could be caught studying. Hermione hardly left the library and forgot her meals until Ron dragged her to the Great Hall. Harry felt a vicious sort of satisfaction that they didn't have time to do anything with each other and were spending as much time with Harry as they ever had. When the holidays came, everyone breathed a great sigh of relief. Harry, however, began to feel dread like he never felt before. His scar had been strangely inert since Sirius's death, but lately it took to a dull throb that was most distracting. Harry tried to feel along his

connection to Voldemort to find the source of his unease, but Voldemort had quite thoroughly blocked him out.

Harry woke up on Christmas Eve, staring at Ron's empty bed and rubbing his face. Ron was probably off with Hermione somewhere. They were inseparable since the holidays began and they once again had time for each other. Tonight was when Harry was supposed to find Sirius's soul. Butterflies fluttered anxiously in his stomach. He got up and got dressed, feeling sluggish. Ron and Hermione had managed to stay at Hogwarts because of Sirius's potion, which had resulted in a Howler from Mrs. Weasley.

No other Gryffindor in their year had stayed at Hogwarts for the Christmas holidays this year. In fact, there weren't that many people at all this year. Harry could have counted the people that stayed on his fingers and toes. In a time when Death Eater attacks were getting bolder and every issue of the Daily Prophet seemed to have some new horror to unveil, everyone wanted their children home with them.

When Harry went down for breakfast, Hedwig swooped down on him with the post. He had received a nice little envelope with fancy, curly cursive writing saying, "Harry". He opened it with curiosity and scanned the letter inside.

Harry,
I'm having a little get together today until we get close to midnight and then have to return to Hogwarts to finish our friend's potion. It's sort of a very small Christmas party. It'll be in my room at the Three Broomsticks. I'm in Room Four. I've sent invitations to Ron and Hermione, of course, as well as Hagrid. I also invited Contessa, Draco, and Professor Snape, though I doubt Professor Snape will come. Professor Morpheus will be there as well.

Your friend,
Remus

P.S. I thought we should all exchange gifts today, since we might be preoccupied with other things tomorrow morning.

Harry wondered why Professor Morpheus was going to be there, but shrugged. Hermione and Ron shortly entered; both had snow in their hair and looked so happy Harry wanted to hex them. "Did you get your post?" Harry asked darkly.

"Oh, yes, Pig brought it to us outside. It'll be lovely to have Christmas Eve dinner with Remus," Hermione giggled, sitting down across from Ron. She was blushing.

Harry eyed her sourly.

Ron sat down next to her, looking distantly happy. "Lovely," he repeated, staring at Hermione.

Harry was about to bang his head on the table to make the cuteness stop when Draco suddenly sat down next to Harry. "Idiots," he said, sneering at Ron and Hermione, "You two had quite the disgusting display out in the middle of the grounds. You're lucky I was the only one looking out of the Astronomy Tower window, otherwise both of you would be expelled. That wasn't your hand up her shirt that I saw, was it, Weasley?"

Ron scowled deeply and Hermione flushed. "Sod off, Malfoy. Don't you have your own table with the other social rejects to sit with?" he asked.

"What were you doing in the Astronomy Tower?" Hermione asked suspiciously.

"Delivering a message to Professor Sinistra from Professor Morpheus as a favor to him. If the correspondence was your business, Granger, I still wouldn't tell you."

"Funny that you mention the Astronomy Tower. If we went up there and looked through a telescope, I'd bet we might find Draco's common courtesy. It's that far away," Ron sighed.

"I do hope you remember what we have to do at midnight. Or can't Gryffindors tell time?"

"There's no need to be rude, Draco," Hermione sniffed. "And we're well aware of it."

"Brilliant. Now, why is the werewolf inviting me and my cousin to his sodding party?"

"Probably to be sociable. You should try it sometime. It's called friendliness. Works wonders for your social life," Ron retorted.

"You know, Weasley, that was almost witty. You should give Granger back her brain before she misses it," Draco sniffed. "Tell him I'm not going. I have better things to do, like clipping my toenails."

"On the contrary, you are going, since I cooked the dinner," Contessa glowered, appearing behind him. Kaw crowed at him from her shoulder and then hopped onto

Harry's plate, stealing bits of his food. Harry sighed, knowing better than to shoo him off.

"Contrary! Going! Dinner!" he cried to Harry and then flew back to his mistress's shoulder.

Draco froze and turned. "Why in the bloody hell did you do a thing like that?" he said.

"I saw no reason not to when he asked me. It gives us a chance to observe our own family traditions. If I see one more turkey, I might scream. Besides, it will irritate your godfather to be there."

"I thought you two were speaking now."

"We are, but that doesn't mean I still don't enjoy irritating him. It's rather fun to wind him up and watch him go, don't you think?"

Draco shrugged. "You two are going to have horrible children one day. I can't decide which one of you will be the worse parent," he said.

Contessa glared at him and then swept up to the staff table. "Be ready by eleven, Draco," she said.

"Father was right. Women are insufferable," Draco sighed.

"Does he tell your mother that?" Hermione asked with some amusement.

"Of course not. He likes his body parts all where they're supposed to be--as in still attached to his body."

Hermione laughed and Draco was smirking a bit. Even Ron looked amused. Harry snorted. For a moment, Harry felt like Draco was one of his friends and he thoroughly enjoyed the moment.

"I suppose I'll be seeing you all at eleven. Try not to act like we're going anywhere together," Draco said, standing up and walking back over the Slytherin table. There was only one other Slytherin left and that was Millicent Bulstrode, who was watching Draco thoughtfully as he sat down.

They finished breakfast and then Harry went to his dormitory and brought out his Christmas presents, struggling with the paper until they were wrapped. They weren't

wrapped well, but they were wrapped. Ron was in the next room and Harry could hear him shouting in frustration, threatening to curse the ribbons for not tying properly. When they went downstairs, Hermione was standing by her own pile of presents, each one neatly and perfectly wrapped, all the same way. Harry looked down at the ruffled and over-folded presents he had wrapped and then at the over-taped and ripped wrapping Ron had done. Hermione was enough to give someone a complex.

"Honestly, Ron, you don't need that much tape. And why is the paper ripped in so many places? And taping up the rips looks tacky, you know."

"If you're so clever, why don't you do it?" Ron whined, glaring at her perfectly wrapped presents.

"When you two marry, why don't you be the present wrapper, Hermione?" Harry asked, causing them to fall silent just as Hermione was about to retort. Hermione turned crimson and Ron's eyes grew very large. Harry felt strangely satisfied and promptly marched out after putting his presents in a bag. Ron and Hermione were following him, and were studiously not looking at each other for the moment.

Contessa and Draco were waiting at the entrance for them. Draco was carrying the bag full of presents and was grumbling to Contessa.

"Why do I have to carry the bag of presents? It's not fair!" Draco whined. "I'm not a servant!"

"Simple equation. I buy the presents and yet credit you for them as well, since they're all from both of us. You carry them in gratitude."

"I wouldn't want to buy any of these idiots Christmas presents in any case!"

"Christmas is supposed to be about the spirit of giving, family, and love," Contessa told him pompously.

"I thought it was about me getting more presents than last year."

"Well, since Uncle Lucius and Aunt Narcissa are in prison and their assets are frozen, you won't be getting more than last year. You'll get what you get and be grateful for it."

"Did you buy your beloved Severus some Christmas presents, too?" Draco asked with an impish grin.

"I don't have a beloved anyone. As for your godfather, however, he does have a Christmas present in there from both of us. I think I bought him a book on meditation and Zen techniques."

Draco began to laugh and Harry joined him as he got closer. Contessa looked very smug. Hermione and Ron were giggling. Harry wasn't sure about anyone else, but the mental image of Snape trying to meditate was hilarious.

"What is so funny?" Snape snapped, walking up. He had turned up a fur-lined black cloak that looked new. He was turning his cold, beady gaze on all of them.

"We were simply envisioning you cross-legged on a meditation rug, wearing a kimono, burning incense, and humming softly to yourself as you raised your arms and curled your fingers. It was quite funny," Draco grinned.

"Probably about as funny as the mental image of you bouncing along the halls as a white ferret," Snape snapped coldly, sneering in displeasure and glaring the Gryffindors into silence. Draco's cheeks turned pink and he glared at Snape.

"I thought you weren't coming," Harry said, trying to keep the disappointment out of his voice and failing.

"Ebenezer may not have bought any presents, but he's coming. Aren't you, Mr. Scrooge?" Draco asked. Harry was surprised Draco was familiar with A Christmas Carol, but then vaguely recalled someone saying that Dickens had been a half-blood wizard who published two versions of each book he wrote--one for the wizarding world and one for the Muggle world.

"Someone has to keep a running commentary on reality for these idiots and make sure Lupin's not too smashed to be useless tonight," Contessa said airily.

"Let's just go and get this over with," Snape said darkly.

"Are you sure the ghosts of Christmas Past, Present, and Future won't be keeping you so busy tonight that you won't be able to help with the potion?" Contessa asked him neutrally. There was nary a smile on her black lips, but Harry could hear it in her voice.

"You were a court jester in a previous life, naturally. Shall we go?" Snape said sourly, offering her his arm. She considered him for a moment before taking it. She then gave

Draco a look that just dared him to say something. They walked forward down the path to Hogsmeade and Harry and the others trailed behind them.

"I thought Contessa couldn't leave Hogwarts," Harry said.

"Dumbledore gave her permission to leave only if Snape went with her," Draco said.

Draco then wisely waited until Contessa and Snape were out of earshot before saying anything else. "I truly hope they never breed. Other than the fact that the sight of Severus Snape without clothes on could potentially cause my poor cousin to go blind, I believe that any child they produce could potentially be the Antichrist," he quipped and then hefted the bag Contessa was making him carry. Ron was having a hard time breathing while he laughed. Hermione was trying to stifle her giggles and Harry was chuckling. Ahead of them, Snape turned and gave all of them a suspicious glare.

"You shouldn't say such things about your own godfather!" Hermione admonished, still trying to stifle her giggles.

Draco shrugged. "Why not? Making fun of adults having sex is the God-given right of any adolescent. For example, no matter how you feel about the Weasleys, you have to admit that with seven children, Ron's father must be a regular nundu in the sack, eh?"

Ron's face turned beet red just as Harry exploded into laughter and Hermione began to shriek in mirth. Snape and Contessa both paused and turned in question at the laughing teenagers. Ron looked completely mortified.

"My parents do not have sex!" Ron shouted as they drew closer to Snape and Contessa.

Snape rolled his eyes and Hermione only laughed harder. Harry had a stitch in his side as he laughed. Draco was sniggering and shaking his head at the same time.

"Of course they do, Ron. How else did you expect the seven of you Weasley children to come along? Did you think you all hatched from eggs?" Contessa asked him, looking somewhere between amused and disdainful.

"Well, they can't have sex any longer! They stopped after Ginny!"

"Sorry, mate, I caught them at it in the pantry at Sirius's house right before they took you home," Harry grinned, exaggerating an unconfirmed suspicion that he had developed when he heard suspicious noises coming from the pantry over the summer

right before Mr. and Mrs. Weasley emerged with rumpled clothing and stupid grins. "Your dad had your mum--"

Ron covered his ears and cut Harry off. "No! No! I refuse to believe it! They're too old to have sex! Not my parents!" he moaned in horror. Hermione was gasping for breath.

"Everyone's parents have sex," Contessa added. "For example, I have it on good authority that Uncle Lucius and Aunt Narcissa used to have shamefully sloppy sex on Draco's bed whenever he was at school. I caught them at it a few times. They always forget to lock the door."

"WHAT?" Draco cried, a horrified look remarkably like Ron's coming across his face. "They--they defiled my bed?"

Ron was laughing now. "Oh, now that's rich," Ron grinned. "'Shamefully sloppy sex'. I like that."

Contessa smirked at Draco, then took Snape's arm again as they walked ahead. Hermione put an arm around Ron, laughing at him. They walked ahead of Harry as well, whispering to each other. They kept laughing. Ron put his arm around Hermione and Harry made a face when he saw Ron's hand creep to Hermione's bottom.

"Disgusting," Draco said, shaking his head. He was walking beside Harry, the bag of presents draped over his shoulder.

"Why, because she's a Muggle-born and he's a Weasley?" Harry asked coldly.

"No, because he's too tall and has horrid freckles and she's got frizzy hair and buckteeth. Well, she used to have buckteeth. Did she grow into them or something?"

"Something like that. And a man who doesn't wash and whose giant nose should be glowing red so as to light the way for the other reindeer and a woman who dresses for Christmas like it's Halloween aren't any better."

"True."

"Are looks really that important to you?" Harry asked darkly, suddenly feeling very aware of his gawky form, his ordinary face, and his glasses. He reflexively tried to smooth his hair, but it didn't make him feel any better. He also knew his hair wasn't going to be smoothed by anything short of a hair care product from Sleekeasy.

Draco suddenly turned his face. His cheeks were pink again. "If it was that important to me, do you think I would have let you--" but Draco cut himself off abruptly, his blush deepening.

"Am I that ugly, then?" Harry asked more defensively than he would have liked.

Draco cast him a glance before looking forward. "I didn't say that, Harry," he sighed.

"Then what are you saying?"

"Never mind," Draco sighed. Harry grabbed his arm and forced him to stop and look at him. Draco wasn't struggling, only staring at a point on Harry's shoulder.

"Honestly, Draco. Do you like me? Even a little?" Harry asked seriously.

Draco didn't answer him and a look of resentment crossed his face.

"Because I like you. I guess I'm just masochistic that way. Liking someone who hates me and everything I stand for. At first I thought maybe I just liked you for looks. And I do. But I like you for other reasons, too. And if you make a sarcastic comment, I swear I will pound your face in."

Draco opened his mouth and closed it. Then he looked up at Harry. His expression was sullen, but Harry thought he almost saw a flicker of something in his gray eyes. "You should let me go. Someone will wonder about us," he finally said.

"Let them wonder. Answer my question, Draco. Do you like me?"

"Oy! C'mon! We're almost there! You guys are holding up progress here!" Ron cried from ahead of them. He suddenly received a sharp glare and an elbow to the ribs from Hermione. He looked thoroughly confused as to why.

"We're holding up progress, Harry," Draco said neutrally, the smallest smile curving at the corners of his mouth. Of his severely kissable mouth.

Harry snuck a peek at the others. All four of them had their backs to them and kept walking forward. Harry leaned forward and impulsively kissed Draco. It was a fleeting thing, yet still warmed Harry to his toes. Draco tasted as sweet as Harry remembered.

Draco looked surprised, but he quickly regained his composure. "If they look back and see us, there's going to be a lot of embarrassing explanations," he said neutrally.

Harry sighed and let him go. "Later. We need to talk later," he told Draco. Draco only looked at him before hurrying forward and joining Contessa and Snape.

They arrived at the Three Broomsticks in good time. Contessa was the one who led them to the room, since she seemed to know where it was. She rapped smartly on the door and a beaming Lupin let them in.

"Happy Christmas!" he cried. He had on a Father Christmas hat and Harry noticed he looked healthier and happier than he had ever seen him.

"Where's the bloody absinthe?" Snape retorted, sneering.

Lupin looked startled. "Severus! What a, er, surprise to have you here! A pleasant one, though."

"Absinthe. I know you have some. If you're going to be so bloody cheerful, I'm going to need some to avoid hexing you."

Lupin blinked. "Are you sure you'll be able to make it tonight? I wouldn't want to interrupt whatever important activities the Ghosts of Christmas Past, Present, and Future have planned for you," he said neutrally.

"Everyone's a bloody jester today. I heard that joke already," Snape snapped, glaring at Contessa, who had removed her arm from his and was smirking at Lupin, who grinned back.

"It's on the table with the other drinks. Morpheus insisted on bringing it."

Snape pushed passed him and headed straight for the liquor table. Contessa smirked a bit and looked at Lupin, heading over to the small array of alcohol on one of the tables as she entered the room. Everyone else trooped in after her, Harry bringing up the rear. Upon noticing a tray full of pastries, the teenagers descended on them. Harry would be damned if he knew what was in them but they tasted good. There was also something that looked suspiciously like some sort of caviar paste and some fancy cracker things that Draco ate as well. Hermione also ate it, but not with the gusto Draco did.

"Remus and I both agreed that alcohol was a fine way to pass the evening if the

company of certain individuals," Morpheus said smoothly, watching Snape with interest as the Potions Master poured himself a glass of a green liquor, then laid a spoon over the glass, then a sugar cube, and then began to drip iced water on the sugar, drop by drop.

Godric slithered up to Harry and they got reacquainted. Harry fed him a pastry. Godric seemed to think it was all right, if a bit too starchy for his tastes.

"The little dodgy fellow would probably taste better, I would think," Godric offered as he slithered back over to the fire and curled up.

Harry smiled a bit to think that Draco did taste rather good, though not in the sense Godric meant it.

"Ah, I love her pastries," Draco said, cramming another one into his mouth. "I do hope she remembered how much I like the bûche de Noël and the smoked salmon."

"What are these? They're great!" Ron cried, ignoring Draco's gibberish and holding up a pastry.

"Burgundy snails in puff pastry with Mediterranean pesto."

Ron choked and began to spit out the pastry. Harry also decided he didn't want anymore and gave the rest to Godric. Hermione, however, simply nodded and continued to eat. Draco smirked and grabbed more of the pastries. It was amazing how much such a small boy could eat.

"Logan Fils? A Muggle brand?" Snape asked Lupin, looking at the bottle of absinthe and sipping at the green liquid in his glass, which now had an opalescent sheen to it. A slight curve to his lips occurred as he drank. Harry wondered what exactly was in absinthe.

"The best, Muggle or not," Lupin demurred. "You should probably not drink too much. We don't need you getting so trolleyed we have to peel you off the floor to get you home."

Snape scowled. "Unlike you, Lupin, I know when to stop," he retorted.

Lupin frowned and turned away from him and looked over at Harry, Hermione, Ron, and Draco. "Well, put your presents under the tree. Contessa, I'll help you bring out the food," Lupin told them and then he and Contessa walked out.

"You know, aren't the rumors about me quite interesting lately, Professor Snape?" Morpheus asked him coolly.

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

"The rumors about me and Contessa. The rumors about me and Professor Sinistra. The rumors about me and Firenze. I was especially horrified with the last one, by the way," Morpheus said darkly.

"Who knows how rumors start? I assure you I had nothing do with it," Snape said airily, taking another sip of his drink and then coughing a little.

"Right," Morpheus said doubtfully.

Harry had wandered across the room to where Draco was, but Draco moved over to Snape. Since he knew it would be painfully obvious that he was stalking Draco if he followed, Harry sighed and sat down on the couch, contenting himself to just watching Draco.

"Happy Christmas!" Hagrid boomed from the doorway, ducking and walking in. He dropped a bag full of presents in front of the tree and grinned at Harry, Ron, and Hermione.

"Happy Christmas, Hagrid," Harry grinned, sliding off the couch. Ron and Hermione echoed the statement to Hagrid.

"When's the eating? I'm starved!"

"Contessa and Remus have gone to get the food. Contessa made it all. They should be back any moment," Morpheus told him.

"Oy, do yeh think that's a good idea? Lettin' her, er, well, make our food?" Hagrid asked, looking nervous.

"Oh, Hagrid, that's all myth and nonsense. She's a wonderful cook and she's never poisoned us. And we've eaten her food plenty of times. That stuff about Necromancers passing diseases and poisons by touch is all rubbish," Hermione said.

"Oh, I wasn't worried about that, Hermione. I just didn't know what to do with that weird stuff she made for Harry's birthday. I was looking for something a bit more

traditional on account of it being Christmas and all."

"Oh, well, as to that--" Hermione began before Contessa and Remus entered the room, floating dishes and platters being led by their wands. Contessa spread the meal on the empty table, just as Harry was reaching for the bottle of absinthe.

"Accio absinthe!" Contessa cried and then caused the bottle to vanish with a smug expression.

"Really, Harry," Lupin said, chuckling and shaking his head.

"I just wanted a sip," Harry said eagerly.

"Sure, on July Thirty-first, you can have all the sips you want," Lupin grinned. Harry glared at him.

"Let's eat," Contessa said.

Harry looked at the food as they all sat down at the table. It was the strangest thing Harry had ever seen.

"The hell is this?" Hagrid asked, poking at a roast bird that wasn't turkey.

"Malfoy family tradition. We're holding le réveillon a bit early in the day, since it's usually held after midnight mass, but accommodations had to be made for our current time schedule. There's the bûche de Noël, oysters, pate de foie gras, roast peacock, rolled turkey filets with chestnuts, celery, ham, a cheese tray, green salad with anchoiade sauce, smoked salmon, green asparagus, apples, pear with spices, truffles, girofles mushrooms, scallops in lemon sauce, some dried fruits, white and red grapes, fine coffee, and champagne. I also have some wines. I recommend the Chablis to drink, but the Can Fronsac is also quite wonderful. I wanted to have a large variety, since I know different people have different tastes," Contessa said, obviously oblivious to the fact that half the people at the table had no idea what she just said.

Hagrid blinked at her. Snape, Draco, Morpheus, Lupin, and Hermione were already filling their plates. Ron was looking at it just as dubiously as Harry and Hagrid were.

Contessa sighed. "Honestly, you can have the rather dull traditional English dinner tomorrow at Hogwarts. Today, you're having a French dinner. My Mère--my Grand-mère, actually, but she always insisted I call her Mère--hated British food and Uncle Aurelius wasn't too fond of it, either. They always made sure we had le réveillon

every Christmas. My Mère was a gourmet cook--her dishes were famous at all the dinner parties Uncle Aurelius used to hold at Malfoy Manor in the old days. She taught Aunt Narcissa, who taught me," she said with pride in her voice.

"Yeh know, I should introduce you to a friend of mine, Olympe Maxime. Yeh two'd get along fine. There's not a man in all Britain that could afford either one of yeh, either. Posh, both of yeh," Hagrid grumbled, shaking his head.

Snape scowled deeply at this and Contessa reached over and smacked Draco's hand as he tried to eat his dinner.

"Grace. We need to say grace first," she said harshly.

"Oh, honestly, neither one of us even believe, Countess," Draco said, rolling his eyes.

"Traditions must be observed. In honor of your grandfather, if no one else. They must be said by the oldest male at the table." Contessa looked around and her eyes rested on Hagrid. "Go on, then."

Hagrid blushed and mumbled something and then put his large, meaty hands together. Everyone else did so as well, Harry rather reluctantly.

Hagrid cleared his throat several times before speaking. "God is great, God is good, let's tuck in," he said and then dropped his hands and prepared to eat.

Contessa cleared her throat as well and Draco groaned in misery. Hagrid sighed and put his hands together again. "Er, God bless this meal, I don't know what most of it is, but sure smells nice and I'd like to get to eating it. God bless everyone here. God bless Hogwarts. God bless Dumbledore. God bless Harry and Ron and Hermione and--"

Contessa cleared her throat again. Hagrid sighed again.

"And may the little baby Jesus smile on us all. Honestly, woman, I don't know what else to say!"

"Let's just pray that God's mercy will give," Lupin said, quoting the last poetic line of the Clone Concoction and exchanging looks with Harry.

"Amen," Hagrid said and then began to eat. He was oblivious to how important that prayer suddenly was to Harry. Tonight they would all find out how merciful God would be. Tonight they would try to bring Sirius back.

To be continued . . .

Chapter 18: Jigsaw

Author's Notes: "Firestarter" lyrics by The Prodigy.

Chapter Eighteen:
The Yule Bell Rings

Apparently, Harry wasn't the only one with the idea to buy Lupin clothes for Christmas. Hermione, Contessa, and Morpheus had all bought him clothes, too. Hermione had bought him a Muggle pair of trousers and a nice jumper, but Contessa and Morpheus had bought him wizard's robes. He had been astounded.

Lupin was wearing the blue and white robes Harry had bought him, standing around the boiling cauldron with the Clone Concoction in it, along with Harry, Ron, Hermione, Draco, Contessa, and Snape. Godric had been left back at the Three Broomsticks, since he said it was too cold to go outside unless he was hunting. Hagrid and Morpheus had left the party before the rest left to work on the potion. Hagrid had been sloshed enough that he sang a bawdy song about dragons on the way back to his hut and Morpheus kept giving them all suspicious looks before leaving. Kaw sat on Contessa's shoulders, watching the cauldron and pausing to preen every now and then.

Snape was stirring at the cauldron, peering into it neutrally. Harry was definitely peering into it anxiously, but unable to see anything other than vaguely glowing grayish-green goop.

"I think I see him," Draco said, peering into the cauldron as well. "Was he a blond? I thought he had black hair."

"Don't be an idiot. It's not ready yet. We can't pull the body out until midnight. We still have another minute or two. It's still shifting."

"Body?" Harry asked. Contessa was standing by the mirror now, staring at it thoughtfully.

"Yes, Potter. It's a Clone Concoction to make him a body. What did you think we were going to pull out?" Snape sneered.

Harry glared at him, but didn't retort, mostly in interest of making sure the potion turned out all right. It just seemed odd to think that they were just going to pull a body out of a cauldron. He jumped a little when a grandfather clock in the corner began to intone the midnight hour.

"Yule! Bell! Ringing!" Kaw cried, buzzing about the room excitedly.

"Now," Snape told Draco, plunging his arms into the boiling green and gray goop. Draco followed suit. Harry moved forward as they pulled out a human body, which promptly slid from their slick grasps and fell to the floor with a thud. Harry moved over to the body, kneeling beside it, just as did Lupin. It was hard to make out any details as the whole body was covered in greenish-gray goop. Harry and Lupin wiped the slime off the body's face.

And there lay Sirius Black, his eyes closed and his chest not rising. He was like a flesh statue: an image of Sirius without the years of Dementors leeching his good looks; an image of Sirius whole and healthy, even if not alive. Harry felt his heart burst.

"Why isn't he breathing?" Harry asked anxiously.

"He has no soul to give his body the energy to live. That's what we have to do now," Contessa said. "The potion was the easy part, Harry."

Behind her, the gray smoky substance of the Netherworld roiled and swirled like never before. "How--how do we do this?" Harry asked, standing up and staring at her.

"You and Snape must take my hands. I will lead your spirits into the Netherworld. I must remain at the gate. Once there, use his knowledge and familiarity to find Sirius's soul and spirit and then come back. I can't tell you what will happen because no one has ever done anything like this before," Contessa said, her voice trembling a bit. Kaw fluttered over to perch on top of the mirror. He was watching everyone quite shrewdly.

"Snape? Why him?" Harry asked, turning to Snape, who had gone rather pale.

"Because I'm the most closely related person to him here who knew him best," Snape said darkly.

"You hate him! How can you be the relative who knew him best?" Harry cried.

"Just because you hate someone doesn't mean you don't know or understand them," Contessa said neutrally. "He's your best chance of getting in and out quickly. The Snapes were always known for being able to contact the dead in the ancient days."

"Harry, be careful," Lupin said gently, squeezing his shoulder. "If it's too dangerous, leave. Don't waste time."

"Good luck, Harry. Be safe!" Hermione said fervently.

"Good luck, mate. See you in a bit, okay?" Ron said, looking anxious.

"Let's get this over with," Snape said darkly, walking over to stand in front of Contessa. Behind her swirled the Netherworld. Harry almost thought he saw a face in there, the face of a beautiful woman with one violet and one green eye.

Contessa held out her hands. She was pale and tight-lipped. Harry took one hand and Snape took the other. Her eyes were closed as she moved backwards, toward the mirror. She opened her eyes right before bumping into it. The gray of her eyes seemed the same as roiling, boiling swirls of the Netherworld.

And then she stepped back and her body was absorbed into the mirror. Harry felt something violently tug at him. Not tugging at his body, but tugging at his soul. He felt pain like he'd never felt before, not even under the Cruciatus Curse. His spirit was torn from his soul, leaving only the thinnest, most fragile of cords as he slipped into the mirror with Contessa, leaving his body behind. He could feel Snape beside him, screaming without a voice.

There was pain, cold, and then finally a very white light. Harry lost all sense of being and slipped into nothingness.

When Harry opened his eyes, he was lying on the ground. Well, not a ground; there was no bottom, but it felt firm--if he even could use the word "feel" in here.

Harry stood up, and it was like he was standing on smoke, surrounded by smoke. He was very cold and he felt very alone. He spun around and saw Snape rising to his feet as well, looking as pale and shaken as Harry must look. His eyes met Harry's for just a moment and for the first time since Harry had ever met him, there was no hate in those cold, black eyes of his. Then Snape turned his face, yanking his gaze violently

from Harry's. He made a small noise as he looked at something just behind them. Harry turned and looked as well.

There was Contessa, or what looked like Contessa. Her entire body looked to be made of black smoke, which roiled and coursed around her undefined form, dissipating into the swirls of gray smoke around them. Her head rolled around and, if Harry could be any judge of her smoky expression, she seemed to be in excruciating pain. Behind her was a white doorway and Harry could catch glimpses of Lupin's worried expression, Draco pacing, Hermione's concerned face, and Ron chewing his nails.

"You must hurry."

Harry looked around and realized that it was Contessa's voice--but it didn't come from her smoky black form. It was just her echoing, bodiless voice, coming from nowhere and yet everywhere.

"I can't hold the door open forever. Find Sirius Black and return. Hurry," she told them.

Snape nodded and reached his hand out to Harry. "Grab my arm, Potter, or you'll get separated and lost," he said harshly. He made a face when Harry grabbed his wrist, but turned forward and began walking. They left Contessa's smoky, inky black body to writhe in agony.

"Sirius Black!" Snape shouted. "Black!"

He called Sirius's name aimlessly, walking around like Contessa once had, trying to peer into the smoke for Sirius. Then something strange happened--well, stranger. The smoke coiled around them and Harry could see something--something that happened long ago.

Harry suddenly felt something strange tingle throughout him, a connection was made by hand to wrist, and Harry was painfully made aware of Snape's memories as they washed over him in rippling tides, more violently than any Pensieve. It was as though calling Sirius's name had ripped Snape's oldest memories of Sirius out of him for Harry to see.

Everything shifted and melted.

Snape was a small boy, painfully thin and sniffing miserably. His black hair was washed and his whole body looked surprisingly clean. He was, however, wearing

shabby gray-blue robes. He looked to be about four or five, maybe younger.

In front of him stood two boys. One was about his age, tall and good-looking with soft black hair and shining gray eyes. Next to him was a petulant child with black hair and brown eyes, curling his lip cruelly at Snape. Harry realized with a jolt this was a very young Sirius and standing next to him, his younger brother, Regulus.

"Mama says you have bad blood," Regulus sniffed, settling himself on a chair. It looked like they were in the Drawing Room of Number Twelve, Grimmauld Place. Only the place was perfectly clean and twice as foreboding as it had been in disrepair.

Snape said nothing, only continuing to rub his nose. He seemed to be one of those children that never stopped producing snot, and it was getting all over his sleeve.

"Crying like a little girl, just because I pushed you. What a whinger," Sirius sneered, crossing his arms.

"It hurt," sniffled Snape, sounding pathetic and tearful. "Why don't you want to play with me?"

"Sniveling baby. I don't play with riffraff like you," Sirius said haughtily, sounding like he was quoting someone--his mother, probably.

"We're cousins. I thought we were supposed to play together," Snape sniffled, reaching out and grabbing the sleeve of Sirius's robe.

"Stupid, sniveling scumblood! I'm not your cousin!" Sirius said, looking disgusted as he shoved Snape onto the floor, causing the small boy to cry again.

"Mama says so," Regulus said from his chair. "She says you're a worthless scumblood, just like your father."

Snape only cried harder, rubbing at his face and smearing snot and tears all over himself. Harry looked at the cruel sneer on his godfather's face and then turned to the crying little boy that was Snape. And he felt pity like he never had when he saw Snape's memories in the Pensieve.

"Sniveling Severus! Snivellus!" Sirius cried triumphantly. "Snivellus! Crying, nasty, ugly, ickle Snivellus!"

Snape continued to wail in misery.

"Honestly, Sorrow, if you can't keep that child quiet! As worthless as his father! Looks just like him!" Mrs. Black said, striding in and glaring hatefully at Snape. She was much younger than her portrait and could be described as a handsome woman. "Stop that, you stupid boy! Honestly, Sirius and Regulus never go on like that."

"He's fine, Capella. He's just a sensitive boy, is all," crooned a dark-haired woman. She had a bruise that was suspiciously hand-shaped on her cheek, but she was a very lovely woman all the same. She bent down and picked up Snape, cradling him in her arms. She had very long, thick black hair that he promptly began to twirl around his small fingers with the adoration that only a son could have for his mother. There was something about her that reminded Harry of Contessa, though he could not say why. Perhaps it was the hair.

"Sensitive! Is that what they call that miserable excuse of your husband? That worthless, gambling wastrel? He's blown away his entire family fortune! He'll start on that boy's tuition next, you'll see. And then he'll fall in with Aurelius Malfoy. Malfoy doesn't play games, Sorrow. If Septimius can't pay him back, Malfoy will kill him. He won't just take it like Mulciber did."

"He's nothing like his father, Capella. He's a good boy," Snape's mother said gently, causing Snape to fall silent as he rested his head on his mother's shoulder, occasionally sniffing and looking angrily at Sirius, who was staring up at his own mother, his arms crossed and a pout on his handsome little boy face.

"Worthless, just like Septimius. Mark my words, Sorrow. I'll loan you no more money after this. You let that scumblood hit you. If Alcor ever raised a hand to me, I'd have hexed him into oblivion. You'd do well to leave him, and probably that sniveling child, too. We may be cousins, but I have no tolerance for the family you married into."

"You have no tolerance for anything, Capella," Mrs. Snape said in a quiet voice.

"What was that?" Mrs. Black asked.

"Never mind. Thank you for the loan, Capella," Mrs. Snape said stiffly, walking out and taking Snape with her.

"Snivellus!" Sirius hissed at Snape as he left.

The scene melted and shifted.

"Snivellus!" Sirius cried. He was much older this time. He looked to be about eleven or twelve. Beside him stood James Potter, around the same age. Just behind them were a troubled-looking young Remus Lupin and curious-looking Peter Pettigrew, poking his head out to get a better view. On the ground in front of them was Severus Snape, at the same age they were, crying and trying to wipe the mud off his robes. He was lying in the middle of a mud puddle, somewhere on the Hogwarts grounds.

After the last bit of Snape's memories involving his father that Harry had seen, he was almost afraid of this one. Yet, he didn't want to leave. It wasn't every day he got to see his father--even if his father was only eleven in this memory.

"What's that?" James asked Sirius.

"Snivellus. Look at him. Sniveling and crying like a baby just because you pushed him. Like he always does."

"You know him?" James asked in surprise.

Sirius paused. "No. Of course not," he said quickly.

James nodded and glared back at the sniveling Snape. "You ever call my friend a half-blood again, and I'll thump your face in but good!" he said.

"Really, James, it doesn't matter," Lupin said quietly.

"It does matter! It matters to me! I'm not going to let people like him say things like that! I can't stand people like him!" James shouted.

Snape wiped his face and glared at James. James glared back.

"I don't have anything else to say to you," James spat and then turned on his heel. Lupin and Pettigrew followed, Lupin casting Snape guarded looks. Sirius, however, remained behind. He knelt down in front of Snape, waiting until the other three boys were out of sight until speaking.

"If you ever tell anyone we're related, Snivellus, I'll feed you piece by piece to the giant squid. I'm not your cousin. You're not mine. We don't know each other. Got it?"

"You'd rather spend your time with blood traitors and half-bloods, then?" Snape spat.

Sirius glared at him. "Look, I don't care what your father did that put my mother in such a strop with him. I don't know hardly anything about you other than my mother is convinced you're as worthless as a Mudblood. All I know is you're an ugly, greasy little git who stinks of Malfoy. You live with them, don't you? With that smarmy Slytherin prefect's family--Lucius is his name, isn't it? What are you, his lapdog?"

Snape scowled at him but said nothing.

"Just remember what I said. Keep your mouth shut," Sirius said, standing up after splashing a bit more mud on Snape. He strode away, joining up with his friends.

"I won't cry," Snape said quietly to himself, wiping at his face and spreading mud along it. "I won't cry anymore. You'll see. I hate you. I hate you all."

The scene shifted and melted.

"Just poke the knob with a stick. And then you'll find out what we do every month," Sirius explained. Pettigrew stood right by him, grinning and giggling. They both looked to be about sixteen. Sirius was even more handsome than he had been when Harry saw him Snape's Pensieve memory, his black hair falling artistically in his eyes and a grin on his face that would have melted any female's heart, had there been any in the room.

Snape looked at them suspiciously and then out of a window and down at the Whomping Willow. "Why are you telling me this?" he asked suspiciously.

"Well, I suppose we might as well let you find out sooner rather than later."

"There's a special surprise down there!" Pettigrew giggled until Sirius elbowed him and gave him a warning glare.

Snape's curiosity and caution were warring with each other. Curiosity obviously won, but instead he said, "Not interested."

"Of course. If that's how you feel, Severus," Sirius said smoothly and then grinned over at Pettigrew. "Let's go."

Snape watched them go, biting his lip and then staring down at the Whomping Willow again.

The scene shifted and melted.

Snape screamed, backing up quickly in the tunnel, staring in fear at a scrabbling wolfen form that Harry knew only too well. Lupin roared in hunger at Snape, trying desperately to claw at him. Snape wasn't moving fast enough, and one of his paws caught Snape's arms, dragging him forward. Snape screamed again, a high-pitched wail of mortal terror.

"Repellus Lupus!" cried a voice Harry instantly recognized. James Potter's voice.

Lupin flew back, dropping Snape half in, half out of the tunnel. James grabbed Snape by the scruff of his neck and dragged him back. Snape was frozen in fear--much like Draco--and was barely moving. James was muttering.

"Going to kill Sirius . . . how fucking daft . . . could have died . . . stupid prat!" James said, dragging Snape out of the tunnel and onto the cold Earth. He smacked the knob and froze the tree, dragging Snape by the back of his robes away from the tree itself.

"And you?" James cried, glaring imperiously down at Snape. "How fucking stupid do you have to be to fall for a trick like that?"

"Werewolf! Lupin's a werewolf!" Snape babbled.

Sirius and Pettigrew came into view. Both were laughing furiously at Snape as James dropped him, glaring angrily at Sirius, and raising his wand. "Sirius, how could you? He could have died!" James exploded, looking genuinely upset.

"What is going on here?" cried a booming voice as a wand brilliantly illuminated the area James, Sirius, Pettigrew, and Snape were at. Pettigrew squealed and slipped off into the shadows, no doubt to transform into a rat and escape. Dumbledore stepped into view.

"Tried to kill me! Black tried to eat me!" Snape said, breathing heavily and crawling away from James. He wasn't making a bit of sense, confusing Sirius and Lupin. James and Sirius had twin expressions of guilt, both frozen to where they stood.

"What?" Dumbledore asked, looking at James and Sirius. James turned his face, working his jaw. Sirius audibly gulped.

"Black! He tricked me! They all tricked me! Lupin! He's a werewolf! He tried to eat me!" Snape said, pulling himself to his feet.

"I dragged him out. No harm done," James said sullenly.

"It was just a joke," Sirius said slowly.

Dumbledore blinked. "Come along, Severus. I'll have Madam Pomfrey check you over and brew you something to help you sleep. James, Sirius--I would like you both to join me in my office in two hours for some explanations," he said, ushering a trembling Snape away and giving them a stern glare.

The scene melted and shifted. There was something strange, something unnatural about the connection Harry felt, joined to Snape by hand to wrist. He could see things, so many different things, as though Snape's memories were flooding out of him and into Harry. It didn't make sense and Harry couldn't understand it, but it happened all the same. Harry could see a million things rushing him all at once.

Snape at the age of three, laughing as his mother spun him around in her arms while his hook-nosed father sullenly watched them both. Snape at the age of four, clutching a stuffed fox and walking away from a castle with his mother and father, both carting bags stuffed full of things. Snape at the age of five, sitting in a small, dirty flat, watching his mother cry on a chair. Her face was freshly bruised. Snape at the age of six, watching as his mother ladled out a horrid-looking soup into his bowl. Snape at the age of seven, watching other children play on a playground, ignoring him. Snape at the age of eight, watching his father practice Dark magic. Snape at the age of nine, watching his father chase his mother across the room, screaming at her nonsensically. Snape at the age of ten, standing by his parents' graves and looking up as a handsome man with long, golden hair and Malfoy features put a hand on his skinny shoulder. Snape at the age of eleven, begging someone, anyone be his friend. Snape at the age of twelve, glaring hatefully at James Potter, surrounded by half the school as he proudly told them he'd been selected for Chaser. Snape at the age of thirteen, gazing adoringly at a beautiful, young Bellatrix Lestrange who pointed at a spinning broomstick. He turned from her and gave the broomstick a look of doubt. Snape at the age of fourteen, staring down at a squalling infant being held in the arms of a golden-haired woman with Malfoy features and a bit of tremble to her arms. Beside her sat the same, golden-haired man who had touched Snape's shoulder at his parents' gravesite. Snape at the age of fifteen, sitting in the middle of the Hogwarts grounds as a crowd of people moved away from him. He looked around and found a pair of graying underpants, looking like he was fighting off angry tears. Snape at the age of sixteen, breathing heavily as Madam Pomfrey handed him a cup full of something steaming. Snape at the age of seventeen, crushing a pamphlet on Healer Apprenticeship in his hand and throwing the wad of paper across his dormitory angrily.

Harry felt dizzy, more waves of memories spinning over him. Snape's memories were more like flashes of a strobe light now, making Harry sick with the movement--not to mention the content.

There was a flash of Snape as a young man, putting on the mask of a Death Eater and picking up a wand. Then a flash of Snape receiving the Dark Mark as Voldemort traced it onto Snape's skin with his wand, causing tears of pain to well up in Snape's eyes. Another flash and Snape was laughing with the other Death Eaters over steaming, dead bodies. He moved away from the group and took off his mask to vomit behind a corner. A final flash of Snape leveling his wand at an unrecognizable man dragging his body across the floor to try to escape, leaving a trail of thick, dark blood as he did so.

"Avada Kedavra," Snape whispered.

Avada Kedavra. How many times had he said it? A multitude of faces swam into Harry's view. Most of them Harry didn't know. But there was one face that stuck out in Snape's memories.

Regulus Black.

Snape quietly approaching Regulus, who was standing in a bedroom in Number Twelve, Grimmauld Place--Draco's bedroom. Regulus turned, just as Snape whispered the Killing Curse and killed his own cousin. Regulus's body slumped to the ground and Snape stared at him dispassionately for a while. He then brazenly walked out of the room as Mrs. Black began to scream at him, flying at him with wand in hand.

"Expelliarmus," he said coldly, sending her wand flying across the room before she had a chance to hex him.

"You killed him! You killed my son!" Capella Black began to wail, sinking to the floor and staring inside Regulus's room and at his wide-eyed corpse.

"The Dark Lord decided he was worthless, much like you once decided I was," Snape told her silkily, whispering in her ear and smiling cruelly before Disapparating.

Harry was beginning to feel sick. He couldn't take anymore of this. But there was one more memory he was forced to watch.

"The Potters," Snape told Dumbledore. He was wearing his Death Eater hooded cloak, but he had taken off his mask. They were in a dark room somewhere, without windows.

Dumbledore began to pace. "Are you sure?"

"Positive. The Lestranges, the Malfoys, and myself have all been assigned to try to find them. He was even trying to use Narcissa and the little Lestrangle girl's Necromantic Soulsight, but they can't find them any better than we can. He seems to be getting closer, though. I think there is a traitor--the Potters' Secret Keeper."

"No, I don't believe it," Dumbledore said, looking concerned.

"I trust it wasn't the werewolf they made Secret Keeper? I made it quite clear how easily he could be turned by Rodolphus or Rabastan. Lestrangle males have a long history of controlling werewolves."

"No, it wasn't him."

"Then it's probably Black. The Dark Lord is making his move soon. I don't know how, when, or why, but he will be acting soon."

Dumbledore suddenly looked worried. "Tonight is Halloween!" he said.

Snape shrugged. "So?"

"Battles between great beings are fought on Halloween!" Dumbledore cried, Disapparating abruptly, leaving behind a very confused-looking Snape.

Harry was suddenly back in the middle of the swirling gray smoke of the Netherworld, clutching at Snape's wrist and staring at his twisted expression of pain. "You had no right to see!" he screamed and ripped his wrist out of Harry's grasp.

Harry cried out in surprise, and he felt himself being blown away, as though he was in a hurricane. He was lost and alone, and he was drowning in the cold smoke of a place that wasn't. He felt himself land on something hard and passed into unconsciousness.

"You should probably wake up."

Harry sat up, grabbing his head in pain. He was surprised his glasses were still on his face, but then reckoned they weren't really. It was all in his head. He looked up and saw a little girl sitting on a rock just ahead of him. He was in the middle of a beautiful glen, with a small pool beside him and shady, flowering trees surrounding him. The place had no real definition to it, yet it seemed real enough. Harry tried to focus on the little girl.

She was probably about seven. Her bushy, red hair had been forced into pigtails and she was peering at Harry with thoughtful pale green eyes. Her nose was long and her face was splattered with freckles. She had a firm chin and buckteeth. Her eyebrows were thick and curved into a rather quirky expression. She wore a pale green dress that matched her eyes. She was a cute, if not pretty child.

"What is this place?"

"It's not a place. If it was, it would be the same place you were at. To suggest this is a place would suggest that space and time exist here, which they don't. This place isn't real, at least not in a sense you can comprehend."

"How much time has gone by?" Harry asked nervously, not entirely understanding the girl's answer and deciding to leave it alone.

"I told you, time doesn't exist here, at least not like in the living world. It's only been a few minutes in your time. But you still shouldn't waste it. Spend too long here, and you'll be stuck," the little girl said.

"There was this guy I was with, but he's gone now. Do you know where he? It was weird. We were touching and he called out Sirius's name . . . Next thing you know, I was seeing bits and pieces of his life."

"Funny things happen when you touch people in the Netherworld. He hasn't gone anywhere. You just can't see him," the little girl shrugged, not looking terrifically impressed with the oddity of it all.

"I'm Harry Potter," Harry said politely, holding out his hand.

The little girl gave him a look like he was a complete idiot. The expression on her face seemed very familiar. "You're not supposed to touch me, not here. You'd channel me and that wouldn't do anyone any good, especially since I haven't been born yet," she said.

"What's your name?" Harry asked, withdrawing his hand at her scornful glance.

"You can call me Alice for right now," she said.

"Why are you here, if you haven't been born yet?"

"I'm waiting," Alice said.

"Waiting for what?"

"Waiting to see if I can be born, stupid."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, I might not be born, might'n't I? Especially if you--never mind," she sighed. Though she appeared to be easily half his age, she was talking to Harry like he was a small, rather retarded child.

"Are you--are you by any chance related to Ron Weasley? You look just like him. You sort of look like a girl I know, too. Hermione Granger. Are you their daughter?"

"I told you, I haven't been born yet. It's easier for you to see me like this. You understand it better. I'm a possibility, not a reality," she said simply.

"I don't understand."

"That much is obvious. If it's easier for your tiny brain to comprehend it, you could say I could possibly be their daughter. But only if certain things work out."

Harry stared at her.

"You won't tell Mummy and Daddy that you met me, will you? It might ruin things if you do," she said, leaning forward.

"I promise," Harry said numbly.

"Morganna wants to see you now. I'm supposed to take you to her."

"Look, er, Alice, I lost the guy that I was with. I don't know where he is and I need to find--"

"Morganna says you'd better come. She has what you're looking for," Alice said in a singsong voice and began to skip away, her red pigtails bouncing up and down.

Harry followed her down a path in between the flowering trees he hadn't seen before. The trees grew steadily darker as he walked along. The air was colder and he shivered. Up ahead, Alice continued to skip along, singing a strange little song to herself. It sounded suspiciously like a Muggle song Harry had heard thumping out of Dudley's stereo this past summer.

"I'm a firestarter, twisted firestarter! You're the firestarter, twisted firestarter! I'm the bitch you hated, filth infatuated--yeah! I'm the pain you tasted, well intoxicated!" she sang loudly. Not only did it sound wrong coming out of the lips of a little girl, but Harry wondered where she'd heard the song. Then again, nothing made sense in this place.

The trees closed in and a pale mist hung in the air, causing Harry to shiver. Alice continued to skip and hum, as though they were going down a row of apple trees rather than twisted, black trees that radiated menace. The blossoms that hung from their limbs were blood red. He began to see faces in the pale mist, swimming before him like fish.

He saw Contessa's face for a moment, looking pale and shaken. "I didn't miss. I hit exactly who I wanted to hit," she said and then began to laugh madly.

Bellatrix's face swam into view, smiling maliciously. "I want his eyes. His mother's eyes. So pretty," she crooned.

And then Lupin's face. His expression was twisted in pain. "No . . . no, I am not an animal!" he moaned.

And then Hermione's face, her expression tearful. "Oh, I was so worried about you two! We thought you'd both been killed," she sobbed.

And then Ron's face. His face was milky white and his freckles stood out drastically. "Did you ever think it would come to this, Harry?" he asked.

And then Neville's face, tears streaking down his face. "I won't let you beat me. Not like you did my parents," he cried defiantly.

And then Sirius's face, pale and streaked with tears. "Moony? Wake up, Moony! Don't

be dead! Please, don't be dead!" he moaned.

And then Tracey Davis's face, a gentle smile on her lips. "It's all right, Harry. He believes in you," she said.

And then--most important of all--Draco's face. Unlike the other faces, his was turned to Harry. He had a serious expression. "I thought Gryffindors were supposed to be brave. Are you just going to let him? You're the great Harry Potter, aren't you?" he asked.

And lastly, a face that had given Harry many a nightmare. It was the cold, livid face of Lord Voldemort, his slitted red eyes gazing at Harry, his sneer revealing pointed teeth. "I am going to make you suffer like no other human being has suffered, Harry Potter. I know your weakness now. It is your friends and your loved ones. And I'm going to make you suffer by making them suffer," he laughed, his high, cold peals of mirth chasing Harry out of the dark grove and into another glen.

This glen was remarkably darker than the one in which Harry had awoken. The dark trees surrounded it and the grass was cold and bare. In the center of the glen was a silvery pool. Sitting on a rock in the middle of a pool was a woman who reminded Harry of Bellatrix or Contessa, if either had been born physically perfect. She had long, black hair that tumbled down in waves and intense eyes, one violet, one green. Her body was perfect and her skin like ivory. She wore no clothes, but Harry felt no desire for her at all. In fact, there was something about her that set Harry's teeth on edge.

"Enjoy the show?" she asked Harry coolly.

"What are you talking about?" Harry asked, shuddering under her gaze.

"The show I put on for you. I thought it might put things into better perspective for you when you make your choice. Funny things happen when you touch someone else in this realm. I just directed it to do what I wanted," she explained.

Harry suddenly realized that standing on either side of the pool, facing the dark-haired woman was Sirius Black and Severus Snape, standing stark still, like statues. "Sirius!" Harry cried and tried to run to him, but Alice stood in his way. She looked as stubborn and resolute as her potential mother often did. The naked woman's thick red lips were curving at the sight of Harry. Sirius did not move or react, nor did Snape.

"If you touch them, they'll disappear," Alice said staunchly, crossing her arms. Harry

looked over at the woman.

"I am Morganna," the woman said. "And you are Harry Potter."

"Morgan Le Fay?" he asked.

"That was one of my seven names, yes."

"How do you know me?" Harry asked her.

"There was one time when you, too, waited here, much like Alice does. I know all the spirits, living and dead, Muggle and wizard. I am the guardian of this place, the gatekeeper between life and death."

"Well, thank you for finding my godfather. We'll be going now," Harry said, trying to move to him again, but Alice shook her head fiercely.

"You should know that I'm fond of these two. The last of the Snapes. The last of the Blacks. Such powerful, potent men filled with such dark natures. I love men with dark natures," Morganna chuckled.

"Bully for you."

"After all, when your little spat with Voldemort is said and done, I will have at least one dark-natured spirit returning to my realm. After all, neither can live while the other survives."

If Harry's body had been there, his blood would have run cold. Morganna was looking less beautiful and more predatory. Harry decided he didn't like her one bit. "We need to go home. Your descendant, Contessa LeStrange, is waiting for us," he said.

"The last of the Lestranges is weak. She won't last much longer. Shameful, really, that my last female descendant be so pathetic."

"Well, then we should be off then. Nice meeting you and all," Harry tried to move around Alice, but she wouldn't let him past. He was half-tempted to push her out of the way, but her warning about touching her stuck in his mind.

"You can only bring back one. The other one I will keep to amuse myself. I will bless one with death, the other with life. You must make your choice. Hurry now. Touch the one you wish to take back," Morganna said simply. Alice moved out of Harry's

way, walked into the pool, and then climbed up onto the rock and Morganna's lap. Morganna held her maternally, smiling viciously at Harry.

Harry felt the world crumble beneath him. "What--what do you mean?" he gasped.

"You know exactly what I mean, last of the Potters. I'll put it in simpler terms, only to humor you. Choose Sirius Black and Severus Snape will die. Choose Severus Snape and Sirius Black will die. It should be an easy choice for you, shouldn't it?"

Harry gasped, clutching his chest, for it suddenly began to hurt. This wasn't right. It wasn't supposed to happen like this! He wasn't supposed to have to choose. He wasn't supposed to be responsible for someone's death.

It was an easy choice. Morganna was right. Anything for Sirius. Sirius was all that mattered. Snape be damned. He hated him in any case. Let him die. Harry began to move towards Sirius. Morganna's and Alice's eyes glittered at him.

Something stopped Harry right before he put his hand on Sirius's arm. His heart was bleeding and he couldn't make it stop. He loved Sirius; he loved him like he had loved no other human being. Sirius was his father, his brother, and his godfather all rolled into one. Harry's life had been so empty, so painful since Sirius had left. Harry had thought he was going to die of grief when he thought Sirius had died. The only thing that had allowed him to act normal was the hope, the prayer, the dream that Sirius could come back to him--to fill that empty gaping hole his parents had left.

But Sirius had fallen into the Veil and, by all rights, should have died. Snape was a living man. A living man that Harry hated. A man that Harry resented. A man that represented everything that was human and fallible in Harry's father and godfather. A man that had devoted his existence to making Harry's life as miserable as possible. A spiteful, hateful man with poor hygiene. No one would truly miss him.

And yet . . . Snape was still a human being and his memories--still fresh in Harry's mind--stirred around Harry's conscience. Snape's memories and the pity they engendered in Harry warred with Harry's love for Sirius. Snape had come here to guide Harry. He had come to help, not to sacrifice his life. He was a living man, with a living body. He had a right--if not more of a right--than Sirius to live.

But Sirius had a right to live, too. It wasn't his fault Bellatrix had Stunned him into the Veil. It was Harry's fault. He had caused all this. He had to fix what he did wrong.

But if he sacrificed Snape's life to get what he wanted, would he make it worse?

Snape was alive and Sirius should have died. If Harry chose Sirius and Snape died, would it be anything less than murder?

"It's an easy choice. The man you love? Or the man you hate?" Morganna said, sounding amused. Harry hated her like he'd never hated anyone in that moment.

"Such a passionate boy," she sighed, looking delighted.

