

Chapter 1: A Gryffindor and a Slytherin

A Gryffindor and A Slytherin

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A Gryffindor and A Slytherin Chapter 1 - The Best-Laid Plans

Draco Malfoy was weary and the school year had barely begun.

He had had his first unhappy summer at Malfoy Manor. His mother, Narcissa, who normally doted on him, seemed to consider it Draco's personal failing that Potter had managed to survive long enough to get Draco's father, Lucius, caught and sent to

Azkaban. She'd never say anything like that out loud to her own son, of course, but it was evident in the subtle contexts of her words, the carefully measured smiles.

It was the first time he had hated staying alone at the Manor. He didn't much feel like spending time with Crabbe or Goyle during the summer -- they were good as his goons, but he had nothing in common with them, besides being in Slytherin. Pansy Parkinson's mother had taken her to some tropical resort or another, and Blaise Zabini had spent the summer with his uncle in Palermo, learning the ins and outs of the local politics. Blaise and Draco had exchanged several owls, and Blaise's had been decidedly more interesting. All Draco could write was along the lines of:

Hello Blaise,

I watched the grass grow today. It didn't seem to grow very long at all. Do write more about your Familia, it all sounds so fascinating from where I sit (which is in my quarters, mostly). My best conversation partner for days has been that brain-addled house-elf, Kreacher, but I've already told you all about him. The school year cannot start soon enough.

*Best,
Draco*

To combat his boredom, Draco had started to keep a journal to record his daily thoughts and he became quite fond of it, actually: he liked having his ideas down on paper. Before, he had thought it a rather girly thing -- a diary of all things. However, it gave him the ability to go back and revisit (and revise) his thoughts later. He was finding that his planning abilities increased greatly when he started writing his ideas

down and connecting them via charts, rather than just coming up with plans and mulling over them in his spare time.

By the time summer was over, Draco had detailed plans for everything -- keeping his leadership position among the sixth-year Slytherins, taking revenge on Potter and his gang, making Dumbledore look like an arse, freeing his father from Azkaban... well, maybe not that last one. At any rate, Draco had many plans, and he was ready for another year at school.

The sixth year at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry began just as it did every year: the Hogwarts Express on September first, the prefects' meeting on the train, the horseless carriages, the Sorting, the speeches, the banquet... same shit, different year, in other words.

On September the second, Draco was eating lunch beneath the Quidditch stands. Crabbe and Goyle had had to go and see Professor Snape, Pansy was angry with him for calling her a two-bit whore, and Blaise was still sulking over Draco's rejection of his advances. Draco smirked as he bit into his sandwich.

Honestly, Blaise was insufferable. Draco had told him that nothing could ever happen between the two of them because Blaise slept around and Draco didn't want to catch anything. Blaise had pointed out that Draco couldn't exactly afford to be picky, since they were the only two gay boys in Slytherin, and Draco was too good for the other houses. Draco had smirked then, and said that if Ravenclaw was good enough for Blaise, then it was good enough for Draco. Blaise had stormed off in a huff. "He'll come around, he always does," Draco thought, chewing.

Still, at the moment, his place among the other sixth-years at the Slytherin table didn't look too inviting. Pansy might go so far as to try and slip something embarrassing into his food. He finished his sandwich and was reaching for another when he became aware of voices drifting towards him from the other end of the stands. He half-turned, hoping to see who it was, but couldn't see anything -- there was a board separating the very bottom part of the stands in the middle. Draco strained his ears to listen.

"...and I just couldn't tell him," said a male voice Draco thought he recognised.

"Well, how about you try again after Quidditch practice tomorrow? It honestly can't be that hard, can it?" a clear female voice asked. Draco was sure he'd heard it before, but it was difficult to place.

"You have no idea how hard it is, Hermione," the male voice said. Draco brightened. Of course. Potter and Granger. They frequently came to eat here. Draco wondered if Weasley was there, too. He might hear something he could use. He dropped his sandwich and, abandoning all poise, crawled over to the thin divider between the stands, pressing his ear to it.

"Well, he'll have to talk to you eventually. You're friends, Harry!" Granger said consolingly.

"Friends or not, he's not going to like this. He's probably expected better from me," Potter said with a sigh. Draco suppressed a giggle. The Gryffindors were so insipid. However, his curiosity was piqued and he kept listening.

"No one expects anything from you, Harry," Granger countered in the same consoling tone. Draco could only do so much to keep himself from snorting. How did everybody else stand her?

"Nobody expects anything... Hermione, where have you been for the past five years? EVERYONE expects me to do something!" Potter's voice was raised now, he was angry. "Dumbledore expects me to go and face Voldemort like a good boy should, every other adult expects me to be brave and daring like a good Gryffindor should, Snape and Malfoy expect me to curl up and die like a good Potter should," he spat, and Draco nodded, thinking that Potter wasn't as thick as he looked. "What nobody expected me to be, is a bleeding fairy. And here I am, defying all their expectations."

Draco's eyes widened. This was history in the making. He was overhearing Potter admit a very personal weakness -- one that Draco himself could identify with. He had just received a weapon to use against Potter unlike any he'd ever dreamed of. A weapon that he could use effectively because he was very well aware of what that kind of thing -- discovering one was gay -- did to a person.

It was lucky really, that Draco had been forced to have lunch out here. Potter and Granger were still talking but Draco wasn't interested in neither the rest of Potter's sob story nor Granger's expert advice. He quietly gathered up his things and headed back to the castle in good spirits, whistling *Weasley Is Our King* and formulating a plot.

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Crabbe and Goyle were waiting for him outside Potions. They had to spend the lunch hour with Snape, who was furious with them for not having received Outstanding OWLs in his class, and who was making them collaborate on Slytherin Potions

Booklets, supposedly as Christmas presents for the first-year Slytherins. Draco grinned at them as they told him this, in surprisingly plaintive tones.

"So, how's the project going?" he asked, smirking.

Crabbe shuffled his feet; Goyle looked at a wall.

"Well, I suppose I should say thank you for your spectacular Potions failures, because I have just had a very interesting lunch hour. I'll see you later, both." Draco walked past them and occupied his usual seat at the back of the classroom. He was paired with Blaise, which he'd thought he was going to dislike, but now that he had his new plan, he'd need Blaise's expert assistance at some point.

Blaise strode into the classroom just then and took his seat beside Draco, not looking at him. Draco stared at him pointedly but the other boy was trying very hard to ignore him. Draco sighed, casting a quick glance around to make sure no one was looking. He slid his hand carefully up Blaise's thigh. Blaise's head snapped up, his black curls bouncing around his face, dark eyes flashing. "Come now, Blaise, must you be so difficult?" Draco asked, his tone deliberately beseeching.

Blaise's expression softened and he put his hand on top of Draco's, looping his little finger around Draco's own. "Have you changed your mind then?"

Draco withdrew his hand delicately and winked. "I might have, I might not have; but I do so adore your company. Won't you be a little more patient?"

Blaise rolled his eyes, but smiled. Draco could tell he was mollified, if only slightly.

His gaze wandered towards the classroom entrance just as Granger and Potter made their way to their desk. Draco still didn't understand how Potter managed to get an Outstanding on his Potions OWL. He suspected he hadn't, and McGonagall had bullied Professor Snape into accepting Potter. More importantly, why would Potter want to take NEWT-level Potions? Whatever he wanted to do in the future must involve a Potions NEWT. Draco would just have to find out what it was, wouldn't he? He made a mental note to procure a copy of Potter's timetable.

Potter looked pensive, and Granger kept casting worried glances his way. Draco studied the back of Potter's head -- how that messy mop irritated him. Didn't he know there were potions for that? Professor Snape stalked into the classroom just then and Draco looked up.

"I trust you all have had a good lunch," Snape said in a bored voice. "One of the ingredients you'll be working with today -- barnacle seeds -- emits fumes that make your digestion speed up, and if you haven't eaten, you shall be starving by the end of this lesson."

Two Ravenclaw students exchanged uneasy looks, and Draco smirked. He really disliked having other House members in their Potions class -- the Gryffindors had been bad enough for the first five years, but Advanced Potions ended up with such a small group that members of all houses were together in one classroom. Snape waved his wand at the blackboard, then at the store cupboard, and the lesson began.

Draco was too busy preparing his Healing Potion to pay any more attention to Potter. He and Granger were two of the few Gryffindors in the class, and that seemed to lessen the attacks on Potter from Snape. Draco didn't like that very much -- he'd rather enjoyed Potter torture at the hands of Snape. He heard Snape speaking softly and looked up to see whom he was talking to -- Potter. The boy was whispering something rapidly, and Snape was not sneering, which Draco found very odd. Potter had a very intense and urgent look as he faced Snape, and Granger was angling her head towards the pair.

When Potter had finished talking, Snape had a strange look on his face. He started saying something to Potter, then cast a glance Draco's way. Draco looked away quickly, but he was too late. He heard a soft whisper and the sound of footsteps. When he dared to look up again, Snape was at the front of the classroom, scribbling something on a long sheet of parchment. Potter had bent over his cauldron and was conferring with Granger in lowered voices.

Draco sighed and started to stir his potion. What was going on? He felt very odd at having witnessed the previous scene -- it seemed that Potter had been talking to Snape as an equal, and the other had actually listened! What could Potter possibly have to say to Snape that wouldn't elicit a curled upper lip?

Several minutes later, Snape said, "Your Healing Potion should be a clear blue by now. If it's not, you'll get no marks for today's exercise. I shall be coming round to look at your cauldrons and supervise as you add the dragon's blood."

Draco and Blaise's potion was perfect as usual, but then again, the Advanced Potions class certainly would never see the same frequency of exploding cauldrons as pre-OWL Potions had, especially with Neville Longbottom finally gone. Professor Snape came around and put his hand on Draco's shoulder.

"I should like to see you add the dragon's blood, Blaise; I know Draco is good with handling it."

Blaise obeyed. The rich blue-red substance started to trickle slowly out of the dropper, and as soon as three drops had fallen into the cauldron, Blaise quickly lifted the dropper, pressing his thumb tightly over the opening, and deposited it in the vial. The potion bubbled dangerously for a moment, then started to boil. Professor Snape nodded approvingly and moved on to the desk in front of them. There was nothing to be done now except wait for the potion to settle, so Draco watched Potter.

"*Visum Proximus*," Draco muttered quietly, pointing his wand discreetly at Potter, thus having a much closer view of the boy's head.

Professor Snape was standing above Potter, instructing him to add the final ingredient to the potion. Potter and Granger's cauldron was in between them, so Potter had to turn slightly to administer the dragon's blood. Draco didn't watch the other boy's hand with the dropper; he watched his face. Potter had surprisingly clear skin, and he was slightly tanned -- golden, not bronze. Draco's upper lip twitched slightly. Even in this small, simple thing, Potter had him beat. Draco didn't tan very well at all. His father, Lucius, tanned a rich, deep bronze. Draco would merely turn a deep pink; his skin would peel for days, leaving him nearly as pale as before. He'd inherited his complexion from his mother, Narcissa, who also didn't tan well. At least he didn't freckle.

He shook off the memories of an otherwise pleasant summer in St Tropez and continued watching Potter, who was angling his dropper over the cauldron at that moment. His face was tense with concentration, his lips pulled back slightly, and Draco could see the tip of a very pink tongue sticking out from between his teeth.

Draco's gaze lingered on Potter's mouth then shot back up to his eyes. A bead of sweat was sliding down the other boy's cheek and Draco wanted to lick it. What? No, that was ridiculous. Draco shook his head slightly, amused. This was Harry Potter, not a potential romantic interest. Draco had to have control.

"Watch out, Potter, there's a Dementor behind you," he called.

Potter turned to glare at him, but didn't mess up his potion. Pity. Smirking, Snape walked over to the Hufflepuffs sitting next to Potter and Granger.

Draco and Blaise's potion was ready, and Draco filled two flasks as Blaise fussed with the remaining ingredients on the desk, loading them onto a tray to carry them back to the store cupboard. Draco labelled the flasks carefully and cleaned out their cauldron. This year, Professor Snape had them sharing cauldrons to ensure "proper teamwork," as he'd put it.

Draco snorted under his breath as he gathered up his things. It probably had to do with that speech Granger had made at the beginning of the year, some rubbish about House unity and working together to oppose the Dark Lord. Of course, the other Slytherins in Advanced Potions were paired off with Ravenclaws, Hufflepuffs, and Gryffindors, but Draco had been adamant about working with one of his own, even if it had to be Blaise. He looked over at Blaise, who was lounging in his seat, running a hand through his thick curly hair. Blaise was very attractive, Draco had to admit, but he did sleep around entirely too much. Even now, with all his advances towards Draco, he was eyeing Zacharias Smith -- a Hufflepuff, of all things. Daphne Greengrass -- who had been nicknamed Queenie for her attitude in first year -- was immersed in conversation with Macmillan, the Hufflepuff prefect.

House unity, Draco thought amusedly. *More like cross-House fornication.*

The bell went and Draco got up, shouldering his schoolbag and telling Blaise to take the potion flasks to the front.

"I'll see you at dinner, Draco," Blaise breathed into his ear.

Draco smiled, his eyes downcast, and turned to walk down the narrow space between the desks. As he looked up to see where he was going, he suddenly found himself staring straight into Potter's eyes, too close. Potter's eyes were a violent shade of green, extremely bright. The pupils were large, and there was a leaf-green pattern of a many-pronged star around each. There were flecks of gold scattered throughout the eyes, which had now narrowed.

"What're you staring at, Malfoy?" Potter asked accusingly, his voice coming from too far away. Draco realised he'd forgotten to cancel the Near-Vision spell, which was tied to Potter, and looked down quickly.

"Nothing much, Potter -- just your pretty face," Draco drawled, looking up just a little to see what effect that had on the other boy. Potter's eyes widened and his mouth opened halfway, lips trembling slightly, and a faint blush coloured the skin over his cheekbones. Draco felt a pang just above his stomach. Potter's face was almost... beautiful, with that wide-eyed look. The pang in his chest seemed to turn into a kind of tickle that was spreading upwards, and Draco's throat constricted.

"He's not worth it, Harry," Granger muttered and tugged on her friend's arm, practically dragging him from the classroom. Draco took the opportunity to finish the Near-Vision spell as soon as Potter's back was turned. "That was very interesting," Draco thought, smiling to himself. He left the Potions classroom in high spirits, determined to forget the infinitesimal fraction of time when he'd wanted to just keep looking into Potter's eyes until-- No. That had just been a moment of weakness, and of course, it did not hurt his plan that Potter was somewhat attractive. It didn't hurt Draco's plan at all.

Draco Malfoy's Diary, September 2

Harry Potter is gay. Where was this crucial bit of information when I was drawing up my plans? Where? No matter, I have drawn a new plan. It's not my best, but it was improvised. I expect I shall refine it in the near future. Must obtain copy of Potter's timetable. Must punish Granger severely for telling Potter I wasn't "worth it." I am very much worth it. Potter shall be mine! Well, that was a thought. I suppose I should let it stand. However, if I'm having thoughts like these, I am better off asleep. I feel unclean right now.

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Chapter 2: A Gryffindor and a Slytherin

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Chapter 2 - Classes, Riddles, and Raids

The Daily Prophet, September 3, 1996

MASS BREAKOUT FROM AZKABAN -- AGAIN!

It appears that the tide of time has turned once again. On Monday evening, a critical security breach occurred at Azkaban, and a number of convicted Death Eaters escaped. The Ministry suspects Bellatrix Lestrange, who managed to evade authorities this summer, as the chief orchestrator of the breakout. It is at present unclear how the Death Eaters were able to get through the guarding wards placed around Azkaban. Since the Dementors left this summer, the wizard prison has been guarded in shifts by teams of Aurors. One of the Aurors on duty yesterday evening, Kingsley Shacklebolt, has been reported as missing. The Department of Magical Law Enforcement has declined to comment, citing orders from Amelia Bones, the recently appointed Minister for Magic.

Amongst the escaped prisoners is Lucius Malfoy, captured in the assault on the Ministry this June. A confirmed Death Eater, Mr Malfoy, formerly of Wiltshire, has donated generously to support the Ministry in the past, and the rumour mill is already at work on what his escape might bring, as Mr. Malfoy had friends in very high places indeed. An anonymous source has informed us that a team of Aurors has been dispatched to the Malfoy Manor and Narcissa Malfoy, the escaped prisoner's wife, has been brought in for questioning.

This marks the second breakout from Azkaban this year -- the first being in January, when a number of Death Eaters escaped, amongst them Bellatrix Lestrange. At the time, the escape was not attributed to the return of He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named, as the now-deposed Minister for Magic, Cornelius Fudge, did not believe reports detailing his return. Ministry officials have said that an official statement will be made in two days' time. It is expected that the escaped convicts will rejoin the Dark Lord, but the Daily Prophet urges all witches and wizards to keep their doors locked and warded. For a full list of prescribed security measures, turn to page three.

Draco put down the newspaper and buttered a piece of toast, carefully ignoring the stares. He thought he was beginning to get an idea of what it was like to be Potter, and it was not altogether pleasant. So his father had escaped from Azkaban. Draco knew that the Aurors were wasting their time at the Manor -- his father may have been careless in the past, but he wasn't stupid. Draco wondered how his mother was doing. Aurors at the Manor, how utterly disgraceful. He had still received his sweets that morning, but no note had come with them. Draco couldn't decide if that was just another manifestation of his mother giving him the cold shoulder (there had been no note on the previous day, either, but that had been the first day of classes), or if she'd been trying to avoid someone reading her note.

Draco pictured his mother, frail and delicate, as she packaged the sweets for him, a burly Auror standing over her shoulder, watching her every move. He shuddered.

Well, the Aurors could just sod off. He decided to run quickly up to the Owlery and send his mother a note before Charms started. Draco was grateful for having come to breakfast early. He gulped down his orange juice and wiped his lips with his handkerchief, hauling his schoolbag up from the floor. He got off the bench, ignoring Pansy's pointed stare and Blaise's inquisitive one, and headed towards the doors. As he neared the stairs, he heard Granger's voice and quickly ducked behind a suit of armour, remembering his luck the day before and hoping to overhear something else.

"... nothing you could have done, Harry." Granger said in a calm tone.

"Yeah, Harry," Weasley's voice chimed in, "you did the best you could. It's not your fault they sent Kingsley."

Potter muttered something indistinct and Draco raised an eyebrow, leaning against the wall and thinking back to the *Prophet* article. The name had rung a bell -- Kingsley Shacklebolt, declared missing in the breakout. Potter was connected to last night's breakout, and the missing Auror? This was interesting. He wished he could continue listening, but they'd walked into the Great Hall, and it would hardly be a good idea to follow them. Draco remembered his mother and headed upstairs.

When he got to the Owlery doors, he threw his schoolbag on the floor and crouched down beside it, pulling out a piece of parchment, his quill, and an inkwell. Smoothing the parchment out on his knee, he thought for a minute, quill poised, then began to write.

Dear Mother,

I read about what's happening in the paper. I do hope you're all right, and the situation is not too inconvenient for you. I trust that our guests are not too bothersome. I'm sure it will all be resolved quickly.

*Your loving son,
Draco.*

Draco re-read the note critically, trying to see it from an outsider's point of view. He didn't think anything was objectionable as it was, so he sealed the parchment with a quick spell, got up and walked into the Owlery. He called for Pandora, his owl. She swooped down onto his shoulder, touching his cheek with her beak. "I need you to take this to Mother," he told her. She stuck out her leg but turned her head away, obviously displeased. Pandora could be quite lazy when it suited her. He tied the parchment to her leg and she flew off abruptly. Draco smirked and headed down to Charms.

As he neared the Charms classroom, Draco remembered something from earlier. How had Potter, Granger, and Weasley known about the Azkaban breakout? They had just been heading for breakfast when Draco had overheard them; they couldn't have got the news. Draco walked into the classroom frowning. Why was he thinking about Potter's post, anyway? He sat down, got his things out of his schoolbag, and poked Vincent in the back with the tip of a quill. Vincent turned around, scowling, but the expression changed to a grin when he saw Draco.

"Where were you at breakfast?" Gregory asked, noticing Draco as well and half-turning to face him.

"I woke up early, and had to post a letter," Draco replied, thumbing through his textbook. "Think we'll get a lot of homework?" he asked, turning to Blaise, who was sitting beside him with a dreamy look on his face.

"Huh?" Blaise looked over at Draco as though seeing him for the first time. "There you are. Where'd you go?"

"Don't you listen? I just told Gregory that I had to post a letter. Honestly, Blaise," Draco said, irritated. "What were you thinking about?" he asked accusingly.

"Oh, nothing, nothing," Blaise said with a strange smile. "Were you saying something about homework?"

"Yes," Draco answered, even more irritated. "Do you think we'll get a lot of it?"

Professor Flitwick walked in, bouncy as usual, and Draco looked away from Blaise, turning to look at the teacher. Flitwick climbed up onto the pile of books in his chair and smiled warmly at the class. "I see many of you are back. I'm simply delighted with you all, though there are fewer Slytherins than Ravenclaws in Advanced Charms this year," he squeaked. Draco barely suppressed a snort. The man was so passive-aggressive; one would think he'd never heard of house unity. The worst thing you could say to Slytherins was that members of another house had bested them. That was just asking for increased competition, not school unity. Draco wondered idly if Potter had passed his Charms OWL. Draco had dropped the wineglass he'd been levitating and had only narrowly passed. That had been Potter's fault, Draco seethed.

"As you all know, Advanced Charms is a step up from your usual charmwork," Professor Flitwick continued, startling Draco into dropping his quill on the table. "From the first day of classes, you're going to be preparing for your N.E.W.Ts. One major unit that is going to take up a large part of your time in class and outside is Apparation magic. Indeed, Apparation is a charm, and since you will all be expected to sit your Apparation examinations next July, we will be dealing with that subject a lot."

Draco perked up considerably. He'd always wanted to learn how to Apparate, but he'd thought it was taught in Transfiguration. He sat up straighter and stopped doodling, which he'd been doing absentmindedly for some time. The parchment below the quill featured a crude drawing of a wineglass. Draco crumpled it up and pushed it to the side of his desk.

"Now, class, kindly turn to page fourteen in your textbooks and begin reading the introductory chapter. I expect you to have a chapter outline with rough notes in one hour. After that, I will take questions about the chapter for the remaining hour. Yes, Miss Greengrass?" he turned to Daphne, who had put up her hand.

"Professor Flitwick, are we going to have a practical portion on Apparation magic, or is it going to be all theory?"

"Of course it is going to be all theory, Miss Greengrass. Only wizards who have passed their Apparation test are allowed to perform this charm," Professor Flitwick replied. "You will be given one crucial bit of information that's absolutely necessary to perform the charm on the day of your examination. Coupled with a good theoretical background, there is no reason why you shouldn't be able to pass." Flitwick looked around the room and chuckled. "Now, I can already see half of you plotting to find out

what this information is," he said with a genial smile. "However, you will be disappointed to find that it is unique to each caster, and you cannot know what it is until you are told on the day of your examination."

There were audible sighs from several students, including Draco and Blaise. They looked at each other and grinned. For the rest of the lesson, Draco made copious notes, stopping occasionally to peek at Blaise's, making sure he'd made more detailed notes than the other boy. When the bell went, Draco was already stuffing his things back into his bag. They had Care of Magical Creatures with the Gryffindors next, and there wasn't much time to get to the half-giant's hut.

Draco passed Pansy on his way out and gave her a quick grin. They'd been on bad terms for a whole day and that was long enough, he decided.

She grinned back, rolling her eyes. "I should have known not to expect 'I'm sorry' from you," she muttered as he kept walking.

Draco loitered near the doorway, waiting for Pansy to get her things. She looped her arm through his and they caught up to Vincent, Gregory, and Blaise. Pansy was talking Draco's ear off about all the gossip that was already circulating regarding the Azkaban breakout and Draco's father.

"Can you believe it? Loony Lovegood has been saying that you orchestrated the whole thing! And you'd been in the Slytherin common room till all hours, and lots of people saw you, and I just don't understand how idiots like her get into Ravenclaw!" Pansy babbled. Draco smiled to himself. She tended to do this a lot, but she was an invaluable source of information.

"Pansy?" he tugged on her arm gently as they walked outside. She stopped talking and looked up at him. "Do you, by any chance, know how to obtain the timetable of a student in another house?"

Pansy's smile was so bright Draco became afraid that she'd blind him. "Only if you tell me who he is," she said.

Draco sighed and rolled his eyes. "Potter, who else?"

Pansy goggled at him, almost stumbling over a protruding tree root as they stepped onto the path leading to the half-giant's hut. "You and Potter?"

Draco rolled his eyes again. "What do you mean, Potter and I? I want to know where he is so I can sneak up on him. I have a plan this year," he said conspiratorially, lowering his voice, glancing at the other three Slytherins. The boys were absorbed in Quidditch talk and weren't paying attention to Draco and Pansy. Good.

Pansy brightened. "Ooh, a plan! Will you tell me the plan?"

"That wasn't part of the deal, Parkinson," Draco said, looking stern.

"All right, all right. But I'll make you tell me anyway!" Pansy vowed.

Draco sighed. "Maybe. So, out with it." He nudged her again.

"Well, you see, Madam Pince has timetables for each student, so that she can check their passes to the Restricted Section against them, to see if any students are claiming to need books for a class that they don't even have," Pansy said quietly. "They're in her desk's bottom drawer, and they're organised alphabetically and by house." Pansy rolled her eyes. "It may seem unreasonable, but 'reasonable' and Madam Pince have never been used in the same sentence."

"So all we'd need to do is create a diversion and get her away from there for long enough to get at this drawer," Draco started thinking out loud. "Hey, you lot!"

The three boys stopped and turned to Draco, waiting for him to catch up, Pansy still on his arm. "Up for a... distraction after classes tonight?" Draco asked, getting right to the point.

Vincent and Gregory nodded immediately, but Blaise frowned. "Already, Draco? It's the second day of classes, for crying out loud." Draco looped his Pansy-free arm around Blaise's waist and gave him a beseeching look. Blaise rolled his eyes. Draco outlined his plan briefly as they neared the clearing near Hagrid's hut. Potter, Granger, and Weasley were huddled together on the ground, talking urgently. Granger would occasionally look around with suspicion. When her gaze fell on Draco, he smirked, staring at her pointedly. Granger looked at him, then at Pansy, tilted her nose slightly upwards and looked away. Draco fumed. Why, the absolute nerve of that filthy Mudblood scum.

He didn't have time to think about just what she deserved for that kind of behaviour, because Hagrid had appeared and started the lesson. He, too, kept going on about Advanced Care of Magical Creatures being very important for their NEWTs, and Draco wondered if someone had actually beaten some sense into the great oaf over the summer -- he didn't sound any more intelligible, mind, but at least the bits Draco did hear sounded sensible. Draco wished he didn't have to continue taking this class, but he needed it. Some antiquated law demanded that all Ministry officials have a NEWT in Care of Magical Creatures. Hagrid didn't have any new creatures for them, taking the time to go over what they already knew from their previous five years. He mentioned that they would study Acromantula (strictly in theory, yeh understan') phoenixes (got us a great one righ' here at Hogwarts, Fawkes is 'is name), as well as various types of snakes (Harry here can talk ter snakes, can't yeh, Harry?).

When the lunch bell went, Draco crouched down to collect his bag from the grass and heard Weasley's voice.

"...did you hear that, Harry, Acromantula! Giant spiders!"

"Hagrid's not taking us to see Aragog, you heard what he said -- strictly in theory," Potter's voice argued, and Draco felt... something odd. Potter's voice had finally broken during the summer, and the Gryffindor boy now had a deep baritone that was nothing if not ... appealing? Draco yanked his schoolbag from the ground, banishing the thought firmly. He stood up abruptly, and caught Potter looking at him. Pansy sidled up to Draco, attaching herself to his arm again, and Potter looked away.

Draco smirked and strode away, Pansy chattering away at his side, the three Slytherin boys following close behind, once again engrossed in Quidditch talk. Draco didn't want to think about Quidditch. He picked at his lunch half-heartedly, mind going over

the details for the evening's visit to the library. Blaise finished lunch early and excused himself with something Draco didn't bother listening to, then disappeared. Draco and Pansy walked to Transfiguration together. Vincent and Gregory hadn't passed their Transfiguration O.W.Ls, and were forced to take Muggle Studies -- with the Hufflepuffs. Draco didn't pity them.

Transfiguration went much like their other classes, except that Blaise rushed in late. Professor McGonagall took a point from Slytherin because Blaise didn't apologise for his tardiness, then harped on Advanced Transfiguration being extremely important from the first day of classes to the day they took their NEWTs. Draco found himself tuning her out. He didn't understand why they all had to say the same thing; why didn't they just gather all the sixth-years together and read them a lecture on the utter importance of every single one of their classes? Snape was the only one who hadn't done it: he considered his subject the most important of all and he didn't need to explain this to Advanced Potions students.

Draco's mind wandered back to the moment after Potions when he'd forgotten to take the Near-Vision Charm off Potter. The other boy's eyes had looked so--

He felt a tug on his sleeve and looked up, irritated. Blaise was giving him a significant look, nodding at the front of the classroom. Draco turned to look that way and resumed listening.

"Today, we are starting to study Animagus forms. Chapter Three of your book contains the legal requirements made of all Animagi, and you are expected to be familiar with it before the next class. Today's class will be on general theory behind wilful metamorphosis and Metamorphmagi, because understanding these concepts is essential to understanding this branch of Transfiguration. Yes, Miss Greengrass?"

"Professor McGonagall, are we going to learn how to become Animagi?" Daphne said in her lilting voice. Draco raised an eyebrow, suddenly overcome by d  ja vu.

"Absolutely not, Miss Greengrass. As you will learn from Chapter Three of your textbook, there are strict laws governing who may and may not become an Animagus, and Ministry permission is required before anyone goes through their training. Unregistered Animagi are punished quite severely," McGonagall said. "As I was saying, wilful metamorphosis is a very important concept to grasp. Kindly turn to Chapter One of your book and begin reading. I will be asking questions during the second hour, so make sure you take notes. You may consult your notes while answering my questions, but you may not use the book. Start."

Draco sighed, and flipped to the appropriate page in his textbook. He took notes, stopping to glance over at Blaise's as usual. He was finished with the chapter earlier than most of his classmates and spent the rest of the time admiring his handwriting, which was very economical, but did not lack flair. His hand was unmistakable, Draco thought with satisfaction. After a ten-minute break, McGonagall grilled them with questions, some of which were quite difficult. Draco was able to answer some without glancing at his notes, and he mentally patted himself on the back for that.

The laws concerning Animagi were certainly strict, yet Draco couldn't help but wonder what it would be like. He remembered Rita Skeeter, that meddlesome reporter who had descended on Hogwarts in their fourth year -- she'd been a beetle; it certainly suited her personality, Draco thought. He pondered what form he would take if he were to become an Animagus, and knew it right away -- a ferret, of course. No one would ever dream of suspecting Draco if he ran around as a ferret. Draco smirked. Sure, ferrets were plebeian, but no one would ever imagine Draco Malfoy wilfully choosing to be one, and that's what made the idea brilliant. The bell went, and he gathered up his things gratefully -- it had been a rather long day.

The three of them -- Draco, Blaise, and Pansy -- walked to the Slytherin dungeons, chatting about becoming Animagi. Draco told them he'd be a smooth snake, and his friends nodded approvingly. Blaise wanted to be an adder, and Pansy said she'd be a tawny owl.

When the boys looked at her incredulously for breaking the pattern of choosing serpents, she rolled her eyes and said "Owls are everywhere! It's the ultimate disguise!"

Draco thought this was a very good point, but he kept that to himself, as he didn't see a need to inflate Pansy's ego any further. They parted ways in the Slytherin common room, and the boys headed to their dormitory.

Draco threw his schoolbag down on the floor and flopped onto his bed. "Can you believe how much homework we've got already?" he asked Blaise, who was lounging on his own bed.

"Yeah, it's disgraceful. You'd think we're in our NEWT year," Blaise said, nodding.

"So what is it with all the mysterious disappearances, Blaise?" Draco asked.

"That would be telling," Blaise said with a wink.

"Are you keeping secrets from me, Zabini?" Draco asked, narrowing his eyes.

"Maybe," Blaise replied, grinning.

"Hmph." Draco fell back down on his bed and closed his eyes. "So are we still on for tonight?"

"You've reconsidered my offer?" Draco could practically hear the hope in Blaise's voice. It made him a little sad.

"No, you pillock. The library!" he replied.

"Oh." Disappointment. "Yeah, of course, I said I'd help."

"Good," Draco said, not looking at him. He wasn't sure if Blaise would agree to the next stage of his plan, and that was causing him to worry a little. He'd have to ponder this further. Sighing, he got up and pulled his schoolbag closer, taking out his textbooks and parchment. Might as well try to get some homework done. Blaise did the same, and Draco waited, then they went into the common room.

Vincent and Gregory were already there, playing Exploding Snap as they usually did at this time of the day. Draco felt oddly domestic. It was all so familiar, so

comfortable: more comfortable than his home had been in the summer, certainly. Draco frowned, thinking of his parents. Was his father out there somewhere, hunted like an animal? Was his mother subjected to any indignities during her interrogation? Draco's frown deepened. His father could definitely take whatever the Aurors threw at him, but his mother was delicate. He hoped he'd have word from her the next day. Father had escaped, after all, and she didn't have a reason to be cross with Draco any more, he hoped.

He opened his Charms textbook and scanned the homework notes he'd jotted. Take notes on two chapters, be ready to answer questions. Write one foot of parchment on the legal ramifications of using Apparition magic without a license. He could do this one from his notes, Draco thought, and began writing. When it was time for dinner, Draco had finished the essay. He put it aside and looked up.

Noticing some first-years huddled together in a group, he rose and strode over to them, glaring.

"What are you doing?" he demanded, and they stood apart, looking extremely guilty. Draco wondered if he'd been so unsubtle in his first year.

"Er, sorry, we were just..." one boy started to say.

Draco interrupted, noticing a small boy who was trying to hide a paper bag behind his back. "What have you got there? Hand it over!"

The boy proffered the bag timidly, tears in his eyes. Draco looked at the bag.

"*Weasleys' Wizarding Wheezes*," he muttered, mentally cursing every Weasley who had ever lived. "Skiving Snackboxes. I should have known."

He turned to glare at the first-years. "Are you aware that these are on the list of items forbidden on school premises? Or should I escort you to Mr. Filch's office to remind you? The list is right there." he jabbed a finger twice in the direction of the notice board.

The first-years cowered, and one boy began to cry. "Slytherins do not cry," Draco said in a cold, low voice, turning on him. "If we're slighted, we wait for the best moment to strike back. And. We. Never. Show. Weakness."

He looked down at the boys again, and decided that they looked properly cowed. "Now, I'm not going to punish you for this. But if I see these filthy things in the common room again, you'll all be doing detentions for the rest of the year, make no mistake. Is that clear?"

The boys started nodding frantically, and Draco relented. "If you want to skive off lessons, find a more creative way of doing it. These snackboxes are so last year," he said with a sly smirk, and walked off, binning the paper bag.

Blaise was staring at him with undisguised awe. "You're something, Draco," he said in a husky voice. Draco smiled slightly. He knew he could have a presence that

demanded respect and awe; after all, he'd practised it meticulously for many years, watching his father. At sixteen, he could command the respect of his peers and lessers by simply using a certain tone of voice; Draco knew that about Slytherin house. He wasn't altogether sure about the rest of the world, however.

Draco's thoughts were interrupted as Pansy bounded into the common room surrounded by her posse, and Blaise looked away, getting up and smoothing out his robes unnecessarily. Draco liked it very much when Blaise got all flustered, but at the same time, it made him uneasy. Blaise was very passionate and could be dangerous when angered, and Draco knew he was playing with fire. He hadn't exactly been leading Blaise on, but he hadn't been doing the opposite, either. The truth was, he didn't know what he wanted. He didn't really fancy Blaise, but he was a little scared of him, and so he was reluctant to flatly turn him down.

Draco pondered this as they all walked to the Great Hall. At dinner, Draco picked at his Yorkshire pudding absentmindedly, casting surreptitious glances at the Gryffindor table. Potter wasn't there and neither was Weasley, but Granger was. She was talking to Longbottom, looking supremely unconcerned with the absence of her best friends. Draco wondered where Potter was. He was certainly up to something, Draco knew, and he desperately wanted to know what it was. Obviously, Potter was Dumbledore's; there was no question about that. Draco thought back to the conversation he'd overheard that morning -- Potter had known about the Auror before he'd seen the Prophet, Draco was sure of it.

He chewed on a piece of lettuce listlessly and looked over at Blaise. Blaise was staring in the direction of the Hufflepuff table and looked very strange. Draco elbowed him hard in the ribs, causing Blaise to drop his fork. "What?" Blaise demanded.

"Nothing," Draco said. "Just wanted your attention."

"Oh. What's going on?"

"Well, the library. Do you want to go right after dinner or do you have something else to do?" Draco asked. He didn't bother asking Pansy, Vincent, or Gregory -- he knew they'd go when he'd tell them to go.

"Right after dinner's fine. I've somewhere I have to be later on, though," Blaise replied.

Draco raised an eyebrow. "Hmm?"

Blaise gave him a sly smile. "That would be telling."

Draco's eyes narrowed, but he didn't respond. He didn't feel like having pudding but he drank tea while Blaise and Pansy finished their food, chatting about homework. Finally, they stood up and Draco followed, motioning to Vincent and Gregory, who rose unquestioningly despite the fact that they were far from finished with their puddings. Draco cast another glance at the Gryffindor table -- still no Potter. Odd.

The five Slytherins climbed the stairs to the library as Draco outlined the plan again. They walked in and sat down at one of the tables, pretending to whisper about homework. As it was still dinner, no one was in the library, and even Granger had

been in the Great Hall when they'd left. Draco nodded to Pansy, then Vincent and Gregory. The two boys rose and headed towards the Restricted Section as Pansy skipped over to Madam Pince's desk.

Draco and Blaise sat very still, waiting.

"Madam Pince, would you please let me take a peek at my library file? I've forgotten what the return date is on one of my books, and if it's today, I'll go and fetch it immediately!" Pansy simpered. Draco applauded inwardly -- the girl was good. There was a loud clicking sound as Madam Pince unlocked her drawer, and it was immediately followed by a loud *crash* from the back of the library, and a mournful voice began to wail: "Students in the Restricted Section!" Normally, sixth-year students would be allowed in the Restricted Section, but Vincent and Gregory weren't technically sixth-years, what with all the OWLs they'd failed.

As Madam Pince got up from her chair and sprinted off as fast as her feet would carry her, Blaise and Draco sprang into action. Blaise rushed over to Madam Pince's desk and Draco stood near the hallway through which she'd just run. Draco didn't dare turn around to see how Blaise was doing. Then he heard Madam Pince screaming at the top of her lungs.

A few moments later, she appeared, red-faced and sputtering, as Vincent and Gregory trailed behind her, looking sheepish. Draco immediately pretended to be looking at a book on a nearby shelf and he felt a hot breath on his cheek. "I've got it," Blaise whispered, lips almost touching Draco's ear. Draco shivered involuntarily and nodded, hoping that Blaise hadn't noticed the shiver.

Madam Pince, Vincent, and Gregory were passing by now, and Draco called, "Excuse me, I'm a Slytherin prefect. What's been going on?"

Madam Pince whirled on him and was going to start screaming again, but he levelled a cold glare at her. Her eyes widened and she closed her mouth sharply, drawing a breath. "These two were trying to get into the Restricted Section, Mr. Malfoy," she said angrily. "They came in with you, did they not?"

Draco turned to Vincent and Gregory, still glaring. "Is this true?"

Vincent spoke up. "No, no, we weren't trying anything, Draco. We were just careless. Gregory pushed me by accident, and I stumbled over the ropes. He didn't see me!"

"We're so sorry," Gregory chimed in, turning to Madam Pince. "We didn't mean it!"

Draco almost sniggered. They were doing surprisingly well. He turned to Madam Pince. "I'll explain to my housemates what proper library conduct is, Madam Pince," he said smoothly. "I promise they shan't be allowed to set foot in the library until they learn proper respect for the hallows of knowledge."

This appeared to mollify the librarian, though she continued to stare daggers at Vincent and Gregory.

Draco turned slightly to face them both. "As for you, you're on house arrest until the end of the week." They both looked shocked and groaned in unison -- Draco hadn't told them he was actually going to punish them. He'd kept that detail private so it would have the desired effect. "Now follow me, unless you want detentions with Mr. Filch. Madam Pince, with your permission?" He raised an inquiring eyebrow.

"Of course. It's good to see that the Slytherin prefects are doing their job, at any rate." Madam Pince said.

Draco nodded politely and jerked his head towards the door. "Follow me. Blaise, are you coming?"

"Yeah," Blaise said, walking back up to him.

Draco made a beeline for Pansy, who was still standing by Madam Pince's desk, hands folded. She was glaring at Vincent and Gregory pointedly. "I'll see you in a while, pet," Draco said, kissing her lightly on the lips. To the rest of the school, Pansy Parkinson was Draco's girlfriend.

The four boys filed out of the library, barely able to keep from grinning. When they got down to the first floor, they burst out laughing, even Vincent and Gregory. Draco clapped them both on the backs jovially.

"Look, boys, it's not like you ever leave the common room, anyway. Blaise and I will bring you food from the kitchens as a consolation prize, how's that?"

Both of them brightened visibly -- they usually went over to the kitchen every evening for snacks, and now that problem was solved as well.

This, Draco reflected, was why it was worth it to be Slytherin. They didn't just break the rules when it suited their purposes. They didn't get caught.

Draco Malfoy's Diary, September 3

Potter's Timetable

Monday: Double Charms, Lunch, Double Potions

Tuesday: Double Transfiguration, Care of Magical Creatures, Lunch, Double Defense Against the Dark Arts

Wednesday: Double Herbology, Lunch, Double Defense Against the Dark Arts

Thursday: Double Potions, Lunch, Double Transfiguration

Friday: Double Charms, Lunch, Care of Magical Creatures, Astronomy

Classes we have in common are underlined.

Charms, Transfiguration, Potions, and Defense Against the Dark Arts seem to dominate this list. Must find someone to cross-reference those subjects for me with

professions that require N.E.W.Ts in them. As an aside, like Professor Snape, I still do not understand how he got into the Advanced Potions class.

I'm glad Pansy and I are speaking again. Blaise is acting very strangely. He didn't pay nearly as much attention to me today as he usually does. I'm not sure if that's good or bad, considering my feelings towards him, or lack thereof. Nevertheless, I don't like it. What is Potter's connection to the missing Auror? I believe today's Care of Magical Creatures lesson confirmed that Weasley is indeed afraid of spiders. Who or what is Aragog? I must find out. Hmm. Queenie seems very eager to learn the practical side of spells that are illegal without a licence. What gives? On an unrelated and entirely insignificant note: was that disappointment in Potter's eyes? Was he checking me out before Pansy came over? These thoughts make me appropriately queasy. Time for bed.

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Chapter 3: A Gryffindor and a Slytherin

A Gryffindor and A Slytherin

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Author's Notes: This was my first novel-length Harry/Draco story. It was completed four months before the release of HBP (and before the announcement of Draco's birth date on Rowling's website) and is now AU. This story stands alone, though it's also a companion piece to *Beyond Wild Moor and Fen*, which is from Harry's point of view. Many thanks to Mishty, Vel, Jaxmari, Kristal and Autumn LeCroix for beta-reading. Constructive criticism is always welcome and appreciated.

A Gryffindor and A Slytherin Chapter 3 - Macmillan and Nott

Draco awoke on Wednesday morning feeling miserable. He had been having an altogether unpleasant dream involving Potter chasing him on a Hippogriff, pointing his wand at him and shouting the words to a spell Draco couldn't make out no matter how hard he tried. Draco tried desperately to keep a safe distance, but Potter kept gaining on him -- apparently, his skill with a Hippogriff matched his skill on a broomstick. Draco kept going for the Golden Snitch, but Potter beat him to it, the Hippogriff turning to look at Draco with a triumphant glare in its eyes. Potter then turned into Weasley riding a Firebolt and wearing a badge that read *Malfoy Is Our King*.

Draco rubbed his eyes sleepily. The dream served as an unpleasant reminder of next week's Quidditch tryouts for Slytherin. He'd been named captain but it was a hollow gesture -- almost the entire team has left the school now: only he, Vincent, and Gregory remained. Vincent and Gregory were not too bad as Beaters but neither of them had any chance whatsoever of being named captain. Draco wondered absentmindedly who the new Gryffindor captain would be, considering that Angelina Johnson had left the school as well. It would be just perfect if Potter was named Gryffindor captain, simply poetic. He'd find out in a week's time, at any rate. Draco yawned and crawled out of bed, shivering a little -- the blasted dungeon floors were always so cold.

Pulling on his dressing gown, Draco padded over to the bathroom. After washing up, he studied his face in the mirror critically. He hadn't removed his facial hair since the first day of classes and there was a thin layer of stubble on his chin that made his face look slightly misshapen -- light tended to play tricks on blond hair. He reached for the bottle of Hair Removing Potion and rubbed several drops of the viscous liquid between his palms, then pressed them against his skin. A few moments later, the fuzz vanished, and Draco smirked at his reflection, satisfied. The mirror made a sound between a giggle and a snort, and Draco resisted the urge to stick his tongue out at it, like he used to when he was twelve. He walked back into the dormitory and pulled the curtains around Blaise's bed back, grabbing the other boy's blanket and pulling it off him. Blaise hugged his pillow and whimpered rather pitifully.

"What time is it?" he asked, opening one eye to look at Draco, who held the blanket with a triumphant look on his face.

"Time to wake up," Draco responded, looking at him expectantly. "I shan't go to breakfast alone again, Blaise. I only let you all sleep later yesterday because it was the second day of classes. Do not test the limits of my generosity."

"Prat," Blaise concluded, abandoning the pillow and swinging off the bed with a sigh. He rubbed his eyes with the heels of his hands, shaking his head slightly. "It is much too early, isn't it?"

"I don't care," Draco said, walking over to the chair where he'd left his robe. It was neatly folded and slung over the back -- Draco was always fastidious about his clothing. He took off his dressing gown and hung it back on the usual hook by his bedside. Blaise inhaled sharply, and Draco turned to him, surprised.

"Why are you still over there, Zabini? Breakfast is starting soon, hurry up, we'll be late."

Blaise made no answer, staring at Draco pointedly. Draco realised he wasn't wearing anything other than his pyjama bottoms. He rolled his eyes and shrugged into his robe. "Honestly, Blaise," he said, wriggling out of the pyjama bottoms under the robe.

"What? I wasn't doing anything, just looking," Blaise said petulantly.

"Look, this is the last conversation I want to have with you at eight o'clock in the morning. Off to get washed with you, now," Draco said impatiently, folding his pyjama bottoms and placing them into a drawer of his bedside table.

Blaise grunted and walked over towards the bathroom, swaying slightly. Blaise was not a morning person. Draco, on the other hand, enjoyed mornings very much, ever since he was small. While Blaise made splashing noises in the bathroom next door, Draco roused Vincent and Gregory, affording them even less ceremony than he'd afforded Blaise. Draco Malfoy was out of bed, his dormitory mates had better do the same, or suffer his impatience. It had been this way since they had first come to Hogwarts, though in their first year Blaise had fiercely opposed Draco's regime. Vincent and Gregory had helped Draco then, but he'd always held more respect for Blaise because of it.

Now they were getting out of their beds, hopping from foot to foot on the dungeon floor. Blaise came out of the bathroom, his dressing gown splattered with water all over the front, and the two boys raced for the door. Gregory won as usual, leaving Vincent standing outside. He grunted and leant against the wall, shutting his eyes. Draco was observing this with some amusement: the morning scene never changed. It

was yet another thing he liked about being in Slytherin: they had routines and rituals. Each dormitory had its own little echoes of many years of wizarding tradition.

Blaise was muttering under his breath as he dressed. Draco remembered that he had come into the common room rather late the previous evening. "I say, Blaise," he said, "Where were you last night?"

Blaise stopped fumbling with the clasp on his robe and looked up with a sly grin. "That would be--"

"-- telling, yes, I know," Draco interrupted, waving his hand around. "So tell me."

"Nope," came the reply, and Blaise crouched down on the floor, evidently looking for his schoolbag.

Draco hoisted his own schoolbag on his shoulder and snorted.

"Fine, don't," he said in an injured tone, and sat down on the bed to wait for Vincent and Gregory.

Soon, all four boys were dressed and ready to go. They took their hats off the pegs on the wall by the door and filed out into the common room.

"Go on, I'll catch up," Draco called to them as they reached the exit. "I need to check the notice board."

The three other boys nodded and walked out into the dungeon hallway, and Draco peered at the notice board. The first Hogsmeade weekend was going to be the first weekend of October, just like it was last year. Draco made a mental note of this and left the common room, smirking to himself. Things were falling into place quite splendidly. He caught up with Blaise, Vincent, and Gregory, who were walking slowly, chatting about Quidditch again.

"You are going to try out, Blaise, aren't you?" Draco piped up, falling into step beside his friend.

"I don't know," Blaise said with a shake of his head. "Way too much temptation in the changing rooms," he added with a sly wink.

Draco rolled his eyes. "You're insufferable, Zabini." Vincent and Gregory sniggered in unison. Draco ignored them. "Just because you try out doesn't mean you're going to make it, you know," he said, waggling his eyebrows at Blaise, who laughed.

"You slay me, Malfoy," he countered as they turned the corner and came into view of the Great Hall. Up ahead, Potter, Granger, and Weasley were walking through the large double doors. Weasley was gesticulating wildly and Potter was laughing. Granger's nose was buried in a book and she nearly tripped over the entryway. Draco snickered.

The Slytherin table was nearly full by the time they reached it, but their seats were left for them, as usual. Pansy was already there, tucking into a plateful of scrambled eggs and kippers while trying to carry on a conversation with Tracey Davis and Millicent Bulstrode. Seeing Draco, she beamed at him and waved him over. Draco took his seat beside her and gave her a peck on the cheek. "Morning, pet," he said throatily and Pansy giggled. Millicent shot them a look, and Draco smirked at her. She was such a prude.

He scooped a dollop of marmalade onto his plate and took a piece of toast from a nearby tray. As he was spreading the marmalade, Draco thought about his plans for the coming week. Apart from the enormous amount of homework they were likely to get, there was the prefects' meeting on Friday -- that was a new thing this year. Every Friday, prefects from each house had to hold an hour-long meeting before the sixth-year Gryffindor Astronomy lesson, which took place in the evening. The meetings were to be held near the Astronomy Tower, so that the sixth-year Gryffindors who had Astronomy didn't have to leave early. Incidentally, both Weasley and Granger had said they were taking Astronomy, so it was really because of them that the meetings had to be held in the spare Prefects' room. Draco bit into his toast hungrily. Slytherins always got the short end of the stick, he fumed, chewing.

Draco took a sip of his coffee and added more cream to it -- he didn't like it when coffee stung his throat, he liked it when it was smooth. A moment later, the windows opened with a whoosh and owl post arrived. Pandora landed in front of Draco's plate. She bore a package filled with Chocoballs and Liquorice Wands, plus a note from Draco's mum. He gave Pandora the rest of his toast and stroked her beak gently in thanks, and she flew off. Draco grabbed a green apple from a nearby tray and bit into it, unsealing the parchment. Seeing the entire roll of parchment filled with his mother's fancy script, he relaxed. Things were apparently back to normal now that Father was free. He read the letter as he nibbled on the apple.

Mum was bored, with no one but the house elves to keep her company. She hadn't heard from Father yet, but she was certain he would attempt to contact her. The letter advised that Lucius may even try to contact Narcissa through Draco, since the school owls would be much less likely to be intercepted than owls going to or from Malfoy Manor. She wrote about going over to the Zabini's on the weekend and other inconsequential things that didn't really interest Draco that much, but it was nice to read about them. Despite the cold-shoulder treatment he'd received from his mum in the summer, he did miss her. A part of him couldn't help but feel satisfied that now she was the one locked up in her quarters with no one but Kreacher to talk to.

Draco thought about Kreacher and shuddered. The house elf had come to stay at Malfoy Manor because Narcissa was the last surviving Black with any sort of a permanent residence. Draco smirked, thinking that Aunt Bella had been too busy organising breakouts from Azkaban to bother with house elves. His thoughts wandered back to Kreacher and Draco didn't feel like finishing his apple any more. The house elf was downright scary, now that Draco thought of it -- always muttering to himself as though no one could hear him. Kreacher seemed to have taken a liking to Draco, and kept turning up with food and drinks whenever Draco was least expecting it.

The elf didn't talk much about the last year he spent in the House of Black, but Draco was able to glean that Potter had been there several times. Unfortunately, Kreacher was bound by powerful magic not to reveal any details. Draco had been disappointed at that, and he refused to see Kreacher for two weeks, hoping that the elf would change his mind or find a way around the magic that bound him. It didn't happen, and Draco didn't have any goods on Potter when he boarded the train to Hogwarts two days earlier. That had been a first, too, Draco reflected, then smiled slightly as he remembered the conversation he'd overheard on Monday between Granger and Potter. That had made up for everything in spades.

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The rest of the week passed without incident, if one didn't count Thursday. A first-year Slytherin was caught sneaking out after hours by Ernie Macmillan. That was useful for Draco, because he knew the only reason Macmillan had caught the little berk was that he'd been snogging Queenie and had walked her to the Slytherin common room. Draco saw Queenie walk into the common room dishevelled and bright-eyed, then heard the first-year's frantic gibbering and Macmillan's lecturing voice.

Draco walked unhurriedly out of the common room and into the dungeon hallway, startling Macmillan and causing the first-year to jump in fear. It was one of the boys he'd caught with *Weasleys' Wizarding Wheezes* earlier that week. Draco glared at the first-year and motioned for him to get inside the common room.

"I'll deal with you later," he said in a sweet voice, punctuating his words with a pointed glare. The boy hurried inside, eyes downcast. Macmillan started to say something, but Draco glared at him in turn.

"Well, well," Draco drawled, leaning casually against the wall. "Isn't it just a tad hypocritical of you to berate the poor bastard when you yourself allowed a student out of bounds?"

Queenie wasn't a prefect, and she wasn't supposed to be out after nine in the evening. Draco had drawn a conclusion rather quickly, and he was pleased to see that he was right -- Macmillan blushed a deep crimson and averted his eyes. Draco raised an eyebrow at him.

"Tell you what, Macmillan. You do me a small favour and I keep my mouth shut about tonight's -- ah -- adventure," he said in his best impression of Professor Snape's ingratiating tone, which Snape reserved for speaking to people he particularly disliked.

"Are you going to blackmail me, Malfoy? If so, you can just forget it!" Macmillan huffed. Draco laughed pleasantly, looking over at the other boy.

"Oh, nothing that crude, Macmillan. All I ask is a little favour. If you like, I'll even let you punish the ickle firstie in addition to forgetting about the incident," Draco said, looking straight at Macmillan. "Or you can walk away, and I walk into the common room and put sweet Daphne in detention... loudly stating the reason."

"It's only twenty past nine, Malfoy! We lost track of time, it's not like --" Macmillan began, fuming, but Draco held his hand up.

"You know I would be well within my rights to punish Daphne even if she was a minute late. However, I don't want to punish Daphne and I don't want to cause you undue embarrassment, provided you do me a small favour. It's a trifle, really, I don't understand why you must get so defensive," Draco said evenly, cocking his head to one side and flashing the other boy an indulgent smile. "In the name of house unity, Macmillan."

The Hufflepuff prefect stared at Draco intently for a moment, then lowered his gaze. "Fine," he mumbled. "What is it that you want?"

Draco reached into the inner pocket of his robe, produced a scrap of parchment with a list on it, and handed it to Macmillan, who took it and looked at it, frowning.

Subjects:

Charms

Transfiguration

Potions

Defence Against the Dark Arts

Macmillan looked up from the parchment. "What do you want with these?" he asked, his round face reflecting honest puzzlement.

Draco smirked. "A list of professions that require NEWTs in all these classes at the same time. That's all."

Macmillan gaped at him. "Why don't you just go to the library and do it yourself?" he sputtered.

"Because I don't fancy doing it myself, Macmillan," Draco replied, smirk firmly in place.

"All right," Macmillan said after a pause -- he obviously realised he was the loser either way. Draco reflected that perhaps the boy wasn't as dim as he looked.

"No hurry, but if you could have it ready for the prefect meeting tomorrow, that would be just great," Draco said, and walked back towards the Slytherin common room. There were several moments of silence, and then he heard the sound of footsteps going in the opposite direction, and a muttered "Slytherins!"

Draco fought the urge to call out an admonishment involving house unity. "*Serpens sanguineus*," he said softly, and the door opened noiselessly. Draco walked into the Slytherin common room, which was nearly deserted except for Blaise, who sat hunched over a roll of parchment, balancing a book on his knees and trying to write. Queenie was sitting on one of the sofas, looking frightened. Beside her sat Theodore Nott, who looked sullen. He had dark circles under his eyes and his face reminded Draco unpleasantly of Granger before she had her teeth fixed. Draco glanced at them indifferently and started walking over to Blaise.

"What were you doing, Malfoy?" Nott demanded, and Draco whirled around to face him.

"Why, Nott, I don't believe it's any of your business what Slytherin prefects do after hours," Draco said without looking at Queenie.

"You're not scaring me with your precious pin, Malfoy," Nott walked closer to him and jabbed a finger at his chest.

Draco took a small step backwards in surprise, but recovered quickly. "What is it that you want, Nott?" he asked haughtily. "Make it quick, I haven't got time for playing games."

"I want to know what game you're playing, Malfoy," Nott said, staring up at Draco. Draco sneered.

"I'm going to recommend you go see Madam Pomfrey, Nott," he said in a quiet voice. "The school year's just beginning, and your brain is already addled."

Draco heard footsteps and heard Blaise walk up behind him. "What's going on, Draco?" Blaise asked, almost putting his chin on Draco's shoulder.

"You stay out of this, Zabini," Nott said, his voice rising. Draco wrinkled his nose -- Nott's breath smelled like overcooked cabbage. Blaise tensed beside him but Draco held out his arm as though to restrain him.

"Look, Nott, I don't know who pissed in your pumpkin juice at dinner," Draco said lazily. "However, rest assured that I will not tolerate that kind of behaviour."

"You'll bloody well tolerate it, Malfoy," Nott spat, his eyes narrowing.

Draco stiffened. Enough was enough. He glared down at Nott coldly. "Learn some manners before you speak to me again, Nott," he hissed, "and mind your place." With that, Draco turned on his heel and pulled Blaise along with him.

"You will listen to me, Malfoy!" Nott yelled with a hint of desperation. Draco ignored him and didn't stop walking until they reached the dormitories. What was Nott on about? Draco pulled the door open and walked in. Vincent and Gregory were sitting on their beds, already in their pyjamas, eating the snacks Blaise and Draco had brought up from the kitchens earlier. Draco must have looked really out of sorts, because they both stared at him curiously.

"What was that all about?" Blaise asked, closing the door behind them.

"I have no idea," Draco replied.

"Whuhappen?" Vincent asked between mouthfuls.

"It's Nott, he just went mental at Draco in the common room," Blaise answered.

Vincent goggled at him. "Nott?"

Draco frowned. Nott had never given him problems before -- in fact, the only person who could ever contest Draco's authority among the sixth-years was Blaise, and Draco had headed that threat off a long time ago by befriending him. It didn't hurt that Blaise was smitten with him, of course, but they had been friends first. It wasn't an alliance of equals, not exactly, but Draco was confident Blaise was not a threat.

Nott, on the other hand, was rather a dark horse. Draco hadn't seen very much of Theodore since the term began -- in fact, this evening was the first time they'd encountered each other outside of classes. At mealtimes, Nott sat with Daphne and several others who didn't belong to Draco's circle, near the fifth-years, whereas Draco's group sat with the seventh-years. Draco walked over to his bed and started pulling off his robe absentmindedly. He changed into his pyjama bottoms and pulled on a dressing gown, ignoring Blaise, who stood leaning against one of the posts of his own bed, leering. Draco stalked past him into the bathroom. He kept mulling over what had just happened as he washed up for the night.

Draco Malfoy's Diary, September 5

I'll need to corner Liam Baddock at the prefects' meeting tomorrow -- he needs to be aware of Nott. What a lucky turn of events with Macmillan, I must say. I do need to speak with Queenie about her questions in class. Everything is going according to plan.

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Chapter 4: A Gryffindor and a Slytherin

A Gryffindor and A Slytherin

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Author's Notes: This was my first novel-length Harry/Draco story. It was completed four months before the release of HBP (and before the announcement of Draco's birth date on Rowling's website) and is now AU. This story stands alone, though it's also a companion piece to *Beyond Wild Moor and Fen*, which is from Harry's point of view. Many thanks to Mishty, Vel, Jaxmari, Kristal and Autumn LeCroix for beta-reading. Constructive criticism is always welcome and appreciated.

