

The Darkness You Can't Escape

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The Darkness You Can't Escape

by [SharaLunison](#)

Summary

Many years after the Dark Lords Voldemort and Potter took over Wizarding Britain, their son Salazar Marvolo Riddle is set to begin his first year at Hogwarts. Unbeknownst to him, Ginny Thomas nee Weasley has been training her youngest son, Merlin Arthur Thomas, to first befriend, then betray and kill the Riddle heir.

Inside both boys is a darkness from which they cannot escape.

This is the sequel to "The One True King". Both fics are very, VERY loosely based around plot from The Lion King movies. The resemblance ends there.

Notes

So, I'd gotten a fair number of requests for a sequel to my fic "The One True King", so the idea for it has been sitting at the back of my mind gaining momentum for the past several years. Full disclosure, I'm working on my Ph.D. so updates are probably going to be very infrequent as the mood and time strikes me. My priority is writing my dissertation. Which I should have been doing when this first chapter happened. Oops.

There's some intentional mystery involved in how Salazar Riddle came to exist. I will tell you that it's NOT Mpreg. And it will be revealed eventually. And it's relevant to the plot. :D

If you read this first chapter and enjoy it, I'd appreciate any comments left giving me your thoughts. This is the first thing I've written in literally years, because school has kept me busy. I'm anticipating that it will move somewhat slower than TOTK, though I intend to keep the same feel as the first half of the story by skipping the unimportant bits. It's a little harder with a cast of OCs.

Hogwarts

~Who Lives, Who Dies, Who Tells Your Story~

Merlin Thomas glowered from the dark corner of his train compartment aboard the Hogwarts Express, watching out the window as his doting mother and father said farewell to all of his older siblings. He'd managed to escape with a single kiss on the cheek and a promise to write about his progress on "The Mission." A sneer twisted his lips. Sod the mission, he was going to Hogwarts to learn enough magic to get away from his crazy ass family once and for all.

The compartment door slid open, and he instinctively turned to favor the intruder with a menacing snarl, only to freeze in shock and no little fear. Salazar Riddle stood in the doorway. The very last person he wanted to see. Echoes of his mother's voice paraded through his head as he stared up at the slit-pupiled green eyes of the other boy. "Riddle is pure evil, Merlin. It's your duty to defeat him. Let him get close, lull him into a false sense of security. Let him believe that you are his friend. And then strike."

"Now Ginny," his father would reply. "Let the boy be."

But as soon as the man was gone from the room, his mother's diatribe would start up again: "Merlin, you are the seventh child of a seventh child. You hold untold magical power within you, waiting to be used. You will take back the Wizarding world from He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named and his slut, Lord Potter. And you will start with their son."

"Hello!" Salazar Riddle said cheerfully, interrupting Merlin's train of thought. The idiot was holding out his hand for Merlin to shake. Merlin squeezed back against his seat, refusing to touch the other boy. Salazar's confident smile faltered a bit. "Er...you're a first year as well, aren't you?"

Merlin darted his eyes back up to Riddle's face, a stiff nod his only response.

Riddle let his hand drop, his mouth settling into a flat line of polite acknowledgement. "Everywhere else is full, so I hope you don't mind me joining you here."

Merlin didn't respond, but Riddle sat in one of the seats opposite anyway. "Would you at least tell me your name?" Riddle asked. "I'm Salazar Riddle, but I suspect you already know that."

"Merlin Thomas," he responded shortly.

Riddle almost choked on his own spit in response. Merlin couldn't help but roll his eyes at the reaction. *Thanks one hell of a lot, Mum.*

"Merlin? You poor sod. I thought *I* had it bad, being named after one of the Hogwarts founders. Did you know Merlin was a Slytherin?"

"He what?" The words escaped his mouth before he could think of holding them back.

“Yeah, that’s what they say,” Salazar responded. “My dads told me it’s part of the history of the house you learn when you first get sorted there.”

Merlin gaped. If his mother were dead, she’d be rolling in her grave right now. Merlin Thomas, the supposed Saviour of the Light, named after a bloody Slytherin.

“We should start a club,” Salazar continued, “For children afflicted with terrible names by their parents.”

Merlin couldn’t contain his amused snort. “Half of Wizarding Britain would need to be in it.”

Salazar grinned in response. Just then, the whistle of the train sounded long and hard and out the window they watched as the platform slowly seemed to move away from them.

“Here we go…” Salazar muttered under his breath.

Merlin took a moment to study the other boy. He seemed too cheerful, too ordinary, for who he was supposed to be. The only thing odd about him were the slit-pupils of his eyes. “Snake blood” his mother would have said with a hiss. Perhaps it was all a front? A ploy to get Merlin to trust him?

“I know what you’re thinking,” Salazar said, turning back to meet Merlin’s eyes. “How could this ordinary lump of an idiot possibly be the child of the Dark Lords? I’m afraid you’ll just have to wait and see.”

Grimacing, Merlin spat, “Like I care.” He settled back against the seat, closing his eyes. He was determined to ignore the other boy for the rest of the journey to Hogwarts. And for the next seven years, come to think of it.

~History Has Its Eyes on You~

“Riddle, Salazar!” the Deputy Headmistress, Professor McGonagall, called out his name in a clear, strong voice. She’d been doing this for decades, after all; she had practice.

Hands shaking slightly, Salazar walked up to the stool and sat, watching as the curious, often hateful faces of the children in the room beyond disappeared behind the hat’s wide brim.

“Well, well,” said a little voice in his ear. “So here you are, young Riddle. What an interesting creature you are.”

He attempted to slam up his Occlumency barriers, trying to shut the hat out of his thoughts and memories. “You have no right,” he hissed.

Occlumency did no good. Just as his father had told him, the hat existed beyond such forms of magic. It was ancient and mysterious, and protecting his mind would do little good to keep it out.

“I’m afraid it’s my duty, Salazar,” the hat murmured regretfully. “But I have never and will never share what I see in a pupil’s head, not even with the Headmaster or Mistress of the school. But you are a puzzling problem. A good head on your shoulders, plenty of bravery—

you must, haven't you? Dealing with spite and hatred day in and day out would require bravery of anyone. Quite loyal to your family as well, a good trait in Hufflepuff."

"Put me in Slytherin!" Salazar hissed.

"Alas, child. Despite your name, that's the absolute last place you belong. You're cunning enough, to be sure, and your darkness would serve you well there. But I'm afraid you lack that most important of Slytherin traits: ambition. Don't quite know what to do with your life, do you?"

How could he? His parents were running the entire bloody Wizarding government, and even the school he was now attending was run by one of his father's followers, Snape. What was left for a child like him to accomplish in the face of that?

Not to mention, his parents were apparently going to live forever without ageing, so it wasn't even like he could take over for them when they went.

"A pickle, to be sure. Now, where to put you..." the hat trailed off, and Salazar felt its consciousness poking around in his head, looking at certain memories, weighing the bits and pieces that made him who he was. It was immensely frustrating to witness, and he helpless to understand the process or do anything about it. "Understanding, hmmm?" the hat asked, almost absent-mindedly. "Better be RAVENCLAW!"

The last word was shouted to the entire room, and as the hat was removed from his head, Salazar heard a visceral gasp of horror come from the table of students clad in blue-trimmed black robes. The Slytherins, of course, looked vastly disappointed, while the rest of the room looked relieved. Salazar made eye contact with one of his childhood friends, Scorpius Malfoy, at the Slytherin table. The older boy gave him an encouraging wink.

He took his seat at the Ravenclaw table, managing to avoid a flinch when every single person seated near him inched away as much as possible. The sorting carried on until a new name caught his attention: his other good friend was up next.

"Snape, Veratrum!" A spindly girl with brilliant red hair and black eyes walked delicately up to the stool and sat down. On the professor's dais above, Salazar saw Headmaster Snape looking on proudly as his daughter was sorted. He couldn't help but smile at the sight—true to his origins as a Master of Potions, Snape had named his daughter after a flower, to honor her mother, Lily, but chose one that was deadly poison if ingested. She was going to be a great beauty when she was older, but he already knew that she was quite adept at hiding her bite until it was too late for her victim to escape.

"RAVENCLAW!" shouted the hat. Salazar straightened in surprise. He'd been sure she'd go to Slytherin. Veratrum walked quickly to the end of the Ravenclaw table to join him, sitting closer on the bench than anyone else had dared.

"Ravenclaw? Really, Vera?" he asked with no little incredulity.

She huffed, smacking the back of his head. "Father will be a little disappointed, but I couldn't very well let you go it here alone, now could I?" she asked. She hugged his arm, looking

away, “You’re my oldest and dearest friend, Sal.”

He briefly wondered how the conversation with the hat had gone for her, but then another name was called out that caught his attention. The boy from the train.

“Thomas, Merlin!” cried McGonagall.

Numerous snickers erupted around the room. Considering how often the wizard’s name was used as part of an epithet, Salazar couldn’t blame them. Still, he commiserated with the boy.

The hat settled over Merlin’s head, and utter silence swept the room for several long minutes.

“*Two* hat stalls this year!” muttered one of the Ravenclaws nearby.

“What’s that mean?” Vera asked.

“Someone who takes longer than normal to be sorted,” the other student answered, glancing meaningfully at Salazar, and then looking away quickly when he realized he was being watched.

“I met him on the train,” Salazar whispered to Vera. “I’m curious where he’ll end up. He didn’t seem like a typical Weasley, despite his parentage.”

The slash on the hat’s brim opened wide, declaring, “SLYTHERIN!” to the hall.

Gasps of shock and horror erupted from the Gryffindor table. Glancing over, Salazar noted there was a veritable *swarm* of red-headed people at that table. Seriously, what was it with Weasley’s and breeding?

“They give redheads a bad name,” Vera sniffed, tossing her long hair over her shoulder.

“Perhaps that’s why he didn’t make it into Gryffindor with the rest,” Salazar joked. Unlike his siblings and cousins, poor Merlin had inherited his father’s darker looks. Jet black, tightly curled hair and a skin complexion with the same rich tones as a chestnut. To Sal’s eyes he had an earthy, relaxed look about him, despite his clear discomfort in his own skin. Realizing that he was watching the other boy’s progress to the Slytherin table next door, Salazar ripped his eyes away and tried to focus on the rest of the sorting.