He had come here to save Sirius. After all the work they had done, after all that Harry suffered, he deserved to bring Sirius back. What would Lupin, Ron, and Hermione say if he returned without Sirius?

What would they say if he returned without Snape?

"Make the right choice, Harry."

"You know which one it is. Look inside your heart, son."

The voices of his mother and father. Harry looked up and around, but they were nowhere to be seen. His eyes filled with tears. They were right. He did know what the right choice was.

And it broke his heart when he grabbed Snape's arm, knowing he had just let Sirius finally, truly die. Gray smoke swirled around them and the last thing Harry saw was Morganna, smiling at him.

Harry woke with a start, gasping for breath as he sat up. Lupin was helping him up, looking at him with concern.

"Snape!" Harry cried, looking around the room in confusion.

"He's fine. He woke up before you did," Lupin said gently. Harry caught a glimpse of Snape sitting up, breathing heavily. His eyes were very wide. Harry wondered if Snape now owed him a wizard's debt, but then realized had he chosen Sirius, he would have effectively murdered Snape. There could be no debt, since his life should never have been in danger. And the agony of that decision tore through Harry's being and he moaned in misery.

His eyes rested on the mirror. It was shattered. Beneath it lay Contessa's body, cold and still. Draco was holding her wrist, looking near tears.

"I can't find a pulse," he moaned.

"No, that's not right," Harry shook his head. "It's not right. She was only supposed to keep Sirius."

"What do you mean?" Lupin asked, looking pale.

Harry felt like he should be crying, but he felt very numb. "He's dead. I had to choose," he moaned. Lupin looked confused and worried.

Ron was staring at Kaw, who was still flying around the room. He had a large, sphere of light in his talons. "Look!" he cried as Kaw dive-bombed Contessa, dropping the sphere of light into her face.

"Contessa! Sirius!" Kaw cried, circling the room madly.

She sat up abruptly, putting a hand over her mouth and turning to look at Harry. She had a look of alarm on her face. She then stood up and ran to Sirius's clone, kneeling over him and kissing him.

Kissing him?

His chest rose and he began to scream. Something that glowed passed from Contessa's mouth to his, like a reverse Dementor's Kiss, and she sat back as his body convulsed. Harry, Lupin, Ron, and Hermione rushed forward.

Sirius's body stopped convulsing and he twitched once more, his chest rising and falling. The good looks that his cloned body had mimicked were now ruined, as though it had been his soul that was ruined by the Dementors, not his body. But Harry didn't care.

Sirius Black opened his eyes and smiled at Harry. "You chose right. Your parents said to tell you that you chose right and they're very proud of you, Harry," he croaked.

Harry threw himself on top of Sirius, tripping over Contessa's legs. Lupin was enthusiastically embracing him. Sirius winced a bit, put his arms around both of them, and sat up.

"Oh, Sirius, I thought I killed you! She made me choose! She made me choose and I thought I'd never see you again!"

Sirius coughed and didn't answer, while everyone else gathered around, too excited about Sirius's words to pay much attention to what Harry said. Instead, Contessa spoke to him, in a voice that wasn't hers. Harry turned and realized her eyes were not gray. One was green and the other was violet.

"You made the selfless choice, Harry Potter. I rewarded you for your virtue. I do so like virtuous, dark-natured men," Morganna smiled and then the violet and green faded from Contessa's eyes, leaving behind a gray that matched Sirius's.

"Not to be rude, but who the hell are you two?" Sirius asked, staring at Draco and Contessa.

"Sirius, I'd like to introduce you to your cousins, Contessa Lestrangle and Draco Malfoy. They helped bring you back. So did Snape," Lupin said gently.

"Ah, damn, the first girl I've kissed in fifteen years and it's my bloody cousin?" Sirius sighed. "I'd say that was rather disgusting, but I'm covered in some sort of gray-green goop right now, so my feelings on disgusting aren't quite back to normal."

Lupin and Harry began to laugh. "I'm sorry, that's what passes for a 'thank you' from Sirius Black," Lupin laughed.

"Gratitude later. Sleep first. Then clothes. And food. What day is it?"

"It's Christmas. Christmas day," Hermione said reverently, staring at the clock. Harry could hardly believe it, but barely half an hour had passed by since midnight.

"Happy Christmas!" Sirius said in an exhausted voice.

"Happy Christmas, Sirius," Harry grinned, hugging him again. Ron and Hermione did the same, each hugging Sirius as enthusiastically as Harry and Lupin had. Snape and Draco were helping Contessa to her feet.

"Bed," Snape said in a tired voice to all of them. "Talk later."

Contessa nodded in agreement. Draco sort of pushed her and Snape along since they were both rather wobbly on their feet. When Harry tried to stand, he realized he was a bit wobbly, too, and Ron had to help him up while Lupin helped up Sirius after

covering him with his new cloak. Hermione went to help Contessa before she fell over and Snape was leaning on Draco.

"Happy! Christmas!" Kaw cried, soaring through the room and settling on Draco's shoulder. Harry wondered how Kaw had gotten a hold of Contessa's and Sirius's souls and then suddenly remembered something Hagrid once said in a lesson about crows being the ferrymen of souls to their destinations, a link between the living and the dead.

As they limped off to bed, Harry looked over at Sirius, who was already falling asleep on Lupin's shoulder. He smiled, feeling relieved. It was all over.

Or was it?

To be continued . . .

Chapter 19: Jigsaw

Author's Notes: Regina Nigellus and the Earnshaw family line belongs to La Fée Verte, my pureblood family tree partner in crime. Used with permission. If you would like to learn more about Regina, please read Love, Marriage and Politics in the 1800s by La Fée Verte, a Regina/Phineas story.

Chapter Nineteen:
Where Loyalties Lie

Harry woke up slowly, looking at the sleeping man on the bed next to his and smiling.

Sirius was sleeping on Dean's bed. The wonderful thing about Hogwarts being so empty is that no one noticed Harry, Ron, Lupin, and Sirius stagger up to the Gryffindor common room and collapse in Harry's dormitory for the night. Hermione had come in to check on them after helping Contessa to her room and Harry had seen her smile over Sirius.

Sirius had woken up after a few hours and had demanded a bath, since he was still covered in the goop from his Clone Concoction. He had to be helped into the shower since he was still weak. Harry was equally wiped out so Ron was drafted for the job since Lupin firmly declined, stating he would go get Sirius some food, since that was the other thing Sirius was demanding. Harry was unsurprised that Lupin declined to help Sirius bathe, since Harry certainly wouldn't help Draco bathe. It could lead to embarrassing results.

Sirius had then promptly fallen asleep after his shower, before Lupin returned with food. He was still sleeping when Harry woke up.

"Sirius. Sirius. Sirius! Wake up!" Harry called, having to repeat Sirius's name as he refused to wake up.

Sirius muttered, rolling over, hiding his head under the pillow, and sticking his bum into the air in protest.

"It's your first day back alive and you want to waste it sleeping?" Harry demanded, sitting up. He felt much refreshed this Christmas morning.

Sirius muttered something that Harry couldn't make out, but sounded rather rude. He then promptly covered himself in the blankets and buried his head deeper beneath the pillows.

Lupin, who was sitting on Neville's bed and had just woken up as well began to laugh. "Sirius, you lazy tramp, get up! Now I know where Draco gets it from. Are all the men in your family this lazy?"

Ron who was already sitting up in his bed began to grin. "Haven't you rested enough?" he asked Sirius.

Sirius sat up, pillows and blankets slipping away as he glared at Harry, Ron, and Lupin. "Horrid, cruel men, all of you. I haven't had a proper body to sleep in for months and all you want me to do is wake up?" he asked.

"Well, you can't have Christmas break--er, lunch, unless you wake up," Harry said sensibly, looking at the time.

"Ah, Hogwarts food!" he said joyously and then looked down. "Er, I haven't any clothes."

"I think we should all agree not to tell Dean there was a naked man sleeping in his bed during the holidays," Ron said.

Lupin laughed. "Well, a fugitive can hardly expect to arrive downstairs as he is. Change into Padfoot and let's go downstairs. There are not enough students here to be upset if we decide to eat downstairs, and most of them won't recognize me," he said with a smile.

Sirius nodded and changed into the big, bear-like dog that was his Animagus form and trotted over to Harry, panting and wagging his tail eagerly. Harry laughed and got dressed, as did Ron. The four Gryffindors all walked, or trotted, down to the Great Hall. They opened the doors and walked in, finding a smaller Christmas table set for thirty at which Dumbledore sat at the head, surrounded by a few teachers and a few students. A delicious lunch was spread out on the table. Dumbledore stood up and beamed at them as Hermione jumped up and began to hug Sirius joyfully.

"Si-Si-Sir--" Professor McGonagall cried, coming to her feet before Lupin clapped a hand over her mouth and smiled at her.

"Snuffles is back, Professor McGonagall," he told her mildly.

"Snuffles?" she asked in wonder, and then made a funny noise as Sirius tackled her and began to lick her face.

"Easy, Snuffles!" Lupin said sternly. "She was in the hospital just before the summer!"

"Blimey, how did Sir--er, Snuffles get back?" Hagrid roared, rushing over and patting Sirius in wonder, who began to lick his hand.

"Er, ask Professor Snape and Contessa," Lupin said. Snape and Contessa were both sitting at the table as well. Snape was determinedly ignoring Sirius. Harry stared at him, wondering if he would say anything about what had happened in the Netherworld, but Snape was pretending Harry didn't exist. Contessa was watching with disgust as Sirius hopped onto a chair and began to scarf down the food that appeared in front of him. Draco, who was sitting by Contessa, watched Sirius with great interest, however.

"Has that animal had all its shots?" Contessa asked coolly.

"Maybe he should be neutered," Snape suggested even more coolly.

Sirius growled at Snape as Harry, Ron, and Lupin sat down. Lupin sat down next to Morpheus, who was watching Sirius with a raised eyebrow.

"Am I missing something?" Morpheus asked Lupin.

"You have no idea," Lupin said, bursting into laughter as Sirius spat a turkey bone at Snape and accidentally knocked Contessa's goblet over and spilled the red liquid all over her lap.

"Definitely should be neutered," Contessa hissed, mopping up the mess with her wand and glaring hatefully at Sirius.

Draco, who had laughed just as loudly as the rest of the table, reached over and patted Sirius's head. "Good dog," he said with a vicious smile.

Sirius gave a joyful yelp and returned to eating.

McGonagall and Hagrid gaped at him in wonder. Dumbledore grinned at Sirius and

then held up his goblet. Everyone else held up theirs, except for Snape, who continued to eat, and Contessa, who was only just refilling her goblet. Draco--instead of holding up his goblet--was offering Sirius one of his extra turkey legs.

"To Snuffles, who despite being a dog certainly has nine lives," Dumbledore said, toasting him. Sirius gave an impressive "woof" and returned to his dinner with a single-mindedness that reminded Harry of Godric.

Harry found himself grinning ear to ear and felt that all was quite right with the world.

"Now, do we really have to spend the holidays here?" Sirius asked gloomily, pulling absently at the red robes Dumbledore had loaned him and sighing as they all slid out of the fireplace and brushed themselves off. Harry, Ron, Hermione, Draco, Lupin, and Contessa had arrived by Floo as well. They had all decided to enjoy the rest of the holiday at Sirius's place--after spending well over an hour explaining to McGonagall and Hagrid how Sirius managed to come back. Contessa and Draco had been willing to join them on Lupin's and Sirius's insistence, but Snape was neither invited nor seemed inclined to come. He did, however, give Contessa a reproving glare for going. Godric--having been retrieved from Lupin's room--was happily coiled around Harry's shoulders. Sirius--as he had upon meeting him--gave the snake a wary glance.

"If he has the power to turn into an animal, why didn't he choose something more sensible like a snake? Dogs are so . . . messy," Godric said. "Mind you, I wouldn't be opposed to him turning into a plump mouse."

"It's only okay to eat rat Animagi," Harry told Godric firmly.

"Well, as I said before, Sirius, you can't just very well be trotting all over Hogwarts and Hogsmeade in any form. People will know who you are," Lupin said mildly.

"This place isn't so bad now," Harry said. "Contessa redecorated."

Sirius looked around at his house in wonder as he took in the new color of the wood and the removal of the horrible paintings and other undesirable objects. He turned and grinned broadly at the large photograph of himself, Lupin, James, Pettigrew, and Lily over the fireplace. James and Lily winked at him.

"Look at all the dust!" Contessa said, sounding horrified. Harry looked around and

didn't really see any dust. "I'm going to have to clean this whole place again!"

"Clean! Dust! Again!" Kaw added, swooping around and landing on Harry's head, pecking at his hair.

"Regular life of the party, aren't you?" Sirius remarked drolly. "Thanks for the redecoration, by the way."

Lupin spoke up. "Since there's so many of us staying here, we'll have to bunk up again. I suppose I'll bunk with you, Sirius. Draco, you'll have to move into Harry's room. Contessa, you'll have to share with Hermione and Ginny so Mr. and Mrs. Weasley can stay in yours when the Weasleys come later today. Fred and George can have Buckbeak's old room. Bill, Fleur, Charlie, and Ana are coming over as well, and I imagine Bill and Fleur will want their own room. Charlie can share with his girlfriend, Ana. Percy will be coming, too, since he made up with his parents, and Ron can share with him."

"Oh no," Ron said forlornly while Hermione patted his back and giggled.

"What happened to Buckbeak?" Sirius asked. Harry realized he hadn't given poor Buckbeak a single thought since Sirius died and hadn't even noticed he was gone.

"Dumbledore was able to give Buckbeak a pardon, since Lucius is no longer manipulating things. He found a mate from what Hagrid told me and is staying in Africa somewhere."

And then it suddenly dawned on Harry he was going to be sharing a room with Draco. Draco had frozen when Lupin gave the new sleeping assignments. Harry gaped at him, wondering if he'd done it on purpose.

"I am not staying in Hermione's room. Hermione, you and Ginny can stay in mine," Contessa said sharply. Harry wondered why she never went into Hermione's room. She had gone in there only once to clean after Hermione left over the summer, and came out looking extremely angry.

"Well, we better get to settling in," Lupin said, giving Contessa an odd look.

"And to cleaning," Contessa said firmly.

Lupin sighed. "Well, we're going to need dinner, so since none of the rest of us can cook--"

--I can make beans on toast--" Sirius interjected but was cut off by Lupin.

--can cook anything worth having for Christmas dinner, why don't you just hop over to the kitchen? Some of us need to clean and some need to decorate for Christmas. I'll move things around and get out linen for all the people coming to stay for the rest of the holiday," Lupin finished.

Contessa nodded. "Fine," she said.

"And, er, could you, er, try not to be--"

"I shall make something disgustingly British and traditional since it pleases you so," she said darkly.

"Well, as much as I hate cleaning, we'd better get started. Sirius, why don't you and Harry get the Christmas decorations? The rest of us will clean, except for Draco, who will probably swirl a bit of dust around and whinge about being treated like a house elf," Hermione said, grinning slightly. Draco stuck his tongue out at her.

"Brilliant. My first day back alive and I get to clean, move things around, and put up Christmas decorations."

"No rest for the wicked, eh, Sirius?" Lupin said with a small smile.

"You know, I've had a very traumatic experience--which I don't remember--and you should have sympathy for me!"

"Well, if you don't remember it, how can it be traumatic?"

"Well, I remember falling into a cold place after my cousin Stunned me. And then I remember waking up to her daughter shoving her tongue down my throat. Traumatic."

Contessa, who was walking towards the kitchen spun around. "I did not shove my tongue down your throat or anywhere on your person! I was delivering your soul in the most efficient way I knew how!" she said, looking indignant.

"Hush, I'm telling a story. So I have multiple traumatic experiences, you see. One cousin trying to kill me and then the other molesting my inert form. No matter that I cannot remember being trapped in a realm beyond understanding."

"I didn't even touch you!" Contessa cried, looking infuriated. Draco was holding his sides, giggling furiously. Harry and everyone else were laughing as well. Except for Sirius, who looked perfectly serious. However, there was a suspicious twinkle in his eye.

"Mouth to mouth contact is considered touching where I come from."

"What a stupid and irritating man you are," Contessa said, spinning on her heel and storming down to the kitchen.

"Stupid! Irritating! Man!" Kaw cried, following her.

Sirius grinned the moment she left. "I had to get her back for that neutering comment," he explained.

"If I didn't know better, I'd say you were in a better mood than I've ever seen you since before Azkaban," Lupin smiled.

"Nothing like getting sucked into the Netherworld and spat back out to reinvigorate your spirit, Remus."

"I'll settle for something more mundane, like a Cheering Charm."

"Well, as fascinating as tormenting my cousin really is, I expect we'd better get to decorating and cleaning, otherwise Molly will have a fit when she gets here. She already dislikes me, the last thing I need is her blaming your emotional turbulence at my dramatic return on me if the place isn't ready. Besides I have a feeling my dearest kissing cousin can throw especially loud and colorful fits when the mood strikes her if we haven't scrubbed away all the dust," Sirius grinned.

Lupin laughed as well and they seemed to be sharing a private joke. Sirius was wiping tears out of his eyes.

"What's so funny?" Harry asked.

"Oh, you'd have had to have met your grandmother, Mrs. Potter. Now there was a woman who knew how to throw loud and colorful fits if things weren't clean. There was one time when James and I barely escaped from a small group of Death Eaters with our lives and she yelled at us for tracking blood and dirt on her floor--while she patched us together and fussed over us like a mother hen, of course. Molly reminds me of her a bit, but I just have this sneaking suspicion that Contessa is of the variety

that doesn't care if your head's hanging off your shoulders, you'd better not drip blood on her floor."

"You have no idea. Over the summer, someone snuck dopplegrass into my Wolfsbane Potion and I actually fully transformed. The next day, while Contessa was patching me up, she spent the entire time fussing at me for clawing up the furniture."

"Someone snuck dopplegrass into your potion? Who the bloody hell did that?" Sirius asked, the humor gone from his voice.

"It's a long story."

Sirius cast a glance at Harry. "Harry, I tell you what. You help me rummage for decorations and put them up, then we'll help whoever else needs help. In the meantime, you can catch me up on everything I've missed," he suggested.

Harry grinned at him. "All right."

So they trooped upstairs and began to rummage around in the attic, finding all the Christmas decorations Sirius had used the year before. On the way up, he marveled over how much the place had changed, and approved of the removal of most of the pictures of his family. Harry told him everything he could remember--leaving out the parts about him and Draco, of course--about what had been happening over the past months. Sirius listened well, becoming quieter as Harry talked. Harry watched him carefully over the boxes of ornaments.

"Are you sure you're okay, Sirius?" he asked earnestly.

Sirius paused. The humor and joke was gone from his face and he seemed to be lost in thought. "I'm fine, Harry," he said in a tight voice.

"You don't remember any of it?" Harry asked.

"Only very little. Enough to know it was a cold, dreary place. I was so cold there and I couldn't warm up. I felt alone, even when James and Lily were with me. I was so worried about you and the others. Then I remember waking up in this glen, lying next to Contessa. This beautiful, terrifying woman walked over to us and smiled. Then she grabbed both of us and smashed us together. It's sort of hard to explain. I could see, hear, and feel everything Contessa felt, like we were one person. Then there was movement and I was still all smashed together with Contessa, but in her body. Then she ran over to my body and put my soul inside it. I could hear James and Lily telling

me good-bye, telling me about you making the right choice."

Harry dropped the box of ornaments and hugged Sirius, who hugged him back. "I'm happy you came back, Sirius. I missed you so much," Harry sighed.

"Thank you, Harry. I can't tell you how grateful I am to you, to everyone who helped bring me back. I really, truly am so happy," Sirius said softly.

"Well, we better get these things downstairs before we start crying like a couple of poufs," Sirius said after a few moments, releasing Harry.

Harry laughed, but felt his stomach drop at Sirius's words. He grabbed the boxes and followed him downstairs, wondering what Sirius would say if he told him how he felt about Draco. He decided not to chance it.

With the aid of magic and Hermione and Lupin's organization, they quickly got the house cleaned, reorganized, and decorated for the holidays. The smell of Christmas dinner cooking filled the house and everyone's spirits were bright. Even Draco could be caught laughing at Ron's jokes or Hermione yelling at him for not working. Eventually, everyone finished and sat down in the sitting room to await the Weasleys.

Sirius disappeared into the kitchen and after a few moments was chased out by Contessa. He had Christmas biscuits in his hands, which he shared with everyone and snickered.

"I don't think she likes me," Sirius said in all innocence. "She makes good biscuits, though."

"Don't take offense," Lupin said. "She doesn't like much of anyone, unless your last name is Malfoy."

"All right, now I expect--tiny Merlin in a teacup!" Mrs. Weasley said as she walked in, the rest of the Weasley family behind her. She exclaimed when she saw Sirius standing there, in the middle of his sitting room, eating Christmas biscuits.

"Wotcher, Molly! Biscuit?" Sirius said mildly, holding one out to her.

Luckily, Mr. Weasley caught Mrs. Weasley when she passed out. He and the rest of the family gaped at Sirius as well. "You're not a ghost!" Mr. Weasley babbled.

"No, I'm alive. Would you like the biscuit? If not, I'm going to eat it," Sirius said

mildly, as if people who lost their bodies and were trapped in the Netherworld came back into cloned bodies every day. Mr. Weasley just gaped at him, so Sirius shrugged his shoulders and ate the biscuit.

"I assume there's a perfectly reasonable explanation why there's a wanted fugitive in front of us and we're not attacking him?" Percy asked pompously from the back of the group.

"Oh no, not the snotty Weasley," Draco sighed. "I was hoping he had caught something dreadful and wouldn't come."

"Well, we tried," Fred said.

"But it didn't work," George added gloomily.

"Of course there's a reasonable explanation. Maybe one day, when you're not so annoying, we'll even tell you about it," Sirius told Percy.

"Now there's a good judge of character," Fred nodded, walking over and clapping him on the back as George did the same.

"That's definitely Sirius Black," Bill grinned, walking up to shake his hand. Ginny ran forward and hugged him.

"Up now, Molly, it's all right," Mr. Weasley soothed, helping her to her feet and fanning her face.

"Aren't you supposed to be dead?" said Charlie's girlfriend, Ana, who blinked as Charlie walked up and shook Sirius's hand as well.

"Clever girl," Fred said, rolling his eyes.

"As sharp as a spoon, that one," George added. "Has a nice bum, though."

Sirius grinned. "No, I'm not supposed to be dead. I was sort of stuck between life and death or something very like it. It's all very confusing, really. It was a simple process of making me a cloned body and then retrieving my soul from the Netherworld, where I was trapped. I'm alive. And single," Sirius said, looking the pretty blonde up and down with appreciation.

"She, however, is not," Charlie said, frowning and putting his arm around Ana's

shoulders. Fred and George were laughing bawdily.

"Don't even think about it," Bill said through clenched teeth and a forced smile just as Sirius turned his gaze on the ever-lovely Fleur. Fleur giggled and so did Ana.

"How did you come back?" Mrs. Weasley demanded.

"I expect by walking. Or possibly Apparating. There's always the chance he went by Floo or broomstick, of course," George said.

"Well, why don't you just walk with me to the kitchen and I'll explain everything, Molly. Then you distract the fire-breathing monster--er, Contessa--and I'll get us some more biscuits," Sirius said, putting an arm around Mrs. Weasley and leading her back down the hallway.

It was the best Christmas Harry ever had.

Christmas dinner was scrumptious. Mrs. Weasley helped Contessa make it, and between the two of them, it was as fine as anything Hogwarts could produce. There was roast turkey and stuffing, roast potatoes, green beans, boiled carrots and cabbage, bread and cranberry sauce, gravy, and then a large Christmas pudding. There were plenty of biscuits and Sirius must have eaten at least two dozen before the end of the day.

The Weasleys were in awe. They asked everyone multiple questions and Hermione was delighted to inform them of everything. Mrs. Weasley promptly forgave everyone for not coming to the Burrow for the holidays. She gave Sirius so fierce a hug that he complained for hours that his ribs ached. Mr. Weasley kept pumping his hand and saying his return was "brilliant." Percy scowled at him, but Fred and George kept asking him questions about if his new body worked properly. Ginny was beyond excited and could barely contain herself. Bill and Charlie were fascinated, while Fleur and Ana seemed confused. Harry made sure to sit next to Sirius and kept poking him every so often to make sure he was real. Ron would grin for no reason and Hermione was positively beaming. Draco and Contessa took turns making the occasional sarcastic comment. It was a great dinner.

The best part was when Contessa served Sirius his dinner in a doggie bowl that had his name emblazoned on it. Fred and George gave her a solemn standing ovation,

while the rest of the table--including Sirius--burst into laughter. Only Contessa, Fred, and George maintained a straight face.

When dinner was over and everyone withdrew to the well-decorated drawing room, Sirius seemed to be in deep conversation with Fred and George. Harry sat right next to Sirius, but wasn't paying much attention to the conversation. Instead, he watched Draco and wondered if Draco ever put any thought into him. Draco was sticking mostly to himself or to Contessa. He had let Kaw out for the evening, since it was a mild night and Kaw was getting restless and anxious.

Contessa kept going in and out, but Harry didn't think anything of it. When Contessa came in with more biscuits for everyone, Sirius smiled at her brightly. "Oh, Contessa, Fred and George brought some pastries. Would you like one?" he asked her politely. It didn't register with Harry at first.

It wasn't until Contessa looked at Sirius suspiciously, then looked in the box and reached her hand in to take one that it dawned on Harry what those "pastries" were. Fred and George had neutral expressions on their faces and Sirius was doing an excellent job of not looking too eager.

"Contessa, wait!" Hermione cried, realizing what they were. Unfortunately, she called out just as Contessa took a bite of one and swallowed.

She promptly turned into a yellow canary, flapping and squawking angrily. Everyone began to roar in laughter, even Draco. By the time she had molted back into her human form, everyone was wiping tears from their eyes. It was a good thing she molted back to human, too--Godric seemed rather interested in her as a small, yellow canary. The laughter paused when she turned glittering gray eyes on Sirius, who was holding his side from a stitch.

"I hope you can run fast," she said conversationally.

Sirius took the hint and grinned over at Harry. "If you'll excuse me," he said, changing to a dog and bounding out of the room just as Contessa lunged at him. She chased him out of the room, her platform heels and his paws pounding down the stairs. The laughter started again as they ran out.

"I hope he can hide well!" Charlie laughed. "She was always good at ferreting people out."

"Now, that was good. Wish we'd taken a picture," Bill sighed.

"No worries. Fred and I sold Sirius everything he needs to make Contessa LeStrange's life as difficult and hilarious as possible. I'm sure there will be plenty more photographic opportunities," George grinned.

"Excellent customer. He made such clever choices," Fred said fondly.

"Somebody's going to get hurt," Draco said, shaking his head sadly. "Let me see one of those catalogues, in any case."

The night wore on until eventually, everyone dropped off. Contessa had gone to bed early, seemingly quite irritated by Sirius. Sirius looked rather pleased with himself and, if he'd been in dog form, Harry would have bet his tail would have been thumping on the ground as he sat. Contessa seemed to be in quite a strop with him. She cast a Colloportus spell so no one could bother her. Hermione and Ginny wound up sleeping in the sitting room. Draco tried to talk to her, but she wouldn't answer. Harry wondered why she got so upset. It was just a Canary Cream, after all.

Harry paused by Bill and Fleur's room--which was formerly Hermione's room. He heard voices and walked in. He caught a glimpse of Phineas walking out of a portrait containing a woman in it. The woman settled herself and glared at Harry without malice. Harry walked in, curious. She was a beautiful woman with long dark hair, pale skin, and light brown eyes. She had the curvy sort of figure that Contessa and Bellatrix had. There was something about her haughty gaze that wasn't entirely unlike Contessa's either.

"Since you haven't bothered to ask me who I am, I assume you already know or are an imbecile of limited intelligence," she told him with a subtle Northern accent. She looked vaguely amused as she spoke to him.

"Well, you're one of Sirius's ancestors, aren't you?" Harry asked, wondering why her portrait hadn't been removed.

"'One of Sirius's ancestors,' he says. You're the one that showed up last year? Sirius's godson? Not terribly bright, are you?"

"Er, yeah," Harry said finding himself at a loss of words before this sharp-tongued woman. He suddenly realized he'd just insulted himself. The woman looked even more amused.

"Defeated the Dark Lord, did you? Whatever else they say of him, he's bloody

inconsiderate. Attacking people on Christmas with snakes and whatnot. It's rude."

"Er, yeah," Harry repeated.

"Well, since we should be properly introduced and you're obviously too slow to pick it up, I am Regina Nigellus. I was born Regina Earnshaw, of the great wizarding family line of the north, Earnshaw."

"Nigellus?" Harry asked with interest. "Are you--"

"Phineas's wife and Sirius's great-great-grandmother. You are slow. Were you dropped on your head as a small child?"

"Er, I don't think so," Harry said.

Regina paused and then made a great show of looking around the room and then looking at the door. She had a look of disgust on her face. "She still here then?" she asked in a conspiratorial voice.

"Er, who?" Harry asked.

Regina looked at him in disbelief and then rolled her eyes while making a sound of disgust. She reminded Harry of Hermione, when she was irritated with Ron. "The little Lestrage bitch. She's still fouling up this house--I can smell her--this house that I swore no Lestrage would enter until that silly cow of my great-great-granddaughter went and married one, the whore. My brother nearly killed his daughter when she threatened to marry a Lestrage, you know. They should have drowned Bellatrix at birth. I told them from the day was she born she was a bad 'un," she said bitterly.

"You mean Contessa?"

"Don't say her name!" Regina said, her nostrils flaring. "She's as bad as her mother. Dirty, rotten, filthy whore! You can't trust them! Any of them! They're all rotten to the core! Mad, I tell you! Raving, filthy beasts!"

Harry was beginning to understand why Contessa didn't want this room. "She's not so bad, I guess. She helped bring back Sirius," he said.

This only enraged Regina further. "Don't you trust her! Don't you let her fool you! She'll rip you to shreds if the mood suits her! Her grandfather was a cannibal! Her great-grandfather experimented on werewolves! And her great-great-great-

grandfather, Wulfric, the sick bastard! The things he and his sister, that foul Necromancer bitch did! They sucked his sister's soul right out with a Dementor's Kiss for her crimes and they should do the same to the little bitch in my house! The travesty of bloodlines crossing that were never meant to cross!" Regina screamed, her perfectly coiffed hair falling down as she roared at Harry.

Harry was backing out, just as Hermione walked in, holding a black cloth. "And you!" Regina cried upon the sight of Hermione. "Insufferable chatterbox! I've had enough of your prattle! If you were my daughter, I would have cast a permanent Silencing Charm on you!"

"I was thinking the same thing," Hermione said neutrally, covering the portrait, which instantly silenced Regina.

"Is she always like that?" Harry asked, wondering how Hermione got to sleep.

"Only when you get her started. Sometimes she's rather nice. She gives good advice, too, when she's not worked up. She doesn't like Contessa, and I figured out why. Regina was born an Earnshaw, and they've been warring with the Lestranges for generations. I wouldn't pay her much attention. The Earnshaws are just as psychotic, really."

"Is what she said true? About Contessa's grandfather being a cannibal and whatnot?"

"Who knows?" Hermione said, shrugging her shoulders. "I wouldn't worry about it."

"Hey, as much as I like you guys, I'd really like some alone time with my girlfriend," Bill said, appearing in the doorway.

"Bill!" Fleur said, sounding scandalized. She was grinning, however.

"Well, I'm going to bed. Good night," Hermione said, heading out after grinning a bit at Fleur. She seemed to like her a lot more when Ron wasn't drooling over her.

"Arry, I'd like a word wiz you," Fleur said suddenly, grabbing his arm. He stared at her. Her English had improved, though not greatly. Harry rather reckoned she and Bill should spend less time snogging and more time practicing her English.

"What?"

"Have you heard of Desiree Beauregard, zat Death Eater 'oo Bill went to school wiz?"

"The name sounds familiar."

"She is my cousin, 'Arry. She 'as Veela blood in 'er, too. You should watch out for 'er. She can use 'er charm on men, and she would use it wrongly," Fleur explained.

Harry stared at her. He doubted Desiree Beauregard was much of a threat to someone like him or Lupin, but any heterosexual man could be in big trouble around her. Harry nodded.

"Be safe, 'Arry," Fleur smiled, squeezing his arm and letting him go. "'Ave a pleasant night."

"Night," Harry said, sloping out to his room. Upon entering it, he found Draco, already lying down on his own bed. Harry moved to his, pulling out his pajamas and staring over at Draco. Draco turned over and presented his back to Harry.

Harry licked his lips and realized he wasn't going to sleep one wink tonight.

Interlude One:

Castle LeStrange. Ancient home of the noble LeStrange line. The word "noble" was used only in the strictest sense, of course. Voldemort was now working out of the castle, his entire base of operations out of the home of the ancestral line of Morgan Le Fay. Contessa spent a long time staring at the castle after she Apparated in front of it around midnight. She had a lot of bad memories attached to it, mostly involving her mother.

It was a dark, twisted place, much like its inhabitants. Spires and gargoyles and wolf statues, oh my. The word "Gothic" didn't really cover it. It was more like a fevered nightmare, fueled by some sick, twisted desire. Contessa began to walk between the two castle guardians--two giant stone wolves--several times the size of normal. Their gaping stone maws were almost comforting next to the horrors that would lie within.

It had been a challenge to get access to Lupin's things to find the charmed bauble that would let her climb out of her window at Number Twelve, Grimmauld Place. Everyone was so busy fawning over Black they hadn't paid her any attention. They had all let their guard down, just as Lucius said they would. He always said Christmas

was the best time to take advantage of someone. Yet, Contessa felt strangely guilty when she snuck into Lupin's room after dinner and rooted through his things to find the bauble. He had so very few things, it wasn't hard to find it. She had nearly fallen to her death twice when climbing down the trellis and scratched her neck viciously on the wood when she finally did fall, but luckily close enough to the ground she hadn't done anything but bruise herself. She had ran down the street, sticking to the shadows and then Disapparated as soon as she was out of sight.

They were at the door before she got there. Her old schoolmates: Desiree Beauregard, Bastion Fort, and Sean Kilroy. Bastion and Sean grabbed her by the arms and dragged her in, even as Desiree grinned at her cruelly. Contessa snarled at the woman, she couldn't help it. Desiree had always flaunted her beauty and power over Contessa. And Contessa hated her for it.

"Ah, the prodigal daughter returns?" Bellatrix asked from the hallway, her voice deceptively cool. Snape was there, moving towards her, his face like stone. He glared at Sean, who was more easily cowed than Bastion, and replaced him at her arm. Contessa looked up at him and once again wondered whose side he was really on.

"Why are you here?" Bellatrix demanded. Contessa tried to swallow the ancient fear of her mother that she had possessed since infancy. It never went away and wasn't about to now.

"T-to see the Dark Lord," she said in a weaker voice than she intended as Snape's grip on her arm tightened. He absently twirled his fingers around her hair and then yanked as hard as he could, causing her to yelp in pain. She knew he was doing it for show, but he play-acted a little too well for her tastes.

"Impudent girl. You are a traitor. What would the Dark Lord want with you?" he hissed. He was always very good at his role.

"Let him decide that," she hissed back.

"The Dark Lord should decide her fate," Bellatrix said, scowling.

Snape and Bastion dragged her forward, down the labyrinthine hallways to the Great Hall. Snape was still pulling at her hair and leering at her. She'd have to tell him to be gentler next time. Her head was going to hurt horribly tomorrow.

"Well, well. Isn't this a surprise?" slithered Voldemort's high, cold voice in a tone that suggested otherwise from the shadows as she entered. Bellatrix moved over the

shadows that he sat in and stood by him. Contessa caught a glimpse of Voldemort's malignant red eyes as she moved in closer. He sat on a high-backed black chair made of ebony, wearing a black robe. Only his livid face could be seen gleaming out of the shadows like the face of a ghost.

"M-my Lord," she said, her knees growing weak. Here was a man--if he could be called that anymore--that knew the meaning of the word power. He radiated it. Few people had ever truly mastered the art of Necromancy. Not even Narcissa knew every secret the Art held, but Voldemort did. He was the exception to every rule. She already knew he surpassed even Narcissa Malfoy, one of the most skilled Necromancers born in the past century. He was a man whose legend could overshadow even the likes of Morgan Le Fay.

"What would you like us to do with this one?" Snape asked, sneering.

"I want to hear what she has to say," Voldemort smiled. Contessa made out several Death Eaters standing in the shadows, all leering at her. She looked around and realized she was surrounded. It was like she was in the center ring of some dark travesty of a carnival. A carnival of Death Eaters.

"As you wish, my Lord," Snape said reluctantly. It was odd, how well he played his part. Contessa idly wondered if he did want her dead or worse. He played at his part so well. After seeing the things he did for Dumbledore, Contessa often wondered whose side he was really on--Lucius's, Dumbledore's, Voldemort's, or his own. Her bet was on the latter.

"I assume you have a good reason to appear before me after betraying me so shamefully," Voldemort told her coolly. "After allowing a Mudblood to possess you."

"She attacked me in the Netherworld, my Lord! I had almost reached Sirius Black when she touched me! I--I was ashamed when I realized what my weakness had allowed. That is why I did not return sooner. I made the most of my new situation and tried to make up for my mistake. I have done better than you asked. I did not just bring back Sirius Black's soul. I brought him back--whole and healthy. I have undone my mother's mistake," Contessa said, managing not to stutter in fear.

Bellatrix sucked in her breath and stopped smirking. Voldemort leaned forward and motioned Snape and Bastion to let her go. Contessa felt inexplicably alone and abandoned as they did so. Voldemort watched her intently.

"He is alive?"

"Yes, my Lord. Only just last night."

"Excellent," Voldemort said with a slow smile. "Now tell me what I want to hear."

"I realize where my place is, my Lord. I was frightened of it. But I know now I am to help you reshape the world in your image. I have learned much and am very close to Harry Potter," Contessa said. He continued to study her intently and she swallowed, hoping her Occlumency held up. It would be embarrassing if it failed her, after being trained by two of the best Occlumens alive--Severus Snape and Lucius Malfoy.

A small smile flitted about Voldemort's lips. "I suppose I could forgive you this once. It was really only a minor infraction, for which you have made up for," he told her.

"Then I ask of you a few things."

"I knew we'd get around to this part. What is it that you seek?"

Contessa moistened her lips with her tongue, casting a glance at Snape, but he only leered at her, as he was expected to do. She often wished to find some warmth in those cold, black eyes of his--warmth that would give her strength in Lucius's absence. But Snape offered no warmth, no comfort, no absolution. He had his own role to play and fully expected her to play hers without his help.

"I seek asylum for my cousin, Draco Malfoy." Lucius had been quite explicit that she do this. Draco was to be excluded from all their plans. He knew as little as possible. He even thought she and Snape harbored feelings for each other, like everyone else. Draco was to be protected at all costs. A part of her that desired to be the center of her uncle's world was bitter about this. Why was Draco to be sheltered and she to be offered to the wolves? Why couldn't she have been born a true Malfoy? If God was kind, he would have made Lucius her father, not the brute who sired her.

"He is weak," Voldemort said coolly.

"He is a child. He is weak, but not all are made to serve you as I do. He is good breeding stock, if nothing else," Contessa said carefully.

"I shall consider it," Voldemort said. It was as good as she could get from him at the moment.

"I also ask of you a favor."

"Yes?"

"I wish to free my aunt and uncle. Other loyal Death Eaters are trapped in Azkaban as well. Why do you leave them there?" Contessa asked.

"Why?" Voldemort hissed. "Because they are weak failures!"

"But how can they make up for their mistakes if you leave them to rot in prison?" Contessa asked him carefully.

Voldemort considered her silently, almost sullenly.

"I only ask for help to free them. To free all of them," Contessa said.

"Very well. Bella, the Forts, Beaugard, Kilroy, Crabbe, Goyle, Macnair, and three others of Bella's choice will accompany you to Azkaban. I will send the Dementors with you. You will command them in my absence."

Contessa tried not to shudder and prostrated herself before Voldemort. "Thank you, my Lord, thank you! You are generous and compassionate beyond all measure!" she groveled.

"Pathetic," Voldemort sneered, tapping his wand. "Your mother is in charge. Heed her or answer to me."

Contessa nodded, scrambling to her feet.

"Now tell me, before you go. Tell me who is it that Harry Potter cherishes? Other than his beloved godfather?" Voldemort asked her.

Contessa dropped her eyes to the floor. "Remus Lupin," she said. She felt like she was going to vomit. Lucius taught her never to let emotions develop for other people--yet here she was, feeling guilty.

"One of his father's old friends. Expected. And?"

"The Weasley family--in particular the youngest male, Ron. Hermione Granger, she's a Mudblood. Rubeus Hagrid. The members of the Order of the Phoenix. I know most of their names, if you like."

"What about the Longbottom boy?"

Contessa's mouth went dry. "They're not particularly close," she said neutrally.

Voldemort watched her shrewdly then waved her and the others away dismissively. "Go then. Free the others and bring them here for their punishments," he said airily. "Snape, you'll remain here. I have a proposition for you."

Contessa breathed a sigh of relief and turned to follow the other Death Eaters out.

"Oh, and one more thing," Voldemort said, causing Contessa to freeze just as she got to the door.

"Yes?" she asked, gulping and turning back to him. Her hands were shaking.

"I have a source at the school that tells me Potter and your dear, sweet cousin have been getting rather close. Scandalously close," Voldemort said.

Contessa's blood ran cold. There were only three people in the world that she well and truly loved: Lucius, Narcissa, and Draco. "I don't know anything about that," she lied. She wondered who the source was and her eyes flicked to Snape, who watched her expressionlessly. Surely he wouldn't endanger his godson like that. Would he? If not him, who else? Nott's son? Crabbe's or Goyle's sons?

"No, I expect you might not. It's a good thing I have other sources," Voldemort said with a small smile.

"Draco . . . really is just a confused young boy," she said, realizing she was pleading.

"So was Regulus. Do you know what happened to Regulus?" Voldemort said coolly.

Contessa's eyes flicked over to Snape again and her stomach sank. She wondered again whose side he was really on: if he was really serving Lucius in his plans or not, or, if he gave a damn about anyone but himself. She wondered why she cared so much about what he thought.

"Such fear. How you love your little Malfoy family. But remember where your loyalties lie, Contessa. I am your father, your master, your god. Now go, bring me back the rest of my servants," Voldemort said, his eyes glittering. Contessa wondered how much he really knew. She wondered if he knew everything and was only giving her enough rope with which to hang herself.

"Of course, my Lord," she whispered, turned, and positively fled his presence.

Her god was cruel.

End Interlude

To be continued . . .

Chapter 20: Jigsaw

Chapter Twenty: Breathing Problems

Draco was already showering when Harry woke up. He lay on his bed very quietly as Draco came out, half-naked and toweling his hair. Harry made it a point to stare at the ceiling until Draco was fully dressed and discarding his towel.

Harry silently got up and headed to the bathroom for his own shower. Draco sat on his bed and made a noise of irritation as Harry disappeared into the shower. Harry wondered why. When he came out, Draco was gone. Harry quickly got dressed and left the room, finding Draco in front of Contessa's room. Hermione and Ginny were standing by it, both looking rather put out. Draco was pounding on the door.

"Come on out, Countess. Honestly, it was just a Canary Cream. No need to be in such a strop about it. I'll give you some Medusa's Poison for him if you'll just come out," Draco called.

The door creaked open and Contessa peered out. She had circles under her eyes and looked like she hadn't slept a wink. She was wearing her nightdress, but Harry noticed she had a nasty cut on her neck and a burn on her hand. She caught Harry staring at her and frowned at him. She let Ginny and Hermione in and gave Harry and then Draco a glare for good measure before closing the door.

Draco's brow was furrowed. He looked over at Harry and then he looked away. He went downstairs and Harry followed at a distance, his eyes inevitably drawn to Draco's rear. It was very cute.

Harry smacked himself on the forehead, wishing it would all go away.

When they entered the kitchen, Mrs. Weasley was complaining to Mr. Weasley while stirring some oatmeal at the stove. "Bloody inconsiderate. With this entire lot to cook for, you'd think that Lestrangle girl could at least help. Locked herself in for no bloody good reason. Hermione and Ginny couldn't even get their things!" she was saying.

Draco gave Sirius a bemused expression. Sirius was standing by the counter, apparently taste testing the sausages. He grinned at Draco and then grinned broadly at

Harry in greeting. Harry grinned back and couldn't resist hugging him again. It was almost like he'd never been gone.

After a bit, everyone else filtered in. Contessa was the last to come in--with her hand bandaged--looking very sour. Harry and Sirius kept up light chitchat that everyone participated in--except for Contessa, who seemed very odd today. She kept absently picking at her food and had a dark, brooding expression that could put the photos of Sirius freshly out of Azkaban to shame.

Sirius seemed to notice how she was behaving, too. As they all went out of the kitchen to head into the sitting room, he stopped her in the hallway. "Look, Contessa, I'm sorry about the Canary Cream. I had no idea you'd take it so hard. You know, it was just a joke thing. You do something to me, I do something to you. You know, I push, you pull," he said awkwardly. Harry stood just behind him and noticed Contessa gave him an almost incredulous look--like she just noticed he was there or something. It was very strange.

Then there was a sudden crack and Harry spun around to see Kingsley, Tonks, Rufus, Dumbledore, and Snape Apparate in. They all looked extremely unhappy. There was another cracking sound from Contessa trying to Disapparate, but when Harry looked over, Contessa was still there, looking a little nauseous and swaying on her feet.

"Idiot, we still have the Anti-Disapparition Jinx up," Kingsley said with a dark smile. He was in front and pointing his wand at her. Contessa grabbed Sirius by his shirt, yanking him in front of her before Kingsley could hex her. Kingsley swore.

Then, Contessa was running, running past all the Weasleys, shoving them aside to get into the sitting room as the Aurors were chasing her. It only took a second for Sirius and Harry to follow.

"Serpensortia!" she cried as they got to the sitting room and she turned to face them. Unlike when Draco had cast the spell in his second year, a couple dozen snakes burst from her wand and began hissing violently, swarming to attack the approaching Aurors. Harry remembered Professor Flitwick once telling his class that certain spells like Serpensortia had different results based on the individual caster and their level of skill.

"Impedimenta!" Kingsley bellowed just as Contessa brought up a Shield Spell. She had backed into the sitting room, surrounded by black adders, looking terrified.

One of the snakes sprung and went for Kingsley's throat, but with a red-orange flash,

Godric had it by the throat instead and quickly killed it, coiling up and spitting venom at the approaching serpentine army. There was a ginger flash as Crookshanks joined the fray beside Godric, clawing open one of the snakes before it bit Tonks.

"Stop it!" Harry shouted at the snakes in Parseltongue. "Listen to me! Stop attacking us right now!"

Most of the snakes paused and the few that didn't were quickly dispatched by Godric and Crookshanks. "Ssstupid wormsss. Don't lisssten to that sstupid bint. Lisssten to my massster and he will protect you. Otherwisse, you will all die," Godric added.

The snakes began to bob their heads, their focus on Harry. Contessa looked surprised. "You--you shouldn't be able to do that!" she screeched. "They're under my control!"

Kingsley raised his wand at the snakes, but Harry grabbed his arms. "Don't, it's not their fault. They don't know any better," he said and then turned back to the snakes. "Leave, now. No harm shall come to you any of you if you all just leave."

"As you wisssh . . . massster," one of the snakes said and began to lead the others out of the room.

"Let them out! Just open the door and let them out!" Harry shouted down the hallway. Ana, who was closest to the door, opened it and watched the parade of snakes go by with a look of curiosity. Most everyone else looked frightened. However, Dumbledore was looking ominously angry. He entered the sitting room as Snape mysteriously went upstairs, causing Harry and Sirius to step aside. The three Aurors were surrounding Contessa, who had her wand out and her back to the fireplace. She kept spinning to face each Auror alternately, shakily pointing her wand at each of them. To Harry, she looked like a cornered animal.

"You stay away from me! All of you!" she cried. She looked near tears.

"What the bloody hell is going on here?" Mr. Weasley asked, who indeed was shaken to use such strong language in front of his children. He had his wand out, but looked like he didn't know whether to use it or not. Mrs. Weasley ran forward, trying to block her children from entering the room.

"The Death Eaters have escaped," Kingsley said, his voice tight. "All of them. Last night, a small group of Death Eaters stormed Azkaban, killed the human guards, and let all the Death Eaters out. They had a large group of Dementors with them. Cell Block Seven is in shambles."

"And they were helped by her! The lying bint!" Rufus said hotly, the tip of his wand sparking a bit. Harry felt his stomach drop.

Contessa pointed her wand at him, her hand trembling. "If I die, I'm going to take as many as you possible with me," she hissed.

"Stand aside, all three of you," Dumbledore said quietly, but with power. Harry took a step away from him, as did Sirius. He was radiating power like the sun radiated heat. The Aurors did as he bade, however reluctantly.

Contessa pointed her wand at him, swallowing. Draco surged forward, pushing Weasleys aside and stopping close to Harry. He looked very upset. "Countess, what have you done?" he whispered so softly that Harry's ears strained to hear.

"Put it down, Contessa," Dumbledore rumbled, and it seemed the room grew a bit dimmer as he glared at her. Tears poured down her face and she dropped her wand like it was hot. It rolled away, stopping by Sirius's feet. He bent down and picked it up.

"Have a seat," Dumbledore said sternly, causing a chair to zip over just behind her and push at the back of her legs until she sat in it. Rufus, Kingsley, and Tonks moved forward and tied her to the chair with strands of unicorn hair that they produced from their sleeves. They stepped back very quickly as Dumbledore stepped forward. Harry watched with mixed feelings as the unicorn hair began to burn into her skin, causing bright pink welts wherever it touched. She flinched a bit, but said nothing.

"Do you understand the severity of what you have done?" he asked her, the timbre of his voice causing her to tremble as it rose slightly.

"I--I haven't d-done anything!" she stammered, trying to sink into the chair.

"You let your family out of prison. You helped killed the guards, even if you did not do it yourself. Innocent men and women. You worked with other Death Eaters in the service of Voldemort," Dumbledore told her harshly.

"N-no! I-it's not t-true!" she cried.

"Liar," Dumbledore said, his voice raising another notch, though he was not shouting. "You not only helped, but orchestrated the whole thing. You have rejoined the Death Eaters and have offered the return of Sirius and knowledge of Harry's friends as a

peace offering."

"I found it," Snape said, walking in and holding up the charmed bauble Lupin kept to allow Contessa to exit the doors. Lupin gasped. "It was hidden underneath a pile of her clothes."

"N-no," she said, sobbing pathetically now. "P-please, it was the Imperius Curse! I-it wasn't my fault! The D-Dark Lord m-made me do it!" She reminded Harry so much of Peter Pettigrew, pleading with Sirius in the Shrieking Shack for his life. Harry felt vaguely disgusted with her.

"Miss LeStrange, I have been protecting you these past months, hoping to get the truth out of you. Yet you have lied to me from day one. I know for a fact that you joined the Death Eaters the day after Voldemort's return. I know for a fact that you not only knowingly delivered the Devil's Snare that killed Bode, but it had been your idea to kill him with it. You always were good at Herbology."

Contessa's wide gray eyes flew over to Snape, who was looking at her very blandly as he gave Dumbledore the bauble. "Y-you . . . traitor!" she said in surprise.

"All on Lucius Malfoy's orders. Are you such a lemming, girl, that you'll do anything your aunt and uncle tell you, so long as they continue to love you? Are you that desperate for love and attention?" Dumbledore asked, his voice growing softer. "Don't you see your uncle for the blind fool he is?"

Draco twitched at this but Contessa looked enraged. "Don't you talk about him like that! Don't you dare! He is a prince amongst men!" she cried. "You don't even deserve to speak his name!"

"He is a blind fool. And so are you."

"Perhaps leniency should be shown to her, Dumbledore," Snape said silkily. "She is, after all, only following the orders of the man who raised her."

"You traitor! You filthy, scumblood traitor! You betrayed everything!" Contessa screamed at Snape. "Don't you dare speak for me! How can you do this to Uncle Lucius after everything the Malfoys have done for you?"

"Ah, yes, everything the Malfoys have done for me," Snape said maliciously. "Should we start with when Aurelius Malfoy murdered my father because he owed him money? Or when Aurelius took me in to assuage his own guilt? Or when Lucius

decided I made such an excellent lackey that I should follow his every order like a dog?"

"You filthy, greasy, ugly, cock-sucking, treacherous scumblood!" Contessa ranted. "You horrid, little dickless bastard! You're as worthless as your father! And your mother, the weak, spineless little whore! Taking every little abuse he dished out on her! She was wet and you know it! She killed herself, like a coward! Or maybe she killed herself because she couldn't stand to have you for a son!"

It all happened in an instant.

Harry just saw Snape surge forward, yet his body didn't move. He just looked at Contessa--looked at her with such loathing that she had caught fire. Lupin had grabbed Snape, pulling him back as Contessa began to scream and most of the room jumped. She was thrashing on the seat, her torso on fire. By the time Harry had a chance to blink, Dumbledore had raised his wand and the flames went out. The chair had fallen over from Contessa's thrashing, and though Harry couldn't see her, she was whimpering.

There was a pause of shock across the room in general, and then Sirius had moved forward to Contessa. Tonks and Rufus were standing in front of Snape, while Kingsley looked over Sirius's shoulder to see what damage had been done. Contessa's hair seemed half burned away. It had reached her waist before, but now seemed to not reach past her shoulders and what little did was burnt beyond recognition. Dumbledore was looking at Snape reproachfully and Draco was watching Snape like he'd never seen him before. Harry rather imagined Snape was feeling just like Harry had when he had accidentally blown up Aunt Marge.

Sirius poked at Contessa and then looked up at Dumbledore. Lupin had his arms around Snape, who was panting so heavily it looked like he had breathing problems, his eyes still flashing as he struggled to control himself. There were horrid splotches of red on his sallow face. He looked even angrier than when he found Harry looking at his memories.

"She's burnt pretty bad," Sirius said, "but nothing a Healer and a good Severing Charm can't cure."

"I will attend to her. Sirius, I leave her in your care. She deserves to go to Azkaban, but there would be no point in it. Lucius and Narcissa would only break her out. We will leave her here, with you to watch over her and make sure she does not escape. The freedoms I have allowed her will continue no longer. And I will personally see to

it that the Wizengamot knows of this when she goes to trial in May. Keep her wand and I'll leave her to you, Sirius. Kingsley, Tonks, and Rufus--please begin warding the house from any potential . . . misbehavior on her part. I shall call an emergency Order meeting to discuss this . . . turn of events," Dumbledore said neutrally. He held the bauble up and then with an audible crack, it shattered and crumbled to dust in his hand.

Harry cast a glance at Snape, who was still struggling in Lupin's grasp. Harry noticed Tonks and Rufus were trying to help Lupin. They were holding Snape's wrists, keeping him away from his wand.

Hermione spoke up. "I know a few good charms she taught me on healing burns--when Lycaon was here over the summer. I also know the potion recipes," she said.

"Excellent, Miss Granger, I shall leave her in your care."