A Gryffindor and A Slytherin

Chapter 4 - House Unity, House Pride

On Friday afternoon, Draco and Pansy left the Slytherin common room together, heading towards the Astronomy Tower. As they walked, Draco filled Pansy in on what had happened with Nott, and Pansy promised to put out some feelers to see if she could find out what Nott's problem was. They were the last to arrive at the meeting. Draco was satisfied -- he'd timed it perfectly. There were four tables arranged in a perfect rectangle in the room, one for each house. He and Pansy took their seats at the Slytherin table as Granger threw them a disapproving look. Draco sneered, and Weasley's ears went red.

Draco looked around the room, drumming out the tune to "Weasley is Our King" on the desk with his fingers. All the prefects looked considerably more frazzled than they had during the first meeting on the train. The Head Boy and Girl had told them what the year's theme would be -- house unity -- and that they were all expected to participate in their house projects, to set an example for the younger students. Draco thought it all quite boring, and had spent most of the first meeting watching Hannah Abbott, who seemed to blush furiously whenever Draco looked at her. Draco thought that very amusing and continued to stare at Hannah suggestively for the entire duration of the meeting.

Pansy hadn't been pleased -- it was, in fact, the reason the two of them had had a row on the first day. Draco couldn't help but smirk as he thought back to the fight. Pansy had cornered him in their compartment, red-faced, eyes flashing. She'd demanded to know what he thought he was doing, making eyes at Hannah for everyone to see. Draco didn't see what the big deal was, and Pansy was livid. She told him that she wasn't going to let him make it look like he was cheating on her -- one word led to another, and Draco had called Pansy a two-bit whore and got slapped.

Draco's eyes searched out Hannah and there she was at the Hufflepuff table across from him, engaged in conversation with Macmillan. However, Draco noticed that Hannah kept sneaking looks over at the Slytherin table and when she saw that he was looking at her, she blushed and didn't look again. Draco smiled to himself. Yes. He could use this, too. He shifted in his chair slightly as though to move away from Pansy and continued gazing at Hannah in a way that he hoped was enticing. He felt a tug on his robe from Pansy's side and turned to her, expecting a stern look. However, Pansy only nodded at Liam Baddock, and mouthed, "pay attention!"

Draco turned to look at Liam, who grinned slyly and rose from his seat elegantly, clearing his throat. He was Head Boy, and his appointment had come as a pleasant surprise -- no one had thought Dumbledore would appoint a Slytherin. Draco felt it was a rather wise move on Dumbledore's part -- a Slytherin Head Boy would affirm the so-called commitment to house unity. When Granger spoke to them at the

beginning of the year, that had been the first thought that entered Draco's mind. Old codger or not, Dumbledore's cunning had to be admired.

Draco's gaze travelled to the classroom wall, where a large fly was sitting motionlessly. Draco remembered Rita Skeeter again, wondering idly if perhaps the fly was really an Animagus. Things had been so much easier at this time two years ago -- Draco hadn't thought he was gay, the Triwizard Tournament had been coming up, and there had been no war.

Draco himself cared little for the war. He saw the whole thing as a game, really -- it always had been a game to him. When he was a little boy, it was a game because his father told him it was. Lucius Malfoy used to tell his son that he was playing pretend whenever he went to meet with people in the Ministry of Magic. Little Draco used to watch his father be a kind and generous father, then a cold, cruel man who destroyed others' lives without a shred of remorse, then a genuflecting sycophant who seemed content with nothing but servitude. Lucius Malfoy was truly a man with a thousand faces -- a talented actor if there ever was one. Lucius loved power and influence, and he used his best talent to get them.

Draco shifted slightly, looking over at Darla Nesbett, the seventh-year Hufflepuff prefect. She was listening to Liam with her mouth slightly open; it made her look foolish. Her eyes cut to Draco and she frowned suspiciously, closing her mouth. Draco was willing to bet she thought him "no better" than his father, the Death Eater. Draco shrugged mentally -- he wasn't better than his father.

Draco did not agree with the newspaper articles that branded Lucius Malfoy an evil man. He knew that his father was not an evil man; he was simply a man who looked out for himself. There were far too many people in the wizarding world who equated looking out for oneself and no one else with evilness. Draco didn't think it was evil. He thought it was sensible. The war was a game his father was playing; maybe Draco

would even get to join. However, Draco hadn't yet decided which side would be winning -- unlike his father, who liked risks and challenges, Draco preferred to simply pick the winning side.

Draco's principles, however, were firmly on the side of the Dark Lord -- Lucius Malfoy had not raised his son idly. There were two major issues at stake in the war, and Draco identified strongly with his father on both.

One bone of contention was Dark Magic; Draco didn't think any magic was truly dark unless the intent behind it was dark. He doubted that Potter had survived as long as he had without resorting to the so-called Dark spells. The rumours surrounding the showdown at the Ministry in June suggested that Potter had stood alone against at least four Death Eaters. Draco refused to believe that he'd done it all using defence spells and mundane attacks like Stunners. It simply wasn't possible.

Draco glanced at Granger, who was listening intently to Liam, occasionally scribbling on a piece of parchment in front of her. She had been injured quite severely in the Ministry showdown in June, Draco had heard. He was sorry she hadn't had the good sense to snuff it and rid Hogwarts of her noisome presence.

The other bone of contention in the war was the issue of Mudbloods. That Draco thought to be a rather valid cause -- his father had explained to him how the wizarding world was polluted by Muggle blood, how the magic got spread out and once powerful families had become mere shells of what they once were because there was too much mundane blood in them. Draco feared that if the inter-breeding continued, there would be no wizards in a few generations' time, and that was a rather scary thought. Of course, Draco's homosexuality would prevent him from continuing the pureblood Malfoy-Black lines anyway, but he chose not to think about that.

Beside him, Liam had finished speaking and sat down; everyone started clapping. Draco clapped absentmindedly with a blank look on his face. Liam had told him to be civil at least at the first meeting, and Draco had promised to comply. A promise was a promise, after all. Granger rose from her seat and cleared her throat. Draco rolled his eyes. She wore a smug, self-satisfied look, as though she had anything to be proud of, the Mudblood. Draco made a face. Granger had even bullied Dumbledore into letting her make the beginning-of-year speech about house unity, when by rights it should have been the Head Boy or Girl. Everyone fell silent, and she spoke.

"As far as Gryffindor house goes, we offer the Defence Association. Several of you --" she glanced at the Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff tables "-- are already familiar with it, others --" she threw Draco and Pansy a pointed look "-- are familiar with some of its members."

Her gaze settled on Draco and he thought he detected a smirk. Why, the impudent, filthy Mudblood, reminding him of how they had all ganged up on Draco, Vincent, and Gregory! Draco snorted, and Liam elbowed him sharply in the ribs. Draco shut his eyes in frustration. He simply couldn't wait until seventh year, when he wouldn't have anyone to defer to. Granger continued talking.

"As you know, the Defence Association is a group of students who get together to practise Defence Against the Dark Arts beyond what is taught in class," she said. "We have an excellent Defence Against the Dark Arts professor this year, but the Gryffindor prefects think that it would be a good idea to continue the DA despite that fact, if only to allow the students to get to know one another better." She took a breath and continued. "It's really quite fun. Harry is a very talented wizard and he's taught us a lot in the last year, he saved both our lives last June," she said with a glance at Weasley, who beamed and nodded several times. Draco managed to suppress a snort. If Potter had taught them so bloody much, why did he have to save their lives at the end of it? Shouldn't they have been able to save their own skins?

"In conclusion, this is the first contribution of Gryffindor house towards house unity this year. Gryffindor will be in charge of organising the meetings and signing up members. Thank you." She curtsied and sat back down, and everyone clapped. Draco didn't, but Liam elbowed him again. Draco put his hands together twice and put his hands back down, wincing. The second nudge had hurt.

Brock Logan, the seventh-year Hufflepuff prefect, nodded to Macmillan. The latter stood and delivered a speech about Hufflepuff organising small gatherings for all four houses on the weekends in various locations around the school. Hufflepuff would provide the snacks, drinks, and music; the only catch being that people would be invited exactly ten minutes beforehand and wouldn't know who else was coming. He waxed philosophic about a goblet they'd bewitched to work similarly to the Triwizard Tournament's Goblet of Fire, only it would spit out twenty random names, not one at a time, and it would always be five names from each house, all in the same year. Macmillan thanked Granger for her help in making said goblet and sat down, shooting a look at Draco and giving him a barely perceptible nod. Good, he had the list, then. The party idea sounded awful.

Trista Morgan, Ravenclaw Head Girl, rose to her feet. She was thinner than a broomstick, and her pinched lips and wire-rimmed spectacles made her look like a professor rather than a student. She had a deep, throaty voice that didn't match her look at all, and Draco found it nearly hypnotic -- it looked like she was just opening her mouth, but it was impossible to associate her bony frame with her voice. Draco was reminded of ventriloquists and their creepy-looking dummies as he listened to her. He fidgeted in the uncomfortable chair and tried to pay attention.

Ravenclaw house was organising homework groups for each year with two members from each house per group. They asked all the professors to create extra credit assignments on which these groups could work together to raise their grades. Students taking their O.W.Ls and N.E.W.Ts that year were guaranteed extra points towards their mark if they participated in all the meetings. Draco thought this was a much better idea than the Hufflepuff parties -- anything to get ahead academically, even if it did mean working together with members of the other houses.

At this point, Draco regretted not having heard what Liam and the others had prepared for the Slytherin contribution -- Draco had declined to participate in the initial brainstorming session. Oh well, Pansy would tell him. The meeting ended as everyone agreed to some kind of a timetable of events, Draco didn't pay attention. He was trying to catch Macmillan's eye in case he forgot about the list, but Macmillan was already headed his way. He handed over a neatly folded piece of parchment. "Here is the list of those ingredients I asked you about, Malfoy. Thanks again for helping me," he said and Draco nodded, rather impressed against his will. "I'll have the descriptions for you in a week's time, Macmillan," he said, pocketing the parchment.

Every single person in the room except Macmillan, who'd already gone out the door, goggled at Draco. Draco smiled beatifically and gave a little shrug. "Well, house unity," he drawled, glaring at Granger, who was having considerable trouble masking her shock.

Liam slapped him on the shoulder genially. "Atta boy, Draco."

Draco seethed. He detested it when Liam was so condescending, and he considered an appropriate comeback that would let Liam know that without offending him. Trista Morgan came over and coughed politely, and Liam turned to her with an apologetic sideways glance at Draco. Draco nodded and leaned against the desk.

Draco had latched onto Liam back when they were still small -- Draco did know how to pick the right friends, his father had taught him to be discerning. The other houses were inferior -- instead of focusing on getting ahead, they focused on worthless emotional bonds that could be severed by something as trivial as a missed birthday, or petty jealousy. Slytherin students left Hogwarts with a well-established network of friendships that would help them get ahead. Slytherin friendships were based on

mutual respect and the recognition that each one of them was striving to get ahead for themselves, not some nebulous greater good. Slytherin pride was self-pride, put simply.

"Listen, we need to talk," Liam said.

Draco looked up, startled. "Yes, we do," he replied, steering his thoughts back into there and then.

Liam's dark eyes narrowed. "Oh?"

"We have a little problem in sixth year," Draco added helpfully.

"And their name is?"

"Theodore Nott."

"Indeed?" A pause.

"He verbally attacked me yesterday evening for no reason whatsoever. When told to mind his manners, he questioned my authority," Draco paused. "You will do something about it?"

"Certainly, Draco," Liam said, brightening. "Actually, this would then tie directly into what I was going to talk to you about."

Draco nodded, and looked at Liam expectantly.

"My younger brother Malcolm is going to try out for Chaser," the Head Boy said, staring intensely at Draco.

"Understood," Draco said. He gave a mental shrug -- as long as the prat didn't want to play Keeper, Draco was all right with it. Draco wanted to pick the new Keeper himself.

This was how things were in Slytherin. There was a pecking order, and no one pretended it didn't exist. A pecking order was necessary to a well-structured society - that was the Slytherin way. There were those at the top and those at the bottom. People moved up to the top by using those who allowed themselves to be used.

Prefects were untouchable -- they had been appointed by an authority that was higher than the students. No Slytherin dared question a Slytherin prefect, and a fifth-year prefect didn't dare question a sixth-year prefect, no more than the self-same sixth-year prefect dared question a seventh-year prefect or the Head Boy. This was how

Slytherins played the game of life at Hogwarts. Rule-breaking was not tolerated because it ruined the game for everyone. Currently, Liam was the head of Slytherin, immediately after Professor Snape. No one dared question Liam any more than they dared question Snape.

Draco grinned privately and said goodbye to Liam. He was about to look around for Pansy when he felt warm hands over his eyes and reached up with his own. "No one else has such small hands, Pansy," he said, gently taking her hands off his face. He didn't like it when people touched his face, and Pansy knew that very well. She must be upset about something, Draco thought, turning towards her. She was glaring at him.

"Since when are you friendly with Macmillan, Draco?" she demanded.

Draco laughed. "Oh that's what it is. You'll be relieved to know it isn't anything overly friendly," he looked at her meaningfully. "Just a favour," he finished, and made a mental note to send the first-year who'd been caught to see Macmillan. A promise was a promise. Pansy was still pouting.

"You're so cagey lately, Draco," she complained. "You never tell me anything any more."

"I have my reasons," Draco responded.

Pansy knew better than to press the issue. They set off down the stairs, walking past the Astronomy classroom where the sixth-year Gryffindors were waiting for Professor Sinistra to come and let them in. Potter, Granger, and Weasley stood a little off to the side and laughing their heads off.

Granger then said, "You won't believe what Malfoy just did in the prefects meeting!" She had perfect timing, Draco had to give her that.

"Not going to die of shock, are you, Granger?" Draco called. He simply could not let her get away with her snide comments in the meeting, there was just no way he would let it go.

The three of them stopped laughing and glared at Draco. Weasley was rapidly turning a fearsome shade of red. He took a step towards Draco and pointed a finger at him accusingly. "I don't know what you did to Ernie, Malfoy, but you'll be sorry. You better not be in the same DA group I am in."

"DA?" Draco mocked. "Dangerously Addle-brained? I'm terrified. I always knew you were a snivelling hypocrite, Weasel, babbling about house unity when other prefects are around, then abandoning all pretence when it's just you, the Mudblood, and Scarhead here." Well, it was true. Weasley was always looking for a chance to confront Draco, whether he was justified or not. He'd nod along with whatever Granger said, then turn around and fling mud at Draco. It was disgusting.

Weasley lunged. "Just. Ignore. Him." Granger ground out, restraining him.

Potter was staring at Draco in exactly the same way he'd stared at him ever since school started -- with careful indifference. It was driving Draco mad. He had been sure Potter had been checking him out in Tuesday's Care of Magical Creatures class. He'd watched Potter in the Great Hall on Wednesday, but the other boy never once looked his way. He had bumped into Potter on purpose outside Potions on Thursday, but the other boy had just shrugged it off and kept walking. It wasn't as though Potter had changed. He'd been the same, in every way, as he was before, back when Draco hadn't even realised he'd noticed what Potter was like. It was just that he'd stopped acknowledging Draco entirely, and Draco didn't like that. Potter owed it to Draco to acknowledge him. Even now, Potter was already turning away -- Professor Sinistra had arrived and she was unlocking the classroom door.

Draco glared at Potter's back, considering a parting shot, but the only things that came to mind weren't safe to utter in front of a teacher. He put an arm around Pansy's shoulders and kissed the top of her head absentmindedly. Pansy lifted her gaze to his.

"You don't think it's possible, do you?" she asked seriously.

"What?"

"House unity," Pansy answered.

"Do you?"

Pansy bit her bottom lip. "To be completely honest, I think it just might work. Though I'm not holding my breath," she added hastily when Draco narrowed his eyes.

"Me neither. They don't get us, Parks," Draco said, using her childhood nickname as he often did when they were having a moment. They were definitely having "a moment" now, Draco reflected.

Pansy and he had always been close. She had put up with his temper tantrums when he was smaller, she had given him the comfort he was used to getting from his mum. Pansy had agreed to pretend to be his girlfriend back in fourth year, when he'd first realised that he just didn't fancy girls in that way. She never pretended it was a sacrifice, either -- she enjoyed the intrigue, and it made her the object of envy among the other Slytherin girls. Pansy enjoyed attention, and being Draco's girlfriend drew attention to her, that was why she did it. Draco loved her for never pretending that it was anything else. They had their differences, because they both knew how to push each other's buttons, but Pansy was the closest to a sister Draco had ever had. He sighed.

"You know, Draco, you scare me sometimes. I look at your eyes and it's as though you're an old man," Pansy said thoughtfully.

"Well, it's not a surprise, considering I am five whole months older than you," Draco deadpanned, and they burst out laughing. "Come on."

"Hey, Pansy," Draco said, remembering the beginning of the meeting. "I sort of tuned Liam out during the meeting. What is it that Slytherin is doing again?"

"Draco! Why, I'm shocked. You listened to all but our Head Boy? Shame on you!" Pansy said, but she was giggling.

"Yes, yes, I shall pay penance later," Draco said as they got down the last stairwell and turned towards the Slytherin dungeon. "What was it, though?"

"Oh, I think it's a brilliant idea. I came up with it, you know," Pansy answered as they approached the entrance to the Slytherin common room.

"*Serpens sanguineus*," Draco muttered and the door swung open. "Go on," he encouraged, as they walked into the common room and settled on one of the sofas.

"Well, see, I started from the whole idea that nobody understands Slytherins," Pansy said enthusiastically. "Everyone would be quite leery of us organising something like the Hufflepuffs, though the idea of Slytherin common room parties was raised during the brainstorm."

Draco scoffed. "Parties in the Slytherin common room? I think not. Snape would have kittens. I'm surprised he lets us participate in any of this house unity business in the first place."

Pansy snickered. "Well, he did have veto power over every idea, yet he agreed to mine. May I finish?"

"All right, all right," Draco said, leaning over to the table and grabbing the bowl of Bertie Bott's Every Flavour Beans

"So every Slytherin is going to write a short essay describing themselves, no longer than one foot of parchment. The essays of the Slytherin students in each year will be given to the members of other houses also in their year. What they then have to do is work together to see if they can guess who wrote each essay," Pansy said, looking smug.

"That's ridiculous. Don't you think that the minute they read 'I have pale skin, blond hair and grey eyes,' they'll immediately know it's my essay? Do you see any other pale blonds in sixth year?" Draco gave her an incredulous look, popping a Bean into his mouth and spitting it out as soon as he bit down. He hated vanilla.

Pansy snorted. "You have to describe yourself from the inside, Draco. Who you are as a person, not what you look like. I told you, I was going on the assumption that no one understands Slytherins. It's a chance to let people see that they have us all wrong."

"So basically, we get to talk about ourselves, and they get to do the work? Why, I agree, it's delightful," Draco said, winking at Pansy. "Won't they be able to tell who it is by the handwriting, though?" Draco thought that he wouldn't put it past the Gryffindors in particular to sneak a peek at Slytherins' notes in class.

"Professor Flitwick promised to bewitch the parchments to alter the writing so it looks like the same person wrote all of them," Pansy replied, and winked back. "That was the whole idea: the less work, the better. Liam had waxed poetic about the Slytherin stereotype; it's too bad you weren't listening to him. I swear even Granger looked humbled."

"I think I've heard everything there is to hear on what Liam thinks about the Slytherin stereotypes, Pansy," Draco snorted.

Liam was very good at smoke and mirrors, and Draco doubted anyone really knew what went on in his mind. Outwardly, he seemed like the model student -- getting good grades, fulfilling his prefect duties unfailingly, condescending but not hostile towards the other houses. He did say he disliked the fact that everyone branded Slytherins as nasty, evil gits who would stop at nothing to seize power, but Draco wasn't sure if Liam wasn't merely saying what he was expected to say.

Draco shook his head. "Well, to whom do we give our essays?"

"There'll be a collection bin in the common room, and people can just keep dropping their essays in. We'll take them out before the first Hogsmeade weekend, then make those who haven't written theirs do them before that Sunday."

"And what if people just make stuff up?" Draco asked, feeling tempted to do it just to mess with everyone.

"Oh, that's not advisable. See, you'll have to own up to writing what you did publicly," Pansy said with a knowing smile. "And Liam said he's going to identify liars just as publicly."

"That doesn't sound so good." Draco frowned at her. Liam had always made a point about knowing everything about everyone.

"Well, it's the whole point. After the essays are in, the other houses will have until Halloween to make their guesses. After the Halloween Feast, there will be readings of five essays every evening after dinner."

"Wait, someone's going to read them out? Why?" Draco was liking this less and less.

"Well, it's the whole point. It's a competition, you see -- the house that gets the most Slytherins right gets two hundred and fifty points awarded. After each essay is read, speakers from the other three houses will give their guesses on who it is. Then the writer gets up and the truth is revealed," Pansy explained.

"And what do we get out of it?" Draco demanded.

"For each person who writes truthfully and no house is able to guess their identity, Slytherin gets fifty house points," Pansy said, beaming.

"This is going to net Slytherin a lot of house points, then," Draco concluded with satisfaction.

Just then, several third-year students walked into the common room, yammering excitedly. Draco glared at them and rose, giving Pansy a quick kiss. He wanted to think, and he needed peace and quiet. He withdrew to his dormitory, wondering absentmindedly where Blaise was.

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Over the weekend, Draco spent all his time in the Slytherin common room, determined to get as much of his homework done as possible -- he'd be losing the entire afternoon on Wednesday to Quidditch tryouts, and it wouldn't do to fall behind on coursework so early in the year. On Sunday afternoon, just before dinner, Draco finished his Potions essay and stretched contentedly. Herbert, Millicent's pet cat, wandered over to where Draco was sitting and looked up at him, purring. Draco reached out an arm and scratched the animal behind the ears. He had seen Nott several times since the Thursday incident, but the other boy seemed determined to avoid him. Good. Liam must have reminded him of the importance of respecting his betters.

Draco tickled under Herbert's chin for the last time and got up, limping -- he'd been sitting with his left leg bent under him and it had fallen asleep. He hadn't seen Blaise all day and Draco wondered what the other boy was up to. Queenie walked in from the girls' dormitories and froze in the doorway when she saw Draco. He looked over at her, raising an eyebrow.

"What is it, Queenie?" Draco asked.

"You're not going to tell everyone, are you, Draco?" she asked in a controlled voice, brushing her brown hair out of her face.

"There's nothing to tell," Draco said, winking.

Queenie gave a small smile and then narrowed her dark eyes. "What did you make him do?"

"Just a small favour," Draco replied, grinning now. "Tell me, Queenie..."

"You better not start asking questions about my personal life, because I'll hex you into Hogsmeade," she said in a low voice.

Draco's expression hardened. "I am not tactless, Greengrass. You should stop hanging around with that uncultured swine, he's a bad influence on you."

"Don't have a go at Theodore, Draco! He's hurting, is what he is," Queenie said, lowering her gaze demurely.

"All the more reason to have a go, then," Draco replied, walking over to her and wrapping an arm around her shoulders.

Draco and Queenie had been friends when they were small, but they drifted apart since Draco and Pansy got close. Queenie disliked Pansy, and the feeling was mutual. Pansy was more useful to Draco than Queenie -- she had access to all sorts of information, and Queenie didn't. Queenie understood that Draco's loyalty was to himself first, he never pretended otherwise. Still, they talked sometimes when it suited them.

"A lot of us are hurting these days, but he's the only one who's showing it," he finished.

"But his dad--"

Draco interrupted, suddenly understanding. "Yeah, Vincent's dad, too. My dad, until recently. He's not the only one." He led her over to the sofa and they sat down. Draco propped his elbows atop his thighs and linked his fingers together, looking at her sideways.

"Draco, he thinks you had something to do with the Azkaban breakout," she said seriously.

"What? Don't tell me Nott listens to those stupid rumours!"

"So it's not true then?" Queenie's eyes were round with genuine surprise.

"What do you think I am, some kind of boy wonder? Hogwarts student by day, vigilante Death Eater by night?" Draco shook his head in amusement. "What does Nott think I can do for him, anyway?"

"Draco, his dad is the only one Theodore has. His mum died a long time ago, and he's been by himself all summer. He's been out of sorts."

"Well he can cry me a river, Queenie," Draco snapped. He could understand that Nott was in pain, but that didn't give him the right to get smart with Draco. "Anyhow, I don't want to talk about Nott any more. I'm curious about you."

"If this is about Ernie, Draco, I--"

"It's not about Macmillan, would you listen?" Draco said, then searched his mind for a better expression than 'curious'. "I'm worried, Queenie," he ventured. Her features softened and she looked up at him with a mixture of hope and suspicion. Aha. Draco picked the rest of his words very carefully -- he'd found the soft spot, now he just had to press it gently. "You're asking strange questions in classes, I'm afraid you're going to get yourself into trouble," he said, carefully arranging his features to look concerned.

"Oh, that," she said with a sigh. "Well, see, I had this idea -- I turn seventeen in November. So I was hoping that I would be allowed to Apparate, take special courses or something."

Draco nodded and gave her a small smile, allowing it to reach his eyes just a little. That ought to be encouragement enough, if he knew anything about Queenie. However, she suddenly looked as though she was about to cry, muttered something about having to go to the library, and left the room in a hurry. Draco collapsed onto the back of the sofa, frustrated. Was nothing going to go his way this year? He thought back to his conversation with Queenie and remembered the list Macmillan had made. He'd forgotten all about it, and it was still in the pocket of his robe. He fished for it and smoothed it out on the sofa cushion beside him.

Professions

Auror (Ministry position, so requires Care of Magical Creatures.)

Healer (Also requires Herbology)

Hit Wizard (Ministry position, so requires Care of Magical Creatures.)

Obliviator (Ministry position, so requires Care of Magical Creatures. Also needs Muggle Studies.)

Unspeakable (Ministry position, so requires Care of Magical Creatures. Also needs Ancient Runes or Arithmancy.)

Draco chuckled slightly at Macmillan's efficiency. He was a model Hufflepuff -- he'd even alphabetised the list. He recalled Potter's timetable from memory and walked back over to his chair, picking up his quill. Dipping it into the inkpot, he crossed off the last two -- Potter didn't have Muggle Studies, Ancient Runes, or Arithmancy. He looked at the remaining three occupations, frowning. Well, a Healer was certainly out of the question. Potter had an obsession with saving the world with a sword rather than healing its ills. Draco crossed Healer off the list.

So, it really came down to Auror and Hit Wizard. Draco frowned, looking from one line to the other. Well, Hit Wizards didn't deal with Dark wizards like Draco's dad. They simply were sent after petty criminals. Aurors were the ones who went after Death Eaters, and Potter was just a poster child for that kind of work. Draco nodded, convinced. After all, Potter was an orphan because of the Dark Lord and his Death Eaters. He'd want to eradicate them all, Gryffindor that he was.

Draco wondered idly what Potter's childhood must have been like, without any parents. He hadn't really wondered about it before, but now that Draco had spent a summer without his father, who was now missing, he began to puzzle over the thought. He shooed it away impatiently -- what did he care about Potter and his wretched childhood? Potter was responsible for Draco's father landing in Azkaban, and that was a line he never should have crossed. Potter would pay. It didn't matter that Lucius Malfoy had escaped. Draco crossed Hit Wizard off, folded the list and stuck it back in his pocket. It was time for dinner.

Draco Malfoy's Diary, September 8

I must admit I feel strangely excited about the Slytherin house unity project. I don't know yet what I'll write about specifically, but it's certainly not going to be the war. There's no point -- I'm quite aware my views are unpopular, right though they may be. I wonder how long it's going to take Potter's class to figure out who has written my essay. I bet they won't be able to.

So apparently, Nott expects me to save his father for him because my father escaped from Azkaban and he believed the rumour that I had something to do with that. I'm afraid he may have gone mental, which is a shame, really. He's always struck me as

an intelligent chap. Is Nott's father even in Azkaban? Tuesday's article only mentioned Father.

Queenie's behaviour is strange. It's as though she's hiding some secret that's really upsetting her. What could it be? What has Apparation got to do with it?

Potter is not playing into my hands, unfortunately. I will have to rein myself in a little more, I suppose, and not insult Weasley or Granger in front of him; it could mean problems in my plan. A pity, really, because Weasley is such easy prey. Why does Potter feign indifference? More importantly, why does it seem to bother me that he might just be indifferent? Well, no, it doesn't bother me at all. Really. No matter, time for bed.

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Chapter 5: A Gryffindor and a Slytherin

A Gryffindor and A Slytherin

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Author's Notes: This was my first novel-length Harry/Draco story. It was completed four months before the release of HBP (and before the announcement of Draco's birth date on Rowling's website) and is now AU. This story stands alone, though it's also a companion piece to *Beyond Wild Moor and Fen*, which is from Harry's point of view. Many thanks to Mishty, Vel, Jaxmari, Kristal and Autumn LeCroix for beta-reading. Constructive criticism is always welcome and appreciated.

A Gryffindor and A Slytherin

Chapter 5 - Expect the Unexpected

On Wednesday after dinner, Draco collapsed onto his bed, trying to think of an excuse not to attend the Quidditch tryouts. Much to his chagrin, he couldn't come up with any excuse that countered his position as captain of the Slytherin team. He wrinkled his nose, sitting up. The dormitory door swung open and Blaise walked in, looking like the cat that got the cream.

"What are you so happy about?" Draco asked in a sullen tone.

Blaise threw his schoolbag on the floor beside his bed and walked over to sit beside him. "My, aren't we in a right state today?" he said, grinning.

"You didn't answer my question," Draco pointed out.

"Question?" Blaise gave him a blank look.

"Oh, forget it. Want to go supervise the Quidditch tryouts for me?" Draco asked.

"Fraid not, seeing as I'll be trying out," Blaise replied, his grin returning.

Draco perked up. "So you're coming, then?"

Blaise raised an eyebrow. "It would be a little difficult for me to try out without showing up, wouldn't it?"

Draco made a face at him and started to rise from the bed with a long-suffering sigh.

"You're such a drama queen," Blaise said in an amused tone, pulling him down by the back of his robe. Draco hadn't been expecting this and fell backwards on the bed, crushing Blaise's forearm. Blaise turned to stare down at him, his dark eyes glittering. Draco gave him a stony glare.

"Stop it, Zabini," Draco said, but his voice came out in a kind of croak. He sat up and coughed a few times to clear his throat. "Come on, we should get going. The tryouts start in twenty minutes."

"Draco, I--" Blaise started to say, but stopped.

Draco turned to look at him. "What?"

Blaise's gaze darted from Draco's face to his midsection, then settled in a far corner of the room. "Nothing. You wouldn't understand. Let's just go," he said, looking downwards and frowning slightly. A heavy silence fell between them.

Draco fumed. Obviously, Blaise wanted to share, but something was preventing him from it. Draco dithered. He was consumed by curiosity -- Blaise's disappearances had been making him increasingly interested in what the other boy was doing. At the same time, though, Draco didn't want to encourage Blaise's personal advances, afraid of putting himself in a position where he couldn't say no any longer.

Blaise was staring at his hands now, looking dangerously brooding and Draco would have given an arm to know Legilimency so he could find out what the other boy was thinking.

Draco shuddered a little, remembering the night Blaise stormed into the dormitory at the end of their fifth year, the day before they were to leave Hogwarts. He'd been seeing a seventh-year Slytherin boy who told him he'd been merely experimenting, Draco later found out, and it broke Blaise's heart. The boy had stood in the doorway for a moment, chest heaving, then walked calmly over to the corner where they usually kept their broomsticks, picked up his Cleansweep 11 and literally snapped it in half with his bare hands. Draco remembered the letters that had followed, where Blaise complained that his arms had hurt for two weeks after the incident, but at least he had got a Nimbus 2001 out of it.

No, Draco mused, it wasn't a good idea to upset Blaise at all. The silence that had fallen was beginning to bear down on him, however, and he considered his next words carefully for a moment. He willed a look of polite concern onto his features. When he spoke, his voice was calm and gentle.

"Look, you're obviously bothered by something, and you obviously don't want to tell me what it is, Blaise."

Something strange flared in Blaise's eyes. "Don't patronise me, Draco," he warned.

"I'm not. I just wish things would go back to the way they used to be," Draco said truthfully, sighing.

Blaise's features softened. "Me too," he whispered. Before Draco could protest, Blaise moved closer to him on the bed and covered Draco's hand with his own. Draco felt a tingle in his chest -- Blaise's hand was large and warm, and for a moment, Draco wanted nothing better but to let Blaise do whatever he wanted.

Draco closed his eyes and exhaled loudly. Beside him, Blaise drew in a breath. Draco shook his head firmly. "I don't mean what you think I mean, Blaise," he said sadly, freeing his hand from under Blaise's. He couldn't keep doing this to himself.

Blaise bowed his head, his curly hair falling on his face. "I just wish you'd tell me what I did wrong, Draco," he said slowly.

"It's nothing you did, Blaise. It's just that... I need... time."

"Time isn't going to make you straight again, Draco," Blaise countered, looking up at him.

Draco waved his hand dismissively. "That's not what I meant."

"What did you mean?" Blaise asked, his tone suddenly aggressive.

"Look, can we talk about this another time? The tryouts are starting in ten minutes and we still need to get to the pitch," Draco said, looking at him plaintively.

"Fine," Blaise exhaled and got up from the bed, walking to the corner where their brooms stood. Just then, Vincent and Gregory lumbered in through the door, startling Draco.

"Sorry we're late, Draco," Vincent said.

"We forgot," Gregory added.

Draco nodded in their direction and went to retrieve his own broomstick. There was a tension between him and Blaise, though nothing their dormitory mates would notice, he knew. After making a beeline for the broom shed so Draco could retrieve the Quidditch balls, they made their way to the Quidditch pitch. A group of Slytherin students were already waiting there. Draco handed the case with the Quidditch balls to Gregory and fell into step beside Blaise, who kept staring straight ahead, the corners of his mouth curling slightly downwards.

"Don't do this," Draco muttered.

Blaise turned to him with a glare. "Do what?"

"This!" Draco gestured almost helplessly, raising his eyes to Blaise's with a deliberately pleading look.

Blaise could be so difficult; it was a good thing Draco knew how to deal with his moods. The pleading look was working, Draco noticed with satisfaction -- Blaise's expression softened and he bumped Draco's shoulder with his own affectionately.

"Fine, fine, you wanker," Blaise said, rolling his eyes, and Draco grinned. He knew the trick to handling Blaise -- all he had to do was leave him to fume by himself for a few minutes, then approach him contritely. It worked every time, Draco reflected,

except perhaps if Blaise was seriously hurt, like he had been last year after Adrian Pucey had dropped him.

They approached the group of students waiting for tryouts and Draco surveyed them critically. There were at least two from every year, excluding seventh-years -- Draco didn't blame them. They had N.E.W.Ts this year, and there was dubious glory in playing Quidditch on the house team for only one season. He spotted Malcolm Baddock with two of his friends and made a mental note to go easy on him -- he'd promised Liam, after all. Draco was surprised to see Millicent Bulstrode standing off to the side, leaning on her broom with a bored look.

He raised an eyebrow. "Millicent?"

"Draco?" she mimicked.

"You're trying out for the team?"

"No, I came here to stand around and look pretty," she scoffed. Several Slytherins sniggered and Millicent turned around to glare at them. "Shut up, midgets." A third-year squeaked in terror.

Draco laughed. "Come now, Millie, you know girls are rarely selected for the team."

"So? I can still try out, can't I?" Millicent growled.

"What position?"

"Chaser," came the reply. "I'd go for Beater if it weren't for your two gorillas."

Draco looked over at Vincent and Gregory, who were glowering at Millicent. She glared back. Well, the girl had spunk, he had to give her that. She was impossibly prudish and horribly boring, but she had bulk, which was always welcome on the Slytherin team. Draco gave a small shrug and set his broomstick on the ground, leaning against it.

"Listen up," he called, and the chatter died instantly. Several second-years looked ready to bolt. Draco smirked. "We're looking for three Chasers and a Keeper, so I need you to split up into two groups. Keepers on the left, Chasers on the right -- take your seats on the benches and wait for your name to be called."

Blaise walked over to the left side from behind him, and the rest of the Slytherins followed suit. Draco opened his mouth to speak but noticed that the majority of his audience were goggling at something behind him. Draco turned, and saw Potter, Weasley, and Weasley's sister approaching the stands. Weasley carried a clipboard.

"What are you doing here?" Draco demanded.

"Don't get your back up, Malfoy," Potter replied evenly. "We've just come to watch your tryouts."

It took all Draco had to remain calm. He did not like this new suddenly-calm Potter. "And what entitles you to said privilege, Potter?" he asked in a mockingly polite tone.

Potter shrugged. "We don't need to be, er, entitled."

"You are banned from Quidditch. Banned for life, if I recall correctly."

"The ban's been lifted, Malfoy," Potter shot back. "It was on only as long as that toad Umbridge was here."

Draco made a face, and Weasley's sister piped up. "Bet you miss your Inquisitorial Squad, Malfoy! Shame you can't do any boot-licking this year."

"Ginny, don't." Potter said in a warning tone, his eyes trained on Draco's.

"Shut your face, blood traitor," Draco spat, cold fury in his voice.

"Look, Malfoy, don't make a scene," Potter said with a tired sigh.

"You are not going to watch our tryouts!" Draco snapped, impatient to get rid of them.

"Try and stop us then," Potter said, a challenge in his eyes.

Draco was seething. "So I suppose they made you captain, did they, Potter?"

"No. Ron's captain," Potter replied.

"They made him captain?" Draco smirked. "Well, Professor Snape shall be very happy to hear that the Quidditch Cup is as good as ours then."

Weasley's face went red. "Shut it, ferret-face," he growled, and Draco gave him a disgusted look, turning to Potter.

"So how does it feel being bested by Weasley once again, Potter?"

"I get by," Potter replied.

Draco was really not liking this new and suddenly-calm Potter at all. Potter was supposed to fly into fits of rage as brilliant as those of Weasley's, he was not supposed to stand and look at Draco blandly. He was supposed to care! Draco whirled on Weasley's sister.

"And the mini-Weasel?" Draco ground out.

At this, Weasley took a threatening step towards him and the girl stared daggers at Draco, who glared back. Potter put his arm around her shoulder protectively and something inside Draco dropped. What was Potter doing?

"Ginny's the new Chaser, she's taking Angelina's place," Potter replied calmly. "Now if you'll excuse us, Malfoy, I believe you have tryouts to supervise?"

Potter was looking straight at him and Draco was unnerved. The way Potter had been acting lately hadn't figured in his plans at all. No matter, the Slytherin tryouts came first. He arranged his face into a look of careful contempt and waved his hand dismissively at the three, turning back to his housemates. The Slytherins had gone very quiet while watching the exchange.

"Well?" Draco snapped irritably. "We can't stop them watching, let's put some fear into those brave hearts," he added mockingly.

Blaise beamed at him from the group of prospective Keepers and Draco flashed him a grin, keeping an eye on the Gryffindors, who were settled on the topmost bench. Weasley was fussing with an inkbottle and quill and Potter was talking to Weasley's sister, their foreheads almost touching. Draco looked back at the Slytherins.

"Right, then, Chasers," he said. "Mount your brooms, form a circle."

The students complied. Draco crouched down beside the chest that held the Quidditch balls and popped it open, taking out the Quaffle. He motioned to Vincent and Gregory to follow the others and mounted his broom, the Quaffle under his arm. He kicked off from the ground and soared upwards.

Draco tossed the Quaffle at Vincent, who caught it with some difficulty, then threw it to Millicent. She caught it deftly and passed to Malcolm Baddock -- so forcefully that he was nearly knocked off his broom. The third-year boy steadied himself clumsily and threw the Quaffle. His aim was off and the other boy had to lunge sideways to catch the ball.

Draco left the circle, letting the other players pass the Quaffle around, watching critically. Millicent was good, he had to admit. For all her bulk, she was surprisingly agile on a broom, the only problem being that she kept nearly knocking Malcolm out. Malcolm wasn't bad, but Millicent's powerful throws were too much for him, considering she was three years older than him and about twice his size. A fifth-year whose name Draco didn't remember was showing promise as well. Draco told them all to start moving around the stadium as they passed the Quaffle back and forth.

Soon they were zooming all around the pitch. Draco hovered above, watching their movements and noting flaws. He was determined to get a good, skilled team together this year instead of just picking the biggest boys. Millicent streaked through the air below him. She tossed the Quaffle at Gregory. He hit it with his foot, causing it to nearly hit the head of a second-year.

The second-year boy threw the Quaffle sideways and it almost hit Draco in the chest. Draco veered out of its way and dove to retrieve it. The ball fell onto the grass and Draco dismounted briefly to collect it when he heard laughter coming from the stands. He straightened up sharply, glaring in the direction of Potter and the two Weasleys, but they weren't looking at him.

Weasley was grabbing at his own throat with his hands and Potter was laughing, his arm still around the shoulders of Weasley's sister. Draco fumed. What was Potter playing at? He was gay; Draco knew it. There was no possible way Potter was so devious as to pretend to be going out with the Weasel girl to prevent rumours from spreading. He glanced at Blaise, who was lounging in his seat and talking to a third-year student Draco didn't recognise; the other three Keeper hopefuls were staring at the Slytherins above and Draco remembered the Quaffle. He got back onto his broomstick and soared upwards.

Coming to hover in the centre of the group, Draco looked around. "You there," he addressed the fifth-year boy who'd shown skill. "What's your name?"

"Bartlett," said the boy in a nasal voice. "Andrew Bartlett." He had short, close-cropped dark hair and his round face looked like it had been squashed against a flat surface. Draco looked around the others once more -- both of the second-year boys looked dejected, and with good reason: neither had managed to catch the Quaffle properly, not once.

"All right, here's how it's going to be," Draco said after another moment of thought. "Bulstrode, Baddock, and Bartlett are the new Slytherin chasers." Malcolm gave a loud whoop of joy and looked around at the rest of them triumphantly. Beside him, Millicent snorted but said nothing. Andrew Bartlett looked relieved.

Draco turned to the others. "The rest of you may leave." The would-be team members began to lower themselves to the ground one by one, most of them looking sullen. Draco swivelled around in mid-air to face the three new Chasers.

"You three are going to help me pick our new Keeper," he said. "If he's not any good, it'll be on your heads, so do your best." He turned slightly towards Vincent and Gregory. "You two can go relax, but don't you leave before tryouts are over, I need someone to carry the balls back to the shed." The boys nodded in unison and sped off towards the stands, Draco following closely behind them.

There were five Keeper hopefuls, and Draco told them to come one by one, starting with the youngest -- that was the third-year Blaise had been talking to earlier. He was terrible -- he couldn't even save Malcolm Baddock's goals. By the time Blaise flew towards the goal hoops, Draco was very frustrated: none of the students were up to his standards as Keepers. The sky was already darkening and Draco was getting extremely tired. The three new Chasers were obviously exhausted as well, and Draco called Vincent and Gregory to replace Andrew and Malcolm when Blaise occupied the Keeper position.

Blaise wasn't as bad as the others, but he was still pretty bad. He didn't have very good coordination when he had to keep his mind on the Quaffle. Blaise was a good flier, but once the Quaffle was hurtling towards him, even Millicent Bulstrode seemed graceful by comparison. Well, Blaise did manage to save more goals than the

Slytherins before him. That was a start, even if he did have to resort to flacking several times. However, with a Keeper like that, they would have to start their practice sessions much earlier this year.

Draco remembered Weasley's spectacular failures during their fifth year and was cheered -- Blaise was certainly not nearly as awful as Weasley. He looked over at the Gryffindors, who were still sitting at the top of the stands. Weasley was scribbling furiously on his clipboard. His sister was engaged in conversation with Potter, who -- Draco noted with curious satisfaction -- no longer had his arm around her shoulders. He saw Potter tilt his head to look his way, but couldn't see his face from the distance. Draco held up an arm to indicate that Blaise could go back to join their classmates.

The seven of them landed in front of the bleachers, where the other students who'd tried out for Keeper were waiting. Draco dropped his broomstick on the ground carelessly and walked closer to them.

"The Slytherin keeper will be Zabini," Draco said. "We have a team, people," he added, turning to the rest of his teammates, completely ignoring the others.

"Don't get cocky, Zabini," Draco warned as he saw Blaise grinning at him. "You got picked because you were better than the rest of them, but you're not great."

"Yeah, sure," Millicent said acidly. "The fact that you're friends with him had nothing to do with it. I say Avery flew much better," she added.

"Fortunately for the Slytherin team, I am the captain, not you, Bulstrode," Draco said, his tone icy. "Do you have a similarly inspired explanation for my allowing a girl to play on the team?"

Millicent glared at him, but made no reply. Draco smirked. Of course she wouldn't have a comeback to that. Draco was interested in putting together a team that would lead Slytherin to the Quidditch Cup, not a team of friends and allies. He cast a glance over his teammates. "We'll have to start practicing as soon as possible. Millicent, throw me that Quaffle."

She did and Draco caught it, crouching down beside the chest where the balls were kept. He replaced the Quaffle in its spot and snapped the lid closed. As he rose, he saw movement out of a corner of his right eye and turned -- the Gryffindors were coming down from the stands, Potter in the lead. Weasley was talking animatedly to his sister, waving the clipboard for emphasis. Draco took in Potter's appearance -- the other boy had grown slightly taller and he seemed even skinnier than Draco remembered him. His shoulders were hunched forward but his head was unbowed, making Potter look slightly like a chicken as he walked.

Draco suppressed a snicker at the mental image of Potter with the head of a chicken. He sneered at the trio as they passed.

"Be afraid, Weasley," he called. "We've got a strong team this year, as you no doubt have noticed. With those sorry excuses for Beaters you've got, and two Weasels on the team, Gryffindor ought to be hurting."

Weasley's face went red and he started to turn towards Draco, but his sister pulled on his robe.

"Come on, Ron," she pleaded. "Don't let him get to you."

Potter shot Draco a look full of contempt and Draco instantly regretted the jab at Weasley. He needed to keep his hatred of Potter and his minions under control if he wanted his plan to work. He took a step backwards and let them pass, glaring at their backs.

::

On Thursday after double Potions, Draco gathered his things into his schoolbag nervously. What was taking Pansy so long? He'd explained her task to her the evening before and she promised she would be timely.

"Say, Granger," Pansy's voice came from across the classroom and an unusual silence fell all around them. "I need to talk to you about prefect business. Meet me outside?"

Draco looked up at Granger pensively. She looked like her eyes were about to pop out of her head. Beside her, Potter was doing a reasonable impression of Granger, Draco thought.

"Sure, Parkinson, I'll meet you in a moment," Granger said, finally finding her voice. "Wait for me?" she said, turning to Potter, who nodded. Granger slung her bag over her shoulder and hurried out after Pansy.

Blaise was standing on his side of their desk, waiting for Draco.

"Go on, I'll catch up," Draco said, "I need to talk to Snape about something." Blaise raised an eyebrow but shrugged, nodded, and left. Draco stood at his desk, waiting for the rest of the class to leave. Snape had withdrawn to his office through a door that connected the two rooms, as he always did after classes. Potter was slouching in his chair. It was lunchtime, so the classroom emptied rather quickly.

Soon, Draco and Potter were the only people left in the classroom. Draco picked up his schoolbag and walked towards Potter, casting a surreptitious glance at the door to Snape's office. He had to hurry: Snape could come back out at any minute. He walked up to Potter and stood over his desk, looking down.

"Potter," he said, and the other boy looked up at him, surprised.

"What now, Malfoy?"

Draco inhaled deeply. This was it. "I was wondering if you wanted to come to Hogsmeade with me and Blaise."

It was as though a thunderclap had just rung out in the classroom -- the silence was so complete, one could hear a quill drop.

"What?" Potter stared at him blankly.

"Do you have trouble with your hearing, Potter? I asked if you wanted to --"

"I heard you, Malfoy," Potter said, still staring. "I can't believe *you just said that*."

Draco steeled himself. He'd prepared the phrase a long time in advance, but he had to be careful and not make it sound too rehearsed. "Well, the year's theme is house unity. What better way to unite the houses than try to settle old feuds?"

Potter's jaw dropped -- literally. "Er..." he offered. "But I... but your dad... but you said..."

Draco waved his hand in a dismissive gesture. "Look, Potter, I realise this is very sudden for you," he looked at the other boy pointedly. "Just come out with us, it'll be interesting."

"Uh," Potter said, colouring slightly, "I'm already going with Ron and Hermione, erm, Malfoy." He looked up at Draco and quickly dropped his gaze again, a more noticeable blush spreading across his cheeks. "Um."

Draco couldn't believe it. Potter thought he was asking him out! Did he have "homosexual" written across his forehead? Besides, how would Potter know? How did Potter think Draco knew? Draco shook his head bemusedly.

"Well, perhaps you'll join us at the Three Broomsticks for some drinks, then?" he offered, half-smiling at the other boy, who was looking everywhere but at Draco. "If Weasley and Granger let you, that is," he amended.

Potter sighed deeply. "Look, Malfoy. How do I know this isn't another ploy of yours to get me into trouble?"

Draco made an innocent face. "Paranoid, are we? You've got nothing to worry about - the Three Broomsticks is a public place, there'll be lots of other people there. Unless, of course, you fear being seen with us," Draco said, carefully tingeing his tone with disappointment.

Potter looked up at him. "No, I don't. Fear being seen with you, that is. I just wish you'd tell me what you want from me."

Draco smiled indulgently. "Just an hour or so of your time, Potter. We'll have some Butterbeer, talk about girls and Quidditch. The usual. Unless, of course, you deem us nasty Slytherins undeserving of your time," he added.

"I don't!" Potter protested, and Draco thought he'd won, until Potter continued. "I just don't trust you, Malfoy. Not as far as I can throw you, anyway."

Draco wanted to tell Potter what he should throw and where, but abstained. He was so close to success, he could taste it -- he couldn't ruin it now. "Look, Potter, I'm not proposing marriage," he said, keeping his tone light, noticing Potter's blush returning with some satisfaction. "Just drinks. We have to start somewhere."

"Start what, Malfoy?"

"The long hard road to house unity, of course," Draco replied with an ever-so-slight emphasis on hard. The innuendo was obviously not lost on Potter, either, because he blushed prettily again, eyes darting towards his hands, which were folded in his lap. After a moment, Potter peered up at Draco intently.

"Fine, Malfoy, I'll meet you and - uh - Zabini. What time?"

"Two o'clock on Saturday," he said with glee. "Cheers, Potter," he said airily, rounding Potter's desk and heading out the door. Just then, the door to Snape's office opened and the professor walked into the classroom.

"Why are you still here, Potter?" Snape asked, his eyes narrowing.

"Uh, I was just--"

"I had to talk to Potter about something, Professor," Draco broke in, causing Snape to whirl around and face him.

"Very well," the Potions Master said after a pause. "I needed to speak with you anyway, Potter," he said with barely masked contempt. "Will you excuse us, Draco?" he added slightly more genially.

"Of course, Professor," Draco bowed slightly and hurried out. He couldn't help but wonder what Snape and Potter could possibly talk about, but he didn't dare listen in. As he came out of the classroom, he saw Pansy and Granger in the dungeon hallway. Granger was glaring. Pansy saw him and a look of relief came over her face.

"Sorry, pet," he called, flashing her a grin. "My talk with Professor Snape took longer than I thought it would. Ready to go for lunch?"

Pansy grinned and nodded. "See you, Granger," she tossed over her shoulder at the Gryffindor girl as she took Draco's offered arm.

"Bye then," Granger muttered. Draco and Pansy turned the corner and he looked back into the dungeon hallway. Granger was standing near the Potions classroom and staring after them with a disturbingly suspicious look on her face.

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On Friday morning at breakfast, Draco was poking at his eggs, listening half-heartedly as Pansy chattered to Millicent about an elaborate dream she had that night, which involved flying teaspoons and George Weasley. The atmosphere at Hogwarts was uneasy -- there had been a spate of Muggle disappearances in the past weeks, and the previous day's paper had reported Muggles had seen the Dark Mark hovering over a building in Bristol. *The Death Eater Children* was the new catchphrase and there was much finger-pointing at Draco, Vincent, Gregory, Nott, and other Slytherins whose parents were reported to be involved with the Dark Lord. Draco sniffed bitterly. House unity, indeed.

There was a clatter and a whoosh as the morning's owl post began to arrive. Pandora landed on Draco's shoulder a moment later -- she bore no sweets this time, only a tiny roll of parchment tied to her leg. He untied it and fed the owl a biscuit from a nearby plate, ruffling her feathers gently. Pandora snapped up the biscuit and flew off. He was just beginning to unroll his mother's letter as an unfamiliar-looking tawny owl landed in his eggs. It held out its leg, dripping with yolk, and Draco made a face. He took the parchment from the owl but it didn't fly away immediately -- it remained motionless on his plate, blinking at him as only owls can.

Draco frowned, laying his mother's note aside and unrolling the strange owl's missive. His heart leapt into his throat.

Draco,

You will meet me at 1 o'clock in the afternoon at the Hog's Head on the next Hogsmeade Saturday. Send date by return owl.

Draco stared at his father's fancy cursive script on the parchment for a moment. His father was well, he was alive, Draco would see him soon! He rooted in his schoolbag for an inkbottle and a quill, scribbled the date of the upcoming Hogsmeade weekend on the back of the parchment and reattached it to the owl's leg. It took off immediately, splattering Draco's sleeve with eggs. Draco muttered an oath under his breath and performed a cleaning spell. He didn't feel like finishing the trampled eggs. He pushed his plate away and started to get up, then abruptly sat down again.

Well, bollocks. He was supposed to meet his father at the Hog's Head at one o'clock, and Potter at The Three Broomsticks at two o'clock on the same day. There was no way he was going to be able to make both meetings. Draco slapped his forehead, causing Pansy to look up at him in alarm.

Draco Malfoy's Diary, September 13th

Father. I could hardly believe my eyes when I read his message, and I'm not sure I've quite recovered. I wonder if he's contacted Mother yet. Perhaps he can't, perhaps the Manor is being watched. I wanted to tell Blaise and Pansy right away, but I've decided I'm going to keep this to myself. Pansy might let it slip accidentally, and Blaise has been acting strangely lately.

Blaise upset me very much today. He shouldn't be doing this to me. It scares me how vividly I still remember the time I lost that game of Exploding Snap to Pansy and she dared me to kiss Blaise, and I enjoyed it, and how horrified I was. I remember the nights we spent waiting for Vincent and Gregory to fall asleep so I could climb into Blaise's bed, of the guilt and shame we shared for being deviant, of my own painful self-discovery. We were supposed to have made a clean break, why won't Blaise let it go? He was okay for most of last year, but I suppose that was because he was seeing Pucey.

I value my friendship with Blaise -- he's easy-going and witty, and knows when to leave well enough alone. A reprise of our intimate relationship would change things, and I don't want them to change. Blaise is almost stereotypically Italian: extremely attentive and extremely jealous. He'd probably demand I stop pretending to be going out with Pansy. No, I need to discourage Blaise, definitely. I will need his help with Potter, so I shall have to be extra careful.

Potter's pretend indifference is highly amusing, I must admit. Despite the snag in the plan for the Hogsmeade Weekend, things are coming along splendidly. Anyway, time for bed.

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Chapter 6: A Gryffindor and a Slytherin

A Gryffindor and A Slytherin

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Author's Notes: This was my first novel-length Harry/Draco story. It was completed four months before the release of HBP (and before the announcement of Draco's birth date on Rowling's website) and is now AU. This story stands alone, though it's also a companion piece to *Beyond Wild Moor and Fen*, which is from Harry's point of view. Many thanks to Mishty, Vel, Jaxmari, Kristal and Autumn LeCroix for beta-reading. Constructive criticism is always welcome and appreciated.

A Gryffindor and A Slytherin

Chapter 6 - Hogsmeade

September seemed to fly past. Everyone got enormous amounts of homework in all their classes and Draco was already having trouble keeping his head above water. Slytherin Quidditch practice every evening contributed to the heavy workload, and his teammates were quietly grumbling. He was pleased, however, because Blaise was certainly improving, as was Malcolm. Draco didn't see much of Potter, other than in the classes they had together.

Before their next Care of Magical Creatures class, Potter had looked like he was going to talk to Draco, but Draco just looked at him coolly, allowing himself a slight smile. Potter flushed as Granger tugged on his robes to signal the half-breed's arrival. After the class, Draco had nodded slightly in Potter's direction and walked off with his friends, not looking back. The two of them seemed to be in the middle of an uneasy truce, and by the fourth week of classes, tongues were wagging about the "sudden

change" in Draco Malfoy. Pansy had told him most people speculated that Draco was afraid of Potter because of something his father had told him. Draco had merely snorted. As if he'd be afraid of Potter in any circumstances.

Draco and Blaise had not talked about their relationship, or lack thereof, since before the Quidditch tryouts. That suited Draco just fine, except for the issue of the time conflict between his meeting with his father and his meeting with Potter. On the last Sunday of September, less than a week before the Hogsmeade weekend, Blaise and Draco spent a few hours flying on the Quidditch pitch. Pansy was busy putting the finishing touches on the essay collection bin for the Slytherin house unity project. Vincent and Gregory were busy pigging out in the Great Hall along with Millicent, so Draco and Blaise went by themselves.

Draco circled around the stadium lazily, letting the light afternoon breeze wash over his face, enjoying a moment of freedom before they had to get back to their homework. The castle grounds looked breathtaking from above -- the lake was awash with ever so slight ripples, making the surface appear ridged. From above, it looked like so much cracked glass dumped into a pit, sunlight dancing on it. Every so often, the giant squid would reach out a tentacle or two, causing breaks in the pattern. The lawns were still green but the leaves on the trees were turning yellow and red already, and the smell in the air was certainly reminiscent of autumn - sweet and woody. Draco took in the pastiche of greens, yellows, reds, and browns -- if there was one thing to be said for going to Hogwarts, it was the scenery. He had to admit that not even the splendour of the Malfoy Manor gardens could compare to this.

Draco wondered how his mother was doing, and whether Father had contacted her yet. There had been nothing in her usual missives about Father -- just the usual platitudes about shopping, visiting friends and relatives, and the occasional mention of Aurors coming to call at strange hours. It amazed Draco, how blithe his mother could be -- he knew she wasn't just an ordinary rich housewife, but she was masterful at keeping up appearances.

He was distracted for a moment and nearly crashed into one of the goal hoops. Righting himself, he looked around to see if Blaise had seen his blunder, but the other boy was busy zigzagging among the goal hoops on the opposite side of the pitch. Draco gazed eastwards and watched as the half-giant left his hut and trudged off towards the Forbidden Forest, carrying a huge sack on his back. The disgusting slobbering creature named Fang bounded all around him, barking so loudly that Draco could hear the echoes on the wind.

Seeing the half-giant reminded him that he still hadn't talked to Blaise about asking Potter to meet them. They must have been out flying for two hours by now, Draco thought. He let out a shrill whistle and a moment later, a very windswept Blaise braked in the air near him. Draco grinned.

"Time to head back, I think," he said, steering his broom downwards. Blaise followed in his wake and soon they dismounted and shouldered their brooms.

"That was fun," Blaise said.

"I told you so," Draco quipped. Blaise rolled his eyes, swaying deliberately and bumping into him, as though trying to knock him sideways. Draco steadied himself, laughing. He didn't enjoy this kind of roughhousing, but his talk with Blaise was more important than making a point to mention his displeasure.

"Listen, I need to talk to you about something," he said, stopping just before they ascended the rough stone steps hewn into the cliffs surrounding the castle.

Blaise put his broom down and leaned on it, peering intently at Draco. "I'm listening."

"You know that next weekend is Hogsmeade weekend," Draco said.

"Yeah, we're still going together, right?"

"Of course. There's just one thing," Draco said, and told Blaise that he had to meet someone who had news of his father. As he spoke, Blaise was nodding slowly.

"Just be careful, Draco--" he began earnestly.

"See, that's not all," Draco interrupted.

"Oh?" A raised eyebrow.

"Yeah. I've, uh, arranged to meet Potter at two o'clock at The Three Broomsticks, as well."

"What?" Blaise's eyes looked like they were going to pop out of their sockets.

Draco shifted his weight and leaned against the rock wall behind him.

"What do you want with Potter?" Blaise's tone was accusing, and that was never a good sign.

"I just thought--" Draco began, but Blaise cut him off with a wave of his hand. Draco bristled.

"I can't believe you! I really can't! You jerk me around for weeks, and all the while you're with --" Blaise spluttered a little -- "Potter?" The other boy's voice was raised now, his eyes darkening.

"Blaise, it's not like that!" Draco snapped. "I'm not with him, nor do I have any desire to be."

"Yeah? Well, what's it like then?" Blaise spat.

"I have some information about Potter, and I intend to use it against him," Draco replied, studying a jutting rock behind Blaise.

"And what information is that?"

"That," Draco said, his tone perfectly neutral, "would be telling." He looked up at Blaise, challenging him.

Blaise seemed to freeze to his spot on the ground. "So that's how we're going to play now, is it?"