“You liiiiiike him!” Vera sang softly, nudging him in the ribs.

“What? I do not!” he protested weakly.

“Liar. What *would* your fathers say if they knew about this?”

He blanched. “That’s not funny, Vera.”

She smiled. “Relax. I won’t tell anyone. Besides, in case you forgot, we’re only *eleven*. Which doesn’t mean you can’t like someone, but it’s hardly going to be a *serious* crush until we’re older, now is it?”

He let out the breath he'd been holding and glared at her. "I don't *like* him. I like him. He's interesting."

She rolled her eyes and nodded, going back to watching the sorting.

But Salazar's eyes drifted to the Slytherin table to find Merlin again. The other boy looked absolutely miserable, but there was also something different now that he was a Slytherin. Almost...like he was carrying less weight on his shoulders.

Sensing eyes on him, Merlin turned and caught Salazar's gaze. Sal froze, arrested by the look in those piercing blue eyes. Pure, unmitigated hatred.

~Just You Wait~

The letter from his dads came at breakfast the next morning. Horrified gasps echoed down the table as the Ravenclaw students realized that the pure white owl of the Dark Lords was descending on their table with a letter clutched in her talons.

Sal rolled his eyes, raising an arm for Hedwig to alight on. She was the sweetest owl, really. It was completely nonsensical for people to be afraid of her just because of who she served. He took the letter from her beak and offered her a rasher of bacon in return. She delicately raised one clawed foot to hold it as she tore off a piece at a time. With a click of her beak, and an affectionate preen through his hair, she was off.

Turning his attention to the letter, Salazar opened it with a bit of trepidation. Sorting announcements went out from Hogwarts as soon as the ceremony was complete, so he knew they were already aware of his sorting into Ravenclaw. He didn't think they would be disappointed, but they did sometimes surprise him...

Dear son,

Your father and I couldn't be prouder of you! If life had been different for us, we might have been in Ravenclaw ourselves, rather than Slytherin. We're excited at the opportunities your sorting will present to you, and encourage you to enjoy your time at Hogwarts as much as possible.

Did you forget anything at home? Please let us know if you require anything at all. I know we promised to refrain from visiting to make things easier for you, but we can't help but worry about you, Sal. Write often to ease our minds, all right?

Severus told us about Vera's sorting as well. Lily is over the moon about it, I hear. Your father and I are glad to know that you'll have one loyal friend that you can trust for the next seven years.

If anyone gives you trouble, let us know. We'll take care of it.

*All my love,
Dad*

Sal folded away the note, trying not to let his emotions show. His dad, Harry, was the more affectionate of his two parents. But he knew they both loved him dearly and would do anything for him. That was part of the problem, of course. Having two Dark Lords as your parents often meant that your playmates were punished or “disappeared” if they failed to meet certain standards. The one time a muggle child in their neighborhood had tried to bully him, the muggle *and* his family were all locked in the dungeon for Death Eater target practice until they finally died. Sal had put the last one out of their misery himself.

It was for good reason that all of the children at Hogwarts were hateful or fearful of him. One word from him to his parents and people could *die*. Or worse, or so the rumors said.

Sighing, Sal applied himself to his breakfast. Vera was awake and eating next to him, but he knew better than to attempt speaking to her before she’d been up for at least an hour. Unfortunately, the other new first year Ravenclaws didn’t know that fact.

“Good morning, Veratrum!” chirped the pair of twins that had been sorted into Ravenclaw along with Sal. Lorcan and Lysander Scamander were Lovegood stock through and through. Both had the pale blond hair and dreamy blue eyes of their mother, Luna. Which was good, given the plainness of their father, Rolf.

Vera’s eyes lifted to theirs, and Sal didn’t need to see her face to know they were getting the patented Snape death-glare. If they were smart, they’d stop there.

“Ooooh, she’s not a morning person, is she Lorcan?” Lysander asked his brother conversationally.

“Indeed she is not, dear Lysander,” the other answered. “I think the remedy is more coffee.”

Wisely, they said not another word but poured a steaming mug of the stuff for Vera, bowing down as they handed it to her. She accepted without a word, taking a few fortifying sips before returning to the meal on her plate. Sal spotted a slight smile on her lips and chuckled as he sipped his morning tea.

Professor Flitwick, the head of Ravenclaw house, came around at that moment to hand out schedules for all of the students. The first years were last, and he greeted them warmly as he handed round the slips of parchment. “Good morning, young new Ravenclaws! I’m your head of house, Filius Flitwick. Feel free to come to me with any questions you might have during your time here at Hogwarts. My office door is always open.”

Studying his timetable, Salazar saw that they had double potions with all the other houses first thing. Other than Merlin, he didn’t know any of the Slytherin students in his year, much less any of the Gryffindors or Hufflepuffs. Scorpius was the only Slytherin he had close ties to, because he was the son of Headmaster Snape’s godson, Draco.

“We’d better get going if we want to find it in time,” Sal murmured to Vera.

“Just let me finish my coffee,” she answered, gulping down the last dregs of the bitter liquid.

“We’ll come with you,” Lorcan and Lysander said in tandem.

Sal looked at them in surprise. They were mainly focused on Vera, but she was obviously friends with him. And they didn't seem as afraid or hateful as he'd expect.

"Fine, but you have to put up with Sal, too," she retorted.

The twins glanced at Sal curiously. "Fine by me," one said. "And me," said the other.

The other first years, one more boy and two girls whose names Sal didn't know yet, ended up following them at a discreet distance. *They* clearly didn't want to become involved with the son of the Dark Lords.

The potions classroom was relatively easy to find. They only took one wrong turn as they entered the dungeon area of the castle. Sal's group were some of the first to line up outside the classroom door, with Merlin and another Slytherin directly in front of them.

"Hello, Merlin," Sal said, doing his best to be polite and cheerful without going too over the top. Vera's elbow nudged him in the side and he noted her rolling eyes out of the corner of his vision. He elbowed her back, hard.

"Sod off, Riddle," Merlin replied, not even looking at him.

The Slytherin he was with looked between Merlin and Sal with wide eyes. "I don't think you should..." the other boy started to say, before a look from Merlin shut him up.

"He's not a god, I'll talk to him any way I like," Merlin told his friend firmly.

Surprisingly, Salazar found himself grinning foolishly. "Well, that's refreshing," he said into the shuttered silence of the hallway. "Please do continue talking to me any way you like, Merlin."

It was clear the other students thought this was a threat, but Merlin looked at him appraisingly. After a long moment of studying each other, they both nodded slightly and turned away to talk to their fellows instead of each other. The atmosphere of the hallway instantly relaxed.

Moments later, Headmaster Snape slammed open the classroom door to admit them to the room. He was the first Headmaster in generations to continue teaching a class while running the school, but he managed it because for the first time in a long while, the Headmaster was prohibited from being involved in political matters, whether that be the Wizengamot or the Ministry itself. It meant the position of Headmaster was strictly focused on the wellbeing and education of the children at Hogwarts, and not on battles over funding or political support or wrangling the board of governors.

It was one of many changes wrought by Lord Minister Voldemort that Sal was particularly proud of.

They all filed into the classroom and started moving toward the potions stations, which were set up with one cauldron on a two-person desk, with stools for seating. Pairings naturally

started to happen within house lines, until Snape entered the room and told them all to stand up again.

Sal glanced at Vera, sitting beside him, but she appeared as confused as he.

“Starting this year, any pair work in any of your courses will be done with someone from another house,” Snape said. There were a few groans of dismay, which he silenced with a single, stern glare. “As such, I have paired you with a partner that you will potentially work with for the remainder of the year, unless you both prove so incompetent that you would benefit from working with another, more advanced student.” The look he gave the class clearly said that if you ended up in such a situation, there was no real hope for you at all.

He waved his wand, and two columns of names appeared on the board behind him. Vera was paired with a mousey-looking Gryffindor named Rose Granger. Salazar was paired with Merlin. Their eyes met as they approached the shared desk, and then they both looked away to focus on the rest of the class as they found their seats. None of the pairings, Sal noticed, were between Gryffindor and Slytherin. That rivalry must still be going strong even in the current generation, which grew up under the Dark Lords’ rule.

“For today’s lesson, I am testing your preparedness. Assuming you have at least *glanced* through your textbook, you should easily be able to follow the directions for a simple boil cure.” Another wave of Snape’s wand replaced the list of pairings with the instructions for the potion. “Begin.”

“I’ll get the ingredients from the cupboard,” Sal offered. “You can prepare the cauldron.” Merlin nodded and set about measuring the required amount of purified, distilled water that would form the base of the potion.

Sal went to the supply cupboard, accidentally brushing shoulders with Vera’s partner, Rose.

“I’m so sorry!” she gasped, clutching her armful of bottles and scuttling back to her table with his friend.

Frowning slightly at her reaction, Sal grabbed the bottles necessary for the boil cure, and turned to leave the cupboard. Only to see that everyone else had waited till he was done and out before crowding in to get what they needed. Idiots, he decided. They might run out of time because of their dawdling. And Uncle Severus was not a forgiving man.

Returning to his desk, he and Merlin easily divided up the tasks for preparing the ingredients and settled into a companionable rhythm. They were nearly the first ones done, but Vera and Rose managed to beat them by a few seconds.

“Ten points to Ravenclaw,” Snape said as they handed in their vials for grading. Neither Slytherin nor Gryffindor received points, despite their partners being from different houses. It was interesting, too, because Snape was known to favor Slytherin with points.

“We make a good team,” Sal offered to Merlin as they cleaned up their space.

“Yes,” Merlin answered, clearly attempting to remain short but failing slightly.

Sal sensed an opening. “Would you like to work on the homework together later tonight? I’m curious what you think about the properties of the snake fangs, since you handled those today.”

Merlin stared at him for a long moment, and Sal sensed that he was struggling with himself. “Perhaps another time,” Merlin finally answered.