Contessa whimpered again. Dumbledore stared at her sadly. "These are the results of your choices, Miss Lestrage. The Sorting Hat would have called out Gryffindor if you had not desired to please your uncle and desperately wished it would call Slytherin. Only the truly strong of will can join Slytherin and not be corrupted, and I'm afraid you are not strong enough. That was the beginning of your poor choices. And now, your latest has led to this house becoming your personal Azkaban. Consider yourself relieved of your duties at Hogwarts," he told her, sounding almost mournful.

Sirius sighed and cut the strands of unicorn hair binding her to the chair with his wand, and picked up Contessa in his arms like a child. Harry only caught a glimpse of her, but the hair she had so proudly cared for was ruined and her neck and torso were blistered and burned.

"Her personal Azkaban, eh?" Sirius asked, his eyes growing cold and dark as he glared at Dumbledore. "And mine, apparently." He spat this last part out and swept out of the room, carrying the whimpering Contessa away. Hermione followed him after a moment's hesitation.

Everyone was staring around at each other in shock. Dumbledore was leaving, presumably to make arrangements for the meeting. The Aurors were already beginning the process of magically warding the house. Snape was storming out, having finally tore himself out of Lupin's grip. Lupin hesitated, and then followed him. Harry turned to Draco and realized Draco was gone.

Harry walked out of the sitting room, past Ron. He walked up the steps and past the

open door where Sirius was laying Contessa on her bed, the burns on her body gleaming in the weak light of her room. Hermione called out to him, but he ignored her. He walked past his own room and up the stairs to the attic, almost intuitively knowing where Draco had gone.

Draco was sitting by a round window, staring out of it. He had the window open. When Harry entered, he wiped at his face and glared at him.

"Go away," he said angrily.

Harry paused halfway into the room and then moved a bit closer, but still left plenty of room between them. He chewed on his lips for a moment before speaking to Draco. "I guess you're happy your parents are free," he said.

Draco shrugged his shoulders but did not respond. He was working his jaw.

"Contessa got off lucky, you know," Harry said.

Draco looked disgusted. "Lucky? You call her being locked up in this place with nothing but that weird dog-man for company lucky?" he asked.

"She deserved worse."

Draco turned his face and stared out of the window for a few moments. "I didn't know a thing, you know. He never tells me anything. Only her," he spat. It was strange, Harry thought, how Draco seemed to both love and resent his cousin.

Harry moved even closer, realizing Draco was talking to him, really, truly talking to him. "I guess he's trying to protect you," Harry said slowly.

"He treats me like I'm an idiot. He asks so much of me, like I'm supposed to be some sort of genius. I can't do the things he asks. It's Contessa he tutored, Contessa he taught all his secrets, Contessa he brought into the Death Eaters--just because she had the same sort of mind he does. He doesn't care about me, his own flesh and blood son. He doesn't trust me like he trusts her," Draco's voice choked up and Harry watched him as he wiped at his face again.

"Maybe he loves you so much he doesn't want you to be hurt. You're a different sort of person from Contessa. She's brainy, like Hermione, but you're more active. You can duel pretty well. You can brew a potion better than her. You're stronger, I think. Tougher," Harry said, realizing he was trying to comfort Draco. It was a strange

experience.

Draco looked at him and didn't say anything. Harry sat down next to him, looking back. Draco had steady gray eyes and without his usual coldness, his eyes really reminded Harry of Sirius's or even Ron's eyes. There seemed to be no bottom to his eyes when he stared at Harry. There was no scorn in them, for once. There was just intensity, concentration, and undefined passion.

"You never did answer my question," Harry said lamely.

"What?" Draco asked, looking startled that Harry broke the silence.

"If you liked me."

Draco rolled his eyes. "After everything just happened, and you want to talk about if I like you or not?" he asked incredulously.

Harry licked his lips. It wasn't his best timing. "Er, well, what else did you want to talk about? Your parents' escape? Contessa's lies? Snape trying to kill her for insulting his mother?" he asked.

Draco turned away. "You're right. I'd rather not talk about any of it, if it's all the same to you," he said darkly.

"Sort of. It bothers you, doesn't it."

"Did you think I was going to rejoice? Did you think this improves my situation in any way?" Draco asked scornfully.

"Oh, so it's all about you, then?" Harry asked coolly.

Draco opened and closed his mouth. "I didn't mean it like that," he sighed.

"Yes, you did."

"Well, I did, but--never mind."

"Never mind what?"

Draco sighed. "I thought Gryffindors were supposed to be bold. You just sit there, staring and thinking, weighing your options. Are you sure you shouldn't have been a

Slytherin?" Draco asked.

"Well, the Sorting Hat almost made me one, but I asked it not to."

"Why?"

"Because Ron had told me only Dark witches and wizards came from the House."

"Which is rubbish."

"I wouldn't say rubbish. More of an exaggeration."

"So I guess you made the right choice, then?" Draco asked coolly.

"Maybe."

Silence fell between them again and Draco went to looking back out of the window. Harry decided to press his luck. "Did you like it?" he asked awkwardly.

"Like what?" Draco asked with some annoyance.

"When we kissed."

Draco turned back to face him but didn't answer. He was leaned back against the wall, one arm dangling out of the window. He always looked so poised, like he expected someone to take his picture at any time. Harry wished he had that sort of grace.

"You're terrible at taking hints. Is this how you chat up a guy?" Draco asked after a moment, snorting slightly.

"Er, what are you talking about?" Harry asked, thoroughly confused.

"I'm emotionally vulnerable. This is the perfect time to take advantage of me. Last night, you had several opportunities to swoop in and all you did is lie on your bed and stare at me until you fell asleep. You didn't even wank. This morning, when I got out of the shower half-dressed, all you did was stare and then run in to take your own shower. At this rate, I expect you'll lose your virginity sometime in your mid-forties."

Harry stared at him. "Do you want me to take advantage of you?" he asked.

Draco sighed and rolled his eyes, leaning forward and grabbing Harry's glasses. He set

them aside carelessly. "You're not supposed to ask, idiot," he said.

Harry leaned forward and grabbed Draco, forcing their faces together. It was a bit of a bump at first, but their lips finally met and Draco's mouth slid open for Harry's tongue. Harry gripped Draco's shoulders, their tongues slipping around the other in earnest. Harry felt emboldened by Draco's arms twining around his neck, his hands traveling down the blond's sides, feeling the slender body shudder a bit beneath him.

And then Draco was pushing him off and getting up to walk away. He did so slowly and pedantically, as though he was taking a casual stroll through the park.

"W-why are you leaving?" Harry asked, wondering if he had done something wrong.

Draco shrugged and turned his face a bit as he continued to move out. There was a bit of a smile on it. "If you're not going to take the hint, then I'm leaving," he said nonchalantly, shrugging.

Harry let Draco get almost to the stairs before grabbing him and spinning him around. Draco was laughing--an impish, almost purring sort of laugh. Harry pressed him close, feeling a responding heat in Draco's body as he gazed into those stormy gray eyes of his.

"Make it interesting for me, Harry," Draco whispered.

"So I'm here to entertain you?" Harry whispered back, shifting his eyes away from Draco to scan the attic. A mattress lay against the wall, scoured clean by Contessa over the summer. Harry caused it to land flat on the floor with a flick of his wand.

"Quid pro quo," Draco responded.

Harry wrestled Draco to the mattress, their bodies landing on it with a thump and bouncing a bit. Draco immediately struggled like he was trying to get away, but it was slowly dawning on Harry that it was the struggle in of itself that turned Draco on. Harry obligingly prevented his escape, wondering if this was normal, if Draco's little fetish was something he should encourage or discourage.

But it was hard to think straight with Draco's warm, soft body moving under him, bucking and twisting and writhing. Harry pinned him to the mattress, feeling his trousers grow tight and pressing himself against Draco. Somehow, Harry managed to get a hand free to hitch up Draco's robe and unbutton the rest. Draco finally acquiesced; his breath hitching as Harry explored his body slowly, tenderly, curiously,

observing that his skin was soft even in the places that grew hard under Harry's touch.

It was hard to describe what happened next. It all seemed to slip away from Harry, even as it was etched into his being. Their hips moved against the other, rolling, bucking, twisting, and moving with furious determination. Hands slipped over places that made Harry bite his tongue to prevent himself from screaming. Lips moved against lips. Breath warmed the other's face. The mewling, almost desperate noises that Draco uttered made it even better. It was graceless, relentless, and completely lacked any style. Their actions possessed only the need and the desire to discover a mutual release of their tension.

It was blinding bliss; an experience that though imitated while alone can never be duplicated. It was a whiteout; a wash of mind and rational thought pouring out, replaced by short-lived ecstasy. It was a release and Harry poured forth every pent-up frustration, sorrow, and joy he had felt over the past year into the bumping and grinding of his hips against Draco's.

When it was done, Harry collapsed on top of Draco and then rolled off, lying beside him, Draco curled up against him. And Harry realized he had just found something better than even getting Sirius back, and something even more important. And possibly a person more important to him than Sirius.

But he bit his tongue, preventing these thoughts from escaping his mind and let the inevitable drowsiness claim him.

Harry woke up after an hour or so, finding that Draco was resting his head on his arm, staring at him. He turned to Draco and grinned. Draco blinked but returned with a small smile after a moment.

"That was fun," Harry said after a moment, wondering what exactly one was supposed to say at a moment like this. The afternoon sun was shining overhead and the cold air that wafted through the open window was enticing.

"It was," Draco said, still watching Harry with a very intent expression.

"Do I get to keep you this time? Or are you going to be a prat tomorrow?"

Draco smirked, but it wasn't a cruel smirk. "Keep me interested, and I suppose you

can 'keep me'. For now," he said arrogantly.

Harry leaned over and kissed him again, savoring the feel of Draco's mouth. They were definitely getting better at this kissing thing. He moved his other arm around Draco, bringing them closer. And then they heard footsteps.

"There you are! We've been--oh dear, I really do have the worst timing, don't I?"

Harry and Draco jumped apart. Draco gracelessly rolled off the mattress, thumped on the floor, and then stood up, pulling down his robes and quickly trying to button them up. Harry did the same, swallowing as he stared at the shocked expression of Remus Lupin. If it wasn't so personally embarrassing, the reddening, supremely mortified expression on Lupin's face would have been quite amusing. It wasn't everyday Harry got to see a grown man blush.

"Are they up there, Remus?" Harry could hear Sirius call from behind Lupin, treading up the steps. Lupin quickly moved to meet him on the stairwell, preventing him from entering the room.

"They're here. Just got up. Apparently were taking a nap after a good game of wizard's chess. Harry won," Lupin said smoothly. "They'll be down in a bit."

"All right. Tell them we're having a late lunch and to hurry. Molly's in a rush to get away from that blasted cousin of mine," Sirius said darkly, moving down the stairs and away from the attic. Harry exhaled, realizing he'd been holding his breath.

Lupin moved so his eyes peered over the floorboards at them. "You did win, didn't you, Harry?" he asked mildly.

Draco scowled, but Harry grinned at him. "Yeah, I won," he said, glancing at Draco.

"You two might want a quick shower before lunch. There's, ah, suspicious evidence on your clothes," Lupin said even more mildly, looking more embarrassed and walking down the stairs as well.

Harry looked down and realized his trousers definitely had "suspicious evidence" clinging to it. The same could be said for Draco's robes.

"Scourgify," Harry said, pointing his wand at his trousers. He, like Tonks, had no skills at little spells like that and the white stains didn't all go away. Draco was having little more success with his own robes.

"It'll be enough to get to our room," Draco said, shrugging his shoulders.

"Last one there has to wash the other's back?" Harry asked hopefully.

Draco answered by running out of the attic, Harry hot on his heels.

Ron was giving Harry and Draco odd looks when they started snickering over things like the mayonnaise at lunch. Draco kept spreading it suggestively on his sandwich and making Harry blush and laugh. And goggle at him when Draco suggestively licked it off his finger. Harry had to look away to prevent an embarrassing scene.

"You're in an awful good mood," Ron told Harry sourly, "Mum's making us leave tonight. She doesn't want to stay here with that Death Eater in the house."

"Her name's Contessa," Draco told Ron, narrowing his eyes.

"You should come with us, Harry. I don't think it's entirely safe here," Mrs. Weasley sniffed.

"Why not? I'm keeping an eye on the Lestrangle girl," Sirius said.

Mrs. Weasley studied him for a moment and then turned back to Harry. "I think my point has been sufficiently made," she said.

"Now, now, Molly, she doesn't have a wand and what with all the spell protections and unicorn hair lining the exits, she can't do anything but glare at people. We discussed this thoroughly at the emergency Order meeting. That's why Dumbledore destroyed that bauble and the Floo powder is being kept in a unicorn hair-lined box. This is the best course of action," Mr. Weasley said gently when he noticed Sirius was about to respond to Mrs. Weasley. Sirius's expression suggested it might be better he not speak at all.

"I'm staying. I belong here," Harry said neutrally, casting a glance at Draco, who was still exchanging glares with Ron.

"Well, Sirius, if you're going to keep an eye on her, you're going to have to take care of her, too," Molly snorted. "She hardly ate breakfast, and Poppy said she's refusing to

leave her bed. You'll have to make sure she eats and washes, as well as not murdering people in their sleep."

"Ah, that's not a problem," Sirius said cheerfully. "No one can resist my beans on toast, so she'll eat. If she starts to minge, I'll dump her in the tub. As for murdering us in our sleep, everyone's going to lock their doors at night, right?"

"Contessa doesn't eat things like beans on toast. She's a gourmet snob. She likes French food," Draco said, giving Sirius a dark look.

"Er, well," Sirius said, scratching his head, "I could make it beans on toasted French bread, I suppose."

"That's a Sirius expression that can be roughly translated to: 'The last time I tried to boil water, I blew up the stove,'" Lupin said with a fond smile.

"I did not! I only blew up the pot!" Sirius said with wounded dignity. Harry burst out laughing, as did most of the table.

After lunch, Harry went to go help everyone pack. He wound up with Hermione and Ginny in their room, shoving things into bags for them and moving heavy objects while they both took turns bossing him about. As Harry repacked a bag full of Hermione's clothes to her specifications, he reflected that girls might be the biggest problem with heterosexuality.

"Well, at least you and Draco won't have to share a room now that we're leaving," Ginny told him.

Hermione exchanged a glance with Harry and smiled a little. "So are you going back home, Hermione?" Harry asked, swiftly changing the subject.

"Well, I have to visit my family on occasion, you know," Hermione said with a smile. "And Ron's coming with me."

"Really?" Harry asked.

"Oh yes, Ron's very excited. Mr. Weasley has already made him promise to bring back souvenirs. Honestly, it's funny how thrilled Mr. Weasley is that Ron's dating me. When Mrs. Weasley begins to ask not so subtly what our future plans are, he begins to excitedly tell us that if we got married, he'd be related to real, live Muggles," Hermione snickered, rolling her eyes. Ginny and Harry laughed as well.

Ginny shook her head and finished packing the last of her things. She cast a glance at the gloomy corner where Contessa's bed stood, complete with Contessa lying on it, her back to them. She appeared to be sleeping for all intents and purposes. She had not moved nor made a sound since they came in to pack. Ginny told Harry and Hermione good-bye and left the room.

Hermione was done also and Harry moved to help her out, closing the door to Contessa's room as they left. "Harry . . . ?" Hermione asked as soon as the door was closed. "Did you and Draco . . . do anything last night?"

"I don't know. Did you and Ron?" Harry retorted, more than a little annoyed by her intrusion.

Hermione blushed. "Sorry. I just couldn't help myself," she said quickly.

Harry sighed, moving away towards the landing and looking down at the Weasleys as they jostled together in the hall, preparing to leave. Mrs. Weasley was lecturing Sirius about something. Sirius seemed to be more interested in cleaning his ears than paying attention to what she was saying. He did nod on occasion to humor her, though.

"If you are--" Hermione began again before Harry glared at her. She quickly changed pace. "You're going to have to tell Ron sometime. He thinks you've got some secret girlfriend. He's feeling a little left out, you know. You two used to be rather close."

"How do you think he'd react?" Harry asked, trying not to sound nervous.

"Better than you think."

"That's not much comfort to me."

"Harry, he loves you as much he does his own brothers. He'll get over it. Granted, he might take it better if your--well, if it wasn't Draco," Hermione finished lamely.

"I don't even know if I have anything to tell Ron," Harry said glumly.

"Draco's a Slytherin, Harry," Hermione said with some amusement.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"You're the brave one. If you want something to change, you're going to have to

change it yourself. He'll just quietly manipulate you into doing whatever he wants, in any case."

"Sort of like how you quietly manipulated Ron into asking you out?"

Hermione sniffed. "So Slytherin was a possibility when I sat under the Sorting Hat. What of it?" she asked. Harry laughed and instantly felt better to think Hermione had been considered for Slytherin, too.

"Why did it pick Gryffindor?"

"Well, Ravenclaw was the big one. It almost Sorted me into that House. It considered Slytherin only for a moment, but then it told me Slytherin wasn't ready for my kind yet. I think it meant Muggle-borns."

"Oy! Time to go! Harry, we'll see you at school!" Ron called from downstairs.

"And don't forget, Ron, I want one of those telly program guides. And a fellytone book, too," Mr. Weasley told him excitedly.

"Telephone book, Dad. And I'm not going to have enough room for all this stuff," Ron sighed, rolling his eyes at his father.

"See if you can't fit one of those little fire bulbs in, then."

"Light bulbs, Mr. Weasley, not fire bulbs," Hermione sighed as she walked downstairs. Everyone was heading to the fireplace to leave. Harry told all the Weasleys goodbye, including Percy. Percy seemed to be in a much better mood than usual. He was having an animated discussion with Fleur about his theories on regulating Dark spells until Bill glared at him. Fleur looked rather relieved when Bill chased him off.

Harry watched them all clatter off or disappear, gaily talking to each other. Mrs. Weasley fussed over him and told him to rush over to the Burrow if "that Death Eater tries anything funny." Harry agreed to make her feel better. The house seemed a lot gloomier the moment they left, however, as though a shadow settled over it. It was harder to breathe for some reason, as though someone had sucked all the good air out of the house.

"Well," Sirius said, rubbing his hands together. "It's just the four of us, then. I'll make dinner."

"Five," Lupin said gently.

"That Lestrage girl's not going to come downstairs. She hasn't the balls. And if she makes me mad, I'll line her room with unicorn hair, too."

"I wasn't speaking of Contessa. I invited Severus to dinner. I don't think he should be alone right now. He told me to go to hell, but I think I'm going to insist ."

Sirius, Harry, and Draco all stared at Lupin as though he had sprouted a second, green head that spat fire. "Excuse me?" Sirius asked.

"I invited him to dinner. He happens to be quite a good cook, from what I understand. Most potion-brewers are. I'm sorry, but I really didn't want beans on toast for dinner. We could ask him to cook," Lupin responded mildly.

"Why, pray tell, did you invite him to dinner at my house?" Sirius asked through clenched teeth.

"Because I feel very badly for him. What Contessa did to him was cruel beyond words. He hasn't anyone else to invite him to dinner. I thought it would be a nice gesture of friendship on our part."

"He could have killed her! I don't care if she revealed a secret about him being Voldemort's sex slave! He set her on fire!"

"Most wizards do, when they're so upset they can't control themselves. He didn't mean to; he didn't even have his wand out. It was wild, unfocused magic. You obviously have no clue what its like to love your mother so much that any aspersion cast on her memory would cause you to fly into a rage," Lupin said very quietly, frowning.

Harry licked his lips as Sirius stared at Lupin incredulously. Draco was scowling.

"What is that supposed to mean? Why don't you take Contessa's side of things? Poor little girl, raised in the shadow of her uncle, doing nasty things to keep his love. Just as pathetic. You should want to marry her, as much as you love pathetic."

Harry suddenly had a feeling this was a very old argument. An argument they'd had before, only in various different forms throughout the years. He withdrew from them, watching Draco walk up the stairs.

"Why should I bother to take her side of things? You already have. You're already identifying with her imprisonment, despite the fact that she deserves it."

"Why would you invite Snape to dinner?" Sirius demanded, ignoring Lupin's last comment.

"Because it turned out we have more in common than we thought. Both of our friends seem to think we're traitors and spies," Lupin retorted. Sirius was getting loud, but Lupin's voice remained as mild and calm as ever.

"Snape is a traitor and a spy! You're not!"

"Yet, that didn't stop you from telling James that ridiculous rumor of how the Lestranges can control and subject werewolves, did it? It didn't cause you to rise to my defense when I was accused of working with Death Eaters and almost ended up in Azkaban myself. That's why you picked Peter to be the Secret Keeper. You thought I would betray James and Lily. You chose poorly, Sirius. Very poorly," Lupin said coldly.

Definitely an old argument.

"Get out of my house!" Sirius screamed, looking like he wanted to hit Lupin. "Just get out!"

And Lupin quietly turned away and walked out. He was scowling.

Sirius looked up at Harry, who was already walking up the steps. There was hurt in his eyes, inexplicable hurt. Loss and sorrow that he always managed to hide so well. Harry stared back at him.

"It's my fault. It's all my fault they're dead. Because I had faith in the wrong people," Sirius choked out and then retreated into the sitting room. Harry heard him seal the door with magic.

Harry couldn't pick on one emotion, so he settled for none as he walked up to his room. Draco was already in it, getting ready to move back to his own room. He paused when he saw Harry come in.

Harry sat down on his bed and stared at Draco's slender waist. "I'm emotionally vulnerable. Want to take advantage of me?" he asked dully. He wasn't sure if what they did earlier was even considered sex, but it was certainly a distraction.

"You'd have to have an emotion to be vulnerable, wouldn't you?" Draco asked shrewdly.

Harry smiled despite himself. "So. You and me? What are we?" he asked. He'd rather think about Draco than any part of the exchange downstairs.

Draco shrugged. "Labels are annoying. Why do we have to be something? Why can't we be ourselves?"

"So is there a 'you and me' this time?"

Draco looked down at the floor. "Why not?"

Harry felt satisfied by this, but with this emotion came subterranean pain and his own guilt. His smile faded.

Draco walked over to him and leaned into his face, staring directly into his eyes. "You helped me forget earlier. Do you want me to help you forget?" he asked softly.

Harry nodded, trying to shove away all his negative emotions. Draco straddled his lap, pulling Harry's glasses off before kissing him. Harry slid his hands across Draco's smooth body, letting his pain soak out of his being with something far more tender and sweet than he was used to. There was nothing so distracting as Draco, with his light, cool hands on Harry's most sensitive areas and warm mouth moving against Harry's mouth.

It was a nice way to forget.

To be continued . . .

Chapter 21: Jigsaw

Author's Notes: "Firestarter" lyrics by The Prodigy.

Chapter Twenty-One:
Swallowing the Darkness

There were four people at Number Twelve, Grimmauld Place. One man, two boys, and a young woman. One had been rescued from death, one had been marked for death, one was terrified of death, and the last practically personified it.

It wasn't so much the house that was depressing, but more the people inside it, Harry often reflected.

Harry was sick of beans on toast. As much as he loved Sirius, he did not love his beans on toast. Christmas break was over and the food alone made Harry long for the fine meals at Hogwarts. Harry had taken to cooking--since he was the only male in the house that could--but his culinary skills were rather limited, since Aunt Petunia had only taught him enough to be useful. So macaroni and cheese, sandwiches, baked beans, bacon, eggs, sausages, and lots of other simple meals became their staple. Harry hated cooking. Draco threw a fit every meal, but eventually ate when he got too hungry. When it was suggested that Draco could cook, he succeeded in topping Sirius by blowing up the stove and the pot. Sirius spent an entire day repairing it.

So much for Lupin's theory on good cooks being great potion brewers. Harry was eating a lot of Christmas cookies, cakes, and candies he'd been given for Christmas. So was Draco. Sirius moped around and stubbornly ate his beans on toast, muttering to himself darkly every time he did so.

Contessa, of course, could cook, but she refused to leave her bed except to use the toilet. When Harry last peeked in on her, she was lying on her bed in practically the same spot and position she'd been when Hermione and Ginny packed their things. She never came out, nor did she speak to anyone. She hadn't washed and the smell of unwashed female disagreed with Harry. Draco went in every now and then to talk to her, but she ignored him. Sirius brought her food once or twice a day, but she wasn't eating. Kaw had come back, but he didn't go anywhere near her. He stuck close to Sirius most of the time, preening and watching everyone.

Lupin's name was not to be brought up. When Harry tried, Sirius gave him a look that peeled a bit of paint off the wall near Harry. He definitely avoided bringing up Snape's name, so as to avoid getting hexed. Sirius was not much in a talking mood and usually took to sitting in the darkened drawing room, brooding. He occasionally tried to talk to Harry, but his sentences usually trailed off and he'd stare off into the distance.

Harry caught him at the cabinet Lupin kept his alcohol in. Sirius was holding a bottle of Wolfsbane Water--apparently Lupin hadn't thrown them all out--and frowning. "This is hard stuff. I don't normally drink this. When did it get here?" Sirius asked, eying Harry suspiciously.

"That was Lupin's drink of choice over the summer, while he thought you were dead. He stopped drinking completely when he found out about the potion to bring you back," Harry explained.

Sirius's jaw worked. "This stuff could kill him," he said after a long moment.

"He knows."

"He didn't used to drink you know. He never touched the stuff until after James died and I went to prison. I think I taught it to him," Sirius said darkly.

Harry didn't respond to that, because he couldn't think of a response. Sirius took the bottle and stalked out to brood over the bottle alone.

Godric's reaction to Harry and Draco's new relationship was typically blithe and reptilian. He decided to question Harry, slithering in after he and Draco had settled down for the night, curled around the other. "If you're not trying to mate with him, then what are you doing?" Godric asked.

"I told you before I'm not trying to mate with him. He's male," Harry explained in Parseltongue while Draco watched them curiously.

"Then why did you two move around on the bed jusst a little bit ago like you were mating?"

Harry blushed. "We were, er, just touching each other. For fun," he quickly explained.

"What'sss the fun in that?"

"It's a mammal thing."

"I exxxpected assssssuch. Sssuccch impractical creaturesss," Godric said. "I sssupposse thiss means I can't eat him, then?"

"You suppose right."

"What'd he say?" Draco asked.

"Er, nothing important," Harry said, blushing. "He was just wondering if it would warm up soon. He's not used to England's weather yet."

Draco was the only bright spot in the house. When Sirius's lackluster conversations would inevitably lead to his silent brooding, Harry and Draco would sneak off. Draco had his room back, but either he or Harry would often sneak into the other's room at night. Harry imagined what they were doing was rather boring by most people's standards. Other than the occasional handjob or rubbing off, they mostly just touched and kissed. Harry was more than willing to take it farther, but wasn't quite sure how. And he didn't want to show his ignorance on the variety of sexual activities a homosexual man could engage in, so he played it safe. He stuck to what he knew, which wasn't much.

He often wished Draco came with instructions, though.

It wasn't that Draco seemed to mind. On the contrary, he seemed to enjoy the affection as much as Harry did. Harry rather thought Lucius wasn't terribly affectionate. He wondered if that's why Draco liked being touched and kissed so much. So Harry decided to broach the subject one quiet night when Draco lay beside him, breathing softly and probably about ready to fall asleep.

"Did you not ever receive any positive affection from your father?" Harry asked.

"What?" Draco asked, stiffening up immediately.

"I mean, I was just wondering if you just liked affection because you never received any from any important male figure in your life."

"That's it. I'm canceling your subscription to Witch Weekly."

"I don't have a subscription to Witch Weekly. I never even read one."

"Then where in name of Merlin's wand did you get an idea like that? Granger?"

"Well, no, actually. I just thought--"

"It's none of your business," Draco spat, sitting up and untangling himself from Harry.

Harry sat up as well, realizing he had offended Draco--which wasn't hard to do if Draco was in one of his moods, but it bothered him. He didn't want Draco to be in a strop with him.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to pry or anything. You--you never talk much about yourself, or what your childhood was like."

"Neither do you," Draco said darkly.

Harry was startled by this. He was an open book as far as he knew. "Why bother? Read the latest Daily Prophet, I'm sure they have some tragic secret to reveal about me. Nothing about me is a secret, Draco. Everything about you is one. You'll run off at the mouth about anyone else's secret, but never your own," Harry retorted.

"Are you trying to psychoanalyze me?"

"I'm trying to understand you. You act like there's three or four different Dracos running around inside your head. Sometimes you're this insufferably arrogant berk, other times you make me laugh. You act like you hate me, but then you act like you don't. I don't get you."

"That much is obvious, Potter."

"My name is Harry."

Draco looked at him, his gray eyes quite serious in the weak moonlight shining through the window. He then abruptly looked away. "My father . . . my father doesn't touch much of anyone. He's not the type to hug anyone or even shake your hand. He's very stiff. The only person he's willing to touch is my mother, and only in private. He never touches her in public, except to offer his arm or help her out of the carriage or something. He didn't like me sitting in his lap or jumping up to hug him when I was little, either. He'd always flinch, like I'd hurt him or something," he said very softly.

"Why?" Harry asked in curiosity, drawing his arms around Draco and pulling him

back down to the bed.

"I don't really know. All I can do is guess. You think I'm secretive? My father can keep a secret better than Snape, but usually more about himself. Other people's secrets don't mean as much to him. Mother always used to complain she lived in a nest of scorpions."

"Er, why?" Harry asked.

Draco's smile came and went. "Me, Father, and Contessa are all Scorpios. She's an Aries. She said we were all quite trying to her nerves. She often said the world was a darker place when we all decided to take on a mood at the same time," Draco said, snorting a little. "I don't think that's very fair, though. You'd hardly know I'm a Scorpio, really. I have a very strong Sagittarius rising sign, not to mention a moon in Aries. And you'd hardly know Mother was an Aries, between her moon in Gemini and Aquarius rising sign."

Harry blinked in the dark room. "You sound like Professor Trelawney," he said. "Divination's all rubbish, you know."

"It is if you don't do it properly," Draco sniffed. "I happen to be doing remarkably well in Divination--with both teachers. It's quite annoying they take turns now, though. Trelawney says I have the makings of a true Seer and that centaur said I am the most gifted human he's ever met when it comes to Divination. I'm quite pleased I decided to take it in place of Care of Magical Creatures this year."

"You're lying."

"Of course I'm lying. The centaur gave me detention for asking him if all centaurs were Sagittarians, though it might have been because then I asked if the female centaurs went around without shirts on, too. I don't see what the problem was; I was only curious. Trelawney gave me three detentions for making a joke about how the full moon and Uranus were actually the same thing in certain circles. Stodgy old bint."

It took Harry a moment to work that out and when he did, he burst out laughing. "You're obsessed with sex," Harry snickered.

"Of course I am. I'm a teenage male Scorpio. I'm supposed to be obsessed with it. It'd be unnatural if at any point a sexual thought wasn't passing through my brain."

"So do I pass through your mind a lot?" Harry asked.

Draco rolled his eyes. "No, of course not. Every time we snog I'm envisioning you're Professor Morpheus," he said.

Harry felt his blood run cold and his heart stop. It must have shown on his face because Draco blinked at him.

"I'm joking, Harry," he said.

"Why do you always have to joke? Why do you always have to make a snide comment instead of being serious and answering my questions?"

"Why do you always have to be so direct? Why are you so nosy?"

"Nosy? I just want to know if you like me or not. You never said."

"Are we back to that again? I thought the only dogged individual in this house was supposed to be that slobbering idiot godfather of yours."

"He doesn't slobber. Now answer my question."

"If I didn't like you, do you think I'd let you touch me? My father would kill me if he knew I was--I wasn't going to produce any heirs to carry on the Malfoy name. I won't even get into what he'd do to you."

"It's funny how a guy who stole Fleur's bath soaps and shampoo wants to avoid labels. And I want you to say it."

"You don't get soap and shampoo like that in Britain. You have to import it."

"Say it, Draco."

"Fine. 'It.'"

"Draco, I swear, I'm going to--"

"You're not bad-looking."

"What an ego-booster."

"You're sort of interesting, I suppose."

"Your flattery makes me all warm and fuzzy on the inside."

"You're not fat. I can't stand fat."

"I'm going to try and not let this go to my head."

"I like your eyes," Draco finally said appraisingly, looking directly into them.

Harry smiled. "What about the rest of me?"

"It's all right," Draco said softly, smiling. Whenever he smiled, Harry wanted to kiss him. So he did.

"And you're very good with your mouth," Draco whispered between breaths, his hands sliding down Harry's body and to the lip of Harry's pajama bottoms.

Harry grinned. "Think so?" he asked.

"Mmm," Draco murmured, slipping a hand into Harry's pajama bottoms and making Harry moan. "Maybe I could convince you to kiss other places of my body beside my mouth?"

Harry was sweating, and not just from nervousness. His hands were already working on stripping Draco, though he found himself fearing he might do something wrong. "No convincing necessary," he said, trying to sound light-hearted. "Though I'm surprised you're not making me wrestle you to the ground for this."

"Oh, you only have to get rough if you want me to reciprocate," Draco giggled, growing warm and hard against Harry.

And then there was a definitive feminine scream off in the distance. Harry and Draco paused. The scream repeated itself. It was too shrill to be produced by any masculine voice box, though whoever was screaming had a great set of lungs.

By the third shriek, Draco was buttoning his pajamas up and Harry had rolled off the bed, taking his wand out from under his pillow and holding it in his hand. By the fourth shriek, the scream was so loud that identification could be placed on the voice.

Contessa.

They flew out of the room and over to hers. The door was wide open. Harry burst in, Draco behind him. The screaming was coming from the bathroom. The door was wide open and the light was on. There seemed to be a lot of splashing around and two struggling shadows were cast onto the floor by the bathroom light.

Harry ran to the door, wand pointed out. He managed to stop himself from accidentally casting an Impediment Jinx on Sirius. Contessa was screaming and sitting in the tub with water running over her. She was still fully dressed. Sirius had her by the wrists and was waving soap at her with his free hand.

"Er, what's going on here?" Harry asked, his wand still out. Draco was just behind him.

"Pervert! She's your cousin!" Draco cried.

Sirius rolled his eyes and sighed. She tried to bite him, but he jerked his hand away from her. Harry noted both her wrists were clutched in his grip. She had odd bruises on her neck and wrists, but they didn't look they were caused by someone's hands.

"Get your mind out of the gutter. I'm not trying to molest her. She was starting to minge. I told her to wash, but she wouldn't. So I'm making her," Sirius explained and then turned back to Contessa. "I mean it. I'll strip you naked and scrub you raw if you don't wash. I cannot abide the smell of an unwashed female."

She screamed again, but all of what she said was unintelligible. Harry blinked and lowered his wand, still staring at Sirius.

"And I'm not removing the Babbling Curse until you agree, either."

"Not to disagree with making her wash or anything, Sirius, but it's three o'clock in the morning."

Sirius cast Harry a glance and then over at Contessa, who would have been slinging some great profanity in his direction if she wasn't speaking in gibberish. She looked like a wet rat under the water, her clothes and hair sticking to her too-pale skin. She had never bothered to completely wash off her make-up and the smeared remnants of it dribbled off her face and onto her dress. She looked sick and drawn. Harry rather reckoned that was from not eating over the past few days.

"I'm sick of it," Sirius sighed. "I'm so sick of dreading having to spend the next few months with nothing but her and me in the house. I'm sick of eating beans on toast or

macaroni and cheese--no offense, Harry. I'm sick of everybody treating me like a walking dead man. I'm sick of being so miserable about being stuck here that I don't appreciate anything. I'm sick of not living a life that you gave back to me. I've chased off my only living friend. She's not going to scare me. She's not going to run this place with her little passive-aggressive melodrama. I'm not having it."

Harry stared at him, blinking slowly. Either Sirius was having a mid-life crisis, or he had been doing a lot of thinking over the past few days.

"This is how it works," Sirius said, turning to Contessa. "You basically tried to trade my life in to Voldemort. So you owe me. You owe me and Harry for what you did. Since Harry's leaving in a couple days, there's not much you can do to make it up to him. However, I figure you can start by making our meals. And doing our laundry. And cleaning my house. I expect breakfast this morning around ten o'clock. I want sausages, bacon, ham, and eggs. Lots of each."

Contessa screamed at him again, but it was still gibberish. She looked quite vexed. Harry had never seen her so worked up. She looked ready to froth at the mouth. Draco was staring between Contessa and Sirius with a curious expression.

"If you don't get up out of that bloody bed and make yourself useful, I'm going to follow you everywhere you go," Sirius grinned, holding up the soap to her and leaning forward to look into her eyes. Gray met gray. Contessa was definitely better at glaring, but Sirius was better at not being affected by it.

"Everywhere," Sirius said when Contessa babbled something at him angrily. "I'll follow you to the loo. I won't leave you alone. I'll move into this room and if you move out, I'll follow. I will make your life a living hell. When you want quiet, I'll make noise. When you want noise, I'll be quiet. If you need to wash, I'll hose you down. If you want to read, I'll take away all the books. And lastly, when we're alone it'll be beans and toast, every day. I figure you're pretty hungry by now--think of how much worse it could get."

Contessa was silent and she stared at the bar of soap he held up to her. She then glared at him. She hesitated and then grabbed the soap from his hand. Sirius grinned and tapped her on the head with his wand. "Finite Babel," he said firmly.

"I'm not some house elf you can just boss around to do your servant's work. I am a noble lady of the house of Lestranger," she hissed at him.

"Don't care. Make yourself useful or I'll start marking my territory. In your room."

"Uncouth bastard."

"Treacherous bitch. I'm a dog Animagus. Trust me when I tell you that I know a bitch when I see one."

"Out!" she roared.

"I mean it. I have a very sensitive nose, so I can tell if you don't wash. Ten o'clock tomorrow morning. Sausages, bacon, ham, and eggs. I also like cheese toast. After breakfast, our laundry needs to be done, and then you need to wash out this room. It still smells nasty."

Contessa only scowled at him, holding the soap like she wanted to shove it down his throat. Sirius turned to Harry and Draco and ushered them out. He looked particularly smug. "You see, boys, females are really quite easy once you learn the trick to dealing with them. They're rather like stubborn mules, but if you have a firm hand and a--"

Sirius never got to finish his statement because Contessa threw the soap at him so hard that he swayed on his feet and fell down, looking a little dazed. There were pieces of the wet soap still stuck to his hair. Contessa looked rather smug now and got up to close the bathroom door. Sirius rubbed his head ruefully, picking out pieces of the soap from his long, black hair.

"That's telling her, Sirius," Harry said calmly, trying not to sound amused.

"I think we've eliminated who we shouldn't go to for advice on dealing with the opposite sex," Draco commented, not only sounding, but looking amused.

"I don't remember women being this hard to deal with. Then again, none of the women I used to talk to would sell me out to Voldemort. Not even my mother, though this one has a long way to go before she gets that spiteful," Sirius scowled, coming to his feet.

"It's hard to hate her. She's too pathetic to hate," Harry said quietly, glancing at the closed bathroom door. The water was running and it sounded like Contessa was washing. Either that, or splashing around convincingly.

"You are definitely your mother's son," Sirius said, shaking his head. "Your father didn't forgive people so quickly. He hated anything even remotely connected to the Dark Arts. That's why he and Snape were always fighting."

Harry remembered Sirius telling him that before, but this time it caused him to frown, remembering snatches of Snape's life. "Maybe he hated Snape because he saw how much you despised him," he said.

Sirius blinked at him. "What?"

"If you were so willing to rebel against everything your mum told you, why did you listen to her about Snape?"

Sirius was very quiet. "How did you find out?" he finally asked, very softly.

"Contessa told us, when we discussing who all was your kin. We had to get three drops of blood from each of them for your potion. And I saw . . . bits and pieces of Snape's life in the Netherworld."

Draco had retreated to the doorway, hidden in the shadows. He was watching Harry very intently.

"By the time I got to rebelling against my mum, it was too late, Harry," Sirius said, looking away. "I was afraid James might not want to be my friend if I told him Snape was actually my cousin. I guess I just automatically thought--at that point--he was as bad as the rest of my family."

"Moony was only trying to be his friend. He tries to be everyone's friend, Sirius."

"He's my friend. He belongs to me, not Snape," Sirius growled.

Harry stared at him and then glanced at Draco. He glanced back at Sirius, realizing he was about to tell a secret that wasn't his and wasn't his right to tell, but he rather thought Sirius should know.

"He loves you, Sirius. He always has. And not like a brother, either," Harry said, licking his lips and wondering how Sirius would react and how angry Lupin would be.

Sirius slowly turned and stared at Harry. "Wh-what?" he asked blinking. Harry instantly regretted saying anything. Sirius looked like the floor had dropped out from underneath him.

"You heard me. And you understood me," Harry said.

Sirius swallowed. "But he's a man," Sirius said softly.

"Of course he is. It doesn't matter, really, at least I don't think it does. It doesn't change how he feels, in any case."

"You should get to bed. It's late," Sirius said in a shaken voice.

Harry slouched back to his room. Sirius headed off to his own room. Harry went inside his room and lay down on the bed he had been sharing with Draco less than half an hour ago. He felt horribly guilty for telling Lupin's secret, but it had seemed like the right thing to do. Harry had almost thought for a moment that Sirius might care about Lupin more than he let on. It had seemed right. Lupin would never tell him and didn't Sirius deserve to know that he was loved? If only they would patch things up, at least. After a few minutes, Draco came in and quietly lay beside him, wrapping his arms around Harry.

Harry felt instantly better and turned and smiled at Draco. "I guess a part of me just wants Sirius to suddenly realize he loves Lupin, too, and then they get together and live happily ever after. But things don't work out like that in real life, do they?" he said.

Draco smiled a bit. "I'm sort of disappointed that Contessa and Père hate each other now. I don't know why it matters to me, but maybe it's just because I love them both that I'd rather thought it would be nice for them to be together," he said softly.

"I think that's how I feel about Lupin and Sirius," Harry said. It was strange that both he and Draco felt the same about something.

"Substitute parents, maybe? Since neither of us have our own with us right now?" Harry asked.

"Definitely have to cut you off from Witch Weekly. Stop trying to psychoanalyze things. It's scaring me," Draco smirked.

Harry grinned back. "Well, I have to keep you interested, don't I?" he whispered.

"Less talking, more kissing," Draco ordered.

For once, Harry obeyed.

Harry woke up the sounds of music thumping through the walls. The next door neighbors' son was home for the holidays and was apparently sharing his music with the whole neighborhood. It sounded like something Harry vaguely recalled thumping from Dudley's room over the summer.

I'm the trouble starter, punkin' instigator
I'm the fear addicted, a danger illustrated

I'm a firestarter, twisted firestarter
You're the firestarter, twisted firestarter
I'm a firestarter, twisted firestarter

I'm the bitch you hated, filth infatuated - yeah
I'm the pain you tasted, well intoxicated

I'm a firestarter, twisted firestarter
You're the firestarter, twisted firestarter

I'm the self inflicted, mind detonator - yeah
I'm the one infected, twisted animator

I'm a firestarter, twisted firestarter
You're the firestarter, twisted firestarter
I'm a firestarter, twisted firestarter

Harry actually rather liked it. Wizarding music was all right, but Harry would always prefer Muggle music to it. There was something about that song that was full of an angry energy that Harry could appreciate. Harry rocked to it as he got up. He noted wistfully that Draco wasn't there, but the smaller boy entered the room after a moment or two.

He smelled of Fleur's bath soap and his hair was wet. Harry, who had been sorting through his clothes for his own shower, grabbed Draco and kissed him on the side of his neck. The scent was not as feminine as one might think a Veela's granddaughter might wash with. It had an indefinable smell that defied both genders. It smelled like Draco.

"Mmm. You smell nice," Harry said happily, snuffling Draco's hair. Draco giggled. "You should have waited for me to shower, though."

"Honestly, I couldn't wait. There's a show downstairs. Contessa Lestrange versus Sirius Black. The only thing they're missing is a stadium and some Christians to toss to the lions. You've got to come see this. Hurry," Draco giggled.

"They're fighting?" Harry asked in surprise.

"Not physically. This is a battle of the wills, Harry."

"I'll be done in a minute," Harry said, rushing through his shower and getting dressed while Draco stepped out. Though he rather liked Draco being naked around him, Harry couldn't stand not to have his clothes on around Draco. There was some sort of paranoid fear inside him that Draco would look at his body and find him wanting.

Harry and Draco headed downstairs. There was no shouting or any loud noises at all. Harry looked at Draco inquiringly, but Draco shook his head and grinned, leading him to the kitchen.

Contessa stood by the stove, finishing up on the eggs. Hot coffee was on the stove, its strong smell wafting past Harry. She wore a black dressing gown and black fuzzy slippers. Her ruined black hair hung around her shoulders in tangles and looked rather unkempt--it badly needed to have the burnt remains trimmed off. There was not a speck of her usual black make-up on her pale, drawn face. Harry even thought he saw bruises on her neck. Contessa was the type of person that almost always exemplified perfect grooming and did not emerge from her room in the morning without being impeccably dressed. Harry had never seen her look so neglectful, even after the night Lupin transformed.

Sirius, however, looked more neat and clean than he ever had. He was wearing a white button-down shirt and a pair of black trousers with lots of pockets on them. His long black hair was neatly combed and tied back. He wore a pair of gleaming jackboots. There was a bit of color to his face, too. He was sitting at the head of the table, calmly reading the Daily Prophet and munching on some cheese toast. He looked up and grinned at Harry.

"Morning, Harry!" he said cheerfully. He was apparently acting like Harry hadn't just rocked his world last night with a revelation about his best friend secretly harboring homosexual feelings for him. Contessa, however, studiously ignored their presence.

"Morning, Sirius," Harry returned, sitting down opposite of Draco and watching Contessa warily.

"Not to worry. I've charmed all the kitchen utensils from being able to spear, slice, cut, or do anything harmful to anything except food. I also charmed all the pots and pans to prevent them from being able to allow poison in the food. I've made some other adjustments around the house, too, on top of what the Aurors did," Sirius grinned.

Contessa walked around the table, slamming plates of food down in front of Harry, Draco, and Sirius. She went back to the stove and picked up the coffee pot and a mug, walking back over to Sirius.

"Coffee?" she asked coldly.

"Sure, why not. It's not too bad, but I prefer tea in the morning for future reference," Sirius said carelessly, flipping back his ponytail and leaning back to smirk at her.

Contessa smiled maliciously and poured the hot coffee onto Sirius's lap. He squealed in pain and his eyes watered as she dumped the empty mug by his plate. Harry stood up with his wand out, but wasn't quite sure what to do. Contessa calmly returned the coffee pot to the stove and returned with a jug of cream and a bowl of sugar.

"Cream? Sugar?" she asked Sirius sweetly. A part of Harry wanted to laugh, though another part sympathized with the look of agony on Sirius's face.

Sirius didn't answer, but grabbed the cream out of her hand and poured it inside his pants. He then sighed and gave a rather vapid smile in relief. Contessa calmly sat the bowl of sugar by his plate and headed over to her own plate and mug of coffee that had been sitting there since Harry came in.

"Sirius, are you, er, all right?" Harry asked.

"Fine," he said in a rather high-pitched voice.

Contessa smiled nastily and carefully drank some her own coffee. After a moment, she screamed and dropped the mug on the table, causing it to crack and the coffee to spill out across the table. Blood was pouring out of her nose and dripping down her chin. She put a hand to her face and whimpered.

"I don't feel at all bad about melting a couple nosebleed nougats into your coffee now," Sirius told her.

"Bastard," she screeched, running out of the room and up the stairs. Blood dripped onto the floor as she ran.

Harry still didn't know whether to laugh or not.

Sirius wolfed down his plate of food and then stood up, wincing. "I never thought there'd be a day I said something like this, but I'm going to go upstairs to soak my willy in something cold," he said and limped out.

Harry and Draco burst out laughing the moment they left. Draco wiped tears from his eyes. "See what I mean? I've never met anyone who could get Contessa back like that. This is going to be fun," he grinned.

"Sirius and my father were the worst troublemakers until the Weasley twins. Worse than the twins, I think. They called their gang 'the Marauders'," Harry laughed.

"Oh, good, because if Father hadn't been in so good with Snape, she would have been expelled by her fifth year. She was always getting into trouble for slipping caterpillars into Gryffindors' food or something like it. Mother always put her onto it. Mother was a troublemaker, too. Father acts like he was angel at school, but Mother told me about one time when he jinxed the Fat Lady so none of the Gryffindors could get into their tower in his seventh year. I think Père helped him, too, but he was only in second year," Draco mused.

Harry blinked, beginning to see why Snape might not have been so popular with the other Gryffindors. They got up and left the kitchen after eating, finding Sirius coming back down the stairs. He met up with them in the hall, grinning. "I found some burn ointment and used that. I feel a bit squishy in certain places, but much better now," he told Harry and Draco.

Contessa also came out a minute after that, still dressed in her nightclothes. She was tugging bags of everyone's laundry behind her and grumbling. As she put a foot onto the step, Sirius flicked his wand and the stairs collapsed into a wooden slide that sent Contessa and the bags into a nasty tumble down it. She landed at the bottom and each of the four laundry bags hit her in succession as they reached the bottom after her.

Harry and Draco were laughing so hard they couldn't breathe. Sirius was grinning widely. Contessa sat up and moaned, holding her ankle. Sirius's brows creased.

"My ankle! You broke my ankle!" she sobbed. All three men stopped laughing and Sirius rushed over to her.

"Are you all right?" he asked in that guilty, anxious tone one took upon realizing their prank had gone wrong. He bent down to inspect her ankle, his back to Harry.

Harry and Draco approached and they saw Sirius twitch oddly, squeak, and then double up in pain. Contessa swiftly stood up, dusting herself off and grabbing the four laundry bags. Her ankle didn't look broken to Harry.

"Apparently, you can teach an old dog new tricks," she told Sirius viciously and then started to drag the bags to the laundry room as Sirius whimpered.

"One man's willy shouldn't take this much abuse in one day," he moaned, limping up the stairs, holding his crotch. Contessa looked rather pleased with herself as she disappeared around the corner.

Harry and Draco began to laugh again. Later, when Sirius had re-emerged and lay on the couch in the sitting room--with an icepack on his groin--he seemed to be lost in thought. Harry and Draco were playing a game of wizard's chess and Harry privately wondered why Sirius was so thoughtful.

Contessa's sudden scream cut into the middle of their game. Harry turned to Sirius and realized he hadn't looked thoughtful, he'd only looked expectant. Sirius was grinning ear to ear as Contessa emerged into the sitting room, soaking wet and dripping soapy suds. Her dressing gown clung to her skin and her hair was plastered to her face. She looked very cross and she turned a hateful expression on Sirius.

"The washing tub water exploded in my face," she hissed.

"Funny, it doing a thing like that. I'd fix it, but as you can see, I'm still recuperating from someone grabbing my willy and twisting it like a doorknob."

"You are the most insufferable, irritating, and stupid man on this planet."

"I'll bet you say that to all the boys. You shouldn't waste your time flattering me so. I don't date relatives."

"I hope you get fleas and die from some obscure canine disease," she scowled.

"Harry, would you be so kind as to fix the washing tub for her? We wouldn't want her to shirk her duties. When you're done with the wash, Contessa, don't forget our lunch. And I'll be needing a new icepack. After lunch, you can scrub that rank hole you call a

room."

"We should have left him trapped in the Netherworld," she muttered, stalking out behind Harry. Harry quickly repaired the glugging washing tub with a couple flicks of his wand, listening to Contessa mutter to herself darkly.

"Draco and I are going back to Hogwarts tomorrow," Harry told her.

"I know," she scowled.

"I'm not mad about what you did. I guess I should be, but I'm not. I think I know why you did it," Harry told her.

Contessa stared at him in shock.

"You wish you were Lucius's daughter, don't you? You wish that more than anything else in the world. You'd do anything he asked you, anything to make him love you. I know how you feel. I used to feel like that about my aunt and uncle when I was little, until I realized it was a lost cause. You're sorry about what you did. I can see it in your eyes."

Contessa was silent for a long time, her face twitching a bit as though she was fighting off tears. Harry knew he was right about her, because that guilty look he'd seen in her eyes before came back.

"There's a spy at the school, Harry. Someone knows about you and Draco and told the Dark Lord. It wasn't me. I think it's Snape, but it could be one of Draco's housemates," she said suddenly.

Harry blinked. "About me and---how did you know?"

Contessa stared at him and then turned away. "Draco has a habit of projecting his feelings," she said neutrally. "It's something he--well, he inherited from our grandparents. I suppose I notice it because he's almost like my brother."

"Draco's life is in danger, isn't it? More than it already was?" Harry asked, his blood running cold.

"Probably. I offered the Dark Lord information on your friends and about Black as part of a deal. One part was to get the Death Eaters' help to free Lucius and Narcissa. The other was to give Draco asylum. I don't know if he'll do it or not. He only said

he'd consider it."

"Whose side are you really on Contessa? Where do you really stand? I can't believe you side with Voldemort."

Contessa shuddered at the mention of his name and then stared at Harry. "I stand where I've always stood. I stand with Lucius Malfoy," she said coldly.

Harry stared at her. "You're a grown woman. Are you always going to let him run your life for you? Are you going to spend your life doing whatever he tells you--like a house elf?"

"I have no one else."

"What about Draco?"

"Draco is--Draco doesn't deserve to be his son! Draco doesn't even have the slightest clue of what it takes to be a Malfoy! I should have been Lucius's child, not him! Lucius protects him, shelters him, worships him! It's always him that Lucius talks about!" she exploded suddenly.

To Harry, all he heard was Draco's complaint in reverse. Draco thought his father favored Contessa because she was more like what Lucius wanted in a child, and Contessa was convinced Lucius favored Draco because he was blood. The irony of it was not lost on Harry.

"I'm not your enemy, Contessa. I could be your friend, if you wanted. Sirius would be your friend. Lupin would be your friend. Dumbledore would protect you--he already does. I think I understand now what he meant about you losing your way. I don't believe you're a bad person, just very misguided. You passed up too many opportunities to do us harm to be a truly bad person."

"I'm not going to be lectured to by a sixteen-year-old child," she hissed, looking angry now.

Harry shrugged and handed her the box of soap. "Draco loves you. I like Draco. That means I have to look out for you, too. His parents may be lost causes, but I don't think you are. If you want it, there would be a lot of people willing to be your friend, to be there for you. I'd hate for Draco to have every part of his family swallowed by darkness. Maybe Dumbledore was wrong. Maybe you are strong enough to swallow that darkness inside of you," he said and then walked away.

Contessa watched him go with very wide gray eyes.

To be continued . . .

Chapter 22: Jigsaw

Author's Notes: "Firestarter" lyrics by The Prodigy. I also took creative license with Harry's burgeoning powers. The French translations were done by generous readers: avapouhi, Avacado, and ce'nedra. Thank you, guys! The English translations will be provided at the end of the story.

Chapter Twenty-Two:

Firestarter

Lupin stood politely by the door, waiting for Draco and Harry on the morning they had to return to Hogwarts. Tonks was there, too, with bright, electric blue hair and eyes to match. She was standing by a scowling Rufus, who was wearing a purple and orange outfit that looked like it came off a Halloween rack. Kingsley was also there, loading their trunks onto a trolley.