"You started this, Zabini. If you don't trust me, why should I trust you?" Draco asked, raising both eyebrows and spreading his hands in a deliberate show of helplessness.

Blaise looked down at his shoes. The silence grew heavy between them and Draco was considering a dozen alternative approaches at the same time, but none were working out in his favour.

"Look, Blaise--" he started to say, but Blaise held up a hand. Draco was beginning to get very irritated with the interruptions.

"No, Draco, you're right." Blaise raised his head to look at Draco, sighing deeply. "If you want to go to Hogsmeade with Potter, that's f-fine. I'll just -- go with Pansy and the girls, or something."

"No, no, you berk," Draco said with a relieved laugh, forgetting his irritation. "We're still going together. I told Potter to meet us at the Three Broomsticks at two. Both of us."

Blaise cocked an eyebrow. "Draco Malfoy, a poster child for house unity at Hogwarts?"

"Something like that," Draco said with a sly grin. "However, learning about my father comes first, and I might be late. That's where you come in. I need you to entertain Potter while I make my way back from my meeting."

"Oh, the things I must subject myself to for the dubious honour of being your friend," Blaise lamented. "Fine, I'll occupy Potter on Saturday while you further your nefarious plots for world domination."

Draco snorted, then grinned. "I won't forget this, Blaise," he said, hoisting his broom over his shoulder again. "Let's go."

They ascended the stairs to the castle in silence.

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On the evening of the following Friday, Draco deposited the essay he'd written for the house unity project into the silver and green collection bin below the notice board in the Slytherin common room. He turned sharply towards a group of third-years sitting in a circle near the fireplace, passing around various objects and yelling out their names, followed by exclamations of "a what?" He walked over to them and coughed loudly. They shut up promptly and several looked up with guilty looks on their faces.

"Why are you making such a racket?" Draco demanded.

"Please, Draco, we were just playing," a tiny girl with pigtails piped up. "We learned the game at the Hufflepuff party last week."

Draco glared at her. He wasn't supposed to express disapproval of anything connected to the house unity projects. "You're making too much noise. Play quietly, some people are trying to do homework," he said imperiously.

"Sorry," the girl said, but there was a mischievous glint in her eye. The little devil knew he wasn't allowed to stop them, Draco realised, the corners of his mouth twitching. She would go far in Slytherin, this one. He gave her a brief nod and stalked off towards the boys' dormitories, determined to get some sleep.

The Hogsmeade Saturday dawned grey and drizzly, and Draco stopped in after breakfast to take his cloak off its peg on the wall, not wishing to catch a cold this early in the year. He was quite prone to colds and though wizards didn't suffer too badly from colds and flu -- not as much as Muggles did -- the illnesses were still rather a

nuisance. He'd managed to catch a particularly stubborn strain in his first year, and it took three whole days before he felt better. He joined Blaise, Vincent, and Gregory in the entrance hall several minutes later and they took off towards the wizarding village, talking about Quidditch strategies.

They passed Liam Baddock along the way, who towered above a small group of third-year boys, looking surly. As the oldest prefect, Liam was responsible for taking the younger boys along with him, then taking them back to the castle. Draco wasn't looking forward to that particular chore in his seventh year. Further up the road, Laurel Iven, the seventh-year girl prefect, was scolding the little pigtailed girl from the night before as several other third-year girls looked on. Draco nodded at them as he passed, reflecting that Pansy would probably enjoy her chore even less come seventh year. Pansy and her friends were probably already at Gladrags right now, Draco thought, smirking.

As the four of them crossed the train tracks and passed the Hogsmeade Station building, Draco noticed Potter, Granger, Weasley, and Longbottom ahead of them. Longbottom was spreading his arms out while saying something in a high-pitched voice, and the rest of the Gryffindors were laughing. Since when did Longbottom have anything funny to say? The things he did were usually very amusing, mind, but Draco hadn't marked Longbottom as a storyteller or a jester. He shrugged and turned to Blaise.

"So, where to?"

Blaise mirrored his shrug and shook his head. "Dunno. Honeydukes?"

"Good idea. Let's go before the third-years raid it like locusts," Draco said.


Vincent and Gregory nodded approvingly and the four of them went straight towards the sweet shop. Draco bought Bertie Bott's Every Flavour Beans for the Slytherin common room -- it was his turn, he remembered from last year. He hoped Pansy would remember to buy a large box as well, otherwise they might run out before the next Hogsmeade weekend. For himself, he picked up several slabs of different kinds of chocolate as well as a large box of pink coconut ice squares. He didn't bother with the brand-name sweets: they were so common. The only exceptions were the Beans and whatever his mother sent him along with her homemade sweets.

After the four of them left Honeydukes, Vincent and Gregory ambled off towards Zonko's -- they were able to spend hours in that place, but Draco had grown out of it. He and Blaise decided to go see Pansy at Gladrags and sure enough, there she was. Surrounded by her posse, she was pawing her way through dress robes of all styles and colours. She made them watch her try on about fifteen different styles before rolling her eyes dramatically and taking the lot to the front counter. Draco swiftly followed her and took the bundle from her.

"Excuse me, but I think that's my prerogative," he said huskily, bending down to kiss her cheek. He could swear that the saleswitch at the counter turned a little green as he paid for the robes. Pansy beamed at her friends, who looked extremely put out by Draco's display of gallantry and were obviously very jealous of Pansy. Millicent looked particularly sulky. Draco winked at her.

"You're so good to me, my darling," Pansy cooed, circling her arms around Draco's neck and rising slightly to give him a kiss. Draco's eyes cut to Blaise, who looked slightly queasy.

They filed out of Gladrags to the sound of Pansy's chattering and stood in front of the shop. The village of Hogsmeade was virtually crawling with Hogwarts students now. Gryffindors and Ravenclaws bustled in and out of stores, Slytherins strolled up and down High Street, Hufflepuffs loitered in front of shop displays, pointing at various items and talking excitedly. The heavy grey clouds that had covered the sky in the morning had dissipated and the sky was a beautiful shade of blue, the shade of blue only seen in Scotland. Draco squinted against the bright glare of the sun.

"Let's go to Madam Puddifoot's!" Pansy cried. "I read an advertisement in the Daily Prophet about a new sort of clair she's selling, I do so want to try them!"

Blaise made a gagging gesture -- everyone knew that Madam Puddifoot's was the love shack of Hogsmeade. Draco was inclined to agree with him on the gagging, but he didn't think it would hurt his image (or Blaise's) if they showed up there with a harem of girls. He noticed Tracey Davis gazing wistfully at Blaise and that cinched it.

"Let's go, pet," he said, wrapping an arm around Pansy's shoulders. "It'll be my treat," he called with a wink at Blaise.

"Play along, will you? We could use some rumours about heterosexual debauchery," he added under his breath. Blaise sniggered.

The eight of them walked past Scrivenshaft's, turned left and followed a narrow side street to the tea shop. The interior of the shop smelled strongly of cinnamon. It was hot and stuffy, and Draco removed his cloak, draping it over the back of a chair. He pulled Pansy's chair out for her, smiling sweetly and gazing at her lovingly. Blaise and Draco then brought four more chairs and they all piled around the tiny table.

Draco threw his arm across the back of Pansy's chair and looked around curiously. He'd only been there once before, and that was when Pansy had insisted he take her there for Valentine's Day in their fourth year -- there'd been garish cherubs throwing confetti at the patrons then. No cherubs were visible this time; gaudy paintings of teapots and fruit bowls covered the walls. The curtains on the windows resembled the frilly dress robes of Ron Weasley, except these were shocking pink.

"Those ♡clairs better be worth it, Parks," he murmured into her ear. "I haven't seen this much kitsch since the last time you dragged me in here."

Pansy giggled. "Hush, Draco. Granted, it's not Florean Fortescue's, but The Three Broomsticks doesn't have the kind of puddings I like."

Madam Puddifoot, a stout witch with shiny black hair, came up to their table, smiling.

"What'll it be, dears?" she inquired in a hearty voice that suited her entire being perfectly. They ordered tea, coffee, and a plateful of the new coconut-vanilla ♡clairs. As they waited, they began making conversation across the table and soon, Blaise and Millicent were engrossed in Quidditch talk.

"That was a foul, that was," Blaise was arguing, making a slashing motion in the air with the side of his hand for emphasis.

"Was not, Blaise, it's not my bloody fault you can't keep your eyes on the Quaffle," Millicent shot back, eyes glittering malevolently.

Draco gave Tracey a sympathetic look -- she didn't look too happy with Blaise's choice of a conversation partner. Seeing Draco's eyes on her, she blushed ever so slightly, but sat up straighter. Their drinks and ☞clairs arrived. For a while, they were busy expressing their appreciation for the pudding with enthusiastic *Mmms* and much lip-smacking. Draco had to admit the ☞clairs were truly excellent. The cream filling had just the right amount of flavouring and it didn't make the puffs soggy. He would have liked to take some back with him, but he didn't think they'd travel well.

Draco cast a glance at a ceramic clock in the shape of a teapot -- it was nearly twenty minutes to one o'clock already. He needed to hurry if he didn't want to be late for his meeting. He rose from his chair, putting several Galleons on the table.

"Well, ladies, lovely as your company is, I'm afraid I'll have to leave you to Blaise -- I have a delivery waiting for me at the Post Office and it cannot wait any longer. I'll see you back in the common room," he said, putting his cloak back on. He'd startled Blaise out of his conversation with Millicent, and the Italian boy was gazing at him pensively.

"Careful at the Post Office, Draco," he said. "I heard those owls they keep there can be quite frisky."

"Oh, I know. I'll make sure I don't upset any esteemed members of the owl species," Draco replied, bending over to kiss Pansy. "See you," he breathed, gave Blaise a significant look, and strode towards the door. Feeling magnanimous, he winked at a Ravenclaw fourth-year who was gawking at him as he passed her table.

Draco was glad to get out into the autumn air again -- Madam Puddifoot's was certainly not conducive to being cool or calm. He had been sweating profusely despite having removed his cloak, and his mind protested at all the garish decorations. Whoever decorated that place must have taken lessons from Dolores Umbridge. Draco hurried back out onto the High Street and wove his way into another narrow street that led to the Hog's Head.

He wrinkled his nose distastefully at the sign above the inn door, casting a surreptitious glance around him to see if anyone was around to see him enter. The small side street was deserted, however, save for a mangy-looking little dog that was rooting around for scraps in a nearby rubbish bin. Draco took a deep breath and pushed open the heavy wooden door. His nose was immediately assaulted by a rancid smell that reminded him vaguely of his uncle's farm in Devon. He looked around, but the bar seemed deserted, save for a burly bearded wizard in a tattered green cloak.

Draco exhaled, glad that he had got there before his father. He walked up to the bar, nodding to the barman in greeting. The grey-bearded old man looked up at Draco, surveying him with narrowed eyes. Draco was suddenly sure he'd met the barman before, but he couldn't place him.

"What do you want, then?" the barman asked in a wheezing voice.

"A Butterbeer, if you please," Draco answered haughtily.

The barman shuffled to the back of the small enclosure behind the bar stand and pulled a bottle from a cracked brown box. Slamming it down in front of Draco, he turned back to the *Daily Prophet*, which was spread out on a small table behind the bar. Draco picked up the bottle with two fingers, his lip curling at how dusty it was. He put several Sickles down on the counter and extracted his handkerchief from his pocket, making an elaborate display of wiping the bottle. When done, he found a table near the wall from where he could still watch the entrance and sat down. There was no clock in sight and Draco was beginning to worry -- he knew it was past one o'clock already, and it wasn't like his father to be late.

When his Butterbeer was finished, Draco's insides were twisted with worry and a horrible suspicion. What if the message wasn't from his father? What if it was someone playing a prank on him, knowing that Draco would show up as instructed? What if there were teachers -- or worse, Aurors -- waiting outside when he came out, ready to question him about the whereabouts of Lucius Malfoy? Draco cursed himself mentally; how could he have been so stupid? Still, it had been Dad's handwriting on the note. Draco suddenly remembered Pansy telling him about the Slytherin essays being bewitched to look like someone else's handwriting and his heart sank.

Father was right -- Draco lacked foresight. He had once again rushed into doing things without thinking, and he didn't want to think about the consequences now. Just as he rose to leave, the door creaked open and a squat, hairy wizard walked in -- he was so fat that he appeared to be rolling along the floor, rather than walking. The newcomer looked around and made straight for Draco. He threw a white square of parchment on the table and proceeded to the bar without looking back. Ordering something that looked poisonous, the short wizard clambered up onto a barstool and started talking to the barman.

Draco picked up the parchment the unexpected visitor had dropped and unfolded it, his breathing shallow.

Behind the inn, right now.

Draco pushed the empty bottle of Butterbeer aside but didn't get up, thinking feverishly. How could he know that it was his father waiting out back and not some prankster? Draco knew an incantation that could help him, but he needed to be by himself when he performed it. He picked up the parchment and walked to the lavatory, which was behind a creaky swinging door. It was surprisingly clean, though straw covered the floor and the smell from the bar lingered here as well. The small room was empty, and Draco relaxed. "*Ostende scriptorem*", he muttered, making a zigzagging motion with his wand as he pointed it at the note.

A puff of smoke rose from the surface of the parchment, growing larger and larger as it hung in front of Draco's face. A vague outline of a person bent over a parchment appeared in the smoke and Draco recognised his father's features in the face before the smoke dissipated. He pocketed the note and walked out, heading towards the door. His spellwork was lamentable -- the image was supposed to be sharp and crisp -- but at least he'd found out what he wanted. Draco made a mental note to practise the Scriptor charm, and never trust anonymous-looking notes again.

His heart raced as he made his way around the side of the inn hurriedly, fingering the wand in his pocket. He turned the corner and saw a cloaked and hooded figure standing near an iron decorative fence that partially obscured a series of rose bushes. The figure raised its head and Draco breathed a sigh of relief at the sight of his father's face. His heart leapt slightly -- his father hadn't changed at all. Of course, that was to be expected, with no more Dementors in Azkaban, Draco corrected himself.

"Father," Draco said deferentially, coming to a stop about a foot from the man and inclining his head slightly.

"Draco, my boy," Lucius Malfoy drawled, coming closer and embracing his son with one arm. His other arm hung by his side and looked rather useless, Draco noticed.

"What's wrong with your arm, Dad? Are you hurt?" Draco asked, concerned.

"Nothing a few days' rest won't fix, but I needed to see you," his father said, stepping away. "Are they treating you well at the school?"

"No worse or better than usual."

"Good, good. Have you been writing to your mother?"

"Of course."

"Good boy. Listen, I need you to send this to her. It's illegal for them to be checking the letters Pandora brings to the Manor from Hogwarts, but they're checking everything else and our fireplaces are being watched, even the one in the cellar. Just send it to her, she'll know what to do." With that, Lucius handed Draco a small, oval mirror with intricate carvings on the frame.

Draco took it -- he knew what it was, of course -- a two-way mirror. He used to have a pair when he was small, but he'd smashed one when he threw it after a house-elf

who'd irritated him. He unfastened his cloak and put the mirror inside his robe pocket. His mind was racing with a million questions, but he wasn't sure where to start.

"Father, I--"

"Look, Draco, we don't have much time. You'll be missed shortly, I expect -- whom did you tell that you were meeting me?"

"No one, I just told Blaise that I was meeting someone who had news of you," Draco replied at once.

"That's my boy," Lucius said fondly. Draco flushed, pleased at the praise.

His father told him about his escape -- someone named Wormtail had created a distraction to draw off the Aurors guarding the prison while Aunt Bella had freed the Death Eaters, finding their cells using a rota she stole from the guardroom. She had been interrupted by the Auror Kingsley Shacklebolt who hadn't followed the others after Wormtail for reasons unknown. Shacklebolt was now a captive of the Dark Lord's -- he was proving very resilient and they hadn't been able to crack him yet.

Draco gazed at his father in awe as he spoke -- he'd never be able to pull off half the things his father did. It all sounded terribly exciting and dangerous, and Draco didn't like dangerous situations. He recalled the conversations he overheard last month and told his father about Potter's concern for Shacklebolt. Lucius' eyes widened.

"You heard him say he was concerned about Shacklebolt?"

"No, no. I heard Weasley tell Potter that it wasn't his fault they'd sent Shacklebolt."

"That Potter boy is so very irritating," Lucius said with a hard look in his eyes. "This is very interesting information indeed, Draco, I'm glad you told me." He paced alongside the iron fence for a few moments.

"Make sure that you send any more information you glean about Potter to your mother. The Dark Lord is very displeased that the boy managed to escape from him once again."

"Do you know how he does it? Potter, I mean. He isn't much. I've duelled with him, and if it hadn't been for his ability to speak Parseltongue, I would have flattened him."

"Don't underestimate Harry Potter, son. What he lacks in skill he makes up for in sheer nerve, and he has friends in high places indeed."

Draco snorted, unable to help himself.

His father gave him an indulgent smile. "Not for long, of course," he added, "but all the same, don't give Potter any undue cause for concern. While I am confident that the Dark Lord's mission will be successful, there is a small possibility that it won't be." Lucius frowned. "In which case you, my son, will need to have a clean record."

"You don't want me to join you, Father?" Draco said, pretending to look put out and trying to prevent his sigh of relief.

"Oh heavens, no, Draco," his father said, not looking at him. "I wouldn't put you in danger any more than I would walk into the Ministry of Magic and surrender. Besides, you're underage and any magic you attempt outside of school is watched by the Ministry. You needn't worry, son. The Dark Lord will be in a position to seize power long before your education is completed, and he will make his move swiftly. You just keep out of trouble and continue fulfilling your prefect duties."

Draco nodded. Well, that was certainly a burden lifted -- he'd gone to the meeting half-expecting to be given the Dark Mark.

"Tell me, Draco, how is Pansy?" his father asked suddenly.

Draco smiled in the way he always smiled at Pansy when he knew people were looking. "She's just great," he said, beaming.

"Don't get too involved, son," Lucius said. "There are many other girls out there. Pansy's a good match, but not the best -- you are heir to my name and fortune, and you're still very young."

Draco made no reply, just tipped his head slightly. Pansy was as good a cover as any, but he wasn't about to let his father know he had no inclination to procreate. He might change his mind one day, after all. His thoughts wandered to Pansy, the Slytherin house unity project, and he suddenly remembered Nott.

"Father, did Theodore Nott's father escape with you?" he asked.

"Yes, yes, he did. He was hurt again, unfortunately -- they hadn't given him time to recover from the injuries he'd sustained in the Department of Mysteries before carting him off to Azkaban," Lucius said with an unpleasant sneer. "The brutality of the Ministry is unthinkable."

Draco made a mental note to speak with Theodore and assuage his distress. He felt so relieved that his father was all right that he was willing to forgive Nott his earlier transgression.

"On that note, I must go, Draco," his father said softly. Draco nodded wordlessly, trying to ignore the pang in his chest.

"When will I see you again?" he asked.

Lucius shook his head. "I don't know. It's dangerous for me to be here and I just wanted to make sure you were all right and they were treating you well." He made a vague gesture in the general direction of the school. "I'll try to be in touch, but I don't want to draw suspicion to you. If you want to ask your mother about me, refer to your uncle Duncan."

They embraced again, and Lucius Disapparated with a barely audible popping sound. Draco recalled the essay he'd just written last week -- the more skilled one was at the charm, the quieter the sound one made when Apparating or Disapparating. Draco made his way back to the street around the inn, feeling a mixture of relief and sadness. He was pleased to see his father, and wished desperately to be back at Malfoy Manor with both his parents. A Lethifold take Potter for making things so complicated for him! He suddenly stopped, remembering the meeting he'd arranged with Potter at The Three Broomsticks. There wasn't a clock in sight, unfortunately, and Draco hurried along, knowing he was very late, hoping that Blaise had been able to keep Potter from leaving.

Draco walked as quickly as he could along High Street, passing students of all ages and houses -- the Hogsmeade weekend was in full swing now, with even the late sleepers out and about. He spotted Vincent and Gregory inside Zonko's and wondered what on earth they found so appealing about the place. No one in Slytherin was daft enough to fall for the tricks that place sold, Draco thought with disdain. He marched past Honeydukes as a screaming bunch of third-years emerged from the doors. Draco patted himself on the back mentally for having the good sense to make his purchases early.

When he finally arrived at the Three Broomsticks some twenty minutes later, the place was packed. He had to look around for a good minute before he spotted Blaise, who sat with his head propped up on his hand, blowing bubbles in his drink with a thin straw. The green drink fizzed dangerously, threatening to spill over the top, but

Blaise withdrew the straw with his mouth. He noticed Draco and grinned, waving. Blaise looked quite ridiculous -- smiling with the straw between his teeth -- and Draco suppressed a grin, feeling put out that Potter was nowhere in sight. He wove his way through the crowd towards the table. Sitting down across from Blaise, he looked around for Rosmerta and waved to her, smiling slightly. She waved back and nodded, indicating that she'd be along. Draco turned to Blaise.

"How did it go?" Blaise asked, an anxious look on his face.

"Everything's fine," Draco responded noncommittally. "Did Potter not show up?"

Blaise frowned. "Yeah, he showed up, but he had to leave."

"You talked to him then?"

"No, we sat here staring at each other the whole time," Blaise said irritably. "Of course I talked to him, you told me to keep him here as long as I could."

"Why, Blaise, your charm must be fading if you couldn't keep Potter for longer than -- er, how late am I?"

"An hour and a half," Blaise said, cocking an eyebrow.

Draco gaped at him. "No, that can't be. I wasn't -- I didn't take that long."

"Yes, you did. Potter left about ten minutes ago, said he had Quidditch practice in an hour."

Draco swore loudly, and a cheerful voice behind him said "Dear me, such language from a Malfoy!"

Draco whirled around, ready to lambaste whomever it was but stopped as he saw Rosmerta, who was trying not to laugh. "What would you like, dear?" she asked with a kind smile.

"Nettle wine with just a tiny drop of blackberry rum, please," Draco said contritely, giving her a sly wink. She blushed and swatted him lightly with her notebook. "Heartbreaker, that's what you are," she complained with a giggle and walked off towards the bar, bumping into a fifth-year Ravenclaw and apologising as she went. Draco turned back to Blaise.

"You'd better never let Pansy see you carry on like that," Blaise said, stirring his drink absentmindedly. "She'll be more furious than she was after the Hannah Abbott incident."

Draco waved him off. "Pansy hates The Three Broomsticks, remember? Doesn't want to mingle with the commoners or something like that. Anyway, back to Potter. What did you talk about?"

"You, of course," Blaise flashed him a toothy grin. "We went over all your relatives and just started in on your parents when Potter had to leave."

Draco glared at him. "Seriously, Blaise. What was he like?"

"What I want to know is what kept you so long. Then I might tell you about my time with Potter. Might." Blaise leaned back in his chair, lifting his glass and sloshing the contents.

"The man I was meeting was late, and we had much to talk about," Draco replied. He must have looked emotional for a moment because Blaise leaned forward again, dark eyes boring into Draco's.

"Is everything fine, Draco? Or are you just putting up a brave front? If so, it doesn't become you."

"I'll have you know I'm not putting up a front of any sort, and yes, everything is just fine. I had many questions and I must have lost track of time," Draco replied, growing more irritated. He didn't want to talk about his father; that information was his and nobody else's. He intended to keep it that way. "I can't give you any details, Blaise --

we might be overheard and I don't trust anyone when it comes to the well-being of my family," he finished.

Blaise looked cross for a moment, then shook his head. "Good old Draco. I believe the news you have is good, if only because you're almost back to your old self. You haven't been the same since your father was taken."

Draco looked at him coolly and started to respond, but Rosmerta was back with his wine. Draco accepted the glass gratefully and sipped, enjoying the flavour. Rosmerta knew just how to prepare this drink the way he liked it. Draco pressed the tip of his tongue to his palate to ease the slight stinging of the blackberry rum. He looked back at Blaise.

"I don't know what you mean by 'back to my old self' but I am quite happy that my father is once again free. Perhaps not under the circumstances that he deserves, but free nonetheless."

"Are you still going after Potter?"

"Oh, certainly. Potter will pay for what he did to my father," Draco said and noticed with alarm that Blaise looked troubled. "What is it, Zabini? Don't tell me that you've caught the Potter fever."

"I just think he's got enough to be dealing with, without anyone else trying to make his life difficult for him," Blaise said with a guarded look.

"What? What are you talking about?"

"Don't you remember? You told me Sirius Black was his godfather."

"Yeah, so? What's my blood traitor cousin got to do with it?"

"Your cousin is dead, Draco, in case you forgot the *Daily Prophet* article that exonerated him," Blaise said, staring at his glass.

"Yeah, Aunt Bella sorted him out, so what?" Draco said impatiently. What was Blaise on about?

"Sirius Black and Potter had been close, and Potter's still grieving," came the reply. Blaise was avoiding Draco's eyes, and Draco got angry.

"Do you think I give a Kneazle's behind about what Potter's feeling?" Draco laughed airily. "It's his own fault, anyway."

"Ouch, Draco," Blaise said, taking a sip from his drink. "That's pretty cruel."

Draco raised an eyebrow, as if to say "So?" Blaise sighed.

"Whatever it is you're planning, I want no part in it. I know you hate Potter, but he's always been decent to me."

"Did he cry on your shoulder or something? What's he said to you to make you this reticent?" Draco demanded, feeling his face grow hot. He couldn't believe Blaise was taking Potter's side.

"He didn't say anything to me. We talked about Quidditch and girls, as a matter of fact. But he looks... haunted. Like he's not all there." Blaise trailed off, staring at a potted plant in the corner. "Besides, this shouldn't come as a shock to you. I've always refused to take part in your childish pranks," he added.

"Childish, are they? I recall you laughed just as hard at Potter's face when he saw the Potter Stinks badges I made in fourth year. You wore one, too," Draco insisted, jabbing a finger in Blaise's direction. The other boy shrugged.

"That was then. I'm not taking sides, Draco. I'm just not going to join in your obsessive crusade to bring Potter down. I think he's been beaten enough over the years." Blaise stared hard at him for a moment. "I would try to dissuade you from doing whatever you're planning, but I know it's no use."

"You're right, it's not. Potter has transgressed against my family, and there's nothing you or anyone can say to prevent my revenge," Draco said with satisfaction.

Blaise half-shrugged and gulped down the remainder of his drink, smacking his lips. "Suit yourself."

Draco bristled, drinking the last of his nettle wine as well, forgetting to enjoy it. He hadn't expected Blaise to support him, but he certainly hadn't expected this cool hostility, either. "Fine, I will. Shall we head back?"

"Yeah," Blaise said, not looking at him. Draco hated this tension. Blaise still hadn't talked to him about his disappearances, which were continuing and alarming in their regularity. Draco's insides froze with horrible suspicion.

"You haven't been seeing Potter all these times, have you, Blaise?"

Blaise's eyes shot up to Draco's face. He looked incredulous. "You think that I have to be bugging Potter to be human to him? Come off it, Draco. Besides, he's straight."

"So who have you been seeing then?" Draco entreated, trying desperately to suppress a smirk at Blaise's ignorance of Potter's sexual proclivities.

"Why must you labour under the delusion that I'm seeing someone? Are you jealous, Draco?"

"Jealous? Why would I be jealous? I'm only curious," Draco shot back, and watched Blaise's hopeful expression crumble with no small amount of satisfaction.

"Curiosity killed the Kneazle, they say," Blaise said blithely, recovering.

He waved at someone behind Draco's back and Rosmerta came over a moment later. They paid for their drinks. Draco got up abruptly, causing his chair to scrape the floor loudly. The crowd had thinned somewhat and he strode towards the exit with relative ease, not looking back to see if Blaise was following. Draco was incensed at losing control like that; he scolded himself mentally for being too free with his emotions. He had been off guard because he was so happy about his father, but that wasn't an excuse. He walked out onto the street, stepping around several younger Hufflepuffs sprawled out near the sidewalk. He wanted to kick one of them just to see what they'd do, but abstained.

Blaise caught up with him several moments later and they made their way back to the castle in relative silence. When they reached the Slytherin common room, Blaise said he needed to go to the library and asked if Draco wanted to join him. Draco declined - he wanted to lie down and have a nap before he resumed doing his homework. Blaise grinned at him and left. Draco stared after him, contemplating the idea of following him to see if he really went to the library -- Blaise hadn't taken any of his school things with him -- then decided he didn't want to bother. Vincent and Gregory were nowhere to be found and Pansy was probably still in Hogsmeade. Draco walked into the boys' dormitory and shut the door tightly behind himself.

Draco Malfoy's Diary, October 5th

Father is all right! I want to run up to those smug Gryffindor prats and tell them about it, but of course, can't. I am worried about his arm, though -- he was wincing as I hugged him goodbye. I wonder how he hurt it. He does look confident in whatever's going on with the Dark Lord and his plans. That's certainly reassuring, and no small part of that is the fact that I won't have to join the ranks of the Dark Lord's elite hit squad. I wonder what he was getting at, with his comments about Pansy. I dread the day he finds out that the best match for me is not someone who's capable of producing offspring, Malfoy or otherwise.

At any rate, I shall take Father's advice and keep my nose clean. No need to step out of line -- not like I'd have time to, with all the homework that's been dumped on us, and with the house unity project. That reminds me, I need to ask Pansy for more details about the Slytherin project. I think she's supposed to be speaking at the House meeting tomorrow evening -- unless it's Liam's turn. No, I spoke last week; it must be Pansy's turn.

Blaise worries me more and more every day. He's been as irritable as you please, and he got downright cross with me when we were on the subject of Potter. What is it with Potter and his ability to corrupt people's minds into pitying his worthless existence? I admit I was slightly looking forward to meeting him today, but I'm certainly glad I didn't, under the circumstances. Ugh, I just said I looked forward to seeing Harry bleeding Potter. I must not be sleeping enough.

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Chapter 7: A Gryffindor and a Slytherin

A Gryffindor and A Slytherin

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Author's Notes: This was my first novel-length Harry/Draco story. It was completed four months before the release of HBP (and before the announcement of Draco's birth date on Rowling's website) and is now AU. This story stands alone, though it's also a companion piece to *Beyond Wild Moor and Fen*, which is from Harry's point of view. Many thanks to Mishty, Vel, Jaxmari, Kristal and Autumn LeCroix for beta-reading. Constructive criticism is always welcome and appreciated.

A Gryffindor and A Slytherin Chapter 7 - Letters and Meetings

Early on Sunday morning, Draco awoke with a start. He'd been dreaming about following Blaise around in a maze of corridors. No sooner had the other boy come into view, he'd disappear around another corner. Draco kept trying to call his name, but no sound came from his throat; every time he'd stretch out his arm to grab Blaise, he'd move out of reach. Draco was irritated and cranky when he rose from his bed. He kicked his shoes out of the way and yanked a towel out of his bedside drawer, heading for the bathroom.

He hadn't seen Potter at dinner the previous evening, which didn't improve his mood any. Draco wasn't sure what to do about Saturday's fiasco -- he didn't know if Potter would accept an obviously fake apology. Still, Draco's plan had been thwarted temporarily, and he needed another means of approaching Potter. Maybe...

As he dressed, Draco recalled his conversation with his father and remembered the two-way mirror he was to send to his mother. He peered around to make sure that the others were still asleep. Pulling the mirror out of his pocket, he placed it on the nightstand and considered how he would send it. It would look too big and lumpy in a roll of parchment, and he didn't want to send it openly as a parcel. Draco bit the inside of his cheek, thinking, and then it came to him. Of course. He'd send his mother the box of coconut ice squares he'd bought yesterday, concealing the mirror in it. As far as he knew, the Aurors weren't reading his letters, so he could let her know about the mirror in the enclosed note. Nevertheless, he would be careful in how he worded his letter.

First, however, he had to prepare the package. Draco opened the box and levitated the sweets out before wrapping the mirror in a tissue and placing it on the bottom. He replaced the sweets in the box and surveyed the result. The middle was slightly raised, but it wasn't noticeable, unless one looked very carefully. He replaced the lid and muttered, "*Involvere*," at which a shimmering liquid substance issued from his wand, enveloping the box of sweets. Several moments later, the box was covered in clear wrapping and Draco put it aside, taking out his quill and some parchment.

Dear Mother,

I know I just wrote last week, but I was in Hogsmeade yesterday and I simply had to send you some coconut ice squares, I know you're fond of them. Make sure you try the ones on the bottom of the box first; they say those are always tastier than the ones on top.

Your loving son,

Draco.

P.S. Send Uncle Duncan my love.

Draco re-read the note with a critical eye and he was sure his mother would understand. He desperately wanted to write, in big bold letters, that he'd seen Dad, but he really didn't want to take the chance that his letter would be read. He hoped he'd been subtle enough, at any rate. He sealed the parchment with a tap of his wand and rose, sticking the box of sweets under his arm. Blaise had stopped snoring and Draco wanted to leave before having to answer unnecessary questions -- he almost never sent anything home.

Draco trudged up towards the Owlery unhappily. Why did they have to have the Owlery so high up, anyway? Couldn't it be nearer to the Slytherin common room? The Gryffindors always had everything more convenient for them. When he walked into the spacious room, trying to sidestep the owl droppings as best as he could, he was startled to see that he wasn't the only early riser. A boy sat on the windowsill with his legs crossed, an owl perched on his shoulder. Draco couldn't see who it was, because the sun was shining straight into the window. The silhouette revealed a slim build, a narrow back, and shoulders that hunched slightly forward, as though under an invisible weight. Draco held his hand up to shield his eyes from the bright light. The boy turned his head towards the owl on his shoulder. Potter.

"What do you think, Hedwig? Should I go visit Hagrid, or will he just want to talk about Sirius again?"

The owl hooted and nipped at her owner's nose affectionately, and he smiled. Draco's breath caught in his throat and he coughed. Potter's smile faded as he turned to look at him.

"Potter. Nice owl," Draco offered, thinking quickly of how to turn the situation to his advantage. Claws sank into his shoulder and he gave a startled yelp, glaring at Pandora -- who had, as usual, chosen to make her grand entrance at the worst possible moment.

"Thanks. Yours is nice, too," Potter said, swinging around and hopping off the windowsill. His owl flew up towards the rafters.

"Listen, Potter, I--" Draco started to say, but Potter shook his head.

"Forget it, Malfoy. You want to play games, I'm not interested. I've got bigger fish to fry."

With that, Potter stalked out of the Owlery, leaving Draco sputtering with indignation. Why, the absolute cheek of the arrogant Gryffindor prat! Bigger fish to fry, indeed! He'd show him, Draco fumed. Potter would beg for Draco's forgiveness by the time he was through with him. Potter's attitude put a serious dent into Draco's plan. He'd have

to regroup and start over from the beginning now. He would go over his notes in the evening, he thought, recovering.

Draco remembered his errand and took the box of sweets from under his arm. He tied the parchment to Pandora's leg and demanded that she not drop the package, as it was fragile. The owl flew off, clipping the side of his face with her wing as a reward for his insolence. This jolted him out of his angry reverie and he sighed. He'd have to be especially nice to Pandora in the coming weeks -- this was the second time he sent her out in four days, and she hated delivering packages.

He made his way down to the Slytherin dungeon muttering various oaths under his breath. This year was not going well for him, not well at all.

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Later that evening, all the students in Slytherin gathered in the common room for the weekly House meeting. These were a longstanding tradition in the house of Salazar. The prefects took turns each week to make announcements and to highlight individual accomplishments. They never spoke of individual failures -- these meetings were supposed to motivate the other, unpraised, students to strive to be highlighted in next week's meeting. Tonight it was Pansy's turn and she perched atop a tall chair that resembled a bar stool. The fireplace behind her was lit and she looked eerie against its backdrop.

The students from each year assembled in little groups on the sofas and chairs. The second-years came in late and were forced to sit on the floor, by Pansy's chair. The Bloody Baron floated through a nearby wall and hung in the air next to them. Strictly speaking, the House ghosts weren't allowed in the common rooms, but an exception

was made in the Baron's case. The ghost reported details of the meetings to Professor Snape, who was technically supposed to be present, but couldn't always make it. Draco frowned, realising that Snape hadn't been present at a single meeting this year, barring the first day of school. He'd made himself available for the prefects to ask questions and present concerns, but he'd been unusually absent from house events.

Pansy gave a little cough and one by one, the Slytherins fell silent. She surveyed the room with a satisfied smile and addressed them.

"Good evening, everyone. Tonight's meeting will be a little different, as it is the due date for the Slytherin House Essays. I hope all of you have submitted yours, because I'm going to check that right now," she said.

Still grinning, Pansy raised her wand and levitated the silver and green collection bin over everyone's heads. The cylindrical bin landed at her feet and Pansy waved her wand in a complicated way, uttering an incantation Draco wasn't familiar with. Draco watched in fascination as a fine silvery mist began to rise from the slit at the top of the bin, shimmering as it coalesced into a serpentine form near the ceiling.

Finally, the mist stopped rising from the bin and the silver serpent hovered in the air for a moment. Quick as a flash, it split into four slightly smaller serpents. They darted through the air to hover above the heads of four students, one of whom was Blaise. Pansy looked around the room.

"Andrew Bartlett, Preston Iven, Rose McNulty, Blaise Zabini," she intoned, "the four of you are not going to bed until your essays are written according to the rules on the notice board and placed in the bin."

Draco glared at his Chaser and Keeper, both of whom avoided his gaze. Draco hoped they wouldn't blame Quidditch practice for their failure to get their essays in on time. Laurel, the seventh-year prefect, was giving a death stare to her little brother, who looked like he wanted to fall through the floor and disappear. There wasn't anyone glaring at Rose, a chubby fourth-year girl, but she looked apprehensive anyway.

"Otherwise," Pansy continued, "you'll find that your new pets" -- she pointed at the silver shimmering snake above Blaise's head -- "are going to follow you around for the rest of the school year." She looked around the common room with an air of triumph, and there was some applause. Most people, even Draco, were eyeing Pansy with newfound appreciation. He'd had no idea what she was up to with the collection bin, but this was rather impressive magic.

"That's Dark magic, Parkinson," Nott spoke up from his seat beside Queenie. "You had to have charmed the pretty snakes," he jabbed a finger in the direction of Blaise's serpent, "to recognise the person from the name. That needs a part of the person to work."

"Oh, Theodore," Pansy said in a cold voice, "are you questioning the judgement of Professor Snape? He approved usage of the spell, you see."

Everyone turned to look at the Bloody Baron, who merely nodded. Draco looked over at Liam, who had narrowed his eyes at Nott.

"What did you use then? Did you steal--" Nott began, but was interrupted by Liam.

"Pansy used the goblets from breakfast last Saturday," the Head Boy said with a menacing edge to his quiet voice. "Because they'd only been used recently, she was able to collect residual magical essence for each Slytherin student."

Liam looked around the room. Sheridan Roper -- a tiny, bespectacled boy in Draco's year -- sat up a little straighter. Sheridan was easily the best at Defence Against the Dark Arts in all of Slytherin. He blinked at Liam from behind his thick glasses, reminding Draco eerily of Potter.

"Since we know where everyone sits at the table, it was the easiest and quickest way of doing it. As Pansy says, our Head of House has approved this, and those wishing to question his judgement will do well to speak to him directly. There will be no more interruptions this evening," Liam said, staring pointedly at Nott, who was studying the carpet with an unreadable look.

Draco smirked. Who did the prat think he was kidding, anyway, with the indignation over Dark magic? If Nott wanted to debate the ethics of magic with his housemates, he should have asked the Sorting Hat to put him into Ravenclaw. His train of thought was interrupted by Pansy, who once again cleared her throat.

"As I was saying before I was so rudely interrupted," she said, "you've got until midnight to finish your essays and drop them in here" -- she pointed at the bin near her feet -- "so the four of you had better hurry."

Blaise gave her an ill-tempered look. "How do we know the other houses won't simply try to steal bits of our handwriting to compare the essays with?"

"You really ought to listen in at the meetings, Blaise," Pansy said, and several students laughed. "We went over that when Liam announced the project three weeks ago -- Professor Flitwick will charm the parchments specially, so that it looks like the same person wrote them all."

Blaise grunted in acknowledgement and slumped back against the sofa cushions. The silvery serpent above him hung its head down in front of his face, and Blaise shooed it away, scowling.

"Pansy," Draco spoke up suddenly, remembering yesterday afternoon. "There are spells that can reveal the writer of any piece of text. How do we know that the other houses won't use them?"

"Ooh, good question, Draco," Pansy said, beaming at him. "Laurel's going to place a jinx on the parchments after Liam duplicates them." She paused, looking around the room. "Let's just say anyone who tries to use magic to find out the writer's identity will find themselves in dire straits indeed."

Draco nodded and settled back down. There were murmurs of approval all around the common room.

"Finally, a reminder -- the first essays will be read out immediately after the Halloween Feast. Hopefully, we can look forward to many house points that evening." With that, Pansy levitated the collection bin back to its original location below the notice board and began to highlight the week's achievements by Slytherins. Draco tuned her out: he wasn't interested.

After the meeting broke up, Draco cornered Nott before the other boy had a chance to retreat to his dormitory, which he shared with Sheridan Roper and two fifth-year boys. Nott stared at Draco from beneath his long black fringe. He licked his lips and shifted his weight.

"Look, I didn't mean to upset your girlfriend, Malfoy--"

Draco held up a hand, silencing him. "This isn't about Pansy. Walk with me," he said and walked out into the dungeon hallway. Nott followed -- he didn't really have a choice, Draco thought with a self-satisfied smirk. They walked in silence all the way to the staircase that led to the entrance hall. The Bloody Baron followed them for part of the way, then disappeared through a wall.

As they reached the stairs, Draco took a quick look around and turned to face Nott. The other boy looked pale and gaunt in the scant light of the wall-mounted torches, and Draco felt a twinge of guilt pluck at his insides -- here was a fellow *Death Eater Child*, only Nott was much worse off than Draco. He shook the thought off; now wasn't the time to get sentimental.

"What gives, Malfoy?" Nott asked, his eyes glittering in the torchlight.

"I thought it might interest you that your father is free," Draco said without preamble.

He was regretting his decision to walk with Nott: something felt off about him. Draco suppressed a shiver. There was an edge of desperation in Nott's face that Draco wasn't comfortable with. However, as he spoke, he noticed the desperation fade away and turn into something different, something that made the other boy look somehow more human.

"You... how do you know?" Nott's voice was trembling with emotion, and Draco's heart skipped a beat. He sighed.

"I have my sources."

"Why hasn't he told me?" Nott demanded.

"Honestly, Theodore, your father's a convicted criminal, but he's no fool. How would he know that our post is not being read by Dumbledore or his underlings?" Draco asked, not bothering to conceal his bitter tone. "At any rate, he was injured in the escape and he's still recovering, that's why he hasn't contacted you."

"How do you know all this?"

"I told you, I have my sources. I'm not at liberty to disclose them, but rest assured that my information is accurate," Draco said. "At any rate, I thought you might like to know," he finished and turned to leave.

"Hey," Nott called softly and Draco turned around with a quizzical look. "Thanks... Draco," Nott said, looking straight at him.

"Don't mention it," Draco said somewhat gruffly and walked away.

They both knew everything had a price, and he'd just bought Nott's favour; it wasn't a sentimental gesture but a calculated one. Still, it felt good to be appreciated. Draco reached the common room and spoke the password. Inside, the crowd had dissipated, though a lot of the students remained sprawled out on the sofas and chairs. Vincent and Gregory were playing chess: a white pawn was clubbing a black one in the middle of the board.

Blaise was lying on his stomach atop one of the sofas, a piece of parchment in front of him, a quill in his hand. Four first-years were sitting across from him, staring at the silvery snake above Blaise's head. Draco noted with amusement that the snake seemed to enjoy the attention -- it was performing complicated acrobatic tricks in the air, much to the first-years' glee. One girl giggled and clapped as the serpent performed a back flip. Blaise glared at her and Draco walked over, shooing the children away. Blaise looked up at him with a dejected expression.

"I don't know what to write about," he complained. "There's too much I don't want others to know."

Draco nodded. "I had the same problem. You'll figure it out, I'm sure. I'll be right back, going to get my Arithmancy book," he said. Blaise nodded absentmindedly, turning back to his blank parchment. Draco walked through the curtain that separated the common room from the hallway leading to the boys' dormitories. Retrieving his book, he walked back to the common room. Vincent and Gregory were talking excitedly to their chess pieces, and Blaise was sitting up now, his parchment still blank.

Above him, the shimmering serpent gave a demonstrative yawn and curled up. Draco took a seat beside his friend, opening his book. He peered up at Blaise's snake, which opened one beady black eye at him, and winked slyly. Draco shook his head, smiling. Pansy had really gone all out -- he'd just made a mental note to ask her about the spell when she emerged from the direction of the girls' dormitories on the opposite side of the common room.

Seeing Draco, Pansy bounded over and flopped down on the sofa beside him, startling Blaise. He gave her an irritated look and went back to staring at his parchment. Draco turned to Pansy.

"Pretty impressive," he said, nodding at the serpent above Blaise's head. It was flinging the tip of its tail from left to right, much like a cat would.

Pansy beamed. "I know. They're a piece of work, aren't they?"

"Where did you learn how to cast it?"

"In an old book Mum gave me, but Granger turned me onto the incantation that would animate them."

"Granger?" Draco gave her an incredulous look.

"Well, I had to talk to her about something when you wanted to speak with Potter in Potions. I figured I might as well get something useful out of it," Pansy said with an impish grin.

"That's my girl," Draco said, pulling her close and kissing her on the cheek. "So what did you write about in your essay?" he asked, jerking his thumb in Blaise's direction.

"Ooh, I think it'll be fun if we try to guess as they're read out, don't you?"

"I guess," Draco said, not particularly disappointed.

Suddenly, a spitting noise came from the floor and Herbert launched himself at Blaise's head, pawing at the silvery snake. Blaise uttered a string of curses in English

and Italian as he attempted to get the cat off. The sight of Blaise with a hissing cat on top of his head was too much to bear. A moment later, Draco was laughing silently, shaking and covering his mouth while Pansy was giggling hysterically beside him. Blaise got Herbert off and shook his head, grinning sheepishly.

"S'pose I should finish this up, or that cat will have my head," he quipped, causing Pansy to burst into a renewed fit of giggles.

"It's a pity we don't have a camera, a picture of that would have been priceless," Draco added with what he hoped was an innocent look.

Blaise rolled his eyes. "Go on, take the mickey. I'll get you back yet, you'll see," he muttered, still grinning. He picked up his quill and started writing. The silver serpent, which had retreated near the ceiling during the cat attack, floated gently down and curled into a coil again, pretending to be asleep.

Draco immersed himself in *Numerology and Grammatica*, searching for an interesting topic to focus on for his term essay. They were supposed to have a topic ready by Monday afternoon and Draco was undecided between the magical properties of the number thirteen and practical applications of Arithmancy in interior decorating. After about an hour, he decided on interior decorating, just as Blaise let out a loud sigh and proclaimed that he was done with his essay. Draco looked up at the silver snake above Blaise's head, but it was still there, swishing its tail around lazily.

Blaise got up, stretched, and walked over to the collection bin, dropping the essay through the slit at the top. At that precise moment, the snake exploded into mist, which seeped languidly into the collection bin. Blaise watched it intently until the last speckle disappeared, then turned to look at Pansy.

"There, happy?" He walked back to the sofa and recapped his ink bottle, yawning.

Pansy yawned as well, glancing at the clock above the mantelpiece. "Almost half past nine -- I hope the others are almost done, it's nearly bedtime for the first-years, and Preston's in first year."

Just then, tiny Preston Iven walked in from the boys' dormitories, followed by a disgruntled-looking Laurel. The snake above his head was coiled into a spring and bouncing up and down as he marched towards the notice board. After the boy deposited his essay, his snake disappeared just as Blaise's had. Laurel ruffled her brother's hair and walked off towards the girls' dormitories.

Draco got up, slamming his textbook shut. He hadn't realised how tired he was until then -- his head spun briefly as he rose to his feet, and he had to grab Blaise to steady himself.

"Oh, but I'm knackered. Going to bed. Night, pet," he said, bending down to kiss Pansy. As he straightened up, he was startled by the gaunt figure of the Bloody Baron hovering right behind the couch.

"Professor Snape wishes to see you at seven o'clock tomorrow morning, Mr Malfoy," the ghost said in his booming voice.

"Did Professor Snape say why he wishes to see me?" Draco asked with no small amount of irritation.

"Didn't," came the reply, and the ghost glided out of the common room as soundlessly as he'd come in.

Draco rolled his eyes. "That settles it, then. I'm off." He flashed Pansy another grin, put his book under his arm, and walked off towards the boys' dormitories.

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On Monday morning, Draco really didn't feel like getting out of bed. He lay in the darkness afforded by the drapes around his bed and stared above him. A tiny iridescent spider was crawling near the top of one of the bedposts. He waited for it to pass out of sight and opened the drapes. The dormitory was pitch-dark and the only sounds were coming from Gregory -- who was snoring -- and Vincent, who was making strange whistling noises. Draco glanced at the silver-encased clock on his bedside table -- it was six-thirty and Snape expected him by seven. He groaned, throwing off his blanket fully and swinging his legs off the bed. He felt around for his slippers, which were under the bed.

Shivering a little, Draco got washed and dressed in a semi-catatonic state. He debated waking the others, but decided against it. The moment he left the room, they'd just go back to sleep again. He'd wake them when he returned. He shuffled out of the dormitory, through the common room, and made his way to Snape's office, gazing idly at the flickering shadows on the walls. When he arrived outside the Potions master's office, he gave three sharp knocks then a soft one; that was how they let their Head of House know that it was a Slytherin at the door.

"Enter," called Snape's voice from the other side of the door, and Draco let himself in. He stood off to the side, waiting for Professor Snape to acknowledge him. The Potions master was seated at his desk, writing in a thick leather-bound book. He glanced up at Draco and gave a tiny nod, letting him know that he'd be with him shortly. Draco nodded in response and occupied himself by staring at a jar of strange star-shaped eyes on a nearby shelf. The eyes moved around in a viscous amber liquid, blinking occasionally. After five minutes, Snape coughed. Draco turned his head to face him and found the professor staring at him pointedly.

"You wanted to see me, Professor?" Draco said, trying to mask his nervousness. He knew that Snape was a Death Eater, and he was likely to have heard from Draco's father. When Draco hadn't given up his father to the authorities, he'd committed a crime: yet another reason to keep his meeting with Lucius from as many people as possible.

"Yes, Draco. You will post these," -- he held out a sheaf of multicoloured parchment -
- "on the common room notice board immediately."

Draco took the scrolls from him, not believing what he was hearing. Snape summoned him at seven on a Monday morning to give him an errand to run? The Head of Slytherin House regarded him darkly from between two sheets of greasy hair that hung limply on either side of his face.

"Is... is that all, Professor?" Draco managed. The hand holding the scrolls was shaking ever so slightly.

"Yes, Draco, that is all," Snape said, dark eyes glinting. "Unless there is something else you wish to speak to me about."

"Uh, no, Sir, there isn't," Draco said resolutely.

"Very well. See you at breakfast, Draco," Snape said with the slightest hint of a smile playing at the corners of his mouth. He picked up his quill again and paid Draco no more attention. Murmuring goodbye, Draco hightailed it out of the office, relieved. When he reached the common room, he applied Sticking Charms to the backs of the scrolls he got from Snape and affixed them to the notice board.

Looking at the notices, he was a little startled. Fourteen all told, they were the member lists for the Defence Association groups and the Ravenclaw study groups. Immersed in the details of the Slytherin house unity project, he'd completely forgotten about what the other houses were doing. Two scrolls for each year -- one in Gryffindor colours and one in Ravenclaw colours -- they listed neat rows of students in all four houses. Draco searched for his name on the red-and-gold scrolls.

*DEFENCE ASSOCIATION -- GROUP 1 -- MONDAYS -- 19:00 -- CLASSROOM
ELEVEN*

Bones, Susan

Boot, Terry

Corner, Michael

Granger, Hermione

Longbottom, Neville

Macmillan, Ernie

Malfoy, Draco

Nott, Theodore

Potter, Harry (leader)

Turpin, Lisa

Draco rubbed his forehead tiredly. Potter and Granger? Potter as group leader? He couldn't even have ended up with Blaise; it had to be Nott, of course. Not that he wasn't going to use the presence of Potter to his advantage, but he'd actually have to defer to Potter, or risk Liam's displeasure. At least there were only two Hufflepuffs in the group. He scanned the other group lists for Blaise and Pansy. Blaise was in the same group as Queenie and Millicent (Tuesdays), and Pansy was with Vincent and Gregory (Thursdays).

There were four groups for the sixth-year students altogether, and Draco noted that a member of a different house led each group -- Sheridan Roper of Slytherin led the Wednesday groups. Of course, Roper was a shoo-in for any Defence against the Dark Arts-related activity. Draco glanced at the blue-and-orange scrolls for the study groups, searching for his name again.

RAVENCLAW STUDY GROUP 1 -- MONDAYS -- 18:00 -- CLASSROOM EIGHT

Bones, Susan

Bulstrode, Millicent

Corner, Michael

Finch-Fletchley, Justin

Longbottom, Neville

Malfoy, Draco

Moon, Jana

Turpin, Lisa

Longbottom again, though no Potter this time. Bones again -- she was the new Minister's niece -- Draco made a mental note to be nice to her, Hufflepuff or not. He could definitely use being in both groups to his advantage. Thankfully, no Nott this time, but Draco wasn't exactly thrilled about being in the same group with Millicent. Searching for Blaise again, he found that Blaise was in Potter's group and he felt an unpleasant twinge, remembering Blaise's words about Potter on Saturday. Pansy was

in the same group as Granger, and Vincent ended up with Weasley. Draco couldn't help but chuckle -- this was going to be one very interesting year.

A groggy-looking Blaise stumbled out of the doorway on the left, dragging his schoolbag across the floor.

"Morning," he muttered, "what's with the awful decorations on the notice board? And what did Snape want from you?"

"He wanted me to post these. House unity group lists, come and see," Draco said.

Blaise stopped a few inches behind him, and Draco felt the other boy's hot breath on the back of his neck. He moved slightly to the side as though to let Blaise see the lists better. Blaise found his name quickly and crouched down beside his schoolbag. There was a strange grin playing across his face that Draco didn't like at all.

"Both on Tuesday," Blaise said grouchily, extracting his timetable, a quill, and an inkpot.

Draco nodded. "I've got mine on Monday... Wait a minute," he suddenly said, frowning. Searching for the names of the Slytherin Quidditch team members on the lists, he saw that they were scattered all over the week. "Oh, great. Wonderful. Bollocks," he fumed.

"What?" Blaise stopped writing on his timetable and blinked up at him.

"Quidditch! We're all over the place -- and we have to keep practising." Draco scanned the lists again suspiciously but realised that all the house teams were in similar situations. "Gotta go, see you at breakfast," he said over his shoulder, and sprinted to the dormitory to get his schoolbag, yelling for Vincent and Gregory to get up before they were late. Draco was going to go right back to Professor Snape and ask him to book the Quidditch pitch for eight o'clock every other night of the week, plus for three hours every Saturday afternoon. There was just no way the Slytherin Quidditch team would suffer because of the house unity project. No way.

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On Saturday, Draco was making his way downstairs from the library when he heard excited shouts and music coming from the direction of the Charms corridor. Instead of walking over to the next staircase that would take him down, he went to investigate -- he was a prefect, after all. The sounds originated down the hall from the Charms classroom, and Draco saw shadows dancing across a wall further up ahead.

The source of the noise was a normally disused classroom. Draco checked that his prefect's badge was in place and strode over, ready to hand out punishments. He'd been in a bad mood all week -- their Quidditch practices were sloppy, there was too much homework, and he saw less and less of Blaise every day. Draco was itching to take out his irritation on someone other than the younger Slytherins, who had all been avoiding him since Wednesday.

As he stopped in the doorway of the classroom, a curious sight greeted him. He first noticed Liam Baddock and Trista Morgan. Liam was sitting on top of a desk, laughing and clapping. Trista was playing a children's tune on a rickety piano in the corner, her glasses down on her nose. Brock Logan, the seventh-year Hufflepuff prefect, sat beside Liam, grinning and pointing at something. The room was full of first-year students -- there were about twenty of them all together, from all four houses.

Little Preston Iven was gliding backwards on a broomstick, chasing a dark-haired Ravenclaw girl, who was squealing and laughing. Preston managed to bump the broom handle into the girl's side, nearly sending her flying across the floor. She scrambled up and grabbed the nearest Gryffindor, whom Preston proceeded to bump with the broom handle. He raised his arms triumphantly and cried "Broom Chaser!" then promptly fell off the broom, laughing. Several first-years cheered, and Liam clapped enthusiastically. Nobody seemed to notice Draco standing in the doorway.

Of course, Draco was witnessing a Hufflepuff party. There were goblets and plates scattered on a table further inside the classroom. It was slightly unnerving to see all these children from the different houses playing so amicably together. Draco experienced a kind of morbid fascination as he watched -- he still remembered how firmly the lines between the houses had been drawn in his first year. Liam noticed him then and waved him over. Draco edged along the wall, trying to dodge the running children. He took a seat beside Liam.

"Found us, did you? Isn't this cute?" Liam asked.

"I suppose that's a word for it. What on earth are they doing?"

"It's a game called Broom Chaser. See, our Preston's drawn a black marble from a sack of white ones, and he's the Broom Chaser. He has to tag people with the broom handle while flying backwards -- they then belong to his team," Liam explained seriously.

Beside him, Logan noticed Draco and nodded in greeting, then turned back to watch the game. Liam continued. "The team members grab the other kids and hold them, long enough for Preston to come tag them. When there's only one person left, they become the Broom Chaser."

Draco shook his head in amusement. "Who comes up with these?"

"The Hufflepuff prefects," Liam responded. "I think Cuthbert Stebbins contributed this one." Stebbins was the fifth-year prefect and the new Hufflepuff Chaser -- his older brother had left the school the year before, Draco remembered.

"Jolly. I can't wait to play Broom Chaser whenever it's my turn to party," he said dryly, rolling his eyes.

Liam laughed, clapping him on the back. "The games are different for each year, and they're different at each party, don't worry."

Draco snorted. He didn't think anything the Hufflepuffs came up with would be worth participating in, but he kept that opinion to himself, seeing as Logan was sitting right there. The first-years continued running around and shouting gleefully. Draco had to

admit that it was reasonably clever to come up with a game involving broomsticks for the first-years, seeing as they weren't allowed broomsticks normally. You had to participate in the game if you wanted a chance to fly.

"How do they manage to get everyone together on such short notice?" Draco asked, remembering that the invitations went out only ten minutes before the parties began.

"I've been wondering about that myself," Liam answered, frowning suddenly. "It has something to do with Harry Potter, that's all I know. He's got a magical device of some sort, I gather."

Draco furrowed his brow in puzzlement. There were rumours that Potter had an Invisibility Cloak -- Draco didn't believe them, but they'd persisted since first year -- but what kind of a device would help him locate people in the castle? For a moment, Draco seriously wished that he could just find Potter and ask him. He shook his head, bemused. Would that things were that easy.

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On Monday after dinner, Draco spent some time in the Slytherin common room, making an outline for his Arithmancy essay using *Numerology and Grammatica* as well as two books on magical interior decorating that he'd checked out from the library earlier. The clock above the mantelpiece was showing twenty minutes to six, and Draco got up reluctantly. He figured he'd need writing materials at the study group meeting, so he dropped his books off in his dormitory but took his schoolbag with him. On his way out, he remembered that Millicent was in his group, and he hollered her name into the hallway leading to the girls' dormitories, pushing aside the thick green curtain.

Millicent poked her head out from her room, looking irritated. "What do you want?"

"Study group in fifteen minutes, so move," Draco snapped. A puzzled look came over her face, then she realised what he was talking about.

"Oh, bloody hell," she complained, and disappeared. Five minutes later, she came out, carrying her schoolbag as well.

They hurried up the stairs to classroom eight, which was on the second floor. They arrived just in time. There were eight desks standing in a half-circle in the middle of the room. Trista Morgan sat in the corner, regarding them from over the top of her glasses as though they were interesting specimens in Herbology class. Draco tugged at his robe's collar uneasily. As they all settled down, Trista rose unsmilingly and walked over to the blackboard, turning to face them.

"Welcome to your first study session. These Monday meetings will mostly be used as homework sessions during which you can ask your peers for help or advice," she lectured.

Draco felt a shiver go down his spine -- he didn't think he'd ever get used to that voice.

"All right," Trista droned, "everyone please write down their classes on a piece of parchment, and underline your strongest subject. I'm going to prepare lists for each of you. These will hold student names with their strongest subjects -- you should never hesitate to contact your fellow group members for help in these subjects." She paused, regarding them indifferently. "You are all, of course, expected to cooperate. If a group member seeks you out with a help request, you will make yourself available at your earliest convenience."