Nodding, Sal picked up his bag and went to meet Vera at the door.

Behind him, he missed the look of confusion and pain that passed across the Slytherin’s face as he left the room.

~I Hope That You Burn~

Outside the potions classroom, Merlin disappeared down an empty corridor and leaned against the cool stone wall in an attempt to calm his thoughts. The letter in his pocket crinkled, reminding him of his conundrum. His mother had sent it this morning.

How dare you!? Do you have any idea what kind of shame you’ve brought to the family by your sorting? The first Weasley to ever be sorted into Slytherin. If you weren’t our only hope, I would disown you!

You couldn’t even do the proper thing and end up in Ravenclaw with the Riddle whelp. At least then you could have made yourself useful. I expect a letter from you by the end of the week telling me all about how you’ve made yourself Riddle’s new best friend.

Do not disappoint me.

Ginevra Thomas

Merlin crushed the letter into a tight ball inside his fist, then opened his palm to stare at the paper. He hated her so much. He had no value except as a means of destroying the Dark Lords. What kind of life was that for a mother to expect of her youngest son? The anger and hurt built inside him, and he realized that his hand was growing hot. Staring at the paper, he watched as the edges began to blacken and then burn with a bright, searing hot blue flame. And yet it didn’t hurt him, but made him feel warm inside in a way he hadn’t experienced since he was a very young child.

The letter crumpled away into ashes, and he held his hand up to the torchlight, inspecting it for damage. Nothing. Not even a mark.

Sighing, Merlin slumped down against the wall and let his head rest against the wide, rough stones. The sodding truth of it all...was that he liked Salazar a lot. The boy wasn’t at all what he had been raised to expect. He suspected that if he tried, as his mother wanted, it would be nothing at all to become Salazar’s friend. And that, of course, was why he should never do such a thing. Merlin was no fool...he knew that his mother’s influence went deep with him, and it would be hard to avoid hurting the Riddle heir even if he did nothing intentionally.

It was safer for them both if Merlin just stayed away. Unfortunately, with this potions partner assignment and the other boy's overtures...it didn't seem like that would be possible.

Friendship

Chapter Notes

This chapter brought to you by my finished dissertation, finished PhD, and NaNoWriMo procrastination. It's been so long since I've had time to write something creative. Thank you all for being so patient. I'm going to try to finish this fic during NaNo, so hopefully there will be regular updates during the next few weeks. Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

~And We Are Full of Stories to Be Told~

After dinner that night, Merlin wanted nothing more than to escape to the privacy of his four poster bed and try to forget that Salazar Riddle even existed. They had every class together. There was no escape.

Unfortunately, his older brother, Algernon, and sister, Poppy, decided to check on him by way of strong-arming him into a classroom just as he reached the staircase that led to the dungeons. As soon as the door closed, Algie had locked and silenced it, and Merlin found two wands trained on him as his siblings got comfortable sitting on the teacher's desk at the front of the room.

Of all his siblings, Algie and Poppy were the ones most like their mother. They wholeheartedly believed in the mission she had set forth for Merlin, and now that he had finally joined them at Hogwarts, it was inevitable that they would meddle in matters that didn't concern them. Algie was a sixth year this year, which unfortunately meant he had a greater repertoire of magic to use against Merlin and that he didn't have to focus on exams this year. Free time was bad for Algie—he tended to get a bit manic when he didn't have enough to do.

Third year Poppy, on the other hand, appeared to be as sweet and charming as her name. She managed to hide a vicious nature under a façade of kindness, manipulating everyone around her into doing what she wanted. Merlin had learned at a young age that Poppy took particular pleasure in causing him physical pain. Their mother never caught on that all the bruises and cuts Merlin suffered as a child were a result of his sister “playing” with him.

The pair were entirely different from Harper and Molly, the Irish twins born so close together that they were both in fourth year Gryffindor. Or Rory, the second youngest who had been Merlin's closest friend until their older siblings scared the boy into ignoring him. The oldest son, John, Merlin wasn't close to because of the difference in their ages. But he had never been treated ill by his oldest brother, now an auror for the Ministry.

“I received a letter from mother this morning,” Algie began. Merlin winced. “She told us to keep a particularly close eye on you since your...unfortunate Sorting. I heard that you got paired with Riddle in Potions. What about in your other classes?”

Bowing to the inevitable, Merlin handed over his timetable. “We have every class together.”

Poppy squealed and snatched the piece of parchment from his hand. “That’s perfect! You can sit with him during every lesson. You should offer to do your homework together!”

Merlin kept his eyes trained on the floor, refusing to offer any suggestions for how to befriend Riddle.

“I heard...” Algie started softly, causing Poppy to abruptly stop prattling and listen to him intently. Merlin felt a chill go down his spine. “I heard that Riddle offered to work with you on Potions homework tonight. And you. Said. NO.” The last word was punctuated by Algie sharply slapping the surface of the desk beside him. Both Merlin and Poppy flinched. “Don’t you think that was a mistake, brother?”

Merlin shivered, fear sweat trickling down the back of his neck as his hands clenched the edges of the desk he stood in front of. “It would be suspicious if I became friendly too fast...” he started to object.

Algie stood and crossed the distance between them in a rush. One hand held Merlin’s collar tightly while the other dug his wand into the flesh at the base of his neck. “Perhaps that is true. But perhaps you are just a coward who needs to be reminded of his mission for the greater good.” Behind him, Poppy giggled and clapped her hands with excitement.

“No...please!” Merlin whimpered.

“You should be making Riddle beg!” Algie spat. “I’ll show you how it’s done.”

There was no one there to hear his screams.

~Changes on Our Hands and on Our Faces~

When the second day of classes dawned, Sal made his way down to the Great Hall with Vera and the rest of the first year Ravenclaws. Their house was made up of early risers, it seemed, as the rest of the tables remained mostly empty for the first half hour they were there.

In their classes the day before, Salazar had learned the identities of his other classmates. Including himself, the Scamander twins, and Vera, there were Lyra Lupin, Lei Zhang, and Rajesh Singh in Ravenclaw*. The other houses remained something of a mystery aside from the Granger girl and Merlin. He knew from his dads that the newest generations of Crabbes, Goyles, and Lestranges were among those sorted into Slytherin. Surprisingly, there was only one other new Weasley aside from Merlin. Someone had named the poor boy after Mad-Eye Moody in some misguided display of admiration for the auror-turned-fugitive who had been hunted down by the Dark Lords themselves a few years before. So far Alastor Weasley had proved to be as unremarkable as his many relatives still attending Hogwarts.

Sal was absorbed in eating his oatmeal, half listening to the conversation around him, when Vera suddenly rested a hand on his arm and squeezed lightly. It was their sign for when something was wrong, to warn the other about something in the vicinity. He nodded slightly in acknowledgement, and she removed her hand.

Looking up from his oatmeal and glancing around at the others sitting across from him, he saw nothing amiss. Pretending to half-listen to Lorcan's story about some magical beast his parents had discovered, he allowed his eyes to wander around the rest of the hall that he could see from his side of the table. The Ravenclaw table sat between Gryffindor and Slytherin, so he had a good view of the snakes who had straggled in for breakfast. Scorpius was among them, and the older boy caught his eye and then looked further up the table at a form who was huddled over a mostly empty plate, their back to Sal's gaze.

Looking back at Scorpius questioningly, he saw the other boy surreptitiously mouth the name, "Merlin." Sal's sharp eyes returned immediately to the hunched figure, watching intently as the other boy lifted his fork and attempted to stab one of sausages on his plate. His hand was shaking too badly for the task, so the utensil ended up falling from his fingers and clattering loudly against the metal plate in the relative quiet of the Great Hall. The nearby Slytherins glanced at Merlin, and then quietly returned to their conversations, though their eyes occasionally made furtive glances at him.

Alarm bells going off in his head, Sal stood and made to walk over there to check on the other boy, but Vera grabbed his sleeve to stop him. He looked down at her angrily, unaware that red was slowly bleeding into his green slit-pupiled eyes, shifting color from that of his dad to his father, Lord Voldemort. "Confronting him won't help him," she pointed out quietly. "Go to the Headmaster."

"If someone attacked him, he'll never admit it to the Headmaster. Uncle Sev's hands will be tied," Sal whispered back. Resolve coursed through him, and he pulled his sleeve free from her fingers. "I'm going to the owlery. Go to class. Don't wait for me."

Vera looked like she had more than half a mind to follow him, but the good sense instilled in her by her father won over. "As you say, my lord," she murmured, turning back to her breakfast.

Sal flinched. She hadn't teased him with that title since they were children. This time...it felt more serious than joking, but he didn't have time to question her further. He hurried from the Great Hall and dashed back up to Ravenclaw tower to fetch some parchment and a self-inking quill. This was one of the few times that contacting his dads was the best course of action.

~Ashen Faces in Cold Breeze~

Sal made it to Charms class, but just barely. He spent the morning watching Merlin like a hawk, only growing more concerned as the boy coasted through lessons, doing the absolute minimum in participation to avoid being called out by the professors. When he did move, it was clear that he was in immense pain.

"What do you think happened?" Vera wondered aloud to him during Transfiguration.

Sal was so full of emotions that he didn't know what to do with himself. Rage, hatred, concern, and a myriad of other feelings cycled through him so that it was nearly impossible to sit still. "Someone obviously injured him. Someone it's not safe for him to report. Someone he wants to protect for some reason." His eyes were still crimson, a fact that had not gone unnoticed by his peers or professors. Virtually everyone except Vera avoided meeting his gaze. "Someone who will be punished," he stated flatly. A hint of sibilance crept into his voice, and Lyra Lupin, sitting nearby, glanced at him with the whites of her eyes showing.

"You need to calm down a little, Sal," Vera whispered. "You're scaring people."

His only response was a wordless hiss, his eyes never leaving Merlin.

The expected intervention happened at lunch when they had taken their seats in the Great Hall. Headmaster Snape turned very pale in his seat and stood to walk very quickly toward the Entrance Hall at some invisible signal. Sal knew, from his connection to both of his parents, that they had just apparated into the school. He instantly relaxed slightly.