Sirius stood in a corner, staring at Lupin like he was trying to drill holes into him with his eyes. Lupin coolly ignored Sirius's presence, standing by the stairs with his hands in his pockets. Neither spoke to the other. Harry had an insane urge to bang their heads together. He still felt a bit guilty about his impulsive decision to tell Sirius about Lupin's feelings--but it had to have been for the best. What if Sirius could--or did--return them? They had always been strangely close in Harry's mind. It was almost as if they formed a pair in his mind right after his third year. He couldn't help but think of them as inseparable.

Contessa stood on the landing, staring down at them. She had not fully dressed since Sirius forced her out of bed and, though she was clean, her hair was in tangles now. Her dressing gown slipped down a shoulder unheeded and she stared at Draco with a sad expression.

"Tu feras attention, n'est-ce pas?" Contessa asked Draco. It took Harry a moment to realize she was speaking in French.

"Oui," Draco said shortly, checking one of his bags and not looking at her. Harry had caught Contessa whispering to Draco last night when Harry went in to spend the night with him. She had gotten up immediately and gave Harry a glare before sweeping out. Draco had been in a very dark mood after that.

"Ils te tueront à cause d'Harry. Ou tu voudras être mort," she continued.

Draco paused and gave her a dark glare. "Ca ne te regarde pas," he spat.

"Tu ne t'inquiètes pas de ce que ton père dirait?" she asked, slapping the banister in frustration. Lupin was watching her curiously, but without comprehension. No one else seemed to understand her but Draco.

"Unlike you, Contessa, I don't exist to please my father," Draco said darkly, turning from her.

Contessa slid down the railing and sat on her legs, biting her bottom lip and looking near tears. "There's a spy at the school, Draco. Why don't you believe me? It could be Snape!" she said. Her hands were clutching the bars of the banister, her face peering out between them like a prisoner.

"Why should I believe anything you say? You've lied to me before."

"Don't you remember, Draco? When you were four and Uncle Lucius and Aunt Narcissa had gone on holiday? They left us with that horrid nanny who read you a werewolf story and frightened you half to death. When you cried in the middle of the night, who came to you? And what did I tell you, Draco?" she said.

Draco paused, his eyes resting on Harry. They exchanged glances. Everyone else was silent, their eyes on Draco. "You told me you'd protect me. You said you'd never let the werewolves get me," he said softly, his eyes flicking to Lupin. Lupin looked down at his feet.

"Did I lie, Draco? Did I lie about that?"

Draco shook his head. Kingsley and Rufus were pushing the trolleys out, exchanging looks. Draco looked away from Lupin and stared at Sirius instead. Their gazes met, gray on gray.

"Do you remember how to call me? Like you did when you were little?" Contessa asked from the landing. She sounded anxious.

Draco nodded, still staring at Sirius. Sirius looked away and went back to staring at Lupin. Lupin continued to stare at his feet.

"Call me, should you need me," she told Draco.

"Should I need you," he said softly and then walked out.

Harry cast a glance at Contessa. She glared at them and then got up and disappeared into her room. Harry looked over at Sirius, who continued to stare down Lupin.

"If you want something to change, you're going to have to do it yourself. No one's going to do it for you," Harry told Sirius firmly, quoting Hermione as best he could.

Sirius stared at him for a moment and then Harry hugged him. "I love you, Sirius. Be careful and I'll see you soon. Don't do anything stupid, okay?" he asked, crushing his face against Sirius's chest. He had Sirius back, and he didn't want to lose him again.

"Well, some people might say that'd be impossible, but I'll see what I can manage," Sirius said, hugging him back and sounding touched.

Godric slithered up and raised his head a bit as Harry crouched down and petted his smooth scales. He was staying behind, as was Kaw. "Watch out for Sirius for me. Try to make sure Contessa doesn't hurt him," Harry told him in Parseltongue.

"Ssshouldn't we worry more about it going the other way? He'sss the one with that magic ssstick that your lot ussse," Godric asked.

"True, but she's sneaky."

"I sssee you've had sssome exxxperiencce with the oppossite gender. All right, I'll keep an eye on them for you," Godric nodded. "You mammalsss would be lossst without a reptile to guide you."

"Right," Harry said with a grin.

"I forgot to ask, but I should know what that snake eats if he's staying here with me," Sirius said.

"Oh, he eats rat Animagi, don't you, Godric?"

"Or plump miccce Animagi. Those are my favoritesss. Or maybe toad Animagi. Or--"

"I'm not opposed to feeding him one in particular," Sirius said with a small smile.

"Contessa knows what he eats. And he can hunt, when it's not too cold. Red Spitting Cobras are nocturnal, mostly. But he's got distant Naga blood in him and is quite bright. He understands English and can follow directions if you need him to."

Sirius nodded. "Harry! Goodbye!" Kaw cried, landing on Harry's head and pecking at him affectionately before landing on Sirius's shoulder. Hedwig hooted in indignation from outside, listening to Kaw squawk and flap his wings.

"Goodbye. See you all soon," Harry grinned at them and walked out the door, joining the others.

Lupin walked out right behind him, but Sirius called out to him from the doorway. Lupin turned and looked back at him, or rather, looked back at Sirius's shoes.

"We're having dinner tonight," Sirius said awkwardly.

"Most people do," Lupin said with the smallest trace of sarcasm.

Sirius looked a little frustrated and then took a deep breath. "You could come and have dinner with us. You could bring Snape, if it makes you happy." Sirius added this last part with something like a growl.

Lupin looked up and met his eyes. "Snape only barely tolerates my presence, Sirius. You act like I'm having an affair with him. I only had dinner with him the once, and that was mostly to make sure he wasn't going to do anything rash. And he was most reluctant to do so. Trying to be someone's friend doesn't mean that you have to abandon your previous friends," he said neutrally.

"Oh, well," Sirius said, visibly relaxing, "you could come have dinner with us. There'll be a show. I was planning on putting some Deflating Draught into Contessa's soup."

Lupin blinked. "Why on Earth would you do something like that?"

"To get her back for giving me Pedigree Chum for breakfast."

"And why did she do that?"

"Because I convinced a few doxies to nest in her hair overnight."

"You did this because . . . ?"

"She exchanged my talcum powder with flea powder."

"Why did she do that?"

"I exchanged her talcum powder for itching powder."

"And why--"

"This could take a while," Harry interjected, grinning.

"I think I'd better have dinner with you two. Someone has to be the grown-up," Lupin sighed.

Sirius grinned. "Great! I'll make sure she makes enough for six people!"

Lupin blinked. "Who are the other three dinner guests?"

"Oh, there's no one else. Those are just my extra portions. I'm a growing Animagus."

"We'd better get going, or they're going to miss the train," Kingsley said gently.

"All right. Well, see you later, Remus," Sirius said eagerly.

"Right," Lupin said, nodding and heading off after the others. Harry watched him carefully, grinning a little.

Lupin gave him a suspicious look but didn't comment. He did, however, cast Draco a glance. Draco was having a "conversation" with Tonks. Apparently, Tonks was trying to bond with her youngest cousin. Draco was trying to make her shut up and told her more than once to "turn off her hair."

"That reminds me," Lupin said, drawing a slim, rectangular parcel from his coat. He handed it to Harry. Harry took it and smiled.

"What's this?" he asked.

"A belated Christmas present. I'm not saying I approve, understand, but I also know you're going to do what you're going to do, and I'd rather you be well-educated about it," he said, looking embarrassed.

Harry opened it and found a slim book on sex--sex involving males with other males, no less. Harry blushed and shoved it into his own coat. "Er, thanks," he said awkwardly.

"I bought it the very night after, er, I accidentally walked in on you in the attic," Lupin mumbled, shoving his hands in his pockets.

"It'll be useful," Harry said. Lupin winced a bit at the statement, but made no other comments.

"Does it have pictures?" Harry asked.

Lupin winced again. "If it's all the same to you, I'd rather not continue this conversation," Lupin said. He was blushing again.

Harry couldn't help but laughing. It was remarkably easy to embarrass Lupin.

He'd have to tell Sirius that, too.

Meeting Neville in the train back to Hogwarts was a strange experience.

"Where's Contessa?" the plump boy asked, peering over Harry, Ron, and Hermione to watch Draco walk past the train compartment they were sitting in. Draco was going to go sit with the Slytherins, but he did give Harry a small smile before joining his housemates.

"She's back at Grimmauld Place," Ron said viciously. "She betrayed us and went back to the Death Eaters. Gave You-Know-Who information on Harry."

Neville stared at him with an expression of shock. "B-but, she wouldn't! She's nothing like her parents!" he cried.

"How do you know?" Ron asked, shrugging.

"B-because she was helping me. She was tutoring me and helping me with all my studies. Her advice on Transfigurations was rubbish, but I wouldn't have received as high marks in Defense Against the Dark Arts if she hadn't been practicing with me almost every day in the dungeons. She's my friend," Neville said, looking upset.

Harry stared at him and went to open his mouth, but Ron beat him to it. "She was probably just softening you up, Neville. She's a bloody liar and a traitor to boot. She's as bad as her parents. All the Lestranges went wrong, the woman in the portrait in Hermione's room said so," Ron said coldly.

It was Hermione who whirled on Ron, before Harry could even say anything. "Ronald Bilius Weasley! How could you say such a thing? How can you judge someone without walking a mile in their shoes? How can you say anything about them when you don't know where they come from?" Hermione said reproachfully.

Harry's blood ran cold. He'd heard Hermione say that before, in one of his dreams. He stared at her, while Ron opened and closed his mouth, looking strangely like a fish out of water.

"But she--" Ron began before Hermione cut him off.

"She only did what her uncle told her to do. She did everything she did out of love and a desire to be loved," Hermione said fiercely. She sounded like she often did when defending house elves.

"She's still responsible for her actions. She still made poor choices--a whole string of them. I don't think she's evil; she's done too many good things and even risked her life for us. She has to make a choice, though. She has to decide where she stands. In the end, your actions become meaningless if you're not standing on the right side," Harry said judiciously.

"She's nothing like her parents," Neville said glumly, turning to stare out of the window. "She understands me."

"Oh, Neville, you've done so well this year. And you'll continue to do so, I know you will," Hermione said, turning to him.

But Neville did not answer.

Neville's marks, however, did not slip after classes began again. In fact, they steadily improved over the course of January, as though he was trying to prove something. He stayed up until all hours studying or practicing with anyone who was willing. He had a permanent expression of disappointment on his face and Harry often wondered how close he and Contessa had gotten. Harry also wondered what Neville had in common with the daughter of the two people that had tortured his parents into insanity. He

didn't dare ask Neville. He didn't have the right.

The problem with school was that Harry didn't get to see Draco enough. He didn't get to touch him, and couldn't even look at him for very long before Hermione would remind him he had homework to do. They just flat out didn't have the time or opportunity to see each other. Harry seriously considered arranging a midnight rendezvous with his Invisibility Cloak, but the problem was that he'd have to split it in half. That and the fact that even the slightest chance of being caught could endanger Draco's life even more.

Not to mention getting them expelled.

Snape was as cold and hateful as ever. And just as greasy and unwashed. He was back to ignoring Harry, which suited him just fine. The more Snape ignored him, the happier Harry was. Snape either didn't remember or was ignoring what had transpired in the Netherworld. Either way was fine with Harry. Lupin was back in Hogsmeade, keeping an eye out for Draco and any suspicious activity.

Harry read the book Lupin gave him, trying to commit it to memory. It did have pictures--rather scientific ones--and Harry really wanted to try some of those things out. So when the next Hogsmeade weekend was announced for the end of January, Harry managed to get Draco alone after Potions.

"What?" Draco hissed, looking around the empty classroom warily.

"Hogsmeade. Shrieking Shack. Bring lunch and some pillows if you can manage it," Harry whispered.

"What?" Draco repeated.

"Just do it. See you then."

Harry snuck a quick kiss and left Draco in the empty classroom, looking flabbergasted.

"I suppose this is your idea of romance? You should try harder next time."

Harry looked around the ruined sitting room of the Shrieking Shack as he laid out the

food he and Draco had managed to nick from the kitchens. He had also laid out the pillows he and Draco had brought in a small pile. Harry had brought his items in his Invisibility Cloak, while Draco had carried his items in a small pouch he had charmed to carry as much as a large sack.

"Wha' w'ong wi' i'?" Harry asked through a mouthful of food.

Draco crossed his arms. "I expect you have me over here so you can have your way with me. You even picked the spot we first got off at. But all you have is a pile of pillows and you didn't even say hello to me. All you did was rip the food out of my hand and begin to stuff your face," he said sourly.

"Wa' a sammi'?" Harry asked through a large bite of his own.

"I suppose so," Draco said haughtily, then shrugging his shoulders and dropping down next to Harry, piling up a large sandwich and tucking in with the same vigor as Harry. "I just thought I'd mention what an insensitive prat you are."

"And you're the authority on that, I'm sure," Harry said after swallowing his sandwich and digging into the potato salad.

"Next time you come up with one of these little meetings, I want you to talk to Granger first."

"Her name's Hermione and why?"

"Because she at least could give you some better ideas. It's lucky you like boys, because you'd never get a girl like this," Draco sighed, waving around to their dingy surroundings.

Harry grinned, swallowing some potato salad. "Maybe that's why I like you instead of a girl," he said.

"You have potato salad on your chin," Draco said in a superior voice.

"Where?" Harry asked, rubbing at it. "I don't feel anything."

"You missed it."

"Where is it?" Harry asked, annoyed now.

"Right," Draco said, leaning in and kissing Harry on his chin, "here."

"Oh," Harry said, grinning. Draco usually wanted Harry to start everything, but whenever Draco kissed him, it put a warm, tingly feeling inside of Harry.

Draco looked imperious as he returned to his food, finishing his sandwich.

"You have a bit of mustard on your lips," Harry whispered, grabbing Draco and pulling him close. "Here, let me get it for you."

Draco giggled into their kiss, apparently as content to abandon their lunch as Harry was. Harry fell back onto the small pile of pillows, taking Draco with him. Draco grabbed his glasses and tossed them onto the floor. They took a lot of abuse when Harry was snogging Draco, but he didn't care. Harry slipped his hands down to Draco's robes, quickly undoing them.

"You once asked me to kiss other parts of your body, but we were interrupted that night. Do you still want me to?" Harry asked between kisses.

Draco nodded, smirking a bit. Harry kept undoing his robes, his hands slowly sliding down Draco's smooth chest. Draco's breath inevitably hitched as Harry moved lower and lower, until he finally found what he was looking for. He hesitated for a moment before working up the courage to do what he wanted to do and placed his mouth on the hardest part of Draco.

"Careful," Draco hissed, tensing up. Harry quickly adjusted. After a moment, Draco relaxed, breathing slowly and heavily once again. Harry found if he pretended he had a lollipop, Draco really seemed to like what he was doing.

Even though it was Draco who trembled beneath him, softly moaning his name, and tangling his fingers in Harry's hair, it was an intense experience. Harry wasn't quite sure if he was doing it right, but Draco didn't seem to be complaining. It wasn't terribly long before Draco came, pulling on Harry's hair and bucking his hips.

When Harry crawled back up to lie beside Draco, the blond boy was breathing heavily, his eyes closed and there was a curve to his lips suggesting that Harry did well. Harry kissed him.

"Your turn," Harry said, grinning.

Draco opened his eyes and smirked. "I knew we'd get to that part eventually," he

sighed, sitting up.

"You don't have to, if you don't want to," Harry said.

"And I wouldn't, if I didn't want to," Draco laughed, pushing him over. Harry lay flat, still grinning.

Draco was actually quite creative. He did things with his tongue that made Harry's head spin. He moved down Harry's chest, tongue lavishing Harry's nipples, darting in and out of his belly button, and then . . . Harry's wildest dreams--and he had plenty of those--did not compare to what Draco actually did to him. Harry nearly thought he was going to burst out his skin. When he finally came, the world seemed to slip away for a few moments. There was only him and Draco, and Harry didn't mind that at all.

He felt very badly about yanking Draco's hair so hard, though.

"Sorry," Harry said.

"You should be. I spent half an hour styling it this morning. Not to mention I'm probably bleeding," Draco said, rubbing his head and glaring at Harry.

"How'd you get so good at that sort of thing, in any case? Had a lot of practice?" Harry asked, trying to sound cool.

Draco stared at him. "Of course. I mean, it's so easy to find other boys who are willing to have a quick blowjob in the gardener's shed behind my grandmother's rose garden. Why, they line up. My father didn't mind at all. Honestly, what a stupid question," Draco said scathingly.

"I mean, I just wondered," Harry said awkwardly.

"What? Did you think I was going to blow Crabbe or Goyle? Maybe Nott? And Zabini's as heterosexual as they make them. Or maybe you think I blew Flint so I could get into the Slytherin Quidditch team?" Draco asked shortly. He looked rather angry, which surprised Harry.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean it like that," Harry said slowly, sitting up.

"I must be some sort of slut, you think? Shagging any bloke who wants a go?"

"Draco! I didn't say that. You just seemed to know your way around, was all," Harry

said.

Draco sighed and sat back, looking a bit calmer. "Of course I do. So do you. It's not that hard. I know what I like, and you know what you like. Chances are likely we like the same things, being as how we're both men," he said sullenly.

"You've got a point," Harry shrugged. "I only wanted to know if I was your first, that's all. You don't have to be so touchy about it."

Draco turned his face, looking angry again. "I almost went all the way with Pansy Parkinson late last year, but that's all," he said.

"Almost?" Harry asked gently.

"I had to leave before things went too far. She was making me sick. Her body . . . it just--I just pretended I had food poisoning the next day," he admitted. "That's when I knew."

"Knew what?" Harry asked.

"I knew I only liked looking at girls. I don't want to touch them," Draco sighed.

Harry smiled. "It's even worse for me. I don't even like looking at them. I realized I didn't like girls after watching the Spice Girls and realizing I was bored," he said.

Draco smirked a bit. "They're nice to look at, if nothing else. Wasn't that the night after we hid under the bed from Lupin, though?" he asked.

Harry nodded. "That sort of helped to," he admitted with a smile.

"It took you that long to work out you didn't like girls?" Draco asked incredulously.

"Well, I guess I should have sussed it out when I was positively bored while kissing Cho."

"You kissed Cho Chang?"

"So? You snogged Pansy Parkinson. That's loads more disgusting."

"You got off with the prettiest girl in the school and were bored, but it takes watching the Spice Girls a year later to figure out you're a homosexual?"

"Well, it was you, really, that made me realize it."

Draco smirked. "Are you trying to blame your deviant sexuality on my incredible good looks and irresistible charm?"

Harry rolled his eyes. "No, I was blaming it on your insufferable egotism and the fact that you might have put a love potion in my food."

Draco actually laughed, a silvery sound that lacked malice. Harry never tired of hearing it. Draco laid down next to him and Harry wrapped his arms around Draco, feeling quite content with the world at that moment.

"What do you see in me?" Harry asked.

Draco closed his eyes and smiled. He didn't answer. Harry held him tighter, wondering once again why someone like Draco would like someone like him. They had the strangest things in common, but they were complete opposites in so many other things. A part of Harry wondered why he liked Draco.

"Say something in French to me," Harry demanded.

"Why?" Draco asked, opening a single eye.

"Because I like it when you speak in French."

Draco stared at him for a moment. "Tu me fais me sentir en sécurité, Harry," he finally said.

"Say something else," Harry demanded. He rather liked it that Draco could speak another language. Not only was the flow of the language rather attractive when he spoke it, but he could pretend Draco said almost anything. Maybe even something nice.

"Avant je voulais être toi. Maintenant je veux seulement être avec toi."

"You're probably telling me I have hair like a rat's nest, but you make it sound so nice," Harry sighed happily, grinning and kissing Draco.

Draco only smiled, though there was something almost wistful about his smile.

Harry and Draco walked back to Hogsmeade with smiles on their faces. They walked side by side, their hands brushing against each other, fingers entwining and then letting go.

"Let's stop in on Lupin before going back," Harry suggested. Draco rolled his eyes, but agreed to accompany him.

Harry hadn't been able to have a really decent conversation with Lupin lately and any letters had to be carefully worded. Harry wanted to talk to Lupin, to see how Sirius was doing. He also wanted to know what Sirius had done about the information Harry had given him.

They approached the Three Broomsticks, pushing past the crowd and up the stairs to Lupin's room. The hallway was empty and neglected, as it always was this time of day. The door to Lupin's room was open.

Harry felt his stomach drop and the little hairs on the back of his neck stood up. He held out an arm, preventing Draco from walking any further. He quickly pulled out his wand. Draco's brows furrowed, but he wisely said nothing and followed suit.

Harry entered the room, as carefully and warily as possible. It was empty. He proceeded further in, taking each step with greater caution. Draco was right behind him.

There was a scarf in the middle of the room, lying on the floor. A Slytherin's scarf. Splatters of blood decorated the floor nearby it. Harry felt nauseous, even as Draco gasped. He saw a folded up piece of parchment nearby it, held down by an empty bottle of absinthe left over from Christmas. Harry bent down and picked it up, terrified to read its contents, but even more terrified not to.

Potter,

We have the werewolf and his pet half-blood Slytherin. If you ever want to see them alive again, you'll touch the scarf. It's a Portkey to where we're waiting for you. Bring the blood traitor with you, but no one else. If you don't come, we'll kill both the half-bloods five minutes after you read this--I have it charmed so I know when you pick it up. If you bring anyone else, we'll kill them. I wonder if this heroic rescue will turn out as badly as your last?

- A Former Housemate

Harry let out a low moan as Draco gave a sharp cry. He tugged at Harry's sleeve, pointing over to a corner. Jebediah's broken body lay in it. At the angle his neck was, there was no doubt he was dead. Harry handed the note to Draco, feeling all the emotions inside of him drain out. Only one emotion remained.

Anger.

"I suppose we have no choice," Draco whispered. He was as pale as a ghost and trembling. His wand shook in his hand.

"I guess so," Harry said numbly. "On three then?"

Draco nodded, bending down to one side of the scarf as Harry crouched by the other. Harry couldn't even feel fear, not even while looking at Draco's wide gray eyes. All he felt was hot, adrenaline-pumping, heart-thumping anger. Like there was fire coursing through his veins.

"One. Two," Harry said throatily, remembering snatches of the Muggle song he had heard pounding out of Sirius's next door neighbors' stereo over the Christmas holidays. He had been hearing it all last year, from Dudley's stereo over the summer to the unborn Alice singing it in the Netherworld.

Now he knew the meaning of it.

I'm a firestarter, twisted firestarter.
You're the firestarter, twisted firestarter.

"Three," Harry said, touching the scarf as Draco did. The familiar yank behind the navel came and Harry and Draco appeared on a snowy field. A line of trees surrounded them and a few mountains loomed off in the distance. It was still morning time, here. Wherever they were, they weren't in England anymore. The scarf fluttered to the ground.

Ahead of them was a ramshackle old building. Just outside of it were Lupin and Tracey, both kneeling in the snow. Their hands were tied behind their backs. Lupin's shaggy hair hung in his face and Tracey was sobbing. Lupin had on nothing but a ragged shirt and a pair of old underpants. His left shoulder was bleeding badly. Tracey had been stripped down to a thin white slip. Both Lupin and Tracey were shivering in the cold. Behind them stood a small group of Death Eaters.

Avery stood at one side, scowling deeply, standing near a plump little brunette witch who Harry recognized as a Slytherin prefect who had graduated in Percy's class. She was giggling and her hair was in pigtails. Her name was Wilhemina Fort and Harry remembered that everyone called her "Willie." She had been the most gregarious Slytherin that Harry ever met. Next to her stood an impressive, muscular man with brown hair who Harry recognized as Bastion Fort from Contessa's memory. He had to be her older brother. Beside him were a blond man with a nasty smile around Bill's age and a painfully beautiful woman with silvery hair that could be none other than Desiree Beauregard, Fleur's cousin. Antonin Dolohov leered at Draco. Augustus Rookwood was there, leaning casually against the crumbling shack. Rabastan Lestrangle stood in the center, fondling a leash he had around Lupin's neck. His mad blue eyes glinted at Harry.

Rookwood spoke. "It's this simple, Potter. You and Malfoy drop your wands and come along quietly, and we won't slaughter your friends. Don't think we'll stop here, either. There's no point in fighting. People will only get hurt, and it'd be your fault again."

His words cut into Harry like a knife. The fire in his veins, pumping behind his eyes, burned hotter. The song continued to play inside his head, a soundtrack to the fire coursing through his veins . . .

I'm the trouble starter, punkin' instigator.
I'm the fear addicted, a danger illustrated.

"LET THEM GO!" Harry screamed. Draco jumped back away from him, turning his frightened gaze on Harry.

Rabastan Lestrangle laughed. "He's so angry! The filthy little diseased brat is infuriated! He must like the little wolfie quite a bit," he giggled, tugging violently on Lupin's leash. Lupin's face raised up and his shaggy hair swept back to reveal his face. It was a mask of pain. His sad, light brown eyes gazed at Harry, expressing their inevitable defeat. Rabastan knelt beside him and licked the side of his face almost sensuously.

Harry had his wand pointed straight for Rabastan. Rabastan grinned, stood up, and pointed his wand at Lupin's head. Tracey continued to sob. Willie slapped her and she fell over onto the snow, still sobbing. Willie giggled at this, as though it was funny.

"This can only go badly for you, Potter," Rookwood said. "Drop your wand."

"Oh dear, I do think the little Malfoy is going to cry. Can't take the heat, can you, blood traitor brat? I can't wait to tell your father how wet you are," Dolohov leered at Draco.

I'm a firestarter, twisted firestarter.
You're the firestarter, twisted firestarter.
I'm a firestarter, twisted firestarter.

"Let him go!" Harry cried to Rabastan.

"He's my new pet. I have a new puppy and Mummy said I could keep him," Rabastan giggled, stroking Lupin's hair like a dog.

All the Death Eaters had their wands out. So did Harry and Draco. Willie giggled again, her eyes glinting malevolently from her little piggy face.

"This is your last chance!" Harry screamed.

"No, Potter, this is your last chance!" Rookwood cried.

I'm the bitch you hated, filth infatuated - yeah.
I'm the pain you tasted, well intoxicated.

Harry didn't remember what spell he cast, or even if he'd cast a spell. All he felt was the fire rushing out of his veins, pouring into his wand and then exploding out of it like a bomb. The Death Eaters scattered--some by the force of Harry's magic. Rabastan Lestrangle was knocked thirty feet away from Lupin and into a pine tree. Draco had struck Dolohov with an Impediment Curse and was running full tilt for Tracey while the man fell over. The building was on fire and Harry felt alive.

"Little bastard!" Fort cried, blood pouring down the side of his square face. "Avada Kedavra!"

Harry dodged the ray of green light and pushed the fire inside of him out of his wand again. The silvery-haired woman was screaming and the nearby trees were burning as well. Harry realized her robes were on fire and the blond man next to her was trying to put them out.

Rookwood was screaming at Fort. "You idiot! The Dark Lord said not to kill Potter!" he screeched.

"Crucio!" Dolohov cried, coming to his knees and sending Draco to the ground, howling in pain. The others were coming to their feet as Tracey sobbed.

Harry roared unintelligibly, pushing all his anger, all his frustration, his pain, and his suffering into his wand. Magic was rushing out of it and Harry was dizzy with the power. Dolohov fell back and Draco stopped screaming. It was like the air was full of heat, fire, and power. Harry was screaming and the Death Eaters were fighting off magic of the likes they had only seen their master cast before.

I'm a firestarter, twisted firestarter.
You're the firestarter, twisted firestarter.

Tracey wriggled free from her bonds and as Willie stumbled back again, she grabbed her wand from the unconscious Avery's robes and struggled against the fire to get back to Lupin. Draco was now dueling with Dolohov. The other Death Eaters were warring with Harry's magic. Harry tried to move closer to Lupin, who was lying on the snow, struggling against his bonds.

Rabastan was up and pointing his wand at Lupin, who was twisting madly as he tried to free himself. "Avada Kedavra!" Rabastan hissed just as Tracey Davis sent him sprawling with a red beam of light coming from her wand. Harry's breath caught as Rabastan's wand involuntarily jerked up, but a jet of pale green light struck Lupin all the same.

Lupin stopped struggling and lay still.

"NO!" Harry screamed, feeling his heart burst as a huge ball of fire erupted from his wand. "YOU FUCKING BASTARD!"

Rabastan jerked away and saw the full force of Harry's magic coming for him. He Disapparated a second before the ball of fire passed where he had lain. It incinerated the trees behind him, their ashes blowing away in the winter wind. Beauregard was sobbing, her robes tattered and burnt. She Disapparated with a crack as well, soon followed by the blond man that had been helping her.

Tracey sobbed and screamed at the sight of Lupin, turning and fleeing as fast as her bare feet would take her.

"Filthy half-blood!" Willie screamed, aiming her wand at Tracey's back. "Avada--"

Draco turned and hexed her, sending the young woman to the ground before she could

fire off the Killing Curse. Tracey continued to run, screaming and crying the whole way.

I'm the self inflicted, mind detonator - yeah.
I'm the one infected, twisted animator.

The fact that Harry had seen himself cast magic like this before in his dreams did little to calm him down.

Dolohov was torturing Draco again with the Cruciatus Curse. His howls of pain cut through Harry's red haze. "Contessa!" Draco choked out between screams of agony. "Contessa, I need you!"

"Immobulus!" Rookwood screamed, cutting past Harry's defenses as he turned to help Draco. Harry couldn't move anymore. All he could do was stare at Draco as he twisted and writhed on the ground, crying in agony. He screamed in frustration, rage, and sorrow, but his mouth would not open to let it out.

"CONTESSA!" Draco screamed. Why was he screaming for her? What could she do to help them? She couldn't even save herself.

"Reducto!" Tracey Davis screamed, blasting down one of the giant trees. It fell on Dolohov as he tormented Draco, crushing the vicious man beneath its great weight. Tracey stood stock still and shook. She was apparently done running.

"Contessa . . . save me from the werewolves," Draco moaned and then passed out.

I'm a firestarter, twisted firestarter.
You're the firestarter, twisted firestarter.
I'm a firestarter, twisted firestarter.

There was only Rookwood and Fort left. They both stood on either side of Tracey, their wands pointing at her. "He's dead! You killed Professor Lupin!" she sobbed, shivering. Harry tried to scream at her that Lupin wasn't dead. He couldn't be dead. Harry wouldn't let him be dead.

"Expelliarmus!" Fort drawled. Tracey's wand went flying and she began to cry again. Harry wanted to shake her, to make her stop crying and fight harder.

"Potter's out for the count; kill the little Malfoy, he's caused too much trouble--I don't care what Lucius or the Dark Lord say. I'll take care of this one," Rookwood ordered

Fort, leveling his wand at Tracey.

Then Tracey did the oddest thing. She went to her knees and clasped her hands together. "Please, God, save us. Please, God, we need you now," she cried.

Rookwood looked amused. Harry wanted to scream at her as he struggled in vain against the Freezing Charm Rookwood had cast on him. He wanted to tell her God didn't exist, and how could you put your faith in something that wasn't real? Nobody watched out for them. Faith got you nowhere. They were going to die and no imaginary God was going to save them now.

Fort had moved over to Draco and was pointing his wand down at the unconscious boy. Harry tried at least to look away, but he couldn't. Fort was in the middle of casting a strange spell on Draco when he suddenly fell back, struck by a strange shimmer in the air. A purple streak of light passed from his wand and hit Draco, causing his small body to arch and then still. However, Fort wasn't going anywhere, either. His head had rolled away from his body when he hit the ground. Harry tried to see who cast the spell, but couldn't move his head.

Rookwood had not noticed what was going on behind him. "God doesn't listen to filthy little monstrosities," he sneered at Tracey.

"You're right, Augustus. He doesn't," said an unfamiliar rich male baritone. "Carnificare!"

Rookwood's head slid forward and pitched off his neck, hanging on by a few scraps of skin at his throat, neatly cut open and gushing blood--reminding Harry of Nearly Headless Nick. Tracey passed out at the sight.

A robed man--or at least Harry thought it was a man--came into view. His robes were of a rich blue, vibrant red, and harsh green. Harry couldn't see any features beyond a humanoid bundle of cloth.

"Finite!" he said, pointing his wand at Harry. Harry fell over, but realized he still couldn't move. He was too weak, as though he had drained his very life into the spells he had been casting earlier. Perhaps he had, at that.

The robed man checked Tracey's pulse and then nodded to himself, ripping off the unconscious Avery's cloak and covering her in it. He then cast a Binding Spell on Avery and Willie. He moved over to Draco and checked his pulse. He made a strange noise. He flicked his wand and a mule pulling a small, cheerfully painted wagon came

into view. He levitated Draco's body onto it and then moved over to Harry, checking his pulse.

"Not doing too well, either, are you?" the man asked. "You've expended an awful lot of energy today. If I leave you here, you'll probably die. I suppose I'd better bring you, too."

Harry gurgled a response, and the man levitated him onto the wagon beside Draco. The robed man held up his wand and sent out a jet of red sparks that tumbled and danced in the air over Tracey. He then covered Harry and Draco both with blankets and then sat at the front of the wagon, grabbing the reigns.

"Come along now, Stallion," the man gently told the mule. The beast surged forward and the rolling, bumping ride lulled Harry to sleep. He looked over at Draco as his eyes involuntarily closed. He was still breathing, if nothing else.

Harry tried not to think about what he had just experienced and passed out.

To be continued . . .

Chapter 23: Jigsaw

Author's Notes: The word and idea behind "Kything" was inspired by Madeline L'engle from her Time Quartet, and the general idea is the same. I however, took severe creative license with it and introduced it to this story. I took creative license with the application and use of it as well.

Chapter Twenty-Three: Counting the Dead

Interlude Two:

Sirius was so bored he wanted to scream. It was Saturday afternoon and he had been reduced to reading--on purpose, no less. Remus had declined to visit since it was a Hogsmeade weekend and Sirius tried very hard not to resent Harry and the other teenagers Remus wanted to meet with instead.

It was very odd. Harry had said that Remus loved him--and not like a brother. Sirius had always wondered. Men didn't normally look at each other the way Remus would look at him. But Remus did nothing else and still did nothing else but watch him with those sad, brown eyes of his. After Harry's revelation, Sirius half expected Remus to do or say something, but the man was as courteous, mild, and physically distant to Sirius as ever.

And Sirius still wondered how he would react if Remus ever did do or say anything. He'd never, ever thought of a man in a sexual way. Well, maybe once. Perhaps twice. Three times, if you took into account the time he was wanked beyond belief. All right, he had to confess it was four. Although there was another time that--

This was pointless. Sirius had certainly thought of it before, he'd just never done anything about it. He'd never really considered Remus or any man very seriously before. He had always thought of his friends like brothers. Was that why Remus had never said anything? He didn't want to endanger their friendship? Or was Harry wrong?

The girl snorted in her sleep and interrupted Sirius's thoughts. Sirius looked over at her, lying on the couch next to his armchair. Shameful really, for her to fall asleep in

the middle of the day. But he expected she wasn't getting much sleep at night.

At first, he'd thought nothing of the bruises around her neck, not even when they started to appear on her wrists and arms. It wasn't the sort of things Sirius was going to put a lot of thought into, not for one of his Death Eater cousins.

But the bruises didn't go away and only seemed to get worse and more numerous. Sirius questioned her about them, but she was evasive and angry about his line of questioning. That didn't necessarily mean anything--she was always evasive and angry with him.

Then he had walked past her room at night after one of his midnight snacks. He'd heard her choking. He had burst into her room, his wand out. But all he saw when he entered was the fading ghost of a man. Silver tendrils of what looked like ghostly Devil's Snare wrapped around her throat had faded with him.

There were two types of spirit apparitions. There were ghosts: the dead whose spirits remained behind. There were the personifications of ideas: like poltergeists. Ghosts couldn't effect things, but things like poltergeists could.

Sirius was by no means an expert on spirit apparitions or death, but you couldn't come from a family founded by a Necromancer without knowing a little something about both. In fact, Sirius's great-aunt Juno had been a Necromancer. He'd never met her as she had died young, gored in the chest by a unicorn. There had been a lot of Black Necromancers over the generations.

He had walked over to Contessa, who was still making gasping noises as she gingerly touched her neck. "You killed that bloke, then?" Sirius had asked.

Contessa had glared at him. "What does it matter?" she had rasped out.

"Ghosts don't leave bruises."

"He's not a ghost," she had rasped.

"That what is he?"

"He takes the shape of Broderick Bode."

"Bode? That dead Unspeakable Dumbledore said you killed? Why'd you kill him?"

Contessa had smiled bitterly. "Why else?"

"Either Voldemort or Malfoy wanted you to do him in, right?"

She had shrugged, looking away, shuddering a bit at the mention of Voldemort's name. She had been breathing heavily, which was to be expected. Her voice had even started to come back.

"If he's not a ghost, then what is he?"

"He's a throne," she had said.

"A what?"

"A sort of . . . spirit that ensures justice is seen to and punishes the wicked. Like a poltergeist, only he personifies justice instead of chaos."

"He could kill you."

"I highly doubt it. That's not his intention, otherwise I'd be dead."

"Why'd he pick you out of all the wicked people to torment?"

"I don't know," Contessa had said. "Just leave me alone."

Sirius had left her alone. He had a feeling she was lying to him, but it was her problem, really. She had fresh bruises every morning, but he didn't say anything. A part of him felt very badly for her, and the other part was delighted that she was being punished. It wasn't like she didn't deserve it.

So there she was, sleeping in the middle of the day on the couch. Sirius turned back to the telly, flipping channels and settling on a comedy he didn't fully understand as it had far too many Muggle in-jokes.

"Draco!" Contessa cried, sitting straight up.

"Eh?" Sirius asked.

"Draco! Draco's in danger!" she cried.

Sirius just stared at her.

"We have to go to him! We have to go there right now! They could all be dead!" she said, falling off the couch as she tried to stand up. She looked frantic.

"Whoa, princess, slow down. You're under house arrest. And so am I for all intents and purposes. We're not going anywhere," Sirius said.

"They're in danger! Don't you care? Draco called out to me! He's in danger, I can feel it!" she cried.

"Right, like I'm going to trust anything you say. Nice try, though. I give you points for good acting," Sirius said, turning back to the telly.

"Damn you!" she exploded. "If Draco's in danger, so is Harry, you idiot! Why don't you believe me?"

"Bugger, I don't know. Maybe because you're a lying, treacherous Death Eater?"

A ceramic statue of a naked witch was tossed at his head. Sirius bounced it away from him with his wand in midair only to be subsequently struck by a flower vase in the head. At least it wasn't his crotch. If she kept doing damage to that area, Sirius was afraid any questions on his sexuality or possible relations with Remus would become moot.

"They're dying! Damn it, that's my cousin! He might as well be my brother! And, if he and Harry die, it's on your head, Sirius Black!" she screamed, her face reddening. Some women are quite beautiful when enraged. Contessa wasn't one of them. She was, however, rather intimidating.

There was something about the look in her eyes that made Sirius reconsider--that and the fact that it would be a brilliant excuse to get out of the house. And perhaps involve him in a little adventure. And if anyone questioned him about why he let the Death Eater out, he could just play stupid and blame her for tricking him. After all, he was just a dumb, lovable dog, right? So what if it was dangerous. At least it would be a change of pace.

Sirius stood up and walked up to his room. It took him a few minutes to find his parents' wedding rings, but he did. He came back downstairs and she was still fuming. Sirius placed his mother's ring on her finger and she looked down at it with a look of confusion. He took the time to put his father's ring on his finger. He made sure to avoid placing the rings on their right ring fingers. People might talk.

"It was my mother's wedding ring. My father charmed it to prevent Apparition unless he was Apparating at the same time--and then she could only go where he went. They had a wonderful, loving relationship, obviously," Sirius explained.

Contessa scowled and tugged at the ring. "It won't come off unless I take it off," Sirius said and then held out his hand. "My father's ring keeps yours attuned to me."

She scowled at him. "Fine, I don't care. We have to go and save them," she said harshly.

"Right, right," Sirius said with a vague smile. "Now where are we going?"

Contessa looked like she was concentrating on something. Either that or she was constipated. Sirius idly wondered if she was leading him into a Death Eater ambush and realized that he was bored enough not to care. He couldn't believe Harry and Draco were in danger. It didn't seem possible, while he was sitting here on an armchair, reading a book in the middle of a bright, windy Saturday afternoon.

"Canada. He's in Alberta, Canada," she said in shock.

Canada? That was a little off the beaten path. Sirius was only vaguely aware there were people in Canada, much less any Death Eaters. "We can't Disapparate that far. We'll have to get a Portkey," he said.

She licked her lips. "Snape could make one to the place we need to go. I could find it on a map for him. He's one of the few people outside of the Ministry who have that skill," she said.

"There are no owls here," Sirius said darkly.

"There's no time for owls. Contact Snape by whatever way that the members of the Order of Phoenix do."

"You know, princess, if I wasn't suspicious before, involving Snape on a trip to Canada makes me ten times more suspicious."

"Why should that matter? You have a history of getting in over your head. Why stop now? You get Snape. I'll go pack our things."

"Then it will literally be a cold day in Hell for me, stuck in Canada with you and

Snape."

"Draco and Harry are in danger. They need us to save them."

Sirius stared at the fervent look in her eyes. Eyes just like his. "You really believe they're in danger, don't you?" he asked, though he knew the answer. It put the first shard of fear in his heart.

Contessa swept upstairs while Sirius pulled out his wand and reluctantly called for Snape. Sirius rather reckoned Harry and Draco better be in danger, because if they weren't, he was going to be very cross about having to talk to Snape for no good reason.

He only hoped he wasn't getting himself into a worse situation than he did when he ran off to the Department of Mysteries and got himself killed last year. . . .

End Interlude

"Wake up, Uncle Harry! Wake up!"

Harry woke up with an enormous headache. He groaned as Alice's voice faded from his mind. A flash of Lupin's still body lying on the snow, fire pouring out of Harry's wand, and Draco twisting under the Cruciatus Curse all crowded in his mind. He pushed it away. Lupin wasn't dead. He couldn't be. Harry lay where he was, breathing heavily and trying to convince his bleeding heart that Lupin was not dead. And then he realized he was naked and in a strange bed.

Harry sat bolt upright and realized with nervous relief that he wasn't naked. He had on his underpants, but nothing else. He wasn't cold however, as the room was tolerably warm and he had a very thick patchwork quilt sliding down his body. It was a bare, white room, with only a wooden bedside table and a washbasin decorating it. The sun shone through a small window with cheerful yellow curtains and it seemed to be late afternoon. There was a wardrobe with closed wooden doors off to the side. Harry was sitting on a large, comfortable bed that took up most of the room. When he looked over beside him, he saw Draco, still sleeping.

Harry grabbed Draco's arm, which felt unnaturally cold. Draco did not stir at his touch and continued to sleep. Harry shook him, but Draco slid back onto the bed, as though

in an enchanted sleep. "Draco! Wake up, Draco!" Harry cried, but Draco continued to sleep.

"Easy. Let him rest. He's lucky he's not dead. That spell that hit him can be deadly on a weak-willed person," came the smooth baritone Harry remembered from his savior. Harry turned to the doorway.

Standing in the doorway with an armful of medical supplies was a very old man with a scarred face. It look like someone had gashed his face open repeatedly with a razor. Most of his features were hard to pick out. He had long, silvery white hair and was wearing dark blue wizard robes of a simple design. As he came closer, Harry appreciated how tall the man was, well over six feet.

The man placed the medical supplies at the foot of the bed and went to check on Draco. He frowned when he touched Draco's smooth cheek. "So cold," he sighed. "This is going to take longer than I expected. I'm no Healer, but I'll do what I can. What about you, boy? Are you any good at healing?"

Harry shook his head, staring at the old man in wonder. "No, one of my friends is, but she's not here. There's also Draco's cousin, but she's not here, either," Harry said awkwardly, realizing belatedly he was babbling.

"Well that doesn't do us a bit of good, does it?" the man asked with some amusement.

"What's your name?" Harry asked. Something about the man was achingly familiar, but Harry couldn't place him.

The man paused as he cast a heating spell on Draco. "Julian. You can call me Julian," the man finally said after a moment and then grabbed a few supplies and walked over to the wash basin.

"I'm Harry Potter," Harry said, watching the man as he began to dump potion ingredients into the bowl and mashed them with a spoon.

"I know," Julian said simply.

"Thank you for saving us," Harry said. Julian didn't seem inclined to talk unless Harry continued speaking. "But why didn't you bring the girl? Or the man in his underwear?"

Julian looked at him. "The girl was not hurt. I cast a spell to protect her and call for

help. Someone from the village will see it and come to get her. Until then, she'll be safe. Anyone who approaches her with intent to do harm will be Stunned. The spell will keep her warm and unconscious until rescued. I didn't notice any man in his underwear, but I wasn't looking, either."

"He's my friend! He might need help!"

"Was he hit by a spell?"

Harry swallowed and looked away. "A Killing Curse. But it was interrupted. Don't you have to concentrate and put all your willpower into that spell?" he asked, choking on his words.

"The Killing Curse requires an extraordinary amount of concentration and power--but even if miscast, it is still deadly. I'm afraid the chances of your friend surviving are slim to none. Especially after all this time."

Harry trembled, but shook his head. No, Julian was wrong. He had to be wrong. There was a chance. Lupin could still be alive. He had to be. Maybe someone in the village would save him when they rescued Tracey.

Water shot out of the Julian's wand and into the bowl. He began to mix up the potion. "Are you feeling well?" he asked Harry.

"I have a horrible headache."

Julian produced a cup that he dipped into his potion. "Drink this, then, it should help. I'm going to feed some to your young friend there, too," he said, handing Harry the cup and then filling another.

"What is it?" Harry asked.

"I don't remember the name of it. I use it for my arthritis and it works wonderfully for pain and recuperation," Julian said, walking back over to Draco and forcing the liquid down Draco's throat. Harry took a sip of it and nearly spit it out.

"It tastes horrible, though," Julian said with some amusement. "Drink up."

Harry downed the liquid quickly and tried not to vomit it back up. After a few moments the taste and his headache faded away.

"Where are we?" Harry asked.

"Alberta, Canada. Near the Rocky Mountains. In the middle of nowhere for your reference," Julian said. Harry's brows came together. Julian had a definite British speech pattern, not a Canadian one.

"You're from England?"

"Originally."

"We're from England, too."

Julian smiled, seemingly amused by Harry. Harry cursed his inability to get his mouth to comply with his brain so he could sound at least reasonably intelligent. Julian continued to feed Draco the potion, until it was all gone. Harry was really worried about Draco now. He actually swallowed the foul concoction when Julian massaged his throat. Never once did he move or did his eyes flutter.

"Is he going to be all right?" Harry asked nervously.

"I think so. He survived the curse--it looked like a variant of something Antonin liked to cast--so he should be able to eventually shake off the after effects. It will take him a little bit of time. That was a nasty shock to his system. I don't know much about the spell. It's a Dolohov family secret. I think the man who cast it was a nephew of Dolohov's," Julian said, pulling down the quilt to treat a nasty burn on Draco's arm. Harry guiltily wondered if Draco had gotten that from Harry's fiery explosions.

"The Death Eater was torturing him with the Cruciatus Curse before Fort sent that purple light into him," Harry said.

"Which I'm sure did nothing to improve his health."

"S-so someone survive the Killing Curse if it was miscast?" Harry asked, thinking painfully of Lupin's still body lying in the snow again.

"If the victim has a strong will and good health."

Harry closed his eyes and hoped that Tracey's hex had caused Rabastan's spell to misfire. He hoped that since Lupin had been eating regularly and living in a relatively safe place, his health had improved. He tried to speak of other subjects, so he wouldn't have to dwell on Lupin. "Did you know those Death Eaters? You called Rookwood

and Dolohov by their first names."

"Hmm, observant, aren't you? Yes, I knew them, or at least some of them. I didn't recognize the younger ones, but I knew Rabastan Lestrangle, Augustus Rookwood, Miles Avery, and Antonin Dolohov," Julian said with a shrug, finishing his treatment of Draco and tucking him in. He moved over to Harry, pointing to Harry's own body.

Harry looked down and gaped at his own wounds. They had been dressed, but half of his chest and his entire wand arm were wounded. He hadn't noticed it or even felt it. Julian carefully redressed and treated his wounds. Harry suspected Julian was using some heavy analgesic potion on him.

"You were a Death Eater, weren't you?" Harry asked.

Julian smiled very thinly. "That was a long time ago, in another life. But yes, I was once a Death Eater," he said honestly. He made no excuses, or promises of redemption. He didn't tell Harry how he'd turned over a new leaf or that he would never do anything wrong ever again. Harry respected that, because somehow he knew that Julian would not hurt him. Julian had produced an Astringing Potion from his medical supplies and it stung so badly that Harry's eyes watered.

"Did you kill people?" Harry asked. He had no fear of this man, his savior. There was regret and penance etched into every scar on Julian's face.

"Oh, yes. Lots of people," Julian said. "Some of them deserved it, most of them did not."

"You served Voldemort because you believed in his cause, then?" Harry asked, putting as much hate into the name as possible.

Julian did not flinch at the name like most wizards did. He looked up from treating Harry's arm and squeezed his wrist. "His name is Tom. Tom Riddle. Voldemort is a figment of Tom's imagination, a mask he wears to make himself feel less human--so he can pretend he's something better. But he is human, Harry Potter. A human twisted and shaped by hate, a human being that had never known love in all his sad, violent life. He is a creature to pity, not to hate. Hate will only lead you down a dark path. Take it from an old man who walked down that dark path at one time," he said, then let Harry's wrist go and bent back to his task of treating Harry's wounds.

"How can you say that after all he's done?" Harry asked.

"I went to school with Tom. I've known him for a very long time. I used to despise him. I used to hate him. I used to resent him. I even used to wish I was him, when I saw the things he could do and I couldn't. I used to blame him for all my sins and all my problems. It took me a long time to realize that Tom wasn't responsible for what I did wrong. Only I was. It took me even longer to realize that Tom--despite all his power--was a man to pity, because he had never known love. And a man who never loved is a sad man indeed."

There was something about the things Julian said that reminded Harry of Dumbledore. Julian stood up and smiled down at Harry. "Now, if you're hungry, I've made some dinner. My sister was a gourmet cook, but I'm afraid I never picked up her skills, so it's roast beef, mash, and creamed spinach for us tonight," he said. "I don't think your friend is up to eating just yet."

"His name's Draco--"

"--Malfoy. Of course he is. Who else could he be? He looks just like his father, though I do see a bit of his mother in him," Julian smiled, looking at Draco fondly. "A bit pretty, but a good-looking boy."

"Er, right," Harry said, reflecting that as a Death Eater, Julian probably knew all about the Malfoys. Julian stepped out of the room and motioned Harry to follow him. Harry followed slowly, looking around the house. There were no photos or pictures of people on the walls; instead, he had cheerful little paintings of English gardens, cottages, and castles--and a lot of crucifixes. The whole place was very small, probably some sort of cabin. There were a lot of bright, cheerful colors painted on the walls and on the upholstery of the furniture. The small kitchen seemed right out of a storybook, right down to the flower-embroidered tablecloth. The place seemed very . . . comfortable.

Julian served a decent dinner and Harry ate third helpings of everything. He felt famished. Julian seemed amused by this. Harry was definitely curious about this rogue Death Eater, but couldn't work up the gumption to ask him what he really wanted to know.

"How'd you find us?" Harry asked instead.

"I go down to the village on the last Saturday of every month to pick up supplies. I enjoy the travel. Apparating is something I was never very good at and only did when I had to. It always makes me nauseous. I happened to be on my way back home when I saw your . . . battle, I suppose you'd call it. Since it certainly didn't seem fair that a

whole group of adults gang up on a couple teenagers, I decided to help you. Imagine my surprise when I got closer and realized that some of my old associates were there."

"Do you think they found you?" Harry asked.

"I doubt it. You have to understand this area was used by Death Eaters in the old days to bury bodies. It's very secluded and only the older ones even know about it. When Tom died and the Death Eaters disbanded, I moved close to here because I knew about it, and I knew no one would disturb me," Julian said. He surprised Harry with his truthfulness. "My question to you is how did Augustus and Antonin get free? They were imprisoned in Azkaban, weren't they?"

"Vold-er, Riddle's not dead. He came back almost two years ago. He's freed his Death Eaters and regrouped," Harry told him, thinking this man had indeed been living in the middle of nowhere not to know about that.

Julian dropped his fork onto his plate and sat back, studying Harry intently. "You're telling the truth. And you are the poorest Occlumens I've ever seen," he said in wonder.

Harry just stared back, seeing shock, pain, regret, and fear in Julian's eyes. Julian blinked and looked away. "And also one of the most powerful Kythers I've ever seen. How did you get past my defenses?" he asked softly.

"What?" Harry asked.

Julian stared at him. "You don't even realize it, do you? You don't realize that your sudden understanding of people is Kything? You don't even realize you're using it. How interesting," he said in wonder.

"I--I don't even know what Kything is."

"It's a magical sense, rather like Legilimency, but only for emotions. It's a sense of other people's emotions and their . . . well-being, I suppose. It's an uncommon skill. Anyone can learn to Kythe, though few bother with such a weak power. Some people are born with a natural ability to do it. You, apparently, are the latter. Didn't you ever find it odd how you'd sometimes just know how people were feeling or thinking?"

"I thought that was normal," Harry said slowly. Was that what he did? Was that how he knew that Contessa felt guilty? Was that how he knew Sirius felt cagey even when he laughed and Lupin was always sad, even when he smiled? Was that how he knew

Snape hated him from the moment he met him?

"No, it is not. But then, you wouldn't be normal, would you? Your mother was a very powerful witch."

"My father was a brilliant wizard. Everyone says I inherited my powers from him," Harry said.

"No," Julian said, shaking his head. "It was your mother. I remember when they went to school with Severus. Your father was a brilliant wizard and certainly exceptional, but James Potter wasn't like Lily Evans. There was a dueling tournament in their seventh year that I attended to see how Severus and Narcissa turned out. Your mother amazed me. She was an extraordinary witch. It only makes sense that her son would be just as extraordinary--if not more so."

"Did she win the tournament?" Harry asked excitedly.

"Of course she won. Trounced her last competitor--James Potter, naturally--with a Blasting Curse that sent him across the stadium. Your father was more visible than your mother after graduation--after all, he became an Auror. Your mother, however, was quite political. She lobbied very hard for better treatment of Muggle-borns, half-bloods, Squibs, Muggles, house elves, non-humans . . . everyone. She cared a lot about people."

She sounded a lot like Hermione, which made Harry smile. "How do you know all this?"

Julian stirred around his mash, not meeting Harry's eyes. "It was my job to know. I was one of the Death Eaters that Tom set with the task of finding your parents," he said quietly.

Harry worked his jaw and turned his face. "You knew Snape and the Malfoys well, then?" he asked.

Julian smiled. "You could say that," he said evasively.

Harry finished his dinner and then set to drinking the spring water Julian had provided with dinner. Harry was very quiet and then decided to ask Julian something that had been bothering him.

"I felt like there was fire in my veins, pumping behind my eyes. I pointed my wand

and fire and blasts of just . . . force, I guess, just came out of it. I could have killed any of the Death Eaters, but I wouldn't let myself. Could my mother do things like that?" Harry asked tentatively.