Draco scribbled down his class list, got up, and handed his parchment to Trista with a mock little bow. He sat back down and stared around the room. One by one, they all finished and handed in their lists. Draco noticed that he and Longbottom were the only pure-bloods in the group: Finch-Fletchley was a Mudblood and the rest, including Millicent, were half-bloods. He wrinkled his nose in distaste, wondering who had drawn up the student lists for the groups. He supposed he should be grateful; after all, he might have ended up with a group full of Mudbloods. Trista had retired to a spare desk in the corner and was poring over the lists submitted.

"All right, so we're supposed to figure out which classes we all have together," Susan Bones spoke up hesitantly. Draco gave her an encouraging smile, which made her sit up slightly straighter, apparently in shock. Recovering, she brushed a piece of lint from her robe and continued.

"Who here has Charms?" Everyone raised a hand. Susan grinned. "All right, how about Transfiguration?" Again, everyone raised a hand. Jana Moon, a petite Gryffindor girl with dark brown curly hair, giggled into her sleeve. Susan grinned wider and tried again. "Defence Against the Dark Arts?" Everyone raised their hands, and most people were laughing now, except for Draco. "Okay, let's try... Potions?" This time, only four people raised their hands -- Draco, Susan, Millicent, and Lisa Turpin.

All but Jana Moon had Herbology, and only three people had History of Magic -- Draco, Moon and Longbottom. Draco rolled his eyes. Three of them had Arithmancy: Draco, Lisa, and Michael Corner. Draco wasn't surprised: Arithmancy was a tough subject and there were only a few students in Professor Vector's advanced class who weren't from Slytherin or Ravenclaw.

Trista walked over from her desk in the corner, placing a blue-tinged parchment in front of each of them.

Draco stared down at his parchment.

Bones, Susan -- Charms

Bulstrode, Millicent -- Care of Magical Creatures

Corner, Michael -- Transfiguration

Finch-Fletchley, Justin -- Defense Against the Dark Arts

Longbottom, Neville -- Herbology

Malfoy, Draco -- Potions

Moon, Jana -- History of Magic

Turpin, Lisa -- Arithmancy

"These are the lists of everyone's strongest subjects," Trista said, as though she hadn't just explained what she was doing five minutes ago. "Now, have you got a list of which classes you have together?"

They murmured their assent. Draco was beginning to feel like a monkey in a cage, performing a set of instructions he neither understood nor cared for. "Transfiguration, Charms, and Defence Against the Dark Arts," he said, impatient to get out of there.

Trista nodded. "I will assign you the Defence Against the Dark Arts group project, then. You'll all receive details by owl post tomorrow morning; you may begin work on the project as soon as you want. It will be due sometime before end-of-term examinations begin in June."

"Please, Trista," Susan Bones broke in, "is this project to be done individually?"

"Oh no," the Head Girl said, smiling strangely. "You'll see when you receive your instructions. There will be other assignments, of course, but this one is special."

Draco wanted to run away -- the combination of her voice and that smile wasn't just unnerving, it was downright terrifying. He was grateful when she told them they could leave. He now had to rush to the ground floor for the first Defence Association meeting... and Potter. He waved at Millicent and hurried out.

Ten minutes later, he strode into classroom eleven. The centaur Firenze usually taught Divination here, and the scent of burnt mallowsweet permeated the room. There were no desks or chairs save a solitary desk opposite the door. A bunch of red cushions were piled haphazardly into a corner. Granger and Macmillan sat on the floor near the lone desk, talking in hushed tones. Draco walked over to the wall opposite them and leaned against it, examining his fingernails while trying to overhear their conversation. One by one, the other members of Monday's group started to come in; most sat down near Granger and Macmillan.

Nott meandered in and looked around uncertainly. Draco motioned him over and he complied, walking to stand beside him and dropping his schoolbag beside Draco's. Potter walked in right after that, looking frazzled, his black hair sticking up at wild angles. Draco pursed his lips, resisting the urge to attack Potter's hair with a comb. He wondered lazily if Potter ever got any action, looking every part the scarecrow. Potter picked up the desk and carried it to the middle of the room, setting it down carefully. Draco smirked.

"Honestly, Potter, haven't you ever heard of levitating objects with your wand?" he drawled, unable to resist the temptation.

Beside Draco, Nott sniggered. Potter shot them a dark look but said nothing, hopping onto the desk with agility that belied his otherwise ungainly form.

"Neville, can you please close the door?" Potter said, and Longbottom scrambled up from the floor and ran over to do as he was told. Draco rolled his eyes. Potter and his minions.

"Thanks, Neville," Potter said with a grin. "All right, well, most of you were in the DA last year, so you all know me. For those of you who weren't here last year, I'm Harry Potter of Gryffindor, and I will be your group leader this evening," he said with an impish grin, turning around to look at Lisa Turpin, who was standing off to the side near the entrance. He didn't look at Draco or Nott, which suited Draco just fine. The rest of the students in the classroom beamed at him.

Great, Draco thought. I've been put into a group with Potter's fan club. He snorted.

"Have you got a cold, Malfoy?" Potter asked icily, drawing giggles from several students.

"Oh no, but thanks for your concern, Potter. I just find your Junior Auror antics amusing," Draco said slowly, looking straight at Potter, who seemed to flinch slightly.

Good. Draco had thought that all the subtle hints he'd been dropping over the years were always lost on the great prat. Potter looked away, apparently determined not to let Draco get to him. Draco congratulated himself for rattling Potter's cage; he'd been growing steadily worried that Potter's indifference wasn't feigned, after all.

The meeting was short. Potter explained the goals of the group -- to learn effective defence against the Dark Arts beyond what they were taught in class. The new Defence Against the Dark Arts teacher, Professor Eaton, was a former Ravenclaw who decided to focus on magical theory in class, given that the DA meetings were now staff-approved and mandatory. He also led the first-year and second-year DA groups. Group leaders from other years would meet with him each week to discuss lesson plans.

Draco watched Potter intently as he spoke -- he looked comfortable and not in the least bit intimidated by his audience. Of course, Potter was always a sucker for attention -- this kind of thing was right up his alley. At several points during Potter's monologue, people interrupted him to clarify details about the group's activities. The DA in fifth year had been learning hexes, curses, and jinxes along with their counter-spells, but the new DA would practise defensive spells only. The meeting broke up after roughly thirty minutes of this.

As they were getting ready to leave, Nott spoke up from beside Draco.

"I've noticed you haven't mentioned the June trial by fire in the Department of Mysteries, Potter. Care to give us an insider's look into fighting Death Eaters?"

Everyone fell silent. Potter turned to stare at Nott, his expression suddenly hard. "I don't talk about that," he said quietly.

"Why not?" Nott asked with a sneer.

"That's none of your business. We're not here to talk about me, anyway." Potter's chest was rising unevenly, as though he was having trouble breathing.

Granger got up and put a hand on his shoulder. Draco shook his head and looked away. Potter's heroics had nearly got her killed, and yet she was running blindly to his side. Gryffindors. He noticed that Longbottom was looking up at Nott with his eyes narrowed slightly -- it was a mildly disturbing sight. Rumour had it that Longbottom had come out of the June fight sporting a broken nose, Draco remembered, and he wondered how that had happened. He looked over at Nott, who had a disdainful expression on his face, still watching Potter.

"Much as I loved this little get-together, I really must be going now," Draco drawled, deciding he'd had enough. This, surprisingly, seemed to break the tension in the room. Potter looked away from Nott, who walked out immediately. Draco shook his head.

"You'll want to control your housemate, Malfoy," Granger called to him. "As a prefect, it's your duty to ensure--"

White-hot anger seared up inside Draco. "When I want an opinion from you on how to carry out my duties, I'll give you one, Mudblood," he spat. Several people gasped, staring at him in shock. He didn't care. He'd been itching to bring her down a notch for weeks...

"You will not call her that again, Malfoy," Potter said quietly. "Not during one of these meetings, anyway."

"You and what army will stop me, Potter?" Draco asked with an indulgent smile.

"I will personally make sure the Head Boy knows you're being deliberately uncooperative," Potter ground out.

Draco could all but stare at him in shock. Potter, tell on Draco? This was news. He managed to force a smirk.

"Fine, but only because you look so pretty today, Potter," he said slowly, relishing the way Potter's face went red at the remark.

Granger gawped at Draco with her mouth slightly open and her eyes narrowed. Draco winked at her and walked out. Taunting Potter had never been as easy as this year. Still, his moment of anger only reinforced the need to make a new plan regarding Potter.

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On Friday after the prefects' meeting, Draco was making his way down to the dungeon from the Astronomy Tower. Pansy had gone off to help Liam and Laurel with something and Draco was strolling along the corridor that led towards the stairwells.

The meeting had been dull as usual. The house unity projects were rumbling along: the Hufflepuff parties were a runaway hit, the Ravenclaw study groups were turning out in record numbers, and the Gryffindor DA sessions were the most popular topic of discussion among the students in lower years. Draco thought he noticed strange looks being cast at the Slytherin prefects during the meeting. The sods were probably trying to figure out which essays had been written by the Slytherins present.

Draco reached the Entrance Hall and decided he'd take a walk outside instead of heading straight to the dungeon. He turned left as he descended the marble staircase and passed the stairs to the dungeon. Walking past classroom eleven, he thought back to Monday's DA meeting and his stomach clenched with uncertainty again. In his mind's eye, he could see Potter sitting atop the teacher's table, leaning on his arms as

he talked to the group. Draco shook his head, firmly banishing the vision. So Potter had grown a spine over the summer -- what did Draco care?

He was still arguing with himself mentally when he pushed open the door to the courtyard, walking out into the surprisingly pleasant October evening. The air had a strange stillness to it, as though everything was lying in wait for something. Looking up at the sky, Draco decided that it was probably going to rain that night. The courtyard was usually deserted outside class hours these days -- it was in a dip that seemed to create a wind tunnel. Fallen leaves danced continually across the ground here, little whirlwinds of their own. Students opted for the lawns instead, enjoying the last of the mild weather. Draco caught movement out of the corner of his eye and turned to look. The scene he beheld was certainly not something he was prepared for.

Blaise was straddling one of the elaborately carved arches that bordered the courtyard, half-concealed by a large willow tree. Blaise's forehead was pressed against that of another boy. Blaise's right hand was caressing the other boy's cheek in an entirely more-than-friendly manner, and Blaise himself was smiling fondly at the other boy. A very blond boy. A very blond Hufflepuff boy. Zacharias Smith.

Draco backed away towards the door quietly, then stalked off in the direction of the Slytherin common room.

Draco Malfoy's Diary, October 18th

I cannot believe Blaise. I absolutely cannot believe him. He's been sneaking around with Zacharias Smith. Not only is Smith a bloody Hufflepuff, but he's also on their Quidditch team, which makes Blaise a double traitor. I can't believe him! I haven't been this angry since Potter landed my father in prison last year, and I was very

angry then. How dare he keep me in the dark? They were obviously quite comfortable together, happy as you please, so what was Zabini trying to do all this time, lead me on? Is he just trying to make me jealous? I'm going to stay up and wait for him to return tonight, and he better have a good explanation for all the sneaking around he's been doing. I just can't believe him! I'm so livid I can't see straight. Sodding prat. How dare he? With a Hufflepuff!

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Chapter 8: A Gryffindor and a Slytherin

A Gryffindor and A Slytherin

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Author's Notes: This was my first novel-length Harry/Draco story. It was completed four months before the release of HBP (and before the announcement of Draco's birth date on Rowling's website) and is now AU. This story stands alone, though it's also a companion piece to *Beyond Wild Moor and Fen*, which is from Harry's point of view. Many thanks to Mishty, Vel, Jaxmari, Kristal and Autumn LeCroix for beta-reading. Constructive criticism is always welcome and appreciated.

A Gryffindor and A Slytherin

Chapter 8 - Cardboard World

Draco told Vincent and Gregory to clear out of the dormitory an hour ago, and they'd known better than to protest. Now he sat on his bed, trying to read a book but failing to concentrate. Shouts and laughter were coming from the direction of the common room through the door, which was slightly ajar. Draco got up and walked over to close the door. Before he could reach it, it swung open and Blaise walked in.

"There you are, I've been looking for y--" he began, but Draco interrupted.

"I saw you with Smith," he accused, glaring as his arms dropped to his sides. Blaise's grin faded.

"Bollocks," he said, looking away.

"That's all you've got to say?"

"What do you want me to say?" Blaise inquired politely. "I must say it's a relief, at least I can talk to you about it now."

"Talk to me about it? Whatever gives you the idea I want to hear about it? You lied to me. I asked you whom you were seeing and you said you weren't seeing anyone," Draco ground out.

"I did not lie. I merely suggested that you were mistaken in your assumption that I was seeing someone." Blaise paused. "Don't tell me you're jealous, Draco."

"Jealous? You wish! I just can't stand the fact that you've been hiding this from me for -- how long?"

"I've been seeing him since July." Blaise said, sighing and walking over to sit on his bed. Draco followed him but didn't sit, choosing to stand in front of Blaise and continue glaring.

"July? JULY?" Draco spluttered. Blaise frowned up at him.

"I ran into him at the Santa Rosalia festival in Palermo. I've told you about it before."

Draco nodded. It was an annual event held in Blaise's family's hometown to commemorate a Muggle saint who saved the city from some disease. "What the hell was Smith doing there?" he demanded.

"He was there with his parents. I was sitting outside Nonna's restaurant on the first day of the festival and saw him walking by. I was glad to see someone from Hogwarts, so I called his name, invited him to have a drink."

"And you began a torrid affair, Sicilian style," Draco said through his teeth.

Blaise shook his head, his expression suddenly wistful. "It wasn't like that. His father's a magical metalsmith, he was attending a summer course with Maestro Cellini -- he's descended from Benvenuto, don't you know. Anyway, Zacharias didn't know anyone, so I introduced him to my friends, and we just... clicked, I suppose. At nights, we'd all go out onto the docks and just sit around talking..." he trailed off, not looking at Draco.

Incensed, Draco turned his back on Blaise and studied a nearby bedpost. Blaise had told him all about Palermo, of course, and his favourite spot at the docks where you could look at the sea even when it was raining. He'd promised to take Draco there when his parents would let him visit... He whirled on Blaise, glaring furiously. "Well?" he demanded.

"Well, we grew friendly and then he told me he was gay... Things just... happened."

Draco continued glaring.

"He's a lot like you, you know," Blaise said in a strange voice.

"You're going to insult me, too? He's a bloody Hufflepuff!"

"I'm not-- Look, I'm not proud of keeping this from you, but this is exactly why I didn't want to tell you. I knew you wouldn't understand."

"Understand what?"

"You can't see past the stereotypes, Draco! You're too caught up in your world of cardboard people defined by their wealth and their bloodlines and their Hogwarts houses!" Blaise's voice was rising as he spoke and his eyes were flashing.

"My world is cardboard now? Just because I'm discerning in my friendships and a good judge of character? Slytherin is the best house! We have the best people from the best families!" Draco's voice was rising as well. He couldn't believe he was hearing this.

"His blood is as pure as yours!"

"His family is a bunch of upstart Yank expatriates!"

"Canadian," Blaise corrected, shifting on the bed.

"Whatever! I don't care! Don't you dare compare me to him!" Draco shouted, not caring who might overhear. The indignity of being compared, even in thought, to Zacharias Smith was too much to bear.

"But you are a lot alike! He's got the same kind of attitude you've got, he's not impressed easily, but unlike you," -- Blaise's face twisted into an ugly sneer -- "he doesn't constantly bully people around to get what he wants!"

"That's why he is a Hufflepuff and I am a Slytherin." Draco forced himself to speak very quietly. "We use people to accomplish our means. You're such a hypocrite, Zabini -- you're using Smith as a substitute for me, a poor substitute, but there you have it."

At this, Blaise rose from the bed and approached Draco, hands balled into fists menacingly. "I care about him, Malfoy. And he cares about me. Which is a lot less than I can say for you," he spat, and stormed out of the room.

Draco stared after him, hands shaking slightly. Blaise had betrayed him. He should have known something was amiss when Blaise took Potter's side during their talk in *The Three Broomsticks*. That Smith fellow was in the original DA, he was probably chummy with Potter. The Hufflepuff must have been poisoning Blaise's mind against him, there was no other explanation for Blaise's cheek and his appalling behaviour.

Draco changed into his pyjamas and crawled into bed, still fuming. He lay quite still, waiting for sleep to come, but his mind kept filling with visions of Blaise and Smith: sitting in the courtyard, walking along the cobblestone-paved streets of Palermo, watching the sunset from the docks. He'd heard so much about Blaise's favourite city he felt like he'd been there. He could virtually smell the salty air tinged with the scent of roasting pork and green peppers, hear the voices of the people singing in the streets... Draco drifted off into restless sleep.

He dreamt that he was in classroom eleven, with Potter sitting on the desk just as he had during the first DA meeting. Draco kept trying to hex him, but Potter was laughing as Draco's spells bounced off him. The classroom melted away around him and he was in the drawing room at Malfoy Manor, and his mother was telling him that she had divorced Father to marry Zacharias Smith. Draco tried to tell her that Smith was gay and he was with Blaise, but she just laughed and told him that it was impossible for a pure-blood wizard to be gay. The drawing room turned into the Hog's Head inn, and Draco looked on in horror as Blaise and his father played a game of Exploding Snap while a plump witch (Draco somehow knew she was Blaise's grandmother) kept offering them more wine.

Draco woke abruptly and sat up, turning his head from side to side wildly. He'd neglected to close the drapes around his bed before falling asleep. It was dark, the only light coming from a framed picture on Blaise's bedside table -- it was a drawing of a bird's eye view of the Palermo beach. Blaise had got it from a friend of his, and the frame was bewitched to glow in the dark. Blaise was afraid of the dark and didn't react well to waking up in total darkness -- he always kept the drapes around his bed slightly open to let the light from the picture frame seep in. Draco's heart clenched suddenly as he remembered the previous night's events. He shook his head -- Blaise had betrayed him, and he would pay for that. He roused Vincent and Gregory and made them go down to breakfast with him.

"Why didn't you wake Blaise?" Vincent asked as they walked to the Great Hall.

Draco was saved from replying by an outburst of raucous laughter from a group of fourth-year Gryffindors and Ravenclaws walking down the marble staircase into the Entrance Hall. Draco made a disparaging comment in their direction, causing Vincent and Gregory to snigger. They followed the group into the Great Hall, where breakfast was already served. By the time they reached the Slytherin table, Vincent had forgotten all about his question.

They had Quidditch practice later that morning, and Draco took vindictive pleasure in mocking Blaise's Keeper abilities whenever the other boy messed up. He got him so riled up at one point that Blaise actually made to storm off the pitch, but Millicent chased after him and he returned, avoiding Draco's gaze. Draco smirked. After practice, Blaise was the first to leave, earning Draco quizzical looks from the other team members. Draco just shrugged, as though he had no idea what was going on.

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In the evening, Draco was sprawled out on a sofa in the common room, preparing an outline for his extra-credit Defence Against the Dark Arts assignment. He'd received the instructions on Tuesday morning just as Trista said he would. He thought the whole thing a bit ironic, because his paper was to be titled *Defence of the Dark Arts* and he was supposed to research and write a set of arguments for the existence and use of Dark magic. Draco wondered if he'd just been lucky or if everyone got the same assignment.

Vincent and Gregory were sitting on the floor in front of the fireplace, shuffling bits of parchment around. They were working on the Potions booklets Snape had assigned them and they both wore slightly puzzled looks. Draco smirked. The two of them had

always been hopeless at Potions -- unfortunately, their passing grades had been out of Snape's hands in their O.W.L. year.

Herbert jumped into Draco's lap and curled up on his parchment. He laughed and scratched behind the cat's ears. Herbert purred.

"Millicent, kindly ask your pet to pick a better lounging spot," he called.

Millicent was sitting on a sofa opposite, arguing quietly about something with Blaise. Blaise and Draco had not spoken since the Quidditch practice that morning, and that suited Draco just fine. He wasn't feeling particularly vengeful any more, not since Blaise's near-meltdown on the pitch, but he certainly didn't want to talk to him.

A soft popping sound came from between the two sofas. It startled Herbert, who jumped off Draco's parchment and dove under his sleeve. A house elf stood in the middle of the common room.

"Mr Vincent Crabbe, Mr Blaise Zabini, your presence is requested in ten minutes in classroom fifteen on the fifth floor, please!" it squeaked.

This must be their Hufflepuff party invitation, Draco realised. He looked up at Blaise, who was looking back at him. Draco started to grin, searching for a suitable remark regarding Hufflepuffs, then remembered last night's events and looked away. The elf hadn't said Draco's name, which meant that three more Slytherins from their year would be going. Laughter came from the direction of the girls' dormitories, and

another house elf emerged, followed by Pansy and Queenie. A moment later, a flustered-looking Sheridan Roper came from the boys' side, also preceded by a house elf.

"Fifth floor?" Blaise called, looking at Pansy.

Pansy nodded, then made a beeline for Draco's sofa and kissed him on the nose. "You're not coming?"

"Wasn't invited," Draco said.

"Well, let's get going," Pansy said in a commanding voice, and the five Slytherins trooped out of the common room, all but Blaise looking as though they were going to serve detention. The house elves disappeared.

Draco considered the situation for a moment. Since seeing the first years' party last week, he'd been wondering about the activities planned for the older students. Since he was a prefect, it was well within his rights to look in on the party, though he could not participate. Herbert poked his head out from under Draco's sleeve, startling him. Millicent had moved to sit beside Gregory; she was now helping him with his booklet.

Draco picked up Herbert and deposited him on the floor, getting up and brushing off his robes. He was about to tell the others he was going to look in on the party, then changed his mind. He would not go running after Blaise -- not that he would actually

be running after Blaise, but the other boy was sure to think that. He sat down with a heavy sigh, picking up his outline again.

By the time he was done with the outline, had finished his Arithmancy homework, and researched the ingredients for the Fearlessness Formula in *One Thousand Magical Herbs and Fungi*, the common room had begun to empty. Draco looked at the clock above the mantelpiece: it was nearly nine o'clock. That meant bedtime for the first-years and as Pansy wasn't there, he would have to pick up her slack. Draco got up, stretching. His lower back felt a little sore from his having sat in the same position for hours.

He walked to the very end of the boys' hallway, where the first-year quarters were. The first-year students lived in a large dormitory at the end of the hall; the room could house up to fifteen students. This was supposed to let the first-years become comfortable with one another before they were allowed to share with the upper-year students. Slytherins in second year and above lived in smaller, four-person dormitories. Two hallways branched on each side of the main hall, leading to more rooms. Draco spoke the password and opened the door into the first-years' dormitory, finding the boys huddled together on the floor.

"Get up from the floor this instant! It's freezing." Draco commanded.

The boys started to scramble to their feet, obviously startled.

"It's nearly nine o'clock," Draco drawled. "You all know what that means,"

Tiny Preston Iven spoke up. "Please, Draco, why do we have to go to bed at nine? The Gryffindors don't!"

"Neither do the Hufflepuffs!" piped up a thin black-haired boy from beside Preston.

"Nor the Ravenclaws," squeaked a pudgy first-year with red cheeks. He looked so much like Longbottom that Draco wanted to ask if they were related.

Draco raised both eyebrows. "How the other houses maintain discipline is none of your -- or my -- concern. In this house, you do what I say, not what your Gryffindor classmates say."

He was sorely tempted to chastise them for making friends with Gryffindors, but that wasn't allowed. He settled for a glare instead. The boys wandered over to their wardrobes, looking glum.

"I'll be back in ten minutes to check on you. Whoever's not in bed by then will get detention," Draco said and left, shaking his head in amusement.

He walked across the common room and into the girls' hallway. He spoke the password to the portrait of a glum witch that hung just beyond the curtain that separated the common room and strode towards the end of the hall. Slytherin girls lived in larger rooms, always grouped by year. Draco wasn't sure why the arrangement was different for the girls; it didn't really interest him that much. He knocked on the first year girls' dormitory door and waited. Male prefects only had the

password to the guardian portrait, never to the individual dormitories. Female prefects also had the password to the boys' guardian portrait -- a sour-faced wizard wearing a top hat -- but not to the boys' actual rooms.

Several moments later, the door opened and a small blond-haired girl peered up at him.

"Y-yes?" she said in a small voice.

"Bedtime," Draco said.

"Oh. Do we--"

"Yes, you have to, I do not want to hear about the other houses," Draco said, irritated. "You will leave the door open. I will be back to check in fifteen minutes."

She curtsied, inclining her head slightly, and Draco turned on his heel and walked back out into the common room. Millicent was reading a book with Herbert curled up next to her. Gregory must have gone to the kitchens by himself. Millicent looked up from her book and fixed Draco with a glower. He raised an eyebrow.

"What?" he asked.

"Nothing," she sneered, and went back to reading.

Draco shrugged, checking the clock. It was nine already, so he made his way over to the first years' dormitory. The boys were in their beds: they were listening intently to Preston Iven, who appeared to be telling them a story. Draco gave a sharp rap on the doorframe and they quickly dove under their blankets. Draco extinguished the lights with a spell and closed the door firmly behind him. After checking on the girls as well, he walked out into the common room, collected his things, and carried them into his dormitory.

Gregory was standing near his bed, wearing pyjamas and a single sock. The other sock lay on the floor and Gregory was scratching himself with an absent-minded look. Draco made a face at him. Gregory's eyes narrowed as they always did when he was trying to concentrate.

"Did you and Blaise have a row?" he asked.

"We had a disagreement regarding house unity," Draco answered with an air of nonchalance.

"Oh," Gregory said and went back to scratching his backside.

"Honestly, Gregory, how do you ever expect to get anywhere with any girls, behaving like that?"

Gregory stopped scratching and gave him a guilty look. "D'you think Millicent fancies me or Vincent?"

Draco suppressed the urge to laugh. "I think your chances are about equal."

The other boy nodded thoughtfully, then climbed into his bed. "Good night, Draco."

"Good night, Vincent."

Vincent pulled the drapes around his bed closed. Draco hesitated for a moment then walked back out into the common room. He would wait for Pansy in the common room -- he wanted to know about the Hufflepuff party, after all. He closed his eyes and threw his head back against the sofa cushion, thinking.

"You're dead, Potter."

"Funny. You'd think I'd have stopped walking around..."

"You're going to pay. I'm going to make you pay for what you've done to my father..."

Draco's jaw tightened at the memory. He would make him pay, too. Potter had acted so cocky that day, even talked back to Snape... that must have been after his godfather had died, Draco realised absently. How pathetic -- Potter's way of dealing with it had been cool detachment and fake bravado. Draco had accompanied Snape back to the dungeon that day, where Blaise had cornered him.

"I don't know what to do, Draco."

"About what?"

"Adrian's acting strangely."

"Look, Blaise. My father is in prison, my mother's a wreck--"

"Right. Sorry."

Blaise had walked away then, and they hadn't spoken until the night before they were to leave and Pucey had dropped Blaise. He'd tried to comfort the other boy then, but he hadn't known how. Blaise hadn't cried -- he'd discarded the broken broomstick and

collapsed onto his bed, head in his hands. Draco'd just sat beside him, hand on his back, giving him the occasional pat.

He was startled by sound coming from the common room entrance -- it was ten o'clock, he realised, and the partygoers were returning. Daphne Greengrass hurried in first and went straight for the girls' dormitories. Sheridan Roper came second; with a quick nod at Draco, he made his way to his quarters. Blaise, Pansy, and Vincent fell through the door: all three of them were laughing hysterically. Draco fixed them with a glare. Pansy ran up to him and threw herself down on the sofa beside him, giggling.

"Oh, Draco, you wouldn't believe! Potter's face!" she squealed, falling back against him. Draco hugged her around the waist and smiled. Making fun of Potter sounded like a great way to spend the evening.

"What did you lot do, spike his drink with a Befuddlement Draught?" he asked, grinning.

"Oh, no, we were playing a game, and Potter--" she collapsed into giggles again.

"Potter had to dance with Vincent," Blaise finished for Pansy, who was shaking uncontrollably against Draco. Pansy gave a little squeak and laughed even harder. Draco tried to picture the scene in his mind.

"What? How?" he asked, laughing.

"We were all blindfolded and had to spin around for a while so we wouldn't know which way we were facing," Blaise said with a grin.

"Then the music started," supplied Vincent.

"We had to grab the person nearest to us and start dancing," Pansy managed between giggles.

"While blindfolded," Blaise added. Draco looked at him incredulously.

"There was a lot of stumbling around before we could actually dance," Pansy said, snuggling up to Draco.

"Then the blindfolds came off," Vincent said with a chortle.

"I ended up with Macmillan, Blaise was with Padma, Sheridan with Finnigan, Greengrass with Corner," Pansy said breathlessly.

"And Potter with Vincent," Draco finished, chuckling.

"Oh, the looks on their faces!" Pansy said with a huge smile, then winked at Vincent.
"Of course, Potter looked funnier than you."

Vincent grunted something that sounded like. "I'll show you funny-looking."

"What did you do, Draco?" Pansy asked, wriggling out of his embrace and turning to face him.

"Oh, homework, putting the first-years to bed -- the usual," Draco said with a scowl.

"Bed," said Vincent suddenly. "Good night."

Draco stared as he walked away.

"I think he's been traumatised," Blaise quipped, and Pansy began to giggle again.

"I don't doubt it," Draco said irritably. Why was Blaise talking to him?

Blaise and Pansy exchanged looks, and she jumped up suddenly.

"Well, I should get some rest," she said airily and bounced away towards the girls' dormitories.

Draco opened his mouth to protest, but she was gone. Blaise sat down beside him. Draco moved away towards the edge of the sofa and studied the curtains that separated the boys' hallway.

"Would you stop acting like a petulant child?" Blaise said.

"I'm acting like a petulant child?" Draco couldn't believe the nerve of him.

"Look, I admit it wasn't right for me to keep you in the dark."

"What isn't right, Zabini, is that you, a Slytherin, are entertaining daft illusions of getting along with a Hufflepuff."

"They're not illusions," Blaise said with a smirk. "Zacharias and I do get along quite well."

"Oh, spare me." Draco snorted.

"Would you give it a rest? I already admitted I shouldn't have hidden things from you. But you can't expect me to sit around and wait."

Draco sneered. "Wait for what?"

Blaise gave him a look. "For you to change your mind about us."

"There is no 'us,' how many times do I have to tell you that?" Draco said in an exasperated tone.

"Exactly! That's why I'm with Zacharias, because there is no us," Blaise exploded.

"So you admit that he's just a substitute!" Draco said triumphantly.

"No, that's not what I meant! I was willing to stop seeing him at the beginning of the year, when I saw you..." Blaise trailed off.

"This is ridiculous. You know full well that I didn't want anything to do with you unless you stopped bugging everything that moved. Now you suddenly care about Smith."

"You're jealous."

"No, I'm not!" Draco fumed. "I just think it's a double standard -- you weren't willing to be exclusive with me, now you're suddenly intent on being with Smith."

"Zacharias doesn't expect me to be faithful," Blaise said with an air of finality.

Draco rolled his eyes. "You want me to believe that a Hufflepuff doesn't expect loyalty? You're barking."

Blaise smirked. "You'd be surprised, Draco."

When Draco made no reply, Blaise heaved an exasperated sigh and closed his eyes for a moment.

"Fine, you're not jealous, so what's your problem?" he asked, opening his eyes again.

Draco raised both eyebrows. "My problem is that you're prancing about with a nouveau-riche Hufflepuff, I thought I had made that clear."

"You're hardly in a position to tell me with whom to prance about," Blaise mocked.

"Well, I'm certainly in a position not to associate with you further," Draco said in a dignified tone. Blaise blanched.

"You're going to try to blackmail me into dropping Zacharias by using our friendship?"

"I'm not blackmailing you, Blaise. I simply can't afford any stains on my reputation."

"Funny, you didn't seem so worried about your reputation when you were going to meet Harry."

The silence that fell was oppressive.

"It's Harry, is it? I knew I couldn't trust you," Draco said finally, getting up from the sofa.

"Oh, for crying out--"

"Sod off, Blaise," Draco spat, and stalked off towards the dormitories.

::

Blaise did not attempt to approach Draco again. This suited Draco just fine. He spent his free time with Pansy, Vincent, and Gregory -- all of whom were inordinately curious about Blaise's conspicuous absence. Vincent and Gregory were told to mind their own business. Pansy, however, wouldn't hear of being headed off that easily. She kept pestering him to go talk to Blaise, and Draco finally lost his temper one afternoon. They had a blazing row in the courtyard and Pansy didn't talk to him for three days afterwards. Draco passed the time by terrorising younger Slytherins in the common room until they were afraid to come out if he was around.

Blaise had taken to spending his free time with Zacharias Smith and Terry Boot. The three of them were in the same Ravenclaw study group, along with Potter. Potter was still skulking about with Weasley, Granger, and Longbottom -- who was a new addition to the team of fearless idiots this year. Draco took care to keep away from Potter as he tried to come up with a new plan -- trouble was, he needed Blaise. For his part, Blaise seemed perfectly content with things as they were, and Draco couldn't understand how the other boy was allowing their friendship of five years to simply end.

He was especially demanding of Blaise at every Quidditch practice, but it didn't seem to unsettle Blaise as it had the first time he'd done it. Draco started to wonder if perhaps there was some potion both Potter and Blaise were taking that made them impervious to Draco's cutting remarks and witty repartee. Potter paid him no more

attention than Blaise -- though Draco supposed that Potter did not usually start confrontations, unless the situation involved the Dark Lord or his Death Eaters.

October whizzed past and soon Halloween and the Quidditch season were upon them. Blaise's essay was read among the first five during the Halloween Feast. Hufflepuffs got it right, and Draco was sure he saw Smith turn and look at Blaise, who had the audacity to blush.

Draco Malfoy's diary, October 31st

I'm just about ready to hex Blaise into next year -- the only thing that's keeping him alive and whole is that the Quidditch season is here and I haven't got time to train a new Keeper. Why did he have to write that nonsense about sunsets, anyway? I don't think he went and told Smith what was in his essay, but honestly -- the sunsets were a dead giveaway. Isn't he at all interested in Slytherin gaining house points? The other essays were equally uninspired, though I suppose the two seventh-years whose essays were read are much closer with their counterparts from the other houses, it being their N.E.W.T. year and all. As for the third-year and the first-year, I have a pretty good idea how they guessed about them. Why, just last week Susan Bones asked me what my favourite colour was during our study session. They've actually been asking the Slytherins questions. If anything, they've made an effort to learn something about us; that in itself is astonishing.

Well, I expect that at least the Gryffindors won't have any desire whatsoever to learn about anything come Sunday. We play Gryffindor on Saturday, and we're going to pound them into the ground. On that happy note, it's time for bed.

Chapter 9: A Gryffindor and a Slytherin

A Gryffindor and A Slytherin

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Author's Notes: This was my first novel-length Harry/Draco story. It was completed four months before the release of HBP (and before the announcement of Draco's birth date on Rowling's website) and is now AU. This story stands alone, though it's also a companion piece to *Beyond Wild Moor and Fen*, which is from Harry's point of view. Many thanks to Mishty, Vel, Jaxmari, Kristal and Autumn LeCroix for beta-reading. Constructive criticism is always welcome and appreciated.

A Gryffindor and A Slytherin Chapter 9 - Bitter Metamorphosis

On the morning of the first Quidditch match of the season, Draco was etching patterns in his breakfast porridge, ignoring the din of the Great Hall around him. Draco leant back to admire a six-pronged star he had drawn -- the porridge was slightly runny and the furrows he'd left with his spoon were slowly filling in from all sides. He glanced over at Millicent, who was heaping cold cuts onto a piece of toast. Pansy was

whispering something to a smiling Tracey Davis. She noticed Draco looking over and gave him a beatific smile.

"All ready for the game, Draco?" she asked. Tracey's smile became even wider as she glanced over at Blaise, who was sitting beside Draco and snoring into his coffee.

"You bet," Draco answered, pushing his plate away.

He looked up at the enchanted ceiling: the sky outside was a light grey. At least there wouldn't be a problem with the sun in his eyes. He licked his lips and looked across at the Gryffindor table, where Weasley was gesticulating wildly, fork in hand. Beside him, Potter wore the slightly dazed look of one just awakened. He looked up at Draco, those awful eyebrows knitting together in a frown. Draco made a slashing gesture across his neck with his hand, and Potter looked away.

Draco smirked and looked over at Gregory. "Hurry it up. We need to get to the changing rooms soon."

Gregory attempted to take a hearty swig of his pumpkin juice and nod at the same time, causing the juice to spill down his front. Millicent sniggered, and so did Vincent. Gregory glared at them, dabbing at his robes with a napkin. Draco turned to Pansy again.

"You're coming to watch the game, aren't you, pet?"

"Am I ever," said Pansy with a mischievous glint in her eyes. Tracey giggled. Draco raised an eyebrow, but the girls ignored him.

Twenty minutes later, the Slytherin team trooped to the changing rooms near the Quidditch pitch. They changed into their green robes and sat in a huddle in the centre of the room. Draco ran through their strategy once more, though everyone wore glazed looks -- they'd been over the finer points of Draco's strategy at least fifteen times already. They filed out onto the yellowing grass as their names were called -- that meddlesome Gryffindor Creevey was commentating from the box beside McGonagall.

"Malfoy... Bulstrode... Zabini... Baddock... Bartlett... Crabbe... Goyle."

His Banshee-like voice carried far across the stadium, and the Slytherins were cheering from their usual seats in the stands. Pansy was at the front with Tracey Davis, waving a large green banner that bore the words "Slytherin for the Cup" in fancy lettering. Draco strode to where the Gryffindor team was standing in a half-circle, leaning on their brooms. Madam Hooch stood nearby, broomstick hovering in mid-air beside her, whistle in hand.

Draco stopped in front of Weasley, who looked sullen and slightly more freckled than usual.

"Captains, shake hands," Madam Hooch said in a tone that brooked no objections.

Weasley stuck his right arm out and Draco did likewise. Weasley's hand was clammy and it made Draco want to snatch his hand away and wipe it on his robe, but he resisted. It was the first time he was playing as Slytherin captain and he would do everything as though his father was watching. He owed his father that much. He released Weasley's hand and took a step backwards, pretending to adjust the front of his robe while wiping off the moisture surreptitiously. He wrinkled his nose and was about to make a disparaging remark about Weasley's nervousness, but the whistle sounded and they were off.

Draco soared towards the Slytherin end of the pitch, stomach clenching slightly as he listened to Creevey's commentary. He started looking around for the Snitch while trying to keep an eye on the game below him.

"Baddock passes to Bulstrode -- these two are really a tag team, aren't they -- Bulstrode dodges Kirke's Bludger -- oh no! Bulstrode scores -- what's that?"

Instead of the roaring he'd expected, Draco heard singing coming from the Slytherins and strained to listen.

*The Gryffindors are merry,
The Gryffindors are gay,
But Potter is a fairy, He's better at ballet.*

*The Slytherins are faster,
The Slytherins are tough,*

*Our captain is a master,
We really know our stuff.*

*So wave that green and silver,
And let the game begin.
Our Seeker will deliver,
And Slytherin will win!*

Draco threw his head back and laughed. Pansy had to be the one behind this, of course; it explained her odd behaviour at breakfast. He wondered if she knew about Potter from another source -- the wording was just perfect. She couldn't have picked a better way to unsettle him today. He glanced over to the other side of the stadium, where Potter hovered on his own broomstick. He was glaring. Draco turned away and waved to Pansy, who was looking like the cat that got the cream.

"Shouldn't that be against the rules, Professor?" Creevey was saying to McGonagall, obviously not realising that everyone could hear him. "Right, okay, and it's Gryffindor in possession, Ginny Weasley of Gryffindor dodges a Bludger--"

The Bludger came pelting from his right and Draco veered to the side. Vincent was waiting for the Bludger -- he smacked it randomly with his bat and it slammed into Ginny Weasley, who had to fight to stay on her broomstick. She dropped the Quaffle and Andrew Bartlett intercepted it, then passed to Malcolm Baddock.

Still chuckling, Draco went back to looking around for the Snitch, occasionally glancing down at the game and over at Potter, whose shoulders were slumped slightly further than usual as he gripped his broom. Slytherin were leading seventy to zero.

Millicent and Malcolm were an excellent team -- Draco had let them practise together and he congratulated himself now, seeing as they were virtually unstoppable.

He watched Malcolm pass the Quaffle to Millicent, who barrelled right through Ginny Weasley and Katie Bell's outstretched arms. She threw the ball at the Gryffindor goalposts, but Weasley caught it. He nearly fell off his broom in the process, but still it wasn't a goal. Slytherin were leading ninety to forty, but the Gryffindor cheering sounded much louder because Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw were supporting Gryffindor as usual.

He turned his head to the side, saw Blaise save a goal from a very difficult position, and couldn't help but grin. He turned back around and then he saw it -- the Snitch, hovering several feet away from Potter. Potter obviously hadn't spotted it and Draco's mind worked feverishly. If he went straight for the Snitch and Potter saw him, he'd be sure to get there first. He needed to distract Potter somehow, but how? If he went in the opposite direction, Potter might rise to the bait or he might not, and he could still see the Snitch...

"And it's Gryffindor in possession once again -- Katie Bell heading for goal -- watch it, Katie, that's a Bludger! OUCH! How's that not a foul?"

Draco dove. The wind rushed in his ears as he aimed to arrive directly below the Snitch's current position. He saw a scarlet blur out of the corner of his eye, and turning, saw Potter flying in the direction of the spot where Draco had been moments ago. What was Potter doing? Was he going to try and knock him off his broom? Potter passed him, however, and Draco wasted no time. He pulled his broomstick up and went for the Snitch, which was still zipping around where he'd last spotted it. This was so much easier with no Potter on his tail.

Draco reached out and he had it -- he had got the Snitch! He turned around to face the Slytherins and realised everyone was oddly quiet. He whipped around to look at Potter and saw that Potter -- Potter was grinning triumphantly with his right hand raised in the air. They looked over at each other and their faces fell simultaneously. Draco gripped the struggling golden ball more firmly and swallowed -- his throat had gone dry. What was going on?

Creevey's irritating, shrill voice pierced the air. "It looks like both Seekers caught the Snitch! But how is this possible? There can be only one!"

Madam Hooch's whistle came from below and a moment later, Draco dismounted beside her. He was furious. Potter landed just behind him and walked over, looking uncomfortable. She ordered them both to show what they had in their hands. They held out their palms and there were two identical-looking Snitches: one kept down by callused fingers with the nails chewed down to the quick, the other by slender white fingers with short, neatly trimmed nails.

Madam Hooch had a positively apoplectic appearance. "Never in the history of Quidditch... a second Snitch... shouldn't be possible..."

The rest of the Gryffindor and Slytherin players were landing all around them, asking questions and shouting at one another. McGonagall was hurrying towards them, holding on to her pointed hat.

"What's going on?" she demanded before even reaching the group. Draco saw Snape walking up behind her unhurriedly. Colin Creevey was rushing to catch up with them.

"It looks like someone's let loose a second Snitch, Professor," Madam Hooch said in a clipped tone.

"What?" several voices cried in unison.

McGonagall looked outraged. She turned to Snape, her mouth opening and closing.

Snape was glowering at Potter. "If I find out who did this..." he said in a low voice. Potter glared at him with a challenging look in his eyes.

"It had to be a Slytherin!" Weasley exclaimed, jabbing his finger in Draco's direction. "No one else is that underhanded..."

"Right, we'd sabotage our own team, that's real smart, Weasel," Millicent growled, taking a step towards him. Madam Hooch stepped in between them, and the Slytherin Chaser backed down, still glaring.

Madam Hooch looked from McGonagall to Snape with a somewhat helpless expression, then exhaled loudly. "I'm afraid I have no choice but to call the game on scored points," she said. "Slytherin wins!"

There were several groans from the Gryffindors, and then more noises of disappointment as Creevey announced the result to the rest of the school.

Draco threw down his broomstick and stalked off towards the castle.

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Draco sat on his bed with the hangings pulled tightly shut around him, his chin resting on his knees, arms wrapped tightly around his legs. He kept reliving the glorious split second in which he'd thought he'd finally bested Potter, finally beaten him to the Snitch. He didn't even care that Slytherin had beaten Gryffindor -- it didn't matter, not to him. Not if he hadn't been the one -- the only one -- to catch the Snitch.

He lay down on his back, breathing loudly through his nose. He wanted to tear something apart, break something -- anything. His fist closed around the bedspread and he pulled, putting all his strength into it. The bedcovering just bunched up around his hand, coming off the bed as Draco tugged on it. He turned over onto his stomach and punched the pillow repeatedly, staring at the dark hangings in front of him, not really seeing them. It was so unfair.

The one time Draco got to the Snitch, the one time he was finally able to beat Potter to it, he had been thwarted by a third party. Whoever had released the second Snitch would pay. Draco didn't know how he would find out who had done it, but find out he would. Maybe not even this year, maybe not even the next, but he would find out, and when he did, whoever did it would pay dearly for taking this away from Draco. His fingers dug into the pillow under his head, squeezing so tightly it hurt.

The bed hangings flew open and Draco closed his eyes involuntarily against the light that came streaming in. He felt a hand on his back and he opened one eye to glare at the intruder. Pansy was looking down at him with concern.

"Go away," Draco muttered into the pillow.

"Draco, why are you being like this? We won, didn't we?"

"It doesn't matter," he mumbled, turning his head so he wouldn't have to look at her. "How'd you get in here, anyway?"

"Blaise let me in." Draco snorted. Typical. Sodding coward sent Pansy to fetch him, instead of facing Draco himself.

"Oh, come on. D'you realise this is the first time in five years that Slytherin won against Gryffindor? And you're captain!"

"Fat load of good that does. We only won on points, Pansy. The Snitch--" he stopped speaking and turned to look at her.

Pansy's eyes darkened. "If I find out who did that..."

"You and me both," Draco echoed, turning around fully and propping himself up on his elbows.

"Do you have any ideas who might have done it?"

Draco chewed his bottom lip. "Well, Slytherin is definitely out. The Gryffindors would have been too smug -- they have Perfect Potter, after all."

"The Hufflepuffs are too stupid to think of something like that," Pansy said with a thoughtful expression.

Draco nodded and frowned. "That leaves Ravenclaws, but why would they do it? They were supporting Gryffindor, and Potter's never failed to win a match yet," he said bitterly.

Pansy made no reply, her eyebrows knitting together as she looked down at him.

"What?" Draco asked.

"I wish you would give the Potter thing a rest, Draco," she said quietly.

"Oh, not you, too," Draco groaned, closing his eyes. He wasn't feeling angry anymore, just defeated.

"Well, you did get the Snitch, even if it was under these circumstances. Don't make it so personal. Quidditch is supposed to be fun," Pansy said with a defiant look.

"What do you know about it? You didn't get beaten by Potter for five years running."

"Four."

"Whatever, you know what I mean." Draco sat up a little straighter.

"All I'm saying is that your team is out there in the common room, and they want you to join them. They're celebrating, because we won, fair and square."

Draco sighed and reached up to rub the bridge of his nose. "I don't feel like we've won, Pansy. I don't feel like there's anything to celebrate, do you understand?"

"You are still the captain, and it was under your direction that Slytherin won. We didn't win under Flint or Montague, in case you've forgotten."

Well, that much was true. Why was he letting whoever had sabotaged the match take even that away from him? Draco quirked a grin at Pansy and she beamed at him.

"Nice song this morning, by the way," he said, running a hand through his hair, trying to force thoughts of the game out of his mind for the moment.

"Ooh, I'm glad you liked it. I wrote it!"

Draco raised both eyebrows. "*Potter's a fairy?* Do you know something I don't?"

Pansy giggled. "I got the idea from him and Vincent -- y'know, when they danced at the party?"

"What, did Potter look -- ah -- comfortable with Vincent?" Draco asked with a smirk.

Pansy began to giggle even harder. "It would be pretty funny if he were-- you know," she breathed, collapsing onto the bed beside him.

Draco hummed noncommittally and got up from the bed. There was no need for Pansy to know just how on-target her rhyme had been. Pansy stood up as well, smoothing out her robe.

"Coming, then?" she asked with a raised eyebrow.

"Well, you're not going to leave me alone until I do, are you?"

"Nope," she sang, and grabbed his hand. "Come on, Vincent and Gregory managed to get Butterbeer from somewhere."

Draco allowed her to drag him out of the dormitory, smiling despite himself. He would smile for them and be merry, but he wouldn't forget what had happened.

::

Dinner was over, but no one was leaving -- it was time for another batch of Slytherin essays to be read out. The Great Hall was abuzz with conversation: everyone was talking about what had happened at the Quidditch game. At the Head Table, Dumbledore rose to his feet and called everyone to silence. Liam Baddock approached him, carrying a low table. He set it down on the floor and motioned to Trista Morgan, who carried a thin stack of parchments. She put them down on the table and lifted the topmost one, tapping it once with her wand.

"Oh, please let it be Liam who reads tonight," Pansy whispered to Tracey Davis. "I can't stand that girl's voice, it gives me the creeps."

Draco privately agreed. He looked up at Liam, wondering if his essay would be read today. He wanted to see if anyone would get it right. So far, nearly all the Slytherin essays had been guessed -- most of the ones that weren't had been written by first-years.

Liam's voice boomed all around the Great Hall -- good, he was reading. Pansy leant back against Draco and he circled her waist loosely with his right arm. The essay was like so many others -- a listing of favourite lessons with reasons for liking them, a favourite colour, and a childhood experience involving a bewitched swing and neglectful parents. As Liam finished reading, Trista tapped the parchment and flicked her wand at the air.

A blazing line shot through the air, red sparks coalescing into the words: *Gryffindor* -- *Pansy Parkinson*.

Pansy snorted. "As if. My favourite colour is pink, everyone knows that. I'd never be caught dead in mauve." Tracey giggled and Draco smiled. He looked over at the Gryffindor table, and was startled to see Potter staring straight at him. Actually, all of the sixth-year Gryffindors were staring. Draco narrowed his eyes, then realised they were looking at Pansy, not at him.

Trista flicked her wand again, and blue sparks spelled *Ravenclaw* -- *Tracey Davis*.

Tracey flipped her hair over her shoulder. "They think I like Herbology? I wonder if I should remind Brocklehurst of that time I was almost bit by a Venomous Tentacula." Draco couldn't believe it. Slytherin and Ravenclaw always had Herbology together, how could anyone from Ravenclaw think that Tracey liked those lessons? He shook his head and looked at Trista, who was waving her wand for the third time.

Yellow sparks spelled *Hufflepuff* -- *Daphne Greengrass*. Liam handed the essay he'd just read to Trista and she tapped it with her wand. A green mist rose from its surface, and the name *Daphne Greengrass* appeared in the middle. The Hufflepuffs cheered. Draco glared at Queenie. He'd need to have a word with her about just how close she was getting to that Macmillan.

::

After dinner, Draco was held up talking to Snape about the game and what it meant for Slytherin's chances for the Quidditch Cup that year, so he couldn't intercept Queenie. When he got back to the dungeon, he couldn't find her and set off to look for her in the library. He wasn't watching where he was going and ran smack into someone. Opening his mouth to apologise, he realised it was Potter.

"Watch where you're going," he said with a scowl. Memories of the Quidditch game came rushing back to him, and that was the last thing he wanted to think about.

"Uh, Malfoy--"

"Looking for Vincent, Potter? Don't worry, he'll save a dance for you. Now get out of my way," Draco drawled.

"I just wanted to say, good game today," Potter said with a frown. "I--"

"Oh, spare me, Potter, I'm not going to join your pity party for one. You know I got there first."

"Oh, forget it, Malfoy," Potter spat and stalked off towards the dungeon.

"Where do you think you're going?" Draco shouted after him, but Potter ignored him and hurried down the stairs. Draco considered going after him, but he didn't have a leg to stand on -- other students were allowed in the dungeons and it wasn't after hours yet. He set off towards the marble staircase to make his way up to the library but stopped as he heard raised voices from across the Entrance Hall.

"The Headmaster banned you from this school almost two years ago, and that ban is still in effect. I'm afraid I cannot let you go beyond this point, Ms Skeeter," McGonagall was saying in an even tone. Skeeter? Rita Skeeter? Draco turned around to look. Sure enough, there she was -- blond curls framing her heavy-jawed, smirking face, jewels glinting in the frame of her spectacles.

"The wizarding world has a right to have a first-hand account of the biggest Quidditch scandal of the past fifty years!" she was saying forcefully, attempting to push past McGonagall.

Draco smirked and folded his hands across his chest, leaning back against the railing. This should be interesting. He felt something tug on his robe and looked down. It was a house-elf.

"Mr. Draco Malfoy, sir, your presence is requested in dungeon five in ten minutes, please!" it squeaked, standing at attention.

Draco gave it an irritated nod and the creature Disapparated with a *pop*. He looked up at the doors again, but the door was shut and McGonagall was walking away. Sodding Hufflepuffs and their parties. He didn't have time to find Queenie and talk to her now, so he decided he might as well go to dungeon five and wait for the party to start. He hoped they wouldn't play any potentially embarrassing games.

As he made his way downstairs into the dungeon, he saw Potter coming his way.

"Will you get out of my sight?" he snapped. Was everyone in league to remind Draco of the spectacular fiasco that was the Quidditch game?

"You're the one who followed me down here, Malfoy," Potter said coolly, stopping a few feet away.

"I didn't follow you, Potter. You should be so lucky," Draco said with a wink.

Even in the scant torchlight, it was obvious that Potter blushed. Draco felt cruel satisfaction and he smirked, walking past the statue that was Harry Potter.

"By the way, Rita Skeeter wants an interview," he threw over his shoulder as he passed.

His mood was improved considerably by the time he reached dungeon five -- making Potter squirm was always an enjoyable exercise, especially when Potter had the good sense to blush so prettily... No, he did not think that just now. Draco attempted to disbelieve it, but failed. He walked into the low-ceilinged room and made his way towards Liam. The Head Boy was leaning on a stack of chairs and chatting with Trista.

"Draco, you're early," Liam said with a genial smile.

"I was nearby," Draco replied, matching the smile and shrugging.

He nodded to Trista, then turned to look around the room. There was a wizard wireless on a low cabinet near the wall opposite, and a long, unstable-looking table laden with snacks and drinks occupied the far end of the dungeon. Brock Logan and

Darla Nesbett, the seventh-year Hufflepuff prefects, were bustling around the room, lighting torches with their wands. The light they gave off was faintly bluish, reminding Draco of the Slytherin common room with its cool, green lighting.

People began arriving -- some by themselves, others in small groups. A bored-looking Millicent was followed by Gregory and Tracey Davis: they were so engrossed in conversation that they didn't see Draco until he walked over to them and coughed loudly. Tracey was wearing a bright green Alice band that glittered under the torches, and Millicent was trying to convince her to take it off because she looked like an overgrown beetle. Tracey was giggling and Gregory was looking at Millicent as though she was prophesying eternal rapture.

Hannah Abbott walked in with Megan Jones, a short Hufflepuff girl with a birdlike face. Upon seeing Draco, Hannah coloured visibly and hurried to stand beside Darla Nesbett, looking the other way. Draco wrinkled his nose. She couldn't be more obvious if she tried. He'd toyed with the idea of leading her on at the beginning of the year, but she was a Mudblood and that just wasn't on.

"Looks like Abbott finally lost the pigtails, you think she's going to start acting her age soon?" he remarked to Gregory, who guffawed.

The Gryffindor girls Rivers and Moon came in. They tended to keep to themselves and were rarely seen with the rest of their housemates outside lessons. Draco had often wondered what their story was, but it just seemed to be that they preferred each other's company to everyone else's. Longbottom, Thomas, and Parvati Patil followed them in.

"Would you look at the great lump? He looks so lost, he probably begged Thomas and Patil to lead him here," Draco said in an undertone, and Tracey burst into giggles.

The Ravenclaw students arrived together, led by the tall and haughty Morag MacDougal. Su Li, a tiny boy with long hair and quick, darting eyes, was arguing with Kevin Entwhistle. Those two were constantly debating one subject or another: they'd been thrown out of Arithmancy three times already for bickering over their approaches to problem-solving.

"I wonder if they ever shut up," Draco snapped, looking over at the pair of them with distaste. "Honestly, you'd think we were only here to talk about homework." Millicent mumbled something indicating grudging approval.

Nott was one of the last to arrive; he followed just behind three Hufflepuff boys, who kept casting suspicious looks at him. He didn't join the other Slytherins -- instead, he leant against a wall near the cabinet that held the wizard wireless. He surveyed the group with an inscrutable expression.

Draco was going to wave him over to join them, but Brock Logan walked into the middle of the room and called for everyone's attention. He had a pleasant, deep voice that went well with his warm brown eyes and Draco wondered idly if he swung the other way. He blanched, shocked by having such thoughts about a Hufflepuff and wrote it off to Blaise-contamination.

"Welcome to the Hufflepuff Hullabaloo!" Logan said, smiling broadly.

There was much tittering, most of it coming from the Slytherins. Draco was fighting to keep a straight face because Liam was giving him a pointed stare. Trust the Hufflepuffs to come up with something as ridiculous as that.

Logan's grin got even wider as he continued. "Darla and I are here to welcome you, but Liam and Trista will be leading the evening's activities. There are refreshments over there" -- he pointed at the long table -- "and we hope you enjoy yourselves!" He flicked his wand at the wireless and Celestina Warbeck's voice began belting out *Warm Butterbeer and Cold Kisses*.

Draco suppressed a snort and walked over to Liam. "You could have warned me," he said in a low voice. "What am I supposed to do when they say something like that?"

Liam grinned at him. "They think it's a hoot. Seems to work every time, too."

Draco raised an eyebrow. "They want people to laugh at them?"

"They're Hufflepuffs."

"Good point."

"So what are we supposed to do now?" Draco asked, turning to study the group. Parvati Patil and Wayne Hopkins, a Hufflepuff, had joined in the debate with Li and Entwistle.

"I'll be leading the game soon, you might want to grab some snacks and drinks before they're all gone."

Draco looked at the snack table, where Gregory was shoving a tray at Millicent. There were bottles of Butterbeer and pumpkin fizz to her right, and Draco decided he could use a drink. He called out to Gregory and told him to grab one. The other boy complied at once, bringing Draco a bottle of fizz. People were moving around the room, grabbing snacks and chatting, mostly about the Quidditch game. Draco considered casting silencing charms on the lot of them, but didn't think it would be prudent with the Head Boy and Girl watching.

Celestina Warbeck's song had ended and the Weird Sisters' lead singer was crooning *Long Time No See*. Nott was sitting beside the cabinet with a bottle of Butterbeer in his hand, his head thrown back against the wall behind him. He was mouthing the words to the song, looking bored. Draco fussed with the top of his bottle, considering going over there and talking to him, when Liam spoke.

"All right, everyone, gather round. We're going to play a game."

The talking stopped after about a minute, and twenty curious faces were turned to Liam. They all knew that every game was different, and Draco wondered what indignities he would be subjected to. He hoped he didn't have to do something too stupid, like dancing with Longbottom.

"The game we're playing is called Galleon Tales. Consider yourselves lucky, as this is one of the few games that are played for house points." At this, excited murmuring broke out -- house points were always a hot commodity at Hogwarts, and everyone leant forward towards Liam.

Liam went on to describe the game, which involved sitting in a circle around a hat. Every person had to prepare a story that was either true or false. The stories were to be told in turns. Before speaking, each person would put a Galleon under the hat, facing upwards with either ships (true) or sails (false). After a story was told, everyone would guess if it was true or false, then the Galleon under the hat would be revealed. Each person who guessed correctly earned his or her house a point. Whoever ended up with the most points would get an extra twenty-five points for their house.

Since the twenty of them made a rather large circle, Liam decided he would sit in the middle and call out the right answers. He used a summoning charm to fetch a large pile of cushions from a dark corner, then levitated them to fall in a perfect circle. He then Summoned two more cushions for himself and Trista and placed them in the middle of the circle. The Head Boy and Girl made themselves comfortable as the rest of the group settled down around them.

Draco sat between Millicent and Gregory, fighting the urge to make a disparaging remark at someone -- anyone. This was the longest time he'd ever spent in the company of Longbottom without making him squirm one way or another. It shouldn't be allowed. There was just no excuse for putting Draco in a room with Longbottom and taking away the ability to hex him. Much to Draco's irritation, Longbottom sat directly opposite, and failed to cower when Draco glared at him.

"All right, let's get cracking. Please don't tell any true stories that only your housemates are likely to know, that wouldn't be very good gamesmanship," said Liam, and pointed to a miniature Sneakoscope he'd fished out of his pocket. "It's tuned very finely for this occasion, so no funny business."

"Why don't you start, Morag?" he continued, turning to the Ravenclaw girl.

Morag MacDougal gave him a thin-lipped smile. Draco was curious if any of her housemates knew that her father was in league with the Dark Lord. The MacDougals were an ancient pure-blood family and Draco had known Morag since they were both very small. His mother had been good friends with Mrs MacDougal when they went to Hogwarts, and they kept in close contact. It was probably the best-kept secret at Hogwarts -- Draco knew better than to mention it and Morag didn't advertise it. Draco looked at her intently, wondering how many people would be shocked to find out that not all of Voldemort's supporters were Slytherins: Morag's father had been in Ravenclaw.