"They're here," he murmured to Vera. She looked nervously toward the doors they had walked through for their Sorting only a couple days before. Sal watched her wipe suddenly clammy hands on her skirt.

Objectively, he knew that his parents had this effect on people. But Harry and Tom had done their best to shield him from the worst of it. This would be his first time seeing them in a position of authority over a large number of ordinary wizarding folk, rather than their loyal Death Eaters.

The doors to the Great Hall opened with a thunderous bang, bouncing off of the ancient stone walls to either side. Several more high-strung students screamed, and there was a collective gasp and hushed silence once the room realized just who had walked through those doors.

The Dark Lords were well-known figures, but Voldemort was the more public of the two in his position as Lord Minister. Harry kept to the shadows for the most part, traversing the social circles and gleaning information from their contacts among the Purebloods. People tended to view Harry as the safer of the two, though his hands were just as stained with blood. Watching the pair striding into the room now, Salazar's chest swelled with pride at the strength and confidence emanating from his dads. The Headmaster followed them at a respectful distance, hands cupped together and head slightly bowed as he acceded to their authority.

Voldemort's eyes scanned the students, and came to rest on a certain figure at the Slytherin table. He slowly paced towards that group, while Harry separated to approach their son. Looking up into his dad's eyes, Salazar felt the last of his tension dissipate. It was all going to be okay now. Harry's long-fingered hand reached out to gently grasp his chin, tilting Sal's face up and forcing his eyes to meet the familiar warm green gaze. Lowering his occlumency shields, Sal allowed Harry to see his recent memories and surface thoughts.

'Your eyes are red, Salazar,' Harry hissed in Parseltongue.

'What?' Sal replied subconsciously in the snake tongue. *'How?'*

Harry silently shook his head to say that he wasn't sure. Releasing his son, he walked slowly around the rest of the table to rejoin Voldemort, who was standing over the quivering figure of Merlin Thomas, their eyes locked in a battle of wills.

'Someone has taught him occlumency,' Sal heard his father hiss with irritation. *'I may not be able to view the necessary memories without breaking his mind.'* Sal made a noise of distress and stood quickly, intent on stopping his father from doing any such thing. Voldemort broke his eye contact with Merlin to peruse his son with interest.

"Let me try," Harry said in English, trading places with Voldemort. He studied the Thomas boy carefully before even beginning to touch his mind. "This is in your best interests, you know," he murmured to the child. "If you let me in, this will be easier for everyone involved. We don't want to have to hurt you." His gaze hardened and he leveled his most serious look at Merlin. "But we will."

Merlin gulped, but internally he did his best to fortify the severely ransacked occlumency barriers protecting his mind. He wasn't sure what they were looking for, but it surely wasn't good.

Sighing as an almost imperceptible haze clouded the boy's eyes, Harry tried casting *legilimens* anyway. His mental probe slid off of the child's shields, so he tried a more Slytherin tactic. "Who hurt you?" he asked while simultaneously sending a needle-thin lance of magic into the shield.

Merlin gasped with pain as a sharp spike akin to the worst ice cream headache he'd ever had sliced through his mind. Against his will, a series of images slipped through the momentary crack in his shield. Algie's deranged grin. The red-hot glowing tip of his brother's wand. The searing pain as the wand touched him. The scent of burning flesh. The stinging burn of a knife carving tiny lines into the most delicate patches of skin on his body. Blood running off his body when he escaped to the dorm to patch himself up. The word *faggot* carved into his left arm. The patchwork of old scars covering his body.

Harry released the boy's mind and turned to peruse the rest of the room, searching for the face from Merlin's memories. A hand on his sleeve distracted him just as he locked eyes with one of the Weasley's at the Gryffindor table. "No...please, my lord. Please don't hurt..." Harry shook off the boy's hand and traded a glance with Tom, instantly transferring the information about the torture and the perpetrator's identity to his lover's mind.

"I ssssee..." Voldemort whispered, his voice clear to every ear in the room. "Harry, see to the boy." His eyes found Sal at the Ravenclaw table, and he motioned for his son to follow as Harry forcibly began to escort Merlin from the room. Sal hesitated, wanting to make sure Merlin was okay, but he wanted to see what his father would do to the person responsible more. So instead of following his dad from the room, he came to stand beside his father instead. Looking up into eyes that were currently identical to his own, he was pleased to find pride and affection shining from Voldemort's eyes.

“I ssuspect...” Voldemort began, pacing slowly toward the Weasleys at the Gryffindor table with Sal at his side, “That most of you have no idea why I am here or why the youngest Thomas child came to our attention. But at least one person...” here, his gaze pinned Algernon Thomas to his seat, the sixth year’s eyes wide with fear and a clear sheen of sweat coating his face, “Knows *exactly* why I am here.”

“Severus.” Voldemort called, ordering the previously silent Headmaster to join them beside Algie. The other Gryffindors, and his own family, had backed away from the older boy as soon as it became clear who had garnered the Dark Lords’ ire.

Sal watched impassively as Merlin’s brother started gasping and looking around for any kind of support he could find. There was none.

“When we established the rules for a new wizarding government nearly twenty years ago,” Voldemort said, “We developed a zero tolerance policy for the abuse of wizarding children. That rule exists as much for Mudbloods as it does for Purebloods. Our contact with the Muggle world was slowly reduced so that today, we can identify magical children born into Muggle families, and remove them to our world long before they can suffer any abuse at the hands of their guardians. Doing so had virtually eliminated child abuse of wizarding kind—or so we thought.

“This morning it was brought to our attention that Merlin Thomas has been abused by, at the very least, his older brother Algernon Thomas. I will not divulge the full details for his sake, but no child should suffer magically induced burns or have their flesh carved by someone who claims to be of the same blood.” Sal bit his lip, thinking of the other boy suffering like that. Gasps of horror echoed through the room, and those still seated fairly close to Algie now physically moved themselves further down the table to get away from him. “A full Wizengamot investigation will be mounted towards the rest of the Thomas family, but for his crimes against his brother while in attendance at Hogwarts, I ask for Headmaster Snape to formally expel Algernon Thomas and erase his name from the school records. Never again will he be allowed to perform magic. And that is assuming the Wizengamot does not choose to administer the kiss.”

“Consider it done, my lord,” Severus said gravely, bowing to the Dark Lord. He held out his hand to Algie, “Your wand, Mr. Thomas.”

To the disgust of everyone in the hall, Algie tried begging for mercy rather than handing over his wand immediately. Eventually Severus simply used *expelliarmus* to summon the boy’s wand. With a sharp crack and a small shockwave of magic, the once powerful bit of wood was broken in two. Algie let out a wail of loss, which Voldemort cut short by throwing a portkey on him to transport him to a Ministry holding cell.

Looking around the hall, Voldemort raised his voice to be heard over the murmurs starting to emerge from the students. “I believe that you have endured enough for today, and should be allowed to have the afternoon off from lessons. However, I want to make one thing very clear.” A hush fell over the room, almost as if everyone were holding their breath. “If any other student is suffering at the hands of their family, or knows a friend who has been abused, please go to your head of house for help. Not all situations will be this extreme, but there is help available if you ask for it.”

With that, he tightly gripped Sal's shoulder and disappeared them both on the spot.

~All the Stories You Will Leave~

Sal appeared with Voldemort in the Department of Magical Law Enforcement at the Ministry of Magic.

"My Lord Minister!" A voice exclaimed. "We weren't expecting you!"

Sal saw that an auror was awkwardly standing at attention behind his desk, his half-eaten lunch splayed across the surface in front of him.

"Forgive me for interrupting your lunch," Voldemort said graciously. "I deposited a prisoner a few minutes ago. My son and I are going to have a few words with him, but once we leave please be sure he gets the usual treatment."

"Absolutely, my lord!" exclaimed the auror, bowing stiffly.

Voldemort led Sal through the auror offices and past all of the well-guarded gates into the holding cells. A pair of auror trainees were processing the newly deposited Algernon Thomas when they approached.

"A few moments of privacy, and then I'll let you get back to your jobs," Voldemort told them. The witches squeaked upon realizing who it was, and scuttled quickly back to the auror offices.

Moving to stand in front of the cell door with his father, Sal watched impassively as Algie sobbed on the floor of the little room beyond.

"I brought you with me to let you get this out of your system," Voldemort said, looking down at Sal with concern in his red eyes. "My own eyes used to change color when I was particularly angry about something. It was one of the first effects of my dark rituals. Your eyes changing is not very surprising given that, but I will be concerned if eliminating your anger doesn't allow them to change back to green."

"Does that mean I get to hurt him?" Sal asked, eyes glinting with dark intent.

Voldemort smiled indulgently at him. "You can do whatever you'd like, except kill him. He deserves to stand trial."

"He deserves to suffer," Sal scoffed. "Death would be too easy." Turning to consider his prey, he fingered the smooth handle of his ash wand. He could do anything...but what he most wanted Algie to feel was the same pain he had inflicted on Merlin.

Salazar started with *crucio*. But the screams of agony coming from the cell did little to ebb the tide of his rage. He released the curse and used *imperio* to force Algie to come close to the bars of the cell, where Sal magically restrained him before releasing his mind. Then he got to work. With only a vague idea of what had been done to Merlin, he used his creativity to fill in the gaps.

By the time he had finished with Algie, the boy had had to be *reenervated* three times. His now naked body was criss-crossed with burn marks and the tiniest, most delicate pattern of knife wounds scrolling the words “blood traitor” across his skin over and over again. The cuts were so small that they barely bled. He was in no danger of dying from them, though shock was a distinct possibility. Algie now lay on the floor quietly, staring at nothing.

“I’ll ensure he doesn’t die from shock or exposure,” Voldemort said when it became clear that Salazar was done. “Let’s see your eyes.”

Sal looked up at his father and was glad to see relief in the Dark Lord’s eyes. “Back to green,” Tom murmured, gently resting one hand on Sal’s head. “And time to go back to Hogwarts. Is a portkey all right?”