Julian stared at him. "No. There's only two wizards I know of that could," he said.

"Who?" Harry asked glumly.

Julian frowned. "Tom Riddle and Albus Dumbledore," he said quietly. Harry frowned.

"I scare myself sometimes," Harry confessed. Somehow it was easier to say what had been truly bothering him since last year to this stranger than to any of his friends. "I wanted to kill those Death Eaters. I've wanted to do so many bad things this past year, just so I could get what I wanted."

Julian was very quiet as he collected the dishes. "But have you actually ever done any of these 'bad' things?" he asked after a few moments.

"No," Harry said.

"Then you're a better man than most, Harry Potter. Off to bed with you. Don't roll over on your friend. With any luck, he might wake up tomorrow," Julian said gently, putting a hand on his shoulder and then walking over to his sitting room to sit in front of his fireplace.

Harry nodded and slipped off to his bed, feeling strangely relieved. That was until he laid down and visions of Lupin's body stilling or Draco screaming in agony came to haunt his dreams.

Interlude Three:

Sirius was very proud of himself. Not only had he not hexed Severus Snape, but had furthermore resisted the temptation to thump his face in.

"I expect there's a good reason why you called me away on one of my few days off, Black?" Snape scowled. It still surprised Sirius that he had come in the first place. Sirius wondered why and realized like most things Snape did, he would never fully

understand it.

"Of course there isn't. I'm bored and wanted to play Exploding Snap with you, was all. You know how much I enjoy your company."

Snape spat him. "Black, if you have wasted my time, I'm going to--"

"What's going on?" Contessa asked, coming downstairs wrapped up in a winter cloak. She shoved a traveling bag at Sirius full of his things, as well his own winter cloak.

"Snape was chatting me up. Said he couldn't resist my incredible animal magnetism anymore," Sirius quipped. Snape turned blazing black eyes on him but Sirius grinned in response.

"Ah, you were arguing," Contessa said wisely. Snape had stiffened the moment she entered the room and stood a little taller. Sirius looked at him curiously.

"Why have you called me here? I expect this was your idea, then, girl?" Snape asked her coldly.

"I assure you I didn't request you here so I could watch you and Black argue like schoolboys."

Snape sneered at her in such a manner that both Sirius and Contessa took a reflexive step back. "Little girl, I suggest you mind who you are speaking to," he told her dangerously. "Do you miss those long tresses of yours?" he asked her dangerously.

Contessa flushed and grabbed the remains of her hair. Sirius had cast a Severing Charm on it out of irritation last week, but he had done a horrible job. Her hair was uneven and rather unsightly. She seemed incapable of responding at the moment.

Sirius decided it was time to step in. "Look, she says your godson is in danger. You care about, Draco, right?" Sirius asked.

Snape scowled. "Of course I care about Draco," he said coldly.

Contessa finally recovered her speech. "His life is in danger. He called for me. If he's in danger, chances are likely that Harry is, too. He's in Alberta, Canada. We need you to make us a Portkey."

"He called for you?" Snape sneered. "How exactly would he call you from Alberta,

Canada?"

"Like my grandmother could call my Uncle Aurelius. Draco's a Kyther. It skips every other Malfoy generation. He was calling me. He's broadcasting where he is right now to me."

Snape stared at her. "Alberta, Canada? That was one of the old Death Eater burial plots for the victims they never wanted found," he said, licking his lips.

Contessa shrugged. "I could show it to you on a map," she said.

"I don't need a map. I know where it is," Snape snapped.

"Just make us the Portkey, and we'll go it alone," Contessa told Snape. "We don't need you after that."

"Do you actually think I'm going to let you go with Black alone? He couldn't babysit his own fleas, much less you. You forget I know full well of what you are capable."

"Can we go now?" Sirius asked.

"I'd rather go with him than spend any extended period of time with you."

"We don't have time for this. Let's go," Sirius said, but Contessa and Snape were ignoring him. They were glaring hatefully at each other instead, like he wasn't even there.

"Stupid girl. I should be telling Dumbledore about how you're trying to break out of this house, not helping you escape it. I should tell him that you've somehow Confunded Black into believing your lies. If I tell Dumbledore what you're doing, you'll be in even worse trouble than you are now," Snape sneered.

"Fine, why don't you run and go tell him, you traitor? He won't be able to find Draco for you. Every second we waste could lead to his death."

"Wow, you guys are so cute together," Sirius said sarcastically. Almost in unison, Contessa and Snape turned to glare at him. Finally, he had their attention. "Look, I used my parents' wedding rings. She can't Disapparate without me. So let's go."

"Your parents' wedding rings? Are you telling me that your father charmed his own wife's wedding ring to prevent her from Disapparating without him?" Snape asked

incredulously.

"Well, they didn't exactly have the most loving relationship. And my father was possessive and paranoid--just look at this house if you don't believe me. Besides, you met my mother. Would you trust her not to cheat on you?"

Snape's face twitched. "Point taken," he said.

"Can we go now?" Contessa demanded.

Snape looked around the room until he found the broken statue of a naked witch that Contessa had tossed at Sirius earlier. He picked it up, looked at it and then back at Sirius with an arched brow.

"What? It's art," Sirius said defensively.

Snape rolled his eyes. "Portus," he said with disgust. The statue glowed blue for a moment and then trembled. He then held out the Portkey for the others to touch. As soon as Contessa's and Sirius's finger touched the statue, the ever-strange sensation of being yanked around by the navel occurred and Sirius stumbled a bit.

They came out in a snowy field. All around them was devastation. Trees had burned or were blasted down. A burnt, ramshackle building swayed in the wind. Blood dotted the virgin snow. And there were bodies everywhere.

Red sparks rolled and tumbled in the air, forming the words, "Help Me!", marking the spot over a girl lying in the snow, covered by a cloak. Snape collapsed from the effort of making a Portkey across the world. Sirius reluctantly reached down and helped him up. Snape was weak and trembling, his face the color of soured milk.

Contessa had been right, Sirius realized with a sinking feeling in his stomach. The shard of fear in his heart stabbed at him.

Sirius walked out front, pulling Snape along. Contessa followed him, her thick brows coming together. Sirius looked around the battlefield until his eyes rested on a still, familiar form. He dropped Snape onto the snow, causing the other man to make an impressive thwump when he hit the ground.

"No!" Sirius choked out, turning into a dog so he could run to Remus faster. When he got there, he found his dearest, oldest friend lying in the snow, gray and quiet. Sirius turned back into a man, and took Remus into his arms. He raised his head and howled,

despite his human form.

"Moony? Wake up, Moony! Don't be dead! Please, don't be dead!" he moaned, tears pouring down his face.

Contessa ran up beside him, though Snape was walking very slowly and looked like he was going to pass out any second. "Oh God, they killed Moony!" Sirius sobbed, feeling every part of his life that had any meaning drain out of him.

"You idiot! He is not dead, but he will be if you don't stop weeping over him and let me do my job! Don't you ever check someone's pulse before going on like that?" Contessa demanded, pushing him away from Remus and pulling out her medical bag.

Sirius paused, wiping his face. "He's . . . not dead?" he asked, shakily, watching her take out a blanket from her pack and wrapping Remus with it.

"Didn't I just say that? Honestly, clean out your ears," Contessa snapped. "If you want him to stay alive, I'll need my wand back."

Sirius hesitated. "How can I trust you?" he asked, looking at Remus's gray face and realizing he may not be dead, but he wasn't far from it.

"I guess you'll just have to, won't you?" she said waspishly. "Otherwise he'll die. And soon, too."

Sirius put his own wand to the back of her head and he pulled hers out from inside his robe. "If he dies, so do you," Sirius said darkly. Contessa only took her wand and bent to treating Lupin without comment.

"Where are Harry and Draco?" Sirius asked.

Contessa looked around and then settled for a point deep into the forest, where the ground rose sharply towards the mountains. "It's hard to feel him now that I'm closer. They're somewhere northwest of here," she said.

"Are you sure they're both still alive?"

"I would know if someone like Harry Potter had died, and if you were near me, so would you. I don't sense their passage into the Netherworld. I can almost always tell if someone I know is dead or not."

Sirius backed away from her and looked around. The girl lying under the cloak was stirring so Sirius knelt beside her. She was a very plain, mousy-looking girl and was wearing only a slip under the cloak. She opened her eyes and stared at Sirius.

Then she screamed and punched him in the face.

Sirius fell back as the girl continued to scream. "Sirius Black! Oh God, it's Sirius Black!" she screeched, looking terrified.

Snape called out from where he was forcing himself into a sitting position. He looked very gray and queasy. "It's all right, Tracey," he said.

"It's all right. I'm not going to hurt you," Sirius said indignantly.

"He's--he's a Death Eater! Professor Snape, there were Death Eaters and they were going to kill us!" she babbled. Sirius wondered how she got involved while he readjusted his jaw.

"He's not a Death Eater, Tracey. He's too stupid to be evil," Snape said weakly and then fell back down on the snow. Sirius took off his cloak and wrapped her in that, combining it with the one already lying on her. He picked her up, even though she weakly tried to struggle. The red sparks disappeared the moment he did.

"Hey, I'm on your side, princess. Relax," Sirius said, trying to soothe the girl.

"Professor Lupin is dead! I was visiting him in Hogsmeade when they came! And they took us, to make Harry come here!" Tracey sobbed, still flailing about in Sirius's arms.

"Remus is not dead. Contessa's working on him. He'll be fine," Sirius said as much to convince himself as the girl. He cast a glance back at Contessa and Remus, half-expecting her to have disappeared, but she was still there, working on him.

"We need to build her a fire and move into the trees. Those sparks kept her warm and safe, but they were also put there to call for help. The last thing we need is attention with either of you around," Snape said weakly, trying to make himself sit up again. If Sirius didn't think Snape was too spiteful to die, he might be worried about him.

"What's that?" Tracey asked shakily, pointing at a pile of rope in the snow, near the burnt-out building.

Snape frowned, his eyes resting on the ropes for a moment before looking back over at Sirius. "We need to go past the tree line," Snape said shortly. Contessa created floating stretchers and Sirius put Tracey on one. She was quite hysterical and Sirius couldn't blame her. Contessa levitated Lupin onto another while Sirius pulled Snape onto the third.

"What about Harry and Draco?" Sirius asked.

"One thing at a time," Contessa said. "I think they're safe . . . for now."

End Interlude

To be continued . . .

Chapter 24: Jigsaw

Author's Notes: The lyrics to "Spooky, Sexy, Foxy Lady" and the wizarding jazz band, "Razzmatazz" belong to ME. French was translated by avapouhi. Much love to her. English translations will be provided at the end of the story. I like to keep people guessing, sorry. I'm evil like that.

Chapter Twenty-Four:
To the Rhythm of a Heartbeat

Interlude Four:

Lupin moaned as he woke up. Everything hurt, so he moaned a little louder and tried to get out of his bed. Only he wasn't on a bed, he was in a sleeping bag, wrapped in blankets. He was nearly naked and he felt dirty and disgusting.

"Remus, are you okay?"

Lupin tried to look up, but everything in his vision swam around. He couldn't see anything, really. He thought he heard Sirius's voice. He felt strong arms around him, wrapping him tighter in the blankets. Lupin realized his face was very cold. Sirius's arms grew tighter, inadvertently choking him. Lupin gurgled in protest.

"He's not talking. Contessa, why isn't he talking?" Sirius said tearfully. The concern in Sirius's voice would have been touching if only Lupin could breathe. He tried to struggle, but he was too weak.

"Because you're choking him, nobhead. Get away from him and let me have a look."

That was definitely Contessa's voice. There was only one other person who could pull off condescension so well--and that was Snape. Sirius let Lupin go, for which he was grateful. Breathing was a highly underrated activity.

Lupin could feel Contessa's cold fingers touch him--checking his pulse, checking on his wounds, checking on his breathing. She fed him something disgusting, but he wasn't stupid enough to resist. He swallowed the foul liquid, hoping she hadn't poisoned it.

"Remus? Are you okay?" Sirius asked again, touching his face. His fingers were noticeably warmer than Contessa's.

Lupin gurgled another response, finding that like his vision, he hadn't recovered his powers of speech. He felt very cold all of a sudden and realized that someone was stripping off his blankets and even his underwear. He tried to struggle but all he did was flop weakly.

"What are you doing?" Sirius demanded.

"Cleaning him. He's covered in sweat, blood, and God only knows what else. He'll get an infection," Contessa said smoothly. "What? Did you think I was going to have a go with him? He's half-dead."

"Of course, I should have known. You probably prefer the fully dead."

"At least I don't start panting when the neighbor's dog goes into heat. I'm surprised you weren't humping the banister in excitement last week."

"I brought the hot water and the soap," came a droll voice, cutting Sirius off before he was able to retort.

That was Snape's voice. Wonderful. There were few things more embarrassing than realizing you're naked in front of the most sarcastic man ever born. Lupin would have protested, but he was still limited to gurgling.

"Are you feeling better?" Contessa asked.

"I'm fine. I just needed rest. It's very difficult to make Portkeys traveling across the globe," Snape snapped. So that's how they got here.

"Moony, we have got to get you a tan," Sirius commented. Then Lupin realized he was naked in front of Sirius and that made it worse.

Then Lupin felt much better. Contessa was sponging all the ick off him, and she was using the hot water Snape brought so it wasn't so damn cold. He could hear Snape cleaning his blankets and was grateful for that, too. He couldn't stand being dirty.

"How's Tracey doing?" Contessa asked. Lupin suddenly recalled Tracey was with him. Why? Something happened, something involving her. He couldn't remember

anything concrete past her visitation. His memories seemed to a total blur of pain and terror. He remembered the emotions, at least.

"She's terrified out of her mind, but otherwise fine."

"Of course she's terrified. She was kidnapped and nearly killed by Death Eaters," Contessa said shortly.

Death Eaters. Blood. Pain. Rabastan Lestrangle. Tracey. Draco. Harry.

Lupin gurgled and flopped around a bit more as a few of his memories returned to him in snatches. Contessa and Sirius stilled him. "They're still alive, Moony. Harry, Draco, and Tracey," Sirius whispered urgently, somehow sensing what was upsetting him. Lupin stopped struggling and let Contessa finish cleaning him. She then wrapped him up with the blankets again, for which he was grateful.

"Miss Lestrangle? Is Professor Lupin all right?" came Tracey's timid voice, breaking in from a little ways off.

"He's not a professor anymore, Tracey, but yes. He woke up, but he's still very weak," Contessa answered, feeding Lupin what tasted like broth. It was definitely better than the potion she had given him before.

"Oh good. Hurry up and get better, Professor Lupin!" Tracey said. Lupin heard her pad away, snow crunching beneath her feet.

"Moony, can you talk yet?" Sirius asked Lupin, touching his face again. Lupin could feel Sirius's warm breath on his face. He felt comfortable and drowsy, despite the fact that Sirius desperately needed a mint.

"He was hit by a miscast Killing Curse, Black," Snape said in irritation. "He may not regain control of his faculties ever again."

That was nice to know.

"You know, if I want to be depressed, I'd go back to Azkaban," Sirius said sullenly. "He'll be fine. He's a tough guy."

"I see, as always, simple fact is beyond your meager comprehension," Snape said coldly.

"Hey," Sirius said with obvious irritation in his voice, "if I gave you some shampoo, would you leave to go wash your hair?"

"I don't know. If I threw a stick, would you chase it?" Snape asked, a sneer in his voice.

"You slimy--"

"I'm going to sit by the fire," Snape said, cutting Sirius off and obviously sweeping off.

Then Contessa snapped at Sirius. "Would you stop pestering him? Hovering over him like that is certainly going to do nothing for his health. Let him rest and recover. When he can talk and move around, I'm sure he will."

"Maybe he needs me," Sirius said stubbornly.

"He's a self-sufficient, fully grown man. I doubt he needs you for anything. What he needs is to be left alone."

No. She was wrong. Lupin definitely wanted Sirius close to him. He never wanted to be alone again. He'd spent his whole life alone.

"Well, I'm staying. You can't make me leave; I already took your wand away."

"Fine. Then stop sucking up his air and give him some space. I'm going to go make sure Tracey's wounds have healed. We'll have to stay here another day or two, but after that, we need to get moving. Once Lupin is strong enough, Snape can send him and Tracey back to Hogsmeade with a Portkey."

"What about Harry and Draco? Will they be safe for that long?"

"Yes, I think so."

"And where were you and Snape last night, anyway?"

"Casting Memory Charms on the villagers who had come to help Tracey."

"Oh. I sniffed around the whole area for any signs of those escaped Death Eaters, but I couldn't find a whiff of anything other than some deer and things like that."

"I wouldn't think so, but it was worth the effort."

"Who do you think used the Beheading Charm on those two Death Eaters and cast that red sparking spell to protect Tracey, anyway?"

"I don't know. It's rare knowledge and not many people use that Charm anymore. It's illegal, even if not Unforgivable. It would take a very powerful wizard, though. That's advanced magic," Contessa said thoughtfully. "I'm reasonably sure that whoever cast those spells rescued Harry and Draco, and is taking care of them right now."

"So whoever has them must be one of the good guys, then?"

"Maybe," she said darkly. Leave it to Snape's protégé to be so cheerful.

"I'm staying here, with Remus."

"Fine. I'll check back on him in a couple hours. Call me if you need me," Contessa said and Lupin heard her move away.

There was a soft rustling of cloth and Lupin felt even warmer, feeling Sirius's long body press against his, his arms wrapped around him. "Be okay, Moony. I don't know what I'd do without you," Sirius murmured into his ear, his breath warming Lupin in more ways than one. "Please be okay."

Though Lupin couldn't vocalize it, there was something about Sirius's arms around him that certainly made him feel more than okay. He quickly fell asleep, lulled by the rhythm of Sirius's heartbeat.

End Interlude

Draco had woken up that morning. He was cranky and didn't have enough energy to get out of bed yet. Harry had tried to catch him up as best as possible, but Draco had a lot of questions Harry couldn't answer; and, he didn't seem to like Julian.

"So, what did you say your name was again?" Draco demanded of the stranger from the large bed he and Harry shared, still holding the cup full of the potion Julian brewed for him.

Julian paused in the middle of laying down a bowl of soup and a cup of water he had brought for Draco. Harry stood in the doorway, watching how Julian's eyes shifted to Draco and gave him an indescribable look.

"Julian," he said shortly, pointing to the cup in Draco's hands. Harry had helped him make the potion and hoped it turned out all right. It was supposed to replenish one's health. Julian had found the recipe in an old, faded book.

"Julian who? Harry said you used to be a Death Eater. From what family did you come? How long did you serve? What did you do in Britain, exactly?" Draco demanded, drinking the potion and then coughing. Harry moved over to the bed and sat beside him, making sure he finished it.

"If it was your business, young Master Malfoy, I would have told you to start with," Julian said in a sharp tone.

"Leave him alone. He saved us," Harry whispered to Draco.

"How can we know you're trustworthy?" Draco asked, ignoring Harry.

"You can't know for sure, I'd expect. You'll just have to make your own decision. You're free to leave, however. I won't stop you," Julian said blithely. Draco scowled at this, because he was so weak Harry had to help him to the toilet and hold him up.

"He's all right, I promise," Harry whispered.

"Harry said we were in Alberta, Canada. Is that true?" Draco demanded.

Julian tilted his head. "Is your friend in the habit of lying to you?" he asked coolly.

Draco scowled again.

"You are an arrogant, demanding little boy. Perhaps you'll be more tolerable after some rest and recovery. I must say, however, that I much preferred you unconscious," Julian said stiffly and then walked out of the room.

"I think you brassed him off," Harry sighed.

"I don't trust him. He's got a dodgy look about him, especially around the eyes," Draco said. "How did he know to find us?"

"I told you, he said he was--"

"--'on his way home.' I heard. Don't you find that suspicious?"

"Not really."

"You trust people far too easily," Draco said. His hands were shaking as he took the cup of water off the bedside table. Harry grabbed his hands and took the cup from him, holding it up to his lips so he could drink. Draco sipped at the water, but seemed to resent Harry's help.

"Just give me a minute. I'll be fine, I don't need your help to eat," Draco said.

Harry leaned over and took the bowl of soup. "Then humor me. I've always wanted to feed you," he said blithely, knowing Draco's weak, shaky hands would spill hot soup all over himself.

Draco glared at him.

"I promise not to tell anyone," Harry said.

Draco reluctantly let Harry feed him. He was very sullen about it. It was an odd experience, feeding a boy his age. When the soup was gone, Harry made Draco lie back down and curled up beside him.

"Julian said he would take us to a nearby village when you're strong enough, so we can get a Portkey home. He was going to take me home today, but I didn't want to leave without you," Harry whispered.

This seemed to mollify Draco and he relaxed against Harry. "I'm sorry about Lupin," he told Harry.

"He'll be fine. The Killing Curse was interrupted and I doubt Rabastan LeStrange was able to put the energy he needed into it. He's fine," Harry said, stiffening up. Lupin was fine, he had to be. Draco fell silent for a few moments before speaking again.

"Contessa's nearby."

"What?"

"I can feel her. She's quite some distance away, though I can't tell you exactly where. But she's here, in Canada with us. She's looking for me. She's very worried."

Harry pulled back to stare at Draco's face. He remembered Contessa telling him something like that before. "How'd she know to come?" he asked.

"I called her," he said simply, as though that explained everything. And maybe it did.

"How'd she get out of Sirius's house? She's under house arrest."

"I don't know. It's just feelings I can get. It doesn't always work, either."

"Is Sirius with her?"

"I don't know."

"Is Lupin okay?"

"I don't know, Harry!"

Harry fell silent when Draco shouted, studying the boy's pointed features. He was a man, really. He was seventeen now, eight months older than Harry, but he looked like a boy.

"What's wrong?" Harry asked him quietly, stroking his hair and pulling him tighter.

Draco was swallowing furiously. "Wrong? You act like I can read her mind or something. It's just a stupid connection I have--Kything, my father calls it. Anyone can learn it, but most people don't bother. It's a very weak power and not very useful. Legilimency is better. Contessa can't do it, but she's connected to me because her grandmother was a Malfoy. I can connect to my mother sometimes, too, but she's better at keeping me out. Some people are born with a natural connection, like my grandfather and her grandmother. I can't even really Kythe with anyone else, most of the time. It's not really something you can control. It works when it wants to," he said. That wasn't his problem and Harry knew it. So he decided to do this the round-about way.

"Kything. You can Kythe, too?"

Draco shook his head, still swallowing. "Of course, I can. It skips every Malfoy generation. It's feelings, really. When you call, you have to mean it. It's not with

words. It's not with thoughts. It's only feelings. It's a sense. And what do you mean, 'too'?"

"Julian said I was a natural Kyther."

Draco sneered at him and then looked away. "It's always so easy for you, isn't it? Parselmouth, Kyther, Seeker, duelist . . . next you'll be a great Animagus and defeat the Dark Lord with a single wave of your wand, won't you?" he asked darkly. "Let me go."

They were getting closer to what was bothering Draco, Harry could feel it. He didn't let Draco go. "What's wrong?" he whispered in Draco's ear.

"None of your business!"

Harry waited, staring at him. Draco was looking at the ceiling now. He looked angry, sad, confused, and lost--all at the same time. Draco eventually turned and looked back at Harry. He wasn't crying, but looked like he should be.

"How do you do it?" Draco asked. "How can you go on? It was horrible, that fight. Not just the Cruciatus Curse, but everything. I was worried, I was sick--I thought I was going to die. I'd never been so frightened in my life. How can you just face everything like you do?"

"The same way you did. Because I have to," Harry said after a moment.

"Is everything all right? I heard shouting."

Harry jumped back away from Draco and sat up. Julian was in the doorway, his scarred brows furrowed together in consternation. His gaze flicked from Harry to Draco and then back to Harry. He was frowning. Harry moved a little bit more away from Draco and tried not to look guilty.

"We're fine," Harry said quickly.

"I just don't feel very well," Draco said from his side of the bed.

"Perhaps Harry should sleep somewhere else. I could sleep on the couch and let him have my bed, if you'd be more comfortable." The way Julian suggested this made Harry involuntarily swallow.

"I'm fine. He's fine," Draco said.

Julian cast another glance at Harry, frowning a little more deeply and then closing the door. Harry heard his footsteps recede back to his own room.

"Do you think he knows?" Harry asked awkwardly.

"Who cares?" Draco asked shortly.

Harry curled up beside him again, drawing him back into an embrace. Draco didn't say anything else before he fell asleep in Harry's arms. Harry wondered for a bit if he could somehow Kythe how Draco felt about him, but apparently it didn't work like that.

All he wound up doing was giving himself a headache and then falling asleep in the process.

Draco was able to get up and move around by the next day. He wasn't ready to do anything strenuous, but was able to walk on his own, eat on his own, and--to his and Harry's mutual relief--use the toilet on his own.

If Julian suspected something about Harry and Draco, he gave no indication of it the next day. He simply sat before his fireplace in his cozy little sitting room, quietly reading his bible and listening to what sounded like jazz, only Harry was reasonably sure that there were more instruments involved than a normal jazz band had. The music was very old and played off a phonograph, much like the one Lupin played his own swing and jazz records off of.

One of the songs caught Draco's attention after lunch. He paused in the middle of walking with Harry through the sitting room to the back porch and stared at the phonograph with a strange expression.

She's a spooky-ky-ky-ky-ky-ky-ky-ky-ky-ky-ky-ky
 sexy-xy-xy-xy-xy-xy-xy-xy-xy-xy-xy-xy-xy-xy-xy-xy
 foxy-xy-xy-xy-xy-xy-xy-xy-xy-xy-xy-xy-xy-xy-xy-xy
 lady-dy-dy-dy-dy-dy-dy-dy-dy-dy-dy-dy-dy!

When she walks, the dark wind blows!

When she dances, the werewolf howls!
When she sings, the day turns to night!
When she prays, the crops are in a blight!

She's my spooky--oh yeah, oh yeah--
 She's my sexy--what a doll, what a doll--
 She's my foxy--singin' the blues, singin' the blues--
 Lady--and I'll never want another, another!

[illegible]

Oh, why don't you cast that voodoo on me?
She tosses her raven tresses for me--for me!
She keeps swinging down the graveyard,
and even the dead men want a part--a part!

She's my spooky--scary little baby!
She's my sexy--evil little baby!
She's my foxy--naughty little baby!
La-la-la-la-lady-dy-dy-dy-dy-dy!

[illegible]

Shes dressin' for a naughty funeral!
She's wearin' black to a wedding hall!
Poison lips that smile so red, so red,
when she kills you dead--so dead!

She's my little spooky--spooky, spooky!
She's my little sexy--sexy, sexy!
She's my little foxy--foxy, foxy!
She's my little lady--lady, lady!

She's my--nasty--SPOOKY--naughty--SEXY--evil--FOXY--wicked--LADY--BABY!

Harry looked from the phonograph to the bible in Julian's hand. Harry wondered how he could listen to music like that with a bible in his hands, calmly turning pages like there was classical music in the background.

And then Draco began to smile and laugh. "I remember this song! It's about Morgan Le Fay, right?"

Julian actually looked up from his bible and stared at him. "That's my favorite song. It came out the year I was born," he said. "Long before you were even thought of."

"It's by Razzmatazz, right? That old jazz band? It's called 'Spooky, Sexy, Foxy, Lady', right? It was their biggest hit, wasn't it?"

Harry had rarely seen Draco so animated. Julian looked a little surprised. "How do you know all that?" he asked.

"I know all the old wizarding jazz bands. My grandfather had a huge collection that he left behind. My father used to take them out for me when I was little. I used to have so much fun, dancing and singing along with Mother. My father knows all the words to this song--to almost all of them," Draco said fondly.

Julian turned back to his bible, suddenly looking very sad. "Yes, I expect he would," he said very softly. So softly that Draco did not hear him, though Harry did.

"Did you know him? My grandfather, I mean, Aurelius Malfoy. Why you and my grandfather must around be the same age!"

"Yes," Julian said in a tight voice. "I knew Aurelius Malfoy."

"Did you like him? Were you friends?"

Julian gave Draco the coldest look Harry had ever seen outside of Lucius Malfoy. "Men like your grandfather didn't have friends. He had servants, lackeys, henchmen, and minions. He had no friends. And no, I didn't like him. I never did. He was a horrible, cold-blooded monster--make no mistake about that," he spat.

The life drained out of Draco's features and he suddenly backed off, stepping away from Julian. He glared at him sullenly. "What happened to him? He ran off just after the Dark Lord was defeated--Father said so. Do you know what happened to him?" Draco asked.

"He died. You shouldn't feel too badly. You're better off without him," Julian said coolly.

Draco turned and stormed out onto the back porch. Harry stared at Julian, who only coolly turned another page of the Bible. He looked like he was reading, but Harry noticed his eyes only glared at one spot, rather than scanning the page. Harry grabbed a large, fluffy quilt off the couch and followed Draco onto the back porch.

They were very high up. Draco stood by the porch railing, looking down at the sheer cliff drop at the huge expanse of snow-topped Canadian forest and then into the gray Rocky Mountains. It was quite beautiful here--an untouched, virgin beauty that England could not compare to. Draco was shivering so Harry took the opportunity to cover him with the large quilt and draw him close. The only window that faced this porch had a thick green curtain over it and it was drawn.

"I'm sorry about your grandfather, Draco," Harry said softly.

"What does it matter? It's not like he ever cared about me. He just left us--all of us. No cards, no notes--just his wand on my parents' bed one day. He never checked up to see how his only son or grandson was doing. He just left. At least now I know what happened to him," Draco said in a tight, fierce voice.

Harry cast a glance at the curtain and it was still drawn. He moved the quilt to drape over his and Draco's head, dragging him down to sit on the wooden floor, so nothing could be seen of them. "Then it was his loss, not yours," Harry said gently.

Draco stared at Harry sullenly. There was a frown on his lips and his eyes were a bit red, though he hadn't cried. "Pourquoi es-tu aussi gentil avec moi? Qu'est-ce que tu attends de moi? Pourquoi suis-je si spécial à tes yeux? Si je te laisse entrer, est-ce que tu partiras? Est-ce que tu vas te lasser et t'en aller?" he suddenly asked, almost fiercely.

"What?" Harry blinked. He really needed to learn French.

"Nothing," Draco said, looking away.

"Say something else in French," Harry smiled.

Draco had an expression somewhere between a smile and a frown. "Je n'ai jamais rencontré quelqu'un comme toi. Tu donnes tellement de toi-même. Tu as cette passion que j'aimerais avoir. Tu m'aimes vraiment pour moi, pas pour mon argent ou quoi que

ce soit d'autre," he said.

It almost sounded so meaningful. Harry could pretend, pretend he said almost anything. Maybe even something nice. "More," Harry urged.

"Tu m'as demandé si je t'aimais bien il y a quelque temps. Je t'aime beaucoup. Je ne sais pas pourquoi, honnêtement. C'est dégoûtant, en fait. Tu me rends heureux, je suppose. J'ai l'impression d'être un idiot coincé dans une mauvaise chanson. Je ne veux pas t'aimer, mais je n'y peux rien," Draco said, with a reluctant half-smile.

Harry sighed and grinned, thinking he could pretend Draco said something really nice that time. "The next time we do anything, you have to start moaning things in French for me, okay?" he said.

Draco blinked and then laughed. "Idiot," he said, rolling his eyes.

"You know, what we did in the Shrieking Shack was fun," Harry whispered.

"It's called plating, Harry. Or a blowjob. Eating willy. Sucking dick. Giving head. Oral--"

"You really can be disgusting at times, you know that?"

Draco was biting his bottom lip and smirking at the same time. He looked like he was trying not to laugh. Harry took the opportunity to kiss him. Draco kissed back. He tasted like the cold chicken salad they'd had for lunch, and yet he was still the most delicious thing Harry ever tasted--each and every time. The feel of his soft lips and slippery tongue made Harry instantly warm and he pulled Draco onto his lap, doing his best to explore every inch of Draco's mouth while they sat under the quilt. Draco curled around him, one arm wrapping around Harry's shoulders after pulling off his glasses and the other sliding down his stomach to fiddle with his belt buckle and slip into his trousers.

"Ahem."

Draco and Harry froze under the quilt and Draco was already separated from Harry by the time Harry let the quilt slide off and looked up at Julian while putting back on his glasses. Julian was frowning very deeply at them from his doorway. Harry blushed.

"We were, er, admiring the view," Harry said, waving his arms at forest and mountains. Draco rolled his eyes.

"Ah, yes," Julian said in a sarcastic tone that reminded Harry very strongly of Snape, "the inside of my quilt is breathtaking, I'm sure."

"Actually," Draco said in a tone he usually reserved for Ron or Neville, "we were fondling each other. I was working my hands down his trousers. Did you want to watch? Or did you come to lecture us on our evil fornications?"

"Draco!" Harry cried, wishing he could Disapparate.

Julian flinched and then he positively scowled. He drew himself up before speaking. "While watching two young men touch each other might turn on some old men, I can assure I am not one of them. Especially given who you are. I may have been a bastard in my younger days, but never that much of a bastard. As for lecturing you--what would be the point? You know full well what you're getting yourself into. You know exactly how badly some people feel about homosexuality. As for it being evil, something like that can only be judged by God. It is not my place to lecture you on it, even if I don't like it.

"Now, I came to give you the potion for your health. So here it is. And please try not to stain my quilt. It was a gift from the old witch at the Apothecary in town, given to me just before she passed away last summer," he concluded stiffly, laying a glass full of blue-green liquid on the windowsill and stalking out. He didn't slam the door, which Harry thought was something in of itself.

Harry looked over at Draco, who was working his jaw. Harry leaned over and grabbed the glass, handing it to Draco. Draco scowled at it.

"Why did you say that?" Harry asked, exasperated.

Draco grabbed the cup and drained it quickly. "To get a rise out of him. He's so controlled. Just like my father," Draco said angrily.

Harry felt like he was getting very close to something very personal about Draco. "And that drives you mad, doesn't it? All that control? All that stiffness--that inability to touch him. It makes you feel like you're not loved, even if you are," Harry said softly.

Draco turned to look at him, but his face was unreadable. "You're trying to psychoanalyze me again," he said.

"Am I wrong?"

Draco turned his face and stared off the porch at the mountains. "No," he said shortly.

"Do you want to be alone?"

"Yes."

Harry sighed and stood up. Draco wasn't ready to talk to Harry about the things that bothered him the most yet. That hurt, but then Harry reflected he wasn't really ready to talk about the things that hurt him the most, either. He walked back into the sitting room. Julian looked up from his bible and studied Harry.

"You should be careful with him," Julian said, his scarred face unreadable.

"Excuse me?" Harry asked.

"He trusts you. He trusts very few people. I don't care what you're doing underneath my quilt--that's your business, not mine. But you should know that he trusts you. He won't tell you, of course. He won't really ever talk to you about how he feels--except in rare circumstances. The Malfoys never really talk about how they really feel. It's not in their nature. It won't change what he feels, however."

Harry stared at him. He wondered how Julian could possibly know so much about Draco. He wondered if Draco really did trust him. He wondered why Julian would even care. There were no answers behind his mask of scars or in his narrowed, electric blue eyes.

He reminded Harry of someone again, but Harry couldn't put his finger on it.

Harry turned away from him and went to the room he shared with Draco. Fears about Lupin entered his mind, followed by sickening worry about everyone else. But Harry shoved it aside. Not now. Not here. He lay back on the bed with his hands behind his head, closing his eyes and trying not to dream.

"Harry?"

Harry opened his eyes and stared at Draco, who was leaning over him. "Have you been sleeping all day? You missed dinner," he said.

Harry shrugged and rolled over so Draco could get in the bed. The sun had only just set over the mountains. "Tired already?" Harry asked as he watched Draco sit down on the bed.

"Sort of. I feel better now, but still sore. I just don't want to go back out there. That man just stares at me, like he's trying to read me like that bible of his. He won't talk for very long. He's about as friendly as Père."

"Really? He talked a bit with me. He doesn't really seem actively unfriendly. I think he just has a lot of secrets, a lot of things that weigh him down. He's very sad, I think," Harry said, watching Draco with interest as he changed into a flannel nightshirt Julian had loaned him. Between Draco being so short and Julian being so tall, the nightshirt fell to Draco's ankles.

"Contessa's not any closer. She's still worried, but it's fading because I tried to Kythe to her that I was safe. I think she felt it. Something else is distracting her. She hasn't moved at all. I wonder why," Draco said vaguely, rolling over to face Harry.

"We should probably wait for her, then."

Draco nodded, his eyes seeming very luminescent in the weak light for some reason. Or maybe it was Harry's imagination. After a few moments, they slowly drifted shut, white-blond lashes fluttering against his pale cheek before settling there to say. Harry smiled a bit. Draco had apparently been a lot more exhausted than he let on. Harry sat up and pulled off his shirt and his trousers to exchange them for a pair of pajamas Julian loaned him. Though Harry was not as tall as the towering Julian, they didn't fit badly. Harry lay back down beside Draco and stared at him until he, too, fell asleep.

Harry woke in the middle of the night to the very pleasant sensation of Draco nibbling his ear. One of Draco's hands was sliding underneath his pajama top and over his chest, while the other was untying the string on his pajama bottoms. Draco rarely started anything, instead often coyly hinting to Harry what he wanted. Harry's body came alive, his arms wrapping around Draco and pressing him against his chest.

"Draco," Harry breathed.

"We have to be quiet, otherwise that old pervert will come in here and glare at us," Draco whispered.

Harry nodded, burying his face in Draco's neck, breathing him in while Draco opened his pajama bottoms and drew out Harry's already hardening length. Harry groaned, feeling Draco wrap his hand around Harry's cock, moving gently and frantically all at the same time.

Harry wanted more. He wanted all of Draco, not just the bits and pieces he'd been given over the past month. Harry rolled over, pressing Draco into the bed, his arms pillared on either side of Draco, looking down at him with nothing but weak moonlight to guide his vision. Draco seemed to sense the change of pace, falling still and dropping his hands back on the bed. He raised an eyebrow.

"I want more. I'm not going to fight you for it, though--not for something like this. Would you let me?" Harry asked softly and then paused for a brief moment before whispering again. "If you think you could handle it, that is."

"I can handle anything you can dish out, Potter," Draco said, smirking. Nobody else in all the world could turn Harry on with just a curve of their lips.

"Think so, Malfoy?" Harry grinned, bending down to kiss Draco. He groaned when Draco bit down softly on his bottom lip.

"But if you think you're going to shag me without at least some lotion, then you're dreaming," Draco growled quietly into his ear. "And before you try to suggest I've been sleeping my way through Hogwarts to know we're going to need that, those magazines of Père's are very informative."

Harry laughed as quietly as he could. "Well, so is the book Lupin gave me. But where am I supposed to find some lotion?" he asked.

"Top drawer of the nightstand. I nicked it from the old codger's bathroom after dinner, just in case."

Harry gaped at Draco while Draco smirked.

"You planned this?"

"Harry, you'll learn one day that a Slytherin's credo is to always be prepared for anything. Besides, I figure it wouldn't be long before you'd get the balls to ask me," Draco said airily.

Harry grinned and pulled his wand out from under his pillow. "Accio lotion," he said. The tube of lotion burst out of the drawer and zoomed into Harry's hand. Harry paused, listening for any footsteps, but the constant snoring from the next room convinced him that they hadn't drawn any attention.

And then Draco had his arms around Harry's neck, pulling him down, urging him on--or in, depending on how you looked at it. Clothes were shed, legs were spread, and lotion was applied on all the right spots with a lot of squirming and nervous laughter. It wasn't very long at all before Draco was arching and trembling slightly as Harry kneeled before him, slowly pushing himself inside Draco. Harry had a feeling there were other things he should be doing beyond lotion to prepare, but neither he or Draco really knew what to expect. It was quite obvious that Harry hurt Draco, especially at first. Harry felt very badly about that, but Draco seemed determined to work through it and wouldn't let him pull out.

It was very hard to think while Harry was inside Draco. It was painfully tight and perhaps the most pleasurable thing Harry ever experienced. Before he knew it, his body was moving against Draco, causing Draco to whimper, but perhaps not entirely in pain now.

Harry put a hand on Draco's smooth chest to steady himself as he moved against him, feeling Draco's heart beat furiously under his palm, pounding against his ribcage almost violently. Harry's other hand was wrapped around Draco's length, busy making him moan. It was a lot different from anything they had ever done before. It was intense, dramatic, binding--completely consuming. Watching Draco's head arched back into the pillows, his soft, pillowed lips whispering what sounded like naughty things in French for Harry's enjoyment was almost orgasmic in of itself. Harry found himself moving to the rhythm of Draco's heartbeat as Draco's legs entwined around him, urging him on.

And then Harry felt something. Not in his body, but he felt like he could feel Draco. And Draco could feel him back. It was like a connection formed from the heart, not by body or mind. Harry felt lust, desire, security, pleasure, pain, fear, fading resentment, and some burgeoning intense emotion he had no word for coming from Draco. It seemed his entire body, his very soul connected to Draco at that moment.

The release was as good as the build-up. Harry never had an orgasm that lasted so long. He felt like he was draining his very being into Draco. He had to bite his lip to prevent from screaming. Harry very much wanted to pass out, but Draco still needed attention and Harry wasn't such a prat that he would just roll over and fall asleep. Harry returned the favor as best he knew how--with his mouth. It didn't take Draco

very long to come, uttering a low, guttural groan that was loud enough that Harry reached up to cover his mouth before Julian woke up. Draco left a slightly sweet, slightly tangy taste in Harry's mouth, even after he swallowed.

Harry lay beside Draco on the bed, tangling their arms and legs after pulling the blankets about them tightly. Draco breathed heavily, still panting into Harry's neck as he rested his head on Harry's shoulder. Harry had never let himself be fully naked around Draco and felt very odd and self-conscious suddenly. Draco didn't seem to think any less of Harry, absently stroking Harry's arms and chest.

"What was that?" Harry asked.

"Sex. Fucking. Buggering. Sod--"

"You know what I mean."

"I don't know. Kything, I guess. Usually the only person I can connect to is someone I . . ." Draco trailed off, cutting himself off.

"What?"

"Don't worry about it. I can sort out Contessa and my mother well enough. It was strange that we connected like that. Maybe it's because we're both Kythers."

They were quiet for a while, drifting in and out of sleep. It was strange that Draco's orgasm had caused shivers of indefinable pleasure to course through Harry's own body, as though he was feeling what Draco felt. He had the strangest thought that somehow their ability to Kythe had caused their pleasure to increase, even in the beginning. That maybe he knew what Draco liked because he could feel Draco's reaction, and vice versa. It wasn't an obvious power. It wasn't something they could control. At times, it felt like instinct. Harry wondered if that was what Kything was. Instinct. Feeling. Then the connection ended as quickly as it had come and Harry almost felt bereft. Harry felt awake enough after a long while to talk again.

"There was a spot inside you that the book said was--"

"--you found it close to the end," Draco said shortly.

"Oh," Harry said. That explained why Draco seemed to be in less pain towards the end. "Sorry I hurt you."

"I figured it would. I mean, the magazines said it would. I didn't actually think it would hurt that bad, but towards the end I almost forgot about it."

"That was the best," Harry whispered. Draco smiled against his shoulder, nipping at his collarbone.

"It was. Next time find the spot sooner, though," Draco said simply.

"I'll try. I was having problems thinking, what with all the blood in my head rushing to other parts."

"Explains a lot about you, actually. You can just blame being an idiot on the permanent state of arousal you develop around my Adonis-like good looks."

"And so modest, too," Harry laughed. He and Draco slipped into a very comfortable, sleepy silence. Harry--though he had wanted to curl up and sleep at first--wasn't quite ready to drop off yet.

He stared at Draco's sleeping face, smiling fondly as a bit of drool escaped Draco's open mouth. Draco snored--not loudly--but had refused to believe Harry when he pointed it out. Harry reached up and stroked the side of Draco's face, thinking about things that were not thoughts. Draco smiled a bit at the touch, settling more comfortably against Harry. He reminded Harry of a cat, stretching languidly if petted and rolling over to more convenient positions to be rubbed.

"I love you, Draco Draconis Malfoy," Harry whispered once he was sure Draco was deep asleep. And then with that profession uttered, Harry let himself drift off, lulled to sleep by the rhythm of Draco's heartbeat.

To be continued . . .

Chapter 25: Jigsaw

Chapter Twenty-Five: Of Flesh and Blood

Interlude Five:

Sirius felt much better now. He made a mental note to never, ever drink any beverages--particularly alcoholic ones--that Snape conjured. He had a vague feeling Snape had only produced the bottle of unidentified liquor in hopes of making Sirius go away.

It had worked.

Sirius was sobering up now, unfortunately. He had also pissed like a racehorse--twice. Remus had only just recovered his powers of speech and vision, but was tired out by strenuous activities such as breathing, so he wasn't much entertainment. Sirius needed to pass the time somehow while Remus slept, Snape glowered, Tracey preached, and Contessa brooded.

If Tracey quoted something out of the bible one more time, Sirius was going to set her hair on fire. If Snape made one more sarcastic comment about Sirius's level of intelligence, Sirius was going to twist Snape's body into the shape of a pretzel. If Contessa kept acting like she knew everything and making nasty comments about dogs, he was going to choke her to death with her own hair. He was almost missing his house.

He heard the familiar sound of Contessa choking. She slept by herself, away from their camp. Sirius wasn't worried about it. He could hunt her down if she ran too far--one of the benefits of having a dog's keen senses. He approached her quietly, having learned the technique of padding about as quietly as possible while in human form as much as in dog form. Contessa was in her sleeping bag, twisting in desperation under the same ghostly Devil's Snare vines that threatened to strangle her every night at Number Twelve, Grimmauld Place.

Both vines and the ghostly appearance of the man faded as Sirius approached. Contessa sat up and rubbed at the fresh bruises around her throat. Before she pulled at her cloak, Sirius noted that the bruises extended to arms and legs as well. He imagined

it was pretty miserable, being choked nearly to the point of suffocation every night. He'd feel sorry for her if she didn't deserve it. Every time he thought about the danger in which she'd put Harry and everyone he cared about, his sympathy drained away.

"What do you want, Black?" she rasped, breathing heavily.

Sirius shrugged. "Nothing. Just heard you choking--again. I could talk to Dumbledore about the throne if you--"

"I can deal with my own problems, Black. I don't need your help," she spat and then coughed violently.

Sirius watched her impassively. She looked a lot like her mother. At times, she looked a lot like her father. There were other times when she looked like people Sirius didn't even know. Sometimes he hated her, sometimes he pitied her.

Contessa glared up at him and then her eyes widened. Sirius opened his mouth to ask her what was wrong and then he heard a man shout, "Immobulus!"

His body froze up. After a moment, Sirius felt a wand tip pressed to the back of his neck. He swore wordlessly, since he could not move even his lips.

"Hello, Black," hissed out a familiar voice. That was Avery. He ripped Sirius's wand out of his pocket. Sirius wished that he could at least grind his teeth in frustration, mentally tearing the man's throat out.

Contessa came to her feet, her face expressionless as she stared at Sirius and Avery. Sirius glared at Contessa, wondering if she had arranged this somehow. Avery's hands roughly patted Sirius down, pulling out Contessa's wand from one of his pockets. Avery tossed it to her. It landed at her feet.

"Willie and I managed to get free from the ropes a bit after the fight and found one of the Portkeys home when we got up at the rendezvous point. The Dark Lord made another Portkey and sent me and Kilroy back to try to find out where Potter has run off to. He's very angry," Avery said in a tight voice.

Contessa bent down and picked up the wand, rolling it in her hand. She then smiled coldly. She pointed her wand at Sirius's face, looking as terrible as her mother often did. "Where's Kilroy?" she asked.

"Moving towards the camp, to make contact with Snape. Lucius was very insistent

that we free you and bring you back home. He was quite upset when he found out what happened to his son--and is vehemently denying the boy has anything to do with Potter. The Dark Lord wants the little Malfoy and Potter brought back for questioning. Snape can make us a Portkey once we find them."

"Lupin survived my uncle's Killing Curse," Contessa said, still smiling coldly at Sirius with her wand in his face. Sirius snarled at her--on the inside of course. "Apparently the girl hexed Rabastan well enough that he wasn't able to put enough will into it."

"The Dark Lord will be pleased. Rabastan was . . . punished . . . for killing him too soon."

Sirius's blood ran cold. Voldemort had something very nasty in mind, he could feel it. "Snape's a triple agent. He's serving Dumbledore," Contessa said. "We can't trust him."

"The Dark Lord seems to think we can," Avery said with an audible shrug, "but in any case, we need to bring this one back. We should cast something a bit more permanent on him."

"I'll do it," Contessa offered. "I've been waiting for this chance for quite some time now. He irritates me."

Sirius screamed at her inside his head, trying to convey just how angry he was through glare alone. She looked unimpressed. "Avada Kedavra," she hissed.

Sirius waited for death, to enter that gray, nebulous realm he'd only just recently escaped as the green light rushed towards him--and then past him. There was a loud thud behind him. Contessa stared at what was presumably Avery's body behind Sirius for a moment, looking pale and frightened. Her hands trembled. Sirius doubted she'd ever killed anyone with her wand before.

"I want this bloody ring off, Black," she said shakily, pointing her wand at Sirius. "I'm going to make you take it off."

One moment saving his life, the next threatening it. Just like a woman. He'd have made an obscene gesture if he could move. She raised her wand--presumably to cast the Imperius Curse on him--when Snape suddenly appeared behind her, looking grim. Contessa froze, a look of alarm on her face. An Invisibility Cloak slipped to the ground around Snape's feet.

"Give me the wand or I'll blow a hole in your neck," Snape said conversationally. Sirius guessed Snape had his wand pressed against the back of her neck.

Contessa handed him the wand, white-lipped. Snape took it with his free hand and then pointed his wand at Sirius's direction. "Finite," he said and Sirius could move again.

"Thanks," Sirius said awkwardly, wondering who exactly he was thanking and for what. Sirius took Contessa's wand and put it back inside his robes, as well as taking his own wand back from Avery's still body. "How'd you know to find us?" he asked Snape.

"I was relieving myself when a Death Eater came upon me. I questioned him, found out he wasn't alone, and then promptly killed him. I went looking for the other one, and found you like this. You have a talent for being in the wrong place at the wrong time, Black," Snape said smoothly and then looked down at Avery. He glanced at Contessa before speaking again. "One of the better uses of the Killing Curse that I've seen. Saved me the trouble."

"Where'd you get the cloak? Isn't that James's cloak?" Sirius asked. He didn't care if Snape or Contessa were killing Death Eaters, but he felt like he was missing something.

"It belonged to Barty Crouch, Junior. I . . . appropriated it from his office after his unfortunate demise," Snape said. Contessa had her hands up and was glaring at Sirius much the same way he imagined he'd been glaring at her a few moments ago.

"How very Slytherin of you," Sirius snorted.

"Incarcerous," Snape said. Ropes shot out of his wand and wrapped tightly around Contessa's body, causing her to fall over. She was glaring up at Snape as he folded up the Invisibility Cloak rather neatly and shoved it into one of his billowed, black sleeves. Sirius had always wished he could have learned that spell. Not even James had been able to get the trick of charming his sleeves to carry objects for him. Then again, neither of them had really bothered with it.

"Fucking, treacherous, lying, cocksucking scumblood," she spat.

"I think she likes you," Sirius offered. "After all, those are your good points."

Snape gave Sirius a cold glare before he reached out and grabbed Contessa's hair,

twisting it around his hand and yanking as hard as he could. She yelped in pain.

"Did you ever listen to anything I told you, girl? Were all my efforts wasted? Perhaps they would have held more weight if my name was Lucius Malfoy?" he whispered into Contessa's ear, sneering at her unpleasantly. He probably thought he was being quiet enough that Sirius couldn't hear him. He actually was, but Sirius had extraordinarily good hearing--both as a human and a dog.

Before she could answer, Snape began to drag her back to camp by her hair. Sirius rolled up her blankets and sleeping bag with a flick of his wand and summoned it to him before following Snape. Contessa was screeching in both pain and anger as she struggled uselessly against the ropes that bound her. It certainly couldn't be comfortable to be dragged anywhere over the bumpy ground covered in twigs, fallen branches, snow, and the occasional sharp rock--especially by one's hair. If Sirius hadn't spent twelve years in prison, he might have blushed at some of the things she called Snape.

Tracey, however, did blush when they entered the camp. Remus sat up and watched in consternation as Snape dumped Contessa next to a tree. "What's going on?" Remus asked in sleepy bewilderment.

Snape tied Contessa to a tree with some rope he produced. He paused as he did so, staring at her neck, roughly pulling down her collar to examine the bruises. He then examined her wrists, arms, ankles, and legs. He glared at Sirius.

"What have you done to her?" Snape asked sharply.

"Nothing," Sirius said, surprised by the sudden heat in Snape's eyes. "She's been visited by a throne almost every night since Christmas. It takes the form of Bode and strangles her with Devil's Snare. Once she gets close to suffocating or a person gets near her, it fades away."

"A throne?" Snape said, turning his head to Contessa. She looked away without saying anything.

"You must be feeling very guilty, to attract a throne," Snape said harshly.

"What?" Sirius asked. "She said they punish the wicked. She said they were personifications of justice, like a poltergeist."

"She lied. Thrones only visit those who are suffering from extreme guilt but who do

not have enough strength to redeem themselves," Snape said, taking on the air of someone talking to an exceptionally stupid toddler. "They only punish those who feel guilty. They are personifications of guilt that a wizard creates to punish themselves--quite inadvertently, I assure you."

Sirius was very quiet.

"You owe me, Black! You owe me! Just let me go! Let me go back to where I belong!" Contessa suddenly screeched.

"What happened?" Remus asked again.

"I was nearly kidnapped by a Death Eater when she killed him," Sirius said darkly.

"I could have let him take you! I could have let him--" but Contessa was abruptly cut off by Snape's cold, "Silencio!"

Sirius shook his head, suddenly remembering something Lily had once told him.

"Even the worst of the Death Eaters is capable of love, Sirius. Crouch is wrong--you can't just go around indiscriminately killing people. They're human beings, too. We can't win against Voldemort with hate, death, and violence. We can only win with pity, love, and mercy," she had said, patting a very pregnant belly.

"I am letting you stay where you belong," Sirius said suddenly. "This is where you belong, with people that aren't murderers or bigots. With people who won't use you or sell you out at the quickest convenience. With people who don't kill other people for fun. You may not want a second chance and you may not even deserve one, but I'm giving it to you anyway. So be grateful."

Contessa stopped mouthing silent obscenities and froze, staring at him. Snape gave him an odd expression. Remus smiled weakly at him, looking proud. Tracey beamed at him.

"We'd better send those two home in the morning, so we can go find Harry and Draco," Sirius said, nodding to Remus and Tracey. Remus frowned at this, but said nothing.

Feeling unusually mature and wise, Sirius decided to bed down for the night, having the strangest feeling that his penance for his own, far less serious crimes was to help heal the broken bits of family he had left.

End Interlude

Harry smiled every time he saw Draco. Draco smiled every time he saw Harry. Since they were in a very small cabin in the woods, they were both smiling a lot. If Julian noticed how stupid they were acting, he mercifully said nothing on the subject. However, he did have a very sour expression on his scarred face.