Morag crawled over to the pointed wizard's hat in front of Liam and put a Galleon he handed to her under it. Sitting back down, she looked straight at Draco for a moment before launching into a story about getting her first broomstick when she was six and learning to fly together with a friend of hers. Draco smirked, remembering the incident all too well. Unfortunately, no one had believed him in first year when he'd told it.

"So he nearly missed the helicopter, but the Muggle didn't notice him, thank Merlin. He was so scared when we landed; he swore he would never go flying again. Of course, boys can be so fickle sometimes," she said with a wry smile, not looking at him.

Draco had to resort to pretending to scratch his nose to hide his smile. It had been too long since he and Morag had spent any time together. Since the Dark Lord had risen again, the MacDougals never visited the Malfoys anymore to avoid arousing suspicion, and the two of them rarely saw each other outside classes. He made up his mind right then to seek her out sometime soon.

"Draco?" Liam's voice startled him, and Draco raised an eyebrow.

"Oh. True," he said hastily, suppressing another grin. Across and to the left, Morag wore an unperturbed look. Gregory, whose turn it was next, went with Draco's opinion.

When all the guesses were in and Trista had checked off columns labelled "True" and "False" in her notebook, Liam lifted the hat and called ships. Trista flicked her wand at the paper in front of her. Draco inclined his head slightly to see better -- she was using Arithmancy to make the numbers in the "True" column add themselves up according to Hogwarts houses. She had created a special symbol for each house, and now there was a tally sheet running at the bottom of the page. Draco wished he could practise Arithmancy, too, but they wouldn't be allowed until seventh year.

"Two points to Slytherin, one point each to Hufflepuff, Gryffindor, and Ravenclaw," Trista rasped.

So it continued, people were telling short stories and the rest of them tried to guess their veracity. Draco was astonished to learn that Hannah Abbott had been the brightest student at her Muggle school before she received her Hogwarts letter (Slytherin did not receive any points that round). The long-haired Su Li had learned to

play the guitar when he was seven and was now considering a career in music (even the Ravensclaws had not known).

The story about Granger beating up Longbottom during the Department of Mysteries fight in June turned out to be false (no one got any points). Draco frowned up at Longbottom -- so how had he got all those injuries then? Surely he hadn't done any actual fighting?

Tracey Davis was smiling rather smugly when no one received any points after she told the story about her involvement with Marcus Flint and everyone said it was true. When it was Draco's turn, he knew what he had to do. He didn't believe in saying "Thank you," because you couldn't buy anything with that, nor could you put it in a pipe and smoke it. Morag had given him a chance at free house points, and he had to repay her in kind. He talked about his Puffskein named Quillan, and the time he and "a friend" had dyed him green using Madame Escallop's Magical Food Colouring from Narcissa Malfoy's kitchen. Morag was the only one to get it right.

In the end, the four houses broke about even on points, but Stephen Cornfoot of Ravenclaw had been right more often than anyone else, and so Ravenclaw got the extra twenty-five. Liam and Trista thanked them all for coming, and the seventh-year Hufflepuff prefects foisted the remaining snacks and drinks on everyone who would take them. Gregory had trouble balancing his armload of Butterbeer bottles and Spearmint Snails as they left.

Draco walked back with Millicent, Gregory, and Tracey but didn't join in their conversation. He had enjoyed himself at the party, just a little. It was strange, interacting with members of other houses in a non-academic way -- they did not seem all that different from his own housemates, and some of the stories had been amusing. Another part of him was glad that he'd gone through the motions of the Hufflepuff house unity project and could simply forget about it now.

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Next morning after breakfast, Draco was digging for his *Intermediate Transfiguration* textbook in his trunk. The dormitory door banged open and he looked up from his crouch. Blaise stood in the doorway, looking sheepish. Draco raised an expectant eyebrow.

"D'you want to come out flying?"

"We're not playing Ravenclaw until the middle of January," Draco said in a crotchety tone.

"No, I mean just for fun." Blaise was wearing a roguish grin that Draco didn't like at all.

"You want to go flying for... fun?"

"Yeah. Want to come?" Blaise tilted his head to one side.

"No, I don't have time for recreational flying," Draco snapped and went back to looking for his book.

"Don't say I didn't ask," Blaise said in an annoyingly cheerful voice. The door slammed, and Draco was alone again.

What was that all about? Blaise had acted as though they hadn't just spent a month ignoring each other, except when it was absolutely necessary for them to talk. Draco found his textbook and put it aside, closing his trunk and pushing it back under the bed. He picked up the book and rose to his feet, brushing off his robe. Something was definitely off about Blaise. He decided that it wouldn't hurt to take a walk before he got started on his homework.

Draco pulled his winter cloak from his wardrobe and walked out. As he passed the common room, Vincent and Gregory rose immediately, ready to follow, but he waved them off and hurried out. He made his way towards the Quidditch pitch, bundling the cloak tighter around himself. The grounds were deserted as it was still rather early on Sunday morning. There was a numbing, chilly edge to the air that reminded all and sundry that winter was just around the corner, though it was still early November. Yesterday's canopy of clouds had dissipated overnight, and everything was bathed in lazy sunlight. It gave little warmth but abundant brilliance, and Draco had to squint as he arrived at the rough stone steps that led down to the Quidditch pitch.

His heart skipped a beat when he looked out onto the stadium, partly shielding his eyes with his palm. Blaise wasn't alone -- there were three other people with him. Draco squinted, but couldn't make out the faces from his distance. He was too far to perform an effective Near-Vision spell. Sighing, he descended cautiously and walked closer to the stadium. He still had to shield his eyes from the sun but he could now see a little better. Blaise was accompanied by Smith, Terry Boot, and -- no. It couldn't be.

It was Potter, there was no mistaking the Firebolt's speed and agility, and there were no other Firebolt owners at Hogwarts except for Harry Potter. Draco narrowed his eyes as he watched Blaise and Potter hover beside each other, talking about something. Draco would have given an arm to hear what they were talking about. Smith flew up towards them from the goalposts and hovered in front of them. He moved his arm as though imitating a wave of water, then jerked his head towards Boot, who was having some trouble with his broomstick. It was rising up and down randomly, and there was only so much the Ravenclaw boy could do to stay in the air.

Potter nodded to Smith and flew towards Boot, stopping near him and releasing his hold on the Firebolt. He lifted his hands up in the air and said something to Boot, who laughed. The sound carried all the way to where Draco stood, ducked behind a medium-height bush. Draco's stomach did a kind of flip as he watched -- surely Potter would fall off his broom. Draco sneered at the thought -- they should be so lucky. If even the Dark Lord couldn't kill Potter properly the first time, surely a little thing like falling off his broom wouldn't stop him living.

Potter was teaching Boot to grip his broom handle properly -- while up in the air. It was against every rule in the book, yet it didn't break any school rules, so Draco was resigned to watching. Smith and Blaise had stopped talking and Blaise went back to doing his eights around the goalposts while Smith practised his throwing movements. Draco had seen enough. He turned on his heel and stalked back towards the rock cliff, up the narrow staircase, and back into the castle.

Upon returning to his dormitory, Draco hung his cloak back into the wardrobe, taking extra care to make sure it hung just so. He shut the wardrobe door tightly, running his hand along the soft wood. He started to walk away and suddenly turned back around, ramming his fist into the wardrobe door with a snarl. He struck with such force that his fist went through the door, but Draco didn't feel the pain. He couldn't remember the last time he'd been so angry.

It was not enough for Potter to take Draco's rightful place at the school, no. He had to take Draco's place in Quidditch, too. Potter always talked back at Draco, frequently making him look ridiculous in front of all his friends. Potter often used Draco to demonstrate hexes and jinxes on during DA meetings, supposedly to show everyone how good Draco was at defending against them -- fat chance. Potter was waiting for Draco to fail at a counter-curse one day, that was all. Potter had taken his father away from him, reducing Lucius Malfoy, a man worth a hundred Harry Potters, to the status of a common criminal. But no, all that wasn't enough for Potter -- he had to have Draco's best friend, too. He had to take everything away, as though a world with Harry Potter in it didn't hold enough room for Draco Malfoy.

Draco withdrew his fist from the ruined wardrobe and blew on the knuckles, which were badly bruised. Wincing, he took his wand out of his pocket and repaired the damage he'd done to the wardrobe. He rubbed his left temple and felt a bulging vein pulsate beneath his fingers, knowing that he had to calm down. He sat down on the bed and forced himself to take deep breaths, hands folded in his lap. None of this was Blaise's fault, he realised -- Potter was simply using Blaise to get to Draco.

Potter had something to do with the house unity projects, after all -- he probably rigged the group lists to end up in the same study group as Blaise and to go to the same party. He'd probably wanted to be in the same DA group as Draco just so he could have an excuse to hurl hexes at him every Monday. As he started thinking more rationally, Draco felt some of the tightness in his chest go away. He pulled out his diary, ink, and quill and crossed out the meticulously drawn diagram for his previous plan. Subtlety and finesse were wasted on Potter. Draco had a new plan, one that would ensure he won. Draco would win, too, because it was about time he won.

Draco Malfoy's diary, November 3rd

I am going to kill him before the year is out.

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Chapter 10: A Gryffindor and a Slytherin

A Gryffindor and A Slytherin

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Author's Notes: This was my first novel-length Harry/Draco story. It was completed four months before the release of HBP (and before the announcement of Draco's birth date on Rowling's website) and is now AU. This story stands alone, though it's also a companion piece to *Beyond Wild Moor and Fen*, which is from Harry's point of view. Many thanks to Mishty, Vel, Jaxmari, Kristal and Autumn LeCroix for beta-reading. Constructive criticism is always welcome and appreciated.

**A Gryffindor and A Slytherin
Chapter 10 - Draco's Detour**

I suppose it's safe to say that I'm in my sixth year, and I'm in Slytherin. I prefer solitude to rambunctious company, and one of my best friends is a girl. I spend my free time in the Slytherin common room most often; you're not likely to see me wandering around the school.

I'm good at Potions and I enjoy the lessons immensely. However, the subject that truly intrigues me is Defence Against the Dark Arts. I quite look forward to the Defence Association meetings, because I'm given to understand that we'd be given a chance to learn about Dark spells and how they are performed. I don't believe we can effectively defend against spells that we only understand in theory, so I think it's important to know the Dark spells in addition to knowing their counter-spells.

Usage of Dark spells lies with one's conscience, after all -- their knowledge is not in itself sufficient to brand a person a Dark wizard. It's like Potions in a way -- even the most fumbling of wizards can brew a poison through merely being incompetent, but we don't label them as Dark Arts practitioners. Even poisons have their use in everyday life. I suppose one would say I place utility above ethics, though I don't agree. I think ethics are just as important, but I believe each person answers to himself, and shouldn't be judged by some myopic standard set by society hundreds of years ago.

The music from that time, however, does tickle my fancy. I'm especially fond of chamber music but I'll listen to anything that has a piano accompaniment. I quite fancy the idea of playing the flute, though I'm far too impatient to learn. Unlike my less discerning housemates, who turn up in droves to Weird Sisters concerts, I fancy The Cunning Minds. Their melodies are to die for, and their song lyrics are metaphorical, not unintelligible -- the unintelligible thing is just a rumour started by people without any appreciation of words transcending language.

To conclude, I'll simply do what most people are doing and speak of my favourite colour. I have several colours that I like to wear and look at, but I tend to prefer black. Not for any reason other than it's practical and it goes with everything.

Gryffindor and Hufflepuff had guessed Theodore Nott, Ravenclaw had guessed Sheridan Roper. Draco smiled, feeling vindicated. So far, his essay was the only one in his year that no one had guessed. He watched with glee as his name appeared in the air. There weren't any gasps of surprise, unfortunately, but one couldn't have everything.

He turned to Blaise and cocked an eyebrow at him. Blaise gave him a lopsided grin, his glance darting towards his hands then to the Hufflepuff table. Draco rolled his eyes. After Draco had witnessed the flying practice almost two weeks ago, he had waited for Blaise in the common room then acted like nothing was wrong between them. They didn't talk about Smith or where Blaise went on Sunday mornings.

Nott's essay was read out last. Even if Draco hadn't been keeping count, he'd have known from the first few sentences. Honestly, could he carry on about his father any more? Draco snorted and looked over at where Nott was sitting, not looking at anyone. Predictably, Gryffindor and Hufflepuff had had no idea what they were doing: they had thought Nott was Draco. Draco smirked once again as Ravenclaw guessed Nott's essay correctly -- he was officially the only sixth-year whose essay had gone unguessed.

To think that those sods had had a whole month to figure out who was who, before the guesses had been collected on Hallowe'en! They couldn't guess the one sixth-year Slytherin who was the centre of attention much more often than the rest. It was the last day of essay readings, and the winning house would be announced. Slytherin had got three hundred points so far, so they already had more points than the house which had guessed the most correctly.

He glanced at the Ravenclaw table and winked at Morag, who smiled. They'd met several times since the Hufflepuff party, and tonight after dinner would be no different. At the staff table, Dumbledore rose to his feet, clapping his hands together three times to get attention. The students fell silent.

"It is time to announce the winner in the first house unity contest," he said, beaming at everyone. "It is with great pleasure that I award Ravenclaw house two hundred and fifty points for guessing correctly the most times."

Cheers erupted from the Ravenclaws. Dumbledore waved them to be silent.

"I hope the exercise has taught all of you something new about your schoolmates. Slytherin, after all, received three hundred and fifty points -- that means there is one person in each year about whom their classmates know nothing at all."

Draco gave everyone around him a look of extreme smugness. Pansy giggled into her sleeve.

"You know we would have all got you right, how many screaming rows did you and Blaise have about The Cunning Minds?" she whispered.

He wrinkled his nose at her. Dumbledore announced the end of the contest and people started to get up from the benches, chattering. Draco rose as well, told Blaise and Pansy he'd see them later, and headed for the library. He passed Hannah Abbott, who was looking at him with something like awe written all over her simple face. He gave her a reserved stare, and she blushed.

Draco pushed past a group of third-years from various houses, who were nattering about the Quidditch scandal. He wondered how long it would take until that topic of conversation would finally be exhausted. No one still knew who had released the second Snitch at the Slytherin versus Gryffindor match, and the incident was still making headlines in wizarding newspapers. Rita Skeeter had failed to gain access to Hogwarts and instead had written a scathing piece about an alleged romance McGonagall had had with an American singing sorcerer back when she was in her early twenties.

Meanwhile, Wright and Sons were busy developing a new Snitch model; supposedly, the new Snitches would refuse to fly if another Snitch was anywhere within the bounds of a pitch. Quidditch game spectators worldwide were being subjected to Snitch-detecting spells at every match while everyone waited for prototype testing to complete. Draco scowled as he waited for a staircase to deposit him on the fourth floor. Why hadn't Snitch manufacturers thought of this earlier, before Draco had to suffer because of their negligence?

The Slytherins had tried to figure out a way to shed light on whomever had released the second Snitch, but so far, they couldn't find a way to do it without getting themselves expelled. Draco stalked down the hallway leading to the library, feeling bile rise up inside him at the thought. Nearly two weeks had passed since that game, yet the thought of it still filled him with loathing. He pushed the library doors open and walked to a table near the back of the reading area.

Morag arrived five minutes later, giving him a quick smile before retrieving a book that Madam Pince had been holding for her. She sat down across from him, placing her schoolbag on the table.

"Very impressive work," she said in her deep, throaty voice. "I had been sure I would guess your essay."

Draco smiled at her indulgently. "I aim to awe."

Morag snorted. "Please. You knew I'd be reading, I didn't expect you to make it easy."

"You expected right. Speaking of essays, this is still bothering me -- why did you lot say Tracey for Queenie's, er, Daphne's essay?"

"I thought it would have been obvious. You heard Tracey's essay, didn't you?"

Draco shook his head. "I wasn't paying attention."

Morag raised her eyebrows. "Well, she talked about having had a crush on Ernie Macmillan when they were ten."

Draco gaped at her. "Tracey knows Macmillan?"

"Apparently. Since uh, Daphne is seeing Ernie we thought she was a shoo-in."

Draco smirked. Tracey had done it on purpose, of course. She'd always been boy-crazy and so didn't have any qualms talking about her crushes to all and sundry. Daphne was seeing Macmillan; everyone knew that. He made a mental note to tell Tracey that the Ravenclaws, at least, had fallen for it. Ravenclaw intelligence was no match for Slytherin cunning.

"So you marked Tracey's essay as Daphne, and thus were forced to mark Daphne as Tracey?"

Morag looked down. "Don't tell the others I told you," she said with a demure smile.

They whiled the evening away chatting quietly about all the things they hadn't talked about for two years. The last thing Draco thought would happen this year was that he'd make a new friend, and from an old friend no less.

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Draco was having considerable trouble getting Queenie alone, so on Friday he told Vincent and Gregory to head Nott off until he'd had a chance to speak to the girl.

"What are we supposed to do?" Vincent asked, scratching the back of his head.

"I don't care, just make sure he does not come in here for the next ten minutes," Draco snapped, glancing over at Queenie, who was reading in one of the carved chairs by the fireplace.

Vincent and Gregory trudged out of the common room and Draco walked over to her and pulled up a second chair. She gave him a quizzical look, marking her page with a pale finger.

"Avoiding me, are you?"

"Maybe."

Draco flashed her a winning smile. "Why?"

"Well, the essay... Ernie." Queenie glanced down at her book again, a faint blush spreading across her cheeks.

"So you did tip him off?"

Her head snapped up and she gave him a sharp look. "Of course not."

Draco narrowed his eyes. She had no reason to lie to him -- Slytherin had got the upper hand in the essay readings, after all. She also knew very well that Draco could easily manipulate Macmillan into telling him the truth. He studied her briefly. Queenie had certainly seemed a lot less high-strung lately; she no longer looked on the verge of tears all the time.

"How are things then?" he asked with a sly look.

She sighed. "What do you want, Draco?"

He pretended to look hurt. "To talk to you, of course."

"Why? You never talk to me unless you want something."

Draco leant against the back of his chair and fixed her with a cold glare. "Well it's a little difficult to talk when Nott glowers at anyone who dares come within two feet of you, Queenie."

Something strange flickered across her face but it was gone before Draco could pinpoint the look. She sighed. "Yeah, I guess."

"So? How have you been? Still want to be an Animagus?" She'd written about her dream of becoming an Animagus in her essay.

Queenie shook her head. "No, I figure if we don't get to pick what animal we turn into, it's not worth the bother. Imagine turning into a pig."

Draco gave a short laugh. "Listen, I want you to come to Hogsmeade with us next time," he said suddenly.

He'd been giving a lot of thought to Slytherin unity recently. The Slytherins couldn't afford to have a divided front any more; not when all the other houses were banding together so successfully behind Potter. As he was the sixth-year prefect, it was his duty to make sure his own year stuck together. Queenie seemed like the weakest link.

"Draco, you know Pansy and I don't get along," Queenie said, pursing her lips as she gave him a suspicious glance.

Draco cocked his head to one side and smirked. "Don't worry about Pansy, I'll handle her. Just come with us."

She licked her lips and shifted in her chair. "All right," she said after a long pause. "But..."

"Yes?"

"Well, Ernie..."

"Oh, we won't keep you the whole time. After all, you're not the only one with friends in other houses." Draco rolled his eyes, and Queenie laughed.

They were interrupted by shouts coming from the doorway and Draco walked over to investigate. The door slid into the wall and he was greeted with the sight of Vincent and Gregory standing in front of the door with their arms crossed while Theodore Nott spouted obscenities at them. Draco called his boys off and Nott stalked inside, heading straight for the boys' dormitories.

He followed the weedy boy with narrowed eyes. Nott was still an enigma: he hadn't shown any interest in house activities, kept to himself most of the time, and didn't

seem interested in upholding Slytherin pride. He'd have to do something about Nott. Just as soon as he dealt with Sheridan Roper.

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Draco stood on the edge of the cliff overlooking the Quidditch stadium, the chilly autumn wind whipping his cloak and robes around his body. It had become a habit, watching Blaise, Potter, Smith, and Boot practise their flying every Sunday. It was the fourth time he had come here. Hufflepuff would be playing Ravenclaw next Saturday; Smith looked like he meant business as he swooped around the goalposts on the far end of the pitch. Potter motioned him over and Smith came careening through the air, robes puffing out behind him and giving him the appearance of a large insect. Potter said something and Smith laughed. Draco's chest tightened inexplicably, and he turned away.

When he looked back up, Blaise was attempting a complicated Keeper move -- the Starfish and Stick, which involved hanging off one's broom with one arm and one leg. Potter and Smith were circling below him, looking up. Draco watched with horror; how could they let Blaise do this? Even professional players rarely resorted to this move; he never allowed it as it was so dangerous. Blaise gave up and clambered back up on his broom with some difficulty; Smith soared up and clapped him on the shoulder, saying something that caused Blaise to grin.

Draco considered getting his broomstick and joining them. Why shouldn't he? Blaise was his best friend, after all, or he could just fly by himself. That prospect didn't suit him, however. He whipped around and stalked away from the edge of the cliff. There was a twinge of something suspiciously like regret right above his stomach. He shook his head bitterly as he walked on. If Draco Malfoy showed up on the pitch, everyone but Blaise would leave, it was certain. He pressed his lips together in a scowl, narrowing his eyes.

He was on the edge of the Forbidden Forest now, right beside the half-breed's hut, which looked deserted. Draco felt a prickly, cold sensation at the base of his neck and he turned around abruptly. There was no one there -- the Quidditch pitch was no longer in view. The ground was bare save for a shiny stone about two feet away. He turned back around, trying to combat the sick, tugging feeling in his chest. A tinny, annoying voice came from somewhere in the back of his skull. *You must realise how utterly absurd your life has become.*

Despair washed over him, and he walked on blindly, ignoring everything around him as he thought of all the things he'd done in his life. For some reason he couldn't remember any of his successes, only failures -- Granger always beat him in classes, Potter always beat him at Quidditch, and Blaise had beaten him socially. He was gay, a disgrace to the Malfoy name and to his pureblood heritage. The path in front of him was thick with fallen pine needles, and Draco kicked out at them, fighting back tears. The voice in his mind cackled. *What's happened to "Slytherins don't cry," eh, boy?*

"We don't," he muttered, dragging his sleeve across his eyes. Great, he was starting to talk to the voices in his head.

He took a left turn, then a right, then a series of lefts. The forest seemed to be getting thicker the further he walked, but it didn't matter, really -- he was sure he would never get out of the forest alive. There was absolutely no reason why he shouldn't simply collapse and weep bitterly -- no one would find him here, he was doomed to wander the forest as long as he lived. A different voice piped up in his head that sounded suspiciously like Snape. *Aren't you being slightly over-dramatic?*

Despite his state of mind, he couldn't shake the feeling that something was watching him from behind, something large, ominous, and altogether unpleasant. He heard a

scraping sound behind him and stopped abruptly, but what did he care if some beast attacked him? It was all so futile and irrelevant. Still, a twinge of morbid curiosity remained. It didn't matter either way, so why not take a look at the source of his imminent demise?

With an effort, Draco turned around, searching the trees behind him for any sign of danger. His gaze slid down to the ground and he realised the reason for his desperation at once. He kicked himself mentally -- why, they'd covered these in Care of Magical Creatures when Professor Grubbly-Plank had taught them last year; he'd written extensive notes on recognising and spotting these creatures.

It was a Pogrebin -- a humanoid figure covered in thick grey hair; a faint musty, mildewy smell was coming from it, and Draco realised belatedly that he'd been smelling it for some time. It stood nearly a foot from the ground, its oversized bald head tilted upwards, sharp, needle-like teeth bared, murky brown eyes flashing with malice. Its hairy arms swung at its sides as it took a step towards Draco, emitting a low, guttural sound.

"*Stupefy!*" he shouted, whipping out his wand and pointing it at the wretched creature.

He wasn't aiming, and the jet of red light hit the ground at the Pogrebin's feet. It gave a loud squeak and jumped up, then ran quickly for the cover of a wild raspberry bush. A moment later, it was gone, and Draco was alone. The unbearable hopelessness was no longer clutching his chest, but he felt an edge of panic creeping up on him.

He pursed his lips and looked around the large clearing. The rays of the afternoon sun seeped through the trees, illuminating the yellowing grass in streaks and patches.

Squint as he might, he couldn't make out anything beyond the thick trunks other than more trees and the occasional bush. Great.

Draco sat down on a tree stump near the edge of the clearing and thought about what he could do. He knew the Four-Point Spell but that wouldn't do him much good. He didn't know where anything was in the forest and he had no idea where he was in relation to the castle. He let out a frustrated sigh, squinting at his wand as he tried to remember spells he might be able to use.

He couldn't be bothered to levitate himself above the trees to see where the castle was. He could only hover at a height of about four feet without risking an ignominious fall. He tapped his wand against the edge of his hand, frowning. A faint spark emerged from the tip, hovered uncertainly in the air for a bit, then faded.

Draco thought back to the detention he'd had to do with Potter, Granger, and Longbottom in their first year and smirked. How Longbottom had panicked when Draco had grabbed him from behind! He must have jumped two feet in the air, and had immediately sent up sparks. Yes, it really looked like the only solution -- to send up sparks and hope someone from the castle saw them.

He raised his wand and released a shower of bright green sparks. They rose as a fountain would -- languidly and gracefully, not like those Muggle fireworks he saw from the roof of Malfoy Manor sometimes. Muggle things were so crude in design and execution. Draco watched the spark cloud dissolve with a pensive look. If someone would notice, how long would it take them to find him? He lamented not having bound the Pogrebin to present the reason for his being in the Forbidden Forest. He hoped he could get away with just the explanation.

Draco pocketed his wand and got up from the tree stump he'd been sitting on, rolling his shoulders. A loud crash came from somewhere ahead, and he looked up, startled. He'd just sent the sparks up; maybe he hadn't got so far from the castle, after all. He started walking towards the source of the noise when another loud *crunch* came from much closer. It sounded like something was tearing through the trees ahead, and whatever it was, it couldn't possibly be good news.

The ground shook slightly, and he backed away a step, heart hammering in his chest. The trees in front of him parted with loud crunching sounds and a massive, hulking figure stepped out into the clearing, only a few feet away from him. Draco instinctively pulled out his wand, but he knew it was no good. It was a giant, and their kind repelled magic very well. It must have been thirty feet tall, though Draco was too afraid to tell for sure. He kept backing away, hoping the creature wouldn't notice him, but it did.

It took another step towards him, causing the ground to shake violently as the enormous foot made contact. Draco stumbled and fell backwards, wand flying out of his hand and rolling away. The giant's large, ugly face was turned towards him, greenish-brown eyes staring stupidly. The creature bared its yellow teeth and let out a low roar, causing the ground to vibrate. It started reaching out towards Draco with a huge dirty hand, and he just lay there, unable to move. His wand was just a few feet away, useless.

Another crash came from Draco's left, and a robed figure came bursting out of the trees, crying "no, Grawp, no!" Draco knew that voice.

The giant stopped reaching for Draco and blinked stupidly at the newcomer.

"Harry," it said, and Draco almost fainted. The creature knew Potter's name.

"No, Grawp!" Potter shouted.

Draco scrambled to his feet and backed up into the trees, finding a trunk to lean on. He was shaking all over -- the creature had a name, and Potter knew it. Potter could somehow control the giant, and Draco was done for. The giant, however, was ignoring Potter's frantically waving arms and was staring at Draco with a decidedly fiendish gleam in its eye.

"Boy," it opined.

Draco clamped his mouth shut with both hands. He was shaking so badly his teeth were chattering, and the stench coming from the creature made him want to vomit.

Potter raised his wand and sent up a blazing shower of scarlet sparks at the giant's head. The creature blinked several times and tried to grab at the flickering air. Potter sent another volley of sparks to the other end of the clearing, and the giant followed, looking mesmerised. A fusillade of more sparks erupted from Potter's wand, directed above the trees. The creature rammed through the trees, looking like a bizarrely enormous child chasing a butterfly.

Draco was still staring after the creature when he felt something warm collide with him. "Move," Potter muttered and tugged on his arm.

Draco stumbled after the Gryffindor in a near-daze, barely able to tear his eyes away from where the giant had stood. A moment later, they burst through a thicket onto a narrow path. A sharp branch whipped across Draco's cheek and he felt warm liquid trickle down his face. Reaching up, he touched his cheek and quickly drew his hand away -- it stung, and there was blood on his fingers. Draco opened his mouth to speak, but Potter lifted a finger to his lips.

"Quiet," he whispered. "He might still hear you."

"What the hell is that thing doing in the forest?" Draco whispered back.

Potter ignored him, looking in the direction from which they'd come, his eyes narrowed slightly. An ear-splitting, earth-shattering roar came from behind him, and Draco jumped. Thundering footsteps let them know that the giant was walking away.

"Stay here, I need to get my broom," Potter ordered and headed back through the bushes from which they'd emerged.

"So you can leave me here? I don't think so, Potter," Draco said, his tone waspish. His heart was still doing the mambo and his knees were wobbly.

He followed Potter into the bushes, holding his hands in front of his face to avoid more scratches. They were back in the clearing where Draco had sat minutes ago, but Potter didn't pause; he hurried through the trees on the left and disappeared from view. Wand. His wand was still on the ground where he'd dropped it, and Draco picked it up, examining it for signs of damage. His mind worked feverishly. He'd got over his terror -- he wasn't a Slytherin because he liked green; Slytherins were nothing if not adaptable. This was the perfect opportunity -- he had Potter exactly where he wanted him: alone, no witnesses.

He hadn't seriously entertained plans of murdering Potter -- he was more than aware that he'd be punished most severely. Draco wouldn't do anything that broke the law if he wasn't sure he could get away with it -- not even if it involved Potter. He did hate Potter badly enough to want to hurt him, and in recent weeks, he had fantasised about various situations in which he killed Potter and got off. Most of them played themselves out outside Hogwarts, however -- there was no way anyone could hurt Potter under Dumbledore's nose.

He could easily kill Potter now and no one would ever be the wiser. He'd hide his wand so they wouldn't be able to use *Priori Incantatem*. He could use Potter's wand until he was able to get a new one. It wouldn't take long, and he'd be rid of Potter's wand before they even found the body. There was just one huge, gaping problem with that plan. Draco owed Potter his life, which hadn't been the case until a few short moments ago. If Potter hadn't shown up when he did, if he hadn't known how to head off that abominable creature, Draco would have been giant food. He couldn't kill Potter now: he didn't want to find out what happened to wizards who messed with magic as ancient and potent as a life debt.

Potter re-emerged with his Firebolt held at his side. Draco glared at him, and he raised an eyebrow.

"You're welcome, Malfoy," he said in an airy tone. Draco sneered. Potter ignored him, and continued. "Can you find your way out?"

"Yeah, that's why I sent up sparks, because I wanted to let everyone know I could find my way out of this Merlin-forsaken place."

Potter laughed. "You got lost?"

"I did not get lost. I fell under a Pogrebin's spell." Draco drew himself up to full height and gave Potter a challenging look.

Potter's eyes narrowed. "Wow, a real Pogrebin? Is it anything like they describe in books?"

"I didn't get a chance to examine it under a magnifying glass, Potter, it scarpered after I sent a Stunner at it."

"Yeah, you would try to Stun it, wouldn't you?" Potter looked disgusted.

"It's what you're supposed to do to them, you nitwit." Draco studied him for a moment. "At least it was only a beast, not a person," he added, barely above a whisper. "Like the people at a certain Ministry department, for example."

Potter coloured and shot him a look full of loathing. "What do you mean by that?" he ground out, his knuckles going white around the Firebolt.

Draco smirked. "You figure it out, unless you're as thick as you look."

Potter let out a loud sigh, closing his eyes for a moment. "Whatever, Malfoy. I'm leaving. If you want to get out of here, follow me." With that, he took off down a path to Draco's left.

Gritting his teeth, he hurried after Potter, imagining all manner of unpleasant things happening to the Gryffindor prat. Why did it have to be him who showed up? Draco would have preferred to owe a life debt to that bumbling oaf Hagrid rather than this insufferable tosser.

"You seem to know your way around here," he commented acidly, "considering that students aren't allowed in the Forest."

Potter turned his head slightly to look back at Draco. "Why, nice to meet you, Mr. Pot. I'm Mr. Cauldron."

"I told you, it was a Pogrebin," Draco huffed, turning up his nose and nearly stumbling over a log on the ground.

Potter sniggered and turned away.

"You didn't answer my question, Potter," Draco pointed out.

Potter didn't turn around. "What question?"

But Draco noticed something that caused him to stop dead in his tracks. "I say, look over there!" he demanded, and Potter whirled around. Draco pointed at a pathway through the trees. Something large gleamed at the end of it, obscured by thick undergrowth.

"Uh, you don't want to go there, that's where Aragog lives," Potter said in a shaky sort of voice that was entirely out of character.

"Aragog?"

Potter slapped his forehead, looking shame-faced. "Um, one of Hagrid's pets."

Something was very familiar about the name. Draco looked over at Potter, who backed away a step and resumed walking. Draco followed him, casting one last glance

at whatever was at the end of the branching path. Aragog, Aragog... Weasley. Draco had just yesterday reread his diary entries from earlier in the school year.

"So why's Weasley scared of Aragog, Potter?" he ventured.

Potter stopped walking abruptly and turned around. "What makes you think he is?"

Draco hadn't been expecting Potter to stop and almost ran into him. He stopped inches from the other boy; he could smell the wind and sweat. Involuntarily, he took a step back -- Potter was much too close, and he wasn't supposed to look or smell like another person. He was Potter.

Scowling, Draco gave him a sideways glance. "That's for me to know."

Potter muttered something that sounded insulting and set off down the path again. Draco followed, keeping a longer distance between them -- he didn't want a repeat of what had just happened.

They were approaching a clearing with a large log across the middle of it. Several black-feathered arrows stuck out of the dark, mossy bark. Potter cast a glance around and hurried across, ducking slightly. Sunlight filtered down from the canopy above, causing light spots to flicker on the ground. A red squirrel hopped out of the log and scampered away into the trees.

They hustled along dry, beaten paths for another ten minutes when Draco realised the air smelled different -- there was a faint waft of water lilies and reeds in the air. They must be getting close to the lake. He breathed a sigh of relief. His mind reeled with what he'd seen and heard, and he was just beginning to realise the extent of his luck -- that giant could have squished him, he might have encountered this Aragog thing, he could have died...

Potter froze without warning again and this time Draco couldn't stop in time -- he slammed into Potter, nearly causing them both to topple to the ground. Draco grabbed onto Potter's robes to steady himself, trying not to think about the heat that radiated from the other boy -- he wouldn't have thought the skinny prat could be so warm. He released Potter and leant against a nearby tree, rubbing his right leg: the tail end of Potter's Firebolt had jabbed him hard in the thigh. A sharp ache shot down Draco's leg and he gave a hiss, causing Potter to turn around and glare at him.

"Quiet!" he said, looking as though he were straining to listen for something.

Massaging his leg gently, Draco grimaced and let go of Potter's robe. "Are you trying to get me to wrestle you to the ground? If so, you're going about it the wrong way, Potter," he whispered into the other boy's ear, watching in fascination as tiny, barely-there bumps of gooseflesh appeared on the back of his neck.

Potter drew in a breath and turned around to face Draco, Firebolt still in hand. They had never stood this close to each other -- they'd been closer several times but that usually involved catching the Snitch, or Potter demonstrating his skills in Muggle duelling. Draco forced a smirk, staring at the bridge of Potter's nose to pretend like he was looking into his eyes. He felt a strange urge to get rid of Potter's ugly glasses so he could see if his eyes were really that green.

"What exactly did you mean by that?"

Draco tried to look innocent, but mental images of what could happen in this situation kept replaying themselves in his head. Horrified, he felt a blush rising and tried to think of anything but boys standing this close to him -- this was Potter, after all.

"You're the one who danced with Vincent, you tell me," he said in an undignified croak.

Draco took a step backwards, but Potter grabbed the front of his robe with his Firebolt-free hand and pulled him close. They were nose to nose now, and Potter's eyes were flashing behind those awful glasses. Maybe he shouldn't have said that. They were alone in the forest, and Potter would probably get away with transfiguring him into something unnatural.

"There are some lines you shouldn't cross, Malfoy," he said in an uneven tone. Then Potter kissed him.

Draco made a noise of surprise and stumbled backwards, shoving Potter away from him. He landed on his rear end, another jolt of pain shot down his leg from his bruised thigh. He wiped his mouth with his robe sleeve, feeling bits of earth on his lips.

"Potter, what do you think you're doing?" he spat.

Potter was looking grimly down at him. "If I hear one more thing about my sexual orientation, I'm going to tell everyone about the first boy I ever kissed. I'll volunteer to drink Veritaserum, too."

"Bastard," Draco pointed out, trying to rise and wincing.

Potter smirked and held out his arm. Draco grabbed onto it and pulled himself to his feet, glaring. He let go of Potter's arm and brushed his hair out of his face. Potter shouldered his Firebolt and set off through the trees without looking back. Draco stared after him until he was no longer visible. He raised a hand to his lips and pressed the tips of his fingers against them, thinking. The first boy Potter had ever kissed?

Draco Malfoy's diary, November 24th

I've written to Mother about the giant in the forest. Someone needs to alert the Ministry about what some people at this school are up to. I absolutely don't understand what that old fool Dumbledore is thinking. If Potter knows about the giant, Dumbledore must know about it, too -- what if it escapes? Potter even knows its name; I wouldn't be surprised if he named it himself. Do these imbeciles even possess any brains to speak of? A giant! Ostensibly the deadliest possible thing to keep in there. If it ever gets out of that forest... I shudder to even think! If it weren't for blind luck, I could have been killed.

Am beginning to think that Potter has been put on this world for the sole purpose of annoying me. I cannot begin to express how infuriated I am after the forest incident. It's a terrible thing to owe someone. What if I arranged for Vincent and Gregory to murder Potter? I could then show up to save him, my debt would be repaid, and I could go back to hating him in peace. Well, that wouldn't work, of course, but it was amusing to think about it. I do so hate him, still, but I cannot simply dispose of him now, though I don't see why I should not continue to make his life unpleasant.

Speaking of unpleasant things, Potter actually had the audacity to kiss me. Harry Potter kissed me. I don't understand it. Ostensibly, he's going to use that kiss to ensure I never defame him, though I think he was bluffing. He's not that devious. Veritaserum, indeed. I think I am unwell, I'd better sleep.

I really hope he doesn't think he's going to get away with this.

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Chapter 11: A Gryffindor and a Slytherin

A Gryffindor and A Slytherin

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Author's Notes: This was my first novel-length Harry/Draco story. It was completed four months before the release of HBP (and before the announcement of Draco's birth date on Rowling's website) and is now AU. This story stands alone, though it's also a companion piece to *Beyond Wild Moor and Fen*, which is from Harry's point of view. Many thanks to Mishty, Vel, Jaxmari, Kristal and Autumn LeCroix for beta-reading. Constructive criticism is always welcome and appreciated.

A Gryffindor and A Slytherin

Chapter 11 - Thicker Than Water

Draco had skipped dinner on Sunday. He hadn't looked at the Gryffindor table during meals on Monday, either. Potter did have the decency to leave him alone during the DA meeting that night. Despite himself, Draco kept watching Potter for signs of -- well, anything, really -- but there was no acknowledgement of what had happened in the forest. Potter seemed to avoid looking at him, in fact.

In the evening after the DA meeting, Draco was sitting in the common room, pretending to work on his Arithmancy project while studying Nott from the corner of his eye. He was talking to Queenie in a low voice, and she kept nodding. Draco wondered what they were talking about. The distraction caused him to make an error in a table he'd been charting and he cursed under his breath.

Half an hour later, Nott left just as Pansy and Millicent walked in from the girls' dormitory hallway. Millicent was cradling a stack of what looked like library books. Draco motioned Pansy over with a significant look in Millicent's direction. Pansy grinned, nodded, and told the other girl to wait. Walking over to the sofa and pushing a stack of parchment aside, she sat down beside him and gave him an expectant look.

"I need you to do something for me," he said in an undertone.

"What's the big secret?" she said, matching his tone.

"No big secret. I need you to start being nicer to Queenie."

Pansy gaped at him. "Oh, this is why you're talking to me now, when she's right there?"

Draco gave her an indulgent smile. Pansy couldn't start raising her loud objections right in front of Queenie; she wouldn't want to put Draco in an awkward position. Her eyes narrowed.

"I don't have time to talk right now, we're meeting Morag and Padma in Greenhouse Three to go over our Herbology unit," she garbled, then caught herself. "You'd better have a very, very good explanation ready when I return."

Still smiling, Draco patted her leg. "I assure you, I have an excellent explanation."

Pansy gave him a half-amused, half-annoyed glance. "We'll see. I'm not agreeing, mind."

"Good girl," he murmured, and watched her go.

Millicent cast a suspicious glance at him over her shoulder as they left the common room. No one else had noticed the exchange. Draco inhaled deeply and picked his project notes back up, dragging his quill across his chin and smiling a little at the light tickle. He would never understand girls. Draco and Queenie had known each other since they were small, and Pansy had immediately considered her a threat, back when she had set her sights on him as future boyfriend material. Even though she now knew very well that he was most certainly not boyfriend material, her animosity towards Queenie had not abated.

Yet Pansy was more than happy to learn that Morag and Draco had been friends of old and were rekindling their old friendship -- why didn't she hate Morag? Both girls were pretty in their own way and both came from old pure-blood wizarding families; Morag was decidedly less friendly, in general, than Queenie. Draco shook his head -- it was useless. He'd repeatedly promised himself he'd not try to delve into the unfathomable depths of the female mind. Now wasn't the time to start.

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On Wednesday morning, the Slytherins sat at their desks in the Defence Against the Dark Arts classroom, some staring at the teacher with their eyes glazed over, others slumped back in their chairs with their chins touching their chests. Many of them stayed up late the previous evening, talking about a recent Muggle killing outside Sheffield. Draco was in a kind of stupor as he listened to Professor Eaton deliver a

lecture on blood magic and its uses in the Dark Arts. It wasn't that Eaton's lessons were uninteresting, not at all. It was just that Draco had studied all this on his own time and now he was interminably bored. Instead of listening to the lecture, he focused on the professor himself.

Rumour had it that the former Ravenclaw had only accepted the teaching post at Hogwarts because he believed there was some Dark magic affecting the position and he had wanted to investigate it himself. Professor Eaton looked just like a teacher should, in Draco's opinion. He wore crisp, always impeccably arranged robes of dark colours and his hair was close-cropped. He had long, sinewy fingers and a habit of tapping the frame of his oval spectacles nervously with them.

Eaton's mannerisms and posture reminded Draco of his Arithmancy tutor, Mr Carver. The chief difference was that Carver must have been approximately Merlin's age before he'd died in the summer. Draco tried to suppress a yawn as the professor made the three chief uses for unicorn blood appear on the blackboard. The door opened suddenly, and Professor Snape walked in, eyes glittering as he took in the classroom and the teacher. The silence that greeted his arrival made his clipped tone sound almost threatening.

"Excuse me, Professor, but may I borrow Mr Malfoy?"

"Certainly, Severus," Eaton said in a neutral tone. Draco could see his hand twitching, as though he wanted to tap his spectacles but didn't dare to in Snape's presence.

"You'd best bring your things, Mr Malfoy," Snape said, turning to him.

Draco's insides froze. What was going on? He shoved his notes and book pell-mell into his schoolbag and rose to his feet, casting a surreptitious glance at Blaise. Blaise's eyes were round with curiosity and there was just a touch of fear in his face. Draco didn't look at anyone else as he hurried to follow Snape, who was already leaving.

They walked down the corridor leading into the Entrance Hall, then descended the stairs to the Slytherin dungeon. Snape walked briskly, not pausing to check if Draco was keeping up -- there was no need. Draco's insides twisted with suspicion, guilt, and bewilderment; he didn't have the slightest idea why he'd been called out of class, but he hoped it didn't have anything to do with the Forbidden Forest.

They reached Snape's office and walked in. Snape sat down behind his desk and motioned him to a chair.

"Sit down, Draco. I'm afraid I have some bad news," he said. Frowning, he placed his elbows on the desk and steepled his fingers.

Draco put his schoolbag down beside the chair carefully and did as he was told. A bile-yellow something flopped over in a jar behind Snape, and Draco's heart gave a startled wobble. He stared at Snape, not knowing what to say.

"What--" he rasped, and coughed to clear his throat. "What's the news, sir?" His stomach gave a tiny, uncomfortable lurch.

"The Headmaster has asked me to inform you that your mother is missing."

Draco's stomach clenched. "Missing?" he repeated, blinking.

Snape nodded. "The Aurors assigned for her... protection went to check on her this morning, and found her gone." The way he'd said protection had sounded almost like an obscenity.

Draco continued blinking. Mother was missing; she must have gone off to meet Father, but what if it wasn't that, what if someone had kidnapped her? What if the Aurors had killed her and were trying to cover it up? He told himself to get a grip. Aurors didn't kill people on the sly; they were perfectly entitled to kill people legally. Besides, his mother was much more resourceful than to let herself be killed in her own home. Surely, she must have gone to be with Father -- they must have been working on a plan using the two-way mirror Father had sent. That had to be it.

He opened his mouth then promptly closed it. He didn't know what to say. What did one say to something like that?

"I know this must come as a shock to you," Snape said in a dull voice.

Draco nodded. "Do you know anything about it, sir?"

Snape gave him an odd look. "I am no wiser than the authorities, Draco."

"This isn't going to be in the *Daily Prophet*, is it? Sir?"

"It might be, if they decide to proclaim her a fugitive," Snape said with a guarded expression.

Draco rubbed his forehead with his fingers. "So this means..."

"The Ministry has decided that Headmaster Dumbledore will be your caretaker until one or both of your parents are found or until you reach legal age."

Draco's head snapped up and he stared at his Head of House with incredulity. "What? They can't do that, I have family--"

Snape held up a hand. "I assure you, Draco, I'm no more pleased about this than you are. However, the Office of Magical Law Enforcement feels that you should not be allowed to leave Hogwarts. They seem to think that you may be in danger of being kidnapped, you see."

Draco rose in his chair slightly, feeling his face grow hot. This never would have happened if Cornelius Fudge had been Minister. He'd have to stay at Hogwarts for Christmas for sure, but he'd be turning seventeen in March. "But who would--"

"Please, Draco. Don't make things any more difficult than they already are. You must understand, should something happen to you while you're with your relatives, your parents are going to be blamed."

Draco sat back down and gave Snape a dejected look. "What could happen? They could kidnap me -- well, good! I'd want them to do that!" he said with fervour. "They'd have a right, they're my parents--"

"Draco."

Draco frowned. "Why does it have to be Dumbledore?" he demanded.

"He's assumed responsibility for you anyway, as soon as you started school in September."

Draco exhaled loudly and looked at Snape sideways. "They're using me as bait, aren't they? Trying to draw Mum and Dad to smuggle me out of school..."

"Don't be a fool, Draco. You give your parents too little credit," Snape said.

Draco sat back in the chair and studied the tops of his shoes. "Do you think she's gone to be with Father, sir?"

Snape's face was bland. He spoke very slowly, as though choosing his words more carefully than usual. "I think your mother knows what she's doing, Draco."

Draco looked up sharply, but the professor wore the same inscrutable look as before. Draco briefly considered breaking the armrests off his chair. He sighed.

"I don't have a choice, do I?"

Snape shook his head slightly. Draco looked back down at his feet, resisting the urge to stomp one of them hard on the ground. "And this information is--"

"Strictly confidential," Snape finished for him.

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Draco didn't attend the Ravenclaw versus Hufflepuff Quidditch game on Saturday. He was still smarting over the double Snitch incident and didn't want to be reminded of it. He also had no desire to watch Blaise cheer for Hufflepuff. Vincent and Gregory went to the match -- Millicent was adamant about watching every single Quidditch game. The two of them stumbled off after her, wearing identical dejected looks and casting guilty glances at Draco. He waved them off, sighing. Millicent would take note of whatever new strategies the other teams would have -- there was nothing quite like delegating lesser tasks to his inferiors.

Tracey Davis had made Pansy promise to come to the match with her weeks ago; her England-sized crush on Blaise was getting ever stronger. Pansy, Draco, and even Blaise had tried various ways of discouraging it but there was no reasoning with Tracey when she was on the hunt. Draco had even suggested that Blaise cave in, but the other boy was horrified. Unlike Draco, who didn't particularly mind being with women, Blaise detested physical closeness of any kind if it involved a girl. Even Pansy never hugged him, knowing that he'd cringe.

Draco stared around the empty common room, reaching for the bowl of Bertie Bott's Every Flavour Beans absentmindedly. His first Bean was cactus-flavoured and Draco spat it out. Deciding this wasn't a good omen for staying in the common room, he fetched his cloak and set out for a walk. He felt deeply discontented with everything in general, so much so that he was having trouble even defining how he was feeling. His parents were missing, his official caretaker was Headmaster bloody Dumbledore, he had to keep a low profile lest his house suffer the consequences, he owed Potter his life...

Potter. It all came down to Harry sodding Potter and his constant meddling in things that weren't his business. It was Potter's fault that Father had been put into Azkaban, and so the fact that Narcissa Malfoy had gone missing could also be blamed on Potter. It really came down to that -- Harry Potter was a meddlesome, interfering prat who didn't understand what was good for him. Draco looked up and realised he'd turned the wrong way and had walked all the way to Snape's office instead of walking out

into the Entrance Hall. He kicked a nearby wall gloomily as he turned on his heel to head the other way.

Just then, Snape's office door creaked open and Potter walked out. Draco froze and waited until the door closed. It didn't look like Potter had noticed him. He was walking away, obviously headed towards the Entrance Hall. What was Potter doing with Snape on a Saturday morning, during a Quidditch game, no less?

"I see you've already doing badly enough to need remedial Potions," he called, surprising even himself.

Potter stopped and turned around. His thin frame looked just on the verge of shaking.

"What's it to you, Malfoy?" he snapped, left hand clenching into a fist, the right reaching for his wand.

Draco whipped out his own wand and glared coldly, continuing to walk towards him with a deliberate swagger. "Just curious."

"Curiosity killed the Kneazle." Potter rolled his shoulders and assumed a battle stance, legs slightly apart and tensing.

"Did Blaise teach you to say that, Potter? There's no way you would have learned that from those Muggles who raised you."

Potter laughed, tilting his head back slightly. "Jealous, Malfoy? Are you jealous that your friend would rather spend time with me than you?"

Draco sniggered, looking at the Gryffindor with incredulity. "You really think he does, don't you? You're daft."

"Funny. Why don't you come flying with us on Sundays then?" Potter said with a smirk that was nothing if not triumphant.

Draco sniggered once again, stopping a foot away from Potter. "I choose not to," he said with an impassive glare.

Potter's smirk faded and his shoulders sagged a little. "You know?"

"Of course I know." Potter didn't need to know how Draco knew, after all.

"Oh."

They stared at each other, wands clutched in their hands. Potter's mouth was set in a thin line. Draco was bound not to attack first -- he owed Potter his life. His life. Cold fury flared up in his chest at the thought and he narrowed his eyes. He wanted to hurt Potter, hurt him so badly that he'd never so much as look at Draco cross-eyed again. He wanted to--

"Malfoy?"

Draco realised he'd been staring at Potter's mouth. He licked his lips and looked him in the eyes. Potter's eyes were impossibly wide behind his ugly spectacles, and his breathing had become erratic. Draco licked his lips again, only deliberately more slowly this time, watching with fascination as Potter's gaze snapped to his mouth.

Oh, but this was fun. He didn't even have to do anything, just watch Potter struggle -- he could practically feel the conflict Potter was facing. The great and noble Gryffindor, reduced to staring at Draco helplessly because he couldn't possibly act on any sexual urges towards his enemy.

Draco cocked his head to one side. "You want to do it again, don't you?"

"Whuh?" Potter was looking into his eyes again. His gaze was unfocused and his lips had parted slightly. Draco's chest suddenly went tight. He took a step closer to Potter, who was still looking at him as though hypnotised.

"Admit it, Potter," he said, smirking.

Potter's eyes widened even more and Draco couldn't help but stare. Potter really did have beautiful eyes. Draco forced himself to look away, wincing. What was he doing? He wasn't supposed to be staring at Potter's eyes. This wasn't about Potter. It was about revenge. Draco once again had Potter exactly how he wanted him -- vulnerable.

He stepped even closer and pressed a palm flat against Potter's chest. Potter jumped a little -- his heart was hammering worse than Draco's was.

"You know you do," Draco whispered, leaning forward, his lips almost touching Potter's ear.

It had seemed like a good idea at the time, anyway.

Then he was being slammed against the wall, the shock of its chill offset by Potter's hands clutching his robes, his mouth on Draco's. The kiss was raw, angry, and wet; it sent an unexpected shock of warmth through him. Draco's fingers dug into the rough wall behind him as he struggled to keep control of himself despite the vexing pressure in his pants. He reached up to grab Potter's robes and shoved him away, breaking the kiss. Potter's hands were still fisted in the front of Draco's robes, his glasses were askew and he looked thoroughly bewildered. Both of them were breathing hard as they stared at each other--

"What's going on here?" came a familiar cold voice from behind Potter.

The Gryffindor quickly let go of Draco and took a step back.

Draco assumed a look of total innocence. "I was just walking to catch the tail end of the game, Professor, when Potter attacked me," he said.

"Fighting, Mr. Potter? Again? I think we'll make it twenty points from Gryffindor and detention on Monday."

Potter gave Draco a murderous stare and bowed his head, muttering.

"I'm sorry, I didn't catch that, Mr. Potter," Snape said with a malicious smile.

"Yes, Professor Snape, sir," Potter said, glaring at the Potions master.

Draco smirked. "May I go, Professor?"

"Yes, you may, Draco. Not so fast, Mr. Potter, I need to have a word with you in private."

Draco didn't look back as he walked away. It was going to be a very good day, after all.

::

Ravenclaw won the game on Saturday -- Cho Chang had caught the Snitch and Ravenclaw was officially in the lead for the Quidditch Cup. Draco was in a foul mood for most of the week, snapping at first-years and handing out punishments like they were broomstick advertisements. He and Pansy had another one of their screaming rows in the courtyard; she just didn't understand about Queenie. This time it was Draco who gave her the silent treatment for a day before she finally relented and agreed to do as she was told.

Potter had carefully avoided going anywhere near him during the DA meeting on Monday -- it had been a fringe benefit Draco hadn't expected. He'd thought Potter would have been raring to take his frustrations out on Draco by using him for hex practice. Instead, Potter had studiously ignored Draco then had gone off to detention with Snape, stalking past the Slytherins as they'd made their way to their common room. Draco had stood in the dungeon hallway and watched Potter's receding back. There had been dark circles under Potter's eyes and he'd looked even more emaciated than usual.

Wednesday morning before breakfast, Draco and Blaise were discussing their study group projects as they walked to breakfast. Vincent, Gregory, and Millicent were walking further ahead, arguing quietly about something. As they entered the Great Hall, Draco knew immediately that something was wrong. A horrible sucking feeling materialised in his stomach as he saw people huddled in groups, glancing over at them

and whispering. Was it the *Prophet* they were huddling over? Was it something about his parents?

Draco looked at the Slytherin table and saw the same huddled groups there, too. He elbowed several third-years out of the way and glanced at the table in front of them.

It was a wizarding photograph of two boys -- a badly taken close-up of a dark-haired boy and a blond one, kissing passionately; the surroundings were too blurred to tell where it had been taken. Draco's heart stopped for a second as he picked it up from the table, heedless of the third-years muttering around him. It wasn't a picture of him and Potter. Relieved, Draco released the breath he'd been holding, but then his stomach clenched. The people in the photo were Blaise and Zacharias Smith. Scrawled across the bottom of the photograph in angry red ink were the words "Dirty homos."

Draco lowered the photograph as he looked over at Blaise, who had gone very pale and he was looking somewhere in front of him. Draco could tell he wasn't seeing anything. He glanced over at the Hufflepuff table, where Smith sat surrounded by his classmates -- some of them had their hands on his back. His head was bowed, his face buried in his hands. A hush fell on the Great Hall and heads were turning to stare curiously at the Slytherin table.

Draco cast a glance at Liam, who simply nodded. The situation concerned a student in Draco's year and thus Draco was in charge.

"You will pass these... things to me," he sneered at the nearest third-year. "All of them. If I see a single Slytherin with copies of these, they will be very sorry."

"Why, Draco?" a fifth-year boy, Roth, spoke in a carrying voice. "What do you care if we laugh at the queers? 'S no more than they deserve."

Draco whirled around on him. "You. Detention. Every day. Until Christmas. With Filch. Any questions?"

With every barked syllable, Roth's head seemed to duck further between his shoulder blades. There were several gasps from the Ravenclaw table -- Draco supposed he had been too loud, but at this point, he didn't care. Ignoring the whispers that broke out, he looked at Blaise again, noticing that his eyes had darkened and narrowed. He put a hand on his friend's shoulder. "Go sit down, Blaise," he said quietly. The other boy just nodded and walked slowly to his usual seat. He slumped down on the bench and buried his face in his hands, much like Smith was doing at the Hufflepuff table.

In the meantime, the photographs had all been passed down to where he was standing, and Draco picked up the stack. He drew himself up to full height and cast a glance over the rest of his house.

"Anyone gossiping or giving Blaise any trouble will be dealing with me personally," he said, glancing to his left, where Nott, Queenie, and several fifth-years sat listening. Queenie looked very pale. Draco nodded at her.

"House meeting," -- he looked at Liam again and raised an eyebrow, earning a nod -- "tonight after DA, in the common room."

He looked around the table again. Liam gave him the thumbs-up, but most people were avoiding his gaze.

"Any questions?" he said again. No one had any.

Breakfast was eerily silent. Pansy was trying to coax Blaise into eating, but he refused. He kept staring in front of himself, clenching and unclenching his fists. Draco put a hand on his shoulder and Blaise flinched, looking away.

"Blaise," Draco said softly. "Look at me."

The other boy tilted his head slightly sideways and glanced at him, eyes dark and glittering dangerously.

Draco met his gaze steadily. "I won't let anyone..." His voice broke off as he searched for words. "No one will touch you. I promise."

Blaise nodded. His face was ashen, worry lurking around his eyes and mouth. Draco squeezed his shoulder. He didn't much feel like eating, either.

During breakfast, Liam spoke with the teachers, then told Draco that they were leaving it up to the students to sort out the situation. They'd been warned that should they find the perpetrators, no action was to be taken: they would be disciplined by the staff. Draco just nodded.

Feet scuffled against the floor, schoolbags were hoisted on shoulders as another day of classes began. The sixth-year Slytherins had double Defence Against the Dark Arts next. Draco sat with Blaise, who wanted to wait for everyone to leave before he set off. Finally, the Great Hall had almost emptied and the two of them set off towards the first-floor classroom.

"Blaise!" called a voice from behind them. Blaise stiffened. Draco turned around. It was Potter, hitching up his schoolbag as he hurried towards them. He carefully sidestepped Draco and walked over to Blaise.

"What do you want, Harry?" Blaise asked in a neutral tone.

Potter recoiled slightly, but the determined look in his eyes didn't waver. "I want to help you find out who did this."

"Do not meddle in the affairs of Slytherins, Potter," Draco sneered. "We don't need your help."

"Sorry, mate," said Blaise, "but Draco's right. This is for us to deal with."

Potter licked his lips and glanced from Draco to Blaise. "Colin Creevey knows a lot about cameras. He said he could trace the pictures to a source."

In the meantime, Granger and Weasley had caught up with Potter.

"Hi, Blaise," said Granger. Weasley echoed the greeting, glaring suspiciously at Draco.

"Hermione, Ron," Blaise said with a curt nod. He turned to Draco. "Well?"

"Why are you telling us this, Potter?" Draco asked.

Potter made a noise like grinding his teeth. Draco thought he knew what the matter was -- Potter wanted to talk to his nice new friend Blaise, and the evil git Malfoy wasn't letting him. Too bad Potter had forgotten that Blaise was a Slytherin, and that's where he had made his real friends. The Gryffindor took a deep breath and he turned to Draco, who met his gaze steadily.

"He'd need Blaise to be present for some parts of the... er... "

"It's part revealing spells and part Muggle technology," Granger piped up. Draco scowled at her. So did Potter.

"Only he can't do the Muggle part until after Christmas, he doesn't have all the equipment with him," Granger continued in a bossy tone.

Draco rolled his eyes. He didn't have time for Granger's antics, and Potter's presence was making him feel queasy. "Fine. Do your best. But leave it to me to deal with them."

Potter, Granger, and Weasley all goggled at him.

Draco narrowed his eyes. "You heard me. I'm going to deal with the bastards myself."

He put an arm around Blaise's shoulders and steered him from the Great Hall.