Sal nodded, accepting the bottle cap his father handed to him without argument. “I’ll see you at Christmas,” Tom murmured to him, moments before the portkey hooked Sal behind the naval and whisked him away.

-o-0-o-

Back at school, Sal decided it was time to go and see how Merlin was faring. He made his way quickly up to the hospital wing, and stepped slowly inside. “Dad?” he called softly.

Harry’s tousled head of black hair poked around a screen near the end of the room. His eyes widened a little as he took in Sal’s appearance. “You should have cleaned yourself up before coming back,” he chided.

Sal looked down at his robes and flushed. It wouldn’t be obvious to just anyone he ran into, but it wouldn’t be hard to tell that he had just tortured someone. He cast a quick *scourgify* on himself. “Can I see Merlin?”

“He’s unconscious,” Harry cautioned. “He wouldn’t want you to see what they did to him.”

“They?” Sal queried, stilling a few feet away where his dad was standing.

Harry grimaced. “Algernon did most of the work, but his sister Poppy watched it with a great deal of enjoyment. It was apparently a common occurrence as they were growing up. He’s covered in scars.”

“Shouldn’t she be expelled as well, then?” Sal spat.

Harry sighed and came out from the screen to grasp his son’s shoulders. “She’ll certainly be part of the trial we build against the Thomases, but she doesn’t seem to have ever raised her wand to Merlin. She was more prone to vicious pinches and psychological tactics. Perhaps she would become more like Algie as she got older, but there’s still some hope that we can get through to her.”

Sal sighed, shoulders slumping as he let go of any hope of getting back at Merlin’s sister. “But he’s okay?”

“He will be,” Harry promised. “He could probably use a friend when he wakes up. Let me finish helping Madam Pomfrey tend to his wounds, and get him dressed again. Then you can sit with him for a while in case he comes round.”

Sal nodded, and retreated to one of the visitor chairs next to an empty bed. He did his best not to eavesdrop, but he still caught his dad’s voice murmuring to the mediwitch behind the curtain.

“Is there any way to heal the scars?” Harry asked.

Madam Pomfrey’s voice was not as quiet as Harry’s, used as she was to being the one in control of her hospital wing. She sniffed. “It’s unlikely. If they had been inflicted with Muggle weapons, it might be possible to regrow the skin and erase the marks. But since they were done with magic...”

“I understand,” Harry said, regret in his voice. “I believe we have a book on glamour charms in our library that would be of interest to Mr. Thomas. I’ll be sure to owl it to him once we return home.”

Some of Pomfrey’s stiffness disappeared from her voice. “That would be very kind of you.”

Sal could imagine his dad’s amused grin. “Just because I am a Dark Lord does not mean I--we--are incapable of kindness. Is it all right for Sal to visit for a bit?”

Pomfrey tutted, but acquiesced. A moment later Harry emerged from the curtain and pushed it aside to reveal the pale form of Merlin Thomas lying in the hospital bed. Sal jumped up at once, and moved to sit in the chair beside the other bed. “He looks so...small,” he whispered.

“He looks like an eleven-year-old boy who has had a trying day,” Harry replied softly. He watched as his son took the Thomas boy’s hand lying against the stiff white sheets. “You like him?”

Sal flinched, looking up at his father as though remembering that he was there for the first time. “I...yes. There’s something about him. He fascinates me.”

“Hmm,” Harry said in response. Sal was already focused back on his friend’s face. “Keep an eye on him, Salazar. I fear this will not be the last time your father and I get involved with the Thomas family. It will take quite some time to complete our investigations and build the case. He may still be in danger from his own family within the school.”

“No one will hurt him again,” Salazar murmured coldly. His hand tightened imperceptibly on that of the unconscious boy.

Harry leaned down and kissed the top of his head. “You are our greatest creation, Salazar. Let us know if you need any more help.”

Smiling up at his dad, Sal nodded. “I will.”

Harry swept out of the hospital wing, and a moment later Sal heard the distinct pop of disapparation from the hallway outside. A voice from the bed beside him made him whip

around.

“Sod off, Riddle,” Merlin said raspily. He weakly tried to lift his hand and shove Sal away, but he didn’t have enough strength.

Sal stood and leaned over the bed so that Merlin was forced to look into his eyes. “Starting from today, Merlin Arthur Thomas, you are my friend. Whether you like it or not.” His eyes flashed red for a moment, and Merlin gulped.

Sitting again, Sal reclaimed his new friend’s hand and settled in to keep him company for as long as Madam Pomfrey would let him stay.

Staring at their joined hands, and turning stiffly to look at Sal’s face, Merlin felt resignation take over him. “Fine. Tell me what happened after I left the Great Hall?”

Sal obliged.

Chapter End Notes

Oops, forgot to add a note about two of the students in Ravenclaw with Sal! There was an asterisk in the story above which leads...here: *Lei Zhang is the daughter of Cho Chang and Rajesh Singh is the son of Padma Patil. Just wanted to let y'all know my thought process in case you were curious! I spent way too much time drafting this list of OCs. X_X

Christmas

Chapter Notes

Happy Thanksgiving! I've been really failing at NaNoWriMo this year, but I still managed to bang out another chapter. I'm hoping this fic will be about 10 chapters, like The One True King. Enjoy!

~When the Sky Above Is Blue~

By the time early December had rolled around, Merlin almost didn't recognize his own life anymore. By order of the Headmaster and the Dark Lords, his family was restricted from interacting with him in any way. He had only one class with any relatives, and it was Alastor Weasley, the only child of his Uncle Ron, and not a cousin he'd had any issues with.

Even his mother wasn't allowed to contact him. Which meant that he was free to enjoy his newfound friendship with Salazar Riddle for as long as the situation with his family was being resolved. Most of the time, this was easy. Sal seemed to understand him in a way that even his brother Rory had never been able to grasp. And he found himself anticipating the way Sal would react to his words and jokes. He went out of his way to make his friend laugh.

But sometimes, he'd be reminded that this was exactly what his mother had wanted. And he'd watch the easy laughter of his friend and worry that an inevitable betrayal was somewhere on the horizon. He didn't want to betray Sal. But what if he couldn't stop himself? On days like that, he was kept awake at night, worrying about what might come to pass.

On the morning of December 3rd, the Head of Slytherin House, Professor Sinistra, posted a sign-up sheet for students staying over the holidays. Stomach sinking, Merlin wondered if he would be forced home despite the Wizengamot investigation. Sal was probably going to spend the break with his dads, which meant that he would be alone in the castle if he were allowed to stay.

Professor Sinistra put one of his fears to rest by handing him a folded note with spiky black writing on the outside. He recognized the hand of the Headmaster from his Potions assignments.

Dear Mr. Thomas,

Pending the completion of the trial against your family, you will be unable to return home on holidays to visit your family. I apologize for the inconvenience and possible emotional distress this decision might place you in. Other arrangements will be made if the trial has not

been resolved by the summer holidays, but you are otherwise welcome to remain at Hogwarts.

Sincerely,

Headmaster Snape

P.S. You might want to talk to Mr. Riddle about his plans for the winter break. I believe he might have another option for you other than remaining at the castle.

Eyes widening at the post-script at the bottom of the message, Merlin rushed to leave the dungeons and find his friend in the Great Hall for breakfast. They had taken to sitting at whichever of their tables they felt like in that moment. He was still getting to know the Headmaster's daughter, Veratrum, but she seemed all right...if a little scary. When they sat at the Slytherin table, they usually joined third year Scorpius Malfoy or Vega Lestrangle, who was a first year like them. She mostly kept to herself, but had an acerbic wit that both boys appreciated.

Today Sal was sitting with Vera at the Ravenclaw table, so Merlin hurried to join them, noting that they had been there for some time already and were nearly done with their food.

"Merlin!" Sal called when he saw his friend approaching. "I'm glad I have a chance to talk to you before class starts."

"Me, too!" Merlin replied, sliding into his seat beside the other boy and beginning to fill his plate. "The Headmaster sent me a note about Christmas. I thought I'd have to stay here for the holidays, but he said you might have a better plan?"

"You should come stay at the manor house with my family," Sal stated in a no-nonsense tone. "I know it might seem kind of intimidating, but my dads are way different in private than they are in the public eye. Plus, we throw an after-Christmas party every year which you'd be invited to anyway as one of my best friends."

Merlin quietly took a bite of his food to avoid answering immediately. His mother's poisonous words were echoing in his mind at the thought of getting so close to the Dark Lords that he was welcome in their own home. "*After-Christmas?*" he asked instead.

"Father's birthday is on New Year's Eve, and the majority of the people who attend are either spending Christmas itself with family, or throwing parties of their own. So we hold ours on December 30th, and celebrate father's birthday at midnight." Sal ducked his head to hide a slight blush, "It's nice. We get the big party out of the way, and then on the day of, we get father all to ourselves *and* celebrate the New Year. It's been the tradition for us for as long as I can remember."

Taking a few more bites of his food, Merlin smiled wistfully at the picture being painted of the Potter-Riddle family. "It sounds really nice..." he said softly.

Sal leaned a little to see Merlin's face. "But?"

Merlin winced as he looked back at his friend. He wasn't usually this transparent. For all that they had grown very close the past few months, he hadn't been able to confess his family's goals to Sal just yet. He knew there wasn't much time left to share the information, because it was bound to come out during the trial. "It's about...my mother..."

Sal's face was gently questioning, but then the Ravenclaw prefect suddenly rose from the table and started urging everyone to their first class of the day. "Come along now, don't dawdle!" the older boy called, "It's nearly the end of term and we need all the points we can get to catch up to Slytherin." This last remark was said with a glower down his long nose in Merlin's direction.

"Tell me later," Sal said, gripping Merlin's shoulder tightly even as he rose from the bench. "I've been wondering about the rest of your family for a while, but I didn't want to pry. We can meet after supper, in that classroom at the top of the dungeon stairs?"

Merlin blanched. "Not that one. Third floor corridor. Second on the left when you're passing the statue of Gunhilda de Gorsemoor."

Sal nodded and hurried off, but Vera lingered a moment longer. "You're supposed to hurt him, aren't you?" she asked shrewdly.