Draco was taking a shower and in the meantime, Harry was looking through a box that Julian said might have more records in it. Draco seemed to like the music Julian listened to and Harry thought it would be nice to play more.

Harry paused when he came upon a large, embroidered handkerchief wrapped around something. It was a pale blue, with darker blue stitching. It looked very nice and very expensive. Harry looked at the monogram, running his fingers over the embroidery thoughtfully. "A.J.M.," it said. Harry cast a glance at Julian, who was sitting in front of his fire, reading from the bible. Harry wondered what the initials stood for.

He carefully unwrapped the handkerchief and found a portrait of a very beautiful woman. Stunning, really. Harry stared at her and then suddenly noticed how Malfoy she looked, with a pointed chin and nose. She didn't look entirely different from a feminine Lucius. Her hair was darker than his and she had rather large eyes that were carefully narrowed in the photo. If the photo was in color, Harry would have guessed her to have rich blonde hair and blue eyes. She was sitting very primly and lady-like, dressed in witch's robes that would have been popular in the forties. Despite the fact that it was a moving photo, she didn't move much, except to pick lint off her dress or make sure her hair was still coiffed. She looked to be a young woman, perhaps Harry's age or a little older. The photo seemed very old, however.

"Who's she?" Harry asked, holding up the photo.

Behind his scars, Julian's face visibly paled. He stared at the photo like a Muggle might stare at a ghost. The bible slipped from his hands, off his lap, and onto the floor.

"She looks like a Malfoy," Harry said, staring at him. Was this Julian's girlfriend when he was a youth?

"Of course she does," Julian said hoarsely. "She was a Malfoy. Julia Aurelia Malfoy

Lestrangle."

"You knew her?" Harry asked as Julian took the photo from his hand, looking almost tearful. "Was she your girlfriend?"

"No, of course not," Julian whispered and then his voice turned hard. "She married Ulric Lestrangle--the bastard. He never appreciated her."

"That must be Contessa's grandmother," Harry suddenly said, putting it together.

"Who?" Julian said, looking up sharply to stare at Harry.

"Draco's cousin, Contessa Lestrangle. She had a Malfoy grandmother--that must be her. Shame she didn't pick up her grandmother's looks, though I think Contessa has her chin and the shape of her eyes," Harry observed, bemused.

"You know Contessa Lestrangle?" Julian asked, clutching the photo to his chest.

"Of course I do. She's the one coming for us--the one I told you about yesterday. We have to wait for her."

"Contessa Lestrangle is coming . . . here?" Julian asked.

Draco had come out of the shower, fully dressed but toweling his hair. He paused by Harry and Julian, his brows furrowing. "How do you know my cousin? She would have only been a little girl when you left," Draco said sharply.

Julian ignored him, instead smiling oddly, almost sadly. "It seems my past is catching up with me, isn't it?" he asked rhetorically.

"What are you talking about?" Draco asked.

"How long?" Julian asked.

"Excuse me?"

"You can tell me where she is, I know you can. Natural Kything skips every Malfoy generation and you can Kythe to her--regardless if she lacks the power. How long before she gets here?"

Draco gaped at him. "A couple hours, I would imagine," he said.

"Then I had better take down my wards for her. Keep Kything to her about where you are," Julian said and then abruptly walked out outside, still clutching the photograph to his chest.

Interlude Six:

"I'm fine, Sirius," Lupin said sharply. "Stop hovering."

Sirius backed off maybe a few inches, still looking concerned. It would have been touching if he wasn't always in Lupin's space lately. While incapacitated, it wasn't bad, but now that Lupin could move around, it was quite distracting.

"You should have gone back with Tracey when Snape sent her back. You're too weak to be climbing mountains," Sirius said stubbornly, repeating himself for the thousandth time that day.

"I'm fine, Sirius," Lupin snapped again, for the thousandth time that day. He was getting testy and sighed when the inexplicable look of sullen hurt passed across Sirius's face. The same expression he'd always take on when he didn't get his way as a boy. Lupin hadn't seen that expression since before Sirius had gone to Azkaban and wasn't pleased to see it had returned.

"Which way?" Snape barked at Contessa for the thousandth time that day. She was paused between two trees, looking without her eyes. They had gotten a late start that day, since Snape had to have a few hours of rest after making a Portkey to send Tracey back. He was still looking a little gray and queasy, but was apparently being as stubborn as Lupin was.

"This way," she said dreamily, repeating herself for the thousandth time that day. They really needed to find some new lines. Lupin was tired of hearing the same things over and over.

Actually, he was just tired, but he wasn't going to admit it. His entire body screamed in agony and exhaustion. He wasn't ready for trekking through mountains and he knew it. Sirius knew it. Snape knew it. Contessa knew it. Hell, even Tracey knew it. She had given him a reproachful look when he stayed. But a man had to have his pride, and he was going to finish this. He had to help find Harry and Draco. If it hadn't

been for him, no one would be in this mess.

He was angry, and he knew he wasn't angry with Sirius. It was convenient, however, to blame him. Lupin painfully remembered pieces of what had happened. Tracey had come to his room. She had brought him biscuits, flowers, and all the heartaches that she had no one else to tell. About how she liked Theodore Nott, even though he was a pureblood and what would he say if he knew about her being a half-blood? About how she was so afraid that Blaise Zabini had found out about her Muggle mother; about how hard the last Defense Against the Dark Arts test was and couldn't Lupin help her study?

Then the Death Eaters had Apparated in. Lupin hadn't even had a chance to pull out his wand before Bastion Fort had broken Jebediah's neck as the Kneazle sprung at him. Rabastan Lestrange was there, putting an almost primal fear into Lupin. The Lestrange brothers had always frightened him, though he could never put his finger on why. A few Stunners later, and Lupin and Tracey had been trussed up and pulled through a Portkey Rabastan had made. They had been stripped near naked and dragged through the snow. Rabastan had bit him on the shoulder, groped him like he was a whore, and whispered threats in his ear. The man's very voice had sent shudders of terror down Lupin's spine.

Lupin paused by a tree and tried to control his breathing. Sirius was next to him again, tentatively reaching out to touch his shoulder. Then he thought better of it and dropped his hand back at his side.

"I'm sending you back to Hogwarts," Snape said impatiently.

"No, you bloody well aren't," Lupin replied tersely. "Besides, at this point I don't think you're up to it. I have to help. It's my fault Harry and Draco got into this mess. If it hadn't been for me, they never would have come."

"You're wrong."

Lupin looked up and realized Contessa was standing in front of him, speaking. She was hanging her head so that her hair covered her face. "It's my fault," she said quietly, but everyone heard her all the same.

Lupin said nothing.

"It's my fault," she repeated. "If I hadn't told the Dark Lord about who Harry Potter cared about, none of this would have happened."

Lupin looked away from her, because she suddenly disgusted him. After everything they did for her, she betrayed them so swiftly in one night; betrayed a boy who had nothing and had suffered more than any young man--any child--ever deserved. He didn't care if she betrayed himself or even Sirius. It was what she did to Harry that made him sick. If she said she was sorry, he might have to hit her. 'Sorry' just didn't quite cover it.

Lucky for her, she didn't apologize. Instead, she put Lupin's arm over her shoulder and helped support his weight. She said nothing, nor did Lupin. He let her help him walk. Sirius gave him an odd expression and Snape had no reaction.

They walked on until they reached a point where the path led to a cliff-like drop off that had probably been a ledge at one point. The never-ending line of trees led off in another direction to an inviting trail. Sirius walked over to the drop-off.

"It looks like the road collapsed. See, you can see the rubble down there and the rest of the ledge a bit up there," Sirius said, pointing to all the things he noticed.

Snape looked disgusted, but he typically had that expression whenever Sirius spoke. He faced the line of trees and the other path. "If you're quite done remarking upon the obvious, can we go?" he asked.

Sirius scowled back at him and Lupin felt Contessa sigh at the same time he did. Apparently, she knew a fight was brewing, too.

"Oh, that's right. I forgot you don't like heights much, do you, Snivellus?" Sirius sneered.

"Aren't you bored with your little joke yet? You came up with that when you were five," Snape asked dangerously, his eyes glinting.

"I don't see what your problem with it is. It's nicer than some of the other things we used to call you. I mean, did you prefer it when Peter called you 'Slithering Snake'? Or how about James's 'Exploding Snape' game? Or maybe you missed me calling you a greasy git with a great honking nose? And from what I remember, the other options were Slimeball, Arsehole--"

"Whenever you two are done reenacting our second year, let us know," Lupin said.

"Sodding idiots," Contessa said, summing it up quite nicely in Lupin's opinion.

"Maybe you two should just kiss and make-up," Lupin offered.

Snape's eyes were narrowed dangerously at Lupin now, while Sirius gaped at him in what could only be described as horror. "That's not funny," Sirius said indignantly. "It's disgusting."

"It's beyond disgusting. It has layers of revulsion words cannot describe," Snape snapped.

"Well, at least you got them to agree on something," Contessa said with a scowl. Lupin smiled very thinly at this.

Sirius walked over to him and Contessa let Lupin lean on him and walked over to the cliff's edge herself. Lupin pursed his lips, stiffening up. He didn't like to touch Sirius--or let Sirius touch him--for very obvious reasons. Sirius blinked at him, apparently sensing his reaction. His brows furrowed. Lupin made a point to look anywhere but Sirius.

Contessa was approaching the cliff's edge, even as Sirius was moving Lupin towards Snape and the tree-lined path. "You're going the wrong way," she called.

"How can this be the wrong way?" Snape snapped, pausing as he moved towards the little path.

Contessa looked very pale and stepped away from the edge of the cliff. Lupin remembered Draco mentioning her acrophobia. "It is. Watch," she said, grabbing a small rock on the ground and bouncing it off the thin air between the two cliffs.

"I'll be damned. That's one clever invisibility spell," Sirius remarked. "How did you know?"

"I didn't. But Draco's this way, so I knew there had to be some way past this."

Sirius moved towards the cliff, even while Snape scowled. Lupin pushed Sirius away and grabbed the rock face beside the invisible cliff ledge. "I'm fine," Lupin sighed, slowly walking on his own down the ledge. Sirius's face darkened a bit, but he simply followed. After a moment, Snape followed, cautiously testing the invisible ledge with every step.

Contessa, however, remained at the edge where visible became invisible. She was

very pale and looked like she was trembling. Lupin paused. Sirius, who was already on the other side, looked irritated.

"Hurry it up!" he barked at her.

"She's scared," Lupin said, looking up at him as he slowly made his way across.
"She's afraid of heights."

"Come along," Snape told her. He was standing in the middle of the invisible ledge, literally looking like he was walking on thin air.

"I-I can't," Contessa said, paling even more. Her face was ghostly white.

"Just walk! It's fine!" Sirius said, rolling his eyes. Lupin frowned as he reached the other side and was forced to sit down. He well remembered the days when Sirius would walk on the parapets of Hogwarts just to frighten him. He had no appreciation of other people's phobias.

"I-I can't move," she said in a quiet voice.

Snape moved closer to her, holding out his hand so that if she reached, she could grab it. "It's safe. Close your eyes if it bothers you so much," he said.

Contessa shook her head. Snape studied her intently.

"I'll lead you, but you'll have to trust that I'll lead you in the right direction. Otherwise, it won't work," Snape said very carefully. Lupin raised an eyebrow. Snape never said anything lightly.

Contessa stared at him for the longest time, a variety of different emotions passing across her face.

"Come on!" Sirius called, looking impatient. "I swear I'm going to throw her over my shoulder so we can get going."

"You'll do no such thing," Lupin said firmly. "Let them work it out."

Sirius blinked and gave Lupin a strange look. Snape was still holding his hand out to Contessa. After a moment, she put her hand in his and closed her eyes. He led her across the ledge without incident or any comments. She shook the entire way. Other than pulling her by the hand, Snape did not touch her. The look on his face was blank.

and neutral. When she was across, he ripped his hand away from hers.

"Open your eyes. It's over," Snape said tersely, moving past all of them and going forward. Lupin cast a glance at the young woman. Her expression was indescribable.

Lupin came to his feet--without anyone else's help, thank you very much. Sirius held out his hand, but Lupin ignored it, limping past him. Sirius worked his jaw and then moved on. Contessa also walked along just in front of them and then came to an abrupt halt. Snape was standing stock still. Lupin couldn't see much ahead of them, but then his vision hadn't fully recovered.

"What's going on?" Sirius called from behind Snape.

"Be silent, you fool!" Snape hissed.

Lupin paused and then he saw what they saw. So did Sirius.

The shadows seemed to shake and move. Lupin realized it wasn't shadows at all, but something rather larger and far more tangible. The dragon stretched and yawned, blinking at all of them rather curiously, reminding Lupin of a rather large and ferocious Godric. Its dagger-like teeth flashed in the waning sunlight. It was dark, with rough scales, and bright purple eyes. It had ridges all along its back and a spiked tail. If Lupin was to take a guess, the dragon was about thirty feet long. That guess was based off a book that Charlie Weasley had once loaned him.

"A Hebridean Black? Here? How'd they get it away from the MacFusty clan?" Sirius asked.

"Ssshhh!" Contessa hissed. The dragon's eyes narrowed and it roared so loudly that Lupin felt its breath blowing about his hair and robes. He felt his stomach drop out. He was definitely in no shape to fight a dragon.

"This is going to hurt," Sirius gulped, ripping out his wand and shoving Lupin behind a large, jutting rock. Snape already had his out and Contessa was diving for cover, landing in a graceless heap next to Lupin as the first burst of flame hit where she had been standing only moments before.

Lupin pressed his wand into Contessa's hand. "Help them. Charlie says the Dragon Keepers have to work together," he hissed.

She yelped in pain, dropping it back on his lap. "Unicorn hair core! I'm allergic to

unicorns!" she cried. A bright red mark in the exact shape of Lupin's wand was singed onto her flesh. Lupin swore.

Sirius and Snape were definitely not working together. Sirius was trying to cast the Conjunctivitis Curse and Snape was trying to charm the trees into distracting the dragon. The dragon roared again and the flames singed Snape and set his robes on fire. He gave a surprised cry and tried to put himself out. Contessa cried out in alarm and covered her mouth as Sirius dodged a vicious swipe of the dragon's claw that had been aimed for his head. Lupin tried to sit up, pointing his wand at the dragon and praying.

Before Lupin could even get an incantation out, the dragon lay down abruptly, rather like a dog would if its master bade it to heel. They all stared at it, but the dragon only yawned. Snape was not on fire anymore, though part of his sleeve had burned through to show the pale, ash-covered skin of his arm.

"Okay, what gives? I know I didn't make it do that. Did you do that? Because it would have been nice to do that before he tried to rip my head off," Sirius told Snape in annoyance.

"No, of course I didn't do that, you imbecile," Snape said, staring at the dragon warily. "This is a trained dragon. It's a pet--or a guardian."

"Well, why did it stop guarding?" Sirius asked in confusion.

"I don't know," Contessa said, standing up. "But Draco's past this dragon."

She helped Lupin up and they approached the dragon slowly. It did not react. Lupin looked around and realized everyone was looking at him expectantly like he was supposed to do something. He spoke to the dragon itself. "Will you let us pass? All four of us?"

The dragon yawned a bit again and then closed its brilliant amethyst eyes. It was apparently returning to the nap they had interrupted.

Sirius put an arm around Lupin, leading him away from Contessa and helping him pass by the dragon, despite his protests. Snape quickly followed. Contessa watched the sleeping dragon curiously as she walked past it. They walked for about fifteen minutes, through the trees and up the hill.

"Through the trees and up the hill. Are we on our way to Grandmother's house?"

Lupin asked. He wondered if Sirius would remember the reference. During their first year at Hogwarts, he had often taken to reading Muggle fairy tales to his friends from a book his mother had given him as a boy. Since James, Sirius, and Peter had all been purebloods, they had found the Muggle fairy tales fascinating.

Sirius grinned over at him, apparently remembering. "I don't know. Did you feel a sudden urge to dress up like an old woman so you can eat a little girl in a red riding hood?" he asked wickedly.

Lupin smiled. He had forgotten how much he enjoyed exchanging banter with Sirius. "Not particularly. Little girls disagree with me. All that sugar and spice, and everything nice isn't good for werewolf constitutions. I much prefer snips and snails, and puppy dog tails," he said casually.

"Guess I better not change into Padfoot when you're hungry, then?" Sirius asked.

A cabin came into view. It was small and roughly hewn on the outside. It had a large front porch and was rather quaint-looking. Draco and Harry were sitting on the steps playing Exploding Snap. An old man with long, gleaming silvery-white hair and a scarred face sat on the porch in a rocking chair, looking somber.

Contessa froze and gave a small cry of surprise. Snape audibly gasped.

End Interlude

When Harry looked up, his heart burst with joy. There was Sirius--with Lupin! Lupin was alive! He jumped up and ran straight for him, laughing.

"Remus! You're alive!" he said joyfully, hugging Lupin tightly and nearly knocking him over. "I knew you were! Never had a doubt!"

"Easy, Harry, easy!" Sirius laughed. "He won't be alive for much longer if you keep squeezing him like that!"

Draco smirked. "Took you long enough. Julian said he took down all of his wards for you, Contessa. Bet that dragon gave you a right scare, though, didn't it?" he said.

Harry looked over at Contessa and Snape and realized that Contessa had her mouth covered and was slowly approaching Julian with wide gray eyes. Snape stood stock still, like a deer caught in the headlights of a car.

Julian stood up to his full height and leaned casually against his porch railing, smiling very sadly down at Contessa and Snape. Draco looked between them with a look of pure confusion.

"Hello, little Countess. You've grown into a young woman, and it seems just the other day you were sitting on your Mère's lap, clinging to her after one of your nightmares."

"Un-Uncle Aurelius!" Contessa sobbed, tears pouring down her face.

"Ah, good, you can talk now. I always told Julia you'd grow out of it," Julian said with approval.

"Wh-what are you talking about?" Draco asked slowly.

"A.J.M.," Harry breathed, letting Lupin go to stare at Julian. "Aurelius Julian Malfoy. Right?"

Julian smiled at Harry sadly. "You're a clever boy, Harry Potter," he said.

"Aurelius Malfoy," Snape breathed very softly. Harry looked at him sharply, suddenly remembering that Aurelius had been the one to kill Snape's father and then take Snape in as his fosterling for some inexplicable reason.

"So I heard from Draco and Harry here that Lucius and Narcissa got themselves arrested," Julian told Contessa neutrally.

"He just recently escaped prison," she told him.

"So I was told," Julian said coldly. "I was also told you've been placed under house arrest by Dumbledore himself and are awaiting trial for murder."

"We were betrayed," Contessa said, glaring at Snape. Snape ignored her and instead watched Julian like one would watch a hungry lion let loose in the zoo.

"Really?" Julian asked, looking coolly at Snape.

"You lied to me," Draco told Julian in a reproachful voice. Harry turned to him and

realized that Draco's fists were balled up and his eyes were narrowed. His knuckles had turned white and there was a nasty scowl on his face.

Julian looked at him, swallowing. Harry could see it now, underneath all those scars. He could see the Malfoy chin, the pointed features. Julian's eyes were different and much larger than Lucius's, not to mention a different color. His nose was straighter. He wasn't nearly as pale as Lucius and Draco, either. He would have been very handsome without the scars--extraordinarily handsome in his youth.

"I see the only member of my family left that hasn't fallen to crime is you, Draco," Julian said sadly.

"You told me Aurelius Malfoy was dead," Draco said in a carefully measured voice. Harry realized Draco was angry. Angry like he'd never seen him before.

Julian flinched. "He did die. Aurelius Malfoy is dead. All that's left is Julian. Aurelius died with his younger sister, Julia Lestranger," he said mournfully.

"You said he was dead," Draco repeated stubbornly.

"Why did you leave us after Mère died, Uncle Aurelius? Why?" Contessa asked.

Julian ignored her, staring at Draco instead. "I didn't lie, Draco. You were better off without me. You didn't need a controlling old man who had spent his whole life killing, torturing, and hating people for nothing more than a pile of gold and servitude to a madman. You didn't need a grandfather who was once king of the wizarding underworld and had his finger in every dodgy pie in Britain. It took my sister's death to realize what a supreme bastard I was. I scarred my own face so I wouldn't have to look at it anymore."

Draco turned his face. "So it was better to just leave without telling anyone?" he asked coldly.

"How was Mère involved in this? What really happened?" Contessa demanded.

Julian stared off at the tree line and looked wistful. "She saw at the end--she saw what we did was wrong. When she knew she was dying from that damn disease. At the end, when I brought you and her back to Malfoy Manor, she knew she was dying.

"She told me--she told me then. I didn't listen. When Tom sent us to kill the Squib--Arabella Figg was her name, I think--Julia let her go. But Tom had set us up. Aurors

swarmed in before we could Disapparate. Your grandmother was so weak. Her disease had just wasted her away. When Frank Longbottom's Stunner hit her, it killed her. Not right away, but she was dead by the time I got her out of there. Did you know that? I never told anyone. I found it ironic that her sons helped torture him into insanity."

"He didn't deserve that," Harry said vehemently as Contessa covered her mouth again, horror-stricken.

Julian turned to look at him. "No, he didn't. What he did was an accident. I heard how hysterical his voice was when he realized he killed her--and that it was a woman he killed. I Stunned him before he could identify her. Frank Longbottom was not responsible for my sister's death--but suffered for it, regardless. After I thought Tom was dead and the most dangerous Death Eaters were locked up, I left. I left my wand behind for Draco, and took my sister's instead. I thought my son would lead his own life. I thought he would relish being free of me. But I see that even in my absence he followed in my footsteps," he said heavily.

Contessa began to plead with him. "Come back. Oh please, Uncle Aurelius. Come back and help him. He's planning on--"

"No."

Draco's face twisted up at that simple word for a brief moment and then went blank. Contessa was scowling.

Julian just looked at Draco. "I love my family enough to know they're better off without me. If Lucius has gotten himself into a mess, he can get himself out of it. He's a big boy and quite clever. My sister raised him--I didn't have the time. He was always more like her than me, in any case. He should be able to figure a way out of his own problems," he said coolly and at that moment, the resemblance between himself and his son was never stronger.

"You should have died for real," Draco hissed. He turned and walked away from him, reaching the tree line and kicking at dirt and rocks.

Contessa frowned at Julian. Julian frowned back. Then without another word, Contessa presented her back to him and went over to stand by Draco, whispering to him in French.

"Thank you. For saving us," Harry said awkwardly.

Julian nodded and then looked at Snape, who had still yet to move. "I did you a disservice many, many years ago, Severus Snape. It wasn't killing your father--I assure you life would have been even more difficult for you if he had lived. It was your mother's resulting suicide that I regret. She loved him, I suppose, though he didn't deserve it. She had a very low opinion of herself and thought you would be better off without her. She was wrong, of course, but you cannot fault her for her line of thought. She knew my . . . religious nature, and that guilt would force me to take you in. She left me a letter explicitly stating I do so. Clever woman, if misguided. I was a hypocrite back then. I did not understand the word of God and thought if I donated enough money to the church, I could save my soul and excuse any sin. I thought if I raised the son of a man I murdered, I could be exonerated from my crimes. I was wrong, as wrong as your mother was when she slit her wrists and bled to death in her tub," he said.

Snape still did not move, but he trembled--once. He was very, very pale. He swallowed, but otherwise had no expression on his face.

"I expect--in some twist of irony--that you wound up learning more from me than my own son. Whatever little game you're playing against my son . . . you should be careful which side of the fence you wind up on," Julian said, shrugging.

Snape licked his lips, and finally spoke. "Is this supposed to be your apology to me?" he spat.

"I apologize to no man. My sins are between me and God. You would do well to remember that, Severus. All men--and women--are accountable for their own sins. Repent to whom it matters and do what you can to make up for it," Julian said, shrugging again. "I bid you all a good day."

Snape was working his jaw. Sirius and Lupin were very, very quiet and looked extremely uncomfortable. Contessa and Draco were both glaring at Julian. Harry ran back to the porch as Julian opened his door to go back inside his cabin.

"If Snape's mother was wrong for abandoning him and thinking he was better off without him--then so are you. You're wrong to abandon your family like that. They need you."

Julian half-turned and stared at Harry with very wide blue eyes. He opened his mouth and then closed it without speaking.

"I just thought . . . you should know," Harry said.

"Good day, Harry Potter. Good luck," Julian said stiffly, disappearing inside of his house. Harry heard him seal the door with magic.

Harry turned back and went to stand by Sirius and Lupin. "Is everyone else all right?" he asked. If Lupin was alive and they were here, then everything else must be fine.

"What do you mean?" Sirius asked sharply.

"Rookwood told me they wouldn't stop there. I just wanted to make sure no one else was attacked," Harry said, feeling very sick to his stomach all of a sudden.

"We left a couple hours after your attack. I haven't heard anything from Dumbledore. I didn't want to tell him--since we were taking Contessa out of the house to look for Draco."

"The Weasleys," Lupin said, his eyes widening. "I just remembered! I heard Rabastan talking about it with Rookwood. They had Stunned me so badly I couldn't get my head straight. The Death Eaters were planning to attack the Burrow! Oh God, how could I forget that!"

"Can't you contact Dumbledore?" Harry demanded, feeling something like a fist close around his heart.

"Not from Canada. We're on the other bloody side of the world!" Sirius said.

"But the Weasleys!" Harry cried.

"Well," Snape said, bending over to pick up a rock. "I suggest we leave now."

"We have to go to the Burrow!" Harry cried.

Snape responded with a, "Portus."

Harry reached out and touched the rock, along with everyone else, his heart in his throat and his stomach in his feet. What had happened to the Weasleys in their absence?

To be continued . . .

Chapter 26: Jigsaw

Chapter Twenty-Six: Smiling at the Crocodile

They arrived in front of the Burrow and Snape promptly passed out. Harry looked back and saw the man lying in a heap, his face gray and his breathing ragged.

"What's wrong with him?" Harry asked, glancing back at the Burrow. It was very quiet.

"This is the second Portkey from Canada to England that he's made today. He'll be fine," Contessa said, bending down to check on him. She looked worried, however.

Sirius conjured a floating stretcher for him and then headed towards the Burrow. Harry ran to catch up to him. Draco was right behind him, though Lupin was limping along slowly and painfully.

As they got closer, Sirius and Harry gasped. The house looked like a corpse, all gray and dark. The doors were wide open and the insides looked either burned or torn apart. As they approached the front door, Harry noticed that blood stained the threshold.

"Oh no," Harry moaned.

"Who's there?" demanded a high-pitched voice. After a moment, Rufus Tiberius stepped out of the shadows, pointing his wand at them. He relaxed when he saw it was Sirius and Harry.

"Oh, you're alive. Thank the Goddess," he breathed, smiling weakly at Harry.

"What happened?" Sirius asked. Harry hadn't quite recovered his powers of speech. They couldn't be--no, not the Weasleys . . .

Harry realized Rufus's face was wet, his eyes were red, and his nose was puffy. He sat down on the threshold and looked glum. "I came back for clues. There's nothing. Tonks, Kingsley, Dawlish--we've been over this place a hundred times," he said.

"WHAT HAPPENED TO THE WEASLEYS?" Harry exploded, feeling his heart burst. Rufus slowly looked up at him.

"It's been, what four days? You-Know-Who and a large group Death Eaters finally struck. They've only been doing piddling, wee things. A small attack here, a break-in there. They've been waiting. They hit the Burrow the day after they hit you, Harry," Rufus said numbly.

"WHAT HAPPENED?" Harry roared, grabbing Rufus by the shoulders and shaking him. Rufus burst into tears. This man was nearly a decade older than Harry but he was crying like a child.

"Bill's missing. He's probably dead," Rufus's voice broke as he spoke. "We've looked everywhere, but we can't find him. Bill, Percy, and the twins were here, having Sunday dinner with Mr. and Mrs. Weasley. They're all at St. Mungo's. Percy's lost an arm. The twins--the twins are all right, though they were hurt badly. Fought like nesting dragons, Mr. Weasley said. Mr. Weasley's okay now--though it was a close call. One of the Death Eaters had tried to use the Imperius Curse on him, but he threw himself out of the second story window to stop himself from hurting George. But Mrs. Weasley--"

"No," Harry said, fighting off the tears. "She can't be--"

"She won't wake up. We don't know what they did to her," Rufus said tearfully. "They almost killed her, but Percy saved her. That's when he lost his arm. Rodolphus Lestranger cursed it so badly that the Healers had to amputate to save him. They're going to try and re-grow it, but it will take time. Mrs. Weasley just won't wake up. Bill's probably dead, but he managed to call me before he went missing. When I got a group of Aurors together to help and arrived, the Death Eaters had already Disapparated. The Weasleys would all be dead if it weren't for Bill's quick thinking. You-Know-Who and the rest of them left once they got Bill."

Everyone was stunned to silence. Contessa had Snape on the floating stretcher and was approaching, looking as gray as Snape--but for different reasons.

"YOU!" Rufus roared, seeing Contessa and jumping to his feet. "HOW DID YOU GET OUT?"

"I let her out. Without her, we wouldn't have found Harry and Draco. And Lupin would have died," Sirius said.

Rufus looked at him in disgust and then grabbed Contessa by her arm, forcing her past the threshold and inside the house. Draco pulled out his wand.

"Let her go!" he shouted.

Rufus ignored him and pushed her further inside the house. Harry grabbed Draco's wand, waiting at him until Draco relaxed to return it. The blond had a sullen, angry expression on his face. Harry followed Rufus in and after a moment and Draco and Sirius followed. Lupin just sat down by the door, looking angry with himself.

"LOOK!" Rufus said, still gripping Contessa by the arm and using his free arm to make a sweeping gesture around the room. The sight of it made Harry choke. Everything was ruined, burned, broken. Splatters of blood lined the floor. Draco moved to free Contessa from Rufus's grip, but Harry pulled him back. Contessa was shaking, her face scrunched up, tears sliding down her cheeks.

"ARE YOU HAPPY, CONTESSA?" Rufus roared. "ARE YOU HAPPY WITH YOUR HANDIWORK? LOOK AT IT, CONTESSA! YOU SHOULD BE PROUD! THE DARK LORD AND YOUR PARENTS CAME HERE ON YOUR INFORMATION! LOOK AT WHAT A WONDERFUL JOB THEY DID! LOOK AT IT! OPEN YOUR BLOODY EYES AND LOOK AT WHAT YOU'VE DONE! BILL IS PROBABLY DEAD BECAUSE OF YOU!"

Contessa was sobbing, but she opened her eyes. Rufus let her go roughly and she sank to the floor. Draco went to her, bending down to help her stand. She was obviously trying to compose herself.

"Does Ron know?" Harry asked quietly.

"Of course he knows. He's at St. Mungo's. He's been there ever since the attack. Dumbledore let Hermione go with him. All the Weasleys are there," Rufus said dully.

Contessa wiped at her face and reached towards the mantelpiece, fumbling around until she found a familiar-looking pot that was mercifully unbroken. It was the Weasleys' Floo powder stash. "Light a fire, Black. We're going to St. Mungo's," she said.

"You can't travel to St. Mungo's by Floo unless you're a staff member," Rufus challenged.

Contessa met his gaze. "It takes them ages to process the paperwork for any

resignation. Granted, they probably have processed my resignation to all the fireplaces by now, but there's always the one down in the Morgue that they forget--its not on the same Floo connection and it's not on the rota. Snape needs to be in the hospital--he damn near killed himself making all those Portkeys. Lupin needs to be there, too--he's not healing as fast as he should and Harry and Draco need to be checked over," she said evenly.

"She's with me. She's fine," Sirius said. "I'm keeping an eye on her."

Rufus scowled, but said nothing.

"Incendio!" Sirius cried, pointing his wand at the dark fireplace. A fire sprang out of it, bringing some light and warmth into the otherwise almost frightening sitting room. Contessa pulled Snape's stretcher closer to the fireplace and Sirius went to help Lupin up.

"St. Mungo's Hospital for Magical Maladies and Injuries, Morgue," Contessa said clearly after tossing the Floo powder in. Then she disappeared into the fire, pushing Snape's floating stretcher in front of her. Harry and the others followed, though Rufus remained behind.

They came out in a dim looking cellar that had audible dripping. Floating stretchers with still bodies covered in white sheets littered the dank room, and rows of filing cabinets that Harry knew could only hold corpses lined the walls. A cramped cluster of unoccupied desks was in a corner.

"They're all at lunch," Contessa said. "The Weasleys should be on the Fourth Floor--Spell Damage."

Contessa grabbed a badge off the wall and pushed Snape's stretcher up a flight of stairs. Harry and the others followed. She led them onto a lift--apparently for staff members since she had to use her badge to make it work--and they all got on. It was an old sort of lift, with gates and a handle bar you had to push to make it work. However, the moment they all got on, it smoothly sailed up to the fourth floor without any guidance. The moment they got off, Contessa smoothly walked into a ward to the immediate left.

The sign said, "Ward 47 - The Somnus the Seer Ward".

As soon as they walked in, Harry recognized the plump brunette they had met in the Office Corridor the last time he was at St. Mungo's. Cassandra Cassius was her name.

She looked up from a man sitting by a window who looked very ill. Her brows furrowed. "Is that Professor Snape?" she asked in shock when her eyes rested on him.

"He over-extended himself somehow while casting magic. His pulse is very slow and I don't like his breathing. He won't wake up, either," Contessa said in a very tight voice. Harry noted she left out the fact that Snape had been making illegal Portkeys.

"Leaping liondragons! Bring him to Room Seven, immediately!" Cassandra exclaimed, moving very quickly to check on Snape's pulse.

Contessa looked over at Lupin. "He needs to be checked out as well. I didn't have all the things I needed and he's healing too slowly. He was hit by a miscast Killing Curse," she said, nodding to Lupin, who scowled.

Cassandra stepped away from Snape to put a hand to Lupin's face. "Clammy. I don't like that. A miscast Killing Curse? Who--"

"And my cousin needs to be checked out and probably Harry, too. They were all attacked by Death Eaters."

Cassandra studied Contessa for a moment with a serious expression and then looked away. "To Room Eight with this one. The other two can go to Room Nine since they can walk on their own," she clucked, creating a floating stretcher and glaring at Lupin.

"I'm fine, I can walk," Lupin said weakly.

"On!" Cassandra said, making Lupin jump a little. Contessa began to push Snape towards Room Seven. Cassandra called out to her. "Let Burke take him. You're not a staff member anymore. You'll have to wait until we're done."

"I qualify as a Healer," Contessa said, stiffening up as a man came up and began to push Snape down the hall. Lupin reluctantly climbed onto the stretcher.

"You were a Corpse Keeper. And you're not employed by St. Mungo's any longer. Lewis, go get Healer Porter and let him know we have two new patients who need his attention," Cassandra said in a no-nonsense tone, pushing the protesting Lupin down the hall. She turned to look at Harry and Draco. "Follow me and I'll show you to Room Nine."

"He needs medical attention, not me. I'm fine. Didn't get anything worse than an Immobulus," Harry said quickly and grabbed Contessa's arm as she angrily glared

after Cassandra. "We have to find the Weasleys."

"I'm sure Snape will be fine. People like him don't die easily. He's rather like a cockroach, I would imagine," Sirius told Contessa.

"I'm fine," Draco said stubbornly. "I don't need to be checked out."

"Of course you do. You're all out of breath and we've hardly walked anywhere," Harry said, pushing him towards a Healer. Draco scowled at him, but was swept up by the Healer before he could argue.

The dark scowl on Contessa's face remained, but she said nothing as she stormed out of the ward, Sirius and Harry in tow. After a couple turns, she turned to a set of double doors with a sign that said, "Ward 53 - The Harry Potter Ward".

"I have a ward named after me?" Harry asked in shock.

Contessa cast a glance at him. "This is a new ward they built about fifteen years ago. It's for all the patients recovering from Dark magic attacks," she said neutrally. She still had a dark look on her face, but it was distant now.

She walked through the doors and into a common area. Fred and George were playing wizard's chess. Fred had a bandage on his head and his right leg, but otherwise seemed unharmed. George had a scar running down his throat and disappearing past his collar. They both looked up and smiled at Harry as he rushed over to them.

"You're okay!" Harry cried.

"Absolutely fine. Just a scratch," George said, though his voice had a very raspy quality to it that Harry had never heard before. He noticed the scar on George's throat looked pretty vicious.

"I'm glad to see you're all right, mate! We were very worried. They said you'd gone missing. Hermione, Ron, and Ginny are due back from getting our snacks any moment now. Hermione's been worried sick. She's been crying every day since you and Malfoy were reported missing," Fred said cheerfully, though his smile and tone seemed forced. His eyes fell on Contessa.

"You--" he said angrily, trying to stand up, but he winced and fell back in his seat.

Contessa looked away from him, swallowing. Sirius looked between her and the

twins, frowning.

"Is your mum all right? Rufus said she wouldn't wake up," Harry said quietly.

George, who had managed to get to his feet--with both his hands balled into fists--practically growled. "She won't. We've all tried talking to her, but she won't wake up," he said, glaring at Contessa.

"Harry! You're all right!" Mr. Weasley said, coming out of his room and beaming at Harry. He limped right past Contessa and hugged Harry fiercely. "They were worried about you. I told them you'd be fine, of course. Never a doubt in my mind."

There were new lines of pain on Mr. Weasley's face that reminded Harry of Lupin. His smile did not reach his eyes. His hands trembled as he rested his hands on Harry's shoulders.

"I'm sorry to hear about Bill," Harry said, frowning.

"He's fine," Mr. Weasley said sharply. "He's not dead."

Harry nodded, feeling very awkward as Mr. Weasley dropped his hands back to his side, his face almost unreadable.

"Percy! Harry's here! He's fine!" Mr. Weasley called and then turned back to Harry. The twins were still glaring at Contessa. "Now, is Remus all right? We heard he'd gone missing, too."

"He's in Ward Forty-Seven. He's still ill, but Contessa saved his life," Sirius said suddenly.

Percy appeared in the room. He looked very pale and his left arm was missing. His left shoulder was bandaged, and looked like they had to take his arm off at the joint. He did beam at Harry, though. "Harry! How nice to see you're all right. We were all quite worried about you. It's splendid to see you made out all right," he said, shaking Harry's hand with his right hand. Though his tone was pompous, it seemed a bit forced.

"It's a shame that they didn't amputate the stick up his arse," Fred said, rolling his eyes. Percy glared at him. Harry was shocked he would joke about such a thing.

"Charlie is coming back from Romania tomorrow," Mr. Weasley said. "He'll be happy

to know you're all right, Harry."

"Can't they re-grow your arm, Percy?" Harry asked, watching Percy sit down next to George.

"It'll take at least a month, with the spell Lestrage cast on me," Percy said darkly and then swallowed, looking like he was forcing himself to look chipper. "It's quite all right. I'll just have to get used to it."

"In the meantime, we're trying to have him demonstrate the sound of a one-armed man clapping," George said slyly, a playful grin on his face.

Percy scowled, his chest puffing out slightly.

"At least he still has his singing voice. You sound like Neville's toad got shoved down your throat," Fred offered to his twin, grinning. "How are we going to fool anyone with switching now?"

The twins began to laugh, George very raspily so. "I can't wait to watch him go in circles the next time we take him for a swim. Or is that a one-legged man that does that?" George grinned.

"How can you joke about this?" Harry demanded, shocked that they could be so blithe. What had happened was horrible and they were laughing about it!

All three Weasleys stared at him somberly. "Do you want us to cry, Harry? Are we supposed to wail, gnash our teeth, and pound at the walls in frustration? It's like facing a Boggart. You have to laugh at it to defeat it," George said in his raw voice.

"Smiling at the crocodile," Sirius said, nodding in understanding. "I read this Muggle book Lily gave me for my twentieth birthday about a boy who never grew up--I think she was trying to say something, knowing her. In it, there was this crocodile that wanted to eat the villain. There was a song they sang in the story about never smiling at a crocodile. I think they're wrong, however. I think you have to smile at the crocodile, otherwise you'll live in fear of it--just like that villain did."

Mr. Weasley smiled at him. "That was very wise, Sirius."

Fred grinned. "Dumbledore's still alive, right? I do hope Sirius wasn't channeling him," he said.

"Sod off, you sodding sod," Sirius said, grinning back. Everyone laughed at the ridiculous insult, though Harry was sure that none of the Weasleys truly meant it.

"Where's that Lestrangle woman?" Fred suddenly asked sharply.

Harry looked around, but Contessa was nowhere to be seen. Sirius's brows furrowed. Mr. Weasley moved down the hall and Harry followed. He opened a closed door and walked in with Harry and Sirius right behind him.

Contessa was sitting by Mrs. Weasley. Mrs. Weasley lay on the bed, looking very pale. She hardly looked to be breathing. Harry walked closer as Mr. Weasley moved further into the room. Harry's chest tightened up as he moved to the foot of Mrs. Weasley's bed.

"Mrs. Weasley? It's me, Harry," Harry said awkwardly. She did not respond, but continued to sleep.

"Harry's fine, Molly. Right as rain. Not a scratch on him. And you should have seen the twins and Percy just now--laughing and joking. I'm so glad Percy made up with us. I knew he was good boy--you always said so," Mr. Weasley said softly, sitting down on an empty bed next to her. His fake smile was gone and he looked very pale and very old.

Mrs. Weasley continued to sleep without response. Harry felt his chest continue to constrict. It wasn't right. She loved everyone so much. She was so strong. It wasn't right that she lie here like that--looking old and frail. She should be yelling at Mr. Weasley for walking around when he should so obviously be resting or looking scandalized at the twins' off-color humor. She shouldn't be lying on a bed, like a living corpse.

Contessa just sat by her without comment, her expression troubled. And then she leaned over and whispered something very quietly into Mrs. Weasley's ear. She got up and walked to the door. "I'm going to go check on Snape, Lupin, and Draco. You can find me there when you're ready to leave," she said in quiet voice.

Harry looked over at Mr. Weasley and noticed his expression was shocked as he stared at Mrs. Weasley. Harry turned to her and realized her eyes were fluttering open.

She turned to stare at her husband, tears pouring down her face. Her eyes were wide open now. "He's alive, Arthur. She--she just told me Bill is still alive," Mrs. Weasley said. Harry and Sirius gasped in surprise simultaneously. Harry suddenly felt like the

hand that had been squeezing his heart had let go.

A thousand years seemed to have lifted off Mr. Weasley's face. "Molly! You're awake! Bill's alive?" he asked in a voice that could only be described as relieved beyond all measure.

"That's what she said, Arthur. She'd know, wouldn't she?" Mrs. Weasley said. Mr. Weasley cried out in joy and moved towards her.

Sirius touched Harry's shoulder just as Mr. and Mrs. Weasley embraced. He made a motion with his head and Harry followed him out reluctantly. He smiled after Mr. and Mrs. Weasley as they laughed and cried at the same time. Sirius paused by Percy and the twins. "You guys should go talk to your parents," he said simply, and then led Harry out.

Percy and the twins looked at each other and then got up, though George had to help Fred stand. They headed towards their parents' room, looking mildly alarmed. Harry could hear them all crying out in surprise and joy as he and Sirius left. They were all so happy just to know their mother was awake and their brother was alive.

Harry and Sirius headed towards Ward Forty-Seven. Sirius looked a little wistful and Harry wondered why. When they arrived, Draco was in the common area, holding a packet and drinking a potion. Contessa sat by him, her hands on her knees, clutching them very tightly. She didn't meet Sirius's or Harry's eyes when they entered the room.

"Well?" Harry asked Draco.

"I'm fine. Just have to drink this potion three times a day for the next week. Lupin has to stay here for the next two weeks. Père has to stay for two weeks, too. That Cassandra person is sending Dumbledore a message now about getting a substitute," Draco said sullenly, grimacing and finish the potion.

Contessa was gripping her knees, still staring at the floor. Harry watched her for a moment before speaking. "That was a decent thing you did. How did you know that's what would wake her up?" he asked.

"I didn't," Contessa said. "I just thought she needed to know. It doesn't matter, you know. The Death Eaters have him."

"Where is he?" Harry asked.

"I can't tell you."

"I can't believe that--"

"Harry, I can't tell you. Voldemort put the Fidelius Charm on his headquarters. I can't tell you no matter how much I want to. My mother is his Secret Keeper."

Harry stared at her. "Tell me who you told him I was close to," he said.

Contessa gave him an odd look. So did Draco. "The Weasleys. Hermione. Lupin. The Order of the Phoenix. I offered him names, but he didn't ask. I think he knows most of them, in any case. He has other spies. He--he asked me about Neville, but I told him you weren't particularly close," she said slowly.

Harry furrowed his brows. "He should already know that. None of that's new information. He has Wormtail--and Wormtail knew about all that. Kreacher probably knew all that. You didn't tell him anything he wouldn't already know," he said.

Contessa blinked at him. "Pettigrew never told him that. I didn't even know that he knew. He told the Dark Lord about Black being an Animagus and perhaps a few other things, but he never told the Dark Lord about any of your friends," she said slowly. "He feigned innocence."

Harry's brows furrowed. "Why didn't he tell him? He was Scabbers for almost thirteen years. He knew all about my friends," he said, looking at Sirius. Peter Pettigrew had betrayed his parents to the Dark Lord. Why hadn't he betrayed the knowledge of Harry's friends?

Contessa shrugged and turned away. "I have to get to an owl. Let me send an owl. Please," Contessa said, standing up and looking at Sirius.

Sirius looked rather uncomfortable. "Dumbledore said I wasn't supposed to--"

"He also said I wasn't to leave the house, either," Contessa countered. "I saved your friend's life. I saved your life. Let me tell my uncle that I found his father. Even prisoners in Azkaban have the right to send letters."

Harry looked at Sirius in surprise, but he wasn't disputing anything she was saying. "Fine," he said.

Contessa headed to the doors. "The Owlery is on the fifth floor," she explained,

walking fast enough to send her heels click-clacking across the tile. Sirius followed her. Draco watched them go with an unhappy expression.

Harry dropped down next to him and leaned his head against the wall, closing his eyes, and feeling drained. He felt Draco casually drop his arm next to Harry's on the armrest, so their fingers could brush against the other's. Harry smiled.

"Harry, mate, you're all right!"

Harry opened his eyes and found Ron rushing towards him, grinning. Hermione and Ginny were just behind him.

"Oh, I was so worried about you two! We thought you'd both been killed," Hermione sobbed, flinging herself on Harry and Draco both, squeezing them tightly. Harry felt a drop in his stomach. Hermione had said that in one of his dreams, too.

"Mum woke up! She's awake and Bill's alive!" Ginny said excitedly as Ron hugged Harry impulsively.

"You--you were worried about me?" Draco asked Hermione in disbelief.

"Of course I was! You're our friend now--whether you want to be or not," Hermione told him, puffing up slightly after letting Harry and Draco go and stepping back while Ginny hugged Harry, too.

Draco was looking at Hermione in something between wonderment and disdain. Harry smiled and clapped him on the back.

"It'll be all right. Ron still hates you," Harry grinned.

Ron nodded in agreement while Hermione and Ginny giggled. Draco rolled his eyes.

Smiling at the crocodile, indeed.

They were to take the Knight Bus back to Hogwarts the next day, after spending the night at Number Twelve, Grimmauld Place. Dumbledore stopped by late in the evening and took both Contessa and Sirius into the sitting room to talk. Harry had a

feeling Sirius might be in trouble, but knew from experience Dumbledore would take all things into account. When Dumbledore left, Sirius looked a little put out. Contessa, however, was positively scowling. Lupin and Snape remained at St. Mungo's and when Harry heard Sirius promise Lupin to visit him every day, he felt strangely happy. Harry was certainly looking forward to two whole weeks without Snape swooping around the Potions classroom, glaring at him.

The fact that Bill was still alive seemed to keep the Weasleys hopeful. Contessa-- while assuring them every time they asked that she would tell them if anything changed--didn't seem very heartened by this fact. Harry found this very sobering, and wondered why the Death Eaters were keeping Bill alive. He was sure whatever reason they had, it couldn't be a good one.

They were sitting in the drawing room with Ginny. Ron and Hermione had disappeared somewhere and Harry didn't have to be told not to disturb them. He found himself staring at Draco while Ginny insisted on another round of Exploding Snap.

"I'm going to bed. I'm tired," Draco said abruptly after returning Harry's gaze from underneath his lashes. Harry watched him go and then looked at Ginny, who was giving him a strange look.

"I'm going to, er, go to bed, too. I'm knackered," Harry told her.

"Right," Ginny said doubtfully, putting away the cards.

Harry got up and walked up the stairs. He went inside his darkened room and closed the door, letting his eyes adjust to the moonlight. There was no sign of Draco until he suddenly reached out and grabbed Harry from the shadows. Draco laughed when Harry jumped and reflexively reached for his wand.

"Jumpy for a Gryffindor, aren't you?" Draco asked, grinning impishly as Harry pushed him against the wall.

Harry already was working on opening Draco's robes as Draco's lips met his. "People grabbing you from the shadows isn't normally as fun as this," Harry said between kisses.

"I think we need more practice," Draco murmured, rubbing urgently at Harry's crotch through the cloth of Harry's robe, causing Harry to moan appreciatively. "I stole a bottle of oil from your werewolf friend's room. I found some interesting magazines with it."

"I didn't need to know that," Harry said, wincing. "He's so . . . old."

"Not that old, not even that bad-looking," Draco said, riding up Harry's robes.

"Did you want to see if he likes teenage boys, then?" Harry asked in annoyance, taking off Draco's robes and leaving him with nothing but his underpants.

"Maybe," Draco said, nipping at Harry's collarbone. "If you don't keep me interested, I just might."

"Prat," Harry sighed, slipping off Draco's underpants. Draco felt so warm and smooth under his hands. Harry wondered again what attraction a gawky boy like him could hold for Draco.

"I told you that you have to keep me interested," Draco whispered urgently, pulling off Harry's glasses in annoyance and tossing them to the side.

Harry grabbed Draco suddenly and pushed him on the bed, climbing on top of him. Draco laughed and struggled for a moment, but Harry pinned him to the bed with his arms and legs, taking his time to suck on one of Draco's nipples. When Draco stopped struggling, Harry spent his time exploring Draco's smooth skin with his tongue and listening to Draco's strangled cries of pleasure. He tried to taste every interesting part he could find, until he finally gave in to Draco's urgings and took Draco in his mouth. The noises Draco made combined with his combination of naughty words in both English and French certainly convinced Harry his work was appreciated.

When they rolled over Draco let Harry inside again, Harry bit his lip to try to prevent from screaming, but sound escaped all the same. There was less pain this time, more confidence on where hands and lips belonged. Harry knew he found that spot inside Draco when the smaller blond arched and cried out while riding him. It lasted forever, but was over far too soon. Harry shuddered as he came, not quite able to strangle all his cries. Draco came only a moment later.

"Brilliant," Draco murmured, collapsing on top of Harry and kissing him again.

"Interesting enough?" Harry asked.

"For the moment," Draco said sleepily, nuzzling Harry's neck before rolling over and going to sleep.

Harry smiled and fell asleep next to him.

When Harry woke up, it was still dark and Draco was gone.

Harry stood up, putting his clothes back on and went to the door, wondering where Draco was. Harry stepped out into the hallway. It was very dark and very quiet, which was unusual, since Sirius usually didn't go to bed until well after midnight.

"Draco?" Harry called, wandering down the darkened hallway. Shadows seemed to move in the corner of his eyes, but when he turned to look, they stilled. Everything was too quiet.

"Ginny?" Harry asked, coming to her door. The door was wide open and her room was empty, though her bed was unmade and slept in. Harry moved further into the darkness, wondering where she had gone.

"Ron?" Harry called, but there was no answer. "Hermione?"

No answer, only shadows, darkness, and open doors with empty beds inside their rooms.

"Sirius! Contessa!" Harry cried. Their rooms, too, were empty and the doors wide open.

"DRACO! RON! HERMIONE! SIRIUS!" Harry shouted, fear gripping his heart like it had when he thought the Weasleys were dead. "WHERE ARE YOU?"

Harry ran down the stairs, but there was no answer. Why was everything so quiet? So dark? Where was everyone?

"Hello, Harry Potter."

Red slitted eyes gleamed out of the darkness and Lord Voldemort stepped out of the shadows, a flash of lightning illuminating his livid face and stick-like figure for a brief moment. Harry was struck dumb for a moment, unable to believe Voldemort could find him here of all places.

"YOU! HOW DID YOU GET HERE?" Harry screamed, reaching for his wand. But it was gone. He had no wand.

"Aw, is da widdle baby looking for his magic wand?" came the mocking baby voice of Bellatrix Lestrange, standing next to Voldemort. She tossed Harry's broken wand at his feet. Contessa stood at the other side of Voldemort. She was crying, but she did nothing to help.

Voldemort smiled. "Even Dumbledore spilled his secrets when I fed him Veritaserum. He really should be more careful about who he employs," he laughed.

"Where's Draco? Where's Ron and Hermione? Ginny? Sirius? WHAT DID YOU DO WITH THEM, YOU BASTARD?" Harry screamed, balling up his fists and trying to jump at Voldemort. But he could not move. He was frozen.

Voldemort laughed, a high-pitched, cold laughter that belonged more in one of those horror films that Dudley seemed to like. "The Mudblood and the blood traitor? They're dead, of course. The blood traitor brats? They'll soon wish they were dead," he answered.

"What can I do, Harry? I can't do anything," Contessa said, turning to stare out of a window. "Uncle Lucius told me I couldn't do anything. I have to do what he says. He's all I have."

"WHAT DID YOU DO WITH MY FRIENDS? WHAT DID YOU DO WITH DRACO?"

"Oh, he's still here," Voldemort said carelessly. Snape came out of the shadows behind him, grinning nastily. In his arms was a struggling, clawing, desperate Draco.

"Do you wuv him, widdle baby Harry? Is he your one twoo wuv?" Bellatrix mocked and then her voice grew hard. "Fucking poof."

"I killed Sirius. I had to do it. I didn't want to, but he told me to. What could I do?" Contessa said, still staring out of the window into the night. Harry's heart exploded and he felt very heavy, very weak. He wanted to die.

"All your pain and misery are Potter's fault, Draco. I'm doing this for your own good," Snape admonished Draco, who was ranting at him in French.

"What could I do? Such powers the Dark Lord has," Contessa said, shuddering. She

was speaking in unison with Peter Pettigrew, who was suddenly standing beside her, also staring out of the window.

"What could I do, Harry? They never liked me--not really. They made fun of me. They always pointed out I wasn't as good as they were. I--I thought the Death Eaters would love me like James and Sirius never did. I was wrong. What could I do?" Pettigrew said sadly.

"Why don't we let the little lovebirds reunite?" Voldemort suggested with another laugh. Bellatrix joined his laughter, as did Snape. "If he can reach Potter before I finish casting my spell, maybe I'll let him live.

Snape let Draco go, pushing him towards Harry. Draco's face was full of fear as he ran towards Harry, mortal fear. Desperation. He reached out to Harry as he ran. Harry managed to lift his arms enough to reach for him, urging Draco to move faster.

"Harry!" Draco cried.

"Avada Kedavra!" Voldemort said lazily, a jet of green light bursting from his wand and striking Draco in the back.

"NO! DRACO!" Harry screamed. Draco fell to the ground, his outstretched hands missing Harry's by a mere hair's breadth before he fell face first onto the floor and lay still.