::

Draco sat in the common room in the evening, waiting for the meeting to start. Blaise was slouching on the sofa, leafing through *Transfiguration Today*. He seemed completely calm, but Draco could see the tightness just behind his bland expression, the vein pulsing near his left temple, the rigidity of his movements. Blaise was in

serious trouble and he knew it -- Slytherin house was only a part of his problems at the moment.

The wizarding world as a whole was fairly tolerant of homosexuality; it wasn't considered a big deal in most circles -- most wizards simply preferred not to know about such things. Not so with pure-blood families. Old wizarding clans which valued blood valued the ability to breed -- unwillingness to produce offspring was considered despicable. After all, the wizarding bloodlines had to continue; it was the crux of the rift between pure-bloods, Muggle-borns, and, to a lesser extent, half-bloods.

A homosexual pure-blood wizard or witch was considered worse than a blood traitor. Gays were forcibly married, disowned, cast out of communities, and otherwise repressed among the pure-blood lines. The necessity of bearing more pure-blood children grew increasingly important with each generation. Tolerance of homosexuality was at an all-time low among pure-bloods. Draco's own charade with Pansy was simply delaying the inevitable. He wasn't repulsed by women like Blaise was, but he just wasn't interested in them sexually.

He'd always figured that he'd be able to produce a Malfoy heir one way or another, however, he was far from keen on having his family find out that he was queer. His father would probably disown him and his mother wouldn't survive the shame. As an only child, Draco felt particularly pressured -- Blaise had two older brothers who were both married, but he wouldn't have an easy time of it when his parents found out about Smith. They would find out, too -- there was no way to keep the gossip from spreading.

He didn't particularly like to be reminded of all this, either. Draco looked over at Blaise again, who had a pained expression on his face as he stared at his magazine. His eyes weren't moving. Draco cast a glance around the common room, doing a

quick round-up. It looked like everyone was there. He raised an eyebrow at Liam, who nodded. Draco cleared his throat, and the chatter died down almost instantly.

"I'm not going to lecture you on what you should think," he began. "I just think we could all do with a refresher on just what being in this house is about, because I think some of us may have forgotten." That got people's attention.

"It's none of anyone's business what you think in private," Draco said slowly, narrowing his eyes at Roth, who looked away.

"You can think that the Dark Lord's servants are called Breast Eaters for all I care." There was some tittering at this, and Liam gave him a mildly disapproving glance, motioning towards the younger students. Draco ignored him and went on.

"You will not, however, sully Slytherin honour. We stick together and we always protect our own, no matter what." He looked around the room, satisfied.

"This is not about blood ties. This is about your Slytherin family. Not all of us are pure-bloods."

He motioned to Millicent. "Do you ever see me treating her differently because she's a half-blood? No. She's one of us, and even if that stupid Hat put a Mudblood into the house, they would still be considered one of us."

Draco rolled his shoulders slightly. "If any of you buy into Dumbledore's "house unity" blather, know this. Slytherin invented unity. We personify it. Unity starts with our house and it ends with our house."

He paused again and cleared his throat. "Slytherin house is about tradition and a united front even when the rest of the world is against us is what we are best at. If you dare break that tradition, you do not deserve to be in this house."

He glanced over at Blaise, who was looking at him with deep, intense emotion behind his dark eyes. Draco inhaled. "Now, then. The pictures in the Great Hall this morning were an attack against one of our own. When one of us is attacked, we strike back as one."

He looked around the room again. "We're going to find out who did this. The other houses have pledged to help, but you know it has to be us who finds out. The other person involved," -- he sneered -- "is a Hufflepuff, and we know they're useless. They're probably already busy planning a party to celebrate the capture of the culprit."

Several people laughed. Draco smirked.

"So where do we start?" Liam spoke up, and everyone turned to look at him.

Draco pursed his lips. "What I'm thinking is, whoever's left those pictures is the same person behind the second Snitch at our match against Gryffindor."

"How do you know?" Queenie asked sharply.

"I don't know for sure, but what are the chances?" Draco reasoned.

A third-year girl put up her hand and Draco nodded at her. "Well, it must be someone from Ravenclaw, then, mustn't it? Ravenclaw hasn't suffered, and they're certainly clever..."

"Possibly, but there's no way to tell," Sheridan Roper spoke up from his chair in the corner. "I think both stunts have Gryffindor written all over them. All audacity, all the time."

"I disagree," said the fifth-year prefect, Brice Owen. "I think it was a Hufflepuff. Hold on, hear me out. It probably took them all of five years to come up with the plan, granted, but in neither case was Hufflepuff hurt. I just saw Smith in the library with his sixth-year buddies, he's hardly an outcast."

Draco glanced over at Blaise, who averted his eyes.

"Well, what about Slytherin?" said Quinn Franco, a burly fifth-year. His remark set off a chain reaction of whispers. When these died down, he continued. "I mean, think about it. The two Snitches were a month ago, and we're still no closer to figuring out who did that. That takes cunning and stealth."

"But it makes no sense!" Pansy objected. "Slytherins don't betray their housemates."

Liam spoke up. "Will you lot stop gibbering for a second? We need to think this through rationally."

"Hold on," Draco said, bending down and reaching into his schoolbag. He pulled out several of the pictures from the stack he'd collected at breakfast and smoothed one out on his knees. "*Ostende scriptorem*," he muttered, zigzagging his wand above the paper.

Everyone watched expectantly as a cloud of smoke rose from the photograph, revealing a vague, wispy shape that was neither here nor there. Draco put his wand away, sighing. He hadn't had time to practise the charm since the Hogsmeade weekend, and they'd finished that unit in Charms.

Laurel Iven walked over to him and took one of the pictures. "*Ostende scriptorem*!" she cried. Another puff of smoke revealed a clear, sharp image of someone wearing a balaclava. Several people gasped. Draco narrowed his eyes.

"What spell is that?" a third-year wanted to know.

"You'll learn it later," Laurel said, smiling. "It draws upon the traces of magic left by a wizard or witch on a piece of parchment they wrote on. It displays an image of the writer as they looked when they were writing."

"And this particular writer must be in sixth year or older, then," Draco mused, half to himself. When he realised everyone was listening, he clarified. "The Scriptor charm is taught in sixth year. They had to have known it, otherwise they wouldn't have concealed their face, would they?"

"Well, that narrows the circle already, doesn't it?" Sheridan Roper said importantly, pushing his glasses up on his nose.

Speculation ran rampant for the next hour as people suggested sensible things like a team of people from the three other houses working together. Some insisted on wild-eyed theories of Dumbledore and the Dark Lord being behind the whole mess. The reason that had necessitated the meeting was forgotten as Slytherins discussed possible perpetrators.

After the meeting broke up, Liam walked over to Draco and clapped him on the shoulder. "I'm proud of you. You'll make a great Head Boy, Draco."

Draco nodded in acknowledgement. They made small talk for a few minutes, then Liam walked off to sit with Laurel and the other seventh-years. The prefects put the first-years to bed and by half past ten, the common room was empty except for Blaise, Draco, Tracey, and Pansy.

They sat in silence for a while. Tracey spoke up first. "Blaise, you should have told me. I wouldn't have... you know."

Blaise raised an eyebrow. "Not something that's just brought up over dinner, is it?"

Tracey coloured. "Sorry," she mumbled and ran off towards the girls' dormitories. Pansy rolled her eyes exasperatedly and hurried after her.

Left alone, Draco and Blaise fell silent. There was no need to say anything -- Draco had been speaking to Blaise just as much as he was speaking to the rest of them during the meeting. He knew Blaise well enough to know that he appreciated what Draco had done for him. Although since their fall-out over Smith they'd been slightly colder with one another, now both knew that things would go back to the way they used to be.

Finally, Draco rose. "Well, better get to bed, it's only Wednesday, after all," he said stiffly. Blaise gave him an unreadable look. Draco walked over to him and extended a hand. "C'mon."

Blaise accepted his hand and got up. They walked into the boys' hallway and Draco pulled the curtain tightly shut behind him. Their dormitory was dark and relatively quiet, if one didn't count the snores that punctuated the silence, alternately emanating from Vincent and Gregory's beds. Draco changed into his pyjamas and hung up his robes. When he turned around from the wardrobe, he jumped a little. Blaise was

standing behind him, wearing his pyjama trousers but no top. He pulled Draco close and kissed him fiercely.

Draco had forgotten how comfortable he and Blaise used to be, how well they knew each other's bodies. Slick heat pooled in his lower abdomen and then he was kissing Blaise, running his hands down the other boy's bare back. He moaned softly as Blaise grabbed his arse and thrust his hips forward. Moments later, they were on Draco's bed, curtains pulled shut around them, pulling off their pyjamas and kissing, holding on to each other with a fervour reminiscent of chance wartime encounters.

Blaise needed this, and it was the best Draco could give him. He threw his head back with a barely suppressed moan as Blaise licked a hot trail from breastbone to earlobe. It was the best Blaise could give Draco, too. Draco teased Blaise's left nipple with his tongue. It was too bad that they didn't see eye to eye on the exclusivity angle. As Blaise took him into his mouth, Draco bit down on his forearm to keep from crying out. It was really too bad that whenever Draco closed his eyes, he kept seeing green with flecks of gold and the leaf-green pattern of a many-pronged star. Draco writhed as Blaise thrust into him, not sure whether he was in pain or in heaven. It was really too damn bad that there was something so bloody touching about dark under-eye circles, messy black hair, and a fierce heart.

Draco Malfoy's diary, December 4th

I have gone certifiably barking. I hope that tomorrow I'm going to wake up and it will all have been a bad dream. I am not thinking about Harry sodding Potter in that way. No. This has got to be a terrible dream. I'm going to go and cry now.

Chapter 12: A Gryffindor and a Slytherin

A Gryffindor and A Slytherin

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Author's Notes: This was my first novel-length Harry/Draco story. It was completed four months before the release of HBP (and before the announcement of Draco's birth date on Rowling's website) and is now AU. This story stands alone, though it's also a companion piece to *Beyond Wild Moor and Fen*, which is from Harry's point of view. Many thanks to Mishty, Vel, Jaxmari, Kristal and Autumn LeCroix for beta-reading. Constructive criticism is always welcome and appreciated.

A Gryffindor and A Slytherin Chapter 12 - Holiday Answers

The following Monday, Draco signed up to stay at Hogwarts over the Christmas holidays. Vincent and Gregory did likewise, of course; as did Blaise. He wasn't wanted at home. Pansy had wanted to stay, too, but she hadn't wanted to disappoint her mother. Mrs. Parkinson had made plans for the two of them to spend the holiday in the Caribbean. The weeks passed by quickly; the approaching holidays seemed to spur their teachers to pile as much work on the sixth-years as humanly possible. Draco

couldn't wait until the break began so he could have more time to look into the incidents with the second Snitch and those damnable photos.

The last prefects' meeting of the term was held on the day before most students would leave school for the holidays. The Hufflepuff parties had been such a resounding success that the prefects decided to continue holding them in the second term as well. Draco had abstained from voting on the issue. He seethed when the Quidditch matches were rearranged so that Ravenclaw would play twice in a row at the beginning of next term, to allow Hufflepuff time to organise the parties in advance.

The next day, Hogwarts emptied. The only people left behind were Draco, his friends, a timid third-year Ravenclaw boy, a first-year Hufflepuff girl, and two Gryffindor seventh-year boys. Even Potter and his cronies had left, Draco couldn't imagine where they'd gone, but he was glad they were. It was probably the first year in a long time that there were more Slytherins around at Christmas than students from any other house. The wizarding world was in a state of unease; unexplained Muggle disappearances were mounting, and there were rumours of the Dark Mark being used as a portent of trouble rather than an after-the-fact signature left behind by Death Eaters.

On Christmas Eve, Draco and Blaise were playing wizards' chess in the Slytherin common room. Vincent and Gregory had gone up to the Owlery to send off the Potions booklets they'd made for the first-year Slytherins at Professor Snape's behest. There was homework to be done for the next term, but no one was bothering. The school had been decorated weeks earlier; Draco had arranged for a medium-sized Christmas tree to be put into the common room. The scent of pine needles mingled with the aroma of spice and fruit that permeated the whole castle, and even Draco couldn't help but look forward to the holiday.

Blaise was frowning at the chessboard. Draco had taken his queen on the previous move, and the situation was desperate for the white pieces. Draco linked his fingers behind his head and leant back in the carved armchair, smirking. Blaise scowled up at him.

"Just surrender," Draco said. "You know you want to."

Blaise gave him a dark look. "How do you manage to infuse everything you say with innuendo?"

Draco sniggered. "Maybe it's you who manages to hear innuendo every time I open my mouth."

"There you go again," Blaise said, grinning now.

Draco rolled his eyes. As pleasant as it was to have his best friend back, their one-night stand still loomed like a shadow in the back of his mind. The only reason Draco had allowed it to happen was that he'd hoped his... morbid fascination with Potter had been due to sexual frustration rather than anything else. Unfortunately, he discovered differently. The morning after and in the following weeks, his mind would wander to that afternoon in the Forbidden Forest, then to the morning of the Ravenclaw versus Hufflepuff game. What was most unsettling wasn't the wandering; it was the dwelling.

He looked at Blaise, who had gone back to perusing the chessboard with the air of a martyr. Something tugged at Draco's memory, something he'd been meaning to ask

Blaise. In the weeks that passed since those photographs had turned up in the Great Hall, Blaise had developed a habit of looking everywhere but at people.

The Great Hall. That was it.

"Say, Blaise?"

"Hmm?" Blaise looked up from the chessboard.

"Since when are you on a first-name basis with Potter's minions?"

"Minions? Oh, them. Well, I'm in the same study group as Harry and they come around sometimes to study with us."

"I see. Who's the other Slytherin in your group?"

"Nott, why?"

Draco pursed his lips, ignoring Blaise's question. He would start joining Blaise for his study groups. That'd let him get closer to Nott, and it ought to keep Granger and

Weasel far away. The sixth-year Slytherins had grown closer since the emergency House meeting two weeks ago. Pansy was being civil to Queenie, and Draco had recruited Sheridan Roper to help with his Defence Against the Dark Arts project. Nott remained the only sixth-year with no allegiances to the group, and that had to change.

Blaise finally made his move, and Draco promptly checked him. Three turns later, Draco won. There was much to be said for distracting one's opponent during a game.

::

Christmas morning brought a pleasant surprise. Draco, Blaise, Vincent, and Gregory came out to the common room to open presents and saw four identical stockings pinned to the mantelpiece. As Draco shook out chocolate Galleons and several satsuma oranges from a stocking with his name embroidered in silver on the rim, a small note fluttered to the floor. Draco picked it up.

Happy Christmas! I hope you lot will at least try to have fun. Enjoy your presents, and make sure the common room's still there when I come back.

Pansy

P.S. The house elves had better put these up.

Draco peeled the skin off a satsuma and broke off a section, grinning at Blaise, who was taking the golden wrapper off a chocolate Galleon. Vincent and Gregory were tearing apart their presents from home. Draco glanced at his pile of presents with some trepidation, but he was surprised to see that it was no smaller than usual. His chest tightened and he wondered if his parents had been able to send anything, and whether it had been dangerous for them to do so. He'd convinced himself that his mother had gone to join his father -- there really couldn't have been any other explanation.

Gregory had given him a set of peacock-feather quills tinted black so that the pattern on the feathers could still be seen but didn't seem garish. Vincent had got him a huge box filled with different kinds of Honeydukes sweets: slabs of chocolate, flavoured ice squares. Blaise's gift was unusually thoughtful: it was an illustrated book on owl psychology. In the past weeks, Draco had complained about Pandora several times; she was offended by the fact that he didn't visit her as often and he didn't know how to get back in her good graces. Pansy's present was, as usual, odd. It was an intricately carved ebony box that contained four identical dark green potion bottles, with grapevines etched into the thick glass.

His parents had sent him presents. No one other than his mother would have sent him *Numbers and Ideograms* -- it was a ridiculously rare Arithmancy tome. He'd mentioned it casually in the last letter he'd written home, before his mother had disappeared. Then there were the usual clothes, books, and sweets from various extended family members; Draco opened these and put them aside.

The very last present he opened was small box wrapped with a black silk ribbon. As he removed the top, he saw a small silver key resting atop a piece of thin parchment. Draco picked them both up and unfolded the note.

Draco,

Under the present circumstances, I thought it best to give you your birthday present early. When you were born, I had a vault created in your name at Gringotts. Every month since then, I have deposited various sums of money in it, to give you as a gift when you became an adult wizard. The key you're holding opens that vault. Happy Christmas.

Keep safe. Mum says she hopes you enjoy the book. I wish I could say we'll be in touch, but I can't. You're a grown boy now, I'm sure you'll understand.

Make sure you destroy this after reading it.

L.M.

Draco reread the note three times, still clutching the tiny key. So they were both fine, and they were together somewhere. His mother was all right. Until that moment, Draco had had reservations about Christmas -- he had only spent the holiday without his family twice before and neither had been a happy occasion. He was very much a creature of habit and he'd always preferred the routines of Christmas at Malfoy Manor to the Hogwarts way of celebrating. However, just knowing that his parents were fine buoyed him and he was now almost prepared to be pleasant at the noonday feast.

The feast was fantastic, even by Draco's standards. The Hogwarts house-elves prepared turkey instead of the goose he was accustomed to at home, but it was delicious. The chestnut stuffing was better than anything he'd ever tried before;

Professor Sprout told them that it had been made with Chinese chestnuts -- she'd been growing them in greenhouse one and didn't want them to go to waste.

Dumbledore was sounding even more inane than usual by the end of the feast; Draco suspected it was all the brandy in the Christmas pudding. The Headmaster made them all pull wizarding crackers with him, chuckling as Draco's cracker produced a toy serpent with bright blue eyes. Dumbledore named the serpent Vincenzo, insisting it appeared very Italian. Blaise looked offended. Despite himself, Draco was amused, and Vincenzo took up permanent residence on his bedside table, on top of the ebony box he'd got from Pansy. As he pulled the hangings shut around his bed that night, he could have sworn the toy snake had winked at him.

On Boxing Day, Draco went to check on a Xenodragon plant. Pansy and her study group were doing an extra-credit Herbology project that involved research and care of the plant in captivity. Draco had promised her he'd stop by to check on it a few times a week. He pulled his cloak's hood over his head and strolled towards the greenhouses. This year, Christmas hadn't brought any snow with it and Hogwarts grounds were a rather depressing sight. The lawns were a drab brown, which together with the dark grey of the stone walkways, and the castle, made everything look unkempt and almost macabre.

Gnashing his teeth, he knocked on the door to the half-giant's hut and hoped the great oaf would be in. Pansy had better make this worth his while. She'd promised she would, but girls were so untrustworthy. The door opened and the beastly dog bounded out. Draco stepped aside quickly to prevent the animal from smashing into him. Hagrid's great hairy face appeared from behind the door.

"Mornin'. Can I help yeh with summat?" he said in a gruff voice, looking suspicious.

Draco wasn't sure how extensive half-giants' memory capacities were, and he hoped Hagrid wouldn't still remember the Hippogriff incident. He assumed the most deferential expression and polite tone he could muster.

"I was wondering if I could have a key to greenhouse three, please."

"What do yeh need it fer?"

"I need to check on a project for a classmate. You know, one of the Ravenclaw study groups, for house unity?"

The gamekeeper's enormous eyebrows knotted for a moment. "I'll unlock it fer yeh. Jus' lemme get me coat."

They walked across the grounds to greenhouse three. Hagrid unlocked the doors and waved him in, saying that he'd wait until he was done. Draco walked in quickly, relaxing as he went -- it was pleasantly warm in the greenhouse and he no longer needed to tug his cloak around himself. He looked around for the Xenodragon and spotted it in the far right corner.

It was a large, deep purple-coloured vine-like plant with finger-like tentacles covered in fine silver hairs. These hairs were one of the main ingredients in the Fearlessness Formula they'd learned to brew in Potions last term. Xenodragons were unique because unlike most other wizarding plants, they were allergic to dragon dung. Considering the amounts of the fertiliser that were used in Herbology lessons, Draco

thought it was a wonder the girls had managed to keep the plant alive as long as they had.

He stepped closer and bent down to inspect a tentacle. The Xenodragon reared up, sticking its thick vines straight out; one of them almost hit Draco on the nose and he recoiled. He'd forgotten how aggressively defensive these plants were. He knew it wouldn't actually attack him, but the sudden movement caused his heart to patter wildly against his ribs. He exhaled and backed away a little more, which seemed to mollify the plant; its tentacles retracted slightly. Draco took a critical look at the thicket of vines and noticed a small spider making its way down from one of the appendages. He took out his wand and pointed it at the insect.

"Evanesco," he muttered.

The spider disappeared, along with the silvery thread from which it had hung. Draco made sure there were no other insects anywhere near the plant and left the greenhouse. Hagrid was standing with his back to the doors, his enormous form obscuring the grounds beyond. Draco coughed and he turned around.

"Thank you," Draco said, keeping his tone carefully neutral. He hadn't liked the fact that the great oaf hadn't just let him have the key, but he'd need to get into the greenhouse again later.

"Don' mention it," the groundskeeper replied, locked the door, and took off towards his hut.

Draco hurried back to the castle, shivering. He cut across the lawn and went for the courtyard -- it was closer than having to go around the castle to the main entrance. As he passed through the enclosure, frowning into the wind, he glanced at the statue of Circe on the corner. A small beetle sat just left of the mud-splattered plaque. Draco stopped dead. This was definitely not beetle season, and the markings around the beetle's eyes looked very familiar, even though it had been nearly two years since he'd last seen this particular insect.

Something clicked in his mind and he reached out to grab the beetle. It struggled against his hand, its many feet tickling his palm unpleasantly. Draco shuddered in disgust, but shoved his hand in his pocket and hurried inside. He didn't stop until he reached the Slytherin common room. He took his hand out of his pocket and threw the writhing beetle to the floor, his eyes narrowing as it immediately began to transform into Rita Skeeter. Blaise gave a cry of surprise from the sofa, where he'd been scribbling something on a piece of parchment.

The last things to disappear were Skeeter's antennae; they retracted rapidly into her temples and she surveyed the common room with a critical stare.

"Not much has changed, I see," she remarked with a smirk. "Good old Slytherin. Do you still have the Sunday house meetings?"

"You were in Slytherin?" Draco couldn't help asking.

She turned to him with a scowl. "Of course I was, you silly boy. Three years ahead of your father, hasn't he told you?"

Draco shook his head, thrown by her mention of his father.

"You haven't heard from your father, have you, Draco?" Skeeter asked in a singsong voice, reaching for her handbag.

"No comment," he replied, composing himself. She hadn't mentioned his mother. It had to mean she didn't know.

"Like father like son, I see." Skeeter turned to Blaise. "So you're one of the loverboys, then?"

"The name's Zabini," he replied with a scowl.

Draco could see his jaw working and realised that Blaise had made the same deduction he had.

"Have you lot found out who did it yet? Or is this most unceremonious way of bringing me here your way of asking for help?"

"Wait a minute, you don't know who took them?"

Skeeter gave him a perfectly blank look. "No. Should I?" Her eyes suddenly lit up with false mirth. "Oh, you thought I did it? Do you really think I'd still be in this room if I had?"

Blaise sat up, his back ramrod-straight. "You can't Apparate out of the school," he said in a low voice.

"I can run, dear. It goes with the territory." She made a vague gesture with her hand, blood-red nails flashing.

"What do you want here?" Draco asked.

She smiled broadly at him. "Well, your teachers have been most ineffective in discovering who's behind that unfortunate second Snitch incident of two months ago. The 'dirty pictures at Hogwarts' angle is icing on the cake. I'm just doing my job."

"You think you can find out who did it?"

"I can find out anything I like," she said with a wide smile, "as you well know."

"You're not allowed on school grounds, though," Draco pointed out.

"Uncooperative officials are an unfortunate drawback of my profession. Tell me, Draco, whatever are you doing in school? Shouldn't you be with your mother?"

"I stayed to keep Blaise company. Mother understands," Draco answered at once.

In a way, the photographs had been a boon, because Blaise's current situation could be used to explain why the Malfoy heir was spending Christmas at Hogwarts.

Rita looked impressed. "I'm going to mention this in my article."

"By all means, do," Draco said with a knowing smirk. Rita's part of their deal in fourth year had been to make sure Slytherins were portrayed in the best light possible in the articles about Hogwarts.

"Back to business as usual then?" she asked, looking smug.

"Only we'll need to find a different place to meet," Draco said.

"I rather like the statue of Circe, don't you?"

Draco nodded and turned to Blaise, who was looking sceptically at Rita.

"So you're hanging around Hogwarts in your Animagus form? All the time?" he asked.

She scoffed. "Not all the time, that would be ridiculous. I only came today because I'd hoped to take a look around while the castle's virtually empty."

"What about when it isn't?"

"I sometimes spend a few days as a beetle, if I'm following a lead."

"How do you survive?"

"The greenhouses are rather useful," she said with a smirk. Blaise looked blank. "Insects, Mr. Zabini. Ground beetles eat insects."

Draco made a face, remembering the spider he'd Vanished earlier, and shuddered.

They shared some pumpkin pasties and leftover Christmas cake with Rita. Vincent and Gregory, whom Draco had dispatched to send thank-you notes to everyone's relatives and friends, returned shortly and produced Butterbeer from their stash. Draco recounted his experiences during the ill-fated Quidditch game against Gryffindor while Rita's Quick Quote Quill took furious notes. Before the boys had to go to lunch, Rita transformed into her Animagus form and Draco took her back out to the courtyard.

It had turned out to be one of the most interesting and educational Christmases Draco had ever had. He hadn't thought about Potter at all, except perhaps right before going to sleep. That didn't count, anyway.

::

On the last Sunday of Christmas break, a mangy-looking barn owl brought Draco a note signed *R.S.* that instructed him to check the sports section of the day's paper. He reached over for the *Sunday Prophet* that he hadn't bothered with earlier and flipped the pages.

January 5, 1997

THE GAME THAT CHANGED QUIDDITCH HISTORY

As Quidditch teams in the remotest corners of the world replace their old Snitches with the now-perfected Singleton series types, the Prophet's Rita Skeeter has managed to talk to a Hogwarts student who witnessed the game that started it all. The student requested anonymity to avoid the wrath of Headmaster Albus Dumbledore, who many believe has become dangerous and unstable following considerable brain damage sustained during his encounter with He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named last year. For the first time since the historic match took place, here is the full account.

The Slytherin versus Gryffindor game began as any other. Draco Malfoy, the talented Captain and Seeker for the Slytherin team, had put together a strong offence. In a cunning move, he recruited Chaser Millicent Bulstrode, the first female Slytherin player in over fifty years. It was one of the wisest decisions in school-league Quidditch lately; Bulstrode's skill on a broom and sure aim far outstrips those of all three Gryffindor Chasers put together. Together with Malcolm Baddock and Andrew Bartlett, Bulstrode proceeded to put Slytherin into a sure lead, which was helped along by the team's promising new Keeper, Blaise Zabini.

Just as Beater Gregory Goyle sent a Bludger at one of the Gryffindor Chasers, Seeker Malfoy spotted the Golden Snitch and dove for it. Almost half a minute later, the Gryffindor Seeker spotted the second Snitch and raced for it. The Slytherin Seeker had caught the Snitch -- but so had the Gryffindor Seeker. As confused onlookers rushed onto the pitch, the Gryffindor captain was overheard accusing the Slytherin team of cheating. This reporter considers that rather poor sportsmanship, considering that Slytherin's Seeker had clearly caught the Snitch first.

The referee called the game on points scored and the win went rightfully to Slytherin. Here, at last, we have the story behind the scandal. Hogwarts officials had, for unfathomable reasons, refused to allow the Prophet's reporter to interview the match participants. It's not altogether surprising, considering Gryffindor's lamentable performance -- the Deputy Headmistress is head of Gryffindor house...

Draco was chuckling by the time he finished reading the article, which segued into a synopsis of the story Rita had written about McGonagall's stormy youth. He hadn't appreciated Rita's skill before, but she had managed to make the Gryffindors look like complete buffoons without making a single deliberate swipe at any of them. He supposed Granger was still blackmailing her. Draco made a face. Uppity Mudblood, blackmailing a pure-blood witch while turning up her nose at Slytherins. How Gryffindors failed to see their own hypocrisy, he would never know.

The Hogwarts Express arrived that evening. Pansy was all ears at dinner as Draco and Blaise filled her in on what had happened in her absence. She oohed and aahed when they recounted the events of Boxing Day, then pouted because her own holiday in the Caribbean had not been nearly as exciting. She was, however, sporting a nice tan, which drew many jealous looks from most of the other girls.

After dinner, Draco headed out of the Great Hall with Pansy on his arm. Blaise, Vincent, and Gregory followed close behind. There were some whispers and stares at Blaise as they passed and Draco distributed death glares liberally. As he fixed a third-year Ravenclaw with a "Just Try It" look, he collided with someone.

"Watch where you're going, Malfoy," the person said.

Draco looked up into the scowling face of Weasley and smirked. "Oh, it's you. No need to apologise then."

Potter was walking in behind Weasley, accompanied by Granger. Draco wondered why they were late for dinner. Potter glanced up with an indifferent expression, but his eyes widened, then immediately narrowed at the sight of Draco.

"Been talking to Rita Skeeter again, Malfoy?" he asked.

Draco raised both eyebrows. "Me? For your information, I was at Hogwarts over the holidays. Besides, don't try to tell me that article is anything but the truth."

Weasley turned beet-red. "I'll show you truth, you smarmy--"

"Ron, no!" Granger screeched. Amazingly, Weasley's fists unclenched.

There was an awkward silence that Draco didn't like. This wasn't how these encounters were supposed to go. He kept staring at Potter, for no reason, really, other than that Potter's hair was sticking up in the back and Draco wanted to see if he could make it lie flat. He cursed himself inwardly -- what the hell was he thinking? He forced himself to look from Potter to Granger. At least her hair stuck up everywhere and it was surely hopeless to do anything to it without a potion.

"Have you got any closer to finding out who did it?" Potter asked suddenly.

Draco shook his head.

"Well, er, Colin brought his -- things," Potter said to Blaise. "Except he said it'll take a week for him to -- er -- sort things out."

Blaise nodded, and Draco wondered why he was getting irritated by the fact that Potter was paying attention to Blaise and not him.

He tugged on Blaise's arm. "Let's go," he said. Blaise obeyed and they set off again. As Draco walked past Potter, he paused and turned slightly.

"You know your way to the dungeon, Potter. Just come get Blaise when he's needed," he said. Potter blinked at him and for a moment Draco wanted to be alone in the dungeon with Potter. He blamed the broccoli he'd eaten at dinner. Broccoli always gave him a funny feeling in his stomach; maybe it had hallucinogenic properties too.

::

Draco and Blaise had lingered at the dinner table on the first Saturday after winter term started, and were returning to the dungeon later than everyone else. Blaise had promised to help Draco with his Transfiguration essay earlier that week. They descended the steps to the dungeon as Blaise speculated on why he was needed for whatever it was Creevey had planned to do with the photographs.

Sniggering filthily, Blaise suggested that they'd probably ask him and Smith to pose for the camera or something along those lines.

"He said we'll have to lead him to wherever the picture was originally taken."

"Both of you?"

"Yeah. Something to do with magical signatures being stronger."

Draco snorted. "I just hope he doesn't make you show up in your Quidditch robes and insist on taking pictures for a calendar." He raised both eyebrows and imitated Creevey's voice. "It'll be brilliant! Slytherin and Hufflepuff, true sign of house unity!"

Blaise guffawed. "Oh, but in that case I shall have to practise my moves," he said, suddenly turning sideways and pressing Draco against the wall. They were next to the Slytherin common room by then. Blaise placed a hand on the wall on Draco's left. His voice dropped several octaves and he affected a lisp. "I'll be the Thlytherin thtar, reprethenting uth to the world," he murmured into his ear. Draco grinned and pressed his hand against Blaise's chest to push him away.

He heard a sharp intake of breath from his left and turned to look. Potter was standing not a foot away, holding a large piece of yellowed parchment in his hands. He was staring, slack-jawed, at the two of them. Draco supposed that considering Blaise's recently-made-public sexual orientation, he must have thought Merlin knew what about the two of them now. Blaise turned to look as well, detaching himself from the wall as he did so.

"Hi, Harry," he said. Potter continued to gape, but managed a nod in response.

"You're spending far too much time in the dungeons, Potter," said Draco. "It's not doing much for your complexion."

Blaise smirked and muttered the password to the common room under his breath. The door slid open and he disappeared behind it. Draco started to follow him.

"Wait," said Potter.

Draco turned around and raised an eyebrow. Behind him, the door to the Slytherin common room closed with a soft thump. He took a step aside so as not to block the entrance and turned to Potter, who was stuffing the parchment he held into his pocket.

"Shocked, Potter?"

"I didn't mean-- I'm not--" Potter broke off and looked away, staring moodily at something no doubt fascinating at the end of the hallway.

"I haven't got all day, Potter. Is this actually important?"

"It's bloody well important," Potter exploded suddenly, taking a threatening step towards Draco, who backed away quickly. He felt a chill on his back from the dungeon wall.

"Why Potter, you dog, you," he drawled, genuinely amused as he remembered their previous encounter in the dungeon. "You just can't resist, can you?"

"Shut. Up. Malfoy," Potter spat. Draco flinched and made an elaborate show of wiping his right eye with his hand.

"Make me, Potter," he taunted.

Potter's eyes widened and his lips parted slightly, releasing a warm puff of breath that caressed Draco's cheek pleasantly.

"Malfoy, I--"

Draco lifted his right hand and brushed two fingers over Potter's bottom lip, dragging it down a little. Potter made a small noise and flinched, eyes widening even further. Draco's mouth curved into a smirk and he bit his own bottom lip. Potter just stared.

"You what, Potter?"

"Oh hell," Potter breathed, and took off down the corridor, shoulders hunched slightly as he walked.

Draco gazed after him, his smirk a huge grin by the time Potter was out of sight.

Draco Malfoy's diary, January 11th

I am amused. I do believe Potter has a crush on me. It's just a little gratifying, I have to admit. It's one thing to idly fantasise about Potter, it's quite another thing to see the arrogant prat so conflicted. To think I hadn't even planned this!

That we still have not found out who distributed those vile photos is beyond vexing.

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Chapter 13: A Gryffindor and a Slytherin

A Gryffindor and A Slytherin

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Author's Notes: This was my first novel-length Harry/Draco story. It was completed four months before the release of HBP (and before the announcement of Draco's birth date on Rowling's website) and is now AU. This story stands alone, though it's also a companion piece to *Beyond Wild Moor and Fen*, which is from Harry's point of view. Many thanks to Mishty, Vel, Jaxmari, Kristal and Autumn LeCroix for beta-reading. Constructive criticism is always welcome and appreciated.

A Gryffindor and A Slytherin

Chapter 13 - Inter-house Cooperation

Potter hadn't come to fetch Blaise, Weasley had. Draco doubted that he would have been able to follow directions, so he wondered how Weasley had managed to find the hidden door to the Slytherin common room. He didn't bother asking -- Weasley looked cross as Draco and Blaise filed out of the doorway and into the dungeon. Draco sneered at him, passing the bag filled with photos for Blaise to carry.

"What are you going there for, Malfoy?" Weasley asked as he led them further into the dungeon rather than towards the entrance hall.

"None of your business, Weasley," said Draco as they turned a corner into a corridor he rarely visited. He glanced sideways at Blaise. "This is where you...?"

Blaise grinned and gave him a quick nod with a glance at Weasley, whose neck was looking redder than usual. Draco sniggered, wondering if Weasley knew that his best friend, much like Blaise, was rather inclined to kiss boys in dungeon hallways. That set his mind on a track that he definitely did not want it to go down and he tried to think about other things, like Vincent's socks, for example. It was fruitless. It didn't help that Potter was waiting at the end of the next hallway.

Potter was talking to Smith, standing several feet away from Granger and Creevey, who were crouched on the floor beside a stack of shiny trays and a medium-sized cauldron. Granger turned around and watched them approach with a guarded look. When she spotted Draco, her eyes narrowed and darted quickly towards Potter, then back to her trays. Draco stopped and glared at Potter, who was obviously avoiding looking at him.

"There you are," Smith said, looking at Blaise.

Blaise gave the bag with the photos to Granger, who began to empty it out.

"What's the occasion for the town meeting?" Draco said, looking from Smith to Granger.

Blaise gave an exasperated sigh and tugged on his robe sleeve. Draco smirked. Creevey rose and approached the sixth-years with some trepidation.

"All right, Harry?" he squeaked. "We can start, right?"

"You should be talking to Blaise here, Creevey, not Potter," Draco said in a crotchety tone.

Potter rolled his eyes. "Yes, Colin, we can start."

Creevey glanced up at Blaise and Smith with an embarrassed look. "Er, where were you -- um --"

"Right over there," Blaise said, pointing to a corner behind Granger. There was a hint of amusement in his voice. Smith was studying the hem of his robe sleeve. It was too dark to tell whether he was blushing.

Creevey snatched up a photograph from where Granger had piled them on the floor and studied it. "*Lumos*," he muttered. He shone his wand at the photo then into the corner that Blaise had indicated.

"This was no professional, I'll tell you that much," Creevey said. "No attention to ambient light...."

"Oh, that's helpful," Draco cut in, "considering Hogwarts is crawling with professional photographers."

Creevey opened his mouth to protest, an earnest expression on his face.

Potter waved an impatient hand. "Never mind, Colin, it's Malfoy."

Creevey looked dejected, as though he would have welcomed a debate, but closed his mouth and went back to studying the photo.

Draco scowled at Potter. "What do you mean by that, Potter?" he bit out.

The other boy began to retort, but Blaise stepped in between them. "Can we just get this over with?"

Potter nodded and turned away. There were several protracted moments of silence while Creevey muttered to himself, occasionally glancing at Potter and Weasley. He pulled a long wooden plank from his pocket and held it against the top of the photo. Draco craned his neck slightly to see what the plank was. There were dashes of varying lengths marked across the top, with numbers written beneath some of them. It was one of those crude Muggle contraptions for measuring length. Creevey slid the plank to the other edge of the photo and frowned.

"This was taken by a Muggle camera," he said after a moment. "I've studied wizarding cameras and none of them produce prints this size."

Blaise looked blank. "Prints?"

"The film is transferred onto special paper, it's sort of like printing," said Granger, who had in the meantime got up and walked over to study the photo with Creevey. "But aren't wizarding photos developed in a potion, Colin?"

"Yes, but the negative has to be blown up to the right size before you put it in the potion. Wizarding cameras don't take photos this size; it's smaller than the nearest standard size."

"What if someone shrank it?" said Smith. "You know, to throw people off?"

Creevey shook his head with a serious expression on his face. "That would've shrunk the people in the picture, and that never looks smooth. It's easy to shrink a still photo, but not a wizarding one. Trust me, I've tried." The last was said with a kind of sheepish look that made him look like a puppy that had done something wrong. Draco was revolted.

"So then it would have to be a Muggle-born, wouldn't it?" Blaise said slowly. "Who has a Muggle camera?"

Vincent, Gregory, and Millicent had had considerable fun rounding up camera owners last month. Draco closed his eyes for a moment, remembering. "Creevey here, Brantley from Ravenclaw, and the Dawson twins from Hufflepuff."

"No Slytherins?" Weasley's voice was accusing.

"There are none of her kind in our house, Weasley," Draco said, glancing at Granger. She gave him a withering look.

"Listen here, Malfoy," Weasley said, taking a step closer to him. Potter's hand strayed to his pocket and Draco reached for his own wand.

Blaise coughed. "Can we just get on with this?"

"He can't go insulting Hermione every time he--" Weasley's face was flushed with indignation.

"He didn't insult her," Blaise interrupted, looking straight at Weasley.

"So he didn't call her names, we all know what he meant--" Weasley was looking apoplectic.

Draco wondered if it was too much to hope for him to just drop dead. "That's as good as you'll ever get it, Weasley," he said, carefully keeping his tone neutral.

"You slimy--"

"Ron, stop. It's not worth it, honestly," Granger spoke up suddenly. "I agree with Blaise. Let's just get this done."

Weasley took a step back, his shoulders sagging slightly. Draco glanced at Potter, who was staring at him. Potter was staring at him. Draco sneered, and Potter shook his head slightly, his eyes unfocussed as though he was coming out of a trance.

"Where were we?" Draco said, turning to Blaise.

"So it was a Muggle camera," Blaise said, looking uncertain.

"The Dawson twins are in first year, so they're pretty much out," Smith added.

"They're Hufflepuffs, they're out by default, I'd say," Draco muttered, earning a sharp glare from Smith. Draco started to leer at him but caught himself and smirked instead.

"Well, we're back to square one, aren't we?" Granger said. "The people with Muggle cameras are all unlikely suspects--"

"Maybe," Draco interrupted with narrowed eyes, "it was actually Creevey. He took the pictures and then volunteered to help--"

Creevey's eyes widened to an impossible size, his mouth a round "O" of surprise.

Blaise coughed again. "Draco, he's a Gryffindor."

Draco pursed his lips. "True. Scratch that then."

"What's that supposed to mean, Blaise?" Weasley asked, narrowing his eyes.

"Well, you lot are not exactly known for your cunning, is all," Blaise said with a straight face, but Draco saw that he was fighting back a smile.

"You'd be surprised, Blaise," Potter said in a clipped tone.

Draco rolled his eyes. "Fascinating as the Gryffindor version of cunning might be, can we get back to what we're here for?"

"Well, if dressing up in a Dementor outfit or hitting people with Bludgers are examples of the Slytherin version of cunning, then you might want to take a page out of our book, Malfoy," Potter said in an infuriatingly calm tone.

Draco's gaze snapped to Potter. The expression on Draco's face must have betrayed what he was feeling because Potter's hand was reaching for his wand again. Draco pressed his lips together for a moment as he tried to come up with a witty retort, but none were forthcoming. He'd waited too long and Potter was smirking now, in that self-satisfied way that he had. Draco wanted to curse the smirk off his face. Instead, he settled for "I don't expect you to appreciate subtlety, Potter."

"You and your mates are about as subtle as Hagrid's dog, Malfoy," Potter said with a cruel inflection to his voice.

Here was something Draco could use. "Speaking of dogs, how's yours doing, Potter? The great shaggy mutt you brought to the train with you last year?"

Before Draco had even finished speaking, Potter went very still, his face suddenly draining of colour. He opened his mouth slightly, then closed it again. His jaw set tightly with a faint tremble near his temples and his eyes were suddenly dull and

empty. The silence was almost deafening. Draco and Potter stared at each other, sneer against scowl. Inwardly, Draco was triumphant -- this made up in spades for his earlier lapse. He'd got to Potter.

"Can we -- uh -- what's going on?" Creevey's voice demanded.

The sound startled them both, and Potter looked away. Granger was looking at him with so much pity in her cow eyes, it made Draco want to grab her by the shoulders and shake her. The last thing Potter needed was pity. Weasley's expression would probably have caused flowers to wilt; he was glowering with such intensity that Draco almost took a step back. Had Sirius Black been important to those two, as well? Or were they actually this devoted to Potter and his emotional attachments?

"I don't know why the hell I came here," Potter muttered to Weasley and walked away.

Draco raised an eyebrow and turned to Blaise. "Unstable, isn't he?" Blaise looked bewildered.

"You're a pathetic excuse for a human being, Malfoy," Granger said.

Draco whirled on her. "Don't you dare speak to me like that, Mudblood."

Weasley lunged, but Blaise stepped in front of Draco and grabbed the Gryffindor's wrists.

"Would somebody please tell me what is going on?" Smith demanded suddenly.
"Obviously my poor Hufflepuff brain has missed something in this Slytherin versus Gryffindor exchange of witty commentary."

Weasley struggled as Blaise held on to his wrists. "Let me go, Blaise."

"No. We didn't come here to fight with you lot. And Harry started it. Well, I did, technically. Not too bright of me to bring up Gryffindor in his presence, really, but I never claimed to be fit for Ravenclaw," Blaise said, panting a little.

Weasley stopped struggling and took a step back, still glowering at Draco.

Draco folded his arms in front of his chest and rolled his eyes at Smith. "I wouldn't worry too much. They're an excitable lot, you see," he said in an undertone. Smith looked astounded, probably because Draco hadn't said so much as two words to him that year.

Granger cleared her throat and stood up. Creevey looked from her to Weasley and blinked rapidly several times.

"So what else is there, besides the Muggle camera being used to take the photos?" Granger's tone was businesslike.

"We know that whoever did this is in sixth year or above," Draco said without looking at her.

"No. We know that whoever wrote on the pictures is in sixth year or above," Blaise said.

Granger looked up at him sharply. "Hold on, how do you know how old the writer is?"

"The Scriptor charm reveals someone wearing a balaclava, that's how," Draco said, irritated.

Granger gave him a blank look. "But that just means the writer knows about the spell."

"Yeah, and it's taught in sixth year." Draco stared at her with some incredulity. This was the brightest witch in their year?

"You don't have to be in sixth year to know about the spells that are taught in it," Granger said with a smug expression on her face.

"Yeah, Hermione knew how to do a Protean Charm last year," Weasley said in a tone that suggested he considered this to be somehow to his credit.

"But that's not until seventh year," Draco said with a frown.

"Exactly," Granger said, sounding exasperated. "There are ways of learning other than in lessons."

Draco opened his mouth, but Blaise interrupted him. "Fine, so we can't figure it out ourselves. Weren't we supposed to do something here?" He gestured to the pile of photos on the floor.

"Well if you lot let the little guy get on with it, we can be out of here before dinner," Smith said with a smirk.

Draco raised an amused eyebrow and glanced at Blaise, who was grinning. Now it was Granger and Weasley's turn to look bewildered.

"So can we get on with it then?" Creevey asked, looking at Weasley.

He nodded and turned away, muttering something under his breath. Draco rolled his eyes.

"Right then," Creevey said, reaching into his pocket and taking out a clear package filled with red crystals.

"Are those rubies?" Blaise asked with a curious look.

"Er, no. They're potassium ferricyanide crystals."

"Pot tassie very what?" Smith asked. Draco frowned. Muggles had the weirdest names for things.

"Potassium ferricyanide -- it's a photo bleaching agent," Creevey said with an important air.

"You're going to bleach the photos? Why?" Smith asked.

"Only partially. I suspected that these were taken with a Muggle camera -- it's where I got the idea in the first place. When a photo taken with a Muggle camera is developed

the wizarding way, it preserves imprints of the people in the photo as well as the person who had taken the photo."

"What? How's that possible?" Blaise asked with a frown. "If it's a Muggle camera..."

Granger interrupted him. "It's supposedly an anomaly, not very well-documented. I've only found mention of it in four books. There's some evidence that the first mechanical Muggle cameras actually were magical devices. It seems to have been covered up by the Ministry of Magic, and there's precious little information on the subject."

"Why don't you ask Weasley's father? Isn't he the one who works with Muggle devices?" Draco said with a smirk.

Weasley narrowed his eyes. "What are you playing at, Malfoy?"

Draco held up his hands in a mock protective gesture. "I'm just asking."

"The point is," Granger said loudly, "that it's possible to detect the traces of magic in wizarding photos taken by Muggle cameras. Because we have so many photos, the traces are going to be stronger."

Draco drew his eyebrows together. "What do we need the Muggle stuff for, then? Can't we just cast revealing spells and have done?"

Granger shook her head with a superior look on her face. "We need to get rid of most of the images before the spell can work properly. That's where the bleach comes in." She nodded to Creevey, who hurried towards the cauldron.

He pointed his wand at the base. "*Incendio*," he squeaked, and flames sprang up under the cauldron, which was filled with water. He muttered another spell Draco couldn't make out, and the flames turned white. The air suddenly became dry and hot.

"You lot had better get back, this stuff isn't very good for your lungs," he threw over his shoulder. Draco took several steps back, marvelling at the change in Creevey's tone; no longer sycophantic, he sounded almost tolerable. The others followed Draco, and the four of them stood staring at the small Gryffindor boy.

Creevey pulled a handkerchief from his pocket and tied it around his head so that only his eyes were visible, then donned a pair of thick glasses that made him look like a frog with square eyes. Draco wondered how deep Creevey's pockets must have been, to hold all those things. Creevey extinguished the fire and ripped open the package of red crystals, then emptied it into the cauldron. He stirred the mixture, holding his wand just above the surface as a jet of air blew from its tip. Muttering something that was unintelligible under the kerchief, Creevey pulled another packet of crystals from his pocket and emptied it into the cauldron as well. He bent over as he stirred and studied the contents carefully.

"Oh, bollocks," he said suddenly, pulling down the handkerchief. "We'll need to filter this."

"Why?" Granger asked.

"The solid bits that won't dissolve anymore, they have to go. I forgot to bring--"

"Oh, that's okay," she said, walking over. Creevey waved his wand in the air quickly as she approached, no doubt to dispel whatever fumes were left over from brewing the potion. Granger cast a Vanishing spell at the cauldron. The air around it rippled slightly.

Creevey took in a sharp breath, then expelled it immediately as he looked at the liquid, which was still there. "Wow, how did you do that?"

"It just takes a bit of extra focus to Vanish parts of a potion; it's really useful if you goof up," Granger said in that vexingly condescending tone of hers.

Draco shifted his weight from one foot to the other and glanced at Blaise, who was whispering something to Smith. Weasley stood leaning against the dungeon wall, looking uncomfortable. Draco turned his attention back to Creevey, who was pulling a long clay dropper out of a bag. He added drops of the liquid in the cauldron to the trays on the floor while Granger added water from the tip of her wand. Draco took a few steps closer and saw that the bottoms of all the trays were covered with a light pink liquid. Creevey pulled a dark glass bottle from his pocket, unscrewing the top. There was a dropper attached to it.

"What's that, Colin?" Granger asked, looking curious.

"Wetting agent. Reduces the surface tension of water, makes for more even bleaching," the small boy replied. "You'd better step away, this stuff smells awful," he added, pulling the handkerchief back over his nose.

Granger hurried off to the side, casting glances over her shoulder -- no doubt she found even this Muggle potion-making fascinating. Creevey used the miniature dropper to add the yellow liquid to each tray. Draco wrinkled his nose -- the stuff did smell foul, like everything Muggles made. The stench was thick and acrid, and he stepped back to stand beside Blaise. When Creevey put away the bottle, he waved his wand in the air again and the smell disappeared quite suddenly. He pulled out a pair of dragonhide gloves from his enormous pockets and put them on. Draco wondered why he needed gloves, allowing himself a brief moment of dark humour as he imagined the Muggle potion melting Creevey's hands clean off.

As they all watched, Creevey pulled photos from the stack on the floor and placed them into the trays one by one. Granger went over to him again. After a muttered instruction from Creevey, she began to levitate the photos into a tray that had been left empty. Draco took a few steps closer and watched in fascination as Blaise and Smith's figures disappeared from the photographs in the trays, as though melting away. The photos that Granger placed in the empty tray looked like simple sheets of paper with the faint outlines of figures, unmoving. Twenty minutes later, they had worked through the entire stack of photos and refilled the trays with the potion twice.

"Why can't you just make the potion once, Creevey?" Draco asked as the small boy was removing his protective gear. Granger had Vanished the remains of the red potion and Creevey dropped the gloves into the empty cauldron.

He gave Draco an odd look. "Potion?"

"Whatever you were using to, ah, bleach." The word tasted strange to Draco, like trying to talk after having licked a section of lemon.

Creevey shrugged. "That's just how it's done."

"Muggles," Draco muttered. "No wonder they'd like to have magic. I would too if I couldn't have a store of potions."

Granger sniffed in a disapproving manner. "For your information, Muggles get along quite well without magic."

Draco gave her a disbelieving look. "That's what you think. My father says that every time Muggles see evidence of magic, they make a huge spectacle of it. I hardly think they'd write books about magic if they weren't interested in having it," he said in a tone that brooked no argument.

Granger regarded him with a strange glint in her eyes, or perhaps it was just the light. "My parents aren't the least bit interested in the magic I can do."

Draco scoffed. "That's because you aren't even allowed to use magic at home yet. Just wait till they see you use magic. I've read that Mudbloods used to be put on display by their families in the past."

"Er, I'm sure this is fascinating, but we sort of need to get on with it before the paper begins to degrade," Creevey cut in, rocking back and forth on his feet.

Granger looked away from Draco and hurried over to the misshapen stack of wet photos in the spare tray. "Blaise, Zacharias, I need you both to go and stand where you were when the photo was taken," she said.

Blaise crossed the distance to the corner he'd indicated earlier. He turned around with a pensive look, glancing at Smith who'd followed him there. "You don't want us to--"

Granger had the grace to blush. "Er, no. Just, um, stand there."

Draco pretended to sneeze, concealing a snigger. This was far too amusing. Granger glared at him, her lips pursed. She muttered a complicated-sounding spell and waved her wand at the stack of photos, pointed it at Blaise and Smith, then back at the photos.

Two strands of silvery smoke rose rapidly from the pile -- one was a light silver, the other a darker grey. They streaked through the air towards the two boys in the corner. The strands exploded into clouds of mist, then coalesced into a perfect replica of Blaise and Smith kissing as they had been in the photo. Draco stared, mesmerised and

triumphant -- the spellwork was impressive, they would finally know who had taken the photos. The mist faded and the ghostly figures of Blaise and Smith disappeared, revealing the startled faces of the real boys behind them.

Draco watched as Granger waved her wand around in a series of concentric circles, drawing out a red-tinged string of mist from the photos. The mist floated past Draco and started gathering just behind Blaise and Smith, near an archway that led into an off-limits part of the dungeon.

"That's where the photographer must have stood," Draco remarked, but no one was listening.

They watched, transfixed, as the mist gathered to form a shape. Draco's gaze travelled from the outline of feet to standard-issue school robes, to the illusory camera clutched in the figure's hands, to the balaclava--

"Oh, great," he snapped. Granger gave the air a sharp poke with her wand and the misty figure, which had been raising its camera, froze.

"We have five minutes, maybe a bit more," she said in a frantic voice, running up to the figure. Draco strode after her.

It was definitely a boy -- the shoes were a boy's, as were the shoulders and the posture. The shoulders were narrow and square, and the figure stood with its legs slightly apart, as though bracing itself. There was something vaguely familiar about it,

but Draco couldn't place why he recognised it. A strange, musty odour permeated the air around the apparition.

"What's that smell?" Draco asked.

"It's not really a smell," Granger replied, peering at the hands holding the mist-camera. "Residual effect of emotion. Whoever this is was filled with a strong emotion of some kind at the time they did it. Colin, can you tell what brand of camera this is?"

Creevey came closer and stood next to her, squinting at the slightly shimmering mist that made up the camera. "No," he said, shaking his head, "I can't read the lettering on the side, other than that it looks just like mine."

"But that's definitely not you holding the camera," Blaise spoke up. His eyes were narrowed. "I recognise him. I don't know who he is, but I know he's in our year."

"How do you figure?"

"I just know," Blaise said, his jaw jutting forward.

"Looks like Su Li," Weasley spoke up suddenly. "Thin and waifish, about your height," he added, looking at Draco.

"The feet are wrong," Granger said. "Su stands sort of duck-footed, this one doesn't. Besides, he has really long hair, it would have stuck out from under the balaclava."

"Couldn't it still be a girl?" Smith asked, stepping closer. "A boyish-looking girl with short hair?"

"Can't really tell without a difference in clothes," Granger said to no one in particular. "This is when Muggle clothes would have been useful."

Draco would have scoffed, but he was too busy studying the figure and trying to commit it to memory -- their time was almost up. He tried desperately to pick out a detail -- anything -- that would place the odd feeling of familiarity, but the frozen mist shimmered one last time, then the figure exploded and dissipated into the air around them, taking the nasty smell with it.

"Well, that narrowed the circle," Smith said with enthusiasm.

Draco gave him an incredulous glance. "Yeah, now we have to corner all the skinny boys who are about my height. Oh, wait, that's half the bloody school," he said with a scowl.

"Oh, stop it," Blaise said, walking over to stand beside him. Draco fought the urge to lean into him. He was tired, his feet were aching, and his eyelids felt like lead all of a sudden. Blaise continued speaking, but his voice seemed to come from a long distance. "I'm telling you it's someone in our year; I wouldn't have recognised them otherwise. I only pay attention to people in classes."

Draco rolled his eyes despite the sudden bout of exhaustion he was feeling. "Can we go?" he asked suddenly, suppressing a yawn.

Blaise looked concerned for a moment. "Yeah, yeah. Thanks, you lot, I really appreciate it," he said, turning to the Gryffindors. "D'you need help cleaning up or anything?"

"You'd better get Malfoy away from here," Creevey said. "He looks like he's about to pass out, probably never been around Muggle chemicals before."

Draco wanted to protest, but he realised he had to concentrate all his energy on staying upright. Stupid Muggles and their stupid potion ingredients. Maybe he had been exposed too long.

Blaise said his goodbyes and led Draco back out through the dungeons, supporting him with one arm around his waist.

"What was that whole scene with Potter about? Why were you going on about dogs?" Blaise asked as they walked well out of earshot of the Gryffindors.

Draco's brain felt numb and sluggish, as though he'd just woken up. "Huh? Oh, Sirius Black was a dog Animagus, didn't you know?"

Blaise's steps faltered for a moment. "You're one cruel bastard, Draco."

"Thanks."

Draco Malfoy's diary, January 14th

Well, paint me blue and call me Stella. We're no closer to figuring out who took those photos than we were a month ago. This is what I get for going along with Potter's harebrained scheme. We've wasted so much time, though I suppose it's not bad that the circle's narrowed considerably. We'll do this the Slytherin way, seems much more reliable than those Muggle exertions.

Potter can just get bent. Just because he's attempted to snog me twice doesn't give him the right to insult my house and get away with it. I hope he stays far away from me lest he need another reminder or two of his dead godfather. Wanker.

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Chapter 14: A Gryffindor and a Slytherin

A Gryffindor and A Slytherin

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Author's Notes: This was my first novel-length Harry/Draco story. It was completed four months before the release of HBP (and before the announcement of Draco's birth date on Rowling's website) and is now AU. This story stands alone, though it's also a companion piece to *Beyond Wild Moor and Fen*, which is from Harry's point of view. Many thanks to Mishty, Vel, Jaxmari, Kristal and Autumn LeCroix for beta-reading. Constructive criticism is always welcome and appreciated.

A Gryffindor and A Slytherin Chapter 14 - Falling Towards Apotheosis

Draco and Blaise had drawn up a list of people in sixth year who may have been the culprit behind the photographs. After some careful observation during lessons and meals, the list was narrowed down to three people -- Wayne Hopkins of Hufflepuff, Kevin Entwhistle of Ravenclaw, and Seamus Finnigan of Gryffindor. Blaise insisted that there was no way Finnigan could have done it -- they were in the same DA group and on good terms -- but Draco was sure that Finnigan's posture was exactly like that of the mysterious photographer.

Hopkins was in Tracey's DA group and she was recruited to befriend and watch him. She'd made some noises about him not being her type, not to mention a Hufflepuff, but she'd relented in the end. After all, no one was asking her to marry the sod. Both Hopkins and Entwhistle were in Pansy's study group where she could watch them relatively freely.

Entwhistle and Finnigan were also in Pansy's DA group and while she couldn't employ the same methods as Tracey, she had an advantage in having Vincent and Gregory there; their mere presence was intimidating. That was another thing Draco couldn't figure out. Neither Vincent nor Gregory had ever been overtly violent. It was as though all of Hogwarts was concerned with mere appearances. Their bulk and lack of cheery dispositions seemed to make people label them as bullies, based on nothing concrete.

Vincent and Gregory would make sure Pansy could stay close to the two suspects; she watched and took careful note of everything they said and did. Draco was doing double study group duty as he'd planned over Christmas -- he was attending his own Monday meetings as well as joining Blaise and Nott on Tuesdays. Potter, who was in Blaise's group, had taken to ignoring Draco again. Not that Draco minded; he was focused on overcoming Nott's bothersome tendency to prefer solitude.

Slytherin played Ravenclaw on the second Saturday of the new term. Blaise had had some reservations about playing -- they still hadn't known who'd taken the pictures. Draco and Pansy managed to coax him into his Quidditch robes and out onto the pitch with promises of chocolate and a back rub. Once he was flying, whatever problems Blaise had with being the focus of public scrutiny seemed to disappear; he seemed to fully concentrate on his Keeper duties and he hadn't let the Ravenclaw Chasers score any goals.

Draco had caught the Snitch -- the new Singleton series had a thin silvery stripe going around the middle -- very early in the game. It had been surprising, because Chang was normally a very good Seeker, but this time she hadn't even bothered to tail Draco as he raced for the catch. She'd looked sullen and withdrawn as they shook hands post-game. Draco wondered idly if she was still pining for Potter. The stupid girl obviously never knew what she wanted, Ravenclaw intelligence or not.

Due to Blaise's stellar performance and Millicent and Malcolm's teamwork, Slytherin was now neck-in-neck with Hufflepuff in the race for the Quidditch Cup. The Slytherins were buzzing with excitement -- they had a chance at the Cup after all, despite the abysmal point totals they'd had before that weekend's game. Even Nott had come out to the common room to celebrate with the rest of the house.