Merlin paled.

"It's all right," she said, a smirk playing around her lips. "I won't let you. And Sal won't care--he believes in you." She leaned in so close that they were almost nose to nose. "But if you slip, I will repay you a hundred fold."

Surprisingly, Merlin felt relief course through him. "I'll be counting on you," he said spontaneously.

Vera backed away, surprise on her face. Then she suddenly threw back her head and laughed. Several nearby students looked at her in surprise, then bemusedly returned to their breakfasts. It took her a few moments to calm herself. "I suppose we have an understanding, then," she told Merlin. She held out her hand. "Truce?"

Grinning like a fool, Merlin took it. "Truce."

~Dreams They Never Knew~

Despite his sudden alliance with Vera against the aims of Ginny Thomas, by the time classes ended and it was time to meet with Sal, Merlin was a nervous wreck. What if Sal rejected him? What if he told his parents and Merlin was expelled and arrested? *What if he hates me?* his innermost thoughts asked.

He hadn't been able to stomach the thought of food, so he was pacing the third floor classroom by himself when Sal bumped through the door, his hands full of wrapped napkins and cups of pumpkin juice.

“What--” he started to ask, when Sal started setting down his burdens on an empty desk and started to explain.

“I figured you wouldn’t be able to eat, and *I* couldn’t eat knowing you were up here worrying a hole in the floor. So I went to the kitchens and the house elves gave me some sandwiches and things to bring for you. We can talk first and eat once you’ve calmed down.” Finished arranging the food on the desk, Sal rubbed his hands together and turned to face his friend.

Merlin felt tears building at the back of his throat and did his best to will them away.
“But...what if--”

“Don’t be silly,” Sal said firmly. He pulled together two chairs and sat in one, motioning Merlin to the other. “There’s nothing you can say that will convince me to stop being your friend.”

Sinking slowly into the chair, Merlin released the stopper on his secret and the words all came out in a rush. “My mother thinks that because I’m the seventh child of a seventh child that I have some special power that will let me destroy the Dark Lords. She wanted me to befriend you to get close to them, and then betray you all and restore control of Wizarding Britain to the light side.”

Sal’s first instinct was to scoff. The old saying was that the seventh son of a seventh son would have great magical power--not simply a child born from two generations of big families. But the fact remained that Ginny Thomas had believed in this power enough to bear seven children--she must have thought it was fate when her youngest and seventh child was born in time to attend Hogwarts with the child of the Dark Lords.

So instead of dismissing the possibility, he asked, “Are you supposed to kill me, as well?”

For answer, Merlin looked away from him and said nothing.

Sighing, Sal leaned over the short space between them and took Merlin’s hand. “The Dark Lords are immortal. You wouldn’t be able to kill them permanently, if you could even kill them the first time.” He wanted to tell Merlin more, that he himself was immortal and incapable of death, but it was too soon to let go of that secret. “Perhaps you’re afraid of hurting or killing me, but you’ve failed to take into account who I am, Merlin. I’m far from defenseless. And now you’ve warned me of your mission. I won’t let my guard down.”

Sniffing, Merlin used his free hand to brush away the tears he hadn’t been able to prevent. “But I *do* have some kind of weird power, Sal,” he whispered. “Let me show you.” He took back his other hand from his friend, and cupped his palms in front of him. Looking inside himself, he found the warm spark of his magic and coaxed it forward into his hands. A light bloomed in the dimness of the room. Focusing on the magic and the flame building in his hands, Merlin grew the fire and power within it a trickle at a time until it danced above his fingers. Figures started to emerge from the flames--beastly faces and suggestions of feathers, scales, and claws. He had been practicing this since the first day at Hogwarts when he accidentally burned his mother’s letter, and he was starting to wonder if he could create an entire creature made of this fire if he poured enough magic into it...

“Stop.”

The choked voice of his friend distracted Merlin just enough to lose the magic, and the flames instantly snuffed out. Looking up, he was startled to realize that Sal was now halfway across the room, a sheen of sweat on his face and his eyes wide.

“Sal?” Merlin whispered. Had he hurt the other boy somehow?

“It’s...all right,” Sal answered, shakily coming back to the chairs and sitting again. “Your magic, though...it’s so dark, Merlin.”

Merlin couldn’t help it, he laughed at the thought of having dark magic. “Don’t be silly, I’m from a light family!”

Sal rubbed his palms on his thighs, trying to soak away his fear sweat. “I’m pretty sure that was fiendfyre.”

Merlin’s breath stopped in his chest. “That’s impossible. Fiendfyre destroys whatever it touches. This doesn’t even prick when I hold it...”

“But it was showing all those beast images. Does it let you shape it into any other kind of form?” Sal asked reasonably.

“I’ve never tried...the beasts just started appearing after I added enough magic to it.” Merlin admitted. “Should I stop practicing?”

Yes! Sal’s internal voice cried. But to his friend he said, “I’m not sure. Why don’t you show my dads during the break, and see what they think? They’re much more familiar with this spell than I am.

“Then...you still want me to come?” Merlin asked with a small voice.

Grinning at him, Sal just said, “Of course! Now, do you think we can eat these sandwiches before the house elves start grumbling at us?”

Smiling, Merlin picked up his sandwich and returned to normal topics of conversation for the pair. “Will your dads take us to Diagon Alley?” he asked. “I’d like to get presents for everyone.”

“I’ll ask them to arrange it,” Sal promised. “Oh! Do you have any formal robes? I’m afraid the after-Christmas party is just a tiny bit stuffy.”

“I do, actually. Mother insisted, because...well...” Merlin trailed off, and picked at the bread on his sandwich.

“Because she was expecting us to become friends, and that you might have to visit me during the holidays?” Sal asked.

Merlin nodded.

“It’s all right,” Sal said. “You won’t regret it, I promise.”

The topic of Christmas was dropped, and they finished their meal before returning to their prospective common rooms. Passing the board where the sign-ups for staying at the castle hung, Merlin decisively did not write his name.

~Knowing That Their Love is True~

Merlin was initially quite surprised by Riddle Manor. For one thing, it was in a Muggle village called Little Hangleton. For another, it was fairly small. Sal told him that his dad, Harry, owned a larger home that they used for the party each year, keeping this residence private for the family. Merlin was touched that they had invited him directly into this home instead of taking up residence at Harry’s for the winter break.

He was given his own room on the third floor, adjacent to Sal’s. The Dark Lords shared a room on the second floor, and Harry also kept his office in the same corridor. Voldemort’s office was on the first floor, along with the family room, kitchen, library, and what the Riddles referred to as the “receiving room,” which was the only space that Death Eaters were allowed to enter.

After the first few days of exploring, however, Merlin realized that the house was perfect for the family’s needs. His was one of two guest rooms available, and after poking his head into the other, he decided it must be reserved for Vera Snape since the setup had more of a feminine air to it.

Like the Thomas home, Riddle Manor had no house elves of its own, but he learned that a house elf cleaning service had been hired to tidy things up once a day. They generally popped in during the middle of the night when everyone was sleeping, much like the Hogwarts elves.

Living with the Dark Lords took some getting used to. They weren’t around very much in the days leading up to Christmas. Apparently the end of the year was quite busy for the Ministry, and they were busily tying up loose ends so that they could spend the week from Christmas to New Year’s in relative quiet. They had escorted the boys to Diagon Alley on their way to the house from Hogwarts, and Merlin basically hadn’t had much contact with them since.

He and Sal busied themselves at first by using the vast library in the manor to get their winter break homework out of the way. It snowed overnight after they finished the last assignment, and they relished in being children and having snowball fights and building snow forts and snowmen in the backyard. When they finally tired of the snow and cold, they came back in to find Harry had made them steaming mugs of hot chocolate and plated up some Muggle digestive biscuits for them to have alongside it. Merlin was used to having them at home, and seeing them in the Riddle house was an unexpected comfort.

When Christmas morning rolled around, Merlin was feeling uncharacteristically shy as he followed his exuberant friend downstairs to the family room to open presents. With Sal’s help, he had picked out tasteful presents for his hosts as well as a gift for Voldemort’s birthday. Finding a gift for Sal had been challenging, but by mutual decision they had agreed to split up in Flourish and Blotts and complete their purchases separately before meeting outside again. He’d had enough spending money left to get Sal a very pretty owl feather quill

he'd spotted as well as some Invisible Ink--"Set your own secret password and exchange messages with your friends!"--and the shops had been nice enough to do the wrapping for him, so he didn't have to worry about getting the supplies and time to do it away from Sal's prying eyes.

Sal opened his present from Merlin and immediately started laughing when he saw the bottle of Invisible Ink. "Open yours!" he demanded.

Having wanted to watch the others opening the gifts from him first, Merlin hadn't touched those from Sal and his dads. He found the one from Sal and ripped into it eagerly. A thin leather-bound journal fell out, followed by a bottle of Invisible Ink. He laughed. "Great minds think alike!"

"I had father help me spell the journal," Sal explained. "It's an exchange diary that only you or I can open. But if someone managed to get past that layer of spells, I figured the Invisible Ink was a nice touch. Basically we trade it back and forth, writing to each other about whatever is going on in our lives. The other person reads it, and then you talk about it together." He gave Merlin a gentle smile. "I know sometimes it's hard to find the right words for things when speaking."

Swallowing hard on the emotions threatening to make him cry, Merlin leapt forward and hugged his friend fiercely. "Thank you!"

From the Dark Lords, he received a wand holster and a set of unbreakable crystal phials for his Potions work. Sal must have told them that he excelled at Defense and Potions.

After presents, they all lazed around the warm fire in the family room for a while. Harry, who was a surprisingly good cook, had thrown some homemade cinnamon rolls in the oven when he first came downstairs. They all enjoyed the sticky treat accompanied by glasses of spiced apple cider for the boys, and coffee for the adults. Conversation wandered from topic to topic, and Merlin basked in the warm atmosphere of the Riddle home. It was so unlike Christmas at the Thomas house, which was always loud and chaotic and inevitably required a visit to his grandmother's house with all of the cousins.