And Voldemort laughed.

Harry sat bolt upright. Draco jumped up only a second later, looking up at him in annoyance. Then he saw the look on Harry's face and the annoyance faded.

"What's wrong?" Draco asked.

A dream. It had all been a dream. Draco wasn't dead. Dumbledore hadn't been fed Veritaserum. Sirius and Lupin were alive and Voldemort wasn't here. Ron, Hermione, and Ginny were all safe.

For now.

"What's wrong, Harry?" Draco repeated.

Harry looked at him and realized what a mistake he had made. A little luxury he couldn't afford. He was a marked man. He was endangering Draco's life. All of their lives.

"We can't do this. We can't. You'll die," Harry said, panicking and pushing Draco away. Harry fell off the bed gracelessly and looked for his clothing.

"I'm going to die whether you stay or not, Harry," Draco said harshly as Harry pulled on his robes and attempted to leave. "Don't be stupid."

Harry froze and looked over at him.

"I already dug my own grave the moment I betrayed him. My father dug my grave the moment he proved to the Dark Lord that he could think for himself. My grandfather dug his grave the moment he questioned the Dark Lord. My grave's been waiting for me since before I was born. How stupid do you think I am? How stupid do you think the Dark Lord is? Somebody already told on us--it's too late now."

Harry sunk down on the bed next to Draco. "What about everyone else?" he said mournfully. "What have I done? I made friends. I let myself care about people and he's going to take it all away."

Harry buried his face in his hands. The dream had seemed so real. He could still see the look on Draco's face, hear Voldemort's laughter, hear Contessa and Pettigrew try to explain their betrayal. He felt Draco's hand touch his shoulder and looked up. Draco withdrew his hand and looked away, not meeting Harry's eyes.

"I thought Gryffindors were supposed to be brave. Are you just going to let him? You're the great Harry Potter, aren't you?" Draco asked. His expression was very careful, as if he was trying to see what Harry was going to do. Harry paused, remembering him say that while he walked through the Netherworld. He couldn't decide if this disturbed him or not.

Harry studied Draco. There was more to Draco Malfoy than had ever met the eye. And every day, he got to peel back another layer and see what he was made of. This was somewhat comforting.

Harry leaned forward to kiss Draco, wanting to forget his dream. Draco responded

after a moment, gripping Harry's shoulder as he gently bit Harry's lower lip and then his mouth slowly traveled down his neck. Harry moaned.

He was going to smile at that crocodile if it was the last thing he ever did.

To be continued . . .

Chapter 27: Jigsaw

Chapter Twenty-Seven: A Danger Illustrated

Interlude Seven:

Sirius peered inside the cellar doorway to make sure Contessa was in the kitchen, making dinner. To his satisfaction, she was clattering around and appeared quite busy. She was grumbling over some weird soufflés that she couldn't get to rise. Sirius shook his head and padded back to the sitting room where Remus was sitting on the couch, listening to the wireless and eating chocolates.

Dumbledore had not been pleased with him for taking her out of the house. Sirius was sure his displeasure was blunted by the fact that it had turned out all right. But, Sirius knew he was skating on thin ice now. It was one of the many reasons Remus was staying with them again.

Sirius threw himself on the couch next to Remus. It had been two weeks since Remus got out of the hospital. Sirius rather liked having Remus over. It cheered him up like it never had before. Perhaps that was because he was allowing himself to think of Remus as more than a friend. Or maybe it was because his own "death" and Remus's near-death experience just made him appreciate what he had all the more.

Remus still looked a little sick, but was otherwise nearly recovered. Sirius didn't like his color--he still looked pale, even by his standards. From what Sirius had heard, Snape had only just got out of the hospital a few days ago--no doubt to the disappointment of most of the Hogwarts students. Apparently, he had nearly killed himself with the last Portkey he had made. Sirius's opinion of Snape went up a notch to think Snape had been willing to die to get them to the Burrow. Either that, or Snape was overconfident, though he didn't strike Sirius as the type.

Sirius tried to pay attention to the program on the wireless, but Remus kept distracting him. Watching him place a chocolate on his tongue, then curl his tongue around the piece in a very suggestive manner, and then close his mouth and eyes while he savored each piece was really more interesting than the comedy show Remus had chosen to put on.

"You know, Contessa says all that sugar and chocolate you like to eat isn't good for you," Sirius said, watching Remus repeat the process of eating a piece of chocolate with more interest than he should probably be showing. He had practically given up on Remus actually loving him. Harry had to be mistaken. Remus acted as he always did towards Sirius. He always stiffened up when Sirius got too close, like he was doing now as Sirius leaned over a little. Sometimes Remus would look at him for a very long time without saying anything. He was as mild and calm as ever.

Remus sighed in irritation. "I'm well aware of that," he said and inched away from Sirius without looking at him.

"So then why eat it all the time? You've always had a sweet tooth, Moony, and you always get sick," Sirius said, drawing back.

"I happen to like it. It's bad for everyone."

"She says it's ten times worse for a werewolf to eat it. She says you should be eating more protein and citrus."

"I find nothing more irritating than a Death Eater who has put Harry and all the people he cares about in mortal danger lecturing me about my diet. Except perhaps a man who has spent his entire life eating whatever fell into his hand first, telling me what I can and cannot eat."

"Wow, we're bitchy today. Is it that time of the month again?"

"The full moon isn't for two weeks," Remus returned.

Contessa came in at that point, before Sirius could respond and set their tea tray on the table. She looked grumpy, even by her standards.

"What's wrong?" Sirius asked, bracing himself for the sarcasm.

"All the soufflés are ruined."

"Pity," Remus said without a trace of sarcasm. That usually meant he was being particularly sarcastic in Sirius's experience.

"Maybe we can have a roast for dinner, instead?" Sirius suggested.

"For a Black, your tastes are remarkably plebeian," Contessa said, sniffing and then

walking out.

"How is a roast plebeian?" Remus asked.

"She was raised by my cousin, Remus. Narcissa doesn't believe in eating anything you can easily pronounce."

Remus shook his head and ate another piece of chocolate, distracting Sirius again with the movement of his tongue. Remus seemed to be returning his attention to the comedy program on the wireless as he took his tea. Sirius tried to pay attention to it again.

Only Sirius couldn't focus on the wireless. Remus was much more interesting. So was the way he ate chocolate. Sirius found himself genuinely curious about what other tricks Remus could do with his tongue. He realized he was thinking of Remus in a very sexual way. Strange.

He sat back and stared at him, trying to understand it. Remus wasn't bad-looking. He was hardly going to wind up on the cover of Witch Weekly but he had a sort of accessible ordinary handsomeness. The lines on his face and his gray-shot hair made him look a bit older than he was, and he had never looked particularly healthy. There was nothing overt or sexual about Remus. On the contrary, he was a very careful, reserved man--no suggestive movements or comments. Unless you counted the fascinating way he went about eating chocolate.

Maybe it had just been too long since the last time Sirius had sex. It had only been fifteen years. Sirius winced at that realization.

"So . . . been dating anyone since I died?" Sirius asked as casually as he could.

Remus choked on his tea and turned to face Sirius. "What?" he asked.

"You never were much for dating. I just wondered if maybe you found a girlfriend at Hogsmeade. Maybe Rosmerta? She was always fit, and seemed to like you a lot."

Remus blinked at him very slowly. "No, I'm not dating Rosmerta," he said.

"Anyone else?" Sirius asked, keeping his tone light. Remus had a very interesting expression on his face. He looked rather . . . well, the best word Sirius could find to describe the expression was discombobulated.

"Erm, no. No girlfriends," Remus said after a moment.

"Oh. Any boyfriends I should know about?" Sirius asked in his best teasing voice, though he kept a very close eye on Remus's expression.

Remus's face flushed and he turned away. "No," he said. He said that in a very final tone of voice.

"Good, I wouldn't want any competition," Sirius said in the same light, teasing voice. Testing the waters, some might call it.

"Stop it, Sirius. Now," Remus said, sounding almost angry. He had put his cup of tea down. Sirius blinked.

"I'm only joking," he said.

"I don't appreciate jokes about that," Remus said, still sounding angry. Well, angry by his standards. He did everything so calmly, so mildly.

"I didn't mean it to be insulting," Sirius said.

"Well, it can be. You need to watch your mouth around Harry with things like that."

"Why? Harry loves my jokes."

"Because--" Remus paused and then sighed. "Because you might offend him."

"Why would that offend him?"

"He might think you're serious."

If Sirius didn't know better, he might think Remus was keeping a secret from him. Maybe he knew something about Harry that Sirius didn't know. Sirius felt a twinge of jealousy. How close had they grown while he was dead?

There was something inherently wrong with the world when you had to wonder what was going on in it while you were dead.

"Do you like men?" Sirius asked. He didn't believe in beating around the bush.

Remus looked at him intently for a moment and then turned away. "What does it

matter?" he asked.

"You know most men would deny they like men frantically, or punch me in the face for asking."

"I'm not denying it, nor will I punch you."

"Do you like me?" Sirius asked, trying not to sound hopeful.

Remus clasped his hands together and stared very determinedly at the wireless. He didn't answer Sirius.

"Answer me, damn it."

"No."

That one word stung like a Stinging Hex. Sirius turned his face and drew back from Remus, realizing that he hadn't even noticed how close he got to him. He felt a lump in his throat and he felt very . . . wounded.

"Oh," was all Sirius could say, trying to find his casual voice and failing. "I thought you might have, but I guess I was wrong."

Remus grabbed his chocolates and ate another piece, staring angrily at the mantelpiece now. Sirius wished he would stop eating them. He resented the fact that he enjoyed watching Remus eat chocolate.

"Not even a little? If you like men, why not me?" Sirius asked.

Remus paused his chocolate eating, blinking. "You're my friend," he said.

"I mean, I'm handsome--well, not as much, but still--I'm clever, I'm witty, I'm unique, I make great beans on toast, I--"

"You're a grown man. Stop it. That was cute when you were sixteen, now it's just annoying," Remus snapped.

"Everything I do annoys you now, does it? I'm not good enough for you, then?" Sirius knew he was being ridiculously petty and immature. It was quite all right to like Remus if Remus liked him first, but if Remus really didn't, then it was just unfair.

Remus was turning to him in something like shock and surprise. "What?" he asked, studying Sirius intently.

"Well, who do you like then? Do you like anyone?"

"I like lots of people. I only love one, however."

And then it sunk in.

"Me?" Sirius asked, leaning forward. He was very close to Remus, who drew back slightly, even as he turned to face Sirius.

"Why does the world have to revolve around you?" Remus asked, the slightest bit of a smile curving the corner of his mouth. Sirius realized he might be testing the waters, too.

"Just your world," Sirius murmured, moving in even closer. Close enough that their thighs were touching and he was putting his arms around Remus. Their faces were so close--so very, unbearably close.

"Padfoot," Remus breathed, reaching up to put a gentle hand on the side of Sirius's face.

"Moony," Sirius breathed back, closing the distance and their lips finally met. He slipped his tongue in, feeling Remus greedily welcome him and knew nothing in his life had ever felt this right.

Then Remus was pulling him down, pulling him closer, pulling him tighter. Sirius was giving all he had and it had taken him his entire life--and even his death--to realize this was what he needed and all he ever wanted.

End Interlude

Life had been steadily improving over the past couple of months for Harry. Things were almost . . . quiet. Remus and Sirius seemed suspiciously close and Draco was almost happy. No other attacks had been made and the search for Bill continued.

When Harry had returned to Hogwarts, Tracey Davis had displayed her gratitude to Harry and Draco by giving them each a box of expensive Honeydukes' chocolates. Draco had given the chocolate to Harry, since he didn't like it. What had been strange was what she said when delivering it.

"It was God. He helped you and that other man save us," she had beamed at him.

Harry had scowled at her. "I don't believe in God."

Tracey had smiled at him gently. "It's all right, Harry. He believes in you," she had said and then walked off. Another part of his visions in the Netherworld had come back to haunt him. He had seen her face, heard her tell him exactly that while he had been walking through the Netherworld. He shuddered when she left.

They had been back at Hogwarts for two weeks when he and Draco finally had a row. It had been over the dumbest thing Draco could possibly get upset about in Harry's opinion. Hermione had planned a small party at the Three Broomsticks to celebrate Ron's seventeenth birthday on a Hogsmeade weekend. Harry usually went to the Shrieking Shack with Draco on Hogsmeade weekends or they went to a spot behind the greenhouses on normal weekends. However, this was Ron's birthday. Draco had been invited, but of course, did not want to go.

"So you're just going to go there? The whole day?" Draco hissed after Potions when Harry extended the invitation in the empty hallway outside the classroom.

"He's my best friend. Of course I am," Harry said. "Why don't you come?"

Draco looked exasperated. "One, I don't like him. Two, I don't even know him. Three, we're supposed to go to the Shrieking Shack," he said.

"We always go there. It's just for the party."

A brief look of anger passed across Draco's face like a shadow and then disappeared. "So is Weasley more important to you than me?" he asked.

Harry stared at him. "He's my best friend, Draco. Just because we're together doesn't mean I no longer have a best friend," he said, and then laughed. "Are you jealous?"

This was, apparently, the wrong thing to say to Draco.

Draco took a step back, a sneer forming across his face. "Jealous? Of what? You and

Weasley? Hardly. Blow him for all I care. I'll just go spend time with my real friends," he said and then walked away, leaving Harry to blink after him in surprise.

When the Easter holidays rolled around and Sirius arranged for Harry to come visit him, Draco was invited. He refused to go, even to see Contessa. It had been a couple weeks since their disagreement and Draco was as good at pretending Harry didn't exist as Snape was. The closest he ever got to paying attention to Harry was in Potions class, where Draco stared hatefully at him on occasion. He always looked away when Harry looked over. Harry had glared at Draco hatefully when he left for the holiday. The fact that Draco refused to even acknowledge his existence plagued him all the way to the train station and onto the Hogwarts Express.

It not only mystified Harry, but angered him. What was Draco's problem? Ron was his best friend. Ron had always been one of the most important people in his life. Harry had never thought of Ron sexually--well, not often. Ron was like his brother and quite obviously liked girls. If Ron hadn't so obviously liked girls, things might have been different. Draco might not even have been a consideration. As much as Harry liked Draco, he couldn't entirely relax around him. There was always an edge to everything they did together. His feelings for Draco didn't overshadow his feelings for his best friend.

Feelings.

He was so confused about everything he had bubbling up inside of him. It would have been easier to forget how frustrated he was if Ron would stop making comments about Draco and expect Harry to laugh. Harry kicked at the seat across from him in the train compartment. Ron and Hermione looked over at him and Hermione frowned. "Are you okay, Harry?" she asked.

"Fine," Harry said.

Ron looked at him and grinned. "I am so happy Malfoy didn't come. I can't stand the little prat, strutting around the place, acting like he's so much better than anyone else. It'll be a relief to not have him around, eh, Harry?"

"Yeah. A relief," Harry said, staring at him. Ron continued to smile and began to talk about Quidditch, causing Hermione to look bored.

Lupin, Moody, and Tonks picked them up from the station. Lupin looked a lot healthier and seemed to be in quite a good mood, actually. He had a small smile that wouldn't disappear and a healthy flush to his face that Harry had never seen before.

He seemed to walk with a little more energy, too. Harry wondered why.

They were walking back to Number Twelve, Grimmauld Place. It was a very peaceful walk, with spring in the air and the bustle of people on their holiday moving about the streets of London. Harry saw a very good-looking boy with platinum-blond hair walk by. He did a double-take, but it wasn't Draco. The boy was too tall and his face far too chiseled. Harry looked away from him angrily after watching the boy grab some girl around the waist while he laughed with his friends. Harry lagged behind, stuffing his hands into his pockets and kicking at pebbles in the street. Why did Draco have to be so difficult?

"Are you all right, Harry?" Lupin asked, falling into step beside him. "You look upset."

"I'm fine," Harry said with more irritation in his voice than he meant to.

"How's school coming along?"

"The usual. Potions is giving me a headache, Defense Against the Dark Arts is a breeze, and if I never have to go to a History of Magic class again, it'll be too soon. I feel like I'm drowning in homework."

"Ah, the trials and tribulations of advanced classes at Hogwarts. I've spent most of my adult life recovering from them. You'll get through it all right. Just keep your nose to the grindstone."

"It's hard to think sometimes. I want to do other things."

"I know. You'll do fine, Harry. Just keep at it. Send me an owl post if you need some help."

"I might do that."

"Why didn't Draco come?"

"Because he's a complete prat."

Lupin studied him for a moment. "You had a row, didn't you?" he asked.

Harry shrugged. "It was Ron's birthday party. He was upset because I wanted to go there, instead of be with him," he said.

"Well, if Draco decided to go with one of his Slytherin friends instead of you, wouldn't you be upset?"

"No. Maybe. It's stupid. Ron's my best friend. That doesn't change," Harry sighed.

Lupin nodded. "Of course not. Draco's hardly a reasonable young man, though. He must like you a lot, to be upset over that."

Harry shrugged. "I don't know. Probably not. I like him a lot more than he does me," he said darkly.

Lupin fell silent, looking thoughtful.

"What does love mean?" Harry asked after a while.

Lupin looked at him sharply. "It's a very strong emotion for a sixteen-year-old boy, is what it is. Don't get carried away, Harry. Just because you have sex with someone doesn't mean you love them. Sometimes it does, most times it doesn't," he said.

Harry worked his jaw. "What if you feel strongly for someone? Isn't that love?"

"You can feel very strongly for someone without truly loving them. I think love, true love, is completely unconditional. It's a very powerful emotion--consuming even. It develops over time. What most people mistake for love at first sight is often simply lust at first sight. I don't think you can ever really, truly love someone at first sight. It takes time and maturity," Lupin said.

Harry fell silent. He had thought he might love Draco. Did he really? He didn't even know Draco all that well. He was still learning things about him. There had yet to be anything comfortable about their relationship other than sex. He was so confused about everything he felt. It was all a jumble to him and he couldn't sort it out.

"How do you know if you love someone?" Harry asked.

Lupin smiled. "If you doubt that the emotion you feel is love, then it's not love. You'll know. It's unmistakable. Just remember love does have to start somewhere. Don't worry so much about these things, Harry. What will happen will happen. Just enjoy yourself," he said, smiling strangely.

Harry nodded quickly and they both went quiet as they walked. Draco was fun,

especially when Harry wanted to forget about things--or when Draco wanted to forget about things. He was a very nice distraction. He did make Harry happy a lot of times, other times he infuriated him. Harry didn't understand what he felt, but he could live with that for the moment.

The Easter holiday went by in a blur. Sirius was like a whirlwind; he never stayed still. Lupin was often to be seen smiling at his antics while pretending he wasn't. It didn't take Harry very long to figure out they were together. Especially when Contessa kept grumbling about it under her breath the entire time. Between Ron and Hermione, Harry was able to forget his Draco problems and focus on having fun. He didn't even really think about Draco, except when he was alone--and horny.

When he returned to Hogwarts, Draco was still ignoring him. Draco swept past him with his nose in the air, not even looking at Harry during Potions. It was really very infuriating. Harry was working on a very complicated Calming Concoction, trying his best to get every ingredient and every stir perfect. He was rather proud of himself until it started to glitter at him in bright colors. It was supposed to be the color of moonshine. He looked at the directions on the board and frowned. He had followed them to the letter. Then he looked over at Draco, who was smirking and holding up a sunstone. This struck Harry as strange, since the potion clearly called for powdered moonstone. Draco smirked some more he slipped the sunstone into his pocket.

With a sinking feeling, Harry bent down to examine the remains of the moonstone powder he had used and realized it wasn't powdered moonstone at all, but powdered sunstone. He checked his ingredients kit and found that someone had put a label on his powdered moonstone that clearly said, "sunstone." He checked the empty packet he had used and it very clearly said, "moonstone." In his rush to make his potion, he hadn't even noticed the color was wrong. Harry poked at the labels and realized they had been peeled off very recently and weren't sticking as well. Harry groaned as Snape swooped by and quickly gave him no marks, smirking slightly as the potion became watery and glowed a nice yellow. Hermione looked horrified.

Harry seethed. There was no way in hell Harry was going to let Draco get away with that.

Harry made sure Snape was busy marking down Lisa Turpin for her purple goop and that Draco was talking to Zabini. He then surreptitiously pointed his wand at Draco's

cauldron and whispered a quick, "Wingardium Leviosa."

Draco's cauldron began to slowly float upwards and by the time Draco looked back at it, Harry ended the spell, causing the cauldron to slam back down and tip over, spilling all over the floor and splashing across the desk and all over Zabini. As a bonus, the cauldron's contents caused Zabini's cauldron to tip over as well and splash all over one of the stone walls. Harry repressed a grin as the silvery liquid coursed around both Slytherins.

Draco immediately looked over at Harry, his eyes narrowing as Harry did his best to look as innocent as possible. Zabini was swearing and everything within a ten foot radius of them was dripping in gently glowing liquid.

"Mr. Malfoy," Snape said, swooping across the room to where Zabini and Draco were. "What happened to your cauldron?"

"I don't know!" Draco cried. "It just fell over! Potter did it, I know he did!"

Snape wheeled over to Harry, who gave him his best innocent expression. "He's nuts. I haven't moved," he said.

Snape's eyes glittered at Harry maliciously for a moment, his fingers twitching. He turned back to Draco. "Collect what you can and put it in a vial for my inspection. You will clean up this mess before you leave, Mr. Malfoy," Snape said and then swept over to the front of the classroom.

Harry glared at him. If that had happened to him and Hermione, he would have probably lost house points and both he and Hermione would have received no marks for the day. That was just entirely unfair. Harry seethed for a while over that.

Harry cleaned up his work area and then left the Potions classroom, still repressing a grin as Draco tried to cast Scourgify on his work area, but was only able to do it in tiny patches. Harry found an alcove and waited, nodding Hermione on. She gave him a suspicious glance, but kept walking. Zabini stalked out, muttering angrily to himself and holding his ruined robes with distaste.

After about twenty minutes, Draco finally left, patches of silver sparkle on his black school robes. He did not look happy as he shouldered his bag. Harry reached out and grabbed him, causing Draco to drop his bag in surprise. Draco struggled, trying to grab his wand as Harry dragged him down towards the end of the hallway and near the door that led to the room in which they had brewed Sirius's potion.

"Let me go," Draco spat, pulling out his wand, but Harry knocked it out of his wrist and pushed him through the door and into the stairwell. Harry took the opportunity to push him against a wall. Draco struggled, obviously trying to gain control, but Harry pinned his wrists against the wall. There were advantages to being bigger than Draco.

"So . . ." Harry breathed, leaning into Draco's face, "about you and me . . ."

"Get away from me, Potter," Draco said, glaring.

"Harry. I told you, my name is Harry," he said, leaning even closer into Draco, even though he was turning his face. Their lips were a mere hair's breadth apart.

"Leave me alone," Draco spat.

"But you like this," Harry grinned, pressing himself against Draco, pinning him to the wall, thrusting his hips into Draco. The other boy's breath hitched.

"Ron's my best friend. You're not. You're something else. Something better," Harry whispered and then closed the distance and kissed Draco, forcing his tongue past the initially unwilling lips.

As Draco's body relaxed and Harry let his hands go to explore the soft skin under his robes, Harry knew they had officially made up. Draco's tongue met Harry's and his hands slipped down to grip Harry's rear, pushing his hips more firmly against his. Harry rode Draco a bit higher up the wall, holding him up as he thrust his erection against Draco's, pulling up cloth so naked flesh could meet naked flesh. He spent a few heated moments thrusting against Draco before the other boy moaned long and low, coming violently a few moments before Harry did, biting Draco's shoulder as he did so.

"This weekend. Behind the greenhouses," Draco whispered.

"Agreed," Harry whispered back.

Harry walked up the stairs to the Astronomy Tower after dinner. Hermione walked beside him, reading while she was walking. Neville was shuffling along with them.

Ron, however, was slumping behind them all, looking dejected.

"I still can't believe Slytherin won the Quidditch Cup," Ron moaned.

"They had a strong team," Harry reasoned, trying not to sound sore about it.

"If you hadn't been kidnapped, we wouldn't have lost that second game to Ravenclaw," Ron said darkly.

"Well, Draco made a lot of sacrifices to win--even the Seeker position. He deserves it, I suppose," Harry said. Draco had been rather insufferable lately about his win. Harry had an urge to shove Draco's smirking face into a bowl of porridge every morning for the past week.

"'Draco'?" Ron asked.

"Er, Malfoy."

"We could have beaten them in the first game, if that insufferable prat hadn't tried to ram you in mid-air," Ron said.

"Harry's been very distracted with other things, I expect," Hermione said, sounding bemused. Harry scowled at her.

"I think we need new Beaters," Harry said. "Fancy trying out, Neville?"

"Oh no. I gave up on brooms in first year," Neville said, rubbing his wrist ruefully.

"Class is about to start," Hermione said, snapping her book shut and hurrying into the Astronomy classroom to take her seat. Professor Sinistra was just beginning the class. Harry glanced over at Draco as he took his seat. Draco smirked at him. Harry rolled his eyes and turned his attention to the class.

"Good evening, class," Professor Sinistra said. "We are very close to May Day and shall be studying the astronomical signs attached to this holiday. Can anyone tell me what ancient Celtic sabbat May Day represents?"

Hermione thrust her arm into the air, bouncing slightly with eagerness. Ron was already rolling his eyes. Professor Sinistra called on her with a frown, since no one else was volunteering.

"It's called Beltane. It is the second most important Pagan sabbat, considered diametrically opposite of Samhain. The name Beltane can either be translated to 'Shining Fire' or 'Beli's Fire', which could be a reference to the ancient Celtic god. The Welsh name is unhelpful in this matter, since the Welsh name Calan Mai simply means 'First of May'. Now, on the Coligny calendar, the name Giamonios is equally unhelpful since it translates to 'End of Winter'," Hermione said. Harry decided that she and Ron were definitely not snogging enough.

"Thank you for the etymology lesson, Miss Granger," Professor Sinistra said with scowl, bringing up a slide showing a phase of the moon. Harry always got the impression Sinistra never liked Hermione much, though she never did anything other than scowl at her. Harry suddenly realized she hadn't awarded Hermione any points for that. Professor Sinistra never gave Hermione any points.

Professor Sinistra began to speak. "We shall discuss the history of the sabbat before going into the astronomical signs attached to it. Beltane is predominantly a sabbat celebrating growth and life. Like Samhain, the veil to the Otherworld is believed to be thin at this time of year. The sabbat ushers in the summer, and the May Pole was used to celebrate the fertility of both the earth and of mankind. It is a holiday with a deep meaning of love to it. In mythological cycles, gods arrive to the land on this holiday. Epic battles are fought over love."

Harry and most of the other boys were scoffing. Hermione and most of the other girls in the class looked enraptured. All of the boys looked quite bored. Harry saw Draco finish scribbling something down, fold it, and then enchant it to flutter to Harry's desk. Harry opened it up and had to bite his tongue to prevent from laughing. Drawn on it was a giant penis sticking out of the ground with stick figures dancing around it with ribbons. The caption on it read, "She forgot to mention the holiday is all about sex and that the May Pole is a PHALLIC SYMBOL!"

Harry was choking on his laughter and hid the paper. Draco was still smirking at him from where he sat with Zabini. Hermione was giving him a reproachful glare as he had to put his face down to cover the laughter and the blush.

Harry was trying desperately to stifle his laughter. He had to keep his head down for quite sometime to recover himself. He felt Hermione poking him and he looked over at her.

"Mr. Potter, are we interrupting your evening nap?"

Harry lifted his head from the desk, going even redder in the face as Professor Sinistra

glared at him. "Five points from Gryffindor. Pay attention," she snapped.

Harry ignored Draco's smirk and returned to listening to the lesson.

"Now, you should all note that tomorrow is April Thirtieth," Professor Sinistra went on to say. "We are going a small trip in the evening to visit the celebrated Seer, Cassandra Vlabatsky's British observatory. On top of being a gifted Seer, she is also a celebrated Astronomer and I'm sure you've noted I use her books as much as Professor Trelawney does for Divination. I expect you to treat this great lady with the respect she deserves. Astronomy and Divination go hand in hand."

Harry nodded, remembering Sirius telling him that a few members of the Order were going to be there, just in case.

"Just as long as she doesn't go on about tea leaves," Ron muttered loud enough for Harry. Hermione repressed a giggle.

And Harry just smiled at Draco.

Interlude Eight:

Contessa wiped at her face angrily after cutting the onions. She hated cutting onions because they forced her to cry. She dropped the chopped onions into the frying pan, since the butter was sufficiently melted. She moved to the beef stock, making sure it was simmering before turning back to the frying onions. Making French onion soup was such a headache and she could never get it as good as Dobby's had been.

Black was talking, as loudly as ever, as he walked down the stairs. "Well, we could always--"

"Shh, Sirius. She might hear you," Lupin said, cutting him off.

Contessa rolled her eyes. Did they think she was an idiot? Did they think she couldn't hear them shagging in their room like the animals they both were? Especially since they seemed to do it all the bloody time. Black was loud about waking up in the morning, for the love of little poisoned apples.

"Why is Morpheus coming to dinner?" Black asked.

"No doubt to try and reassure himself that Bill is still alive by talking to Contessa. Bill is his best friend," Lupin answered. They moved past the kitchen and to the sitting room.

Morpheus. Victor Morpheus.

Contessa bit her lip and stabbed at the London broil she was making, seasoning it with an angry scowl. She had had a crush on him since she was twelve years old. He never once noticed her or wished to initiate conversation with her--until Bill went missing. Morpheus was always so calm, so mysterious, so handsome. She hated him for it now. He could at least have the decency to be a little uglier.

Contessa shoved the London broil into the oven and then stirred the onions a bit more, adding them to the simmering broth, seasoning it, and then covering it. She looked around the kitchen and found her recipe book. She expected that she had better ask Black what he would like for a side dish and dessert, since he would no doubt whinge should she not make it to his specifications. She hated having to cater to his whims. She hated this house. She hated having to be some sort of human house elf.

She grabbed the recipe book and stomped to the sitting room. "Now, what do you--" she began and then cut herself off to sigh.

Black had jumped back from Lupin, as he had just quite obviously been kissing him. Lupin adjusted his robes that had been partially opened and gave Contessa the most forced smile she had ever seen. Teenagers. You'd think they were teenagers, the way they acted lately.

"Yes, Contessa?" Lupin asked smoothly while Black glared at her.

"Side dishes. Dessert. What do you want?" she demanded.

"Potatoes au gratin," Black said sullenly.

"A chocolate cake," Lupin added.

"Fine. Would you like that with or without the impending heart attack you're going to give yourself when you hit forty?" Contessa asked Lupin.

"With, please," he responded blithely. "We all have to die from something."

Comments like that made her want to strangle him in his sleep, only they locked their bedroom door at night and she didn't have her wand.

"Morpheus is going to be here in an hour. You'd better hurry with dinner," Black told her. "So why don't you go bake something?"

"Trust me, the last thing I want to see is you shagging each other like the rutting canines you are," Contessa said, curling a lip in disgust and sweeping out of the room. Unfortunately, the effect of her sweeping out was ruined when she tripped over one of the endtables.

Black and Lupin were laughing, though Lupin was obviously trying to repress it. She shot them as evil a glare as possible. It only made Black laugh harder.

"I can tell you're Tonks's cousin!" Black called out to her. "Next time you put your nose in the air, you might want to consider looking where you're going first."

Lupin had covered his mouth and was looking at Black. Black continued to speak. "Did I ever tell you about the time when Bellatrix was so busy glaring at me when we were kids that she walked straight into a wall? It was great."

"I hate you!" she huffed.

"We have got to get you some new material for your retorts," Sirius sighed.

She stormed into the kitchen, picturing Black and Lupin being drawn and quartered. She cut some potatoes and pictured a few more interesting ways for them to die before completing the potatoes au gratin. She got out the ingredients for the cake, checked on the food, and then stomped up to her room to get ready. She wasn't going to be dressed in house robes in front of Victor Morpheus.

She bathed and found a nice black robe buried in her things. She glared at the mirror while applying her make-up. She absently touched her shorn hair, mentally bemoaning how Snape had set it on fire. It was ruined now, at least until it re-grew. He had burned it with magic and no magic could restore it. Morpheus was going to see her like this. She tied what little length she had back and stormed out to mix the cake. She wished Snape would die horribly, too, for burning her hair.

Black came in and sampled the food before noticing the death glare she was giving him. He smiled at her. Why was no one ever intimidated by her glares?

"So . . . you're all dressed up. You don't like this Morpheus bloke, do you?" Black asked her, grinning.

"I hope Lupin eats you during one of his transformations."

Black's smile grew wider. "You do like him, then," he said.

"You should go wash Lupin's fleas off of you. Why don't you nance up to the shower and leave me alone?"

"Have I ever told you that you're just like the little sister I never had and definitely never wanted?" he asked and finally left, looking amused. Contessa imagined him suffering from an Entrail Expelling Curse to pass the time.

She fussed over the food until she heard the doorbell ring. She let Lupin and Black answer it, instead setting the table. She heard them talking and then something that sounded like glass breaking. She looked up at the open doorway and saw pink smoke filtering past it and then dissipating. Morpheus appeared in the doorway a moment later, swinging around a strange, glowing charm and holding out her wand. He smiled as he walked downstairs. It was a bone-chilling smile.

"Your wand, my lady," he said politely. "We must hurry. The Dark Lord wants us to bring Lupin and Black to him immediately."

Contessa felt her blood run cold and realized she didn't really want Lupin or Black dead at all. Now, their miserable deaths were rather assured. And there was nothing she could do to stop it.

She took her wand and nodded, feeling the Devil's Snare close around her neck though the throne was nowhere to be seen.

End Interlude

Ron cornered Harry after dinner the next day. Lately, he'd been pestering Harry at every opportunity to find out who his mysterious "girlfriend" was. The more Harry disappeared on the weekends to spend time with Draco, the more Ron pestered him.

Ron finally got him alone after their shower, while he dressed for their trip to Madame Vablatsky's observatory.

Ron actually looked hurt. Harry bit his lip as he pulled on a sock.

"Why won't you tell me, Harry? Hermione knows. I thought we were best mates. Don't I deserve to know who your girlfriend is?" he asked.

Harry held up his shoes and stared at them. "I don't have a girlfriend," Harry finally said, moving to put on his shoe.

"But you said--"

"I have a boyfriend. If you want to call him that."

Ron sat down on his bed, still half-dressed. "It's Malfoy, isn't it?" he asked after a moment.

Harry winced. "Yes," he admitted. Ron was his best friend. He deserved to know.

"You're snogging Draco Malfoy?"

"Well, er, yes," Harry said, blushing.

Ron looked very uncomfortable and was looking anywhere in the room but Harry.

"That doesn't mean anything about you and me, you know," Harry said quickly, fearing Ron thought he might like him. This wasn't strictly true, however. There had been plenty of times--especially when he had problems with Draco--when he found himself thinking about Ron. Ron meant a lot to him and always had, but it was also very clear that Ron was very much into Hermione.

Ron looked only a little less uncomfortable. "Why Malfoy?"

Harry shrugged. "Various reasons. The things that have happened, I guess. He's not exactly the same. He's changed."

"So have you," Ron said.

"I never really liked girls, not really," Harry said.

"Not that. You just . . . changed. I can't even explain why. You're more confident. Stronger. You think more."

"Everybody changes," Harry said.

"Do you . . . really like him?" Ron asked, still looking disgusted. Harry wondered if it was because Ron was disgusted by the fact that he was gay, or because he had chosen to be gay with Draco.

"I . . . well, yes," Harry said, looking away and putting on his other shoe.

"Oh," Ron said, giving him a strange look.

"Look, this doesn't mean that I go into the boys' showers and--"

"I know that, Harry. I'm not stupid. You're still Harry. It's weird and I think rather disgusting, but that doesn't mean I'm blinkered about it, either," Ron said.

Harry smiled at him and held out his hand. "Still best mates?" he asked, deciding to never to tell Ron about all the times he had to use cold water in the boys' showers.

Ron hesitated and then smiled and took his hand. "Still best mates," he said.

They caught up to Hermione, Parvati, Lavender, Dean, and Neville, and walked up to the Astronomy Tower. Harry craned his neck around until he saw the Slytherins join them. Draco was walking with Nott, who was tapping out some sort of rhythm on the air with his wand. Draco looked fascinated and wasn't paying Harry any mind at the moment. Harry wondered when Draco and Nott had become friends--or at least on speaking terms--and then resolved to ask Draco at the next opportunity. He still knew so little about the Slytherins and their interactions.

Professor Sinistra was waiting for them in the middle of the room. She waved them over to an old, broken telescope near her desk. "Professor Dumbledore has been kind enough to arrange for the Portkey. If you'll each touch the telescope on the count of three, we shall all arrive at Madame Vablatsky's observatory," she said in a business-like tone.

Harry walked over to the telescope, as did everyone else.

"One," Professor Sinistra said, reaching out to touch the telescope as well. "Two. Three."

There was a jerk just behind Harry's navel, and he felt himself yanked through a blur of color and sound, finding himself in a cold, stone observatory.

There was an old woman sitting on a chair by a large telescope in the center of the room. She stared at them sightlessly, wearing a shimmering robe like the night sky. She did not react to their arrival. Someone in Harry's class whispered something as they backed away from the Portkey. Professor Sinistra's mouth opened and closed and Harry noticed she had a wand in her hand. She was trembling.

"Madame Vablatsky?" she asked. Harry pulled out his own wand but just as he did so, he heard a familiar feminine voice screech out, "Expelliarmus!"

Bellatrix.

His wand flew from his hand and he watched Madame Vablatsky slump to the ground. She was dead. He heard Professor Sinistra screaming as he searched for his wand. And then a strange pink smoke began to fill the room. He looked up and saw Ron slump to the ground. Hermione was also sliding to the ground, landing awkwardly.

Why were the Death Eaters here? How could this happen? Where were the members of the Order? Why were his eyes so heavy?

Harry tried to move, but he slipped to the ground, too weak to stand. He looked around and then finally saw his wand, lying on the ground. He tried to reach for it, but he couldn't find the energy. His eyes twisted over the pink, smoky room and fell on a white-blond-haired boy slumped on the ground, being picked up by Bellatrix Lestrange.

He felt his eyes closing; he felt all his energy draining away. He tried reaching for his wand, reaching for anything, but all he saw was a dark, hooded figure. From beneath the black cowls, red eyes glinted at him maliciously.

"Such resistance. 'Tis a pity you chose Gryffindor. You would have done well in Slytherin," Voldemort commented in his high-pitched voice, a malicious smile gleaming from beneath his hood as Harry Potter passed out.

He could hear Alice singing the words to "Firestarter" off in the distance as he passed out.

"I'm the fear addicted, a danger illustrated."

To be continued . . .

Chapter 28: Jigsaw

Chapter Twenty-Eight: The Pain You Tasted

Harry's head hurt. He could hear someone calling to him, but it took him a while to recognize the voice. It was Alice.

"Wake up, Uncle Harry! Wake up!"

When he woke up, he was still in the observatory. It was very dark. He could hear noises, but they were distant and muffled. He sat up abruptly, gasping and looking around. Godric was curled up on his chest. All the other students were still lying on the ground. Harry wondered what had happened and how Godric had got there. The last thing he remembered was Voldemort standing over him and everyone else slumping to the ground.

Harry gasped in surprise, his mind whirling as he tried to grasp what happened.

"One of your teachersss wasss a ssspy. Thisss wasss all arranged by that one Voldemort fellow that everyone keepsss talking about. I imagine he wasss trying to kill you again. Not terribly good at it, iss he?" Godric asked, sounding almost amused, even though Harry had never found anything less funny.

"Wh-what happened?" asked Harry as he sat up and Godric slid off him.

"I'm not entirely sssure."

Harry ran over to Draco. He was still breathing and looked unharmed. Ron, Hermione, and everyone else seemed fine, too -- just unconscious. Harry tried to shake Ron awake, but he only moaned and continued to sleep. Harry heard shouting outside and looked up, hearing the sound of spells being cast. Harry shook his head, feeling slightly dizzy and wondering if it was from the pink smoke.

"There wasss fighting outssside. I ekssspect you'll want to be going in that direction. Jusst follow me," Godric said in an amicable tone, slithering through a large hole that had been blasted into one of the walls.

Harry stumbled after him, taking a moment to get his bearings when he got outside. They were on some sort of rocky hill and down below, in the valley, he saw people in what appeared to be a fight that was already over. It was impossible to tell who had won. Harry saw the other side of the valley, to the hill that was twin to the one he stood on. It was dark and the moon was high. Off in the distance, Harry saw Dumbledore and Voldemort, fighting a battle that seemed somehow unreal.

Harry moved further away from the building, finding a rope tied to a rock. Harry wondered why it was there, but figured he might as well use it. He grabbed onto the rope and climbed down. Godric rode his shoulders on the way down, hissing at him to swing on the rope whenever a spell came close. When they came to the bottom, Harry sunk to his ankles in the mud of the peat marsh, looking around at the flashing chaos that spun around him. He suddenly remembered something he heard his mother whispering to him in his dreams.

Harry sucked in his breath, and began to walk forward. "We're probably going to die, you know," he said. Godric seemed unimpressed by this statement.

Harry felt disconnected from reality. Everything was happening so quickly, so suddenly. The Death Eaters and the Order of the Phoenix couldn't really be waging a pitched battle on in the peat marsh valley of Bleaklow. Everything he felt and saw seemed like it was coming through a tunnel, filtered and distant.

Harry found Contessa lying unmoving on the ground. Her face was split open from left temple to right jawline, bleeding slowly. She was covered in mud and vomit. Near her lay a headless corpse. He thought Contessa was dead, too, until she moaned. Harry gripped her arm and an almost painful connection formed between them. He saw everything she had experienced over the past few hours, right through her eyes -- all in the span of a second.

Contessa took her wand and nodded, swallowing in fear. She could feel her throat tighten, as though Devil's Snare was closing around her neck, even though her throne was nowhere to be seen. Morpheus turned from her, walking back into the hallway, where Black and Lupin lay. She followed him, staring at the two unconscious men.

"We will need to transport them outside, so that the others can meet up with us," he said in a dreamy sort of voice. Godric slithered forwards and rose up, hissing at them

and obviously preparing to strike. Instead of doing so, however, the snake instead watched her, as if waiting to see what she was going to do.

She had to make a decision. Now or never. Whose side was she really on?

She already knew the answer to that.

"Stupefy!" she screamed, pointing her wand at Morpheus's back.

The red beam of light hit him and sent him sprawling across Black and Lupin. He lay still. She pointed her wand at Black and Lupin, each in turn. "Ennervate!" she cried both times.

Godric seemed satisfied with this, and much to her surprise, slithered up her body and came to rest on her shoulders. He was watching Morpheus's prone form rather intently.

"What the hell?" Black asked, sitting up and blinking at Morpheus, who was lying across his legs.

"What . . . what happened?" Lupin asked, sitting up as well and staring up at her. He was eyeing her wand nervously. She realized she was still pointing it at him. She dropped her arm to her side and Lupin looked up to eye Godric instead of her.

"He's the spy. I thought it was Snape," she said, looking at Morpheus.

"What the hell is going on?" Black asked, jumping to his feet and pointing his wand at Morpheus, "Incarcerous."

Lupin studied her for a moment, glancing again at the wand in her hand with trepidation. She dropped her gaze from his face and he looked away to point his wand at Morpheus. "We need answers. Ennervate!"

Morpheus began to stir, struggling weakly as Black kicked him over. Both Black and Lupin had their wands pointed at them. His dark eyes were wide, his breathing heavy, and his expression both frightened and confused. It suddenly clicked what that expression meant. She had seen it before. It was generally the expression one had when recovering from the Imperius Curse.

"I'm not your enemy," he said, eyeing Black with trepidation.

"Really? Could have fooled me," Sirius growled, little red sparks shooting out of his wand.

"What are you after, Victor?" Lupin asked coolly.

"I was under the Imperius Curse! I swear, I'm not your enemy," he said, his eyes shifting from Black to Lupin in obvious worry.

"Who was it, Morpheus?" Contessa asked. She couldn't trust a couple of former Gryffindors to get to the bottom of this, especially since Sirius looked about ready to hex him.

Morpheus's eyes fell on her. "Sinistra," he choked.

Contessa nodded. It all made perfect sense. It had been Sinistra who had gathered all the information on Harry from Morpheus and her other sources. It had to have been someone long in Dumbledore's employ, someone who he would have trusted. It was Sinistra who was working for Voldemort, not Morpheus or Snape. Someone who wasn't in the Order of the Phoenix, because Dumbledore was far too clever not to use Legilimency on any member he inducted.

"Sinistra? Vesta Sinistra?" Lupin asked, his brows furrowing

"You have to believe me!" Morpheus protested, looking frantic. "Listen to me, there's a field trip she planned. I overheard her. She planned it with . . . You-Know-Who -- "

"What the hell is this all about?" Black demanded.

"He was under the Imperius Curse. Did you need a quick refresher course on Unforgivable Curses?" asked Contessa. Black's eyes narrowed at her.

"What field trip?" asked Lupin.

"This is insane, how can we trust anything he says?" Black demanded, scowling.

Contessa turned back to Morpheus. "Go on," she urged.

"Sinistra is taking the students to Madame Vablatsky's British observatory. The Death Eaters are planning an attack!" Morpheus said, struggling against his bonds. He looked more than confused, he looked terrified.

"Sinistra is a Hogwarts professor!" Sirius said. "Dumbledore wouldn't -- "

"Sinistra is a pure-blood and hates Muggles. We have to go to the observatory," Contessa said. "He's not lying. I've seen what people look like when they come out from under the Imperius Curse and he had that same expression. Cast Legilimency on him, if you like."

Lupin pointed his wand at Morpheus and said, "Legilimens!" Morpheus blinked and made a gurgling noise. A few moments passed and then Lupin lifted his wand and looked up at Sirius. "He's telling the truth."

"We've got to go save Harry!" Sirius cried.

Lupin nodded and stowed his wand. "I know where the Observatory is," he said.

"We can't Disapparate from in here, we're going to have to get outside," Sirius said. Trust a Gryffindor to state the obvious.

Contessa spoke up. "I'm coming."

"If someone would be so kind as to release me?" asked Morpheus.

"Finite," Lupin said, and the ropes around Morpheus disappeared. Lupin helped him up. Sirius was staring at Contessa thoughtfully.

"Why should we trust you?" Sirius asked her, crossing his arms. "You're still under house arrest."

"I helped you find Draco and Harry in Canada. I saved your life when Avery tried to take you. I saved both of your lives just now. Have no doubt that Voldemort wanted both of you brought in so he could kill you or hold you hostage to call out Harry. He's been trying to draw him away from Dumbledore's protection this whole bloody year. The lives of my family are on the line. I'm coming," Contessa said, crossing her arms.

"Are you sure you weren't a Hufflepuff in school?" asked Sirius. "Because you're as stubborn as a centaur."

Lupin studied her for a long moment. He sighed and then pointed his wand at the doorway. Silvery strands of unicorn hair tore away from it with a loud ripping sound. He looked back at her. "If you double-cross us, Contessa, I'll kill you myself."

Contessa nodded, trying to keep a scowl off her face.

They carefully exited the house and Lupin led them to an alleyway close by. Godric remained on Contessa's shoulders, and Sirius kept his wand trained on Morpheus. Contessa found it amusing that he trusted her more than Morpheus.

Lupin gave them the location of where to Apparate to. Contessa closed her eyes as she did so, feeling the inevitable sensation of wanting to vomit. She had never been very good at Apparition and had only barely passed the tests a couple years ago. She'd even splinched herself twice before. Contessa somehow managed to land in the observatory, but she Apparated several feet off the floor and crashed to the ground in a painful heap, cursing the wizard who invented the spell. She got to her feet and promptly vomited all over an astrolabe.

"Harry!" she heard Black cry. She looked up and he was running up next to Harry, who was lying on the floor. She looked around and found Draco nearby, who was lying on the floor as well. She knew they were both alive, but she ran to Draco's side and examined him. His breathing was even and he did not wake when she touched his face. Godric slithered off her body and over to Harry.

"We should leave them unconscious. Otherwise they'll try to get involved," Lupin said.

"Look!" cried Morpheus, pointing at one of the walls. It had a huge, gaping hole in it, the edges glowing slightly from what was obviously a very powerful Reductor Curse cast upon it.

Black and Lupin were already moving towards it and Contessa followed them. They exited from the observatory onto a rocky hill. Down below was the wide peat marsh valley and across the valley was another rocky rise. The valley was filled with wizards and witches launching spells at each other. Every recognizable member of the Order of the Phoenix and the Death Eaters was down there, trying to kill each other. Off in the distance, Voldemort and Dumbledore warred with each other, casting magic she couldn't even begin to understand. She shielded her eyes as she stumbled out, a particular bright flash of light from one of their spells near-blinding her as it lit up the night.

"Reducto!" someone screamed and Contessa opened her eyes to realize the edge of the cliff she stood on was sliding out from beneath her. She screamed and flailed, knowing that she had no purchase, no way to stop herself from dying.

Then someone grabbed her.

She felt herself grabbed by the arm and pulled back up onto the ledge so forcefully her arm threatened to pull from its socket. She lay on the ground panting, looking up to see Black frowning at her. He was sitting on the ground, breathing heavily.

"I guess that takes care of one my debts to you," he said.

Contessa heard the cracking sound of someone Disapparating and looked up to see Lupin trembling and looking queasy. "There's an Anti-Apparition Jinx covering the valley," he said, holding his stomach and grimacing. "Either that or some sort of interference."

She made no comment as Lupin and Morpheus conjured up thick ropes and wrapped them around a rock. Everyone was crouched down low, trying to avoid anyone casting spells at them. "We're going to have to climb down. I'll go down first, Sirius, you cover me. Then Morpheus, Contessa, and you go last, Sirius. We'll cover you from the bottom," Lupin said.

"Are the kids going to be safe here alone?" asked Sirius.

"As safe as anywhere else, I expect," Lupin said and then pointed his wand at the observatory. "Invisus Saeptum!"

From what Contessa remembered of the spell, it was advanced magic. She'd never been able to master it and was impressed Lupin had. An invisible wall of force sprung up around the observatory, visible only by a slight distortion in the air when the flare of the magic below lit up the area.

Black nodded and Lupin began to climb down. Both Black and Morpheus took turns making sure no one picked off Lupin as he climbed down. Morpheus climbed down a moment after Lupin. Then Black was looking at her expectantly, holding the rope.

"I can't," she whispered.

Black rolled his eyes. "Look, I know you're scared of heights, but there's no other way down. All you have to do is climb down the rope," he said impatiently.

"I'm not terribly good with climbing down ropes, either," she said, swallowing to make her mouth wet again and stowing her wand.

Black sighed and then suddenly grabbed her around the waist. "You're not much good for anything, are you?" he asked, and then grabbed the rope with his free arm, swinging them both over the side. A spell burst into the rock face beside them, causing dust and pebbles to go flying into their face, and Contessa coughed and struggled uselessly. Black forced her to grab the rope, and then slid down with an agility that rather surprised her. When they arrived safely on the ground, Black let her go and smirked a bit.

"This way!" Lupin cried, beckoning them forward. Black and Morpheus turned from her and followed him. It almost seemed they were disappearing into the darkness itself, and she could hear shouting, explosions, and incantations off in the distance. She tried to follow after a moment, but tripped over a rock and tumbled into the mud. Black, Lupin, and Morpheus were already out of sight. Contessa slipped in the mud a few more times, but then came to a crouching position. She looked up and stopped dead when she realized her mother was standing in front of her.

Bellatrix smiled, her wand pointed at Contessa's face. Contessa realized she had done a very stupid thing. She had forgotten to take her wand back out.

"You've been a very naughty girl, Contessa. You helped the filthy blood traitors, didn't you?" she asked. "The Dark Lord said you'd gone wrong. He was right, he is always right."

Contessa reached for her wand and felt the bile in her stomach rising to the back of her throat. There were quite a few things in the world that terrified her: heights, high speeds, the Dark Lord, and her mother. There was no chance she could hex someone as powerful and quick as Bellatrix Lestrange before she got hexed herself. She couldn't even find it in herself to move, staring into her mother's wild eyes. What was she doing here? She didn't belong here. She was a Healer, not an Auror.

"I brought you into this world, and I'll take you out of it. It's a mother's duty," Bellatrix mused. By the time Contessa's fingers closed on her wand, Bellatrix slashed her wand through the air and muttered an unintelligible curse. Next thing Contessa knew, she was flying through the air and then slammed into the rock face of the hills. She felt something break and distantly hoped it wasn't anything terribly important. Her face stung as though it had been cut open. Contessa reached up with her free hand and brushed the hair away from the pain, mildly surprised that her arms still worked. She had somehow managed to hang onto her wand. Her face was bleeding badly and the pain grew worse every second as dirt and hair flew into it. It was hard to see, but she vaguely registered her mother standing over her, grinning.

Contessa felt a rush of anger and hate like she never felt before. Resentment, frustration, jealousy -- her mother was everything she had tried to be and always failed miserably. Bellatrix pointed her wand at Contessa again, a nasty jeer on her once-beautiful face. Contessa raised her wand as well.

"Carnificare!" Contessa screamed, just as Bellatrix got as far as "Avada --"

Contessa watched in both fascination and surprise as the shimmer that came from her own wand passed through Bellatrix's neck just as a small green glow died at the tip of her mother's wand. Bellatrix's mouth worked soundlessly as her head slid forward and pitched onto the ground. Her body soon followed with a sickening thud.

Instead of celebrating her mother's death, Contessa threw up all over herself and blacked out, wishing she could just wake up and the whole night could turn out to be nothing but a bad dream. . . .

Harry gasped and let Contessa's arm go, staring at her in wonder. Her eyes were open now, filled with fear, pain, and confusion. She was going to die soon and she knew it. Harry wasn't going to let that happen.

"It's a very basic Healing Charm," Professor Flitwick had always told his class this past year. They had learned it early in this past year, but Harry had never been very good at it. Healers could use it to great effect, but Professor Flitwick always told him anyone could use it save someone's life.

"Medicus Injurius," Harry said, pointing his wand at Contessa's face. Her face seemed to stop bleeding, but whatever was wrong with her would have to be treated by a true Healer.

"Just don't move, they'll think you're dead," he whispered to her. She moaned a little in response, her eyes fluttering shut.

Harry turned around, facing the battle once again. He looked up and saw flashes of light from the hill that Dumbledore and Voldemort fought on. He had to get there. He had to finish this. He drew in a deep breath and ran forward, trying to make sure he didn't trip over anything in the dark. It was hard to see and the flashes of light from Voldemort's and Dumbledore's battle were his only illumination. He didn't cast a light

spell, because that would make him far too easy a target. He hoped that Sirius and Lupin were still safe, that everyone was safe.

Harry stopped dead when he found Julian. How had he gotten there? How did he even know to come here? Why had he come? Harry went to ask him all these questions until he noticed the man was leaning against a rock, bleeding badly. His wizened face was gaunt and haggard, his expression twisted up in pain. His long white hair was stained with both blood and mud. Nearby, Lucius Malfoy and Rodolphus Lestrage were in a standoff, both of their wands pressed against the others throat, the two wizards facing each other. Lucius wore a twisted snarl on face, but Rodolphus was leering nastily at him. Neither man was moving much and no one else was around. Harry saw Lucius's eyes flicker to him in an instant before going back to glaring hatefully at his cousin. Rodolphus was leering at Lucius.