Draco's persistence with Nott was starting to pay off; the stringy boy was joining the rest of his classmates in nightly fireside discussions. They were mostly recaps of intelligence gathered on the suspects -- Entwistle, Finnigan, and Hopkins -- but the Slytherins would also talk about Quidditch, gossip about other students, and moan about homework. Nott rarely spoke, but at least he was there, participating. Draco was sure that with time, he'd open up further. Whenever he did speak, he always offered precise insights and even Draco had to admit that Nott was very clever.

Days folded into weeks, and still the Slytherins were no closer to figuring out who had slighted them last term. Draco had met with Rita Skeeter twice, filling her in on what they'd found out. She'd promised to tail the three suspects in her Animagus form to see if she could find out anything further. The staff were presumably no closer to the truth in their own investigation of the matter; Rita was outraged. Draco just shrugged whenever she brought it up -- he knew the Headmaster wouldn't bother with trying to help them. Anyone with common sense could see that Dumbledore hated the Slytherins. Draco would never forget how he'd taken their House Cup away from them in first year merely to reward Potter's meddlesome heroics.

The Saturday after Valentine's Day marked the second Hogsmeade weekend of the year. This time, all of the sixth-year Slytherins were going together, except for Nott. He had caught a cold and was forbidden to go outside by Madam Pomfrey. She'd insisted on keeping him indoors despite copious amounts of the Pepper-Up Potion. As usual, Pansy insisted on taking her entourage -- and thus Draco and the boys -- to Madam Puddifoot's. Blaise had flatly refused to go. He told Draco he'd meet him at the Three Broomsticks, should he grow tired of the garish and want to get away.

Draco did grow tired of the tea-shop and this time it was Queenie who gave him an easy out. She needed to go and meet Macmillan at the pub and Draco said he'd accompany her. They couldn't let Slytherins walk around alone, not with a lunatic photographer on the loose. Pansy put up a bit of a fight but Draco could tell it was just for show -- she seemed to have relaxed about Queenie since their grudging reconciliation last month.

Draco held the door open for Queenie then followed her out into the wind-blown streets of Hogsmeade. They walked in companionable silence down the snow-covered pathway, then turned onto High Street. Queenie tugged on her scarf and smiled at Draco.

"It's nice, isn't it?" she said.

"What is?"

"Just... Hogsmeade. Life. This year is so different, with the house unity projects," Queenie said, a wistful smile on her lips.

Draco made a noncommittal noise. He needed to remind Pansy that Queenie's first priority should be Slytherin, not the house unity rot. "I'm most fond of our house banding together like we have. We've never got along as well as we have this year," he said carefully.

Queenie's smile left her eyes. "It's nice," she said in a blithe tone that Draco didn't like.

"Something the matter?" he asked, looking at her sideways.

They were passing Honeydukes just as Morag MacDougal and a group of Ravenclaws were entering. Draco gave her a small wave and a grin. She grinned back and went into the shop. He turned back to Queenie, who looked thoughtful.

"Well?" he said, nudging her slightly with his shoulder.

Queenie took a deep breath, closing her eyes and seemingly enjoying the crisp winter air. "It's all a bit surreal, to be frank."

"Quite," said Draco in an agreeable tone. His sixth year did certainly have a surreal kind of quality to it. He didn't have his family behind him, he'd led Slytherin to their first Quidditch victory against Gryffindor despite the double Snitch, he owed Potter

his life, there was a giant in the Forbidden Forest, he wanted to get close to Potter again... no. That kind of thinking just wouldn't do. Draco looked up and was grateful to see that they'd arrived at the Three Broomsticks.

They walked inside and Draco groaned inwardly. Blaise was there, sure enough, as was Macmillan -- they were sitting at the same table, in fact, along with Potter, Granger, Weasley, Boot, Smith, and Longbottom. Queenie hurried over to the empty seat beside Macmillan -- it looked like he'd been saving it for her.

"Draco!" Blaise called. "Come on over and have a seat, mate."

Scowling, Draco unfastened his cloak and hung it on a nearby peg. He sat down in the only other empty seat available -- at the corner of the table next to Potter, who was talking to Longbottom and paying Draco no heed.

"What Hogsmeade needs is a Quidditch shop," Longbottom was saying to Potter. "Every village needs a Quidditch shop."

"Also, every village needs an idiot, and you're it, Longbottom," Draco said with a smirk. The other two turned to look at him.

"Shut up, Malfoy," Longbottom said without the merest hint of a stutter.

Draco gaped at him, but recovered. "Well, as much as I enjoy listening to you making a fool of yourself, there is already a Quidditch shop in Hogsmeade."

Potter looked up with interest. "There is?"

It was the first time Potter had addressed him directly since they'd met in the dungeon to trace those photographs. The Gryffindor had avoided Draco entirely during meals and ignored his taunts during lessons. He'd paired him with Susan Bones during the DA meetings and seemed to be content pretending Draco didn't exist. His almost-friendly tone caught Draco off-guard and for a moment, it was like he was talking to Blaise.

"Yeah, Quaffles and Bludgers, right as you pass the Post Office," he replied. "Old Donegal owns it. I'm surprised you've not heard of it, considering he's a distant relation to your Head of House." Draco congratulated himself once more on his knowledge of pure-blood genealogy.

"I thought it was never open," Potter said, still in that almost-friendly tone.

Draco raised an eyebrow. "Yeah, Donegal doesn't like too many visitors. Makes good money off collectors' items, I expect. He's got connections all over."

They looked at each other for a moment, seemingly both shocked that they'd just had an entirely civil exchange without going for their wands once. Longbottom seemed

even more shocked than they were -- he looked from Potter to Draco and back again, his eyebrows disappearing under his fringe.

No one else seemed to have noticed. Longbottom was still staring blankly at the two of them as they gaped at each other.

"Hey, Neville! C'mere for a second," called Weasley from across the table. His voice was oddly high-pitched and sounded out of place. Longbottom got up obediently and walked over, knocking his chair to the floor as he did so. He gave Potter a sheepish grin as he picked the chair back up. Madam Rosmerta hurried over at the noise. Seeing Draco, she broke into a wide smile.

"My favourite heart-breaker. No, no, don't tell me. Nettle wine and blackberry rum, right?"

"Yes, please, O Fairest of all innkeepers," he said and bit his lip slightly, allowing his smile to reach his eyes.

Rosmerta blushed a deep crimson and hurried off. Draco stole a glance at Potter, whose gaze seemed to have fixed on Draco's mouth.

"Heart-breaker, huh," Potter said without the slightest hint of a question in his tone. "Been here before then?"

"If I didn't know better, Potter, I'd say you were chatting me up," Draco returned, his expression deliberately stony.

Potter seemed undaunted. "'Course you've been here before. Told me to meet you. What was that all about?"

"It's hardly of any consequence now, Potter," Draco said, smiling warmly at Rosmerta who'd just returned with his wine. Draco picked the glass up and took a sip.

Potter slipped his hands around his tankard of Butterbeer and gave him a furtive look. "So, humour me then. Twenty questions. What was that scene in the dungeon all about?"

"Scene?" Draco asked. Potter seemed unable to stay on the same subject for longer than a minute.

Potter cast a glance around and leant slightly closer. "You and Blaise." Draco felt warm breath on his face, smelling like Butterbeer and... Firewhisky?

"You know, contrary to what you may think, Potter, Slytherins are human, too. We horse around with one another, except we're not as obvious about it as you

Gryffindors," he said in a dignified tone. Had Potter been drinking something stronger than Butterbeer? That would explain a lot of things.

"So you were, er, horsing around?" Potter said with a smirk.

Draco matched the smirk. "Fantastic deduction, Potter. Are you sure you don't want to switch to Ravenclaw?"

Potter's eyebrows knotted and his nose wrinkled slightly in an all-too-familiar scowl. Draco glanced at Blaise, who was trying to explain something to Granger, his hands flying in front of her face with blinding speed. Smith was sitting next to Blaise, quietly talking to Macmillan and Queenie. Slytherins, a Mudblood, and Hufflepuffs. The world was ending.

Draco turned back to Potter, who had apparently followed Draco's gaze. Potter, however, was unmistakably eyeing... Smith. Draco recalled a Sunday afternoon; the same afternoon Potter had rescued him from the giant in the Forbidden Forest. Potter and Smith, circling each other on the pitch. Smith throwing his head back and laughing at something Potter had said. Oh hell no. Draco's eyes narrowed.

"So, Potter, twenty questions," he said, and the other boy turned to look at him, eyes slightly out of focus. Draco ran his finger around the rim of his glass and bit his lip. "Why did you ask about Blaise?" He smirked as Potter coloured slightly.

"Just curious," Potter said to his tankard.

"Oh, get out of it, Potter," Draco said, still smirking.

Potter made no reply and stared off to the side, where two grizzled-looking wizards were playing some strange card game. The pub was abuzz with conversation and laughter but there was a tense silence around Draco and Potter; it seemed to mute everything around them. Draco shifted in his seat and his knee brushed ever so slightly against Potter's. He wondered what the other boy would do if Draco were to hook his leg around Potter's under the table. The thought gave Draco a pleasant twinge in the pit of his stomach.

Draco sat back abruptly and finished off his nettle wine. Clearly there was something in the air that addled his brain and made him have impossible thoughts.

"Blaise," he called in a lazy drawl.

Blaise, who'd been listening to Granger deliver some sort of a lecture, looked up. "Yeah?"

"We need to meet Pansy."

Blaise nodded and started to get up. Draco rose as well and put his cloak back on. He stared down at Potter while Blaise said his goodbyes, but Potter didn't look up. He

was still staring at his tankard when Draco and Blaise left the pub, heading back up the street to Honeydukes. They needed to buy sweets for the common room and Pansy insisted they help her pick out something new.

"So what were you and Granger talking about?" Draco asked, determined to keep his mind on things that were not Potter.

"An article in last month's *Transfiguration Today*, about incomplete transformations. Why?"

"Just curious," Draco said, and winced. The phrase made him think of Potter, who'd said the same thing to him just moments ago. Things had been going so well, why did everything have to come back to Potter again? "Do you have any idea why Potter decided to have a civil conversation with me?"

"That'll be the Firewhisky," Blaise said with an impish grin. He stuck his hands in his pockets and sidled up to Draco. "How did you manage to have a civil conversation with him?"

"Firewhisky?" Draco asked, pointedly ignoring the question.

"Yeah, they smuggled in a bottle Seamus gave them. Mixed it with the Butterbeer -- you know what that does."

Draco nodded. Firewhisky by itself didn't tend to get one drunk too easily, but mixed with Butterbeer it produced a happy feeling and a warm buzz that lasted for hours. Draco had tried it once on his own and vowed to never try again -- it had made him act nicely towards a house-elf, and the creature was so shocked and terrified that it refused to come out of its hole for two days.

"Finnigan? I hope you didn't drink it. You know we suspect him."

"Come off it, Draco, I told you it can't be Seamus. Besides, he wouldn't have known I'd be there."

"Wouldn't he have?" Draco asked, cocking an eyebrow at Blaise as they walked up to the doors of Honeydukes. "You seem quite in with the Gryffindors lately."

Blaise rolled his eyes. "Please. I'm not in with them any more than you are. Only time I see them out of class is in the DA meetings and study groups."

"And you see a certain Gryffindor every Sunday," Draco said, not unkindly.

Blaise gaped at him for a moment, then grinned. "I should have known."

"Indeed. All I'm saying is you should watch yourself. I know you're not dumb, but we still have no idea who it was, and they sure seem to dislike you."

"I think it's more the fact that I'm gay," Blaise said in a low voice and pulled open the shop door.

Draco just frowned. Something in the way Blaise had spoken caused a tug at the back of his mind, but he couldn't figure out what it was.

::

A week later, Gryffindor played Ravenclaw and won by a hairline, bringing Gryffindor closer to the Quidditch Cup. It was nothing to fret about; Slytherin and Hufflepuff were still in the lead, with Gryffindor and Ravenclaw tied for second place. The final two games of the season promised to be eventful to say the least. The Slytherins had supported Ravenclaw as they always did, though Draco noticed at least two third-years cheering when Potter caught the Snitch.

The next day, Draco was supposed to meet Sheridan to go over his Defence Against the Dark Arts project. Blaise had gone off to his flying practice; Draco realised that he didn't even mind. Not only that, he felt no particular desire to join them anymore. Try as he might, he couldn't conjure up any bitterness or resentment towards the fact that he wasn't included in Blaise's Sunday routine. Draco supposed it was the certainty that when the chips fell down, Blaise would be on his side.

He collected his notes and went out into the common room. Sheridan was nowhere to be seen. Vincent and Gregory were playing chess near the fireplace. Queenie sat slumped in one of the armchairs near the two boys. When Draco walked through the doorway, she looked up sharply. Draco started to smile but she sprang out of the chair and all but ran to him.

"Draco!" she cried in a voice that was so unlike her usual guarded tone, Draco actually took a step back. He set his notes down on the table beside the bowl of Bertie Bott's Every Flavour Beans.

"What's going on, Queenie?"

She drew an unsteady breath and looked up at him with trepidation. "I have to tell you something."

Draco frowned. "Go on then."

"Oh, it's Theodore, it's been Theodore all along," she said in a shaky voice.

"What are you talking about?"

"After the Quidditch game, I didn't think it was all that horrible, and we still won, didn't we, and he promised--"

"Pull yourself together, Queenie," snapped Draco. "Are you telling me Nott is responsible for the second Snitch?"

"Y-yes," she said, eyes shining with tears. "And the photos. I'm so sorry."

Nott? Theodore Nott? A Slytherin? Draco blinked rapidly several times. "Why haven't you told me this before?"

"He p-p-promised he wouldn't--" A sob escaped her, and she swayed slightly on the spot.

Draco reached out to steady her with an awkward embrace. "Why haven't you said anything, Queenie?" he asked quietly. "Where is he? Did he hurt you?"

Queenie started crying. "He didn't -- hurt me -- we were in here -- and then --" she choked on a sob and Draco pulled her closer.

"There, now," he said in a hollow sort of voice that didn't belong to him, glancing at Vincent and Gregory. They were looking on with bewildered expressions. Queenie sniffed and drew back, wiping her eyes with the tips of her fingers.

"We were just talking and then Blaise came out. He said hi and we said hi. Theodore asked him where he was going, and Blaise said just for a spot of flying with the boys and did Theodore want to join them. Theodore said no and Blaise left and now he's gone after him and I don't know if he's going to do something..."

She pulled herself up to her full height and squared her shoulders with a shake of her head. "I should have known better than to hide it but he promised he wouldn't do anything else, and..." she trailed off and looked away.

Draco struggled to process all this new information, his mind a tumult of conflicted thoughts. So Nott had been the one behind it all, but why? What did Nott gain from betraying his housemates, from humiliating Blaise?

Blaise.

"Vincent. Gregory. Go get our brooms. Move." They obeyed, and Draco turned back to Queenie. "Professor Snape. Tell him to get to the Quidditch pitch." She nodded with frantic ferocity and ran out of the common room. Vincent and Gregory sprinted out of the boys' hallway. Gregory carried Draco's Nimbus 2001. Draco grabbed it and followed Queenie out the door. The two boys tore after him, through the dungeon and into the Entrance Hall, then out into the cold February air.

"Quidditch pitch," Draco called, and kicked off without bothering to look behind him. He sped through the air, bitter wind whipping his robes, lashing them painfully against his legs. He took a sharp turn towards the pitch, straining to make out airborne figures, but there were none. Draco looked down and his stomach dropped. There were three people standing on the pitch; two crumpled forms lay nearby. One of the people had a second in a chokehold, and the third was standing motionlessly in front of them. Angry voices carried through the wind, but Draco couldn't make out any words.

He urged his broom to fly faster. He could see the people on the pitch clearer now -- Nott had Smith by the throat, his wand pointing at Blaise. Blaise's fists were clenched by his sides. He looked like he was shaking. Draco could hear what they were saying now.

"Just don't hurt him," Blaise said. Where was his wand?

"Hurt him? I'm going to kill him," Nott snarled. Draco slammed into him full force; it was the only course of action he could take.

The three of them toppled to the ground. Nott's wand flew out of his hand and he lost his hold on Smith's throat. Draco landed on top of him, pinning him to the ground. The front end of his broom was pressing into the hollow of Nott's throat. Draco narrowed his eyes.

"Thought you could get away with it, did you?" he asked, his voice barely above a whisper. Nott's upper lip was twitching. Draco pushed the broomstick slightly forward. "I'd drive this right through you if it weren't a waste of a perfectly good

broomstick," Draco said, and then he was being pulled off Nott by his robes. What--? Draco turned around to protest but the words froze on his lips. Snape had arrived.

Draco spat on the ground in front of Nott, who had sat up and was rubbing his throat. Nearby, Blaise was kneeling beside Smith.

"What is the meaning of this?" Snape asked. "Miss Greengrass was nattering about nefarious plots, murder, and Merlin knows what else. Why are you fighting for everyone to see? Have you no pride in your house?"

But Draco wasn't listening. He stared at Potter's prone form. There was a dark patch around his head on the grass. Several brown blades shone with red drops right below Potter's mouth. Draco felt blood drain from his face and pointed a shaky finger at Potter. Snape whirled around and swore.

"Potter. I should have known."

Snape conjured up a stretcher and loaded Potter on it. Draco couldn't bear to look away, not even as Potter's still form rose into the air, a thick, viscous string of blood trailing from his mouth. It didn't look like he was breathing. His glasses were askew and a few blades of dead grass clung to his pale skin. Draco swallowed thickly, stepping back as the stretcher floated past him. Snape ordered Vincent and Gregory to take Potter's stretcher to the hospital wing, then turned around swiftly to face the others.

"*Ennervate*," he said, and Terry Boot sat up, rubbing his forehead.

Snape sneered. "I think you all have some explaining to-- where is Nott?"

Draco turned his head so fast that his neck made a cracking noise.

Nott was gone.

Draco Malfoy's diary, February 23rd

I feel like I've been hit by the Hogwarts Express moving at full speed. I simply cannot believe that Nott was behind it all -- to think he was meeting with us and listening to us discuss our suspects. That just makes my insides twist and I hate the feeling, I hate feeling like I've been had. Blaise told me what happened -- they'd got a practice Quaffle and were going to stage an impromptu match with no Seeker or Beaters.

Shortly after they kicked off, Potter fell off his broom -- Nott had hit him with a Stunner in mid-air, except they didn't realise it at that point. The three of them flew down to him. It's interesting to note that Smith of all people had thought to guide Potter's Firebolt down to the ground as well. As Boot approached Potter, a Stunner hit him -- Blaise said he saw it clearly, and turned around to see where it had come from. The next moment, Nott had disarmed them both. With Potter and Boot out of the running, Blaise couldn't do much without a wand.

Apparently, Nott has gone completely round the twist. Blaise said he carried on about purity and house pride and how I had no idea what I was doing and how Smith had tainted Blaise. Nott sounded like a complete lunatic, but he had his wand at Smith's throat by that point, and Blaise dared not go for his own wand for fear of antagonising him further. Nott apparently believed that somehow Smith was responsible for Blaise's deviance. He'd got it into his head that if Smith were to die, Blaise would be straight again.

Nott was carrying on about his father and how he hated the Dark Lord for taking his father away from him. Blaise said he was practically frothing at the mouth and he was just carrying on and on, like he'd snapped or something. Blaise was edging towards his wand, then Nott started in on the homophobia. The wanker had chastised Blaise for allowing himself to be "tainted" or some rot. Blaise was trying to reason with him, and then we showed up.

At any rate, Nott seems to have fled for parts unknown. Professor Snape questioned us about what had happened and Blaise told him the story. Snape said he would tell Dumbledore about it and that we shouldn't become vigilantes, but I'll be damned if I let Nott get away with it. Eventually, he'll turn up, and then he'll be sorry he was ever born. Sanctimonious little tosser, he should be locked up in St. Mungo's for life. In retrospect, it seems ridiculous that we did not suspect him. He'd acted shiftily all year, and both the Snitch incident and the way the photographs were protected from spellwork had Slytherin written all over it. It's all Potter's fault.

As for Queenie, she told Pansy the rest of the story; Pansy was just telling me all about it. Apparently, Nott's father used to work for the Apparition Licensing Office before he was sent to Azkaban. Nott claimed to have access to the information Queenie needed to learn to Apparate out of turn. It seems that Queenie's family is falling apart and she wants to flee, but has no way of leaving her home without being

noticed, or something. Pansy's rather excitable about it and I think I may have missed part of the explanation in all the complicated genealogy information she trotted out.

So Nott claimed he would help her learn to Apparate, which had been the only thing holding her back from telling the rest of us what was going on. It's all Pansy's fault, clearly. Had she not been so horrid to Queenie since day one, she never would have made friends with that lunatic. I expect she knows that quite well, she certainly looks guilty whenever she talks about Queenie. What a Sunday.

I am not worried about Potter. In fact, I'm going to go walk by the hospital wing to see if he's died yet.

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Chapter 15: A Gryffindor and a Slytherin

A Gryffindor and A Slytherin

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Author's Notes: This was my first novel-length Harry/Draco story. It was completed four months before the release of HBP (and before the announcement of Draco's birth date on Rowling's website) and is now AU. This story stands alone, though it's also a companion piece to *Beyond Wild Moor and Fen*, which is from Harry's point of view. Many thanks to Mishty, Vel, Jaxmari, Kristal and Autumn LeCroix for beta-reading. Constructive criticism is always welcome and appreciated.

A Gryffindor and A Slytherin

Chapter 15 - It Shines Not Forever

Draco was angry with himself. He felt relieved that Potter hadn't died. There were many things Draco had previously felt when Potter had survived brushes with death. Relief had certainly never been on that list. Draco told himself that he was relieved because he still owed Potter a wizard's debt. Draco hadn't acted in order to save Potter on the Quidditch pitch; he'd acted to save Smith. Had Potter died, Draco would have had to live the rest of his life knowing that he owed it to Potter. Obviously, it was natural to feel relief that he wouldn't be forced to remain forever in the speccy git's debt.

Potter hadn't been in Potions on Monday but he had turned up for Care of Magical Creatures on Tuesday, looking pale. The Gryffindors immediately surrounded him, patting him on the back and asking if he was okay. It was disgusting to watch. Potter kept nodding and grinning, but his gaze often strayed to where the Slytherins were standing.

Potter was very lucky not to have died. He'd been about twenty feet in the air when Nott's Stunner had hit him. Had he been conscious, wild magic would likely have saved him by making him bounce. However, a Stunned wizard falling from such a height was no better off than a Muggle. Draco loudly suggested that they all start

calling Potter The Boy Who Would Not Die. To his astonishment, Potter had laughed along with the Slytherins.

The Slytherins had expected to receive considerable backlash for the fact that Nott had been the one behind the Snitches and the photographs. To their surprise, people from other houses seemed almost sympathetic. A group of fifth-year Hufflepuffs had rescued Malcolm Baddock from Filch's ire after the Slytherin Chaser had dragged some spring mud in with him.

Draco figured that all this had more to do with the fact that Slytherin had suffered in both cases rather than with any genuine inclination to forgive. Draco had had fun telling Rita Skeeter all the details behind Sunday's events. Nott may have fled, but he wouldn't get very far in the wizarding world with everyone knowing what he'd done.

On the following Saturday, Blaise and Draco were discussing Rita's article as they dropped off their library books in their dormitory. A house elf materialised suddenly in front of Blaise's bedside table.

"Mr. Draco Malfoy, Mr. Blaise Zabini, your presence is requested in ten minutes in classroom eleven on the first floor, please!" it squeaked, then Disapparated.

Draco raised an eyebrow. "Well, at least we're going together this time. Maybe luck will be with me and I'll get to watch Potter dance with Vincent."

Blaise chortled as he headed out the door. Pansy, Queenie, and Millicent were coming out of the girls' hallway.

"Party invitation?" Pansy asked, grinning.

Draco nodded. "Let's go then."

Vincent and Gregory gave everyone dejected looks.

"Don't worry, boys, we'll bring you some nosh," Draco said, winking. Vincent rolled his eyes.

They left the common room and made their way through the dungeon hallways and up the stairs to the first floor in silence. Classroom eleven looked much like dungeon five had done when Draco had gone to his first Hufflepuff party last term, complete with unsteady-looking table and floating candles instead of wall torches. There was a wizard's wireless on a desk near the window and it was playing *Faith Tonality* by The Cunning Minds. Liam was standing near the desk, talking to Trista and the Hufflepuff prefects. Hannah Abbott, who had been throwing more and more longing gazes at Draco at meals, hid behind Macmillan when she saw Pansy.

Zacharias Smith walked in a moment later, deep in conversation with Susan Bones and Justin Finch-Fletchley. He brightened when he saw Blaise, but didn't walk over. Morag led the Ravenclaws inside not a moment later. She smiled at the Slytherins and walked towards them with Mandy Brocklehurst in tow. After making a beeline for the

snack table, Boot joined them, as did his friends Corner and Goldstein. They were soon discussing Nott's whereabouts. Though only a week had passed with no sightings, Nott's actions and escape were quickly becoming legendary at Hogwarts.

The Gryffindors arrived late, with Potter and Weasley in the lead. Darla Nesbett did the obligatory welcome speech, complete with the phrase 'Hufflepuff Hullabaloo,' which in Draco's opinion would never stop being funny. Darla invited them to have some snacks and drinks, announcing that Liam would start the evening's game shortly.

The tension that had been there during the first party he'd attended in October seemed to have almost disappeared. People from all four houses were talking together -- mostly swapping gossip about those housemates who weren't there. The Witching Hour was on the wireless. The music, conversation, and occasional clink of bottles made Draco remember many a birthday party at Malfoy manor. Pansy and Queenie were discussing the latest Gladrags offerings with Morag and Mandy as Millicent stood by wearing a disapproving look.

The only people who weren't participating in anything were Potter and Weasley. They stood off to the side with bottles of Butterbeer in their hands, talking in voices so low, Draco couldn't pick out the subject matter no matter how hard he strained to listen.

Seamus Finnigan started an impromptu game of Gossip with six other people -- they all stood in a circle taking turns to whisper into each other's ears. Whispered words had a tendency to take on a life of their own, as it happened.

"Bulging!" Parvati Patil called out, and Maurelle Rivers started giggling beside her.

"I said 'Budgie!'" she said, and everyone laughed. Draco had to work hard to pretend he hadn't been listening.

Liam called everyone's attention then and the conversation and giggles died down.

"All right, it's good to see that you lot are having fun already. I think you'll find tonight's game just as fun, if not more," he said with a sly smirk.

A fiendish gleam in Liam's eyes was mildly unsettling. He drew a small canvas bag out of his pocket and tossed it into the air, then caught it as it fell. Trista Morgan came up behind him and waved her wand, causing twenty chairs to appear in the centre of the classroom.

"If you'll all take your seats, we can get started," Liam said.

The Weird Sisters were playing a cover of Celestina Warbeck's *You Stole My Cauldron But You Can't Have My Heart* as people took their seats. Liam waved his wand at the wireless and turned down the volume, then addressed the room.

"Tonight's game is called Darling If You Love Me."

Draco sniggered at the sound of the name, as did several other people. Liam grinned and continued.

"There are exactly twenty marbles in this bag, eighteen white and two black. I'm going to pass the bag around the room and each of you will take out a marble without looking. Once you've got your marble, you'll show it to the room. The first person to pull a black marble will lead the round. The second person with a black marble is the target."

"The target?" Blaise asked.

"That's the fun part," Liam said, his grin widening. "The lead walks over to the target, sits on their lap, and says 'Darling, if you love me, won't you please smile?'"

Pansy, Queenie, and Morag tittered.

"And to what end are we doing this?" Draco asked, feeling like his eyebrows had reached an impossible height.

"To make the target smile, of course," Liam said. "The lead can do whatever they want -- pull faces, tickle, play with their hair, whisper in their ear, just generally act loving. The target has to say 'Darling, I love you, but I just can't smile tonight.' without laughing or even cracking a smile. If they say the phrase without a hitch, they win the round and the marbles are passed around again." He brandished the bag of marbles as though to emphasise, then continued. "If the target so much as smiles, they

are out of the game and they take a white marble with them. The game continues until two people are left -- they must repeat the procedure again until one of them cracks a smile, whereupon they are out of the game. The last witch or wizard standing is the winner."

"What do we get out of it, though?" Blaise wanted to know.

"A lot of laughter, I expect," Liam replied.

Blaise looked dubious. Draco rolled his eyes. Liam evidently took their silence as consent, since only Slytherins could have been expected to raise a stink over no tangible reward for winning. The Head Boy handed the bag to Draco, who took out a marble. Black.

"Excellent, so you're the lead, Draco," Liam said.

Draco smirked and passed the bag to Blaise, who pulled out a white marble. The marbles made their way quickly around the circle. They reached Potter and he took out a black one. The laughter that followed was positively deafening. Even Draco joined in; the only person who didn't seem amused was Potter. Upon seeing the expression on his fearless leader's face, Weasley stopped laughing too.

"Who comes up with these games, anyway?" Potter asked with a petulant look.

"This one was -- Hannah's idea," Macmillan wheezed.

Hannah Abbott went very red but she, too, was smiling. "We wrote them on slips of parchment and they're pulled randomly out of a hat," she said, shooting Draco a quick look.

"Well, I think it's a bit stupid," Potter said.

"Don't be a spoilsport, Potter," Draco snapped. "It's a game. I'll just be pretending you're Pansy, anyway."

Pansy and several other girls giggled. Potter glared at him. Draco got up from his chair and walked over to him, conscious of the silence that fell around them. He grabbed the back of Potter's chair and straddled him. The scuffling sound his foot made on the floor sounded like a distant explosion. He leant close to the other boy's ear. What would Potter do if Draco were to lick it? Weasley was too close, though, he might see it.

"Darling, if you love me, won't you please smile?" Draco said in a deliberately breathy voice, struck by the improbability of the situation -- the odds of Draco ever saying something like this to Potter were slim to none.

Several girls Draco couldn't see were giggling hysterically. He drew back to look at Potter's face, but his expression was sullen. He was staring fixedly into space, his legs tense. He didn't even look like he was fighting back a smile. Draco felt torn between feeling smug that he had such a paralysing effect on Potter and feeling peevish that he probably wouldn't win the round.

"Darling, I love you, but I just can't smile tonight," Potter croaked, looking distressed. A flush was spreading across his face, making his eyes seem brighter in the dim light of the classroom.

Honestly, could he be any more obvious? Draco didn't understand how the rest of the school hadn't pegged him for a flaming homosexual by now -- any warm-blooded straight male would have found the situation uncomfortably amusing. Only a closeted gay boy or a raging homophobe would react the way Potter did.

"Good show, Potter," he murmured in the same breathy voice he'd used earlier, then got up from Potter's lap and stalked over to Pansy, giving her a kiss on the cheek. "He doesn't really love me, you needn't worry, pet," he said loudly. Everyone except Potter and Weasley laughed. Draco smirked and sat back down in his chair.

"That was something," Blaise whispered to him. "I hope I pull a black one with you."

"You would lose," Draco whispered back, glancing at Potter, who was staring at the two of them, his lips a straight line. Draco would have given his left arm to know what he was thinking.

Draco couldn't help laughing like a hyena when Millicent boomed the "darling if you love me" line at him, so he was out of the running early. The last two standing were Terry Boot and Susan Bones. Susan won, to much applause and giggles. Liam broke the party up after that. The sixth-years filed out of the classroom in mixed groups, talking all the way to the entrance hall.

Draco sidled up to Morag as they walked along the corridor. "Keeping busy?"

"That's one way to put it. Your girlfriend is quite the team leader," Morag replied.

"I think you mean slave driver," Draco said, dropping his voice. "I'm glad I'm not in any groups with her, she'd drive me barmy."

"Oh no you don't, Draco," Pansy called, turning around and beaming at Morag. "I will not have you spreading dissent."

"That's all he ever does though," Weasley said as he and Potter passed them.

"You're just jealous that you didn't get to sit on Potter's lap, aren't you, Weasley?" Pansy said with a snide glare.

Weasley's face turned red as if on cue. He stopped, as did Potter. Draco walked up behind Pansy and put an arm around her shoulders.

"You started this, Weasel King. Be a man for once, admit you shouldn't pick fights you can't win," he spat. "Isn't it your Mudblood friend who keeps harping the loudest about house unity? Some example you're setting, picking on Slytherin girls in the hallways."

"Girls? He was talking about you, Ferret-face," Potter said through his teeth.

"But he was talking to my girlfriend, Scarhead," Draco mocked. There was a group of people gathered around them now.

"You know what? All three of you are being ridiculous," Susan Bones said, stepping between them.

Draco had no intention of antagonising the Minister's niece. "You're right, of course. Come on, Pansy. Morag, I'll talk to you tomorrow."

Draco enjoyed the moment of silence that greeted their departure, then planted a fleeting kiss on top of Pansy's head as they walked.

"Told you it would never work, Parks," he murmured, recalling a conversation they'd had about house unity at the beginning of the year.

Pansy leant her head against his upper arm and made no reply.

"Malfoy," someone said loudly from behind as they were almost at the dungeon stairs.

Draco looked around and saw Potter standing near the marble staircase. The other Gryffindors were headed upstairs, Weasley looking around at Potter every three steps. He looked like a lost puppy. Draco disentangled himself from Pansy and gave Blaise a pointed look. Blaise grinned in a manner far too lascivious for Draco's liking, and urged the girls to go on. Millicent cast a suspicious look around her shoulder but descended the stairs with the other Slytherins. When they were gone, Draco turned to Potter, who was now leaning against the railing, his face grim.

"What do you want, Potter?"

"Can we talk?"

"About what?"

"I just have to ask you a question. You don't have to look so afraid."

"Afraid? In your dreams, Potter. Follow me."

They hurried to the small chamber across from the Great Hall. Draco let Potter go in front of him, then cast a glance around to make sure Mrs. Norris wasn't anywhere in the vicinity. He pulled the door shut, moved a little to the left, and crossed his arms in front of his chest.

"Speak."

Potter shot him a baleful glare. "Are you gay?"

Draco grinned. Leave it to Potter to attack the Gordian knot with a sword. "I don't think it's my sexual orientation we ought to be debating, Potter."

Potter grabbed his robes and shoved him hard against the wall. Draco struggled against his grip, but Potter was stronger than him.

"What're you playing at, Malfoy?" Potter said in a growling voice, his eyes narrowed to slits.

"You're a prissy thing, aren't you, Potter? I bet you wank off to thoughts of Blaise and Smith shagging in the Quidditch changing rooms, don't you? How about Blaise giving it to me in the dungeon? Bet you'd love to see that, wouldn't you?" Draco whispered.

Potter's breathing was laborious. "So it's true then?" he managed.

The two of them were so close that Draco could smell chocolate and Butterbeer on his breath. Draco liked chocolate and Butterbeer, especially in combination. He wrested Potter's hand away from his neck, then snatched Potter's glasses off him and threw them aside. Potter took a startled step back, but Draco grabbed his robes and pulled him closer, pressing himself against Potter.

"How about I show you," he said.

He dragged his tongue across Potter's bottom lip, tasting the chocolate. Potter's sharp intake of breath sent a pleasant shiver through Draco. He put a hand on the back of the other boy's neck and found Potter's tongue with his. Potter made a small sound between a choke and sob, leant forward, and mashed his mouth against Draco's. Draco was pouring all his hatred into this kiss; it was violent and vicious. Potter was raping Draco's mouth with his tongue; Draco reciprocated by biting down on Potter's lower lip. Potter hissed and pressed against him even harder. It filled Draco with a kind of longing he hadn't experienced before this moment. If he'd wanted to humiliate Potter before, now he wanted to break him. He wanted to make Potter whisper his name every time he closed his eyes.

His right hand was fisted in Potter's hair, his left was pulling up the other boy's robe. Potter broke away, panting.

"What--"

Draco ignored him, grabbing onto Potter's underpants with both hands and pulling them down, moving with his hands. His back scraped against the wall as he slid downwards and he hoped his robes wouldn't be ruined by this little adventure. He ran his hands lightly up Potter's thighs. His skin was warm and smooth, and Draco had to fight not to lick where he'd just touched. He continued moving up, pulling Potter's robes up as he went. He smirked against Potter's skin, then dragged his tongue experimentally up from Potter's navel to his chest.

"S-stop," Potter gasped, shivering. Draco straightened up and looked him in the eye.

"Don't tell me this isn't exactly what you wanted, Potter."

"But what about you and Pansy Parkinson?" There was an edge of panic in his voice that made Draco very happy.

Draco really wasn't interested in explaining the intricacies of Slytherin relationships to Potter. He was positively flabbergasted by Potter's ability to think about Draco's alleged loyalties with his pants around his ankles. He grabbed Potter's cock with sure fingers, chuckling at the hiss that followed.

"Pansy and I have a unique relationship, Potter, and it happens to be none of your business," he said, punctuating his words with long, slow strokes.

Potter gasped and gripped his shoulder more tightly, burying his face in the curve of Draco's neck.

"Besides," Draco continued, whispering now, "It's a hand job, not a marriage contract."

He licked Potter's exposed neck and shuddered at the resulting groan.

Potter didn't scream Draco's name when he came, he just choked and bit down too hard on his shoulder. Draco rather liked it. He wiped his hand unceremoniously on Potter's robes. The other boy drew back, shaking slightly as he released him. Draco started to roll his eyes when Potter leaned in to kiss him again.

Twenty minutes later Draco left the chamber, smirking. As he entered the common room, he saw Blaise lounging on the sofa.

"That didn't take long," Blaise remarked with a pointed stare.

Draco raised an eyebrow. "Something on your mind, Blaise?"

"I hope this means you'll stop calling him Potter, you know. Some things just call for first-name basis," Blaise continued, undaunted.

"What are you talking about?" Draco asked, doing his very best to look bewildered.

Blaise frowned slightly. "What's going on with you and Potter, then?"

"Should something be going on with me and Potter?"

Blaise's frown deepened. "Well, he doesn't usually ask you for late-night talks that last half an hour."

"Oh, that. It was nothing really, yet another hare-brained idea of Potter's that he just couldn't wait to share." Draco pursed his lips. "Besides, it's, well, Potter, and I didn't know he was gay..." Draco trailed off without adding "before this year started."

Blaise regarded him with a mixture of suspicion and worry on his face. "I'm surprised, Draco. I mean, you'd have to be blind not to notice his hard-on for you."

"Blind or straight," Draco said with a smirk.

"So you noticed?"

"Of course I noticed. I'm neither blind nor straight. Doesn't mean I'm going to let him shag me."

Blaise got up from the sofa and walked over to him. "But you'll sit in his lap and whisper sweet nothings in his ear. You are such an infernal tease, Draco."

Draco looked up at him, eyebrow raised. "Want to make something of it?"

"Hell yes."

Blaise reached for his shoulders, but Draco sidestepped him. "Blaise, we're in the common room. And don't pretend like you didn't just let slip some rather interesting gossip."

"Gossip?"

"What's this about Potter and his hard-on? Did I miss the inter-house memo announcing that he was gay?"

Blaise cocked his head to one side. "Well, he hasn't said anything, but the way he reacts to you? Plus, I've seen him checking out Zacharias."

Draco grinned, deciding not to mention what he'd noticed at the Three Broomsticks last month. "You could use some competition," he said instead.

"Uh huh," Blaise said, stepping closer. "Harry can have Zacharias, you know. For a while."

"Stop it, Blaise," Draco said, then pushed him away and started walking towards the boys' hallway. "It's late. I'm going to sleep."

"Oh, to have your self-control," Blaise whined and followed him.

Draco was glad he was walking in front and could hide his smug smirk from Blaise.

::

Draco and Potter were back at the "uneasy truce" stage they'd briefly tangled with at the start of the year -- neither boy antagonised the other and there were some

whispers. For his part, Draco made a point of spending all of his free time around Pansy. This, more than anything, made Blaise suspect that something was going on, but Draco would just laugh it off and poke fun at Blaise for being a Hufflepuff supporter.

During the DA group meeting on Monday, they were practising the counter-spell for the Heart-Liquefying Curse. Potter was walking around the room and making sure everyone's wand movements were just right. He stopped behind Draco, a little too close for comfort, and Draco lowered his wand arm, turning his head slightly so that Potter's breath was on his cheek.

"You're really wanton, you know that, right?" he muttered. A rather traitorous part of him wanted Potter to stand even closer.

"I want to talk to you, Malfoy," Potter said, lowering his voice as well.

Draco snorted. "Is that what we're going to call it?" He took a slight step backwards so that his back almost touched Potter's chest. He felt Potter stiffen as though affronted, but the quickened breathing was unmistakable.

"In the courtyard, after dinner on Thursday."

Draco thought about Rita Skeeter and shook his head. "Not the courtyard. On the pitch, and make it Wednesday. Pansy's got study group then."

"Fine. Just... leave your thugs behind."

"We'll see about that, Potter."

Someone called Potter's name and he walked off. Draco went back to practicing his counter-spell, smirking.

::

On Wednesday at dinner, a few straggler owls were delivering the evening edition of the *Daily Prophet* -- mostly to the teachers. One of the owls flew right over Draco and a piece of parchment fluttered into his lap. Draco cast a quick glance around, but no one seemed to have noticed -- not even Blaise, who was gesturing at Millicent with a chicken leg as he extolled the virtues of Italian food.

Draco unrolled the parchment, balancing it on his knees.

Do not leave the dungeon on March 16th, no matter what happens.

Draco turned the note around, but there was nothing else on it. March 16th was next Sunday. Why shouldn't Draco leave the dungeon? He put down his fork and pushed his plate away. He was really getting quite sick of the anonymous notes and letters signed with initials. Muttering an excuse to the others, he hurried out of the Great Hall and into the dungeon.

Once in his dormitory, Draco put his schoolbag down on the floor and took out his wand.

"Ostende scriptorem," he said, zigzagging his wand above the parchment.

Mother.

Draco's stomach gave a wobble as he watched her form fade from the air -- bent over an illusory parchment, hair framing her face. She looked just like she did when he would dream about her. Aside from the relief he felt from seeing his mother alive and well, worry gnawed at his insides. What was going on? Why was his mother writing to him to tell him to stay in the dungeons next Sunday? He shook his head. Voices sounded from the common room -- dinner must be over. He had to go and meet Potter.

Draco grabbed his broomstick and walked out of the dormitory, then made his way towards the Quidditch pitch. Winter frost and patches of snow still made up most of the landscape, but the air seemed somehow fresher. Draco had always wondered if changes on the calendar made people perceive the weather differently. It was March, after all, and that meant spring. The school year was drawing to a close, and so few of Draco's plans had come to fruition that year.

It was no different from any other year, really, Draco mused as he cut across the lawn towards the stairs that led to the pitch. The frosted grass crunched and shattered under his feet. Draco stopped for a moment to pull the hood of his cloak over his head. His fingers felt like they were frozen around his broomstick. Why had he suggested the Quidditch pitch, anyway? It was all Potter's fault.

It was growing dark already. As he descended the stone stairs to the Quidditch pitch, Draco squinted, trying to see if Potter was there or not. He couldn't see anyone, though, not even as he finished his descent and paused at the foot of the stairs. Was this Potter's idea of a joke? Draco tugged his hood further down.

"Over here, Malfoy," came a calm voice from behind him.

He turned around and saw Potter leaning against the rock wall beside his Firebolt. Draco walked over and propped his own broomstick against the cliff. He squared his shoulders and faced Potter, arranging his face into a carefully controlled scowl.

"So what's this about?"

Potter's eyes snapped up and glittered. When he spoke, his voice sounded carefully controlled. "You and me. Quidditch. Mind games. Sex."

Draco grinned rather freely, from disbelief more than anything else. "Did you practise that line, Potter?"

"What if I did?" Potter replied, matching Draco's grin with one of his own.

"Give it a few years, Potter, and you might be able to convince a Hufflepuff."

Potter's grin faded. "I don't have a few years, Malfoy."

Draco raised an eyebrow. "Come again?"

"You heard me. Here's the thing, Malfoy. Your dad's master wants to kill me, and he'll probably succeed, though I'm damned if I won't try to stop him." Potter pushed his glasses slightly up his nose. "So I figured while I'm on borrowed time, I might as well make the most of it."

Draco blinked at him. "You're propositioning me."

Potter looked shocked. "I didn't even get to that part yet."

"I'm good at sub-text."

It was Potter's turn to blink. "Sub-text?"

"Reading between the lines, you nitwit."

Potter detached himself from the wall and stepped closer. "So is the fact that you haven't tried to hex me yet sub-text for 'yes'?"

"That depends."

"On what?"

"On whether you can live with fucking someone who hates you." The crude word stung Draco's ears but it fit.

Potter flinched. "Do you?"

"Of course I do. Don't you feel the same?"

"Er, hate's a bit strong. I reserve that for, you know, Snape. Voldemort."

Draco blanched at the name, but rolled his eyes. Potter couldn't even admit he hated him. Gryffindors, always associating sex with ridiculous fluffy bunnies and feelings. "Fine, you dislike me, then. Wish I would turn into a ferret permanently and get eaten by giant spiders."

"I want you, Malfoy." Potter stepped even closer to him and pushed Draco's hood off in a too-familiar way that made Draco want to run away. "What's it gonna be?"

"We can work something out," Draco murmured, wondering when he'd run out of breath.

The kiss was no less angry, but it was less violent than last time.

::

"Where did you get this scar?"

"Compliments of your friendly neighbourhood Hippogriff."

"I like it."

"You would."

::

If someone had told Draco in September that he'd be having clandestine meetings with Potter later in the year, Draco would have laughed them out of school. That, more than the sheer "what the hell" factor of the meetings, made Draco approach them with humour rather than any serious reflection on what he was doing and what would happen if they were to get caught. At any rate, Nott wasn't around to take any snapshots. Nothing changed during lessons and study groups; Draco did not go out of his way to be unpleasant to Potter but he didn't hold back whenever the opportunity presented itself.

Preston Iven had accidentally flung a bit of dragon dung at Pansy's Xenodragon plant during a Friday Herbology lesson. The plant swelled up and turned a sickly yellow; its vines became limp and oozed disgusting pus. Months of her group's work were ruined, and Pansy was in a right snit all day. She couldn't berate him herself as he was the older prefect's brother; Pansy was reduced to waiting for Laurel to discipline him. Technically, Pansy was well within her rights to give him lines or detention, but family boundaries just weren't crossed.

Pansy was never good at not getting her way, and broke down as they left the Great Hall after dinner. She started to cry, clutching Draco's sleeve for support.

"The poor thing's moping around in its pot now, just flopping about if someone comes near it!" she sobbed. "How many times did I tell those sods to be careful? It's going to take months for it to get better! It's lucky the little prat came straight to me after it happened, or it could have died!"

"Shhh, Parks, it wasn't your fault, you're not going to lose marks because of Preston," Draco said in a calming tone, putting his arms around her.

Pansy just cried harder. "You don't understand! It's not about the marks! I care about that plant, we've spent so much time tending it!"

Draco hugged her close and she buried her face in his robe, sniffing loudly and hiccupping. Draco looked around helplessly and saw Weasley, Potter, and Granger staring at them from the doors to the Great Hall.

He kicked himself mentally for letting Pansy have her breakdown before they reached the dungeon, then scowled at the three of them. Granger looked disgusted, Weasley looked sheepish, and Potter was glaring at Pansy.

Draco smirked and brought a hand up to stroke Pansy's hair gently. "Come on, pet, let's get you to the common room," he said loudly enough for the Gryffindors to hear. Pansy gave a feeble sniff and went along, clinging to him. It wasn't that she was emotionally unstable; she just enjoyed the attention, so she never held back when her nerves gave out. It worked out well for both of them.

::

"So you're not sleeping with her?"

"I've told you, Potter, my relationship with Pansy is none of your concern. After all, I don't ask you about Weasley's sister."

"Ginny? What about her?"

"Did you think I didn't see you with her when we had the Quidditch tryouts?"

"That was nothing, though, we just--"

"Whatever you say, Potty."

"You're really annoying."

"And you talk too much."

::

Two weeks after Nott's escape, Draco was walking to dinner, flanked by Vincent and Gregory. Blaise had gone off to meet Smith in the library earlier that afternoon and the girls had gone to the greenhouse to look after the sick Xenodragon plant. Draco had left the common room later than usual and he expected that the others would already be in the Great Hall. As Draco walked through the double doors, the first thing he heard was Pansy's voice.

"Draco! They caught Theodore!" she cried, waving at him frantically. Draco quickened his pace and rushed over to the Slytherin table. He snatched the evening edition of the *Daily Prophet* out of Pansy's hands. Pansy pointed to an article at the bottom of the first page and Draco scanned it quickly.

Nott had somehow managed to make it to Diagon Alley -- probably broke into one of the Hogsmeade homes and used their fireplace. He'd been staying at the Leaky Cauldron under an assumed name until today. A pub patron spotted him at breakfast, recognised his face from the pictures the *Prophet* had printed last week, and immediately alerted the Hit Wizards. What Nott had done to Potter, Blaise, Smith, and Boot had been a serious crime. He was facing serious assault and attempted murder charges. He'd turned seventeen in October and was thus a fully-grown wizard.

The article said that Nott was half-mad when a Hit Wizard apprehended him. On account of the boy's mental state, he was being kept in a St. Mungo's ward until law enforcement officials could figure out if he was fit to stand trial. Draco hoped he'd be locked up there for life. Without Dementors, Azkaban was too good for Nott; his

daddy would probably break him out anyway. As Draco started to hand the paper back to Pansy, he noticed his surname in the centerpiece article.

MISSING AUROR TURNS UP

Readers of the Daily Prophet will recall that Auror Kingsley Shacklebolt has been missing since 3rd September, the day of the mass breakout from Azkaban by a number of convicted Death Eaters. Late last night, Shacklebolt knocked on the door of Victoria Archer's Cardiff home. Archer says he looked very much like a ghost, but was very polite as he introduced himself and requested use of her fireplace to get to the Ministry of Magic.

"I gave him some Floo powder and he left," says Archer, 29. "Minutes later, I heard the sounds of Apparition outside my window and looked out. Four wizards were running off in the direction of the motorway just behind my home. That was the last I saw of them."

Shacklebolt is currently in St. Mungo's Hospital for Magical Maladies and Injuries, undergoing treatment for prolonged exposure to the Imperius Curse and various magically induced burns, says Healer Worley, 36. A Ministry spokesperson has informed the Daily Prophet that the Auror had been held in captivity by the Dark Lord's Death Eaters. He had been tortured for information about his supposed involvement in a mythical secret society, the Order of the Phoenix.

Shacklebolt was being taken to a different location by escaped convict and confirmed Death Eater, Lucius Malfoy. A confidential source tells the Daily Prophet that Malfoy had most likely miscalculated his Apparition point and ended up in the path of an oncoming lorry, the impact of which killed him instantly. He must have been the one

to have put Shackbolt under the Imperius Curse, because the Auror, who had Apparated several feet away from the motorway, was freed from the curse immediately.

Lucius Malfoy's body, recovered by the wizards whom Archer had seen running behind her home, was taken to St. Mungo's Hospital. He was pronounced dead on arrival. Attempts to contact Malfoy's wife Narcissa at their Wiltshire manor have so far been fruitless...

Draco's felt the blood drain from his face as he stared at the paragraph about his father's death. His hand was shaking so badly that he wasn't even reading anymore, just staring stupidly at the wretched paper.

Dead on arrival. *Dead on arrival.* Deadonarrivaldeadonarrivaldeadonarrival.

He looked up at Pansy, who had turned away and was talking to Blaise. Draco tried to swallow the lump in his throat. His chest felt hollow. Horror gnawed at his stomach. He felt his knees buckle and grabbed the table for support, upending Pansy's goblet of juice. She turned around, worry replacing fury on her face as she took one look at Draco.

"Draco? Oh my goodness, Draco, what's wrong?"

Draco saw her lips moving, but her voice was coming from somewhere far away. Surely he would never be able to blink again.

Pansy snatched the *Daily Prophet* out of his hands and Draco sank down onto the bench. Blaise stood up and started reading the article over Pansy's shoulder. They both finished reading at the same time and looked at Draco with identical expressions of fear and pity.

Bile rose up in Draco's throat and he swallowed. "I'll just -- go -- bed," he croaked, and stood up again.

"I'll come with you," Blaise said and put an arm around his shoulders, steering him gently towards the doors. Draco stumbled along, heedless of the mindless chatter all around him. His mind was blank, except for the memory of an October afternoon in Hogsmeade.

Draco Malfoy's diary, March 9, 1997

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Chapter 16: A Gryffindor and a Slytherin

A Gryffindor and A Slytherin

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Author's Notes: This was my first novel-length Harry/Draco story. It was completed four months before the release of HBP (and before the announcement of Draco's birth date on Rowling's website) and is now AU. This story stands alone, though it's also a companion piece to *Beyond Wild Moor and Fen*, which is from Harry's point of view. Many thanks to Mishty, Vel, Jaxmari, Kristal and Autumn LeCroix for beta-reading. Constructive criticism is always welcome and appreciated.

A Gryffindor and A Slytherin Chapter 16 - Mors Mortis

Draco turned his head to one side and saw Vincenzo, the toy snake from Christmas, who was blinking at him.

Christmas. The letter from his father. Father.

Draco shut his eyes tightly. It was around five in the morning. He had woken up twenty minutes ago and had been sitting on the edge of his bed since then, staring into space. He'd lain awake for hours the night before, gazing at the ceiling, not blinking.

He didn't remember falling asleep. He didn't remember who had pulled shut the hangings around his bed as he pulled them open. He felt unhinged, separated from reality -- on the one hand, there was Hogwarts and business as usual. On the other hand, there was a newspaper page that had destroyed Draco's family. He opened his eyes and sighed. For once, he was glad that Vincent snored; the sound helped Draco focus on his surroundings.

Vincenzo blinked again, then slithered off the box on which he had been curled up. Draco's gaze fell onto the box -- the ornate potion bottles, Pansy's Christmas present. Why did everything have to remind him of the last time he'd had news of his father, before...

He picked up the box and hurled it against the wall opposite, expecting to hear glass shattering, but all the box did was smack against the wall with a dull thud. Of course; the bottles inside must be Unbreakable; he shouldn't have expected any less from Pansy.

"Draco?" came a sleepy voice from somewhere behind him, and Draco jumped.

"Go back to sleep, Blaise," he said in a hollow voice.

He heard the sound of bed hangings being shoved aside. Blaise shuffled over to his bed and sat down, curling one leg under himself. He looked a mess, Draco noted with a strange detachment. Normally he would tease Blaise about the state of his hair but

that was in a distant past that existed now only in memory. Draco looked down at his hands, which were folded in his lap.

"Have you heard from your mum?" Blaise asked.

Draco shook his head. Blaise didn't know that Mother had run away from the Aurors. Draco's mouth twitched involuntarily as he thought about telling Blaise just what kind of situation he was in currently. He swallowed and looked at Blaise, frowning.

"Maybe there's been some mistake," he said dully.

Blaise peered at him. "A mistake?"

"Yeah. Maybe it wasn't dad. Maybe it was someone else."

The corners of Blaise's mouth turned down. "I'm sorry," he said.

"Don't be. I'm serious. Maybe it was just someone else," Draco said, desperation creeping into his voice. There was a stinging behind his eyes and the lump in his throat had returned. "I don't know. Polyjuice Potion. It could have been, couldn't it?"

"Yeah," Blaise said. "Possible."

"Think about it," Draco said, heart leaping in his chest. "Maybe Father wants everyone to think he's" -- he gulped -- "dead."

"Your mum would know, wouldn't she?" Blaise asked, not looking at him.

"Yeah," Draco said. "I'll send her an owl." He'd do no such thing, of course. He couldn't risk having someone intercept the owl. He frowned. Why hadn't Mother contacted him, anyway? The accident had happened on Saturday evening, and it was Monday morning already. Maybe there would be an owl from her at breakfast.

Blaise was frowning. "Do you want to go to the Owlery now?" he asked. "It's still early, no one will see us."

"No," Draco said. "I'll wait and see if there's any post at breakfast."

He got up and walked over to pick up the box he'd thrown earlier. It had a slight dent in the side from the impact, but was otherwise unharmed. Draco put it back down on his bedside table. He'd have a letter from Mother later, he was sure. Father couldn't be dead, he just couldn't be. Their family was on the winning side in the war. Winners didn't die.

The stinging behind Draco's eyes was more insistent now and he cast about for a distraction, anything to stop from seeing the words "dead on arrival" in his mind's eye again. He grabbed Blaise's hair and pulled, leaning down for a kiss. He didn't mind that the other boy tasted sour from sleep; the jolt of pleasure was almost enough to keep his inner turmoil at bay. Blaise broke the kiss and frowned up at him.

"This isn't a good idea," he said in a low voice, his breathing unsteady.

"Why not?" Draco demanded, feeling his face flush.

"Because," Blaise said, looking away, "I don't want to use you."

"Shut up," Draco growled, pushing him down on the bed. "You'll use me when I tell you to."

Twenty minutes of being able to forget was better than none. It didn't matter that he thought about someone else the whole time.

::

Draco kept his head down throughout breakfast to avoid the stares. There had been no letter.

Blaise, Pansy, Vincent, and Gregory surrounded him everywhere he went, glowering at anyone who so much as glanced in Draco's direction. The Slytherin table had been especially quiet that morning. The *Daily Prophet* had held no new information. Draco sat through his morning classes -- Defence Against the Dark Arts and History of Magic -- in a kind of stupor, trying to focus on everything but the sympathetic looks and whispers.

They had Potions after lunch, and Draco had considered skiving off just to avoid Potter. Any sort of commiseration from Potter would break Draco, he knew it would - it was a flight of wild speculation, really, but Draco guessed that if anyone knew the truth about Father, it was Potter. He was Dumbledore's favourite boy, after all, and Dumbledore knew everything. If Potter were to look at him with pity, Draco would have to stop clinging to the hope that there'd been some mistake.

To his immense relief, Potter offered no pity. When Draco looked at him as he passed, Potter simply met his gaze and held it for a moment, then looked away.

Snape lingered at Draco's desk at the beginning of the lesson. Draco looked up into his guarded black eyes and wished he hadn't. There was no pity in Snape's face, but neither was there any hope.

Draco was glad to focus on shredding his dittany leaves.

He made his way to the DA group meeting after dinner, vaguely aware that he was the only Slytherin in his group now that Nott was gone. He wondered if he should go

back to the dungeon and get Blaise to come with him, but decided against it. He refused to look weak. They were learning how to resist Memory Charms, and Potter paired him with Lisa Turpin, a round-faced Ravenclaw girl. Draco kept his mind on his spellwork and refused to look at anyone. He was relieved when the meeting was over. As he turned to leave the classroom, Potter called his name.

Draco turned around and narrowed his eyes. Granger and Longbottom were standing off to the side, talking. Granger was doing a poor job of pretending she wasn't paying attention to Potter and Draco.

"What do you want, Potter?" he asked in a guarded tone.

Potter gave Granger a sharp look, and she pulled Longbottom out of the classroom, shutting the door behind them. Everyone else had already left.

"I just wanted to say I'm sorry to hear about your dad," Potter said.

Draco closed his eyes for a moment. The sinking feeling in his chest intensified, and he looked up at Potter, then crossed the distance between them, glaring. "Save your pity for someone who needs it, Potter," he muttered.

"It's not pity, Malfoy," Potter said. "I just know exactly what you must--"

"Shut up, Potter. Just shut up. You have no idea what it's like to lose... to lose--"

"Oh, really, Malfoy?" Potter's nostrils were flaring and his voice was rising. "Don't I, now? Maybe next time you decide to bring up my godfather--"

"Is that what this is about? You're still sore I mentioned your dead godfather? For your information, he was family," Draco said with a sneer. "A blood traitor, so all I can say is good riddance to bad rubbish--"

Potter punched him in the mouth. Draco felt salt and copper in his mouth as his lip began to bleed. He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and looked up at Potter, whose fists were clenched at his sides, chest heaving, eyes narrowed to slits behind his glasses.

"You know, Potter," Draco murmured, "if only you'd had the good sense to snuff it sixteen years ago, none of this would be happening."

"Yeah," Potter said, his voice raspy. "You're right, Malfoy. But don't tell me you hold me responsible for your dad's choices. I didn't make him join Voldemort. You want someone to blame, blame him. You're-- you're pathetic."

"Pathetic, am I?" Draco snarled, reaching for his wand, but Potter grabbed his wrist. Draco tried to pull out of his grip, but Potter was too strong.

"Look, Malfoy," Potter said, the edge to his voice abating slightly. "I don't-- I don't want to have to fight you. Not you. Not anyone from school." His voice broke, and he looked almost plaintively at Draco.