"Oh!" Sal suddenly exclaimed, sloshing the last few sips in his cider glass. "Maybe now is a good time to show them that thing you can do, Merlin."

Hesitantly setting his glass aside, Merlin asked, "Are you sure? Did you warn them?"

Sal nodded. "They're curious to see what you can do." He stood and moved to sit on the arm of Harry's chair, and the trio leaned in to watch as Merlin prepared to summon his fire.

Releasing an explosive breath, Merlin tried to calm himself and look inside. It was hard to believe he was going to show *the Dark Lords* this weird bit of magic that only he seemed capable of. Letting go of his fears and worries, he focused on coaxing forward his magic, being careful not to rush it. He hadn't told Sal this before, but when he rushed this process, fire tended to gout forward in large swirls because he wasn't properly controlling them. The last thing he wanted was to set fire to the Riddle's home on *Christmas*.

Slowly, the flames in his hands built. He worked them up to the same point as the last time he'd shown Sal his magic, not wanting to test his limits by pouring more magic into it as he was wont to do during practice. Staring into the flames, he glimpsed the scaly skin of something snake or lizard-like. Biting his lip, he wondered if he could convince it to pick one form instead of the cavalcade of beastly attributes. Concentrating on the scales, he gently prodded the fire with his magic, coaxing it into forming a long ribbon of fire as he imagined a snake in his hands.

Sal was watching on, his upper lip damp with sweat, and with his hand a vice grip around Harry's. There was a roaring in his ears and he could feel a great pressure building up in the room, to which Merlin seemed oblivious. He watched as the fiendfyre started condensing into a thin, coiled line, and then a great *pop* of the magical pressure burst and in Merlin's hands rested a fully-formed fiendfyre cobra.

"Fascinating," murmured Voldemort. "Definitely fiendfyre, but in a form I've never seen before. Most wizards find it tremendously difficult to control, but you seem to have an innate connection to what you're creating," he told Merlin.

Harry gently squeezed Sal's hand. "Okay?" he asked very softly.

Nodding, Sal let go and slowly approached Merlin, who was sitting on the floor and cradling the snake. "I think..." Sal said thoughtfully, "That it's no longer feeding on your magic. Did you just...create a magical creature, basically?" he asked dubiously.

Merlin wasn't sure. The cobra felt different now in his hands. Sal was right that it was no longer directly connected to his magic, but neither did it feel like the same fire he had been handling before. The snake was still moving on its own, and he could feel the cool glide of scaly coils against his fingers, as though it weren't made of fire at all. "It feels like a snake to me, now," he told his audience. "But I've never done this before...usually when I stop concentrating the fire just goes out. What if it burns stuff like real fiendfyre?" he asked worriedly.

"Only one way to find out," Harry said, standing. He gently urged Sal back a little and then reached out one hand to hover over the snake. A perplexed frown formed on his face, and then he lowered his hand to rest of the fiery scales of its head. Nothing happened. '*Hello,*' Harry hissed to it in parseltongue.

The snake's tongue darted out as it turned to consider Harry with interest. '*Hello, ssspeaker,*' it answered.

Merlin couldn't understand what his snake was saying, but he relaxed a little to know that it was capable of communication with the Riddles. This would make things so much easier to ensure that his creation was safe.

'*What are you?*' Harry asked next.

The snake let out a wordless hiss that Harry took for a chuckle. '*I am a sssnake, of courssse.*' It offered no further explanation, but turned away from Harry, effectively ending the

conversation. It's eyes looked at Merlin's face, and with a satisfied hiss it began to slither up the boy's arm.

Stiffening, Merlin looked up at Harry with alarm. "Um."

Grinning, Harry quickly reassured him. "It's all right, let it explore a bit. I don't think the fire can hurt anything. It felt cold to me, just as you said."

Which was a good thing, because the snake was now loosely coiled around Merlin's throat like a brilliant orange-red torque of fire.

'Massster...' Harry heard the snake sigh, before it apparently went straight to sleep.

"Well then," Harry sighed. "It seems harmless enough for now. I'd be cautious about setting it anywhere at first, since it's unclear if it will burn anything when not in direct contact with you. It views you as its master, so it's possible that your subconscious desire to not hurt us is protecting us from being burned when touching it."

Merlin gently stroked the coils around his neck and smiled. "I'll be careful until we can learn more about her," he promised.

"Her?" Sal asked, coming forward again. He hesitantly reached out a hand, and, feeling no heat coming from the snake, gently tapped one finger against her side. He remained unaffected, and finally relaxed enough to sit with Merlin on the floor again.

Merlin seemed nonplussed about his ability to give the snake an appropriate sex. "It just feels right, I guess. I suppose if I'm wrong she'll correct me when she wakes up."

"You'll have to think of an appropriate name," Voldemort said. He hadn't moved, unlike the others, and still sat in his armchair cradling his cup of coffee. "I do miss our beloved Nagini, but she lived a long and fulfilling life."

"Do you think you could make more familiars with the fire? All those beasts swirling in it, you know?" Sal asked.

"I don't know," Merlin sighed. "What would I do with them all? I suppose I'll have to see what happens when I try to summon the flames again." He was still stroking the snake's scales. "It's a pity I can't speak parseltongue like you," he told Sal.

"You only say that because you've never heard the kind of conversations snakes like to have," Sal stated drily. "Uncle Severus has a runespoor for Potions ingredients, and the three heads are *constantly* bickering about food and staying warm. Most other snakes I've talked to have been the same. Nagini was different, but she had so much magic in her that I think it affected her intelligence for the better. She used to play with me when I was a baby," he said, smiling with fondness over memories of the giant snake.

"All the stories I've heard about Nagini are terrifying," Merlin confessed, carefully not looking at the Dark Lords.

"Yes, well, they're probably true," Harry admitted.

“True or not, the expectations of your family, particularly your mother, are relevant to something we need to discuss with you, Merlin,” Voldemort said. He set aside his coffee cup and rearranged himself in the chair almost like it were a throne. “The case is progressing very slowly. Though we have veritaserum and pensieve testimony from your brother Algernon, it is proving much harder to get any evidence against the rest of your family. Fanatical devotion to Light-magic ideals aside, there’s simply not enough there to justify removing you from the family permanently. Particularly since you’re still a minor.”

Merlin felt his heart sink into his toes. “You mean...I’ll have to go back for the summer?”

Voldemort shook his head. “It remains to be seen what you will be forced to do. If you stand trial against them, and reveal everything they have done to you, both physically and psychologically, the Wizengamot will likely decide in your favor and agree for you to be taken in either by the Muggleborn Orphanage Bureau or by a petitioning wizarding family. If you don’t testify, and it is completely your choice, you can petition yourself to be removed from the family. But they will want to know why, and those details may not be kept secret if they are relevant to the case.

In either instance, I don’t think there is enough of a case to have anyone other than Algernon sent to Azkaban. Your mother and sister will likely go free with mild penalties. Should you not testify *or* petition to be removed, you will return to your family home as soon as the trials have reached a verdict, and it will take another extreme instance of abuse such as the one you suffered at the beginning of the year for us to be able to intervene again. As things stand, I would expect the trial to be resolved in the middle of summer vacation next year.”

Merlin gently ran his fingers over his snake familiar and thought carefully over everything Voldemort had told him. The thought of returning to face his mother in the privacy of their home was terrifying. The happy memories he had made here with the Riddles would become tainted as she picked them apart to start planning for the murders she wanted him to commit. And if she saw his snake...

No, it didn’t bear thinking about.

But was he capable of testifying against her? Was he strong enough to sit on the stand and bare his soul about the atrocity of being raised to kill the Wizarding world’s leaders? He just wasn’t sure.

“You have time to think about it, Merlin,” Harry reminded him gently when the silence had gone on for long enough. “You could even make up your mind five minutes before the trial if it came to that, though I think you’ll have resolved yourself to one of those choices well before then.”

“Write about it in our journal,” Sal invited. “We can figure it out together.”

Smiling gratefully at them all, Sal decided that it was Christmas, and that was no time to be worrying so much about something he couldn’t control yet. “In the meantime,” he said, “Could you convince your dads to have a snowball fight with us?”

Voldemort snorted, but Harry’s eyes lit up with glee. “It’s on, kid!”

Sal and Merlin got massacred by the Dark Lords, but it was worth it.

~Dust and Sunlight Ever Make the Sky So Blue~

On the night of the New Years party, Sal and Merlin got ready together in Sal's room in the family wing of the large house owned by Harry Potter. It was not a new house, but had been artfully decorated to look like an ancient pureblood manor home. The true Potter Manor had been burned down early on in the skirmishing that took place when the Dark Lords established themselves as leaders of the British Wizarding world, but according to Harry it wasn't a great loss.

Fidgeting with his dress robes, Merlin asked, "Do I look all right? I feel...awkward."

Laughing, Sal turned to help his friend. Sal was resplendent in emerald green robes that matched his eyes. They were trimmed in black and paler green trim, with a thin silver chain acting as a closure across his chest. Underneath he wore black slacks and a dark grey button-up shirt and black cravat. Sal smoothed the shoulders of Merlin's dress robes, and tugged at a few of the seams, muttering de-wrinkle and fabric easing charms under his breath, utilizing the elements woven into the fabric by its creator. "There," he said, turning Merlin to face the mirror again.

The changes definitely made a big difference in how the robes fit. Now Merlin looked less frumpy and poor and more like his Pureblooded friend. The robes were a deep red almost the color of blood, and trimmed in black and gold twisted trim, with a gold chain closure. His mother had thought he'd be in Gryffindor like the rest of his family, clearly, but he couldn't say that the colors didn't suit his dark skin, either. Underneath he wore black slacks like Sal, and a pink button-up shirt that complemented the red robes quite nicely. His cravat was also black.

"I think we're ready," Sal said. "Physically, at least," he acknowledged when Merlin looked at the door with mild panic. "It'll be fine, Merlin," Sal reassured him.

"But what if..."

"No one is going to hurt you here. The worst that might happen is that you stumble into my father's solar and find a dark revel happening. They'd simply usher you out as soon as they notice you--father doesn't allow children."