Before Harry could do anything, Godric lunged forward lightning fast and he spat venom into Rodolphus's face, causing the other man to reel back, his wand jerking up as he howled in pain.

"Avada Kedavra!" Lucius cried just as quickly as Godric had lunged. A rushing green light hit Rodolphus as he hit the ground. He lay very still. Lucius sneered and turned to Harry with his wand raised, but Godric rose up between them, hissing violently at Lucius.

Lucius glanced at Godric in distaste and dropped his wand to his side. Lucius turned from the snake and grabbed Julian by the arm, tugging him behind the rock for cover. Harry followed him, crouching beside the two men.

"Whatever you're planning, Lucius, don't do it," Julian said. His breathing was ragged and uneven.

Lucius's eyes shifted from his father to Harry as he licked his lips. "The filthy half-blood will pay for his deception," Lucius said. It took Harry a moment to realize Lucius was not speaking of him as the man's gaze shifted up to the hill where Voldemort and Dumbledore fought.

"Don't be an idiot, boy," Julian told his son, his voice taking on a sort of command to it that Harry never heard before. "Go find your wife. Get out of here. What will be settled will be settled. One way or another, it will all end tonight."

"Where is Draco?" Lucius asked, turning his cold gaze on Harry.

"Safe and unconscious," Harry said.

"He is not for you to take," said Julian. "He is a man now. Take your wife and go."

"I have to find her first," Lucius said, eyeing his father. "Tell me where she is. I lost her when Rodolphus attacked."

Julian's breath grew even more ragged and then he pointed towards a pair of wizards dueling. "Past them. She is trying to find a place to hide," he said.

Lucius looked at Julian for a moment and Harry turned his face, embarrassed by the obvious father and son moment. Lucius squeezed the other man's arm. "It was . . . good to see you again," Lucius said, and then turned and disappeared into the fight.

The old man watched his son leave, his expression unreadable. Harry felt sadness suddenly emanate from Julian. Sadness, regret, loss, fear . . .

"Julian," Harry said, and grabbed the man's arm before he thought better of it. As with Contessa, the past few hours of Julian's life flashed before Harry's eyes.

Julian was sitting out on his porch when Severus Snape and Albus Dumbledore appeared in the middle of his front yard, holding onto what looked like a ball of multi-colored yarn. He managed to hide most of his surprise as Dumbledore pocketed the yarn and looked up at him.

"Aurelius Malfoy. You are looking well," Dumbledore said graciously, smiling in that insufferable manner of his.

"I prefer to go by Julian these days, Albus," he said, leaning back and narrowing his eyes at Severus. Julian was quite amazed that Severus had thrown his lot in with Dumbledore, of all people.

"Of course, of course. May we come in?" Dumbledore asked.

Julian stood up stiffly and waved his wand at the door, causing it to open. "Might as well," he said, stalking inside. Dumbledore and Severus followed.

"Would you like some tea?" Julian asked in a cool tone, leading them into his kitchen and motioning them to seats.

"Yes, that would be nice," Dumbledore said. Severus nodded quickly, his gaze darting all over the kitchen as though he expected something to jump out and bite him. He had always been jumpy, even as a child.

Julian found his tea service and tapped the kettle, which immediately filled with tea and whistled a little. He set the tray on the kitchen table and sat down across from Dumbledore, watching as the older man dropped spoonfuls of sugar into his tea. Severus drank it plain, as he always had.

"I assume you have some inkling of what's going on," Dumbledore said after a few sips of tea.

Julian crossed his arms, giving Dumbledore his coldest expression. "Yes," he answered.

"I have a spy in my school. It took Severus some time to find out who she was, but he found out only last night," Dumbledore said.

"She?"

"Yes. Vesta Sinistra. Didn't you know?" Dumbledore asked in a polite tone.

Julian shook his head. "I knew a lot of the Death Eaters, Albus, but not all. No one knew them all. You should know that."

"She has arranged for a field trip to take Harry Potter's class to Madam Vablatsky's observatory. She did this with all the other sixth and seventh year students, so I didn't think anything of it. But now I know what Voldemort intends to do."

"He'll have back-up plans, Albus. He won't risk everything on this one venture, though I doubt he'll trust anyone else to kill Harry but himself at this point."

"I'm well aware of that. What sort of back-up plans do you think he would have? You knew Voldemort better than any other man or woman alive."

"He's normally rather thorough. Anyone and everything Harry's close to will be attacked. He'll want an alternate way to draw the boy out, should his attempt fail."

Dumbledore nodded, and Julian wondered why the older man even bothered. Dumbledore was clever. He no doubt knew all this. Dumbledore had to have some other reason for coming all the way to Canada to find him.

"The Dark Lord knows that Potter has . . . an affection for Draco," Severus suddenly said, his eyes boring into Julian's face.

Julian swallowed, feeling a void open inside his stomach. Draco was most certainly marked for death now.

"Lucius has been running a counter campaign against the Dark Lord ever since his arrest and the discovery that the Dark Lord is a half-blood. He has been attempting to ruin the Dark Lord's credibility within certain pure-blood circles and is planning on leaving the country after that. I suspect the Dark Lord is aware of this as well. I was told last night that I was expected to come to the observatory tonight and kill Lucius myself."

"No doubt to test your own loyalty," Julian said softly. "Everything's a test with him. Everything. He trusts no one. He never did."

"This involves your family, Julian. Voldemort will want all of them dead and you're certain to be next since he's no doubt heard that you're still alive by now,"
Dumbledore told him. Julian had never seen the man look so serious in all his life.

Julian felt his face twitch, despite himself. "I left for a reason."

"Yes, I know."

Julian silently collected the tea tray and the empty cups, tapping on them with his wand so they immediately cleaned themselves and then putting it away, looking outside the window to the expanse of forest and mountain outside.

"I'll come with you, Dumbledore," he said. He cast a glance behind him and noticed Dumbledore was smiling at him. Julian went to fetch his cloak.

Dumbledore created another Portkey out of an old teacup and they arrived inside his office at Hogwarts. Julian was impressed. In the space of an hour, Dumbledore had made two Portkeys halfway across the globe. The man hadn't even broken a sweat, while most people would be dead from the energy expenditure.

Dumbledore and Severus then left him to communicate to the other members of the

Order of the Phoenix. Julian waited for a while, staring at the portraits, most of whom stared back without saying anything, except for Phineas Nigellus -- who snidely asked Julian how his family was doing. Julian briefly considered burning Phineas's portrait, but since Dumbledore reentered his office at that moment, Julian settled for ignoring him. Severus came in a moment later.

"I cannot reach Black or Lupin," Severus said to Dumbledore.

"We still have a little time," Dumbledore said, glancing at a clock. "We can spare someone to go check on them."

"I think Morpheus is having dinner with them. I'll contact him," Severus said and then swept out again. When he returned a few minutes later, he was frowning. "Morpheus said they're fine, but they had too much to drink tonight."

Dumbledore's brows creased at this, but the clock began to chime as it struck seven o'clock. "We need to go," he sighed. "Are you ready?"

Severus jerked his head, just as Julian nodded. Dumbledore picked up a rubber duck he had lying on his desk. Julian stared at it in bewilderment until Dumbledore said, "Portus."

Julian reached out and touched the Portkey, ignoring the yank behind his navel as he stumbled into a cold, stone observatory. He blinked and spent a moment gaining his bearings and pulling out his wand.

"Stupefy!" Dumbledore cried, pointing his wand at a hooded man standing over the prone form of Harry Potter and preparing to cast a spell on him.

"Avada Kedav -- " Tom began before Dumbledore's bolt of red light shot into him, interrupting his spell. Tom spun and his hood fell back, revealing a pale, almost serpentine face with glowing red malicious eyes.

Spells and hexes were bouncing all over the room, and Dumbledore was obviously trying to protect the children lying unconscious on the ground. Julian's eyes fell on a white-blond head and saw his own grandson lying there. Julian pulled out his wand and blasted a hole into the wall.

"Take the fight out of here!" Dumbledore roared as more of his people Apparated in to fight the Death Eaters that were appearing. Tom was trying to cast another spell on Harry, when Dumbledore got him square in the chest with a Stunner and he flew

backwards. Dumbledore followed up with another Stunner that sent Tom flying through the exit Julian had made. Dumbledore disappeared after him with a whirl of his blue cloak. Julian ran outside, praying he could find Lucius and stop him before he got in over his head.

Dumbledore's people were quickly herding the Death Eaters out with spells and doing their best to protect the children. It didn't take long before they were all forced out. As Julian ran outside, he realized he was standing on one side of the rocky hills that surrounded the valley below. Tom and Dumbledore had already taken their fight to the other side. The Death Eaters tried to Apparate to Tom's aid, but many were repelled to the valley below by Dumbledore's magic. The Death Eaters were soon joined by Apparating members of Dumbledore's Order.

"Lucius!" Julian cried, Apparating down to the valley below, his feet sinking to the ankles in the mud. He fended off a few spells directed at him and then watched as Dumbledore cast an Anti-Apparition Jinx that covered the valley, preventing anymore of the Death Eaters from getting into the valley. Julian was duly impressed.

He heard someone shout a Killing Curse in his direction and spun to avoid it, slinging off a Beheading Charm off in the direction of the Death Eater. He was soon lost to the fighting, the shouting of oaths, curses, profanities, hexes, and jinxes. He tried calling Lucius's name several times, but could not find his son. Julian tried to find Lucius with his Kything abilities, but was too distracted by trying to stay alive.

Julian heard another Killing Curse screamed at him by a familiar voice and dodged behind a rock to avoid it. There was a flash and a cry of, "Reducto!"

Julian tried to move away, but he was too old and slow. Shards of the rock exploded towards him and he felt his own flesh tear and bleed and bones break as his torso was ripped open by the rubble. He fell back with a cry and looked up, realizing his nephew Rodolphus was leering over him, his wand out and audibly growling like an animal. Whatever time Rodolphus had spent in Azkaban had apparently unhinged him more than he had been prior to that.

"Rodolphus, stop this," Julian croaked out, clutching his torso. He knew he had come here to die, but had hoped it wouldn't be like this. He felt weak and light-headed, too weak to even lift his wand in defense.

"Stupefy!"

Rodolphus stumbled back as a Stunner whizzed past him. Julian looked up and

realized that Lucius had finally found him. There was quick movement between the two younger men and a flash of spells being directed at the other. When Julian finally made out what was going on, the two men were standing in front of each other, their wands pointed at the other's throat, both waiting to see what the other would do as they glared into the other's eyes.

Julian gasped loudly, jerking his arm out of Harry's grasp. He stared at Harry with wide blue eyes. "What are you?" he asked in a throaty whisper. "How can you use your Kything power like that?"

"I . . . don't know," Harry said, taking a step back.

"You have to get out of here. You don't belong here," Julian said.

"I belong up there," Harry said, looking up at the hill that Voldemort and Dumbledore still fought on.

"Get out of here, Harry. Take my grandson and get to safety."

"It's my destiny, isn't it? My fate?"

"Fate is what you make it. Destiny is pure rubbish. Get out of here, Harry," Julian croaked. Blood poured out of his wounds and between his fingers, staining his robes. Harry pointed his wand at Julian's torso.

"Medicus Injurius," he said.

Julian smiled and the flow of his blood seemed to slow. "It won't work, Harry. But thank you for trying," he whispered.

"You're not going to die," Harry said lamely, reaching out to touch him, but then pulling back before he did, not wanting to be inside Julian's head again.

"The problem with being alive is that you have to die sometime."

Harry looked up at the rock face. He wasn't sure if he could climb it, but he was going to try anyway. "I have to get up there," he said. It had to end, and it would end tonight,

one way or the other. Neither could live while the other survived.

"Harry, no," Julian said as Harry moved away from him, too quick for the weakening Julian to reach out and grab him.

Godric watched Harry with a detached interest, tilting his head slightly. "You'll likely die if you go up there," he said.

"I know," Harry told him. "But I have to do it."

"Then I'll watccch your back. Do what you need to do, massster," Godric said, slithering away.

Harry grabbed onto a rock and began to pull himself upwards, feeling sick with anticipation and dread. He ignored the feeling of his hands and arms being scraped up by the rock and continued to climb. Alice was singing inside Harry's head again, her childish voice almost mocking in tone.

"I'm the pain you tasted, well intoxicated."

To be concluded. . . .

Chapter 29: Jigsaw

Chapter Twenty-Nine: The Battle of Beltane

Interlude Nine:

Draco had a pounding headache when he woke up. He came to his feet after a moment, looking around the observatory. Madam Vablatsky was lying face down on the floor, looking rather dead. The other students seemed to be waking up. As Draco looked around, he saw a giant gaping hole in one of the walls. There was shouting outside, and flashes of light in the night.

"Wh-what happened?" Weasley asked, looking around the room as most of the students came to their feet, looking bewildered.

"Where's Harry?" Granger asked.

Draco shifted his gaze, but there was no sign of Harry anywhere. He felt panic rising in his chest, but forced it down. They had been attacked by Death Eaters, but there were no Death Eaters now. And Harry was gone.

"Oh no!" Longbottom cried, rushing past Draco and to a giant hole in the wall. When he got there, he seemed to stop dead in the air and bounce back for some reason. Draco watched in fascination as the boy put his hand up in the air, but couldn't seem to move through the hole.

"It's an invisible wall. I know just the thing," Granger said in that insufferable know-it-all tone of hers that made Draco want to choke her with her own hair. She pointed her wand at the hole. "Finite Incantatem!"

There was an audible popping noise and then Longbottom's hand finally went through the hole. He moved outside after a moment. All the Gryffindors--Weasley, Granger, Patil, and Thomas--followed. Most of the Slytherins hung back warily.

Draco exchanged a glance with Blaise and they headed out as well. To his surprise, Theodore followed. The flashing lights nearly blinded Draco at first, but when his eyes adjusted, he realized that they were on top of a hill, and there was a peat marsh

valley below, filled with wizards fighting. When Draco looked across the valley, he thought he saw the Dark Lord battling with Dumbledore on the other hill. His blood ran cold.

"I think we should go inside," Draco said quickly, moving back into the observatory, away from the insanity of the battle. He tried not to wonder if his father and mother were out there. Blaise and Theodore had also come back in. Millicent and Pansy were still inside, both looking frightened.

"What's going on?" Pansy asked.

Draco opened his mouth to tell her they were in a lot of trouble when Rabastan Lestranger, Desiree Beauregard, Willie Fort, and Bill Weasley did it for him. Ron Weasley was screaming at his brother, and Draco dove for cover under a table when Willie started shooting hexes inside the building. He caught a glimpse of Rabastan grabbing Patil and dragging her outside. Draco didn't know Rabastan very well, but what he did know had been made very explicit by his father--don't touch him, don't look at him, don't go near him, and never, ever, be caught alone with him.

All the Slytherins were hiding and all the Gryffindors were fighting. Draco expected there was some deep philosophical meaning behind this, but he was too busy trying to sink into the shadows underneath the table he found. They were looking for him.

"Come on out, Draco!" Willie giggled. "The Dark Lord wants to talk to you!"

Draco shuddered, watching Weasley duel with his older brother for a moment. Bill Weasley seemed to be under the Imperius Curse. Draco pressed himself against the wall, clutching his wand and praying to a God he didn't believe in. He could hear Granger and Thomas exchanging hexes with Beauregard. He didn't even want to think about what Rabastan was doing to Patil. He couldn't hear Longbottom at all and just assumed the fat little idiot had got himself killed already.

He heard Pansy scream and Millicent cry out a hex. Draco closed his eyes, wondering if Theodore would be helping the other Death Eaters or not. There was nothing Draco could do now. He had always known something like this was bound to happen, but it didn't change how frightened he felt.

Then, to make matters worse, the table he was hiding under levitated upwards and then crashed to the side, exposing him. He swore, opening his eyes and finding Desiree Beauregard staring down at him with a slight sneer on her face. Draco swallowed, noticing a resemblance between her that girl from Beauxbatons who was

dating the oldest Weasley. Then it clicked on how he could use this to his advantage.

"The Dark Lord has some unfinished business with you, Malfoy," she said coolly.

Draco feigned the dumbest look he could put on his face, trying to channel images of Longbottom and Weasley for reference. He let himself smile a little and jerk towards the woman. "Who cares about him? I'm the richest man in the world, I could buy you anything you ever wanted," he said, trying to act as lovesick as he could and moving closer to her.

Beauregard smiled a bit at him and dropped her wand to her side. "Apparently not so much of a poofster, then," she said, and laughed.

"Serpensortia!" Draco screamed. A dozen cobras sprang out of his wand, all hissing and landing on Beauregard. She screamed as they sank their fangs into her white flesh and collapsed to the ground, struggling against the snakes

Well, that took care of that.

Draco looked around and realized Theodore Nott was standing over Willie Fort's prone body. Pansy's arm was bleeding and Blaise was still hiding under a giant telescope. Millicent was staring at Willie in horror.

"Why--" Draco croaked at Theodore and then cleared his throat. "Why did you fight them?"

Theodore studied Draco for a moment, his dark eyes very intent. "Tracey. They hurt Tracey," he said and then turned his face, working his jaw. It suddenly occurred to Draco that he should have paid more attention to the fact that Tracey and Theodore had gotten very close this past year. When she had spoke of her beliefs, Theodore had listened.

Draco turned around and realized Granger was unconscious, but Weasley had been successful against his brother. The older Weasley was lying on the ground, his temple bleeding, but still breathing. Thomas was holding Granger up, slapping at her face. Weasley just leaned against the wall, breathing heavily and looking stunned.

"Where's Parvati and the Lestrangle?" Longbottom asked, limping past Draco. His right leg was badly torn and bleeding. Draco was surprised to see he was still standing.

Draco looked around, trying his best to listen for anything other than the sound of Blaise crying--God, it wasn't that bad, Draco thought--and almost thought he heard feminine screaming from outside. Longbottom must have heard it first, because he surged out of the door, limp and all. Weasley's eyes opened wide and he followed, as did Thomas, who dropped Granger's rather slimy body to rush outside. Confident they would be hexed before he would be, Draco followed them, Theodore right behind him.

He saw a red flash of light and Thomas skidded back onto the ground. Draco heard more shouting as he moved to the doorway and peeked outside to see Lycaon lunging at Neville, his fists slamming into the fat boy's face, knocking him over. The arrival of the werewolf did not mean anything good, of that Draco was certain. Lycaon turned, his movements animalistic despite the fact that it wasn't a full moon. Draco gasped and stumbled back as the man tackled him, clawing at his skin with his nails and roughly knocking Draco's wand from his hand. Weasley fired a Stunner off at Lycaon, but the werewolf dodged. Draco had a brief glimpse of Patil pinned to the wall of the observatory, and Rabastan pointing his wand at Weasley.

The fact that Draco now knew exactly who Lycaon was working for and the knowledge of how he got the doppelgrass did nothing to comfort him as the man's fist slammed into his stomach and he saw stars--almost literally--when his head cracked against a rock. He could hear Theodore shouting spells, and Weasley's voice had joined him, but Lycaon moved too fast for them. Draco was suddenly wishing the rest of his housemates were a little braver, and would come out and help him. Rabastan had seen the commotion by now and fired a Binding Charm off at Patil before he started to move towards the other students. Lycaon was making off with Draco, despite his struggling.

"Incurrero!" Draco heard a familiar voice--Weasley's--scream out a Trip Jinx at Lycaon and realized the werewolf was far too close to the cliff edge. Close enough that they were both pitching forward. Lycaon let Draco go and tried to twist around to grab some purchase, but all he managed to do was knock his hand into Draco's chin. Draco screamed as loud as he could, closing his eyes and wondering if it would hurt much when he landed.

"Wingardium Leviosa!" Theodore screamed and Draco felt his body lift up on the wind as Lycaon continued to fall, a look of surprise on his face. Draco avoided watching Lycaon crash into the ground, but couldn't shut off his ears to prevent himself from hearing the sickening thud of his landing.

He heard Rabastan slinging curses and opened his eyes to see Theodore fall back.

Weasley grabbed Theodore before he fell off the cliff and Draco was starting to sink lower to the ground as Longbottom gave a cry, his wounded leg giving out as he tried to avoid a hex aimed at him. Rabastan pointed his wand at Draco and his face twisted up in malice as he screamed out, "Stupe--"

"Stupefy! Stupefy! Stupefy! Stupefy! Stupefy!" Longbottom screamed, pointing his wand at Rabastan and red bolt after red bolt struck him in the chest, sending the older man whirling backwards, a look of surprise in his face. "Stupefy! Stupefy! Stupefy!"

Draco opened his eyes and looked up, seeing Weasley pointing his wand at him. "Carpe Retractum!" he said, and Draco's body was pulled towards the cliff. Weasley helped him back onto ground.

Draco looked back at Longbottom, who had tears streaking down his face. His wand was still pointed at Rabastan, even though the man was lying quite still on the ground. "I think I killed him," Longbottom said shakily.

Draco moved over to Rabastan warily. Weasley walked in front of him, his wand pointed at the man. Patil was screaming and twisting under her bonds, cursing in a most unladylike manner. Rabastan was indeed dead, his large blue eyes wide and staring blankly at the sky above. His mouth was slightly open. Draco suddenly felt very weak and small.

Longbottom moaned again, "I killed him." He looked somewhere between satisfied and horrified.

Weasley undid Patil's bonds, then looked around. "We better get them inside and try to heal their wounds. If we can get Hermione to wake up, she's pretty good at things like that," he said.

Draco looked around and took in his surroundings again, wondering what was happening with his family and with Harry. The moon was high in the sky, and it had to be past midnight. Draco suddenly remembered Sinistra's last class and the lesson on Beltane. This was a day of life? It felt like a day of death to him.

"Malfoy, c'mon, get Nott," Weasley said while he helped Longbottom stand.

Draco swallowed and glanced at the other hill across the valley. He did a double take when he saw someone climbing up the side, to where the Dark Lord and Dumbledore were still locked in battle.

It was Harry.

End Interlude

Harry kept climbing, though his arms were bleeding now. He could hear shouting and spell-slinging coming from all directions. He could feel the hate, the anger, the fear, and the frustration permeating from every person on the battlefield. Yet, Harry felt disconnected, like he wasn't even there. It was all a dream. People weren't really fighting to the death all around him, were they? Voldemort and Dumbledore weren't dueling on a hill he was climbing up. He wasn't really hearing the sounds of people trying to kill each other. It was dark. Dark and unreal.

The last time Harry had been in a battle, he had been angry--so angry he could have killed everyone in sight if he'd let himself. Tonight, he felt like he was already dead. He didn't have any emotions.

Somehow, he managed to reach the top. Harry pulled himself over the lip of the edge and surveyed his surroundings, staying crouched low to the ground. He remembered to pull out his wand when he thought back to Contessa's mistake.

The sound suddenly went out all around Harry, like some sort of blanket Silencing Spell. Harry realized it was some sort of magical explosion, a backlash from Voldemort and Dumbledore's battle. He could hear the battle off in the distance, but everything around him was as silent as a tomb.

He cast a glance over his shoulder and almost thought he saw a man climbing up over the edge of the cliff some distance away, but then Harry blinked his eyes and the man melted away into the darkness.

Harry tried to make out what was happening between Voldemort and Dumbledore between the flashes of light and then wished he hadn't, because the battle was over. Voldemort had won. Dumbledore fell to the ground, crumpled and unmoving. The sound came rushing back, causing Harry's ears to pop.

When his ears popped, he heard Alice again, singing off in the distance.

I'm the trouble starter, punkin' instigator.

I'm the fear addicted, a danger illustrated.

Voldemort looked up and saw Harry, a sneer forming on his snake-like face. He glanced at Dumbledore's crumpled form and his sneer became a rather satisfied smile. "Did you care about him, Harry Potter?" he asked, looking back up. Harry gripped his wand, watching Voldemort very carefully and wondering if he could pull off the same trick he did after the Triwizard Tournament.

Harry pointed his wand at Voldemort and screamed, "Carnificare!"

A shimmer in the air burst from Harry's wand, almost glowing against the solid darkness of the night. Voldemort raised his wand and the shimmer bounced back, heading straight for Harry's head.

"NO!" Harry screamed, pointing his wand at the shimmer now. He didn't consciously cast a spell, but fiery sparks flew out of the tip of his wand and the shimmer veered sharply to the right, only cutting the side of his neck instead of decapitating him.

I'm a firestarter, twisted firestarter.
You're the firestarter, twisted firestarter.
I'm a firestarter, twisted firestarter.

Harry grabbed his bleeding neck, ignoring the pain as he dodged another curse aimed for him. Voldemort was quicker than he was and Harry was suddenly lifted up into the air, as though some invisible creature had him by the neck. He began to choke, grasping his throat and glaring hatefully at Voldemort. The other wizard was laughing at Harry's pain.

Harry screamed, and more fiery sparks flew out of his wand as the anger built up inside him like steam inside a train. The choke hold was gone and Harry fell to the ground, twisting his ankle on impact. Harry ignored the pain, glancing at Voldemort who was waving his wand at the fire that had sprung up around him. Harry wondered if he had somehow done that.

I'm the bitch you hated, filth infatuated - yeah.
I'm the pain you tasted, well intoxicated.

Fear suddenly choked Harry for no discernible reason. Fear of losing Draco. Fear of losing Sirius. Fear of losing Lupin. Fear of losing his friends--the only family he truly had left. Pain filled him. Pain over Dumbledore and Julian. Pain over his parents. Pain over the suffering he had inadvertently caused in those he cared about. Harry pointed

his wand at Voldemort, as angry, hate-filled words spilled out of his mouth.

"Av-Ava-Avada--" Harry couldn't finish it. He couldn't say the words. He wasn't a killer. He wasn't going to give in to hate again, like he had when Sirius had died.

"Do it, Harry. Try to kill me. You'll be a hero," Voldemort sneered. "Cast the Killing Curse and see what happens."

"Stupefy!" Harry screamed. The red bolt shot from his wand, but it bounced off a Shield Spell Voldemort brought up.

"Impedimenta! Incarcerous! Immobulus!"

Nothing worked. Harry pointed his wand, trying to summon the fire and the magic force he had used with the Death Eaters in Canada, that he had just used to save his own life, but nothing came out of his wand. Voldemort continued to laugh.

"I can't die, Potter. Don't you see? You couldn't kill me, even if you wanted to. I am immortal," Voldemort taunted. He leveled his wand at Harry. "Avada Kedavra!"

I'm a firestarter, twisted firestarter.
You're the firestarter, twisted firestarter.

Harry tried to move, but he knew he wasn't going to be fast enough. The sound of rushing death and a bright green light was barreling straight for him. Before Harry could blink, a man leapt out of the shadows in front of him, taking the full brunt of the Killing Curse and falling to the ground, still.

The man's body rolled over when it landed, coming to a rest face up. It was Peter Pettigrew. Harry gasped while Voldemort stopped laughing, looking angry now. Peter had finally met the fate he had arranged for his two friends, while saving the life of their son and repaying his wizard's debt.

Voldemort began to laugh again. "Pointless! He dies like the traitor he was and you'll soon join him!" he screamed.

In his mind's eye, memories flashed. Harry blinked and closed his eyes, a second suddenly stretching out across eternity.

"I was ripped from my body, I was less than spirit, less than the meanest ghost . . . but still, I was alive. What I was, even I do not know . . . I, who have gone further than

anybody along the path that leads to immortality. You know my goal--to conquer death."

"You can't live without a soul, but you can live without your spirit. Some people can even place their spirits within objects and function normally, though their lives become inexorably tied to the object. Souls are usually very similar to each other, mostly only distinguishable by the spirit attached to them. Spirits are always different. Spirit is you, your essence, your nature, and your personality. An easy way to think of it is that your soul would be a box, and your spirit would be the contents. If spirit was a fire, the soul would be its kindling."

Harry opened his eyes, the second finally passing him by. He suddenly understood. He didn't understand exactly what Voldemort had done to try and achieve immortality. He certainly didn't understand how he did it. He only understood why he had done it. Voldemort hadn't lied. He couldn't die, because he had never lived. He had given up part of his soul to the Dark Arts.

Harry and Voldemort pointed their wands at each other. Neither spoke, because for some spells, there are no words. There is only will and wand.

I'm the self inflicted, mind detonator - yeah.
I'm the one infected, twisted animator.

Harry poured every emotion, every memory, every joy, every pain, every sorrow, every pleasure into his wand. A great sphere of white light surrounded him, even as a sphere of darkness surrounded Voldemort. The spheres grew and collided. Harry could see Voldemort's face through the walls of light and darkness surrounding them. Hate and loathing--and perhaps even a little fear--was written across his alien face.

Harry's senses tingled and he felt all those around him. He could feel Ron bent over Hermione, trying desperately to wake her up. He could feel Snape, fighting back to back with Sirius now. He could feel Sirius, desperately searching for Lupin even as he fought with the Death Eaters. He could feel Mr. and Mrs. Weasley as they helped take a wounded Professor Morpheus out of the battle. He could feel Tonks, hexing a Death Eater away from Contessa's unconscious body. He could feel Kingsley Shacklebolt grab Rufus when a pit appeared in the ground beneath his feet. He could feel the Weasley twins fighting for their lives, a perfectly matched and synchronized team. He could feel Lupin, choking under Sinistra's spell--his wand lay in the mud, hidden in the dark. He could feel Neville, holding his leg and staring in wonder as Draco helped Pansy bandage his bleeding leg. He could feel Hagrid, laying into Death Eaters left and right with his fists and a pink umbrella. He felt Sinistra turn as Hagrid barreled

straight for her, and he felt Hagrid fall under her Killing Curse. He felt his own pain at Hagrid's loss, but things were going by so fast, he spiraled away to mix with all his other emotions, adding to the power of his sphere of light. Most important of all, he felt Draco, bandaging Neville's leg and hoping Harry was all right. Harry felt the loss of Hagrid. He felt the pain of all the people he knew. He felt their love. He felt their hate. He felt their fear. He felt their determination.

Harry focused back on Voldemort and reached out with his spirit, pouring himself into Voldemort's spirit, into his soul. He fought Voldemort with the strongest power he had: himself.

I'm a firestarter, twisted firestarter.
You're the firestarter, twisted firestarter.
I'm a firestarter, twisted firestarter.

Harry shared with him every memory he could pull out of himself. He infused life into Voldemort, injecting it into his shriveled, divided soul. Voldemort's red eyes went wide as he suddenly experienced everything Harry had ever experienced:

Harry poured every part of himself and showed Tom Riddle what it was like to be human again. He showed him what it was like to love, to hate, to feel pain, to feel guilt, to be loved, to be hated--he showed him everything. It was like when he had poured out his rage and anger in Canada, but this time he gave out his very life. Harry gave Voldemort his soul.

The spheres of light and darkness exploded in a shower of colors. Harry and Voldemort--no, Tom, his name was Tom--stood facing each other. Harry could hear Dumbledore calling out his name as the old man struggled to a sitting position, but it was like it was through a tunnel. Harry felt his life flag out of him, draining away with Tom's.

Tom blinked, staring at Harry. He opened his mouth, and but no sound came out. Tom Riddle had finally discovered his humanity. His soul was complete once, his body filled with life, and he subsequently did what he should have done fifteen years ago when he put his wand to a young mother who sacrificed her life to save her son.

He died.

His stolen, false body began to crumble to dust. The dust that had once been a monster named Lord Voldemort and a man named Tom Marvolo Riddle blew away with the night wind, finally carried away to the death he had avoided for over fifteen years.

Harry collapsed to the ground, feeling the last of his life ebb away. He had poured his life into Voldemort and now had none left for himself. He closed his eyes and drew his last breath.

"Harry!" he heard Dumbledore cry as he faded away. He could feel Dumbledore's hands on his face.

Then Harry was gone.

When Harry woke up, he was in a beautiful glen. The trees were lined with emerald green leaves and he could hear a chorus of bird song echoing softly. The sky was a bright blue and delicate white clouds floated lazily in it. The grass was achingly green. Everything seemed so perfect, bright, and rich.

Harry stood up and realized he was wearing emerald green robes. The embroidery and care put into the design was amazing. He looked over and realized Tom Riddle was also coming to his feet. He wore pale green robes and was blinking at Harry in surprise. He looked young, perhaps around the same age he had been when Harry had seen him in his diary.

"Where are we?" Harry asked, sensing that in this place, Tom was no longer a threat.

Tom shook his head in confusion. "I don't know," he said slowly.

"We're dead, aren't we?" Harry asked. He felt a pang in his chest, thinking of Draco. He pushed that thought away.

Tom nodded and looked over a part of the glen that was hazy, filled with gray mist. Emerging from it were two figures. One was very tall and very handsome, with long golden hair and pointed features.

"Aurelius?" Tom asked, looking incredulous.

Julian's face split into a grin. He also looked to be the same age as Tom and Harry. Just behind him was the same girl Harry recognized from Julian's photograph--his sister, Julia Malfoy LeStrange. She was as lovely as she had been in the picture.

"Where are we?" Tom asked.

Julian walked up and clapped Tom on the back and then smiled at Harry. "It's not a where. It's not even a place. It's just another phase of existence," he said. "It's hard to explain, but you'll understand soon enough."

"It's the next adventure," Harry said, remembering something Dumbledore once told him.

"I don't understand why I'm here," Tom said, looking around the beauty of the glen.

"It's not for me to say," Julian said.

Out of the gray mist emerged two more figures. One was most certainly Morgana and with her came little Alice, who was grinning widely at Harry. Morgana didn't look as frightening as she had before. In fact, she looked very demure. She wore a simple gray robe and was smiling benignly, her violet and green eyes sparkling at Tom. Alice was dressed in a ruffled white robe and beamed at Harry.

"Uncle Harry!" she cried, waving at him.

Harry waved back and his breath caught at the sight of four more people emerging from the gray mist. One was a very young-looking Peter Pettigrew with flaxen hair and an apple-cheeked face. He wore a contrite smile. Hagrid stood beside him, wiping at his face and then beaming at Harry. Beside him stood none other than Harry's parents, James and Lily Potter.

Harry broke away from Tom and ran towards his parents. They held out their arms and Harry finally got to experience the one thing he'd wanted more than anything in his whole. He got to hug his parents. He'd never felt so complete in all his life.

For a moment, he felt like he had been transported back to a time where his memories couldn't produce anything beyond a sense of happiness and contentment.

"Look at you! A man already!" James said, laughing. He seized Harry around the middle and squeezed him tightly, making Harry grin.

"Oh, Harry!" Lily said, kissing him on the cheek. She was beaming through her tears.

"Mum! Dad!" Harry cried, laughing and crying at the same time. He'd never felt

happier. "I've missed you!"

Harry looked over and realized Peter was looking at them and smiling, biting his bottom lip a little. Harry finally understood, as though he was Kything Peter's feelings at that moment, and perhaps he was. Harry understood the guilt, the remorse, the fear, and the suffering Peter had endured. He understood the self-loathing. He understood Peter had chosen to die because he felt this was the only way he could ever make amends for the sins he had committed.

Lily patted Peter on the shoulder and smiled. He grinned back at her. Harry wondered how they worked it all out. He glanced at Tom, who was talking to Morgana while Julian and Julia stood near him. Alice smiled at Harry, as did Hagrid when Harry turned to him

"I'm sorry I gotta jus' skip out on yeh like this. Take care o' Grawp fer me, he'll need ter go back home soon. It was a real pleasure knowin' yeh, Harry. I'll miss yeh a lot, until yeh come back, o' course. Tell ev'ryone I'll miss 'em," Hagrid said, giving him a hug that would have probably killed Harry, had they been in the flesh.

Harry hugged him back. "What do you mean, Hagrid? We're both dead now," he said.

"I'm sorry it couldn't be for any longer, Harry. At least we got to hold you, just the once," Lily said, kissing Harry again and stepping back. Harry looked at her in confusion as James gave him another squeeze and also stepped back.

"We love you, son. We'll see you in a century or so, I guess," James said.

"Take care, Harry," Peter said. "Tell Remus and Sirius that I'm sorry. Tell them that I'm happy they found each other. I'll see them sometime in the far future, I imagine."

"What? I don't understand," Harry said.

Morgana and Tom had stopped talking and were now smiling at Harry. So was everyone else.

"Take care of my grandson, Harry. Tell both him and my son that I always loved them, though I was never any good at showing it," Julian said.

"And tell my granddaughter that I'm very proud of her," Julia said. "Tell her that I always knew she was a strong young woman."

"I--I don't understand. I'm dead. How can I--?" Harry asked before Tom cut him off.

"I'll see you around, Harry. I'm grateful to you, for what it's worth. The powers-that-be have decided part of my penance is to take Morgana's job. I shall now be the gatekeeper between life and death," Tom said.

"And I shall finally rest," Morgana said.

"B-but, I don't understand!" Harry cried.

"That's obvious," Alice giggled.

"And either must die at the hand of the other for neither can live while the other survives," Morgana quoted, smiling.

"I didn't kill him," Harry said. "Well, not exactly."

"Yet, without your help, he would not have died as he was meant to fifteen years ago," Morgana chided gently. "Death need not always be so violent, last of the Potters. He died at your hand, when he tried to kill you all those years ago. It was your mother's love that saved you, but it was you who gave Tom Riddle death."

"Aren't I dead, though?" Harry asked blankly.

Morgana smiled. "Only for a moment. I only wanted one dark-natured man, not both," she said, laughing.

"Mum? Dad?" Harry said turning to his parents. It suddenly hurt him to leave this bright, happy place--to leave his parents.

"We love you, Harry. Be happy," his mother said tearfully.

"We're so proud of you. More than you'll ever know," his father said, beaming.

"Wake up!" Alice cried, walking up to him. Harry stared down at her.

"I am awake," Harry said in confusion.

She shoved at his chest roughly. "Wake up, Uncle Harry! Wake up!" she cried again, shoving at his chest with every syllable.

"What--?"

It all became blurry. Harry could hear everyone echoing a chorus of farewell. The glen became painfully bright and then everything turned bright. He felt weightless and realized everything was becoming dark and he could hear other voices. Voices he recognized--the voices of the people he cared about the most.

Harry woke up.

The End.

Dedication: I take dedications seriously, so here goes. This fic is dedicated to the following people: My cousin Veli -- who helped me out in life and gave me love and the mothering I never truly had, Siriusly Black 2's baby -- who is a nice, bright spot in the world, and my good friend, furiosity -- who taught me a lot about canon, writing, and even a little bit of life.

Author's Notes: Thank you so much to everyone who reviewed, read, emailed, and sent me concrit! I love you all and appreciate it so much.

I also especially thank those who put up with my 27557872213 revisions. ^^;;

As promised, the translations of the French. If you Babelfished the text, you may have gotten the wrong impression, so here's what I meant:

Conversation between Contessa and Draco in Ch. 22 Beginning:

"Tu feras attention, n'est-ce pas?" Contessa asked Draco = You will be careful, won't you?

"Oui," Draco said shortly = Yes.

"Ils te tueront à cause d'Harry. Ou tu voudras être mort," she continued = They will kill you because of Harry. Or you'll wish you were dead.

"Ca ne te regarde pas," he spat. = It's none of your business.

"Tu ne t'inquiètes pas de ce que ton père dirait?" she asked = Don't you care about

what your father would say?

Conversation between Draco and Harry in the Shrieking Shack in Ch. 22 Middle:

"Tu me fais me sentir en sécurité, Harry," he finally said. = You make me feel safe, Harry.

"Avant je voulais être toi. Maintenant je veux seulement être avec toi." = I used to want to be you. Now, I just want to be with you.

Conversation between Harry and Draco on Julian's porch in Ch. 24, Middle:

"Pourquoi es-tu aussi gentil avec moi? Qu'est-ce que tu attends de moi? Pourquoi suis-je si spécial à tes yeux? Si je te laisse entrer, est-ce que tu partiras? Est-ce que tu vas te lasser et t'en aller?" he suddenly asked, almost fiercely. = Why are you so nice to me? What do you want from me? Why am I so special to you? If I let you in, will you leave? Will you get bored and leave?

"Je n'ai jamais rencontré quelqu'un comme toi. Tu donnes tellement de toi-même. Tu as cette passion que j'aimerais avoir. Tu m'aimes vraiment pour moi, pas pour mon argent ou quoi que ce soit d'autre," he said. = I've never met anyone like you before. You give so much of yourself. You have this passion which I wish that I had. You actually like me for me, not for my money or anything else.

"Tu m'as demandé si je t'aimais bien il y a quelque temps. Je t'aime beaucoup. Je ne sais pas pourquoi, honnêtement. C'est dégoûtant, en fait. Tu me rends heureux, je suppose. J'ai l'impression d'être un idiot coincé dans une mauvaise chanson. Je ne veux pas t'aimer, mais je n'y peux rien," Draco said, with a reluctant half-smile. = You asked me if I liked you before. I like you a lot. I don't know why, really. It's disgusting, actually. You make me happy, I suppose. I feel like an idiot trapped in a bad song. I don't want to like you, but I can't help it.

Thank you so much for reading!

Chapter 30: Jigsaw

IMPORTANT AUTHOR'S NOTES: I am posting this only because a lot of people felt the fic was "unfinished" and wanted "more" and to find out what happened to everyone. It was not originally posted for a good reason. I will be honest about why. This part is info-dump at its worst, boring, and both cheesy and pretentious in spots. The entire fic is canon-shafted since the release of HBP, but this ending even more so. If you like the ending in the previous chapter, turn back now. All you'll get is me yammering on about everyone's fates. It's sheer indulgence. Think of it sort of like a deleted scene you find on a DVD. I don't have the interest or drive to edit this and make it any better, so forgive the extremely flawed nature of it.

On the bright side, I can say that a year has passed since I finished this fic, and I know I've grown as a writer (though I still have much to learn), so my future endeavors will be better.

Epilogue:

All Good Things . . .

They had won.

Most of the Death Eaters had been killed, arrested, or had fled in panic once the man once known as Lord Voldemort fell. Vestra Sinistra was still at large, as was Walden Macnair. Lucius and Narcissa Malfoy had been caught while attempting to leave the country and arrested. Contessa was convalescing at St. Mungo's due to her injuries, but was scheduled to go to Azkaban pending her recovery to await her trial for Broderick Bode's death. She had a permanent scar on her face from the gash her mother had given her.

Dumbledore had survived whatever Tom had done to him, though he seemed very quiet and old to Harry. Frail, even. Sirius and Lupin had survived, though Lupin had wound up back in the hospital for a few days. Ron and Hermione had done fine, though Hermione had some minor injuries. The Weasleys were much better now that they had Bill back, and other than being a bit dazed and plagued by nightmares, Bill was doing as well as could be expected. Neville's leg healed up after a couple weeks in the hospital. Kingsley Shacklebolt, however, was in a coma and no one was sure if

he'd ever wake up. Snape had come out with minor injuries and a twitch that came on him at odd times. Professor Morpheus had sustained some injuries, but had recovered enough to accept the post as Defense Against Dark Arts teacher for the next year. Parvati had become very quiet after Rabastan attacked her, but was unharmed, and most of the rest of the students in Harry's class had only sustained relatively minor injuries. Both Hagrid and Julian, however, had fallen in the valley. Draco was very quiet, most of the time, but otherwise fine. Julian's death seemed to have hit him rather hard. Harry wondered why, but like many things about Draco, he accepted he would never fully understand it.

There was a funeral held for Julian, and Dumbledore delivered the eulogy. Not many people attended, mostly because the few people who would have cared to were in prison. Draco never cried that Harry had ever seen, but there were times when Harry rather thought Draco needed to. Trying to give him comfort felt odd, and usually the best way Harry gave it was with sex.

Hagrid's funeral, however, was large and well-attended. Dumbledore gave the eulogy as well, and few left with a dry eye. Hagrid had been mourned by many a student who had attended during the years he'd worked at Hogwarts. A funeral was also held for Peter Pettigrew, and all of his former friends attended, even Sirius. It was Lupin who gave his eulogy, however.

Narcissa Malfoy wound up making a deal with the ministry for herself, her husband, and her niece. The three of them were to pool their general knowledge of Death Eaters, possible locations the escaped and at large Death Eaters could be, Voldemort's plots and plans, and people and creatures that sided with him and provide as much information as possible to the Ministry. She and Lucius donated one of their secret vaults to the Ministry, and Contessa donated one of the two Lestrangle vaults she had received in her inheritance. She also gave up the Lestrangle noble titles and property. From what Harry heard, Castle Lestrangle was to be turned into a museum. Contessa received three years in Azkaban, while Lucius and Narcissa received five. Narcissa and Lucius had to leave Britain as soon as they were free, and were not allowed to return without special permission from the Ministry. Dumbledore had promised them if he ever heard of any misdeeds from them again, justice would be swift and painful. Contessa, however, was allowed to remain in the country.

In return, Draco received all of Lucius's holdings, assets, and stock in his name. He also was given one of the secret vaults. The last secret vault was to be cleared out upon Lucius's and Narcissa's departure. In one day, Draco had become a very wealthy man. Harry would have thought he would have been happy about this, but he had only nodded and signed the necessary paperwork. He even bought a house over the

summer, a relatively modest home. Well, modest by Draco's standards, in any case.

Between injuries and recovery, Harry's entire Astronomy class missed the final exams and the rest of their sixth year term. Dumbledore arranged for make-up tutoring over the summer, given the circumstances.

It was just after their sixth year ended that Harry walked into the empty sitting room of Draco's new house. Draco stood by the window, staring out of it with a thoughtful expression on his face. He drummed his fingers on the windowsill, and Harry recognized the tune he was drumming out after a moment. Spooky, Sexy, Foxy Lady by Razzmatazz, Julian's favorite song.

Harry walked over and leaned against the wall by the window, studying Draco for the longest time. Most of Harry's Kything powers seemed burned out by the battle with Voldemort, but he didn't mind. Maybe he could try his hand at being normal, for once.

Harry decided to just talk about something, anything. "Hermione explained to me how that Kything thing works. Did you know that the members of the Order of the Phoenix used it to communicate with each other by wand? The kind of Kything you study is called advanced Kything. You and I have natural Kything. She said it's almost like the communication of a person's spirit. She also called it a 'woolly discipline' that wasn't nearly as exacting as Legilimency," he said.

Draco rolled his eyes. "How did she explain what you did, with the fire and everything else?"

"Kything. No one can explain it. Not even Dumbledore. I guess that's why she's calling it a woolly discipline."

Draco frowned a bit, swallowing. "Guess you're just lucky that way." The venom in his voice was unmistakable.

Harry let silence hang in the air between them for a while before speaking again. "Do you like me, Draco? You never did answer the question."

"Would I ask you to come live with me after we're done with school if I didn't?"

Harry smiled, studying Draco's face. The other boy was smiling a bit. "Why do you Slytherins never give a straight answer?"

"We do. We're just subtle about it. Why do you Gryffindors always have to have

everything explained to you?"

Harry reached out and grabbed Draco by the front of his robes, pulling him closer. "This you and me thing isn't so bad."

"Says you. It's lucky my father has to leave the country when he gets out of prison, because if he ever finds out, he'd kill you," Draco said, his breath warming Harry's face. He hadn't stopped smiling.

"You're such a romantic," Harry snickered, and before Draco could up with some sarcastic response, he kissed him. They were definitely getting better at kissing.

Life went on, as life often does. Harry's seventh year was relatively uneventful--well, as uneventful as the N.E.W.T. year can be. He managed to score what he needed and was accepted into Auror training. After completing the training, Harry devoted himself to bringing the escaped Death Eaters to justice. The most satisfying of all his arrests was when he caught Professor Sinistra, while she slept in a hovel in Croatia.

Draco, Snape, and Contessa invented a potion that cured lycanthropy based on Healer Smethwyck's research some time after Harry left Hogwarts. Their first successful cure was performed on none other than Remus Lupin. All three potion brewers and Healer Smethwyck were featured in the Daily Prophet as modern day Mungo Bonhams. The Slytherins were, of course, immensely pleased by their newfound fame.

Dumbledore stepped down shortly after this discovery, naming Lupin as the new Headmaster of Hogwarts since Professor McGonagall retired as well. Dumbledore said his farewells to everyone and then left without a forwarding address. Everyone knew he had left to die alone and many cried at his departure. Harry was saddened, but the twinkling in Dumbledore's eyes as he bid him good-bye made Harry realize Dumbledore was ready for his next great adventure.

Sirius was acquitted of all crimes when Peter Pettigrew's body was shown and Dumbledore explained the story of Peter's betrayal. Sirius was quite pleased when an article in the Daily Prophet came out, describing the harrowing story of his life. Snape was not happy with this turn of events, especially when it bumped an article on him back to Page Five. Sirius spent most of his life doing what he did best: pretty much nothing.

Sirius and Lupin seemed quite happy with each other and made quite a nice couple. Both men seemed to be getting on fine, though there were times when Sirius obviously tried Lupin's patience to no end. Sirius and Lupin tried to hide their relationship from the students, and were even successful, though rumors always spread. Harry often wondered if they didn't spread with Snape's assistance. Sirius and Lupin remained together until they died, many years in the future.

Ron and Hermione married a couple of years after leaving Hogwarts. Ron went to work in the Department of Magical Games and Sports at the Ministry, and was eventually made Head. Hermione became a Healer--and a very good one. She eventually came to be in charge of St. Mungo's. A one Alice Jane Weasley was born to them, followed by a Harry Ronald Weasley a couple years later. It turned out that Alice was a Necromancer--which explained a lot about her appearances to Harry from the Netherworld. Harry was named godfather of both children, and he loved them as dearly as if they were his own. Alice didn't seem to recall any of her pre-birth activities, but seemed to be just as precocious as she had been when Harry met her in the Netherworld. It shocked the entire Weasley family when Alice became the first one their family in nearly two hundred years to not be a Gryffindor. Alice was a Slytherin, though young Harry was a Gryffindor. The sibling rivalry in the Granger-Weasley household attained such heights that Hermione often joked their niece and nephew were trying to reenact old Godric's and Salazar's falling out.

Godric the snake continued to guard Harry. He was quite useful on Auror missions and saved Harry's life more than once. He seemed to thoroughly enjoy the chance to attack "dodgy types." Despite all this, he never ceased in his suggestions that should Harry tire of Draco, Godric would be happy to eat him.

Contessa was released from prison after three years, and Lupin gave her the position of school librarian after Madam Pince finally retired. When Madam Pomfrey retired many years later, Contessa took that position and let someone else have the position of Hogwarts librarian. She worked quietly, and it seemed three years in prison and breaking away from Lucius had softened her up a bit. She had become a very quiet, somber woman. She never married or dated as far as Harry knew.

Severus Snape was made the Deputy Headmaster, and once his commercial line of potions took off in the British markets, he retired to live in peace. To Harry's knowledge, Snape never dated or married, though one could never be too sure with someone like him. There were rumors about him and Contessa, but it remained entirely unproven.

Neville Longbottom eventually married Parvati Patil, who never forgot how he had saved her life. He opened a successful business dealing in magical plants, especially rare ones he grew himself. Few people could rival Neville Longbottom's extensive knowledge on plants both mundane and magical. Neville and Parvati eventually had five very lovely children, each named after some rare plant. Harry could never keep their names straight.

Tracey Davis became a missionary after completing her training as a Healer. She joined the Magical Missionaries of Manchester and always sent Harry and Draco a Christmas card every year. To Harry's everlasting surprise, she eventually married Theodore Nott, who joined her in her Missionary work. Dean Thomas became a professional artist, and Seamus Finnigan got a job in the Ministry, though Harry could never remember as what, despite nodding to him in greeting every day at work. Tonks eventually gave into Rufus's incessant pleading, and dated him. She subsequently spent the next five years trying to make him go away, before giving in to the inevitable and marrying him. She even managed to avoid children until she eventually caved to that as well and gave birth to Rufinus Quirinius Tiberius X. Kingsley Shacklebolt became Head of the Aurors, and as far as Harry could tell, he was single and seemed to like it that way.

Lucius and Narcissa Malfoy lived their lives out in France, and whenever they were given special permission to return to Britain, Harry had to pretend he was nothing more than a casual acquaintance of Draco. It took some work on his part, and he always had the feeling Lucius suspected something when his repetitive line of questioning inevitably took a turn to inquiring on when Draco was going to carry on the family name. Draco, of course, smoothly changed the subject and assured his parents he was still looking for someone. He never came out to them. By the time he was thirty, Howlers were a commonplace occurrence from his mother every time he had a birthday. His lack of marriage or procreation apparently rather upset her. Harry wisely avoided discussing the subject with Draco.

Fred's and George's joke shop eventually overtook and bought out Zonko's. Fred married Angelina Johnson, though George remained a professional bachelor. Fred had fraternal twin boys he named Castor and Pollux--Angelina's idea, not his--that were as much trouble as he and George had been had been. Percy eventually became the Minister of Magic, to Mrs. Weasley's everlasting joy. He married a few times, and divorced just as many. He never had children, and given his compulsive nature, Harry thought this was rather a blessing. Bill and Fleur broke up shortly after his return, and Harry suspected it had something to do with Desiree Beauregard, Fleur's cousin--who had apparently been the one who held him under the Imperius Curse. Bill never married, either, which might have been due to the fact that he traveled the world so

much while working for Gringotts'. However, whenever he came back to Britain--which was often--he was often found in the company of Morpheus. Harry had his suspicions on the nature of their friendship, but certainly wasn't going to ask to find out for sure. Charlie wound up marrying Ana, and they had three children, all boys. Mrs. Weasley lived in constant fear that a dragon might eat one of her grandchildren, but they were all kept quite safe. Ginny eventually became a professional Chaser for the Chudley Cannons, and Ron was always the first one on his feet at all her games, cheering her on. She married an American Muggle named John Powers, who had been stationed in Britain and had met one day when her broom went haywire and she crashed into his front lawn. They had two boys, both of whom turned out to be wizards. With the many successes of their children, Mr. and Mrs. Weasley were eventually able to retire quite comfortably.

As for Harry and Draco . . . things between them were always rather complicated. They fought. They fought a lot, actually. There were many, many things they did not see eye to eye on and never would. The lack of constant excitement forced them to realize this very quickly, especially when they moved in together. Harry still didn't understand why Draco got so worked up about towels on the floor and when he squeezed the toothpaste from the middle of the tube. They broke up and got back together a lot. Harry either lived with Draco or with Sirius, depending on Draco's mood. Everytime they broke up and Harry got even remotely close to someone else, Draco always seemed to show up again. Eventually, ten years after they left Hogwarts, the constant bickering became slightly less frequent, and Harry permanently moved in with Draco. They were happy more often than not. Harry figured out it was love when all the Christmas cards and gifts came addressed to them both. Life, all in all, was good for both of them, despite the frequent argument. Hermione often told Harry that he would never have been satisfied with anyone who bored him, and Harry reflected she was right. There was always a challenge there, no matter what. Love, hate, like, dislike, anger, and joy--all those emotions summed up their relationship. Neither of them would have had it any other way.

Life is like a jigsaw puzzle. If you fit together enough of the pieces, you can make a beautiful picture.

The End.