"Spare me, Potter," Draco said in a carefully controlled tone. He struggled furiously to be unaffected by the lost look in Potter's eyes. How was it that he had to struggle even as his split lip smarted? Potter had done that. This wasn't supposed to be difficult. Potter wasn't supposed to look at him like that, and Draco's heart wasn't supposed to drop into his stomach at the sight. Potter's fingers around his wrist were hot even through the school robes. Draco tugged, and Potter let go, suddenly looking defiant.

"Fine, Malfoy. Do whatever you want. Go join Voldemort for all I care, it's what you always wanted, isn't it?"

With that, Potter stalked out of the classroom, leaving Draco alone with the lump that reappeared in his throat. He was suddenly tired. His lip was bleeding; his wrist still burned from where Potter had clutched it, and his control was almost gone. He wanted to run to his mother and hide his face in the folds of her robes, like he used to when he was little.

Snape came to the common room later that evening, to inform Draco officially of Lucius's death and offer condolences on behalf of the school. Draco listened to his impassive voice, nodded, and retreated to his dormitory immediately after. To hell with "boys don't cry".

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Four days after the news of Lucius Malfoy's death, it was Draco's birthday. In the morning, he stood staring down at the small silver key he'd got from his father. It was as though Father must have known somehow that he wouldn't live to see his son's seventeenth birthday, Draco reflected. His shock had been replaced by bitter resentment, mostly directed towards his mother, of all people. Draco couldn't believe she hadn't tried to contact him for so long. The resentment alternated with icy fear -- maybe Mother was dead too. Draco tried not to think about that.

Slytherin lost spectacularly to Hufflepuff on Saturday; the Hufflepuff Seeker caught the Snitch before either team had scored any goals. Draco found that he didn't care. He felt detached from everything around him -- somewhere behind him was Hogwarts with its lessons, gossip, Quidditch, and parties. Ahead of him loomed an uncertain future without his father, a future that did not preclude war. Meanwhile, he and Potter had avoided each other since their row on Monday, and Draco was just fine with that.

The school had been buzzing with anticipation all week -- Seamus Finnigan had liked the idea of the Hufflepuff parties so much during first term, that he'd suggested they hold a St. Patrick's Day party for the whole school. Draco thought it was a ridiculous idea. St. Patrick was well known for driving the druids and witchcraft out of Ireland -- apparently, Finnigan's history knowledge was lacking. Draco told Liam so, but the Head Boy just smiled at him and told him to show up regardless. After lunch on Sunday, Draco and the other Slytherins made their way towards the Great Hall.

The four house tables had been moved, two to a wall, laden with snacks, fruit, and drinks. The teachers were going to supervise from the head table. Draco looked at Snape, whose head was angled slightly towards McGonagall. The deputy Headmistress was saying something Snape clearly didn't approve of. He looked up at Draco as though he felt that he was being watched. Draco almost kicked himself -- of

course! Snape would know about Mother. Well, at least he'd get something out of attending this ridiculous event.

He walked towards the head table, barely listening to the chatter of the crowd and Liam's voice as he welcomed everyone to the first ever school-wide St. Patrick's Day party. Draco scoffed -- St. Patrick's Day, of all things. It wasn't until tomorrow, anyway -- though he supposed it would have been difficult to organise a party when everyone had lessons to go to. He didn't see why he had to attend, but he would make the best of his time. They couldn't make him participate in whatever inane activities Finnigan and his mates had cooked up.

Snape and McGonagall were still deep in conversation when Draco reached them. He stood off to the side and watched the crowd. A wireless was playing from the opposite corner -- the sound was probably magically amplified, because it was as loud as a live concert. People were dancing in the middle of the Great Hall, passing around large sacks. Suddenly, the music stopped. People holding the sacks pulled various articles of green clothing from the bags and put them on.

Many of the people who lined the walls were laughing -- Finnigan had pulled a pair of exceptionally large green knickers from his bag; after some hesitation he pulled them on his head. This made him look like an overlarge frog and Draco couldn't help but snigger. After watching for a few minutes, he realised what the game entailed -- whoever ended up with the clothing sack when the music stopped had to put on something from the bag.

Draco noted with satisfaction that many Slytherins were not participating, choosing instead to point and laugh from the sidelines. Blaise was, unfortunately, dancing, as were Pansy and Queenie. Draco needed to get back there and prevent them from humiliating themselves any further. Green was a Slytherin colour, mind, but not nearly in such amounts. He glanced over at Snape and noticed that he was no longer

talking to McGonagall. Snape, too, was studying the crowd -- with an expression of great distaste on his face.

"Could I have a word, Professor?" he asked, loudly, to make sure he was heard despite the music.

The Potions master looked up at him sharply, then nodded. McGonagall studied Draco, her spectacles low on her nose. He suddenly felt like a butterfly pinned to a board. Snape rose from his seat and Draco followed him to the antechamber just behind the head table. They walked in and Snape closed the door.

"You wanted a word, Draco?" he asked, folding his arms across his chest and squaring his shoulders.

Draco swallowed, sick dread filling his stomach all of a sudden. "Professor, I was wondering if you knew anything about-- about--"

Snape's expression was inscrutable. "Not any more than you do, I'm afraid."

"Is it true? Only I haven't heard from..." Draco trailed off and looked away.

"I know this must be a very difficult time for you, Draco," Snape said. "But you must understand that the circumstances surrounding Lucius's accident are very delicate. I commend you on your restraint in the past week. I can only hope you will continue to be patient."

Draco exhaled. Mother had to be all right; Snape wouldn't have told him to be patient if she weren't. "Thank you, sir," he said.

"Not at all," Snape said. "Now if--"

CRASH.

The noise was so loud that Draco yelped. The ground was trembling beneath his feet - what was going on? Was it an earthquake? The next moment, Snape was gone with a swish of his robes. Draco followed him out the door. It felt and sounded like an earthquake, all right; at least what Draco imagined an earthquake to be like.

Draco walked over to the middle of the Great Hall and stood next to Morag. The music was still blaring but no one was dancing; people were glancing around fearfully. Many of them were wearing odd green garments over their school robes. Draco heard nervous laughter from a group of fifth-year girls. He couldn't tell which house they were from for all the green they were wearing.

"Professor... Dumbledore," came a raspy, gurgling shout from the doorway and Draco looked away from the girls.

Hagrid was leaning against the doorframe. Both his arms hung limply at his sides; Draco could tell they were broken. Half of Hagrid's face seemed to be missing behind a mass of blood and matted hair. There were dark stains all down his front, blood gushed from his nose.

"Get the children--" Hagrid croaked, blood bubbling from his mouth. He toppled over sideways and lay quite still.

"HAGRID! NO!" came a shout from Draco's left.

He was almost knocked off his feet as Potter sprinted past him, a ridiculous green cloak trailing behind him, a green pirate's hat on his head.

"GET BACK, HARRY!" Dumbledore's voice boomed. Draco whirled around to look at him. The Headmaster had risen, his face grim.

CRASH. The shaking was getting stronger now; Draco thought he saw the very walls wobble.

There was another loud crash and several people screamed. Draco turned back around and felt his face drain of colour.

Most of the double doors were gone, as was a large chunk of the wall above them.

The giant from the Forbidden Forest stood where the doors had been. Potter stood frozen in front of it.

The screaming started after a moment of stunned silence -- people were running towards the back of the Great Hall, tripping over each other and the abandoned sacks of clothes.

"Harry. Grawp kill Harry," the giant boomed over the screams and the music, which was still playing. The giant's voice sounded serene, like it was speaking in his sleep. The creature started to reach out for Potter, who seemed rooted to his spot. The creature's enormous fingers closed around Potter's shoulders and Draco heard a cracking noise.

As Potter's feet were lifted off the ground, Draco remembered.

He whipped out his wand and sent a volley of sparks in the direction of the giant's head. The monster's great eyes widened.

"Shiny," it said, and dropped Potter. He fell to the ground not far from Hagrid and didn't move.

There was a flash like lightning, and the giant froze. Draco turned around. Dumbledore and Snape both had their wands out and were pointing them at the creature. Most of the students were huddled behind the head table. The teachers were on their feet. Everyone's faces wore identical expressions of disbelief and horror. The wireless blared harshly against the sudden silence. Some part of Draco's mind registered that it was his favourite song.

*Watch my abating faith
It's a tonality,
Yeah, faith tonality.*

Faith. Draco stared at the unmoving giant. He suddenly remembered his mother's note. Draco wasn't supposed to have been here today. He was supposed to have stayed in the dungeons. He'd forgotten all about the letter; his father's death had been the foremost thing on his mind. He became vaguely aware of adults rushing past him. Someone was sobbing.

"Draco!" -- hiccough -- "Blaise! Somebody!" -- gasp -- "Please!"

The shout jolted Draco out of his stupor. "Pansy?" he blurted, looking around wildly.

He saw her on the ground beside -- oh God.

Draco rushed over to Pansy and knelt beside her. Her face was red and shining with tears. She threw her arms around Draco's neck and buried her face in his robes, shaking. Vincent, Gregory, and Millicent stood over them, wearing identical looks of horror. Tracey was crying into Millicent's robes while Sheridan Roper clutched Vincent's shoulder for support.

Queenie was pinned beneath a huge chunk of wall. Her glassy eyes stared up at Draco with her usual unassuming gaze; her mouth was open in a soft "O" of surprise. Draco didn't need to be a Mediwizard to know she was dead. One of her hands stuck out at an odd angle, fingers curled around some nonexistent object. Draco closed his hands around her fingers helplessly. They were still warm and pliant. Draco suddenly felt very small.

Where was Blaise? Draco looked around and saw him limping towards them. He was very pale, wincing with every step.

"Took a chunk out of my leg, I reckon -- QUEENIE!"

Draco looked over to where most of the teachers were huddled around Potter and Hagrid. Bitter resentment flooded through him and he thought his face might break from his deep scowl.

"Yeah, that's right! Save your precious, perfect Potter! Who cares if a Slytherin's dead?" he yelled, shaking with rage.

The music finally stopped.

"It is always the innocent who are the first to suffer," a deep melodious voice said from behind him.

Draco turned around and saw the centaur Firenze, who taught Divination to the younger students. The centaur looked sadly down at Queenie's body, then swished his tail and walked out of the Great Hall, his head bowed.

Snape hurried over to them. He was followed closely by McGonagall, whose lips were trembling.

"Clear off, all of you. Back to the dungeon, now," Snape barked.

"Daphne, Daphne!" came an anguished cry from behind them.

Ernie Macmillan was rushing up with several other people. They stopped several feet away from the Slytherins. Macmillan stared at Queenie for a moment. His Adam's apple bobbed up and down furiously and he turned away, covering his eyes with a hand.

"Dead, she's dead, and there was nothing, nothing, nothing--" Pansy sobbed, tugging on Draco's robes.

Draco squeezed her shoulder tightly. "Come on, Pansy, shhh, there now, come on, you can't do anything..."

"She didn't do anything! Why?" Pansy wailed, then choked on a sob.

Draco stood up and pulled her up forcibly. She immediately went limp. Draco sighed and lifted her off the floor with some difficulty. She put her arms around his neck and continued sobbing. Draco looked around at the other Slytherins and jerked his head towards the door.

"You heard Professor Snape. Let's go," he said, and set off.

Potter and Hagrid were no longer there. The giant was still towering where it had arrived, unmoving, and Draco had to duck around it to get through the doors. He was frozen with fear and didn't think he breathed until he was beyond the doors.

The entrance hall was in ruins. There were chunks of wall and huge wooden splinters everywhere. A bitter wind from outside stirred up clouds of dust. Draco told Vincent and Gregory to clear a path towards the dungeon with their wands. There was already a path leading to the Hufflepuff common room and another towards the marble staircase, but it looked like the sixth-years were the first Slytherins to get out of the Great Hall.

"D-Draco," Blaise whispered suddenly, tugging on the back of his robe.

Draco turned his head to look, blowing Pansy's hair away from his face.

"Look," Blaise whispered, pointing to the floor near where the doors used to be.

Draco squinted and saw a ground beetle crawling towards them, two of its legs dragging behind it. Rita Skeeter.

"Get her," he told Blaise.

Blaise wrinkled his nose. "Ew."

"She was a Slytherin once," Draco muttered, glancing at the others. Vincent and Gregory were almost done clearing the path. Sheridan, Tracey, and Millicent were huddled together, talking in hushed voices.

Blaise sighed and crouched with some difficulty, holding his hand out to the beetle. Its antennae wriggled a bit as it hesitated. It finally crawled into Blaise's outstretched

palm. Blaise straightened up just as Vincent called out that they were done. They descended the stairs in silence.

Once in the common room, Draco deposited Pansy on the sofa. His arms were sore from carrying her, and he stretched them out gingerly. Pansy sat on the sofa like a rag doll, her head bowed, hiccupping occasionally. Tracey sat down beside her and they embraced, crying with renewed energy. Millicent ordered Vincent and Gregory to bring tea things from the kitchen.

"Make sure you bring enough for everybody, the others'll start arriving soon," she called after them as they filed out.

Draco said he had to go change his robes and gave Blaise a meaningful glance. They went into their dormitory, where Blaise deposited Rita on Vincent's bed. She immediately transformed. She looked pale and her hair was matted with blood in spots.

"Both -- ankles," she croaked. "Need -- healing."

Draco and Blaise exchanged glances.

"We can make a Healing Potion," Blaise said. He gestured to his injured leg with a rueful grin. "I could use some, too, and I hate having to spend time in the hospital wing."

"I'm guessing you don't want to be taken to the hospital wing?" Draco asked, turning to Rita.

She shook her head. "A potion's fine." She looked up at them. "Thank you."

Draco's voice was grim. "We already lost one Slytherin today," he said. "Never again."

Rita's eyes widened. "Someone died?"

"A girl in our year," Blaise said. His voice broke and he turned away. He crouched down on the floor beside his bed, wincing, and popped his trunk open, then started to get his Potions kit out. "Oh, bollocks. I haven't got any barnacle seeds, those were from Snape's private store."

"I nicked some," Draco said. "Figured they'd come in handy. I hope you've got dragon's blood, because I haven't."

"That I have," Blaise said.

Draco walked to his bed and opened his own trunk. Rita conjured up a worktable, as neither of the boys knew how to do that. They decided that Blaise would make the potion while Draco went out to be with the others; Draco was the prefect and he'd be expected to be on hand. Along with the barnacle seeds, Draco pulled out a large slab of Honeydukes' chocolate from his trunk and gave it to Blaise and Rita, to counter the digestion-enhancing effects of the seeds.

He locked the dormitory door and walked out into the common room. Vincent and Gregory were back; they made a group of house-elves bring in several tea trays. Other Slytherins were arriving in small groups. Many of the younger students were crying. There would be many nightmare-induced screams in the weeks to come. After having some tea, Pansy was able to pull herself together enough to act the prefect for the younger students. Liam and Laurel took a head count. The only people missing were Blaise and Queenie. Draco made up a story about a giant being Blaise's Boggart.

"He just needs some time alone, he'll be out as soon as he's pulled himself together," he told Liam, who nodded. Boggarts were understandable, after all.

"Liam, do you think this has something to do with Theodore Nott?" Malcolm Baddock asked.

Liam shook his head. "Nott is in St. Mungo's. No, the giant had to have come from the Dark Lord."

Draco felt his face burn and looked down at his feet. He'd avoided thinking about it, but now there was no way out. He knew exactly where the giant had come from. It was partially his fault that Queenie was dead. He'd been the one to tell Mother about the giant in the forest. Clearly, the information had made it to the Dark Lord. Draco

knew now where the dreamy quality of the giant's voice had come from: the Imperius Curse. Only someone as powerful as the Dark Lord could have made the curse work on a giant.

"But why is the Dark Lord attacking Hogwarts?" Preston Iven asked, his voice fearful.

Laurel patted her brother's hair. "It's Harry Potter," she said with a sour expression. "I heard the giant say it wanted to kill Harry. The Dark Lord wants him dead for some reason."

"Probably revenge," Brice Owen said, setting his teacup down on the table.

"Speaking of which, Draco, whatever possessed you to save Harry Potter?" Liam asked in a clipped tone.

Draco looked up, thinking fast. What was he supposed to say? *Why, Liam, to repay a wizard's debt, of course?* He frowned. "I simply thought that a Slytherin saving Dumbledore's favourite boy would help improve our image in front of the whole school. Don't you think so?"

Liam looked taken aback for a moment, then smirked. "I think I have a reasonable guess who's going to be Head Boy next year. Good job, Draco."

Draco exhaled. Pansy was looking at him with narrowed eyes. She cocked an eyebrow, mouthing a "what?" at him.

"I'll tell you later," Draco muttered so only she could hear. There was no way he was telling her or anyone about the wizard's debt, of course. He'd rather pretend to be lovesick over Potter than admit his part in Queenie's death.

"Please, Draco, how did you know the spell to stop the giant?" Melanie Atwood, a third-year, asked.

"I just distracted it," Draco replied. "I figured they're all dumb enough to be easily distracted by something sparkly."

"Wow," the girl said, tugging on one of her pigtails. "That's quick thinking."

"Thanks," Draco said. He wanted to smile at her but found that he couldn't.

The Slytherins continued discussing what had happened. The subject of Queenie's death did not come up. Blaise came out to the common room twenty minutes later, no longer limping. He sat down beside Draco and elbowed him in the ribs discreetly, nodding towards the exit. Draco announced that he was going to go ask Professor Snape about dinner. The two boys were astonished to find the Entrance Hall back to normal -- there was no sign of the destruction the giant had wreaked. Even the doors to the Great Hall were back in place.

Blaise and Draco hurried out into the courtyard. Blaise took beetle-Rita out of his pocket and let her go. She began to crawl very quickly in the general direction of Hogsmeade. The two boys stood in the windy courtyard for some time. Draco was worn out physically and emotionally -- it seemed like everything kept happening to him. Father's death, now Queenie, the giant, Potter... Draco shook his head.

He could see thick, swirling storm clouds on the horizon. Occasionally, a lightning bolt would split the sky in two. Every distant thunderclap reminded Draco of the giant. Draco shivered with the wind and tugged on Blaise's sleeve.

"Let's go. We still need to see Snape."

They reached Snape's office and Draco knocked -- three sharp, one soft. There was no reply. Draco looked at Blaise, who raised an eyebrow.

"Hospital wing," they said together and headed back towards the entrance hall.

Madam Pomfrey looked cross when they entered the hospital wing. "Harry is fine, boys, he needs rest. He's had too many visitors already. Run along now."

"We're not here for Potter," Draco said, ignoring the pang he felt at hearing that Potter was all right. "We're looking for Professor Snape."

Pomfrey's eyes darkened. "There is an emergency meeting being held in the staff lounge, and you'd better not disturb them."

"Well, we've been sent by the Head Boy to ask about dinner," Draco said.

"Dinner will be held as usual; your head of house will come to talk to you before. Oh, dear, you are Slytherins, aren't you?"

"Right," Blaise said, stealing a glance at the beds. Three of them had curtains drawn around them. "She's..."

Tears filled the matron's eyes. "I'm sorry, dears. There was nothing I could do for her or Hagrid."

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Queenie's parents had come for her body during lunch on Monday. The sixth-year Slytherins left the Great Hall and stood in a huddle outside the castle's front door, watching as they took Queenie away. The stretcher was covered with a white sheet. Draco stared after them long after they were gone. The other Slytherins went back inside, but Draco told them he'd catch up with them later. He saw Ernie Macmillan

standing off to the side with a grim expression on his face. Draco nodded to him and Macmillan returned the gesture.

"He will pay," Macmillan said.

Draco almost laughed. The poor sod thought he could take on the Dark Lord? "Someone will pay, that's for sure," he said.

"By the way," Macmillan said in a confidential tone, "you're supposed to head the DA meeting tonight."

"I'm supposed to-- why?"

"Harry, er," -- Macmillan looked uncomfortable for a moment -- "he hasn't taken Hagrid's death well."

Draco raised an eyebrow. Potter hadn't been in Potions, but Draco had thought he was still in the hospital wing. "He's not in the hospital wing?"

Macmillan shook his head. "He's put an Imperturbable Charm around his bed and refuses to talk to anyone."

Draco sneered half-heartedly. Trust Potter to milk the occasion for all it was worth. "All right," he said, "thanks for the warning."

With that, he went back inside. He wondered if it was wrong that he felt overwhelming guilt for Queenie's death, but nothing whatsoever for Hagrid's.

No one knew what had happened to the giant. Some said it was placed into a special warded area in the Forbidden Forest. Others said that trained giant handlers had taken it back to the mountains from whence it came. Draco didn't think Dumbledore would allow the giant back among its mates so it could cause more damage. Snape had told the Slytherins last night that the creature was Hagrid's half-brother. The great oaf had somehow found him and brought him home.

Every time he thought about the creature, there was an uncomfortable gnawing feeling in his chest. If only he hadn't written to Mother about it. He felt sick when he thought that his mother had given the information to the Dark Lord. He was beginning to seriously doubt whether the Dark Lord was as fearsome as people claimed he was.

To set a giant on a school? During a party, no less? It was sick, sure, and twisted, certainly, but not particularly fear-inducing. Draco felt nauseated when he thought about it. The Dark Lord must have known about the St. Patrick's Day party somehow; the plan for it was hardly secret. Draco couldn't believe that his mother went along with it, couldn't believe she would endanger children. Sure, she'd written to him, but what about Queenie? The more he thought about it, the sicker it made him feel.

The DA meeting was subdued. Granger looked sullen; Macmillan's eyes were red, and Longbottom kept staring at Draco with huge, wonder-filled eyes. It irritated Draco to no end. Both Granger and Longbottom stayed behind after the meeting wrapped up.

"That was a decent thing you did for Harry, Malfoy," Granger said. "Thank you."

"Yeah, thanks, Malfoy," Longbottom chimed in. "You were very brave," he added.

Draco sneered. "Just doing my bit of hero-worship. Don't worry, I'm not going to try to be his friend."

"Why did you do it, though?" Granger asked.

Draco raised an eyebrow. "You don't know?"

"No."

"He won't talk to anyone," Longbottom said with a frown.

"Well, I suggest you ask him when he's feeling social again. Excuse me."

Draco left the classroom, shaking his head. He would never understand Gryffindors. Potter hadn't bragged about having saved Draco in the Forbidden Forest? Thunder rang outside and Draco flinched. For a split second, he thought the giant had come back, but then he heard the telltale patter of rain against the window of the classroom he was passing. The thunderstorm they'd seen yesterday had made it over to Hogwarts after all.

Draco loved thunderstorms, always had since he was small. He used to love sitting on his swing in the courtyard at the Manor, watching for lightning as the rain soaked him. He still loved thunder, especially the kind that reverberated in his chest. Yes. It had been too long since Draco had allowed himself to enjoy a thunderstorm. They were much more rare in Scotland than in England, and that decided it. When he reached the Slytherin dungeon, he grabbed his cloak and umbrella and headed outside.

The rain wasn't torrential yet and the umbrella helped keep most of it away -- as much as Draco liked summer rain, he wasn't about to get drenched in this weather. The bitter air stung his cheeks and he angled the umbrella to push against the wind. He pulled his hood up and set off towards the Quidditch pitch. He'd sit in the stands and watch the storm from there.

Draco made his way across the lawn, recalling a similar walk he'd taken just under two weeks ago. The grass had been frosted then; now it was squishing under his feet, as though reminding him that things had changed forever since his last walk. A loud howl split the air and Draco jumped, turning around in the direction of the sound. That beastly creature Fang was sitting outside Hagrid's hut, wailing. Someone was leaning against the door. It was Potter. Draco's heart leapt into his throat irksomely. Since when was he more interested in Potter than in a good thunderstorm?

However, he'd already changed direction and was walking towards the hut, cursing himself mentally. Potter's head was thrown back against the door, his eyes closed. He gave the impression of a music aficionado listening to a particularly well-delivered overture. Too bad the overture in question was a howling dog.

"Oh, shut up," Draco snapped at Fang, who paid him no heed.

Potter's eyes flew open. "What the hell do you want, Malfoy?"

"I want you to take this beastly creature away so I can watch my thunderstorm in peace, that's what," Draco said in a crotchety tone.

Unexpectedly, Potter laughed. "Always out for yourself, huh, Malfoy?" he said with a sneer that rivalled Millicent's. "Just can't leave things alone, can you? Who the hell asked you to interfere yesterday, huh?"

Draco blinked at him. "If you thought I was going to be happy with owing you my life, you were wrong," he said.

"You're such an idiot, Malfoy. No, really, you're impossible. I wasn't going to hold it over your head. I especially wouldn't have held it over your head if I was dead."

"That's precisely it, Potter. I was facing the prospect of living a life that belonged to you by all accounts, and that just was not on. Your friend, the giant, decided to gift me with a chance to repay my debt, and now we're square. If that creature were to show up again right now, I wouldn't move a muscle, except to run away. Just making sure we're on the same page, you understand. I didn't do it for you, I did it for me. So I don't give a damn if you approve or not."

Potter scowled. "Are you finished?"

"Quite."

"Fine, then, sod off."

Draco's eyebrows shot up. "I'll have less of the cheek, Potter. I'm still a school prefect."

"And I still fucked you, school prefect," Potter said, leering. "So why don't you sod off anyway?"

Draco scowled. "So self-righteous, aren't you, Potter? Think the world revolves around you, don't you? Did you know that your dead mate's half-brother killed Queenie?"

"Who the hell is Queenie?"

"Daphne Greengrass."

Potter's smirk disappeared. "Daphne died? How?"

"Crushed by a chunk of wall that the giant tore out of the Great Hall entrance. They took her away this afternoon, but I see you've been too busy feeling sorry for yourself to notice anyone else."

"I'm sorry," Potter said. "I didn't know."

"No surprises there."

"You know what, Malfoy? I--"

"No, you know what, Potter? Your mate deserved what he got. He brought that creature to our forest. Because of him, an innocent girl is dead. I'm guessing Hagrid must have been a Gryffindor before he got expelled, because only a Gryffindor could be that blinkered by emotion."

With a snarl, Potter lunged at Draco. They tumbled to the ground. Draco's grip slackened in surprise and the wind tore the umbrella out of his hand. The rain lashed at his face. Potter straddled him and drew back his fist. Draco shut his eyes with a pre-emptive wince. He couldn't fight like the Muggles did, and his wand was useless to him in his pocket. All he could hope for was that Potter wouldn't kill him. Fang stopped howling.

The punch never came, though. Instead, Draco felt Potter's hot mouth on his neck, licking the raindrops off, making him shiver. Potter rocked against him as he lapped at his neck. Draco felt himself grow hard. He opened his eyes at the same time as Potter lifted his head to look at Draco. His glasses were misted over and his hair was plastered to his forehead. Draco reached up and took the glasses off.

Lightning danced across the sky, illuminating Potter's face with an eerie glow. Draco could see that foul scar just under Potter's fringe, in stark contrast with his pale skin. Thunder rang out and Fang began to howl again. The rain around them was coming down in earnest now; Draco glanced at the castle but he couldn't see it behind the wall of water.

"Why is it," Potter said with a detached air, "that I let you get to me, Malfoy?"

Draco coughed. "Dunno. Maybe because I'm right and you don't want to admit it."

Potter leaned down above him, using his elbows for leverage. "You're right? About what?"

"Everything, really. I'm quite good at being right. Can we fuck now?"

Potter's breath hitched, but he shook his head. "No. You're really not impressed by the Boy Who Lived thing, are you, Malfoy?"

"Not in the least," Draco confirmed.

"And you're not just jealous."

"Jealous of what, Potter? Look, I'm all wet, and it's cold. Either beat me to a pulp or let's shag, either way. I'm not interested in your existential angst."

Potter snorted. "You remind me of one of your ancestors, you know that?"

"Which one?"

"Never mind."

"I didn't know you went to the trouble of researching my ancestors. How romantic. Excuse me while I swoon."

"Prat."

Draco squirmed. "Do you think we could move this someplace drier?"

Potter lowered his mouth to Draco's. "No way," he whispered. "I like you wet."

A raindrop glistened on his lower lip and Draco licked it.

Potter's breath was warm against his skin. "Malfoy," he whispered.

Draco shivered. There was something positively dirty about the way Potter said his surname.

"I want you. Now," Potter mumbled and sucked on Draco's earlobe.

"Keep talking, Potter," Draco gasped, arching his back, "and I might consider it."

In the end, they settled on locking Fang back up, going back to the castle and finding a broom cupboard. It was much too cold outside.

Draco Malfoy's diary, March 17th

That was nothing. Really, it was nothing, it didn't mean a thing. It's just sex. Potter is not clever or witty and I am not interested in talking to him. I hate Potter. He's a natural at blow jobs but I hate him. Hate hate hate. Hate.

In other news, I think the world is literally about to spin off its axis. My father is dead and I have no idea what to do. I find myself missing him, even though I didn't really miss him that much when he was on the run. I suppose there is truth to the statement that you never know what you've got until it's gone. Still no word from Mother. I guess I should look for the positive in this; maybe she simply thinks I'm really well-adjusted.

Queenie is dead. I'm suddenly remembering all these little moments from our childhood friendship, and then all I see is her face as she lay under that rock. Poor Pansy, though. She's absolutely guilt-ridden about the way she had treated Queenie for the better part of our six years here. I'm not too worried about her, though, Pansy is much better at coping with tragedy than I am. Of course I'll never actually tell her this, but she was really very stoic when her brother died in that explosion three years ago.

There's just this empty feeling deep in my gut. Nothing really feels good, except, perhaps, the completely meaningless sex with Potter, but that's woefully unfulfilling spiritually. Not that I've spent any time thinking about Potter in the context of spiritual fulfillment or anything. One thing that keeps bothering me -- I thought Snape was a Death Eater. Father had always hinted at it and I've heard rumours about

people who happened to see his Dark Mark. However, Snape looked just as lost and shocked as the rest of them yesterday. Why didn't the Dark Lord tell him there was going to be a giant coming to Hogwarts and won't Snape please stay out of harm's way? I thought the Dark Lord valued his Death Eaters.

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Chapter 17: A Gryffindor and a Slytherin

A Gryffindor and A Slytherin

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Author's Notes: This was my first novel-length Harry/Draco story. It was completed four months before the release of HBP (and before the announcement of Draco's birth date on Rowling's website) and is now AU. This story stands alone, though it's also a companion piece to *Beyond Wild Moor and Fen*, which is from Harry's point of view. Many thanks to Mishty, Vel, Jaxmari, Kristal and Autumn LeCroix for beta-reading. Constructive criticism is always welcome and appreciated.

A Gryffindor and A Slytherin
Chapter 17 - As They Once Were Meant To Be

Many people looked relieved to be boarding the train to leave for the Easter break. Hogwarts seemed much less safe now. Pansy had broken down again when she saw the Thestrals pulling the school carriages to Hogsmeade station. Nearly every student could see the Thestrals now. It was as though every bit of the innocence traditionally associated with one's Hogwarts years was gone. A giant sent by the Dark Lord had attacked the school and killed a teacher and a student. In retrospect, it seemed miraculous that the losses had been so low.

The Slytherins had hung a black-framed wizarding photo of Queenie in the common room. Taken during a party at the end of fifth year, the photo showed her with a rare smile on her face. She perpetually tilted her bottle of Butterbeer at the unseen photographer. Nott sat beside her, scowling in the other direction. Treacherous prig or not, Nott had been one of them, so they decided against cutting him out of the photograph. Besides, what Nott had done paled in comparison to the giant.

Draco was of age now, and neither Snape nor Dumbledore could stop him from leaving Hogwarts for the break. Pansy's parents had invited him to stay with them, but Draco begged off. He planned to spend the week in London. If he was supposed to be an adult wizard now, he would act like one. His mother clearly thought him adult enough to deal with his father's death without any support, he thought bitterly as he stared out the train window. The Parkinsons took him to Diagon Alley and Draco took a room at the Leaky Cauldron.

"Harry Potter himself stayed in this room once, young master," Tom, the grotesque landlord, told Draco as he let him into the room.

Draco briefly considered demanding another room, just for old times' sake, but whom was he fooling? He was willing to suck Potter off but refused to stay in a room where Potter had once lodged? Such hypocrisy was for Gryffindors, not Slytherins. He stood by the window and looked out onto the Muggle street below. The journey to London had sent Draco from that fine line between two worlds, out from his comfortable past and into an uncertain future. That evening had been the first time he had disembarked from the Hogwarts Express and had not seen his parents there.

Having to fend for himself wasn't so bad with a Gringotts vault of his own, though. He had food sent up to his room every evening. He walked around Diagon Alley, drank smoothies at Florean Fortescue's, bought trinkets for Pansy and the girls, browsed the shelves at Flourish and Blotts, and stayed well away from the Weasley twins' new joke shop. He even ventured into Knockturn Alley once, but fled from the display of Borgin and Burkes; try as he might, he could not forget his father.

Draco considered using the time away from school to write to his mother, but he didn't want to take the risk -- he'd left Pandora at Hogwarts, and he couldn't trust any other owl, especially not post office owls. On many levels, he still couldn't believe what his mother had done with the information about the giant. Despite the fact that his resentment was ebbing for the way she'd completely ignored him after Father's death, Draco didn't think things would ever be the same between them. Still, they were family, and families moved past such things.

He almost didn't want to go back to Hogwarts when Easter break was over. Almost.

::

Gryffindor lost to Hufflepuff in the final Quidditch game of the season. Potter had caught the Snitch, but Hufflepuff was so far ahead on points that it didn't matter. For the first time in twenty-five years, Hufflepuff had the Quidditch Cup. Draco thought it a testament to that whole year at Hogwarts. He was sure that in the future it would come to be known as The Year of Bizarre Accidents.

Before dinner that evening, he glanced at the giant hourglasses that counted house points and saw that Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw were head-to-head, with Slytherin and Gryffindor trailing behind. Draco shook his head and took his seat at the Slytherin table. Bizarre, there was no other word for it.

Their teachers, for their part, seemed determined to drive any thoughts of unpleasantness, war, and death out of the students' minds with massive amounts of homework. Some days, Draco wondered if he should even bother going back for his seventh year. If the weeks leading up to the examination period were any indication, seventh year would simply chew them all up and spit them out as mere husks of students.

The events of early spring seemed to have broken many house barriers that the house unity projects couldn't. People from all houses were frequently seen in groups on the lawns of Hogwarts grounds, in the library, in hallways between classes. Draco would have spoken out against this blatant break of tradition if it weren't for a particular Gryffindor's guarded smiles whenever they passed each other. Draco refused to acknowledge what he and Potter had as a relationship. They were gay teenagers with healthy sex drives, that was all.

Pansy had forgotten about his promise to tell her why he'd saved Potter from the giant; Draco didn't bring it up. He was sure that Blaise suspected something. Fortunately, Draco was much more discreet with night-time disappearances than Blaise had been.

::

Draco couldn't believe exams were finished. Almost everybody else had gone to Hogsmeade, but Draco couldn't be bothered. Potter had cornered him, quite literally, the evening before, and persuaded him to stay behind. Draco wondered if he should check into the hospital wing. Clearly, he was going mad and losing touch with reality. In the real world, Potter was not supposed to employ persuasion tactics that involved tongue usage.

Draco was leaning against the statue of Circe in the courtyard, pondering whether perhaps he had dreamt the whole thing and Potter wasn't going to show up. Just then, Potter walked outside. Draco wasn't sure if Potter was smiling at him or if he was screwing up his face as he squinted into the sunshine. While he was busy thinking about this, Potter walked right up to him, put a possessive hand on his hip, and kissed him without preamble.

Draco pushed him away, looking around in alarm. "What do you think you're doing, Potter?" he spluttered. "We could be seen!"

"Nah, everyone's in Hogsmeade," Potter said in a raspy voice.

There was something wicked lurking behind those irritatingly green eyes and Draco found himself wanting to agree. Fortunately, common sense triumphed. "Not the teachers, you daft prat."

Potter's mouth curled into a smirk. "Fine, let's find someplace more private."

"If you'll unhand me," Draco said, trying to sound grumpy but failing.

They were just about to re-enter the building when Snape materialised in the doorway. Draco hated it when he did that. The two boys backed away a few steps and Snape strode out into the courtyard, looking decidedly at odds with the sun-drenched surroundings. He was holding a rolled-up newspaper. He frowned at Draco, then turned to glare at Potter.

"Were you fighting with Mr Malfoy?"

"No, sir," Potter said in a sullen tone.

"Very well. I have something for you from Professor Dumbledore. Hold this for me," Snape said, extending the newspaper to Potter and reaching into his pocket with his other hand.

"I'll hold it, Professor--" Draco said and reached out for the paper at the same time as Potter.

He felt a jerk behind his navel and his vision blurred; the words "Potter will probably drop it" never left his lips.

Draco blinked. He found himself standing on a dirt road instead of the cracked stones of the courtyard.

"Idiot boy," Snape barked at Draco, and yanked the newspaper back.

Draco gaped, turning to Potter, who was standing next to them, his hand still extended.

Potter looked up at Snape. "What is this place?" he asked, looking bewildered.

"Welcome to Godric's Hollow, Mr Potter," Snape said with a bitter edge to his voice.

Draco's eyes widened. This was the village where Potter's parents had been killed. He looked to his left and saw the ruins of a two-storey family home. The entire top floor was caved in. Thick sheets of ivy covered most of the building. The front door was partially off its hinges. It swung softly back and forth as a strong wind gusted all around them.

"Professor," Potter said, his voice low and urgent.

Draco looked up at Snape, who was giving Potter a significant look, angling his head ever so slightly towards Draco. Draco's eyes widened and he glanced over at Potter, who was staring straight ahead, obviously avoiding looking at him.

"Ah, Harry, so glad you could join us," came a high-pitched, cold voice from the front door of the house.

Draco looked away from Potter and saw a tall, skeletal figure with a horrible white face. He didn't need to be told who it was. Draco's stomach gave a violent lurch. He hadn't thought the Dark Lord was quite this grotesque.

"You see, Bella?" the Dark Lord said to a cloaked figure standing next to him. "I told you Severus could be trusted." He turned back to gaze at Potter, but noticed Draco. "Who is the other boy?"

"Did baby Harry bwing a fwend?" the woman -- Aunt Bella! -- said in a mocking tone, pushing her cloak's hood off. "Why, it's Draco!" she said, her tone back to normal. "Draco Malfoy, my nephew."

"Ah, I see. A shame about your mother and father, boy," the Dark Lord said, not sounding sorry at all.

Draco's heart stopped for a moment. He swallowed. Mother and father? What--

"Why did you bring the other boy, Severus?" the Dark Lord continued, turning to Snape.

"He happened to be standing next to the Potter boy when the Portkey was about to activate, my Lord. I knew he could be trusted to keep quiet about our -- ah -- sudden disappearance, so I continued as planned. Unfortunately, Draco decided to be helpful when I asked Potter to hold the Portkey," Snape replied in a smooth voice.

Not a muscle twitched in his face and Draco wondered if he had known about his mother...?

"Very well," the Dark Lord said. "Bring him in, you can take him back with you when we're done."

Draco just stood there, opening and closing his mouth in astonishment. Had this man just brushed off the deaths -- deaths, plural? -- of his mother and father without even a second glance at him?

Snape grabbed Potter's arm and pushed him roughly forward. "Come along, Draco," he murmured. "It'll be all right."

Draco stumbled after them as they entered the dilapidated house, glass and rocks crunching beneath their shoes. The inside wasn't much better than the outside. There was an unhealthy, musty-sweet smell about the place, like a dead thing festering. Draco wrinkled his nose. He could see a patch of blue sky above; part of the ceiling still held. Brown and yellow leaves rustled underfoot as they walked further in.

"Welcome home, Harry," the Dark Lord said in an amiable tone. "I don't expect you remember this place at all. This is where your parents lived and died." He gave a short laugh, like nails down a blackboard. Draco shuddered. The Dark Lord continued speaking. "I thought it would be nice of me to let you see your birthplace before you died."

Draco glanced at Potter, who was struggling furiously. Snape was still clutching his upper arm, his lip curling.

The Dark Lord seemed to have noticed Potter's struggling as well. "Your persistence is admirable, Harry, but surely you must realise how futile it would be to run? There's nowhere you can go. My people are all over the village; they'd only catch you and bring you right back. You're only making things harder on yourself."

Potter stopped struggling and squared his shoulders. "Who said I was going to run?"

The Dark Lord laughed again. "Ambition. I admire that in an adversary. It's too bad you are no match for me, boy. The potion, Severus?"

Snape reached into his pocket and handed him a black bottle. The Dark Lord's long, spidery fingers closed around it. Draco shuddered in revulsion. This... thing was supposed to be the most powerful Dark wizard in the world? Couldn't he magic himself into at least a semblance of a human being?

"I'd wasted so much time on that useless Auror," the Dark Lord said. "He knew nothing, of course. That glimpse our -- mmm -- special connection allowed me into the nature of the prophecy in September was most illuminating. Unfortunately, I hadn't counted on Dumbledore's keeping it a secret from everyone but you, Harry. I'd thought he would have told his precious Order everything. But no matter! I will find out what this mysterious power you possess is." He uncorked the bottle in his hand and shook it slightly. "I will become Harry Potter. Whatever other power resides in your blood shall be mine for an hour and I will know how to destroy you. Severus."

Snape grabbed a handful of Potter's hair and yanked. Draco winced involuntarily and looked over at his aunt, who was watching the scene in front of her with a cruel smile playing across her lips. She looked so much like Mother. If her hair weren't dark, her features softer, and her eyes not quite so hard and menacing, he would have thought she was Narcissa. Draco couldn't bear to keep looking at her. He wanted desperately to ask about Mother but he knew better.

Meanwhile, Snape deposited Potter's hair into the bottle the Dark Lord held out. Polyjuice. Why, though? What was all that rot about prophecies and powers? He glanced at Potter, who was looking at the floor, his jaw set stubbornly. Draco noticed that Potter's left hand was inching across his stomach. The nutter was reaching for his wand. Draco wondered if he should alert Aunt Bella to Potter's plan, and then it hit him.

He understood in the back of his mind that Mother was dead. He didn't particularly care how. All he knew was that both his parents were dead, and that man with his

snake-like face and cold voice was responsible. To top it off, he didn't even care. Lucius and Narcissa Malfoy had been expendable to this man. Ultimately, Draco would be expendable, too. Draco watched as Potter's hand moved slowly and carefully towards his pocket.

Draco was only vaguely aware of the Dark Lord drinking the Polyjuice Potion and transforming across from him. There was a teeming mass of thoughts and feelings in him, but the need for revenge was strongest. The Dark Lord had caused the deaths of Draco's parents. He would pay. Potter would fight the Dark Lord. Draco knew this. He also knew that he would do everything to make sure that Potter won.

Draco Malfoy always picked the winning side.

He watched as two of Potter's fingers disappeared into his pocket. He felt something strange and glanced briefly up at Snape. The professor was staring at him intently. Draco's eyes strayed inadvertently back to Potter's fingers and hot guilt filled his insides. He'd given Potter away without meaning to.

To his astonishment, Snape's gaze shifted downwards to Potter's hand then snapped back to Draco. Draco's eyes widened. Snape was on their side.

"Well, well, well, your vision is quite bad, Harry," the Dark Lord said in Potter's voice.

Draco shivered as he stared at the two seemingly identical boys. He was stricken by how easily he could tell the difference between them -- the real Potter could never sneer like this, he never looked so comfortable in his own skin.

"Take his wand, Severus," the Dark Lord commanded, staring at Snape with an unfocused look in his -- Potter's -- eyes.

His eyes. The Dark Lord didn't have Potter's glasses. It was now or never.

"*Petrificus Totalus!*" Draco shouted, whipping out his wand and pointing it at Bellatrix. She fell onto the floor with a thud.

The Dark Lord whirled on him. For a second, Draco thought he was looking at Potter. All he could see -- the mad look in his eyes, his aggressive stance, his bared teeth, that hand curled around a wand -- made him remember other things. The slightly surprised look when they'd kissed, the way he'd bitten down on Draco's shoulder that first time, those hands--

"*Stupefy!*" the Dark Lord screeched.

The jet of red light rushed towards him and Draco looked helplessly at Potter. He immediately found his wits again; the other boy looked terrified and real... There seemed to be no one else in the room but the two of them, and for one delirious second, Draco thought that time had stopped. Then the Stunner hit him and Draco was falling through a web of white-hot pain, his lungs leaden and useless. All he could see

was Potter's face, set in grim determination, his eyes shining with resolve and... gratitude? Potter turned towards the Dark Lord. Inky darkness exploded behind Draco's eyes and he saw no more.

::

Draco opened his eyes and blinked several times, adjusting to the gloom around him. Was this the Beyond? Somehow, it didn't seem right that the Beyond would have pillows and blankets. He turned his head to the right and saw Potter, of all people. He sat slumped in a visitor's chair, clearly asleep. His legs were stretched out in front of him, going under the bed. Draco squinted and saw that Potter was drooling onto his robes. He sniggered quietly, and prodded Potter's knee.

"Wha?" Potter sat up straight, pushing his glasses back up on his nose. "You're awake."

"So are you. What are you doing here, Potter?"

Potter flushed. "I'm, er, not sure. I fell asleep." He ran a hand through his hair. "Are you okay?"

"Never better. Did you kill him?"

"What?"

Draco sat up and fixed him with a glare. "Did you kill the Dark Lord?"

"Er, no. He got away. With your aunt. Again." Potter's voice wavered and he stared down into his lap.

"Honestly, Potter, do I have to do everything myself?"

Potter frowned. "Dra-- er, Malfoy, what? I don't understand. You want me to kill--"

"What, you think I'm making idle conversation?" Draco demanded, leaning forward and grabbing Potter's robe.

"Why?" Potter whispered, his breath catching in his throat.

"He killed my parents."

"Mine too," Potter said, his tone brittle.

"You're going to kill him, aren't you?" Draco asked, leaning even closer. They were nose to nose now. He suddenly became aware of Potter's heart beating against Draco's fingers where they clutched his robe.

"Yeah," Potter breathed, his tone unsteady. "I'll try..."

He kissed Draco, prying his lips softly with his tongue. Draco sighed and leant into the kiss, but suddenly felt like there were several thousand needles stabbing him in the chest. He let go of Potter's robes and fell back down on his pillow. Stupid, stupid, stupid.

"Stunner -- damage," he managed, trying to inhale. A Stunner to the chest at close range was not a laughing matter. Ideally, he shouldn't have moved at all.

"Sorry," Potter said, looking worried. "Should I get Madam--"

"No, I'll be fine. I just need rest," Draco said, regaining his breath. The last thing he needed right now was Pomfrey asking him questions about why he was leaning forward in the first place.

"Okay. I'll, er, just go then." Potter got up, knocking the chair over.

Draco winced as the loud bang caused a stab of pain behind his eyes. Potter picked up the chair and stood over Draco's bed for a moment. He opened his mouth as though to say something, but seemed to think better of it and turned to leave.

Draco remembered something. "Potter," he called.

The other boy turned around quickly. "Yeah?"

"What did the Dark Lord mean by 'special connection'?"

Potter's hand shot up to worry his scar. "This. He, can see things. Sometimes. If I let him."

"Oh. Can you do the same?"

Potter's face was grim. "Yeah, it works both ways. I have to let him in if he lets me in, though."

"Was that how you knew about the Azkaban breakout?"

Draco was sure Potter grinned, though he couldn't tell for sure in the gloomy darkness.

"You're really clever, you know that? You and Hermione would get along," Potter said.

"You're making me ill."

"Yeah, yeah. See you, Malfoy."

Draco watched him go with a bemused look. Potter was a terrible liar. Madam Pomfrey would not have allowed him to fall asleep in that chair, not unless Potter had a tantrum and made Dumbledore tell her to let him stay.

::

Snape visited Draco in the morning. He told him that Dumbledore had known about the trip to Godric's Hollow the whole time. He showed up almost immediately after Draco lost consciousness. The Dark Lord had fled, as had Bellatrix, who had time to recover from Draco's curse. Draco was just glad he'd survived; he didn't care for the details. It was done with, for now. Snape looked tired as he told Draco about his mother's death. It turned out that she'd killed herself shortly after the failed attack on

Potter that ended up killing Queenie. Snape hadn't known, he'd found out at the same time as Draco.

Draco would never know why his mother had died. He would never see his parents again, that was all that mattered. On the one hand, there was the Dark Lord with his Death Eaters and supposedly awesome power. On the other hand, there was Dumbledore and his Order, whatever it was, along with the Ministry wonks, various Weasleys, and Potter. Let them fight their stupid wars. Draco would finish school and leave them all behind.

Madam Pomfrey decided that Draco was well enough to leave the hospital wing to attend the Leaving Feast. When he reached the Slytherin table, he was immediately surrounded by his housemates, who had more questions than Draco had answers. He didn't even know what exactly had happened after he'd passed out. He didn't want to know. He'd done as much fighting as he ever would. Nothing would change that, not if Draco could help it.

The feast was delicious as Leaving Feasts were wont to be. As he finished his second helping of trifle, Draco remembered to glance around the Great Hall, which was... decorated in Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw colours. He turned to look at the hourglasses and saw that, indeed, Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw were tied on points. So, it seemed, were Slytherin and Gryffindor, but they were just behind the other two houses. He elbowed Blaise and nodded towards the hourglasses.

"Yeah, I noticed the decorations," Blaise said. He took a swig of pumpkin juice. "Wonder what Dumbledore will say about that."

"He'll just award some extra points, you wait," Draco said with considerable bitterness. "Five thousand points to Gryffindor because Potter managed to not get himself killed yet again!"

Blaise snorted juice out of his nose. "From your lips to his ears, mate," he said, dabbing at his robes with a napkin. "Speaking of which," he added and nodded in the direction of the head table.

Draco turned to look -- indeed, Dumbledore had risen.

"Another year is ending. It has been, in a word, an experience. A learning experience for all of you, I hope, in more ways than one..."

Draco tuned him out. The Headmaster would blather on about house unity, no doubt, and tragedy for good measure; he'd tell them all to watch their backs because the Dark Lord was coming to get them. Nothing the old man said would bring back Queenie, or Draco's parents. Draco wondered why he even bothered; surely he knew that no one took him seriously. They'd all go home and listen to what their parents told them. He felt a pang -- well, those who had parents to go home to. He reached for the coffee pot and almost dropped it when Blaise gave him a sharp poke.

"Listen," Blaise said, ignoring his glare.

"Well, tradition dictates that it is time to award the House Cup," Dumbledore said with an important air. "The point standings are as follows: in the lead are Hufflepuff

and Ravenclaw house, with six hundred and eighty points apiece. Gryffindor house is just behind them with six hundred and thirty points, and Slytherin in last place with six hundred and twenty-five. Well done, Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw!"

Cheers broke out from the two middle tables, but Dumbledore held up his hand. "We are not quite done yet."

"Here it comes," Draco spat, throwing his fork down and glaring at the Headmaster.

"I still have some points to award," Dumbledore continued.

Draco wanted to hurl his plate at him, trifle and all. The Ravensclaws and Hufflepuffs looked mutinous.

"To Mr. Harry Potter, for once again demonstrating outstanding courage in the face of insurmountable odds, I award Gryffindor house fifty points."

The roar from the Gryffindor table was deafening. Draco was grinding his teeth as he watched the rubies fill the hourglass until they were level with the yellow and blue sapphires.

Wait a second. The three other houses had equal point counts--

"And last but not least, to Mr. Draco Malfoy, for decisive action when it mattered most and for out-foxing the oldest fox in the chicken coop, I award Slytherin house fifty-five points."

Draco's jaw dropped. There was a moment of silence that seemed deafening. Then the Slytherin table exploded in cheers that far outstripped the Gryffindors' earlier ones. People were getting up all around him, clapping and shouting his name. Draco just kept blinking. Then Hufflepuffs, Ravenclaws, and even Gryffindors were on their feet -- cheering for him, for Draco. Blaise looked down at him with an enormous grin on his face. Draco looked over at the Gryffindor table and saw Potter, applauding wildly and beaming. It was unreal.

Not only that, but he'd got more points than Potter. When the cheering and applause died down, Dumbledore smiled down at them all. Draco suddenly wondered how he hadn't found his eye-twinkling endearing before. He immediately pinched himself. Honestly, what was he thinking? Endearing. Dumbledore was still a mad old coot.

"As you may have noticed, this means that the point counts are equal. The House Cup rightfully belongs to all four houses this year. I hope you are as proud of yourselves as I am proud of all of you. Through co-operation, you all have managed to achieve unity between the four houses, and such a thing has not happened in over a thousand years."

It was the best Leaving Feast Draco had ever attended.

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Draco was staring out of the window of the Hogwarts Express, watching the stretching plains go by, thinking about how things had changed in only a year. Vincent and Gregory had decided to ride with Millicent and Tracey, so it was just Draco, Blaise, and Pansy in the compartment. Pansy was telling Blaise about her plans for the summer; this was one thing that hadn't changed.

He shifted around on the uncomfortable seat, wondering when the food cart would be coming. He wouldn't say no to a pumpkin pasty. Draco wondered if they'd passed Edinburgh yet -- it would be on the other side of the train. He decided to go out in the corridor and look; he'd always liked looking at the city. He wondered what it would be like to live there. It was large enough to get lost in, yet there was something about the air and the people that endeared Draco to Edinburgh whenever he visited. He got up and smoothed the front of his robes.

"I'm going to go and see if we're past Edinburgh," he told Blaise.

Pansy was rhapsodising about something Italian-sounding and ignored him completely. Blaise nodded.

Draco pulled the door open.

Potter stood outside the compartment, looking defiant. Draco cast a glance at Blaise, indicating Pansy with a quick flicker of his eyes. Blaise winked and turned to the girl,

who hadn't noticed their exchange of looks and was still going on about Milan. Draco left the compartment and shut the door behind him tightly, murmuring a locking spell.

"Not going to invite me to sit with your lot, are you?" Potter asked with a bitter undertone.

Draco glanced at him in surprise. "I thought you wanted to see me. If you'd like to sit with my friends--"

"No, no, that's not what I meant. Oh, forget it." Potter dug his hand into his hair, his jaw tightening.

Draco looked towards the end of the corridor, making sure no one was there to see them. He opened the door leading to the platform that connected their carriage with the next one, motioning for Potter to follow. It was dark on the platform as there were no windows, and the floor was slightly wobbly. Draco leant gingerly against a wall, hoping it wasn't too dirty. It was a tight, closed space filled with the smell of burnt tea leaves that was characteristic of train stations and railways. Potter followed him in and shut the door, plunging them into near-total darkness but for the light that filtered in from the adjoining carriages.

"Are you afraid?" Potter asked in a raspy voice.

"Afraid? Afraid of what?"

"The Dark Lord. What you did back there..."

"...is none of your concern. I'm safer at the Manor than anywhere. The Ministry doesn't know Mother is dead, do they?"

Potter shook his head, looking away.

"The Dark Lord wouldn't go after me where I'm being watched by Aurors, Potter."

"He goes after me anywhere."

"Well, that's you. I'm not worth getting caught over, Potter," Draco said, suddenly surprised by the acidic undertone in his voice. It was the truth, but it stung. Even here Potter had him beat; even the Dark Lord's attention was not on the son of his once-faithful Death Eater but on the son of his dead enemy.

A part of Potter's face was illuminated; the rest of him was in shadow. Draco was reminded of Godric's Hollow, and the way Potter had looked right before Draco had lost consciousness. His eyes held none of the panic they'd glittered with then, but there was something about the set of his jaw, or was it his frown? As Draco's heart did that little leap he had forgotten it could do, he reached out and pulled the other boy close. Potter's hands fell on his chest and he felt a tugging in his heart at the closeness.

Why Potter? Why did it have to be Potter? Their lips were touching then, and Draco kissed Potter with a kind of bitterness he couldn't put into thoughts.

Potter drew a breath and thrust against him, hands sliding down Draco's sides, hitching up his robes, running along his bare chest, waist, hips. Draco sighed into their kiss and reached to pull up Potter's robes. Somewhere at the back of his mind, he was afraid that someone could come through the door at any moment, but at the same time, he didn't care. He bit down gently on Potter's lower lip and pulled, causing him to whimper, fingers scrabbling against Draco's sides as he tried to pull off his pants.

Ten minutes later, they were cleaned up as best they could be, given the lighting conditions. Draco ran a hand lightly down Potter's cheek and leant in to kiss him -- slowly and carefully, closing his eyes for the first time since their kiss in the Forbidden Forest. He wasn't bitter. He was just tired. The fact that he wanted to be kissing Potter seemed almost an afterthought after everything that had happened. Why shouldn't he allow himself an indulgence? This was something that finally belonged to him, and his to take, not something procured by his parents.

They broke apart and looked at each other. Potter's eyes were glinting in the shadows, and Draco knew that no matter what happened, this moment would stay with him forever.

"I'll see you in September?" Potter whispered.

"If you're lucky," Draco whispered back.

"Prat."

"Wanker."

"Malfoy--"

"I'll see you, Potter."

Smirking through his frown, Draco left the dark platform and unlocked his compartment. He caught a glimpse of Potter staring after him as he disappeared behind the door.

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The Hogwarts Express pulled into Kings Cross station just after seven in the evening. Students jostled in corridors, shouting at their classmates to hurry up. Draco and his friends waited out the initial rush in their compartment. They'd talked so much on the way that no one spoke; Draco stared out of the window. It felt strange not to see the landscape passing by anymore. A mangy yellow cat was perched atop a railing on the opposite side of the station. It seemed to be staring straight at Draco. He stared back for a while, then it was time to leave. He told two fourth-years to load his trunk onto a trolley.

After passing the magical barrier between Platform Nine and Three Quarters and the Muggle world, he said his goodbyes to Blaise and Pansy. He'd see Blaise in a few days; the boy had been disowned by his family and he was coming to live with Draco after he collected his things. Draco was only allowing it as long as Blaise didn't bring home any stray Hufflepuffs. Pansy promised to write just like she always did. Draco knew he'd get about two letters; Pansy was a horrible letter writer.

Mrs. Goyle had come to collect both Vincent and Gregory. Draco smiled thinly and assured her that her son had been on his best behaviour all year. She made him promise to come visit in the summer, after he got his Apparation licence. When they were all gone, Draco stared around at the other wizards and witches on the platform.

Every year since their fourth, many Slytherin family members greeting their children would look increasingly haggard. This time there were many more tears and furtive glances at the Gryffindor, Hufflepuff, and Ravenclaw families. Nearly palpable lines had been drawn between children and parents alike, and perhaps for the first time in his life, Draco realised just how different Hogwarts was from the rest of the world. Unity had reigned at Hogwarts when they had left the castle. Mistrust and fear ruled the world at large.

In a flash of realisation, Draco understood why Dumbledore had been so keen on fostering and strengthening house unity at Hogwarts. Children and teenagers made quick decisions, and close friendships were formed so much easier. The students would take the message -- and proof -- of unity home. After all, everything began in the family. Draco smiled bitterly -- he was his own family now. He was glad Blaise was coming to stay. He hadn't wanted to spend another lonely summer at Malfoy Manor.

Draco had to get to Paddington station quickly if he wanted to catch the last train to Pewsey; it left at half past eight and it would take him at least twenty minutes to

switch stations. He didn't trust the Underground and so needed to take a taxi. In his pocket, he had a roll of those funny-looking papers Muggles used as money. He'd found it in his Gringotts vault when he'd gone to London during Easter.

When he reached Pewsey, he was going to have to take another taxi to the Manor. He wasn't sure if he had enough to pay for both journeys, but he was overage now and he could simply Oblivate one or both the Muggle drivers in a pinch. He wasn't supposed to do it without a license, but he truly did not care. He gripped the handle of his trolley and set off towards the station exit.

"Hey, Malfoy, wait!" came Potter's voice from behind him. When had Draco begun to recognise that voice so quickly?

Draco stopped and turned to face him. Potter was looking to his right and waving an impatient hand at something. Draco glanced over to see the werewolf Lupin standing a few feet away from three Muggles who were all glaring at Potter. Lupin nodded, smiling, and Potter turned to Draco.

"Do you still hate me?"

Draco stared at him intensely for a moment, then turned around and walked away.

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June 30, 1997. Malfoy Manor, Avebury, Wiltshire.

Potter,

Last time we spoke, you asked me if I still hated you. I didn't answer you then because only a true Slytherin would have been able to understand the short answer. The long answer, however, would have taken much more time than I had then. I think I've managed to break it down as simply as I can without compromising myself should this letter fall into the hands of a Weasley.

When I was small, things were very simple. There were Malfoys and there were those who opposed us, the villains. Since the day we were introduced, you were the designated villain in my life. Our last year at Hogwarts changed many things about the way I see the world. Some of them were sensible things like realising that the associations my friends choose needn't reflect badly on me. Others were less sensible things like realising that I was really quite interested in associating with the designated villain.

I'll cut this short because I do have a modicum of faith in your ability to pick up sub-text. For what it's worth, you've proven that you're not the typical cardboard villain. You're disgustingly brave and unnecessarily generous. You're surprisingly ambitious and uncharacteristically cunning. I don't hate you any more because you are so unlike your housemates in many ways and so like mine in others: a Gryffindor and a Slytherin.

Draco

[end]