Sighing, Merlin gathered his Slytherin instincts around him like a shield, squared his shoulders, and stepped with Harry out into the hall. Fern, as he had named the fire snake, remained in his room, sitting on a magically heated rock as she digested the two mice he had procured for her that morning. Luckily, she was completely harmless to either objects or people when not touching him, though it remained to be seen if she would burn anything were he to be threatened.

The arrival of the two boys to the party went mostly unnoticed--children, even the child of influential figures such as the Dark Lords, were inconsequential to the wizards and witches jockeying for power in the series of parlors and drawing rooms that had been opened up for the party. The pair mingled with other children brought along by their parents, and shared

words with a few adults who deigned to notice them, but for the most part they were free to enjoy the delicacies prepared for the guests, sip the alcohol-free punch which was the only thing not behind an age line at the side of the main ballroom, and people watch.

As the night wore on, however, the adults grew more inebriated. And the veil of disinterest started to lift. One woman, who Merlin recognized as the matriarch of the Macmillan family, and someone his mother communicated with as a Light family, leaned into their space to say, rather loudly, “Merlin Thomas? Does your mother know you’re here?”

“Probably not,” Merlin answered. “My friend Salazar invited me.”

She turned her bleary eyes on the other boy and they widened comically. “The Dark Lords’ child. How *did* they manage to make you, boy? Frog spawn and moonlit rituals?” she cackled at her own joke, and wandered off without waiting for a response.

Merlin looked at his friend worriedly. Sal was standing very stiffly, as though an iron rod had been attached to his spine.

“It’s all right,” Sal told him. “I’m mostly used to it.”

“I understand why people are curious about it,” Merlin told him. “There are a lot more same sex couples being open about their relationships since the Dark Lords took over. If there’s a way for them to have children together...”

“There’s not,” Sal said shortly. He turned to look at his friend and Merlin shivered to see the hint of red in his eyes. “The method they used was a fluke. The chances of it working for anyone else are nonexistent. And besides...there’s plenty of wizarding children being brought in from the Muggle world who need adopting.”

Sensing that the subject needed to be changed, Merlin asked, “Should we go see if the next entertainment has started yet?”

Sal seemed relieved, and nodded before leading the way.

The Dark Lords had arranged a series of performances to take place throughout the evening, both inside and outside of the manor. They had already seen some very talented tumblers in the grand solar, and a musical performance in one of the more intimate parlors, which had resulted in many of the couples present dancing to the romantic music.

“If I remember correctly, this one should be father’s demonstration!” Sal said, hurriedly leading his friend to the largest ballroom, where a crowd was beginning to form. Due to their smaller size, they were able to worm their way through to the very front, where Voldemort immediately spotted them and smiled warmly at them.

Merlin, having become used to the man’s calm and quiet demeanor at home, was startled by the charisma oozing from the Dark Lord as he stepped onto a short platform in the middle of the room, and then set it to hover about three feet above the floor.

“Welcome, welcome, dear friends and acquaintances!” Voldemort began. He had cast a slight *sonorus* charm on his voice to make sure he was heard throughout the large room. “Tonight we celebrate the coming of a New Year and with it the 20th anniversary of the liberation of Wizarding Britain! And I suppose we are also celebrating my birthday,” he added with chagrin, eliciting chuckles throughout the room.

“Since this year is such an important year for the Ministry, I wanted to provide a little demonstration of magic for my dear guests.” Small gasps came from the crowd as he punctuated his words with a burst of brilliant gold fire from his wand. “As you are all no doubt aware, before I claimed the position of Lord Minister, magic was classified into two types--Dark and Light. Many proponents of so-called Light magic led the populace to believe that Dark magic was evil and would damage your very soul if you used it. This completely ignored that several frequently uses jinxes and hexes were classified as Dark. For instance--” he quickly flicked his wand at a wizard in the front row, and intoned the incantation for the Bat-Bogey Hex. A moment later, the man had a bat painfully forcing its way out of his left nostril and winging its way across the room with quiet squeaks.

Giggles erupted at the display, especially when the man pulled a large handkerchief from his pocket and delicately blew his nose.

“A bit painful, to be sure, but otherwise a harmless spell used even by schoolchildren as a retaliation against the thoughtless words or actions of their peers.” The wizard used as an example flushed crimson, and soon had quietly melted back into the crowd rather than remaining at the front of the room.

Sal leaned close to whisper in Merlin’s ear. “He must have said something that father took offense to.” Merlin nodded in agreement.

“And yet,” Voldemort continued, “The Bat-Bogey Hex was once labeled as Dark magic. I think we can all agree that casting it has had no effect on the souls of generations of children. Neither has the Dusting Charm, the Tripping Jinx, or countless other spells.” There were murmurs of surprise from his audience now--many hadn’t been aware that such commonly used spells were considered Dark.

“This is not to say that Dark magic has no dangers,” Voldemort reassured them. “Casting any one of the Unforgiveables will undoubtedly damage your soul if you are unaccustomed to the addictive nature of Dark magic. This is why Dark wizards undergo rigorous training and practice to acclimate their bodies to the effects of Dark magic. It is a bit like building up an immunity to poison by ingesting it a bit at a time until your body is used to taking it in.

“And it is also true that some witches and wizards are more suited to studying Dark magic than others. Up to now, Dark magic families have kept the training of their children at home due to the restrictions placed upon them by the Ministry. Today I would like to announce that this is changing.” Everyone present was hanging on his every word, including Sal and Merlin. “Starting next year, study of the Dark Arts will be an optional elective at Hogwarts for students in their third year or higher. Additional material will also be added to the Defense curriculum, to aid students in protecting themselves from the effects of Dark magic, whether they are the caster or the victim. But this is only possible because of a new spell developed by the Department of Mysteries, which identifies those with the strongest affinity

for Dark magic. Only those students who can safely study the subject will be offered the chance to enroll. Tonight, I would like to share this spell with you, to see which of you is truly Light or Dark.

“Esteemed guests, please raise your wands aloft and repeat after me.” Every single person in the room complied, many eager to see if they were suited for Dark magic, while others were hopeful that the spell would show that their reliance on Light magic was the result of affinity rather than choice. “*Revelio anima*,” Voldemort intoned. The room repeated the words after him.

Sal caught his father’s eyes as he prepared to cast, and noticed a slight shake of the man’s head in his direction. As a result, he pretended to cast the spell, quickly observed the effects on his father and Merlin, and then silently cast an illusion to make it seem that he was one of the Dark magic users in the room, as would be expected of the son of the Dark Lords.

Merlin, a bit nonplussed that there was a spell to show how Light his family was, cast the spell without expecting much. When a cloud of black fog appeared above him, he was stunned. Looking throughout the room, he saw others who were as surprised as he was, and also noted that the color of one’s cloud could vary drastically. No one in the room had a pristine white cloud, which he would have associated with Light magic. Instead, there were pale grays, darker grays, grays that were almost black. And above him, Sal, and Voldemort hung clouds of pure black so dark you could barely tell it was a cloud at all.

“And so you see,” Voldemort said into the ringing silence of the room, “Everyone has some affinity for Dark magic. Your affinity does not change simply by casting more and more Dark spells. Observe Mr. Thomas here, for instance,” the Dark Lord singled Merlin out, motioning him to approach the hovering platform. “Have you ever cast a Dark spell, Mr. Thomas?”

“No!” Merlin gasped, causing the crowd to break out into whispers of speculation about the rest of his family.

“And yet, his affinity is as Dark as mine or my son’s,” Voldemort told the room. “For those of you who are too old to enjoy this new curriculum at Hogwarts, additional courses in Dark magic will be provided at the Ministry free of charge. I hope that you will join, and convince your friends to try this spell and come to learn as well. It is time for Wizarding Britain to gain true understanding of magic and how it can be used to build our world. Thank you.”

Thunderous applause greeted the conclusion of his demonstration, and the crowd began to disperse. Voldemort lowered his platform and approached Merlin, a hint of apology on his face. “Perhaps I shouldn’t have singled you out like that, Mr. Thomas. But you were such a perfect example...”

“It’s...all right,” Merlin answered. “Please excuse me sir, I have a lot to think about.”

“Of course,” Voldemort murmured. But Merlin was already pushing his way out of the room, intent on finding a quiet place to sit and think for a while. He completely forgot that he was leaving Sal behind.

Sal watched him go, and turned to his father with a question in his eyes. *'Why couldn't I cast the spell?'* he asked in Parseltongue.

'I didn't want to chance it,' Voldemort responded. *'Later tonight, we can test it together to see what happens.'*

Sal nodded and went off to try and find his friend.

That night, in the privacy of his parents' bedroom, Salazar cast the *revelio anima* spell to unremarkable results. Exactly as it had when he pretended to cast the spell, a cloud as black as night hovered over his head. Tom was relieved. "It would have been problematic if it didn't work as intended for you, once your Defense professor tries to ascertain the affinities of students starting next year. This is the least complicated of all the things I thought might happen when you cast it." He smoothed Sal's unruly hair, inherited from Harry.

Sal leaned into the touch, and then hugged his father tightly around the waist.

Tom huffed indignantly, and Sal grinned into his nightshirt before letting go and dashing from the room, heading to his own room and bed.

"Looks like we were right," Harry murmured, moving to sit behind his husband on the bed, long limbs wrapping around Tom's waist in a manner entirely different from the hug their son had just given him.

"Hmmm..." Tom agreed, one hand traveling up Harry's leg in a suggestive motion. "It simplifies things a great deal."

A sharp nip to the sensitive flesh under Tom's ear made him growl. The wet heat of Harry's tongue soothed the spot a moment later. "As nice as it is to have a child to raise, Tom, having two in Riddle Manor has made me a tad frustrated." Harry's hips arched against him, and Tom groaned.

"I suppose I'll have to fix that, then," Tom said. He turned the tables, seizing his lover's legs and turning to press him into the bed.

"Happy birthday," Harry told him breathlessly, seizing his lips in a searing kiss.

They got very little sleep that night.

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